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1 Gender, Religion, and Harm

Conceptual and Methodological Reflections

Brenda Bartelink, Chia Longman, and Tamsin Bradley

Following the success of an earlier volume titled Interrogating Harmful Cultural Practices: Gender, Culture and Coercion with Chia Longman and Tamsin Bradley, this new book, joined by co-editor Brenda Bartelink, brings together a collection of original contributions that focus more specifically on the relationship between harmful practices, gender, and religion. Harmful cultural practices (sometimes referred to as 'traditional practices') (HCP/HTP) is a label that has been increasingly applied over the past decades, predominantly within a human rights framework and in the development sector, to refer to certain discriminatory practices against women in, or originating from, the Global South. Often mentioned practices include female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/FGC), child and forced marriages and dowry, honour crimes, son preference, and polygamy. The application of the concept in academic theory and research, however, has been less widespread and more hesitant. And as feminist anthropologists, as we explained in the previous volume and elaborate further in this one, we find there are good reasons to remain cautious. In this volume, however, we draw our focus towards the relationship between religion and harmful practices, which, as illustrated in the various chapters, is highly complex and context specific.

Scholarship on HCP seems to have been reluctant, even nervous, to tackle the relationship between gender, religion, and harm. Postcolonial discourses rightly warn and are critical of attempts to reduce and essentialize the values and beliefs of 'others' in a way that dehumanizes adherents, cultural values, and worldviews. In this volume, we nevertheless attempt to demonstrate how important it is to combine approaches and theories from a range of disciplines, namely social anthropology, the study of religion, and gender studies, in order to bring a more nuanced and sensitive picture of how and why certain practices – particularly in relation to various religious discourses, traditions, and contexts – that may be harmful to women and girls exist, and how they can potentially be challenged.

The subject of this volume is timely. In 2015, all UN Member States across the world adopted 17 Goals as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with a 15-year action plan to end poverty, protect the planet, and improve the lives and wellbeing of all.

Gender equality has been part of the international Human Rights and Development agenda for many decades now, and consequently in 2015, it was

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also listed as a separate sustainable development goal. The SDG 5 focusses on gender equality and refers to not only the progress made but also the many challenges that are still to be tackled, including the high global prevalence of violence against women and girls (VAWG). Although the disease itself is more likely to kill men, the broader impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic also affect women and girls disproportionately – albeit often indirectly and collaterally – in terms of their health, social and economic situation, and rights (Flor et al. 2022). There has been a steep increase in VAWG, especially domestic violence, due to lockdown measures across the globe (Thiel et al 2022). We also see a resurgence of highly conservative patriarchal social, cultural, and religious norms being allowed again unabated in places where human rights had begun to win through (Imam et al., 2017; Shaheed, 2020; Sweetman, 2017; UNWOMEN, n.d.).

Emerging observations show that practices such as (girl) child/early marriages (CEM) and FGM/C are also regaining ground. Diminished access to health services, including sexual and reproductive health, has left women without much-needed support and protection. Online harassment, time poverty, and mental health issues are all being worsened as a result of the stringent measures put in place to curb the pandemic. In contexts of poverty, the absence and retraction of kin support and community interventions, and education, health, social, and care services have meant that women's lives across the globe have suddenly become more stressful and fragile (see Azcona et al., 2020). The questions that remain are: what will be left of the advancements in gender equality and reductions in violence? Will we be able to pick up where we left off and continue to fight for a better safer world for women and girls? Or will we have lost decades? This volume will consider these critical questions and seek to provide a detailed picture of the patriarchal infrastructure in relation to culture and religion that still seems to dominate our gendered worlds.

Here in the introductory chapter, we first discuss the contested concept of HCP more generally and reflect on its relationship to the equally complex notion of 'religion'. Based on the advances made in policies, development work, and academic research on gender-based violence (GBV) and equality so far, from a feminist decolonial anthropological perspective, we suggest that although the notions of HCP/HTP and even the apparently more neutral 'harmful practices' (HP) are highly problematic, they remain somewhat useful terms to consider from a critical perspective. We then explore the contours of the tense relationship between religion and feminism, which serves as the background to many public policies and scholarly approaches – and the controversies that accompany them – to the relationship between gender, religion, and HCPs. Next, we argue that broader histories, and in particular, the entanglements of religion, secularism, and colonialism in state formation and national politics, are also crucial in contextualizing and understanding the global and local dynamics of gendered harm. This is followed by a section on crucial ethical, political, and methodological considerations when studying gender, religion, and harm from a feminist perspective, particularly from the vantage point of white scholars located in a position of privilege in the Global North. We argue that cultural relativism and decolonial

critiques act as crucial analytical tools to understand gender inequality and work as allies in a feminist struggle against patriarchy, in general, and against its most extreme forms of VAWG, in particular. The chapter then takes a critical look at 'social norm theories' that, in recent years, have become part of popular analytical frameworks that seek to offer potential remedies to GBV in the so-called developing world. The chapter ends with an introduction to the contributions made in the chapters that follow.

Interrogating Harmful Practices in Relation to Religion

Although references to harmful practices against women in developing countries or what today is more commonly referred to as 'the Global South' have circulated in human rights and development circles since the fifties, the oft-cited UN Fact Sheet No.23, *Harmful Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children*, set a particular tone with its emphasis on the role of 'culture', 'tradition', and 'morality' in its listing of women-targeted violence, abuse, and harm, referring to the 'force' of 'beliefs', 'values', and 'norms':

> Traditional cultural practices reflect values and beliefs held by members of a community for periods often spanning generations. Every social grouping in the world has specific traditional cultural practices and beliefs, some of which are beneficial to all members, while others are harmful to a specific group, such as women. These harmful traditional practices include female genital mutilation (FGM); forced feeding of women; early marriage; the various taboos or practices which prevent women from controlling their own fertility; nutritional taboos and traditional birth practices; son preference and its implications for the status of the girl child; female infanticide; early pregnancy; and dowry price. Despite their harmful nature and their violation of international human rights laws, such practices persist because they are not questioned and take on an aura of morality in the eyes of those practicing them.
>
> (United Nations, 1995, pp. 1–2)

As noted above, while commonly used in human rights, development, and feminist activist policy programmes, practices, and discourse for decades, the notions of HCP/HTP/HP have only been applied and interrogated more critically in academic scholarship in more recent years. Scholars have questioned the neo-colonialist bias and overwhelming focus on 'non-Western' HTPs/HCPs, the North/Americo-Eurocentrism and problematic framing of 'tradition', and the static essentialist notion of 'culture' as a determinative factor, versus Western (secular) freedom and modernity (Jeffreys, 2013; Le Roux & Bartelink, 2020; Longman & Bradley, 2015; Lugones, 2010; Winter et al., 2002). From a post-development, postcolonial, and decolonial feminist perspective, the neo-colonialist and paternalistic, and sometimes femonationalist (e.g. see: Farris, 2017) framing of women

of the Global South and from minority or migrant backgrounds as victims of 'tradition' or 'culture', devoid of any internal diversity or individual agency, has also been problematized (e.g. see: Manning, 2020). Feminist calls have been made to abandon, or conversely broaden, the scope of HCP arguing that so-called patriarchal Western practices, included those now popular in parts of the Global South, fit the UN mould (beauty practices, ranging from make-up, high heels to non-medical and cosmetic surgery, etc.) (Jeffreys, 2013; Rahbari et al., 2018). The category has also been questioned from an intersectional perspective; the approach is almost exclusively applied to harm and violence to girls and women specifically, thereby omitting or deflecting attention to harmful cultural practices against, e.g. boys, men, and transgender and non-binary persons, and at times making insufficient distinctions between the roles and experiences of different age-categories, and ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities (Longman & Bradley, 2015). At the same time, paradoxically, the term itself can also be held accountable for deflecting attention *away* from VAWG, precisely due to its gender-neutral terminology (Le Roux & Bartelink, 2020). Finally, the emphasis on 'culture' or 'tradition' tends to prioritize the private sphere, thereby downplaying the systemic nature of harmful practices globally, and particularly the underlying patriarchal norms and the role of the state in sustaining and (re)producing gender inequality and VAWG (Le Roux & Bartelink, 2020).

In this volume, we aim to take forward some of these discussions by focussing on the intersections between religion, culture, and gender in shaping practices deemed harmful by international development and feminist discourses. Although the notion of 'religion' does not figure centrally in earlier UN documents on HCP/HTP, certain biases around religion on HTP/HCP circulate in a vast amount of public, policy, and academic discourses, such as an overemphasis on Islam (with some additional interest in Christianity) (Le Roux & Bartelink, 2020; Longman & Bradley, 2015). Western secularism in general, and specifically Islamophobic prejudices, have also contributed to faulty presumptions conflating 'religion' and 'culture', such as the erroneous framing of FGM/C and honour-related violence as 'Islamic' (Abu-Lughod, 2013a, b). Such biases can be traced back to dominant strands in development, human rights, and feminist thought as developed in the West that contained modernist-secularist presumptions with regard to 'tradition' versus 'modernity'. Such binary thinking is also often racialized and gendered, conceiving of the autonomous liberated individual and its body (free from pain, modification, or harm) as secular versus the traditional religious body as coerced and oppressed (Longman & Bradley, 2015) Hence, the lens of the religious/secular binary complicates the notion of HCP/HTP, for example by raising the question whether particular 'secular' practices can be viewed as oppressive or harmful (e.g. bans on headscarves and veiling). The role of religion in its complex relationship to ethics, morality, social norms, and 'culture' similarly needs to be interrogated, as does its relation to the legal apparatus and politics of the nation-state. We simply need more empirical studies on how religion interacts with gender, violence, and harm in specific contexts, whether as a justification for its persistence or as a source for its potential eradication (Boddy, 2016; Østebø & Østebø, 2014).

The chapters in this volume contribute to filling this gap in our knowledge, but in doing so also highlight how diverse women's experiences of the relationship between religion and harm can be.

Somewhat neglected in earlier scholarship, the role and impact of religion on gender equality has also become increasingly recognized in development initiatives and studies in recent years (Tomalin, 2015). It has been widely acknowledged that engagement between faith actors and development actors is a crucial step towards understanding the role of religion in approaching harmful practices such as FGM/FGC and child marriage (Boddy, 2016; Le Roux & Palm, 2018; Østebø & Østebø, 2014). There is also a need to understand the role of religious traditions, laws, and belief systems as well as the influence of religious leaders and communities on the ground (Deneulin & Zampini-Davies, 2017; Kraft & Wilkinson, 2020). However, in their recent study of the approach to a number of HCP/HTP practices (FGM/C, CEM, honour-related violence, and son preference) among development organizations – the majority of which were international faith-based organizations (FBOs) – it emerged that a more integrated approach by practitioners was preferred when approaching GBV and the structural gender equalities that underlie them (of which religion is a possible thread), whilst avoiding usage of the terms HTP or HCP because of their Western Colonialist connotations. (Le Roux & Bartelink, 2020).

Taking religion as an entry point for addressing HCP/HTP also means looking critically at what religion is and does (as a concept) in the framing, problematizing, and solving of oppressive gender practices. As referred to above, a case in point is the (implicit) understanding of practices such as female circumcision, early marriage, or veiling as 'Islamic' practices when these occur in Muslim majority contexts or populations. However, when similar practices occur in non-Muslim contexts, they tend to be blamed on culture. It is therefore relevant and interesting to explore when, and indeed why, religion is framed as 'good' or 'bad' in relation to how culture or other intersecting identities such as gender, class, ethnicity, or sexuality are understood. Seeing the framing of forms of GBV as HCP/HTP can be traced back to colonial and missionary discourses, which were often concerned with creating 'modern' and 'civilized' societies. With this in mind, the current mobilization of these terms, which is mainly intended to address forms of gender-based violence and oppression as occurring in the Global South and in migrant-communities in the Global North, needs to be critically examined. This volume therefore calls for more attention to and analyses of how GBV is framed and understood by whom within a particular context and what these terms mobilize as a consequence.

At the local level, people often refer to religion as being the means to explain the 'why' of practices such as female circumcision and early marriage, but theological research typically struggles to find strong links (Abdi, 2007; Al-Awa, 2019; Johnson, 2000; Lethome & Abdi, 2008; Rouzi, 2013; Wangila, 2007). While studies have emerged exploring the relations between harmful practices and religion, research that focuses on the myths surrounding religion in relation to HCP/HTP is limited (Wangila, 2007). Yet research on religion and HCP/HTP since

2015 has also given us a much more nuanced insight into what religion means to people and how it is used, both positively and negatively, to shape wider political discourses, to create safe spaces, to process trauma, and to strategize (Bradley, 2020; Longman & Bradley, 2015; Winters, 2014). Religion often provides leadership which can potentially be harnessed for change. In other words, religious figures who might otherwise be seen as a barrier to tackling HCP/HTP can also become change agents. However, in the process of bringing about change, the tensions among different facets and dimensions of religion often playout within cultural and social arenas, the impact of which is disproportionally felt in the lives of women and girls (Østebø & Østebø, 2014).

Central to our approach is the recognition that, as social scientists, it is also important to interrogate our framings of gender, religion, and harm. As such, in this volume, we urge reflection on how women and girls actually experience a range of oppressive, harmful, and/or violent practices, which must precede any comparison or analysis, and subsequent policy recommendations. The global donor commitment to reduce and end gender-related harm, particularly VAWG, is arguably at the strongest it has ever been, but clear answers as to *why* harmful practices persist are proving slow to emerge. Religion as an entry point allows for a deeper exploration of the complexities of this question, which, in turn, can contribute to developing a better understanding of what possible actions can be taken to facilitate their eradication. What this means is that the dominance of social norms that sanction and might even reward the observance of, for example, forms of female cutting, male circumcision, early and forced marriage, nutritional taboos, birth practices, mandatory (un)veiling, harmful spiritual practices, polygamy, gender unequal marital and inheritance rights, and so-called honour crimes need to be understood contextually if they are to be addressed effectively.

Additionally, through the chapters, we seek to capture the different ways women and girls as agents can and do navigate, subvert, and use aspects of both religion and culture as forms of capital to carve more positive gendered worlds. Women's agency and an empowered view of the world can also be seen through various kinds of activism against harmful practices. Competing priorities mean that global and local actors often stand in the way of women's own voices being heard, which, in turn, means that the strategies they use – which are specific to the social, religious, and cultural contexts in which they live – to realize their right to decide on their own bodies are not seen or understood. At the same time, local and global debates on these matters have often failed to acknowledge patriarchy as a structural form of violence (e.g. see: Hunnicutt, 2009).

It almost goes without saying that violence, oppression, and discrimination of women and girls are produced by and legitimized on the basis of patriarchal discourses and power constellations that, while having a particular local form, is affecting them across the globe: in the Global North and Global South, in international politics and local contexts, across religious and secular contexts, in 'developed' and 'developing' contexts, and in so-called modern as well as traditional societies. In this volume, we understand 'violence' to operate as a spectrum

ranging from physical, sexual, and psychological violence through to forms of social exclusion. Examples of this include women and girls from the South being marginalized from global policy/development forums and decision making and the absence of female voices in debates around veiling and unveiling that result in bans and restrictions on female dress (discussed further below). The denial of 'voice' and 'representation' from influential debates and forums, especially those that disproportionately affect the lives of women and girls, represents a form of oppression that should be regarded as violent (e.g. see: Murray, 2017; Lugones, 2010). We argue that the harm caused by specific types of HCP/HTP goes beyond their immediate impact to trigger and conceal multiple other forms for violence, though the practices themselves often represent the most severe forms of physical and psychological abuse. HCP/HTP have also become a global policy focus; multiple forums have been established to discuss the issue, but these often result in privileged professionals (mostly from the Global North, but also middle-class urban professional in cities in the Global South who work in sectors heavily funded within Global North/International development schemes) discussing what should and should not happen to girls predominately living in the Global South. The analysis we propose and apply in this volume seeks to push more critically into questions around the extent to which girls are included in discussions over the very practices that impact upon their lives. We combine this, through the inclusion of religion, with a more intersectional and nuanced approach to understanding the 'why' of HCPs.

In this volume, our authors ask challenging and difficult questions that push us to reflect on our own biases and encourage us to question the very construction of notions of violence, oppression, and harm. We position the contributions of the volume in the wider context of academic and public debates about the problematization and solution strategies for GBV, oppression, and discrimination, particularly, but not exclusively, in its intersection with religion. While, depending on the context and case at hand, we find that the notions of HCP/HTP carry and cause too much epistemic violence to be applied uncritically in policy, activist, and development discourses, in light of its relatively recent introduction into academic work we contend that, for now, from a firm decolonial feminist perspective, it remains a useful term to think with critically and to push back against.

Feminism and Religion

Any publication that takes 'religion' and 'gender' as central categories of analysis requires a brief refection on the rather contentious relationship between these terms in gender studies and feminist research. From the Western modern liberal point of view, in progressive social and political movements, and in the secular academy, religion has generally been seen as oppositional to sexual and gender equality, often oppressive and therefore 'harmful' to women. The second wave feminist and other liberation movements in the mid-twentieth century coincided with processes of societal secularization, including reduced church attendance and a decrease in individual religious self-identification. The role of the church

was diminished in terms of its regulatory and ideological hegemony in gender arrangements and epistemes, particularly regarding ideals of womanhood and femininity and traditional views on gender roles, reproduction, and sexuality. For the most part, in the twentieth and twenty-first century, the progressive liberation of women has therefore been viewed as tied to the anticipated linear process of secularization; religion was identified as universally 'patriarchal', and as having contributed to problematic binary gender ideologies by propagating subservient images of women (and sexual and gender minorities) and their role in society. Particularly in Western Europe, where the process of disaffiliation with traditional religious institutions has been most extensive, the feminist movement has largely perceived religion as antithetical to women's emancipation (Badinter, 2006; Jeffreys, 2013; Knibbe & Bartelink, 2019). In addition to negative and critical views, in feminist and gender research, a negligence or marginalization of the role of religion in women's lives has been observed (Llewellyn & Trzebiatowska, 2013; Longman, 2021;).

Colonial and paternalistic biases in the representation and on the plight of 'non-Western' women in feminist and gender research, whether located in the so-called Global South or concerning the position of women from ethnic-religious minority groups and migrant backgrounds in the North, have been widely criticized over the past decades (Abu-Lughod, 2015). Terms such as 'femonationalism' (Farris, 2017) and 'homonationalism' (Puar, 2018; see also Allen, 2016) capture the insidious way in which the feminist and LGBT rights agenda has been co-opted across a spectrum of actors (ranging from left to right, including neo-liberals, nationalists, and feminists), in a 'white saviour' civilizing mission of oppressed 'others'. But this also serves to stigmatize ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities and migrants as both backward and potentially threatening to the – falsely perceived – homogeneous white liberal progressive nation-state. In Western Europe, this has selectively and overwhelmingly focused on Muslims, and Muslim men in particular (Boulila, 2013; Boulila & Carri, 2017; Hark & Villa, 2020), where gender and sexuality have played central roles in the 'religionization' of racism (e.g. see: Nye, 2019), particularly with the rise of Islamophobia in the twenty-first century. The result is that 'Muslim' has, in Western Europe, become a racial category as well as a religious one.

In the 2000s, issues such as (un)veiling, honour-related violence, FGM/C, and forced/arranged/sham marriages had already gained increased public and political attention and featured prominently in the so-called feminism versus multiculturalism debate in Western societies (Volpp, 2001). In her important essay, 'Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?' (first published in 1997), Susan Moller Okin warned about the threats to gender equality when granting special groups rights in the name of 'respect for cultural diversity' or multicultural toleration (see Okin, 1999). Western societies could possibly tolerate or turn a blind eye to 'imported' practices that might harm women and vulnerable groups 'within' minorities, such as polygamy among migrant populations. This unfolded alongside parallel debates in the arenas of international gender politics, feminist and human rights activism, and the field of development (as we detailed in the previous paragraph and in a

previous volume) during which the notion of 'harmful cultural practices' gained more and more currency.

In this volume, we problematize practices that might fall within the scope of this now widely used concept, but now do so by focussing more specifically on 'religion'. While 'religion' can be conceived of as a part of – an equally if not more complex to define – 'culture', we think the shift in public and political debates from accommodating 'group rights' or 'multicultural policies' to the role of religion in private and public life warrants a closer look, specifically regarding the relationship between gender, religion, and harm. Furthermore, both religion and culture are frequently mentioned, and are often problematically conflated, when harmful practices such as those referred to above are being discussed. For example, while veiling (and Islamic veiling in particular) is often assumed to be a religious prescription and/or practice rather than a cultural norm, its position in relation to notions of 'harm' is somewhat more complicated. When it comes to discussing practices often identified as 'harmful', the conflation of religion and culture is both mistaken and problematic. FGM in its various forms, for example, is present among populations of different religious persuasions, including Muslim, Christian, and secular, yet at the same time, the majority of the communities of any given religion either concede that the practice is not religious or are altogether oblivious to its existence within their religion. The same holds for the complex notion of 'honour', which is often expressed through religious rites and their related social concepts (e.g. marriage and family). Honour appears to act to ensure obedience through its oppositional relationship with notions of dishonour and the stigma applied to not conforming.

Again, from an emic point of view, it might well be that particular groups, communities, or individuals claim that a certain HCP is 'religious' and experience it as such. Religious discourse or (counter-)authorities might also be appealed to in defending and justifying, or potentially countering, a certain practice. For this reason, rather than assuming a straightforward relationship with either 'culture' or 'religion', we question which 'harmful' cultural practices might also be religious practices, and ask when do they become, or perhaps cease to be, religious? What is the role of 'religion' in supporting, legitimizing, and reproducing these practices, or conversely, in what way might 'religion' function as a structural or political resource to combat or eradicate them, or can it offer the individual 'victim' forms of agency that allow them to resist or cope with the threat or experience of inflicted harm? While religion it is often asserted that religion is at least partly to blame for the persistence of harmful cultural practices (e.g. see: Manson, 2019), research (Le Roux & Bartelink, 2017) has shown that some religious leaders blame 'culture', thereby side stepping any responsibility. The division into the two categories of 'religion' and 'culture' is often made for the convenience of supporting one's own position: one or the other can be blamed depending on where a person stands on along the religious-secular continuum.

In any case, from a decolonial post-secular feminist perspective (e.g. see: Runyan, 2018; Vasilaki, 2016), we do not want to make the rather simplistic assumption that religion would always and only be oppressive to women (and

sexual and gender minorities) and that secularism would be the only liberatory path to salvation. As authors such as Scott (2017) have argued, gender equality and women's rights were historically not incorporated in the project of secularism in the West. The separation between church and state accompanied binary constructions of the secular versus the religious, the public versus the private, and the male versus the female sphere. The development of Western modernity is tied to the process of colonization, and this gendered and binary arrangement is part of an oppositional framework in which the secular emancipated (and masculine) West is positioned versus a traditional, oppressive, religious (and feminized) 'Other': i.e., the Global South.

In a play on Susan Okin's earlier provocatively titled essay 'Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?', feminist scholars of religion Kristin Aune et al. (2017) recently provocatively question if secularism might also be 'bad' for women. In our previous volume, we similarly discussed veiling, which, save its most extreme forms perhaps, does not inflict any bodily injuries or physical harm upon its wearer. Forced veiling – ostensibly in the name of religion – can certainly be viewed as oppressive to women denying them free choice of what to wear. But forced *un*veiling can be seen in certain secularist regimes (e.g. Burqa bans in France or Belgium) where – in the name of gender equality, public safety, and security, or neutrality – women who choose to veil may similarly be denied a free choice of what to wear, and may be subject to imprisonment, fines, and expulsion from or discrimination in schools or the workplace (Longman & Coene, 2015). Religious and secular worldviews both make claims regarding how the world is, and for those who believe these claims they also act as an authoritative force behind moral claims regarding how the world ought to be, including where men and women are positioned and how they should act. Values, norms, and beliefs (religious or otherwise) feed into a cultural process in which human environments are shaped. A stark example of how contradictory and inconsistent norms, and indeed laws, around what is deemed acceptable attire for a woman arose in France during the early stages of the pandemic: for a time, overlapping laws meant it was both illegal to cover one's face (for religious reasons) and also illegal to *not* cover one's face (for public health reasons) (e.g. see: Warner et al., 2020). This serves as a reminder that *why* something is being practised matters as well as *what* is being practised.

In any case, considering the so-called post-secular turn in the study of gender and religion (see McLennan, 2010), which marks shifts in feminist and gender scholarship towards recognizing the potential agentic and empowering role that religion may have in many women's lives (Braidotti, 2008; Graham, 2012; Vasilaki, 2016), we wish to underline the contextual, complex, and contradictory relationship between religion (and secularism), power, and in particular, gendered harm and oppression. That said, as already alluded to, untangling this relationship and confronting the problems that emerge is not straightforward. Challenging or even identifying entry points to destabilize the process of construction, enforcement, and reinforcement of negative gendered norms is difficult, not least because religion and religious leaders are able to assert a firm claim to 'know'. Moreover, many religious women do not feel that they are being constrained because they have

carved a form of 'religious feminism' (Tomalin, 2015) that allows them to operate in accordance with the identity they feel they 'freely' own.

Harmful Power Structures and Globalizing Dynamics

In view of our aim of 'thinking with and against' HCP as a means of interrogating the wider geographies of knowledge that gave rise to the forms of social engineering that we observe today, to historicize contemporary global and local dynamics around gender, religion, and harm is crucial step. Contemporary understandings of these notions, as scholars of decoloniality have argued so convincingly and powerfully in recent years, have been shaped by the European project of modernity and its expansion through colonized societies across the globe (Chidester, 2014). As such the historic context of colonialism and its ongoing impact should be treated as a central focus of critical reflection when thinking about HCP/HTP.

The project of modernity in Europe amounted to a fundamental transformation of how societies were organized. Subjects were increasingly distinguished from social structures of kinship, such as the extended family, and these traditional forms of organization were actively rejected. In the context of the encounter between Europeans and 'other civilizations and traditions', in particular, a conception emerged of modern nation-states that would govern the lives of people (e.g. see: Chakrabarty, 2008; van der Veer, 2015). This came with a particular conception of progressive time, cast against the so-called traditional societies of medieval Europe as well as the colonized societies, that were seen as backward and outdated (e.g. Fabian, 2014). As van der Veer (2015) reminds us, our contemporary concept of culture has emerged out of that assumed opposition between 'traditional cultures' and 'nationalist cultures'. In addition, colonizing societies, such as England, the Netherlands, or Belgium, have produced their own forms of religious superiority, built on the racialization of cultural and religious others. In Europe, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this stabilized into a discourse on the civilized Christian nation, which was cast against the 'uncivilized' 'traditional' spiritualities of Islam and African cultures (Chidester, 2014; van der Veer, 2015). The hierarchies that emerged – of good and bad religion, culture, and tradition – deeply influenced the organization and positioning of religion in (post-)colonial societies across the globe.

In contemporary discourses on religion, gender, and harm, we still observe certain religions being considered 'good', whilst others are located in the past or considered harmful or dangerous. For example, the privileging of Christian religion over African Traditional Spiritualities in Kenya (Meinema, 2020) and the marginalization of Coptic Christianity in Egypt as a response to Christian colonial dominance by the Sunni Muslim majority need to be seen in the context of this history (Mahmood, 2015). Similarly, contemporary Muslim politics in India, against the background of Hindu majoritarianism and Muslim marginalization, recreate colonial representations of Islam as 'uncivilized', which are mobilized alongside particular religious (Brahmin) notions of purity (Ghassem-Fachandi,

2010; Matthew, 2021). As mentioned earlier, in Europe, older colonial stereotypes on Islam have been revived in the context of concerns over the integration and access to citizenship of Muslim migrants and refugees (Scott, 2017). It is therefore important to distinguish between the 'empirical heterogeneity' of religions (Chakrabarty, 2008) and the particular forms of religion that have been accepted as part of modern postcolonial societies and their governing bodies states for their potential to contribute to unity (e.g. van der Veer, 2015).

Secular Formations

The elephant in the room here, as the anthropologists Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood have so convincingly argued, is, of course, secularism. The process of separating out categories of traditional and modern, bad religion and good religion, and past and future, emerged in the context of the secular formation of modern societies. As is well known, the secular formation of European societies was focussed on the emancipation of society from religious rule and relegating religion to the private sphere (Casanova, 2006). Although the Christian church and doctrine continued to have significant influence on social life in Western Europe well into twentieth century, religious views were increasingly seen as a matter of private conscience. The separation of the public from the private is crucial to our understanding of how and why religion and gender became a subject of contestation in modern societies. In particular because, along with religion, gender and sexuality also came to be considered as matters of the private sphere (Mahmood, 2012; Scott, 2017). Therefore, and as Mahmood (2013) reminds us with reference to the colonized societies of the Middle East, in particular, religious governance of private and family matters increased as a result of secularization (Mahmood, 2012, 2013).

Following the same binary logic that was characteristic of modernity as described above, the private sphere became seen as primarily a women's domain. At the same time, the public became the domain of the masculine, women's participation in the public domain became closely tied to fitting within neat gender and sexualized categories (Cady & Fessenden, 2013). This fitted the desire of governments of nineteenth-century nation-states to manage and control the sexuality of subjects, and especially the rules regarding women and men's public behaviour based on moral, interiorized notions of what was 'respectable' and 'normal' in that particular context (Mosse, 2020). As Lugones furthermore reminds us, 'respectability' is not only gendered but is also racialized (Lugones, 2008). Gender norms that were focused on the preservation of sexual purity of white European bourgeois women continue to live on alongside and in contrast to the orientalist fantasies of sexuality in the colonies and the violent exploitation of black women and men (Licata & Volpato, 2010; Lugones, 2007)

Contrary to what is often assumed from a secular perspective, the historical structures of superiority and marginalization have not disappeared with secularization. Rather, religion has been given a particular place in the context of secular formations (e.g. see: Chakrabarty, 2008; Keane, 2016), which means that religious

influence on sexuality, reproduction, and other intimate dimensions of people's private lives has increased (Mahmood, 2015). Contemporary struggles and contestations over religion and gender need to be understood against the background of the dynamics described above. This also requires, as we pointed out earlier in the overview of the contentious relationship between religion and feminism, a deeper reflection on how the secular is entangled into this. The aforementioned example of forced unveiling illustrates how secular politics legitimizes forceful imposition of certain gendered bodily practices. As Nadia Fadil (2011) argues in her article on unveiling as a practice of Muslim self-formation in Belgium, even in contexts where women have the agency to choose to wear a veil or not, this choice must be understood within the broader webs of power in which people are embedded. Since many of the cases discussed in this volume are situated in secular states, secularism should be considered a formational structure.

Methodological and Ethico-political Positionings

As feminist anthropologists who have worked for decades on the intersections between gender, religion, and culture with specific focus on the impact they have on and for women's lives, we do not apply a strict analytical division between the categories of 'religion' and 'culture'. From a feminist perspective, we also see them as deeply intertwined by and through a patriarchal gendered ideology that embeds power dynamics as a structural reality on the lives of men and women. We are, in line with gender theory (see Connell, 2020), that this ideology serves relatively few men well. Men and women have had to find ways of carving out space within it to exercise agency and express identity and subjectivity. However, the harsh realities of gender power and how it operates can be seen as a deprivation of capabilities; it restricts individual freedoms and, in turn, limits one's opportunities to flourish (see Sen, 1999, pp. 87–88) in accordance with principles of human equality and well-being. This applies especially, but not exclusively, to women (including those who self-identify as such) and sexual and gender minorities. From an intersectional perspective, we underline the necessity to complicate and always contextualize these categories and inequalities further. This includes the axes of race, ethnicity, social-economic status, ability, geographical location, and, of course, religious/secular life stance, identity, or affiliation.

This volume takes an even more nuanced view of the global situation by highlighting the absence of any obvious link between religion and HCPs in a number of contexts, as well as acknowledging that those who have been 'harmed' by cultural practices do not necessarily see their experience this way. Many women who have undergone FGM, for example, do not see it as a harmful practice at all. It is critical that we address this tension; we must seek to both understand and respect women's own reflections and experiences whilst at the same time holding firm to activist convictions that such practices represent abuse. FGM is now acknowledged by UNICEF to be among the most extreme forms of child abuse. How, then, might we move towards an understanding of why some women seemingly embrace and endorse such practices that, from the outside and for many on

the inside, represent harm? Here the adoption of a culturally relativist stance is useful. Anthropologists have at times come under harsh criticism for incorporating relativism into their methodology, which many have viewed as endorsement for the beliefs and practices recorded through ethnography (e.g. see: Lewis, 2013 for an overview of critiques of anthropology). But as Bradley (2020) highlighted, rather than being an apologetic approach, relativism as a useful research tool for studying and understanding the lives of others. Our argument in this volume is, if we are to see change, understanding how change might be possible, we have to appreciate at a deep level the motivations and attitudes of different individuals and communities. We must seek to understand *why* harmful practices persist. This requires close insight and a nuanced approach. Cultural relativism teaches us to reflect on and honestly acknowledge our biases, which may otherwise prevent us from gaining such insights. Understanding in detail the lives of 'others' often reveals the differences between an individual's view and a community attitude. In other words, a girl may not want to be cut or enter an early marriage, but because her community legitimizes these practices, for her to reject them would lead to extreme forms of social sanctioning and stigmatization that could represent greater harm than conforming. Thus, what appears to be a 'choice' may in fact be subject to intense social pressure and/or coercion.

Another important reflection to be made in our attempt to understand why individuals seemingly endorse practices that, through a human rights and feminist gendered lens, are seen as harmful is on the meaning of the notions such as 'harm' and 'pain'. It is possible that individual girls and women separate 'harm' from 'pain'. That is to say, they may experience being cut as extreme pain but do not see it as harm because it gives them access to adulthood and a respected place in their community complete with marriage prospects. The pain then is a necessary part of the transition. There are many and varied rites and traditions across societies that involve 'painful' body modifications, including piercing, tattooing, and stretching, binding, or shaping of various parts of the body (DeMello, 2007). Some studies looking at women's experiences of childbirth in Africa go further, arguing that pain itself is socially constructed to the point that the intensity of giving birth can be lessened through the cultural and psychological normalization of pain. Conversely, the medicalization of childbirth in the West has been accused of increasing a woman's trauma and feelings of pain because the biomedical discourse tells women what they will experience and how to respond (Gottlieb, 1995).

In short, cultural relativism understood as an anthropological and methodological term (as opposed to a political stance), if applied with sensitivity, supports a form of activism that begins with an understanding of context and the identification of how, when, and if change is likely, and whether it can be nurtured and supported. As feminist editors to this book from diverse religious and secular backgrounds, yet belonging to the ethnic majority, and living and working in the privileged contexts of North-western Europe, we also need to reflect upon our own positions and biases with regard to cross-cultural comparison, assessment, and intervention. Feminist anthropologists have been among the first

and most staunch critics of the colonial roots of their own discipline, and have struggled to establish more collaborative and reciprocal forms of research that seek to challenge, rather than reproduce, power inequalities between researchers and researched (Craven & Davis, 2013; Morgensen, 2013). We similarly fully support recent calls to decolonize disciplines of anthropology, gender and religious studies, the academy, and our societies more generally (Chidester, 2014; Lugones, 2008, 2010; Mogstad & Tse, 2018). This means, to the best of our abilities, to take an ethico-political stance as allies and, where possible, as advocates for all those affected by the harm caused by what bell hooks (1981) many years ago referred to as 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy'.

Social Norm Theories

Ethical considerations have also entered the debate on gender, culture, and harm, and particularly in how to end abusive practices, through the lens of social norm theory. In recent years, the body of theoretical and empirical literature on social norms across a wide range of fields (including sociology, anthropology, social and moral psychology, economics, law, political science, and health sciences) has grown considerably, and this has been accompanied by an increased interest in social norm approaches among Global Health practitioners and donors (Cislaghi & Heise, 2018), including those seeking to end HCPs. Social convention/norm theory posits that change happens as more individuals shift attitudes to the point when gradually the whole community holds them. At this point, the once individually held view becomes the community's view (see Mackie et al., 2015). Mackie (2018) accepts that this takes considerable time, but when individual attitudes start to change at a pace, this wholesale shift can and will happen quickly. What we do not know as activists is what triggers this process or specifically what the tipping points for sustainable change may be.

Theorists working within this social norm approach have drawn on a number of country case studies to develop insights into how norms are maintained and what might be the best triggers for change. Much of this work has focused on the practice of FGM, with the most in-depth studies emerging from Senegal and Kenya (e.g. see: Kandala et al., 2019). Yet many African feminists argue that the focus cannot be placed solely on the norms themselves, but rather the analysis of the operation of both power and gender within the wider socioeconomic and political contexts is critical. In this volume, we intend to illustrate the complex ways in which religion and power operate in both challenging and sustaining HCP/HTP, and we seek to demonstrate that it matters *whose* social norm it is. This requires us to focus on the gendered webs of power in which norms are practised and legitimized or problematized. Van Bavel's chapter is an example of the complex ways in which religion and power operate in challenging and sustaining FGM, demonstrating that it matters whose social norm it is, and speaks to a focus on the gendered webs of power in which it is practised and legitimized or problematized. In light of this, intersectionality as an approach has become important in developing social convention theories in such a way that they can elicit the

nuance of how power operates through gendered constructions and networks of various kinds that build and sustain broader systems of social inequalities that divide and marginalize people, on the basis of not just gender but also ethnicity, race, and education (see Iyer et al., 2008; Hankivsky, 2012; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016).

Shell Duncan et al. (2020), citing Hill Collins and Bilge (2016), describe intersectionality as

> an analytic tool that holds that people's lives and organisation of power in society are shaped not by a single axis of social division, such as gender, but instead by many axes that work together and influence each other.

Applying this to FGM and social norm theory requires a number of perspectives to come together. Mackie (1996) argues that FGM represents a social norm that has become 'locked' into a broader social system because it provides access to status through marriage. Social competition between families and groups means that any avenue available to extend status will be used. The locking-in of FGM is arguably also the result of the risks involved in not marrying well, including stigma, 'illegitimate' child rearing, and a loss of status (see also Mackie & LeJeune, 2009; Mackie, 2019).

Shell-Duncan et al. (2020) added to this understanding of how FGM as a norm becomes 'locked-in' by highlighting the operation of peer pressure. Peer pressure is linked to stigma in that identity as part of a peer network is critically important in contexts where livelihoods are precarious, and membership to such a network requires conformity to certain practices, such as FGM. Social networks represent important sources of different forms of capital, ranging from economic capital during times of hardship to emotional. Moreau and Shell-Duncan write:

> It is important to recognise that the practice is not, for the most part, perpetuated out of ignorance of the health risks or criminal ban, nor out of a blind adherence to 'tradition'. Instead, it represents a strategy to cope with the challenges faced by families who seek to assure the future welfare of their daughters.
>
> (Moreau & Shell-Duncan, 2020, p. 66)

This work is important not only in helping us understand why individuals and communities persist with practices that appear harmful but also in giving us a much more complex insight into the intersections of power, gender, age, class, and ethnicity, and we argue in this volume that religion must also be part of this analytical web.

Cislaghi and Heise (2019) have brought together gender and social norms to form a practical and theoretical lens through which to understand the relationships between individual attitudes and expressions of identity and personhood and the wider contextual realities of peoples' lives. In this volume, although

we recognize the potential of the recent framework of social norm theories to analyse and strategize against HCPs among women and girls, there are still several shortcomings (e.g. see: Piedalue et al., 2020). Furthermore, we argue that these approaches still need to be developed further to better include the influence and role of religion both in terms of leadership influence but also in providing systems of values and beliefs that entrench certain harmful attitudes and behaviours. Criticisms of social norm theories state that the wider context is both centrally important but also fluid. Social and even gender norms are not static but will change as other factors in the environment change. For example, the economic dimension to FGM, through its link to bride price, will be and is more or less significant depending on the socioeconomic climate.

In short, this volume brings religion more centrally into the theoretical discourses on social and gender norms, while recognizing its importance with regard to patriarchal power dynamics.

Structure of the Book

The nine case-study chapters in this volume demonstrate how adopting a gendered lens, sensitized to the impact of religion and culture, can generate a much-needed evidence base regarding what works to end harmful practices while avoiding the reifying and essentializing pitfalls outlined in this introduction.

The volume begins by exploring harmful practices and religion in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. While COVID-19 did not exist at the time when we convened the first meetings that led to the eventual publication of this book, throughout the writing and editing process while the pandemic swept across the globe it became clear that amongst its lesser-known, yet grave impacts was an increase in harmful gender practices. In Chapter 2, Bradley and Meme explore this and consider how COVID-19 has created an economic crisis that may compel families who already live in poverty to force their daughters into marriage at an early age, which, in turn, can mean securing successful marriage arrangements through subjecting girls to FGM or other forms of harm. Even in contexts where significant progress has ostensibly been made in recent years – including where religious actors have been successfully engaged into transforming harmful practices, taking part in initiatives, and challenging the related discourses to eradicate them – these moves have been rolled back, while underlying structures of gender inequality have re-emerged to further legitimize the forms of violence and oppression these girls are subjected to.

In Chapter 3, Oka and Storms argue that the understanding of cousin marriage among Dutch-Turkish and Dutch-Moroccan people as a 'Muslim' practice obscures the multiple meanings of cousin marriages as a strategy for establishing loving relationships, intimacy, and raising healthy children. Rather than building on this existing value to further promote healthy and free partnership choice among these communities, the framing of cousin marriage as a problematic Muslim practice in public policy contributes to the further marginalization of Muslims in the Netherlands, meaning transparency on marital decisions is less likely to be

realized. In Chapter 4, Bradley and Mubaiwa further demonstrate how national policies that frame religion as a social problem hampers open conversation and may in fact contribute to a rise in harmful practices. In the UK, securitization policies affect Mosques in such a way that efforts to challenge forced marriage and FGM from an Islamic perspective are hindered, which may contribute to strengthening assumptions on how Islam sanctions these practices and ultimately put more women and girls at risk of being forced into marriage or subjected to FGM. These examples all speak to how particular discourses and policies affect religious minority groups and therefore may indirectly and unintendedly create space for harmful practices to continue or increase.

In Chapter 5, Hamilton explores the complex intersections between particular practices among Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani (BIP) communities in the UK, including forced marriages and FGM. The vulnerability experienced in the daily lives of the women who took part in the research comes through strongly in the interviews presented. This vulnerability can be seen as a feature of social relations: when people are at risk, they have been made vulnerable to violence. In the case of the refugee women interviewed, for example, it was clear that the ways in which people are marginalized and maintained in a state of poverty, and the constant insecurity over their status, all contribute to significantly increasing the likelihood of them suffering other forms of violence, including those categorized as HCPs (if they have not already). The chapter draws out key themes relating to notions of *izzat*, power, and religious and cultural identity, which are presented thematically with reference to extracts from the women's narratives.

The volume then turns to discussing the cases of national policies that create and legitimize gendered practices – such as forced veiling and early marriage – informed by explicit religious and secular political ideologies. In Chapter 6, Rahbari explores the effects of Shi'i juristic rulings on child marriage in Iran. Rahbari critiques common assumptions of harmful practices as merely cultural or religious practices, pointing out the variation in religiously and culturally informed marriage practices across diverse communities and regions in Iran. She discusses the social opposition to legalizing child marriage, arguing that legalization must be understood as part of a hegemonic religio-political agenda, which makes child marriage a form of gendered biopolitics that disproportionally affects women and girls. Understanding such harmful practices as political, when they are legalized or legitimized by state law, is of crucial importance to the transformation of these practices, which in the case of Iran can be done through developing a legal framework for consent in marriage.

In Chapter 7, Sarah Fischer continues this discussion, taking us through a comparative analysis of forced veiling in Iran and forced unveiling in Turkey. In both contexts, state regulation of women's veiling practices leads to the discrimination of women in the education system, in the workplace, and within their families. This means that women face constant surveillance on their veiling practices, while it limits their room for manoeuvre in education and on the labour market. It strengthens the forms of control over how women conduct themselves and behave in the family sphere. The comparison between two states, with

very different religious/secular histories and opposing veiling policies, has some striking similarities when women's lived experiences are considered. This suggests not only that the direct influence of the nation-state in creating gendered forms of harm needs to be considered, but also that only research into women's experiences of such forms of oppression and discrimination can offer insight into the multi-layered social consequences of such national policies.

The next three chapters explore harmful gendered practices that are understood or addressed more explicitly as cultural forms of gender-based violence. In Chapter 8, Chipenembe, Longman, and Coene focus on the gendered forms of harm that lesbian, bi-sexual, and transwomen women in Mozambique experience as a consequence of their sexual orientation. In particular, women often face severe oppression and harm from within their families and communities when they publicly challenge their sexual and gendered marginalization. This may include being forced into certain cultural and/or spiritual practices 'to cure' them, such as early or forced marriage, rape, and other forms of sexual violence. Chipenembe discusses two groups of traditional religious leaders: those who promote such practices and others who resist them. However, the chapter calls us to consider the physical and psychological forms of violence that LBT women face while navigating their sexual wellbeing when their families, communities, and spiritual leaders want them to submit to hetero- and gender-normative ideals. While the forms of violence Chipenembe's interlocutors experience cannot be explained by referring to culture or tradition alone, the dominant 'hetero-normative culture' in which this violence is legitimized needs to be acknowledged.

In Chapter 9, van Bavel discusses Protestant activism against female circumcision practices among the Maasai in Loita, Kenya, that include a firm rejection of Maasai cultural and spiritual practices. Van Bavel demonstrates that rejecting female circumcision is only possible for a small group of formally educated protestants that become part of a community in which 'not cutting' is the social norm. However, for many, this does not only contribute to increased secrecy around the practice but also to forms of counter-activism that understand female circumcision as a way of protecting, of even 'rescuing', Masaai cultural identity from erosion. This then provides a context in which interventions fail to have a sustainable impact, and in which prevalence of female genital cutting may actually increase.

In Chapter 10, Le Roux explores the understandings of girl's sexuality in religious communities across different contexts. Comparing early marriage practices among Christian, Muslim, and Hindu communities with the abstinence movement in the US, Le Roux argues that harmful practices are found across different contexts and cultures. Furthermore, the problematization of 'culture' and 'tradition' in relation to harmful practices in non-Western contexts obscures the drive to control female sexuality that is underlying many of these practices. Undoubtedly, religion often plays a role in facilitating and legitimizing such practices, which Le Roux argues with reference to cases from Bangladesh and the US. Yet these cases also demonstrate that religion is, in turn, is often closely intertwined with state politics.

The final chapter in this volume questions both the extent to which lenses of culture and tradition can help us understand how these gendered forms of violence are shaped and their efficacy as the focus of interventions that seek to challenge harmful practices. The contributions of Le Roux and of Chipenembe, Longman, and Coene illustrate how this obscures a more nuanced understanding of how gender and heteronormative structures operate to control female sexuality. The role religion plays in this is hard to grasp as it may be used to legitimize particular harmful practices, but it can also be used to resist them. However, all the chapters in this volume speak to the importance of having a rigorous understanding of how religion is entangled with power within a particular context, including state politics as well as the gendered webs of power in which people – and women and girls in particular – are embedded.

The volume is concluded by Professor Azza Karam, who currently serves as the Secretary-General of Religions for Peace – the largest multi-religious leadership platform with 92 national and 6 regional interreligious councils. Her contribution, titled *Faith-full Reflections from a Civically minded, Radically Inclusive, Other*, considers the value of the work presented in the ten chapters, particularly in relation to the role of religion in 'doing' development, and especially doing 'gender' in development. She also asks important questions that, as yet, have not been answered, including what happens when certain religious organizations become bigger, stronger, and more impactful partners of political and economic regimes and interests? The reflections end with the reminder that, while the pendulum of judgement about religion has, in recent years, moved from extreme harm to extreme good, neither is entirely accurate: narratives of this kind, which mirror the arrogance of absolutism of truth, rarely move us further in the arc of history. Karam maintains that there is indeed harm done to human rights and particularly to gender when powerful religious institutions and faith-based organizations are able to shape global development practices, but argues that when religions work together to serve as civic agents, and to serve all barring none, *that* is when the arc of history can bend towards justice.

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