Harmful Practices in the Eastern & Southern Africa Region
2021 Child Helpline Data

At the end of March 2022, we invited 133 of our child helpline members to submit their data through an online survey. The survey included, among other things, information about the reasons why children and young people were making contact. We asked the child helplines to provide the number of contacts received in 2021 that were about violence and, specifically, harmful practices, disaggregated by the gender of the child or young person concerned.

We obtained relevant data from 12 of our member child helplines in Eastern & Southern Africa in 2021. Altogether, these child helplines received a total of 608,788 counselling contacts. The most common reason for contacting a child helpline in Eastern & Southern African countries – occurring 100,991 times – was violence, which accounted for 16.6% of all counselling contacts.

Child/Early/Forced marriage and FGM, which together are referred to here as “Harmful Practices”, are two of the 14 sub-categories under “Violence”. Of the 12 child helplines who reported data in the region in 2021, 8 of them – our members in Burundi, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe – reported data on contacts concerning these Harmful Practices. Together, they reported a total of 7,669 contacts about harmful traditional practices, accounting for 7.6% of all violence concerns in those countries.

Harmful Practices (7.6%)

All other contacts about violence (92.4%)

Harmful traditional practices are forms of violence that have been committed in certain communities and societies for so long that they are considered – or are being presented by perpetrators – as part of accepted cultural practice. The most common ones are forced or early marriage, so called “honour” based violence, and female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM).

Child marriage is a legal or customary union where one or both of the parties are under 18 years of age. Early marriage refers to a legal or customary union involving a person below 18 years in countries where the majority age is attained earlier or upon marriage.

FGM refers to all procedures that intentionally alter or cause injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. Procedures can cause severe bleeding and problems urinating and subsequent cysts and infections, as well as complications in childbirth and increased risk of newborn deaths. FGM is a violation of the human rights of girls and women.

What are Harmful Traditional Practices?

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Eastern & Southern Africa region
Eastern and Southern Africa is a vast, geographically diverse region that stretches from the Red Sea in the north to the Cape of Good Hope in the south. It contains Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Comoros, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.
In addition to the data we gathered from our member child helplines, we also looked at the prevalence of both FGM\(^5,6\) and child marriage\(^7\) in these countries, as published by UNICEF.

The findings show that the number of contacts received by our child helpline members relating to Child/Early/Forced Marriage correlate with the prevalence of the issue in the country. This means that the likelihood of child helplines receiving such contacts is higher in countries where the issue is more prevalent. For example, Malawi has the highest rate of females married under the age of 18 (42.1%) out of all the countries in this region in our data set. Malawi's child helpline also receives the highest rate of contacts concerning child/early/forced marriage out of violence-related contacts made by girls (36.2%) compared to other countries in the region.

This suggests that child helplines provide support in the issues really impacting children in the region, and their data captures a realistic impression of these issues. It is important to listen to the voices of children, they tell us what their concerns are.

That isn't the case for FGM. This might be due in part to the fact that we only have very few data points, making analysis difficult. According to UNICEF, Ethiopia has a 65.2% prevalence among girls and woman aged 15 to 49 years. Kenya 21.0%, Uganda 0.3% and Tanzania 10.0%. In comparison, our child helpline members received contacts relating to FGM that corresponded to 0.0%, 0.8%, 0.1% and 7.6% of all violence-related contacts, for these same countries respectively. All contacts received by these child helplines on the subject of FGM came from girls or young women.

Child helplines provide crucial support to children and young people who are victims of harmful practices. Every child and young person should have free and unrestricted access to child helpline services.