

Appraisal Of the Legal and Institutional Frameworks on Eradication of Harmful Cultural Practices of Female Genital Mutilation and Widowhood Practices in Ekiti State, Nigeria

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DOI: 10.56201/JLGP.v9.no2.2024.pg126.138

Abstract

Female Genital Mutilation and Widowhood Practice is one of the cultural harmful practices suffered by women in Nigeria. This remains a pervasive issue in Ekiti State, with significant consequences for victims. This study evaluates the effectiveness of legal and institutional frameworks in eradicating Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and harmful widowhood practices in Ekiti State, Nigeria. Despite international and national efforts to abolish these practices, they persist due to cultural and social norms. This study employs a doctrinal approach to examine the legal frameworks governing Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and harmful widowhood practices in Ekiti State, Nigeria. The doctrinal analysis reveals significant shortcomings, including inadequate definitions, insufficient penalties, and limited jurisdictional scope. Furthermore, inconsistencies between federal and state laws, and the lack of effective implementation mechanisms, undermine efforts to eradicate these harmful practices. The research aims to critically analyze the existing laws, policies, and judicial decisions to identify gaps and inconsistencies hindering effective eradication. Through a comprehensive review of relevant statutes, case laws, and policy documents, this study evaluates the adequacy of Nigeria's legal framework in addressing FGM and widowhood practices. Particular attention is paid to the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015, the Ekiti State Gender-Based Violence (Prohibition) Law 2019, The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) as amended, The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of women in Africa. The paper highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the current legal framework and identifies areas for improvement. The study aims to educate and enhance the protection of women from such cultural harmful practices. It also analyses that female Genital Mutilation and widowhood practices are violation of a victim's rights. The paper highlights how women in a patriarchal society are faced with some practices that affect their dignity and self-esteem. This study recommends legislative reforms, policy revisions, and judicial activism to strengthen the legal framework. Specifically, it advocates for clearer definitions, stiffer penalties, and enhanced jurisdictional scope. Effective

implementation requires inter-agency collaboration, community engagement, and capacity building for law enforcement and judicial officials. This research contributes to the understanding of the legal dimensions of FGM and harmful widowhood practices, informing policy and legislative reforms aimed at eradicating these practices in Ekiti State

Keywords: Female, Genital-mutilation, Widowhood, Harmful-practices, Culture

1.0 Introduction

Culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, customs, and practices of a particular group or society (Hofstede, 2001). In Ekiti State, Nigeria, certain cultural practices, such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and widowhood practices, have been identified as harmful and violating human rights. Despite efforts to eradicate these practices, they persist, highlighting the need for an appraisal of the legislative and institutional framework governing their prevention and response.

This study examines the effectiveness of existing laws, policies, and institutions in addressing these harmful cultural practices, with a view to identifying gaps and recommending improvements.

A culture is the way of life, beliefs, norms and traditions which certain groups of people adopt as their ways of life. Harmful cultural practices are therefore the beliefs, norms and traditions that are causing or likely to cause harm in society. Harmful cultural practices have done a lot of harms to those who believe in it, thus becoming a menace that needs to be banned in the society. Harmful cultural practices, though not limited to any gender, could be the violation of the right of women, girls and children because they are the most vulnerable persons. Harmful cultural practices are often justified and presented by perpetrators as integral parts of the accepted traditions and ways of life, sometimes even being disguised as superstitions or deeply held beliefs in some communities and locality. It is intended in this paper to discuss the duo of Female Genital Mutilation and Widowhood Practice as forms of Harmful Cultural Practices with reference to Ekiti State, the statutory and institutional framework put in place to combat this menace. The paper also examines the effectiveness as well as measures to block the gaps in the law, to achieve greater efficiency in combating these harmful practices.

The author has formulated four questions below for investigation:

1. What are the existing legislative and institutional frameworks addressing FGM and widowhood practices in Ekiti State?
2. How effective are these frameworks in preventing and responding to FGM and widowhood practices?
3. What are the challenges and gaps in implementing these frameworks?
4. What is the impact of these frameworks on reducing the prevalence of FGM and widowhood practices?

2.0 Female Genital Mutilation

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is the violation of the right of a girl child. According to the United Nations Children Education Fund (UNICEF,2018), the practices of FGM is common in Nigeria especially the Northern Part of the country and some few States in the Southern part and unfortunately Ekiti State is one of the States where the cultural practice of Female Genital Mutilation is prevalent Nigeria.

2.1 Legal Framework on Harmful Cultural Practices on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and Widowhood Practices

Harmful cultural practices, such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and widowhood rites, have been perpetuated for centuries, causing irreparable harm to women and girls worldwide. These practices are deeply rooted in societal norms, traditions, and beliefs, often justified as essential to cultural identity and community cohesion. However, they violate fundamental human rights, including the right to bodily autonomy, health, and dignity. In response, governments and international organizations have established legislative frameworks to prevent and eliminate these harmful practices. This discussion will examine the legislative framework surrounding FGM and widowhood rites, exploring the strengths and limitations of existing laws, and highlighting the need for continued advocacy and action to protect the rights and well-being of women and girls.

2.1.1 *Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act, 2015.*

Section 6 of the Act Prohibits female circumcision or genital mutilation, and prescribes a fine of N200,000 or imprisonment for 4 years or both for offenders. (Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act, 2015)

The section provides that a Person who performs female circumcision or genital mutilation or engages another to carry out such circumcision or mutilation commits an offense and is liable on conviction to a term of imprisonment not exceeding 4 years or to a fine not exceeding N200,000.00 or both. Also, anyone who attempts to carry out the offense of female circumcision or genital mutilation also commits an offense and is liable on conviction to a term of imprisonment not exceeding 2 years or to a fine not exceeding N100,000.00 or both. A person who also incites, aids or abets or counsels another to commit the offense of female circumcision or mutilation commits an offense and is liable on conviction to a term of imprisonment not exceeding 2 years or to a fine not exceeding N100,000.00 or both.

Section 15(1) Prohibits harmful tradition practice against a widow. It criminalizes offenders and prescribes a fine of N500,000 or imprisonment not exceeding 2 years or both for offenders.

Section 20(1) Prohibits harmful traditional practices, and prescribes a fine of N500,000 or imprisonment not exceeding 4 years or both for offenders.

2.1.2 Gender - Based Violence Prohibition Law 2019 (Ekiti State)

Section 7 of the Law Prohibits female genital mutilation

“(1.) The circumcision or genital mutilation of the girl child or woman is hereby prohibited.

(2) A person who performs female circumcision or genital mutilation or engages another to carry out such circumcision or mutilation commits an offense and is liable on conviction to a minimum of 1 year imprisonment or to a fine of N200, 000.00 or both.

(3) A person who attempts to commit the offense provided for in subsection (2) of this Section commits an offense and is liable on conviction to a term of imprisonment not exceeding 1 year or to a fine not exceeding N100,000.00 or both.

(4) A person who incites, aids, abets, or counsels another person to commit the offense provided for in subsection (2) of this Section commits an offense and is liable on conviction to a term of imprisonment not exceeding 1 year or to a fine not exceeding N100,000.00 or both.”

Section 16 of the Law Prohibits harmful widowhood practices.

Section 16 (1) provides that a person who subjects a widow to harmful traditional practices commits an offense and is liable on conviction to a minimum of 2 years imprisonment or to a fine of N 200.000.00 or both.

Section 21 of the law criminalizes harmful traditional practices

A person who carries out harmful traditional practices on another commits an offense and is liable on conviction to a minimum of 1 year of a fine of #200,000 or both.

2.1.3 The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999 as amended)

The constitution of Nigeria provides for the fundamental rights of citizens

Section 34 provides for Right to dignity of human person

(1) Every individual is entitled to respect for the dignity of his person, and accordingly -

(a) no person shall be subject to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment;

(b) no person shall be held in slavery or servitude;

2.1.4 Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People Right on the Right of Women in Africa

States Parties shall prohibit and condemn all forms of harmful practices which negatively affect the human rights of women and which are contrary to recognized international standards. States parties shall take all necessary legislative and other measures to eliminate such practices, including:

- a) Creation of public awareness in all sectors of society regarding harmful practices through information, formal and informal education and outreach programmes*
- b) Prohibition, through legislative measures backed by sanctions, of all forms of female genital mutilation, scarification, medicalization and para-medicalization of female genital mutilation and all other practices in order to eradicate them*

- c) *Provision of necessary support to victims of harmful practices through basic services such as health services, legal and judicial support, emotional and psychological counselling as well as vocational training to make them self-supporting.*
- d) *Protection of women who are at risk of being subjected to harmful practices or all other forms of violence, abuse and intolerance.*

Widows' Rights

States Parties shall take appropriate legal measures to ensure that widows enjoy all human rights through the implementation of the following provisions:

- a) *that widows are not subjected to inhuman, humiliating or degrading treatment*
- b) *that a widow shall automatically become the guardian and custodian of her children, after the death of her husband, unless this is contrary to the interests and the welfare of the children*
- c) *that a widow shall have the right to remarry, and in that event, to marry the person of her choice.*

Right to Inheritance

A widow shall have the right to an equitable share in the inheritance of the property of her husband. A widow shall have the right to continue to live in the matrimonial house.

In case of remarriage, she shall retain this right if the house belongs to her or she has inherited it.

Women and men shall have the right to inherit, in equitable shares, their parents' properties.

2.2 Effects of Female Genital Mutilation

Some of the side effects of female genital mutilation (FGM) can be divided into physical, emotional and psychological effects

2.2.1 Physical Effects

1. Hemorrhage: Hemorrhage is the bleeding that occurs inside a body when a blood vessel is damaged. Female Genital Mutilation can lead to hemorrhage and the damage can be permanent, if the girl is bleeding after being cut and it's not controlled. Uncontrolled hemorrhage is life threatening. Some of the symptoms of hemorrhage include headache, diarrhea, weakness, low blood pressure, confusion, dizziness among others. This can cause intense pain, bleeding, and shock, especially if performed in unsterile conditions with no anesthesia. (WHO,2018).

2. Infection and Sepsis: The risk of infection is high due to unsterile equipment and poor hygiene, leading to potentially life-threatening complications like sepsis. In most cases, the genitals are infected. The traditional circumcision practitioners (*onikola/alabe*) that carry out these practices are mostly illiterates. They use unsterilized knives, blades, needles, syringes and other sharp objects on these girls, thus causing infections on their wounds. Some diseases like HIV and Urinary Tract Infection (UTI) are transmitted via sharing of sharp objects used by the traditional circumcisers for these girls. (UNICEF,2020).

3. Damage to genital and urinary tract issues (UTI): FGM can cause permanent damage to genital and urinary tract tissues, leading-to chronic pain, urinary incontinence, and reproductive problems such as infertility, low libido etc (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2010).

4. Increased risk of childbirth complications: FGM can increase the risk of obstetric complications, such as prolonged labor, fetal distress, and emergency cesarean sections. (WHO, 2018).

5. Chronic pains and discomfort: Women who have undergone FGM may experience chronic pain, discomfort, and difficulty with sexual intercourse. A girl child or women are left with severe pains after their genitals are mutilated. This has a long-term effect on them both psychologically and emotionally. (Lancet, 2019)

6. Death: In some cases, the issue of Female Genital Mutilation has led to death, complications from the mutilation when not properly treated. Some of these complications are from infections, hemorrhage etc.

2.2.2 Emotional and Psychological Effects

1. Traumatic and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): FGM can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression due to the traumatic nature of the procedure. (Journal of Traumatic Stress, 2018).

2. Anxiety and Depression: Women who have undergone FGM may experience anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem due to the physical and emotional trauma.

3. Low self-esteem: FGM can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, and low self-esteem, affecting a woman's confidence and overall well-being.

4. Fear of intimacy and relationship: Women who have undergone FGM may experience fear of intimacy and difficulty forming healthy relationships due to the traumatic nature and procedures (Sexuality Research and Social Policy. 2019)

Furthermore, the issue of gender-based violence can lead to long term consequences which includes chronic health problems such as urinary tract infections, reproductive issues, and sexual dysfunction.

Also, Female Genital Mutilation can cause reproductive health issues such as infertility, miscarriage, and stillbirth. (Reproductive Health, 2019)

Female genital mutilation can lead to mental health disorders. Women who have undergone FGM are at a higher risk of developing mental health disorders, such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD. (Journal of Mental Health, 2020).

2.3 Institutional Efforts to Curb Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

In Ekiti State, there are lots of advocacy and campaign against the menace of Female Genital Mutilation across the State. The civil society organizations like Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), and National Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ) have taken it upon themselves to campaign against FGM in the state. Also, the office of the First Lady of the State and the Ministry of Women Affairs, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health are not left out in various actions to stamp out Female Genital Mutilation. Other Non-governmental Organization like Balm in Gilead foundation (BIGIF) has also advocated against Female genital mutilation in the state.

1. Ekiti State Government establishes the Ekiti State Gender-Based Violence Management Committee to coordinate responses to GBV, including FGM and widowhood practices.
2. Ekiti State Ministry of Women Affairs implements programs to empower women and girls, including sensitization campaigns against FGM and widowhood practices.
3. Ekiti State Ministry of Health: Provides medical support and rehabilitation services for survivors of FGM and other forms of GBV.
4. Some government agencies and Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) have also raised awareness and advocacy to promote abandonment of harmful cultural practices.
5. Ekiti State Gender-Based Violence Referral Pathway: Guides service providers in responding to GBV cases, including FGM and widowhood practices.

2.4. Challenges of Curbing Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Ekiti State

1. Inadequate legal enforcement: Weak enforcement of laws and policies prohibits FGM, allowing perpetrators to go unpunished.
In Ekiti State, a significant gap in the fight against female genital mutilation (FGM) is the lack of criminal jurisdiction by Customary Courts, which are closest to the grassroots and most competent to handle such cases. However, the Law to Prohibit Female Circumcision or Genital Mutilation in Ekiti State, vested jurisdiction on the State High Court. It is therefore pertinent to amend the Law and allow such matters to be adjudicated by the customary court, with appeals lying to the customary court of appeal of Ekiti State.
2. Limited awareness and understanding: Despite efforts to educate communities, many remain uninformed about the harmful effects of FGM, hindering progress toward abandonment (UNICEF, 2019).
3. Deep-rooted cultural and social norms: Persistent cultural beliefs and social norms perpetuate FGM, posing a substantial challenge to changing attitudes and behaviors. (World Health Organization, 2018).
4. Limited access to services: Survivors of FGM often lack access to medical, psychological, and social support services. Ekiti State Government, (2020).
5. Stigma and discrimination: Survivors face stigma and discrimination, discouraging them from seeking help and hindering efforts to address these practices. UNFPA. (2020).
6. Limited engagement of traditional leaders: Traditional leaders' involvement is crucial, but their engagement is often limited, hindering efforts to change cultural norms.
7. Inadequate funding: Insufficient funding constrains efforts to address FGM and widowhood practices, limiting program scope and effectiveness.
8. Limited data and research: Inadequate data and research hinder understanding of the prevalence and dynamics of FGM and widowhood practices, making it difficult to develop effective interventions.
9. Weak institutional capacity: Government agencies and institutions lack the capacity and resources to effectively address FGM and widowhood practices.

10. Limited community involvement: Community members are not adequately involved in efforts to address FGM and widowhood practices, limiting ownership and sustainability.

3.0 Harmful Widowhood Practices

The culture of widowhood has been in existence for over a long period of time, and it has been transmitted among generations in the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. In Yoruba land, Ekiti inclusive, if a husband dies, his wife would be made to pass through some rites and rituals like shaving her head, wearing black apparels for forty days, and staying indoors for forty days which are all in violation of the Constitution and fundamental human rights of such widows. For instance, Section 35 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (As Amended) provides for the right to dignity of human person. Harmful widowhood practices refer to traditional customs and beliefs that cause physical, emotional, or economic harm to widows, often perpetuating gender inequality and human rights violations. Examples include:

1. Widow inheritance: forcing a widow to marry a male relative of her late husband
2. Widow cleansing: subjecting a widow to rituals, such as sexual cleansing, to "purify" her
3. Property grabbing: confiscating a widow's property, land, or assets by her late husband's family
4. Social ostracism: isolating or stigmatizing a widow, restricting her social interactions and mobility
5. Forced mourning: imposing prolonged or excessive mourning periods, limiting a widow's autonomy
6. Hair shaving: forcing a widow to shave her hair as a symbol of mourning or submission
7. Dress code restrictions: imposing strict dress codes or attire on widows, symbolizing their status
8. Economic deprivation: denying a widow access to her late husband's assets, income, or resources
9. These practices vary across cultures and communities, but they often share a common goal: to control, subordinate, and exploit widows.

3.1 Effect of Harmful Widowhood Practice

In a situation where a woman is forced to wear certain clothes, stay indoors for a period of days, shave or barb her hair without her consent, such woman would be traumatized and sad due to the torture she had been made to pass through.

Widows in some cases are considered as part of the deceased's property which could be inherited by her late husband's family without having any right to inherit from her late husband's property.

1. Psychological trauma: Widows experience emotional distress, anxiety, and depression due to forced mourning, social ostracism, and economic deprivation (Adepoju, 2019).
2. Economic vulnerability: Widows face property grabbing, loss of inheritance, and reduced access to resources, leading to poverty and economic dependence (Ojo, 2020).

3. Social exclusion: Widows are stigmatized, isolated, and excluded from social events, limiting their social support networks and community engagement (Fapohunda, 2018).
4. Health risks: Widows may experience poor physical and mental health due to forced sex, forced marriage, and lack of access to healthcare (WHO, 2019).
5. Limited access to education and employment: Widows face barriers to education and employment, perpetuating cycles of poverty and dependence (UNICEF, 2012)

3.2 Causes of harmful widowhood practice

1. Patriarchy: Our Culture believes in a society where the male dominates and rule over the women. When a husband dies, the wife is made to face hardships and inhuman treatment. Patriarchal societies often perpetuate gender inequality, leading to harmful widowhood practices (Human Rights Watch, 2019).
2. Cultural and social norms: Deeply ingrained cultural and social norms perpetuate harmful widowhood practices (UN Women, 2018).
3. Low-Level Education: Widows who are illiterate are considered not to be mentally fit, therefore in most cases, such illiterate widow may not know whether her right is trampled on or not. Limited access to education can perpetuate harmful widowhood practices (UNICEF, 2018).
4. Poverty: There is a popular saying among the Yoruba people that the death of a woman's husband is the beginning of her misfortune, and this is applicable when the woman is extremely poor and relies solely on the husband before his death. When a woman's husband dies, some of the deceased relative may force the woman out of her husband's house and acquire the deceased's property forcefully. This is why most women, even the educated ones, do buy and separate their belongings and properties from their husband's, while he is still alive, but this is however not applicable to a poor widow. Economic dependence and poverty can contribute to harmful widowhood practices (World Bank 2019)
5. Power dynamics: Imbalanced power dynamics between men and women can lead to harmful widowhood practices (African Women's Development Fund, 2019).Also Traditional beliefs and superstitions can contribute to harmful widowhood practices (The Loomba Foundation 2019)

3.3 Legislation to Curb Harmful Widowhood Practices in Ekiti State

The Ekiti State Gender-Based Violence (Prohibition) Law, 2019 has repealed the Rights of Widows Law, Cap R6.

Section 16 (1) of the Ekiti State Gender-Based Violence (Prohibition) law provides for curbing harmful widowhood practices in the state

“A person who subjects a widow to harmful traditional practices commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a minimum of 2 years imprisonment or to a fine of N 200,000.00 or both

(2) A person who attempts to commit the abuse provided for in subsection (1) of this Section commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a term of imprisonment for 1 year or to a fine of N100, 000.00 or both.

(3) A person who incites, aids, abets, or counsels another person to commit the act of violence as provided for in subsection (1) of this Section commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a minimum of 1 year imprisonment or to a fine of N 100,000.00 or both.

(4) A person who receives or assists another who, to his or her knowledge, committed the offence provided for in subsection (1) of this Section is an accessory after the fact and is liable on conviction to a term of imprisonment for 6 months or to a fine not exceeding N100,000.00 or both.”

3.4 Institutional Efforts to Curb Harmful Widowhood Practice in Ekiti State

The Civil Society Organization (CSO's) and some Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) have established and organized programmes to empower indigent widows across the State, e.g. some vocations or financial empowerment for trading among others. The Office of the Wife of the Governor is also doing a lot to fight the menace of Harmful Widowhood practice. The patriarchal culture has also made women to be disadvantaged in a way, notwithstanding, a woman is expected to protect her interest even while the husband is living because of the selfish interest of some relatives.

3.5 Challenges in combating Harmful Widowhood Practices in Ekiti State

Limited access to justice: Widows may face challenges in accessing justice due to lack of awareness, financial constraints, or cultural barriers. Also violators of widows right may not be punished.

Harmful widowhood practices are often deeply rooted in cultural norms and traditions, making it challenging to change attitudes and behaviors. Also Widows may face stigma and shame, which can prevent them from seeking help or reporting abuses.

Widows may lack support systems, including family, friends, and community networks, which can exacerbate their vulnerability.

Addressing the Gaps

The Ekiti State Government should review and amend the existing laws to specifically address harmful widowhood practices and provide sufficient penalties.

There is need for public sensitization and awareness campaigns. This will help and change attitudes and behaviors towards harmful widowhood practices across the state. The government and civil society organizations should establish support systems and services, including counseling, legal aid, and economic empowerment programs, to support widows and help them access justice. Harmful widowhood practice is a cultural practice which stems from tradition and customs, mostly prevalent in the localities. The Ekiti State Customary Court, which is closer to the grassroots with competence over the subject matter should be made to

have Criminal Jurisdiction over such harmful widowhood practice. Appeal on such matters should consequently lie to the Customary Court of Appeal of Ekiti State.

4.0 Summary of findings

This paper examines the harmful cultural practices of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and widowhood practices in Ekiti State, Nigeria. It highlights the prevalence, causes, and consequences of these practices, as well as the gaps and challenges in addressing them. The report provides recommendations for curbing FGM and widowhood practices, including strengthening legal frameworks, community engagement, education, support services, institutional capacity building, research, partnerships, alternative rites of passage, economic empowerment, with monitoring and evaluation

5.0 Conclusion

Conclusively, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and widowhood practices are harmful cultural practices that perpetuate gender-based violence, discrimination, and human rights violations in Ekiti State. To curb these practices, a multi-faceted approach has been proposed which includes strong legal frameworks and enforcement, community engagement and education, support services for survivors, institutional capacity building, research and data collection, partnerships, and collaborations, economic empowerment, etc.

Recommendations

To effectively eradicate female genital mutilation and widowhood practices in Ekiti, the following measures are recommended.

1. **Strengthen Legal Framework:** Enact more laws that specifically prohibit FGM and widowhood practices in the state and increase penalties for offenders while providing protection for survivors.
2. **Community Engagement:** Stakeholders should collaborate with traditional leaders, community groups, and religious organizations to raise awareness. Also, there is a need to engage in dialogue to change cultural norms and practices.
3. **Education and Sensitization:** There is a need to integrate FGM and widowhood practices education into school curriculum, conduct public awareness campaigns, workshops, and seminars among others
4. **Support Services:** There is a need to establish medical, psychological, and social support services for survivors, while providing economic empowerment programs for women and girls through entrepreneurship skills development programs.
5. **Partnership and Collaboration:** There is a need to foster partnership and collaboration among government, NGOs, community groups, and international organizations.
6. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Relevant stakeholders and government are expected to establish a monitoring and evaluation system to track progress, while conducting regular assessments to inform program improvement.

It is believed that the recommendations above will help Ekiti State in the fight against harmful widowhood practice and female genital mutilation.

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