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Discussing culture and gender-based violence in comprehensive sexuality education in Ethiopia



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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of education programmes, including comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), to address gender-based violence in schools is under increasing scrutiny. Explanations for the persisting challenges with these programmes have so far typically pointed towards ‘culture’. Drawing on a qualitative case study in Ethiopia, this paper analyses the relations between gender-based violence and culture, as it is presented in CSE. It reveals that uncritical conceptions of tradition and modernity, as well as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ cultures in CSE, fail to address and discuss gender relations and patriarchy as the root causes of gender-based violence. This enhances the vulnerability of young women and the reduces the effectiveness of CSE in addressing gender-based violence.

1. Introduction

Tensions that arise with promoting educational initiatives and conducting research on sexuality in developing contexts are being increasingly reported. On the one hand development and modernisation are celebrated by young people as inspiring an ideal of free and liberal sexual practices; yet at the same time they are viewed to be at odds with a traditional cultural identity (Leclerc-Madlala, 2004; Parkes et al., 2016; Lator, 2004; Spronk, 2009). For instance, Lator (2004) argues that in Sub-Saharan Africa, there is a widespread (though contested) belief that modernisation has led to a dramatic increase in child sexual abuse; and Leclerc-Madlala (2004) reveals how ideals of modernity and cosmopolitanism are believed to lead to transactional sex in South Africa. Spronk (2009) also describes that sexuality is centrally placed in the positioning of young urban professionals in Nairobi, as modern subjects. However, for these young professionals, ‘proper morality’ remains important to their modern sexual identities and is strongly connected to cultural heritage and notions of ‘Africanness’. It is without doubt that development efforts, including educational programmes for the promotion of sexual health, affect notions of culture, modernity, and tradition, as well as what is considered to be ‘proper’ (see e.g. Bhana, 2015; Chilisa, 2005; Heslop et al., 2015).

Over the past two decades, research has paid increasing attention to ‘culture’ in relation to education programmes on sexuality and gender-based violence. Some of this research has been inspired by concerns that cultural barriers, mostly referring to tradition, negatively affect the promotion of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) (see e.g.

Chandra-Mouli et al., 2015; Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2016). At the same time, post-colonial and feminist theorists have pointed out that conceptualising culture as a barrier to sexual health offers a narrow and simplified view of postcolonial and developing contexts (Chilisa, 2005; Khau, 2012; Mohanty, 1991; Tamale, 2011). Sexual health research has largely not considered contextual interpretations of what sexual health means (Chilisa, 2005), and lacks a socio-historical approach to gender and sexuality issues in Sub-Saharan African societies (Tamale, 2011). These theorists argue that the ‘modern’ seems to be indicative of the types of knowledge, understanding and information that has been developed in the West, which dominate interpretations of what ‘awareness’ or ‘sexual knowledge’ should entail. In similar vein, several studies have highlighted how ‘culture’ is often looked at to explain high prevalence rates of gender-based violence (Bhana, 2015; Kedir and Admasachew, 2010; Meyer, 2008). However, little is known about how teachers and students in schools, who are directly involved with gender-based violence view the relationship between culture and gender-based violence, and what an educational response to gender-based violence should look like.

Against this backdrop, the study examines how students and teachers interpret the relationship between culture and gender-based violence, and how comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) should discuss culture in relation to gender-based violence in schools in Ethiopia. A limited number of studies examine how educational programmes, such as CSE, include discussions of culture (see e.g. Browes, 2015; Geary, 2007; Mukoro, 2017), however this discussion is not in relation to gender-based violence. This study addresses this gap in

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research by drawing on data from interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted in schools with CSE programmes running in two separate fieldwork trips to Ethiopia. On both occasions, it was striking that participants often referred to ‘culture’ as explanatory factor for gender-based violence. The research reveals that notions of culture and desired cultural change are highly gendered and influenced by ideas of what is ‘modern’. This affects the vulnerability of young women and limits the effectiveness of CSE to address gender-based violence. The paper specifically addresses the implications for sexuality education programmes in successfully addressing gender-based violence by paying attention to culture.

1.1. Culture and gender-based violence

In light of growing attention for SRHR, gender-based violence is receiving increased international attention. Aiming to explain high prevalence of gender-based violence, [Kedir and Admasachew \(2010\)](#) reveal how their sample of gender experts typically ‘blame’ culture for persisting intimate partner violence in Ethiopia. The authors highlight culture is often used as an excuse not to intervene or to remain silent about violent behaviour, even if respondents think this is not a legitimate excuse (see also [Bhana, 2015](#); [Meyer, 2008](#)). Arguably, ‘culture-blaming’ reflects a narrative adopted by the general population including young people, parents and teachers, although these groups interpret differently the legitimacy of its explanation for violence. Teachers in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, for instance, use culture for legitimising gender-based violence; referring to the dominant position of men according to Zulu culture and expressing discontent about increased attention to women’s rights that may threaten this superior male position ([Bhana et al., 2009](#)). For some teachers, their attachment to traditional culture is a form of nostalgia that is threatened by more modern values of, in this case, gender equality and women’s rights ([DePalma and Francis, 2014](#)).

The conceptual distinction between traditional and modern values has become a common in debates about the relationship between culture, cultural change, and gender-based violence, as will be further demonstrated in this paper. However, research has shown that this perceived dichotomy is more nuanced. For instance, young girls position themselves *between* notions of tradition and modernity in relation to their sexual relationships, rather than on the one side or the other, and their positioning may vary on context and time ([Parkes et al., 2016](#)). Furthermore, the common belief that modernity leads to a decrease in gender-based violence has been contested (see [Parkes et al., 2016](#)). Much of the literature agrees that the structural factors that affect gender-based violence, such as social, political and economic inequalities, are typically overlooked or simplified when static notions of culture, modernity, or tradition are employed in research and/or programme development ([Bhana et al., 2009](#); [Kedir and Admasachew, 2010](#); [Shih et al., 2017](#)).

Patriarchy is central in understanding linkages between culture and gender-based violence ([Winter et al., 2002](#)). A discussion of the imbalance of power in gendered relations ought to be central to explanations of gender based violence ([Leach and Humphreys, 2007](#)). Such power imbalances are often supported by patriarchal structures in societies that favour male dominance and male sexual entitlement. Indeed, since men have mostly held and controlled the powerful positions in patriarchal societies, cultures have been shaped and influenced more dominantly by men than by women. However, the fact that cultures have been shaped in social and historical processes, also means that they can be re-imagined and re-defined ([Connell, 2002, 2012](#)). In line with concerns that static representations of culture may disregard the complexities of contemporary communities ([Parkes et al., 2016](#); [Shih et al., 2017](#); [Spronk, 2009](#)), this study engages with culture as a fluid, socially constructed notion, that may vary dependent on context and time, and that interacts with and changes in interactions and relations with people and other cultures. Likewise, ‘modernity’ or ‘tradition’ do

not refer to uniform entities but to socially constructed concepts that interact with each other and their wider social, economic and political contexts. Within the thematic scope of this study, modernity is understood as economic and social development achieved by means of formal education and economic activity, reflected in individuals’ lifestyles, beliefs and practices. Tradition refers to long-established customs or beliefs that have been passed on from the one generation to the next, often based on religious beliefs, indigenous knowledge, or customary law and practice.

Gender relations and their implications for SRHR interact with these notions of culture. For instance, ideals of female purity and decency are part of the belief systems supporting the practice of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) amongst African migrants in Europe ([Alhassan et al., 2016](#)), where the practice served as an act of affirming a particular (African) cultural identity. In another study in South Africa, virginity was shown to be associated with the decency and morally good behaviour of women, which was not expected for men ([Harrison, 2008](#)). A focus on virginity testing seemed to revive with ‘neo-traditionalist and cultural’ approaches to HIV prevention ([Harrison, 2008](#)), indicating the close interlinkages between culture, sexual health, and gender relations. Such gendered ideals of decency are reinforced in schools. A study in Kenya, Ghana, and Mozambique, for example, reveals that discourses in schools, families and religious institutions which emphasise female chastity may lead to sexual coercion ([Heslop et al., 2015](#)). Likewise, [Dunne \(2007\)](#) highlights that schools are gendered institutions where young men and women are socialised through gendered violence. In light of the interactions between gender and culture, this paper analyses how notions of decency underpin (cultural) values and practices that are the root causes of gender-based violence. Decency here refers to practices that show morality and respectability, most typically by emphasising the importance of female virginity and sexual abstinence and innocence. It will be argued that addressing and questioning ideals of ‘decency’ in CSE could be an important entry point to addressing gender-based violence.

1.2. The role of culture in comprehensive sexuality education

CSE has been one of the many types of programmes implemented in developing contexts in order to improve young people’s knowledge of SRHR. CSE is premised on ideals of young peoples’ agency, self-determination and right to make informed decisions ([Hague, Miedema, and Le Mat, 2017](#)). Among the positive health outcomes reportedly resulting from CSE are delayed age of first sexual experience and increase in condom use ([Kirby, 2008](#)). It is also been argued that CSE takes a comprehensive stance on wider societal issues such as ‘harmful traditional practices’, gender-based violence, and addresses issues of gender and sexual diversity ([Braeken and Cardinal, 2008](#)). As such, CSE has the potential to shape attitudes and values towards these issues, and to develop skills that go beyond maintaining one’s health. Non-health outcomes that may result from CSE include better academic learning outcomes, less violence, greater respect and understanding towards others, and improved gender relations ([UNESCO, 2018b](#)).

While some of these positive outcomes have clearly been shown in research, the contested nature of CSE in relation to culture has largely not been scrutinised. In sexual health programmes, ‘culture’ often tends to be understood as a threat to successfully implementing comprehensive programmes ([Chandra-Mouli et al., 2015](#); [Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2016](#)). This barrier is mostly associated with persisting forms of gender inequality and the prevalence of ‘harmful traditional practices’ that are considered to be a part of ‘culture’. Research has shown that a focus on culture in SRHR educational programmes wrongly assume a narrow causal relationship between culture and behaviour ([Geary, 2007](#); [Shih et al., 2017](#)). Indeed, re-instilling ‘good’ cultural practices does not address the root causes of problems leading to HIV, which are more deeply embedded in social and economic structures ([Shih et al., 2017](#)). In line with post-colonial critiques, education programmes that

conceptualise culture merely as barrier or cause for certain behaviours are thus at risk of adopting a ‘developmentalist’ approach (Lewis, 2002) to sexuality education where the ‘modern’ is indicative of the types of knowledges of what SRHR should entail.

It has also been argued that educational programmes could use culture as an entry point to nurture responsible, ethical, and healthy behaviour (Geary, 2007). In this way, education can play a pivotal role in establishing a critical relationship between individuals and their cultural, social, and economic context (Geary, 2007; Parkes et al., 2016), and, we argue, in examining gender relations within that cultural, social and economic context. In the same vein, Mukoro (2017) proposes that a ‘culturally sensitive sexuality education’ should not try to ‘resolve’ issues of cultural diversity in sexuality education, but instead such education should sensitize and expose students to conflicting (cultural) values. A mono-cultural sexuality education in which contents, approach and expected outcomes are defined by a single sexual culture risks obscuring cultural differences and alienating students who identify with different sexual cultures or ideals (Mukoro, 2017). In what follows, this paper will bring further nuance to debates about the linkages between culture, CSE, and gender-based violence by unpacking how teachers and students interpret culture as a cause for gender-based violence, and analysing how CSE can include discussions on this.

2. Research context

Education is considered an important means of addressing gender inequalities in Ethiopia. According to UNESCO statistics, Ethiopian primary and secondary schools have nearly achieved gender parity (Gender Parity Index (GPI) being 0,91 and 0,96 respectively), yet gender parity in tertiary education is lagging behind (GPI 0,48) according to the latest statistics of 2015 (UNESCOa, 2018). Many girls face child marriage (41% marry under 18 according to UNFPA, 2012), FGM/C (74% according to UNICEF, 2013), domestic violence, and fewer work opportunities than men (UN-HABITAT, 2008). Teenage pregnancies are a growing concern, with an average of 10% of 15–19 year olds falling pregnant (CSA and ICF, 2016). Gender inequality and highly patriarchal structures in Ethiopian society are among the root causes of unmet SRHR needs (Pankhurst, 2014). Prostitution was among the major problems facing young women in the geographical context of study (as came forward through the data as well). This often resulted from migration, job seeking, economic challenges, and family pressure (Hoot et al., 2006; Van Blerk, 2008).

Reliable statistical data on the prevalence of gender-based violence in schools is difficult to retrieve, and Ethiopia is no exception. Numbers that do give an indication about the scope of the problem are not always consistent. For instance, Ethiopia’s prevalence rate of intimate partner violence is one of the highest among countries included in the World Health Organisation (WHO) Multi Country Study of Violence Against Women, and 71% of ever-partnered women (15+ years old) reported to have experienced physical or sexual violence (WHO, 2005). Similarly, a doctoral study on sexual violence in secondary schools in the East of Ethiopia, reports that 70% of the young men and 68% of the young women had respectively offended or become a victim of sexual violence (Bekele, 2012). A more recent study on violence against children, however, reports that in Ethiopia, 26.3% of women older than 15 and 12.9% of adolescent girls (aged 15–19) have experienced intimate partner violence (the latter statistic relying on national survey data) (Know Violence in Childhood, 2017). What should be noted is that the percentages of adolescent girls who have experienced sexual violence in Ethiopia is in the top 20 of the 168 countries included in this overview. Therefore, even if these percentages suggest a dramatic decrease of violence over time, they remain high compared to other countries. At the same time, these statistics indicate the need to triangulate several data sets for reliable statistical information on the prevalence of sexual violence.

Sexual and reproductive health (SRH) for young people is a policy

priority for Ethiopia, with many actors involved in the issue as part of a development agenda. CSE is one of the many types of programmes that are implemented in Ethiopia to improve young people’s knowledge and awareness of their SRH. CSE programmes are widely supported in the country by UN-agencies, European governments and numerous Ethiopian NGOs, CSOs and Charities Organisations. Ethiopia’s 2009 Charities Proclamation, however, has restricted organisations supported by foreign funds in working on rights and advocacy. SRH education and programmes in Ethiopia are therefore primarily focused on promoting health, with rights remaining implicit and the final ‘R’ of SRHR being omitted.

The CSE programme in this study is a computer-based programme developed in the Netherlands and adapted in Ethiopia to make the programme context-specific (for example a lesson on ‘harmful traditional practices’ was added and language on rights was revised). The programme aims to empower young people to make their own decisions by giving factual information about sexuality. Its roots are in gender and rights-based approaches, in line with international guidance documents, such as the ‘It’s All One’ curriculum (International Sexuality and HIV Curriculum Working Group, 2009) and the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (ITGSE) (UNESCO, 2018b). It is an extra-curricular programme that consists of 16 lessons, with one lesson focusing on gender-based violence. The sessions take place in mixed-sex classes, and in each school a small sub-selection of students participate in the programme depending on their interest, availability, and in some schools overall performance. In the schools of study, the programme is offered to students between grade seven and ten (age 14–18).

The CSE programme was selected as a case study when it was in the first phase of piloting and implementation in Ethiopian schools. Within this context, the CSE programme was seen as a promising initiative that could address gender-based violence and broader gender and sexual health concerns, and was among the first CSE programmes to be implemented in the country. However at the national level there was no discussion of integrating the programme into the formal curriculum. Teachers struggled with implementing the programme within the allocated time framework, and expressed need for additional training. Furthermore, young people at times felt the programme communicated gender-biased messages and was not always inclusive of the diversity of young peoples’ needs and realities (Le Mat, 2017). Despite these challenges, young people and the teachers who had participated in/facilitated the CSE programme, were overall positive about its approach; it not only led to better knowledge about gender equality and SRH, but was also considered to decrease gendered bullying, improve social skills such as empathy, and enhance academic learning outcomes thanks to improved self-esteem and English language skills. As such, many teachers, students, and NGO stakeholders recommended the programme expands in reach, if not be fully integrated into the national curriculum.

3. Methods

This paper draws on data from two consecutive fieldwork trips to Ethiopia, which investigated how CSE can address school-related gender-based violence. The fieldwork engaged with teachers and students in one school in Addis Ababa (April–May 2013) and five schools and one out of school youth centre¹ in the Oromia region (April–May 2014). All of the education centres included in the research provided the same extra-curricular CSE programme, which was implemented by an Ethiopian NGO in collaboration with Dutch expert organisations on SRHR. The school in Addis Ababa was located in the merchant centre of the city, where many migrants from rural areas of the country reside. The schools in Oromia were located in the Southwest Shewa Zone, in

¹ The out of school youth centre is referred to as ‘school’ in the results section, for anonymity reasons

Table 1
Number of participants in interviews and FGDs.

	Addis Ababa		Oromia region (combined) ^a		Total (N = 105)	
	Interviews	FGDs	Interviews	FGDs		
Young women	9	5 (1 FGD)	8	11 (2 FGDs)	5 (1 FGD, Mixed: 1 female, 4 male)	34
Young men	6	5 (1 FGD)	7	12 (2 FGDs)		34
Female teachers	6	3 (1 FGD)	10	/		19
Male teachers	6	5 (1 FGD)	9	/		18 ^b
Total	27	18	34	28		105 ^c

^a While the issues at stake in each school and each town may differ contextually, for clarity of data presentation, interviews in all towns in Oromia region outside Addis Ababa are combined in this Table.

^b The total is not be the cumulative of all numbers in the row, because two participants participated in both an interview and a FGD. They are not counted twice in this cell.

^c The total is not be the cumulative of all numbers in the column, because two participants participated in both an interview and a FGD. They are not counted twice in this cell.

towns with between 10,000 and 40,000 inhabitants. The schools hosted students from the town as well as surrounding villages as the schools were close to main roads. This location made the schools accessible to NGOs, facilitating collaboration for education programmes such as CSE. In all school contexts, poverty is one of the major concerns for students' families.

In total, 57 interviews and nine focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with 68 students and 37 teachers, who were directly concerned with the CSE programme and addressing gender-based violence in schools (see Table 1 for an overview). Students were between 14 and 20 years old, and were in grades seven to ten (with the exception of students in the out-of-school youth centre). All teachers in Oromia region were CSE teachers, and in Addis Ababa a broader selection of teachers was included, in addition to all CSE teachers in the school. When possible, interviews were held in English but sometimes an interpreter was used to translate the interviews or FGDs. Interviews were held mostly individually, but when students preferred they were conducted as duo- or group-interviews with their close friends. Interviews took between 30–40 min. FGDs lasted one to one and a half hour and consisted of between three to six participants. FGDs were conducted according to age group and students and teachers were not mixed. Seven FGDs with students were held in six of the seven education centres. One of the students' FGDs were mixed-sex, and six single-sex. The two FGDs with teachers were held in the school in Addis Ababa.

Schools and the out-of-school-youth centre were purposively selected in collaboration with the partner NGO. Selection was based on the presence of the CSE programme in the school and availability and interest to participate from the school (or youth centre) management and CSE teachers. All participants were approached in person for participation. Student participants were first approached by their CSE teacher who is usually known to be a trusted teacher in the school. As such, although the CSE teacher was informed about the aim of including a sample of students with diverse background, there may be bias in the responses due to the teachers' selection, as well as student self-selection. Interviews and FGDs with students and teachers were held in the CSE classroom, which was considered to be the space were students and teachers would feel most comfortable to speak freely and in privacy. In addition to FGDs and interviews, ethnographic notes were taken and conversations were held with Ethiopian SRH experts and Dutch nationals working on SRH in Ethiopia to further contextualise the emerging findings.

The interviews and FGDs were designed and conducted by the first author of this paper and further validated in collaboration with the Ethiopian partner NGO and after a first round of interviews. Topics during interviews and FGDs included the causes of gender-based violence, how CSE should address these causes, its relevance in doing so, and the challenges. Before starting the interview or FGD, anonymity and confidentiality was assured and participants' verbal consent was

asked for their participation in this research. The participants' permission was asked to record the conversations and they were free to switch off the recorder in case they felt uncomfortable, or withdraw from the study. All data were stored anonymously in a protected off-line drive. Ethical procedure was approved by the authors' University ethics board.

Recordings of the interviews and FGDs were transcribed and coded in two analytical phases. A pre-defined code list was developed based on a literature review and used for the first coding phase. The list included codes such as *causes of GBV*, *addressing GBV*, *challenges in addressing GBV*, and *relevance of CSE*. Initial analysis found that 'culture' was often mentioned in all of these code categories. The second step in the analysis therefore involved an unpacking of how culture was conceptualised in relation to gender-based violence and CSE. All excerpts that were coded as *culture* were listed, further coded and organised manually to unravel recurring categories of analysis and linkages between concepts. The analysis process was geared towards identifying common interpretations of culture as a cause for gender-based violence and how this is addressed in CSE. Hence, the paper presents commonly shared interpretations, but highlights when relevant differences between categories of respondents appeared.

4. Results

4.1. Interpretations of culture as a cause for gender-based violence

4.1.1. Modernity, tradition, 'good' and 'bad' culture

Students and teachers typically referred to culture as one of the main causes of gender-based violence. In what follows, our analysis highlights how elements of both traditional and modern cultures are associated with these causes. For instance, modern culture was thought of as a result of globalisation and influences from abroad, which inspire young people to follow the overly sexualised ideals that are portrayed in popular media. Participants stated this could lead to sexual coercion and other forms of gender-based violence. Traditional culture, on the other-hand, was thought to lead to gender-based violence and gender inequality more broadly by valuing men more than women:

[Gender inequality] is there because of, first it's a traditional culture. This is the main cause, of all traditional cultures. Because of in the past, there is a misunderstanding that is the inferiority and superiority of males and females. That way is the females only working in house and [giving birth to] the babies. That is the only works of the girls. That is the traditional culture. [Addis Ababa, school1, student4, male]

Participants discussed that such traditional culture leads to inequalities in gender roles, limited opportunities for women, misogynist language, and sexual coercion.

In order to better understand the linkages between culture and gender-based violence, it is first important to analyse more closely what participants meant by ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ cultures. Modern culture typically referred to economic and social development, exposure to and interaction with the ‘globalised’ world (i.e. films, foods, and people from other (developed) countries), wealth, being educated, liberal values about women’s roles in society, and gender equality. Traditional culture on the other hand referred to Ethiopian dancing and music based on folklore, traditional (Ethiopian) clothing, eating together, respecting parents and elders, taboos around sexuality, practicing religion, ‘harmful traditional practices’ (such as FGM/C, abduction, and child marriage) and gender inequality more broadly.

Interestingly, students and teachers typically divided their culture into a ‘bad’ and ‘good’ binary. They considered education essential to become knowledgeable about this:

Now, I understand more about my culture, that there are bad cultures that bring bad influence, and good ones that need to be appreciated. I protect myself from bad cultures. [Town1, School1, FGD, student4, female].

Some students, mostly in the school in Addis Ababa, added that the ‘bad’ culture was changing as Ethiopia is moving on towards a developed country, but that the embeddedness of this ‘bad’ culture remained visible in gender discrimination or harassments in school, sports classes, as well as poor academic performance of girls. They thought these forms of inequalities to be more prevalent in the (less-developed) rural areas than in urban Addis Ababa, even though young women in the school in Addis Ababa experienced gender discrimination and violence (Le Mat, 2016).

In the context of sexual and gender relations, both traditional and modern cultures were thought to have ‘bad’ and ‘good’ sides (for an analytical summary, see Fig. 1). The ‘good’ sides of modernity related to exposure to international interactions, new (scientific) knowledge, access to education and increased attention for women’s rights. ‘Bad’ sides of modernity were associated with overly liberal standards about sexual activity, pre-marital sex, young women’s clothing, divorce, prostitution, and sexually explicit media. For traditional culture, ‘good’ sides were folkloric Ethiopian dancing and music, eating together, and practicing religion. In participants’ views, religion was separated from ‘bad’ traditions such as FGM/C. This reflects that FGM/C in Ethiopia is mostly seen as a traditional rather than a religious practice, despite the fact that in some regions of the country religious leaders strongly support the practice (Pankhurst, 2014; Østebø and Østebø, 2014). ‘Bad’

traditional culture referred to such ‘harmful traditional practices’, also including abduction and child marriage, being ashamed to speak about sexuality, girls being disadvantaged in society, including in education, and gender inequality more broadly.

It should be noted that, contrary to an understanding of culture as fluid and socially constructed in a particular context and time, participants often expressed fixed ideas about what is ‘traditional’ or ‘modern’, and ‘good’ or ‘bad’. This would suggest there is very little interaction between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ values for instance, and that these are static notions. In fact, as will be revealed throughout the remainder of this paper, such categorical understandings of culture were predominant in ideas about how gender-based violence should be addressed, including in the CSE programme.

4.1.2. Gender equality as a reflection of modernity?

Gender equality was at the core of teachers and young people’s understandings as to the role of culture in addressing gender-based violence and promoting social and economic development more broadly. The majority of the participants agreed to the idea of promoting gender equality in their society. Some teachers and students held the opinion that promoting gender equality is not necessary anymore as Ethiopia has already developed the adequate non-discriminatory legal frameworks. However, the fact that participants agree with the idea of gender equality, did not always mean they behaved in accordance with the ideals of gender equality, as revealed in other studies in the same schools (Kosar-Altinyelken and Le Mat, 2018; Le Mat, 2016, 2017).

FGD analysis reveals that there is agreement amongst participants in the definition of gender equality; that is girls and boys being able to do the same things, walking, talking and dressing freely without having to worry about other peoples’ comments, sharing burdens in household tasks, and getting the same opportunities to and within education and the labour market. Interestingly, gender equality was often immediately related to notions of culture, tradition and modernity. For instance, in an FGD, female teachers mentioned how symbolic meanings in their society, such as *elilta* (a form of ululation to express happiness), illustrated how girls and boys were treated and valued differently right from their day of birth:

Teacher7: For instance, during the birth time, in the culture, (...) the backward society thinks that whenever a man is born, [one has to] do *elilta* more than six times. When it is a woman (...)

Teacher8: (...) When a woman [gives birth to] a baby boy, the time of *elilta* is seven times. But when [she gives birth to a] girl, the *elilta*

	‘Bad’ Culture	‘Good’ Culture
Modernity	Overly liberal standards about e.g. sexual activity and young women’s clothing; Pre-marital sex; Divorce; Prostitution; Sexually explicit media.	Economic and social development; Exposure to and interaction with the outside world; Access to scientific knowledge; Openness to speak about sexuality; Being educated; Women’s rights; Women’s participation in labour market; Gender equality.
Tradition	Male superiority; Few education/employment opportunities for women; ‘Harmful traditional practices’, e.g. female circumcision and child marriage; Shame around sexuality; Gender inequality.	Folkloric Ethiopian dancing and music; Traditional (Ethiopian) clothing; Eating together; Respecting parents and elders; Practicing religion (Christianity, Islam).

Fig. 1. Analytical summary of participants’ common conceptualisations of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ modern and traditional culture in Ethiopia.

is only five times. [Addis Ababa, school1, FGD, teachers7,8, female]

Clearly, not only the notion of (traditional) culture is relevant here, but by referring to ‘backward society’, these teachers demonstrated, in line with other interviews (see section 4.2.2), that gender inequality is associated with the uneducated segments of society and lack of development, as opposed to the urban ‘modern’.

As much as modernity seemed to be conflated with development and ‘good’ cultures that provide the same opportunities to girls as to boys, modernity was equally associated with threats. These threats mainly concerned Ethiopian culture and identity, but interestingly were also considered to pose limitations to addressing gender-based violence. One teacher observed:

[Young people] see different kinds of films, different kinds of programmes from outside [our country], they know more about different kinds of things. (...) But, sometimes globalisation it has own negative impact. First, it pushes our culture sometimes, in some ways. So that culture, that’s why they do different kinds of sexual violence. They get these things from globalisation. [Addis Ababa, School1, FGD, teacher8, female]

Globalisation, in this case referring to exposure to foreign (sexually explicit) films and music, was seen as a factor that influences and inspires young people to become sexually active at a younger age, for boys to have many girlfriends at the same time, and for girls to make use of their sexuality to live a more ‘cosmopolitan’ lifestyle in the form of transactional sex. This is reflective of tensions highlighted in other studies, where modernisation is, on the one hand, celebrated by young people as inspiring an ideal of free and liberal sexual practices, yet at the same time viewed to be at odds with a traditional cultural identity (Leclerc-Madlala, 2004; Parkes et al., 2016; Lalor, 2004; Spronk, 2009). The following findings further reveal that interpretations of the link between modernity and sexuality are highly gendered, where girls in particular are more vulnerable to negative prejudices.

While these issues came up in all schools, sex as a ‘pursuit of modernity’ (Leclerc-Madlala, 2004) emerged in particular in the urban school setting in Addis Ababa, where notions of modernity and globalisation were associated with attracting girls to sex work and transactional sex. For instance, when discussing the meaning of gender equality and the causes of gender-based violence during interviews and FGDs with teachers, many immediately emphasised that in the vicinity of the school (*sabategna, piazza*, and the regional bus station *autobistera*) prostitution was highly prevalent. According to teachers, this affected the behaviour of their students, in particular female students:

Our students are the neighbour of those prostitutes, so they can observe a lot of different things while those prostitutes are acting towards individuals to get money. So they keep this in mind, they come to school, they act like those prostitutes. [Addis Ababa, School1, teacher17, male]

I don’t think that money is the only thing to get them into. They take it as a modernisation. When they are participating in such activities, they feel they are modern, they are trendy, [like] their peers, their friends, and they behave in a wrong way. Naturally, they are not like that. But they are exposed to the time, the time is automatically changing. They are exposed to pornography, they are exposed to foreign films, movies. [Addis Ababa, School1, FGD, teacher2, male]

Interpretations of why their students would ‘act like prostitutes’ was diverse among teachers. In an FGD with female teachers, the issue was approached with a lot of emotion and sympathy, and explanations included poverty, sex for survival (see also Leclerc-Madlala, 2004; Heslop et al., 2015), family background, vulnerability to peer pressure, and being forced into (abusive) sexual relationships. For many SRH experts and male teachers, however, prostitution was clearly motivated by ideals of modernity, yet, they added, this was not the students’ ‘natural’ behaviour (see also Kosar-Altinyelken and Le Mat, 2018).

It is striking to see how the ‘bad’ influence of modernity affected understandings of girls’ freedoms and sexual relationships more than boys’. This extended to ideas of girls’ dress and style, where teachers and students observed that some girls in the school had changed their looks. They typically associated girls showing more skin in the ways they dress, wearing jewellery, artificial (‘European’) hair, and make-up, with the desire to be modern. Some argued that the clothing, hair style or make-up of some female students was ‘too inviting’, meaning they must be held responsible for any sexualised acts they ‘call upon themselves’. These sexualised acts extended to teacher-student relationships. Many students and teachers shared how they knew of cases, or were personally approached by either a teacher or a student, for sex in exchange for books, money, or good grades (see also Le Mat, 2016). In some cases this led to female students dropping out of school if they were approached by a teacher who expected them to be interested in grades or books in exchange for sex against the girl’s will. It is ironic that modernity, associated with gender equality and completing education, was equally considered to lead girls to dropping out of their education or severely limiting their engagement with learning, in this case through very sexualised encounters and expectations.

4.2. Promoting ‘good modernity’ in CSE

Participants saw education, and especially CSE, as an opportunity to change understandings of gender roles and relations that pose limitations to girls, and as such as a means to achieve development. It was considered essential for students to get ‘the right knowledge’ about gender and sexual health. This notion of ‘right’ information generally referred to modern, scientific, factual information, as opposed to the traditional ‘myths’ present in Ethiopian society. In the CSE programme, ‘myths’ refer to beliefs that preserve practices such as FGM/C, child marriage and virginity-testing. These practices or beliefs are rooted in patriarchal traditions that are considered essential to instilling good moral behaviour and obedience in girls. By providing factual information, the CSE programme aimed to discourage these traditional practices, or contest the ‘myths’ surrounding them, by emphasising the dangers they pose to young women’s health and futures. Teachers and students expected that providing scientific information would lead young people and communities to make right decisions (i.e. abstinence-until-marriage; supporting female participation in education and the labour market), which in turn would lead to future family wealth or broader country development. The following sections present illustrations of how educating young people about ‘facts’ and ‘myths’ were thought to address the cultural causes of gender-based violence, reflecting on the limitations of this approach, and highlighting the underpinning ideals of decency that were prominent in conceptualisations of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ cultures, yet prescribe certain restrictive behaviours to girls that were reinforced through CSE lessons. It will reveal how the root causes of gender-based violence cannot be addressed by contesting culture alone, and underlying assumptions about gender relations and decency need to be better dealt with.

4.2.1. Myths, facts, and going ‘the right way’

Opposing traditional ‘myths’ with the right information was considered especially important in the towns in Oromia region, where teachers and students expressed discrepancy between the messages and beliefs that are present in the community and what is learned in the CSE classroom. For instance, one belief held is that girls who have developed big breasts have had sexual intercourse, which is considered shameful outside marriage and is often a trigger for bullying. By opposing this ‘myth’ with scientific ‘facts’, students learned to see this from another perspective; in this case decreasing gendered bullying. This aspect of the programme was appreciated especially by girls, as it relieved them from certain speculative prejudices, such as this relation between breast-size and virginity. At the same time, however, values underlying female virginity and sexual innocence were not questioned,

supporting ideals of female chastity.

Changing ‘traditional’ notions and providing new perspectives to cultural beliefs also led to increased confusion and tensions. This was particularly the case with teaching about virginity. CSE teaches the ‘fact’ that both girls and boys can be virgins, as it means not having had sexual intercourse, and that virginity cannot be tested. Teachers felt challenged in fully explaining this:

Virginity is confusion for them, they know a different thing previously. The information [that virginity cannot be tested] is confusing and a surprise to them. (...) our culture... it takes time to change their minds. Because they believe that virginity is for only for girls. So it takes time to convince, for teachers it’s difficult. [Town4, School2, teacher2, female]

Because of these conflicting messages, teachers expressed a need for more evidence and information on virginity. However, this ‘factual’ information was not discussed in reference to the underlying values in society, where virginity is associated with virtues of decency, moral behaviour, and being respectful towards elders. This discrepancy between the ‘factual’ information and the generally accepted underlying implications in society led to increased confusion for students. Students reported not understanding the definition of virginity and male students reported an overemphasis on girls’ virginity, lack of guidance and clarity on what virginity means for boys and how boys can lose their virginity. This therefore indicates that the ‘scientific’ information in the CSE programme was not sufficient; students wanted to discuss the implications and meanings of virginity in relation to their identity as young women or young men embedded within their society. Furthermore, a purely scientific discussion of the definition of virginity did not necessarily disrupt ideals of decency and female sexual innocence, reinforcing restrictive notions of ‘proper’ female behaviour.

In the school in Addis Ababa, teachers and students felt that education, including CSE, should be better tailored towards the specific realities and experiences of young people in their school environments – particularly issues that were associated with globalisation and cultural change. This included discussing the influence of pornography, Western media, the prevalence of prostitution, and symbolic meanings of how to dress and when/what kind of sexual relationships are appropriate (it should be noted that these questions were also relevant in Oromia region, yet less emphasised). In an FGD, teachers concluded that their lessons should include more emphasis on nurturing individual responsibility and consciousness:

Teacher5: We cannot stop the effect of globalisation. Nobody can stop it. We cannot stop [students] watch these unnecessary things. (...) We can, for example, in our school we block the pornographic parts, we block Facebook and some, we have internet connection here. We only have Google for some useful information. But, we cannot stop it completely. The very thing is, the very serious thing is, to limit them, to block them. Not to go to these areas. Or, we have to allow them to watch, but consciously.

Teacher2: We have to do that side by side. We need to teach them not to do that, and also we need to avoid the accessibility of these bad things. For example pornography is accessible in every small shop.

Teacher1: We may block Facebook or pornographies but they may get at the website using different links. We can’t stop by this matter. We [should] teach them to go in the right way. The option is up to them. This is the responsibility what they are expected to grow. [Addis Ababa, School1, FGD, teachers1,2,5, male]

As becomes evident from the above quotes, teachers did not always feel clear or well prepared with regards to their roles in addressing ‘bad’ influences. Much of their attention was focussed on instilling ideals of responsibility and decency and therefore contributing to students going in ‘the right way’ and becoming ‘good’ Ethiopian citizens. This discourse was reflected in all schools in the study. However, teaching

about cultural change remained pragmatic, meaning instructing students to replace ‘bad’ with ‘good’ cultures, and ‘myths’ with ‘facts’. Such pragmatism contained little reflection about expressions and positions of power underlying inequalities and vulnerabilities, which would help in re-imagining gender and power orders in a society (Connell, 2002, 2012).

4.2.2. Beyond science: shame, silence, and decency

In addition to the ways in which the CSE programme aimed to promote ‘good’ cultures by providing scientific information and instilling good moral behaviour, the programme encouraged openness to speak about sexuality, which was also viewed as an indicator of a positive, modern culture. Interestingly, teachers and students constructed ideals of openness and self-confidence in speaking about personal matters as markers of socio-economic class and development, which, in their understanding, reflected values of modern European societies. The fact that the CSE programme was developed in Western Europe may have strengthened this perception (see also Tamale, 2011). In contrast, students and teachers reflected on shame and silence as signs of ‘underdevelopment’, ‘bad’ traditional culture or for ‘those of the countryside’. For example, when two students talked about their female peers who come from remote villages in the countryside, they hinted that lower classes in particular view sexuality-related issues as shameful, yet education has taught the girls in the interviews who participated in CSE the ‘right’ knowledge and skills to openly discuss sexuality-related matters:

Student3: It’s very difficult, because, if [girls from the countryside go] to their mother, the parents think the menstruation [is] shameful, so I don’t think they discuss.

Student2: Yeah, they don’t [talk about it], even your best friend does not want to share [her questions with] you, because she thinks it’s very shameful. (...) They will hate themselves about this. Some, as I say, from hundred girls, maybe one can tell you about her life-experience, about menstruation and also about another thing, but they don’t feel free as it is, they don’t have the confidence to talk about it. [Town3, School2, students 2,3, female]

This quote illustrates that on the one hand, structural factors such as social and economic status, in addition to culture and gender relations, influence understandings of sexuality and means to maintain sexual health, in line with other studies (Bhana et al., 2009; Parkes et al., 2013; Shih et al., 2017). On the other hand, these girls highlighted a general tendency of attributing causes for inequalities to uneducated segments of society, most typically from the countryside. Interestingly, analysis also showed that students and teachers from the school in Addis Ababa perceived those outside of Addis Ababa to be less educated and less knowledgeable about gender equality, similar to how participants in the rural towns perceived their peers from the more remote areas or lower classes. As such, ‘openness’ to speak about sexuality, became a marker of modernity and development, instead of a reflection on values in society related to silence and decency, which particularly affected young women.

Nevertheless, shame to speak about sexuality affected girls in both rural and urban areas, albeit in different ways. Teachers in towns in Oromia articulated that students need to be educated with scientific facts, because of their assumed innocence, lack of knowledge and shame to learn about sexuality. In contrast, teachers in Addis Ababa held the opinion that students ‘already know everything’ about sexuality, due to the high prevalence of prostitution around the school (even though shame was also seen to affect women’s abilities to speak out about gender-based violence). Young women in Addis Ababa were also thought to have higher levels of responsibility because they had access to information and education about gender equality. In relation to teacher-student sexual relationships, one teacher commented:

And even the characteristic of the females themselves, from the

culture also: they are too shy and they are too afraid to defend themselves if they are asked in such a way. They don't have the intention to report the issue to the concerned body also. (...) Also there are co-curricular activities [such as CSE that works on gender issues], but not all girls are participating. Most of the girls are not interested to act here. So, that also brought misunderstanding or it affected them not to defend themselves when they are [faced with] such kind of silly [advances from male teachers]. [Addis Ababa, School1, FGD, teacher3, male]

Interpreting these notions of shame, silence, and decency in relation to gender-based violence, it seems that young women have to find a careful balance between 'modern' identities, including speaking openly about sexuality, reporting harassment, being self-confident and participating in CSE, and, at the same time, keeping up ideals of decency that mean they do not speak about, 'invite' or pursue sexual relationships. Our data reveals, therefore, that not only do ideals of decency underpin the causes of gender-based violence (Alhassan et al., 2016; Heslop et al., 2015), but that girls also are required to simultaneously maintain and challenge such ideals, particularly those of female chastity, in a context of cultural change.

These notions of shame and decency should be interpreted within a context where CSE often discouraged and dismissed pre-marital sex as immoral and 'rude' behaviour, particularly for girls (see Le Mat, 2017). Consequently, being a 'good student' implied avoiding impressions of sexual desire, especially for young women due to the articulation of discourses on female chastity and the dismissal of discourses on female sexual desire (see also Heslop et al., 2015). As a result young women were not always able to share their concerns or questions in CSE due to a fear of bullying and the community judging them as immoral or 'rude' (see also Kebede et al., 2014; Le Mat, 2017). This extended to girls choosing not to report cases of gender-based violence, which students in both urban Addis Ababa and towns in Oromia region said would be shameful. Hence, promotion of gender equality in CSE would need to go beyond categorical understandings of tradition/modernity in order to address the deeper underlying causes of gender-based violence and disrupt ideals of decency. Unavoidably, this must entail discussions of the role of patriarchy and power relations in society that have shaped and uphold ideals of female chastity.

Finally, while much of the controversial nature of CSE was justified by claiming the scientific nature of the knowledge in the programme and the focus on instilling values of decency and responsibility, it is particularly the social, emotional, and non-scientific elements that are less emphasised but create tensions that cannot be ignored. This includes the implications of newly taught definitions of virginity on being a 'good' man or woman in society. In other words, in the program 'modern' or 'scientific' knowledge takes the form of static truths that will open up the road to modernity and development, as opposed to the traditional 'myths' that need to be tackled. However, these messages tend to bypass the social and cultural meanings behind traditional and modern knowledges and behaviours. Furthermore, while messages of gender equality are integrated in, and underpin the programme, they conflict with social conceptions of female chastity that inform traditional, but prevalent values related to virginity, pre-marital sex, and speaking about sexuality. Such conflicts are not always addressed or renegotiated in CSE programmes due to the heavy focus on 'scientific' knowledge which fails to create a dialogue on cultural meanings, changes, and gender relations. Hence, in recognising the fluid nature of culture, it is important for CSE to encourage this dialogue between multiple (scientific, traditional, and gendered) meanings of sexuality and relationships, moving away from a mono-cultural sexuality education (see Mukoro, 2017).

5. Conclusion

This paper engaged with the views of students and teachers on the

relationship between gender-based violence and culture, and the role of CSE in addressing culture as a cause for gender-based violence. Our analysis has found that teachers and students conceive of the relationship between culture and gender-based violence along two axes: modernity and tradition, and 'good' and 'bad' culture. Participants viewed both modernity and tradition to have elements of 'good' and 'bad' culture, and typically believed that gender-based violence could be addressed by replacing 'bad' traditions with 'good' modern cultures. In contrast to literature that discusses tradition to be a form of nostalgia among teachers (DePalma and Francis, 2014), in our sample expressions of unequal gender relations considered traditional were dismissed as backward, harmful towards girls, and limiting the social and economic development of the country.

Pragmatism of instructing students to replace 'bad' traditions with 'good' modern culture was clearly reflected in the CSE programme that opposed traditional community 'myths' and substituted them with modern scientific 'facts'. As such, CSE depicts culture as binaries of modernity/tradition and 'good'/'bad' culture, treating culture as a static entity and viewing 'good' modernity as a neutral developmental goal. This not only misrepresents the complexity of contemporary communities (Parkes et al., 2016), but also perpetuates inequalities. For instance, those who are educated position themselves as such by labelling those in society who are uneducated, living in rural areas or of lower socio-economic status as 'backward'. Hence, the association of 'modern' culture with development and being educated, can act as dividing mechanism to distance the urban from the rural, or the poor from the middle-class, despite the fact that gender-based violence exists within and beyond these socio-economic structures. Furthermore, the extra-curricular programme strengthens imperialist notions that 'bad' traditions can be addressed with development (Chilisa, 2005; Tamale, 2011). At the same time, participants typically regarded the causes of gender-based violence as something 'outside' of themselves or 'other', such as the less educated, the 'bad' other person, culture, or country. Projections of the causes of gender-based violence included practices considered 'bad' modernity, such as transactional sex, revealing the tension between CSE's promotion of modern culture as a neutral developmental goal, and elements of this same culture that are understood as causes of gender-based violence.

Within these categorical understandings of 'good', 'bad' and 'modern' and 'traditional' culture, the notion that female decency is rooted in patriarchy was rarely discussed. Ideals of female decency were re-emphasised as promoting 'good' modernity, yet they posed limitations to young women's emancipation and to addressing gender-based violence. For instance, bullying, fear of judgement and a lack of discussion around different meanings of virginity, pre-marital sex, and female sexual freedoms more generally, limit girls in their expressions of desire (or discontent) and force them into a framework of decency. Those girls who do express themselves are perceived as wanting to take modernity and cosmopolitanism too far, or as 'acting like prostitutes'. This demonstrates that, attempting to replace the 'bad' with the 'good' in educational programmes does not encourage the critical thinking skills, levels of self-reflection, and ethical responsibilities that are necessary to address the root causes of violence and inequalities (see also Geary, 2007; Parkes et al., 2016). Moreover, static representations of culture and backwardness risk essentialising gender inequalities as (traditional) culture and, as such, CSE risks perpetuating 'developmentalist' approaches to education that assume modern knowledge is a neutral means to address SRHR and gender inequalities. CSE, therefore, must urgently improve engagement with socio-cultural, economic and gendered discourses, for instance meanings behind virginity, pre-marital sex, transactional sexual relationships and sex work, ensuring that binary understandings of 'modernity' and 'tradition' are avoided. CSE should include discussions of gender relations and patriarchy; an entry point here could be questioning the ideals of decency which underpin the practices that perpetuate gender-based violence.

Culture is thus not so much a 'factor' that can hamper or strengthen

the delivery of CSE, but rather a changing reality that needs to be integrated and addressed in teachings of sexuality and gender relations. This goes beyond the CSE curriculum and CSE teacher training alone; extending to the wider education system. At a national level, this means there are important gains to be made in addressing gender-based violence in schools, including in the formal curriculum, broader school management, and national teacher training. Education policies should encourage an integration of discussions of cultural change and gender relations into training and education management. At the international level, critical efforts are needed to re-think how 'culture' can be discussed in educational programmes and trainings that address gender-based violence. The findings of this study suggest categorical understandings and instructions of 'bad' and 'good' culture may only scratch the surface and not be effective in addressing the root causes of gender-based violence. More critical discussions of culture, including its gendered and socio-economic dynamics, and one's own relationship to culture could be important starting points for such a dialogue. To support this, global guidance documents such as International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (UNESCO, 2018b) should include directions on how to facilitate such dialogues in more reflexive and less pragmatic ways. At the same time, it is evident from this study that the relationship between 'culture' and gender-based violence is not universal. Thus, while similar issues may be at stake in other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Bhana, 2015; Parkes et al., 2016), a contextualised analysis of cultural, gender, and socio-economic relations could better inform the particular dynamics that need to be included in future educational dialogues that concern gender-based violence.

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