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**CONSCIENTIZATION: A CRITICAL ELEMENT FOR FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION
ABANDONMENT AMONG WOMEN IN RURAL COMMUNITIES IN NIGERIA**

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CONSCIENTIZATION: A CRITICAL ELEMENT FOR FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION ABANDONMENT AMONG WOMEN IN RURAL COMMUNITIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Despite its cultural importance, FGM has drawn considerable criticism because of its potential for both short- and long-term medical complications, as well as harm to reproductive health and infringement on women's rights. FGM, according to WHO, (2023) involves the numbing, burning, piercing, partial or total removal of the female external genitalia provokes medical, emotional, social, legal and economic repercussions at all levels of society; and many survivors of FGM often have to endure the negative effects of the practice to their sexual, reproductive health and overall wellbeing. Over the years, world leaders, international and national organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations have put a lot of effort and resources into ending FGM which is internationally recognised as a violation of human rights, and an extreme form of violence against girls and women.

Introduction

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), also known as female circumcision, is a harmful cultural practice with an estimated 200 million survivors worldwide. In many cultures: globally, in Africa and in Nigeria, FGM is a recognised and accepted cultural practice that is considered important for the socialisation of women, curbing their sexual appetites and preparing them for marriage. It

is also considered part of a rite of passage into womanhood that includes a period of seclusion and education about the rights and duties of a wife.

Despite its cultural importance, FGM has drawn considerable criticism because of its potential for both short- and long-term medical complications, as well as harm to reproductive health and infringement on women's rights. FGM, according to WHO, (2023) involves the numbing, burning, piercing, partial or total removal of the female external genitalia provokes medical, emotional, social, legal and economic repercussions at all levels of society; and many survivors of FGM often have to endure the negative effects of the practice to their sexual, reproductive health and overall wellbeing. Over the years, world leaders, international and national organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations have put a lot of effort and resources into ending FGM which is internationally recognised as a violation of human rights, and an extreme form of violence against girls and women. However, it seems a mammoth task to eliminate FGM from our communities. It is projected that about 64 million girls aged 0 to 15 will be at risk of FGM by year 2030; which will expose them to both short- and long-term complications and even death; including maternal and infant mortality. In addition, world leaders stand to lose \$1.4 billion annually. (UNICEF,2020).

This paper therefore aims to explore conscientisation as a key element for the effective abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in rural communities in Nigeria. This will be done under the following sub-headings:

- FGM in Nigerian Rural Communities
- Efforts at achieving Abandonment of FGM in Nigeria
- Challenges of FGM Abandonment in Nigeria
- Concept of Conscientisation
- Elements of Conscientization
- The Role of Conscientization in Abandonment of FGM
- Conscientisation strategies for FGM abandonment in Rural Nigeria
- Suggestions For Incorporation of Conscientisation into FGM Programming

FGM in Nigerian Rural Communities

FGM, often deeply rooted in tradition and cultural beliefs, has persisted for generations in many Nigerian rural communities. The practice is associated with notions of purity, femininity, and

social acceptance, making it a complex and deeply ingrained social norm. Some scholars say the ancient ritual remains deeply entrenched in many places, especially our rural communities and will require a lot of strategic interventions to eradicate. (UNFPA,2020).

Addressing FGM practice with its resultant consequences and complications requires a multifaceted approach, with conscientization emerging as a critical element for FGM abandonment among women in these rural areas. Conscientisation, a term popularised by Paulo Freire, refers to the process of developing critical awareness and empowering individuals to take action against oppressive social structures. (Freire, 1972). Understanding the times, trends and sociodemographic patterns of FGM prevalence is crucial in designing effective frameworks for action. Yaya & Bishwajit, (2018). These frameworks should include community-based programs that create an enabling environment for the abandonment of FGM, as well as legislative reform strategies. Kandala & Shell-Duncan, (2019). Furthermore, it is essential to engage in holistic development programs that encompass education and empowerment initiatives. Studies have shown that the education and empowerment of women play a critical role in abandoning the practice of female genital mutilation (Dean et al., 2014). Conscientization as an adult education concept can contribute to FGM abandonment by challenging and changing deep-rooted cultural beliefs, norms, and practices that perpetuate the harmful practice. By raising awareness and promoting critical thinking, conscientization empowers individuals to question the legitimacy of FGM and can facilitate the collective examination of cultural norms and practices in Nigeria.

This paper explores the role of conscientization in fostering FGM abandonment and its significance in the context of rural communities in Nigeria.

Efforts at achieving Abandonment of FGM in Nigeria

Over the past few decades, Nigeria has made significant progress in raising awareness and promoting the abandonment of FGM. This progress can be attributed to a combination of factors, including increased advocacy activities targeting healthcare providers, traditional and church leaders, and political stakeholders. These advocacy activities aim to educate and sensitize these stakeholders about the harmful consequences of FGM and the importance of abandoning the practice. Additionally, community-led interventions have been implemented in Nigeria to empower women and create sustainable change. Appreciably, various strategies have been adopted in order to raise awareness and work towards ending FGM by the United Nations Population Fund

(UNFPA), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organization (WHO), and other anti-FGM organisations in different parts of the world, and in Nigeria; nevertheless, Nigeria still has one of the highest number of cases of FGM in the world, and this may hinder the global commitment to end FGM by 2030 as called for in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 3 and 5.

Wogu. Amonyeze, Folorunsho & Aloh, (2019). Noted that in Enugu State, Nigeria, various strategies have been adopted to sensitize and mobilize rural communities against the practice of FGM. These strategies according to them, include grassroots awareness campaigns, the establishment of support networks for survivors and at-risk girls, and the training of community health workers and traditional birth attendants to provide culturally sensitive education on the harms of FGM. Community dialogues and workshops are also organized, where individuals can openly discuss the cultural and socio-economic factors that perpetuate FGM.

Challenges of FGM Abandonment in Nigeria

Although, several efforts have been made globally; especially in places where FGM is practiced like in Nigeria, and several abandonment ceremonies done, nevertheless, state prevalence of FGM across Nigeria still ranges from 62 percent in Imo to less than 1 per cent in Adamawa and Gombe. (UNICEF, 2022).

This is even more concerning because FGM is illegal in Nigeria and the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act signed into law by former president Goodluck Jonathan in 2015 stipulates a jail term of up to four years or a N200,000 (US\$486) fine for offenders. Awojulugbe, (2021). Regardless of this law, the practice seems to continue unabated as UN Population Fund 2017 Report estimates that one in four women and girls between the ages of 15 and 49 have undergone FGM in Nigeria. The report raises concerns that the practice has reached alarming rates in six Nigerian states, especially in the rural communities. The total abandonment of FGM in Nigeria seems a colossal task because of the social dynamics that sustain and fuel the practice. Some of the reasons given for the continuous practice are: Superstitions, preservation of chastity and purification, family honour, hygiene, esthetics, protect virginity, prevention of promiscuity, modification of sociosexual attitudes, Increased sexual pleasure of husbands, enhancement of fertility, increased matrimonial opportunities, prevention of infant and maternal mortality and for legal reasons (in some communities, a woman cannot inherit property if not circumcised).

Some experts also believe that total abandonment of FGM seems to be sluggish because most interventions are focused only on medical and legal issues. Also, medicalisation of the Practice of FGM: families seek the aid of medical personnel to perform FGM on their daughters to minimise or alleviate the medical issues, this leads to legitimisation which is undesirable in the effort to abandon the practice.

Criminalisation of the Practice of FGM: is also seen as a possible problem in abandonment efforts because even in communities where abandonment ceremonies has taken place, the practice of FGM may continue underground, and those who abide simply do so in fear of legal consequences not because of attitudinal change.

Finally, personal interaction with FGM survivors and other community members where FGM is prevalent in Nigeria, revealed that one of the factors fueling the continuous practice of FGM, thus hampering the abandonment of the practice is the testimony of FGM survivors who claim to not have experienced any side effects or complications due to the practice. One of such survivors stated “I and all my sisters and my daughters and their daughters were all circumcised and none of us has any problem. We enjoy sex and have had healthy children who are alive without cesarian sections. In fact, one of my neighbors and her daughters who were not circumcised are always having infections because that place is not easy to clean if not circumcised”.

The Concept of Conscientisation

Paulo Freire's conscientisation theory, also known as critical consciousness theory, is a transformative educational and social philosophy that emphasizes the development of critical thinking and awareness about issues, particularly those that affect marginalised individuals and communities. It involves helping individuals recognise the social, political, and economic contradictions within society and empowering them to take action against oppressive elements of reality. This process encourages learners to analyse and question the world around them, and collectively work towards liberation. Conscientization goes beyond traditional education and knowledge acquisition; this theory emphasizes the role of education in promoting social justice, equality, and human liberation. At its core, conscientisation theory aims to empower individuals to recognise and challenge oppressive systems and structures that perpetuate inequality, exploitation, and social injustice. The theory proposes a process through which individuals move

from a state of "unconsciousness" or passive acceptance of their circumstances to a state of "consciousness" characterized by critical awareness, action, and the potential for liberation.

Conscientization means the ways in which individuals and communities develop a critical understanding of their social reality through reflection and action. This involves examining and acting on the root causes of oppression as experienced in the here and now. This goes beyond simply acquiring technical literacy skills. It is a cornerstone to ending the culture of silence, in which oppression is not mentioned and thereby maintained. (Jan, 2019).

Conscientization is one of the key ideas of Paulo Freire (1921-1997) in his well-known book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* which was first translated into English language in 1970. Freire was committed to giving a voice to the poor and his ideas on education were intended to make people politically aware. His methods, using critical dialogue and consciousness-raising. Freire's analysis of traditional education is similar to the critique developed by Ivan Illich in his book *Deschooling Society* (1971). Paulo Freire argued that the conventional educational system of education treated learners like empty bank accounts in which the teacher can make deposits. This he referred to as the 'banking concept' of education, where "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable in relations to those whom they consider to know nothing". As a consequence, both are dehumanised.

Freire asserted that education can either be an instrument for liberating people or an instrument of oppression and disempowerment; but never neutral. He believed that in order to avoid being a tool of oppression, education needs to involve a new relationship between teacher, the learner, and the society. In what he referred to as the 'archaeology of consciousness', Freire identified three different levels of political awareness: magical consciousness, naïve consciousness and critical consciousness. It was the role of the educator to foster a process of dialogue and liberation that would enable citizens to reach critical consciousness and empowerment.

Key concepts in conscientisation theory include:

1. **Dialogical Pedagogy:** Freire emphasizes the importance of dialogue in the educational process; instead of a one-sided transfer of knowledge, he advocates for a reciprocal and participatory approach, where educators and learners engage in open discussions where both parties engage in a continuous process of questioning and reflection to co-construct knowledge and critically examine social realities.
2. **Problem-Posing Education:** Instead of traditional banking education, where knowledge is deposited into passive learners, Freire's approach encourages "problem-posing" education. This involves posing open-ended questions and presenting real-life situations that prompt learners to think critically and engage with the material.
3. **Cultural Context:** Freire's theory recognises that education cannot be separated from the cultural and social context in which it occurs. Therefore, educators must consider the lived experiences of their learners and relate educational content to their reality.
4. **Critical Consciousness:** The ultimate goal of conscientisation is to foster critical consciousness in individuals. This means helping them recognise and understand the social, economic, and political structures that create and perpetuate oppression. By becoming critically aware, individuals are empowered to question these dynamics, and they are inspired to take collective action to transform their circumstances.
5. **Praxis:** Freire emphasizes the concept of "praxis," which is the integration of theory and practice or reflection and action. Learners are encouraged not only to apply their knowledge and critical understanding to real-world situations, but also to take practical steps towards changing those situations through informed and deliberate actions which will enable them to transform their own lives and communities. (Think, reflect and act) are three words that summarise the concept of praxis.
6. **Transformation and Solidarity:** Conscientisation aims for transformative change, both on an individual and societal level. It fosters a sense of solidarity among marginalized individuals, promoting collaboration to challenge oppressive systems and work towards a more just and equitable society.

7. **Liberation:** The ultimate goal of conscientization is the liberation of individuals and communities from oppressive systems. This involves not only changing external circumstances but also transforming the way people perceive themselves and their role in society.

In summary, Paulo Freire's conscientisation theory proposes an educational approach that seeks to empower individuals by fostering critical awareness, dialogue, and action to challenge and transform oppressive social structures. It promotes a collaborative and reflective learning process that equips individuals with the tools to become agents of change in their own lives and communities. This theory has been widely influential in the fields of education, social work, and community development. It underscores the importance of education as a tool for social change and emphasizes the need for educators to collaborate with learners or in this case, for stakeholders in FGM interventions to collaborate with the women and other stakeholders in rural communities in a process of mutual empowerment and liberation. This is even more so because, although many rural women are aware of the negative consequences and implications of FGM, they still support the practice because they believe it is a cultural or religious requirement as discovered in a recent study. There is therefore need for a more wholistic approach like conscientisation to bring about the desired change in attitude towards FGM practice in Nigeria, especially in the rural areas.

The Role of Conscientisation in Abandonment of FGM

Over the past few decades, Nigeria has made significant progress in raising awareness and promoting the abandonment of FGM, this progress can be attributed to a combination of factors, including increased advocacy activities targeting healthcare providers, traditional and religious leaders, and political stakeholders. These advocacy activities aim to educate and sensitise these stakeholders about the harmful consequences of FGM and the importance of abandoning the practice. These interventions emphasise the importance of community involvement, ensuring that community members have a voice and active role in decision-making processes related to FGM abandonment.

Conscientisation, as a key element in these interventions, play a crucial role in challenging and changing deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and practices that perpetuate the harmful tradition of

FGM. By raising awareness and promoting critical thinking, conscientisation empowers individuals to question the legitimacy of FGM and facilitates the collective examination of cultural norms and practices in Nigeria. The process of conscientisation involves creating a space for dialogue and reflection; where individuals are encouraged to critically analyse the social, political, and economic factors that influence their beliefs and practices. Through this process, individuals become aware of the negative consequences of FGM and recognise it as a violation of human rights and a threat to the health and well-being of women and girls. Conscientisation also fosters a sense of collective solidarity among community members, as they collectively awaken to the realities of societal oppression and envision a new society based on equity and justice. Moreover, conscientisation promotes the development of leadership skills and advocacy capabilities among individuals and communities. These skills enable them to challenge existing power structures that encourage the continuous practice of FGM and advocate for total abandonment of the practice.

Conscientisation strategies for effective abandonment of FGM

To effectively implement conscientisation as a key strategy for FGM abandonment among women in rural Nigeria, it is crucial to involve and collaborate with various stakeholders. These stakeholders can include community leaders, religious leaders, healthcare providers, educators, governmental and non-governmental organisations and all other important and influential members of the community. By engaging these stakeholders, the process of conscientisation can be integrated into existing structures and systems, making it more sustainable and impactful. Additionally, it is important to adapt conscientisation strategies to be culturally sensitive and to suit local contexts and address specific cultural beliefs and practices related to FGM. These strategies include grassroots awareness campaigns, the establishment of support networks for survivors and at-risk girls, and the training of community health workers and traditional birth attendants. Community dialogues and workshops should also be organised, where individuals can openly discuss the cultural and socio-economic factors that perpetuate FGM.

Initiatives towards FGM abandonment should aim to create a safe space for individuals to challenge and question the social norms surrounding FGM, leading to increased awareness and understanding of its harmful effects. Furthermore, mass media advocacy and activities play a crucial role in raising awareness about FGM and promoting the abandonment of the practice.

Through the use of television, radio, and social media platforms, messages against FGM can reach a larger audience, including those in remote areas where access to information and resources may be limited. One of the key components of conscientisation is the dissemination of scientific evidence against FGM to dispel any misconceptions or myths surrounding the practice. By providing scientific evidence that highlight the immediate and long-term health consequences of FGM on physical, reproductive, and emotional health, it is hoped that individuals will be empowered to make informed decisions and take action against FGM. (Mathews ,2011).

It is important to note, however, that conscientisation alone may not produce immediate and comprehensive results in changing entrenched cultural attitudes towards FGM. Nevertheless, there have been successful cases where conscientization efforts have led to the abandonment of FGM in various communities in other parts of the world. A study in Egypt reported that women who were exposed to mass media were more likely to support the abandonment of the practice (Keles, Eker, Bektemür, Hilowle, Kassim, Hassan-Kadle, Adali, & Karaketir, (2022). Through the dissemination of information via mass media, such as television and radio programs, individuals who have access to these platforms are more likely to be aware of the negative consequences of FGM and be motivated to take action against it. Additionally, the involvement of religious and community leaders is crucial in promoting conscientisation and the abandonment of FGM. By leveraging their influence and authority, religious and community leaders have the power to challenge traditional beliefs and practices that perpetuate FGM.

Additionally, education plays a crucial role in conscientisation efforts, this also involves the engagement of healthcare providers and professionals in the fight against FGM. Equipping them with the necessary knowledge and skills to educate others about FGM, as well as providing clinical and psychological care for survivors, raising awareness about the physical, reproductive, and emotional health risks associated with the practice. This includes providing education on the potential complications of FGM, such as infection, childbirth difficulties, and psychological trauma, this is crucial in changing cultural attitudes and ultimately eliminating the practice of FGM (Abolfotouh, & Ebrahim, (2015). Furthermore, the involvement of healthcare professionals in conscientisation efforts is crucial. They should receive specialised training to enhance their knowledge of FGM and be equipped to address prevention and management of the practice.

By working in collaboration with healthcare professionals, traditional rulers and leaders, religious leaders, traditional birth attendants and circumcisers, a comprehensive and culturally sensitive approach to conscientisation can be achieved. This approach should include public discussions about FGM, involving all stakeholders in educational and awareness-raising efforts; using culturally and linguistically appropriate methods of communication, and providing support and resources for the communities to address the underlying socio-cultural factors that contribute to the continuation of FGM.

Conscientization should also involve engaging traditional midwives, who often perform FGM for a fee. These midwives should be provided with health education to increase their understanding of the harmful effects of FGM. Furthermore, they should be seen as potential change agents and educators, using their influence to discourage the practice and promote alternative methods of initiation or rites of passage that do not involve FGM. Culturally sensitive education is an essential component of conscientisation efforts to eradicate FGM in Nigeria (Ogunsiji & Ussher, 2021). This involves understanding and respecting the cultural norms and values that surround FGM, as well as addressing the complex meanings and beliefs associated with the practice. Culturally sensitive education should aim to challenge and transform these beliefs, while also acknowledging the importance of cultural heritage and identity. It is important for healthcare providers and educators in Nigeria to approach this issue with cultural sensitivity and respect, ensuring that their interventions are appropriate and relevant to the local context.

One approach to culturally sensitive education is to provide objective information about FGM, including a detailed explanation of female genital anatomy and function. This can help dispel myths and misconceptions surrounding FGM, as well as promote a better understanding of the physical and emotional harm it causes. Additionally, education should address the social and emotional aspects of FGM, highlighting the negative impact it has on girls' well-being, self-esteem, and reproductive health.

Suggestions For Incorporation of Conscientisation into FGM Programming

Accelerating the abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in rural Nigeria through conscientization requires a thoughtful and context-specific approach. Here are recommendations for utilising conscientisation to expedite the process of FGM abandonment in these communities:

Community Mobilisation and Dialogue

- Conscientisation initiatives should be tailored to the specific cultural and social context of each community. This can be done by recognising and respecting local traditions, beliefs, and values.
- Community leaders, elders, and other influential figures in the communities should be engaged to ensure that the conscientisation process is integrated into existing structures and is accepted by the community.
- Collaborate with existing women's groups or establish new ones to serve as platforms for conscientisation. These groups can provide mutual support, share experiences, and collectively challenge the practice of FGM. Also, empowering women's groups to lead conscientisation efforts within their communities, fostering a sense of ownership and agency.
- participatory workshops and training sessions that involve women, men, and youth in discussions about the harmful effects of FGM should be organised. Also incorporating interactive activities, role-playing, and storytelling to facilitate a deeper understanding of the consequences of FGM.

Multimedia Campaigns and Integration with Formal Education:

- Culturally sensitive multimedia campaigns should be developed, including radio programs, videos, and printed materials, to reach a broader audience. This should feature testimonials from women who have abandoned FGM or community leaders who support the cause, emphasizing positive role models and success stories.
- Conscientisation strategies should be integrated into formal education programs, ensuring that school curricula addresses the harmful effects of FGM.

- Teachers should be trained to facilitate open discussions about FGM, encouraging learners to critically analyse cultural practices and challenge harmful norms.

Cross-Sectoral Collaboration:

- Collaboration should be fostered among NGOs, government agencies, healthcare providers, educators, and community leaders. A multi-sectoral approach ensures a more comprehensive and sustainable impact. This can be done by pooling of resources and expertise to create a unified front against FGM, leveraging the strengths of each sector involved.
- Training sessions for healthcare professionals in rural areas to sensitise them to the physical and psychological consequences of FGM, this should also involve engaging traditional midwives, nurses and Doctors who often perform FGM for a fee. These medical personnel should be provided with health education to increase their understanding of the harmful effects of FGM. This will also help to discourage the medicalisation of FGM issue.
- Healthcare providers should also be equipped with the knowledge and skills to engage in conscientisation efforts during community health outreach programs. Furthermore, they should be seen as potential change agents and educators, using their influence to discourage the practice and promote alternative methods of initiation or rites of passage that do not involve FGM.
- Religious leaders should be engaged in conscientisation efforts, emphasizing shared values of compassion, dignity, and respect for human rights. This should involve working with religious leaders to dispel any misconceptions that may contribute to the perpetuation of FGM within religious communities.
- There should be awareness creation about existing laws that criminalise FGM in Nigeria and provide legal literacy training to community members. This can be done by collaborating with legal professionals to ensure that the legal framework is effectively communicated, and to advocate for the enforcement of anti-FGM laws.

Crisis Intervention and Support Services:

- There should be Establishment and promotion of support services for survivors of FGM and those who choose to abandon the practice, including counselling, medical care, and community-based networks. There is also a need to address concerns related to social isolation, stigma, and potential backlash, offering a safety net for those who resist the practice.

Measurable Indicators and Monitoring and Sustainability:

- It is important to develop clear and measurable indicators to assess the impact of conscientisation efforts on FGM abandonment. Therefore, establishing a monitoring and evaluation framework to track progress, identify challenges, and adjust strategies accordingly is necessary.
- Conscientisation initiatives should be designed with a focus on long-term sustainability. This can be done by encouraging the establishment of local committees or task forces that can continue awareness-raising and critical consciousness efforts beyond the initial intervention.
- Also, conscientisation initiatives should be integrated into broader community development programs to address the root causes of FGM, such as poverty, ignorance and gender inequality and other factors that contribute to the continuous practice of FGM in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Conscientisation through culturally sensitive education is a key strategy to promoting the abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation in Nigeria. This approach recognises the importance of understanding and respecting cultural traditions, while also challenging harmful practices. Conscientisation efforts should aim to empower women and other individuals and communities; encouraging critical thinking and questioning of the underlying beliefs and values that support FGM. This approach recognises the need for comprehensive education that goes beyond simply providing information about the risks and complications of FGM and foster critical awareness and understanding of the underlying factors that contribute to the continuation of FGM in Nigeria. By

promoting dialogue and open discussions within communities, conscientization encourages individuals to reflect on the social, cultural, and gender dynamics that uphold FGM. These discussions can help challenge misconceptions, debunk myths, and highlight the negative consequences of FGM on women's physical and mental health. Furthermore, conscientisation also addresses the religious and spiritual beliefs associated with FGM.

This requires engaging with religious leaders and promoting a nuanced understanding of religious texts, emphasizing the values of compassion, equality, and the protection of human rights. By incorporating religious leaders into the dialogue, conscientisation efforts can help reshape and reinterpret traditional beliefs in a way that is compatible with gender equality and the abandonment. (Wogu, Amonyeze, Folorunsho, & Aloh, (2019).

By combining these recommendations into a comprehensive and culturally sensitive strategy, conscientisation can be a powerful tool to accelerate the abandonment of FGM in rural Nigeria. The key is to foster critical awareness, engage communities actively, and create an environment that supports positive social change.

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