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How can we change the norms that supports violence against women?

It was the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle who first formalized the idea of *tabula rasa*, Latin for “clean slate”. He believed that humans are born with an empty mind, and that it is the impression of their environments on them as they grow that lead them to believe and do certain things. This idea has lived through thousands of years and has made its way into modern psychology as *nature vs. nurture*, or the study of how genetics and the environments we grow in both affect our understanding of the world and our response to it. While research has shown that violent behavior can have footing in both the genetic and learned poles of this debate, several studies have shown that violence is most clearly a result of the environment in which we are raised. When it comes to violence against women, this means three things: first, since violence seems to be something that is learned, then it can be unlearned as well; second, since violence impacts children most directly through their environments, it follows that to change the norms supporting violence against women, we focus our energy on building the healthiest environments for the next generation of children; and third but most important, since violence against women is such a large issue today, the only way it could have been learned by so many people only means one thing: **violence against women is part of our culture**. This violence is taught to our children when we teach them culture.

Mind blowing, isn't it, to think that the cultural practices we grew up with as children subconsciously make us more likely to accept violence? How exactly can we use these three insights to change the norms supporting violence against women? The idea is to help our culture unlearn violent practices by investing directly in preventing these practices from entering the environments in which our children are raised.

The first stage of any unlearning process is realizing that what we have learned is not what we should have learned. This means identifying those ideals and practices we grew up with or noticed as kids that may not be the healthiest for our women. As we raise the next generation of children, our men and women both need to understand that a practice that is culturally acceptable is not necessarily a practice that is ethically correct. Just because a practice has been around for generations does not make it time-tested. Critics might argue that this point-of-view interferes with our responsibility to pass on our culture to our children, whether it is good or bad. They are sorely mistaken. Our responsibility is not to blindly pass on cultural practices because our predecessors did so. If this were the case, Germans today would have never realized the absurdities of the Nazis and would still be passing those practices on to their children. Confederate monuments in the Southern United States would still be publicly honored. Women in India would still be burning themselves alive at their husbands' funeral pyres. Look at what is happening today in parts of Africa and Asia as a result of female genital mutilation- so many women are suffering because of an outdated, unspoken cultural practice. Years and years of history have proven to us that not all culture and history are to be celebrated. Instead, they must never be forgotten- this is very different from being celebrated.

Then, what is our responsibility to our culture and our children? **It is to explain both the good and bad parts of our culture to our children so that they never repeat the bad and so that they carry forward the good.** Our responsibility is to pass down our culture in an educated, open-minded way. Ultimately, we are giving our children the opportunity to redesign our practices in a way that can benefit their future and that of our culture.

Most education travels in one direction: from parent to child. However, educating our culture to unlearn violence against women must travel in two directions: it must be a mutual exchange from parent to child as well as from child to parent. Parents need to teach their children the history of the culture and its practices, as well as the reasoning behind why they are followed (versus blindly telling them to follow something). Equipped with this knowledge, children then must ask questions about these practices, provide their thoughts about them, and challenge them, giving their parents and the older generation an opportunity to reconsider or better explain those practices. Of course, a healthy exchange like this can only succeed if we foster a household environment in which open-minded and productive discussions are encouraged. This must be our focus as a generation, to give our children the freedom to challenge and redesign old ideas. It is in these environments that both children and parents can work together to identify outdated and dangerous practices like violence against women. Once identified, they can be filtered and improved to better fit the current generation.

You may notice that this process is very similar to the scientific method- while science itself is factual, the process of discovery is not- it is opinionated and iterative. Like science, the process of cultural discovery must be open-ended and evolving, spurred by creative ideas and discussion. This way, we are not trapped between culturally correct and morally correct ideas but instead constantly finding better ways to express ourselves as a culture. Let's pass this thinking on to our children and see where they take us.