

KNOW THE FACTS: WHAT IS FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION (FGM) ?

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a human rights violation, a form of torture and an extreme form of violence against girls and women. It is most often carried out on girls between infancy and age 15, though adult women are occasionally subjected. FGM has no health benefits, only harm.

FGM involves removing and damaging healthy and normal female genital tissue, thereby interfering with the natural functions of girls' and women's bodies. FGM is generally done without anaesthetic. The World Health Organization (WHO) has classified FGM into 4 types:

- **Clitoridectomy:** partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce
- **Excision:** partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora
- **Infibulation:** the most extreme form, the removal of all external genitalia and the stitching together of the two sides of the vulva
- **Other:** all other harmful procedures done to the female genitalia for nonmedical purposes, for example, pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterizing

FGM is generally performed without anesthetic, and **can have lifelong health consequences** including:

- Chronic infection
- Hemorrhage
- Severe pain during urination, menstruation, and sexual intercourse
- Complications during childbirth
- Increased risk newborn deaths
- Psychological trauma as a result of being subjected to FGM
- In some cases, death.

It is estimated that **at least 200 million girls** and women globally have undergone FGM, and **30 million are at risk over the next decade.**

The practice is mostly carried out by traditional circumcisers, who often play other central roles in communities, such as attending childbirths. However, according to a 2010 World Health Organization study of existing data, **the medicalization of FGM is increasing.** More than **18% of all girls and women** who have been subjected to FGM had **the procedure performed on them by a health-care provider;** in some countries **the rate is as high as 74%.**



WHERE IS FGM PERFORMED?

FGM occurs around the world:

- Countries with the highest prevalence rates are on the African continent and in the Middle East
- Asia
- Australia and New Zealand
- Latin America
- North America
- Western Europe

In countries with diaspora communities originating from countries with high prevalence rates of FGM, girls are frequently at risk of “**vacation cutting:**” being brought to their families’ home country during school vacations to undergo FGM.

WHY IS FGM PERFORMED?

Ultimately a way to control women and girls’ sexuality, the causes of FGM include a mix of cultural, religious and social factors within families and communities:

- It is associated with ideals of femininity and modesty
- It is believed that girls are “clean” and “beautiful” after removal of body parts that are considered “male” or “unclean”
- FGM typically takes place during rite of passage ceremonies into womanhood
- FGM is often an immediate precursor to child marriage.
- The practice is often motivated by beliefs about what is considered proper sexual behaviour, linking procedures to premarital virginity and marital fidelity.
- In many communities, it is believed to reduce a woman’s libido and therefore believed to help her resist “illicit” sexual acts. When a vaginal opening is covered or narrowed (infibulation), the fear of the pain of opening it, and the fear that this will be found out, is expected to further discourage “illicit” sexual intercourse among women with this type of FGM.

While celebrating cultural values and heritage is important, **girls should be able to celebrate transitions to womanhood and learn about their cultural and community values without the harmful effects of FGM** or forced marriage.

Equality Now notes the tremendous social pressure that supports the continuity of the practice and the fact that many girls undergo FGM for many reasons. However, the social and economic pressures to undergo FGM do not negate the violation of human rights or violence inherent in the practice. Compelling a girl or woman to undergo bodily mutilation in order to maintain social and economic status is itself part of the human rights violation.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

FGM violates various human rights under international and national law, including: women and girls’ rights to:

- Equality
- Life
- Security of the person
- Dignity
- Freedom from discrimination
- Freedom from torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.



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2003: The Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) **banned FGM** (Article 5)

December 2012: the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution (Res L21 revision 1) calling on States to implement laws eliminating FGM among several other recommendations. This was **the first time the General Assembly included the elimination of FGM on its agenda.**

October 2015: the UN General Assembly adopted the Sustainable Development Goals, a roadmap whose “goals and targets will stimulate action over the next 15 years in areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet.” Covering 17 goals and 169 targets, “Agenda 2030” addresses many issues ranging from poverty to HIV/AIDS to climate change. **For the first time, the gender equality goal includes** targets aimed at ending violence and discrimination against women and girls, including **a specific target on eliminating FGM** and child, early and forced marriage (CEFM).

Treaty monitoring bodies overseeing the following human rights treaties have all interpreted **FGM as a human rights violation** in breach of these treaties, with some including medicalization:

- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child
- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
- The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- The Convention Against Torture

In countries and regions where FGM has been reduced or abandoned altogether, evidence shows that the decline resulted when the human rights of women and girls were reinforced and legally protected, and an all-inclusive strategy was used. Such an approach fully engages families, community leaders, educators, law makers or enforcers, health care and social service providers to play an active role.

Research shows that if **practicing communities themselves decide to abandon FGM, the practice can be eliminated** very rapidly.

Sources:

- World Health Organization
- UNICEF (2013; 2016)
- Equality Now and partner publications



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