



Female Genital Mutilation: Freeing African women from the shadow of the knife

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Abstract: Millions of women and girls throughout the African continent are still subjected to female genital mutilation with devastating consequences of lifelong pain and trauma. The international community must help African states battling centuries of prejudice to eradicate this brutal practice.

As the world marks International Women’s Day 2025 under the theme ‘Accelerate Action’, the call to end female genital mutilation (FGM) has never been more urgent. In the dim recesses of tradition, where the shadows of ancient customs loom large, FGM, a sinister practice, continues to carve its mark on girls and women. This brutal rite, a stark manifestation of gender-based violence, echoes through generations, leaving indelible scars both physical and psychological. FGM stands as one of the most egregious violations of human rights, a testament to the enduring grip of patriarchal dominance.

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The United Nations [reports](#) a staggering 230m victims worldwide, with [Africa bearing the brunt](#)—144m cases within its borders. [Defined](#) by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as the partial or total removal of external female genitalia for non-medical reasons, FGM is a profound assault on bodily autonomy and dignity.

This brutal rite, a stark manifestation of gender-based violence, echoes through generations, leaving indelible scars both physical and psychological. FGM stands as one of the most egregious violations of human rights, a testament to the enduring grip of patriarchal dominance. The United Nations [reports](#) a staggering 230m victims worldwide, with [Africa bearing the brunt](#)—144m cases within its borders. [Defined](#) by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as the partial or total removal of external female genitalia for non-medical reasons, FGM is a profound assault on bodily autonomy and dignity. Social and cultural rights are an integral part of the human rights framework, encompassing the rights to participate in cultural life, enjoy social protection, and access education and health. In Africa, this practice persists, driven by a tangled web of cultural, religious, and social norms. It is a rite of passage, a purported shield of chastity, and a mark of [marital fidelity](#). Yet, behind these justifications lies a trail of consequences of blood and tears, a cacophony of pain, and a litany of [health repercussions](#): severe pain, infections, complications in childbirth, even death. The long-term consequences are equally devastating, encompassing chronic pain, psychological trauma and sexual dysfunction.

Culture persists despite anti-FGM laws

In Somalia, where [FGM prevalence](#) soars at a staggering 99 percent, and in Guinea and Djibouti, where it exceeds 90 per cent, the battle against this practice is daunting. In these regions, FGM is not merely a procedure but a societal mandate, enforced by tradition and often conducted in clandestine operations to evade legal repercussions. Even as countries like The Gambia strive to enforce anti-FGM laws, the resistance remains fierce, with religious leaders opposing the ban and pushing the practice further underground. In 2024, the National Assembly [rejected a bill](#) aimed at repealing the country's 2015 prohibition on female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C). Had it passed, it would have been the first instance of a FGM/C ban being reversed. Conflict, climate change and poverty exacerbate the situation, displacing communities and intensifying the desperation that drives the continuation of FGM.

Although several [African countries](#) have enacted specific laws against FGM, ensuring the implementation and enforcement of these laws and commitments necessitates continuous monitoring of the human rights situation and the effective use of accountability mechanisms. In countries where FGM is banned, the practice often moves underground, with procedures being performed on younger girls to [avoid detection](#), making it [difficult](#) to capture accurate rates. There has also been a shift towards 'less severe' forms of FGM, such as sunnah, which involves the removal of the clitoris and is perceived by some in Sudan and Somalia as [less harmful](#). The practice has also become

'[medicalised](#)', with trained professionals performing FGM in clinics, homes, or other locations, under the guise of safety.

Additionally, there is often a lack of acceptance of anti-FGM legislation among affected communities, who may view these laws as foreign impositions that challenge their cultural practices. The role of traditional and religious leaders in perpetuating FGM cannot be overlooked. In some cases, these leaders wield more influence than government authorities, complicating efforts to enforce anti-FGM laws. As a case in point, the debates in The Gambia about the constitutionality of the 2015 anti-FGM law has illustrated the challenges posed by conservative backlash and the need for sustained advocacy and education efforts.

Proactive measures needed to support legal bans

Ensuring access to justice for women and girls affected by FGM requires states to take proactive measures to prevent, investigate, prosecute and punish violators. The effectiveness of legal frameworks depends not only on the existence of laws but also on the willingness and capacity of law enforcement and judicial systems to enforce them. In [Kenya](#), a special unit for investigating FGM cases has prosecuted numerous cases since its establishment in 2014. Similarly, [Burkina Faso](#) has demonstrated a strong commitment to enforcing its anti-FGM laws, with hundreds of convictions reported. Judicial decisions, such as the Constitutional Court of Uganda's ruling in Law and Advocacy for Women in [Uganda v. Attorney General](#), have played a crucial role in affirming the unconstitutionality of FGM and reinforcing state obligations to protect women's rights. Such rulings contribute to the development of progressive jurisprudence that aligns national laws with international human rights standards.

The international community has recognised the need to eliminate FGM through various human rights instruments. Articles 3 and 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([UDHR](#)) assert the rights to life, liberty, security of person, and protection from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women ([CEDAW](#)) explicitly calls for the elimination of harmful practices affecting women's health. The Convention on the Rights of the Child ([CRC](#)) obliges states to protect children from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury, or abuse. The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, also known as the [Maputo Protocol](#), specifically addresses FGM, urging states to prohibit and condemn all forms of harmful practices which negatively affect the human rights of women and girls. The Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)), particularly Goal 5, further underscore international commitment to ending harmful practices, including FGM, by 2030. The African Union's [Agenda 2063](#) also condemns all forms of violence and discrimination against women and girls, including FGM.

The [Maputo Protocol](#) is particularly significant as it is the only international human rights instrument that explicitly prohibits FGM. Article 5 of the Protocol obliges states to ensure that legislative measures and sanctions are in place to prohibit all forms of FGM and its medicalisation. States are further required to promote awareness campaigns and

provide health, legal, and judicial services to victims. The Protocol adopts a comprehensive approach to eradicating FGM, integrating criminal law, education and awareness campaigns, and the rehabilitation of victims. This holistic strategy recognises the limitations of punitive measures alone and underscores the need for societal change and support for survivors. Despite its robust provisions, the enforcement of the Protocol remains a challenge, and ongoing efforts are needed to ensure its effective implementation.

In November 2023, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) and the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) took a significant step towards enhancing accountability by launching the [Joint General Comment](#) on Female Genital Mutilation. This comprehensive document serves as an invaluable resource, providing authoritative guidance on the necessary measures for governments to meet their obligations under regional and international human rights treaties to eradicate FGM. The Joint General Comment on FGM outlines several key state obligations aimed at eradicating this harmful practice. Central to this is the principle of the [best interests of the child](#), which takes precedence over any cultural, religious, or social justifications for FGM. Legislative actions are mandated, requiring states to enact specific laws prohibiting FGM, defining it clearly, ensuring victim protection from prosecution, and holding perpetrators accountable. Medical professionals are prohibited from involvement in FGM and must provide necessary post-FGM care to survivors. States are also required to facilitate access to justice by offering legal aid, training law enforcement and judicial officers, reforming evidence laws and allowing civil actions for FGM-related violations.

Education and international pressure vital for profound societal change

With just five years left to meet the 2030 SDGs target of eliminating FGM, accelerating action is not optional, it is an imperative. Laws alone are not enough; the fight against FGM requires a profound societal shift. Education and awareness campaigns, alternative rites of passage, and economic empowerment programs must be scaled up. Survivors' voices must be amplified, and international bodies must bolster national initiatives with the resources and technical support needed to sustain momentum.

This battle is not just a legal one, it is a fight for dignity, bodily autonomy, and the fundamental rights of women and girls. It is a struggle to dismantle traditions that bind them to pain and subjugation, replacing them with opportunities, freedom, and agency over their own lives. Africa stands at a crossroads, where the future is poised on the edge of a blade, demanding courage, compassion, and an unyielding commitment to justice. As the world watches, we must act, not tomorrow, not next year, but now. The time for hesitation has passed. The time for action is now. Every girl and woman deserve a future free from the shadow of the knife, a future where justice, equality, and freedom reign supreme.