



COVID-19 Disrupts Fight Against Child Marriage and FGM in Africa

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Abstract: Essential COVID-19 measures interrupted the battle against female genital mutilation and child marriage. With restrictions now eased, Africa must renew efforts to combat these human rights abuses which blight the lives of millions of women and girls.

As Africa breathes a tentative sigh of relief amid its relative [return to normal](#) following the last two years of the COVID-19 crisis, there is growing awareness that other serious societal problems have been unintentionally exacerbated by restrictions imposed during the pandemic. According to UNICEF and UNIFPA (United Nations Fund for Population Activities), health and safety restrictions in many countries around the world contributed to 10m more [child marriages](#) and an additional 2m cases of [female genital mutilation](#) (FGM) globally. This was due to [prolonged and strict](#) lockdowns and school closures which disturbed programmes and gains previously made in the fight against these human rights abuses. Even before the virus outbreak, these UN agencies reported that worldwide, 100m girls

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were at risk of child marriage and 4m girls and women were at risk of female genital mutilation every year.

Euphemistically known among practising communities as female circumcision, FGM includes 'all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for cultural or other non-medical reasons', according to [UNFPA](#). The [World Health Organization](#) reports that more than 200m women and girls around the world have been subjected to this major physical and emotional trauma, with 80 percent of cases carried out in Africa. Countries where FGM is prevalent include Guinea, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Gambia, Mauritania, Ethiopia, Mali, Burkina Faso, Sudan, Egypt and Uganda.

Effects of FGM

[Mary Oloiparuni](#) will never forget the agony and terror she endured as a 13-year-old girl, when she was restrained and mutilated in a doorway in her parents' home. She bled profusely; 19 years on, the scarring and pain remain. Giving birth to each of her five children was an excruciating and harrowing experience as it is for any woman who has suffered FGM. The distressing legacy will haunt her for the rest of her life.

Because the practice has physical, social, psychological and other negative effects, local, national and international bodies have made [interventions](#) in African countries to ensure zero tolerance towards FGM. In particular, the Uganda government enacted the [Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act](#) of 2010 with a maximum sentence of life imprisonment for aggravated FGM. In 2014, [five people pleaded](#) guilty under this new law and were jailed for four years for procuring and aiding FGM. Similar arrests and convictions were ongoing, with hundreds jailed, until COVID-19 interrupted these efforts. Like other African states, Uganda had also forged initiatives mobilising community leaders to educate the public on the dangers of FGM.

The aforementioned legislation was introduced in parliament and pushed through, thanks to collective [efforts from leaders](#) of the Sebei sub-region where FGM is practised. In fact, [UNICEF reports](#) that 95 per cent of women in eastern Uganda support abandonment of FGM but strong social influences and peer pressure, especially from [fellow women](#), limit women's ability to stop the practice and influence others against it.

Child marriage in Africa

In another major global human rights violation, records indicate that about 650m girls and women alive today were married in childhood. Child marriage [is defined](#) as a union where either one or both partners are under 18. Although many more girls are married as children, the percentage of boys married in childhood remains sizeable. [As of 2019](#), before COVID-19 emerged, an estimated 21.2 percent of females and 4.5 per cent of males aged 20–24 were first married

before the age of 18, based on data for 82 countries. The problem is worst in [Sub-Saharan Africa](#)—four in 10 girls are married while still children. According to [A Report on Child Marriage in Africa](#), published in 2018 by the Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria, if current trends continue, Africa will become the region with the largest number of child marriages in the world by 2050. Niger takes the lead in sub-Saharan Africa with [77 percent](#) of girls married before the age of 18, followed by the Central African Republic, Chad, Burkina Faso, Mali, Zambia and Guinea.

Kenyan girl [Joyce Lekishon Masiaya](#) was just 12 years old when she learned that her father was planning to marry her off to a 48-year-old man for a bride price of 120 litres of locally-brewed alcohol and 20 litres of cooking oil. She did everything in her power to stop the wedding and was lucky enough to succeed in her fight. Joyce is now enrolled in Asante Africa Foundation's Girls Advancement Program — Wezesha Vijana ([GAP](#)) that extensively empowers survivors through education on children's rights. Sadly, not many of her female peers in Kenya are fortunate enough to escape this horrifying trauma.

Like FGM, child marriage comes at a high physical and emotional cost. Victims are not only deprived of [education](#) as they drop out of school but they are also exposed to greater risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases and of suffering violence at the hands of their spouse. The International Center for Research on Women ([ICRW](#)) reports that girls who marry before the age of 18 are twice as likely to experience domestic violence compared to girls who marry after the age of 18. Due to poverty and low education levels, these girls' vulnerability is increased. Other effects of child marriage include high [mortality rates](#) during pregnancies and childbirth, and abuse of other fundamental [human rights](#). For instance, while they are still children, they are subject to marital rape by their spouses and have no say in their own reproductive rights.

With COVID-19 disrupting the fight against these two harmful practices—child marriage and FGM—the situation has worsened for African children and women. The imposition of lockdowns and other measures such as quarantines to curb further spread of the virus became a nightmare for the victims. The '[stay at home, save lives](#)' slogan was a double-edged sword for many African women and children, for whom staying home was far from safe, as they were trapped in houses, homes and communities with their domestic violence perpetrators with little or no possibility of escape and limited opportunities to seek help.

Considering what happened during the outbreak of [Ebola](#) in West Africa, it is predicted that the situation could get worse unless we all play our role in protecting these friends, relatives and family members. That is why there are renewed calls by the UN for 'united, concerted and well-funded' actions to end these harmful practices by 2030. So, what are we all supposed to do to achieve these very ambitious [Sustainable Development Goals](#) post-COVID-19, especially Goal 5.3?

Way forward

As various stakeholders have previously emphasised, we must learn from the past and remain alert regarding our obligations to protect victims and support survivors of child marriage and FGM. Already, the African Union and other stakeholders such as UNICEF, UNFPA, World Vision, Plan International and other civil society organisations are rigorously building the capacity of journalists on the continent to mainstream these issues in the media in the post-COVID-19 era. Domestically, we need to strengthen the enforcement of existing policies and legislation to protect the rights of girls and women to live free from violence and discrimination. States where FGM and child marriage are still prevalent must come up with better national action plans to end these harmful practices post-COVID-19. Moreover, these action plans can only become more effective when included in national budgets to cater for programmes such as comprehensive sexual and reproductive health, education, social welfare and legal services. At regional level, institutions and economic communities must work together to prevent the movement of girls and women across borders when the purpose is to get them into countries with less restrictive child marriage and FGM laws. In our local communities, religious and traditional leaders need to stand up against these harmful practices and strike down myths associated with child marriage and FGM. Societal and peer pressure often drives these practices, leaving individual victims and families helpless, hence the need for more information and dedicated campaigns to spur positive change. These leaders can also partner with the media to reach wider audiences. Additionally, [UNICEF](#) says public pledges to abandon child marriage and FGM—particularly pledges by entire communities—are an effective model of collective commitment. But these public pledges 'must be paired with comprehensive strategies for challenging the social norms, practices and behaviours' that condone child marriage and FGM. Furthermore, testimonials by survivors such as Mary and Joyce, mentioned earlier in this piece, help to build understanding of the practices' grim realities and long-lasting impact on women's lives. Advocacy campaigns and social media can amplify the message that ending these harmful practices improves and indeed saves lives.