

Eliminating Female genital mutilation

An interagency statement

OHCHR, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNECA, UNESCO,
UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNIFEM, WHO



World Health
Organization

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Eliminating female genital mutilation: the imperative



The term "female genital mutilation" (also called "female genital cutting" and "female genital mutilation/cutting") refers to all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. Between 100 and 140 million girls and women in the world are estimated to have undergone such procedures, and 3 million girls are estimated to be at risk of undergoing the procedures every year. Female genital mutilation has been reported to occur in all parts of the world, but it is most prevalent in: the western, eastern, and north-eastern regions of Africa, some countries in Asia and the Middle East and among certain immigrant communities in North America and Europe.

Female genital mutilation has no known health benefits. On the contrary, it is known to be harmful to girls and women in many ways. First and foremost, it is painful and traumatic. The removal of or damage to healthy, normal genital tissue interferes with the natural functioning of the body and causes several immediate and long-term health consequences. For example, babies born to women who have undergone female genital mutilation suffer a higher rate of neonatal death compared with babies born to women who have not undergone the procedure.

Communities that practise female genital mutilation report a variety of social and religious reasons for continuing with it. Seen from a human rights perspective, the practice reflects deep-rooted inequality between the sexes, and constitutes an extreme form of discrimination against women. Female genital mutilation is nearly always carried out on minors and is therefore a violation of the rights of the child. The practice also violates the rights to health, security and physical integrity of the person, the right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and the right to life when the procedure results in death.

Decades of prevention work undertaken by local communities, governments, and national and international organizations have contributed to a reduction in the prevalence of female genital mutilation in some areas. Communities that have employed a process of collective decision-making have been able to abandon the practice. Indeed, if the practising communities decide themselves to abandon female genital mutilation, the practice can be eliminated very rapidly. Several governments have passed laws against the practice, and where these laws have been complemented by culturally-sensitive education and public awareness-raising activities, the practice has declined. National and international organizations have played a key role in advocating against the practice and generating data that confirm its harmful consequences. The African Union's *Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa*, and its Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa constitute a major contribution to the promotion of gender equality and the elimination of female genital mutilation.



However, despite some successes, the overall rate of decline in the prevalence of female genital mutilation has been slow. It is therefore a global imperative to strengthen work for the elimination of this practice, which is essential for the achievement of many of the Millennium Development Goals.

This Statement is a call to all States, international and national organizations, civil society and communities to uphold the rights of girls and women. It also call on those bodies and communities to develop, strengthen, and support specific and concrete actions directed towards ending female genital mutilation.

On behalf of our respective agencies, we reaffirm our commitment to the elimination of female genital mutilation within a generation.

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