

# FACTSHEET: FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION/CUTTING (FGM)



## DEFINITION

Female genital mutilation is also known as female genital cutting. It is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as “all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.”<sup>71</sup> FGM is recognized internationally as a violation of the human rights of girls and women.

## FACTS

- Approximately 100-140 million girls and women in the world have experienced female genital mutilation/cutting
- More than 3 million girls in Africa annually are at risk of the practice.<sup>72</sup>

“Female genital cutting is an abuse of human, women’s and child rights. It contravenes a girl’s right to a whole body. It happens to girls without their permission and often against their will. It increases and perpetuates gender inequality<sup>73</sup>”

Orchid Project

## What are the causes of FGM?

There are no simple answers to why FGM takes place. Here are some reasons:

- **Position of girls in society** – It reflects deep-rooted gender inequality, and constitutes an extreme form of discrimination against women. FGM is a result of social norms which consider this act a necessary part of raising a girl properly, a way to make girls ‘clean’ and ‘beautiful’ and to prepare her for adulthood and marriage.
- **Control and power** – Fear of female sexuality is often pervasive and FGM tends to be a way to control and diminish female sexuality and sexual experience. FGM is often motivated by beliefs about what is considered proper sexual behaviour, linking procedures to premarital virginity and marital fidelity. FGM is in many communities also believed to reduce a woman’s libido and therefore believed to help her resist “illicit” sexual acts that may harm the family honour.
- **Culture of acceptance** – In some communities FGM has become a social convention. The social pressure to conform to what others do and have been doing is a strong motivation to perpetuate the practice. FGM may also be associated with religious beliefs although no religious scriptures require it.
- **Weak laws** – Laws may not be adequately or sufficiently implemented to stop FGM. This can result in abusers going unpunished for their crimes. In some cases there may be no national legislation prohibiting FGM.
- **Limited support** – There may be no or limited support to help girls and young women escape this practice and protect those that stand against it. It is not just men who condone this practice. There are also women who even advocate for the practice.

## What are the consequences of FGM?

- Girls and young women will experience **blood loss and severe pain** from the experience of FGM.
- FGM **harms the long-term health** of girls and young women. It involves removing and harming healthy and normal parts of their vagina. It can harm the way that women’s and girls’ bodies work and cause urine infections, fistula, infertility, problems during childbirth, increased risk of HIV/AIDS infection and even death.
- This practice can have an emotional impact on the girls and young women and can leave them feeling scared, embarrassed and distressed.
- FGM can **stop sexual enjoyment** for young women.
- The practice of FGM **controls girls and young women**. It reinforces their lower position in society and gives others power over them and their bodies.
- FGM can limit the life choices of girls and young women.