

Violence against women and the girl child

Female genital mutilation



Key points

- According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO), at least 200 million girls and women have undergone FGM based on recent data from 31 countries.^{1, 2}
- FGM is slowly declining in some countries and subregions where the practice is prevalent.
- Despite recent progress, the prevalence of FGM remains alarmingly high in parts of Northern Africa, Eastern Africa and West Africa.³
- Because COVID-19 is interrupting programmes to end FGM, progress may be threatened.
- Progress in the elimination of FGM is not universal, and where it is taking place it is not fast enough.⁴ Even in countries where the practice has become less common, progress would need to be at least 10 times faster to meet the global target of its elimination by 2030.
- Based on the latest available data, in six countries⁵ at least 3 out of every 4 women and adolescent girls aged 15–19 have undergone FGM.

Background

Female genital mutilation is a violation of the human rights of girls and women that affects girls and women worldwide. There is a large body of literature documenting the adverse health consequences of female genital mutilation over both the short and long term: the practice is a direct manifestation of gender inequality, which "constitutes irreparable, irreversible harm and is an act of violence against women and girls".⁶

While the practice is most concentrated in countries in Africa, from the Atlantic coast across to the Horn of Africa, it is also practiced in countries in the Middle East, such as Iraq and Yemen, in some countries in Asia, and also in some communities in Australia, Europe and Northern America.⁷

Female genital mutilation is condemned in international treaties and conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women and the Cairo Declaration for the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation.

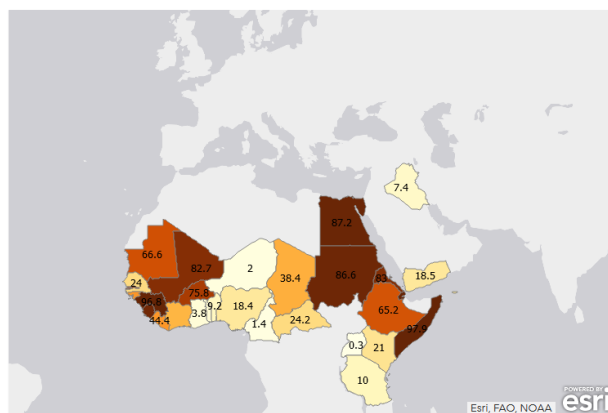
Furthermore, since FGM is regarded as a traditional practice prejudicial to the health of children and is, in most cases, performed on minors, it violates the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In many countries national legislation includes an explicit ban on the practice.

Current Situation

With its inclusion under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 5.3, which is aimed at the elimination of this harmful practice by 2030, FGM holds a prominent position on the global development agenda. Although the practice has persisted for centuries, it is becoming less common, with a marked decline reported in countries such as Egypt where it was once universal, as well as in countries such as Kenya, where the practice is restricted to specific ethnic communities.

Prevalence rates of FGM vary significantly by country. The latest available data on the proportion of adolescent girls aged 15–49 years who have undergone FGM or cutting are shown by country in figure I, which highlights the fact that, despite recent progress, the prevalence of FGM remains alarmingly high in parts of Northern Africa and West Africa.⁸ Moreover, the onset of COVID-19 has interrupted programmes to end FGM, which could threaten progress towards the elimination of the practice.

Figure I Proportion of adolescent girls and women who have undergone female genital mutilation or cutting in selected countries: 2010-2018 (latest available)



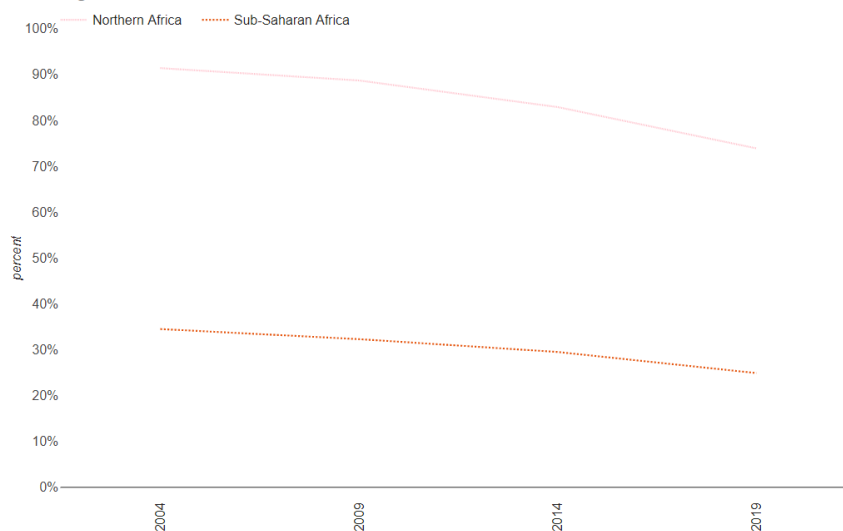
Source: SDG indicator 5.3.2, SDG database (accessed July 2020).

Note: Latest available data between 2010 and 2018, with the exception of Cameroon (2004), Djibouti (2006) and Somalia (2006).

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Such declines at the country level have contributed to a reduction in regional rates over the past 15 years. In Northern Africa, the proportion of adolescent girls aged 15–19 years who have undergone FGM or cutting decreased by 17.5%, from 91.4% in 2004 to 73.9% in 2019. In sub-Saharan Africa, its prevalence decreased by 9.6%, from 34.5% to 24.9%, over the same time period (see figure II).

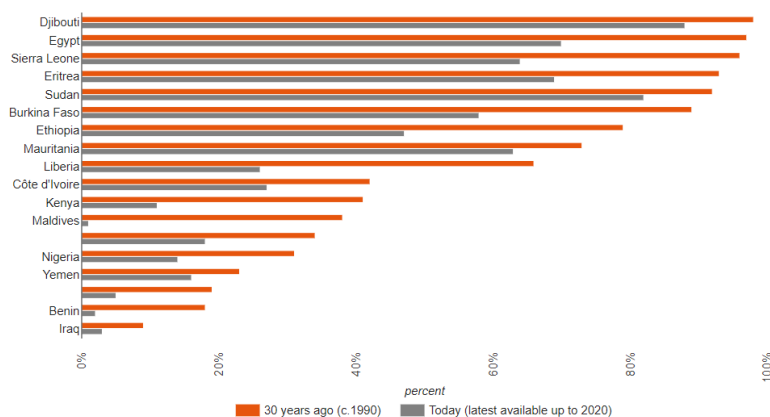
Figure II Proportion of adolescent girls aged 15-19 years who have undergone female genital mutilation or cutting: 2004 to 2019



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Statistics Division, statistical annex to the report of the Secretary-General on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (E/2020/57) (<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs>); and UNICEF global databases, 2020.

Figure III shows data for the 18 countries with a decline in the percentage of adolescent girls who have undergone FGM over the course of the past 30 years.

Figure III Percentage of adolescent girls aged 15-19 years who have undergone FGM in countries with a declining prevalence: 1990 and 2020

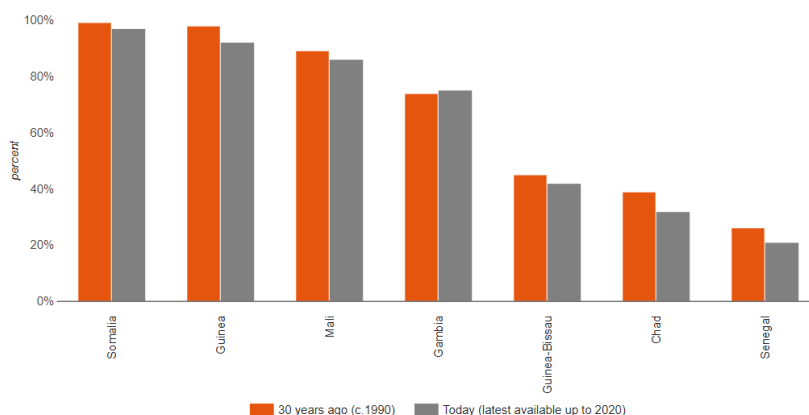


Note: Countries included in this chart have a significantly lower prevalence of FGM today compared to 30 years ago. The chart excludes countries with a national prevalence below 5%. Trend data are not available for Indonesia.

Source: UNICEF, Female Genital Mutilation: A New Generation Calls for Ending an Old Practice, New York, 2020.

Figure IV highlights the seven countries where the prevalence of FGM either remains persistently high or where no significant decline has been observed over the same time period.

Figure IV Percentage of adolescent girls aged 15-19 years who have undergone FGM in countries with a universal prevalence and/or without a significant decline: 1990 and 2020



Note: Figure IV includes countries without a significant decline in prevalence, and those for which prevalence among the cohort aged 15-19 years is 90% or higher. This chart excludes countries with a national prevalence below 5%.

Source: UNICEF, Female Genital Mutilation: A New Generation Calls for Ending an Old Practice, New York, 2020.

Progress has been extremely slow in Guinea and Somalia, where the practice remains almost universal and where at least 9 in 10 women and adolescent girls aged 15-19 years have been cut. Based on the latest available data, in six countries⁹ at least 3 out of every 4 women and adolescent girls aged 15-19 have undergone FGM.

Progress in the elimination of FGM is not universal, and where there is progress it is not fast enough. Even in countries where the practice has become less common, progress would need to be at least 10 times faster to meet the global target of its elimination by 2030.¹⁰

Legislative environment

FGM is widely condemned in both international treaties and conventions as well as under national legislation in many countries.

Vulnerable groups

The risk faced by women and adolescent girls aged 15–19 of undergoing FGM is highly dependent on context, with ethnicity playing a particularly strong role in determining whether they will be cut.¹¹

Country in focus

In Kenya, where the practice has been banned under law since 2011, 4 in 10 women and adolescent girls have undergone FGM, although the variation across ethnic groups is dramatic; the practice is still prevalent among some ethnicities (for example, among the Somali population, where it is estimated to be 94%), but almost non-existent among others (including both the Luhya and Luo ethnicities, where it is less than 1%).

About the data

Coverage

Girls and women aged 15–49.

Availability

Global reporting covers 31 countries in which the practice is concentrated and which have data on national prevalence.

Definitions

- Proportion of girls and women aged 15–49 years who have undergone female genital mutilation (FGM) (Sustainable Development Goal indicator 5.3.2) refers to "all procedures involving partial or total removal of the female external genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons".

Footnotes

1. [United Nations Children's Fund \(UNICEF\), February 2020.](#)
2. [World Health Organization \(WHO\), 2020.](#)
3. [United Nations Population Fund \(UNFPA\), 2020.](#)
4. See report of the Secretary-General on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (E/2020/57), para. 51.
5. Djibouti, the Gambia, Mali, the Republic of Guinea, Somalia and the Sudan.
6. General Assembly resolution 73/149.
7. UNICEF, Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A global concern, New York, 2016.
8. [United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs \(UNDESA\), Statistics Division.](#)
9. Djibouti, the Gambia, Mali, the Republic of Guinea, Somalia and the Sudan.
10. UNICEF, Female Genital Mutilation: A New Generation Calls for Ending an Old Practice, New York, 2020.
11. UNICEF, Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A statistical overview and exploration of the dynamics of change, New York, 2013.