



International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation

6th February, 2022

By Daniel Amdavi and Pheza Otieno

Introduction

The UN General Assembly in 2012 chose February 6th as the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation. The reason we celebrate this day is to boost and direct the efforts made on the elimination of this backward and harmful cultural practice. Female genital mutilation is not only a violation of girls' rights but can also lead to serious health complications, and even death. Girls who were forced to go through female genital mutilation are at an increased risk of child marriage and dropping out of school, threatening their ability to build a better future for themselves, their families and their communities.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) involves all procedures that change or injure the female private parts. There are no medical reasons for performing this act that is why it is considered all over the world as abuse of human rights. The specific human rights that are violated are the right to health and the integrity of girls and women (UNFPA, 2022).

Here are some of the latest numbers on FGM (UNICEF, 2022):

**At least 200 million girls and women alive today have gone through female genital mutilation. Another 2 million girls could be at risk by 2030 because of COVID-19. These numbers mean that the speed of ending this dangerous practice has gone down.*

**A worrying trend is coming up where around 1 in 4 girls and women have undergone female genital mutilation, or 52 million worldwide, were forced to undergo the practice at the hands of someone who works in a medical institution. This proportion is twice as high among adolescents, indicating growth in the medicalization of the practice.*

Female genital mutilation is a global problem. It is mainly practiced in 30 countries in Africa and the Middle East. Some countries in Asia and Latin America also practice FGM. The practice of female genital mutilation continues to persist amongst immigrant populations living in Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand (UNICEF, 2022).

What are the effects of Female Genital Mutilation?

Female genital mutilation has no known advantages or benefits to girls. Instead, girls who undergo female genital mutilation face short-term complications such as severe pain, shock, excessive bleeding, infections, and difficulty in passing urine, as well as long-term consequences for their sexual and reproductive health and mental health. Further, as mentioned earlier, girls who undergo female genital mutilation are at increased risk of child marriage and dropping out of school.

Global Legal Framework on Female Genital Mutilation

A number of international conventions and declarations form the legal framework for the protection and promotion of women and girls' human rights and are relevant to FGM. They include; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), among others.

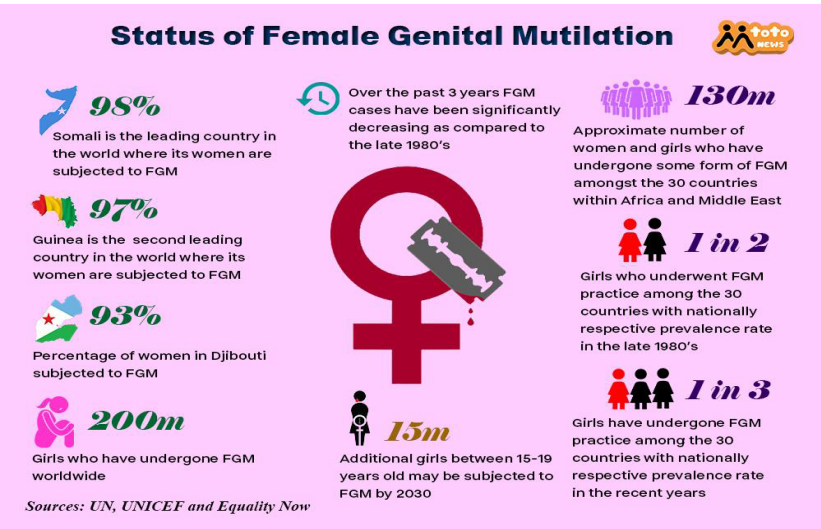
According to the UN Human Rights Committee, “FGM/C constitutes cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment that violates the general prohibition against torture”. (28 Too Many, 2018b)

As a result, national governments have international legal responsibilities to adopt:

“effective and appropriate measures to abolish harmful traditional practices affecting the health of children, particularly girls, including early marriage and FGM, as well as preventing third parties, including medical providers, from coercing women to undergo traditional practices, such as FGM/C.” (28 Too Many, 2018a)

Moreover, fear of FGM in one’s country of origin is reason for international protection (asylum) under the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees.

Regional legal instruments on FGM in Africa
There are specific legal obligations for the African continent, including; the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights (art 18), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (art 21), the Maputo Protocol (Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa, art 5). The Maputo protocol (The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa) obliges States to implement legislation against FGM, as well as other measures such as public awareness of FGM in all sectors of society through programs of information, informal or formal education and sensitization, provision of necessary support to survivors (including health services, legal and judicial support, psychological and emotional advice as well as professional trainings), and protection of women who are at risk (art.5, Maputo).



Female Genital Mutilation in Africa

According to Equality Now, an estimated 55 million girls under the age of 15 in 28 African countries and 130 million girls in Africa and Middle East have experienced or are at risk of experiencing FGM, which remains prevalent in parts of West, East, Central, and Northern Africa. This, despite the fact that laws against FGM are most common in the African continent where 28 countries have specific anti-FGM laws or legal provisions.

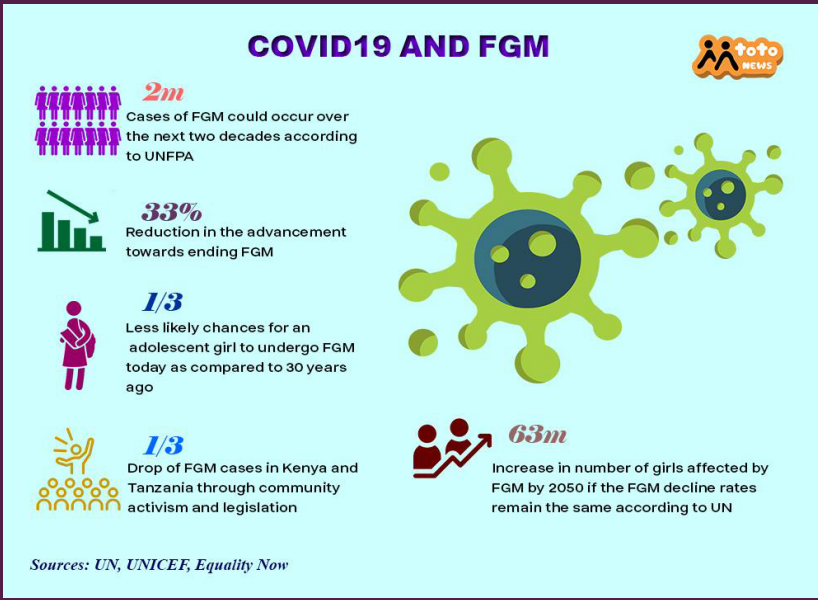
The move to end FGM in Africa has over the years gained traction on the continent with state and non-state actors at the international, regional, and national levels coalescing around actions designed to address this harmful practice.

These efforts have seen African governments commit to the global goal of ending FGM by 2030 in addition to launching a continental drive aimed at promoting and accelerating the collective abandonment of FGM at the community level through the development and enforcement of comprehensive anti-FGM laws; increasing and allocating resources to end FGM, and strengthening partnerships geared towards eliminating female genital mutilation.

Covid 19 and Female Genital Mutilation

In 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively and disproportionately affected girls and women, resulting in a shadow pandemic. This has resulted in disrupting SDG target 5.3 on the elimination of all harmful practices including, female genital mutilation. UNFPA estimates additional 2 million girls projected to be at risk of undergoing female genital mutilation by 2030.

Millions of girls are at increased risk of female genital mutilation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Closed schools, lockdowns and disruption to services that protect girls from this harmful practice has resulted in increased cases of female genital mutilation.



Conclusion and Recommendations

While progress has been made and girls are a third less likely to undergo this harmful practice compared to 30 years ago, the pace must be 10 times faster to reach the global target of zero incidences by 2030. UNICEF reports that while an estimated \$2.4 billion is needed to achieve that goal in 31 priority countries, only \$275 million is expected to be spent, indicating a resource gap of about \$2.1 billion. There's therefore urgent need for increased investment in efforts towards combating female genital mutilation. Indeed, the theme for this year's celebrations is "Accelerating Investment to End Female Genital Mutilation" calling for investment in programmes to provide services and response for those affected and those at risk and in developing and enforcing laws and fortifying institutional capacity to address eradicating female genital mutilation.

To further promote the elimination of female genital mutilation, coordinated and systematic efforts are needed targeted at the countries and communities where the practice is prevalent. The efforts must engage whole communities, these include community leaders, men, women and children. The focus should be on human rights, gender equality, sexual education and attention to the needs of women and girls who suffer from female genital mutilation consequences.

References

UNFPA. 2022. <https://www.unfpa.org/events/international-day-zero-tolerance-female-genital-mutilation> Accessed on 2/2/2022

UNICEF. 2022. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/international-day-zero-tolerance-female-genital-mutilation-unicef-warns-covid-19> Accessed on 4/02/2022