

# Her Voice, Her Future: Investing In Survivor-led Movements To End Female Genital Mutilation In Ghana

Op-ed By UN Country Team, Ghana

**FEMALE GENITAL Mutilation continues to be practiced in Ghana, in the shadows of the great progress made on women empowerment and gender consciousness, and despite the criminalization of the practice in the country since 1994.**

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a human rights violation and an extreme form of gender discrimination that poses significant health risks and consequences, and reflects deep-rooted inequality between women and men. As we commemorate the International Day of Zero Tolerance on FGM today, the practice of FGM in Ghana demands our immediate attention and united efforts to eradicate it from our communities.

Globally, there are over 200 million girls and women who are survivors of FGM and in 2024, nearly 4.4 million girls - or more than 12,000 each day - are at risk of the practice. In Ghana, a 2023 draft baseline survey report on FGM in Northern Ghana supported by UNFPA and done in partnership with the University of Health and Allied Sci-

ences revealed that 5 per 100 population of female aged 15 - 49 years had undergone FGM in the Kasena-Nankena West and Wa East Districts. Occurrences of FGM were also observed in the Sawla Tuna-Kalba (3 per 100 population of female) and Pusiga (2 per 100 population of females) districts. The survey also revealed that 29% of respondents still support the practice of FGM.

The practice of FGM carries severe life-long mental and reproductive health risks and complications. FGM survivors suffer unbearable pain, excessive bleeding, swelling of genital tissues and excruciating urination among others. The long-term consequences of FGM is immeasurable and often leads to complications during childbirth, resulting in obstetric fistula and sometimes, even death. The global estimates, show that the financial cost of health care for FGM survivors is USD 1.4 billion every year!

The continuous practice of FGM is deeply rooted in cultural traditions of the people and justified under the pretext of cultural preservation and misguided notions of purity. For instance, in the UNFPA

supported baseline survey, about 28.8% of the respondents indicated that FGM is a good practice that helps to control the sexuality of women and the early desire to engage in sexual intercourse among girls. Women and children of women not done FGM are often stigmatized in the community, and further pressure is put by the in-laws of such women to go back and get cut, further driving the practice to be performed even on those who had escaped it as children from their parents' homes.

Whilst Ghana prides herself of her rich cultural diversity and upholds the positive cultural values, social norms, and traditions of her people, it is imperative while doing these to also ensure that the fundamental human rights of women and young girls are also protected.

We therefore need to confront the cultural norms and misconceptions perpetuating this harmful practice. The practice of FGM is not an acceptable rite of passage; it is an affront to the rights and dignity of women and girls. The government of Ghana, as a champion of human rights and progress, need to take bold and decisive action to end the practice

of FGM within its borders and tackle the cross-border dimensions where girls are taken into neighbouring countries to undergo the practice as highlighted by 20% of respondents from the baseline survey.

The Government's involvement should include the rigorous enforcement of existing laws and initiatives to raise awareness about harmful effect of FGM, its human rights implications and the disempowerment it causes to women and girls; and that FGM is being done against national laws. Service delivery points could also be used to implement risk education programmes, investigate cases, and use antenatal and child welfare clinics for effective monitoring of FGM.

Stakeholders such as non-governmental organizations, community leaders, healthcare professionals, religious and traditional leaders should continue to play crucial and complimentary roles in educating the communities, challenging harmful norms and dismantling the deeply ingrained beliefs that sustain FGM, as well as providing support to survivors as part of the comprehensive strategy to eradicate FGM. Community leaders could also

develop byelaws against FGM in line with national laws, but easily enforceable by them.

Women-led and FGM survivor-led organizations, especially at the grassroots level, have in-depth understanding of the challenges that women and girls face and are vital resources on how to advance their rights. As exemplified in the theme for this year, it is crucial to amplify the voices of FGM survivors and prioritize investments in survivor-led initiatives including ensuring accessible, comprehensive and culturally sensitive services for FGM survivors by strengthening the skills of health, social, and legal professionals to deliver such sensitive and informed care.

Various community-based platforms can be used for awareness raising including places of worship, community durbars, schools, etc. The media, as a powerful tool for social change, should also be involved by shedding light on the realities of FGM. Through documentaries, articles, and interviews, the media can expose the devastating consequences of this practice, amplify voices of survivors and foster a collective sense of responsibility to protect the rights and well-being

of women and girls.

As concerned citizens, we cannot remain passive. The number of girls at risk of undergoing FGM worldwide is projected to rise to 4.6 million in the year 2030 unless efforts to end it are intensified.

The time for action is now. Let us stand united against FGM. Together, we can create a safer and healthier future for the girls of Ghana. Our collective action today will determine the well-being and dignity of generations to come. Every day that FGM persists is a day where the rights and future of young girls and women are compromised. Let Ghana stand as a beacon of progress, showing the world that cultural heritage and human rights can coexist without sacrificing the well-being of its most vulnerable citizens.

It is time to end the silence surrounding FGM and ensure a safer, healthier, and more equitable future for all. By investing in survivor-led movements to end FGM, and including survivors in meaningful participation to co-create solutions, we will build their power and agency, promote social and gender transformation to eradicate FGM and other harmful practices in a generation.