

# Questions and Answers about Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C)

The EU has actively participated in international cooperation to promote the elimination of Female Genital Mutilation. Discussion on Female Genital Mutilation is included in human rights and political dialogues with partner countries and in annual dialogues with civil society organisations. Moreover, the EU supports several projects worldwide contributing to the elimination of the practice.

What is FGM/C?

Female genital mutilation consists of the (partial or complete) removal of the external female genitalia, and the infliction of other injuries to the female genitalia for no medical reasons. There are several variations, including partial or complete removal of the clitoris, of the labia minora and majora, the narrowing of the vaginal opening by joining the two sides of the wound, leaving only a small opening for urine and menstrual fluids, and any other non-medical injury such as scraping, incising, pricking or burning. Female genital mutilation causes pain, infection, problems with sexual intercourse, problems with urination, problems with childbirth, and death.

It is estimated that at least 500,000 women in Europe have undergone FGM/C and 200 million women worldwide. If the practice continues at the current pace, 68 million girls will be cut between 2015 and 2030 in 25 countries where FGM is routinely practiced and data available.

FGM is also defined by the Council of Europe's [Istanbul Convention](#), which requires its criminalisation. Its victims have to be protected in accordance with the Convention's support and protection measures in those Member States that have ratified the Convention. The European Commission has proposed the EU accession to the Istanbul Convention in March 2016 (see [press release](#)).

What does the EU do?

As an issue of great concern the European Union tackles FGM in various ways in its internal and external action, which includes better legal protection and improved access to support for victims, instilling social change and capacity building of practitioners. The actions are based on the focus areas of the [Communication](#) towards the elimination of female genital mutilation from 25 November 2013, on fighting harmful practices such as FGM, as violence of any kind against women and girls, as well as on the [Gender Action Plan from 2016- 2020](#).

## **1. Knowledge**

Estimates show that there may be as many as 200 million victims of female genital mutilation (FGM) worldwide, including at least 500,000 in the EU. These are estimates and there is no official data available on measuring the

actual scale of the phenomenon.

It is difficult to estimate the number of victims and girls at risk, and there is little reliable information regarding how, by whom and where it is carried out. Therefore, improving data collection has been a priority.

[European Institute for Gender Equality](#) has carried out research on the prevalence of female genital mutilation in the European Union. It plays a leading role in providing information and supporting Member States to prevent and combat this harmful practice. In November 2018, EIGE published [a study on the prevalence of FGM in Belgium, Greece, France, Italy, Cyprus and Malta](#). This study supports the European institutions and EU Member States in providing more accurate qualitative and quantitative information on female genital mutilation and its risk among girls within the EU, taking into account new patterns of migration.

On 6 February 2017 the Advisory Committee on equal opportunities for women and men has published [an opinion on combating FGM/C](#) and other harmful practices containing recommendations to the European Commission and to the Member States.

In 2016, a [prevalence study](#) funded under the Commission's Daphne III programme, was carried out to develop a common definition and methodology on FGM prevalence. It shows that over half a million first-generation immigrant women and girls in the EU, Norway and Switzerland had undergone FGM before their arrival.

## **2. Prevention**

Prevention is essential and relies on sustainable societal change, as FGM is often deeply rooted in communities' societal and social norms, causing a social pressure on parents to have their daughters cut. Sometimes, it is claimed that undergoing FGM will be beneficial for the girl and preserves her honour.

To change these social norms, the European Union funds grassroots activities, including through its [Spotlight Initiative](#) that focus on health education, children's rights and laws prohibiting FGM. The aim is to help counter the belief that girls need to be cut and raise awareness among those in contact with victims of FGM and girls at risk of FGM.

The EU dedicated the year 2017 to the fight against violence against women. The actions included the funding of projects that deal with FGM/C, as well as an awareness campaign and a dedicated [website NON.NO.NEIN – Say No, Stop Violence against Women](#) providing the main platform for these actions.

This campaign was extended and intensified during 2018. In 2018, the campaign focused on disseminating accurate information and messages about the Istanbul Convention. Outputs of the 2018 campaign implemented in collaboration with the Council of Europe and the European Coalition to End Violence Against Women and Girls (comprising over 25 European civil society networks) include a [GIF](#) addressing domestic violence in the context of family values; [a](#)

[harassment-Free Zone icon](#) addressing sexual harassment printed on stickers, posters and used online; and [an information leaflet](#) explaining the content of the Istanbul Convention and countering myths.

In February 2017, a [web-based platform](#) on Female Genital Mutilation was launched to train judges, nurses, asylum officers, doctors, teachers, police officers and other professionals who are in contact with girls at risk and women who undergone FGM, and to better equip them to prevent it and support these victims. EUR 4.5 million were dedicated to [nine transnational projects](#). Their aim was to prevent, inform about and combat violence against women, young people and children linked to harmful practices.

Combating violence against children is a priority for the European Commission. At the 9<sup>th</sup> European Forum on the rights of the child, **10 Principles for integrated child protection systems** were proposed. They aim to prevent and respond to violence against children, including gender-based violence, FGM and other harmful practices. The Commission funds [projects to strengthen national child protection systems](#), for instance through the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme, including projects promoting integrated approaches to child victims, such as children's houses.

In 2016, the [10<sup>th</sup> European Forum on the rights of the child](#) was dedicated to the protection of children in migration. Discussions particularly focused on the risks of gender-based violence and harmful practices for children in migration. In order to support the preventive work of health professionals, training packages have been developed, which address FGM as a specific topic in the training [modules](#) among the wider aim of improving the quality of and access to health services for migrant and ethnic minorities. Further, training packages for health professionals have been developed, to improve the quality of and access to health services for migrant and ethnic minorities. FGM/C is a specific topic in the online [training modules](#).

### 3. Prosecution

FGM is a crime in all EU Member States. In many EU countries it is also possible to prosecute for conducting FGMs abroad, following the principle of extra-territoriality. This prevents families from taking their daughters to their country of origin to have them mutilated there.

- Criminalisation of FGM is also required under the Istanbul Convention and its victims therefore also fall under the scope of the Convention's prevention, support and protection measures, in those Member States that have ratified the Convention (the criminalisation of FGM is a Member State competence). On 13 June 2017, the Istanbul Convention was co-signed by the Commission and Council Presidency on behalf of the EU. The terms of the Conclusion and the related code of conduct on the respective roles of implementation of EU and Member States are currently negotiated in the Council of the EU.
- A correct and timely implementation of the [Victims' Rights Directive](#) ensures that victims of FGM are able to access free confidential specialist support services, including trauma support and counselling, as well as shelters in emergency situations. It also puts in place

measures to protect victims against any threat of physical or emotional harm during criminal investigations and trial. In addition, children will be subject to specific protection measures taking into account of their age and maturity. The Victims' Rights Directive applies to all victims of crimes without discrimination and regardless of their residence status, ensuring that it also applies to individuals such as undocumented migrants.

- A [Mutual Learning Seminar](#) for Member States and independent academic experts organised by the Commission in April 2016 examined and discussed good practices in tackling female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage and other harmful practices through legislation, improving the evidence base on FGM and the role of awareness raising and training.
- The Commission also disseminates training materials on FGM for legal practitioners, through the [European e-Justice Portal](#). The e-learning course 'United against female genital mutilation' addresses the issue of FGM in the context of health and asylum services. It is aimed at legal practitioners and provides an introduction to understanding FGM as a human rights issue and as a specific form of gender based violence, and its implications in the area of asylum.
- The European Commission published an [analysis of European court cases related to FGM](#) in 2016, in an effort to identify what has allowed states to effectively prosecute.

#### 4. Protection

Girls and women at risk or victims of FGM need particular support when they arrive on the EU territory. EU legislation is in place: a woman or a girl at risk of suffering FGM is eligible for international protection and her specific needs should be taken into account.

- Under the recast Asylum Procedures Directive and the recast Reception Conditions Directive, Member States have now an obligation to identify applicants with special procedural and reception needs, due to their gender or as consequence of serious forms of sexual violence. If such needs are identified, Member States need to provide adequate procedural and reception support to these vulnerable applicants.
- Relevant provisions of the Asylum Procedures Directive provide, for instance, that personal interviews shall be conducted by persons competent to take into account, among other things, the applicant's cultural origin, gender and vulnerability. In addition, Member States should, wherever possible, select an interviewer and interpreter of the same sex of the applicant if the latter requests it.
- Relevant provisions of the Reception Conditions Directive also provide that victims of female genital mutilation should receive the necessary medical and psychological treatment, and staff working with victims of female genital mutilation should have appropriate training.
- The European Asylum Support Office have developed an online training platform for immigration and asylum officials in Member States on gender-specific issues related to asylum and the application of EU law in this area; first trainings will take place this year.
- The reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) put forward by

the Commission in May and July 2016 aims to reinforce the protection safeguards available to persons with specific needs, including unaccompanied children seeking asylum in Europe. They mention that specific needs of female **applicants who have experienced gender-based harm** should be taken into account. This includes ensuring access, to medical care, legal support, appropriate trauma counselling and psycho-social care at different stages of the asylum procedure.

## 5. External action

The EU is supporting projects worldwide dedicated to the elimination of sexual and gender biased violence, and more especially FGM in 19 countries in Africa (total amount of approximately EUR 13.8 million).

An example of this EU support includes a project dedicated to the strengthening of the capacities of the African Court on Human and People's Rights to combat sexual violence against women and its consequences. It also encompasses an EUR 11 million EU contribution to the UNICEF-UNFPA Joint Programmes on the Abandonment of FGM/C which aims at:

- supporting 17 countries to enact legal and policy frameworks with appropriate resources and implementation for eliminating FGM;
- providing timely, appropriate and quality services to girls and women at risk of or having experienced FGM in select districts in programme countries, and;
- supporting activities so that a majority of individuals, families and communities in programme areas accept the norm of keeping the girls intact.

Among the main results, 16 countries have national coordination and action plans to end FGM in place and 10 have national budget. In 2017, three additional countries (Sudan, Mali and Somalia) introduced legislation to stop FGM. Cross-border collaboration have been initiated in East Africa. The database "Data For All" allows all partner organisations to measure progress and capture data.

3.3 million women and girls benefited from an access to prevention, protection and care services, and 21,176 communities involving 11,431,220 individuals made public declarations on FGM abandonment. New partnerships have been established with health workers to address the medicalization of FGM.

The Commission also supports effort towards the elimination of the FGM practice in the Southern Neighbourhood, for example in Egypt, with the project: "Abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and Empowerment of Families' Joint Programme" that started in December 2011 and ended in 2017.

This experience has shown that projects and strategies should encompass a multi-level, multi-thematic and coordinated approach, paying specific attention to issues at the margins. Some pillars can contribute to a change of attitudes: engaging with justice, health, religious and political authorities and practitioners, from communities at grassroots level to

national level, and to change social norms by engaging with women, men girls and boys.

The joint European Union – United Nations Spotlight Initiative to end violence against women and girls launched in September 2017 is a partnership bringing together the EU, the United Nations, the civil society and government partners (€ 500 million). The thematic focus of the Spotlight Initiative in Africa is on gender-based violence and harmful practices. Eight countries have been selected (Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Niger, Uganda, and Zimbabwe) where the EU is investing substantive amounts to end FGM and child marriage through comprehensive and integrated approaches, tackling those issues at multiple levels.

Fighting against harmful practices including FGM/C is a priority for EU external action as recognised both under the [EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy 2015-2019](#), the [Gender Action Plan II “Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment: Transforming the Lives of Girls and Women through EU External Relations 2016-2020”](#), as well as the [EU Strategic Approach to Women, Peace and Security](#).

The 2008 EU [Guidelines](#) on Violence against Women and Girls and combating all forms of discrimination against them, as well as revised in [2017 Guidelines on the Promotion and protection of Rights of the Child in external actions](#), clearly sets the fight against violence and discrimination against women and girls as a key objective of the EU’s external human rights policy. It provides guidance to EU delegations and the Embassies of the EU Member States in partner countries on actions they can carry out to address these issues.

The EU contributes to eliminating FGM/C globally. It has actively participated in international cooperation to promote the elimination of FGM/C and regularly raises FGM/C in its human rights and political dialogues with partner countries, UN and regional organisations and in annual dialogues with civil society organisations.

The EU is furthermore part of the Donor Working Group on FGM, which brings together key governmental and intergovernmental organisations, and foundations committed to supporting the abandonment of the practice. The EU participates to each of its annual gathering and hosted its meeting in Brussels in December 2017, preceded by the European Forum to build bridges on FGM organised by End FGM European Network with EU support.

What happens next?

[The Advisory Committee on equal opportunities for women and men](#) brings together representatives of EU countries, social partners at EU level and NGOs who assist the Commission in formulating and implementing activities aimed at promoting gender equality. On 2 February 2017, the Advisory Committee on equal opportunities for women and men published an [opinion](#) on combating FGM/C and other harmful practices that contains recommendations to the European Commission and to the Member States. This platform will continue its work in exchanges of relevant experience, policies and practices between EU countries, social partners at EU level and NGOs to combat FGM.

The Commission also commits to continue implementation of measures set out in the Communication [Towards the elimination of female genital mutilation](#) and use appropriate instruments to eradicate FGM/C and build on this experience to tackle other harmful practices.

Under the [Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme](#), the funding will continue for Member States' and civil society-led projects tackling gender-based violence, including FGM/C. In 2018, the European Commission selected 33 projects for a total initial budget of EUR 12.7 million. Furthermore, the 213 proposals which were received for another call for proposals published in 2018 are currently being evaluated (the indicative budget for that call is 13.3 million). Finally, another call published at the beginning of January 2019 will be open for submission from 31 January to 13 June 2019. The overall indicative budget is of EUR 11.7 million with an envelope of EUR 7 million specifically dedicated to gender-based violence (the rest of the funds being allocated to violence against children). This includes projects focusing specifically on combatting FGM/C, empowering girls and women in communities potentially affected by FGM, supporting victims, and supporting professionals, who are in contact with girls at risk and women who have undergone FGM/C, through a web-based platform on female genital mutilation. It also contributes to projects as aimed at working with boys and men via awareness raising [campaigns](#).

For More Information

[Joint Statement on the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation](#)

[NON.NO.NEIN – Say No! Stop Violence against Women](#)

[“Spotlight Initiative”](#)

Communication from the European Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: [Towards the elimination of female genital mutilation](#)

Joint Communication from the European Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: [Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy \(2015-2019\)](#)

[“Keeping human rights at the heart of the EU agenda”](#)

[Gender Action Plan II “Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment: Transforming the Lives of Girls and Women through EU External Relations 2016-2020”](#)

[EU guidelines on Violence against Women and Girls and combating all forms of discrimination against them](#)

[Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-2019](#)

[Istanbul Convention](#)