

## EDITORIAL

## Gynaecology

# Ending female genital mutilation: A global call to action from FIGO

## Abstract

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) affects over 230 million women and girls in more than 90 countries. Despite global condemnation and recognition of FGM as a violation of fundamental human rights, the practice persists, alongside an alarming rise of medicalization – with over 52 million procedures now performed by healthcare professionals. FGM causes severe short- and long-term consequences, including obstetric complications, chronic pain, infertility, sexual dysfunction, and significant mental health burdens. Ending FGM is a medical responsibility and a moral imperative. FIGO unequivocally condemns all forms of FGM, including medicalization, and calls for unified global action. FIGO urges its member societies and healthcare providers to strengthen capacity-building, enforce ethical guidelines, raise community awareness, provide reconstructive care and mental health care, and advance research in this field.

## KEYWORDS

female genital mutilation, global health, obstetrics and gynecology, physicians

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) affects more than 230 million women and girls in over 90 countries.<sup>1-5</sup> The practice – defined as the partial or total removal of external female genitalia or any other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons – has no health benefits and is deeply rooted in sociocultural norms around purity, modesty, marriageability, initiation rites and beliefs.<sup>1-4</sup> The international community and numerous legal instruments have declared FGM a violation of fundamental human rights, including the right to bodily autonomy and health; denial of freedom from discrimination and violence; the right to live free from cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment; and in extreme cases which may lead to death, the right to life itself.<sup>1,2,5-8</sup> Despite such global efforts, projections estimate that 4.4 million girls remain at risk across 2025, equivalent to more than 12 000 new cases every day.<sup>9</sup>

While prevalence has declined in some countries, population growth among young girls in high-prevalence countries results in an overall ongoing increase in FGM numbers.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the rise of medicalization – when FGM is performed by health professionals under the guise of safety – presents a grave threat.<sup>2</sup> An estimated 52 million women and girls have undergone medically performed FGM, and healthcare providers are increasingly asked to perform such procedures.<sup>1</sup> Cross-border practices further complicate the issue,

with families seeking areas where the procedure is legal or perceived to be safer or more socially acceptable.

FGM has many short- and long-term health implications that undermine the sexual and reproductive health of women and girls across their lifespans.<sup>10</sup> Short-term complications can include severe pain, hemorrhage, shock, infection, or death. Long-term consequences are extensive and can include adverse fetomaternal outcomes during pregnancy and childbirth, chronic pain, urinary incontinence, infertility, menstrual disturbances, and sexual dysfunction.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, routine health procedures may be complicated due to anatomical differences brought about by FGM, including gynecologic examinations, cervical cancer screening, abortions, and intrauterine device placement.<sup>3</sup> Recognizing that FGM survivors are at significantly higher risk for anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), societies should advocate for and support the provision of mental health interventions adapted to their specific needs and consistent with WHO guidelines.<sup>11</sup>

## 2 | FIGO'S POSITION ON FGM

FIGO has long recognized FGM as a severe violation of human rights and a significant public health concern.<sup>12,13</sup> In its 1994 resolution,

FIGO condemned the practice as harmful, medically unnecessary and rooted in gender-based discrimination. FIGO urged its member societies to advocate for legal reform, public awareness, and collaboration with global partners. Since then, FIGO has continued its commitment by supporting clinical education on FGM-related complications, integrating gender equity into reproductive health agendas, and amplifying survivor voices. Through partnerships with organizations such as WHO, UNFPA, and UNICEF, FIGO contributes to global efforts to eliminate FGM by promoting evidence-based care, training health professionals, and strengthening advocacy across its global network.

A broad coalition of professional organizations, global health agencies and civil society organizations actively oppose FGM, recognizing it as a violation of human rights, an extreme form of gender-based violence, and a major public health emergency. WHO has taken a leading role, most recently releasing updated guidelines in April 2025 that expand on previous recommendations to include clinical management of complications, mental health support, prevention strategies, and a strong stance against the medicalization of FGM.<sup>10</sup> Alongside WHO, many other professional organizations and advocacy groups have called for legal reform, healthcare provider training, and survivor-centered care. Together, these efforts underscore a unified global commitment to eliminating FGM through policy change, education, community engagement, increased funding and ethical medical practice.

FIGO unequivocally condemns FGM in all forms, including medicalization, as a violation of human rights and medical ethics. FIGO pledges to advocate for the global abandonment of FGM and support survivor-centered care.

### 3 | FIGO RECOMMENDATIONS

OBGYN member societies are encouraged to address persistent misconceptions linking FGM to religious obligation; these continue to influence its practice in many settings. Engaging faith leaders and promoting culturally sensitive education can help to dispel these beliefs. Societies should also recognize and respond to the growing trend of medicalized FGM – particularly its performance under the guise of harm reduction. Upholding ethical standards and supporting informed community dialogue are essential to countering these evolving challenges.

To accelerate progress towards the abandonment of FGM, FIGO urges OBGYN member societies and healthcare workers to take the following actions.

#### 3.1 | Increase capacity strengthening efforts

FIGO urges its member societies to lead efforts to implement comprehensive training programs for all health workers on FGM prevention and management. Training should be integrated into both pre-service and in-service education, aiming to build knowledge, clinical skills, confidence, and effective communication and counseling.

It is essential to provide access to capacity-strengthening tools, including WHO clinical guidelines, handbooks, and person-centered communication guides. These resources support health workers to provide appropriate care at the point of service. Training should also address personal values, promote cultural competence, and reduce stigma associated with FGM to ensure respectful, patient-centered, trauma-informed care.<sup>11</sup>

#### 3.2 | Develop and enforce ethical guidelines

FIGO encourages its member societies to advocate for laws and professional codes of conduct that recommend healthcare workers adhere to a zero-tolerance approach to FGM, including medicalized procedures.<sup>6</sup>

#### 3.3 | Improve education and awareness

FIGO emphasizes that its member societies should raise awareness among women, girls, men, and boys in the community about the immediate dangers and long-term consequences of FGM. Societies should include social workers, social media influencers, and community and religious leaders in educational endeavors. FIGO urges members to become visible champions in the movement to eliminate FGM by issuing their own statements, hosting campaigns, and supporting local initiatives. Educational interventions for both men and boys and women and girls are crucial for FGM abandonment, particularly given men's significant role in perpetuating the practice.<sup>2</sup>

#### 3.4 | Manage complications

FIGO strongly recommends that national OBGYN societies ensure the availability of reconstructive procedures when requested by survivors of FGM. These procedures can significantly improve health and wellbeing, addressing complications like chronic pain, sexual dysfunction and psychological trauma.<sup>10</sup> The timing of procedures should be guided by expert knowledge, women's preferences, and local health system capacities, with pre-procedure counseling offering unbiased information on benefits, risks and expected changes. In high-prevalence countries, where reconstructive surgeries remain scarce, FIGO advocates for specialized training for OBGYNs to build professional capacity and ensure the provision of these essential services. FIGO encourages member societies to expand access to sexual health support for survivors, particularly in regions with high FGM prevalence.

#### 3.5 | Support mental health interventions

FIGO is supportive of advocacy for and provision of mental health interventions adapted to the specific needs of FGM survivors, consistent with WHO guidelines.<sup>10</sup>

### 3.6 | Conduct research

FIGO encourages member societies to collaborate with researchers, NGOs and governments to strengthen evidence-based care, and to research and document the prevalence and harmful effects of FGM.<sup>14-16</sup> Collectively, these recommendations reflect FIGO's unwavering commitment to advancing the health, rights, and dignity of women and girls, including those affected by FGM. By mobilizing its global network of OBGYN professionals, FIGO calls for unified action to prevent FGM and to ensure that survivors receive respectful, evidence-based, and holistic care – with rights-based, person-centered and trauma-informed care in mind. True progress requires more than clinical intervention. It demands transformation of harmful cultural norms and legal accountability, and sustained investment in education and research. FIGO recognizes that ending FGM is not only a medical responsibility but a moral imperative, grounded in gender justice and human dignity. Through collaboration with governments, communities and international partners, FIGO envisions a future where no girl is subjected to this violent practice, and every survivor receives the compassionate care and justice they deserve.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

A.S. and J.D.V.E. were responsible for conceptualization of the paper. The first draft was written by A.S. and M.K. All authors gave final approval of the version to be published and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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