

Zero tolerance for female genital mutilation

The European Union is committed to working collectively to eradicate female genital mutilation (FGM) as part of broader efforts to combat all forms of violence against women and girls, and to support the efforts of its Member States in this field. The European Commission has undertaken to assess EU efforts to combat FGM every year, on or around the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation on 6 February.

Facts and figures

Female genital mutilation (FGM) includes all procedures that intentionally alter or cause injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. FGM is carried out for cultural, religious and/or social [reasons](#), mostly on young girls between infancy and the age of 15. It has no health benefits and can have serious immediate and long-term [effects on health and wellbeing](#).

In 2016, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) [estimated](#) that, worldwide, at least 200 million women and girls are currently living with the consequences of FGM, and around 3 million girls are at risk of undergoing FGM every year. The practice, which is most common in 28 [African](#) countries, is also prevalent in the [Middle East](#) (Yemen, northern Iraq), and Asia ([Indonesia](#)), and has been reported to a lesser extent elsewhere. An [assessment](#), issued by the UN Secretary General in December 2018, finds that prevalence has been reduced in some regions, but progress could be cancelled out by [population growth](#), girls undergoing FGM (increasingly performed by [medical professionals](#)) at a younger age, and the fact that, as a result of population movement, it is becoming a global issue.

Official EU statistics on the prevalence of FGM in Europe are lacking. However, three [studies](#) to map FGM, conducted by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) between 2012 and 2018, found that there are victims (or potential victims), in at least 16 EU countries: Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Malta, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the UK. Around 20 000 women and girls from FGM-practising countries [seek asylum](#) in EU Member States every year, with an estimated 1 000 asylum claims directly related to FGM. This number has increased steadily since 2008.

Commitments and action to combat FGM

FGM constitutes a form of child abuse and gender-based violence; recognised internationally as a violation of the human rights of girls and women. The practice also violates a person's rights to health, security and physical integrity; the right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment; and the right to life in cases where the procedure results in death. A range of measures have been adopted at international, EU and national level to prevent FGM and to protect FGM victims.

International instruments

At [international level](#), United Nations and Council of Europe standards are benchmarks in work to combat FGM. Key treaties, including the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW), the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), and the Geneva Convention, all cover FGM [indirectly](#), with [specific guidance](#) on protection and asylum for victims. The Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence ([Istanbul Convention](#)), is the [first treaty](#) to recognise that FGM exists in Europe (Article 38), and sets out a number of specific obligations on preventing and combating the practice, and providing support to victims and those at risk.

International action

The UN's longstanding efforts to end the practice culminated in its [first specific resolution](#) on female genital mutilation in December 2012, calling for the adoption of national action plans and comprehensive, multi-disciplinary strategies to eliminate FGM. The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development identifies FGM as a [harmful practice](#) which is to be eliminated by 2030 ([Goal 5](#)), a priority [reaffirmed](#) by the UN in 2018.

The UN named 6 February the [International Day](#) of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation, and the [European Commission](#) takes stock annually, around that day, of EU efforts to combat FGM.

Legislative and policy framework at European level

Although the EU itself currently has no binding instrument designed to protect women from violence, [relevant instruments](#) exist in a number of areas. The principles of gender equality and non-discrimination are affirmed in the Treaty on European Union and the [EU Charter of Fundamental Rights](#), which also guarantees the right to dignity and includes specific provisions on the right to physical and mental integrity. The [Directive on Victims' Rights](#) requires provision of support services to victims of violence, including FGM. In relation to asylum, the [Asylum Reception Conditions Directive](#) specifically mentions victims of FGM amongst vulnerable persons who should receive appropriate healthcare during their asylum procedure, while the [recast Qualification Directive](#) includes FGM as grounds to consider when granting asylum. The EU also signed the Istanbul Convention on 13 June 2017 and is currently in the accession [process](#). Parliament has urged those Member States that have not yet done so to [ratify](#) and implement this Convention.

Combating gender-based violence is a priority in the European Commission's [strategic engagement for gender equality 2016-2019](#). On FGM, this includes pursuing the measures set out in the action plan adopted in the 2013 [communication](#), 'Towards the elimination of female genital mutilation', aiming to ensure that action to combat FGM is mainstreamed across the fields of justice, police, health, social services, child protection, education, immigration and asylum and external action. Areas where the Commission has promised to act include:

- Providing the reliable, comparable EU-level data necessary to establish the prevalence of FGM and provide a solid basis for policy;
- Improving victim support by helping Member States to develop support services for victims, and training and awareness-raising for relevant professionals, focusing on empowering communities;
- Supporting Member States in prosecuting FGM more effectively;
- Ensuring that women at risk are protected more effectively under EU asylum rules through proper transposition and implementation of the EU legislative framework on asylum and victim protection;
- Promoting worldwide elimination of FGM, by ensuring that EU external policy addresses FGM, and that awareness is included in gender and child rights training for EU staff in relevant external delegations.

The Commission has reported on [action](#) undertaken to 2018, including the launch of a [knowledge platform](#) for professionals who come into contact with (potential) victims, and funding made available under the [Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme 2014-2020](#) and the joint EU-United Nations [Spotlight initiative](#).

Instruments against FGM at national level

Many of the [actions](#) needed to end FGM lie within the competences of the Member States. FGM is now a prosecutable offence under [national laws](#) in all Member States, either as a specific criminal act or as an act of bodily harm or injury. However, very few [cases](#) are brought to court. A number of Member States have also developed [national action plans](#) on FGM. Continuing issues of concern include barriers to reporting and successful prosecution, support for victims and ensuring long-term, sustainable cultural change.

European Parliament position

The European Parliament has played a particularly important role in raising awareness and pushing for firm action on FGM, including through the work of its Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality ([FEMM](#)). Parliament has adopted resolutions on FGM in [2001](#), [2009](#), [2012](#), [2014](#), and [2018](#), calling on the Commission and Member States to provide the legal and other means required to raise awareness, protect and support victims and ensure that offenders are prosecuted. In 2016, it [urged](#) Member States to recognise FGM as a form of persecution and the Commission to draw up interpretive guidelines on FGM, according appropriate protection to women and girls seeking asylum.

This publication is a further update of an ['at a glance' note](#) originally published in January 2015.