

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

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**Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), much like COVID-19, is a global issue that requires a global response. 200 million women and girls around the world are affected by the practice. There are an estimated 3 million girls at risk of undergoing FGM every year. The majority of girls are cut before they turn 15 years-old.**

It is grounded in discriminatory gender norms, and has significant health and socio-economic impacts on women throughout their lives. Ending the practice would have a transformative effect for women and girls, with accelerated progress essential to achieving a Sustainable Development Goal, on gender equality.

From March 2020, early in the global COVID-19 crisis, reports began to emerge from our partners and allies that they were witnessing increased rates of FGM. In Sierra Leone, a country making positive progress in ending the practice through political leadership - a national and civil society action - we were hearing consistent reports of girls being subjected to FGM or fleeing their homes for fear

of being cut, from various part of the country due to school closures and the implementation of lockdown measures.

Since the start of the pandemic, a range of excellent reports have highlighted the gendered impact of the COVID-19 crisis on women and girls, which has brought pre-existing inequalities and gender-based violence into sharp focus. But at a global policy level there has been less acknowledgement of how the pandemic is specifically affecting the practice of FGM.

In response, Uncut Gems began conducting community sensitisation and radio programmes about the impacts of COVID-19 on the practice of FGM. We found out that the increased rates of FGM are being reported where COVID-19 related lockdowns are being seen as an opportunity to carry out FGM undetected. Lack of FGM integration within the COVID-19 response is leaving girls at risk and survivors with no recourse to essential prevention, protection and support services. Fear of the virus may be leading to a re-

emergence of previously abandoned social norms around FGM in some rural communities.

Mabel underwent FGM at age nine, and she has experienced health problems throughout her life as a result. She was trained by Uncut Gems Sierra Leone to raise awareness of the impact of FGM in local communities. Read Mabel's story:

"I am Mabel Kamara. I am a girls' rights activist from Sierra Leone, fighting against female genital mutilation.

When I was about nine years-old, they did FGM on me. One bright and early morning my mother asked me to accompany her to the village to buy food stuffs for the house. During the course of our journey, I noticed she had diverted our journey and we started walking through a bush asking me to follow her, we went deeper and deeper until I saw some other girls sitting naked on the ground close by a hut. I asked my mum what was going on and she then told me that she brought me here to be initiate into bondo society. She went on to say that it will help me to take good care of my matrimonial home and will also help me to remain clean and to have access to decision-making skills in our society as a woman.

We were there until it was my own turn to go in. An old woman took me in and asked me to remove my clothes. She then applied white dust on me and gave me a small stick to hold tight in my mouth so I will not be able to shout. They had no needle, so they used a mate, there was no anaesthetic. The pain was so, so, so intense. They cut all of it, and then they stitched it. It was a very painful experience and I fought hard and I managed to grab the soweï by the neck and she had to fight to free herself, and it was during our toss and turn she stabbed me at the left side of my vagina.

Later that day after going through a lot of bleeding, they applied a lot of leaves on my vagina saying it would make me heal faster. The worst happened after the third day when I was called upon again for checkup and they told me that the clitoris has grown back there and that I'm a witch. I swallowed my clitoris during my could have stopped them. I felt that pain for years.

This brought in a lot of complications to my genital area. It tortured me emotionally, physically, psychologically and I was discriminated against by my friends, I was called names and the most common name was that I was a witch.

**FGM HAS LASTING PHYSICAL AND MENTAL CONSEQUENCES THAT NEED TO BE DISCUSSED SO THAT GIRLS AND WOMEN NO LONGER HAVE TO SUFFER IN SILENCE. AS WELL AS THE NEED FOR LEGISLATIVE CHANGE, IT'S ESSENTIAL THAT THE TRADITIONAL ATTITUDES AND SOCIAL NORMS THAT ALLOW FGM TO CONTINUE ARE TACKLED SO THAT OPEN, HONEST DISCUSSIONS ABOUT THE RISKS AND CONSEQUENCES OF FGM MAY HAPPEN. UNCUT HAS BEEN WORKING CLOSELY WITH YOUNG GIRLS TO ACT AS AMBASSADORS OF FGM TO PREACH THE WORST AND HIGH RISKS OF BEING CUT.**

I stayed in the bush for two months and ended up having pneumonia due to the excess cold. This was the most painful experience of my life.

I am now 20 years-old and I am left with nothing due to this culture, I still get flashbacks from that horrible experience up till this day. I have trouble holding on to relationships as men come my way but refuse to stay due to my poor sex life, even though I try to explain my experience, but no one will stay.

I have been tortured psychologically, thinking of my sex life. I can't even feel in bed that I'm having sex so for such reasons I have decided to stay single and lost all hope on the thought of having children.

The only thing giving me hope and courage now is the fact that I get to stand firm and educate others about the harmfulness of FGM.

FGM is harmful and should have stopped no matter who you are or the country or continent you come from."

Educating people is empowering them. It is only through their minds that you can change the attitude of people. ■