

POLICY BRIEF

ELIMINATING THE REARING HEAD OF FGM



DISMANTLING  PATRIARCHY

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Introduction

Despite being criminalised under Nigerian law, female genital mutilation (FGM) persists, deeply rooted in cultural traditions, myths, and weak policy enforcement.

This policy brief examines the systemic factors sustaining the practice, the legal and advocacy gaps, and urgent strategies to eliminate them.

The discussion, drawn from a panel of journalists, legal practitioners, gender advocates, FGM survivors, and media professionals, highlights several key barriers:

Cultural and Traditional Norms: FGM is upheld as a rite of passage and a way to preserve family honour and sexual purity, perpetuating harmful myths.

Lack of Education and Awareness: Many individuals, particularly in rural areas, are unaware of the medical, psychological, and human rights violations associated with FGM.

Weak Law Enforcement: While laws such as the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act criminalise FGM, enforcement remains inadequate, with low prosecution rates and poor reporting mechanisms.

Social Pressure and Stigma: Families who resist the practice often face ostracisation from their communities, making

compliance a social expectation.

Economic Factors: Traditional circumcisers rely on FGM as a source of income to sustain the practice.

To combat FGM effectively, a multi-sectoral approach is essential. This includes stronger media advocacy, community-driven awareness, survivor-led storytelling, legal reforms, and capacity building for law enforcement and healthcare providers.

Furthermore, collaborating with religious and traditional leaders can help shift deeply ingrained beliefs.

This policy brief outlines concrete strategies for ending FGM permanently, ensuring that advocacy efforts go beyond an

annual discussion on February 6th and become a consistent movement for gender equality and human rights.

Key Issues & Challenges

Despite decades of advocacy and legal frameworks designed to prohibit Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Nigeria, the practice continues to persist at alarming rates.

The reasons for this are multifaceted, involving deep-seated cultural beliefs, systemic enforcement failures, and economic dependencies.

This section outlines the key issues and challenges preventing the total eradication of FGM, using insights from experts, survivors, and gender rights advocates.

Cultural and Traditional Norms: A Deeply Rooted Practice

FGM is deeply ingrained in Nigerian culture, passed down through generations as an essential rite of passage for young girls. Many communities uphold the practice under the belief that it is a necessary tradition, ensuring that a girl is deemed respectable, pure, and suitable for marriage.

Yemi Balogun, a journalist with Per Second News, emphasised, "*Our people believe this is tradition, this is culture, and it has come to stay. The fact that even this culture that we are talking about is older than some of us makes it difficult to eliminate. Imagine that this practice has been going on for years, and despite our advocacy, it is still not tackled.*"

These entrenched cultural beliefs are extremely difficult to dismantle, particularly when reinforced by family elders, religious leaders, and community structures.

Many mothers and grandmothers who underwent FGM themselves see it as their duty to continue the tradition, perpetuating the cycle of harm.

Lack of Awareness and Education: The Knowledge Gap

A major obstacle to eradicating FGM is the widespread lack of awareness about its harmful physical, psychological, and legal consequences. Many people do not understand the medical complications associated with FGM, nor do they recognise it as a violation of human rights.

Yemi Balogun highlighted the role of ignorance in sustaining the practice:

"A lot of people don't even know that this issue of female genital mutilation is a serious public health concern. It is only the few educated people and those who have heard about it through the radio, TV, or newspaper who understand the dangers of this practice. Many people continue it simply because they don't know better."

This lack of awareness means that even when laws exist, they fail to have an impact because communities do not see FGM as a crime.

Additionally, misinformation about FGM fuels its continuation, such as the myth that FGM preserves a girl's chastity or ensures her ability to marry well.

Weak Law Enforcement: Policies Without Action

Although Nigeria has laws prohibiting FGM, enforcement remains weak, making it easy for perpetrators to evade consequences. The Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act stipulates penalties of up to four years imprisonment and a fine of N200,000 for perpetrators, yet prosecutions are rare.

Joy Dogo Njeb founder of SheResonance, a legal practitioner and women's rights advocate, explained:

"In Nigeria, there's usually an enforcement issue. Even though the punishment for FGM exists, it is too little compared to the lifetime effect it has on its victims. There is no real enforcement mechanism in place to ensure that offenders are held accountable."

Additionally, FGM is usually performed on infants and young girls, making it difficult for survivors to report the crime when they are older. As Joy further noted:

"FGM is usually carried out on girls when they are very little. They are completely dependent on their parents and don't even know their rights.

Their own families—mothers, aunts, grandmothers—are the ones carrying it out. How can a child report such a crime?"

Even when survivors grow older and want to seek justice, cultural and emotional barriers prevent them from taking legal action against family members.

"It is considered a taboo in Nigeria to sue one's parents," Joy added.

"Even though the law allows survivors to seek justice at any age, very few would actually take their parents to court."

Without stronger enforcement mechanisms, FGM laws remain ineffective, and the practice continues unchecked.

Social Pressure and Stigma: The Cost of Non-Compliance

For many families, rejecting FGM is not just a personal decision—it is a social risk. In several communities, families who refuse to cut their daughters face ostracisation, discrimination, and ridicule.

Gladys Emmanuel Human Founder of Tabitha Organisation, a human rights lawyer and gender advocate, described the intense pressure to conform:

"In some communities in Northern Nigeria, FGM is called 'Kachia.' Families who refuse to subject their daughters to cutting sometimes face pressure from the community. They may even fear being ostracised or punished because the practice is seen as a form of purification and womanhood."

This social expectation makes it difficult for parents to resist FGM, as they fear their daughters will be rejected or labelled as unworthy of marriage.

Kosisochukwu Charity Ani founder of MyselfDefenceNG, a gender equality advocate, also noted how cultural expectations shape gender roles from childhood:

inequalities are ingrained early, reinforcing the idea that women must conform to societal

" expectations—including FGM."

As long as social pressure continues to enforce compliance, many families will feel trapped in a system that forces them to subject their daughters to FGM.

Economic Factors: FGM as a Livelihood

For many traditional circumcisers, FGM is a source of income. The practice is passed down generationally, and many older women see it as a profession, believing they are performing an important service.

Gladys Emmanuel Founder of Tabitha organization Emmanuel explained how economic survival drives FGM:

"For some, FGM is not just a tradition—it is their livelihood. These elderly women have no other skills to rely on. They grew up practising

"FGM, their mothers did it before them, and now they do it as well. If they stop, they lose their income."

Because FGM remains financially profitable, many practitioners actively resist campaigns against it.

Joy, the legal practitioner, emphasised the importance of economic alternatives:

"If we want to eliminate FGM, we need to give these women an alternative means of earning a living. Without economic empowerment, they will continue convincing families to cut their daughters."

Policy Recommendations

Eliminating Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Nigeria requires a multi-sectoral and community-driven approach that

addresses the cultural, legal, social, and economic factors sustaining the practice. The following policy recommendations are based on insights from FGM survivors, legal practitioners, gender advocates, journalists, and human rights organisations, who have identified strategic interventions to end FGM permanently.

Strengthening Law Enforcement and Accountability

While FGM is criminalised under Nigerian law, enforcement remains weak due to low prosecution rates, lack of awareness, and cultural resistance. To bridge this gap, stronger law enforcement mechanisms must be put in place.

Key Actions

- **Increase Prosecutions:** Ensure that individuals who perform, procure, or aid FGM face legal consequences as outlined in the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act.
- **Strengthen Reporting Mechanisms:** Establish anonymous helplines, community-based reporting desks, and whistleblower protections to encourage victims and bystanders to report FGM cases.
- **Train Law Enforcement and Judicial Officials:** Many police officers, prosecutors, and judges lack proper training on FGM-related laws. Specialised gender-based violence (GBV) training should be provided to ensure efficient prosecution and survivor-centered justice.

- **Expand Legal Aid for Survivors:** Many survivors are reluctant to seek justice due to financial and emotional barriers. The government and civil society organisations should provide free legal services to FGM survivors pursuing justice.
- Legal practitioner Joy emphasised the need for stronger enforcement:

"Laws exist, but there is little enforcement. Until perpetrators are truly punished and survivors feel safe enough to report cases, FGM will continue unchecked."

Expanding Education and Awareness Campaigns

A major driver of FGM is misinformation and cultural ignorance. Many families do not understand the physical, psychological, and legal consequences of the practice. Targeted education and awareness

Key Actions

- **Incorporate FGM Education into School Curriculums:** Schools should teach students about the dangers of FGM, its legal implications, and its violation of human rights.
- **Community-Based Awareness Programs:** Conduct town hall meetings, workshops, and storytelling sessions in rural and urban areas to educate families, religious leaders, and community members about the dangers of FGM.
- **Utilise Traditional and Social Media:** Run radio programmes, television documentaries, newspaper articles, and social media campaigns to reach diverse audiences, including those in remote areas.
- **Engage Survivors in Advocacy:** Survivors' media initiatives.

testimonies humanise the issue and make it more relatable. Survivor-led campaigns should be prioritised in community dialogues and media initiatives.

Kosisochukwu Charity Ani founder of MyselfDefenceNG, a gender advocate, emphasised the power of survivor-led storytelling:

"Sometimes, statistics alone do not move people. When a survivor shares her personal experience, it humanises the issue and makes it real for others."

Engaging Traditional and Religious Leaders as Change Agents

In many communities, traditional rulers and religious leaders are gatekeepers of culture. Without their active involvement, efforts to eradicate FGM will face resistance.

These leaders must be engaged as allies in the fight against FGM.

Key Actions

- **Work with Religious and Traditional Leaders to Denounce FGM:** Conduct dialogues and training sessions with imams, pastors, chiefs, and village heads, equipping them with scientific, medical, and human rights-based information to counter misconceptions about FGM.
- **Encourage Alternative Rites of Passage:** In communities where FGM is considered a rite of passage, introduce alternative, non-harmful ceremonies that honour girls' transition to womanhood without cutting.
- **Leverage Places of Worship:** Incorporate anti-FGM messages into religious

- sermons and teachings to shift societal mindsets from within.

Yemi Balogun stressed the importance of community engagement:

"If we want to truly end FGM, we must get traditional rulers, religious leaders, and community influencers to speak out against it. They are the ones people listen to."

Addressing the Economic Drivers of FGM

For many traditional circumcisers, FGM is a primary source of income. To end the practice, alternative economic opportunities must be created for these individuals.

Key Actions

Provide Economic Alternatives for Circumcisers: Train and equip FGM practitioners with new vocational skills

(e.g., tailoring, farming, entrepreneurship) so they can transition to alternative livelihoods.

- **Offer Microfinance Support:** Government and NGOs should provide grants, loans, and economic incentives for circumcisers and their communities to shift away from FGM.
- **Create Employment Programs for Women in High-Risk Communities:** Many women support FGM due to financial dependence. Economic empowerment initiatives should be established to help women gain financial independence and resist societal pressure to continue the practice.

Gladys Emmanuel Founder of Tabitha organisation, highlighted the economic

(factors sustaining FGM:

"FGM is not just about culture—it is also about livelihood. If we want to end it, we must provide financial alternatives to the people who rely on it to survive."

Strengthening Support Services for Survivors

Many FGM survivors suffer from lifelong physical, psychological, and sexual complications. However, few medical and psychosocial services exist to support them.

Key Actions

- **Expand Access to Medical Treatment:** Ensure that FGM-related health complications (such as childbirth difficulties and chronic pain) are properly addressed in hospitals and clinics.

- (Establish Survivor Support Groups: Create safe spaces and peer support networks where FGM survivors can share experiences and receive emotional healing.
- Increase Access to Psychological Counseling: Many survivors suffer from depression, trauma, and sexual dysfunction. Free counseling services should be made available to help them cope with the long-term impact of FGM.
- Raise Awareness of Reconstructive Surgery Options: Some survivors may wish to undergo reconstructive surgery to restore some of what was lost. Awareness of medical options and financial assistance programs should be provided.

Ololade Ajayi, Founder of Dohs and advocate, shared her personal experience:

"FGM affected me sexually and during childbirth. I didn't even know that my inability to dilate during labour was because of FGM until a doctor explained it to me years later. We need more awareness and support for survivors."

Leveraging Technology and Digital Advocacy

FGM advocacy must evolve in the digital age. Technology and social media can be powerful tools in the fight against FGM.

Key Actions

- **Develop Mobile Apps for FGM Awareness and Reporting:** Create apps that provide education, survivor resources, and anonymous reporting options for FGM cases.

- **Launch Online Petitions and Campaigns:** Use Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to mobilise public action and pressure policymakers.
- **Utilise Artificial Intelligence (AI) for Community Monitoring:** AI tools can help track FGM trends and identify high-risk communities for targeted interventions.
- **Conduct Virtual Training for Activists and Law Enforcement:** Webinars and e-learning platforms can help train grassroots activists and law enforcement officers on FGM-related issues.

Conclusion & Call to Action

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) remains a critical human rights violation in Nigeria,

sustained by deep-rooted cultural traditions, misinformation, social pressures, weak enforcement, and economic incentives.

Despite the existence of laws prohibiting FGM, implementation remains weak, and millions of girls continue to suffer the lifelong physical, psychological, and sexual consequences of the practice.

This policy brief has outlined the key challenges preventing the eradication of FGM, including cultural norms, lack of education, poor law enforcement, economic dependency, and inadequate survivor support systems. To end FGM permanently, Nigeria must adopt a multi-sectoral approach that integrates:

- Stronger law enforcement and accountability mechanisms

- Expanding education and awareness programs
- Engaging religious and traditional leaders as change agents
- Providing economic alternatives for circumcisers
- Strengthening medical and psychosocial support for survivors
- Leveraging technology and digital advocacy

The fight against FGM cannot be seasonal—it must be continuous and community-driven. As Yemi Balogun, a journalist and communication strategist, emphasised:

"We must step up the pace, strengthen alliances, and build movements to end FGM. If we only talk about it once a year, we will never eliminate it."

- Ending FGM requires a collective effort from:
- Government agencies—to enforce laws and provide survivor support
- Civil society organisations—to advocate for policy change and community awareness
- Traditional and religious leaders—to dismantle harmful cultural norms
- Media professionals—to amplify survivor voices and counter misinformation
- Medical professionals—to treat survivors and provide health education
- The public—to challenge societal acceptance of FGM and report cases

What You Can Do

Advocate for stronger enforcement of anti-FGM laws—Call on policymakers to ensure that existing laws are enforced and that

perpetrators are held accountable.

Educate your community—Share factual information about the dangers of FGM, especially in rural areas where myths and misinformation persist.

Support survivors—Encourage FGM survivors to seek medical and psychological care. Create safe spaces where they can share their experiences.

Engage men and boys in the fight against FGM—Challenge harmful gender norms and involve men in advocacy efforts.

Use digital platforms to raise awareness—Leverage social media, blogs, and online petitions to amplify the movement against FGM.

Encourage economic empowerment programs—Support initiatives that provide organisations to take action.

Conclusion

The elimination of FGM in Nigeria is possible, but only if stakeholders at every level take urgent and sustained action. The time to act is now—not just on February 6th, but every single day.

As Gladys Emmanuel Founder of Tabitha organization Emmanuel, a human rights lawyer and gender advocate, stated:

"We have to do more than just talk. We must ensure that survivors get justice, communities get educated, and circumcisers get alternative livelihoods. We must make FGM history."

Together, we can eliminate the rearing head of FGM and protect the rights, health, and dignity of future generations of women and girls in Nigeria.

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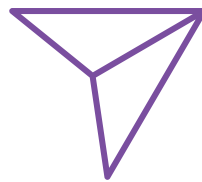
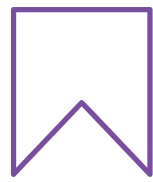
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