



February 6th marks the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). According to [WHO](#), this form of violence against women affects more than 200 million girls, mainly between the ages of 4 and 12, and women worldwide. FGM is practised in 28 African countries, as well as certain parts of Asia and the Middle East. However, contrary to what is often thought, many women and girls in European countries are also subjected to this form of gender-based violence.

The practice is internationally recognised as a human rights violation and has far reaching consequences for girls and women with regard to their sexual and reproductive health as well as their psychological well-being. The underlying reasons for implementing FGM include gender patterns and expectations.

FGM in Europe?

Even though most European countries, such as Belgium, France and the United Kingdom have laws prohibiting FGM, this does not guarantee that girls and women will be protected from it. Estimates from the [European Parliament](#) show that 180 000 female European migrants are at

risk of FGM every year. Within many migrant groups from countries where FGM is practised, the phenomenon continues to exist even after migration. Girls are particularly at risk when they temporarily return to their country of origin during holiday periods.

Estimates from [UNHCR](#) also show that every year, 20 000 women and girls coming from countries where FGM is being practised, apply for asylum in European Member States, a significant proportion of them actually on the grounds of being at risk of FGM.

Testimonies have indicated that it is often difficult for victims to report this problem. In UNHCR's report, for instance, a testimony from a woman who became a victim of FGM and applied for asylum in Belgium, shows how a social worker didn't understand what she had been through. This makes it even more difficult for victims to communicate about their experiences and to seek the help they need.

An international response?

At the international level, the problem is getting increased attention. In 2012, for example, the UN General Assembly adopted a groundbreaking [resolution](#) condemning the practice and recognising it as harmful to girls worldwide. The text also called on states to condemn FGM and to protect women from all forms of violence. Additional resolutions were also adopted in [2014](#) and [2016](#) confirming this.

The SDGs also pay special attention to the eradication of FGM. The phenomenon is inextricably linked to gender inequality and other forms of violence against women. The pursuit of a more gender equal world has been put onto the global agenda through the [sustainable development goal](#) number 5. The eradication of FGM is one of the targets and highlights its paramount importance to achieving Goal 5.

Furthermore, [‘The Spotlight Initiative’](#), a joint EU/UN programme, also emphasizes the need for a more gender equal society, as well as combating gender-based violence, including

banning FGM.

Towards a FGM-free future?

Worldwide attention to the phenomenon is slowly leading to a declining trend. According to recent figures, the number of FGM cases has decreased by 24% since 2000. However, this decline is not noticeable to the same extent everywhere. Furthermore, according to UNICEF, current progress is insufficient to cope with rapid population growth.

International actors increasingly stress that we need to be vigilant when it comes to the prevention of FGM within a European context. February 6th is therefore the ideal time to reflect on the impact of FGM on girls and women worldwide. For as long as this horrific practice exists, the achievement of other SDGs, such as access to healthcare and welfare for all, will remain an illusion.