

UNDERSTANDING AND COMBATING FGM/C

A Service Provider's Guide for Supporting Sub-Saharan African Muslim Communities in the United States

by Khadijetou Diagana

in collaboration with the African Family Health Organization



ABOUT THE AFRICAN FAMILY HEALTH ORGANIZATION (AFAHO)

The African Family Health Organization (AFAHO) is a community-based organization dedicated to supporting African and Caribbean immigrants and refugees (ACIR) in the greater Philadelphia area. Their mission is to enhance community health and foster social integration through a unique peer support approach. This approach relies on shared language, cultural expertise, advocacy, and navigation skills to assist individuals and families overcome barriers and key social determinants of health. AFAHO aims to empower community members with the information and resources needed to thrive, improve health and educational outcomes, integrate into society, and achieve self-sufficiency.

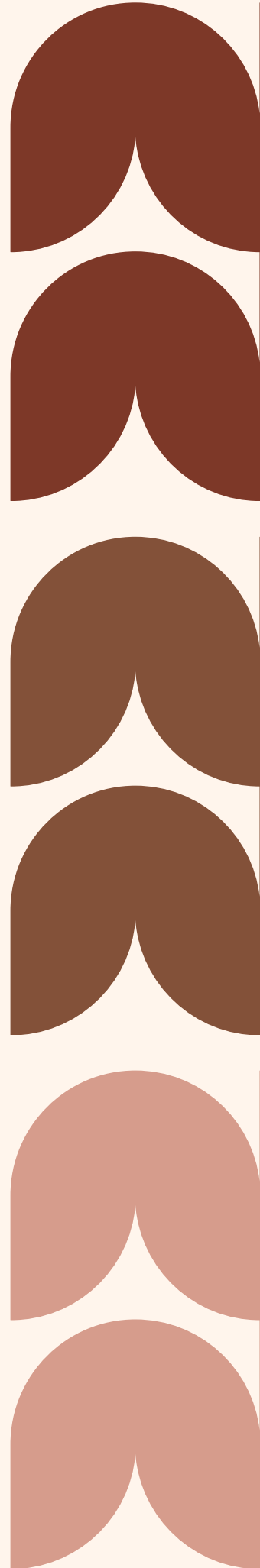
AFAHO has over 10 years of experience supporting women who have been impacted by Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C). They have linked numerous women to medical care for FGM/C complications, facilitated support groups for healing, connected women to legal aid for asylum petitions, continued sustained education to the community and provided trainings to medical health providers and religious leaders.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) remains a deeply rooted cultural practice in various Sub-Saharan African Muslim communities, posing severe health risks and violating the rights of millions of girls and women.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) , there is an increasing number of girls and women residing in the United States who are survivors of FGM/C or that could be at risk of experiencing it in the future.

This guide aims to equip service providers including doctors, school nurses and social workers with the knowledge and tools necessary to educate and support communities impacted by FGM/C.



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WHAT IS FGM/C ?

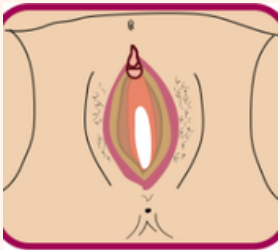
Female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C) refers to the practice of partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other procedures to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons (definition adapted from the World Health Organization, WHO).

Globally, there are **200 million** are FGM/C survivors (United Nations).

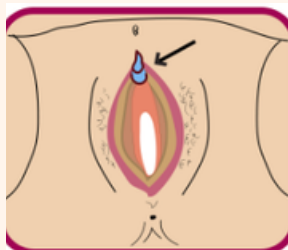
In recent years, the CDC has started to focus on the prevalence of FGM/C in the United States. In 2016, it found that up to **513,000 girls and women residing in the U.S. might have undergone FGM/C or could be at risk of encountering it in the future.**

The United Nations describes FGM/C as an **internationally recognized human rights violation & aims for the elimination of the practice by 2030.** According to the WHO, treatment of health complications resulting from undergoing FGM/C costs \$1.4 billion annually to health systems globally, and the number is expected to rise if this harmful practice is not abandoned.

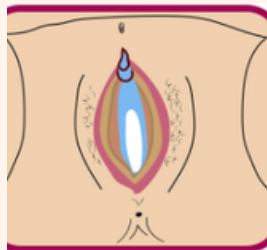
TYPES OF FGM/C



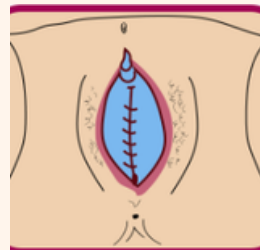
NO FGM/C



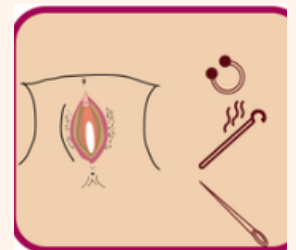
TYPE 1
Clitoridectomy is the term used to describe the partial or complete removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce.



TYPE 2
Excision involves the removal of the clitoris and/or the labia minora.



TYPE 3
Infibulation is the closure of the vaginal opening achieved by cutting and repositioning the labia minora and/or the labia majora, sometimes accompanied by clitoral excision.



TYPE 4
All other harmful practices performed on female genitalia for non-medical purposes (such as pricking, piercing, incising, scraping, and cauterization)

THE FGM/C LIFECYCLE: THE ADVERSE CONSEQUENCES FOR GIRLS & WOMEN

INFANCY & EARLY CHILDHOOD 0-5 YEARS OLD



- FGM/C is often performed on girls between infancy and age 15.
- Immediate physical consequences often include: severe pain, bleeding, shock, and risk of infection.

CHILDHOOD 6-12 years



- Physical health issues such as urinary problems, infections, and complications during menstruation begin.
- Psychological effects such as trauma, anxiety, and depression may begin to manifest.

ADULTHOOD & ELDERLY 36-60+ years

- Long-term physical and psychological consequences may worsen including: chronic pain, persistent infections, PTSD, anxiety disorders, and depression.
- Older women may require specialized medical care for conditions such as urinary incontinence & pelvic floor disorders.



THE FGM/C LIFECYCLE

ADOLESCENCE 13-19 years



- Complications during puberty, including obstructed menstrual flow, painful menstruation, and increased risk of urinary tract infections.
- Adolescent girls may face social stigma, and feelings of shame & inadequacy.

EARLY ADULTHOOD 20-35 years

- Some women may experience sexual dysfunction, pain during intercourse, infertility and difficulties during pregnancy and childbirth due to scar tissue and vaginal narrowing.
- Survivors face an increased risk of maternal and infant mortality.



MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT FGM/C

MYTH	FACTS
It is an issue that only occurs in low and middle income countries	While FGM/C rates are higher in low & middle income countries, it also occurs in immigrant communities in high income countries due to cultural practices and migration. It is a global issue.
It is only practiced on the African continent	FGM/C occurs across various cultures, religions, and regions, including parts of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. It is not confined to any specific group.
It is an Islamic practice	FGM/C is a traditional and cultural practice that predates Islam and is not endorsed by the Qur'an - the leading Islamic text.
It is a harmless cultural practice	FGM/C is a harmful practice with serious health consequences, including physical, psychological, and sexual complications.
It is the same as male circumcision	FGM/C and male circumcision are fundamentally different practices. Male circumcision, while culturally practiced, is generally considered safe and may have health benefits when performed under medical standards.
It is necessary for hygiene or health reasons	There is no medical justification for FGM/C. In fact, it can lead to severe health complications, including infections, chronic pain, difficulties during childbirth, and psychological trauma.
It is a practice of the past	Despite global efforts to eradicate FGM/C, it continues to be practiced in many communities worldwide. FGM/C is a current issue and work towards its elimination through education and advocacy is needed
It is a private matter & not a concern for outsiders	FGM/C is a human rights violation that requires a collective response from various stakeholders such as governments, international organizations, communities, and service providers.

ADVOCACY DO'S

Center Survivor Voices

Amplify the voices and experiences of FGM/C survivors in your advocacy efforts, ensuring they are at the forefront of discussions and decision-making processes.

Provide safe spaces for survivors to share their stories, advocate for their needs, and contribute to developing appropriate resources that will help them.

Engage Men and Boys as Allies

Advocate for the involvement of men and boys in efforts to end FGM/C and support survivors, recognizing their important role as allies and agents of change within families and communities.

Promote education and awareness-raising activities that challenge harmful gender norms and promote gender equality, fostering attitudes of respect and support for women and girls.

Raise Public Awareness

Raise public awareness about the prevalence and consequences of FGM/C in Sub-Saharan African communities in the US through education campaigns, media outreach, and community events.

Challenge harmful myths and misconceptions surrounding FGM/C, and promote positive cultural norms that reject the practice and prioritize the health and well-being of women and girls.

ADVOCACY DON'TS

Tokenize or Exploit Survivor Stories

Avoid tokenizing or exploiting survivor stories for the sake of advocacy or fundraising efforts, and ensure that survivors have agency and control over how their stories are shared and utilized

Respect survivors' privacy and autonomy, and obtain informed consent before sharing their stories publicly.

Stigmatize or Marginalize Communities

Avoid stigmatizing in your advocacy efforts, recognizing that FGM/C is a complex cultural practice rooted in social norms and beliefs.

Foster dialogue and collaboration with community members and leaders to address FGM/C in a culturally sensitive and respectful manner.

Impose Solutions Without Community Input

Avoid imposing solutions or interventions without meaningful consultation and input from community members and allies.

Foster participatory approaches to advocacy that empower communities to drive change from within, while providing support and resources to amplify their efforts.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN MUSLIM WOMEN

Supporting Sub-Saharan African Muslim young girls and women who have undergone FGM/C and now reside in the United States requires specific considerations due to unique cultural, legal, and healthcare contexts. Here are some tailored recommendations:

ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE



Ensure survivors have access to culturally sensitive healthcare services including primary care, gynecological care and specialist care for FGM/C complications.

Train healthcare providers to recognize and address the unique healthcare needs of FGM/C survivors.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT



Offer specialized counseling and support groups to address trauma, anxiety, depression, and other psychological consequences.

Offer services in multiple languages and ensure cultural humility among counselors and mental health professionals.

LEGAL SUPPORT



Inform survivors of their legal rights and options, including seeking asylum or other forms of immigration relief.

Provide legal assistance and advocacy for survivors seeking protection and financial compensation.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



Conduct community outreach and educational programs in schools, mosques, and workplaces to raise awareness.

Engage religious leaders, including Imams, and service providers as allies in efforts to end FGM/C and promote alternative rites of passage.

EMPOWERMENT & EDUCATION



Empower survivors through education, vocational training, and economic opportunities.

Foster supportive networks and peer mentorship programs to help survivors connect with others who may have shared lived experiences.

POLICY ADVOCACY



Advocate for policies and programs at the local, state, and federal levels that support FGM/C survivors and eliminate the practice.

Work with lawmakers and government agencies to ensure that FGM/C is recognized as a form of gender-based violence and a human rights violation.

RESOURCES FOR ALLIES OF FGM/C SURVIVORS & POTENTIAL VICTIMS

Global Organizations

United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) & United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA):
Focuses on a joint program of eliminating FGM/C by 2030.
<https://www.unfpa.org/unfpa-unicef-joint-programme-female-genital-mutilation>

World Health Organization (WHO): Offers guidelines, reports, and training materials on FGM/C and women's health.
<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/female-genital-mutilation>

UN Women: Focuses on gender equality and women's empowerment, including advocacy against harmful practices such as FGM/C.
<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/2/compilation-women-leading-the-movement-to-end-female-genital-mutilation>

NGOs and Civil Society Organizations

Orchid Project: Aims to end FGM/C by supporting grassroots organizations, advocacy, and research.
<https://www.orchidproject.org/>

28 Too Many: Conducts research, advocacy, and capacity-building to end FGM/C in the 28 African countries where it is prevalent.
<https://www.fgmcri.org/>

Equality Now: Advocates for the rights of women and girls, including campaigns against FGM/C and legal reform.
<https://equalitynow.org/>

United States Specific Resources

END FGM/C U.S. Network: Provides categorized and accessible resources for service providers, activists, policymakers, and individuals interested in learning more about FGM/C prevention, survivor support, and advocacy efforts in North America.
<https://endfgmnetwork.org/>

Safe Hands for Girls USA: Is a nonprofit organization working to end FGM/C in the United States and globally. They offer resources, training, and survivor support services for service providers, educators, and community leaders working on FGM/C prevention and advocacy.
<https://www.safehandsforgirls.com/>

CREDITS

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