

# FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION / CUTTING IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*This factsheet provides helpful information for media professionals and others who are interested in communicating about female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) in the United States of America (U.S.).*

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that

**513,000  
WOMEN AND GIRLS**

in the United States are either survivors or at risk of FGM/C.

**THERE ARE ONLY TWO  
INSTANCES OF FEDERAL  
CRIMINAL PROSECUTION  
FOR FGM/C IN THE  
UNITED STATES.**

FGM/C is punishable under federal law by imprisonment of up to 10 years, under 18 U.S.C § 116,

**BUT ONLY 41 STATES HAVE  
ENACTED LAWS SPECIFICALLY  
ADDRESSING FGM/C.**



### **FGM/C is a human rights violation**

FGM/C is a harmful practice that involves the partial or total removal of external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. FGM/C is most often practiced on infants or young girls before the age of 15 but is also known to happen later in life.

FGM/C is internationally recognized as a serious [human rights violation](#), constituting torture and an extreme form of gender-based violence (GBV) that can cause lifelong physical and psychological trauma and, in some cases, death. Rooted in gender inequality, it jeopardizes the health and well-being of millions of women and girls.

Research shows that FGM/C is a global issue, as are the efforts to end it. FGM/C is found on every continent except Antarctica and is known to occur in [over 90 countries](#) across the globe, including the United States. It is performed by various ethnic, religious, and socio-economic groups.

## FGM/C impacts women and girls in the United States

In the U.S., [approximately 513,000 women and girls](#) have undergone or are at risk of FGM/C. Women and girls living in the US, including those who chose to [identify](#) as non-binary or transgender, may be subjected to and continue to be at risk of FGM/C. They may be subject to FGM/C on U.S. land, or taken to neighboring states or to their families' countries of origin — a practice known as "[vacation cutting](#)." According to [AHA Foundation's latest research](#), the population impacted by FGM/C is highly concentrated in major metropolitan areas and in six states; Minnesota, California, New York, Texas, Washington, and Virginia. Additionally, affected women and girls are nearly twice as likely to live below the poverty line than the general population.

FGM/C is often mistakenly considered and generally dealt with as an issue practiced only by specific diaspora communities. In part, this is due to the fact that the [prevalence rates](#) published by the CDC were estimated based on immigration patterns from countries with high prevalence of FGM/C. This limited and incomplete data continues to be the primary source of information in the U.S. and informs domestic law and policy.

These estimates do not represent the full picture. FGM/C is also practiced in the U.S. by some local, non-immigrant communities and by people whose countries of origin do not have a high prevalence of FGM/C overall. For instance, there are reports and evidence of FGM/C being practiced by [certain Christian communities](#) in the South and Midwest, as well as the [Bohra community](#), predominantly present in South Asia, among others.

FGM/C is not unique to the Global South. Historically, U.S. and U.K. [gynecologists in the 19th and 20th centuries practiced FGM/C](#) as a procedure to treat hysteria, erotomania, and "lesbianism." Some forms of FGM/C were even [covered by Blue Cross Blue Shield insurance](#) until 1977.

Moreover, there is [evidence](#) showing that, from the 1950s to the present, another form of FGM/C known as the "husband stitch" or "vaginal tuck" was practiced by U.S. doctors on mothers without their knowledge and sometimes upon the request of their partners. This practice consists of [adding one or more additional sutures](#) while repairing the mother's tear or episiotomy to tighten her vaginal opening to enhance her partner's sexual pleasure during intercourse.

Despite this growing evidence that FGM/C affects a broad diversity of people in the U.S., including in communities outside those where the practice has traditionally occurred, reliable, disaggregated data on actual prevalence rates in the U.S. is lacking.

Lack of data impacts all aspects of the approach the government takes to tackle the issue effectively. Moreover, targeting certain ethnic groups or nationalities in the context of FGM/C can cause further secrecy in practice, increase stigmatization, and lead to systemic discrimination in law and policy. Accurate and sensitive data gathering on FGM/C must be undertaken and shared publicly.

“ There is such a silence that surrounds this practice that until we are talking about it more, we are really never going to know the number of girls in the US that have been affected. We have to remove the shame, make it a subject safe to talk about. ”

**Jenny, FGM/C survivor**

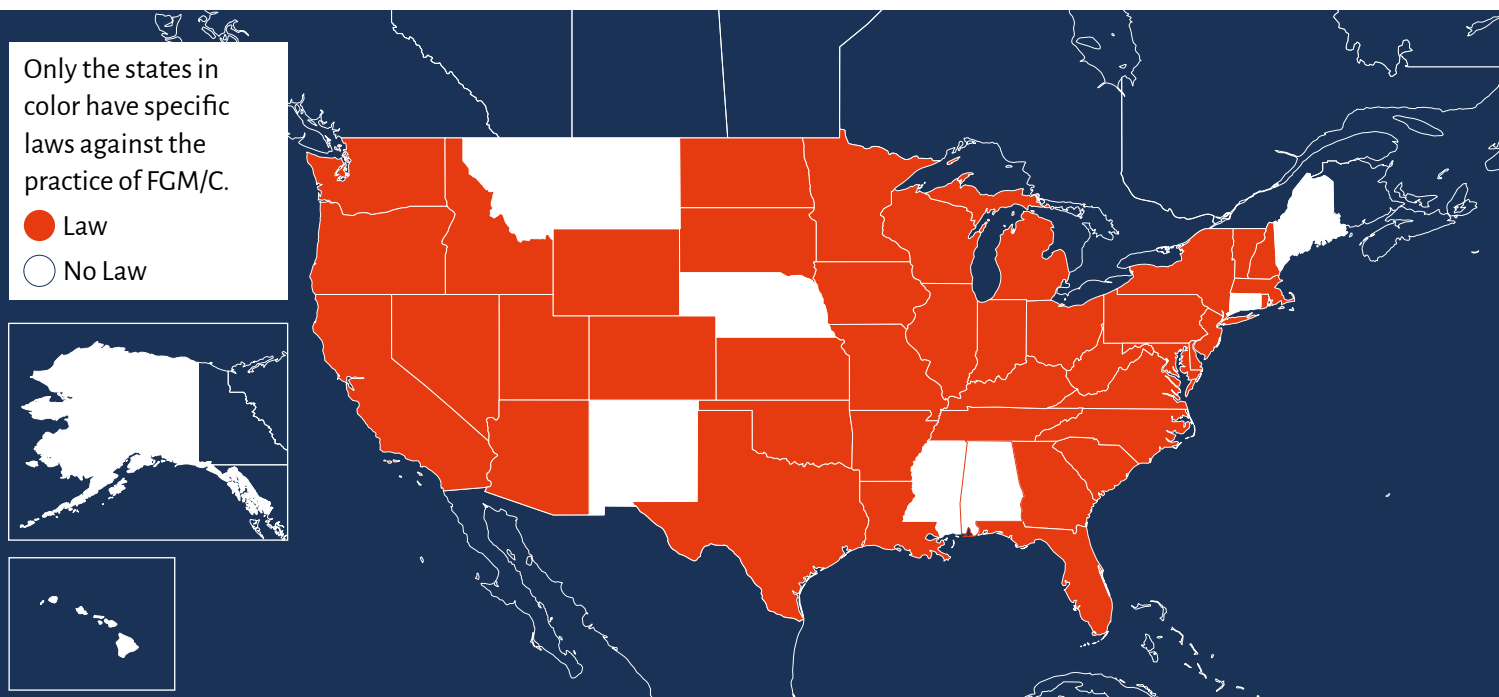
## Legal status of FGM/C in the United States

FGM/C was first outlawed under U.S. federal law in 1996. Under the [Strengthening the Opposition to Female Genital Mutilation Act of 2020](#), also known as the Stop FGM Act 2020, it is illegal to perform FGM/C on a girl under the age of 18 or for the parent, caretaker, or guardian of a girl under the age of 18 to facilitate or consent to FGM/C being performed. Transporting a girl for the purpose of FGM/C is also a punishable offense. Violation of this law is punishable by imprisonment of up to 10 years.

To date, only two criminal prosecutions have been brought forward at the federal level against FGM/C. In [U.S. v. Nagarwala](#), a U.S. licensed doctor was charged with performing FGM/C on nine girls aged 7-13 at a Detroit, Michigan clinic. In November 2018, a federal judge in Detroit dismissed six of the eight charges on the grounds that the 1996 law was unconstitutional because Congress did not have the right to criminalize

the practice. The [Stop FGM Act 2020](#) expressly noted that the District Court of Michigan erred in this decision and is now in effect. Subsequent to the new law, in 2021, a woman in Texas was [indicted](#) for transporting a minor from the U.S. to a foreign country for the purpose of FGM/C.

Out of the 50 U.S. states, [only 41 states](#) in the U.S. have laws against FGM/C in varying degrees of protection. The remaining nine states and the District of Columbia, which do not have specific laws to address FGM/C generally rely on anti-violence laws. These states are; Alabama, Alaska, Connecticut, Hawaii, Maine, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, and New Mexico. Similar to the federal level, [prosecutions under state law](#) regarding FGM/C have been minimal. To further explore state-by-state laws regarding FGM/C, see the [interactive map](#) and [table](#) on U.S. Laws Against FGM/C developed by Equality Now and the U.S. End FGM/C Network.



However, even in those states that have a penal code statute outlawing FGM/C, not all have enacted comprehensive legislation or taken a multi-sectoral approach. [Research shows](#) comprehensive approaches are required to respond effectively to FGM/C. In addition to prohibiting FGM/C, state-level laws should include provisions and funding for sustained outreach

and education, prevention, survivor services, and multi-sectoral stakeholder training. Statutes must also prohibit the transport of women and girls for the purpose of FGM/C or “vacation-cutting.”

State laws are particularly important because states have a significantly greater capacity to reach at-risk

populations and intervene to provide protection and support. They are crucial because they govern the activities of state-run institutions, including law enforcement, the courts, healthcare, social services, and other programs. As such, they have a more direct impact on the day-to-day lives of people within their jurisdiction. Enacting state laws is only a first step; laws must be effectively implemented using a multi-sectoral approach and accompanied by programs for community education and training of frontline professionals, including healthcare providers, law enforcement, and more.

Federal and state laws on FGM/C have complementary functions. Together, they can leverage the resources from different systems, thus allowing for a comprehensive approach to change. As such, it is imperative that all states adopt robust, progressive legislation on FGM/C.

Passing the [Equal Rights Amendment](#) (ERA) into the U.S. Constitution could facilitate the adoption and subsequent protection of legislation regarding FGM/C. Section 2 of the ERA grants Congress an independent source of power to pass legislation to enforce sex equality, which could include laws to ensure women and girls are protected against FGM/C. Read more about how the ERA could help to address FGM/C in [Equality Now's Factsheet](#).

“ In its most recent review of the United States in 2023, the Committee recommended, “states to pass legislation that prohibits and criminalizes all forms of female genital mutilation and to effectively implement the Strengthening the Opposition to Female Genital Mutilation Act. ”

## International legal obligations regarding FGM/C in the United States

FGM/C is a violation of international human rights law and is recognized as a form of GBV and a violation of women and girls' rights under a number of international instruments.

The U.S. has ratified a few international human rights instruments and treaty bodies and has legal obligations pertaining to FGM/C. The [Universal Declaration on Human Rights](#), the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR), and the [Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#).

The Human Rights Committee, the body charged with monitoring the implementation of the ICCPR, condemns the practice of FGM/C as a [violation of Articles 7 and 24](#). In its [most recent review of the United States](#) in 2023, the Committee noted concern that “not all states have laws against female genital mutilation” and [recommended](#), “states to pass legislation that prohibits and criminalizes all forms of female genital mutilation and to effectively implement the [Strengthening the Opposition to Female Genital Mutilation Act](#).” Additionally, the Committee Against Torture, the body charged with monitoring the implementation of the Convention Against Torture, states that [FGM/C falls within the scope of the Convention](#). As such, the U.S. has clear obligations under international law pertaining to FGM/C.

The United States has yet to ratify four other key instruments in this area; the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#), the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#), the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), and the [Convention on the Rights of persons with Disabilities](#). The ratification of these instruments would allow for greater accountability of the U.S. in international fora pertaining to the elimination of FGM/C.

## The media is a critical ally in the movement to end FGM/C

The media has a pivotal role to play in addressing these issues. Well-informed and sensitive coverage can broaden public understanding about FGM/C, shape public discourse, and influence policy-makers' decisions to ensure effective legal and social protections are well implemented and properly funded.

By shining a much-needed light on the harms caused by FGM/C, reporting can be a powerful tool to advance a comprehensive approach and strengthen support and protection for vulnerable women and girls, such as within the education, healthcare, and criminal justice systems.

FGM/C is a complex issue that can be challenging to report on. It requires a nuanced understanding of how best to educate and engage audiences, foster positive social change, avoid stigmatizing communities, report accurately, and safeguard survivors, those at risk, and campaigners. Often, survivors of FGM/C are asked to share their stories, and those who choose to do so can find this empowering. But for some, recounting their personal trauma can be distressing. It is essential that media professionals are mindful of reporting on important subjects with a gender-sensitive, culturally sensitive, accurate, and human-rights-based approach.



“ Bringing the harmful traditional practice of FGM/C out of the shadows is key to its elimination and the media is instrumental in educating people that this practice continues in the US. Sharing the stories of FGM/C survivors helps those who have suffered trauma, as well as those who are protecting their child from this practice. The media is a powerful ally in the effort to eliminate FGM/C. ”

### Zehra Patwa,

Survivor, resident of Connecticut state, U.S., and co-founder of WeSpeakOut, an organization that strives to work for equal rights for Bohra women in all spheres of life, specifically on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) or khafz.



## Resources for Media Professionals

To assist media professionals and others in communicating about FGM/C, please refer to the following resources which contain useful information on FGM/C and practical reporting tips in accordance with journalistic best practices:

- [US FGM/C state-by-state Map and Table on laws on FGM/C - Equality Now and the U.S. End FGM/C Network](#)
- [Journalists' Handbook on Female Genital Mutilation: Guidelines for Gender-Sensitive Reporting—Global Edition - Equality Now](#)
- [Resource Guide to Best Practice for Sensitive and Effective Reporting on FGM/C - Sahiyo](#)
- [Research and Resources on FGM/C - Sahiyo](#)
- [A Study of the Prevalence, Distribution, and Impact of FGM/C in the U.S., 2015-2019 - AHA Foundation](#)
- [2016 US FGM Summit Report - Equality Now, Safe Hands for Girls, US Institute for Peace](#)
- [Training Manual for Legal Professionals on FGM/C in the U.S. - U.S. End FGM/C Network](#)
- [FGM/C Survivor's stories - Equality Now:](#)
  - ▶ [Jenny's Story](#)
  - ▶ [Renee's Story](#)
  - ▶ [Zehra's story](#)
- [Voices to End FGM/C Digital Storytelling Project - Sahiyo and Silence Speaks](#)
- [Submission To The UN Human Rights Committee Over The USA's Failure To Uphold The Rights Of Women And Girls In All Their Diversity - Equality Now](#)

Our hope is that the toolkit/s are adopted and shared by a wide range of editors, media houses, influencers, civil society organizations, and journalists and become a standardized benchmark for informed and conscientious reporting on FGM/C.

## About Sahiyo

Our mission is to empower Asian and other communities to end female genital cutting (FGC) and create positive social change through dialogue, education and collaboration based on community involvement. Sahiyo formed in 2015 as an advocacy collective of South Asian and other survivors of female genital cutting (FGC), also known as female genital mutilation, to address the lack of acknowledgment of FGC as gender-based violence and child abuse impacting U.S. women. Sahiyo empowers underrepresented communities to advocate for their inclusion within FGC discourse and support them to create systemic change to end this centuries-long practice. Sahiyo utilizes collaborative grassroots campaigns and storytelling techniques to train communities to lead this change. Sahiyo also partners with frontline workers (i.e. healthcare providers) to create culturally sensitive systems of care for survivors and with the government to address policy-level change.

Sahiyo U.S. is fiscally sponsored by Empowerment WORKS (EW), a U.S.-based civic and social change organization advancing a whole system approach to a sustainable world. Empowerment WORKS partners with nonprofit organizations and shares knowledge and best practices to accelerate change through their Partners in Empowerment network.

## Contact Sahiyo:

 [info@sahiyo.org](mailto:info@sahiyo.org)

 [sahiyo.org](http://sahiyo.org)

 [@sahiyovoices](https://www.facebook.com/sahiyovoices)

 [@sahiyovoices](https://www.instagram.com/sahiyovoices)

 [@sahiyovoices](https://twitter.com/sahiyovoices)

 [@sahiyo](https://www.linkedin.com/company/sahiyo)



## About Equality Now

Founded in 1992, Equality Now is an international human rights organization that works to protect and promote the rights of all women and girls around the world.

Our campaigns are centered on four program areas: Legal Equality, End Sexual Violence, End Harmful Practices, and End Sexual Exploitation, with a cross-cutting focus on the unique needs of adolescent girls. Equality Now combines grassroots activism with international, regional, and national legal advocacy to achieve legal and systemic change to benefit all women and girls and works to ensure that governments enact and enforce laws and policies that uphold their rights.

## Contact Equality Now:

 [press@equalitynow.org](mailto:press@equalitynow.org)

 [equalitynow.org/pressroom](http://equalitynow.org/pressroom)

 [@equalitynoworg](https://www.facebook.com/equalitynoworg)

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