

WDI UK Statement on Female Genital Mutilation

This statement is in support of the UN International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation on February 6th 2026.

Female Genital Mutilation has been a criminal offence in the UK since 1985. The current UK legislation is the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003 and the Female Genital Mutilation (Protection and Guidance) (Scotland) Act 2020.

We condemn the poor implementation of this legislation, under which there have been three cases prosecuted within the UK since 1985, only one of which resulted in a conviction.

Women and girls subjected to female genital mutilation (FGM) have experienced a profound violation of their bodily integrity, dignity, health, and human rights. FGM is an irreversible act of violence inflicted on females because of their sex, overwhelmingly carried out on children, and sustained through systems that prioritise custom, control, and silence over the safety and autonomy of women and girls. Any framework that fails to name this harm clearly risks compounding it.

Women's Declaration International UK is the UK branch of Women's Declaration International, an organisation that advocates internationally for the sex-based human rights of women and girls. Its advocacy is grounded in the Declaration on Women's Sex-Based Rights (2019), which reaffirms that the rights of women and girls set out in the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) are sex-based.

The Declaration was developed in response to the growing replacement of the category of sex with concepts such as "gender identity" and "gender reassignment" in law, policy, and practice. It affirms that this shift undermines the ability of states and institutions to identify sex-based discrimination and to safeguard women, girls, and other vulnerable groups from harm. Nowhere is this failure more dangerous than in relation to sex-based harmful practices, including FGM.

The Declaration on Women's Sex-Based Rights has been signed by over 40,000 individuals internationally, and hundreds of organisations worldwide committed to the promotion of women's human rights. It provides a principled foundation for addressing violence against women and girls without cultural relativism, euphemism, or erasure.

FGM as a violation of sex-based human rights

FGM is a serious violation of the human rights of women and girls and constitutes sex-based violence inflicted on females because they are female. It causes lifelong physical and psychological harm and has no medical, ethical, or human-rights justification.

Concern is warranted at attempts either academic, policy-based, or rhetorical, to legitimise, minimise, or reframe FGM as a "cultural practice" deserving protection or accommodation. Such attempts undermine established human-rights standards and risk weakening protections for women and girls.

CEDAW prohibits the justification of harmful practices, including FGM

CEDAW establishes that culture, custom, religion, or tradition can never be invoked to justify discrimination or violence against women and girls. It places a clear obligation on States Parties to identify, challenge, and abolish laws, customs, and practices that harm women and girls, including those that are socially entrenched or presented as culturally significant.

CEDAW does not accommodate or reinterpret harmful practices. On the contrary, it provides the legal framework through which such practices are named as discrimination and required to be eliminated. Its provisions mandate the dismantling of stereotypes and practices that damage women's dignity,

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health, and bodily integrity, and require states to prioritise the rights and safety of women and girls over claims of cultural legitimacy.

FGM is a clear and unequivocal example of the type of sex-based harmful practice CEDAW was designed to confront and eradicate. Any attempt to excuse, normalise, or legitimise FGM on cultural grounds is therefore directly contrary to CEDAW's object and purpose and can be robustly challenged using CEDAW's own obligations and standards.

Sex-based rights are essential to protecting women and girls

The Declaration on Women's Sex-Based Rights reaffirms that women's human rights are grounded in sex, not in cultural roles, identities, or social norms. This clarity is essential. FGM targets female bodies, overwhelmingly girls, and is imposed because of sex-based expectations relating to female sexuality, purity, and control.

When international frameworks lose clarity about sex as a material reality, the ability to identify and oppose practices such as FGM is weakened. Sex-based rights are not exclusionary; they are protective. They enable accurate identification of victims, accountability for perpetrators, and effective safeguarding of women and girls.

Culture cannot override bodily integrity

Cultural diversity does not, and must never, override the fundamental rights of women and girls to physical integrity, health, and freedom from violence. Respect for culture cannot be used to justify irreversible injury, coercion, or harm.

International human-rights law recognises that culture is neither static nor immune from scrutiny. Where cultural practices conflict with equality, dignity, and bodily integrity, states are required to act to protect those at risk. There is no human right to practice violence, and there is no cultural exemption to the prohibition of FGM.

Call to States

We call upon states, international bodies, and human-rights institutions to:

1. Formally and consistently reject in law, policy, and public position any attempt to legitimise, minimise, or reframe female genital mutilation as a protected or acceptable cultural practice, and respond promptly and decisively whenever such attempts arise.
2. Actively uphold CEDAW as a sex-based human-rights treaty and ensure that women and girls remain clearly and accurately identifiable as the protected class in all legislation, policy development, data collection, safeguarding frameworks, and reporting mechanisms.
3. Maintain clear, accurate, and authoritative language that explicitly recognises female genital mutilation as a harmful practice and a form of violence against women and girls, and to correct or challenge language which obscures, neutralises, or relativises this harm.
4. Implement, monitor, and enforce effective prevention, protection, and accountability measures, including robust legal prohibitions, safeguarding systems, and prosecution where applicable, with the explicit aim of eliminating female genital mutilation.
5. Ensure sustained access to survivor-centred, sex-specific health, legal, and social support services, and allocate adequate resources to prevention, survivor support, and long-term recovery, informed by the experiences and needs of affected women and girls.

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Conclusion

FGM is a human-rights violation to be eliminated. The international community already possesses the legal and moral tools to do so in the sex-based protections that CEDAW provides.

Further Reading

United Nations International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation <https://www.un.org/en/observances/female-genital-mutilation-day>

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

CEDAW General Recommendation No. 14: Female Circumcision <https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/cedaw/1990/en/27729>

Zero tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2017/595916/EPRS_ATA\(2017\)595916_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2017/595916/EPRS_ATA(2017)595916_EN.pdf)

Sources of international human rights law on Female Genital Mutilation <https://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/645-sources-of-international-human-rights-law-on-female-genital-mutilation.html>