

CONDEMN THE PRACTICE NOT THE PEOPLE



A social determinants approach to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

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What is FGM?

FGM (also known as female circumcision or genital cutting) is a practice that includes

'all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons'

This cultural practice has significant impacts on the health of affected women and girls.

How FGM affects women and girls

Short-term

- Severe pain
- Excessive bleeding
- Shock
- Psychological trauma
- Infection
- Urinary retention
- Death

Long-term

- Reproductive tract infections
- Excessive scarring
- Complications during pregnancy and childbirth
- Infertility
- Painful periods
- Psychological issues
- Difficulty in undergoing medical examinations
- Pelvic pain

Determinants of health for FGM affected women

- **Culture** - the practice is deeply-rooted in the culture and traditional beliefs of FGM practicing communities. It is viewed as a symbol of identity and membership in the community, as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood and eligibility for marriage.
- **Religion** - some believe FGM is sanctioned by their religion. FGM is practiced by both Christians and Muslims and has no basis in either religion.
- **Education** - lack of education for most affected women acts as a barrier to understanding the health impacts.
- **Language** - a barrier to accessing health care services
- **Gender** - impacts on women's ability to make decisions about their health
- **Social isolation** - impacts on women's ability to access services

Compounding factors

- **Language** - lack of English language proficiency impacts on women's access to mainstream services
- **Racism/Discrimination** - women experience prejudice on the basis of their ethnicity and their practices termed barbaric
- **Stigma** - many women experience stigma on the basis of their appearance or mode of dressing
- **Media** - mainstream media has sensationalised FGM to the extent of humiliating affected women
- **Legal status** - the illegal status of FGM can serve to demonise practicing communities
- **Health promotion approaches** - some mainstream approaches to FGM elimination have not taken into account the marginalised context of the affected communities

Women's Health West approach

Working with FGM affected communities with the aim of eliminating the practice is a long-term project that encompasses strengthening women's knowledge about FGM, and increasing their access to sexual and reproductive health services. The program also aims to build the capacity and expertise of mainstream and specialist sexual and reproductive health services to respond to the needs of women affected by or at risk of FGM.

FGM is a sensitive issue that is associated with cultural minority groups in Australia. The minority status of FGM practicing communities means there is significant potential that FGM initiatives will result in racist backlash. Backlash can impact upon the potential for the program aim of FGM elimination to be achieved.

This is because:

- Women are likely to be less receptive to change if they feel condemned
- Women are more likely to defend the practice rather than being open to empowerment approaches and consequently embracing change
- Some approaches may serve to fuel racism

The approach taken by Women's Health West includes:

- **Culturally appropriate health promotion** – where community-identified solutions guide program design and delivery
- **Gendered approach** – that aims to increase the capacity of women and girls to take control over sexual and reproductive health decision-making
- **Community development** – engaging in actions that build skills, processes, networks and strategies within affected communities, required to bring about change

