

**POSITION PAPER**

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# **A Building Bridges Approach: the key to ending Female Genital Mutilation**



**End FGM**  
EUROPEAN NETWORK



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# About End FGM EU

The End FGM European Network (End FGM EU) is an umbrella network of 22 European organisations operating to sustain European action to ending female genital mutilation by connecting grassroots communities with non-government organisations. The Network strives to build bridges and cooperation's with all relevant actors in the field of FGM both in Europe and globally. Platforming community voices to influence European governments and policy makers to work towards the elimination of FGM.

End FGM EU operates as a meeting ground for communities, NGOs, CSOs and EU level stakeholders to engage, interact and cooperate with one another by sharing experiences and exchanging knowledge. Through these exchanges, the Network pinpoints key areas in need of attention and address that can further develop the efforts to end FGM whilst securing opportunities for members' to best support them in their work.



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# Executive Summary

FGM is internationally recognised as a gross violation of human rights, a form of violence against women and girls and a manifestation of gender inequality. According to research by UNFPA, if current trends continue in the direction they are moving in, 68 million girls will face FGM between 2015 and 2030<sup>1</sup>. According to UNICEF data, more than 200 million women and girls today are survivors of FGM<sup>2</sup>.

The new figures project that the current estimates of 3.9 million girls cut each year will rise to 4.6 million by 2030, unless massively scaled-up efforts are taken urgently to prevent that from happening. Such increase is due to estimated population growth in communities that practice FGM. Within this context, we must urgently push the international community to scale up efforts and ensure that we are effectively working towards both the abandonment of FGM and the provision of adequate services for women and girls affected<sup>3</sup>.

End FGM EU recognises the importance of strengthening current efforts to end FGM, to understand and promote strategies that yield results. Building on years of reflection between the Network and its members, in 2017, the Network dedicated its work to the theme of Building Bridges to end FGM, during which several seminars and workshops were held to comprehensively explore this approach and identify best practises. The work accumulated in the development of a 'Building Bridges' approach to ending FGM. This proposed framework entails strategies which aim at enabling and strengthening synergies and cooperation between actors in different regions, sectors, or working on other forms of gender-based violence, to implement coordinated actions, policies and legal frameworks to end FGM in a more effective way. The 'Building Bridges' approach is a threefold strategy composed by the following pillars:

## ► Building bridges between regions

Strengthening the linkages between tackling FGM in Europe and in other regions, through the connections that migrant communities maintain with their countries of origin as well as, building alliances among civil society organisations at an inter-regional level

## ► Building bridges between sectors

Creating synergies between stakeholders in different professional sectors and policy areas to tackle FGM in a coordinated way

## ► Building bridges between FGM and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV)<sup>4</sup>

This approach emphasises the importance of tackling FGM in the *continuum* of GBV and establish parallels with other harmful practices

1 See UNFPA press release [here](#).

2 Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A Global Concern, UNICEF, 2016, available [here](#).

3 For the sake of space, throughout the document we will refer to both these aspects of work against FGM (efforts to ending the practice + services provided to survivors) with the wording "end FGM"/"tackle FGM". It has to be kept in mind however that such wording has these two components: ending the perpetuation of the practice and ending its negative effects on concerned women and girls.

4 We would like to highlight here the gender-based aspect of violence, which is the expression of power inequalities among genders. It has to be born in mind that such gender-based violence affects disproportionately women and girls. However, it can also be addressed to a wide variety of persons due to their gender orientation or sexual identity. This is why, regardless the target, we use in this paper the general acronym GBV.

# Key Recommendations

- 1. Address FGM and other harmful practices between countries and stakeholders through projects that take a transnational approach;*
- 2. Ensure greater geographical flexibility of funding schemes to achieve the global eradication of FGM in a transcontinental way;*
- 3. Decision-makers and State authorities from different countries should engage in a dialogue to promote coordinated prevention, protection mechanisms, transnational prosecution and integrated policies to tackle FGM;*
- 4. Invest in awareness raising and training of public officials and professionals in several sectors on FGM-related issues;*
- 5. Establish multi-stakeholder platforms to coordinate the work among the different sectors at policy and service-provision level, and to effectively build bridges among all relevant actors, including civil society and, most importantly, affected communities;*
- 6. Ensure a holistic approach when tackling FGM, not singling out the practice as such, but addressing the root causes of gender inequality that underline all forms of GBV, including FGM;*
- 7. Involve men and boys in the process of reshaping gender relations and changing behaviour, and in supporting the leading role of women and girls and their empowerment;*
- 8. Adopt an intersectional approach to GBV and create partnerships with multiple stakeholders representing different identities and focusing on diversified forms of violence.*

A compilation of good practice case studies from End FGM EU members applying the three pillars of our Building Bridges Approach can be found [here](#).



# Introduction

FGM is a human rights violation that has existed for several centuries and is strongly linked to social norms shaped by tradition, culture and religion. While the exact number of girls and women worldwide who have undergone FGM remains unknown, the latest UNICEF statistical report<sup>5</sup> estimates that at least 200 million girls and women in 30 countries, mostly but not solely in Africa, have been subjected to the practice.

Multiple efforts to end the practice exist at local, national, regional and international level. It is now time to scale up and coordinate these efforts to capitalise on them and bring about increased long-lasting change through effective and comprehensive strategies. By looking at past and present experiences, as well as the expertise of the End FGM EU members,

lessons can be learned in terms of approaches that are most effective to tackle FGM and to accelerate change. This collective reflection resulted in the developing of the building bridges framework to connect different actors and their experiences. The paper challenges the “working in silos approach”<sup>6</sup>, we need to cooperate to effectively end FGM<sup>7</sup>.

Since its foundation, End FGM EU has had the mission of creating an enabling environment for coordinated and comprehensive action to end FGM in Europe, and to facilitate transnational, cross-border cooperation at global level. This position paper follows this aim and puts down on paper years of reflection and strategic thinking by the European Network and its members.



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5 Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A Global Concern, UNICEF, 2016, available [here](#).

6 Meaning working towards the same objective, but without sharing information or talking to each other.

7 It has to be stressed that, by taking this position, End FGM EU does not mean that single actions do not produce positive effects alone. On the contrary, our building bridges approach aims at multiplying and increasing the already important impact of single actions, by making such efforts last longer and bring about a greater and more sustainable change.

# Definition of ‘Building Bridges’

FGM is a complex issue that requires a holistic address of the deep-seated cultural and societal norms that underpin the practise. Building bridges is an innovative approach to the challenge on how to scale up efforts to end FGM. It is a **threefold strategy** that if invested in will bring current efforts to end FGM to the next level. Within the context of this paper, the definition of a ‘Building Bridges’ approach in tackling FGM<sup>8</sup>, is:

“Strategies aiming at enabling and strengthening synergies and cooperation between actors in different regions, sectors, or working on other forms of gender-based violence, to implement coordinated actions, policies and legal frameworks to end FGM in a more effective way”

## 1. Building Bridges between Regions

“Strategies aiming at enabling and strengthening synergies and cooperation between diaspora communities and communities in their homeland, as well as among stakeholders in different regions of the world, to implement coordinated actions, policies and legal frameworks to end FGM through a cross-border approach”

## WHY?

FGM is now recognised as a **global issue**, which affects all continents, including Europe. FGM has emerged as an issue in the European Union (EU) due to migration from high-prevalence countries – migrants’ countries of origin –. Diaspora communities residing in the EU are concerned by the practice, not only because of the hundreds of thousands of women and girls living in Europe with the lifelong consequences of FGM, but also because of the risks girls are under every year due to the perpetuation of the practice.

The decision to cut or not to cut a girl is often not an individual one: families and communities both in the country of origin and in countries of residence have a considerable influence on it. As it is known, the practice of FGM is deeply rooted in gender and social norms and socio-cultural dynamics that perpetuate it within communities. Therefore, community and family pressure, including from traditional and religious leaders, play a fundamental role in the perpetuation of FGM from generation to generation. Members of diaspora communities may affect FGM

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8 Such definition evolved from the first one adopted in 2014, see Annex [“Network and Build Bridges – November 2014”](#).



abandonment programmes in their countries of origin both in a positive and negative way. Such connection is due to the strong international cultural, economic, political and affective linkages that exist between diaspora communities and communities in their homeland.

In a negative sense, members of diaspora communities may sometimes encourage their community in the country of origin to continue traditional practices like FGM, in some cases due to the lack of awareness of the social change that might have occurred in the country since they left. This might also happen because FGM is given even more cultural weight by diaspora communities, as it might be perceived as representing a symbolic connection with their countries of origin, a proof of their cultural identity, to which they hold on to so as not to lose connection with their cultural roots. In a positive sense, diaspora communities through their experiences abroad and contacts with other cultural, social and political realities can also play a key role in showing how communities can shift from FGM practices and abandon this harmful tradition, without losing their sense of belonging or rejecting their cultural identity.

## HOW?

According to the experience of End FGM EU members, working with representatives of **diaspora communities living in Europe** has an impact not only here, but also in their countries of origin. Indeed, they represent a bridge between two realities and can -and do- play an important and effective role back home, through knowledge transfer and awareness raising among their families. In this growingly interconnected world of social media and advanced communication technology, awareness raising continues even when communities are not in their homeland<sup>9</sup>. It is crucial to enhance and capitalise on such a **multiplier effect** emerging from human relationships in a globalised world, where such activities can ensure double the impact.

### RECOMMENDATION 1

The practice of FGM must be addressed in **bi- and multilateral discussions** between countries and stakeholders and projects should take this key aspect into consideration.

Building bridges between actors in countries of residence and countries of origin is a fundamental strategy to **effectively address the cross-border dimension of FGM**, and meaningfully tackle it. However, applying this approach entails **going beyond the traditional distinction between international cooperation projects and domestic ones**, which requires a re-adaptation of current funding schemes. Most donors have specific geographic eligibility criteria to access their funds, which makes it difficult to put in place truly comprehensive and cross-border projects.

### RECOMMENDATION 2

There is a need for greater **funding flexibility** to achieve the global eradication of FGM, a problem that must be tackled in a transcontinental way to achieve greater impact.

**Different actors and stakeholders can play a role in building bridges between regions** to end FGM and improve care of affected women and girls. Apart from communities, civil society organisations can build cross-border projects together to address the global dimension of FGM<sup>10</sup> and professionals within the same sector can share their experiences and learn from one another's practices.

Furthermore, there is a need to institutionalise this approach to make it more sustainable and systematic. Decision-makers and State authorities are in the perfect position to institutionalise and systematise a 'Building Bridges' approach through policies, bi-lateral agreements, protocols and legal frameworks.

<sup>9</sup> This comes out of testimonies of diaspora community representatives with whom End FGM EU and its members engage in our daily work. For instance, within the project CHANGE Plus, behaviour change activities have not only helped the so-called "change agents" and "change champions" to bring about change within their diaspora communities here in Europe, but also back home, thanks to engaging in constructive exchanges with their families and communities there.

<sup>10</sup> See Annex "[End FGM EU members' projects with a Building Bridges Approach](#)".

### RECOMMENDATION 3

Decision-makers and State authorities should engage into a **dialogue among authorities from different countries**, to: promote coordinated legislation, policies and initiatives to improve transnational prevention of FGM; foster cross-border protection mechanisms for women and girls affected by or at risk of FGM; enhance transnational prosecution; and promote integrated policies.

Some attempts to coordinate policies and practices have been made at regional level, within Europe and among several African countries<sup>11</sup>. Yet cross-border mechanisms to protect girls at risk of FGM are still poor both in Europe and in Africa. Some pilot projects have been implemented, at community level,

within partnerships between European and African NGOs<sup>12</sup>. These projects need to be scaled up in order to inform possible similar projects in the future. Moreover, to date, little has been done to build bridges among other regions and countries of origin, such as the Middle East and South-East Asia, and other countries of destination, such as the United States, Canada or Australia.

Finally, a wider transnational, cross-regional mechanism tackling FGM has still to be discussed. Along this line, and beyond the migration-related transnational linkages between countries of origin and countries of destination, End FGM EU deems it very important to foster cooperation among civil society operating in different regions of the world<sup>13</sup>.

## 2. Building Bridges between Sectors

**“Strategies aiming at enabling and strengthening synergies and cooperation between stakeholders from different sectors and fields of action, in order to implement coordinated, comprehensive and integrated actions, policies and legal frameworks to end FGM through a multi-sectorial approach”**

### WHY?

Building bridges between actors and sectors to end FGM entails **promoting interaction and collaboration between stakeholders in different fields of action**, which can all contribute to enhancing prevention, protection, prosecution and integrated policies towards ending the practice. Concerned stakeholders include national and regional institutions, governmental and public officials, civil society organisations (including women's rights and

youth movements), professionals in several sectors (health, asylum, social work, child protection, GBV, law, law enforcement, education, journalism and media), FGM survivors, community representatives, as well as traditional and religious leaders. Building bridges between these multiple stakeholders, promoting cooperation and exchanges among them, is key to strengthen integrated and holistic approaches to end FGM.

11 For instance, through parliamentarians' consultations between European and African MPs promoted by UNFPA and EPF (more information available [here](#)).

12 See Annex [“End FGM EU members' projects with a Building Bridges Approach”](#).

13 Therefore, End FGM EU plans to launch in 2018 a global civil society Inter-Regional Coalition to end FGM.

## HOW?

The first key step to ensure collaboration among multiple stakeholders around FGM is making them aware of the issue.

### RECOMMENDATION 4

Sensitising and **training public officials and professionals** in several sectors on FGM-related issues is crucial to build bridges between sectors.

From a policy standpoint, building bridges between sectors means particularly **mainstreaming FGM in all relevant policy areas**, beyond justice, GBV, gender equality and human rights, and particularly integrate FGM in the areas where it is not currently strongly and consistently addressed, this includes asylum and migration, health, education, research and data collection. A multi-sectoral approach is needed to fully address the issue<sup>14</sup>.

Accordingly, the Network commends and encourages the establishment of multi-disciplinary, **cross-sectorial and multi-agency integrated national systems tackling FGM**, possibly within an efficient institutional setting. This model can take the shape of an inter-ministerial coordination overseen by a centralised unit within a relevant ministry, inter-agency working groups at national, regional and local level or other similar platforms helping, among other tasks, to put in place relevant guidelines or protocols. Such systems are already in place in a few EU Member States<sup>15</sup> but need to be more systematically spread within and beyond the European context. They have proven to be effective in terms of efficiency, coordination and avoiding duplication of efforts when working towards the abandonment of FGM, as well as the protection and care of women and girls concerned. Moreover, addressing the issue from different angles and supporting FGM-affected

women and girls through the full range of services available is very beneficial for them, as it considers the complexity and entirety of their lives and experiences as a whole. Comprehensive **National Action Plans** can and should enable the establishment of such systems and provide them with the necessary multi-annual planning, centralised coordination and adequate national budgeting and human resources for their effective implementation.

### RECOMMENDATION 5

It is crucial that such integrated national mechanisms not only coordinate the work among the different sectors at policy and service-provision level, but also represent **institutionalised multi-stakeholder platforms** to effectively build bridges among all relevant actors, including by actively involving civil society organisations and especially **communities** into decision and policy-making and implementation.

The latter is key, to take into consideration the needs of FGM survivors and FGM-affected communities, in order to shape and better tailor national policies and service provision. Too often governments delegate the work with communities almost exclusively to civil society organisations, who execute the work with very limited and unsustainable funds. On the contrary, institutions should perceive and treat communities not only as distant beneficiaries of pre-designed policies and services, but as key persons to meaningfully engage with at all stages. There is a strong need to establish more direct and sustainable relationships between institutions and community representatives, by integrating them in institutional multi-stakeholder platforms to institutionalise the crucial role they play in ending FGM and making national, regional or local policies and practices more tailored and effective. Of course, the work of civil society is key to ensure this, but it is fundamental that national authorities play their part as well<sup>16</sup>.

14 This is why after our 2017 Annual Theme “Building Bridges” we will focus our 2018 Annual Campaign on “FGM is #MyIssueToo”, to advocate for FGM mainstreaming in all relevant policy areas and professional sectors. Check out our campaign on the [website](#).

15 Examples of such model can be found in Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Belgium and United Kingdom, among others.

16 A promising practice on this can be found in the Netherlands, concerning the official role of community representatives seen as “key persons”. See Annex “End FGM EU members’ projects with a Building Bridges Approach”.

### 3. Building Bridges between FGM and other forms of GBV

**“Strategies aiming at enabling and strengthening synergies and cooperation between actors working on different forms of gender-based violence, to implement coordinated actions, policies and legal frameworks to end FGM through a holistic approach”**

#### WHY?

It is important not to consider FGM as an isolated practice, but to see it within **a continuum of violence**, which is deeply rooted in gender inequality and gender-based discrimination against women and girls. Research shows that girls and women who are survivors of FGM could be at risk of or subjected to other forms of GBV, such as child marriage, intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence. Developing partnerships with actors working towards the elimination of other forms of GBV, including the abandonment of other harmful practices, is therefore key to ensure a strategic and comprehensive approach to ending FGM and to meet the needs of concerned women and girls. This consideration also stems from the common international and regional human rights legal framework, which sets the basis for working towards the elimination of all forms of discrimination and GBV<sup>17</sup>.

#### HOW?

##### RECOMMENDATION 6

The holistic way of approaching FGM, not singling out the practice, but in fact tackling the **root causes of gender inequality** that underline all forms of GBV, including FGM, is, according to End FGM EU and its members, the most effective way to end the practice in the long term and bring about sustainable long-lasting change.

This includes **challenging traditional gendered power structures and social norms** as a key strategy to deconstruct patriarchal gender relations and promote equality between women and men. Addressing such structural inequalities and power imbalances can ensure a deep reflection on societal and gender roles, which can lead to enhanced results, in terms of quantity (all forms of GBV are questioned at once since they are all expressions of the same power structures) and quality (achieve sustainable and long-lasting change through inducing in-depth critical thinking).

##### RECOMMENDATION 7

It is crucial to involve **men and boys** in such processes as they play a significant role in reshaping gender relations and changing behaviour. However, the focus needs to be kept on the leading role of women and girls, with men and boys supporting their empowerment.

There are many underlying factors connected to gender power structures which can be found shaping different forms of GBV. A recurring element is the position of weakness and economic dependence in which women are placed compared to men, which makes it difficult to exit from the spiral of violence<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, **empowering women and girls**, including from an economical point of view, investing in their education and, consequently, enabling them to work and actively contribute to the income of their families, will transform their position of powerlessness,

<sup>17</sup> See also “Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting and Violence Against Women and Girls Strengthening the policy linkages between different forms of violence”, available [here](#).

<sup>18</sup> Among many other reasons, families often cut their daughters to make them acceptable in society and desirable wives, since the dowry for their marriage is the only economical contribution that daughters can bring to their household.

and thus contribute to ending GBV. Another key element to tackle is the strong connection between **female sexuality** and **family and male honour** which is at the heart of several forms of GBV, including FGM. Working to rise the taboo around female sexuality and putting an end to control over female bodily autonomy would contribute to challenging gendered power structures and the root causes of several forms of GBV. Focusing on the structural elements of violence also contributes to unmasking common challenges for women and girls around the world, rather than unfairly focusing on the cultural and distant “otherness”.

### RECOMMENDATION 8

A key strategy to bringing together different experiences, focusing on diversified forms of violence and having the common goal of eliminating them, is to adopt an **intersectional approach** to GBV and create partnerships with multiple stakeholders representing different identities<sup>19</sup>.

Unfortunately programmes to end different forms of GBV are much too often planned and implemented in isolation, while they would benefit from having a **coordinated strategy**, particularly when addressing the same national or community context, whilst maintaining a tailored approach to the different manifestations of violence.

Furthermore, this third pillar of building bridges between FGM and other forms of GBV can and has to go beyond what is most commonly known as intimate partner or non-partner violence. For example, it needs to reflect on and explore possible linkages with other forms of **gender-related operations on the genitalia**, among which, *inter alia*, Intersex



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Genital Mutilation (IGM), female cosmetic genital surgery and male circumcision. Concerning the first example, FGM and IGM are similar operations internationally condemned as child rights violations, since they are both performed predominantly on children, conforming their bodies to gender stereotypes and constitute violations of their right to bodily integrity, carrying dire physical and psychological consequences<sup>20</sup>. On the other hand, concerning links between FGM and genital cosmetic surgery, particularly in the European and US contexts, a reflection needs to be made on the differences and similarities between a banned harmful practice and legal cosmetic surgery on girls (including minors), as well as on the discriminatory effects that such different legal status produces<sup>21</sup>. These are some of the reflections that the End FGM EU and its member organisations hope to expand on in the near future by undertaking further research and liaising with stakeholders working on these issues.

<sup>19</sup> Including among others based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, disability, etc.

<sup>20</sup> When considering this correlation, another key element of gender power structure that needs to be addressed and deconstructed is its aspect of gender dualism and heteronormativity.

<sup>21</sup> Legislation banning FGM but allowing cosmetic genital surgery has sometimes produced the racial-profiling effect that a Caucasian-looking girl asking for labiaplasty is given permission by the medical personnel, while another girl of African descent is denied the very same operation, under the suspicion of undergoing FGM.



# Conclusion

The End FGM EU has dedicated its **2017 theme** to '**Building Bridges to end FGM**' to fine-tune its approach and pursue it with concrete actions and initiatives. The present document is one of the main outcomes of this year's commitment and puts the strategy adopted down on paper after years of work, projects and reflections of End FGM EU, its members and external stakeholders.

This position paper explains the **threefold End FGM EU strategy of Building Bridges between regions, between sectors, and between FGM and other forms of GBV**.

The first aspect taken into consideration is the **transnational nature** of the issue. This is linked to the fact that FGM is a traditional practice that several migrant communities bring from their countries of origin to their countries of residence in connection with their cultural identity, but also to the reality that FGM is a global issue affecting, on different scales, all continents. There is a strong need to increase synergies and cooperation among stakeholders in different countries and regions of the world, to implement a **cross-border approach** to end FGM.

The second element of this strategy intends to tackle FGM as a violation that affects **several aspects of the lives of the women and girls concerned**. It therefore aims at addressing them in a coordinated and integrated way, assessing the full picture without working on one individual aspect while neglecting another. There is the need to strengthen cooperation between different sectors and fields of action, in order to implement a **multi-sectorial approach** to end FGM.

The third aspect addresses the importance of seeing FGM not as an isolated practice, but within the **continuum of GBV**. The strategy intends to challenge the root causes of GBV to bring about sustainable and deep change. There is the need to ensure synergies and intersectionality between actors working on different forms of GBV, in order to implement a **holistic approach** to end FGM.

This threefold strategy, and associated recommendation, will shape the future work of End FGM EU and inform initiatives taking all three pillars as guidance, to capitalise on current efforts and ensure a coordinated action to end FGM in Europe and beyond.



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