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An Experience of Pain and Anguish

African Governments Should Do More to End Female Genital Mutilation

**Agnes Odhiambo**

Senior Researcher, Women's Rights Division

[AgnesOdhiambo](#)

Bahati was 10 years old when she was told she should “get prepared to become a real Maasai woman.” She knew what this meant. Her sister had been told the same thing when she had turned 10. “They cut her and forced her to marry a month later,” Bahati recalled. “I started crying. I was afraid.”

These were the words of a 12-year-old Tanzanian girl describing her experience of female genital mutilation (FGM) two years ago. [She told Human Rights Watch researchers](#) that her grandmother had forced her to leave school to undergo FGM, in order to prepare her for marriage.



Pion H., 12, was 10-years-old when her father tried to force her to undergo female genital mutilation (FGM) and marry a much older man. © 2014 Marcus Bleasdale/VII for Human Rights Watch

FGM is the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia for non-medical purposes. At least 200 million girls and women alive today have undergone it, most of them in Africa. In Somalia and Guinea, almost all young girls and women are cut, while over 80 percent in Djibouti, Sierra Leone, Mali, Egypt, Sudan, and Eritrea have been mutilated. FGM is mostly carried out on young girls from infancy to around age 15.

February 6 is International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation. This [year's theme targets Africa](#) specifically, with the ambitious aim to end FGM by 2030.

FGM is not usually done by families to expressly harm their daughters. In fact, they often believe it is the right thing to do, whether as a mark of cultural or religious identity, or as something necessary for a girl's cleanliness, marriage prospects, or family “honor.”

Whatever the motive, [FGM is a form of violence against women and girls](#). It is irreversible and carries immediate and long-term negative impacts on women's physical and mental health. It can kill. And FGM is also a form of discrimination against women, reflecting deep-seated gender inequalities.

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FGM poses a particular challenge for governments because it is rooted in cultural practices, and is often carried out in secrecy. But change is possible. Recent data showing a slow decline in its overall prevalence indicates a shift towards denouncing FGM and a commitment to end it. Still, too many girls are at risk of this outdated, violent practice, and African governments should take decisive action to end it.

International best practice shows that a holistic approach that enables communities to see FGM differently – as harmful – and to come up with alternatives, is most successful. Introducing laws banning FGM in ways that empower communities is important. Strong political leadership is also needed to mobilize and raise awareness, provide financial resources, and properly protect girls.

More than anything, younger generations of girls need to know that they will not go through Bahati's experience.

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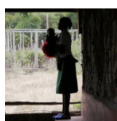
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