

# The Gambia may allow female genital mutilation again, another sign of a global trend eroding women's rights

March 31 2024, by Satang Nabaneh

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The Gambia's ban on [female genital mutilation \(FGM\)](#) since 2015 is [under threat](#). Proposed changes before parliament could permit [medicalized](#) female genital cutting and allow it for consenting adults.

This potential reversal has thrust the country into the [global spotlight](#) as the latest example of the backlash against gender equality.

The Gambia's criminalization of FGM was not the first in west Africa but it came as a surprise. The president at the time, Yahya Jammeh, declared the [rampant cultural tradition](#) a non-religious practice that caused harm. There was some dissent within the country but human rights groups [welcomed](#) the ban.

Jammeh, who was president from 1994 to 2016, also oversaw the passage of other progressive gender-related laws. The [Domestic Violence Act 2013](#) provided a framework for combating [domestic violence](#) in all its forms (physical, sexual, emotional, economic) and protection in particular for women and children. The [Sexual Offenses Act 2013](#) expanded the definition of rape, broadened the circumstances in which individuals could be charged, and reduced the burden of proof in prosecutions.

Jammeh also [outlawed](#) child marriages in 2016. This was significant in country where [1 in 5 young people aged 15–19 \(19%\)](#) are married.

In [one of the world's most aid-dependent countries](#), these reforms were all central to international donor interests. And they helped to improve the country's democratic reputation. But at the same time, they made it easy for the [autocratic](#) leader to get away with other excesses. He also

mobilized religion to manipulate beliefs and sentiments, particularly affecting girls and women. For example, Jammeh [mandated](#) that female government workers wear veils or headscarves when he declared his [Muslim majority](#) country an Islamic state in 2016.

President Adama Barrow, Jammeh's successor, has emphasized religious tolerance and has refrained from employing religious symbolism. Unlike the state-sponsored homophobia under the Jammeh regime, Barrow has downplayed homosexuality as a "[non-issue](#)."

I am a legal scholar and human rights practitioner with published research on [female genital mutilation](#), [gender equality and women's rights](#) and [governance](#) in The Gambia. It's my view that Jammeh's ostensible compliance with gender equality norms was selective and intended for the international gallery rather than a genuine commitment to women's rights and democracy.

His tactical stance highlighted a broader trend. Autocratic African leaders often accommodate global gender norms to maintain domestic power dynamics. The result, for example, is [increased women's political participation through quotas](#) along with a conservative approach to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The Gambia experience also shows that western donors and multilateral institutions need to go beyond just pushing for reforms. Once they have got the reforms they advocated for, they should have a strategy for sustaining them. Forces that were opposed to the reform often regroup to campaign for its removal.

At its core, [female genital mutilation constitutes](#) a [violation](#) of the human rights of girls and women. These include the right to non-discrimination, to protection from physical and mental violence, and to health and life.

From a feminist perspective, the prevalence of FGM in numerous African nations revolves around upholding gender-specific norms and exerting control over women's sexuality.

## Female genital mutilation in The Gambia

Female genital cutting is a [deeply ingrained practice](#). It is driven by cultural beliefs and often performed by traditional healers. According to the most recent [national survey](#), a large majority of Gambian women aged 15–49 years (73%) have undergone female genital cutting. More alarming is an [8% increase in the prevalence](#) of FGM among girls under the age of 14—from 42.4% in 2010 to 50.6% in 2018.

Numerous health risks associated with all types of the practice have been documented by the [World Health Organization](#) and [systematic reviews](#). These include severe pain, bleeding, infections and complications during childbirth and elevated rates of anxiety and other mental health disorders. This has led to [calls](#) for the practice to be banned in order to protect girls' health and well-being.

The Gambia's current struggle with the FGM ban reflects a complex interplay between cultural norms, religious beliefs, and the fight for gender equality. The potential repeal of the ban poses a threat to human rights of women and girls in The Gambia.

## Reversal of hard-won gains

Though The Gambia is constitutionally secular, religion influences nearly every facet of society. Islamic fundamentalists in the country are known for attacks on [religious minorities](#), including [hate speech](#) against the Ahmadiyya Muslim community and the [Christian community](#).

The main fundamentalist religious actors draw inspiration from and still support the exiled former dictator Jammeh. They are at the forefront of the [recent pushback](#) against the anti-FGM law. They argue that the ban violates their religious and cultural freedoms as guaranteed in the [1997 constitution](#).

On 4 March 2024 a [strong supporter of Jammeh](#) proposed a private member's [bill](#) in the National Assembly that seeks to overturn the ban.

The push to reassert traditional gender roles isn't isolated to The Gambia. There is a global trend of rolling back progress on gender equality. This trend is characterized by attempts to limit [women's bodily choices](#), an [increase in violence](#) against them, as well as [attacks](#) on LGBTQI+ communities. It reflects a broader political climate of backlash against women's rights and gender equality as a weapon in the reversal of democratic achievements.

Attempts have been seen to reverse legal protections against women and girls in [Kenya](#). In Sudan, state-sanctioned violence and societal pressure is aimed at [restricting](#) women's public participation. Similarly, Tanzania previously enacted a policy barring teenage mothers from [attending](#) public schools, though this policy has been reversed.

This global context highlights how anti-rights movements, undemocratic norms and gendered politics are working together to erode women's rights and exacerbate inequalities.

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