

# Somalia: Female genital mutilation down

April 16 2013, by Jason Straziuso

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(AP)—Attitudes in Somalia toward a practice that critics decry as torture may be changing, as new data released by the U.N. children's agency on Tuesday showed that female genital mutilation among children in northern Somalia is on the decline.

The survey released by [UNICEF](#) and the governments of Somaliland and Puntland found that 25 percent of girls from the ages of 1 to 14 years old have undergone the practice, compared with 99 percent of [women](#) in those regions.

UNICEF has been working with community and religious leaders in northern Somalia to try to change attitudes toward female genital mutilation. Sheema Sen Gupta, the chief of child protection for UNICEF in Somalia, said that 28 communities in Somaliland have declared an end to the practice, and UNICEF hopes to have that number up to 60 by the end of this year.

"If you ask the average Somali woman why they practice FGM now, they will tell you it's for religious reasons. But it's not religious because FGM predates Islam," Gupta said.

In December the U.N. General Assembly unanimously approved a resolution calling for a global ban on female genital mutilation, a centuries-old practice stemming from the belief that circumcising girls controls women's sexuality and enhances fertility. It has also been linked to religious and [cultural practices](#), although Muslim and Christian leaders have spoken out against it.

"When [religious leaders](#) are able to come out and say this is not a [religious practice](#), then people start listening," said UNICEF chief Gupta.

Female genital mutilation is commonplace in 28 countries in Africa as well as in Yemen, Iraq, Malaysia, Indonesia and among certain ethnic groups in South America, according to Amnesty International. But the issue is a worldwide concern because it is also practiced by immigrants in diaspora communities.

The U.N. said in 2010 that about 70 million girls and women had undergone the procedure, and the [World Health Organization](#) said about 6,000 girls were circumcised every day.

Aside from religious reasons, Somali women say that they choose female genital mutilation for their daughters so that they are more eligible for marriage, said Gupta.

"Even the women who are educated, including Somali women living in the U.K., for example, when we talk to them and try to understand why they practice FGM they say, 'My daughter is not going to be marriageable if she is not circumcised,'" Gupta said. "So the social pressures are such, the traditional norms are such, that even when people know that it's painful, it's barbaric, etc., people are saying, 'Can my daughter be married?'"

But Gupta said that when she talks to Somali men and asks if a woman should be circumcised, the men say they don't know and that the women say it needs to be done.

The survey data released Tuesday is only the fourth multiple-indicator cluster survey to be carried out in Somalia, a notoriously difficult place to gather solid information over the last 20 years.

The survey also found that the literacy rate among women in northern Somalia is on the rise, as is school attendance. Access to quality drinking water is also up.

However, Susannah Price, a spokeswoman for UNICEF, said that new information showing a low number of children being vaccinated was "depressing," and it showed more work needs to be done.

The future does appear brighter for reducing the number of girls subjected to [female genital mutilation](#), said Gupta. She noted that Somalia's new constitution, passed last year, bans the practice. Al-Shabab, the militant group that controls large parts of south-central Somalia, also bans it, she said.

"I think we've made a dent and I think, for us, I think there's going to be quite a bit of progress from now on," Gupta said.

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