

# Gambian president calls halt to female genital mutilation

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Gambian President Yahya Jammeh has banned female genital mutilation, branding the practice as outdated and not a requirement of Islam, the information ministry announced Tuesday.

Female genital mutilation, or FGM, remains highly common in the Gambia, along with a number of other African countries and parts of the Middle East.

Communication minister Sherrif Bojang confirmed the ban in a Facebook post shortly after midnight on Monday, writing: "Female genital mutilation (FGM) has been banned with immediate effect."

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that more than 125 million women worldwide have undergone the practice, which involves cutting off the labia and clitoris, often when girls are young.

It can lead to serious health problems, including infections, bleeding, infertility and complications in childbirth, and impairs sexual pleasure.

Bojang told AFP Jammeh had made the announcement at a rally in the southern village of Kanalai, the president's birthplace, where he had met with huge applause from a crowd of girls and young women.

The president declared that the practice was not required by Islam—the religion of around 95 percent of the tiny country's 1.8 million population—and that it should be banished to the past, Bojang said.

Parents and village authorities are being warned to immediately stop performing the procedure on girls or face sanctions.

"The president said the decision to ban FGM is basically for the protection of the girl child," Bojang told AFP.

There is no specific legislation banning FGM in the Gambia, and commentators say any prosecutions would likely rely on existing aspects of the penal code, such as provisions dealing with grievous bodily harm, punishable by up to five years in jail.

British newspaper The Guardian, which launched a worldwide campaign against FGM last year, quoted prominent Gambian anti-FGM campaigner Jaha Dukureh as saying: "I'm really amazed that the president did this. I didn't expect this in a million years.

"I'm just really proud of my country and I'm really, really happy."

According to UN children's fund Unicef, around three quarters of Gambian women are living with the effects of genital mutilation.

The Gambia, a former British colony nestled within Senegal, is one of the poorest nations in the world and has been ruled with an iron fist by Jammeh since he seized power in a coup in 1994.

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