

Understanding social media discussions about female genital mutilation

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Conversations on social media about female genital mutilation (FGM) have not changed dramatically over the five years to 2020, according to an analysis of English Twitter data, though there was a shift from raising

awareness to calling for an end to the practice.

Earlier on, users discussing the topic were mainly from the U.S. and UK, but later the majority came from Nigeria and Kenya. The research, published in *PLOS Global Public Health*, may be useful in informing communication and designing culturally effective campaigns against FGM.

At least 200 million women and girls living in 30 countries have undergone FGM despite it being illegal in almost all of the countries where it happens. FGM can lead to short- and long-term health consequences such as hemorrhage, shock, chronic infections, sexual health challenges and obstetric complications and poor mental health outcomes.

Gray Babbs and Sarah E. Weber of Boston University School of Public Health and colleagues analyzed [social media](#) discussion between 2015 and 2020 to assess sentiments, knowledge and attitudes about FGM over time. Surveys do not always elicit truthful answers, and the perceived anonymity of social media can bring private conversations into the public sphere.

They saw increases in conversation related to five [news stories](#) in the study period: when stricter laws were set in Eritrea, when the practice was outlawed in Egypt and banned in The Gambia and Sudan, and when a doctor was charged in the U.S. with performing FGM. Although it is not associated with any one [religious group](#), Islam was associated with FGM in all years studied, with some individuals using FGM to justify Islamophobia and connecting it to other practices like honor killings and acid attacks.

There was a shift over time from awareness raising to explicit calls to end FGM. This aligned with movement-based language in the later

period, tying FGM to feminism and human rights struggles. Using Twitter data in this way allows [public health workers](#) to listen to [public discourse](#), understand perceptions, and develop appropriate communications and effective interventions.

The authors add, "We observed a 17-fold increase in daily FGM conversations on International Day of Zero Tolerance. This suggests there might be opportunity for using social media to educate the public about the FGM practice on or around International Day of Zero Tolerance."

More information: Use of machine learning methods to understand discussions of female genital mutilation/cutting on social media, *PLOS Global Public Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pgph.0000878](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0000878)

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