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Guinean expert: 'We need to target different people in our fight against FGM'

By Cécile Barbière | EURACTIV.fr | translated by Samuel White ⌚ Est. 6min

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School girls in the Central African Republic. [Pierre Holtz UNICEF/Flickr]

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Despite long efforts to clamp down on female genital mutilation (FGM) and a raft of international commitments, the rate of female circumcision in Guinea is still rising, Alpha Amado Bano Barry told EURACTIV France.

Alpha Amado Bano Barry is a Guinean anthropologist. He has studied the effects of female circumcision on Guinean society and is the author of a socio-anthropological book on the perpetuation of the practice. He will take part in the [ID4D conference "Ending female genital mutilation: a shared challenge for North and South"](#) in Paris on Monday 6 February, organised by the French Development Agency in partnership with [Excision Parlons-en!](#)

Barry spoke to euractiv.fr's Cécile Barbière.

This interview is published in partnership with the [ID4D blog](#), coordinated by the French Development Agency.

Guinea is a country where female genital mutilation (FGM) still occurs on a large scale. Have efforts to stop FGM improved the situation in recent years?

Guinea is one of a small number of countries where the prevalence of female circumcision is extremely high, at 97%. The rate is 91% in Egypt, 93% in Djibouti and 98% in Somalia. But given the statistical margin of error, the rate is certainly more or less the same in all these countries.

Yet like most African countries, Guinea agreed to respect most of the international commitments – 11 in total – that prohibit FGM. Female circumcision has been a punishable offence in Guinea since 1969. This ban was even enshrined in national law in 2000, even if prosecutions are rare.

Between 2010 and 2015, there were a few rare cases, but the courts were lenient and did not apply the full penalties to circumcisers or members of women's families. In some areas, we have identified the risk of the population rising up and demonstrating against such a judicial decision.

At least eight or nine strategies to fight female circumcision have been developed and implemented by the international community. But the end result, in spite of all this effort, is that the rate of FGM has continued to rise.



Female genital mutilation: Putting human rights at the core of Europe's asylum system

Female genital mutilation (FGM) survivors, and women and girls at risk, are particularly vulnerable in the asylum system. They must receive support to help them navigate the process, writes Liuska Sanna.

The only countries where rates of FGM have fallen in recent years are Burkina Faso and Rwanda, but they were already below 50% to begin with.

What are the religious and social factors that perpetuate this practice at such levels in Guinea?

There are two main explanations. First, Guineans tend to conform to the dominant social standard without any thought or debate. And second, there is also the idea that circumcision helps with abstinence, making women keep their virginity until they are married.

This is nothing to do with religious beliefs but is seen as a sign that a mother has done a good job of raising her daughter.

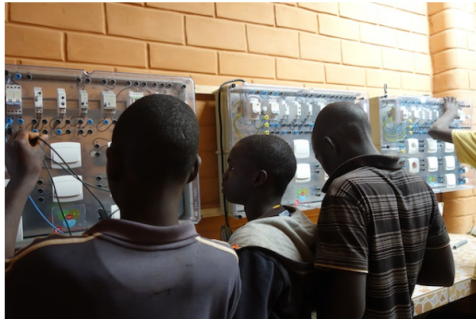
Circumcision restricts sexuality. This logic dictates that a woman's sexual desire is stronger than a man's and that it is responsible for promiscuity.

On the religious side, the message from the mosques is ambivalent: some imams say women should be circumcised and others do not, depending on who is funding them.

Why is it that neither the ban nor the many awareness campaigns seem to have had any effect on the practice of female genital mutilation in Guinea?

We have tried out all the strategies to fight the practice: information campaigns, converting circumcisers to other professions, educating health professionals about the effects of FGM on women's health, particularly when it comes to giving birth.

But the fight against FGM cannot be carried out while ignoring the main actors. The messages of these campaigns have to be adapted to the country's sociology. Many NGOs aim their work at mothers, but they are wrong. Mothers have no power to stop this tradition. Only the father has the power to make that decision. And he is under pressure from his sisters, because traditionally under Guinea's patriarchal system, girls belong to the father's family.



Senegal aid projects appeal for EU funding ahead of Dakar summit

Projects in Senegal helping disabled schoolchildren and rescuing street kids have appealed for a continuation of their EU funding, as Brussels officials fly in for a summit in the capital, Dakar, with leaders of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) nations on Thursday (28 April).

If we work on fathers, we should aim to give them the tools to stand up to their own sisters, whose role is to defend circumcision. Fathers should be encouraged to develop a sense of guilt for anything that happens to their daughters.

Finally, there are families that do not practice FGM, but they are too quiet. There are no structures in place to allow these people to come out of anonymity and assume any kind of leadership on the issue.

So nothing has changed?

The type of mutilation has changed. The tradition in Guinea used to be to cut a lot and also to close the vagina. But this practice has become very marginal and is gradually dying out because not many circumcisers know how to perform it.

In Conakry (the capital of Guinea) and the big cities, the principle of "pretending" has grown. This consists of performing only a light cut to make the community believe a real circumcision has taken place.

The places where circumcisions are performed are also moving from the remote areas to health centres in the cities, for families that can afford them. Unfortunately, this means FGM is being taken from the public sphere into the family, which will complicate the fight against FGM. Without the public revelation of these acts, it will be easier for family members to escape justice.

What kinds of levers exist today to ensure that the fight against female genital mutilation is really effective?

The problem with Guinea is that there is no continuity in the fight against FGM.

Firstly, international politicians need to help the Guinean state to build a solid structure, to coordinate its actions with domestic and international NGOs, which each bring their own different approaches and tread all over each other's feet. Coordination is a problem that needs to be solved.

to be solved.

Secondly, we can only make real progress on FGM by targeting our actions on the right people. The message has to be suited to the social structure of the country concerned. Fathers should be targeted and families that do not practice FGM should be supported and held up as examples.

Finally, the way we currently work focusses a lot on adults and very little on young people in schools and universities.

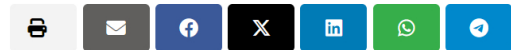


UNICEF: Increasing number of genital mutilation victims

A million girls worldwide suffer genital mutilation every year and that number is only increasing in some countries, according to a report by UNICEF. The European Commission has warned that the practice could be on the rise in Europe as well. EURACTIV Germany reports.

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