

POSITION STATEMENT

Tackling FGM in Europe - Strategies for Effective Community Engagement

1. Introduction

This position statement outlines the critical role of community engagement in tackling female genital mutilation (FGM) within Europe. This statement was developed by End FGM EU secretariat in cooperation with the members who are part of the Network's Community Engagement Working Group¹. It seeks to provide needed guidance to key stakeholders on effective strategies that will make a difference in working with affected communities to tackle FGM.

2. Background

FGM which involves the removal of healthy female genitalia has in recent years affects in Europe more than 500.000 women and girls, although numbers are likely to be much higher, and started to receive attention by European Union (EU) institutions and its Member States, through law and policy-making, as well as service provision and data collection.

The issue of community engagement is a relatively new concept for the EU. In the past ten years, some policy instruments have been adopted by the different European Institutions that include the engagement of FGM-affected communities as one of their key priorities and recommendations. This issue was included in the 2013 European Commission's [Communication](#) towards the elimination of FGM, in the 2014 Council [Conclusions](#) on "Preventing and combating all forms of violence against women and girls, including female genital mutilation", and in three resolutions of the European Parliament ([2009](#), [2012](#), [2018](#)).

However, there is limited guidance on how to effectively engage key FGM-affected communities within Europe. While there is widespread recognition that FGM is a deeply entrenched social norm, there is little attention to how to meaningfully engage communities to address it. This position statement provides strategies for working with communities to enable them to have a stronger voice and a clearly recognised role in ending the practice of FGM in Europe and providing care for survivors.

3. Why it is important to engage communities to end FGM?

Engagement of affected communities is crucial to ending FGM, since true change can only come from the communities themselves. A grassroots peer-to-peer approach has greater impact and acceptability on the long-term sustainable abandonment of FGM. Moreover, affected communities are best placed to lead policy and decision-making, as well as service provision, concerning them and their specific and self-defined needs. No action impacting on communities must be defined, carried out and evaluated without them being fully engaged.

The issue of FGM is not new to Europe² but current high numbers are due to diaspora communities living in our region and coming from FGM affected countries of origin. Some End FGM EU member organisations were founded by FGM survivors arrived in Europe in the 1980s and most organisations being part of the Network have been closely working with FGM-affected diaspora communities for many years, including by ensuring that they have access to services as the rest of the population without discrimination. Nevertheless, a great degree of unfamiliarity is still present in our region around FGM. Working with representatives of diaspora communities around this issue has an impact not only here, but also in their countries of origin. Indeed, they represent a bridge between two realities. In Europe, diaspora communities are connected to their country of origin due to strong international cultural, economic, political and affective linkages, facilitated by communications technologies. Back home, they

¹ FORWARD (UK), GAMS (Belgium), Equipop (France), Terre des Femmes (Germany), FSAN (the Netherlands), UNAF (Spain), Save a Girl Save a Generation (Spain), Lessan (Germany), Medicos del Mundo (Spain), LebKom (Germany), INTACT (Belgium), and End FGM EU Ambassador Fatima Awil.

² Clitoridectomy was performed until 1920s in some countries in Europe as an alleged cure against female hysteria.

can – and do – play an important and effective role through knowledge transfer and awareness raising among their families.

4. Definition of “engagement”

Community engagement refers to “**the process of getting communities fully involved in the decisions that affect them**”. It means involving communities in every step of the process and actively and meaningfully collaborating with their members. It means shaping programmes, activities, policies and service provision not only “for” communities, but most importantly “with” communities. Engaging communities must be responsive to their specific and self-defined needs. *Community engagement* can take different forms: we can involve communities in ‘behavioural change’ programmes, advocacy and awareness-raising activities, research, policy-making and service provision. Methods of involving communities in our work will be discussed further on in this document.

5. Definition and complexities of “affected communities”

Since we are a European Network and our members work predominantly in their respective European countries, when we talk about “FGM-affected communities” we mostly focus on the diaspora communities, meaning on migrant communities settled in Europe originating from FGM-affected countries.

However, communities affected by FGM are not a homogeneous group (in terms of culture, ethnicity and country of origin, gender, age, length of stay, status, etc). Addressing these complexities is necessary to ensure a tailored and effective community engagement that is inclusive of all community actors. First, it is important to be aware of the differences between **settled and newly arrived migrants** and their respective perceptions and opinions around the issue, which is to various extents influenced by their period of stay in Europe and their level of integration. Second, all community engagement has to aim towards empowering of **women and girls** affected by or at risk of FGM. They should lead discussions and be empowered to speak up against the practice and to set the agenda. However, the involvement of **men and boys** in supporting and standing by the side of their female counterparts is also key to accelerating the process of FGM abandonment, since without their participation, only one part of the community will be mobilised, which will not be sustainable in the long term. To be effective and inclusive, community engagement must be gender-sensitive as well as age-sensitive, considering the importance of engaging different age groups. **Older** community members play an important role as respected keepers of the traditions and are therefore key persons to change the narrative around FGM. On the other hand, **younger** community members are also key stakeholders who may take on the opportunity and responsibility to set the tone around how FGM is perceived in the future. Thus, inter-gender and inter-generational dialogue and cooperation are key to ensure effectiveness of community engagement. And last but not least, it is paramount to engage **religious and community leaders**, whose authority places them in key positions as social and political influencers.

6. Challenges to community engagement

There are a few obstacles which need to be analysed and addressed to effectively and meaningfully engage communities.

From the **perspective of the communities** themselves, the precarious life conditions in which many of their members live, in terms of migration status, lack of employment and fixed income, housing and administrative issues, etc. represent the first big issue which undermines their participation. More urgent needs prevail compared to the commitment to ending FGM, which inevitably loses priority. Moreover, the current political climate, hostile towards migrants, severely undermines diaspora communities’ equal participation in society. Because of scarce and unsustainable project-based funding, community members who do participate in activities to ending FGM often do so as volunteers, without remuneration. In addition, community members are often not perceived as real actors, but are only considered beneficiaries of projects and actions, which prevents their meaningful and complete participation. Finally, apart from external obstacles, community members also face internal pressure by other more conservative members of their own communities due to the role they play in changing traditions and bringing new perspectives, which might be perceived as attacks to their identity and culture.

Organisations and institutions who want to engage communities to end FGM also face challenges. These are mostly related to the cultural and linguistic barriers that exist, particularly when organisations are not sufficiently rooted in affected communities. To overcome these obstacles, it is recognised that the cultural sensitivity of trained interpreters and cultural mediators is key to engaging communities. However, resources are seldom available to recruit such positions. Moreover, engaging communities always involves building trust, which requires time, while, projects or political conditions often favour short-term actions with concrete and fast results. Finally, organisations and individuals engaging diaspora communities to end FGM are often at risk of being instrumentalised within the current political scenario of rising racism and xenophobia. Some may come under attack themselves.

7. 7 Principles for effective and meaningful community engagement

Following the analysis carried out so far, the End FGM European Network identified the following 7 Principles for effective community engagement:

- I. ***Understand community context & needs***
Understand the context of the communities in terms of culture, values, norms, economic conditions, power relations, etc. Identify existing resources and capacities within the community together with barriers and challenges for disaggregated groups within the community. Use range of methods including participatory tools and consultations.
- II. ***Engage & communicate appropriately***
Identify the best methods of engaging community members and conveying your messages to the different internal groups tailored to the specific context of the community as initially assessed. Identify ways to overcome barriers that affect effective community engagement, to ensure inclusiveness and accessibility for all.
- III. ***Ensure inclusive collaboration***
Ensure representation from all internal community groups and that their voices are reflected throughout the assessment, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation phases. Develop cooperation and effective partnerships with all community actors to ensure that their involvement is integrated and collaborative.
- IV. ***Empower & develop leadership***
Identify and mobilise community assets, knowledge and resources. Aim to build the capacity of the community for long-term impact by providing training to allow upskilling and particularly leadership development.
- V. ***Do no harm***
Ensure not to further re-victimise affected women and girls and to provide support for those in need. Tact and sensitivity are required when listening to the concerns, needs and experiences of all community stakeholders, particularly women and girls. Ensure protection for those who speak out against FGM to ensure a safe environment for community engagement.
- VI. ***Be accountable & transparent***
Remain accountable to communities and ensure their concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered. Ensure that the community is well informed and consulted. Be clear on goals and programmes, in order not to fuel wrong expectations, as well as on legal and ethical safeguarding obligations in relation to consent, confidentiality, etc.
- VII. ***Involve communities in monitoring & evaluation***
Include the community in the review of methods and processes of any action carried out. Apply changes as necessary and obtain/provide feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions from/to the community.

8. End FGM EU Position statement

End FGM EU affirms that it is paramount to meaningfully and effectively engage diaspora communities, and the community-based organisations representing them, in any decision, policy, activity, action or service having an

impact on them. This means shaping programmes, activities, policies and service provision not only “for” communities, but most importantly “with” communities, by actively and meaningfully involving their members in every step of the process.

In order to ensure an effective community engagement, it is crucial to acknowledge that communities are not homogenous and therefore tailor actions towards the different community actors to ensure a truly inclusive engagement. Finally, engaging communities is a delicate matter and requires the need to analyse and manage obstacles and risk factors, both from the community perspective and from the organisational and institutional point of view.

End FGM EU identified the following 7 Principles which need to be taken into consideration for an effective and meaningful community engagement: I) Understand community context & needs; II) Engage & communicate appropriately; III) Ensure inclusive collaboration; IV) Empower & develop leadership; V) Do no harm; VI) Be accountable & transparent; VII) Involve communities in monitoring & evaluation.

End FGM EU adopts the aforementioned 7 Principles as its own principles for community engagement, commits to ensure that its members uphold them, and calls upon other European and national organisations, institutions and individuals involved in efforts to end FGM and providing care to survivors to do the same.

9. Recommendations

To the EU and its Member States:

- Ensure that appropriate and structured mechanisms are in place to meaningfully engage FGM-affected diaspora communities and community-based organisations in policy and decision-making, service provision and other actions having an impact on them, throughout all phases of the process, and ensure their recognition not only as beneficiaries but as real actors;
- Ensure to support the sustainability of community engagement in projects and programmes, through adequate funding that takes into account their operational realities. To this aim, ensure that funding schemes are more flexible, to ensure structural longer-term sustainable support for community engagement and to enable cross-continental building bridges projects and overcome the traditional difference between domestic and cooperation programmes;
- Counter the current hostile political climate towards migrants and promote a positive non-discriminatory and non-stigmatizing narrative to ensure that diaspora communities can equally participate in society;
- Ensure that more European and national investments go to integration programmes and projects, and that activities carried out by civil society organisations, including community-led organisations, engaging community members receive adequate and sustainable resources.

To other organisations (including organisations of professionals):

- Systematically engage diaspora communities concerning projects and service provision, in terms of shaping them according to their self-defined needs and priorities, as well as delivering them with cultural sensitivity;
- Ensure that training modules for professionals stress the key role played by communities in service provision and ensure that engaging communities is a top priority for them, to ensure better prevention and protection for affected subjects.

To End FGM EU and its members:

- Systematically uphold these 7 Principles when engaging FGM-affected diaspora communities in any action carried out to end FGM and provide protection to survivors.