

# YOUTH ENGAGEMENT MANIFESTO

TACKLING FGM IN EUROPE – STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE  
ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH FROM FGM-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES



**End FGM**  
EUROPEAN NETWORK

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## SUMMARY

End FGM European Network recognises the critical role of engaging youth from FGM-affected communities in tackling Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), within Europe and indeed globally. In the movement to end FGM, young people struggle to be truly at the centre. They are often seen or heard but not really listened to. Youth are rarely provided the opportunity to shape programmes and activities concerning them, with tokenism being a sad reality and a hindrance for everyone concerned. There are several challenges to effectively and meaningfully engage youth from FGM-affected communities in the work to end FGM. We believe youth engagement is an area which needs further improvement. The following 5 Principles are simple and effective and are addressed to youth, organisations, decision-makers and professionals who may want to work with young people.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

End FGM European Network recognises the critical role of engaging youth from FGM-affected communities in tackling Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) within Europe and indeed globally. This statement was developed by End FGM EU secretariat, in cooperation with the Members who are part of the Network’s Youth Engagement Working Group.<sup>1</sup>

It seeks to provide needed guidance to key stakeholders on effective strategies that will make a difference in working with youth to tackle FGM. These include organisations that mainly or partially work with youth, organisations that do not engage youth, other institutions, decision makers and professionals.

## 2 BACKGROUND

FGM, which involves the removal of healthy female genitalia, affects more than **600.000 women and girls** in Europe, with a further 180.000 girls at risk in only 13 countries. As a result of these concerning numbers, FGM started to receive attention by the European Union (EU) and its Member States, through law and policy-making, as well as service provision and data collection.

combating all forms of violence against women and girls, including female genital mutilation”), others, such as the four latest European Parliament resolutions on the matter (**2009, 2012, 2014, 2018**), have little to no mention of engaging young people, with the exception of the very last one adopted in **2020**.

Within the European policy framework and programmes concerning youth engagement we can find the **EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027**, a EU Youth Coordinator within the European Commission, as well as dedicated programmes such as Erasmus, Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, which are specifically designed to provide young people opportunities.

In conclusion, at European level there are existing gaps, limited guidance and a lack of specific policies and programmes on how to effectively engage youth from FGM-affected communities within Europe to address FGM. Although there is a widespread recognition that FGM is a deeply entrenched social norm affecting mostly girls and young women, there is little attention on how to meaningfully engage youth to end it. Thus, this position statement provides strategies for working specifically with youth to enable them to have platforms to speak out and have a recognised role in ending the practice of FGM in Europe.

The issue of youth engagement and FGM is a relatively new concept for the EU and it is not homogeneously considered in EU policy instruments. While some specifically refer to the engagement of young people from FGM-affected communities (2013 European Commission’s Communication towards the elimination of FGM and the 2014 Council Conclusions on “Preventing and

<sup>1</sup> APF (Portugal), AkiDwa (Ireland), Equipop (France), FORWARD (UK), TERRE DES FEMMES (Germany), National FGM Centre (UK), Youth Ambassadors (Hawa War, Hamdi Arif, Fatu Banora, Salamata Wone, Hadeel Elshak, Ana Aua Só, Veronique Ahyee, Kadiatou Diallo, Djenaba Diallo, Alya Harding), Integrate UK (Amaal Ali, Sakiya Ghalib, Lisa Zimmermann)

### 3 WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO ENGAGE YOUTH TO END FGM?

#### A. Importance of youth-led change

FGM is a global issue affecting at least 200 million girls and women in at least 30 countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia, and girls below 14 represent 44 million of those who have been cut, which indicates FGM as a clear child's rights issue.

Our commitment to end FGM in Europe and beyond would be incomplete and unsustainable without mobilising, preparing and working alongside the next generation of activists for the tasks ahead. End FGM EU believes that **children and young people have a unique perspective and potential to drive this change**, if they are educated and/or empowered to play their role in promoting and protecting the rights of women and girls. To this aim, End FGM EU embraces young people from FGM-affected communities as core partners in ending FGM and we are actively working towards a youth centred approach. To this aim, we started in 2017 a Youth Ambassadors' programme, which is a safe place where young people from different EU countries can come together, make connections, share experiences with each other and contribute to the work of the Network.



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#### B. Role of youth in ending FGM

Young people are in a strong position to end FGM within their generation by encouraging their age-mates, families, community members and leaders to do the same. However, it is necessary to foster the empowerment of youth and ensure a safe space for them in order to openly discuss and tackle such a complex issue, free from discrimination, oppression or risk of ostracisation. Learning from their experiences is essential for creating effective policies and systems to better engage FGM-affected youth and communities.

Young people are in a unique position to coordinate community participation, sensitively address cultural barriers, build bridges between relevant actors, their country of origin and fellows. Here, they can act as cultural mediators and encourage inter-generational dialogue. Community elders often play an important role as respected keepers of the traditions and are therefore key persons in changing the narrative around FGM. Whilst this is the case, young people are vital for confronting and communicating existing issues in the most appropriate manner to older family members. This can be considered one of the most effective ways to change attitudes towards FGM overtime. Discussions on the involvement of youth in the work to eradicate FGM must focus on also including boys and young men as key actors. They are central actors in changing the narrative around FGM and taking a stand against the practice within their communities.

In summary, young people are the next generation and therefore are able to contribute to the movement for a long period of time and thus set the tone around how FGM is perceived in the future.

### 4 WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE YOUTH FROM AN FGM-AFFECTED COMMUNITY?

#### A. Definition of "youth"

"Youth" is best recognised as the **period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood's independence**. For the purpose of this paper and with regard to End FGM EU activities and projects implemented with youth, we refer to the World Health Organisation (WHO) definition of the term "youth" as the group of individuals between the ages of 15-24. The category "youth" further defines all people within this age group regardless of their socioeconomic status, ethnic identity, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, sex characteristics, marital status, religion, disability, political affiliation, or physical location.<sup>2</sup>

#### B. Definition of "affected communities"

"Affected communities" means communities where FGM is traditionally practised and where there are survivors of the practice. As a European Network, with Members working 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**.<sup>3</sup>



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#### C. Multiple identities

Youth from FGM-affected diaspora communities may experience **multi-layered complex identities** and are more likely to experience exclusion. Navigating between transnational identities may present complex challenges, as a result of belonging to the community of their parents and to the European society in which they are born and/or raised. Despite feelings of belonging to two (or more) different societies, such youth may feel a lack of acceptance from both: from experiencing racism and discrimination and being considered "non-European" in Europe, to being considered "too western" in the countries of origin of their families. In terms of exposure to FGM, they may also be faced with polar-opposite pressures, in cases where FGM is accepted and celebrated by one society whilst being rejected by the other. Consequently, they may face stigmatisation or isolation whether or not they have experienced FGM.



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<sup>2</sup> Source: Youth Power.

<sup>3</sup> For a more exhaustive definition of the complexities of FGM-affected communities, see the Position Statement on "Tackling FGM in Europe – A strategy for effective community engagement" produced by the End FGM European Network.

## 5 DEFINITION OF “ENGAGEMENT”

Youth engagement refers to the **process of getting youth fully involved in the decisions that affect them**. It means involving youth in every step of the process, as well as the shaping and evaluation of programmes, activities, policies and service provision. This is essential so these resources are not only created “for” youth, but most importantly “with” youth. Engaging youth must

be responsive to their specific and self-defined needs, mutually beneficial and oriented to the growth of youth as much as the benefit of the organisation/institution. In regard to this, time must be taken out to discover what each young person wants to gain from engagement. Necessary steps must be taken for the experience to be enriching for each young person.

## 6 CHALLENGES TO YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

In order to ensure effective youth engagement, there are a few obstacles, which must be analysed and addressed.

### A. Challenges from the perspective of youth

- ★ Youth are often not recognised for their influence and valuable contribution in ending FGM. This can lead to young people feeling irrelevant, disempowered and thus become inactive in the movement to end FGM.
- ★ Young people are often treated as a homogenous group. Doing so fails to recognise the unique backgrounds, perspectives, cultures and experiences of different youth sub groups. This also fails to recognise that different barriers to participation exist for different young people. Extra steps must be taken to map the critical voices who are not involved and to actively target these young people. It is noted that despite the fact that FGM is a global issue, the youth engaged usually come from a limited number of communities, mostly from sub-Saharan African countries.

- ★ Lack of accessibility to meetings and events present another major barrier to young people. Important moments are not organised to fit their agendas. Although young persons may be dedicating their free time to ending FGM, their involvement is often dependent on their school schedules, limited finances and/or other external factors (e.g. work, traineeships). Not consulting with them first on their preferred occasions of engagement and adapting to them is a clear disregard for their time and energy.
- ★ Safeguarding issues for minors and a need for parental consent can also pose obstacles, especially if parents do not understand the language of their host country or are against their child’s involvement in the end-FGM movement.
- ★ The concept of “honour” may also present challenges for young women. The need to protect perceived cultural and religious beliefs and/or honour by others may restrict a young person’s opportunity to fully participate (or in any way). Such restrictions may

## 6 CHALLENGES TO YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

correlate with parents, family members or society opposing young people (especially young girls/women) regularly partaking in group meetings after school or travelling for national or international opportunities, without being accompanied by a family member. Such extracurricular activities may also be recognised as a low priority, in comparison to other responsibilities e.g. school. It should be noted that challenges surrounding the concept of “honour” differ between communities (and families).

### B. Challenges from the perspective of organisations/other stakeholders/institutions

- ★ Too often, instead of meaningfully engaging youth, organisations and other stakeholders adopt tokenism<sup>4</sup> as their way of working, which results in a superficial involvement of youth, rather than of inherent value. This might be due, among other issues, to: the lack of specific expertise around youth engagement by actors who do not necessarily focus exclusively or specifically on children and youth; lack of a youth-centred approach in the planning and working methods of stakeholders; lack of child- and youth-friendly policies and structures within the organisation.
- ★ Even though the understanding and recognition that engaging youth in social projects is highly beneficial for organisations and youth themselves is widely received, there is still much uncertainty on how to conduct meaningful and successful youth engagement. The lack of model projects or previous successful initiatives makes it difficult for organisations to plan their own youth projects. Many strategic guidelines that explain what to be aware of when engaging with youth exist, but empirical examples of implementation are not always available.



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HAWA WAR

<sup>4</sup> Tokenism involves the symbolic involvement of those from an underrepresented or disadvantaged group (e.g. based on their gender, race/ethnicity, disability, age) in order to appear inclusive.

## 7 THE 5 PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE AND MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH



Following the analysis carried out so far, the End FGM European Network identified the following 5 Principles for effective youth engagement:

### I. COMMUNICATE APPROPRIATELY WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

All communication should be done in clear and accessible language, be interactive and have a youth-friendly tone, as well as be culturally sensitive and understanding of their identities. Accessibility should always be considered, such as times for planned activities and locations (disability-friendly spaces). This also includes verbal communication, alongside all resources and materials, including text, images and video materials. Communication must take place on platforms used by young people such as WhatsApp, rather than more traditional platforms such as email, which they are less likely to engage with.



### II. BUILD YOUTH LEADERSHIP



Young people should be involved in all parts of the process and from the early stages. From the very top decisions to the micro decisions. Young people should shape the projects and activities they are going to be involved in. Necessary changes should be made where young people provide feedback after analysis. Young people should be recognised for the work they do and the input they give.

## 7 THE 5 PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE AND MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH

### III. SAFEGUARD YOUTH

Young people should feel safe and protected at all times. Ground rules should be set at all events and sessions, wherever young people are involved. The ground rules should also include a trigger warning. Young people should be told what to expect in advance. Young people should be told where to go for help or support. Professionals and facilitators working with young people should have up-to-date safeguarding training.



### IV. LISTEN TO YOUNG PEOPLE



Professionals and facilitators working with young people should be open-minded and respectful. Young people should be given the opportunity to define their own terms. Young people should be taken seriously and not underestimated. Do not speak for young people. Lastly, professionals and facilitators should reach out and listen to diverse groups of young people from across cultural and economic backgrounds.

### V. FOSTER EMPOWERMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Engaging youth should always be beneficial to young people, in terms of tailored capacity building and empowerment. Periodically consulting, reflecting on past goals and setting new ones for each young person to work towards is a great tool to achieve this. Relevant training and/or external opportunities should be given to young people to be able to grow and benefit from the engagement. Certification should also be distributed to youth after training sessions, as evidence for their participation, which can further build their curriculum vitae (CV) and help in their future endeavours.



## 8 END FGM EU POSITION STATEMENT

End FGM EU affirms its commitment to meaningfully and effectively engage youth 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” youth, but most importantly “with” youth, by actively and meaningfully involving them in every step of the process.

In order to ensure an effective youth engagement, it is crucial to understand the complex identities of youth and tailor actions towards them to ensure a truly inclusive engagement. Finally, engaging youth is a delicate matter and requires the need to analyse and manage obstacles and risk factors, both from the youth perspective and from the organisational and institutional point of view.

End FGM EU identified the following 5 Principles which need to be taken into consideration for an effective and meaningful youth engagement: I) Communicate appropriately with young people; II) Build youth leadership; III) Safeguard youth; IV) Listen to young people; V) Foster empowerment of young people.

End FGM EU adopts the aforementioned 5 Principles as its own principles for youth 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 youth from FGM-affected communities 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 youth engagement in projects and programmes, through adequate funding that takes into account their operational and personal realities. To this aim, funding schemes should be more flexible and less burdensome, to ensure tailored and more appropriate support for youth engagement;

- ★ Encourage learning opportunities for best practices between organisations that mainly or partially work with youth, those that are yet to engage youth, other institutions, decision makers and professionals.

### To other organisations and relevant stakeholders:

- ★ Systematically and actively engage youth concerning projects and service provision, in terms of shaping them according to their self-defined needs and priorities, as well as delivering them in a youth-friendly way and evaluating them;

- ★ Create together with young people practical guidelines and best practices guides on youth engagement programmes that adopt child- and youth-friendly policies and structures. Where possible, such policies and guidelines should include information on remuneration or other forms of compensation for young people’s efforts and time;
- ★ Ensure relevant training for staff on effective youth engagement (including training on safeguarding, intersectionality, discrimination, gender-, age- and cultural sensitivity);
- ★ Encourage partnership between different youth-led initiatives, to foster collaboration between young people and mutual growth;

- ★ Recognise youth-led work and expertise and engage young people in a mutually beneficial way that is oriented to their growth as much as the benefit of the organisation/institution.

### To End FGM EU and its Members:

- ★ Systematically uphold these 5 Principles when engaging youth from FGM-affected communities in any action carried out to end FGM and provide protection to survivors.



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Photos throughout the publication:  
End FGM European Network Youth Ambassadors

### The End FGM European Network

The End FGM European Network is an umbrella of 30 organisations in 14 European countries working to ensure sustainable European action to end Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). We are the central platform connecting grassroots communities and European decision-makers. The Network facilitates cooperation between all relevant actors in the field of FGM both in Europe and globally. Our mission is to be the driving force of the European movement to end all forms of Female Genital Mutilation.

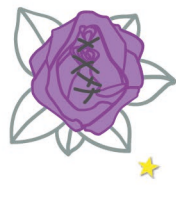
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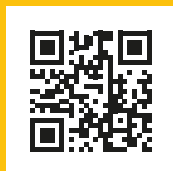


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