



END FGM
CANADA NETWORK

END FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION/CUTTING

How to be an ally to women and girls impacted by FGM/C

“When I arrived in Canada from Kenya, I was shocked to realize there is a silence about FGM here, that there is a fear of offending other people’s rights, traditions and religion. As a survivor, I want to tell Canadians that they are welcome to condemn female genital mutilation because it is basically violence. Nobody deserves to be taken through this pain that affects you for life. We need Canada’s silence on Female Genital Mutilation to end, so girls can be protected and survivors supported. And we need that silence to end now.”

- Maryan Abdikadir, FGM Survivor/Activist; Board Member, End FGM Canada Network

A note on language: The language commonly used when referring to those who have experienced FGM/C is that of cisgender females (i.e., women and girls). However, End FGM Canada Network recognizes that individuals who identify as trans, two-spirited, non-binary, gender-fluid, and gender-neutral may also experience FGM/C

1. Follow the lead of feminist survivors, activists and organizations.

Find them using #EndFGM on Twitter. They have developed effective community-based, legal and educational strategies to eradicate FGM/C.

2. Educate yourself on FGM/C.

You don’t have to be an expert, but you need to know that there are 4 main forms of female genital mutilation/cutting and that they all can cause lifelong emotional, physical and sexual trauma.

Make sure you know the Canadian laws on FGM/C; Bill C- 27 Criminal Code 286 (2).

FGM/C is illegal, whether it is done in Canada or girls are taken outside of Canada for the procedure. It is aggravated assault in the criminal code. Under the Criminal Code, any person who commits an aggravated assault is guilty of an indictable offence and is liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 14 years.

Take the End FGM Canada Network free online FGM/C Foundation Module (link needed).

[Bill C- 27 Crimal Code 286 \(2\)](#)
[Ontario Human Rights Commission](#)



3. Don't ask survivors to share their mutilation/cutting story for your education.

Often, survivors are asked to share their stories. A survivor may choose to share (and even find it empowering), but don't assume that. Stories of personal trauma can be distressing to recount. This is why you need to educate yourself.

4. Make the links between FGM/C and other forms of gender-based violence that exist to control women's and non-binary people's bodies and sexualities.

FGM/C is related to rape culture and femicide and in some countries, child marriage. If FGM/C can be linked to any culture at all, it's the culture of global patriarchy *that sees girls and women as the property of men.*

5. Learn about *American survivors Renée Bergstrom and Jennifer*

Both women are survivors of FGM/C from Christian Fundamentalist communities in the USA. What this teaches us is that this is an issue for girls of all backgrounds and is not just an 'over there' issue.

- [Renée Bergstrom's story](#)
- [Jennifer's story](#)

6. Validate women's experiences

Survivors may feel alone in their experience in regard to how they feel about undergoing FGM/C and what they are experiencing as a result of it. Validating their experience and providing assurance that they are not alone in having undergone FGM/C can be beneficial. Some information to share is below:

- You are not alone in experiencing this - FGM/C has been reported in [92 countries globally](#), including Canada.
- FGM/C is a global issue that can happen to many, it is important to emphasize that you are not alone in experiencing it or dealing with how complicated it is, especially because of its connection to community and family.
 - FGM/C occurs in Canada too
 - Survivors come from all different backgrounds (religions, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, colour etc.)
 - FGM/C has no basis in any religion and is carried out by different people with different beliefs.



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- Other responses that can be used (please consider the context of the conversation before responding in these ways)
 - “Sorry you have to struggle with this” - expresses care for what has happened.
 - “What happened to you was wrong. It was done without your consent” - can be helpful in times when they have been denied that experience – particularly when they are told it was part of their culture.
 - “Being emotional is okay.”

Resources:

- [Validation](#) - This video is a story of a woman who needed validation that FGM/C was wrong and that what happened to her was wrong.

7. Know that there are backlash groups fighting to maintain FGM/C.

There’s not just a culture of silence in Canada but also a culture of silencing. Several young women from Canadian diaspora communities who tried to speak out and protect other girls from FGM/C were pressured, bullied and threatened into silence by their own families and communities. FGM/C activists of all colours and ethnicities around the globe have been criticized and pressured to stop their work, including in Canada. Critics from FGM/C-affected communities may call you racist for taking a stand, as they argue that you are interfering in their community and or religious practices. This is not the case.

Here’s the thing: cutting a girl’s genitals when there is no medical purpose is always harmful. It’s human rights abuse, it’s child abuse and it’s sexual violence. The UN considers it torture. FGM/C predates Islam and Christianity and has no basis in religion. Know that by speaking out against FGM/C you are supporting FGM/C activists around the world in their fight to end this harmful practice.

8. Get involved!

Talk about this issue at your workplace, educational institution, and with your government. Organize a film night, book club, lunch & learn. We need to educate more teachers, care providers and legal workers. In Canada, we need a National Action Plan to protect girls and support survivors. Check out the End FGM/C Canada Network and [sign our petition](#).

How do I engage in a conversation with FGM/C-impacted women?

Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is an enormously sensitive topic for some individuals, while others are comfortable talking about it. It's important to pick up cues from the survivor or community member you are speaking with on how they feel about FGM/C. Do they feel ashamed? Indifferent? Are they traumatized? Comfortable or nervous discussing it and/or the physical and mental health consequences? The tips below are a starting point on how to navigate a sensitive topic.

| Do | Don't |
|---|--|
| Use the same terminology as they do | Use the word 'mutilation' unless they use it first |
| Let them know you are there for them if they want to talk about their FGM/C experience | Insist on discussing FGM/C if they do not want to |
| Let them guide the conversation | Ask personal questions about their anatomy; what it looks like, how it functions (orgasms) or feels |
| Recognize that FGM/C happens in over 90 countries and it is not isolated to one race or community. It is not in any Islamic or Christian text | Connect FGM/C to someone's race, religion or community practices |
| Keep an open mind about how they might feel about their own FGM/C | Assume all individuals are unhappy living with their FGM/C. Some may see FGM/C and its potential consequences as a normal part of life. Some women may feel proud and courageous having undergone FGM/C and prefer the aesthetics of their altered genitalia. They may view FGM/C as a cultural rite of passage and not a human rights violation |
| Stay focused on what the experience was like for the survivor and keep it about them | Mention or compare FGM/C to male circumcision |
| Explain the legal consequences around FGM/C in Canada | Assume everyone knows FGM/C and 'vacation cutting' are illegal in Canada |



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Use a non-judgemental tone

React with shock and horror

Resources:

- [Things Not to Say to FGM Survivors and Campaigners](#) - a video where UK survivors discuss some of the common beliefs around the practice and the reactions that are most unhelpful.

This document was created in collaboration with shared materials from [Sahiyo](#); Farzana Doctor, MSW, RSW, Psychotherapist, Canadian FGM/C Survivors/Activists; Maryan Abdikadir, FGM Survivor/Activist and End FGM Canada Network.