

SOCIAL + BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

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Synthesis of the risks and likelihood of pushback against the abandonment of harmful practices
Country Snapshot

Eritrea

➤ RISK OF EXPERIENCING PUSHBACK: LOW

RISK OF
EXPERIENCING
← PUSHBACK

Eritrea has seen a decline in FGM prevalence, supported by legal bans and community outreach. Child marriage remains a challenge and advocacy has made notable progress in influencing public opinion. However, entrenched social norms, generational pressures, and limited enforcement of laws in rural areas continue to challenge efforts to eradicate these harmful practices.

The level of risk of pushback has been determined through a desk review and in-country consultations, undertaken in 2024.

Synthesis of the risks and likelihood of community pushback against the abandonment of harmful practices

FGM and child marriage are deeply embedded in Eritrean society, particularly among rural and pastoralist communities.¹ According to the 2010 Eritrea Population and Health Survey (EPHS), 83 per cent of women aged 15–49 had undergone FGM.² However, data from a 2024 assessment across 20 sub-zones shows a declining trend in FGM prevalence among women aged 15–49, and significantly lower rates among girls: 2.3 per cent among those under 5 and 4.4 per cent among girls under 15.³

This suggests intergenerational shifts in attitudes and practices, although the pressure to conform remains strong in many areas. The high value placed on virginity and fidelity before marriage is a significant factor sustaining both child marriage and FGM.⁴ Nationally, 41 per cent of women aged 20–24 were married before age 18, and 13 per cent before age 15, according to the 2010 EPHS. A 2023 study in the subregion of Serejeka found a 42 per cent prevalence of child

- 1 Girls Not Brides, 'Eritrea'; Mehari, H., Haile, F., Habtezigghi, S., Mulugeta, Y., Abraham, G., Berhe, M. and Abdu, N., 'Determinants of Child Marriage and Its Related Adverse Health Outcomes Among Married Women in Sub-Region of Serejeka, Central Region in Eritrea: A Cross-Sectional Study', 2023.
- 2 State of Eritrea, 'Population and Health Survey', 2010.
- 3 Ministry of Health, Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare and National Union of Eritrean Women, 'Community Mapping Study on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)-2024', October 2024.
- 4 UNICEF, 'Case study on ending female genital mutilation in The State of Eritrea', 2021.

marriage.⁵ However there is limited, comparable data on subnational differences, and little evidence on whether national prevalence has shifted since 2010.

Legal frameworks have been established and weakly enforced. Eritrea has ratified key international agreements, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).^{6, 7, 8, 9} Domestically, Proclamation No. 158/2007 explicitly prohibits FGM, and the Transitional Civil Code sets the legal minimum marriage age at 18 for both sexes. Despite this legal foundation, enforcement remains limited, particularly in rural areas where customary and religious norms take precedence.

🔄 Evolving Trends and Discourse on Harmful Practices

Advocates, including the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, the Ministry of Health and the National Union of Eritrean Women, in partnership with international organizations like UNICEF and UNFPA, play a key role in ending harmful practices. They offer education, training for religious leaders and law enforcement, legal support, and health services in collaboration with faith institutions.¹⁰ Initiatives such as the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on the Elimination of FGM (UNJP-FGM)¹¹ aimed at shifting cultural perceptions have resulted in a decrease in the most severe forms of FGM, especially among younger populations, indicating a favourable trend in community-driven cessation.¹²

Eritrea's National Steering Committee to End Harmful Practices, supported by a National Technical Committee, leads coordinated action across sectors. Key institutions involved include the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, the Ministry of Health, the National Union of Eritrean Women, and development partners such as UNFPA and UNICEF. These bodies support national

and subnational committees through education, training, community mobilization, and data collection.

Furthermore, religious leaders like Sheikh Adam Osman Fagi, a senior Muslim leader in Barentu, have been active in community mobilization efforts to end FGM, including public marches and awareness events organized under the UNJP-FGM. By engaging in these initiatives and speaking about the need to protect girls' health and rights, he and other faith leaders are helping to reduce the perceived religious necessity of FGM and foster change within communities. Some faith-based groups are also leading advocacy for child protection, linking the abandonment of child marriage to religious teachings on the sanctity of life and the welfare of children.¹³

On the other hand, conservative religious and community elders often oppose these efforts, arguing that FGM and child marriage are an essential part of Eritrean culture and religious identity. According to a 2003 study on FGM in Eritrea, not cutting a girl is considered an insult to the mother, and in some communities, an uncut girl is regarded as an orphan. Among the Kunama, an uncut girl or woman is buried alongside children and, instead of being carried to the funeral on a bed, she is covered with torn clothes or rags. This reflects the belief that an uncut female is viewed as not yet a woman and will continue to be regarded as a child until she has undergone FGM.¹⁴ This association reinforces the belief that FGM is essential not only in life but also in death, making it especially difficult to challenge within certain cultural systems. For these reasons, FGM is traditionally performed on girls below the age of five years, with many (34 per cent) undergoing the practices before turning one month old.¹⁵

Even though initiatives such as UNJP-FGM have been effective in engaging communities to understand

⁵ Mehari, H., Haile, F., Habtezeghi, S., Mulugeta, Y., Abraham, G., Berhe, M. and Abdu, N., 'Determinants of Child Marriage and Its Related Adverse Health Outcomes Among Married Women in Sub-Region of Serejeka, Central Region in Eritrea: A Cross-Sectional Study', 2023.

⁶ OHCHR, 'Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women', [CEDAW] 1979.

⁷ African Union, 'The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights', 1981.

⁸ OHCHR, 'The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa', 2003.

⁹ OHCHR, 'Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)', 1989.

¹⁰ UNICEF, 'UNICEF-UNFPA Engagements with Faith Institutions and Religious Actors in 17 Countries in 2023', 2023.

¹¹ Isaac, Samuel, 'Accelerating the Eradication of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in Eritrea', 2021.

¹² UNICEF, 'Case Study on ending female genital mutilation in the State of Eritrea', 2021.

¹³ UNICEF, 'Former circumcisers and religious leaders galvanize communities to end FGM in Eritrea by 2030', 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/esa/stories/former-circumcisers-and-religious-leaders-galvanize-communities-end-fgm-eritrea-2030>.

¹⁴ Zerai, Worku, 'A study on Female Genital Mutilation in Eritrea', 2003.

¹⁵ State of Eritrea, 'Population and Health Survey', 2010.

the dangers of these practices, many people are still practising them due to social pressures.¹⁶

Despite commendable progress in positive social norms and behaviour change and a reduction in severe forms of FGM, deeply entrenched traditions continue to drive resistance in some areas. Achieving the complete abandonment of FGM and child marriage by the 2030 SDG deadline will require a targeted, multilevel strategy – one that reinforces legal accountability while also engaging communities to shift social norms from within.

Given Eritrea's progress, structured knowledge exchange with other countries could support regional learning. For instance, Eritrea's National Technical Committee on FGM is decentralized and consistently active across all regions. This platform enables ongoing coordination, information sharing, and accountability among government, religious, and community actors. In 2023, Eritrean authorities prosecuted known circumcisers, a significant step in enforcing national FGM legislation.



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¹⁶ Giri, Rabindra, 'Former Circumcisers and Religious Leaders Galvanize Communities to End FGM in Eritrea by 2030: National Joint Programme Supported by UNICEF/UNFPA Specifically Targets Communities in the Rural Hinterlands of Eritrea', 2020; Islamic Relief, 'One Cut Too Many: Policy Brief on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting', 2017.

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