



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

Country Snapshot

Uganda

➤ RISK OF EXPERIENCING PUSHBACK: LOW

RISK OF
EXPERIENCING
← PUSHBACK

Cultural and economic factors drive child marriage and FGM in isolated communities in Uganda, although national initiatives and religious leadership have begun to counter these practices. Digital engagement and social media campaigns have mobilized younger generations, but pushback persists in rural areas and cross-border FGM takes place.

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

Female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage remain significant challenges affecting the rights and futures of girls in **Uganda**. These practices, though differing in prevalence, are deeply rooted in cultural traditions and, in some cases, interconnected. **Child marriage, in particular, is pervasive, with one in three girls married before their 18th birthday.** According to the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey 2022¹, 33 per cent of women aged 20–24 were married before turning 18, of whom 6 per cent were married before the age of 15. Among men in the same age group, 6 per cent were married before age 18.² Despite child marriage remaining common in Uganda, **progress has been steady over the past 25 years.** In comparison, before 2000, around half of girls married in childhood.³ Nevertheless, this decline would need to be substantially accelerated to meet the target of eliminating child marriage by 2030.⁴ **FGM, though less widespread nationally, persists and is deeply entrenched in specific communities in Eastern Uganda.**⁵ Nationally, 0.3 per cent of women aged 20–49 had undergone FGM in 2022.⁶ Prevalence is alarmingly high in Eastern Uganda, at 51.5 per cent in Moroto, 49.2 per cent in Nakapiripirit, and 43 per cent in Amudat.⁷ The practice is closely associated with practices of certain ethnic groups, including the Sabiny, the Pokot and the Tepeth.⁸

This analysis draws on a desk review, consultations with government and civil society representatives, and a community workshop held in Loro Sub-County, Amudat district. Discussions revealed both the challenges in eliminating these practices and the commitment of local leaders to finding sustainable solutions.

- 1 Note this survey was conducted by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics, who published the survey findings in 2023. Full results of the survey, including datasets, are yet to be released, and the data source is currently pending review by UNICEF for inclusion in global reporting against the Sustainable Development Goals. Pending approval from both the Government of Uganda and UNICEF, this source is expected to be reflected in global reporting in early 2026.
- 2 Uganda Bureau of Statistics, Uganda Demographic and Health Survey, 2022, 2023
- 3 Child Marriage Data Portal: <https://childmarriagedata.org/country-profiles/uganda/>
- 4 UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage, 'Child Marriage in Uganda: Country Profile', 2019.
- 5 UNFPA, 'Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Uganda Factsheet', 2021.
- 6 Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), Uganda Demographic and Health Survey 2022, 2023.
- 7 UNFPA, 'Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Uganda Factsheet', 2021.
- 8 Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU), 'The Persistence of Female Genital Mutilation in Uganda's communities: A case for the Pokot and Tepeth communities in Karamoja', 2023.

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Since it is illegal and done in private, the ones who have had challenges are not able to seek help because they fear going to the hospital. When you go to the hospital, there's a legal consequence. So you die in silence.

Key informant, National Association for Women of Uganda

Efforts to combat child marriage and FGM in Uganda face substantial challenges rooted in deep-seated cultural norms, religious beliefs, and economic incentives. While national laws and advocacy initiatives have made progress, resistance remains entrenched, particularly in rural and border areas where these practices are most prevalent.

Long-standing sociocultural norms and practices

fuelling pushback: The persistence of child marriage and FGM in Uganda is heavily driven by entrenched cultural and religious norms in rural and border regions where these practices are most prevalent. In communities such as the Pokot, Sebei, and Tepeth, FGM remains a deeply rooted cultural tradition, seen as an essential rite of passage into womanhood.⁹ Girls who undergo FGM gain higher social status, are considered 'clean', and are integrated into community life.¹⁰ In these borderland settings, FGM is sustained by cross-border ties: among the Pokot, who straddle Amudat (Uganda)–West Pokot (Kenya), families often seek cutters across the border to evade Ugandan enforcement; similar dynamics affect Sebei/Sabiny communities living along the Uganda–Kenya frontier. The Tepeth (Karamoja) are also implicated in cross-border movement for FGM, underscoring the need for coordinated action with Kenya.¹¹

For these communities, FGM is not only a physical marker of maturity but also a symbol of familial honour, ensuring the girl's acceptance in society and her family's adherence to cultural norms.¹² For instance, in Sebei, those who undergo 'the cut' at the same time are considered as family, and among the Pokot people, it is customary for a girl to be married immediately after she has undergone FGM because it signifies a transition

into womanhood.¹³ The girls often undergo FGM around the age of 14–15, which is younger than in the past.¹⁴ Additionally, in Sebei, FGM and circumcision of boys are also closely linked, as they are both viewed as important rites of passage, with girls often cut in secret at the same time as boys' circumcision ceremonies, obscuring the illegal practice from authorities. It is also considered an honour for older women to have experienced FGM by the time their sons are being circumcised, and there has therefore been a trend in older women undergoing FGM to be honoured at their sons' circumcision ceremonies.¹⁵

Child marriage, similarly, is perpetuated by cultural expectations that place a high value on a girl's virginity and marital status. Pregnancy outside of marriage is highly stigmatized in Uganda despite its high rate. A 2022 study recorded that 24 per cent of girls aged between 15 and 19 had children or were expecting a child.¹⁶ To avoid the social stigma of pregnancy outside of wedlock, prevailing cultural norms compel unmarried, pregnant girls into marriage, even when underage.¹⁷ These expectations create a vicious cycle that traps girls in early marriages, denying them education and perpetuating gender inequality.¹⁸

The role of mothers in perpetuating FGM and child marriage is also significant. They promote these practices because their honour and respect among peers and in the community depend on their daughters fitting into society by adhering to cultural practices. They may otherwise be seen as failures. Additionally, mothers are role models to their daughters, and as long as they attach value to those practices, they will continue to thrive.¹⁹

Economic and systemic barriers: Economic factors and systemic challenges pose significant barriers to eliminating harmful practices in Uganda, particularly in regions characterized by high poverty and low institutional capacity.

⁹ UNFPA, 'Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Uganda Factsheet', 2021.

¹⁰ CCFU, 'The Persistence of Female Genital Mutilation', 2024.

¹¹ UNICEF, Case study on ending cross-border FGM in the Republic of Uganda', 2021; FGM/C, 'FGM in Uganda – Key Findings', 2013.

¹² Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU), 'The Persistence of Female Genital Mutilation in Uganda's communities: A case for the Pokot and Tepeth communities in Karamoja', 2023.

¹³ CCFU, 'The Persistence of Female Genital Mutilation', 2024.

¹⁴ UNICEF, 'Female Genital Mutilation in Uganda', 2020.

¹⁵ WN3, Uganda.

¹⁶ UBOS, Uganda Demographic and Health Survey 2022, 2023.

¹⁷ KII9, Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, Uganda.

¹⁸ Kahwa, Jane et al., 'Early marriage and girl child education in Uganda: A case study of Rubaga Division, Kampala', 2023.

¹⁹ UNICEF and the Republic of Uganda, 'Female Genital Mutilation in Uganda', 2020.

- **Economic incentives for harmful practices:**

Economic hardship drives many families to marry their daughters at an early age, often in exchange for a bride price that provides much-needed financial relief.²⁰ In Bududa District, for instance, natural disasters such as landslides have exacerbated child marriage, as families seek financial means to relocate or rebuild by marrying off their daughters.²¹ For FGM practitioners, the practice is a source of income and social standing. In communities like Karamoja and Sebei, practitioners earn a steady livelihood by performing FGM. Without alternative economic opportunities, these practitioners have little incentive to abandon the practice.²² Furthermore, families often see FGM as enhancing a girl's prospects for marriage and increasing the bride price.²³ There is also a growing shift in roles, with young girls increasingly being trained as traditional practitioners.²⁴ As a result, young girls can integrate into peer networks, making traditional practitioners harder to identify, since most interventions target older women.

- **Systemic challenges and weak enforcement:**

Uganda has implemented strong laws to combat child marriage and FGM, but enforcement is limited due to resources, and the stigma surrounding reporting. Child marriage is illegal in Uganda under the Children Act of 2016, which defines child marriage in broad terms to include formal and informal unions of any person below age 18 'for the purpose of living as husband and wife'.²⁵ Article 42(A) protects children from all forms of violence, including child marriage.²⁶ The Ugandan Constitution also clearly sets the minimum legal age of marriage for both men and women at 18.²⁷ In 2010, Uganda adopted the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act, which criminalizes attempting or carrying out FGM, aggravated FGM, and aiding or abetting FGM, among other activities. In addition, the Children Act introduced an amendment in 2016 to protect children from harmful customary or cultural practices. FGM and child marriage are often conducted in secret, particularly in remote regions, border regions, and across the border, making it difficult for authorities

to intervene. Law enforcement agencies often lack the necessary resources and training to handle these cases effectively, and local officials may face pressure from community leaders to turn a blind eye. The coexistence of statutory and customary laws further complicates enforcement. For example, while statutory law sets the minimum age for marriage at 18, customary practices allow for marriage at puberty, creating ambiguity and undermining efforts to protect girls from child marriage.²⁸ Furthermore, stigma surrounding the reporting of child marriage and FGM remains a significant barrier to justice. The fear of social ostracism often silences survivors and their families, preventing cases from being brought to the authorities.²⁹ This allows perpetrators to operate with impunity and perpetuates a cycle of harm. However, efforts are underway to unify customary and statutory laws regarding the legal age of marriage and address cross-border FGM.³⁰



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²⁰ UNICEF, 'Tracking Key Insights on Harmful Practices (Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation)', 2024.

²¹ KII9, Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, Uganda.

²² CCFU, 'The Persistence of Female Genital Mutilation', 2024.

²³ UNICEF, 'Tracking Key Insights on Harmful Practices (Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation)', 2024.

²⁴ Insights from Co-creation workshop in Loroo sub-county, Amudat district

²⁵ Republic of Uganda, The Children (Amendment) Act, 2016.

²⁶ Republic of Uganda, The Children (Amendment) Act, Sec. 42(A)(1), 2016.

²⁷ Republic of Uganda, The Constitution, Sec. 31(1), 2018.

²⁸ FGM/C Research Initiative, 'Uganda', n.d., www.fgmc.org/country/uganda/

²⁹ KII12, Amudat Inter-Religious Development Initiative (AIDI), Uganda.

³⁰ 28 Too Many, 'Uganda: The Law and FGM', 2018.

Evolving Trends and Discourse on Harmful Practices

The trends and discourse surrounding child marriage and FGM in Uganda are evolving, reflecting both progress and persistent resistance. Advocacy campaigns, legal frameworks, and grass-roots initiatives have sparked shifts in public attitudes, particularly among youth and progressive religious leaders. However, resistance remains strong in conservative communities, with harmful practices increasingly going underground and misinformation spreading through digital platforms.

Community and religious engagement: Efforts to combat FGM and child marriage in Uganda have increasingly focused on engaging community leaders and religious figures, recognizing their pivotal role in shaping societal norms and influencing behaviour. However, the dynamics of engagement vary significantly across regions, with mixed outcomes depending on the community's openness to change and the stance of local leadership.

- **Progressive religious leadership:** Religious leaders have emerged as critical allies in combating pushback and addressing resistance to change.³¹ The Catholic Church of Uganda and the Inter-religious Council of Uganda have unified efforts to challenge harmful practices through sermons, workshops, and cultural events. For example, Bishop Joseph Eciru Oliach of Soroti urges parents to prioritize education over dowries, describing child marriage as a practice that 'forces girls out of school and kills their future'.³² Cultural events like Karamoja Culture Day have been leveraged to advocate for the abandonment of FGM while preserving other cultural traditions. These initiatives seek to demonstrate that rejecting harmful practices does not equate to abandoning cultural identity, a message crucial for countering resistance.³³
- **Community-driven advocacy:** Advocacy groups, including the Uganda Parliamentary Forum on Children, Girls Not Brides Uganda, and UWONET, lead awareness campaigns using social media hashtags such as #EndChildMarriage and #EndFGM, targeting younger audiences. Their initiatives often include survivor testimonies, cultural performances, and interactive dialogues to address resistance within

communities. Initiatives such as 'Mama Clubs To End FGM' go a long way in localizing advocacy efforts and indeed targeting households. These efforts have proven particularly effective in urban and peri-urban areas, where literacy levels and access to information are higher.³⁴

- **Challenges in engagement:** Nevertheless, interventions against FGM and child marriage have had varying levels of success in Uganda. Although national initiatives have gained traction, resistance persists in rural and border areas, where advocacy campaigns struggle to penetrate. In some instances, media strategies and public awareness campaigns have had a limited impact in mobilizing these communities, although there is some evidence of online engagement with child marriage content.³⁵ Tailoring current interventions with localized approaches and engagement can help strengthen communication strategies that resonate with local contexts and more resistant communities.



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³¹ CCFU, 'The Persistence of Female Genital Mutilation', 2024.

³² Onyulo, Tonny, 'Church fights Uganda's child marriage "plague"', 9 December 2023, www.catholicregister.org/home/international/item/36216-church-fights-uganda-s-child-marriage-plague.

³³ PPU, 'President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni has called for a thorough examination of cultural practices to ensure alignment with modern scientific understanding', 2024.

³⁴ Education and Development Uganda, 'Current Projects: The Girls Not Brides Uganda Partnership', www.edouganda.org/our-impact/girls-not-brides-uganda-partnership

³⁵ UNICEF, 'Tracking Key Insights on Harmful Practices', 2024.

Resistance and pushback: As advocacy and legal efforts to eliminate FGM and child marriage have intensified, so too have the strategies employed by those resisting change.

- **Digital misinformation:** Opposition to anti-FGM and child marriage campaigns has expanded into digital spaces. Proponents of these practices use social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook to disseminate misinformation and promote narratives that portray these practices as essential cultural traditions. This digital pushback complicates advocacy efforts, as misinformation spreads quickly and often reaches communities that are already resistant to external influence.³⁶
- **Politicization of advocacy:** Anti-FGM and anti-child marriage campaigns are often framed by opponents as Western-imposed agendas aimed at eroding cultural identity. While national religious leaders in Uganda have often played a progressive role in advocating against FGM and child marriage, resistance persists at the local level. In some rural communities, religious leaders support these practices under the guise of cultural preservation. Cultural leaders in these areas continue to push back against the outlawing of the practice, viewing it as an infringement on cultural identity. In addition, religious messages that promote FGM abandonment by emphasizing the wholeness of all of God's creations have been losing traction due to campaigns that promote male circumcision for the prevention of HIV/AIDS. Further, the language and messaging used in campaigns and interventions such as 'fighting FGM' are perceived as disrespectful and outright attacks. Terms such as 'ending' or 'abandoning' FGM, on the other hand, are more acceptable.³⁷
- **Underground and concealed practices:** FGM has increasingly gone underground, with procedures carried out in secret and without the public ceremonies that traditionally accompanied them. This shift has made enforcement more difficult and raised concerns about the safety and well-being of girls, particularly in regions like Sebei and Karamoja.³⁸ In these areas, FGM is not only hidden in private homes but also increasingly disguised within seemingly

legitimate community events. Local insights suggest that FGM is sometimes conducted during religious ceremonies, such as baptisms, or community fundraisers like Harambee gatherings, which offer plausible deniability and social cover. This evolving tactic makes it even more challenging to detect and prevent the practice, as gatherings may appear innocuous to outsiders. A social media post from 2019 captured this frustration in the Sebei region: *'The Constitutional Court recently told us the Constitution must conform to culture. You bring up FGM: how much of a success has the ban been in the Sebei region? It just went underground and became more dangerous.'*³⁹ Among the Pokot community, which spans the porous border between Kenya and Uganda, cross-border FGM remains prevalent. Families often perceive Kenyan practitioners as offering higher-quality and more affordable procedures, which further perpetuates the practice and complicates enforcement across national lines. The hidden nature of these practices has far-reaching consequences. For example, it has been noted with concern that more women who have been subjected to FGM are choosing to give birth away from hospitals due to fear of being reported to the police.⁴⁰

Shifting perceptions: While resistance persists, there are encouraging signs of shifting perceptions and evolving discourse:

- **Public declarations and cultural adaptations:** Growing advocacy from younger generations and the engagement of key cultural and religious leaders offer hope for long-term change. In 2023, as part of the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation (UNJP-FGM), the Government led 223 public declarations denouncing FGM and child marriage, supported by local stakeholders. Consensus for public declarations is achieved through traditional art forms, such as songs, poems, and drama, that convey the harms of the practice, while using culturally meaningful methods that help communities preserve their identity even as they are asked to abandon practices long valued as part of their cultural heritage. Notably, the UNJP-FGM activities have engaged over 2,000 local leaders, with 292 religious leaders and 90 cultural leaders publicly renouncing FGM.⁴¹

³⁶ IFEX, 'Gendered disinformation being weaponised against women', 2025.

³⁷ KII13, Inter-Religious Council of Uganda

³⁸ UNICEF, 'Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Uganda', 2020.

³⁹ UNICEF, 'Tracking Key Insights on Harmful Practices (Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation)', 2024.

⁴⁰ UNICEF, 'Case Study on Ending Cross-Border Female Genital Mutilation in the Republic of Uganda', 2021.

⁴¹ UNFPA, Transforming Lives, Inspiring Change, 2024.



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- **Local media campaigns:** Speaking at the commemoration of the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation in 2023, the UN Resident Coordinator called for sustainable partnerships with men and boys to eliminate the threat of FGM. During the same event, Hon. Peace Mutuuzo, the Ugandan State Minister for Gender and Culture at the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, called for plans to set up local radio stations in the communities affected most by FGM to facilitate more focused campaigns against the practice.⁴² For instance, in Amudat, an area with a high prevalence of FGM, there are no local stations.⁴³
- **Government and policy initiatives:** The Uganda Child Rights NGO Network began the first toll-free Child Helpline service in 2005. In 2014, the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development took over the management of the 116 number, known as the

Uganda Child Helpline or the Sauti (Voice) Helpline. The line facilitates reports of child rights violations and links children at risk or in need of protection with resources and services. The Sauti Helpline also runs sensitization campaigns in schools and communities, as well as on television and radio.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the National Strategy to End Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy is a multisectoral strategy led by the Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development with support from UNICEF, which focuses on strengthening laws, empowering families, and shifting harmful cultural norms.^{45, 46} The National Strategy to Eliminate Female Genital Mutilation is nearing approval by the senior management of the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, while the Draft National Action Plan II on the Elimination of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is also being reviewed.

⁴² UN Uganda, 'Government and UN Recommit to end Female Genital Mutilation', 8 February 2023, <https://uganda.un.org/en/223264-government-and-un-recommit-end-female-genital-mutilation>

⁴³ WN3, Uganda.

⁴⁴ UNICEF, 'Uganda Case Study: Review of Technology-Based Interventions to Address Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation', 2023.

⁴⁵ Republic of Uganda Ministry for Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) and UNICEF, 'The National Strategy to End Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy 2022/2023-2026/2027', 2023.

⁴⁶ Uganda Ministry for Gender, 'The National Strategy to End Child Marriage', 2015.

Conclusion and Path Forward

Efforts to eliminate child marriage and FGM in Uganda have made significant progress, driven by legal reforms, community advocacy, and growing youth engagement. However, these harmful practices remain deeply entrenched in cultural, religious, and economic systems, particularly in rural and border areas. Pushback, often fuelled by cultural norms, misinformation, and economic incentives, presents a significant challenge, with practices increasingly going underground or shifting across borders to evade detection.

To ensure the abandonment of harmful practices and the protection of child rights, Uganda must adopt a comprehensive strategy that integrates legal, social, and economic interventions. The following recommendations are proposed:

- **Strengthen legal frameworks and enforcement:** Harmonize customary laws with statutory provisions to eliminate loopholes around child marriage and FGM. Enhance law enforcement presence in remote districts like Karamoja and Sebei, ensuring better tracking and prosecution of cases. Develop cross-border enforcement protocols with Kenya to address cross-border FGM among the Pokot and Tepeth communities. Continue advocacy work and partnerships with bodies such as the East African Legislative Assembly for an FGM cross-regional bill at the East African Community (EAC).
- **Community and religious engagement and trust-building:** Partner with local cultural leaders and civil society in Sebei and Karamoja to introduce alternative rites of passage that replace FGM. Identify influential religious leaders in the regions with the support of the Amudat Inter-Religious Council and the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda, and engage them through localized dialogues to reinterpret religious teachings that justify child marriage and FGM.
- **Economic support and education:** Expand scholarships for girls in high-prevalence districts like Amudat and Moroto to keep them in school and delay marriage. Implement integrated household economic strengthening programmes in high-prevalence districts. These should include cash transfers, livelihood support and social protection measures targeting vulnerable families, as well as awareness raising, skills building, youth empowerment and entrepreneurship activities. By reducing poverty driven reliance on child marriage and FGM as survival strategies, these programmes will complement education initiatives such as scholarships to keep

girls in school and delay marriage, while enabling families to see real opportunities outside of FGM and child marriage.

- **Targeted advocacy and media campaigns:** Launch district-specific campaigns on local radio, community forums, and digital platforms to counter misinformation and promote legal awareness, with careful consideration of language. Share survivor stories to highlight the impact of FGM and child marriage on health and education. Engage leaders and align messaging with local contexts to shift cultural narratives and amplify anti-FGM and anti-child marriage campaigns, particularly among younger audiences. Establish strong social support networks for peers, mothers, faith leaders and allies to amplify resistance to FGM and child marriage, thus bridging the gap between youth and elders in decision-making around harmful practices.
- **Monitoring and collaboration:** Strengthen community-based surveillance in districts like Moroto and Nakapiripirit to detect emerging trends, such as training of younger cutters and underground FGM practices. Increase inter-agency collaboration between Uganda and Kenya to prevent cross-border FGM. Develop localized data collection mechanisms to monitor FGM and child marriage trends, particularly in hard-to-reach areas.

By prioritizing legal reform, community engagement, and economic empowerment, alongside targeted advocacy and education, Uganda can accelerate progress towards safeguarding the rights and futures of its children. The process demands sustained commitment, collaboration among stakeholders, and innovative approaches that adapt to the evolving nature of resistance, ensuring that no child is left behind on the path to ending these harmful practices.



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