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

**Country Snapshot**

# Nigeria

**↘ RISK OF EXPERIENCING PUSHBACK: MODERATE**

**RISK OF EXPERIENCING → ← PUSHBACK**

Nigeria faces moderate risk in eliminating harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and child marriage due to deeply rooted cultural, religious and economic factors, particularly in rural and conservative regions. Despite improvements in legal frameworks, resistance remains strong in many communities, especially in the north and among certain southern groups.

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 pushback against the abandonment of harmful practices

In Nigeria, 15 million girls and women have been subjected to female genital mutilation (FGM), accounting for 7 per cent of the global total.[1] One in seven girls and women are affected, though generational progress is evident: in the early 1990s, 30 per cent of adolescent girls were cut, while today the prevalence has dropped to 7 per cent among girls aged 15 to 19.[2] Child marriage remains common in Nigeria, with one in three girls marrying before the age of 18.[3] Child marriage is particularly common in areas facing economic hardship, insecurity and limited access to education. This phenomenon disproportionately affects young girls. Pushback against the elimination of FGM and child marriage stems from a combination of traditional beliefs, religious misinterpretations and economic pressures. Among some communities in the south, FGM is perceived as a traditional and cultural rite of passage while, in parts of the north, certain interpretations frame FGM as a form

1 UNICEF global databases, 2025.

2 UNICEF analysis based on Demographic and Health Survey and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, 1999-2024.

3 Nigeria, Federal Ministry of Health and Social Welfare et al., Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey 2024. FMoHSW, Abuja, Nigeria, 2025. This survey was conducted by the Government of Nigeria with technical assistance from ICF International and survey findings were published in late 2025. The data source is currently pending review by UNICEF for inclusion in global reporting against the Sustainable Development Goals. Pending approval from both UNICEF and the Government of Nigeria, this source is expected to be reflected in global reporting in early 2026.

of 'Sunna' – even though many Islamic scholars reject this.[4, 5, 6] Patriarchal norms also sustain these practices, through male-dominated leadership in communities.[7] In some northern states, child marriage serves as a financial survival strategy, intensified by insecurity and displacement from conflict, which push families to marry their daughters for protection and short-term economic relief.[8] This is especially true in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe where conflict, insecurity and displacement have intensified vulnerabilities such as sexual violence, kidnappings, and child marriages.[9] Also, when girls escape from forced marriages, community and religious leaders often return them to their husbands, reinforcing acceptability of child marriage.[10] Camps for internally displaced people are also high-risk environments for both child marriage and FGM, due to weakened community safeguards and protection systems.

Nigeria has enacted laws that prohibit harmful practices, including the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (2015), the National Health Act (2014) and the Child Rights Act (2003).[11] However, legal enforcement remains weak and is complicated by differing interpretations across statutory, customary and sharia legal systems. This has, in some cases, pushed the practices underground or across borders in Benin and Niger, and increased the likelihood of medicalized FGM.[12]

### Evolving Trends and Discourse on Harmful Practices

Faith leaders and traditional rulers play an important role in efforts to eliminate FGM and child marriage: some oppose efforts aimed at ending harmful practices, while others actively advocate for change. Programmes have successfully engaged faith leaders to reduce FGM rates, though conservative religious opposition persists. Groups such as the Christian Council of Nigeria and Nasrul-Lahi-L-Fatih Society emphasize the health risks of FGM and the moral obligation to protect girls' rights.[13] Meanwhile, opposition from conservative religious figures continues to slow legislative reforms and communities' acceptance of elimination efforts.

Despite opposition, the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on the Elimination of FGM has successfully mobilized faith leaders to advocate for the elimination of the practice.[14] Intergenerational town hall meetings, weekly education sessions, and community consultations across five states have contributed to declining FGM rates among girls under nine.[15] However, resistance remains strong in some areas, especially when harmful practices are viewed as cultural markers, rites of passage or perceived prerequisites for marriage. In such cases, political actors may resist reforms due to community sentiment or concerns about social cohesion.

The prevalence of FGM and child marriage also varies regionally. While northern states face higher child marriage rates, southern regions like the south-west have a lower prevalence of child marriage, but have sustained FGM practices among Yoruba and Igbo communities.[16] This highlights the need for region-specific interventions that consider local customs, economic incentives and faith-based opposition.

To counter resistance effectively, Nigeria must strengthen faith-based engagement, ensuring collaboration with both Islamic and Christian leaders to promote interpretations that favour child protection. Engaging religious and traditional leaders and leveraging community groups is equally important to gradually shift the cultural and traditional beliefs

4 United Nations Children Fund, 'Nigeria Takes Bold Steps to End Child Marriage and Protect the Rights of Children: Stakeholders Commit to Eliminating Child Marriage in Nigeria', Press release, 16 February 2024.

5 Society for the Improvement of Rural People, 'An Alternative to FGM at Naming Ceremonies in Igbo Land', Guest blog, FGM/C Research Initiative, 6 March, 2018.

6 Al-Awa, Mohamed Selim, 'FGM in the Context of Islam', The National Council for Childhood and Motherhood Cornish El-Nile, Maadi, Cairo, 2012.

7 Okeke, Tochukwu Christopher, Ugochukwu Bond Anyaehie and Cyril Chukwuma Ezenyeaku, 'An Overview of Female Genital Mutilation in Nigeria', Annals of medical and health sciences research, 2012.

8 Braimah, Tim S., 'Child Marriage in Northern Nigeria: Section 61 of Part I of the 1999 Constitution and the Protection of Children Against Child Marriage', African Human Rights Law Journal, vol. 14, no. 2, 2014, pp. 474–488.

9 Bolarinwa, Obasanjo et al., 'Spatial distribution and multilevel analysis of factors associated with child marriage in Nigeria', International Health, vol. 15, no. 2, March 2023.

10 Human Rights Watch, 'Nigeria: Child Marriage Violates Girls' Rights: States Should Urgently Adopt Laws to Enforce Child Rights Act', 17 January 2022.

11 Osei-Tutu, Joana Ama, 'Chibok Girls: Ten Years On and Boko Haram Still Thrives', Fresh perspectives, Australian Institute of International Affairs, April 2024.

12 Thomson Reuters Foundation and 28 Too Many, 'Nigeria: The Law and FGM: An overview of 28 African countries', September 2018.

13 United Nations, Nigeria, 'Traditional and Religious Leaders Urged to Mobilise Community Action to End Violence Against Women and Girls', 7 August 2020.

14 UNICEF, 'Compilation of Faith Engagement - Joint Programme 2023', Internal records, 2023.

15 United Nations, Nigeria, 'Traditional and Religious Leaders Urged to Mobilise Community Action to End Violence Against Women and Girls' 7 August 2020.

16 Fang, Xiangming et al., 'The economic burden of child marriage in Nigeria', Child Abuse & Neglect, December 2024.

that drive FGM. Expanding training for imams, pastors and traditional elders will ensure consistent messaging on child protection, health risks and the human rights implications of these practices. Advocacy by faith leaders familiar with human rights standards is particularly effective, strengthening credibility and trust among religious and traditional communities. Beyond faith leaders, community and traditional leaders, community-based child protection structures, grass-roots women's groups, especially market women's associations, youth groups and civil society organization such as the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria, play a vital role in the community-level prevention and response to FGM and child marriage.

With FGM increasingly medicalized and occurring in secrecy, monitoring mechanisms should be reinforced to track and prevent covert procedures. Strengthening economic support for at-risk families, providing financial incentives for keeping girls in school and offering alternative income programmes for traditional practitioners will deliver viable alternatives.

Cross-border cooperation and tailored regional interventions combining legal, community and religious efforts are crucial for progress. Given regional variations, interventions must be tailored to local contexts. A multifaceted approach combining legal reforms, programme implementation, religious advocacy, peacebuilding efforts and community-led solutions is crucial for sustainable change.

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