



WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

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July 18th, 2024

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Legislators' Statement on Female Genital Mutilation in The Gambia

Representative Samba Baldeh, Representative Supreme Moore Omokunde, and Representative LaTonya Johnson have released the following statement.

“On Monday, the Gambian National Assembly struck down a bill that threatened to reverse the crucial ban on Female Genital Mutilation or FGM, first established by former President Jammeh in 2015. While this rejection marks a historic human rights victory, it is also a showing of the work still to come in educating and informing the world on the rights of women to bodily autonomy.

Despite the existing ban, The Gambia remains one of the leading countries in FGM across the world. The practice exists as a longstanding custom of the major tribes that comprise the small country and is rooted in notions of safeguarding a young girl's chastity and misconceptions regarding hygiene, neither of which have any legitimate basis in Islam. FGM is not a religious or cultural obligation, but rather a deep-rooted form of gender-based violence that perpetuates the suffering and oppression of young girls and women.

Female Genital Mutilation is a practice that involves the forcible removal of the external female genitalia, typically performed by an elderly woman of the practicing community known as the “cutter”. Scenes of young girls, often around the age of 12, held down by aunts and mothers as they undergo a devastating loss they cannot comprehend at an age they cannot consent at - that is the reality of FGM in The Gambia. Women who have undergone FGM can only be regarded as survivors, as the gruesome procedure introduces a host of long-term medical repercussions. Many children die during the cutting, while survivors suffer chronic pain, infection, and labor complications.

The practice is alive today due to societal norms that regard speaking and educating about female reproductive health as taboo. Ironically, women are often the enforcers of FGM in their



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communities, revealing a deeply ingrained system of oppression, where women fear if they do not undergo FGM, they will be unable to marry and, consequently, survive.

The end to this practice cannot come from legislation alone, but through collective advocacy and challenge to the social norms that sustain it, both from within the country and the international community. All opponents of Female Genital Mutilation *must* lift their voices against those who challenge the bodily autonomy rights of women. I am joined in this call to action by State Representative Supreme Moore Omokunde (D-17), who travelled to The Gambia with a Congressional Delegation in June and witnessed the profound societal effects of FGM, and State Senator LaTonya Johnson (D-6). Depriving women of their agency to make decisions about their own bodies must never be accepted—not in Wisconsin, not in The Gambia, and not anywhere in the world.”

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