

# Sierra Leone's On Track To Ban Female Genital Mutilation

Reuters



KANO, NIGERIA - NOVEMBER 29: A local girls is seen in Dawakin Kudu village on November 29, 2006 near Freetown, Sierra Leone. The village is famous for the indigo coloured dye. This is the third day of the Royal Tour to Sierra Leone and Nigeria. (Photo by Chris Jackson/Getty Images) | Chris Jackson via Getty Images

By Kieran Guilbert

LONDON, July 7 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Sierra Leone's decision to back an international treaty on the rights of women in Africa could lead to a new law banning female genital mutilation (FGM) in a country where the practice is rife, campaigners said on Tuesday.

The Ebola-hit country last week became one of the last West African nations to ratify the Maputo Protocol, which addresses a range of issues including FGM, violence against women, child and forced marriage, and women's economic empowerment.

The treaty, which was first adopted by Mozambique in July 2003 and has been ratified by 37 African states to date, should compel Sierra Leone to introduce a law banning FGM nationwide, according to rights group Equality Now.

Sierra Leone, along with West African neighbors Liberia and Mali, are among a handful of FGM-affected countries in the continent which have not yet banned the practice.

Campaigners say FGM is particularly difficult to eliminate in Sierra Leone because of the influence of secret women's societies which back the practice and wield significant political clout.

"This (ratification) is important because it demonstrates a political commitment to protect the rights of girls and women in Sierra Leone, and provides a legal framework for them to access justice," said Equality Now program officer Kavinya Makau.

"It is a critical first step towards making FGM illegal," Makau told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from Nairobi.

FGM involves the partial or total removal of the external genitalia and is seen by many families as a gateway to marriage and a way of preserving a girl's purity, with uncut girls ostracized in many communities.

It affects an estimated 140 million girls and women across a swathe of Africa and parts of the Middle East and Asia.

## NINE IN TEN CUT

While the practice is legal in Sierra Leone, where nine in 10 girls and women have been cut, the government has introduced fines for FGM as part of its efforts to stamp out Ebola.

Sierra Leone has also imposed restrictions on travel and gatherings, which would prevent people congregating for the festivals that accompany cutting ceremonies.

The protocol, which still needs to be enshrined with the African Union before it is implemented in Sierra Leone, will only have an impact if it involves all levels of society, according to FGM campaigner and survivor Alimatu Dimonekene.

"The FGM crackdown needs to reach out to people on the ground and women in villages across the country, and a government-led outreach program may be required" she said.

"Sierra Leone must take a blanket approach to include politicians, health workers and communities, and even consider how to involve the cutters in the discussions to eliminate the practice," Dimonekene told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Nigeria became the latest African nation to outlaw FGM in May when the former president, Goodluck Jonathan, signed the ban into law as one of his final acts as leader.

(Reporting By Kieran Guilbert, Editing by Tim Pearce; Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers humanitarian news, women's rights, trafficking, corruption and climate change. Visit [www.trust.org](http://www.trust.org))

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