

Liberia



PREVALENCE OF SANDE MEMBERSHIP: 44.4%¹

Key Findings

Due to the taboo nature of FGM in Liberia, little official research has been conducted into the prevalence of the practice outside of Liberia's secret women's society, Sande. Instead, survey respondents are asked if they are members of Sande. Anecdotal evidence from contacts who have worked in Liberia, however, shows that FGM is also performed on women who are not members of Sande. Therefore, any estimates of FGM prevalence based solely on Sande membership are unreliable. However, until further research can be done, we are only able to report the prevalence of Sande membership.

Among all Liberian women aged 15–49, the estimated prevalence of Sande membership is 44.4%.²

Geography:

Sande membership appears to be most commonly practised in the north-western and north-central regions³

Age:

Initiation is most likely to take place during adolescence

Type:

Type I (partial or full clitoridectomy) is the most common type of FGM practised⁴

Agent:

FGM is performed by a *zoe*, who runs the bush school adolescent girls attend and is a Sande society leader⁵

Development Indicators

HDI Rank: 177 out of 188 countries (2015)⁶

Population: 4,722,887 (as at 9 May 2017), with a 2.44% growth rate (2016 est.)⁷

Infant Mortality Rate: 53 deaths per 1,000 live births (2015)⁸

Maternal Mortality Ratio: 725 deaths per 100,000 live births (2015)⁹

Literacy: 47.6% of the total population aged 15 and over can read/write¹⁰

'If you are a child, your mother and your grandmother are telling you that you need to be cut. You don't know any better.'

~ Mae Azango, Liberian journalist¹¹

Prevalence

FGM in Liberia is closely linked with a woman's entry into the Sande secret society and in fact forms part of the initiation ritual. Because of the taboo nature of FGM, the prevalence of FGM outside of Sande has not been studied, and the DHS presents figures for women who have heard of and are members of Sande, noting that 'Membership in the Sande society is a proxy for female genital cutting'. However, anecdotal evidence from contacts who have worked in Liberia shows that women who are not members of Sande are also cut.

The figures presented below and on the map have therefore been adjusted to represent the prevalence of Sande membership in all women aged 15-49, which is the only data available.

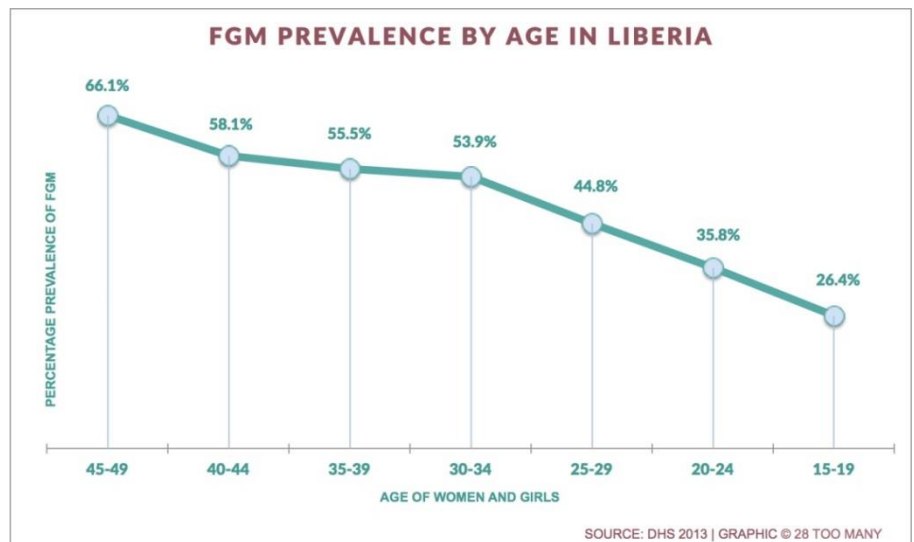
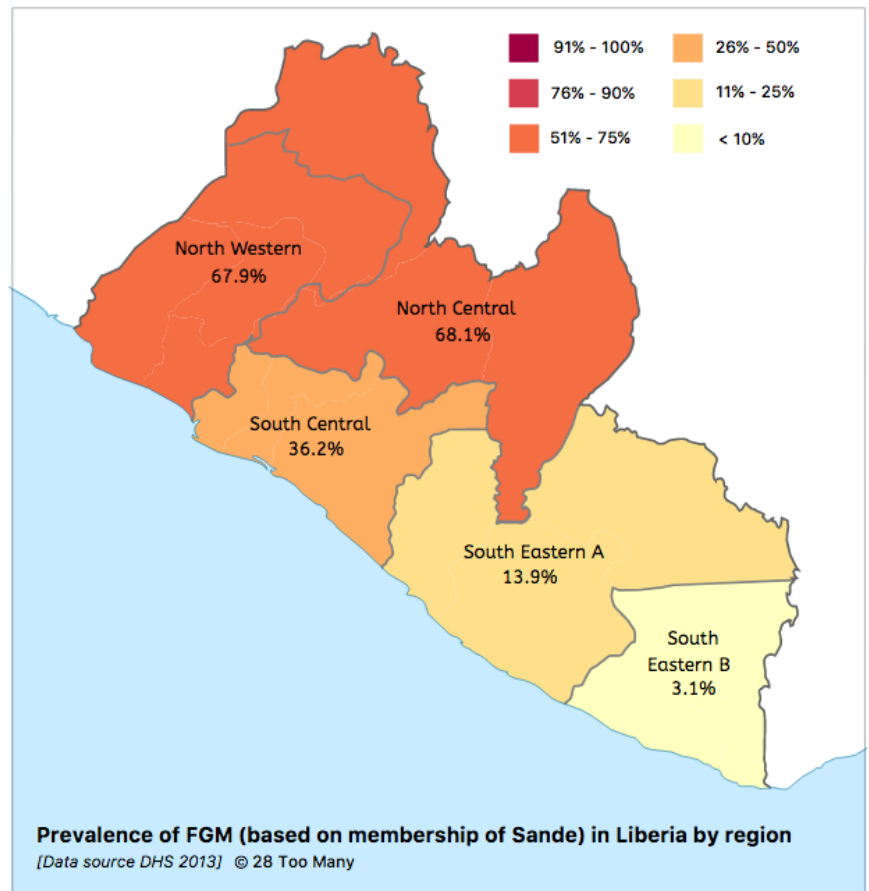
44.4% of all women aged 15-49 are members of Sande society and are therefore assumed to have undergone FGM. More

women who live in rural areas are members of Sande (55.6%) than women who live in urban areas (37.1%), and membership is far more common in North Central (68.1%) and North Western (67.9%) regions than in other parts of the country. The lowest percentage of membership is in Maryland county (1.9%), in the far south-east, although this figure is based on a small number of women and should be treated with caution.

Membership of Sande and attitudes as to whether it and its practices should continue are inversely related to level of education and wealth, and vary more greatly in accordance with county of residence and religion.¹²

The prevalence of Sande membership in women aged 15-49 is 44.4%. This is a decrease from the figure of 58.2% reported by the DHS in 2007. Reasons for this apparent large drop over a six-year period are unclear.

Due to the large age-range of women included, the overall prevalence alone may not fully reflect the progress that has been made in recent years. Breaking down the most recent data by age group shows that membership of



Sande for women aged 45–49 is 66.1%, while for the youngest age group this has fallen to 26.4%. Despite the fact that a small proportion of women may be cut after the age of 15, the data suggests a trend towards lower prevalence among younger women.¹³

Liberian Law

The Liberian Government has not yet passed legislation that prohibits the practice of FGM. However, it has proposed a stand-alone anti-FGM bill, which has been drafted and submitted for consideration.

- 1 **(‘DHS’)**: Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS), Ministry of Health and Social Welfare [Liberia], National AIDS Control Program [Liberia], and ICF International (2014) *Liberia Demographic and Health Survey 2013*, p.276. Monrovia, Liberia: Liberia Institute of Statistics GeoInformation Services (LISGIS) and ICF International. Available at <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR291/FR291.pdf>.
- 2 DHS, p.276.
- 3 DHS, p.276.
- 4 DHS, p.275.
- 5 Carol P. MacCormack cited in Benjamin Nicholas Lawrance (2014) *Amistad’s Orphans: An Atlantic Story of Children, Slavery, and Smuggling*, p.258. Yale University Press. Available at https://books.google.com.au/books?id=fIAKBgAAQBAJ&printsec=copyright&source=gbs_pub_info_r#v=onepage&q&f=false (accessed 16 May 2017).
- 6 United Nations Development Programme (2015) *Human Development Index*. Available at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/indicators/137506> (accessed 16 May 2017).
- 7 - Country Meters (2017) *Liberia*, 16 May 2017. Available at http://countrymeters.info/en/Burkina_Faso (accessed 1 May 2017).
- Central Intelligence Agency (2017) *World Factbook: Liberia*, 12 January. Available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/li.html> (accessed 16 May 2017).
- 8 Countdown to 2030 (2015) *A Decade of Tracking Progress for Maternal, Newborn and Child Survival The 2015 Report: Liberia*. Available at http://countdown2030.org/documents/2015Report/Liberia_2015.pdf (accessed 16 May 2017).
- 9 WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group and United Nations Population Division Maternal Mortality Estimation Inter-Agency Group (2015) Maternal mortality in 1990-2015: Liberia. Available at http://www.who.int/gho/maternal_health/countries/lbr.pdf?ua=1 (accessed 16 May 2017).
- 10 Central Intelligence Agency, *op. cit.*
- 11 Jonathan Kay (2012) ‘Meet Mae Azango, the Liberian journalist who refuses to be silenced on female genital mutilation’, *National Post*, 4 December. Available at <http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/jonathan-kay-meet-mae-azango-the-liberian-journalist-who-refuses-to-be-silenced-on-female-genital-mutilation> (accessed 22 May 2017).
- 12 DHS, pp.275-276.
- 13 - DHS, pp.275-276.
- Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS) [Liberia], Ministry of Health and Social Welfare [Liberia], National AIDS Control Program [Liberia], and Macro International Inc. (2008) *Liberia Demographic and Health Survey 2007*, p.242. Monrovia, Liberia: Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS) and Macro International Inc. Available at <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/fr201/fr201.pdf>.

UNICEF Statistical Profile on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting:

NICEF (2016) *Liberia: Statistical Profile on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting*. Available at https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/country_profiles/Liberia/FGMC_LBR.pdf.

Images on website:

- 1 Feed My Starving Children (2015) *untitled*. Available at <https://flic.kr/p/qTU7pH>. CCL: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>.
- 2 US Agency for International Development (2013) *Liberia, Advancing Youth Project*. Available at <https://flic.kr/p/nHjLLy>. CCL: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/>.
- 3 USAID/US Agency for International Development (2015) *USAID - Ebola Recovery*. Available at <https://flic.kr/p/rm8Fx5>. CCL: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/>.