

# Liberia



PREVALENCE OF SANDE MEMBERSHIP: 38.2%<sup>1</sup>

## Key Findings

Due to the taboo nature of FGM in Liberia, it is only very recently that a country-wide survey (the DHS 2019–2020) has measured the prevalence of FGM. Prior to this, research typically concerned membership of Liberia's secret women's society, Sande, which has commonly been used as a proxy for FGM. 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 likely to be unreliable.

The prevalence of FGM in women aged 15–49 is 38.2%

83.3% of women aged 15–49 are aware of FGM as a practice<sup>2</sup>

### **Geography:**

The prevalence of FGM is highest in the North Western region<sup>3</sup>

### **Age:**

Initiation to Sande societies typically takes place during adolescence

### **Type:**

Type I (partial or full clitoridectomy) is the most common type of FGM practised<sup>4</sup>

### **Agent:**

FGM is performed by a *zoe*, who runs the bush school adolescent girls attend and is a Sande society leader<sup>5</sup>

## Development Indicators

**HDI Rank:** 181 out of 189 countries (2018)<sup>6</sup>

**SDG Gender Index Rating:** 121 out of 129 countries (2019)<sup>7</sup>

**Population:** 5,112,456 (as at 12 June 2020), with a 2.71% growth rate (2020 est.)<sup>8</sup>

**Infant Mortality Rate:** 53.5 deaths per 1,000 live births (2019)<sup>9</sup>

**Maternal Mortality Ratio:** 661 deaths per 100,000 live births (2017)<sup>10</sup>

**Literacy:** 48.3% of the total population aged 15 and over can read/write<sup>11</sup>

*'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.'*

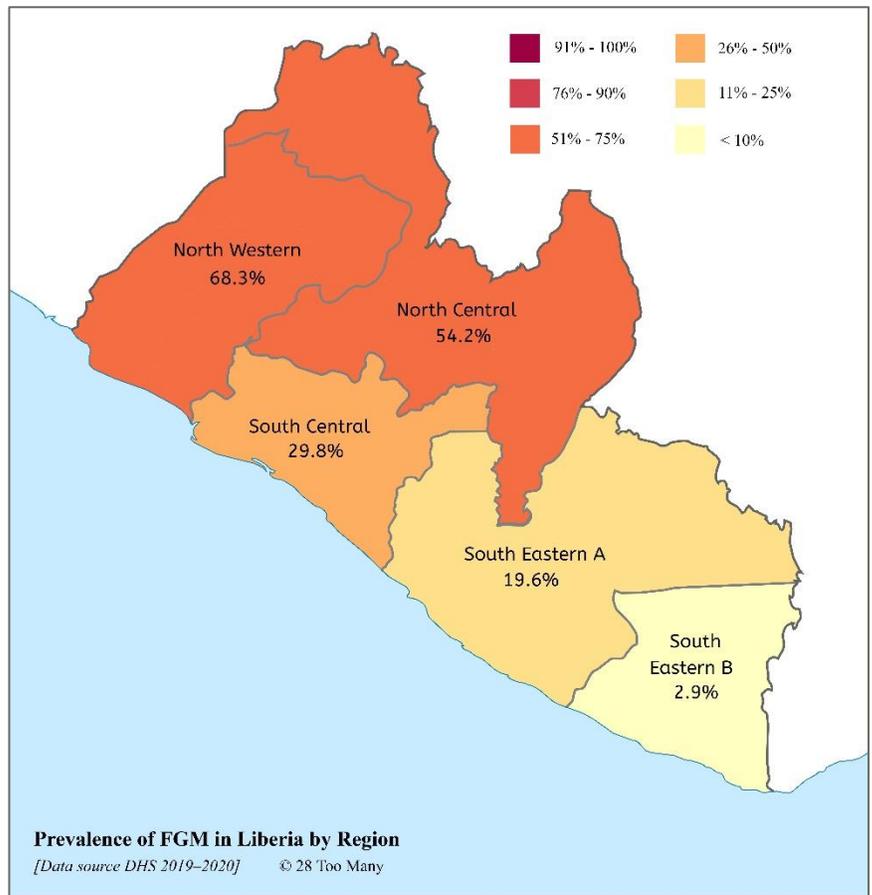
*~ Mae Azango, Liberian journalist<sup>12</sup>*

## 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. However, anecdotal evidence from contacts who have worked in Liberia shows that women who are not members of Sande are also cut.

Because of the taboo nature of FGM, the country-wide prevalence of FGM outside of Sande has not been studied until very recently (in the DHS 2019–2020), and only limited data is currently available.

38.2% of women aged 15–49 have undergone FGM. The practice is considerably more prevalent among women who live in rural areas (52.3%) than those in urban areas (29.9%), and most prevalent in the North Western (68.3%) and North Central (54.2%) regions. The lowest prevalence of FGM is in the far south-east (2.9%).

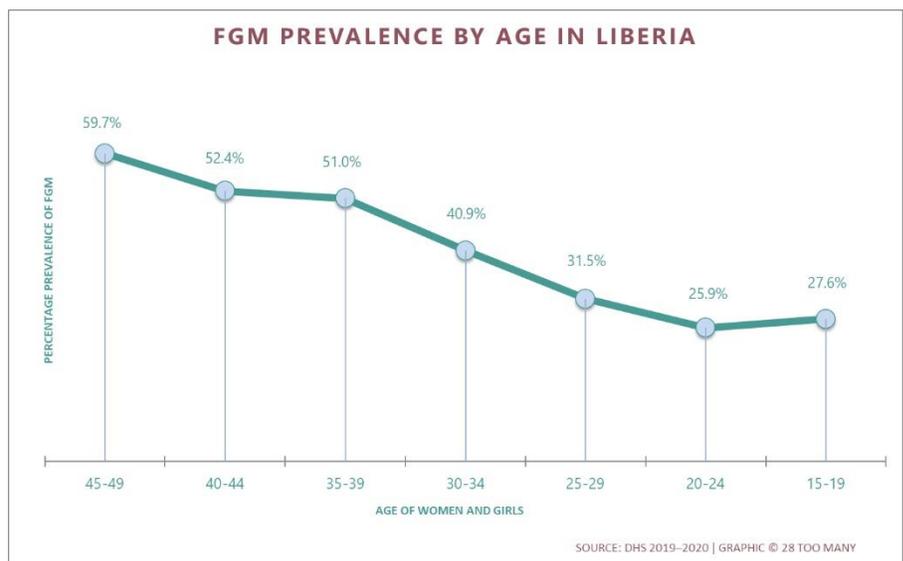


FGM is more prevalent among Muslim women (58.6%) than Christian women (34.7%) and is less prevalent in women in higher wealth quintiles than those in the lower quintiles.

This page will be updated as further data is released by DHS.<sup>13</sup>

The prevalence of FGM in women aged 15–49 (38.2%) cannot be directly compared with data from previous years, which used membership of Sande societies as a proxy for FGM. In any case, due to the large age-range of women included in DHS surveys, changes in the overall FGM prevalence in a country over time may not fully illustrate the progress that has been made.

Breaking down the most recent data by age group suggests that the practice is in decline. In women aged 45–49, 59.7% of women have experienced FGM, while in women aged 15–19 this figure is 27.6%. Despite the fact that a small number of women may be cut after the age of 15, the data suggests a trend towards lower prevalence in younger women.<sup>14</sup>



## Liberian Law

The Liberian Government has not yet passed legislation that prohibits FGM. In 2016 a ban on FGM was proposed in the new Domestic Violence Act, but all references were removed when the bill was passed in 2017, due to political pressure. In January 2018 the outgoing president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, signed Executive Order No. 92 banning FGM for girls under 18 years of age; however, this Order expired in January 2019.

- 1 **(‘DHS’)**: Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS), Ministry of Health and Social Welfare [Liberia], and ICF (2020) *Liberia Demographic and Health Survey 2019–20: Key Indicators*, p.55. Monrovia, Liberia and Rockville, Maryland, USA: Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS), Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, and ICF.
- 2 DHS.
- 3 DHS.
- 4 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.275. Monrovia, Liberia: Liberia Institute of Statistics GeoInformation Services (LISGIS) and ICF International. Available at <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR291/FR291.pdf>.
- 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](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 (2018) *Human Development Reports*. Available at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2018-update> (accessed 12 June 2019).
- 7 Equal Measures 2030 (2019) *Harnessing the Power of Data for Gender Equality: Introducing the 2019 EM2030 SDG Gender Index*, pp.12–13. Available at [www.data.em2030.org/2019-global-report](http://www.data.em2030.org/2019-global-report) (accessed 12 June 2019).
- 8 - Country Meters (2020) *Liberia*, 12 June 2020. Available at <https://countrymeters.info/en/Liberia> (accessed 12 June 2020).  
- Central Intelligence Agency (2020) *World Factbook: Liberia*, 10 June. Available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/li.html> (accessed 12 June 2020).
- 9 UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (2019) *Liberia*. Available at <https://childmortality.org/data/Liberia>.
- 10 World Health Organization (2017) *Maternal mortality ratio (per 100 000 live births)*. Available at [https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/indicators/indicator-details/GHO/maternal-mortality-ratio-\(per-100-000-live-births\)](https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/indicators/indicator-details/GHO/maternal-mortality-ratio-(per-100-000-live-births)).
- 11 Central Intelligence Agency, *op. cit.*
- 12 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).
- 13 DHS.
- 14 DHS.

### **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](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/>.