



Working Paper

# Navigating the politics of backlash: Women's rights and repealing the FGM ban in The Gambia



ODI Global

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Advancing  
Learning and  
Innovation on  
Gender Norms

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## Abstract

The Gambia has one of the highest rates of female genital mutilation (FGM) in the world. The practice was criminalised through legal reform in 2015. But after nearly a decade without enforcement, the first convictions under the law in 2023 set off a chain of events that brought the country to the brink of repealing it. This would have made The Gambia the first country ever to reverse a ban on the practice. This report seeks to address one overarching question: what shaped the emergence of the bill to lift the ban on FGM, as well as its subsequent defeat?

The report provides an overview of the political landscape in The Gambia, introducing salient economic, social and political factors that set the stage for advancing or hindering this policy initiative. It then introduces the key stakeholders engaged in the initiative and explores their motivations. Next, the report lays out the current political economy considerations influencing the trajectory of this attempt at reform, before closing with some reflections on what may lie ahead, together with domestic, regional and global implications.

ODI Global has conducted this analysis to support international actors in developing a politically informed analysis of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) policy initiatives that may enhance the effectiveness of their assistance.

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# Abbreviations and acronyms

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<b>APRC</b>	Alliance for the Patriotic Reorientation and Construction
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
<b>ECOWAS</b>	Economic Community of West African States
<b>FGM</b>	female genital mutilation
<b>FLAG</b>	Female Lawyers Association – Gambia
<b>GAMCOTRAP</b>	Gambia Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children
<b>IPU</b>	Inter-Parliamentary Union
<b>LGBTQ+</b>	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer. The plus sign represents people who identify using other terms.
<b>MP</b>	Member of Parliament
<b>NGBV</b>	Network Against Gender-Based Violence
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organisation
<b>ODA</b>	official development assistance
<b>SRHR</b>	sexual and reproductive health and rights
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children’s Fund
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>US</b>	United States
<b>WILL</b>	Women in Liberation and Leadership

# Executive summary

## Overview

The Gambia has one of the highest rates of female genital mutilation (FGM) in the world (DHS, 2020). Although the practice was criminalised in 2015, the law went unenforced until 2023, when the first convictions took place. Three women were charged and ordered to pay a fine or spend a year in prison for carrying out FGM on eight children in the Central River Region. These convictions were the catalyst for a concerted backlash against the ban and set off a chain of events that brought the country to the brink of repealing it. In March 2024, a private member's bill was tabled in Parliament seeking to overturn the ban. The bill passed its first and second readings. Before proceeding to a third and final reading, however, the bill was referred to parliamentary committee for a consultation process. The joint committee returned its report to the National Assembly in July 2024, recommending that the ban on FGM be maintained. After intense lobbying and advocacy from both sides throughout the consultation process, Parliament ultimately rejected the bill. However, a case filed before the Supreme Court to decriminalise FGM is set to be heard later in 2025.

This working paper seeks to address one overarching question: what shaped the emergence of the bill to lift the ban on FGM, as well as its subsequent defeat? The analysis is based on a review of secondary scholarly and grey literature, media sources, and interviews with five key informants from civil society, media and international organisations.

## Background

The law criminalising FGM was a legacy of the previous president, Yahya Jammeh, whose rule was characterised by many human rights violations. Jammeh's decision to ban FGM came as a surprise to many Gambians. Analysis suggests his compliance was more for the 'international gallery' than any genuine commitment to women's rights and democracy (Nabaneh, 2024). The Gambia is one of the poorest countries on the African continent in per capita terms and it has a high level of dependency on foreign development assistance (Gambia Bureau of Statistics, 2019; World Bank, 2025). This may have pushed Jammeh to align policy-making with donor perspectives – including on the question of FGM.

A year after the ban was introduced, Jammeh was replaced as leader by President Adama Barrow of the National People's Party (the current president). The fact that the law was brought in by an undemocratic regime significantly undermined its credibility from the start. This was only further compounded by the lack of enforcement from the subsequent government.

In 2020, the percentage of women who had experienced FGM in The Gambia was 73%. Over half of Gambian girls aged 5–9 are cut, increasing to 63% of girls aged 10–14 (DHS, 2020). Many cutters

are highly respected women elders within their communities. Opinion data from 2020 suggests that 46% of women think FGM should be continued, with the same proportion saying the opposite. Encouragingly, this indicates a significant drop in support: in 2013, the percentage of those in favour of the practice was 65%. While changes in social norms appear to be underway, the continued widespread practice must be situated within a wider context of significant gender inequalities. The Gender Inequality Index ranks The Gambia 149 out of 166 in the world in terms of gender equality (UNDP, 2024) and women's political participation is low, with only 5 female National Assembly members out of a total of 58 (IPU, 2025).

The practice of FGM in The Gambia is deeply rooted in cultural and religious tradition. The country is predominantly Muslim with high levels of religiosity (CIA, 2024). While Islamic scholarly opinion on the topic at the global level is divided, most imams and religious scholars in The Gambia hold deeply ingrained views that FGM is an Islamic doctrine (interviews).

## Stakeholders and motivations

The drive to overturn the 2015 ban was led by a coalition of religious, political and community figures. Chief among them was Imam Abdoulie Fatty, a renowned cleric who travelled to the Central River Region to meet the convicted women and pay their fines in a public demonstration of support (Jadama, 2023). The Gambia Supreme Islamic Council (2023) declared a fatwa, calling on the government to reconsider the law. National Assembly Member Almameh Gibba tabled the private member's bill seeking to overturn the ban. Some religious women's organisations have also campaigned to overturn the ban and the influence of cutters themselves must also be considered. Many Gambians were appalled at the prospect that cutters – as women elders who are highly respected within their communities – could be sent to prison.

Pro-FGM actors framed FGM as follows: 1) the practice is obligatory in Islam and rooted in Gambian tradition and culture; 2) Gambians should adhere to the practice, with sanctions for non-compliance and rewards for compliance; and 3) the ban is part of a colonial, western ideology to eradicate the practice.

The coalition of progressive actors that mobilised to maintain the ban came predominantly from Gambian civil society. The majority of these were women-led organisations and movements, chief among them the Gambia Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (GAMCOTRAP). GAMCOTRAP was directly involved in the 2023 conviction, with one of its community-based coordinators reporting the incident to the police (Coker, 2023).

Many progressive civil society organisations receive money from external partners and international donors, who provide much-needed resources to support Gambian civil society actors in protecting women's rights. Yet their financial flows also neatly tie into the narrative of pro-FGM actors, who claim these campaigns are part of a western conspiracy.



Progressive civil society actors came together around a strategic action plan that involved meetings with key ministries and National Assembly members, media advocacy, community mobilisation and the drafting of position papers. ‘Quiet diplomacy’ also took place, with international organisations and bilateral donors privately raising concerns, as well as threatening to pull out their resources, programmes and funding from the country.

Notably, President Barrow and other politicians stayed largely silent on the issue, fearing backlash and a loss of power. The referral to parliamentary committee was a welcome relief to politicians who were personally against FGM but feared speaking out, as this shifted responsibility away from parliamentarians to a more ‘neutral’ committee. Parliamentarians felt more ready to accept and vote in favour of the findings of the joint committee’s report, viewing this as less politically risky than a simple vote on the amendment (interview).

## Current political considerations

Although the 2024 bill did not pass, the debate is not over. A coalition led by Gibba has launched a case with the Supreme Court claiming that the law criminalising FGM violates Gambians’ constitutional rights to cultural, traditional and religious freedoms (Alkamba Times, 2024b; The Standard, 2024). It is likely that the Supreme Court will uphold the ban, drawing similar conclusions to the joint committee report. These are centred on the right to health for women and girls; their freedom from physical and psychological harm; and the country’s commitment to regional and international conventions.

Yet even with the maintenance of the ban, it is unlikely there will be major enforcement through prosecutions and convictions. The most likely outcome can then be regarded as a stalemate: a law that remains in place, but with little enforcement; civil society organisations mobilising for norm change, but with limited political will to complement these efforts. It is therefore important for progressive international organisations and donors to keep funding like-minded civil society groups in the country. They can also provide support to key ministries and civil society organisations for their FGM sensitisation campaigns and norm change initiatives.

Longer term, many civil society and international organisations believe that other core legislation protecting women’s and girls’ rights could be under threat in the country, which aligns with a global backlash against women’s rights. The risk is compounded by shrinking funding to counter anti-rights threats, with overseas development budget cuts across Europe and President Donald Trump freezing all US foreign development assistance (Bond, 2025; NL Times, 2025; The White House, 2025b).

These assaults to human rights can be seen as a resurgence of patriarchal social norms. But pro-rights actors are fighting back, providing an alternative vision for what the prevailing norms should be. The research in this working paper demonstrates the importance to these actors of developing a politically informed approach: illuminating strategic opportunities and political openings to safeguard and enhance human rights for all.

# 1 Introduction

The Gambia has one of the highest rates of female genital mutilation (FGM) in the world. The practice is shaped by powerful social norms, which in turn are deeply rooted in culture, tradition and religion (DHS, 2020). In 2015, the government brought about progressive legal reform by criminalising the practice of FGM. But after nearly a decade without enforcement, the first convictions under the law in 2023 set off a chain of events that brought the country to the brink of repealing it. This would have made The Gambia the first country ever to reverse a ban on the practice.

A close examination of the political context is necessary to understand how this recent policy development occurred. This is motivated by the growing global backlash against gender equality, emboldened by the new Trump administration in the United States (US) (The White House, 2025a). The backlash is fuelled by actors working inside and outside of government who fund initiatives to roll back gender equality policies and programmes around the world, often using religion to justify their approach (Flood et al., 2018; Corredor, 2019; Shameem, 2021).

Sexual and reproductive rights in particular are a common target for these actors, both in western contexts (Datta, 2021) and across the African continent (Okech, 2023; Judge, 2024; Otieno and Makabira, 2024). These global narrative shifts are considerably increasing political risks for governments who wish to advance progressive policy initiatives to protect and enhance sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

The rollback of multilateral and bilateral funds for sexual and reproductive rights deepens the vulnerability of communities reliant on outside funds in need of such services (NL Times, 2025; The White House, 2025b). The shrinking pool of official development assistance (ODA) places further strain on all those committed to supporting SRHR and gender equality, pushing them to consider how to enhance the effectiveness of their support.

ODI Global has conducted the following research to support international actors in developing a politically informed analysis of three key SRHR policy initiatives that will have critical consequences for gender equality across the African continent: FGM in The Gambia; LGBTQ+ rights in Kenya; and abortion rights in Sierra Leone.

This report on The Gambia seeks to address one overarching question: what shaped the emergence of the bill to lift the ban on FGM, as well as its subsequent defeat? To answer this, the report begins by providing an overview of the political landscape in The Gambia, introducing salient economic, social and political factors that set the stage for both advancing and hindering this policy initiative (Chapters 2–4). Next, the report provides a historical perspective on the legal

and policy framework for FGM law reform (Chapter 5), before introducing the key stakeholders engaged in the initiative and exploring their motivations (Chapter 6). It then lays out the current political considerations influencing the trajectory of this attempt at reform, before closing with some reflections on what may lie ahead, along with domestic, regional and global implications (Chapter 7).

The analysis is based on a review of secondary scholarly and grey literature, along with media sources. The research greatly benefited from the insights of five key informants from civil society, media and international organisations – who remain anonymous due to the sensitivity of the topic.

## 2 Overview

The Gambia passed a law in 2015, under the previous regime of President Yahya Jammeh, that criminalised the practice of FGM. Under Section 32 of the Women's (Amendment) Act 2015, it became an offence to commit 'female circumcision', and to request, incite or promote the practice. Both offences were punishable with three years' imprisonment, a fine of 50,000 Gambian dalasis (approximately \$1,300 in 2015), or both.

In 2023, eight years later and under the new government of President Adama Barrow, the first convictions under this law took place. Three women – one cutter and two mothers – were charged and ordered to pay 15,000 dalasis each (approximately \$250 in 2023) or spend one year in prison for carrying out FGM on eight children in the Central River Region. These convictions were the catalyst for a concerted backlash against the ban on FGM, based largely on religious grounds.

Imam Abdoulie Fatty, a renowned cleric and former State House Imam under President Jammeh, paid the fines of the three women on behalf of the Islamic Enlightenment Society. Meanwhile, the Gambia Supreme Islamic Council issued a fatwa, or religious ruling, calling on the government to reconsider its law prohibiting FGM, citing the practice's so-called legitimacy in Islam. Then, in 2024, Almameh Gibba, a National Assembly Member, tabled a private member's bill in parliament seeking to overturn the ban.

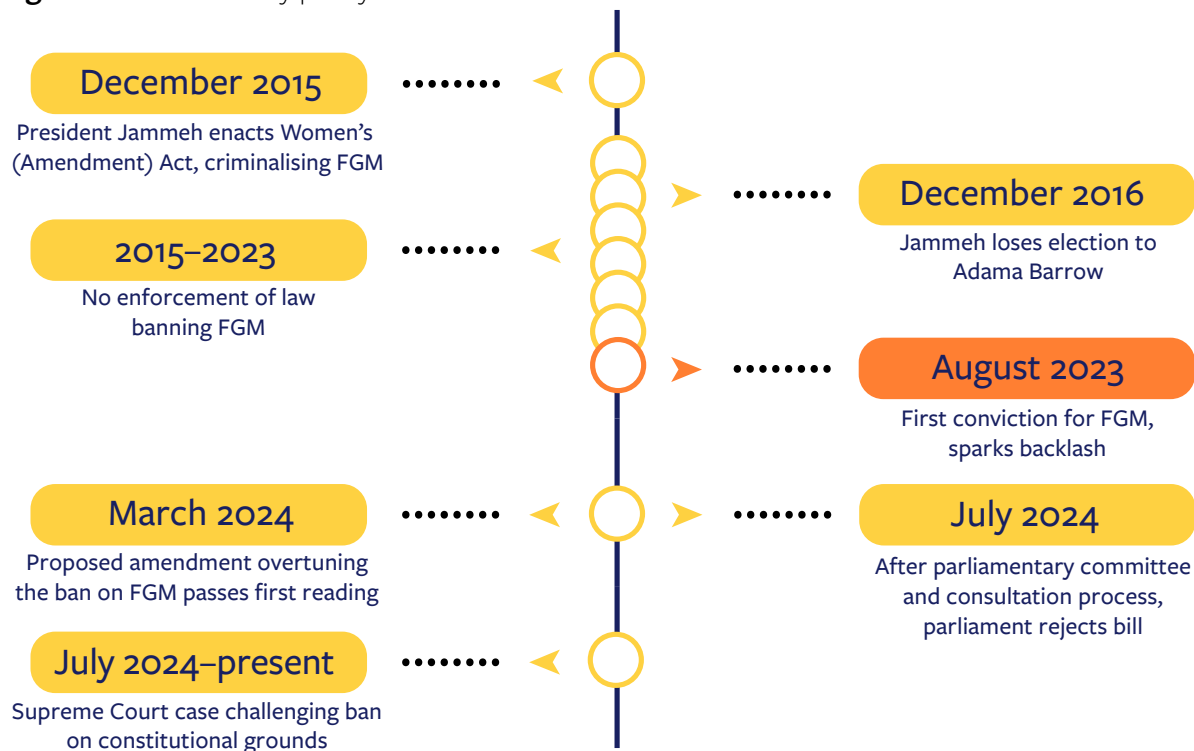
To the shock of domestic and international progressive actors on SRHR, the bill passed its second reading with only 4 of the 47 lawmakers present voting against it. This sparked fears that The Gambia could become the first country ever to reverse a ban on the practice of FGM. Before proceeding to a third and final reading, however, the bill was referred to parliamentary committee for a three-month consultation process.

After intense lobbying and advocacy from both sides, Parliament ultimately rejected the bill. Out of 53 lawmakers, 34 voted against each of its proposed clauses, thereby maintaining the ban on FGM. The rejection of the bill was a critical win for women's and girls' rights. However, after the defeat of his proposed bill, National Assembly Member Almameh Gibba – along with seven other individuals and organisations – filed a case before the Supreme Court to decriminalise FGM, claiming that the ban violates Gambians' constitutional rights to cultural and religious freedoms. The case is set to be heard later in 2025.

### 3 Timeline

This chapter provides details of key moments in the policy reform process, a timeline of which is illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1** Timeline of key policy moments on FGM law reform



**May 2010:** the Women's Act is passed, containing legal provisions for the advancement of women and girls, incorporating and enforcing the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa ('the Maputo Protocol').

**December 2015:** the Women's (Amendment) Act is enacted, an amendment to the 2010 Women's Act that criminalises and sets out punishments for performing, aiding and/or abetting FGM.

**January 2023:** anti-FGM campaign group Gambia Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (GAMCOTRAP) receives a tip-off of an FGM ceremony taking place in a village in Niani District, Central River Region. Eight children are due to be cut, all of whom are found at the compound of the cutter. Three of the children have already undergone FGM. The incident is reported to local police.

**August 2023:** conviction of three of the women involved in the January 2023 ceremony for FGM crimes (a cutter and two mothers) at Kaur/Kuntaur Magistrates' Court. Stronger calls to repeal the law begin after this first conviction under the 2015 law.

**September 2023:** Imam Abdoulie Fatty, a renowned cleric and former State House Imam, pays the fines of the three women on behalf of the Islamic Enlightenment Society, an Islamic group that defends the practice.

**September 2023:** fatwa issued by the Gambia Supreme Islamic Council calling on the government to reconsider the law prohibiting FGM, citing its legitimacy in Islam as a 'virtue' of the religion and a *sunnah* practice approved by the Prophet Muhammad.

**March 2024:** the Women's (Amendment) Bill 2024 is tabled by National Assembly Member Almameh Gibba, seeking to overturn the 2015 ban on FGM. Hundreds of people protest outside Parliament on 18 March, most of whom appear to support repealing the ban.

**March 2024:** the Women's (Amendment) Bill 2024 passes its second reading with only 4 of the 47 lawmakers present voting against it – raising concerns among rights groups that The Gambia could become the first country ever to reverse a ban on the practice. However, members of parliament (MPs) call for more consultation and the bill is referred to parliamentary committee to be examined for three months before returning to Parliament for debate and a vote.

**June 2024:** Gambian President Adama Barrow, who until this point has remained silent on the matter, says that his government will abide by the 2015 ban on FGM – even as a bill comes before parliament that could see the law revoked. Barrow is caught between international pressure to uphold and enforce the ban and traditionalists who want to see the legislation revoked.

**July 2024:** Parliament rejects the Women's (Amendment) Bill 2024 after voting against all its proposed clauses. Out of 53 lawmakers, 34 vote to maintain the FGM ban; the remainder vote to repeal it.

**July 2024:** after defeat of his proposed bill, Almameh Gibba, along with seven other National Assembly members, file a case before the Supreme Court to decriminalise FGM, claiming that the ban violates Gambians' constitutional rights to cultural, traditional and religious freedoms.

**November 2024:** a second FGM case is brought to light in the media – raising fears that the debate on FGM could be reignited once again.

**December 2024:** the Supreme Court grants the plaintiffs additional time to find legal representation for their case. The matter is adjourned to the next session of the court in 2025.

## 4 Foundational factors

This section provides an overview of the political landscape in The Gambia and explores the political, economic and social factors that shape the debate around FGM in the country.

### 4.1 Political stability

The Gambia is a presidential republic. It gained its independence from the United Kingdom (UK) in 1965 and has only had three leaders since then. Dawda Jawara led the country from independence until 1994, when he was deposed in a bloodless military coup. This led to the installation of the military group's leader, Yahya Jammeh, as President. As leader of the Alliance for the Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC), he ruled in authoritarian fashion until his defeat in the country's 2016 elections. The incumbent President, Adama Barrow, ushered in a period of relative political stability. From the National People's Party, Barrow won his second term in 2021 (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). The next presidential elections are set to take place in 2026.

The law criminalising FGM was a legacy of previous President Yahya Jammeh – who was referred to in multiple interviews as a 'dictator' with little regard for human rights or democracy. His rule was characterised by extrajudicial killings, torture, enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests and detentions, sexual and gender-based violence, and other gross human rights violations (Sekhu, 2023). Other less progressive actions and statements by Jammeh included ordering the execution of all criminals and political opponents on death row (BBC, 2012), claiming that he could cure HIV with herbal concoctions (BBC, 2007), and suggesting that all homosexuals should be beheaded (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

Jammeh's decision to ban FGM came as a surprise to many Gambians (Mafotsing, 2024). It is unclear why he decided to pass the law criminalising the practice given his previously expressed view that campaigners against FGM were 'enemies of Islam' (Jaw, 1999). Key informants interviewed for this report suggest he was motivated by a combination of incentives, including international pressure from donor countries and national pressure from feminist movements to pass a ban. Analysis suggests his compliance was more for the 'international gallery' than any genuine commitment to women's rights and democracy (Nabaneh, 2024).

He may also have been influenced by a chance encounter he had with women from his local community who had undergone FGM and were vocal about its negative consequences and/or by civil society organisations convincing the First Lady that the practice should be banned (interviews).

Jammeh passed the law in 2015 and was replaced as president a year later, following presidential elections and a brief period of constitutional crisis. After initially accepting defeat and conceding

to Adama Barrow, Jammeh then rejected the election results and deployed troops to the capital city, Banjul – resulting in a standoff that was only resolved after military intervention from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024).

Healing from Jammeh’s 22 years of rule is still underway through a Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (Republic of The Gambia, 2022), which continues to issue reparations from that period to victims of gross human rights violations (interview). The fact that the law criminalising FGM was brought in by an undemocratic regime significantly undermined its credibility from the start, allowing religious leaders and other opponents to argue that political support for the ban came under duress (Mafotsing, 2024; interview).

The bill’s lack of credibility was further compounded by the fact that there was little to no enforcement of the law between its introduction in 2015 and the first conviction in 2023. While most Gambians were aware of the law’s existence (Gambia Bureau of Statistics, 2019), many assumed that it was not in enforcement as the law ‘belonged’ to the former regime and was therefore not applicable under Barrow’s government (interviews). It is for these reasons that the first conviction in 2023 came as a big surprise to many Gambians, sparking a backlash due, in particular, to the ban’s perceived threat to their religious rights and freedoms.

## 4.2 Social norms and gender (in)equality

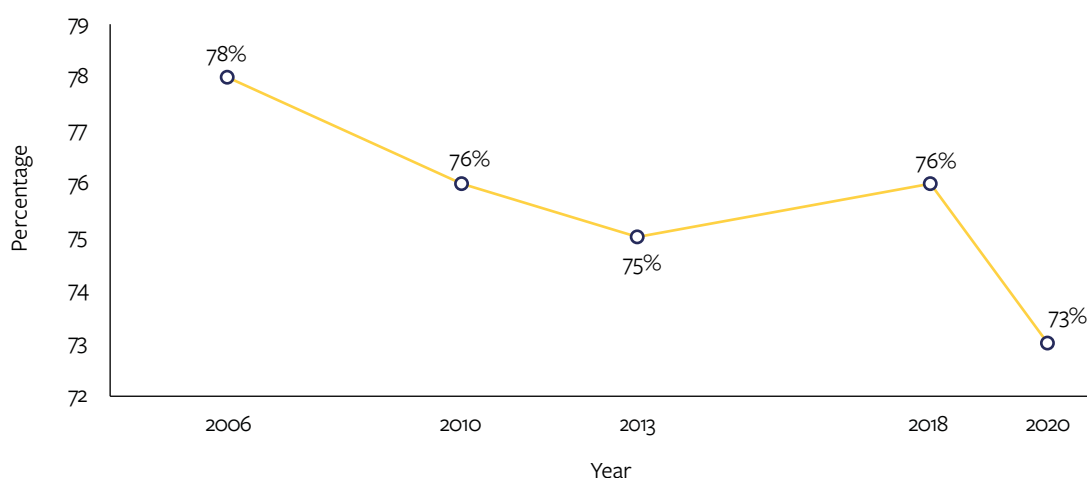
FGM in The Gambia is shaped by deeply entrenched social norms (Hernlund and Shell-Duncan, 2007). This means that the practice is conditioned on the behaviour and perceived expectations of one’s community. According to nationally representative data, the percentage of women who have experienced FGM was 73% in 2020, marginally down from 75% in 2013 (see Figure 2) (DHS, 2020).

The practice is generally carried out on girls aged 2–14, though 1 in 5 Gambian girls experience FGM before their first birthday (Gambia Bureau of Statistics, 2019; Gambia Bureau of Statistics and ICF, 2021). Over half of Gambian girls aged 5–9 are cut, increasing to 63% of girls aged 10–14 (DHS, 2020).

Data on attitudes relating to FGM consider people’s personal beliefs on whether the practice should be continued. Here, opinion in 2020 was evenly split, with 46% of women thinking FGM should be continued and the same proportion saying the opposite. Encouragingly, these beliefs appear to be shifting. In 2013, the estimate of women in favour of continuing the practice was 65% – reflecting a significant drop in support in a relatively short space of time (ibid.).

Changes in social norms appear to be underway. Older generations are relatively more supportive of the practice (ibid.), a finding that was reiterated through the interviews. In general, women tend to view FGM as a valued part of their culture, though younger people are increasingly likely to reject the practice. Over time, this should translate into lower prevalence rates as fewer people decide to get their children cut.



**Figure 2** FGM prevalence in The Gambia

Source: UNFPA (2024)

A final aspect related to FGM and social norms is the revered status of cutters in Gambian culture and society. Many cutters are highly respected elders within their communities, whose practice has been passed down through generations (Lloyd-Roberts, 2013; Maclean et al., 2024; interviews).

The issue of FGM also sits within a broader perspective of the status of women in The Gambia. The Gender Inequality Index, which considers health, labour market and empowerment outcomes, ranks The Gambia 149 out of 166 countries in the world in terms of gender equality (UNDP, 2024). One of the starkest gender gaps is in political participation. Just 5 of the 58 National Assembly members are women (IPU, 2025). This lack of women's political participation is intrinsically linked to slow policy reforms on key issues affecting women, most notably FGM (Nabaneh, 2022; interview).

To sum up, the widespread practice of FGM, despite evidence of small but significant norm change, suggests that any policy initiative on this sensitive issue is likely to be contested – even among women.

### 4.3 Religiosity

The Gambia is a predominantly (>95%) Muslim country whose population exhibits high levels of religiosity (CIA, 2024). Religious leaders are therefore highly influential figures who can wield significant power over their congregations. Many Gambians will rely on their imam, or religious leader, to interpret the faith and provide teachings and guidance for them to follow (interviews). The most recent results from the Afrobarometer survey, which provides nationally representative data, finds that the level of trust Gambians have in their religious leaders is by far the highest (80%) when compared to traditional leaders (60%), the President (45%), the National Assembly (35%) or any other societal actors (Afrobarometer, 2025).

Religious leaders are also seen as a key political constituency in the country: their revered status in society allows them to exert significant political influence. National Assembly members and other political figures know that support from religious leaders is important, given their power to persuade communities to vote in a certain way (interviews). This means that politicians generally try to keep their local religious leaders ‘on side’, lest they risk losing their support and accompanying bloc of votes.

The practice of FGM in The Gambia is deeply rooted in cultural and religious tradition. While Islamic scholarly opinion on the topic at the global level is divided, most imams and religious scholars in The Gambia hold deeply ingrained views that FGM is an Islamic doctrine (interviews). This in turn holds true for the population: 53% of Gambian women believe that their religion requires female circumcision, while only 34% believe it does not (DHS, 2020).

The political influence of religious leaders positions legal restrictions on FGM in opposition to a key constituency of public opinion, who are also able to influence how effectively such policies can be implemented.

#### **4.4 Dependency on foreign development assistance**

Despite being a small country of 2.4 million people, The Gambia is one of the poorest countries on the African continent in per capita terms (Gambia Bureau of Statistics, 2019; World Bank, 2025). The country has a high level of public debt, at around 60% of its gross domestic product in 2024 (IMF, 2025), and the single largest item in its 2022 budget was debt servicing – totalling almost 6 billion dalasis (approximately \$100 million in 2022) (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). In addition, according to the Human Development Index, a multidimensional measure that takes into account health, education and economic indices, The Gambia ranks 174 out of 193 countries (UNDP, 2024).

The Gambia has a high level of dependency on foreign development assistance. In 2022, net ODA was approximately 12.5% of gross national income, with only seven countries across sub-Saharan Africa having a higher proportion (World Bank, 2025). The country’s 2024 budget estimated that 35% (approximately 12.2 billion dalasis, or \$180 million in 2024) of its total revenue came from donor funds (Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, 2024).

This high ODA dependency may have pushed key political actors, notably Jammeh, to align policy-making with donor perspectives – including on the question of FGM.

## 5 Legal and policy framework

The Gambia has a legal and policy framework that in theory should protect fundamental human rights and make progressive reform relatively straightforward. The Constitution, established in 1997 after approval through a national referendum, enshrines the protection of certain fundamental rights and freedoms. These include the right to life, the right to protection from inhuman treatment, and the right to freedom to practise any religion and to manifest such practices (Republic of The Gambia, 1997).

The Gambia is also a signatory to numerous charters that further protect human rights. In 1983, the country became a signatory to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (Banjul Charter), which protects and promotes human rights and basic freedoms across the continent, including the respect for life and integrity of person; the right to dignity and freedom from cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment; the elimination of discrimination against women; and ensuring the protection of the rights of women and children (Organization of African Unity, 1981; African Union, 2017).

The Gambia became a signatory of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child in 2000. This charter makes states responsible for taking all appropriate measures to eliminate 'harmful social and cultural practices', particularly those that risk the health or life of a child – but without making direct reference to FGM (African Union, 1990; 2023a).

The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol), which was ratified by The Gambia in 2005, goes further by explicitly prohibiting all forms of FGM and calling for their eradication (African Union, 2003, 2023b). This makes it one of the few human rights instruments that explicitly prohibits the practice. However, The Gambia did not pass any domestic legislation to this effect in the 10 years following its ratification of the Maputo Protocol.

In addition to the Constitution, laws in The Gambia are formed through a combination of acts of the National Assembly; common law; customary law; and Sharia law for matters such as marriage, divorce and inheritance (Republic of The Gambia, 1997). The most common route for new legislation is through an act of the National Assembly.

From 2010 to 2015, at least three laws in support of women's rights were passed in The Gambia: the Women's Act 2010; the Domestic Violence Act 2013; and the Sexual Offences Act 2013 (Jammeh, 2014). The drive for this reform within government was led by Dr Isatou Njie-Saidy, who was Vice President and Minister for Women's Affairs during this time and someone who has publicly been a staunch advocate of women's rights throughout her political career (see, for example, UNECA, 2009).

The Women's Act (2010) provided a number of human rights protections for women and girls, including protection from violence and harm, the right to health and dignity, and the prohibition of discrimination in education and employment. But one crucial omission in the final bill signed into law was any reference to FGM (Jammeh, 2014).

However, in 2015, following an executive directive by President Jammeh, Vice President Njie-Saidy tabled a bill seeking to amend the 2010 Women's Act by adding provisions explicitly prohibiting all forms of FGM (Njie and Faal, 2015; Nabaneh and Sawo, 2024). This amendment centred on the criminalisation of the practice, along with punishment for those who commit FGM and those who request, incite or promote the practice (Women's (Amendment) Act, 2015).

Both offences would be punishable with three years' imprisonment, a fine of 50,000 dalasis (approximately \$1,300 in 2015), or both. In situations where FGM caused death, this punishment would increase to life imprisonment (*ibid.*). The bill was passed by a large majority in the National Assembly and signed into law by the President (Vanguard News, 2015). However, no convictions were made under this law for almost a decade – suggesting it was largely ignored.

Fast forward to 2023, and in the aftermath of the controversy surrounding the first convictions under the FGM ban came the next reform initiative – this time to reverse the ban through a private member's bill. The Women's (Amendment) Bill 2024 was introduced into the National Assembly in March 2024, seeking to reverse the 2015 amendment and overturn the ban on FGM.

Private members' bills are usually introduced into the legislature by parliamentarians who are not government ministers (that is, not acting on behalf of the executive branch). The primary purpose of these bills is to change the law, but they can also be effective in generating publicity around an issue – which in turn can lead to greater mobilisation for its cause (Nabaneh and Sawo, 2024; UK Parliament, n.d.).

The Women's (Amendment) Bill 2024 was proposed by National Assembly Member Almameh Gibba. This private member's bill appeared to ride the wave of outrage from Gambians following the first convictions under the FGM law. The bill passed its second reading with only 4 of the 47 National Assembly members present opposing the bill from proceeding (Cullinan, 2024).

Normally, a bill would then go through a third reading before receiving presidential assent and being passed into law. However, at the second reading, National Assembly members called for more consultation and the bill was referred to a specialised parliamentary committee for further consideration and scrutiny (see Figure 3). This meant that the decision on whether to overturn the ban on FGM was postponed for at least three months (Ahmed and Ford, 2024).

**Figure 3** Post on X by Deputy Speaker Seedy SK Njie signalling the 2024 Women's (Amendment) Bill's referral to committee



Source: Cullinan (2024)

The period from March to July 2024 was one of intense consultation as the Joint Committee on Health and Gender began scrutinising the bill: gathering evidence from key witnesses and subject matter experts, summarising their key findings, and providing a final opinion of the joint committee on the clauses of the bill and any amendments proposed (Republic of The Gambia, 2024).

The joint committee returned its report to the National Assembly in July 2024, recommending that the country should maintain its ban on FGM. Importantly, the committee framed its decision in terms of the country's adherence to national, regional and international legal frameworks:

'The Gambia's commitment to national, regional, and international conventions, such as CEDAW ... and the Maputo Protocol, reflects its dedication to eliminating discrimination and promoting gender equality.

'The practice of Female Genital Mutilation or Cutting (FGM/C) directly violates these commitments by infringing upon the fundamental right to health and causing severe physical and psychological harm to women and girls ... It is essential to uphold and enforce laws against FGM/C to protect women's and children's rights and foster a progressive social change in The Gambia.' (Republic of The Gambia, 2024: 16)

After adopting the report, lawmakers voted again on the proposed 2024 amendment. A majority of them (34 out of 53) voted against each of the two proposed clauses of the bill, prompting the Speaker to stop the bill from moving forward to a final reading – exhausting the legislative process and effectively killing the bill (Christensen, 2024a; Egbejule, 2024).

Crucially, the four-month period of parliamentary committee allowed key stakeholders on both sides of the debate time to mobilise and advocate for their point of view to policy-makers and communities across the country – many of whom are outlined in detail, along with their incentives, in the next chapter.

## 6 Key stakeholders and motivations

### 6.1 Actors and organisations opposing the ban on FGM

**Table 1** Key actors and organisations opposing the ban on FGM

Actor or organisation	Activity
<b>Islamic Enlightenment Society</b>	Civil society group seeking to defend Islamic values. Supported and paid the fines of those convicted under the FGM ban and led the campaign to overturn it.
<b>Gambia Supreme Islamic Council</b>	Apex organisation that oversees all Islamic associations across The Gambia. Issued a fatwa in support of FGM as an Islamic practice.
<b>Imam Abdoulie Fatty</b>	Highly influential Muslim cleric and former State House Imam under President Jammeh. Vociferous in his support for FGM as an Islamic practice. A key face of the campaign.
<b>Almameh Gibba</b>	National Assembly Member for Foni Kansala, part of the ‘No to Alliance’ movement (a breakaway faction of the APRC). Put forward the private member’s bill to overturn the FGM ban. A key face of the campaign.
<b>Concerned Citizens</b>	Gambian civil society group campaigning to overturn the ban. One of the plaintiffs for the upcoming Supreme Court appeal of the ban.
<b>Gambian Women Are Free To Choose</b>	Gambian civil society group campaigning to overturn the ban. One of the plaintiffs for the upcoming Supreme Court appeal of the ban.
<b>Women’s Association for Islamic Solidarity</b>	Gambian civil society group campaigning to overturn the ban. One of the plaintiffs for the upcoming Supreme Court appeal of the ban.

### The political influence of organised religion

The drive to overturn the 2015 ban on FGM was led by a coalition of stakeholders united by their religious belief that FGM is an ‘Islamic’ practice, deeply rooted in the culture and tradition of The Gambia. As outlined in Section 4.3, there is a high level of religiosity in the country, which means that religious leaders are a key political constituency with high levels of influence.

#### Religious leaders

In the aftermath of the controversy following the convictions, numerous influential religious and political figures pushed for a reversal of the ban. Chief among them was Imam Abdoulie Fatty, a renowned cleric and former State House Imam under President Jammeh. Leading a delegation

from the Islamic Enlightenment Society, a civil society group that seeks to defend Islamic values, Fatty travelled to the Central River Region to meet the three convicted women and pay their fines, directly presenting the cash to them in a very public demonstration of support (Jadama, 2023). During his visit, Fatty framed the terms of the debate strongly on religious grounds:

‘This campaign against female circumcision is actually a fight against Islam. But we are ready to sacrifice everything and we are not going to take even one step back ... Enough is enough. Let us stop provoking and offending each other. We should follow the command of Prophet Muhammad. Instead, they are fighting Islam, but Allah will be the judge.’ (Jadama, 2023)

In addition, the Gambia Supreme Islamic Council – the de facto leading Muslim authority in The Gambia that oversees Islamic organisations and associations across the country – declared a fatwa, or religious ruling, reiterating the practice of female circumcision as ‘one of the virtues of Islam’, rooted in the *sunnah*, or teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (Gambia Supreme Islamic Council, 2023).

This is despite the fact that the Saudi Arabia-based Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, an intergovernmental organisation of 57 largely Muslim-majority countries – whose Islamic Summit was held in The Gambia for the first time in 2024 – is explicitly in favour of eliminating the practice (OIC, 2016). Other leading Muslim authorities to condemn FGM include the prestigious Al-Azhar Mosque and University in Egypt, whose Grand Imam said in 1997 that FGM has ‘nothing to do with religion’ (BBC, 1997).

Observers note that Imam Fatty in particular exerted strong influence on the public and political discourse on FGM through his campaign to uphold it as a religious and traditional Gambian practice. This cemented his status as one of the key faces of the campaign. Religious leaders from other ethnic groups practising FGM allied with him, supporting his position and forming an advocacy group for the law to be repealed (interviews).

## Politicians

Several National Assembly members – recognising the power that comes from aligning with popular and influential religious leaders – allied themselves to the cause of overturning the ban on FGM (Touray, 2024). The key protagonist was Alameh Gibba, National Assembly Member for Foni Kansala, who put forward the private member’s bill seeking to overturn the ban. He was referred to in the interviews as a ‘disciple’ of Imam Fatty.

Gibba, along with many of the National Assembly members who voted to overturn the ban, comes from the south-west of the country (West Coast and Lower River regions) where prevalence rates of FGM are relatively higher (DHS, 2023; Taylor, 2024). Many of these same parliamentarians appear to be part of the ‘No to Alliance’ movement – a breakaway faction of the APRC that continues to support ex-President Jammeh (Sillah, 2025).



Interestingly, this is despite the fact that Jammeh was the one to bring in the FGM ban – though many argue this came under duress. As discussed in Section 4.1, analysis suggests Jammeh’s decision was part of a broader tactical trade-off: accommodating global gender norms to enhance the country’s democratic reputation and gain legitimacy among international donors, in order to maintain his grip on power domestically (Nabaneh, 2024).

Gibba was not well-known outside of his constituency before spearheading the debate to overturn the FGM ban in parliament (Christensen, 2024b). His championing of the cause has served him well, acting as a career boost and providing him prominence in national and international media coverage. In this regard, his motivations may have been a combination of playing to his political base of religious constituents who predominantly practise FGM, and opportunistically seizing the moment to become another key face of the campaign by assuming political leadership of the drive to overturn the ban. This demonstrates how some political actors may potentially be motivated more by personal gain than necessarily by ideological commitment.

### Civil society

Another set of actors opposing the FGM ban are various civil society groups. These groups – which are predominantly women’s organisations – do not appear to be particularly influential. Further research is needed to deepen understandings of their motivations. It is likely that adherence to religious interpretation is a primary driver of their position to protect FGM. The most prominent examples of these civil society groups are the Women’s Association for Islamic Solidarity, Gambian Women Are Free To Choose and Concerned Citizens.

These groups express the sentiment that FGM is a part of Gambians’ religious beliefs and that the 2015 ban represents the imposition of ‘western values’ by international donors or former colonial powers. This can be seen from their demonstrations, where protestors recite Arabic prayers, chant slogans including ‘Female circumcision is my religious belief, Gambia is not for sale’, and hold up posters with messages like ‘It’s our right to practice our religion’ and ‘We will not sell our religion for worldly gains’.

There are suggestions that the religious organisations mentioned are financially supporting these civil society groups, including drafting young girls from religious school to protest, and providing them with transport to attend demonstrations at the National Assembly (Touray, 2024). The demonstrations include many posters in English – despite the fact that more than half of women in The Gambia cannot read at all, and support for FGM is highest among those with the lowest levels of education (primary, pre-primary or no education) (Gambia Bureau of Statistics, 2019; DHS, 2020). This could suggest a manipulation, or even instrumentalisation, of young women and girls by religious organisations to further their cause and provide greater legitimacy for it (Touray, 2024).

## The normative power of culture and tradition

### Cutters

A final group with entrenched incentives to overturn the criminalisation of FGM are the cutters themselves. These women benefit economically from families who pay them for their services. While this in itself would appear to create a strong motivation for their support for FGM, on further analysis the normative imperative seems to weigh greater than the economic one (interviews).

Cutters in The Gambia tend to be elder women who, through their role, enjoy a certain level of respect and status within their community. They often remain close to the families of the girls they cut, who consult them for health, spiritual and marital advice (Christensen, 2024b).

For example, Yassin Fatty, the cutter who was convicted in 2023, was 95 years old at the time and inherited her vocation from family members on both her mother's and father's side. After participating in a 'dropping-the-knife' ceremony to abandon the practice, organised by Gambian anti-FGM non-governmental organisation (NGO) GAMCOTRAP in 2013, she was given money to start a bakery as an alternative means of income generation (Maclean et al., 2024). The underlying assumption here was that she had been carrying out the practice for livelihood purposes and would stop once she had an alternative option.

Instead, it appears that what motivated her – as with many cutters – was the immense source of pride that comes with upholding a longstanding Gambian tradition, especially one that is often passed down through generations. In an interview with the New York Times, Fatty said:

‘Even if you bring a bag of money, I won’t stop what I found my grandparents doing. I don’t do anything just because I’m told to by outsiders. I listen to myself.’ (Maclean et al., 2024)

Many Gambians were appalled at the prospect that cutters – as elders who are highly respected within their communities – could be sent to prison. This argument was especially compelling among Gambians for two reasons: first, because of how widespread FGM is in the country and, second, because of the prevalent longstanding social norm of respect for cutters in The Gambia (interview).

The prospect of thousands of well-respected women elders being convicted and potentially imprisoned understandably felt like an affront to the culture and tradition of Gambians – which no doubt influenced public opinion. Afrobarometer's most recent survey suggests that more Gambians want to repeal the law banning FGM (46.8%) compared to those who think it should stay (44%) (Afrobarometer, 2025).

The framing of the FGM narrative by pro-FGM actors in The Gambia in response to the convictions can be summarised as follows:

1. **The practice is obligatory in Islam and rooted in Gambian tradition and culture.**

This argument states that as a Muslim you should be cut: if you are not cut, you are not a ‘clean’, good practising Muslim. It draws its power from the high levels of religiosity in the country, and the fact that religious leaders serve as gatekeepers to guide communities in matters of religious interpretation, including FGM (interview). This strategy also tries to make a distinction between ‘female genital mutilation’ and ‘female circumcision’ – implying there is a difference between them and claiming that the latter is acceptable and indeed what is prescribed in Islam (Gambia Supreme Islamic Council, 2023; Saine, 2024). The language of ‘circumcision’ also implies a practice comparable to male circumcision, which is not contested by the public or by policy-makers (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2009; Mafotsing, 2024).

2. **Gambians should adhere to the practice, with sanctions for non-compliance and rewards for compliance.**

This links to FGM being a strong social norm in The Gambia. The pervasive narrative is that women who are not cut will be promiscuous and sexually active. This suggests that uncut women may not be virgins at marriage and are unlikely to remain faithful to their husbands – both of which would bring disgrace to a Gambian woman and her family. Meanwhile, being cut can be a source of pride within one’s family and community, elevating a woman’s status and making her eligible for marriage (Maclean et al., 2024; interviews).

3. **The ban is part of a colonial, western ideology to eradicate the practice.**

Another dominant narrative is that ‘outsiders’ are imposing their views on Gambians, erasing their culture and traditions in the name of western imperialism. Arguments that support this narrative include that secular western society wants Gambian women to be promiscuous; that ‘outsiders’ want to create internal conflict to destabilise the country; and that they want Gambian people to lose their religious identity (Bah, 2024; interviews). The upholding of religious values is intricately connected with anti-colonial sentiments in The Gambia and across the African continent (interviews). References to the country’s culture and religion not being ‘for sale’ suggest a belief – which to some extent may be true – that the west is using its economic resources to influence the elimination of FGM in The Gambia.

For pro-reform actors seeking to maintain the ban on FGM, this situation creates a ‘triple bind’. First, politicians are unlikely to be swayed by their advocacy efforts, given the oversized influence of local religious leaders, who are largely against the ban and can use their political weight to mobilise people. Second, because of the strong social norms in favour of FGM, their campaigns risk alienating many Gambians. And finally, prevailing narratives paint progressive legal reform on FGM as a western imposition that is in direct opposition to Gambian traditions and the teachings of Islam. Thus, regressive actors are portrayed as the defenders of cultural and religious values in the face of a perceived threat to these rights and freedoms.

## 6.2 Actors and organisations supporting the ban on FGM

**Table 2** Key organisations supporting the ban on FGM

Actor or organisation	Activity
<b>Gambia Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (GAMCOTRAP)</b>	Gambian civil society organisation led by Isatou Touray (former Vice President of The Gambia). Raises awareness about the harms of FGM and mobilises communities to abandon the practice. Campaigned for the maintenance of the ban on FGM.
<b>Network Against Gender-Based Violence (NGBV)</b>	Gambian umbrella organisation of civil society organisations, NGOs and government institutions, led by Fallu Sowe. Played a key coordinating role in campaigning for the maintenance of the FGM ban.
<b>Women in Liberation and Leadership (WILL)</b>	Gambian civil society organisation led by Fatou Baldeh, survivor of FGM. Works to address violence against women and girls. Campaigned for the maintenance of the ban on FGM.
<b>Safe Hands for Girls</b>	Gambian civil society organisation led by Jaha Dukureh, survivor of FGM. Conducts grassroots activities and high-level advocacy to fight FGM and child marriage. Campaigned for the maintenance of the ban on FGM.
<b>Female Lawyers Association – Gambia (FLAG)</b>	Gambian civil society organisation. Works to protect the rights of women and children. Supporting the Ministry of Justice in its defence of the FGM ban in the upcoming Supreme Court case.
<b>UN Population Fund (UNFPA)</b>	International organisation with Gambia country presence. Worked ‘behind the scenes’ along with other international organisations and NGOs to support Gambian civil society voices.

### In defence of human rights

The coalition of progressive actors that mobilised to maintain the ban were united in their view of FGM as a human rights violation that is deeply damaging to the health of women and girls. These actors came predominantly from Gambian civil society, many of whom had been campaigning for the criminalisation of FGM long before the 2015 law came into place. They were supported by several international organisations committed to ending the practice at the global level.

### Civil society

The majority of Gambian civil society groups advocating in support of the ban were women-led organisations and movements. Most well-known among them is GAMCOTRAP, which has been campaigning against FGM since 1984. Its co-founder and executive director is Dr Isatou Touray, a political activist who was the first Gambian female presidential candidate and who served as Vice President under President Barrow from 2019 to 2022.

GAMCOTRAP has been influential in its push for legal reform to bring in a ban on the practice, as well as its community-based sensitisation campaigns. These seek to align themselves with Gambian culture, stressing the importance of preserving positive traditional practices while

eliminating those that are harmful to women and girls (Hernlund, 2022). GAMCOTRAP was also directly involved in the controversy of the 2023 conviction, with one of its community-based coordinators receiving a tip-off that the cutting ceremony was taking place and reporting the incident to the police (Coker, 2023).

Safe Hands for Girls is another influential women's rights organisation dedicated to eradicating FGM. Established in 2013, it works through community outreach, youth mobilisation and campaigning across the country. Founder Jaha Dukureh, herself a survivor of FGM, is an outspoken critic of the practice and has found global recognition through her activism – in 2018 she was appointed Regional UN Women Ambassador for Africa (UN Women, 2018; Safe Hands for Girls, n.d.). She was a notable figure throughout the recent campaign to maintain the ban, including attending the National Assembly during debates on the proposed Women's (Amendment) Bill 2024 (Christensen, 2024a).

Other prominent women's organisations include Women in Liberation and Leadership (WILL), which was founded in 2018 by Fatou Baldeh – another survivor of FGM. Its mission is to address violence against women and girls and protect their sexual and reproductive health through advocacy, awareness-raising, capacity building and psycho-social support (WILL, n.d.). The Female Lawyers Association – Gambia (FLAG) is a group of lawyers who contribute to the development and realisation of the rights of women and children in The Gambia. Currently led by Anna Njie, their past presidents have been influential in legal reform processes in The Gambia. For example, founding member and first President Janet Ramatoulie Sallah-Njie played a key role in reviewing national laws related to women and gender-based violence and drafting the Women's Act 2010, the Sexual Offences Act 2013 and the Domestic Violence Act 2013. She is currently Commissioner and Vice-Chairperson of the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights (FLAG, n.d.). Other notable young women's organisations involved in the campaign to maintain the ban on FGM include Think Young Women and The Girls' Agenda (Girard, 2025).

Finally, an important umbrella group is the Network Against Gender-Based Violence (NGBV). Co-founded and led by Fallu Sowe, this membership-based organisation, established in 2009, comprises various civil society organisations, NGOs and affiliated government institutions working to counter all forms of gender-based violence, including FGM. NGBV has been influential in setting up and managing nine 'one stop centres', which are located within hospitals across the country and provide support to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (NGBV, n.d.). NGBV also played a critical role in coordinating the response of progressive actors to the potential overturn of the FGM ban (interviews).

Many of the organisations outlined above receive money from external partners to support their activities. Donors include UN agencies, international NGOs, European bilateral donors, and largely European- and US-based philanthropic organisations (FLAG n.d.; GAMCOTRAP, n.d.; NGBV, n.d.; Safe Hands for Girls, n.d.; WILL, n.d.). These donors provide much-needed resources to support

Gambian civil society actors in protecting women's rights. Yet their financial flows also neatly tie into the narrative of pro-FGM actors, who claim these campaigns are part of a western conspiracy seeking influence and instability in The Gambia.

After the Women's (Amendment) Bill 2024, seeking to decriminalise FGM, passed its first and second readings in the National Assembly, many Gambian civil society organisations, including those listed above, mobilised to advocate for maintaining the ban, which undoubtedly made a difference to the eventual outcome (Drammeh, 2024). This action was motivated by their concern for human rights: there was a genuine fear that the ban on FGM could be overturned, undoing decades of progress securing and strengthening the rights of women and girls.

In response, progressive civil society actors came together around a strategic action plan, which can be summarised as follows (interview):

- **Meetings with key ministries:** including the Ministry of Justice; Ministry of Health; and Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Welfare. These were identified as the key stakeholders within government.
- **Meetings with National Assembly members:** including particularly the Select Committees on Gender, Children and Social Welfare; Human Rights; and Health. This was especially pertinent because the bill was referred to a Joint Committee of Health and Gender, whose membership consisted of National Assembly members. Many civil society organisations were consulted and asked to provide evidence as witnesses under the joint committee.
- **Media advocacy:** including press conferences; social media, television and radio campaigns; and the showcasing of progressive religious leaders to convince Gambians that FGM is not a religious practice.
- **Community mobilisation:** including engaging with activists; survivors; religious and community leaders; women and youth leaders – as well as making sure they were present and visible at the National Assembly. This would demonstrate to parliamentarians that the population is truly divided on the issue and that those advocating for maintaining the ban can be heard among grassroots movements. Hence, National Assembly members may not lose their seats by supporting the ban.
- **Position papers:** drafting short, evidence-based briefs on the dangers and limitations of FGM from various dimensions, including legal and human rights; health consequences; socioeconomic implications; and survivors' perspectives.

The centring of survivors throughout this action plan was a compelling strategy to humanise the debate and provide stories of the lived reality of women and girls who had been cut. This trend continued in the joint committee, where more than 15 survivors were called as witnesses for committee members to hear their experiences (Dukureh, 2024; Republic of The Gambia, 2024; interviews).

## International organisations

The international community was also caught by surprise by the prospect of The Gambia becoming the first country ever to overturn a ban on FGM. Following the controversy around the convictions and the bill to decriminalise FGM passing its first and second readings, international organisations undertook a period of intense mobilisation to campaign against the removal of the ban.

The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) have a Joint Programme on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation, which is operational in 17 countries in Africa and the Arab States, including in The Gambia (UNFPA, 2024). With an ongoing presence in the country, these actors were able to react quickly to the situation and assess how best to support. Other international organisations that supported maintaining the FGM ban through their work on defending human rights included Action Aid, Equality Now and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU).

**Figure 4** Dropping of the knife procession by ex-cutters



Source: Dropping of the knife procession by ex-cutters in Wassu, Central River District in The Gambia, April 2013. Credit: UNFPA The Gambia.

Given the sensitivities regarding western influence, the initial strategy of international organisations present in The Gambia was to conduct ‘behind the scenes’ advocacy. This consisted of supporting Gambian civil society organisations, putting them at the forefront, and providing resources and assistance to them as needed. Simultaneously, international organisations also engaged in private discussions with government and National Assembly members to understand their motivations and make the case to them to reject the bill (interviews).

One later initiative, described in interviews as a ‘turning point’ of the debate, was the organisation of a benchmarking visit to Cairo for around 30 National Assembly members in June 2024. This was led by the joint committee and supported by several international organisations including the UNFPA, IPU and the World Bank (Alkamba Times, 2024a). The purpose of the trip was to learn about Egypt’s experience in addressing FGM, as a fellow Muslim-majority country with high prevalence rates. This allowed the parliamentarians to get a different perspective in a neutral environment outside of The Gambia, where the issue was salient and the debate highly polarised.

The study tour provided opportunities for National Assembly members to meet with government colleagues, professional health workers and Islamic scholars from Al-Azhar University. This reportedly helped to shift the views of some of the attendees who, through first-hand testimony of the harmful health effects of FGM (including through medicalisation) as well as alternative interpretations of the faith in which the practice is discouraged, decided to support the ban (IPU, 2024; interviews).

However, those who were not directly involved in the tour were more sceptical of its true impact, suggesting the trip was an opportunistic one that did not reveal any new information, while others framed it as a ‘typical government trip’ to travel somewhere nice and collect per diems (Touray, 2024; interviews).

A final strategy of international organisations was the use of diplomatic channels to encourage The Gambia to maintain the ban. Public diplomatic pressure came in the form of strongly worded statements, including from the UN Secretary General; the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights; the European Parliament; and the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls (Radice, 2024). These did not appear to be so effective, though, and again played into the narrative of western powers dictating how The Gambia should vote on a matter of state sovereignty – undermining progressive activism (interview).

In addition to this public pressure, however, a ‘quiet diplomacy’ took place. This entailed international organisations and bilateral donors privately raising their concerns, as well as threatening to pull out their resources, programmes and funding from the country, and possibly even restrict visa access for high-profile advocates of FGM. High-level discussions were also held directly between ambassador-level staff and the President. This more private, economic diplomacy seemed to be more influential given The Gambia’s high poverty and dependency on foreign development assistance (interviews).



## A resounding silence from politicians

Politicians were conspicuous by their absence from campaigns related to the Women's (Amendment) Bill 2024. President Barrow remained neutral, staying silent throughout most of the process – reiterating the contentious nature of the FGM debate in The Gambia and the political risks associated with taking one side over another. President Barrow comes from the region with the highest prevalence of FGM in the country, suggesting he may risk a great loss of constituent support if he speaks out against the practice (DHS, 2023; interview).

There are suggestions that Barrow may also have been influenced by the First Lady, Fatoumatta Bah-Barrow. Some observers say that she does not consider FGM a significant issue and that she has refused to speak out publicly about it until very recently (interviews).

Barrow's stance characterised that of many political actors: the politically powerful feared a loss of political power by taking a stand against FGM. Information Minister Ismaila Ceesay, for example, stated that while the government does not support FGM, it will 'allow democracy to run its course' (Christensen, 2024b). Meanwhile, lawmakers who opposed the bill were met with political and even physical threats. Religious leaders told some National Assembly members that if they did not vote to repeal the 2015 law, they would campaign against them and make sure they lost their seat (interview). One National Assembly member who voted against the bill reported receiving anonymous death threats (Christensen, 2024b).

Barrow did eventually speak up on the matter, saying in June 2024 that his government would abide by the 2015 ban even as the new bill was being debated in committee. However, he was non-committal on his course of action if the amendment were to pass – seemingly caught between international pressure to uphold the ban and a population that largely practises FGM and sees it as part of their culture and religion (AFP, 2024).

The referral to parliamentary committee was a welcome relief to politicians, especially those who were personally against FGM but feared speaking out. The joint committee's investigation and report shifted responsibility away from parliamentarians to a more 'neutral' committee that considered justifications for and against the repeal of the ban. The joint committee conducted a thorough review process, seeking out expert and witness testimonies in order to ensure a well-informed scrutiny of the bill (Republic of The Gambia, 2024). Parliamentarians felt more ready to accept and vote in favour of the findings of the joint committee's report, viewing this as less politically risky than a simple vote on the amendment (interview).

## 7 Current political considerations

### 7.1 Supreme Court case

There was a collective sigh of relief from progressive actors on SRHR when the Women's (Amendment) Bill 2024 failed to pass to a third and final reading in the National Assembly, exhausting the legislative process. But the debate is still not over. National Assembly Member Almameh Gibba, along with the three convicted women, and four religious and civil society groups – the Islamic Enlightenment Society; Women's Association for Islamic Solidarity; Gambian Women Are Free To Choose; and Concerned Citizens – have launched a case with the Supreme Court claiming that the 2015 Women's (Amendment) Act criminalising FGM violates Gambians' constitutional rights to cultural, traditional and religious freedoms (Alkamba Times, 2024b; The Standard, 2024).

In particular, they point to Section 25(1)(c), which guarantees every Gambian the right to 'freedom to practise any religion and to manifest such practice' and Section 32, which enshrines the right to 'enjoy, practise, profess, maintain and promote any culture, language, tradition or religion' (Republic of The Gambia, 1997: 26 and 28).

In December 2024, the Supreme Court granted the plaintiffs additional time to secure legal representation for their case, which will be heard in the next session of the court in 2025 (The Standard, 2024). Meanwhile, some progressive civil society organisations, including FLAG and the Gambia Bar Association, are planning to support the Ministry of Justice in its defence by joining the case as interested parties (interview). In July 2025, the Supreme Court case was resumed (Bass, 2025).

### 7.2 What might happen next?

The Gambia's struggle with the FGM ban reflects a complex interplay between cultural norms, religious beliefs and the fight for gender equality (Nabaneh, 2024). The recent political and legal challenges to the ban show how easily progress can be reversed.

It is likely that the Supreme Court will uphold the ban, drawing similar conclusions to the joint committee report. These are centred on the right to health for women and girls; their freedom from physical and psychological harm; and the country's commitment to regional and international conventions, including the Maputo Protocol, which explicitly prohibits the practice. This has been bolstered by the recent ECOWAS Court of Justice ruling against Sierra Leone on 8 July 2025, which found the nation in breach of its human rights obligations – including contravening key legal provisions of the Maputo Protocol and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child – for failing to criminalise FGM (Bah, 2025; Johnson, 2025).

Yet even with the maintenance of the ban, it is unlikely there will be major enforcement through prosecutions and convictions. The prospect of fining or imprisoning older women – many of whom are mothers and grandmothers – is deeply contentious, particularly given prevalent social norms in The Gambia around FGM and respect for elders.

Instead, the mobilisation that occurred during the parliamentary committee stage will need to be sustained to encourage a shift in the hearts and minds of Gambians. Encouragingly, early signs of this are emerging: senior leadership figures in the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Welfare have begun calling for schools to start teaching children about the dangers of FGM as well as providing support to those who may be at risk (Coker, 2025b).

Given the controversial nature of the debate, with popular opinion appearing to be split fairly evenly on the issue (DHS, 2020), many political actors will want to avoid coming down strongly on either side and risk alienating a sizeable proportion of their constituents, potentially losing popularity and, crucially, votes. The next legislative elections are set to take place in 2027.

The same goes for President Barrow, who recently confirmed his intention to run for re-election in the next presidential elections (M. Jawo, 2025). His approval ratings are currently low; over 60% of Gambians disapprove or strongly disapprove of his performance, with their biggest grievance being the decline of peace and security in the country (Afrobarometer, 2025). He will likely spend the next year building up his campaign and forging alliances, before an anticipated election in December 2026.

The most likely outcome regarding FGM in The Gambia can then be regarded as a stalemate: a law that remains in place, but with little enforcement; civil society organisations mobilising for norm change, but with limited political will to complement these efforts. However, the situation is fragile and can explode at any moment.

One potential flashpoint is the tragic death of a one-month-old baby, who died from excessive bleeding after undergoing FGM in August 2025 (K. Jawo, 2025). This sparked widespread moral outrage, domestically and internationally, and has thrust the issue of FGM back into the spotlight in The Gambia (Bah and Coker, 2025; France 24, 2025; Naadi, 2025). Swift action was taken: police arrested three women in connection with the baby's death, including her mother and the cutter, and launched an investigation into the child's death (K. Jawo, 2025). On 14 August 2025, Gambian police charged three women under the Women's (Amendment) Act 2015 (Saine, 2025). A second death, this time of a three-week old baby, was subsequently reported in September 2025 (Coker, 2025a).

Beyond this very live issue, there are two further areas of contention that could act as an ignition. The first is constitutional reform. President Barrow has pledged to bring in a new constitution since his election in 2016, but failed to pass through a draft constitution in 2020 during his first term (Saine, 2024). The newly updated 2024 draft Constitution establishes a two-term limit for

presidents but removes a clause from the 2020 draft that would retroactively apply this limit. This means that Barrow could potentially serve two more terms as president – a move viewed by his opponents as anti-democratic and reminiscent of The Gambia’s autocratic past (Camara, 2024). In July 2025, Gambian lawmakers rejected the newly-proposed draft Constitution – seen as a significant setback in the country’s path to democratic transition (Joof, 2025; Nabaneh, 2025).

The second is the prospect of Yahya Jammeh returning to The Gambia. In early 2025, he declared through an audio message to his followers that he intends to return to the country from exile in Equatorial Guinea (France 24 English, 2025). While Jammeh has made similar comments in the past (CFR, 2020), it now appears to be a more likely possibility. According to his ‘No to Alliance’ followers in the National Assembly, the ex-President still commands a substantial base of supporters and remains a prominent figure in Gambian politics (Sillah, 2025). Without retroactive term limits in a future constitution, Jammeh could potentially even contest democratic presidential elections in 2026 and serve two additional five-year terms. After reportedly orchestrating the embezzlement of close to \$1 billion of public funds, he clearly has the economic resources to launch a campaign and contest the election if he is able to safely return to The Gambia without conviction or imprisonment (Sharife and Anderson, 2019).

In the background to all the politicking, it is important for progressive international organisations, bilateral donors and philanthropic organisations to keep funding like-minded groups in the country. Otherwise, groups may be further tempted by alternative sources of funding from actors holding opposing ideological beliefs.

After the European Union threatened to withdraw funding from The Gambia in 2014 over human rights concerns, Jammeh courted money from Qatar, Kuwait and Turkey instead and allegedly cut off dialogue with the European Union (Euractiv, 2014). Similarly, Barrow has sought closer ties to Saudi Arabia, which in turn has provided financing for infrastructure projects, including a \$50 million roads project and a \$40 million plan to redevelop the airport in Banjul (SFD, 2021).

Beyond the usual development projects on infrastructure, agriculture, health and education, progressive donors can provide support to key ministries and civil society organisations for their FGM sensitisation campaigns and norm change initiatives, showing an alternative future for Gambian people where culture and tradition are preserved and respected – but not at the expense of women’s and girls’ rights.

### 7.3 Implications in The Gambia

Rights advocates fear that the controversy around the Women’s (Amendment) Bill 2024 has the potential for wider repercussions in the country, dismantling protections for women and girls. Many civil society and international organisations believe that other core legislation protecting women’s and girls’ rights could be under threat, including those related to child marriage,

sexual and gender-based violence and even girls' education (Christensen, 2024b; Kerr Fatou Media, 2024). Jaha Dukureh, from Safe Hands for Girls, put it as follows:

'This is just the opening. I don't think this is only about FGM ... this is bigger than FGM. I think if they succeed with repealing the law against FGM, they will come after the Child Marriage Law. Who knows they might even come after the Domestic Violence Law. And next thing we know, the Sexual Violence Act. So I think this is bigger than FGM, this is about the control of women and their bodies.' (Al Jazeera, 2024)

While the overturn of the ban has been avoided for now, it has meant that other issues previously deemed 'off the table' may now return for debate. This underscores how the rights of women and girls are increasingly threatened by political Islam and religious fundamentalism in the country, itself a legacy of Jammeh's regime, where religious symbolism was exploited to consolidate and reinforce autocratic rule (Agyemang et al., 2024; Touray, 2024).

In the case of FGM in The Gambia, the distance between the norm of carrying out the practice and the law criminalising it was particularly great. Thus, even when the 2015 law set the normative standard to which Gambians are held to account, the gap was sufficiently large for it to have little impact on the norm. This raises the question of whether change can be legislated in such instances, or whether alternative strategies – such as education, awareness-raising and space for critical reflection – might be better placed (Nabaneh and Muula, 2019).

In the end, the law remained in place due to the work of civil society, including survivors of FGM (Drammeh, 2024; Dukureh, 2024). An open and vibrant civic space is critical to ensuring that future threats to women's and girls' rights, as well as to democracy, are contained (Khan and Sharp, 2025).

## 7.4 Regional implications

The bill in The Gambia also led to fears from rights advocates and international organisations of a 'domino effect', where other countries with FGM bans in the region might decide to follow suit (Christensen, 2024b; interviews). Of particular concern was Senegal, given the demographic and geographic proximity between the two countries. A clear example of the domino effect was Kenya's proposed 2023 Family Protection Bill, written in near-identical terms to Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act that passed into law the same year (Mersie and Hlatshwayo, 2023; Browne, 2025).

The ongoing FGM Supreme Court case in The Gambia is also similar to Kenya's situation in 2021, where the High Court rejected a petition to reverse its ban on FGM on constitutional grounds. Encouragingly, the court heard testimony from survivors and health experts, citing the legal protection of the law from this harmful practice as well as Kenya's ratification of international treaties including CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol as justifications for the constitutionality of the ban (Equality Now, 2021).

## 7.5 A global backlash against women's rights

Progress on women's rights is deteriorating globally, fuelled by a coordinated and well-resourced backlash against gender equality by anti-rights actors. This is directly connected to the concurrent rise of authoritarianism and the weakening of democracy and its institutions (Khan et al., 2023). The anti-gender backlash is a significant barrier to progress on gender equality, and risks eroding the hard-won gains made by feminists, social movements and wider civil society in recent decades.

Current political circumstances have only served to embolden anti-rights actors, who sense an opportune moment to pursue their regressive agenda. This is exemplified by the recent re-election of Donald Trump in the US. The ascendance of such figures suggests there is an entrenched political support for anti-rights politics, with its nationalist, religious and anti-democratic undertones and outright attacks on the rights of women and girls, LGBTQ+ people, and other minorities.

The effect of this anti-rights backlash is compounded by shrinking funding to counter the threats it poses. Budget cuts to ODA are being seen across Europe, including in the Netherlands and the UK (Brien and Loft, 2025; NL Times, 2025). In the US, meanwhile, President Trump used his executive powers to freeze all US foreign development assistance in February 2025 (which in 2023 totalled \$39 billion) – before officially closing down the US Agency for International Development in July 2025 (Faguy, 2025; Kessler, 2025; The White House, 2025b).

Gender is a clear target. In the Netherlands, the UK and the US, for example, development programmes supporting gender equality have been slashed (Bond, 2025; NL Times, 2025; The White House, 2025a). The immediate impact of these funding cuts has already been felt: in February 2025, all US funding for UNFPA, totalling \$377million, was terminated with immediate effect – with disastrous consequences for SRHR worldwide, including on FGM (UNFPA, 2025).

These assaults to human rights can be seen as a resurgence of patriarchal social norms, which risk unravelling the normative frameworks that have helped protect and strengthen human rights for decades. But pro-rights actors are fighting back, providing an alternative vision for what the prevailing norms should be. This research has demonstrated the importance to these actors of developing a politically informed approach: illuminating strategic opportunities and political openings to safeguard and enhance human rights for all.

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