



**GENERATION**

AFRICA-LED MOVEMENT TO END FGM/C | MY POWER MY VOICE

**THE  
TRANSFORMATIONAL  
POWER OF LANGUAGE  
IN ACTION**

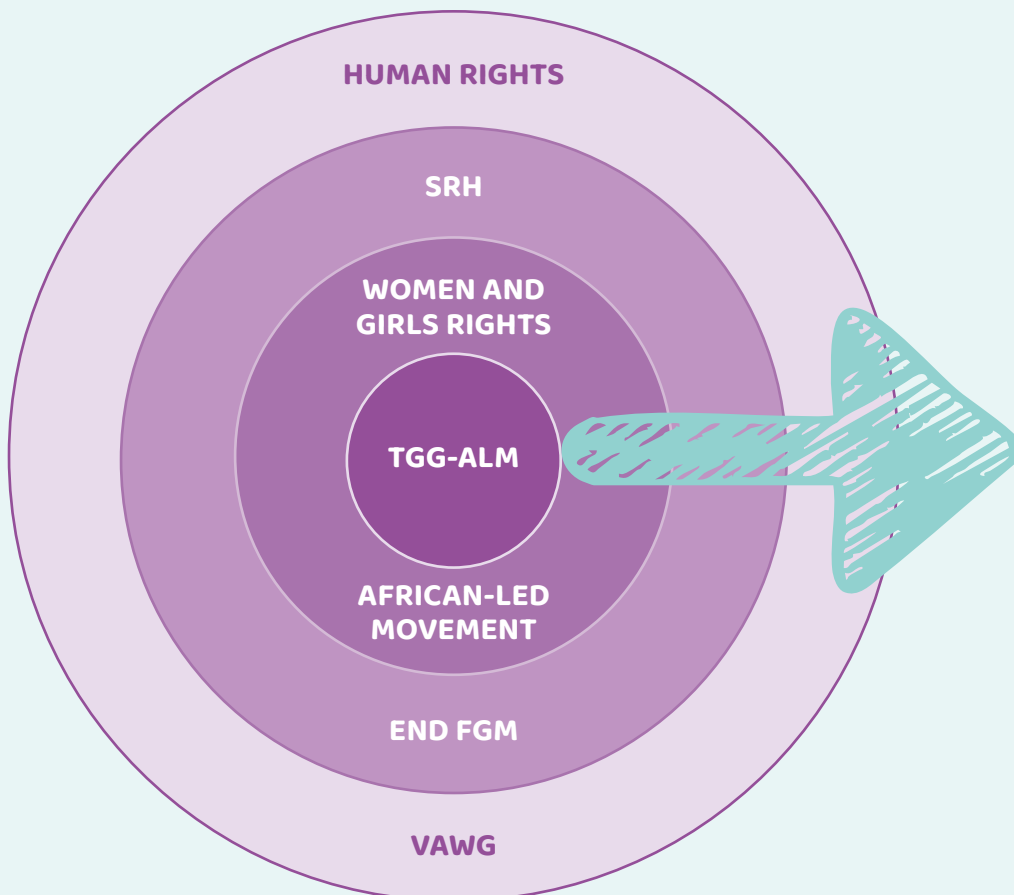
# INTRODUCTION

**Framing conversations about Female Genital Mutilation and Cutting (FGM) is an essential part of our work at The Girl Generation: Support to the Africa-led movement to end FGM (TGG-ALM). We want to leverage the role of language used by the movement to end FGM to shift paradigms, such as cultural relativism and patriarchal norms, and to reimagine a world free from harmful norms where human rights, justice, and equality for all prevail.**

Whilst this document is aimed at those working within the movement to end FGM, we trust that a renewed engagement with the power of language has significance across the adjacent and complementary spheres of violence against women and girls, women and girls rights and human rights.

This paper is a living document, to be updated and adapted as we collectively learn and engage on this issue together. We invite you to be part of this evolving journey as we begin gathering stories of the change and influence which result from these language shifts. Your input, reflections, and experiences will be invaluable as we continue this work, and we encourage you to join us in creating a more intentional and impactful dialogue.

This paper is intended as a thought piece to guide our thinking in how we, and those we work with, use language, helping us all to become more reflective, conscious, and intentional. We hope it encourages you to reflect on your own language, start meaningful conversations, and contribute to real, lasting change in this vital area.



Influence change in language across adjacent sectors and movements

# SECTION 1:



**THE POWER OF  
LANGUAGE IN  
THE MOVEMENT  
TO END FGM**

## THE POWER OF LANGUAGE IN THE MOVEMENT TO END FGM

### The language we use has both positive and negative power.

Language is a powerful tool which must be used carefully and thoughtfully to ensure it contributes to the overall objective of ending FGM, whilst placing women, girls and survivors at the centre and catalysing gender transformative change.

Working together to end FGM, our language can drive change by shaping thoughts and perception, engaging the most vulnerable, and facilitating healing for and with women and girls. It can build trust and empower individuals and communities. It can capture the attention of decision-makers, influencing policy, and inspires a movement to take action.

On the other hand, it can ignite and reinforce prejudice and victimisation. The language used around FGM can reinforce stigma or trauma, spread misconceptions, cultural imperialism, or harmful generalisations, generating a negative cycle. It can undermine the seriousness of FGM, hiding it in culturally acceptable language and terminology, and alienating those that should be at the centre of the movement for change.

**With this in mind, our renewed, bold position is to describe FGM as violence, a violent criminal act and abuse against women and girls that is generated by inequality and discriminatory social norms.**

Let us explore this position further.



### Current working definition of FGM

Female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM) is a practice that involves altering or injuring the female genitalia for non-medical reasons. Internationally recognised as a human rights violation, it is estimated that some 230 million girls and women globally have undergone some form of female genital mutilation - many before the age of 15. No matter where or how it is performed, FGM causes extreme physical and psychological harm. (What is female genital mutilation? | UNICEF). Despite tremendous progress made over recent years, FGM persists - driven by social norms, gender inequality and the desire to control women's sexuality.

## OUR LANGUAGE CAN REINFORCE OR BELITTLE THE GRAVITY OF FGM

FGM is regularly positioned as a “harmful practice” or “cultural norm”. This might hold some truth, as we unpack below, but this is not an adequate description. This minimises the seriousness of the act and its harmful physical and emotional consequences and serves to undermine its seriousness and make it harder to tackle the beliefs and attitudes that underpin it.

A lot of literature also still refers to FGM as “female circumcision” giving a notion that it could be similar to male circumcision which is known to be beneficial, or at least not harmful.

**Let’s call FGM what it really is. We need to be unapologetic about FGM being an act of violence against girls, an act of sexual and child abuse and an expression of pervasive patriarchy and power imbalances.**

### FGM is:

- **A Human Rights Violation:** Far beyond a tradition – it is torture. It’s against internationally recognised human rights, not an issue of local, cultural discernment (see side box).
- **Sexual Violence and Child Abuse:** Recognising the cruelty is central - and the long term consequences to physical, emotional and mental health.
- **An expression of power imbalances, gendered inequalities and patriarchy:** it occurs within a broader continuum of systemic violence against women and girls, harmful social norms, and gendered expectations that impact their lives. FGM is an expression of patriarchy, which is an ideology and system of societal organisations in which men hold power and women are explicitly or implicitly excluded from it.
- **A stand alone crime in numerous nations:** But when framed as an act of violence against girls, it is **illegal** under international human rights conventions. Even if a country does not have a law against FGM specifically, it could be considered illegal under laws against violence, sitting firmly within already existing human rights convention. FGM is illegal because harming and exploiting a child is illegal under many conventions, including the “Convention on the Rights of the Child.”



**Our Message: The language we use has profound implications for programming and advocacy - when we call it what it is, decision-makers listen. Reframe and name FGM as a global human rights concern, and a violent, criminal act, not just a cultural or religious one.**



## UNDERSTANDING THE LANGUAGE OF “SOCIAL NORMS”

In the movement to end FGM, the term “social norm” has typically provided a proven academic and theoretical framework in which to place FGM (as an act that is “normal” or “common” within practicing communities), and through which to pursue a range of proven “interventions” in response, building on evidence from similar contexts. Outputs and outcomes from these interventions could in turn be “measured”, providing evidence of “social norms change” and providing compelling arguments for investment from donors.

However, through our sustained centring on the voices of survivors and girls, we now see the harm **it causes to normalise a violent act such as FGM**, and we want to move away from this language. Work around changing social norms is slow, collaboratively challenging different elements of a community and deeply rooted beliefs. By calling FGM violence, we inspire a much stronger reaction and a need for much more disruptive, deeper and faster change.



Spotlight on

### FGM is condemned by a number of international treaties and conventions, as well as by national legislation in many countries

Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being,” and this statement has been used to argue that FGM violates the right to health and bodily integrity. With FGM considered as a form of violence against women, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women can be invoked. Similarly, defining it as a form of torture brings it under the rubric of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Moreover, since FGM is regarded as a traditional practice prejudicial to the health of children and is, in most cases, performed on minors, it violates the Convention on the Rights of the Child. An interagency statement on FGM, issued by 10 UN organizations, was issued in 2008.

(Source: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/female-genital-mutilation/>).



## OUR LANGUAGE CAN PLACE WOMEN, GIRLS, AND SURVIVORS AT THE CENTRE, OR EXCLUDE AND ALIENATE THEM

Respectful, empathetic, and non-judgmental language is crucial in **building trust** with those affected by FGM, creating a safe space for them to share and seek support, and be part of the movement for change. The alternative is to ignore, alienate and stigmatise those who have the most to gain or lose, and this is to the detriment of the full movement, excluding the most important voice.

### Centring on girls, women and survivors means...

- **Avoiding Re-traumatisation:** Careless reporting on FGM and descriptions of the practice and its consequences can harm survivors again and again.
- **Honouring survivors:** Celebrate resilience and tenacity rather than vilifies and victimises
- **Celebrating agency & autonomy:** Recognising their voice and choices - a powerful voice for change “and a renewed emphasis on survivors as movement leaders.”
- **Respecting the diversity of cultures and communities:** not using stereotypes or generalising entire communities with our language
- **Acknowledging emotional consequences:** Shedding light on the unseen scars rather than a physical act and social norm.

**Our Message:** Adopting the language of empowerment and respect has the power to challenge patriarchy, build trust with and engagement of survivors, and support healing



**We want to move towards the language of empowerment** - central to both girl-centred and gender-transformative programming and approaches. We aim to use rights-centred language to advocate for ending FGM while remaining sensitive to cultural contexts, and intersecting identities, avoiding alienation, and promoting dialogue as the centre-piece of change. For example, local-level advocacy efforts may require different language than is used at a global level, or countries where an FGM law exists may need different language from those where it doesn't.



### Spotlight on

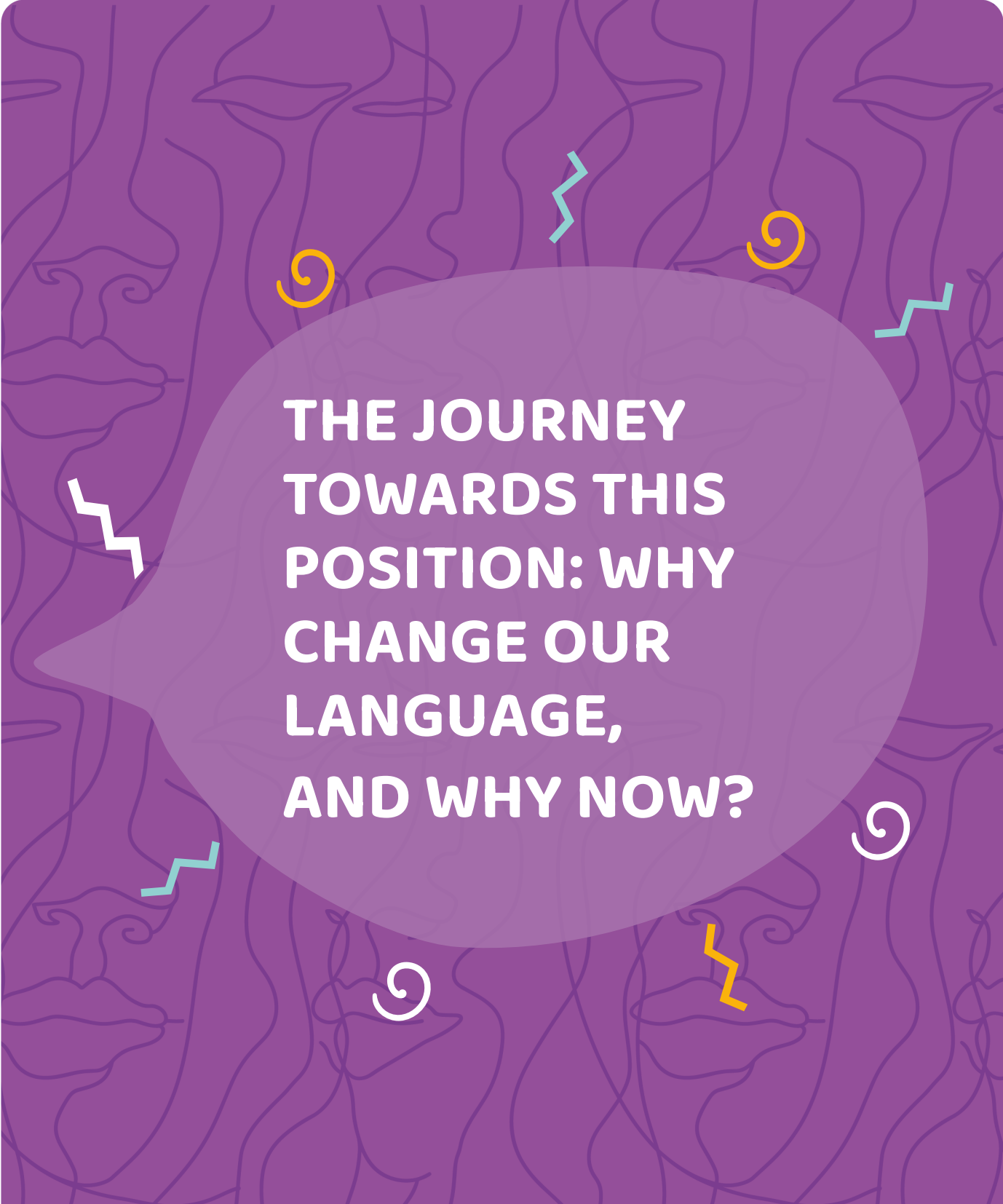
#### **As with all effective communications, the language we choose needs to be tailored to our audience and context.**

Although the underpinning human rights based and gender transformative principles remain the same, what we say within a community setting or with local leaders, will not be the same as what we say in a global advocacy space. This thought piece isn't intended to be a substitute for toolkits or guidance for community-based end FGM interventions. For example, changing and challenging the language used around FGM in a community setting, and naming FGM as violence in this context, will require preparatory actions, an understanding of the context, conversations with local representatives and the creation of safe spaces to have these conversations.

The TGG-ALM programme will be producing more detailed toolkits in the future as we learn from our work in different contexts, and are able to share case studies about the impact that a change in language can influence.



## SECTION 2:



**THE JOURNEY  
TOWARDS THIS  
POSITION: WHY  
CHANGE OUR  
LANGUAGE,  
AND WHY NOW?**


## THE JOURNEY TOWARDS THIS POSITION: WHY CHANGE OUR LANGUAGE, AND WHY NOW?

**At a time when there is a considerable roll-back on gender rights around the world, we need to double-down to unpack what is driving inequality, and what is reinforcing oppression, exploitation, and violence.**

Our conviction on the importance of the power of language has emerged from our practical work of listening to girls and survivors, the core drivers and approaches underpinning our programme, and a growing evidence base on the role of language in generating change.

## OUR CORE VALUE: LISTENING TO GIRLS AND SURVIVORS

No movement can be successful unless it's led by those who are affected by it. At TGG-ALM, we know we cannot end FGM without survivors and those affected right at the centre. This is now part of our DNA and core beliefs - placing girls and survivor's voices, views and well-being as a core driver and focus. Once engaged, the language and experience of girls and survivors shapes the way we work, and what we focus on. **In this case, we have heard their voices – girls and survivors who say that FGM is not a cultural practice but an act of sexual violence and abuse - and we know that this cannot be ignored.**



*“Language is a cornerstone in the battle against FGM. In my work as the National Coordinator for the Survivor Network Kenya and the Founder of Sustainable Education for Nomadic Communities, I’ve witnessed firsthand how our careful use of communication can shift attitudes and drive action. By employing clear, compassionate, and empowering language, we can challenge harmful practices, educate communities, and create a global dialogue that upholds the rights and dignity of every girl. Effective language not only raises awareness but also fosters a collaborative effort toward a future free from FGM.”*

**Rumana Isaack Mohammed**  
National Coordinator,  
Survivors Leadership Initiative Network, Kenya

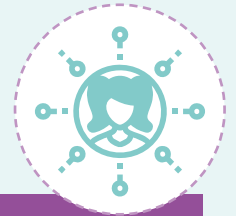
**At TGG-ALM, our journey to this point has included progressive influences and inspirations.**



Initially, FGM was broadly described as a cultural and/ or religious practice, with responses trying to be sensitive to the local culture. This was in line with a widely accepted definition of FGM as a social norm.



Specifically, **girls and survivors' wellbeing and mental health** became a priority in our work, an area which had been significantly overlooked and underfunded. Due to inappropriate and victimising language, survivors were vulnerable to continuous re-traumatisation when they did step forward to speak out about what had happened to them.



As a programme, we have a strong **girl-centred ethos**, with a focus on listening to girls and survivors and engaging them in the movement to end FGM. Many girls and survivors we work with have questioned why FGM is considered a protected “tradition”.



The Survivor's Leadership Initiative (SLI) is an innovative element of TGG-ALM in which survivors are given safe space to process what happened to them, to raise their voice and become empowered to speak up. We also work to build capacity within the community through training and grants, supporting women, girls and survivors to exercise their power in speaking out on FGM.



**Our Message:** Impacted by the profound honesty and courage of the survivors who have spoken out about their experience, we started to use language that clearly identifies FGM as a form of violence. This has proven to be very powerful with our target audiences (donors, policy-makers, adjacent movements) and empowering for girls and survivors to name what happened to them themselves.



## FOUNDATIONS: ROOTED IN CORE DRIVERS AND APPROACHES

**Our belief in the vital role that language plays in ending FGM is rooted in and upheld by the multidisciplinary approach at the core of TGG-ALM, encompassing sociology, psychology, linguistics, law, and public health. This includes:**

### **Girl Centred Approach (GCA):**

Our GCA aims at empowering girls: giving them a voice and supporting them in becoming agents of change within their communities and countries, while also promoting their safety and wellbeing. Language is a powerful tool in the hands of the girls, reflecting how they themselves see FGM, allowing them to call the practice for what it is, and facilitating them to build a link between the local practices and the international conventions that promote their elimination. A language that reflects the seriousness of this practice will additionally ensure that in our work with girls who are at risk or survivors of FGM, we take seriously the need to protect them and support their physical and emotional wellbeing while they lead a conversation around these topics.

### **Gender Transformative Approaches:**

Framing FGM within a broader spectrum of patriarchy and global gender-based violence leads us to prioritise Gender Transformative communication. This type of communication addresses the root causes of gender inequality, actively challenges gender stereotypes, and calls for change. This is

achieved by giving women and girls the front stage in any communication around FGM, in telling stories and in identifying pathways of change, rather than portraying them as voiceless victims and powerless actors.

### **Human Rights Approach:**

FGM violates a series of well-established human rights principles, norms, and standards, including the principles of equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex, the right to life (when the procedure results in death), the right to freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, and the rights of the child. Because it can lead to severe consequences for a woman's physical and mental health, FGM is also a violation of a person's right to the highest attainable standard of health. Although many governments worldwide recognise FGM as an act of violence against women and girls and as a violation of human rights, the issue is clouded in debate because the practice is deeply entrenched in culture and tradition, making legislation difficult to approve and enforce.<sup>1</sup> We believe in the importance of using a rights-based language that clearly refers back to international conventions

such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

### **Feminist Approach:**

The ongoing feminist movement acknowledges language as a "powerful instrument of patriarchy". As feminist linguist Julia Penelope named in her book *Speaking Freely*, "Language is power, in ways more literal than most people think. When we speak, we exercise the power of language to transform reality."

### **Decolonial development theory and anti-racist framing:**

Language also plays an important role in disrupting and subverting traditional and colonial framing of development and programming. Language can be used in re-framing where we see power and agency in terms of driving change - rejecting language which plays on traditional development roles of "developed" and "developing" at the core of patriarchal, and instead centring African girls and girls' voices as the source of power and change.

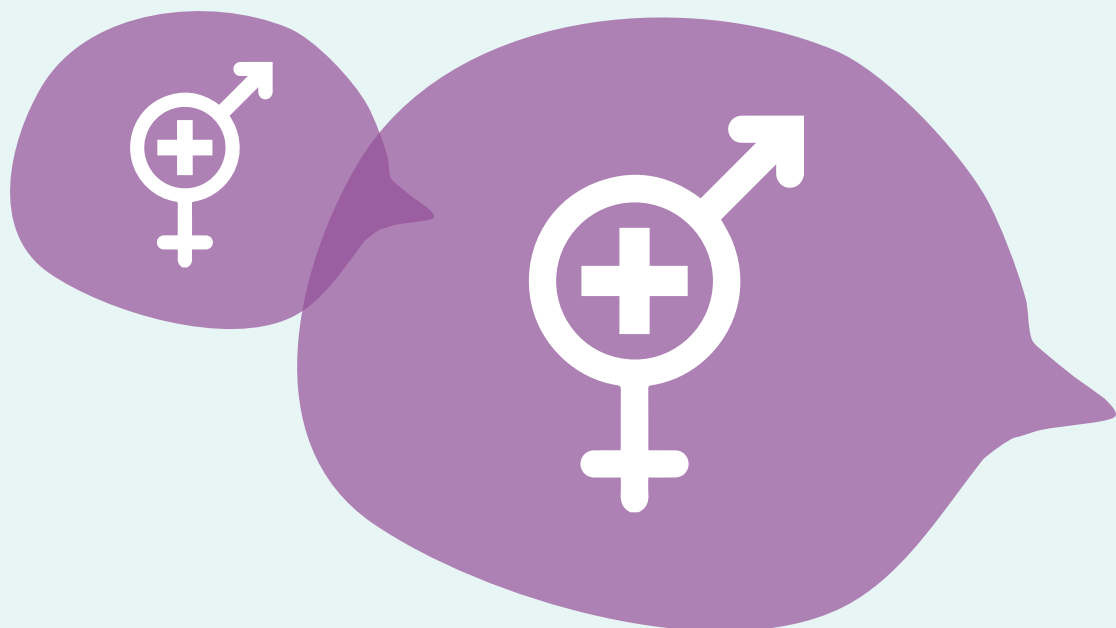
## EVIDENCE OF THE POWER OF LANGUAGE AS A KEY DRIVER OF GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

The role of language in influencing change is a growing area of focus within the movement to end FGM. It has not been extensively discussed or systematically studied before, so the evidence base is currently lacking. However, recognising the potential impact of language is an important step.

There is evidence from related sectors that we can draw on. For example, the feminist movement recognises language as both a generator and marker of power, and there is substantial documentation of how language can be used to challenge gender and racial stereotypes. This reinforces the importance of being deliberate in our language choices to effect meaningful change.

In *Language as an Agent of Change: Promoting Gender Fairness*, Mary Rose Ferrer Montano offers “valuable insights to the ongoing discourse on language as a catalyst for transformative societal change”, exploring the complex dynamics of gendered language usage in an effort to provide guidance for language-based initiatives that advance gender equality. The research leads to the recommendation of an advocacy initiative aiming to raise awareness and encourage the use of gender-fair language to combat discrimination and foster gender equality.

The UN Gender-Inclusive Language Guidelines are a further example of the growing appreciation of the role of language in influencing gender equality. “Using gender-inclusive language means speaking and writing in a way that does not discriminate against a particular sex, social gender or gender identity, and does not perpetuate gender stereotypes.” Developed on the core understanding that language plays a leading role in shaping cultural and social attitudes, the guidelines state that “using gender-inclusive language is a powerful way to promote gender equality and eradicate gender bias.”



## SECTION 3:



**HOW DO WE  
CHANGE OUR  
LANGUAGE?**

## HOW DO WE CHANGE OUR LANGUAGE?

### It starts here.

Change starts with each of us as individuals, and with us as teams and organisations. As we work on this issue, we have a responsibility to examine and adjust the way we think and talk about FGM and those it impacts. This takes personal reflection and commitment to change our underlying values and its outputs, leadership within organisations to make space and to direct clear expectations, and a renewed focus to identify harmful narratives that are engrained in our programming which we often overlook.

In this section, we first provide a brief guide to the language we are recommending and language which is problematic, as a crib sheet for self-reflection and learning. Next, we provide some ideas for how we can thoughtfully reflect and change the language we use, and how this can happen at individual, team and programme level.

TGG-ALM is currently compiling language to be promoted or avoided in our focal countries, which will be added to this Position Paper in subsequent versions.

## WHAT WE DO OR DON'T SAY AS TGG-ALM - A BRIEF GUIDE

We encourage all activists and those involved in the movement to end FGM to think carefully and reflect upon the language they use to talk about FGM to different audiences.

These are some of the specific terms we want to promote or avoid:

### New Framing: We promote these key definitions or explanations of FGM

- Violence against women and girls
- A human rights violation
- A form of torture and abuse
- An extreme form of violence and discrimination against girls and women rooted in harmful gender norms
- A form of sexual violence against women and girls
- A criminal offence (in countries where FGM is criminalized). A criminal act.
- A type of gender-based violence.
- A form of child abuse
- A source of trauma
- A safeguarding issue
- Communities subjected to violence.



## Language that we use only under specific circumstances

Description of medical consequences – we would only use this in a medical context

A social norm - as described above this is a terminology which places FGM within an evidence based theoretical framework, with a clear, understood path for response, but can minimise the issue as “normal” or “acceptable”.

FGM can cause life-long physical and psychological harm - this is factually correct but we need to be careful not to stigmatise or shame survivors. This explanation can be used to explain the life-altering consequences of FGM



## Problematic Language: that we never use

### Rationale

Violence against women and girls

Harmful practice

Barbaric practice

Abhorrent crime

We risk FGM being made ‘safer’ through medicalisation

We risk suggesting that criminalisation of FGM alone will end the practice.

Menace/ scrooge

Horrific effects of FGM

Victim of FGM

Mutilated woman

We risk victimisation and discrimination on the individual.

Mutilation

Mutilation is part of the term FGM but we ask users to exercise sensitivity if using it in a stand-alone way.

This term on its own may risk victimisation on the individual, but when dealing with stakeholders in the health sector, the use of the term mutilation is critical to demonstrate the severity and magnitude of the damage caused by FGM.

A religious practice

A cultural norm

We risk normalising a violent act as an acceptable part of culture or religion

Female circumcision

We risk comparison with male circumcision which has some proven health benefits and much lower risk.

Practising communities

We risk normalising the behaviour. Instead use “Communities subjected to violence



## We aim to avoid language which includes:

- An indication that survivors of FGM are not able to enjoy sexual pleasure.
- A call for men to marry women who have not undergone FGM.
- An indication that men have the final say on whether FGM should end or not.
- “Engaging Men and Boys”: Men are already in positions of power - they are involved and hold the power for change. Instead - we speak of allies in ending FGM



## SIMPLE STEPS TO REFLECTION AND PRACTICAL CHANGE

Here are some suggested approaches and questions to guide personal and team reflections on the language you use.

### Individual Reflection and Challenge

1. Using the table above, identify what other words, terminology, and language you currently use, or are used, to describe FGM in the context that you work in. What are the positive or negative power dynamics of this language?
2. What are some of the most common - and difficult - questions that you have come across about FGM and the myths that you have encountered. How have you answered them?
3. What areas of work are you involved in that are influenced by language? How could you influence these? From fundraising and global advocacy to community engagement and grant-making, what scope do you have for framing FGM as violence? How can you use language which shows respect, builds trust and empowers girls, women and survivors? Co-create some ideas together.

What are the pro's and con's of using the different terms?

Think about the words you use to describe and explain FGM. What are they?

What does this language say about the underlying drivers and beliefs behind FGM, and our responses to it?

## Team reflection and identifying opportunities for change

- ✔ Create a safe space for honest discussion, not policing or patrolling “wrong” language. This must also be a learning environment, non-judgemental and supportive of growth.
- ✔ Make this a regular, on-going conversation in your teams - look at what you are currently working on and make a habit of critiquing and scrutinising the use of language and imagery in your work and communication. What values are explicit, and what might be hidden underneath?
- ✔ Where possible, bring in survivors to the conversation to work with you, to help identify blind-spots and understand their viewpoint in the work you do.

### Take the following steps for reflection and scrutiny:

- ✔ Think about the language you currently use or hear to describe FGM. What do these make you think and feel?
- ✔ What are the alternative words/ terminology you can use? How do these change the actions you take or what you do?
- ✔ What does “violence” mean to you? How does the term make you react and respond to an issue? How does it change your response to position FGM as violence.

Look at both written and image-based materials/ resources you are currently working on and producing.

## PROGRAMMATIC RESPONSES - LEADING TO DEEPER, VALUES CHANGE ACROSS YOUR ORGANISATION

As well as expressly changing the words and images we use across our programmes, we have a responsibility and opportunity to change the influences which drive our decision-making and planning in order to bring the voices and perspectives of girls, women and survivors into our work.

### This can involve:

- Putting women and girls at the centre of your programme, engaging with their voice and agency to determine approaches, activities, and language.
- Listening to their experiences and views on what works and what doesn't and take on board their advice. Look at using co-creation processes to bring new ideas and different perspectives to the fore.
- Training your staff in Girl Centred Programming and Gender Transformative approaches. All materials can be found on our website: <https://thegirlgeneration.org/global-public-goods/>
- Include survivors in your work - but do so in a way that doesn't retraumatise or trigger. When survivors are given a prominent place in the room we are forced to think carefully about the language we use. Protect them and support them to share their views and look after their well-being with safeguarding mechanisms in place.
- This will lead to speaking and behaving differently, becoming acutely aware of the way survivors perceive and interpret what we are doing.

Over time, our aim is to bring together acse studies and examples of this deeper programmatic response in action.

## THE WAY FORWARD

**At this point in our journey at TGG-ALM we see the power of language as a prominent force in inspiring sustainable change.**

We urge you, as a priority, to lead yourself and those around you on a journey of self-reflection on the specific words and the language you use in the movement to end FGM.

Our core message is that **the language we use has profound implications for programming and advocacy to end FGM.** When we call it what it is, decision-makers listen. Our renewed, bold position is to describe FGM as an act of violence and abuse against women and girls, that is generated by inequality and discriminatory social norms. Reframe and name FGM as a global human rights concern, not just a cultural or religious one and a violent, criminal act.



**WILL YOU JOIN US?**

## Acknowledgements

The development of this Position Paper has been a collaborative effort, with contributions from many team members and partners of the TGG-ALM programme. We are grateful for the valuable input, comments, and reviews provided throughout the process. For any further information or queries regarding the paper, please contact Leyla Hussein, Global Advocacy Director, TGG-ALM programme: [l.hussein@options.co.uk](mailto:l.hussein@options.co.uk)



-  [thegirlgeneration.org](http://thegirlgeneration.org)
-  [info@thegirlgeneration.org](mailto:info@thegirlgeneration.org)
-  @TheGirlGen
-  TheGirlGen
-  @TheGirlGen

### Our partners



October 2024

