



## COI QUERY

<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>Liberia</b>
<b>Title</b>	<b>Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C), including in Gbandi society</b>
<b>Reference period</b>	January 2021 to 11 December 2024
<b>Topic(s)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><a href="#">Prevalence</a></li><li><a href="#">Legislation and implementation</a></li><li><a href="#">Societal attitudes</a></li><li><a href="#">Possibility to refuse FGM/C and consequences for refusal</a></li><li><a href="#">Access to justice</a></li><li><a href="#">Access to support services</a></li></ol>
<b>Date of completion</b>	12 December 2024
<b>Query Code</b>	Q85-2024
<b>Contributing EU+ COI units (if applicable)</b>	N/A



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Cite as: EUAA, Country of Origin Information Query, Liberia, Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C), including in Gbandi society, 12 December 2024, [url](#)



## COI QUERY RESPONSE – Liberia

### Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C), including in Gbandi society

#### 1. Prevalence

According to the 2019-20 Liberia Demographic and Health Survey, 38.2 % of girls and women between ages 15 and 49 had undergone FGM/C.<sup>1</sup> However, a November 2021 article by UN Women placed the figure at 50 %, for women aged 15 to 49 in Liberia.<sup>2</sup> The Liberia Demographic and Health Survey added that 83.3 % of women aged 15–49 were aware of FGM/C as a practice.<sup>3</sup> According to the same source, FGM/C was considerably more prevalent among women who live in rural areas (52 %) than those in urban areas (30 %), and the prevalence of circumcision was reported to ‘sharply’ decline with increasing education and wealth.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Christian women were ‘less likely than women of other religions to be circumcised’, according to the survey.<sup>5</sup>

The country report by Bertelsmann Stiftung on Liberia, covering 1 February 2021 to 31 January 2023, affirmed that ‘the prevalence of clitoridectomy remains high and is left unaddressed by the state’.<sup>6</sup> The 2023 USDOS country report added that ‘FGM/C was a problem and contributed to maternal morbidity’.<sup>7</sup>

The Robert Lansing Institute (RLI), a research-based non-governmental organization (NGO), illustrated that the major groups that practice FGM/C were ‘the Mande speaking peoples of western Liberia such as the Gola and Kissi’.<sup>8</sup> A local news source, the New Dawn, noted that ‘two major societies or ethnic groups’ have been ‘historically associated with FGM/C in Liberia: the Krahn society, who live in the southeastern region of Liberia, and have the practice ‘deeply ingrained in their cultural and traditional beliefs’ and the Bassa society, who also live in the southeastern region, and practice FGM/C through initiations in the Sande society.’<sup>9</sup> New Dawn added that FGM/C was practiced in 11 regions in the country, namely: Bong County, Lofa

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<sup>1</sup> Liberia, Ministry of Health, Demographic and Health Surveys, Liberia Demographic and Health Survey 2019-20, April 2021, [url](#), p. 297

<sup>2</sup> UN Women, Working with traditional leaders to end violence against women in West Africa, 26 November 2021, [url](#)

<sup>3</sup> Liberia, Ministry of Health, Demographic and Health Surveys, Liberia Demographic and Health Survey 2019-20, April 2021, [url](#), p. 297

<sup>4</sup> Liberia, Ministry of Health, Demographic and Health Surveys, Liberia Demographic and Health Survey 2019-20, April 2021, [url](#), p. 298

<sup>5</sup> Liberia, Ministry of Health, Demographic and Health Surveys, Liberia Demographic and Health Survey 2019-20, April 2021, [url](#), p. 298

<sup>6</sup> Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI, 2024 Country Report—Liberia (February 1, 2021 to January 31, 2023), 19 March 2024, [url](#), p. 11

<sup>7</sup> USDOS, 2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Liberia, 23 April 2024, [url](#), p. 22

<sup>8</sup> RLI, Liberia likely to join countries that criminalized FGM, 14 March 2024, [url](#)

<sup>9</sup> New Dawn (The), Women want penalties for violators of FGM practice, 24 October 2023, [url](#)



County, Nimba County, Grand Gedeh County, Maryland County, River Gee County, River Cess County, Grand Kru County, Sinoe County, Margibi County, and Gbarpolu County.<sup>10</sup>

Sources illustrated that FGM/C occurred in initiation rituals of the Sande society<sup>11</sup>, a women's bush society<sup>12</sup>, which combined traditional religious and cultural practices.<sup>13</sup> The 2019-20 Liberia Demographic and Health Survey, published in April 2021, illustrated that 'the rituals involve taking girls into the bush to initiate them into adulthood by teaching them local customs, sex and sexual etiquette, female hygiene, and housekeeping skills', as well as 'typically' involving FGM/C.<sup>14</sup> Equality Now also indicated that 'non-members' of the Sande society 'could be kidnapped and forced to undergo FGM'.<sup>15</sup>

Since the ban on FGM/C by the National Council of Chiefs and Elders in Liberia in February 2023, 'traditional ceremonies to effectively enforce the ban on FGM have been conducted in five out of 11 FGM practicing counties in Liberia, namely Montserrado, Grand Cape Mount, Nimba, Bong and Lofa counties', according to a February 2024 article by the United Nations (UN).<sup>16</sup> USDOS added that after the 2023 ban, the National Council of Chiefs and Elders in Liberia, 'closed a traditional rural school in Montserrado County, replacing it with a heritage and vocational center to train FGM/C practitioners with alternative skills for livelihood'.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the USDOS report covering 2023 described that 'local authorities closed three secretive rural so-called bush schools, where the practice took place, in three separate counties and worked with UN Women to provide training to residents'.<sup>18</sup>

However, in an October 2023 article, New Dawn noted that many girls at a young age were still be subjected to FGM/C 'without having a choice in the matter', despite the February 2023 ban.<sup>19</sup> Sources further added that, the February 2022 ban on FGM/C for three years, was not adhered to and the practice continued.<sup>20</sup>

Concerning the Gbandi society, according to Spotlight Initiative, a United Nations programme aimed at ending all violence against women, 'the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) among the Gbandi people can be traced as far back as over 200 years ago'.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the same source described that 'Kolahun District is the home of the Gbandi people, one of five

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<sup>10</sup> New Dawn (The), Women want penalties for violators of FGM practice, 24 October 2023, [url](#)

<sup>11</sup> USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Liberia, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 16; Liberia, Ministry of Health, Demographic and Health Surveys, Liberia Demographic and Health Survey 2019-20, April 2021, [url](#), p. 297

<sup>12</sup> Liberia, Ministry of Health, Demographic and Health Surveys, Liberia Demographic and Health Survey 2019-20, April 2021, [url](#), p. 297

<sup>13</sup> USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Liberia, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 16

<sup>14</sup> Liberia, Ministry of Health, Demographic and Health Surveys, Liberia Demographic and Health Survey 2019-20, April 2021, [url](#), p. 297

<sup>15</sup> Equality Now, Liberian government suspends FGM for three years: What's the next big step?, 31 March 2022, [url](#)

<sup>16</sup> UN, Liberia, Significant progress in the fight against Female Genital Mutilation in Liberia, 15 February 2024, [url](#)

<sup>17</sup> USDOS, 2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Liberia, 23 April 2024, [url](#), p. 20

<sup>18</sup> USDOS, 2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Liberia, 23 April 2024, [url](#), p. 20

<sup>19</sup> New Dawn (The), Women want penalties for violators of FGM practice, 24 October 2023, [url](#)

<sup>20</sup> New Dawn (The), Civil Society, EU demand justice for girl, 11, 27 October 2024, [url](#); Vice News, They Said Female Genital Mutilation Was Banned. But Girls Are Still Falling Victim, 14 December 2022, [url](#)

<sup>21</sup> Spotlight Initiative, Liberia: Annual Narrative Programme Report (01 January 2022 – 31 December 2022), 28 September 2023, [url](#), p. 57



ethnic groups found in Lofa County, Liberia where the practice FGM is on the large scale'.<sup>22</sup> In the Lofa county, where the Gbandi are reported to be located,<sup>23</sup> 68 % of girls and women between ages 15 and 49 have undergone FGM/C.<sup>24</sup>

Although prior to the reference period, 28 Too Many described in a 2019 report that 'like other peoples of the Mande-Fu group, the Gbandi practice FGM as part of Sande initiations',<sup>25</sup> which is an initiation 'tied to conceptions of sexual/gender identity and fertility'.<sup>26</sup>

Further information on the prevalence of FGM/C, specifically in the Gbandi society, could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within time constraints.

## 2. Legislation and implementation

Sources stated that the law in Liberia did not legally prohibit the practice of FGM/C.<sup>27</sup> Liberia was reported as one of three Western African countries that does not have a law criminalizing FGM/C<sup>28</sup> and as of April 2024, two anti-FGM bills were pending before Liberian Parliament, seeking to permanently outlaw FGM/C in the country.<sup>29</sup> According to the country report by the United States Department of State (USDOS) covering 2023, NGOs reported 'there was little political will within the legislature to address the issue'.<sup>30</sup>

According to sources, despite that specific national legislation has not been passed on FGM/C, 'Section 242 of the Penal Code addresses malicious and unlawful injuries towards another person by cutting off or otherwise depriving him or her of any of the members of his body', which is a 'felony punishable up to five years'.<sup>31</sup> Sources further noted that these provisions have not been used on prosecutions related to FGM/C.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, a September 2018 report by 28 Too Many, a research-based initiative aimed at ending FGM/C, affirmed that 'in the absence of national legislation outlawing FGM, there are no officially reported

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<sup>22</sup> Spotlight Initiative, Liberia: Annual Narrative Programme Report (01 January 2022 – 31 December 2022), 28 September 2023, [url](#), p. 57

<sup>23</sup> Spotlight Initiative, Liberia: Annual Narrative Programme Report (01 January 2022 – 31 December 2022), 28 September 2023, [url](#), p. 57

<sup>24</sup> Liberia, Ministry of Health, Demographic and Health Surveys, Liberia Demographic and Health Survey 2019-20, April 2021, [url](#), p. 298

<sup>25</sup> 28 Too Many, Country Profile: FGM in Liberia, September 2019, [url](#), p. 29; The source has been included due to its relevance despite occurring prior to the reference period of the query.

<sup>26</sup> 28 Too Many, Country Profile: FGM in Liberia, September 2019, [url](#), p. 48

<sup>27</sup> USDOS, 2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Liberia, 23 April 2024, [url](#), p. 20; Equality Now, FGM in Liberia, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>28</sup> Equality Now, FGM in Liberia, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>29</sup> Front Page Africa Online, Liberia: Four Girls Abducted into Sande Bush for Genital Cutting over 'Offensive Behavior', 8 April 2024, [url](#)

<sup>30</sup> USDOS, 2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Liberia, 23 April 2024, [url](#), p. 20

<sup>31</sup> Equality Now, FGM in Liberia, n.d., [url](#); RLI, Liberia likely to join countries that criminalized FGM, 14 March 2024, [url](#)

<sup>32</sup> Femnet, The African Women's Development and Communications Network, Policy Brief: Liberia, November 2021, [url](#), p. 6; RLI, Liberia likely to join countries that criminalized FGM, 14 March 2024, [url](#)



prosecutions or court proceedings in Liberia'.<sup>33</sup> The same source noted that 'there is also no evidence that other legislation has been used in any way to prosecute perpetrators of FGM'.<sup>34</sup> Sources described that in February 2022, the traditional local council in Liberia banned the practice of FGM/C for three years.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, on 6 February 2023, traditional leaders, specifically the National Council of Chiefs and Elders of Liberia, declared a national ban the practice of FGM in Liberia.<sup>36</sup> According to a local news source, the Liberian Investigator, 'traditional laws and regulations declared by traditional authorities are binding on community members', but were not always abided by traditional leaders.<sup>37</sup> Corroborating information could not be found.

### 3. Societal attitudes

According to data from the 2019-20 Liberia Demographic and Health Survey, concerning the views of women who had heard of FGM/C, 64 % said that the practice should not be continued, 20 % said that the practice should be continued, and 16 % either did not know or said that it depends.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, according to the same survey, 73 % of women in urban areas and 48 % of women in rural areas stated that they do not want the practice to continue.<sup>39</sup>

Sources described that FGM/C was performed by traditional leaders, the 'zoes', as a passage into adulthood ceremony for women.<sup>40</sup> Equality Now described that the practice was 'deeply entrenched within the culture'.<sup>41</sup> 28 Too Many added that the practice was 'a social tradition often enforced by community pressure and the threat of stigma'.<sup>42</sup>

The 2022 annual report by the USDOS described that 'political resistance to legislative prohibition of FGM/C continued because of the public sensitivity of the topic and its association with cultural traditions of certain tribes and secret societies in populous

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<sup>33</sup> 28 Too Many, Liberia: The Law and FGM, September 2018, [url](#), p. 5; The source has been included due to its relevance despite occurring prior to the reference period of the query.

<sup>34</sup> 28 Too Many, Liberia: The Law and FGM, September 2018, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>35</sup> Equality Now, Liberian government suspends FGM for three years: What's the next big step?, 31 March 2022, [url](#); USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Liberia, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 16

<sup>36</sup> UN, Liberia, Significant progress in the fight against Female Genital Mutilation in Liberia, 15 February 2024, [url](#); Equality Now, Traditional Leaders In Liberia Make Historic Announcement Declaring Ban On Female Genital Mutilation, 9 February 2023, [url](#); Front Page Africa Online, Liberia: Four Girls Abducted into Sande Bush for Genital Cutting over 'Offensive Behavior', 8 April 2024, [url](#); USDOS, 2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Liberia, 23 April 2024, [url](#), p. 20; Guardian (The), Traditional Leaders in Liberia Make Historic Announcement Declaring Ban on Female Genital Mutilation, 9 February 2023, [url](#)

<sup>37</sup> Liberian Investigator (The), Is FGM Banned in Liberia? What You Need to Know, 17 July 2024, [url](#)

<sup>38</sup> Liberia, Ministry of Health, Demographic and Health Surveys, Liberia Demographic and Health Survey 2019-20, April 2021, [url](#), p. 298

<sup>39</sup> Liberia, Ministry of Health, Demographic and Health Surveys, Liberia Demographic and Health Survey 2019-20, April 2021, [url](#), p. 299

<sup>40</sup> Vice News, They Said Female Genital Mutilation Was Banned. But Girls Are Still Falling Victim, 14 December 2022, [url](#); Equality Now, Liberian government suspends FGM for three years: What's the next big step?, 31 March 2022, [url](#)

<sup>41</sup> Equality Now, Liberian government suspends FGM for three years: What's the next big step?, 31 March 2022, [url](#)

<sup>42</sup> 28 Too Many, Country Profile: FGM in Liberia, September 2019, [url](#), p. 62



counties'.<sup>43</sup> However, the country report by Bertelsmann Stiftung on Liberia, covering 1 February 2021 to 31 January 2023, described that memberships in secret societies were decreasing because 'people are more often resisting female genital mutilation'.<sup>44</sup>

Further information on societal attitudes could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within time constraints.

#### **4. Possibility to refuse FGM/C and consequences for refusal**

Information on the possibility to refuse FGM/C and consequences for refusal could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within time constraints. However, the following information may be relevant.

According to the 2019 report by 28 Too Many, 'there have been numerous reports of forced initiation to Sande (in other words, forced FGM) as punishment for speaking out against the practice and of young girls being forcibly initiated after the slightest accusations of breaking Sande law'.<sup>45</sup> UN Women noted that FGM/C 'often' occurs without the consent of the woman or girl.<sup>46</sup>

#### **5. Access to justice**

Information on access to justice for victims of FGM/C could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within time constraints.

According to sources, in April 2024 two chief 'zoes' were arrested and one was detained for refusing to respect a judge's order to present to the court three young women who were allegedly abducted and initiated into the Sande Society to undergo' FGM/C.<sup>47</sup> A June 2022 article by the United Nations Human Rights Office of the Commissioner (OHCHR), described a case of a woman reporting her daughter being abducted by the Sande society and subjected to FGM/C, while the women who abducted her were not prosecuted.<sup>48</sup>

#### **6. Access to support services**

Information on access to support services for victims of FGM/C could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within time constraints.

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<sup>43</sup> USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Liberia, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 16

<sup>44</sup> Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI, 2024 Country Report—Liberia (February 1, 2021 to January 31, 2023), 19 March 2024, [url](#), p. 11

<sup>45</sup> 28 Too Many, Country Profile: FGM in Liberia, September 2019, [url](#), p. 106

<sup>46</sup> UN Women, Working with traditional leaders to end violence against women in West Africa, 26 November 2021, [url](#)

<sup>47</sup> VOA, Liberian Judge Jails Local Chief Over FGM Practice, 12 April 2024, [url](#); New Dawn (The), Chief Zoe spends night in prison, 10 April 2024, [url](#); Front Page Africa Online, Liberia: Chief Zoe Remanded for Failing to Produce Allegedly Abducted Women; Habeas Corpus Petition Sparks Legal Battle, 10 April 2024, [url](#)

<sup>48</sup> OHCHR, Following a moratorium on FGM in Liberia, victims are still seeking justice, 9 June 2022, [url](#)



For information on support services for victims on gender-based violence in Liberia, see EUAA query response on [Gender-based violence, including domestic violence and rape](#), published on 17 July 2024.



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