



for every child

April 6, 2021

Written Testimony in Support of SB 1069: An Act Concerning Female Genital Mutilation Presented to the Connecticut Joint Committee on Judiciary

Dear Chair Winfield, Chair Stafstrom, and distinguished committee members:

On behalf of UNICEF USA, I am writing in support of SB 1069 to direct the Commissioner of Public Health, in consultation with staff at The Women's Center at The University of Connecticut Health Center, to conduct a study of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) in the state of Connecticut and report the results of the study to the Connecticut General Assembly. This is an important first step in banning the practice of FGM/C in Connecticut.

I am constantly reminded how important it is that children have the right to be children. Too many children lose that right, for too many reasons. One of those reasons is FGM/C. Worldwide, over 4 million girls are at risk of undergoing FGM/C annually. Some of them are right here in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control, half a million women and girls living in the United States have been cut or are at risk of FGM/C. More than 2,600 such women and girls reside in Connecticut, which ranks the state as 26th in the nation for at-risk populations.

FGM/C is defined by the World Health Organization as removal of all or part of a girl's healthy sex organs and surrounding tissue for non-medical reasons. There are no health benefits to this practice. In fact, immediate risks include hemorrhage, shock, infection, urine retention, and severe pain. Girls subjected to FGM/C are also at increased risk of becoming child brides and dropping out of school, threatening their ability to build a better future for themselves and their communities. These risks are just as real for girls in the United States as they are anywhere.

UNICEF, along with UNFPA, jointly leads the largest global program to accelerate the abandonment of FGM/C. Although there is global progress in eliminating FGM/C, an estimated 68 million girls will be cut between now and 2030.

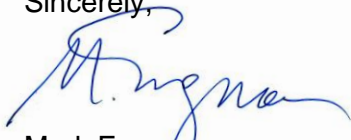
Research from the global program shows that we need laws as well as momentum at the community level to end FGM/C. To change a harmful social norm like FGM/C, while social change begins from the grassroots and spreads across communities, it needs to be codified by laws and policies from governments. Legal frameworks that criminalize FGM/C send a clear signal that the practice will no longer be tolerated. Where FGM/C is socially contested,

legislation serves to encourage those who wish to abandon it and deter those who might commit it. This is why laws like SB 1069 are a crucial step. Laws can help shift attitudes; changing attitudes in turn support stronger enforcement.

Thirty-nine U.S. states have already passed laws banning FGM/C, and with your help Connecticut can be next. With anti-FGM/C laws enacted in neighboring states, we fear Connecticut could become a destination for the practice.

FGM/C is a violation of girls' and women's human rights and comes at a cost society cannot afford. For the sake of protecting children from abuse and protecting their futures, we believe that every single U.S. state must take legislative steps to ban FGM/C. SB 1069 is an important first step in raising awareness about FGM/C in Connecticut. In addition to supporting its passage, we also urge you to take the necessary steps to enact comprehensive legislation to end the practice in the state.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "M. Engman", written over a light blue rectangular background.

Mark Engman
Vice President, Public Policy & Advocacy