



Genital Autonomy
Legal Defense and Education Fund
Affirming rights. Protecting choice. Redressing harm.
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**STATEMENT ON THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF ZERO TOLERANCE FOR
FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION**

February 6, 2023 is the twelfth anniversary of the *International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation*. This annual observance was established by the United Nations General Assembly as an occasion [“to raise awareness, renew commitments and reiterate that female genital mutilation is an unacceptable harmful practice and a violation of women and girls’ basic human rights.”](#)

The [Genital Autonomy Legal Defense and Education Fund \(GALDEF\)](#) supports the United Nations’ goal of ending the practice of female genital cutting (FGC) worldwide. We agree that FGC is an inherently harmful practice that violates the fundamental right to bodily integrity of those who are subjected to it. As our [Values Statement](#) makes clear, **GALDEF** stands in full “solidarity with female and intersex victims of genital cutting. . . .” Likewise, the United Nations’ goal of eradicating FGC is consistent with **GALDEF’s** [Vision](#): “To create a world where the rights of children to bodily integrity and future autonomy over their genitals and their sexuality are respected.”

In light of our Values and Vision, **GALDEF** believes that it is incumbent upon us to join the many voices around the globe on February 6 calling for an end to FGC and we are proud to do so. At the same time, we believe that it is equally incumbent upon us to point out – and equally incumbent upon the international community to recognize – the ongoing disparity between the widespread condemnation of genital cutting of girls (or people with vulvas) and the continued tolerance of genital cutting of boys (or people with penises) and intersex children.

We believe it is necessary to call attention to this disparity in part because of the harmful effects it is having on efforts to end FGC, itself. As the universal right (irrespective of sex) to genital autonomy has gained popularity, the position that genital cutting of girls should be prohibited under all circumstances while genital cutting of boys should continue to be permitted has become untenable. [In recognition](#)

[of this changing cultural landscape, defenders of male genital cutting \(MGC\) are therefore increasingly arguing that certain forms of “benign” FGC should be permitted.](#) At the same time, the widespread medicalization of MGC in the United States has provided a convenient model for proponents of FGC. The result is that, more and more, [FGC is being performed by medical professionals](#), undermining efforts to eliminate this practice. In both of these ways, then, the continued tolerance for MGC will only undermine efforts to eliminate FGC.

Apart from these practical, strategic concerns, however, is the matter of basic fairness and equitable treatment. Paradoxically, the United Nations’ official theme for this year’s observance of the *International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation* is [“Partnership with Men and Boys to Transform Social and Gender Norms to End Female Genital Mutilation.”](#) Yet, while it is estimated that about 250 million girls and women worldwide have been subjected to genital cutting, it is also estimated that about one billion boys and men worldwide have been subjected to genital cutting. It is unknown how many intersex individuals worldwide have been subjected to intersex genital cutting (IGC).

We do not believe that a moral distinction can be made between the medically unnecessary genital cutting of children based upon nothing more than a child’s sex or the appearance of that child’s genitals. **GALDEF** believes that all children, regardless of sex, have a fundamental and inherent right not to have their genitals cut, scarred or surgically modified in any way without their consent and when not urgently and medically indicated. By the same token, we do not believe that the goal of ending FGC is “trivialized” or undermined in any way by making common cause with the goals of ending MGC and IGC but, rather, will only be strengthened by doing so. A moral principle is always more powerful when applied universally. If the United Nations is to succeed in situating its zero tolerance for FGM on a solid moral foundation and if it is to succeed in its goal of ending FGM, it will have to revise its policy of tolerance for male genital cutting and adopt a position of universal respect for genital autonomy, regardless of sex.

It is in this spirit of universal respect for genital autonomy and in observance of the *International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation*, February 6, 2023, that **GALDEF** reiterates its support of the right of genital autonomy for girls and for *all* children and calls upon all people of good will who value human rights to do the same.