



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 214
BEFORE THE HOUSE CRIMINAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE
DECEMBER 12, 2018

The AHA Foundation wishes to be recorded in strong support for SB 214, which would ban female genital mutilation in the state of Ohio. The AHA Foundation thanks the sponsors for their leadership and support and the Committee for prioritizing a hearing on this important legislation.

SB 214 would establish criminal penalties for performing female genital mutilation (FGM) on a child, and transporting a child for the purpose of FGM. The bill also provides strong criminal penalties.

To understand the importance of this bill, it is important to understand FGM on a global and local scale. FGM is a form of gender-based violence that is internationally recognized as a violation of women's and girls' fundamental human rights. The practice of FGM is generally motivated by beliefs about what is considered proper sexual behavior and cultural ideas of femininity and modesty. This includes the notion that girls are "clean" and "beautiful" after the removal of body parts that are considered "male" or "unclean." FGM is also considered a way to reduce a woman's libido, safeguarding virginity and marital fidelity. Communities that practice FGM believe that it will ensure a girl's marriage, virginity, beauty, and family honor.

FGM is defined by the World Health Organization as the partial or total removal of the female external genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. There are various types and degrees of FGM varying from pricking or incising the genital area to the most severe, which involves removing or cutting external tissue including the clitoris, inner and outer labia and sewing or narrowing the opening to leave only a small hole to allow for menstruation and urination. It is estimated that 85% of girls who are cut undergo forms that range from removal or partial removal of the clitoris and/or removal of the prepuce, with or without removal of the inner and outer labia.

The timing of FGM can range from shortly after birth to the time a woman is pregnant with her first child; however the victims are commonly between the ages of four and ten years old. The procedure is typically carried out by traditional practitioners with or without anesthesia using a knife or razor. FGM has no health benefits. Many girls who undergo FGM face lasting physical and psychological consequences. It is important to note that even girls who experience less severe physical consequences from the procedure may face lifelong psychological consequences.

During and immediately following the procedure girls may experience severe pain, shock, hemorrhage, tetanus or sepsis, urine retention, open sores in the genital region and injury to nearby genital tissue. Over the course of her life, a survivor may experience recurrent bladder and urinary tract infections, cysts and infertility. Survivors also face an increased risk of complications during childbirth, including maternal and newborn deaths. If a girl is forced to undergo an infibulation, where the vaginal opening is covered or narrowed, she will likely undergo

numerous surgeries throughout her life to open and close the opening for sexual intercourse and childbirth. These surgeries put a survivor at further risk. The practice of FGM can indirectly or directly lead to death.

The practice of FGM is largely concentrated in 30 countries in Africa and the Middle East, where UNICEF estimates that 200 million women and girls have undergone FGM. A recent report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that there are 513,000 women and girls in the U.S. who are at risk or have undergone FGM. According to the Population Reference Bureau, an estimated 24,320 live in Ohio, which is ranked 9th in the nation for the number of women and girls at risk. The Columbus metro area ranks 7th in the nation among metro areas. Girls who have close ties to countries where FGM is prevalent are most at risk of undergoing the procedure.

In 1996, the U.S. passed a federal law banning the practice of FGM (18 U.S. Code § 116 Female Genital Mutilation). The legislation was strengthened in 2013 with the passage of a provision to outlaw “vacation cutting”, the practice of knowingly taking a girl abroad to inflict FGM. Unfortunately, a Michigan district judge ruled that the federal ban on FGM is unconstitutional, and is a law enforcement matter that should be handled by the states.

This legislation will provide protections for girls in the state and will send a strong message that Ohio stands against FGM as a form of gender-based violence. Additionally, through working with survivors and their communities, at the AHA Foundation we know anecdotally that parents who may be facing pressure to cut their girls from family or community members use existing legislation banning FGM as an excuse to not perform the procedure on their girls.

By passing SB 214, Ohio would join 27 other states in enacting statutes to criminalize FGM. Twelve states – Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, South Dakota, Texas, and Virginia – include in their statute a provision to address transporting a girls for FGM.

The AHA Foundation urges the House Criminal Justice Committee to support SB 214 and to advance the bill out of committee favorably.

About the AHA Foundation

AHA Foundation is a 501(c)3 non-profit founded by women’s rights activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali. The AHA Foundation is the leading organization working to end honor violence that shames, hurts or kills thousands of women and girls in the U.S. each year, and puts millions more at risk. Honor violence is typically seen in the form of physical or emotional abuse, sexual assault, rape or kidnapping, but it also includes female genital mutilation and forced marriage. We ensure that women and girls of all races, cultures, religions and beliefs who are facing honor violence have a way out, and that survivors get the help they need to thrive.

Since inception 10 years ago, the focus of the Foundation's programs includes: 1) compiling data on these crimes, which are not currently tracked by U.S. law enforcement or government agencies, 2) publishing reports and articles and organizing conferences about the continued oppression of women and girls in the U.S. committed in the name of religion and culture, 3) lobbying and outreach to expand and strengthen state and national legislation for the protection of women and girls, 4) training of law enforcement and service providers, and 5) connecting women and girls in crisis to appropriate services.