

# A VOICE FOR CHANGE

Awareness, Empowerment  
and Protection against  
Harmful Practices



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## 1. Introduction

This brochure is designed for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds who want to know more about harmful practices.

We want to provide you with valuable information to help you understand what harmful practices are, why they occur, what Dutch laws say about them and how you can protect yourself and others.

We want to raise awareness, start the conversation, and encourage you to take action to stop harmful practices. Together, we can create a positive change and contribute to a world where harmful practices will be a thing of the past.

## 2. What are harmful practices?

Harmful practices fall under an umbrella term that is used to describe all forms of oppression and violence against children (especially girls) and women. These practices are deeply-rooted in some traditions, cultures, religions, but can also be superstition. These practices are often based on strict views on sexuality and gender. These harmful practices are prohibited in the Netherlands, because they can cause serious physical, emotional, and psychological harm to victims.

This brochure addresses the harmful practices of female circumcision, forced marriage, abandonment, and honor-based violence.

## 3. Female circumcision

### What is female circumcision?

Female circumcision, also known as female genital mutilation (FGM), is a medically unnecessary procedure performed on the external female genitalia. Depending on the country of origin, female circumcision can be performed on babies, children, young adults or girls, or women who are about to be married.

### What are the types of female circumcision?

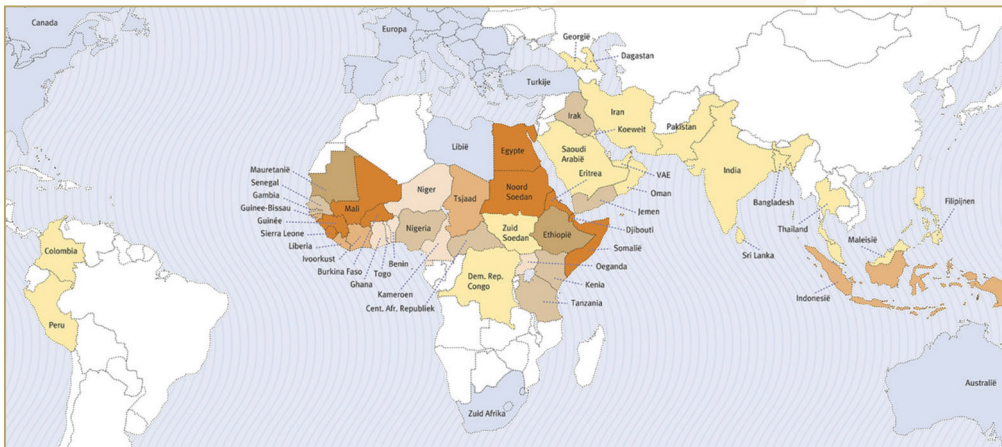
The World Health Organisation (WHO) distinguishes four types of female circumcision:

- **Type 1:** Partial or total removal of the visible portion of the clitoris or just the skin fold around the clitoris (**clitoridectomy**).
- **Type 2:** Partial or total removal of the visible portion of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without removal of the labia majora (**excision**).
- **Type 3:** Narrowing of the vaginal opening by cutting and stitching together the small and/or large labia, with or without removal of the visible portion of the clitoris (**infibulation**).
- **Type 4:** All other harmful, medically unnecessary actions performed on female genital organs, such as pricking, piercing, carving, scraping and cauterisation.

### How common is female circumcision?

Female circumcision is a global problem. It occurs not only in Africa, but also, in the Middle East, Asia, and South America. Worldwide, at least, two hundred (200) million girls and women have been circumcised. Every year, approximately, four (4) million girls are at risk of being circumcised. Circumcision is typically carried out at a girl's home, without anaesthesia and in unhygienic conditions by a traditional circumciser.

### African countries with the highest prevalence:



1.	Somalia	(99%)
2.	Guinea	(95%)
3.	Djibouti	(93%)
4.	Mali	(89%)
5.	Egypt	(87%)
6.	Sudan	(87%)
7.	Eritrea	(83%)
8.	Sierra Leone	(83%)
9.	Gambia	(76%)
10.	Ethiopia	(65%)

Source: SHDS, DHS, MICS, EHS, EPHS

### How many girls are at risk in the Netherlands?

In the Netherlands, **41,000 women** have undergone genital circumcision. An estimated **4,200 girls** (within the next twenty years) are at risk of being circumcised. Most circumcised women who live in the Netherlands (82%) come from Somalia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, and the Kurdish Autonomous Region in Iraq.

### Why are girls circumcised?

The reasons for why parents subject their daughters to circumcision vary from family to family and from community to community. Communities that practice female circumcision often cite the following reasons for the procedure:

- It is a cultural practice or a tradition
- It improves a girl's marriage prospects
- It protects the virginity of the girl and the honor of the family
- It confers status within the community
- It is a religious prescription
- It promotes hygiene, beauty, and cleanliness

### What happens if a girl is not circumcised?

In communities where female circumcision is a tradition, uncircumcised girls may face significant social consequences. The family and community consider the girl unclean, and she is suspected of sexually uninhibited behaviour. Therefore, members of the community often exert pressure on the girl to be circumcised. An uncircumcised, 'open'

woman is believed to bring shame upon her family, hence, is often ostracised and is less likely to get married.

**What are the health risks?**

Girls and women who have been circumcised are at risk of physical, psychological, and sexual issues throughout their lives. The risk of complications is high, both shortly after the procedure and over the long term.

**Immediate complications:**

**Long-term complications:**

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• extreme pain</li> <li>• severe blood loss</li> <li>• infections</li> <li>• urination issues</li> <li>• shock</li> <li>• possible fatality</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• urinary issues</li> <li>• vaginal issues</li> <li>• menstruation issues</li> <li>• sexual issues</li> <li>• psychological issues</li> <li>• childbirth complications</li> </ul> |
|---|--|

**Care for circumcised women**

Women do not always make the connection between the complaints they develop and their circumcision procedure. Often, women do not seek out assistance due to feeling of shame or insufficient knowledge. As a result, many of them live with complaints that can sometimes be easily remedied. That is why the Dutch Public Health Service (GGD) has a special **after-care consultation** for circumcised women who are experiencing the negative effects of circumcision. During these after-care consultations, circumcised women can ask questions, discuss their complaints, and, if necessary, be referred to a specialist health-care

provider. The following cities and regions host after-care consultations: Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam, North Netherlands, (Groningen, Leeuwarden & Assen), IJsselland region and North and East Gelderland.

**What is the stance of Dutch law on female circumcision?**

The international community considers female circumcision as a form of violence against women and a fundamental violation of human rights. The Netherlands also has a zero-tolerance policy for female circumcision. Female circumcision has been prohibited by law since 1993.

- All forms of female circumcision are criminalised under the general offense of ‘assault’ (Article 300 et seq. Dutch Criminal Code).
- If a girl is circumcised in the Netherlands, it is always considered a criminal offence. This applies to everyone living in the Netherlands, including those who do not have a residence permit.
- The prison term is up to twelve years. But if the girl’s parent(s) perform the circumcision themselves, the punishment is higher (maximum of sixteen years).
- When parents order a circumcision, pay for it, provide means by which the circumcision is performed and/or assist during the circumcision, they are also liable to punishment.
- Physicians who participate in female circumcision can also be prosecuted under medical disciplinary law.

## What is the declaration against female circumcision?

The Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS), in consultation with the Dutch Ministry of Justice and chain partners, as well as other organisations, has developed a declaration against female circumcision. This declaration is intended for parents who come from high-risk countries and are planning to go on holiday. It provides parents with evidence that female circumcision is illegal in the Netherlands, and it is intended to **provide support** for resisting social or family pressure. The declaration states that female circumcision is both harmful and punishable by law in the Netherlands. In addition to Dutch, English, and French languages, the declaration is also available in Somali, Arabic, Amharic (Ethiopia), and Tigrinya (Eritrea).

## 4. Forced marriage

### What is forced marriage?

In a forced marriage, one person is forced to marry another who is not of their choice. The coercion comes from the parents, family or other individuals in their surroundings. If one of the marital partners is a minor, this is termed a 'child marriage'.

### How common is forced marriage?

Each year, an estimated 350 to 1,000 people in the Netherlands are subjected to a forced marriage. Forced marriage primarily occurs among young people aged between 16 and 25 years. It often takes place among girls and women, but it sometimes occurs in boys and men. Forced marriage occurs among people from migrant communities, including Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese-Hindustani, Somali, Syrian, Iranian, Iraqi, Afghan, Pakistani, Kurdish, Chinese, Moluccan, Roma and strict Christian communities in the Netherlands<sup>1</sup>.

### Why is someone forced to get married?

Forced marriage is viewed as a way to safeguard the interests of the family or community, to strengthen family ties or to resolve issues. In some situations, an individual is forced to marry to protect the family's honour or to obtain a residence permit. Online humiliation (shaming) can also be a reason for a forced marriage.

<sup>1</sup> National Expertise Centre on Forced Marriage and Abandonment (2022). Forced Marriage Fact Sheet, available via <https://www.huwelijksdwangenachterlating.nl/sites/www.huwelijksdwangenachterlating.nl/files/2023-03/Huwelijksdwang-februari%202023.pdf> and Augeo (2023). Forced marriage, available via <https://www.augeo.nl/nl-nl/huwelijksdwang/>

**What does forced marriage entail?**

The applied pressure can range from subtle to highly coercive. There may be social pressure, psychological pressure and intimidation. But, there may also be physical violence, isolation or threats of abandonment abroad. If coercion takes the form of (threats of) physical violence, it is classified as criminal behaviour.

**What is marital captivity?**

Marital captivity refers to a situation in which someone remains in a (religious) marriage against their will because it is difficult to obtain a divorce. In which case, someone is trapped in the marriage and is not free. Women in particular are victims of this.

**What is the stance of Dutch law on forced marriage?**

Forced marriage is prohibited and punishable in the Netherlands (Article 284 of the Dutch Criminal Code):

- Perpetrators can receive a maximum sentence of two years of imprisonment.
- It is also illegal to compel a person from the Netherlands to marry abroad.
- In the Netherlands, you must first have a civil marriage, before you are allowed to marry according to your faith. Imams, priests or rabbis are liable to prosecution if they perform a religious marriage between individuals who are not legally married (Article 449 of the Dutch Criminal Code).

- Child marriages are prohibited in the Netherlands. Both partners must be at least 18 years of age to be able to marry.
- You are not allowed to marry relatives, such as parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren, siblings and adopted children.
- Marrying a cousin is only allowed if both partners genuinely choose to do so.
- Marital captivity is a criminal offense in the Netherlands (Marital Captivity Act). Both the partner and the family or community can be prosecuted.



## 5. Abandonment

### What is abandonment?

In the case of abandonment, someone is sent to or left behind in a foreign country against their will, often after a holiday. The coercion comes from the spouse, parent(s) and/or family. The victim's passport, residence permit, mobile phone and bank card are often confiscated to ensure that they cannot return to the Netherlands.

### How common is abandonment?

An estimated 150-800 people are abandoned annually, according to estimates. It mainly involves young people between the ages of 14-18 and adult women aged between 20-35 (with or without children). However, boys or men can also be victims. It occurs particularly in North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Egypt), West Africa (Guinea, Ghana, Nigeria), East Africa (Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan) and the Middle East (Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, Pakistan, India, Saudi Arabia, Syria)<sup>2</sup>.

### Why are people abandoned?

Parents have various reasons for abandoning their child. Typically, parents are concerned that their child is becoming too 'westernised', meaning they are adapting too many Western norms and values. At times, parents may also want to prevent undesirable behaviour, such as associating with the wrong friends, poor academic performance or

so-called 'deviant behaviour', such as homosexuality. Among adults, marital issues or protecting family honour can play a role in the decision to abandon someone. Abandoned individuals often end up with family members or in a boarding school (especially boys). Consequently, they often suffer psychological and physical issues.

### What is the stance of Dutch law on abandonment?

Children have the right to protection, care, education, and a safe and secure place to live. Abandonment, therefore, is a form of child abuse and/or neglect, even when parents believe they are acting in the best interest of their child.

The following laws can result in a penalty for parents or family members:

- As a parent, you have 'parental authority' over your child. You cannot simply terminate this authority (Article 279 of the Dutch Criminal Code).
- You are not allowed to endanger someone's health.
- You are not allowed to compel someone to do something (Article 284 of the Dutch Criminal Code).
- Article 26 of the Compulsory Education Act: parents are liable to punishment if they abandon their child abroad without applying for an exemption from compulsory education (ages 5-16).

<sup>2</sup> National Expertise Centre on Forced Marriage and Abandonment (2022). Forced Abandonment Fact Sheet, available via [https://www.huwelijksdwangenachterlating.nl/sites/www.huwelijksdwangenachterlating.nl/files/2023-03/Gedwongen\\_achterlating-februari\\_2023.pdf](https://www.huwelijksdwangenachterlating.nl/sites/www.huwelijksdwangenachterlating.nl/files/2023-03/Gedwongen_achterlating-februari_2023.pdf)

## 6. Honour-based violence

### What is honour-based violence?

Honour-based violence entails mental or physical violence to protect or restore a family's honour or 'good name'. Girls and women bear the responsibility of protecting the family honour, while parents, men and boys are responsible for maintaining and, if necessary, restoring this honour. In many cases, whole families, extended families and sometimes even communities are involved. In the worst case scenario, the victim is murdered.

### What are examples of honour-based violence?

Examples of honour-based violence include:

- physical abuse (hitting, kicking)
- psychological abuse (strict control, humiliation and/or threats)
- disownment
- (forced) suicide
- honour killing

### How often does honour-based violence occur?

The police register around 2,500 - 3,000 crimes a year in which family honour is suspected to be a factor. There are 7-17 fatalities annually in the Netherlands. Police believe the number of incidents is even higher because many cases go unreported to the police. This is due to the fear of talking about these sensitive issues.

### What are the motives for honour-based violence?

There are traditional views on the roles of women and men, and on the sexuality and reproductive rights of women. A woman's honour is linked to her sexuality. And a woman's sexual honour is linked to her family's honour.

Honour-based violence may occur in the following situations:

- honour disputes arising from, for example, inheritances
- loss of virginity of a girl or woman
- an extramarital affair
- wanting to divorce
- attracting attention or criticism due to behavior, clothing style or profession
- insulting family members
- not agreeing to an arranged marriage
- sexual orientation
- not wanting to engage in honour-related violence against another person

### What is the stance of Dutch law on honour-based violence?

Honour-based violence is a punishable offence in the Netherlands. The perpetrator's punishment will depend on the nature of their offence. For assault, perpetrators can receive a few months' imprisonment (Section 300 of the Dutch Criminal Code) and for premeditated murder, life imprisonment (Section 289 of the Dutch Criminal Code).

## 7. Assistance

What assistance do you need?	Contact
Are you in <b>immediate danger</b> or facing violence?	Call the police: 112
Are you not in immediate danger, but do require help? Call <b>Veilig Thuis</b> (means a safe house) This phone number is free of charge, available 24/7 and can be called anonymously.	0800 - 2000  From abroad: +31 70 311 90 07  You can also chat via the website <a href="http://www.veiligthuis.nl">www.veiligthuis.nl</a> .
Have you been abandoned or is there a case of forced marriage abroad? Contact the <b>National Expertise Centre on Forced Marriage and Abandonment</b> (LKHA). You can also contact them for (anonymous) advice.	+31 70 345 43 19  <a href="http://www.huwelijksdwangenachterlating.nl">www.huwelijksdwangenachterlating.nl</a> or <a href="mailto:LKHA@veiligthuishaaglanden.nl">LKHA@veiligthuishaaglanden.nl</a>
Do you need assistance abroad? The <b>Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs</b> assists Dutch victims of forced marriage and abandonment who wish to return to the Netherlands. Contact the Dutch embassy in the country where you are. Or ask the Foreign Affairs Contact Centre (available 24/7) for help.	You can call: +31 247 247 247  You can send a Whatsapp message to: +31 6 823 877 96
Do you need help or information about hidden women and marital captivity?	<b>Femmes for Freedom</b> +31 70 362 65 06 <a href="mailto:info@femmesforfreedom.com">info@femmesforfreedom.com</a> <a href="http://www.femmesforfreedom.com">www.femmesforfreedom.com</a>
If you have been circumcised and need medical and/or psychological assistance, you can visit the <b>after-care consultations</b> of the Dutch Public Health Service (GGD).	<a href="http://www.pharos.nl/infosheets/meisjesbesnijdenis-vgv-spreekuren/">www.pharos.nl/infosheets/meisjesbesnijdenis-vgv-spreekuren/</a>

What assistance do you need?	Contact
The <b>Federation of Somali Associations in the Netherlands</b> (FSAN) provides information, training sessions, workshops and advice on female circumcision and other harmful practices. You can also contact us for more information on key individual in your region.	+31 20 486 16 28   +31 6 288 548 84 <a href="mailto:info@fsan.nl">info@fsan.nl</a> <a href="http://www.fsan.nl">www.fsan.nl</a>



This brochure is part of the project:  
Change through Connection with Key Persons,  
funded by the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport

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**Design:** DG Graphic Design  
**Printing:** De Koning Repro  
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**FSAN** | Federatie Somalische  
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Ministry of VWS



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