## The West’s Female-Genital Mutilation Wake-Up Call

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The U.K. alone is now treating 300 women and girls each month for the aftereffects of the brutal, unnecessary surgery. We need Obama to follow through on his promise to eradicate it.

New figures from the U.K. are finally revealing the true extent of female genital mutilation: In just six months, nearly 2,000 women and girls have been treated by Britain’s National Health Service after undergoing the brutal procedure.

And with these statistics, which have been made available for the first time, hiding from the issue is no longer an option for Britain and the U.S.—and President Obama’s pledge to eradicate this abuse has never been more pressing.

While FGM—the process of removing either parts or the entirety of the external female genitalia—has been a federal offense in the U.S. since 1996, a dearth of tangible data has meant years of Western authorities theorizing on [the extent of (and solution to) the problem](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/06/11/america-s-underground-female-genital-mutilation-crisis.html)—with few results. Though the past year has seen [a number oflegislative steps](http://www.thedailybeast.com/witw/articles/2014/07/23/british-law-prosecutes-parents-for-fgm.html) being taken toward both identifying victims and punishing perpetrators, these calls to action have largely occurred on paper, and convictions remain nonexistent.

“The NHS is getting real numbers based on real cases, and this takes [these measures] out of the theoretical discussion and clearly puts it into the context of individuals,” says [Shelby Quast](http://www.thedailybeast.com/witw/articles/2014/06/12/will-the-us-truly-lead-end-fgm.html), the Washington-based policy director of women’s rights organization Equality Now. “It’s a very high number, but this is just the tip of the iceberg.”

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For the U.K., a nation of 64 million people, this number is staggering: An average of around 300 girls and women are being treated for FGM each month; not far off 100 per week, more than 10 every single day. The report’s findings have been an unsettling glimpse into the enormity of the practice and the problem—one which is now more visible, certainly, but still lacks the training and funding required before real changes can be implemented.

Former U.S. Rep. Mary Bono, who played a major role in the passing of a bill against FGM “holidays” (in which girls would be taken to their parents’ native countries to undergo the procedure), describes the latest findings as “disturbing on many levels.”

“Two thousand women may have been seen by medical professionals, but that doesn’t account for the many others who have suffered without any treatment,” Bono said. “Unfortunately, the issue is almost completely ignored in the U.S., even though it is occurring here as well.”

In the past few months, Washington has made further promises about how it will deal with FGM, in meetings with senior-level officials from the White House and Department of Justice, as well as human-rights workers, as recently as early October. A prevalence study has been pledged, but like so many measures of this ilk that have been discussed, whether it will be put into practice remains to be seen. “It’s good news that we’re seeing a lot in terms of commitments,” Quast adds, “but it’s also extremely important that we don’t stop there.”

In terms of transparency, the U.K. has taken a vital step forward by openly quantifying the extent of the situation. For too long, issues deemed as “foreign” by Western governments have been allowed to permeate communities, neighborhoods, families—all because they have taken root elsewhere first. Whether it’s a major health epidemic, the mass kidnap of children, or girls undergoing bodily mutilation, it is no longer good enough to just hope that these problems won’t infiltrate our soil.

And, shocking as these recent numbers are, we must bear in mind that what trickles through to America or Britain is a tiny fraction of the issue elsewhere. With FGM found to be common practice in 28 African countries by the World Health Organization, and a quarter of those nations with a “cutting” rate of more than 85 percent, the scale of this violence is almost unimaginable.

It is not America’s job to solve Africa’s problems, but we can’t continue to dismiss this as the troubles of a faraway land. We have a responsibility to help those who need it —wherever they may be in the world—and to ensure that the promises readily espoused as convenient soundbites really do become a reality.