

# Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

## Information for journalists



### What is FGM?

- FGM is violence against women and girls.
- FGM is a serious violation of women and girls' human rights.
- When practised on girls FGM is child abuse.
- FGM is illegal in the UK and has been since 1985.
- More than 125 million women and girls are affected by FGM around the world today. (UNICEF, 2013)
- To date, no one in the UK has been convicted for practising FGM.

### What does female genital mutilation actually mean?

Female genital mutilation (FGM) refers to '*all procedures involving partial or total removal of the female external genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons*'. The WHO classifies FGM into four types, ranging from total or partial removal of the clitoris (Type I) to cutting and repositioning of the labia and narrowing of the vaginal opening (Type III – Infibulation).

Such procedures have affected millions of women and girls across continents and belief systems for centuries. Different terms are used to describe these procedures, including 'female genital cutting' and 'circumcision', but the term 'female genital mutilation' or 'FGM' has been adopted internationally in recognition of the severity of the harm caused to women and girls.

### How does FGM affect women's health?

FGM procedures can cause severe bleeding and problems urinating. It can lead to cysts, infections and infertility, as well as complications in childbirth and increased risk of newborn deaths. (World Health Organisation)

## **Why do people practice FGM?**

Many reasons have been given for the practice of FGM including as a rite of passage into womanhood, improving girls' marriage prospects, maintaining girls' virginity and honour and protecting tradition and religion. Families often think that FGM is in girls' best interests and many girls are brought up to believe that FGM is acceptable.

## **How many women are affected by FGM and where is it practised?**

More than 125 million women and girls are affected by FGM today, predominantly in pockets of the Middle East and across central Africa; but also, reportedly, in South Asia and in **diaspora communities** all over the world, including in the UK.

## **How many women and girls in Scotland are at risk of FGM?**

Limited data means it is not possible to accurately assess how many women and girls in Scotland are at risk of or have undergone FGM. Recent research by Scottish Refugee Council found people born in FGM-practising countries living in every local authority area in Scotland. These are known as '*potentially affected communities*' as there is no data available on FGM prevalence among those communities, and the data is not broken down by age or gender.

The number of children born into *potentially affected* communities in Scotland has increased significantly over the last decade, with 363 girls born in Scotland to mothers born in an FGM-practising country in 2012.

## **If FGM is illegal in the UK, why has no one been prosecuted?**

As with other forms of violence against women and girls, FGM is hidden and stigmatised and is not readily discussed within communities or families. There are significant hurdles to investigating and prosecuting FGM, including for example, the potential need for a child victim to testify against their parents or wider family network. There is a lack of awareness among both affected communities and service providers of the nature and complexities of FGM.

## **Why is FGM such a sensitive issue?**

FGM is complex, hidden and stigmatised. The reasons and rational for perpetuating the practice differ across every community, even within countries where it is practised. Community activists who speak out against FGM have found themselves ostracised from their communities or targeted by abuse and threats from those who support the practice. There is a real risk of stigmatising whole communities when speaking about FGM particularly in a diaspora context, such as the UK. To achieve change, the voices of affected communities must take the lead and be supported to speak out and challenge the practice themselves.

## **What needs to be done to stop FGM and support affected communities?**

FGM is a complex issue and there is no one simple solution to eradicating the practice. A sensitive and multifaceted approach is needed. Work to tackle FGM must be done in partnership with communities affected by FGM, engaging with men, women and girls in order to understand, inform, challenge and find solutions.

At the same time a strong legal framework is needed. As with other forms of violence against women and girls, prosecuting those who perpetrate abuse helps to send a strong message that the state will not tolerate gender based violence in Scotland or the UK.

Training, education and openness to tackle FGM are all essential.

Support, services and referral pathways for women living in Scotland who are survivors of FGM should be strengthened. Information should be made more widely available to everyone who is working to support women who may have suffered FGM.

### **What is Scottish Refugee Council doing to tackle FGM?**

Although FGM is not principally a 'refugee issue', many of the potentially affected communities in Scotland have sought refugee protection in the UK. As a form of gender based violence, fear of FGM for women and their daughters, can be a reason why women or families flee their countries of origin and seek asylum.

Scottish Refugee Council works with other agencies to increase awareness of FGM and improve gender sensitivity within the Home Office and within the asylum system in the UK.

Scottish Refugee Council has conducted research into FGM in Scotland which provides a baseline of information that can be used to better understand where resources are required to begin to address this issue in Scotland. The research also explores best practice approaches to preventing and responding to the practice.

### **Where can I find out more?**

- [www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk /fgm](http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/fgm)
- [www.fgmaware.org](http://www.fgmaware.org)
- [www.darf.org.uk/](http://www.darf.org.uk/)
- <http://www.forwarduk.org.uk/key-issues/fgm/>
- [www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/)
- [www.data.unicef.org/child-protection/fgmc](http://www.data.unicef.org/child-protection/fgmc)
- [www.un.org/en/events/femalegenitalmutilationday/](http://www.un.org/en/events/femalegenitalmutilationday/)