

Female Genital Mutilation: factsheet for staff & volunteers

Understanding FGM

- **FGM is illegal in the UK.** For the purpose of the criminal law in England and Wales, FGM is mutilation of the labia majora, labia minor or clitoris.
- FGM is an unacceptable practice for which there is no justification. **It is child abuse and a form of violence against women and girls.**
- FGM is **prevalent in 30 countries.** These are concentrated in countries around the Atlantic coast to the Horn of Africa, in areas of the Middle East, and in some countries in Asia.
- It is estimated that approximately 103,000 women aged 15-49 and approximately 24,000 women aged 50 and over who have migrated to England and Wales are living with the consequences of FGM. In addition, approximately 10,000 girls aged under 15 who have migrated to England and Wales are likely to have undergone FGM.
- **FGM is a deeply embedded social norm, practised by families for a variety of complex reasons.** It is often thought to be essential for a girl to become a proper woman, and to be marriageable. The practice is not required by any religion.

What is FGM?

FGM is a procedure where the female genital organs are injured or changed and there is no medical reason for this. It is frequently a very traumatic and violent act for the victim and can cause harm in many ways. The practice can cause severe pain and there may be immediate and/or long-term health consequences, including mental health problems, difficulties in childbirth, causing danger to the child and mother; and/or death.

The age at which FGM is carried out varies enormously according to the community. The procedure may be carried out shortly after birth, during childhood or adolescence, just before marriage or during a woman's first pregnancy.

Types of FGM

FGM has been classified by the World Health Organisation into four types, ranging from a symbolic scratch to the clitoris to the fairly extensive removal and narrowing of the vaginal opening.

Names for FGM

FGM is known by a variety of names, including 'female genital cutting', 'circumcision' or 'initiation'. The term 'female circumcision' is anatomically incorrect and misleading in terms of the harm FGM can cause. The terms 'FGM' or 'cut' are increasingly used at a community level, although they are not always understood by individuals in practising communities, largely because they are English terms.

Cultural Underpinnings and Motives of FGM

FGM is a traditional practice often carried out by a family who believe it is beneficial and is in a girl or woman's best interests. This may limit a girl's motivation to come forward to raise concerns or talk openly about FGM – reinforcing the need for all professionals to be aware of the issues and risks of FGM.

Although FGM is practised by secular communities, it is most often claimed to be carried out in accordance with religious beliefs. However, FGM predates Christianity, Islam and Judaism, and the Bible, Koran, Torah and other religious texts do not advocate or justify FGM.

FGM is a complex issue, and individuals and families who support it give a variety of justifications and motivations for this.

However, FGM is a crime and child abuse, and no explanation or motive can justify it.

The justifications given may be based on a belief that, for example, it:

- brings status and respect to the girl;
- preserves a girl's virginity/chastity;
- is part of being a woman;
- is a rite of passage;
- gives a girl social acceptance, especially for marriage;
- upholds the family "honour";
- cleanses and purifies the girl;
- gives the girl and her family a sense of belonging to the community;
- fulfils a religious requirement believed to exist;
- perpetuates a custom/tradition;
- helps girls and women to be clean and hygienic;
- is aesthetically desirable;
- makes childbirth safer for the infant; and
- rids the family of bad luck or evil spirits.

FGM: Part of Wider Safeguarding Responsibilities

FGM is not an issue where action or intervention can be determined by personal preference – it is an illegal, extremely harmful practice and a form of child abuse and violence against women and girls. Fears of being branded 'racist' or 'discriminatory' should not weaken the protection that professionals provide.

International Prevalence of FGM

FGM is a deeply rooted practice, widely carried out mainly among specific ethnic populations in Africa and parts of the Middle East and Asia. It serves as a complex form of social control of women's sexual and reproductive rights. The exact number of girls and women alive today who have undergone FGM is unknown, however, UNICEF estimates that over 200 million girls and women worldwide have undergone FGM.

While FGM is concentrated in countries around the Atlantic coast to the Horn of Africa, and areas of the Middle East like Iraq and Yemen, it has also been documented in other communities. It has also been identified in parts of Europe, North America and Australia.

Prevalence of FGM in England and Wales

The prevalence of FGM in England and Wales is difficult to estimate because of the hidden nature of the crime. However, a 2015 study estimated that:

- approximately 60,000 girls aged 0-14 were born in England and Wales to mothers who had undergone FGM; and
- approximately 103,000 women aged 15-49 and approximately 24,000 women aged 50 and over who have migrated to England and Wales are living with the consequences of FGM. In addition, approximately 10,000 girls aged under 15 who have migrated to England and Wales are likely to have undergone FGM.

The 2015 study reported that no local authority area in England and Wales is likely to be free from FGM entirely.

What to do if I suspect a girl is at risk of FGM, or if I suspect a girl was subject to FGM?

You must speak to the Designated Safeguarding Lead immediately:

Jenny Purchase

Additional information for teachers: FGM Mandatory Reporting Duty

By law, teachers in England and Wales must report to the police any 'known' cases of FGM in under 18s which they identify in the course of their professional work.

"Known" cases are those where either a girl informs the person that an act of FGM – however described – has been carried out on her, or where the person observes physical signs on a girl appearing to show that an act of FGM has been carried out.