

**FORWARD**

# **FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION**

**Frequently Asked Questions:  
A Campaigner's Guide for Young People**



# Who are FORWARD?

FORWARD (Foundation for Women's Health, Research and Development) is the leading African women-led organisation working on female genital mutilation, child marriage and maternal health in the UK and Africa. For over 30 years we have been committed to safeguarding the rights and dignity of African girls and women. We do this through community engagement, grassroots partnerships, international advocacy, training and research.

## Young People Speak Out!

Young People Speak Out is FORWARD's Youth Programme. It trains young people to become campaigners and peer-educators on violence against women and girls, including FGM. The programme provides a safe space for young women and men aged 16-25 years, to develop their ideas, gain skills and explore ways to support themselves and those at risk. The programme uses youth-friendly and culturally sensitive methods including participatory training, workshops, film screenings and creative and interactive events to raise awareness.

For more information about this programme please contact the Youth Programme team on **020 8960 4000 (ext 2)** or email: [youth@forwarduk.org.uk](mailto:youth@forwarduk.org.uk)



# Purpose of this guide

The purpose of this guide is to provide some answers to questions we are most commonly asked in our work. The answers provided are in line with FORWARD's beliefs but we encourage you to also explore the issues further.

The guide might help you work through some questions you have. It is designed to help young activists who want to end FGM to navigate some of the trickier issues they may face and confidently answer questions and challenges they might encounter while campaigning.

You can find ideas about different ways to campaign to end FGM in our resource '16 Ways to Help End FGM', which can be found on our website.



# What is FGM?

Female genital mutilation, or FGM as it is commonly called, is a practice that involves harm to and the removal of a girl's external genitals.

There are four main types of FGM, based on the extent of the change made. They are as follows:

## Type 1

(the medical name is 'clitoridectomy')

Partial or total removal of the clitoris.

## Type 2

(the medical name is 'excision')

Partial or total removal of the clitoris and the inner lips.

## Type 3

(the medical name is 'infibulation')

Partial or total removal of the clitoris and inner and outer lips, and the sewing together of the outer lips to leave a smooth layer of scar tissue covering the genitals. A small hole is left to allow urine and menstrual (period) blood to leave the body.

## Type 4

Covers a wide range of practices found across the world, and includes pricking, burning or piercing the female genitals.



# Does FGM have any other names?

FGM is known by a lot of different terms including female genital cutting, female circumcision, excision, or being 'cut' or 'closed'. Many communities also use local terms to refer to the practice including 'tahur' or 'sunna'.

## FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

**ABSUM**  
**HALALAYS**  
**KUTAIRI**  
**MEKHNISHAB**  
**BONDO**  
**ISA ARU**  
**TAHUR**  
**MEGREZ**  
**SUNNA**  
**BONDO**  
**GUDNI**  
**YANKAN GISHIRI**  
**SUNNA PHARAONIC**  
**BOLOKOLI**  
**NOISICXE**  
**FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION**

Different communities all have different names for FGM dependent on what language they speak. As a campaigner it is important to remember this when engaging with practising communities. It is also important to be aware of your audience as some communities find terms like 'female genital mutilation' and 'barbaric' offensive and accusatory.

# How many people are affected by FGM?

FGM affects an estimated  
**200 million**  
girls and women worldwide



It is estimated that  
**137,000**

women and girls  
have undergone  
FGM in England  
& Wales and up to

**60,000**  
could be  
at risk

# Where is FGM practised?

FGM is mainly practised in 29 countries in Africa, parts of the Middle East, and parts of South East Asia. It has been happening for decades in Europe, America and other countries where migrants from FGM affected communities live. FGM is practised in the UK on girls from FGM affected communities.

## When and how is FGM performed?

FGM is most commonly performed on girls between the ages of 5 and 8. However FGM is also performed on babies, teenagers, and on adult women. The age differs from community to community.

In many affected communities, FGM is performed by older women who are known by different names like 'circumciser', 'cutter' or 'excisor'. It is often performed without sterilised equipment or anaesthetic (a medicine that numbs an area to reduce pain). Often razor blades or knives are used to cut the genitals.

In more urban areas FGM may be performed by medically trained people with the use of anaesthetic (painkillers) or sterilised (cleaned) equipment. These procedures still put women and girls at risk and there have been complications leading to death for some women and girls who have had FGM performed by medically trained people.

# Is FGM illegal?

FGM is a violation of a girl and woman's human rights in accordance with several international human rights instruments.

Article 1 of CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women) describes 'discrimination against women' as:

**"Any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field."**

Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;

**"Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex"**

FGM is direct discrimination against women.

## FGM also violates the following international human rights;

- A woman's right to health
- A woman's right to life and physical integrity
- A woman's right to freedom from violence & torture
- A woman's right to dignity, liberty, security of person & privacy



These rights are contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – Articles 1 & 3, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) – preamble and Article 9(1) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) – Article 19.

FGM has also been included under Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as enacted by the UN initiative to transform our world. The aim is to mobilise international communities, national governments, key stakeholders, communities and individuals to achieve the Global Goals through the elimination of FGM by 2030.

**FGM is illegal in the UK and is considered a human rights violation and a form of child abuse. In the UK, the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003 (replaces the Female Circumcision Act of 1985) makes it a criminal offence to;**

- **Excise, infibulate or otherwise mutilate the whole or any part of a girl or woman's labia majora, labia minora or clitoris.**
- **Aid, abet, counsel or procure a girl to mutilate her own genitalia; or**
- **Aid, abet, counsel or procure a non-UK person to mutilate a UK national's or permanent resident's genitalia outside of the UK.**

**Definition of a girl includes woman.**

**The crime is punishable by up to 14 years in prison.**

# Why is FGM performed?

FGM is performed by many communities as an important part of culture and tradition. People continue to practise it because it is something that they have witnessed their own mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers practising for centuries. Often both men and women support the practice of FGM. Many reasons are given for continuing and supporting the practice and often more than one reason is given.

These are some of the reasons:

## Social reasons

- 👤 To keep the cultural identity of a community.
- 👤 To signal that a girl has now become a woman.
- 👤 To protect a girl's virginity – to prove she has not had sex before marriage.
- 👤 To decrease a woman's sexual desire.
- 👤 To prepare a girl for marriage - once FGM has been performed a girl is seen as ready for marriage. There is a direct link between FGM and child marriage.
- 👤 To enhance men's sexual pleasure.
- 👤 To increase a girl's beauty.
- 👤 To follow a religious requirement (although there is no evidence to suggest that FGM is required by any religion).

## Economic reasons

- £ It is believed that FGM ensures a girl's virginity, making sure she has not had sex with anyone before marriage. This may make men more willing to marry her and pay more money for her (her bride price, which is money paid by the husband's family to her parents).
- £ Circumcisers also get paid for each circumcision performed so this provides them with a good income (source of money).
- £ The FGM celebration can also involve gifts and money for a girl and her family.
- £ In some communities traditional leaders and chiefs are paid to give permission for girls to be cut.

**“All my life I've tried to think of a reason for my circumcision. If I could think of a reason, then perhaps I would be able to accept what they've done to me. But I've never been able to find one. And the more I've thought about it, the angrier I've got.”**

Waris Dirie (model, author and human rights activist)

A young woman wearing a dark grey hijab and a blue jacket over a light-colored top is holding a white sign with both hands. She is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a blurred street scene with multi-story buildings.

FGM  
IS EVERYBODY'S  
BUSINESS

# Myths & Misunderstandings

In most FGM affected communities there are myths that support the practice, which tend to influence people's attitudes. Here are ways to respond to these myths:

## MYTHS

An uncut woman will become promiscuous ('sleep around') and have an uncontrollable sexual appetite. >

If the clitoris is not cut, it will continue to grow. >

If the clitoris is not cut, it will harm the husband during intercourse. >

If the clitoris is not cut, it will harm the baby during delivery. >

If a woman does not undergo FGM, she will become infertile. >

If a woman does not undergo FGM, her genitals will smell. >

FGM is required by religion. >

If you are against FGM, you are ashamed of your culture/family. >



## FACTS

FGM makes no difference to a woman's sexual appetite but can stop her from enjoying sex. Sexual desire mainly arises from hormones secreted by glands in the brain. Women should be able to choose what level of sexual activity is right for them personally. Some women like to wait to have sex until they are married, some feel ready earlier. So long as sexual activity is safe and respectful, all that matters is that women do what they feel is right.

The clitoris stops growing after puberty.

The clitoris gives a woman sexual pleasure and does not cause any harm to her or her husband.

The clitoris causes no harm to the foetus, the child or the mother, whereas FGM may cause serious complications during childbirth.

FGM has nothing to do with fertility; and FGM may actually cause infertility because of infections. Fertility is linked to a woman's internal sexual organs (hormones / ovaries / eggs / uterus & fallopian tubes).

FGM does not make the vagina more hygienic. The natural vagina remains clean with a simple daily hygiene regimen (having a bath/shower).

NO mainstream religion endorses FGM. Look at page 18 'FGM and Religion' to explore this further.

The campaign to end FGM is led by women and men from practicing communities who are proud of who they are and their cultural roots. Culture is dynamic - it grows and changes all the time. You can be proud of your culture and family and still wish to see FGM ended.

# Where did FGM start?

The origins of FGM are not clear but it has been practised for thousands of years. Some of the earliest records of FGM are during the Ancient Egyptian times during the rule of the Pharaohs. Mummies have been found with evidence they had undergone some form of FGM. It is believed that Pharaohs would perform FGM on their many wives as a way to ensure that they did not have sex with other men, ensuring all children born were biologically the Pharaoh's own. The link between Ancient Egypt and FGM is evident in the fact that Type 3 is sometimes known as Pharaonic circumcision. It is believed that FGM spread along the Egyptian coast of the Red Sea into East Africa and via trading routes into West Africa. The practice is believed to have spread to the Middle East and Asia with the expansion of religion. FGM has also been found in many communities around the world seemingly unconnected – including Australia and South America – suggesting it started there with no outside influence, perhaps due to similar ideas around female sexuality and behaviour.

The practice can also be dated back to the Roman era, when a 'fibula', a clasp, was used on women's outer labia to prevent infidelity ('cheating'). A form of FGM was practiced by doctors on women in England until the 19th century. It was seen as a way to prevent women having affairs and some doctors believed it was a way to 'cure' lesbianism.

# What right do Western people have to impose their cultural views on another culture/society?

The campaign to end FGM started with African women from practising communities, who have been at the forefront of the campaign for decades. They have paved the way and continue to lead all of the present work to end FGM. This includes FORWARD which was established in 1983 and the Inter African Committee on Harmful Traditional Practices that has been in existence since 1984. Today a number of organisations in Africa and the UK are working with communities to end the practice. Campaigning to end FGM does not mean that you are not proud of your culture and being from outside of practising communities does not mean you do not have a part to play in standing up against FGM, but the communities that practice FGM need to be at the heart of all work to end the practice for lasting change to take place and for effective and sensitive programmes to have any effect.

FORWARD supports affected communities themselves to come together to end FGM. To create change, social and cultural attitudes need to be challenged from within FGM-practising communities by openly addressing the issue and removing the taboo around discussing it.

FGM violates a number of agreed human rights laws and principles. Human rights are universal, which means they apply to everyone equally – regardless of factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, religion or disability. All children have a special right to health care, safe environments, education and a protected childhood that allows full growth and development. It is therefore necessary that everyone plays a role in ensuring these rights and opportunities are obtained and upheld equally.



## Type 1 doesn't seem that bad; what if FGM Type 3 is banned but Type 1 allowed?

Although many people think that a 'nick' of the clitoris for symbolic reasons is not harmful, the truth is that ALL forms of FGM can have short and long-term complications. The extent of the effects of FGM on a girl's health and well-being depends on the type of procedure. The most invasive form, Type 3, poses a greater risk to the health and wellbeing of girls and women. Additionally all forms of FGM violate human rights and are largely based on controlling women's sexuality. This means FGM is a form of gender based violence. Girls should not be subjected to a practice which is harmful and not in their best interests.

## What health complications are associated with FGM?

FGM can cause both short-term and long-term physical and psychological complications and can also lead to death. Some of the complications are as follows:

### Physical

- Severe pain or shock during the procedure
- Severe blood loss during the procedure
- Increased risk of blood-borne infections, including HIV
- Urinary problems – difficulties passing urine because the hole is very small or taking a long time to wee
- Problems with periods – difficulties with the flow of menstrual blood due to the small hole or excessively long and painful periods

- Infections, particularly of the urinary tract and bladder, which can cause a dull ache around the groin, a sensation of repeatedly needing to wee, and a burning or stinging sensation when weeing. It can also cause infections of the pelvic region and trouble with fertility
- Difficult or painful sex
- Difficulties in childbirth

## Psychological

Studies show that FGM may affect a woman psychologically for the rest of her life. Some psychological effects include:

- Anger at the person who performed FGM or arranged for FGM to be carried out
- Emotional distress, fear and feelings of helplessness
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): symptoms can include flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety and depression for a long time after FGM
- Sexual phobia: fear and difficulties in having sex
- Feelings of not being a 'whole' or a 'normal' girl or woman
- Because the clitoris is so sensitive, a woman's sexual pleasure can be greatly decreased by its removal. This can negatively impact on a marriage and in sexual relations. However, FGM does not take away sexual desire. This is because sexuality is more than physical, it includes feelings around love, attraction and intimacy

**“You have the feeling that you have not been allowed to have something that you should have by nature. It is something to do with pleasure ... you hear about this pleasure but you have never felt it, you don't know what it is, how would you know?”**

Female participant in FORWARD's London PEER research

Everyone's body is different and not every girl who has undergone FGM will experience all these complications. Some complications are only linked with certain forms of FGM.

# Is FGM a religious requirement?

Some people practice FGM because they mistakenly believe it is required as part of their religion. Although practised by some Christian, Islamic and Beta-Israel Jewish communities, as well as communities who hold traditional faiths, there is no evidence that FGM is required by any religion.

FGM is not found in the Qu'ran (The Islamic Holy Book) or in the Bible (The Christian Holy Book) or the Torah (The Jewish Holy Book) or in any other religious book. Many Islamic scholars around the world have condemned the practice of FGM and are clear that FGM is not an Islamic requirement. Islamic scholars and clerics have stressed that Islam forbids people from inflicting harm on others, and that those putting their daughters through FGM are going against the teachings of Islam. Most Muslims around the world do not practise FGM.

**“FGM is a harmful practice and a clear case of child abuse. It is a form of reverse racism not to protect these girls from harmful practices that take from their God-given right to an intact natural body.”**

Dr Yunes Teinaz, Islamic Cultural Centre

For more information on FGM and religion, have a look on our website:

[www.forwardyouth.org.uk](http://www.forwardyouth.org.uk)



# Is male circumcision the same as female genital mutilation?

Male circumcision is the removal of the foreskin (the retractable fold of skin that covers the head of the penis). It is also done for cultural, religious or sometimes medical reasons. There are important differences between male circumcision and FGM, including the underlying reasons behind each practice and the severity of health complications associated with them. The main differences are:

- ❗ Male circumcision is not linked to the control of men's sexual behaviour while in many communities FGM is practised to control women's sexual behaviour: to make sure that they remain virgins before marriage and faithful during marriage. This is linked with wider societal attitudes towards controlling girls and women.
- ❗ There are religious requirements for male circumcision in Jewish and Muslim communities, but no religious justification for FGM by any of the religions.
- ❗ There is still debate in the medical profession over whether male circumcision is medically beneficial, harmful or neutral. The health complications associated with FGM are well established. In cases where the male circumcision procedure goes wrong however, the impact on health can be severe.
- ❗ Male circumcision is legal in most countries, and is often done in hospitals and other healthcare settings.

Male circumcision is often carried out in childhood (meaning it is done without the consent of the child) and it is often done for no medical reason. Male circumcision, like FGM, can be seen as a violation of human rights.

It can be unhelpful to try and compare FGM and male circumcision – they are both complex issues in their own right and there are organisations that specifically campaign against forced male circumcision of boys just as there are organisations like FORWARD who specifically campaign to end FGM.

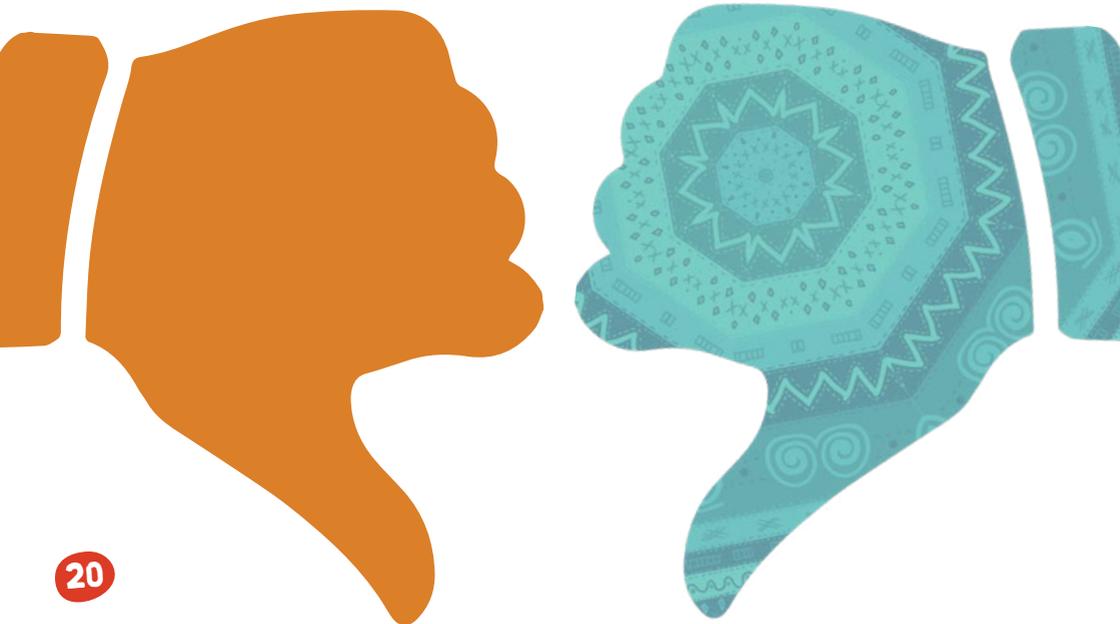
# If a girl or woman gives consent, would FGM be okay?

FGM is illegal. Under no circumstances can a girl or young woman consent to having FGM. Even if she 'willingly' undergoes the procedure, anyone involved with helping her to seek out the procedure, or the person who performs it themselves, will be liable to criminal prosecution.

For consent to be meaningful it has to be given freely and not due to pressure from other people. The pressure to undergo FGM is often so strong that girls or women feel that they have no choice but to have the procedure. Pressure may be based on the following things:

- To do it as part of her culture.
- To feel like she is the same as her friends and to fit in.
- To stop the criticism, negative comments and bullying that she and her family may be experiencing.
- She may be due to get married soon and does not want to face shame from her husband's family who expect the bride to have undergone FGM.

Young women may also not be fully informed about all of the facts and health risks that are linked to FGM before 'consenting' to undergo the procedure.



# How is FGM different from cosmetic surgery such as 'designer vaginas'?

Some people argue that cosmetic surgeries – including procedures such as breast enlargements, facelifts or 'designer vaginas' (an operation to change the way the vagina looks) – are equally harmful cultural practices similar to FGM, as they are all medically unnecessary and can affect health, both physically and psychologically.

There is a lot of debate around genital cosmetic surgery. Some people believe that it is a person's individual choice how they change their body, and that if they've given consent for the procedure to happen, then it is nobody else's business. They might argue that if it makes someone feel better about themselves, then it is a good thing.

Other people believe that the desire to alter natural genitals purely for cosmetic reasons is driven by cultural pressures, such as pressures to look a certain way, which can be influenced by factors such as marketing and pornography. Seeing constant unrealistic images of bodies can cause young people, particularly young women, to feel unhappy with how their body or genitals look and seek to change them through unnecessary invasive surgery. They would argue that even if someone chooses to undergo the surgery, they are doing so under a lot of pressure and social influence.

**The UK Prime Minister, Theresa May suggested in 2014 that cosmetic genital surgery might fall under 'FGM Type 4' in UK law, as the definition of Type 4 is necessarily vague. A lot of the reasons given for FGM and cosmetic genital surgery can overlap – such as wanting to look more beautiful or 'feminine' (by the standards of society), wanting to appeal more to men, and wanting to make sex more pleasurable for men.**

However, an important difference is that in cosmetic surgery women actively give their consent for the operations. With FGM the decision is made for the child or woman, who is usually neither informed nor old enough to decide for herself. The extreme societal pressure also makes it difficult to determine if a girl is freely deciding to undergo the procedure without pressure from others. Therefore, the girls who undergo FGM may not actually be giving consent to the practice.



## If a woman has had FGM, is she still able to be sexually active or achieve sexual pleasure?

The clitoris is the part of the female genitalia which is solely responsible for sexual pleasure. A lot of women who have undergone type 1 and 2 FGM are still able to have sexual intercourse as the opening to the vagina has not been closed or severely damaged. Their ability to experience sexual pleasure may be absent or decreased because the clitoris has been removed or altered. The scar tissue can make sex more difficult or painful as scar tissue is less stretchy than uncut tissue.

For some women who are sewn up or 'closed' (infibulation – Type 3 FGM), it can be difficult or impossible to have penetrative sex because the opening may be very small (the size of a matchstick head). In some cases, custom requires that the woman be 'opened up', either by her husband or a female member of the family for her wedding night, after she has been inspected and they are happy that she is still a virgin. This can cause more physical and emotional trauma for a woman, particularly those who have undergone Type 3 FGM and may require support from a trained health professional. It is recommended for women who have undergone FGM to seek medical advice or counselling to make a decision about being opened up.

Sexual desire however may not be affected since it comes from the brain, and not the genitals. So girls and women may still want sex, but struggle to enjoy it fully. Women can still enjoy the emotional side of sex, such as the feeling of intimacy with their partner.



In the UK, it is possible for a girl or a woman to be opened up by a medical professional. This operation is known as de-infibulation which allows a girl who has gone through Type 3 FGM to be 'opened up' safely, under anaesthetic and by a medical professional. This process allows for more natural urination, menstruation, sexual intercourse and childbirth.

For a list of specialist clinics that offer de-infibulation services please read the section 'What are the health complications associated with FGM?' on page 16.

# Would it be better if FGM was done by professionals in hospitals using sterilised equipment?

**No. FGM is harmful regardless of how it is performed.**

Many girls have still died due to complications when undergoing FGM in healthcare settings. Although having FGM done in the hospital could reduce the risk of infections and drugs may help to dull the pain of the procedure, physical and psychological complications could still happen. This is because the effects of FGM do not only occur during the procedure but can develop later on in a woman's life. FGM can also affect a girl or woman's physical and emotional wellbeing; for a list of the possible physical and psychological health complications of FGM, read the section 'What are the health complications associated with FGM?' on page 16.

**According to the World Medical Association, health professionals swear an oath not to do any harm to their patients, therefore it is considered unethical for health professionals to perform FGM on girls or women.**

Health staff in the UK are also forbidden from performing FGM. FGM being performed by a medical professional in a clinic or a hospital may reduce some of the risks of the operation to a certain extent, but it does not take into consideration the reasons why the girl is on the operating table in the first place. Why should she alter her natural body in the first place? Did she make an informed choice, knowing all the facts? Or was there pressure or expectations from family or the community to have FGM done? It might also make the practice seem more acceptable since medical professionals like doctors are respected.

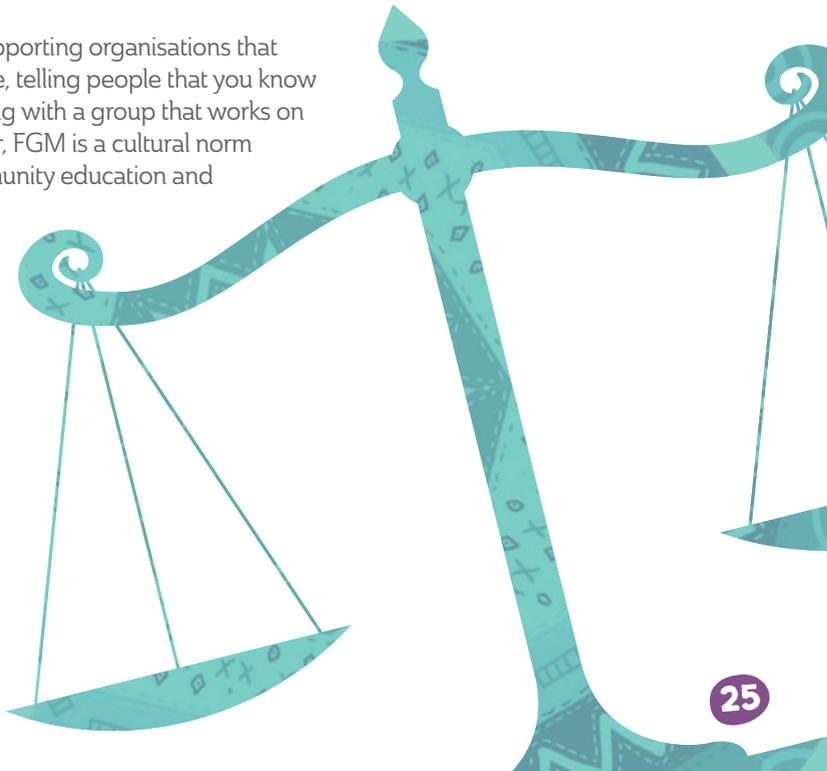
# If FGM is a cultural practice can it be banned?

Laws that ban FGM are important as they protect children and women. This provides security for girls and women who stand up against FGM. Making FGM illegal recognises it as a human rights violation. Additionally, laws provide a good environment for working to end FGM as it shows that governments are committed to ending the practice. Ending FGM is not as simple as making it illegal, but it is an important step to addressing an unacceptable cultural practice.

**In the UK the FGM Act (2003) makes it illegal to help, support or arrange for FGM to be performed on a girl either in the UK or abroad. The offence is punishable by up to 14 years in prison, a fine, or both.**

The law is an important step to ending FGM. But there is still much work to be done, through involving affected communities to increase awareness of FGM. Therefore it is important to continue campaigning on this issue.

You can do this by supporting organisations that campaign on the issue, telling people that you know about it or volunteering with a group that works on these issues. However, FGM is a cultural norm and will require community education and empowerment; engaging different people in communities and government. Without engagement with affected communities to abandon FGM, laws alone will not be enough to end this practice.



# If FGM is a cultural practice can it still be stopped?

It is important to remember that, even though FGM is a cultural practice for many communities, cultures and traditions never stay the same. They are organic, they change and grow both naturally and through activism. Throughout history every single community on the face of the earth has had harmful cultural practices and traditions.

In England, hundreds of years ago, it was culturally acceptable to burn women alive if they were suspected of being witches, or particularly sinful. In China, for hundreds of years, women had their feet 'bound' from childhood, which meant wrapping them tightly in cloth constantly so the feet didn't grow. This deformed the feet and made it difficult to walk. The practice was to make them appear more delicate and 'feminine', which was considered more beautiful to men. Both of these practices were once cultural norms and very deeply ingrained in society. Both have now ended.

In the same way, communities who practise FGM need to engage in conversation, education and awareness raising to emphasise that just because something is your culture or tradition, it does not mean it is good, or that it should continue to happen. This is especially important when it causes severe harm, pain, torture, suffering or degradation to human beings.

When we work with communities to understand these issues we can make sure that they themselves abandon the practice and that FGM is stopped.



FGM

# The UK has banned FGM. Has anyone been convicted (sent to jail) for practising FGM in the UK?

Despite the FGM Act (2003) – the law banning FGM in the UK – there have been no convictions in the UK. However this does not mean that FGM is not still occurring both in the UK and to British girls abroad. Active steps are being taken by all professionals concerned with the protection of children in the UK to ensure that those practising FGM in the UK are prosecuted.

It is also important to note that prosecution is not the only way to ensure that there is an end to FGM.

Under the law in France there have been more than 100 prosecutions of families. This is because in France, there are routine physical examinations of all girls. Although this has led to prosecutions it is a controversial way to end FGM. This is because it opens up ethical questions around protecting and maintaining the dignity of girls. It also does not engage communities on why FGM is harmful and does not allow them the opportunity to actively make the decision to end FGM in their communities.

A girl who has undergone FGM will never be in trouble with the law herself. If her case is taken forward she is legally entitled to remain anonymous, so anybody not directly involved in her case will not know her name and her name will never be released publicly.



# What happens if I receive a disclosure?

A disclosure is when someone tells you they have undergone FGM or are concerned someone may be at risk. People may wish to disclose for a number of reasons – they might simply want to share what has happened to them, they might be seeking support, or they may wish to challenge you.

If you are worried someone is at risk of FGM, you should report it, even if you were sworn to secrecy or if you feel like you are betraying someone. Stopping FGM from happening can prevent a lifetime of physical and emotional health complications. You can speak to FORWARD for advice, or a trusted adult. You can contact professionals including teachers, nurses, children's services, the police and voluntary organisations such as the NSPCC as they all have a duty to help stop FGM in the UK.

Professionals are required to treat any reported case of FGM as a child protection issue and this means it will be taken seriously. Children's Services or the police will possibly organise a meeting to assess the case. This investigation will also try to find out if other siblings in the family are at risk. Parents may be part of this meeting to discuss the concern.

A girl will not automatically be taken away from her home. This will ONLY happen in rare cases when the parents fail to guarantee that they will not cut their daughter.

If FGM has already happened, you may wish to support somebody. It might help to share accurate information about FGM, including the information on FGM in this guide and also on our website ([www.forwardyouth.org.uk](http://www.forwardyouth.org.uk)).

**Allow the person to share whatever they feel comfortable sharing. Do not ask intrusive or insensitive questions. Be careful not to assume you know how the person disclosing is feeling. Avoid saying things such as: 'you must be so angry at your parents' or 'you must hate what has been done to you' for example. Allow the young person disclosing to express their feelings in their own way.**

Receiving a disclosure can potentially be distressing or upsetting, so remember to look after your own wellbeing too.



# If a girl has undergone FGM where can she get support?

If a girl or a woman needs support, advice or guidance she can contact FORWARD for support or to be signposted to specialist support services.

**FORWARD** T: 0208 960 4000 E: [youth@forwarduk.org.uk](mailto:youth@forwarduk.org.uk)

Alternatively she can contact her GP or any of the specialist FGM clinics, who have extensive experience in dealing with FGM and understand the cultural reasons behind the practice.

Contact numbers for specialist health clinics can be found on our website ([www.forwardyouth.org.uk](http://www.forwardyouth.org.uk)) or in our Information, Services and Support (ISS) Guide. The ISS Guide also includes the names of other FGM organisations that can provide support.





You can download a copy of the ISS Guide from [www.forwarduk.org.uk/Information-Hub](http://www.forwarduk.org.uk/Information-Hub) or request a copy from [youth@forwarduk.org.uk](mailto:youth@forwarduk.org.uk)

# FORWARD

FORWARD is a UK registered charity.

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