

‘DO NO HARM’

Lived Experiences and Impacts of UK's FGM Safeguarding Policies and Procedures. Bristol study

Since the 2014 Girl Summit, the UK government has introduced a swathe of legislative changes and new safeguarding measures to protect girls from Female genital mutilation (FGM). The government's commitment to end FGM is to be commended, however, concerns have begun to surface about the inadvertent harm that the current far-reaching and stringent approach to FGM safeguarding is causing girls and their families.

This study, carried out by FORWARD and the University of Huddersfield, examines the views and experiences of UK's FGM safeguarding policies and procedures, both among African diaspora communities and regulated professionals in Bristol. Using a Participatory Evaluative Ethnographic Research (PEER) approach, we spoke to 38 women, men and young people from diaspora communities, and seven statutory professionals from education, policing, midwifery, and social care.

FGM Mandatory Reporting Duty

What is FGM Mandatory Reporting Duty?

Regulated professionals in health, social care and teaching have a statutory duty to report known cases of FGM among girls under 18 to the police. This duty applies only in cases in which a girl discloses that she has had FGM, or if a physical evidence is observed.

Observed Impact

- Singling out FGM from other forms of child abuse with a mandatory reporting duty to the police has led to overreactions and unjustified reporting, stigmatising communities.
- Families are criminalised and forced to face complex legal processes after a report of FGM without sufficient evidence.
- Statutory professionals are sceptical as to whether having an FGM-specific Mandatory Reporting Duty brings any benefit to safeguarding girls.

While FGM is thought to be still practiced by some diaspora families in the UK, particularly among newly arrived immigrants, there is no evidence to suggest that it happens on a large scale. This calls into question the need for a targeted and stringent FGM safeguarding approach.

“ [the FGM Mandatory Reporting Duty] singles out FGM as a particular issue, which can be stigmatising for a community. We should be looking at safeguarding as a whole, and teaching professionals to spot the signs of any abuse within any family.

Police detective

“ Imagine that you haven't done anything, someone reports you and you end up in a court... all that is stress; all the harassment, the hassle. That is very serious.

Yusuf, man, Somali

“ It is better to investigate and analyse information thoroughly before they take any action [...] There is a negative impact with reporting to the police, for the child and for the family. That's why I think reporting should only happen when they are completely confident and sure.

Yusra, woman, Sudanese

Note: all names used are pseudonyms

FGM safeguarding at schools

What are the FGM safeguarding & risk assessment in Schools?

The FGM safeguarding guidelines include a list of risk indicators to help professionals responsible for child protection identify if FGM has occurred or if a girl is at risk. Examples of these include:

- A child's mother has undergone FGM;
- A girl has frequent urinary, menstrual or stomach problems;
- A family is travelling for an extended period of time to an area with a high prevalence of FGM.

Observed impact

Professionals are cautioned against considering any one of the risk indicators in isolation and to conduct full risk assessments. Yet, many families were immediately referred to social service based only on their holiday plans or their daughters' frequent bathroom visits.

- Families who have no intention to subject their daughters to FGM faced unjustified scrutiny, feel violated and discriminated against.
- This increased focus on FGM is undermining the welfare of young girls as signs of other health issues or abuse they are facing could be wrongly interpreted and overlooked.

“ When children are going on summer holiday, mothers face fear. [...] The assumption is that you are going on holiday and you are doing FGM to your daughter. It's really the holiday that you were thinking about.

Asha, woman, Somali

“ Schools are supposed to do their own risk assessment to assess the family and only refer to social care if they [parents] actually pose risk. Nobody cared. Rather than actually looking at the documentation, they just decided that everyone going to Africa should be referred to social care.

Social worker

Note: all names used are pseudonyms

FGM safeguarding in healthcare

What is FGM safeguarding & risk assessments in healthcare?

The FGM Information-Sharing System allows healthcare staff to indicate on a girl's health record that she is potentially at risk from FGM if born to a mother who has had it. This allows medical professionals to perform FGM safeguarding during routine healthcare services by having ongoing conversations with mothers or pregnant women who have undergone FGM.

Observed impact

- Women endured repetitive and uncomfortable conversations about FGM during routine healthcare appointments, often at the expense of other health issues.
- Alarming instances of girls being subjected to unjustified physical examinations to check if FGM has been performed.
- Trust and engagement between health professionals and communities are being damaged as a result of these negative experiences.

The inherent presumption that girls born to mothers with FGM are at risk was criticised as outdated and unsubstantiated. It also goes against recent research demonstrating that FGM is increasingly being abandoned by diaspora communities in Europe.

“ I don't understand why you would have this particular risk-indication system when you don't have one for domestic abuse risk, and other forms of abuse, because young people are at risk from an awful lot of safeguarding issues.

Local councillor

“ If they know you are pregnant with a girl, they do this talk about FGM. Every time. At all the appointments. I feel this is a big issue in their mind.

Filsan, woman, Somali

“ When I had my daughter in hospital, I stayed there for five days. They kept talking to me about FGM until I left.

Dina, woman, Egyptian

Note: all names used are pseudonyms

Operation limelight

What is Operation Limelight?

At UK airports, border force and police officers focus on passengers travelling to and from countries affected by FGM. It can involve interviewing families to determine if they are travelling with intent to perform FGM. An estimated 500 people were spoken to at Heathrow Airport on a single Thursday in 2018, having returned to the UK from FGM-prevalent countries.

Observed Impact

- Families left feeling discriminated against and harassed, having been pulled aside and interrogated about their travel.
- Parents felt that the colour of their skin was the sole basis for their selection from among other passengers
- Racial profiling and excessive scrutiny are causing anxiety and distress, and is having a significant toll on parents' mental health & wellbeing.

Operation Limelight has burdened some families in ways not experienced by the wider UK population. Families feel that it has taken away their freedom and their right to travel like any other family.

“ Why do we have to be stopped at the airport when we are actually just [going] on holiday like anyone else.

Safiya, woman, Sudanese

“ [Operation Limelight] is a racist approach because how can you actually just target a whole community because of their ethnicity.

Yusuf, man, Somali

“ Every time you want to go somewhere your plans are going to be scrutinised [...]. So, I suppose they are constantly living with it in the back of their minds and it must put pressure on them, and they must worry about what impact it has on their children.

Police detective

“ Parents are telling me, 'can I please have one of those [FGM] leaflets to show that I've had a conversation with you? Because I don't want to be stopped at the airport'.

School safeguarding lead

Note: all names used are pseudonyms



Policy reflections & recommendations

FGM safeguarding approaches enacted since 2014 have caused a great deal of harm to the girls and their families. These impacts had a big toll on parents' mental health, are alienating communities, and damaging the trust that existed between them and professionals. This is even undermining FGM safeguarding overall.

We make several recommendations to address FGM in a more sensitive and inclusive way.

1

Holistic training for professionals must be provided to ensure better understanding of FGM, adherence to safeguarding, and reduce the influence of bias in decision making.

2

FGM safeguarding approaches in medical settings must be reviewed to establish approaches that are effective and eliminate distress to patients.

3

Police involvement during FGM safeguarding and risk assessment must be reconsidered - less heavy-handed practices may be more appropriate and effective.

4

The current, 'special' approach to FGM safeguarding must be re-assessed. This should be grounded in a thorough national review of the approach's need and effectiveness.

5

A community-centric approach must be incorporated into all FGM prevention efforts - by recognising the role communities play in ending FGM and involving them in policy design & delivery.