

female. genital mutilation

The prevalence of female genital mutilation (FGM) in the UK is difficult to estimate because of the hidden nature of the crime. However the World Health Organisation estimates that over 20,000 girls under the age of 15 in the UK are at risk of FGM each year. It is practiced in over 28 countries in Africa, some in the Middle East and Asia, but as communities are now migrating, it is becoming a growing concern in Greater Manchester as we welcome people from these communities. Girls could be taken abroad over the holidays for the procedure or cutters are flown into the Manchester area.

We see it as abuse, but female genital mutilation, sometimes known as 'female genital cutting' or female circumcision is seen by many in Somali, Egyptian, Sudanese, Nigerian, Sierra Leonean and middle eastern communities (but not exclusively these countries) as essential to preserve a girl's purity and honour. This is not the case, it is a way of socially controlling women and is a category in the government's domestic abuse definition.

What is it?

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is any procedure which involves the partial or complete removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for no medical reason. Many believe that FGM is necessary to ensure acceptance by their community, however this custom is against the law in the UK and many other countries.

All types of FGM are illegal in the UK; it is an offence to take a female out of the UK for FGM or for anyone to circumcise women or children for cultural or non-medical reasons here in the UK.

Types of FGM

FGM has been categorised into four types, ranging from a symbolic pricking to the clitoris or prepuce, to the fairly extensive removal and closing of the vaginal opening. All these forms of FGM have been found in the UK.

Usually it is a girls' parents or her extended family who are responsible for arranging FGM. Some of the reasons given for the continued practice include protecting family honour, preserving tradition, ensuring a women's chastity, cleanliness and as a preparation for marriage.

Whilst FGM is seen often by family as an act of love, rather than cruelty, it causes significant harm and constitutes physical and emotional abuse. FGM is considered to be child abuse in the UK and violation of a child's right to life and their body integrity as well as of their right to health.

Health implications

The procedure is often carried out without anaesthetic, usually by a woman with no formal medical training using a knife or razor.

Short term implications include: severe pain and shock, broken limbs (from being held down), infection, increased risk of blood borne viruses including HIV, Hepatitis B and C, urine retention, injury to adjacent tissues and immediate fatal haemorrhaging.

Long term risks include: kidney, urinary and vaginal infection, sexual dysfunction and problems giving birth as well as psychological trauma. Because of its illegality, many women and girls who develop health problems avoid hospitals and doctors, seeking help from 'healers' or back-street clinics. An estimated 10% of victims die from short term effects and 25% from recurrent problems.

The warning signs

Girls and women from practising FGM communities talking about holidays where they will 'become a woman' or 'become just like my mum and sister'.

If women in the family have already undergone FGM then there is an increased risk to other girls in the family.

Girls who have had the procedure performed will often avoid exercise on their return to school, ask to go to the toilet more often, find it hard to sit still for long periods or may have further time off school due to problems related to the procedure.

It is essential that teachers, doctors and other professionals learn the warning signs that a girl might be at risk.

What to do if you are worried someone may be at risk?

Advise them to talk to someone they trust, maybe a teacher or a school nurse. They are here to help and protect people.

Remember that no-one is allowed to physically or emotionally hurt people and FGM is not allowed in this country.

What can you do?

If you are concerned that a girl is at risk of FGM, this must be shared with your local Safeguarding Children's Team or the police without delay.

There is a Greater Manchester FGM forum for professionals working or coming into contact with FGM.

The aim of the forum is to enable statutory and voluntary organisations to work together to raise awareness of FGM, identify women and girls at high risk and reduce incidents in Greater Manchester. To help achieve this, the forum has developed training for staff, set up new ways of working and publicised information. This leaflet is part of that ongoing work.

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Support for victims

BSCA FGM Project: A project to support women and girls from communities affected by FGM in Bolton. The support for survivors include weekly drop in services, one to one sessions, referrals to relevant agencies and counselling. Address: 192 Deane Road, Bolton BL3 5DP ☎ 01204 399239 Email bolsomcom@hotmail.com or visit www.boltonbsca.com

Greater Manchester Police regard FGM as a form of domestic abuse and honour-based violence. They encourage people to report cases of FGM to prevent women from suffering from serious injury or harm. Police officers work within the community to raise awareness of the issues of FGM and the long term impact on women and the community. FGM is a criminal offence and the police will prosecute anybody committing offences under the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003.

St. Mary's Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) is based at St. Mary's hospital and provides a range of services to women and children (and men) who have experienced sexual violence. If you require support or information please contact the centre on 0161 276 6515 or www.stmaryscentre.org.uk

NESTAC (New Steps for the African Community): Trains doctors, nurses and medical students at hospitals and universities across Greater Manchester to help women who have undergone female circumcision. They are also setting up emotional support groups in Rochdale, Salford and North Manchester and run youth groups to educate teenagers on the health risks. ☎ 01706 868993 or mobile ☎ 07862 279289

Saheli Asian Women's Project: Provides advice, information and support services to Asian women and their children fleeing domestic abuse and/or forced marriages. The project gives Asian women a chance to get away from violent domestic situations by providing an environment which is safe, culturally familiar and which helps them come to a decision of their own. It can be either a one-off reconciliation, or coming to terms with being a single parent and living independently. All staff can speak English, Urdu, Punjabi and Hindi. ☎ 0161 945 4187 Email: sahelilt@btconnect.com www.saheli.org.uk

Forward: A foundation for women's health, research and development for African women and girls.

National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) 24 hour hotline ☎ 0800 111 ☎ 020 8960 4000 or visit www.forward.org.uk

Victim Support ☎ 0845 456 88 00