Female genital mutilation

Can it be eradicated in a generation?
The first ever prosecution for FGM is currently working its way through the judicial system. The question is: will this be the first of many or a one off?

Leyla Hussein, FGM survivor and campaigner, hopes the action is not an isolated instance, but the start of a drive to eradicate the practice.

Over the past 18 months Leyla, and many others campaigners, have battled to keep FGM in the headlines. Her online petition “Stop FGM in the UK now” has over 110,000 signatures and has already been addressed by the government, with Leyla invited to give evidence at the Home Affairs Committee inquiry in March.

Also famous for her Bafta-nominated documentary The cruel cut, which aired last year, Leyla believes that it is thanks to survivors like herself who have been speaking out recently, that the anti-FGM campaign has reached such a level.

“You can talk about any social issue all day, every day, but you need to actually have the person who has experienced it speaking out,” she says.

“Then people connect to it because they can hear it and see it first hand and they can’t walk away from it. I think that the British public was ready for a British girl like me, with a London accent, who has gone through FGM and is willing to speak out about it.”

Leyla’s documentary has not been the only TV show to beam FGM into homes across the UK, as popular primetime TV dramas, such as Casualty and Law and Order: UK have been covering the subject, which for so long has been surrounded by cultural sensitivities and social taboo. The Evening Standard has also been a particularly vocal news source, running regular stories, features and interviews as part of its own anti-FGM campaign.

The latest bid to raise awareness comes in the form of a music video by youth charity Integrate Bristol, which features politicians, celebrities and local members of the public. Trustee of the charity, Fahma Mohamed, also launched her own online petition to Michael Gove, asking him to write to all schools in England reminding them of their duty to safeguard girls from FGM.

The petition was a success with over 250,000 signatures and resulted in a meeting with Michael Gove and even backing from UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon, who met with Fahma and backed her call to use education as the tool for change.

But it’s not just survivors and charities making the push for change. “There’s so much going on – we can hardly keep up with ourselves,” says RCM policy advisor Janet Fyle, who helped to head up a royal college and union collaboration, which has resulted in the report Tackling FGM in the UK: intercollegiate recommendations for identifying, recording and reporting.

The intercollegiate report was launched at the House of Commons in November and makes nine recommendations, with the first being to treat FGM as child abuse. The report states that implementing a comprehensive multi-agency action plan is urgently required to ensure that the UK laws already in place protect young girls at risk of undergoing FGM.

As Midwives went to press, the Home Affairs Committee was preparing to publish its report Female genital mutilation: the case for a national action plan, after considering the intercollegiate report, which Janet and other RCM policy staff were invited to discuss.

WHO (2014) CLASSIFICATION OF FGM

► Type I: Clitoridectomy: partial or total removal of the clitoris.
► Type II: Excision: partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora.
► Type III: Infibulation: narrowing of the vaginal orifice with creation of a covering seal by cutting and appositioning the labia minora and/or labia majora with or without excision of the clitoris.
► Type IV: All other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, for example: pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterisation.
In May, a woman was arrested at Heathrow airport on suspicion of conspiracy to commit FGM and a 13-year-old girl travelling with her was taken into care. This came about after a week-long anti-FGM initiative held across six other airports. Comfort, who worked with police years ago at Heathrow on a similar campaign, believes it is a very good form of action. ‘It is raising awareness and also giving information directly to the families travelling to different parts of the world, but particularly targeting the FGM-practising communities,’ she says.

But Comfort opposes the idea of medical examinations at airports – such as those carried out in France on girls thought to be at risk of FGM. Instead, she suggests that medical assessments – similar to those that used to be carried out by health visitors on all children of a certain age – should be brought back to safeguard those at risk.

‘Prevention is better in the sense that we all need to collaborate and work with the grass-roots community in order to change attitudes and mindset,’ she adds.

Over 66,000 women in the UK have already undergone FGM

More than 24,000 girls are at risk in the UK

FGM has been a criminal offence in the UK since 1985 and the Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act

This was later replaced by the FGM Act (2003) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and the prohibition of FGM Act (2005) in Scotland

Both the 2003 and 2005 acts carry a maximum prison sentence of 14 years

‘We recommend in the intercollegiate report that there is a clear pathway for referral for all health professionals, but it has to be a national pathway, so whether a midwife works in deepest Cornwall or in Brixton, she knows the pathway and what to do if a woman in her care has undergone FGM,’ Janet says.

But just how prevalent is FGM in the UK?

New figures reveal that nearly 4000 women and girls have been treated for FGM in London’s hospitals since 2009 (FOI, 2014) and at least 66,000 in the UK are believed to be victims (Dorkenoo et al, 2007).

‘We average about two reversals per week,’ says Comfort Momoh, midwife and FGM consultant/public health specialist at Guy’s and St Thomas’ Hospital in London. Comfort established and runs the African Well Woman’s Clinic at Guy’s, offering support, information and surgical reversal of FGM. She has also helped to set up similar clinics across the UK and has run a course to train others in FGM reversals.

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What role do midwives play in the fight against FGM?

Earlier this year, the Department of Health announced that, from April, all NHS hospitals would be required to record if a patient has undergone FGM or if there is a family history of it. By September, all acute hospitals will have to report this data to the department on a monthly basis – this will include midwives. ‘Midwives are key people who can actually prevent FGM from taking place,’ says Leyla. She believes that midwives can play a crucial role in educating women about FGM, but also preventing and safeguarding future girls who might be born into FGM-practising families. ‘A lot of these women will not go to their GP and might never have had smear tests done, but a lot of them still fall pregnant and they will visit a midwife because they have to, so the midwife might be the first or the only health professional they’ve come across.’

If it wasn’t for the community nurse who spoke to Leyla two months after the birth of her daughter about the FGM she had undergone years before, Leyla would still be thinking that there wasn’t anything wrong with the practice. ‘That’s why I’m adamant that health professionals, especially midwives, play an important role in tackling FGM – but, obviously, they can’t do it without having the appropriate training in place for them, and until FGM is on every medical students’ curriculum and compulsory in child protection training, we may still be having this conversation in 10 years’ time.’

Leyla is in agreement with the recommendations for a referral pathway made by the intercollegiate group. She is also in favour of midwives using the red book to keep a record of any women who have been subjected to FGM and for this to be passed onto a child’s health visitor, nursery, primary and even secondary school nurses. ‘That’s not going to offend anyone, that’s going to safeguard her child. It also alerts the parents to what is going on and makes them aware that they know they are being watched.’ It is working according to Leyla: ‘Just recently, with all the FGM profiling, a lot of people in our communities are saying “oh, so-and-so might not do it now because they’re worried they might get arrested”, so the fact that the information is starting to get out there has really helped because once it happens there’s no way back from it,’ she adds.

Lindsey Ahmet, a senior midwifery lecturer at Middlesex University London, agrees that FGM is an area all health professionals need to sharpen up on. ‘At the moment there is no real consistency, but FGM is certainly something people should be aware of and I’d emphasise that it’s every midwife’s responsibility to educate themselves, whether they work in Ulster, Birmingham or the outskirts of Scotland. It would be good to make it part of continuing professional development for both students and practising midwives to take up.’

Comfort agrees: ‘We also need to support the woman and her family with information. It’s about making the links between FGM and the complications she may have had and to help her not to have FGM performed on her daughter in the future. We need to give her information about the law and highlight the safeguarding issues and ongoing support to empower her.’

With regards to midwives, Comfort suggests that a clear plan of action for FGM is needed from pre-labour, delivery to post-delivery, to making a note in the red book. ‘But I do have a problem with reporting a 21-year-old non-pregnant woman, who has summoned the courage to come to my clinic asking to be assessed for FGM, to the police or social services,’ she says. ‘I worry that this will send the practice deeper underground, as youngsters I’ve had conversations with say that to be reported would be like being punished twice, so we are still discussing and having conversations around that.’

But Comfort, like Leyla, and the many other FGM survivors, campaigners and supporters, believe that education and changing opinions, beliefs and attitudes at a grass-roots level in the community is the best form of prevention and action in eradicating the practice in a generation. With the UK’s first FGM charges in 2014, who knows how many more there might be, and how many girls may be saved from FGM.

For more information, visit:
- www.forswarchk.org.uk
- nhs.uk/Conditions/female-genital-mutilation/Pages/Introduction.aspx
- To read the intercollegiate recommendations, visit: rcm.org.uk/sites/default/files/FGM_Report.pdf

For references, visit the RCM website.