

Safeguarding Focus: FGM (female genital mutilation)

FGM is a collective term for all procedures involving partial or total removal of external female genitalia for cultural or other non-therapeutic reasons. Typically it is performed on girls aged between 4 - 15 or on older girls before marriage or pregnancy. **It is illegal in the UK and it is also illegal to take a child abroad to undergo FGM. There is a maximum prison sentence of 14 years for anyone found to have aided this procedure in any way.** It is considered to be child abuse as it causes physical, psychological and sexual harm.

FGM is more common than many people realise, both across the world and in the UK. It is practised in 28 African countries and in parts of the Middle and Far East and increasingly in developed countries amongst the immigrant and refugee communities. In the UK it has been estimated that 24,000 girls under the age of 15 are at risk of FGM.

Signs and Indicators to be aware of some indications that FGM may have taken place include:

- The family comes from a community that is known to practice FGM, especially if there are elderly women present in the extended family
- A girl / young woman may spend time out of the classroom or from other activities, with bladder or menstrual problems
- A long absence from school or in the school holidays could be an indication that a girl / young woman has recently undergone an FGM procedure, particularly if there are behavioural changes on her return - this may also be due to a forced marriage
- A girl / young woman requiring to be excused from physical exercise lessons without the support of her GP
- A girl / young woman may ask for help, either directly or indirectly
- A girl / young woman who is suffering emotional / psychological effects of undergoing FGM, for example withdrawal or depression

Some indications that FGM may be about to take place include:

- A conversation with a girl / young woman where they may refer to FGM, either in relation to themselves or another female family member or friend;
- A girl / young woman requesting help to prevent it happening;
- A girl / young woman expressing anxiety about a 'special procedure' or a 'special occasion' which may include discussion of a holiday to their country of origin;
- A boy may also indicate some concern about his sister or other female relative.

Action to Take if Workers Believe a Child is at Risk of FGM

Report to child protection designated person or **phone initial response on 0191 2772500** in an emergency - do not delay – ring 999.
If a girl / young woman is thought to be at risk of FGM, you **need to act quickly** - before she is abused by undergoing FGM in the UK, or taken abroad to undergo the procedure. An interpreter must be used in all interviews with the family if their preferred language is not English. The interpreter must be female.

Cultural context

Despite the obvious harm and distress it can cause, many parents from communities who practice FGM believe it important in order to protect their cultural identity. FGM is often practiced within a religious context. However, neither the Koran nor the Bible supports the practice of FGM. As well as religious reasons, parents may also say that undergoing FGM is in their daughter's best interests because

- status and respect within the community;
- Keeps her virginity / chastity;
- Is a rite of passage within the custom and tradition in their culture;
- Makes her socially acceptable to others, especially to men for the purposes of marriage;
- Ensures the family are seen as honourable;
- Helps girls and women to be clean and hygienic.

Long term health implications include:

- Excessive damage to the reproductive system;
- Uterus, vaginal and pelvic infections;
- Infertility;
- Cysts;
- Complications in pregnancy and childbirth;
- Psychological damage;
- Sexual dysfunction;
- Difficulties in menstruation;
- Difficulties in passing urine;
- Increased risk of HIV transmission.