

Froebel House School

Female Genital Mutilation – A Child Protection Issue

Michael Evans looks at the horrific practice of FGM and gives advice to schools on what to look out for and how to deal with any concerns they might have for female pupils.

The World Health Organisation estimates that about 125 million girls and women alive today have been affected, with 92 million African girls and women aged 10 and above having been subjected to FGM. It is further estimated that more than three million African girls are at risk of undergoing FGM each year.

The practice is most common in western, eastern and north-eastern regions of Africa; in some countries of Asia and the Middle East; and among migrants from these areas. Africa has the highest prevalence of FGM, with cases being reported in 28 countries, but studies have indicated that it is also practised in parts of India, Indonesia, Iraq, Israel, Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Iran.

The prevalence will vary between and within regions and countries. Ethnicity is usually the deciding factor. Of the 28 African countries that are involved, in seven of them the practice is almost universal, with over 90% of girls being subjected to FGM, while six of the countries the average is less than 15%.

Serious Complications

The type of procedure also varies enormously. Again, this is largely dependent on ethnicity and custom.

There are no health benefits in FGM and its consequences can be serious. Immediate complications can include severe pain, shock haemorrhage, tetanus, sepsis, hepatitis B and C, urine retention, damage to nearby organs and even death.

Serious long-term complications can also result. These can include chronic bladder and urinary tract infections, menstrual problems, kidney damage, cysts, infertility, an increased risk of childbirth complications and new-born deaths, and in many cases the need for later corrective surgery.

A further consequence can be serious psychological damage. Research carried out in practising African communities found that women who have undergone FGM suffered the same levels of post-traumatic stress disorder as adults who had experienced early childhood abuse.

Entrenched Beliefs

In every society where FGM is practised it is deeply entrenched in the social, economic and political structure. There is strong motivation to conform to the established tradition. In regions where it is widely practised, men and women alike are usually unquestionably in support of the practice. There is a strong feeling that departure from the normal expectation can result in condemnation, harassment or ostracism by the local community.

There is often an expectation that men will only marry women who have undergone the practice – and the desire for a good marriage and the social and economic security that will result, are often the overriding factors.

Child Abuse and Illegal Practice

In the UK, FGM of children is regarded as child abuse and, since 1985, under the Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act, it has been illegal to carry out or assist with an FGM procedure. Since 2003 it has also been a criminal offence for UK nationals and permanent UK residents to take a girl to another country for the purpose of carrying out FGM. Anyone found guilty of carrying out FGM, assisting in the procedure, or taking a child to another country for FGM faces a prison sentence of up to 14 years.

In the UK, it is girls from the Somali, Kenyan, Sierra Leonean, Egyptian, Nigerian, Eritrean, Yemeni, Kurdish and Indonesian communities that are most at risk. FGM tends to occur in areas where there are large concentrations of FGM-practising communities. These areas include London, Cardiff, Manchester, Sheffield, Northampton, Birmingham, Oxford, Crawley, Reading, Slough and Milton Keynes. However, According to the NHS, FGM can happen anywhere in the UK.

In view of the hidden nature of this crime, statistics are hard to come by, but according to the NSPCC, a study based on 2001 census data estimated that in England and Wales 23,000 girls under the age of 15 could be at risk each year, with 66,000 women suffering from the consequences of FGM. It is pointed out that since 2001 there has been significant population growth and immigration from practising countries, so these figures would undoubtedly be a conservative estimate.

Time to Change

The World Health Organisation is committed to eliminating FGM within the span of a generation, which might seem like a tall order for something that has been an important feature of life in so many regions for the past 5000 years.

However, a comparison is drawn between FGM and the former Chinese practice of binding the feet of young girls in the belief that it would make them more beautiful. For a thousand years in China foot binding was almost universal, but following concentrated opposition it was abandoned within a generation.

Schools' Responsibilities

Schools can obviously play their part. Something teachers should look out for is where a girl is taken back to her family's country of origin at the beginning of the long summer holiday. This can allow time for her to heal from an FGM procedure before she returns to school.

Teachers should be alert to a girl talking about such a visit, especially if she mentions a special occasion when she "will become a woman". She may be heard talking to other children about FGM or she may confide in her teacher or another adult, or ask for help if she feels she is at risk. A concerned girl might also run away from home.

Another warning sign is the arrival of an older female relative from the country of origin who might have come for the express purpose of carrying out FGM.

Signs that a girl might have been subjected to FGM include asking to be excused from PE or swimming classes; spending long periods of time in the toilet; appearing to have difficulty walking, standing or sitting; or asking for help, but being unable to be specific about the problem due to embarrassment or fear.

The Department for Education is investing £700,000 to support programmes that will address safeguarding issues, including FGM, in minority ethnic communities. Teachers should always be aware that FGM is a child protection issue and, if there is the faintest suspicion that any girl is at risk, or has been subjected to FGM, appropriate actions must be taken according to the school's child protection policy.