ADDRESSING FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The cross-jurisdictional nature of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in the UK; and the increasing policy initiatives in England, Wales and Scotland, has marked a widening disparity with developments in Northern Ireland. The purpose of this paper is to promote discussion within government departments in developing a strategic direction and consistency for tackling FGM within the UK nations.

FGM at a glance

FGM is illegal in the UK. For the purpose of the criminal law in NI, England and Wales, FGM is mutilation of the labia majora, labia minora or clitoris. Religious, social or cultural reasons are sometimes given for FGM; however, FGM is child abuse, as the child has been subjected to irreparable physical harm. FGM is often carried out on minors; it is a violation of the rights of children and a child protection issue. The procedure is dangerous and has no health benefits for girls and women, it doesn’t enhance fertility and it doesn’t make childbirth safer. It is used to control female sexuality and can cause severe and long-lasting damage to physical and emotional health.

Prevalence of FGM

UNICEF has estimated that more than 125 million girls and women globally have undergone FGM. Because of the hidden nature of the crime, the prevalence of FGM in the UK is difficult to estimate. Research indicates that 23,000 girls under 15 years could be at risk of FGM in England and Wales; and nearly 60,000 women could be living with the consequences of FGM. As the demographic of our society changes in NI, FGM is becoming an increasing concern, because we know that girls are more at risk of FGM when it has been carried out on their mother, sister or a member of their extended family. (HM Government, 2011)

FGM and the Law

Practicing FGM in the UK has been a criminal offence since the Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act 1985. The Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003¹ repealed and re-enacted the provisions of the 1985 Act and revised it to set the maximum penalty for FGM to 14 years' imprisonment and make it a criminal offence for UK nationals or permanent UK residents to (i) perform FGM overseas (ii) make a UK national or permanent UK resident overseas to have FGM.

The Serious Crimes Act 2015² amends the 2003 Act and contains a number of preventative and protective provisions for victims of FGM. Measures include Civil Protection Orders; new legislation to grant victims of FGM lifelong anonymity from the time an allegation is made; and measures that can be used to prosecute parents if they fail to prevent their daughter being cut. [Please note the NI Assembly granted legislative consent for the extension of these provisions in the Serious Crime Bill in Nov 2014.]

Relevant Policy & Guidance

Cooperating to Safeguard Children (2003) remains the core statutory guidance governing the provision of inter-agency cooperation and multi-disciplinary responsibilities for child protection in NI. The recently published Multi-agency practice guidelines: Female genital mutilation (DHSSPS, 2014)³ assist frontline professionals who are responsible for safeguarding children and protecting adults from the abuses associated with female genital mutilation. As noted in the Guidelines – ‘Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a form of child abuse and violence against women and girls and should, therefore, be dealt with as part of existing child and adult safeguarding structures, policies and procedures.’

¹ In Scotland it is illegal under the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation (Scotland) Act 2005.


³ The FGM Multi-agency practice guidelines are broadly adapted from guidelines produced in England and Wales in 2011.
Developments in England

In 2013 the UK government announced the biggest ever international investment (£35 million over five years) aimed at eradicating FGM. On 6 February 2014, the government made a Declaration to end FGM within a generation and appointed a consortium of leading anti-FGM campaigners to deliver The Girl Summit - a global campaign to end FGM; supported by a range of measures, noted below, to combat FGM both in the UK and internationally.

- The establishment of FGM prevention programme designed to support how the NHS tackles FGM. Part of this prevention programme included a mandatory requirement for all NHS acute hospitals (from April 2014) to provide information on patients who have undergone FGM; or if there is a family history of FGM; or if an FGM related procedure has been carried out on a women. The data is to be recorded centrally, so as to provide more information on the incidence and prevalence of FGM.
- The launch of a £100,000 community engagement initiative with the voluntary sector.
- The Home Office supported the launch of NSPCC’s free 24 hour female genital mutilation (FGM) helpline.

✓ The Girl Summit co-hosted by the UK Government and UNICEF, focussed on mobilising domestic and international efforts to end FGM and child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) within a generation. Junior Minister Jennifer McCann represented the NI Executive alongside world leaders to agree on action to end FGM. The campaign included:
  - FGM awareness raising posters were circulated to schools, GP surgeries, police stations and hospitals around the country; and placed in public toilets across England and Wales to direct mothers and carers to the NSPCC FGM helpline if they are suspicious a girl they know is at risk of having the procedure.
  - Online adverts on Facebook and Netmums to direct mothers to the NSPCC website for support and advice.
  - Online advertising to target professionals such as doctors, teachers and midwives, reminding them of their role in helping to prevent FGM and their duty to report it.
  - Educational materials, including factsheets on FGM, provided by the NSPCC, and on GOV.UK to reinforce that FGM is child abuse and that it is their duty to report it.
  - A free resource, which includes a DVD, available on Gov.uk and NSPCC website for members of these communities to discuss the issue among their friends and family.

Some of outworking initiatives of the Summit included:
- Strengthening the law enforcement response to FGM - specifically a package of domestic provisions contained in the Serious Crime Bill (see FGM and the Law). A consultation on mandatory reporting has recently been successfully completed and this measure has been incorporated into the Serious Crimes Act 2015.
- The government has set up a specialist FGM unit to drive a step change in nationwide outreach on FGM with criminal justice partners, children’s services, healthcare professionals and affected communities.
- Mandatory recording requirements for GPs and mental health trusts requiring them to record FGM incidence by October 2015.
- Improved training for frontline health workers on how to communicate sensitively with patients about FGM, through new e-learning sessions launched by Health Education England.
- Recognising and preventing FGM training for professionals with safeguarding responsibilities. It gives an introduction to FGM and the action that must take to protect girls who may be at risk.
- The delivery of training workshops for local safeguarding children’s boards in high-prevalence FGM areas (run in conjunction with FORWARD).
- Bespoke peer support to local areas who want to strengthen their ability to combat FGM.
- In March/April 2015 the Health Education England (HEE) will be launching a new e-learning resource designed to improve the knowledge and understanding of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) amongst healthcare professionals in the NHS.

4 In July 2014 the UK government hosted #YouthforChange, an event developed by young people to ignite action around girls’ rights and strengthen young people as leaders of the future. Views from the event were incorporated into Girl Summit 2014 to ensure the voices of young people are represented on FGM.
Developments in Scotland

In August 2013, the FGM Strategic Group in Glasgow identified the need for a Scottish Government funded scoping project into FGM to provide a credible and comprehensive baseline to inform recommendations for future evidence-based interventions, community engagement, legislative and policy work. The recommendations include a strong strategic framework; and indicates that an action plan must be informed by communities affected by FGM and should be cross-cutting and developed in partnership with all key stakeholders. The research also identifies a clear need to:

- Establish a specialist, multi-disciplinary ‘hub and spoke’ FGM service in Scotland, incorporating maternity services, obstetrics and gynaecology, psychological and psychosexual services, with links to social work and the police.
- Develop a network of named professionals with expertise on FGM in every local authority area and ensure clear referral pathways are in place;
- Include FGM in all professional training on child protection and safeguarding, as well as foundation training for midwives, GPs, social workers and other frontline professionals;
- Support key community figures and emerging community leaders to be advocates for sustainable and long-term behaviour change;
- Ensure that all women and girls living in Scotland are covered by legislation on FGM, irrespective of immigration status.

✓ In March 2015, £220,000 was secured from the Scottish government directed towards FGM community engagement projects as well as awareness-raising, training and support services.
✓ In Feb 2014, the Education Secretary Michael Russell said he would be writing to every head teacher in the nation asking them to train their staff and educate parents about FGM.
✓ The National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland, refreshed in May 2014 also contains a dedicated section on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). It sets out national expectations for all individuals working with children and young people to identify and act on child protection concerns.

Developments in Wales

Since 2012 the Welsh Government has done a considerable amount of work to raise awareness of FGM, to develop the knowledge of professionals and support communities to break down the barriers associated with exposing and ending FGM. This includes:

✓ Representation on the Wales Strategic FGM Leadership Group made up of key strategic decision makers from statutory, non-statutory and voluntary organisations. The group supports the governance and reporting arrangements of FGM; provide direction and advice to the existing Regional FGM Advisory and Delivery; and they monitor and evaluate activity by use of an Action plan to report progress of the group’s strategic objectives. The action plan includes (i) data gathering and information sharing (ii) training and awareness raising (iii) communications engagement plan (iv) law enforcement (v) health work programme (vi) community engagement and (vii) evaluation and development of protocols and guidance.

✓ Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act passed on 10th March 2015 places statutory duties to produce a range of local strategies (multi-agency collaboration, awareness raising, training and workplace policies) which will cover FGM.

✓ Safeguarding in Education Guidance highlights the issue of FGM, providing detailed information on the risk indicators and links to further guidance.
✓ Hosting the Together we can end FGM in Wales conference to raise awareness of the issue among professionals.
✓ Funding Bawso, the all-Wales service which provides specialist and holistic support to BME communities, to provide training on the issue to frontline staff. This funding also includes the production of the FGM Toolkit for professionals and parents as a teaching aid, to raise awareness of the health impact of FGM.
✓ Developing a National Training Framework which will provide training to key professional’s right across the public sector, to help them to identify cases of FGM and to support survivors.
✓ Holding two culturally mediated and safeguarding training events to educational professionals which examined the issue of FGM.

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5 Representatives from key statutory and voluntary organisations including Police Scotland, the Procurator Fiscal, Glasgow Social Work Services, Glasgow Education Services, NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde, Scottish Government and Rape Crisis Glasgow.


7 Education Scotland have produced a short PowerPoint presentation, which authorities and head teachers can use to raise awareness of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in schools and early years settings.

Next steps for Northern Ireland...

NSPCC is pleased that collaborative efforts have led to the development of regional guidance for FGM. However, we would seek for this issue to be given adequate priority and we emphasise the need for a proportionate response from government departments to better protect victims, and potential victims of FGM.

We have noted a number of suggestions for consideration:

1. The establishment of a FGM Strategic Group to include membership from key statutory and voluntary organisations, to coordinate and operationalise the Multi-agency Practice Guidelines; the responsibilities in the Serious Crimes Act 2015 and the development of an agreed NI wide FGM strategy.

2. Collation of intelligence and management information from agencies on the prevalence and incidence of FGM in NI.

3. Implementation of a regionally organised public health awareness raising campaign on FGM - existing materials from Home Office/NSPCC could potentially be used.

4. Targeted awareness-raising with communities affected.

5. Training to develop the competence, knowledge and awareness of multi-disciplinary frontline staff from education, health, police and the voluntary sector using publicity, social media and other communications methods.

6. Development of Prosecution guidance for NI on the issue of FGM.

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