



Africans Unite Against Child Abuse

Promoting the Rights and Welfare of African Children

## WHAT IS FGM?

Safeguarding African Children in the UK Series **4**





**WHAT IS FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION (FGM)?**

# Acknowledgments



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# About AFRUCA



AFRUCA – Africans Unite Against Child Abuse was established in May 2001 to promote the rights and welfare of African Children in the UK. We also work in partnership with other organisations in Africa and across Europe.

AFRUCA works with practitioners working with children and in the African community to raise awareness and educate everyone about issues affecting the welfare of children so we can all act to protect them from abuse and harm. Our work includes:

**Awareness raising** - within the African community across the UK and among young Africans about children's rights as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international conventions and UK legislation promoting the rights and welfare of children.

**Information, education, and advisory services** - to raise the profile of African children in the UK, increase awareness of their needs, improve policies and practices, and develop the leadership potential of young Africans. Activities include research and publishing reports; media work; conferences, seminars, workshops, and training programmes for parents, policy makers, service providers, community leaders, and young people; community meetings; advice and consultancy services.

**Advocacy and policy development:** working closely with policy makers, especially within the framework of the Government's 'Every Child Matters' agenda, to shape the development of policy and regulatory action to promote the welfare of children.

**Community and international development:** in partnership with others, establishing programmes and projects to help relieve some of the suffering and hardship that African children experience.

For further information about our work, please visit our website at [www.afruca.org](http://www.afruca.org)

# Introduction – What is Female Genital Mutilation?



Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is the partial or total removal of any part of the female genitalia. This includes the removal of the clitoris, labia minora (inner lips of the vagina) or the stitching of the labia majora (outer lips of the vagina). In many communities, this procedure is also known as Female Circumcision, Female Genital Cutting, “Clitoridectomy” or “Sunna”.

## **The World Health Organisation (1997) defines FGM as comprising:**

*“All procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs whether for cultural or non-therapeutic reasons”*

According to World Health Organisation (WHO) statistics, communities from 28 African countries practice FGM. FGM is also practised in parts of the Middle East including Yemen, Syria and among the Kurds in Northern Iraq.

WHO estimates that between 130 to 140 million girls and women are victims of FGM with those from the African continent recording an annual estimate of 3 million victims.

With the upsurge in migrant African communities into the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States of America in the last 20 years, FGM is no longer an African problem, but a global one. According to the 2001 UK census, there are 587,000 black Africans in the UK. The number of African children in the UK grew from about 96,667 in 1992 to about 145,667 in 2000 – a 50% increase over the 8 year period. In 2003, 41% of asylum applications were from Africa, especially those from conflict zones such as Sierra Leone, Somalia, Angola, Eritrea, Zimbabwe and Liberia.

According to the latest study in 2006 by the Foundation for Women’s Health, Research and Development (FORWARD-UK), it is estimated that nearly 66,000 women with FGM were living in England and Wales in 2001. The study also estimates that over 20,000 girls under the age of 15 are at risk of FGM or may have been subjected to any one of the different types.

One of the challenges that this rapid increase of migrant Africans poses for the UK government is the need for proactive strategies to address harmful cultural practices such as FGM. At AFRUCA, we have produced this publication to highlight the problem of Female Genital Mutilation and the role that members of the African community in the UK can play in addressing it.

# What are the Different Types of FGM?



## There are four types of FGM:

**Type 1:** This type involves cutting off the hood or prepuce of the clitoris. This type is also known as “Sunna” among practising communities and is considered to be the mildest form of FGM.

**Type 2:** This type is known as “clitoridectomy” and involves the excision of the entire clitoris and parts of the inner lips of the female genitalia (labia minora). When the injury heals, it leaves a scar tissue.

**Type 3:** This type is called infibulation, and sometimes referred to as Pharonic circumcision. It involves the excision of the whole of the clitoris, the whole of the labia minora and incisions to the labia majora to enable the vagina to be stitched and narrowed.

**Type 4:** This type includes any procedure that affects the female genitalia such as piercing, pricking, stretching of the clitoris and or labia minora, and adding corrosive substances and herbs to add dryness or to narrow the vagina.

## Why is FGM Practised?

No one in practising African communities can really tell you or confirm how FGM started. But there are several tales of the origins of FGM and most of them are masked in myths, religious beliefs and socio-cultural ideologies in the different communities. We will highlight a few of them:

**Our ancestors:** It is believed that at some point in the process of human settlement in communities, the “ancestors” decided that FGM should be practised for reasons such as to avoid the wrath of the gods, to purify the society, to remove the “male organ” in girls and women, to curtail sexual excitement in girls thereby preventing pre-marital sex and preserving virginity, to avoid pregnancy outside marriage, to preserve family honour and promote fertility of the womb and the land.

**Myths and Beliefs:** In some communities, FGM is seen as necessary to shield women from all kinds of diseases and demonic mishaps. It is believed that un-mutilated women have sex with demons who can bring all types of diseases. There is also the belief that such women give birth to demonic babies that come out physically deformed, live for short periods of time and cause grief to the family.

It is also believed that mutilated women are very hard working in the farms, therefore an asset to any family that marries them.

**Culture:** In many communities, FGM is practiced as ceremonial rites of passage just before girls move into their puberty (teen years). It is believed that FGM during this ceremony is important to curtail sexual excitement and ensure chastity before marriage.

**Social Acceptance:** It is believed that un-mutilated girls and women are unclean, promiscuous, and unmarriageable. It is also believed that the clitoris can be used to bewitch husbands and make it impossible for them to take more wives. In this instance, women who would not permit their husbands to take more wives are branded witches.

Among the communities that practice Type IV FGM mentioned above, it is believed that to be socially accepted and therefore marriageable, the girls and women must pull their labia minora, use herbs and chemicals to tighten the vagina, and insert rings into the vagina to ensure male pleasure during intercourse. Girls and women who reject this are stigmatised and even ostracised.

**Religious obligation:** In some communities it is mistakenly believed that FGM is a religious requirement. A majority of Africans are either Christians or Muslims, yet it is claimed that neither the Bible nor the Koran supports FGM.

## When and How is FGM Carried Out?

When this procedure is carried out varies from one community to the other. In some communities, it is carried out just a few hours after the girl-child has been born. In others it ranges from when the girl is eight days old, four months old, seven years old to just before puberty or before marriage, during pregnancy and just before the first child is born.

Most of the FGM procedure is carried out by older women in the community called traditional birth attendants using implements such as razor blades, knives, broken bottles or sharpened stones. In some other communities, village barbers who are often men do it using their shaving blades. However, in some communities, they seek the help of medical professionals such as nurses and doctors.



# What Are the Risks and Complications of FGM?



## Risks

- There is the risk of haemorrhage or excessive bleeding and infections. This is because FGM is more often performed by traditional birth attendants who use crude, un-sterilised implements to cut veins without anaesthetics
- Surgical mishaps can also happen and cause injury to adjoining areas, such as the urethra and anus
- There is the risk of shock from pain and bleeding. The wound may fail to heal and this can cause infections
- There is also the possibility that group FGM rituals can cause transmission of infections such as HIV from one girl/woman to others
- Some girls and women are known to have died during or after the procedure because of excessive bleeding and surgical mishaps

## Complications

The following complications can result after FGM procedures:

- Scarring and hardening of the tissues around the vagina
- Difficulty with passing of urine and menstrual blood
- Decrease or loss of sexual sensation
- Painful intercourse
- Uterine, vaginal and pelvic infections
- Infertility
- Obstructed labour and painful childbirth
- Psychological problems such as nightmares, anxiety, self-confidence, depression and mental ill health
- Physical problems such as persistent back pain, urine incontinence and foot drop

## Social Complications

Social complications also arise such as marriage breakdowns, high rates of divorce, broken homes – affecting children's health and upbringing and a growing number of unmarriageable young women – mutilated or not.



## Is FGM Child Abuse?



Our conviction at AFRUCA is that FGM is an abuse of the girl child. The cultural arguments for the practice are clearly against the interest of the (girl) child. The practice is carried out on the assumption by parents and the community that it is alright to violate and harm a (girl) child. The procedure violates a girl's right to good health and protection from pre-meditated infliction of grievous genital harm. FGM is an assault on young African girls and a denial of their rights to sexual enjoyment when they become women.

Several International Human Rights Conventions recognise FGM as a form of abuse and violence that discriminates against girls and women. These conventions recognise that FGM is a harmful procedure that affects women and girls. Some of these conventions are:

- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1959)
- The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990)
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990)
- The United Nations Declaration on Violence Against Women (1993)



# FGM And Religion



Africans have strong religious values. The dominant religions in Africa are Christianity and Islam. What do these two religions say about FGM?

## THE BIBLE AND FGM

The Bible is very silent on FGM. The directive from God to have Abraham remove the foreskins of males born to him through circumcision is very clear in Genesis 17.10-14...23-27:

*"This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. 12 For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. 13 Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. 14 Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."*

*...23 On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household, and circumcised them, as God told him. 24 Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised, 25 and his son Ishmael was thirteen; 26 Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that same day. 27 And every male in Abraham's household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner, was circumcised with him.*

*And in Genesis 21:1-4*

*"Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. 2 Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. 3 Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. 4 When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him".*

(The Bible New International Version)

It is important to note that nowhere in the Bible was it mentioned that any female children or grown women should be circumcised.

## THE KORAN AND FGM

At an international conference in Cairo, Egypt in November 2006, the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar, the highest Sunni Islamic institution in the world, Sheikh Mohammed Sayyid Tantawi categorically stated, "FGM has neither been mentioned in Quran nor Sunnah". This statement was reaffirmed by the top official cleric and Grand Mufti of Egypt, Sheikh Ali Gomaa who said "Prophet Mohammed didn't circumcise his four daughters". Sheikh Yousif Algaradawi, a prominent Islamic figure, also addressed the conference by avowing that "FGM is not an Islamic requirement".

The Muslim Women's League (<http://www.mwlusa.org>) have quoted Sayyid Sabiq, a renowned scholar and author among various Muslim scholars that have denounced FGM as an un-Islamic practice. "According to Sayyid Sabiq, of Fiqh-us-Sunnah, all hadiths concerning female circumcision are non-authentic."

## What is the UK Government's Response to FGM?

In 1985 the UK government passed the Female Circumcision Prohibition Act which made it illegal for anyone to carry out the practice within the United Kingdom. But then, parents started taking their children abroad for the procedure. In response to this development, the UK government passed the 2003 Female Genital Mutilation Act which helped to strengthen the 1985 Act. So far no one has been prosecuted for carrying out FGM in the UK.



# The 2003 Female Genital Mutilation Act



It is illegal for any residents of the UK to perform FGM within or outside the UK. The punishment for violating the 2003 Act carries 14 years imprisonment, a fine or both.

The Metropolitan Police Service in conjunction with London Safeguarding Children Board, the British Medical Association (BMA), Foundation for Women's Health Research and Development (FORWARD), Africans Unite Against Child Abuse (AFRUCA) and Development Support Agency (DSA) have issued a joint statement to schools and the community to warn against the practice of FGM within or outside the UK.

The UK Children's Acts of 1989, 2004 and Every Child Matters 2005 are part of the strategies to protect African girls at risk of FGM. The Safeguarding Children Boards and some local authorities have also developed protocols to help practitioners gain awareness and skills that would enable them respond to the practice.

A number of African Well Women Clinics and services are also working as part of the National Health Service (NHS). The key aims of this service are to fill a gap in the ability of local health care services to meet the needs of women experiencing difficulties arising from FGM, work to increase the knowledge and awareness of professionals in order to protect girls who are at risk of the practice and raise awareness among practising communities. The clinics provide reversal services for those with type three FGM.



# Examples of FGM In Our Community



## Case Study One

*This young woman is a victim of type three FGM. She was mutilated and stitched up when she was seven years old. Her legs were bound for 21 days. She had problems with urine and menstrual flow and suffered greatly as a teenager and now as a grown woman. When she got married sexual relations was a problem and she always bled after every sexual intercourse. She has Pelvic Inflammatory Disease, an infection that has been with her for a long time but cannot take antibiotics because she is breastfeeding her baby.*

## Case Study Two

*She has type three FGM. She has gone through the trauma of a divorce because she had married outside her culture, and her husband could not cope with the complications of FGM. Some of these were the fact that she had painful intercourse. Besides, like most women, she feels that the men do not understand the need to be sensitive and even more patient because the trauma of FGM has scarred their wives' genitalia as well as their ability to fully enjoy sex.*

## Case Study Three

*She has type 3 FGM. Her first pregnancy in her country of birth ended in a stillbirth because of her stitches. Medical intervention was not readily available to relieve her labour.*

## Case Study Four

*She has type 1 FGM. The tip of her clitoris has a large scar tissue and she finds sexual activity an ordeal.*

## Case Study Five

*She has type 1 FGM. She went through the ordeal twice because her mother insists it was not done properly the first time.*

# Addressing FGM in Our Community



Female Genital Mutilation is a problem in our community because it violates the rights of the girl-child to health and impairs her future prospects in life. It is therefore important for every member of the community to work to preserve the health of every girl-child and ensure a sustainable future for all members of our community.

## There are four main steps to safeguard girls at risk of FGM

- **Step one** – Ensure that every girl-child born in your own family is protected from any type of FGM. You will do this by informing members of the family including the parents, mothers-in-law, the aunts, and uncles that FGM is unacceptable, illegal, and a criminal offence punishable by 14 years imprisonment. With information provided above, you will convince them that FGM is an unhealthy practice which has terrible physical, psychological and social consequences.
- **Step two** – Know that every girl-child born to any African family is potentially at risk of FGM and ensure other people are equally aware. You will do this by informing your neighbours and peers at community meetings, social gatherings such as weddings and naming ceremonies of the dangers and illegality of FGM.
- **Step three** – Know what to do if you suspect a child is at risk of FGM. You will do this by calling Crime Stoppers anonymously on **0800 555 111** to report any suspicion or rumour of impending FGM and informing your local council child protection agency. You can find the council's switchboard number on your council tax bill.
- **Step four** – Engage your church or mosque to speak out against FGM. You will do this by approaching the Pastor or Imam and work with them to speak out against FGM.
- **Step five** – Contact AFRUCA to learn more about how to protect children in our community from abuse and harm.

# AFRUCA – Our Work with African Parents in the UK



At AFRUCA we recognise that in order to help protect children we need to work with those who have the most impact on a child's life: the parents.

African parents face so many challenges on arrival in the UK. Many parents have to deal with problems they have never come across before including racism, housing problems, language difficulties, cultural barriers, problems with immigration, mental health problems and so many others.

Also, for most parents, it is difficult to understand that there are strict rules about how children should be brought up. A lot of the time, these government rules are against the cultural practices like FGM that parents are used to in their countries of origin. This means that without knowing it, most parents fall foul of the law in the UK.

At AFRUCA, we are very concerned about the number of African children being removed from their families. We want to work with parents to overcome the problems they are facing about bringing up their children and give them the knowledge to protect their children from abuse and harm. Here are some of the ways we support parents to help them better safeguard children from abuse:

- **Training Courses:** We hold informative workshops to equip parents with a basic knowledge of child protection and related rules and regulations. Cultural practices, religious beliefs and other issues in relation to child protection are also covered.
- **Advice Road-shows:** We run local advice surgeries in different parts of London to give parents who need one-on-one advice on child protection or parenting to come to us for advice and help.
- **Support:** We work with parents who have children presently in the care system or have a child protection plan to ensure they can get the best outcomes for their children.
- **Information:** We produce and disseminate publications that deal with different aspects of safeguarding children in the African community and provide useful information about child protection. We also signpost parents to other sources for help and advice if they need it.





**What is Child Abuse?**

**What is Child Trafficking?**

**What is Private Fostering?**

**What is Female Genital Mutilation?**

**What is Witchcraft Abuse?**

**What is Physical Abuse?**

Our Safeguarding African Children in the UK series of publications are produced to help raise awareness among the UK African community about different forms of child abuse and what they can do to help address these.

This publication (FGM) can also be downloaded from our website at [www.afruca.org](http://www.afruca.org)







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- 3 What is Private Fostering?
- 4 What is Female Genital Mutilation?
- 5 What is Witchcraft Abuse?
- 6 What is Physical Abuse?

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