

FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

Introduction

Female Genital Mutilation often referred to as FGM. This is a difficult topic, but an important one especially those working with children, families or adults at risk.

FGM is not a cultural curiosity, not a religious requirement and not a private matter. In fact, it is a serious human right abuse, a form of violence against women and girls, and is illegal in the UK under Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003.

What is FGM?

Female Genital Mutilation refers to any procedure that intentionally alters or injures the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) classifies FGM into four types, ranging from:

- Partial or total removal of the clitoris.
- Removal of the labia.
- Narrowing of the vaginal opening through stitching (known as infibulation).
- Other harmful procedures such as pricking, cutting or burning.

FGM is most commonly used carried out on girls between infancy and age 15, though it can happen at any time.

The impact of FGM

FGM has lifelong consequences which may include chronic pain and infection, difficulty urinating or menstruating, complications during childbirth, increased risk of maternal and infant death, sexual dysfunction, along with anxiety, depression and PTSD.

Survivors may also experience shame, isolation, and difficulty accessing help, particularly if they fear judgement or repercussions.

Case Study

A real case from the UK involved a 13-year-old girl whose teacher noticed she became withdrawn after a family holiday abroad.

She complained of pain when sitting, frequently asked to leave lessons, and her academic performance dropped sharply.

A safeguarding referral was made.

Medical examination confirmed FGM had taken place overseas.

The outcome:

- The child received specialist medical and psychological support
- Safeguarding measures were put in place for younger siblings
- And the case helped prevent further harm within the family

This case highlights how professional curiosity and timely action can make a real difference.

Why does FGM happen?

FGM is rooted in deeply embedded social norms, not religion, despite what is sometimes claimed.

Common reasons given include:

- Belief that it preserves a girl's purity or virginity.
- Control of female sexuality
- Social pressure to conform
 - Perceived marriageability
 - Misconceptions about cleanliness or femininity

In many communities, families may fear that not carrying out FGM will lead to social exclusion, stigma or rejection.

Remember:

One sign on its own doesn't mean FGM has definitely taken place - but if several things don't feel right, it's important to take notice.

Legal Position in the UK

FGM is **ILLEGAL** in the UK under the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003

It is a crime to:

- Perform FGM in the UK.
- Take a child abroad to have FGM
- Assist, encourage, or fail to protect a child from FGM.

Professionals in regulated roles have a mandatory reporting duty if they discover FGM has been carried out on a girl under 18.

Signs and Indicators of FGM

Sometimes we might be the only people who notice when something doesn't feel right, so it's important to be aware of the signs:

Things that may occur before FGM:

- A family talking about taking a long trip to a country where FGM is common.
- Mention of a "special ceremony" or a girl "becoming a woman".
- Older sisters or female relatives who have already been through FGM.
- A girl feeling worried or scared about an upcoming trip.

What to do and signposting

If you are concerned about a child or young person:

Call the Police on 999 if you believe the person is in immediate risk, threat or harm.

Support and information:

NSPCC FGM Helpline: 0800 028 3550 | Police (non-emergency): 101 | Emergency: 999

NHS FGM Clinics offer confidential specialist support for survivors