



No: 067  
17 August 2015

## One Minute Guide: Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

### What is it?

FGM is a serious form of child abuse and violence against women and girls. It has been illegal in this country since 1985 and councils have a statutory duty to safeguard children and protect and promote the welfare of all women and girls.

It is the practice, traditional in some cultures, of partially or totally removing the external genitalia of girls and young women for non-medical reasons. FGM is sometimes referred to as "cutting", female circumcision, Sunna or Khifad. The practice has been illegal in the United Kingdom since 1985. This means that it is an offence for anyone to perform FGM here or to arrange for a girl to be taken abroad. FGM is performed on young women and girls at different ages, depending on the community or ethnic group that carries it out. In some cases, FGM is carried out on babies or infants. In other cases, FGM is carried out as a 'rite of passage' at a later stage in a girl's life. The procedure can be extremely risky and it is often carried out by someone with no medical training, without anaesthetic or using unsterilised equipment.

### Is FGM an issue in the UK?

Whilst the vast majority of FGM is practiced in African countries, Asia and the Middle East, it has been estimated that over 20,000 girls under the age of 15 are at risk of female genital mutilation (FGM) in the UK each year, and that 66,000 women in the UK are living with the consequences of FGM. However, the true extent is unknown, due to the hidden nature of the crime.

The girls may be taken from the UK to their countries of origin so that FGM can be carried out during the summer holidays, allowing them time to "heal" before they return to school. There have also been instances of FGM being performed in the UK.

In February, 2014, the UK government announced plans to part-fund a new study into how many women and girls living in England and Wales are affected by FGM. This was part of a wider commitment to preventing FGM during the [International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation](#). Read the [2015 Government declaration on female genital mutilation](#) for details on other steps being taken.

### Why is FGM a safeguarding issue?

FGM is a form of child abuse, an act of violence and a violation of human rights. It can lead to both short term and long term physical and emotional difficulties, and in extreme cases, death. Immediate physical issues can include severe pain, haemorrhaging, infections etc. Longer term consequences are scarring, permanent damage to sexual and

reproductive organs, infertility, difficulties during labour etc. Mental health can be severely affected with depression. Local authorities have a statutory duty to safeguard and protect the welfare of all children and young people and this includes those at risk of FGM.

### **What are the signs that a girl may be at risk of, or have already undergone FGM?**

The following are some signs that a girl may be at risk of FGM:

- The family belongs to a community in which FGM is practised.
- The family makes preparations for the girl to take a holiday, planning an absence from school.
- The girl talks about a 'special procedure/ceremony that is going to take place.
- There is an awareness by a health professional that the procedure has already taken place with other females members of the family.

The following are some signs that FGM may already have taken place:

- Prolonged absence from school and noticeable behaviour change on return to school.
- Avoidance of specific lessons or activities – particularly physical activities, giving reasons of bladder, menstrual or abdominal problems.
- Difficulties in sitting still in class or looking uncomfortable whilst seated.
- Complaints about pain or talking about something that someone did that they are not allowed to talk about.

The above are a number of potential indicators, however, it should be noted that these lists are not exhaustive and FGM should not be assumed just on the basis of someone presenting with one or more of these warning signs. These could also be indicators of other types of abuse such as forced marriage or sexual abuse that will also require a multi-agency response.

### **How can I find out more?**

It is important that professionals are aware and informed of this issue, particularly those undertaking direct work with children and young people. More detailed information can be accessed via [NHS Choices](#), which includes the different forms of FGM, effects – both immediate and longer term etc. You could also read the [Statement Opposing Female Genital Mutilation](#), published by the Government in June 2015 and another useful resource document is the [Local Government Association's FGM: A Councillor's Guide](#). The statutory guidance is contained in the [Multi-Agency Practice Guidelines: Female Genital Mutilation](#).

### **What should I do if I suspect a girl or young woman is at risk of FGM?**

Whilst the number of young women and girls in Redbridge at risk of FGM is relatively small in number, there are some who have already undergone the procedure or could be under pressure to have it performed. There will shortly be a new mandatory duty, alongside the use of protection orders, arising from the [Serious Crime Act 2015](#), placed on front line workers e.g. health, education and social workers to notify the police where FGM appears to have been committed on a girl under 18.

## **What is an FGM Protection Order?**

An FGM protection order is a new provision that will allow a girl who is at risk of FGM or a “relevant third party” to apply to the court for an order to impose restrictions or requirements on a person or persons with the aim of preventing FGM. It is an order that may be made by a court that imposes any prohibitions, restrictions or requirements considered appropriate to protect a girl from FGM. FGM Protection Orders may be imposed on people who commit, or attempt to commit an act of FGM, or those who are involved in FGM. This can include people who aid or, abet, counsel, procure, encourage or assist another person to commit, or attempt to commit, an act of FGM.

## **Who can apply for an FGM protection order?**

The court can make an FGM protection order following an application by the girl who is to be protected by the order or a “relevant third party”. An application can also be made by any person who has leave of the court (which will depend on the applicant’s connection to the girl to be protected and their knowledge of her circumstances). The court may also issue an FGM protection order without an application having been made in the context of other family proceedings that are before the court (e.g. child protection proceedings) or criminal proceedings relating to FGM.

Any concerns regarding FGM should be reported to the Child Protection and Assessment Team (CPAT) [CPAT.Referrals@redbridge.gov.uk](mailto:CPAT.Referrals@redbridge.gov.uk) or 020 8708 3885 or 020 8708 5825 after 17:00 or at weekends.