



Developing excellence  
in response to FGM and  
other harmful practices



## **Briefing about the work of the National FGM Centre (NFGMC)**

### **Key messages**

- FGM is a hidden form of child abuse which has been illegal in the UK since 1985.
- FGM and other harmful practices such as breast flattening, forced marriage, child abuse linked to faith and belief are often interconnected safeguarding issues.
- A multi-agency approach which includes health, education, social services and law enforcement is needed to tackle FGM and other harmful practices.
- The Centre's aim is to help end FGM for girls and women by 2030 through delivering a multifaceted social care model of delivery which spans prevention to late intervention, by supporting local authorities, community engagement, training professionals and producing resources e.g. online FGM assessment tool.
- The Centre is pivotal in the fight against FGM and other harmful practices; Government must act to help secure the Centre's long-term future by committing funding to the Centre beyond 2020.

### **What is the National FGM Centre?**

We work with local authorities and communities to keep children and young people safe from female genital mutilation (FGM), breast flattening and child abuse linked to faith or belief (CALFB). Through our work we aim to: prevent new cases; protect children and young people; support those affected by FGM and other harmful practices; and partner with local organisations to deliver services and continuously learn about and improve our approach.

The NFGMC is a partnership between Barnardo's and the Local Government Association, funded by the Department for Education. The Centre is the only organisation of its kind internationally. Through a multifaceted social care model of delivery we aim to achieve a system change in the delivery of children's services to children and families affected by FGM, breast flattening and CALFB. We currently work with 10 local authorities<sup>1</sup> and between September 2015 and February 2019 we have worked with:

- 388 families;
- 522 girls at risk of FGM, 192 women with FGM and 13 girls under 18 who had FGM before coming to the UK;
- Families from 60 countries;
- Secured 23 FGM Protection Orders; and
- Worked on 29 cases about child abuse linked to faith and belief.

## How the National FGM Centre is creating system change

We provide guidance and support across the spectrum from prevention, to early intervention, children in need, to child protection. We achieve this through a multifaceted social care model of delivery by embedding specialist social workers in local authorities, engaging with communities, delivering training to professionals and hosting the knowledge hub to share best practice and guidance.



### **1. Social workers**

We are the only service which has a social care model to ending FGM by employing, managing, supporting and embedding social workers into each local authority's multi-agency safeguarding team to provide support in cases where FGM, breast flattening and CALFB are a concern. This support can range from advice and guidance to frontline professionals, to child protection proceedings and applications for FGM Protection Orders.

### **2. Community engagement**

We recognise that communities have a wealth of knowledge and resources that can be harnessed to address issues that affect them such as FGM, breast flattening and child abuse linked to faith and belief. Therefore our community engagement methods emphasise a bottom-up and community-led approach to tackling FGM and other harmful practices and facilitate a means through which community members we work with are informed, consulted and involved in issues which affect them.

### **3. Professional development and training**

We run CPD accredited training on FGM for all professionals, including community organisations, working with children and families through our practice development. The training focuses on how to talk to families about FGM what is needed to be included in a referral in order for it to reach statutory threshold and professionals' mandatory reporting duty.

### **4. Knowledge Hub**

We host the [Knowledge Hub](#) on our website which is a 'one-stop shop' for quality assured national and international guidance, information and resources regarding FGM, breast flattening and CALFB. It supports the continue learning of professionals, the development of good practice and the understanding of excellence in the delivery of services.

## **Female genital mutilation**

The World Health Organisation defines FGM as comprising all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. FGM is a form of child abuse and can result in significant consequences for their mental and physical health.

As of 2015, health professionals, teachers and social workers have a mandatory duty to report known cases of FGM to the police.<sup>2</sup> Despite the practice of FGM being illegal in the UK, NHS digital statistics from April 2017 to March 2018 show:

- **There were 4,495 newly recorded cases of women and girls where FGM was identified;**
- 6,195 individual women and girls who had an attendance where FGM was identified or a procedure related to FGM was undertaken;
- 9,490 attendances reported at NHS trusts and GP practices where FGM was identified or a procedure related to FGM was undertaken.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, **FGM was identified at the end of assessment in to 940 cases** according to the Child in Need Census for 2017-18.

**However, these figures underestimate the scale of FGM as it remains to be a hidden practice.** Research has shown that there is no local authority in England and Wales where there was not a woman living with FGM, estimating there are 103,000 women between the ages of 15-49 and 10,000 girls between 0-14 have undergone FGM and a further 60,000 girls at risk of FGM in the UK.<sup>4</sup>

***“Girls who had not been circumcised were perceived in practising communities as less honourable ‘easy-goers’, to be insulted and shunned. In some instances, this can even go so far as people refusing to eat food that has been prepared by an uncircumcised girl/woman, and curses being put upon the girl and her whole family.” (Between Two Cultures, 2016)***

## **Breast flattening**

Breast flattening, also known as breast ironing, is the process during which young pubescent girls’ breasts are ironed, massaged, flattened and/or pounded down over a period of time in order for the breasts to disappear or delay the development of the breasts entirely. Breast flattening usually starts with the first signs of puberty, which can be as young as nine years old and is usually carried out by female relatives. It is believed that by carrying out this act, young girls will be protected from harassment, rape, abduction and early forced marriage and therefore kept in education.

It is estimated that breast ironing affects 3.8million women around the world. However, **there are no figures available for the number of teenage girls who might be affected within the UK** nor is there a specific law around breast ironing in the UK.

***“My mother took a pestle, she warmed it well in the fire and then she used it to pound my breasts while I was lying down. She took the back of a coconut, warmed it in the fire and used it to iron the breasts. I was crying and trembling to escape but there was no way.” (Survivor)***

## **Child abuse linked to faith or belief**

In 2012 the Government published a National Action Plan to tackle CALFB which defines it as belief in concepts of:

- Witchcraft and spirit possession, demons or the devil acting through children or leading them astray;
- Supernatural benefits or the use of their body parts is believed to produce potent magical remedies;

- Use of belief in magic or witchcraft to create fear in children to make them more compliant when they are being trafficked for domestic slavery or sexual exploitation.

Child protection statistics for 2017/18 showed that **councils dealt with 1,630 cases of CALFB – an increase of 12 per cent compared to the previous year**. This amounts to **30 cases per week across the country**. Councils have a responsibility to safeguard against all forms of child abuse, however CALFB can be difficult to identify, thus making it difficult to estimate the magnitude of faith-based abuse. Research has found that only 12 per cent of professionals of community and faith-based organisations were familiar with the National Action Plan and most weren't aware that their Local Safeguarding Children Board had a policy on this form of child abuse.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, only 33 per cent were confident in identifying key indicators of this abuse.

***"In order to save the child, to get the evil out of them, or to stop them from being witches, the parents or the church will exorcise them. To them they are not starving or beating the child, but the spirit that is inside them."***

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<sup>1</sup> Hertfordshire, Essex, Thurrock, Stafford, Stoke-on-Trent, Redbridge, Harrow, Brent, Croydon and Wandsworth

<sup>2</sup> Department for Education and Home Office (2015) Mandatory reporting of female genital mutilation: procedural information <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mandatory-reporting-of-female-genital-mutilation-procedural-information>

<sup>3</sup> NHS digital <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/female-genital-mutilation/female-genital-mutilation-fgm---annual-report-2017-18>

<sup>4</sup> City University and Equality Now (2015) Prevalence of Female Genital Mutilation in England and Wales: National and local estimates [https://www.city.ac.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/282388/FGM-statistics-final-report-21-07-15-released-text.pdf](https://www.city.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/282388/FGM-statistics-final-report-21-07-15-released-text.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Victoria Climbié Foundation UK and the Manchester Metropolitan Police in 2016