

MPs' fury over the 'national scandal' of FGM

A report by MPs urgently calls for a national plan to deal with the issue of female genital mutilation in the UK. But is it up to communities or authorities to put an end to this abuse?



Time to act: Many teenagers are helping to raise awareness of the issue © Christian Sinibaldi



It is, in the words of an important government report, a 'national scandal' which has resulted in the 'preventable mutilation of thousands of girls.'

These powerful words refer to female genital mutilation (FGM); a shocking form of child abuse that involves the removal of part or all of a girl's external genitals, sometimes without anesthetic and often while the girl is forcibly restrained.

According to a Home Affairs Committee report written by MPs, there are 170,000 victims of FGM in the UK and a further 65,000 girls under the age of 13 are thought to be at risk.

Cutting a girl's genitals is unthinkable cruel to many of us. Yet in the UK it is carried out in communities originally from parts of Africa and some countries in the Middle East, often by family members with good intentions. They act in the misguided belief that FGM is a religious requirement and a prerequisite to marriage, because it preserves virginity

and chastity.

It is most often performed by a traditional practitioner, who may use knives, scissors, pieces of glass, or razor blades. The effects are devastating. FGM causes severe pain and bleeding, difficulties urinating, infections and injury to neighbouring organs, not to mention extreme distress and trauma. It can damage women's relationships and how they feel about themselves for years.

And the report's authors made clear their feelings about the extent of the abuse. MPs are scathing about the failure of police, prosecutors and healthcare workers to bring perpetrators to justice. They want to see a dramatic increase in prosecutions for those who carry out the abuse and possibly for doctors who fail to report it.

But part of the problem in tackling FGM is breaking the wall of silence that surrounds it. Although it has been a crime to carry out the procedure in the

UK since 1985, until this year there had not been a single prosecution.

BREAKING THE WALL OF SILENCE

Some say the authorities must do more to end this abuse. Little action has so far been taken because people fear they will be branded racist or culturally insensitive if they intervene. But this report rightly urges the authorities to be bolder, they claim. More prosecutions for the perpetrators and more medical examinations for those at risk will stop this unacceptable child abuse.

But others warn that the authorities must proceed with caution, otherwise these measures could prove counterproductive and reinforce racial stereotypes. Victims might not want to talk about their experience and could be reluctant to inform on family members. Some think that meaningful relationships between the authorities and communities are required if this report is to have any lasting effect.

Q & A

Q Stories like these are too awful to think about.

A The issue of FGM makes for difficult reading, even for adults. But there is hope. This new report, combined with the high-profile campaigns of newspapers, politicians, campaign groups and public figures, has put the

issue under the spotlight like never before. Hopefully, with a bit more understanding and awareness from all of us, this type of abuse will soon be something of the past.

Q Why hasn't more been done to prevent it?

A For too long people have viewed FGM as a cultural practice and a private family matter. One anti-FGM campaigner decided to conduct an experiment earlier this year. She approached members of the public to

sign a fake petition in favour of FGM, telling them it was part of her culture. Worryingly, 19 people signed.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'In this country we find it difficult to talk about anything related to race, gender or religion.'
Leyla Hussein

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

▶ MPs' fury over the 'national scandal' of FGM

WORD WATCH

Home Affairs Committee – The Home Affairs Committee examines the policy and administration of the Home Office government department. It conducts inquiries and writes reports which contain recommendations for the government. It is also currently working on police reform and counter-terrorism, among other issues.

Africa – FGM is practised in 29 countries in Africa and some countries in Asia and the Middle East.

Report – The report also recommends the introduction of FGM protection orders to place girls in danger under the protection of a court, regular medical examinations of girls who are deemed to be at high risk, and a right

to anonymity for victims willing to testify in court. They also want to see a national publicity campaign stressing that FGM is child abuse and a serious crime.

Prosecution – The first UK prosecutions were announced in March. Two people are currently awaiting trial. In France, there have been more than 100 prosecutions.

YOU DECIDE

1. How does reading this article make you feel?
2. Do you think the report will have a lasting effect?

ACTIVITIES

1. In groups, create an infographic (information poster) displaying facts and figures related to FGM.
2. Write a letter to your local MP expressing your opinions on this issue.

 **BECOME AN EXPERT** Check our website for a selection of useful links to videos and further reading.

 **NOTES**

