

FGM safeguarding policies are alienating UK's African diaspora communities

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Credit: United Nations

Ahead of tomorrow's International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation, by the United Nations, FORWARD, the leading African women-led organization working to end violence against women and girls, and the University of Huddersfield have published new research that documents how the stringent, targeted, FGM safeguarding measures introduced since the 2014 Girl Summit are causing distress and

mistrust amongst African diaspora communities in Bristol, and potentially across the country.

The research reveals first-hand evidence documenting how FGM safeguarding policies are leaving families feeling racially profiled, criminalized and stigmatized.

Over the latter half of the last decade, the UK government intensified its response to FGM, giving FGM a 'special' status within national safeguarding, going far beyond the UK's regulatory approach to other forms of child abuse.

This includes the introduction of FGM Mandatory Reporting Duty, the launch of the FGM Safeguarding and Risk Assessments procedures across healthcare, education, and social care, and the introduction of Operation Limelight at the UK borders. While these rightly reflect the serious impact of FGM on women and girls, these measures are inadvertently causing harm to the very people these policies are designed to protect.

Central to the conversations with research participants was the persistent feeling of being 'suspected' of wrongdoing, being repeatedly singled out, criminalized and treated differently.

Furthermore, they expressed feelings of frustration that, given their efforts to protect their daughters from FGM, they found themselves at the receiving end of heavy-handed safeguarding measures. The new policies have put innocent families under immense scrutiny by multi-agency professionals, making them vulnerable to unjustified targeting and investigations. Among one of the most alarming, unintended outcomes from the new measures, is that the welfare of young girls appears to have been undermined, as the increased focus on FGM diverted professionals' attention away from other issues facing young

girls in the community.

"This study clearly shows that current safeguarding measures around FGM are failing some girls and their families," said study co-author Dr. Kate Smith, Senior Research Fellow, University of Huddersfield. "But it also shines a light on ways that authorities could be working more effectively with communities to safeguard against FGM, and to help inform future efforts to end these practices."

The research revealed how community members in the Bristol area are increasingly reluctant to interact with professionals or access healthcare services out of fear of being scrutinized or reported; how families are distressed and frightened by FGM safeguarding procedures at school, in medical institutions and at UK airports. These concerns are echoed by regulated professionals who are increasingly ill at ease as they witness the growing mistrust and disconnection from the communities they work with.

The decision of the government to give special and far-reaching safeguarding status to FGM was supported by estimates that 60,000 girls are born in the UK to mothers who have had FGM and are therefore considered to be potentially at risk. However, a growing body of evidence suggests that attitudes to, and practices of FGM, are significantly and considerably altered by immigration due to mixing with other cultures and reduced pressures from extended families and communities.

A serious issue

Professionals who participated in the research expressed deep skepticism of the need to single out FGM from other forms of child abuse. These concerns call into question the need for the existing targeted and stringent FGM safeguarding requirements.

"FGM is a serious issue that needs to be addressed—but the current safeguarding measures appear to have caused a great deal of harm," said study author Amy Abdelshahid, Head of Evidence, FORWARD. "Ethnic profiling and punitive approaches are alienating communities and risk undermining FGM prevention efforts. We need to see sensitive and inclusive interventions; only then will we achieve meaningful progress in ending FGM in the UK."

The authors propose a series of national recommendations to address FGM in a more compassionate and inclusive way in Bristol and on a national level. These range from holistic training for professionals, to a full review of policy guidelines and approach to safeguarding. There is also dire need to re-examine the 'special' approach to FGM safeguarding, grounded in fair, high-quality data on risk that takes into account cultural shifts in attitudes towards FGM among diaspora communities. Most importantly, the prevention of FGM calls for a community-centric approach to policymaking. Crucially, this means acknowledging the role communities themselves can and do play in eliminating FGM and involving them in policy development and implementation.

In efforts to bring positive change, The Bristol Safeguarding Children's Board has started to implement changes to their procedures already; for example, revising the risk assessment guidelines to be more nuanced.

It is FORWARD's sincere hope that by minimizing the harmful impact that interventions against FGM can have on families and communities, we will more effectively achieve the goal of eliminating FGM.

More information: www.forwarduk.org.uk/forward-p...rding-bristol-study/

Provided by University of Huddersfield

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