

Youth For Change UK - Policy Brief

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and child early and forced marriage (CEFM) are forms of gender-based violence and affect millions of girls globally. Both practices have been illegal here in the UK: since 1989 for FGM¹, and 2014² for child marriage. However, it is estimated that there are 170,000 women and girls living in the UK that have undergone FGM in the past and 65,000 girls aged 13 and under, that remain at risk of undergoing the harmful practice³. In addition to this, according to the Forced Marriage Unit there are at least 1,200 potential cases of child early and forced marriage that are reported in the UK every year.⁴

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) – Female genital mutilation, also known as ‘female genital cutting’ or ‘female circumcision’, refers to “all procedures involving partial or total removal of the female external genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons⁵

Child and Early Forced Marriage (CEFM) – The term “child marriage” is used to describe a legal or customary union between two people, of whom one or both spouses is below the age of 18. While boys can be subjected to child marriage, the practice affects girls in greater numbers and with graver consequences. Child marriage is often referred to as “early” and/or “forced” marriage since children, given their age, are not able to give free, prior and informed consent to their marriage partners or to the timing of their marriage⁶

¹ Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act 1985

² Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014

³ Female genital mutilation: the case for a national action plan Second Report of Session 2014–15, House of Commons, 2014

⁴ Statistics from January to December 2014: Forced Marriage Unit; Home Office 2014

As Youth for Change, we want to ensure all necessary steps are taken to eradicate these illegal practices once and for all. This statement outlines the recommendations and rationale that we would like to put forward to UK authorities.

The underlying causes of FGM and CEFM are both complicated and varied. These practices are often imbedded in social and cultural attitudes and customs and are often perceived as the best choice to secure a positive and most appropriate future for a girl.

For instance, entering into a marriage at an early age might be perceived by families as providing a safe economic option for girls by ensuring they are looked after and cared for by their partners. FGM is also considered by some communities as part of a girl's initiation into womanhood and can also be performed for reasons of hygiene.

What is Youth For Change?

Launched in 2014, Youth for Change is a global coalition of young activists working in partnership with organisations and governments to create positive change. With teams based in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, the UK & Tanzania.

Youth For Change aims to influence national and international decision-makers by carrying out campaigns and providing access to policy spaces to young people. With a current global focus to **end Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)** – violations of human rights that affect young people across the globe.

In reality, these practices control and limit the choices women and girls have over their own lives and bodies. Both of these practices can also be a major obstacle for girls to complete their education and can cause both physical and psychological harm

According to research by UNICEF⁵:

- Girls who marry before 18 are more likely to experience domestic violence than their peers who marry later.
- Girls who marry early are more likely to believe that a man is sometimes justified in beating his wife than women who marry later.

As Youth for Change, we believe the UK government has so far shown great leadership in its efforts to outlaw child marriage and FGM. At the same, we think more can and should be done. We believe the school environment in the UK is a key space to prevent both FGM and CEFM, as girls at risk of these practices should be able to safely and effectively report their concerns. It is for this reasons that we are advocating for the Department of education to improve the training delivered to school staff to allow them to identify and report potential cases of FGM and CEFM more effectively and support girls at risk.

Our Research

Youth for Change commissioned some research to seek out the views of school staff, young people and members of safeguarding boards on the issue of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) and how it is addressed in UK schools – both primary, secondary, and sixth forms. Research was carried out through interviews and focus groups discussions.

⁵ UNICEF (2005). Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice. UNICEF: New York. This analysis was conducted for Cambodia, Colombia, Haiti, India, Kenya, Peru, South Africa, Turkmenistan and Zambia.

⁶ UNICEF *Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: a statistical overview and exploration of the dynamics of change*. (2013)

The results show that whilst the majority of school staff are aware of their legal responsibilities and their school safeguarding procedure around FGM and CEFM, 40% did not feel well equipped to deal with FGM or CEFM and reported that lack of training was a problem. In addition, the young people spoken to overwhelmingly said that they felt that staff did not have enough knowledge of FGM or CEFM with 20% saying that they would not report any concerns they had to any member of school staff

The message from young people was loud and clear; both they and their teachers do not have enough knowledge of FGM or CEFM, with 94% of young people saying that their school staff members do not know enough about the issues. School staff, young people and safeguarding boards all need better, more consistent and more regular information and training on CEFM and FGM.

Our research findings show that there are three main problems:

- School staff feel unprepared - with 40% of school staff stating that they do not feel well equipped to deal with FGM and CEFM
- Training for school staff is inconsistent - with 72.2% of school staff surveyed stating that lack of training on FGM and CEFM is a problem in their school
- Young people do not feel confident to report - with 20% of the young people stating that they would not report concerns to a member of school staff

We strongly believe that the UK school system can and should play a vital role in the fight against FGM and CEFM. It's for this reason that Youth For Change have decided to campaign to improve FGM and CEFM training in the UK

school system in order to make it a more effective institution to report and address both practices.

We are calling on the UK Department of Education to make UK schools a safer place to report FGM and child marriage. With the aim of improving the protection of young people from such harmful practices

Our Recommendations

Whilst acknowledging the huge progress the current Government has made in tackling FGM and CEFM both in the UK and overseas, it is important that more is done to ensure girls in the UK feel safe. We also commend the leadership demonstrated by the UK government on this issue, when previously communicating with schools and we think further action will build on such positive legacy. Feedback received from the teachers covered in our research suggests that the letter sent by the then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, in 2014, warning schools to be alert to the dangers of FGM empowered teachers to do more and invest much needed resources on the issues in their schools.

From our research interesting feedback emerged on ideas which could improve training on FGM and CEFM:

- School staff stated that they would like training that is *clear* on the practical steps staff should take if they have concerns
- Teachers found training particularly effective when delivered by a survivor or expert, rather than cascaded training (where instead training is delivered to the safeguarding lead who then trains other staff members)

- Training was found most effective when tailored around the local school area – for example by providing data on local prevalence levels
- Training should have more practical information on what signs of concern teachers should look out for when dealing with cases of FGM and CEFM

The young people that took part in our research also made a range of recommendations that we think could help them feel more comfortable to report concerns of FGM and CEFM and confident that the staff in their school would know what to do. Their suggestions included:

- Providing specific spaces in school where young people can go to talk to school staff about any concerns they may have
- Having specified teachers assigned as school contact points
- Talking more frequently about these issues within the school through expert visits and dedicated lesson time on the topics

In summary, Youth for Change believes the following steps should be taken as a matter of urgency to eradicate FGM and CEFM:

- The UK government/Department of Education should carry out a review into the current state of CEFM & FGM training provisions for school staff, with the aim of improving the protection of young people from such harmful practices
- The review should be done in partnership with Youth for Change (and other youth-led organisations) to ensure young people can contribute meaningfully to the process and in a participatory way