

**Equalities and Human Rights Committee**  
**Female Genital Mutilation (Protection and Guidance) (Scotland) Bill**  
**Note of Meeting with Women's Support Project, Glasgow**  
**21 August 2019**

In attendance:

- Ruth Maguire MSP
- Mary Fee MSP
- Jan Macleod, Women's Support Project
- Five service users

The Project gave a brief background to their work on FGM, and distributed leaflets on their 'Rights & Choices' initiative.

**Social pressure**

- Two of the women have daughters, and spoke about the pressures at home, from mothers, grandmothers, and aunties to undertake FGM on their daughters.
- It was felt that the law in Scotland, and the proposed Protection Order, helps when they speak to family members and can say 'no, this is wrong'.
- Children may be seen as dirty if they do not have FGM. Cases of children putting pressure on other children if they have not had FGM.

**Experience of FGM**

- One of the women had FGM twice, because the first time didn't 'work' properly.
- One of the women was 7 years old when FGM was done to her "you will never forget".
- Another woman said that she was 'opened up' before marriage, to allow for intercourse, as the opening was too small. This had also affected her menstruation.
- There was an awareness in the room that sometimes it happens to babies, but the view was that mainly it was young girls.

- For some women, in some communities, there can be negative consequences to not undergoing FGM, for example becoming a target for abuse or rape.
- There has been an asylum case of a woman whose mother was a cutter, and she was meant to carry on the tradition, but didn't want to.

### **Experience with health and social work service**

- One of the women has had three babies in Scotland and has not been asked about FGM. She said she generally does not speak to health workers about her problems – there was consensus on this in the room.
- The women voiced their discomfort about visiting sexual health clinics. One of the women said she felt like she stood out in her hijab and was embarrassed to be there. There was a frustration that you are always seen by someone different at each visit.
- It was suggested that if a woman from a community affected by FGM worked at the sexual health clinic, this might make survivors more comfortable. A further suggestion was to invite a nurse into a community group to talk about health issues, like smear tests.
- One of the women said that women don't know where to get help. Social work and GP never asked her about FGM. She's had 3 children, and no-one asked. Only discovered she had FGM when she started going to a community group.
- It was agreed that there can be a bigger cultural problem within communities, in that women tend to stay quiet and not speak up.

### **Talking to children, by parents and in school**

- One of the women said she would like some support in how to talk to her 10-year-old daughter about FGM. She does not know where to begin. She would be grateful if teachers could talk about it, to girls and boys. It would give her a place to start from.
- If schools are to teach children about FGM, it needs to be in the right way, from a human rights and health perspective. Thought needs to be given to the potential impact on some young girls if they are singled out by other students.
- Jan referred to the work by FORWARD and Daughters of Eve, in relation to young people. She also spoke about the world that young people are growing up in, where they have access to pornography on their phones and will see images that don't match with their own bodies.

## **Impact of FGM on women**

- There was talk of pain and not necessarily associating it with FGM.
- There was consensus that the women in the room did not enjoy sex.
- One of the women said she never cries about FGM, she keeps it all in. Many women feel that the right thing to do is to keep things inside, otherwise it might show weakness. There is also a fear of gossip among different communities.

## **FGM and asylum**

Jan said that some women come to UK to save their daughters from FGM. But it doesn't mean that you are guaranteed to stay here. You may get sent back to your country of origin, but a different region.

## **FGM and the law**

There was concern about how someone was stopped at Edinburgh Airport, as though she was going away to have FGM performed. They did not like how they were spoken to by the Border Police and would have preferred a female officer to talk to her.

## **Views on the Bill**

There was strong support in the room for FGM Protection Orders. It was felt that this was an additional device that could be used to protect young girls – the women would be able to say 'no'. However, there also needs to be engagement at community level – all communities need to be aware, including dads.

Jan said that there are lessons that can be learned from Forced Marriage Protection Orders.

In terms of the provisions in force in the rest of the UK, there was no support for any of them:

- Anonymity – it was felt this is covered in Scottish legislation
- Duty to notify the police – there is no need for such a provision because there is already enough in place to allow professionals to report FGM suspicions.
  - The service users were not keen on this. They highlighted that women are not always informed or consulted about decisions, even regarding their own children, but it might be difficult for them to prove this. This offence might deter women from coming forward.