



OxfordAgainstCutting
ProtectingGirls&Women

“Why we need to step up efforts to end harmful practices during the Covid 19 outbreak” Kate Agha, CEO of Oxford Against Cutting, considers the impact of the outbreak for families affected by female genital mutilation (FGM) and forced marriage

Our charity, Oxford Against Cutting, regularly appeals to communities and professionals to “Speak Up!” about FGM and forced marriage. We believe conversations create social change and help people reach support services. However, many people, from across society, find it challenging to have conversations about FGM or forced marriage, as this usually means thinking about sex and cultural groups. Imagine how much more challenging it is for a child, scared for her safety, to speak up? (I use “her” as the majority of victims of honour-based abuses are female, though there are of course male victims of forced marriage and honour-based violence). Who does the child speak to? Will they understand the cultural pressures? How can services protect her? Will she get her parents into trouble?

Now let’s think about our child at risk during the Covid-19 outbreak – how has lockdown, school closures and restrictions on movement changed the risks of FGM or forced marriage? How can she best reach support services? Are these harms increasing?

‘Honour’-based abuses, such as FGM and forced marriage, affect thousands of people in the UK; an estimated 60,000 girls are at risk of FGM and an estimated 8-10,000 British Nationals are forced into marriage each year. The Covid-19 outbreak has undoubtedly created significantly higher risks for children from practicing communities. Jasvinder Sanghera CBE, Founder of national charity Karma Nirvana, recently commented that communities have reported “threats of imminent forced marriages taking place after lockdown and Skype marriages during lockdown”. Likewise, activists are concerned that families from practicing communities may be making plans to carry out FGM and forced marriages in originating countries, once travel restrictions are lifted. FGM and forced marriages may also be carried out in the UK. There have been a number of reports suggesting that cutters are resident in the UK.

Let’s also consider the impact of Covid-19 on these families at an international level. FGM and forced marriage are “community harms”, mostly carried out in the belief that they will ensure “good girl” behaviour, with “virginity” before marriage being essential to the “honour” of a girl, her family and community. UNFPA has confirmed that FGM and early and forced marriage are likely to increase following the outbreak of Covid-19, due to lower programme coverage. They anticipate “2 million cases of FGM will occur between 2020 and

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2030 that could have been averted” (Interim Technical Note 27 April 2020). UNICEF points to a number of factors that will likely increase harmful practices, including school closures, the decrease in access to health information, lack of support services and child marriages taking place to secure dowry and bride price. We also need to consider that some of the most effective overseas programmes to support communities to end FGM, for example, involve community gatherings (such as alternative rites of passage ceremonies) and these are not possible with social distancing.

In short, there are a lot of signs that harmful practices are increasing overseas, with more barriers to education and health and less opportunity to implement change programmes. The overseas increase is important to factor into our response, as it is likely to have a ripple effect in the UK. With the rise in harmful traditions overseas, practicing-communities in the UK will come under increased pressure from family abroad to ensure they are “part of the group” and upholding cultural traditions based on “honour”.

Now let’s add to this likely spike in cultural harm, the barriers to support. Before lockdown, there were more opportunities for victims to seek help including speaking to a teacher at school, or a healthcare professional during a check-up. Professionals, such as teachers, play a vital role in safeguarding children. Seeing children on a daily basis, they are usually well placed to spot signs that something may be wrong. Children from practicing communities now have much less opportunity to reach out and they are often living with multiple perpetrators. Jasvinder Sanghera CBE points out “Lockdown for these victims means being entombed in homes with threats from mothers, fathers, uncles, brothers and sisters and wider family members...Lockdown has increased family and community surveillance, reducing even further the opportunity for victims to report, especially as the schools are no longer the “eyes and ears””. If children do reach a phone or computer, it is now imperative they reach specialist support quickly, especially as risk may have increased with a time delay in waiting for this opportunity.

Why “specialist” support? In an ordinary month, many ‘honour’-based crimes will go unreported. Victims may feel that they cannot speak out for fear of bringing ‘shame’ to their family. They may be threatened, coerced or blackmailed into keeping quiet. When victims do reach out, this may be the only one chance to help, so we need to ensure the response is spot-on. Helplines need to be answered quickly, by people with specialist knowledge and understanding of honour-based abuses and with multiple language skills. The response needs to be sensitive and nuanced – a poor response, for example police being unnecessarily heavy-handed, can increase risk and damage community relations, driving harmful cultural practices further underground.

To support families to reach specialist services, our Thames Valley charity has launched a campaign to protect those who are at increased risk of ‘honour’-based abuses, such as FGM and forced marriage. Our helplines poster is being disseminated across the Thames Valley, signposting those at risk to national support services, including the NSPCC FGM Helpline, Karma Nirvana and The Forced Marriage Unit (FMU), as well as local support services for Oxfordshire, East Berkshire, West Berkshire and Buckinghamshire. Posters are being shared

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on social media and disseminated in places such as hospitals, GP surgeries and pharmacies. Our charity is also supporting ongoing conversations and “speaking up” through online community meet-ups and schools webinars.

Forced marriages often bring repeated violence and rape, as well as significant harm to mental health and well being. FGM can lead to life-long physical and psychological harm. A survivor in our team describes FGM as “pain for life”. Both practices can be fatal. The needs of the women from different ethnic backgrounds should be acknowledged and included when designing support services and emergency response. Let’s all step up our efforts to ensure a careful, timely response to the likely spike in honour-based abuses and the additional barriers presented by the Covid-19 outbreak.

Notes:

Our Lockdown and Feeling Trapped posters for all areas of the Thames Valley in A4, printer version and social media size can be accessed on our website here:

<https://www.oxfordagainstcutting.org/resources/>

Kate Agha is the CEO and Co-Founder of Oxford Against Cutting. She has experience in outreach work with girls and women from migrant communities suffering all types of domestic abuse and honour-based abuse. She has an MA in Humanitarian and Development Practice and previously practised law as a solicitor. Her research includes thesis study on violence against women in Pakistan. Kate has a passion for working with young people and advocacy through creative arts.

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