

## FGM happens in the UK as well as abroad

When I was circumcised I was five or six but it happens to girls as young as four.

It starts as a ceremony - the girl is bought clothes, gold earrings and bangles. She has henna put on her hands and feet's it is a celebration where she is the centre of attention.

But later on they take her and put her in a 'Gadha', which is shaped like a deep egg dish. They lay her across it and hold her legs open; there is often three persons holding her very tight when she's on the 'Gadha', two holding her legs and hands and one holding her chest and head.

The equipment is handmade, a sharp curved knife which is not sterilised. And the girl is given no anaesthetic. It is usually mostly women that are there.

They leave a little hole for urination. There are no stitches; they treat the wound with herbs, salt and water. It bleeds a lot and the victim is in great pain.

I was horribly frightened and crying. The 'ceremony' takes as little as 20 minutes or an hour depending on how much the girl struggles.

In Sudan and in neighbouring countries, FGM is a cultural issue, if you don't have circumcision people think you are dirty and no man will marry you. You could say it is about ownership or protection - if someone tries to rape you they cannot do it easily.

I came to the UK to study and about same years ago suffered a great deal of blood and pain so I went to hospital.

The nurses and doctors didn't know about FGM. They were looking at me like I was a freak and I had to explain I was circumcised. It turned out that when I was circumcised they left part of one of my labia inside me so the UK doctors operated to get rid of it.

While the NHS staff who treated me didn't know about female circumcision, I am ashamed to say I attended a ceremony at a private hospital in Harley Street in London. The girl, who was about eight, was anaesthetised and circumcised.

I feel so guilty now and today, with the education I have had about FGM, I would report them to the police but at the time it didn't cross my mind.

Many families here take girls to their country of origin to have it done. It is a holiday; they see family and the countryside and are then circumcised.

When they return, they tell the girl not to talk about it. They say the government will take her away from her family, that she will lose all she has in the UK.

We need education that is respectful and sensitive. It can't be a cultural confrontation, a judgment. People have been practising this for centuries and see it as embedded in their culture. You cannot approach them aggressively - you have to invite them to talk, to show them the consequences of FGM later on, during menstruation, during childbirth and so on.

We must educate grandmothers and mothers and the young children, and campaign against it.

Many in our generation are fighting it. These days people are more aware, and I know many educated women who will not practise it. People see it as a form of murder, paralysing a part of your body. They say, 'We have had enough!'

End

***The interviewee is a volunteer at the Manor Gardens Advocacy Project, one of the organisations funded as part of this Special Initiative.***