

Thousands of girls mutilated in Britain

The NHS is offering to reverse female circumcision amid concerns that there are 500 victims a year with no prosecutions

Girls are brainwashed into believing circumcision to be a cultural, and, in some cases, religious obligation that should be kept secret

Richard Kerbaj

The NHS is to advertise free operations to reverse female circumcisions, with experts warning that each year more than 500 British girls have their genitals mutilated.

Despite having been outlawed in 1985, female circumcision is still practised in British African communities, in some cases on girls as young as 5. Police have been unable to bring a single prosecution even though they suspect that community elders are being flown from the Horn of Africa to carry out the procedures.

The advertisement will appear from next month on a Somali satellite TV station much viewed in Britain. It features Juliet Albert, a midwife who does the reverse operations, and promises, in English and Somali, confidentiality for victims of female genital mutilation.

The advertisement was expected to help to undermine demand for girls to be circumcised, and to popularise the reversal procedure, Ms Albert said. Thousands of such operations have been carried out at specialist clinics and hospitals around Britain and demand is growing slowly.

Female circumcision, which is done for various reasons, such as religious and cultural traditions, can cause severe health complications including infections and psychological problems. The procedure, predominantly carried out on girls aged between 5 and 12, can range from the removal of the clitoris to the removal of all

the exterior parts of the vagina, which is then sewn up.

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A study by the Foundation for Women's Health, Research and Development (Forward), estimated that 66,000 women living in England and Wales had been circumcised, most before leaving their country of origin. The government-funded research also found that more than 7,000 girls were at a high risk of being subjected to genital mutilation in Britain.

Sarah McCulloch, of the Agency for Culture Change Management UK, said that every year more than 500 British girls were having circumcisions. "A lot of them are done in the UK, but some still travel overseas," she said.

She said that a code of silence in Britain's African communities had allowed circumcisions to continue and prevented arrests. The unqualified female elders, known as "house doctors" because they act in secret in a family home, are flown into the country.

"What the communities do is they gather together and collect money to pay for the ticket for a 'doctor' to come from Somalia, Sudan, or whatever," she told *The Times*. "And when she arrives here, she goes to a house and has the girls brought to her."

While Scotland Yard is understood to have made investigations into female circumcision in the UK, and offered a £20,000 reward for information, no one has been successfully prosecuted for carrying out the procedure.

Detective Constable Jason Morgan, from Scotland Yard's Project Azure, denied that police were complacent. "We don't bury our heads in the sand and say it's not going on," he said.

It is illegal to take a person abroad for the operation but no one has been prosecuted for this either.

Ms McCulloch said that girls were brainwashed into believing circumcision to be a cultural, and, in some cases, religious obligation that should be kept secret. "It is something they simply do not discuss — if they do they'd be seen as betraying their family and their community and culture," she said. "I know many girls who want to accuse their parents but can't. They don't want to take their parents to court."

Waris Dirie, a former UN envoy for the prevention of female genital mutilation, said that it had no justification. Ms Dirie is a victim of the procedure and it haunts her to this day. "Female genital mutilation has nothing to do with tradition, religion or culture. It is the most cynical form of child abuse and a crime that has to be punished," she told *The Times*.

Ms McCulloch said that men were becoming more vocal in opposition to female circumcision. "I've talked to some fathers who've made clear to their wives that they don't want this done to their daughters — only for them to go out and come back to find their girls circumcised," she said.

Lynette Parvez, head teacher of Kelmscott School in Walthamstow, northeast London, said that several teachers there would soon be trained to detect victims of female circumcision, and pupils at risk. Experts believe that most of the procedures are done during summer holidays when the girls have enough time to recover without suspicion about their absence.

While Ms Parvez is unaware of any cases at her school, which serves many pupils of African origin, she said that she had been shocked and appalled to hear that female circumcisions were taking place in the UK.

Case study: female circumcision, the husband

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It took a death threat to stop Abdi's wife from circumcising their two daughters, aged 2 and 4. She called him from Somalia while on holiday to say she wanted to carry out the procedure.

Abdi, a London-based Somali, said that his wife's eagerness to circumcise their daughters was fuelled by a combination of religious, cultural and tribal pressures placed on her after she took the girls to Somalia for a brief summer break last year.

But he refused to be swayed, despite his wife's argument that the girls would improve their chances of attracting a good husband because they would be perceived as being more traditional and pure.

"I told my wife and her mother — who was really eager to have my girls circumcised — that if they dare do it, I will kill my wife," he said. "And I also said I will take the girls to the GP when they return from Somalia to make sure that they didn't have it done to them."

Abdi, 29, is one of a growing number of African men opposing female circumcision because of the psychological and physiological effects it has on its victims.

"It is women who believe in the concept as their duty to look after their children," said Abdi, who is also aware of prospective mother-in-laws examining their sons' future brides to ensure they are circumcised.

Women "fear that if they don't circumcise their daughters then they won't be able to get them married", he said.

"I know many men who work very hard — and at times make serious threats to their wives — to make sure their girls don't get circumcised," he added.

Case study: Female circumcision, the daughter

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When Zarah was 7 she saw her older sister being pinned to the ground by a room full of women. Then she heard her sister scream and quickly realised that she was next in line to have her genitals mutilated.

Unfortunately for Zarah, now 33, there was nowhere to run in her aunt's home in

Somalia. Both she and her sister, then 10, had been taken there by their mother for a "holiday". "When that happened to me, I immediately lost all trust in my mother and I think that hasn't changed to this day," Zarah said. "In fact, I've lost trust in both my parents because my father was also aware of what was going to happen to us."

Zarah said that the psychological scars were worse than the pain. She has nightmares, and relationships have been ruined by her fear of intimacy.

"It always affects you psychologically because the memories never go away," she said. "I've told a couple of former partners about what I had been through and they were understanding. But there's

a big part of me that seems unable to overcome it all.”

Zarah added: “My mother told me after the event, ‘Don’t ever tell anybody’.” Such secrecy was what allowed the practice to go in the UK, she said. “We all know that it

goes on even here, but we have no proof. But if I do find out, I will immediately contact the police. No one deserves to go through this.”

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