

PRESS RELEASE:

New guidelines to make FGM education in secondary schools inadequate

Thursday 28th February 2019

Immediate Release

The Department for Education this week announced new guidelines on compulsory relationships and sex education classes indicating that secondary schools should address the physical and emotional damage caused by FGM. While FORWARD welcomes any initiative that will increase awareness and knowledge on FGM, we are concerned that the new guidelines restrict it to the secondary school level.

It is estimated that over 200 million women and girls around the world have undergone FGM. UNICEF data indicates that majority of girls were cut before 5 years and most cutting occurs between the ages of 5 to 14 years. FGM disproportionately affects younger girls, particularly those of Primary School age. Since 2016, FORWARD has worked with over 3,000 primary school children nationally and has found that equipping young people with age appropriate language and resilience to speak up if they are at risk of any form of abuse including FGM is a vital preventative measure.

FORWARD's experience shows that it is best to work with children in years 5 and 6 as this is the time when they would also be exploring topics on puberty, noticing changes to the body. Starting in year 7 is too late to begin the conversation on FGM with young people, it needs to begin sooner in primary school where children are learning to develop boundaries.

FORWARD believes that it is important that children as young as 4 begin to develop an understanding of safe and unsafe touching using tools such as the NSPCC P.A.N.T.S rule to ensure that they are able to seek support if they are at risk of harm. FGM should be included in any such safeguarding training so that it is part of a range of risks and not 'othered'.

The Department for Education previously funded FORWARD's national partnership project that worked with partners in Birmingham, Bristol, Manchester and Newcastle with its main objective being to safeguard children from FGM. Over the three year project period FORWARD and partners reached over 20,000 young people across the country with information on the harms of FGM. It is important that we learn lessons from such interventions to inform and shape new curriculum on FGM in the UK.

Early interventions when addressing any form of abuse is highly effective in protecting young people. Beginning the conversation in years 5 and 6 ensures that young people have a robust understanding of the harmfulness of FGM and are enabled to seek support from their education staff if they are at risk. FORWARD has learned that a 'whole school approach' is imperative and all school staff should receive training to equip them with the legal and pastoral knowledge to enable them to respond to disclosures in an empathetic and effective way. This is because a girl may choose to disclose to other school staff not specifically to their class teacher.

Female Genital Mutilation

Female Genital Mutilation comprises all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons (WHO). It is also sometimes referred to as female genital cutting or female circumcision. There are no health benefits to FGM and it is recognised internationally as a human rights violation.

For information on FORWARD's work in schools on FGM see here: <https://forwarduk.org.uk/what-we-do/uk-programmes/schools-programme/>

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

- FORWARD has been campaigning against FGM and other forms of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) affecting African women and girls since 1983.
- FORWARD's key areas of work are: [female genital mutilation \(FGM\)](#), [child marriage](#) and related rights abuses of girls and women.
- FORWARD works in the UK, Europe and Africa to help change practices and policies that affect access, dignity and wellbeing. www.forwarduk.org.uk Twitter: @FORWARDUK
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