

## EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

### FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

#### SUBMISSION FROM SCOTTISH REFUGEE COUNCIL

##### **About Scottish Refugee Council**

Scottish Refugee Council is an independent charity providing advice and information to people seeking asylum and refugees in Scotland. We also campaign for the fair treatment of refugees and asylum seekers and raise awareness of refugee issues. Over the last three years, our Raising Refugee Women's Voices project has built up expertise in evidence based policy advocacy on gender and human rights issues, including gender based violence, in a refugee context. We work closely with the Refugee Women's Strategy Group which is concerned with the impact of gender based violence on refugee women both in Scotland and globally.

##### **Introduction**

Scottish Refugee Council warmly welcomes the opportunity to provide a statement and to participate in the roundtable evidence gathering session. Our statement sets out some general comments; provides background on work we have been involved in to date; outlines the details of a Scottish Government funded scoping project we will be leading on over the next few months; and suggests some questions the Committee may wish to consider in deciding the remit of an inquiry into Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Scotland.

##### **General Comments**

Scottish Refugee Council believes that FGM is a serious abuse of the human rights of women and girls. Women and girls have been subjected to different forms of FGM in the name of different belief systems in different parts of the world for centuries. It is a practice fundamentally embedded in gender inequality and causes harm and suffering to millions of women and girls all over the world.

However, we acknowledge that this is a very complex issue to which a sensitive and multifaceted approach is needed. Agencies need to work in partnership with communities to tackle and prevent FGM, engaging with men, women and girls in order to understand, inform, challenge and help find solutions.

At the same time, there must be a strong legal framework in place. Prosecuting those who transgress the law on FGM helps to send a strong message that the state will not tolerate gender based violence. Agencies and communities need to work together in order to protect women and girls. There is no one simple solution and there must be training, education and openness in order to tackle it. Support, services and referral pathways for women who have undergone FGM should be strengthened and information made more widely available to everyone who is working to support women and girls who may have experienced FGM.

##### **Understanding FGM in Scotland: scoping prevalence and learning from best practice**

In order to be able to plan and implement work to effectively tackle FGM in Scotland, the Scottish Government and agencies responding to and raising awareness about the issue need reliable

data and information on practising communities, the nature and scope of the issue in Scotland, and an understanding of best practice in preventing, tackling and responding to FGM.

In August 2013, Scottish Refugee Council and the Women's Support Project convened an FGM Strategic Group with key stakeholders including local authority representatives (social work, education), NHS, Procurator Fiscal, Police Scotland and voluntary organisations in the West of Scotland. The group reflects and has highlighted the need for a coordinated response to FGM in Scotland and a lack of data and information were identified as key concerns.

There are no clear and robust figures for the prevalence of FGM in Scotland. However, anecdotal reports suggest it is a significant issue. Although not necessarily an indication of prevalence, 2011 census data suggests that at least 2,403 girls were born in Scotland to parents from FGM practising countries between 1997 and 2011, and the number of residents in Scotland born in Africa has doubled since 2001 (Scottish Government, 2013). In addition, whilst FGM practices are not confined to refugee populations, a report by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees found that 2,401 women from FGM practising countries sought asylum in the UK in 2011 (UNHCR, 2013). Since 2000, around 10% of people seeking asylum in the UK annually have been dispersed to Glasgow by the Home Office. Around one-third of new arrivals to Scotland have originated from countries where UNICEF estimates FGM prevalence rates to be above 75%.

An effective response must be based on evidence. A robust estimate of prevalence of FGM, its nature and risk in Scotland should underpin interventions, and it is important that agencies responding to FGM in Scotland learn from identified best practice in other parts of the UK and Europe. This should increase the impact and cost-effectiveness of any interventions in the field.

Scottish Refugee Council has been granted funding by the Scottish Government to carry out a scoping project, which will seek to make a significant contribution to knowledge about FGM in Scotland by summer 2014, providing a credible and comprehensive baseline to inform recommendations for future evidence-based interventions, community engagement, legislative and policy work. Ultimately, the project will contribute to a growing body of evidence around understanding, tackling and responding to FGM in the UK, Europe and globally.

We will take a partnership approach to the project, working through our membership on the existing FGM Strategic Group in the West of Scotland, to:

- Explore the issue of FGM in Scotland and provide an evidence-based estimate of FGM prevalence among communities in Scotland and their geographical location;
- Describe and draw learning from what work has been undertaken to tackle, prevent and respond to FGM in Scotland to date;
- Draw learning from best practice approaches to tackling, preventing and responding to FGM in other parts of the UK and Europe;
- Make recommendations for future work (with communities, services, legislation, prosecution and policy) in Scotland based on findings from the above.

The FGM Strategic Group has committed to supporting this work and is currently developing an action plan to include actions in four key areas:

- Gathering and sharing information
- Improving coordination and provision of services
- Training and awareness-raising among practitioners
- Community awareness raising and prevention

### **Questions the Equal Opportunities Committee may wish to consider in deciding the remit of an inquiry**

#### **Timing of an inquiry**

In light of the work the Scottish Government has funded Scottish Refugee Council to carry out over the next six months, the Equal Opportunities Committee may wish to consider whether an inquiry into FGM would be most usefully carried out in this parliamentary session, or whether it would be more fruitful to initiate an inquiry once a baseline of information on FGM in Scotland has been published, in summer 2014. Scottish Refugee Council would be happy to work with the Committee whenever it decides to launch an inquiry.

#### **Remit for an inquiry**

In deciding whether the Equal Opportunities Committee is best placed to carry out an inquiry into FGM, the Committee may wish to consider the need for a multi-faceted approach, which construes FGM fundamentally as a human rights issue and a manifestation of gender inequality. A strong legal framework is necessary, but a focus on prosecutions in isolation may be unhelpful, when service provision and training and awareness-raising are equally important, and long-term investment in community engagement is essential in order to tackle and prevent the practice.

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