

A complex issue has surfaced in some Western nations, including the United Kingdom, about whether or not Female Genital Piercing (FGP) is “Female Genital Mutilation” (“FGM”).

Most of us have a straightforward notion of what “Female Genital Mutilation” is and what it is not. Except, “FGM” is actually a very complex subject involving passionate and sometimes conflicting beliefs.

Remember, this is a rapidly changing social and legal issue; contact us, check our website and the government agencies listed at the end of this document for the most recent developments and statistics.

FGP IS...

Female Genital Piercing or FGP is a term used by some researchers and healthcare professionals to describe the piercing of the vulva (female external sex organs) for the purpose of inserting specifically designed jewellery for adornment and other personal motivations.

Female Genital Piercing falls under the umbrella of other common Western practices of “Female Genital Alteration” that are widely accepted to carry some risk of injury, including various forms of pubic hair removal, trimming, or coloring, as well as the more permanent practices of tattooing and cosmetic surgery.

Western-style genital piercing emerged from underground communities into a widespread professional industry at the beginning of the 1990s.

Ethical female genital piercing services should only be performed by a trained and skilled professional body piercer who is in compliance with all regulations and laws.

The body piercing industry has established various “tried and true” piercing placements of the vulva that have been shown over decades to heal successfully for hundreds of thousands of adult women. Female genital piercings are not appropriate for experimental innovation.

Professional female genital piercing is performed only with the full and informed consent of the adult female recipient. Full and informed consent includes:

- Free from any coercion or pressure by the piercer, friends, partner, or family.
- Documented proof of age as 18 years or older (such as an original passport).
- Signed release form.
- Consultation for suitable anatomy prior to the piercing.

- Current and accurate information provided to the client both verbally and in writing, including healing times, aftercare guidelines, and any individualized considerations.

- Signed documents of consent and photocopies of proof of age should be kept on file at the place of business.

“FGM” IS...

PART 1: THE DEFINITION

The United Nations’ (UN) and World Health Organization’s (WHO) legal definitions of “Female Genital Mutilation” include three extreme and detailed categories of tissue removal and modification, plus a fourth ambiguous catch-all: “Type IV is a category that subsumes all other harmful, or potentially harmful, practices that are performed on the genitalia of girls and women.” The vague and overreaching definition of Type IV “FGM” is the source of confusion for the Western-style body piercing’s miscategorization.

The UN definitions and therefore the UK legislation provided no qualitative or quantitative scale for what constitutes “harmful.” A rash, abrasion, puncture, burn, and/or bruising, etc., any injury that is a result of a deliberate action, no matter how temporary or permanent is technically “harmful.” With such overreaching definitions, even the most common Western adult female genital grooming practices of waxing, electrolysis, and pubic hair trimming or shaving fall within the definitions of Type IV “FGM.”

The UN/WHO’s own documents acknowledge their definitions for “female genital mutilation” were deliberately broad to close any feared legal “loopholes” for the practices they were trying to eradicate.

The United Nations found that traditional “FGM” is usually carried out on girls between the ages of 0-15.

PART 2: “FGM-RISK” FEMALES

When the United Nations and World Health Organization developed the “FGM” definition, it was understood that these definitions were one part of a two-part system.

The second part of the system was who was being looked at for “FGM risk.” This definition was to be applied only to females who are from “at risk” communities. To separate the definitions from the context of whom they should target, confuses and undermines the anti-FGM campaign.

The UN and WHO have identified “female genital mutilation” as occurring in ethnic groups in or immigrated from 28 African countries as well as Iraq, Israel, Oman, United Arab Emirates, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan.

The UN and WHO never intended to target the Western consensual practices (of European and North American origin).

PROBLEMS

The United Nations’ definition of “FGM” was taken out of context.

The UN’s definition of FGM was ONLY intended to be applied to “At-Risk” communities and immigrants from those places. The UN/World Health Organization never intended for their definitions to be applied to non-immigrant Britons, Europeans, or North Americans.

The “Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003,” did not clearly define “mutilation” or “harm.”

The UK’s usage of the UN’s term “piercing” without clarification that this was referring to non-Western traditions, practiced by clearly identified ethnic groups confused the meaning among regulators and healthcare workers who knew only of Western-style “body piercing.”

RECORDING AND REPORTING

Under increasing political pressure, such as the Serious Crime Act 2015, National Health Service (NHS) mandated healthcare workers to document for NHS’ quarterly reports all known observances of potentially altered vulvas. This mandate included reporting adult females’ Western-style body piercing, a practice never targeted by the UN/WHO.

The summaries of these reports mention large numbers as “newly recorded cases.” Out of context, “newly recorded cases” misleads casual readers into believing that there is an ongoing epidemic of “FGM” in the UK. However, if a reader studies the reports they’ll find, these are just newly identified healthcare clients that may or may not have had something done to their genitals at some time in their lives.

The few incidents recorded as happening recently AND in the UK are adult female Western-style body piercings and not traditional “FGM.”

So why the misinformation in the UK media? This journalism error usually falls within four categories:

- Not actually reading the entire NHS report past the summary
- Not understanding statistical reporting
- Choosing to sensationalize headlines to grab attention and boost readership
- Deliberately fueling political outrage, particularly among anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim groups.

Despite years of ongoing trainings, programs, and investigations by NHS and Crown Prosecution Service, to date, there have been NO prosecutions in the UK. That is because “FGM” is not regularly happening in the UK. Yes, many of the anti-“FGM” safeguards should be continued, but the “FGM” issue doesn’t need to be a national panic.

SOLUTIONS

If you are concerned about this mislabeling issue in the UK then you can take action:

- Fact-check articles. If the media is misinforming, notify the website or contact the editorial staff and request corrections.
- Contact your political leaders to request the 2003 Act's definitions for "piercing," "harm," and "mutilation," are clarified and the definition considering a "woman" as a "girl" or "child" is amended.
- For the 2003 Act as well as eradication campaigns to continue and to make sense, request that allegations of "Female Genital Mutilation" be kept clearly in context with the ethnic populations flagged by the United Nations as "FGM-affected."
- At the national level as well as face-to-face with your healthcare provider, urge a policy change that the NHS stop identifying adult female genital body piercing as "mutilation."
- Share this pamphlet and information.

THE UKAPP OFFICIAL RESPONSE ON THE UK CATEGORIZATION OF "PIERCING" AS "FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION."

The United Kingdom's Association of Professional Piercers does not consider elective female genital piercing to be mutilation or "Female Genital Mutilation" ("FGM"). **We support the right for all adults to pierce their bodies in a safe, informed, and consensual manner when performed by a qualified practitioner under appropriate asepsis.** We are urging UK government officials to readdress the language of the current laws and regulations to clarify the confusion arising from the existing definitions, including definitional section 6 (1) of the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003, in which "Girl includes woman," as well as any "FGM" regulations that include the term "pierce," such as ISB 1610 of 2014. We are available to assist in this process.

RESOURCES

If you believe a girl is in eminent risk or has recently been a victim of "FGM," call the police and medical services at 999.

To monitor NHS quarterly reports:
<https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/female-genital-mutilation>

United Kingdom's Association of Professional Piercers
www.ukapp.org.uk

Association of Professional Piercers (International non-profit, established in 1994)
www.safepiercing.org

If you know a British national who's already been taken abroad for "FGM," contact the Foreign and Commonwealth Office at 020 7008 1500 or for overseas +44 (0)20 7008 1500

Contact the NSPCC anonymously if you're worried that a girl is at risk or maybe a victim of FGM. Email: fgmhelp@nspcc.org.uk Telephone: 0800 028 3550. Overseas: +44 (0)800 028 3550

For "FGM" survivor support contact FORWARD at www.forwarduk.org.uk. Email: support@forwarduk.org.uk. Telephone: 020 8960 4000

¹ Remember that over time language and understandings change. Currently, there are strong cultural shifts among many to remove implicit gendering biases and assumptions of the secondary sexual characteristics. As such, many professionals are dropping the "male" and "female" from their vocabulary when referencing genitals, preferring instead to only reference the anatomical structures, such as "vulva piercings" for the general area. The UKAPP supports both approaches depending on the context and situation.

² To date, there have been no large, long-term scientific studies of body piercing. As such, this estimate is extrapolated from individual shops' statistics as well as opinions from industry experts.

³ World Health Organization. "Eliminating Female Genital Mutilation: an Interagency Statement: UNAIDS, UNDP, UNECA, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNHCHR, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNIFEM, WHO." World Health Organization, (2008). p.4.
<http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/fgm/9789241596442/en/>

⁴ Ibid., pp. 4, 11-12.

⁵ Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003, Chapter 31. Parliament, United Kingdom.

⁶ World Health Organization et al. (2008: 22-28).

⁷ Ibid., p.4.

⁸ Ibid., pp.4-7.

⁹ Ibid., pp.29-30.

¹⁰ For current and past quarterly reports, visit: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/female-genital-mutilation>

¹¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/fgm-detectives_uk_5a943fdce4b02cb368c45e10?guccounter=1&guce_referrer_us=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2x1LmNvbS8&guce_referrer_cs=lnNaCHtIPOsGBb18E0KJPA

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WHY FEMALE GENITAL PIERCING IS NOT "FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION"