

Monday 28th June, 2010

Dear Rt Hon Theresa May MP,

On behalf of the FGM Forum, a national network operating in the UK and working against female genital mutilation (FGM), I would like to extend our best wishes to you and your team in your new roles.

We are writing to explore how the FGM Forum could work with your department to ensure that the rights of vulnerable women and girls living with, or at risk of, FGM are protected through an integrated violence against women and girls strategy.

We were delighted to note the importance that David Cameron, William Hague and Andrew Mitchell all paid to the issue of FGM, when questioned by one of our members at the World Economic Forum in Davos earlier this year. This showed great leadership. In particular, we were heartened to hear David Cameron state that FGM was “a subject that we take extremely seriously”.

I am the Executive Director of the Foundation for Women’s Health Research and Development (FORWARD) – a member of the UK FGM Forum and one of the lead agencies working on FGM in the UK. FORWARD was instrumental in the development of the first government fact sheet on FGM. We note with concern that this resource is no longer on the website of the Government Equalities Office.

FGM is an invisible form of violence against women and girls and a grave human rights violation. While the true extent of FGM is unknown, it is estimated that over 66,000 women in England and Wales are affected by FGM in the UK and over 24,000 British girls are at high risk of the more severe form of FGM. Although this practice is illegal in the UK, there is still lack of awareness and attention to the needs of women and girls already living with FGM. This lack of awareness among health professionals can lead to additional costs to the health systems through emergency caesarean sections and even result in maternal mortality.

Additionally, while the government policy “Every Child Matters” makes it a duty for statutory agencies to safeguard all children from abuse and harm, there is still a reluctance to address the specific needs of thousands of girls mainly from refugee, migrant and minority communities who are at risk of FGM leading to a serious missed opportunities for preventative work in schools. We note with pleasure the stated importance of schools in the Conservative’s “Ending Violence Against Women” Strategy Paper (2008).

In 2008 when the UK government reported to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the concluding remarks recommended the UK government “to ensure the full implementation of legislation to prohibit FGM; expansion of training activities and programmes for public officials; design and implement targeted prevention strategies; and engagement and involvement of community and religious leaders and women’s organisations”.

It is the opinion of the UK FGM Forum that government coordination of the work of in the UK is central to effective action against FGM. The UK FGM Forum is coordinated by the UK Cross- Government Coordinator on FGM. The FGM Forum consists of more than 35 members, including statutory agencies, government agencies, specialist service providers and voluntary sector agencies.

The work of the UK Cross-Government FGM Coordinator has provided the needed leadership to coordinate and provide harmonization of efforts. This position has been fundamental in enabling government departments, statutory agencies, civil society organisations, and key stakeholders to work together to tackle FGM. This is evident in the new resources and website which is helping to reach wider audiences. The Coordinator is working on a draft multi-agency guide which will provide guidance and needed coordination of interventions at the local level. It is therefore imperative that this post receives adequate funding and political commitment to ensure continuity of the work of FGM.

We would very much welcome an opportunity to talk with you further about this important issue and to this end, we will be following up with your office to see if you might be amenable. In the meantime, we would be grateful if you would consider the points raised in this letter.

We very much look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Naana Otoo-Oyortey, MBE

FORWARD Executive Director

On behalf of:

Julia Lalla-Maharajh, Orchid Project

Nasheima Sheikh, Birminham and Solihull Women's Aid

Sarah Creighton, Consultant Gynaecologist, University College Hospital, London

Sarah McCulloch, ACCM (UK)

Cc:

Rt Hon William Hague MP – Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

Rt Hon Andrew Lansley CBE MP - Secretary of State for Health

Rt Hon Michael Gove MP – Secretary of State for Education

Lynne Featherstone MP – Minister for Equalities