Protecting girls at the border

Hayley Benson

(Former) Border Force Higher Officer
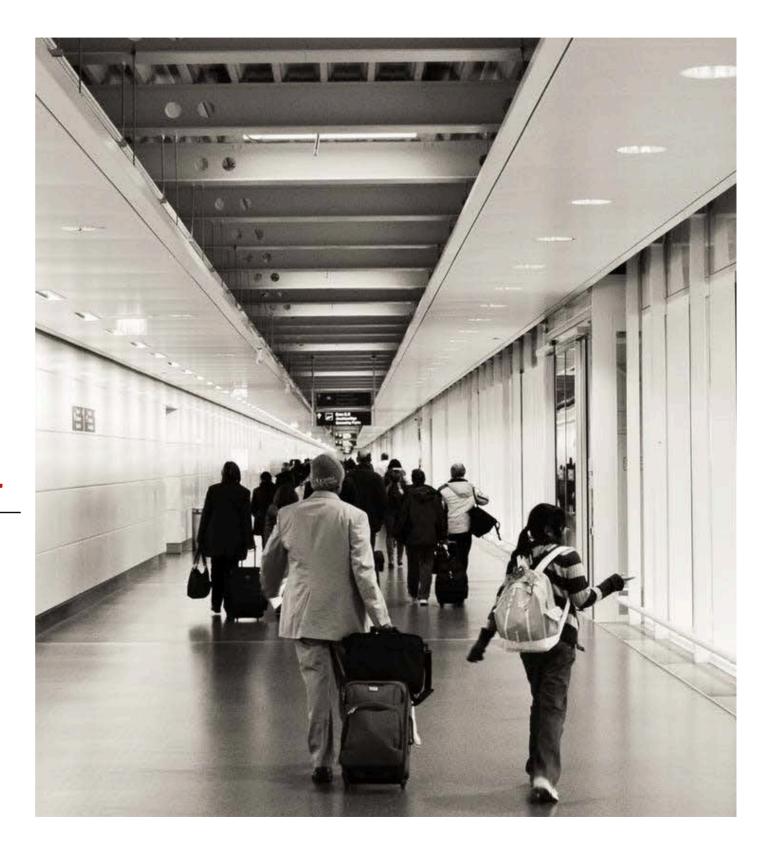
NATIONAL FGM CENTRE

Developing excellence in response to FGM and other harmful practices

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Haley Benson

"I feel a huge honour in protecting some of the most vulnerable young women and girls in society from becoming victims of female genital mutilation (FGM)."

It was my job to manage Border Force's main enforcement campaign against FGM, "Operation Limelight". The operation, which is police-led, is run with Home Office colleagues. The operation selects flights coming into and out of the UK. We know the countries where FGM is most common, so these flights are closely monitored.

During the campaign, Border Force, police officers, social workers from the National FGM Centre (at Stansted, Heathrow and Gatwick), local authority social workers and FGM survivors, are on-hand at outbound flights to provide advice and information to families about the warning signs of FGM, what to look out for and how to report them. They also offer advice on forced marriage and honour-based abuse, including offences such as 'breast ironing'. Our work raises awareness to all passengers who are visiting countries of prevalence for a holiday. These people may hear or see something that could be vital in expanding our intelligence.

Border Control work with other key agencies including the MET Police, National FGM Centre, survivors and local authorities social workers.

National FGM Centre: Head of Centre, Leethen Bartholomew and National Lead for Sustainability and Partnering, Meg Fassam-Wright at Opertation Limelight in Heathrow.

As well as educating, we speak to people to identify any passengers who are possibly at risk of harm. If at any time our concerns are raised we separate the person at risk from the rest of the party to speak to them. If the child or adult is believed to be in immediate danger or we have evidence to believe a harmful practice is about to take place, the police will take action.

On inbound flights, we go to the gates of the arriving flights so we can talk to passengers. Border Force officers document check all passengers, handing over passports of interest to police officers. They are then spoken to privately and asked questions around their travel. Work is also done to ascertain whether the child or young person has been kept safe during their travels and not targeted for FGM and other

offences. If there are concerns, we carry out further checks such as baggage searches. Police also create reports about passengers which can be followed up if needed. The operation doesn't stop when the passengers leave the airport and continues in many forms throughout the year across the country.

It's important that people know how much we care about the welfare of the travelling public and that we do understand how difficult it can be to talk about these issues. Our officers are specially trained in dealing with not just sensitive issues, but how to deal with passengers' responses which can sometimes be challenging.

Our officers receive specific training. It's this training that allows us to liaise with agencies to ensure that a vulnerable passenger is protected and looked after properly. It is this training that allows us to protect the United Kingdom Border every single day.

Backed by the Home Office, our work is crucial to preventing serious harm to vulnerable children and adults. We will not stop until FGM and other harmful practices cease and those living in our country are protected from these practices.

I joined Border Force to defend and protect the rights of girl and women, and feel privileged to be doing a job I love alongside dedicated officers who are driven to improve the lives of the vulnerable. Identifying just one passenger at risk from a full 11 hour day is a success in my eyes.

Written by Haley Benson.

If you would like to know more about FGM you can head to our website www.nationalfgmcentre.org.uk.

For more information on Operation Limelight, please contact the Metropolitan Police.

Photo credit from The Independent