

# Harmful Practices

The background of the slide features a grid of light bulbs. Most are grey and unlit, but one in the center is yellow and lit, with rays emanating from it. A large black magnifying glass is positioned over this lit bulb, with a grey hand holding the handle. The hand is coming from the right side of the frame, where a portion of an orange folder or document is also visible.

the most common  
misconceptions

# WHAT IS IN THIS BOOKLET?

**Belief 1:** FGM is safe if carried out by a health care provider

**Belief 2:** FGM is a religious obligation

**Belief 3:** FGM is an 'African' problem

**Belief 4:** Harmful practices, like FGM, are 'barbaric'

**Belief 5:** A person who has experienced a harmful practice is a victim

**Belief 6:** It is possible to prove a girl is a virgin by examining her hymen

**Belief 7:** Forced marriage only affects South Asian communities

**Belief 8:** Harmful practices only affect people from 'developing countries' and 'struggling families'

**Belief 9:** A child who has been accused of witchcraft but not been physically/sexually/emotionally abused as a result does not require an intervention

## Belief 1

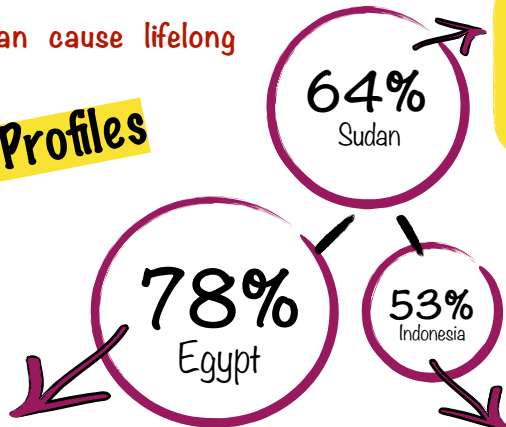
# FGM IS SAFE IF CARRIED OUT BY A HEALTH CARE PROVIDER

The medicalisation of FGM refers to situations in which FGM is practised by any category of health-care provider, whether in a public or private clinic, at home or elsewhere. It also includes the procedure of re-infibulation at any time in a woman life. **Regardless of the setting, FGM can cause lifelong**

**health implications**, and is a gross violation of the rights of girls and women, and denies them rights to bodily integrity and autonomy. Beyond the short term complications and risks, FGM can cause life-long health implications and trauma for survivors.

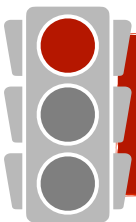
## Country Profiles

Cases of FGM in **Egypt** are carried out by a health care provider  
EHIS, 2015



Cases of FGM in **Sudan** are carried out by a midwife  
28 too Many, 2019

Cases of FGM in **Indonesia** are carried out by medical personnel  
National Basic Health Survey, 2013



**DON'T:** Portray harmful practices as an issue of the 'other'.  
Ending harmful practices is a global priority for everyone  
and can affect anyone in society

# FGM IS A RELIGIOUS OBLIGATION

Although we know that FGM predates any religion, it is sometimes thought to be a 'religious practice'. **FGM is not supported in any major religious texts**, and many religious leaders in fact believe that the

tradition should end, and have signed a declaration opposing the practice.

FGM is performed on girls because they are girls, and must be considered as a form of gender-based violence.

### FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION RELIGIOUS LEADERS DECLARATION

We, the signatories, recognise that:

1. Female Genital Mutilation, in all its types, is a grave violation of the rights of girls and women.
2. Female Genital Mutilation is child abuse and a violation of a child's bodily integrity as well as their right to health.
3. Female Genital Mutilation can have serious consequences for a woman's health and in some instances can lead to death.
4. Female Genital Mutilation is not a religious requirement. Causing harm and distress is not condoned by our faith.

Signed by over 200  
religious leaders and  
organisations

<http://nationalfgmcentre.org.uk/knowledge-hub-resources/>



**DON'T:** Refer to some harmful practices as more 'severe' than others, including when referring to types of FGM. All harmful practices violate an individual's human rights and can impact a person's physical and psychological health & well-being.

## Belief 3

### FGM IS AN 'AFRICAN' PROBLEM

FGM is a global problem affecting millions of girls and women around the world, and is practiced on every continent except Antarctica. The idea that FGM is only practised in Africa is a common misconception, as we know that it also affects communities in South America, the Middle East, South Asia, South East Asia, and Eastern

Europe, for example Georgia and Russia. The National FGM Centre has **worked with families from more than 65 countries**, highlighting the global nature of the practice. Due to migration, affected communities could be living in any country so the true prevalence of the practice can never be fully captured.

200,000,000

women worldwide have undergone  
Female Genital Mutilation

(World Health Organisation)



**DON'T:** Refer to harmful practices as 'difficult' to tackle, which places an immediate barrier for practitioners. Try to use a strengths based approach, and demonstrate success stories

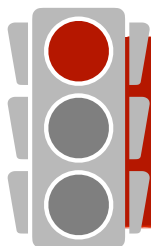
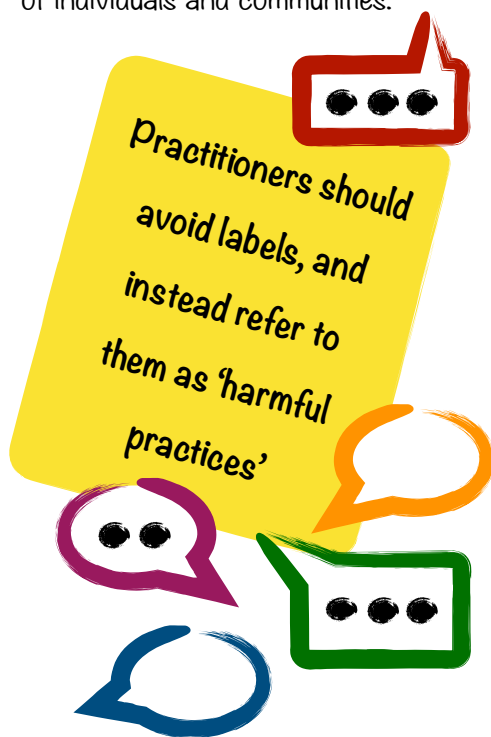
## Belief 4

### HARMFUL PRACTICES, LIKE FGM, ARE 'BARBARIC'

Whilst it is true that harmful practices violate the rights of children and vulnerable adults, the term 'barbaric' in itself is not useful. The term 'barbaric' has deep rooted primitive connotations, and often, a person who performs the act is seen to be a 'barbarian' which according to the English dictionary, means 'uncivilised'.

Using such words creates a rhetoric of 'otherness'. To combat harmful practices, one must firstly understand the practice and its

motivations, without the stigmatisation of individuals and communities.



**DON'T:** Use graphic images, videos or soundbites that risk the re-traumatisation of survivors and of affected communities. You may also risk traumatising practitioners.

## **A PERSON WHO HAS EXPERIENCED A HARMFUL PRACTICE IS A VICTIM**

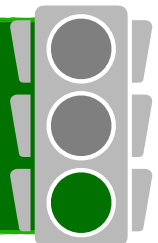
Although it is important to recognise harmful practices as violations of human rights, **being a victim should not be seen as the identity of an individual.** Experiences of trauma are individual to each person and should be seen on a continuum, from victim to survivor. Some individuals identify themselves as victim's, whilst others argue they are survivors. Some individuals also argue they are working on the continuum towards identifying as a survivor.

"In the past I would have said I was a victim, but now I would say I am a survivor"

**FGM Survivor**

Practitioners should **seek to empower individuals** who have experienced harmful practices by addressing their physical, emotional and psychological needs, and see them as survivors who have overcome extreme forms of trauma.

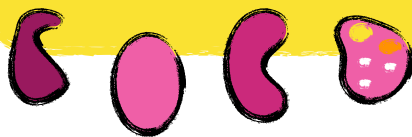
**DO: Capture women's life experiences in any interaction you have with service users. Understanding a person's life experiences is integral to understanding trauma, and the impact it can have on every aspects of a person's life, including parenting.**



## It is possible to prove a girl is a virgin by examining her hymen

According to the UN, virginity testing is a gynaecological examination conducted under the belief that it determines whether a woman or girl has had vaginal intercourse. Virginity testing is a **gross violation of the rights of girls and women** around the world is based on gender-based norms that female sexuality should be controlled.

The hymen, a fold of membrane at the vaginal opening, **varies dramatically from woman to woman**. In some women the hymen looks like a ring, in others it is crescent shaped. Some women have several holes, others have no hymen at all.



According to the World Health Organisation, the examination has **no scientific merit**, and is often performed to establish a girl's marriage eligibility, bride price or dowry, and is also thought to encourage girls to remain virgins.

**DO: Think of every interaction you have with a service user, child or adult, as a form of community engagement. Be clear in your messaging as it could pass through the family, extended family, and their community as a whole**

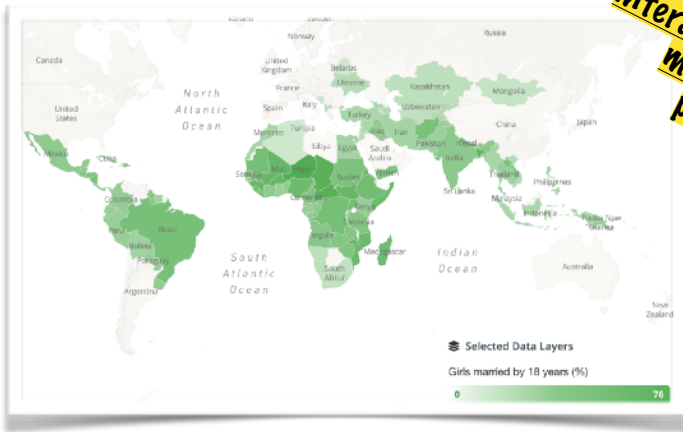




## Forced marriage only affects South Asian communities

Forced marriage is a global issue, and a gross violation of the rights of the rights of children and adults, affecting communities in Europe, the Middle East, Asia, the America's and beyond. Forced marriage can happen in any country, culture, religion and ethnicity,

and is not limited to 'developing countries'. According to Girls not Brides (2020), **every year, 12 million girls marry before the age of 18**, that's about 1 in 5 girls in the world.

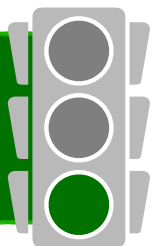


Check out Girls Not Brides interactive child marriage map for a global perspective



<https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/where-does-it-happen/>

**DO: Acknowledge the resilience of those who have been affected by harmful practices. Acknowledge that harmful practices are not only limited to BAME communities**



## **HARMFUL PRACTICES ONLY AFFECT PEOPLE FROM 'DEVELOPING COUNTRIES' AND 'STRUGGLING FAMILIES'**

Harmful practices are a global issue. We know that there are hundreds of harmful practices around the world, but we are learning about new practices every day.

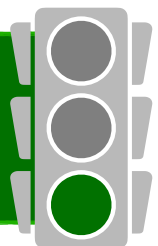
The definition of a harmful practice is:



**Persistent practices and behaviours that are grounded on discrimination on the basis of sex, gender, age and other grounds as well as multiple and/or intersecting forms of discrimination that often involve violence and cause physical and/or psychological harm or suffering**

Whilst we know that economic status can affect communities in various different ways, harmful practices are largely perpetuated on individuals on the grounds of a protected characteristic, and for the most part, on the basis of gender. As such, harmful practices can affect any country, regardless of its status as either 'developing' or 'developed'.

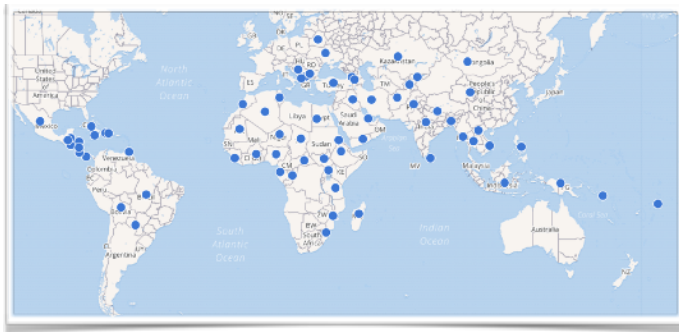
**DO: Use non-stigmatising language, and avoid judgemental terminology such as 'barbaric', 'savage' & 'repulsive'**



**A child who has been accused of witchcraft but not been physically/sexually/emotionally abused as a result does not require an intervention**

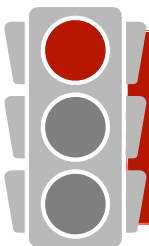
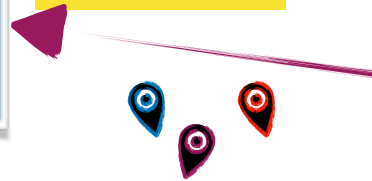
For a child, **the accusation** of being a witch, or possessed for example (even when not accompanied by any physical/sexual abuse) **can be psychological damaging and impact their emotional wellbeing and self-esteem.**

The view that a child is a witch/possessed may also lead to physical/sexual/emotional abuse, and as such, professionals should take this seriously and put measures in place using a multi-agency response to safeguard the child.



<http://nationalfgmcentre.org.uk/harmful-practices-map/>

**Check out the National FGM Centre's map of Harmful Practices**



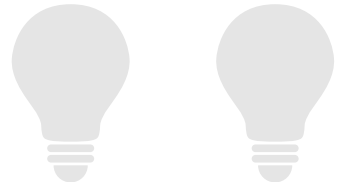
**DON'T:** focus on the physical impacts of harmful practices. Harmful practices are about the daily inequalities girls and women in particular face. Focus on harmful practices as a human rights issue



**Please get in touch for more information on the work of the National FGM Centre or to enquire about training:**



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[info@nationalfgmcentre.org.uk](mailto:info@nationalfgmcentre.org.uk)  
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**Developing excellence  
in response to FGM and  
other harmful practices**

