

WOMEN'S HEALTH

Multicultural Women's Health – Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Family Planning Queensland's (FPQ's) Multicultural Women's Health project aims to address reproductive and sexual health for women of language backgrounds other than English.

What is FGM?

The World Health Organisation identified FGM in 1995 as *all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs whether for cultural or non-therapeutic reasons.*

Members of communities involved with the issue do not traditionally use the term female genital mutilation. In their cultures FGM may be called *circumcision, cutting or cleansing.*

Contrary to popular belief, FGM is not based on religious beliefs. Neither the Koran nor the Bible supports the practice, and there is substantial scriptural teaching opposing FGM. FGM is not unique to Islam or Africa. The practice occurs in various parts of Asia, the Middle East, South America and Western countries like France, Canada and the USA where the practice may continue after migration.

It is relatively unknown in most other parts of the Muslim world, including South and South-East Asia, part of North Africa and Saudi Arabia.

Within some community norms and beliefs, FGM is practiced as a rite of passage, conferring status and esteem, like the initiation of boys in some communities.

Other reasons given for FGM include:

- cultural identity, promotion of social cohesion and conformity to the values of the group
- family honour
- a means of ensuring the virginity of young girls, their marriageability and social and economic status
- control of female sexuality and behaviour
- enhancement of beauty
- perception of hygiene and cleanliness

Negative consequences of FGM

Some women may go through life not presenting any health problems brought on as a result of FGM. However, there are many negative, short and long-term consequences of FGM, which impact on women's lives, as well as causing trauma to the children on whom it is performed. Consequences include:

Short term:

- continuous bleeding
- fear, fever, shock
- infection including tetanus
- urine retention
- death

Long term:

- chronic recurrent infection including infection of the vagina and uterus
- severe scar formation
- pelvic infection
- infertility
- vulval abscesses
- problems in pregnancy and childbirth
- sexual dysfunction
- trauma, nightmares, depression

The response to FGM in Australia

As a result of a Family Law Council report to the Attorney General's office in 1994, on the inquiry into FGM, Australia has enacted legislation against the practice.

In Queensland the practice is illegal. The removal of a child from Australia or across state borders for the purposes of FGM is also against the law.

Despite clear legislation outlawing this practice, it continues to be justified by practicing populations on grounds of religion, culture, preserving virginity, psychosexual and family honour and to avoid stigma attached to the family.

The Multicultural Women's Health (FGM) project aims to raise awareness of the illegality of the practice by working with key leaders in affected communities and health and community service providers.

The project aims to mobilise affected communities, health professionals, religious leaders, traditional leaders, women and men, through education and information, to change their mindset and involve them in combating FGM.

What is the major focus of the Multicultural Women's Health Project?

The project focuses on the prevention of FGM and increasing the access of affected women to information and services to improve their sexual and reproductive health. FPQ receives funding from Queensland Health (through a Commonwealth initiative) to implement a community development and awareness program with affected communities as well as training for health service providers.

Community development and education

There is a strong focus on community development, with a team of bilingual community educators, male and female, from targeted communities, who are trained to provide education in their own languages. The project uses various communication channels, such as face-to-face and community media, to increase awareness. The project also disseminates information about laws in Australia, health issues and the negative impact of the practice.

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The project's target groups are community members from the Horn of Africa, and other countries where the practice is prevalent.

Health service provider training

The second component of the project is to work with health and other service providers to develop their awareness of FGM practices and help them respond to their clients' health needs.

Training and community awareness workshops about FGM are regularly held for medical practitioners, nurses, community service providers, teachers, guidance counsellors, carers, university students and health sector staff.

The project has developed a range of awareness raising resources relating to this practice, including a poster, an FGM conference CD and DVD and information presentations and publications.

Overall, FPQ's Multicultural Women's Health project aims to support women and communities affected by the practice of FGM, improve health providers' services to affected women and facilitate a coordinated community response to FGM in Queensland.

For more information about FGM, the Multicultural Women's Health Education (FGM) project, or FPQ's services, please contact the project officer on 3350 0240 or your local FPQ centre, or visit FPQ's website at www.fpq.com.au



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