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(FGM Helpline)

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0800 11 11

Police 999

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Multi-Agency  
Safeguarding Hub  
(MASH)  
0845 050 7666

Oxford Rose Clinic:  
Specialist clinic for  
FGM survivors  
oxfordrose.clinic@nhs.net

Oxfordshire Domestic  
Abuse Helpline  
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to protect  
a girl at  
risk of  
FGM.**

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## Engaging men in the campaign against FGM: successes and challenges

April 2019

*"Men are dominant in our society. Men make the decisions. If we can get men to say that FGM is harmful to our daughters, we can make a change."*

**Hassan Sabrie, Men's Champion against FGM**

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“I think there are critical reasons why men need to be involved in the campaign to end female genital mutilation (FGM). From the men’s perspective, FGM affects whole families. It harms girls who are cut, often leading to life-long trauma and pain. It can harm the girl’s future marriage, with great suffering during intercourse and childbirth. Many husbands feel helpless and confused about their wife’s experiences and responses to intimacy. This, in turn, can damage relationships and lead to men suffering poor mental health and low self-esteem. In order to tackle a harm that affects whole families, we need to think about everyone affected.”

**Kate Agha, Executive Director, Oxford Against Cutting**

## Introduction

Oxford Against Cutting (OAC) is an Oxford-based charity committed to working to help prevent female genital mutilation (FGM) of girls and women living in the Thames Valley. OAC has recognised the importance of involving men in the fight against FGM, and engaged in projects working with men since 2015. The following report looks at why it is important to involve men in our work, and summarises our early work in this area to provide background and context. We then describe our latest and most substantive piece of work with men and boys, supported by The Funding Network. Through producing this report, we aim to share learning and contribute to the discussion on the role of men in helping to end FGM.

## Why is it important to involve men in the campaign against FGM?

There has been a range of projects to engage men in the process to end FGM, sometimes as part of wider initiatives to end violence against women and girls and promote gender equality, both nationally and at EU level<sup>1</sup>.

Wider work on equality has, for some time, recognised that relations between the genders have many dimensions and are complex and changing. Any consensus for change must, therefore, include men<sup>2</sup>. Though, traditionally, it has been taken for granted that domination and control of women by men has perpetuated the practice, some work, for example, by UNICEF has shown that many men wish the practice to stop, though this can be constrained by a lack of communication between women and men about the practice.

Studies show the importance of men’s involvement, in ways which include youth- and men’s-work for educational or therapeutic purposes, the strengthening of men’s knowledge and skills to enable their general advocacy; peer education and mentoring; and fostering networks to support community-wide change<sup>3</sup>. Models for change often recognise that it is essential to address

“I’ve spoken to Gambian, Nigerian, Eritrean and Tanzanian men about FGM and they have gone back to speak to their wives about it. One African man told me there is a lot of pressure to have girls cut and his relatives will think it is a "shame" that his daughter hasn't been cut when he goes to his country.”

**Hassan Sabrie, Men’s Champion against FGM**





The men's discussion highlighted some gaps in men's understanding about the harm caused by FGM, and confusion around related subjects such as the differences between male and female circumcision. This showed a need for greater education around FGM. The men's group discussion is summarised in this word cloud.

### ***Nigerian Muslim Group (May 2016)***

This was a one-hour session attended by 11 men and four women, which included prayer time and group business, and included discussion on Islamic duty as well as encouragement to sing African songs. An educational session followed, with explanations that FGM is not a religious requirement, discussions based on models of female genitalia to educate about the different types of FGM and the harm; and the sharing of resources with the showing of a film and the Let's Talk FGM App. The session was well received, and sowed the seeds that an all-male group would be helpful.

### ***East Oxford United boys' project (May 2018)***

East Oxford United is a community football club that encourages young people from low-income families, in deprived areas of Oxford to participate in football.

We worked with 19 boys from the club, who ranged from 13 to 17 years of age, and included participants from a wide number of ethnic and national origins, including East African, Eastern European, Middle Eastern, South Asian, British African and Asian and English. The project aimed to encourage social cohesion by supporting boys to become anti-FGM champions and learn about healthy relationships. The boys took part in "football workshops" on four subjects: relating to the 'roles' of girls and boys; healthy/unhealthy relationships; FGM (including the reasons, the harm and the law) and creating change/becoming a champion. This learning sits at the



heart of family life and will help support healthy decisions for the next generation. It will also help families understand that FGM is not a "women's" issue that should be understood/tackled only by women. The football project brought communities together from different cultural groups and supported intergenerational conversations between boys and their families about FGM and abuse issues.

### ***Engaging with faith leaders (2018)***

In recognition of the importance of including faith leaders in the discussion about FGM, this project began with outreach work carried out by an OAC Community Outreach Director, during which she successfully managed to link with Sheik Ramzy (Oxford) and Deacon Bob Hughes (Banbury). Both faith leaders were invited to join one of OAC's training sessions at a local primary school. The session

covered what FGM is (harm, reasons, law etc), and how to safeguard children. Both faith leaders were present during the training, and Sheik Ramzy spoke after the session. Following this, both faith leaders were invited to take part in a short interview. The interview covered a range of topics, such as misconceptions about FGM, female sexuality and how we can come together to help eradicate the practice.

The interview was filmed by an OAC Young Champion, who, along with another filmmaker volunteer prepared the final clips (selected by the OAC team based on those they felt would be most powerful/effective for use in future media campaigns). Both faith leaders were then asked to pledge to speak about FGM with their congregation each year before the summer holidays. A factsheet created by OAC was shared to help faith leaders to talk about FGM<sup>6</sup>.

### ***Resources developed<sup>7</sup>***

#### ***Men speak up – helpline poster (2016)<sup>8</sup>***

During 2016, OAC used the annual summer poster campaign to include male voices in the anti-FGM agenda. This aimed to appeal to a wider audience and encourage men to take an active role to help stop the practice. The image of an African man was based on the previous year's, which had depicted a young woman removing a gag to 'speak up', with helpline numbers listed for advice and support.

"Our message in this [poster] campaign is to speak up. The helplines are for everyone, not only girls at risk."  
**Kaddy Touray, OAC Community Outreach Director**

Using the image of a man was intended to move to a stage of identifying those men who can help prevent the practice, reflecting how important it is for men from FGM-affected communities to understand what happens if their daughter is cut and how this will impact on her life. The poster was displayed across Oxford in GP surgeries, community centres, police stations and schools and local press coverage included radio interviews for Jack FM and coverage by the Oxford Mail<sup>9</sup>.

#### ***Men's narratives (2016)***

OAC introduced a narrative, added to those collected from women to help communities manage any pressure they are under to have their daughters cut<sup>10</sup>.

#### ***Film: Men Speak Up – are you ready to speak? (2017)<sup>11</sup>***

The initial men's discussion groups had highlighted a need for supporting resources to include men and develop their understanding of the issues surrounding FGM. In response to this, we held an event for men in a workshop style with food and an opportunity for men to network and befriend men from other communities. OAC facilitators presented short films to start conversations about FGM and in particular to address knowledge gaps on the harm caused by FGM. Group work included opportunities for creative thinking about how FGM can be tackled within communities. At the end of the session, the men were invited to volunteer to continue their discussions and six (representatives from Gambian, Nigerian, Sudanese and Kurdish communities) were involved in creating a short film with film-maker Stephen Fontaine. In addition to developing the film as a wider learning resource,

the session provided learning about FGM for the men involved and increased dissemination of OAC materials into their communities.

The film is suitable for young people at secondary school and 16 plus, and as at March 2019, this video had received over 270 views on YouTube.

***Film: Let's Talk FGM – Men Speak Up about FGM (2017)***<sup>12</sup>

This video, a shorter and more accessible version of 'Men speak up...' is also available via YouTube as well as being a part of the healthcare workers' 'Let's Talk FGM' app<sup>13</sup>. As at early April 2019, this video had received over 130 views.

## Men talking about Female Genital Mutilation - #wetalkedFGM (2018-19)

Recognising from previous work that men and boys can engage and be supportive agents for change, the #wetalkedFGM campaign for men was introduced in May 2018. Supported by The Funding Network, this consisted of a range of work that included men's discussion groups, case studies and a social media campaign. The project encourages men and men's groups to 'pledge' to talk about FGM to other men, having a conversation with another man about FGM and asking him to speak to another man, and so on. To date, organisations that have pledged include NASUWT Milton Keynes Local Members Association, Milton Keynes Somali Outreach Project and East Oxford United.

Experience from the #wetalkedFGM project has shown that it can be difficult to develop working relations with men's groups for anti-FGM work, especially to convene larger groups. Initial outreach work led to some engagement with existing groups, though there was some reluctance to take part in an initiative, which involved face-to-face facilitation. Instead, some success has been achieved by working with smaller groups and individuals to capture case studies for learning, and these are reported on in the following section. These activities have contributed to a range of learning, which we summarise below.

### **Men's Group – Milton Keynes (November 2018)**

Nine participants took part in a training and discussion session. The OAC facilitators included one facilitator from an FGM-affected community and they talked about the role that men can play in helping to eradicate the practice. The men were introduced to the idea of the pledge and the hashtag; however, they were not yet ready to pledge. There was some discussion at the beginning, where a participant questioned whether this group were being targeted because they are Muslim which created some tension. This might have been alleviated by providing greater clarity about what will be discussed before the session. The facilitator discussed FGM in relation to other religions and generally diffused the resulting tension. However, only the Imam in attendance openly spoke out against FGM during the session.



On reflection and despite the tension, the facilitators felt that it was a positive session. All of the men stayed and listened to what the OAC facilitators had to say, with the session including 45 minutes of men-only discussion. In some sense, this session probably had more of an impact than previous sessions where (most) men had been openly against FGM. Whilst

more sessions would be needed for this group to change attitudes/speak out against FGM, at least the session introduced the conversation to a group of men who would have otherwise not spoken about the topic at all. At the end, some attendees were photographed, and featured on Twitter with the #wetalkedFGM hash tag.

### **Men's Community Group – Oxford (November 2018)**

Ten participants took part in a training and discussion session, facilitated by an OAC team of Community Outreach Director and a Project



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Following

Men can make change happen and help #endFGM ! - so proud of these Oxford men for speaking openly and honestly about FGM and taking part in #wetalkedFGM Thank you Hassan from @diversityfooty



11:20 AM - 5 Nov 2018

10 Retweets 23 Likes



Coordinator. During the discussion, it was recognised that FGM is harmful and a violation of human rights. In Africa, it was argued, there is still an incentive to carry out FGM because people can make money from carrying it out. Change, though, would only come through educating people, not least to separate out FGM as a cultural rather than religious requirement. It is important to speak to the younger generations, and also involve older community members. In later feedback on the session, it was identified that male facilitators might be preferred (particularly from the perspective of religious leaders), as such discussions include talking about sexual issues. In particular, one facilitator was from an FGM-affected community and wearing a hijab and it was felt that this was less appropriate for a men's group than a white, British female facilitator.

In all, the session included 45 minutes of men-only discussion. After the session, the group were photographed, and featured on Twitter with the **#wetalkedFGM** hash tag.

### **Case studies (2019)**

OAC also engaged with and interviewed two individual men from FGM-affected communities. The discussions showed an understanding of some of the enablers and barriers which men supporting anti-FGM campaigns might face, and we have summarised these below. The questions asked are shown in Appendix 3.

**Case study A**, is a man from Egypt originally, who has lived in a middle-eastern country in addition to the UK. **Case study B**, is originally from north east Africa though he has lived in the UK for many years.

Firstly, they identified a number of factors that can **contribute to a lack of understanding** about FGM. These included a lack of education about genitalia or sex at school, though both had educated themselves about the practice. Videos and Facebook were identified as useful tools for learning (where less reading is required and information can be absorbed more quickly).

Both, though, were knowledgeable about the facts relating to and the myths surrounding FGM. For example, they cited research to support their arguments, such as studies that show FGM does not make any difference to women's sexual activity. They also identified that FGM is not attached to any religion, both understanding that it is a cultural practice.

They recognised that several **factors contribute to its continuation**, with entrenched ideas that perpetuate despite being wrong. These included the argument that FGM prevents girls being promiscuous, that it keeps them 'polite'; cultures where men must "prove their 'manship'" and women their dignity; cultures which "blame the girl" for any violence she suffers. One, though, argued that stigma may occur less within diaspora communities. This, they felt was because, as there is not one single person doing the cutting, the community is less likely who knows who has or hasn't been cut.

**Both identified ways in which men can contribute to ending FGM.** These covered:

- In cultures like their own where men have greater authority and "as communities they listen to the men more than women", "they can say 'don't do it'", especially once they understand the harmful consequences of FGM;
- Producing solid arguments within religious text that there is no evidence these religions support FGM
- Men speaking to men, particularly religious men
- Support arguments with facts and research

**Barriers to men talking about FGM to one another** were mainly the sensitivity of the subject as sex and relationships are rarely discussed. The fact that FGM is illegal, and that they may be revealed to the police would also put people off from discussing it in the UK. They may also be “scared” to reveal their name on something like Twitter.

## Other projects

Work with men’s groups has also been successful elsewhere in the Thames Valley. Within The Alliance for Cohesion and Racial Equality (ACRE), whose core activities are to promote equality, community empowerment and community cohesion in Reading, a group of men were concerned about the impact of FGM on women. Because of this, they supported the local campaign to raise awareness of the harmful impact of FGM among affected communities and Reading society. Since September 2017 they have galvanised a number of men in Reading to support the campaign against FGM, and to raise awareness of the harmful nature within affected communities. In addition, the group provides peer support with over 40 people attending the groups over the last year, from nine different national and ethnic backgrounds (including the UK).



## Learning points and impact

The work which OAC has completed on working with men has helped develop our understanding further on ways to make this successful. The factors which led to events and discussions being positively received have included:

- Framing community events to include a range of discussions of interest (immigration law, human rights) and cultural activities such as song or prayer or henna adornment. These can then include an element of education relating to FGM.
- Creating a shared space with men and women (eg, for initial discussions), whilst respecting the fact that men will only wish to discuss sensitive issues with other men. This may be particularly the case for some groups, such as some Muslim men, and religious sensitivities around gender should be taken into account. This may promote discussion within families after the event, encouraging men and women to communicate.
- Recognising that it can take time to build understanding and consensus, and the success of a discussion may be measurable simply by the fact that participants have engaged and listened to the facts about FGM.
- Including a faith leader to open up discussion about FGM as a cultural, rather than a religious practice.

It is also important to be mindful that some communities, for example, some Muslims may already feel pressurised by wider society and therefore concerned about discussing FGM. Many community members may also be concerned about discussing FGM because of its illegality, further supporting a case for providing a safe, non-judgemental space for discussion.

Some of the needs of men in FGM-affected communities were identified, and include a need for more education around issues such as the harm that FGM can cause. Such discussions should predominantly take place in male-only spaces, though video and social media were identified as useful points of learning. These are a helpful source of knowledge for men to access in their own time and space. This may be supported by the fact that OAC's YouTube videos featuring men have been viewed over 400 times. The projects have also reached and engaged with a diverse range of communities.

Involvement with OAC projects has provided learning for men to communicate further within their communities, and educate other men on the harm caused by FGM. Some men were also willing to be identified as anti-FGM advocates, for example, through social media. This will hopefully begin to establish a set of role models and allow others to question and seek a better understanding of FGM.

Furthermore, this work has started to foster networks to support change. This work is in its early stages in Oxford, though as this report demonstrates, Oxford Against Cutting has already made impact with its work, and learned valuable lessons about what works for this type of initiative. This will contribute to building a group of men as advocates and campaigners against FGM. As the case study from Reading shows, this type of community, 'ground-up' support can lead to long-term, sustainable activities which begin to change societal norms.

"It is a girl's human right to be safe from harm and everyone has a responsibility to protect children. Men in FGM-affected communities are often key decision-makers in families and we know they can make a significant difference to stop the practice. While some men have shown great commitment to help end FGM in the Thames Valley, there is still a very long way to go."

**Kate Agha, Executive Director, Oxford Against Cutting**

## Appendix 1 – References

- 1 See, for example: O’Neill S., Dubourg D., Florquin S., Bos M., Zewolde S., Richard F. «Men have a role to play but they don’t play it»: A mixed methods study exploring men’s involvement in Female Genital Mutilation in Belgium, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom: Summary. Men Speak Out Project, Brussels, 2017, <http://menspeakout.eu/>.
- 2 Connell, R.W. (2003) The Role of Men and Boys in Achieving Gender Equality. Consultant’s paper for ‘The Role of Men and Boys in Achieving Gender Equality’, Expert Group Meeting, organised by DAW in collaboration with ILO and UNAIDS, 21-24 October 2003, Brasilia, Brazil, <<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/men-boys2003/Connell-bp.pdf>>.
- 3 Flood, M. (2019). Harmful Traditional and Cultural Practices Related to Violence Against Women and Successful Strategies to Eliminate Such Practices - Working with Men. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) Expert Group Meeting - Strategies for implementing the recommendations from the Secretary-General’s Study on Violence against Women with Particular Emphasis on the Role of National Machineries, Bangkok, Thailand, 26-27 April.
- 4 The Acquire Project (2008). Engaging Boys and Men in Gender Transformation: The Group Education Manual, [http://www.acquireproject.org/archive/files/7.0\\_engage\\_men\\_as\\_partners/7.2\\_resources/7.2.3\\_tools/Group\\_Education\\_Manual\\_final.pdf](http://www.acquireproject.org/archive/files/7.0_engage_men_as_partners/7.2_resources/7.2.3_tools/Group_Education_Manual_final.pdf)
- 5 Kaplan, A., Cham, B., Njie, L. A., Seixas, A., Blanco, S., and Utzet, M. (2013). Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: The Secret World of Women as Seen by Men. Obstetrics and Gynecology International, Volume 2013.
- 6 Faith leaders guidance is available at <https://www.oxfordagainstcutting.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Faith-leaders-guidance.pdf>
- 7 Further resources to support awareness-raising and address issues relating to FGM can be found at <https://www.oxfordagainstcutting.org/resources/>
- 8 The poster features on the cover of this report.
- 9 See: [http://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/14552955.Call\\_for\\_men\\_to\\_speak\\_out\\_about\\_FGM\\_before\\_start\\_of\\_39\\_cutting\\_season\\_39/](http://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/14552955.Call_for_men_to_speak_out_about_FGM_before_start_of_39_cutting_season_39/)
- 10 See: <https://www.oxfordagainstcutting.org/es-story/>
- 11 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4k4ny6HRkg>
- 12 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1eySHWQssNE>
- 13 <https://www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/support-advice/getting-help/lets-talk-fgm-app/>

## Appendix 2 - Itinerary for Family Immigration and Human Rights Forum

<b>Time</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Lead Person</b>
12:00pm	Arrival and sign up	OAC Community Outreach Director
12:20pm	Lunch and Networking	OAC team
13:00pm	Forum- Immigration and Human Rights talk	Immigration Lawyer
13:30pm	Law on FGM	OAC team
13:40pm	Split groups	OAC Community Outreach Director
13:55pm	FGM video- Sara's story	OAC Community Outreach Director
14:05pm	Discussion about Sara's video (what participants learnt from the video-pick up main points)	OAC Community Outreach Director
14:15pm	Needlecraft Video <i>Would we all be quiet if groups were cutting off ears and noses?</i>  <i>We need to think about FGM in the same way..?</i>	OAC Community Outreach Director
14:20pm	Men Speak-up	Male facilitator
14:25pm	Man2Man discussion & Question and Answer	Male facilitator  OAC Community Outreach Director (observation)
15:10pm	Group together & closing Remarks	OAC team

## Appendix 3 – Men’s case study - questions

**NOTE: It should be made clear to interviewees that any cases of actual FGM which are raised will have to be reported by the professional taking the case study.**

When did you first become aware of FGM?

In what ways do you think men can make a difference when it comes to FGM? (in creating awareness/changing mindsets/ending the practice)

Have you had any conversations with men about FGM? If yes, what have their thoughts been?

What reasons do you think are given for FGM?

Do you think men see women’s sexual pleasure as important?

In what ways do men in your community have the power to make decisions and stop FGM from happening?

In what ways can we act to end FGM?

Do you think that there are particular tools which are helpful to have conversations? The hashtag, the app, hard copy e.g. booklet, etc.

Who do you think is best placed to talk about FGM with men?

Are you connected to any (men’s) groups that might benefit from training?



**OxfordAgainstCutting**  
StopFemaleGenitalMutilation

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