



OxfordAgainstCutting
StopFemaleGenitalMutilation

The importance of language in reporting about FGM

Oxford Against Cutting works with local communities, survivors and schools to support education and raise awareness of FGM. As a charity, we are careful to ensure that our work is delivered in a sensitive manner which does not stigmatise, judge or 'other' anybody. Our focus is on educating people on the harms of FGM and showing how we can all work together to support the campaign to end FGM in a generation.

For anybody working in this highly sensitive area - charities, the media, policy makers, professionals and the general public - it is imperative that we carefully consider our use of language. It's important to avoid language which is judgemental, such as 'barbaric', 'outrageous', or 'horrific'.

The word 'barbaric', for example, suggests that FGM is practiced out of cruelty and fails to recognise the complex reasons and motivations for the practice. In FGM-practicing communities, FGM is seen as an important cultural tradition which seeks to preserve a girl or woman's virginity/control her sexuality. A girl or woman who has not undergone FGM may be seen as 'impure', rejected from society and deemed unmarriageable. It is important, therefore, to understand that parents/families cut their daughters, not because they want to hurt them, but to ensure their best prospects in life. A mother may have experienced the physical and psychological pain of FGM herself, but she may feel compelled to have her daughter cut because the practice is so deeply embedded into her culture that saying "no" does not feel like an option. We recommend that language such as "harmful" and "illegal" is much more appropriate to help tackle FGM in our communities.

Anyone reporting on or working in this area plays a key role in shaping the public's understanding of FGM and it is for this reason that judgemental terms, such as 'barbarity', must be avoided. Not only does this terminology reinforce misunderstandings around the practice but it can also lead to communities feeling isolated and 'othered'. It's important to remember that FGM is a global concern and any language which fuels discrimination or reinforces stereotypes will only damage efforts to work together to end the practice.

For further guidance on talking about/reporting on FGM, please refer to End FGM European Network's paper, 'How to talk about FGM'.

https://www.endfgm.eu/editor/files/2017/05/How_to_Talk_about_FGM_FINAL_position_paper_v4_2.pdf