



Webinars for Women – summary report

May 2020

“I would just like to say how insightful all the pilot sessions were and I felt very safe to share my own experiences, so thank you”

Webinar participant

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“Many women from communities affected by FGM and honour-based abuse feel isolated following the harms they have suffered. The outbreak of COVID-19 and time in lockdown exacerbated this sense of isolation and took away opportunities for community groups to meet in person. It then became pressing for charities to create safe online spaces to facilitate connection, learning and mutual support.”

Kate Agha, CEO, Oxford Against Cutting

Introduction

Oxford Against Cutting (OAC) is an Oxford-based charity working to end harmful cultural practices suffered by girls and women living in the Thames Valley. These include female genital mutilation (FGM), ‘honour’-based abuse (HBA) and early and forced marriage (EFM) and female cosmetic genital surgery. Our mission is to end cultural practices that harm girls and women by providing education, supporting survivors, raising awareness of support services and empowering young people to champion initiatives against harmful practices. People from affected communities and young people are at the forefront of our activities.

In March 2020, in response to a need to continue our work online during the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, OAC developed a series of webinar discussions on FGM and HBA to facilitate open discussions on issues relating to FGM and HBA and how these can operate in different cultures. A series of eight, free-to attend, one-hour sessions was run from 13th April to 5th May 2020 (plus one practise session on 10th April), with OAC staff facilitating and moderating using ‘Zoom’ software. Each week, one session was run around FGM and another on HBA. Funding was provided by the Ennismore Foundation.

In association with the webinars, the [‘Jasmine Community’](#) was created. This is a network for families affected by forced marriage and honour-based abuse (HBA) and people who care. It is run by people from affected communities and aims to provide support and advocacy work on HBA issues, approaching HBA with nuance and expertise from communities affected by it.

The following short report summarises the development of the webinar sessions, their format and some of the learning identified.

Thank you for giving space to these issues – this was a really interesting discussion.

This was a brilliant session. So many different aspects to consider, definitely an area for more work.

Webinar participants

Our webinars

Format and development

At the outset, a core planning team met to discuss the structure of the webinars. The key, agreed aim was to keep the webinars fairly relaxed and informal, though supported by a structured template to ensure that participants had clarity around safeguarding and that their anonymity/confidentiality was preserved as much as possible. A set of principles was agreed, and translated into a 'template' for each session. This included: an outline of the structure as well as a 'script', for the moderator and lead facilitator to explain the 'ground rules' of the session; the ways in which participants' identity could be protected and reassurance about this being a safe place to speak; questions/topics; and a section for facilitators/moderators to take notes on attendance numbers, issues arising and the content of the discussion .

As no research was being undertaken, full ethical approval was not required, however, it was built in to communications and also the facilitators 'script' to explain fully to participants that brief (anonymised) notes would be taken. It was not possible for participants to be completely anonymous to OAC, as they must send their email address to take part. These details were, though, stored confidentially, and participants given advice on being less visible within the actual webinar if they wished, such as changing their username/switching off their video (a very small number chose to do this) and communicating with facilitators confidentially using the 'chat' function in Zoom.

For each of the individual webinars, four questions were prepared in advance to ask participants which guided the discussion. These were finessed and finalised in consultation with facilitators and other OAC staff. Where appropriate, facilitators were given additional time to gather resources (eg, a 'cheat sheet' on incidences of 'honour'-based abuse) so that they were fully informed and prepared to answer questions.

Finally, broad themes discussed during the meet-ups were written up (anonymously), to catalogue some of the learning for project evaluation and potential future sessions. A summary of these was confirmed with the group by the moderator at the end of each session, to ensure that they reflected the content of the session to their satisfaction. Technical issues experienced, eg, establishing audio contact and 'frozen' cameras were also recorded, and this information will be useful for setting up instructions for future webinars.

Creating a safe space

Plans for the webinars were subjected to OAC's standard risk assessment procedure, which identified a concern about the potential vulnerability of some participants and the possibility of negative psychological triggers within session content. Control measures agreed to mitigate these were to:

- Use the verbal discussion guidelines to create a safe space.
- Have a facilitator on hand at the end of the meeting to provide support if needed.
- Ensure that facilitators have a good understanding of the issues.
- Develop sensitive, non-stigmatising resources (based on advice from community leaders).
- Give a link to follow-up support / helplines in the invitation to meet-up.

Concerns were also raised that participation could lead to abusive partners behaving aggressively if they found out that the participant was online. It was identified that most participants were known OAC as these were primarily aimed at existing facilitator/OAC staff networks, and that facilitators would discuss concerns confidentially with Kate Agha. Furthermore, the FAQs issues included the link to a page about safety joining online meetings. The risk assessment was circulated to all those involved in the webinars, and relevant members of the trustee board.

Each session was run by an experienced facilitator supported by a moderator, with other OAC staff present as participators to provide additional support and expertise. A minimum of two of those present at every session had level 3 safeguarding training, and all project facilitators are DBS checked to help maintain the safe space. A [set of FAQs](#), including advice about accessing online spaces in a safe way, was developed to explain fully the format of the webinars and how to participate in the safest way. This is accessible from the OAC website, with full text available in Appendix 1 for information.

Publicity and recruitment

The sessions were initially designed to be closed groups, with participants known to OAC staff through their existing networks. The initial six webinars were advertised via flyers (see Appendix 2) shared by OAC staff and allies to address those primarily from affected communities with some direct approaches to other community groups and sharing via WhatsApp networks. These provided an email address for contacting OAC with a no-obligation expression of interest and further details of how to take part. The final two sessions were advertised more widely across social media, including Twitter and LinkedIn, to attract a broader audience (in recognition that fewer people may be available during Ramadan). Some direct approaches were successfully made to high-profile activists via social media.

Date	Description	Lead facilitator:¹	Number of attendees
13/4/2020	FGM discussion	Kaddy Touray	5 (plus 3 OAC representatives)

¹ All sessions were moderated by Dot Pritchard, OAC Senior Project Coordinator, and each also had a support facilitator

14/4/2020	HBA – Forced Marriage	Sobia Afridi	4 (plus 4 OAC representatives)
20/4/2020	FGM, disability and accessing support	Dr Nesreen Yanni	6 (plus 4 OAC representatives)
21/4/2020	HBA and forced marriage – Beauty, marriage and the media	Monica Majumdar-Choudhary	4 (plus 8 from OAC)
27/4/2020	The practice of FGM in The Gambia	Kaddy Touray	4 (plus 3 from OAC)
28/4/2020	HBA – forced and arranged marriages	Sobia Afridi	1 (plus 4 from OAC)
4/5/2020	The medicalisation of FGM	Dr Nesreen Yanni	4 (plus 6 from OAC including a youth wing representative)
5/5/2020	HBA – ‘Caste’, groups and identity	Monica Majumdar-Choudhary	8 (plus 7 from OAC)

Essential contact details were obtained from participants, which will be deleted at the end of the webinar series (unless the participant opts in to receiving an OAC newsletter). Ethnicity data was not specifically requested from participants upon joining, but a number of different cultural perspectives were represented across the series of workshops. Through attendees from their own networks, OAC facilitators/attendees were able to identify participants from the following communities: Bangladeshi, Bengali, British, Egyptian, Gambian, Iraqi, Kenyan, Nepalese, Nigerian, Pakistani, and Sudanese. This range of experience contributed to more varied discussions and descriptions of lived experience from several backgrounds, identifying both shared and differing themes.

It’s great that we’re having conversations about this as the medicalisation of FGM is increasing and obscuring the impact that anti-FGM activists are having on FGM.

Webinar participant

Discussion points and learning

The issues discussed during the sessions were wide, with a diverse range of views and interesting conversations. These have been summarised below.

COVID-19 and the ongoing crisis

The impact of COVID-19 on the safety of women and girls was a key subject discussed. Many women’s freedom has been taken away, even if it’s simply to go to the shops or visit the GP. It can be more difficult to access online GP and support services if English is not your first language, if you don’t have internet access or lack the technology. E- and telephone consultations are off-putting and leading people to keep things to themselves. There is less space for vulnerable people to seek help, eg, by making a personal call, and they may wait until the crisis has passed, potentially becoming more endangered. At the same time, exposure to potentially abusive partners or extended family has been increased at a time

when stressors exist to increase manipulation and control. For forced marriage, the virus may create a number of influencing factors, such as a difficult financial climate. Anecdotally, there was discussion around increased online weddings (eg, via Skype) and weddings over the phone.

In terms of FGM, it was also felt that the crisis would not be widely used as an opportunity to cut girls, particularly because the death rates from Coronavirus are higher in the BME community so they would want to avoid going to hospital (should there be complications).

Other themes and issues

More general themes and issues were also discussed relating to FGM which occur at all times, not just in a crisis. These included understanding the increased vulnerability of women and girls with a disability, the gaps in knowledge around this and the need for a specific forum for women/parents to discuss this type of issue and offer them help. The reasons for carrying out FGM were also discussed, including reasons of perceived purity and maintaining cultural traditions, and myths around controlling women's sexuality often despite evidence to the contrary. The practice is often seen as essential for women to be

Thank you, this has been really interesting. I always wonder about engaging faith leaders – how do we go about this? I also think thoughts on intergenerational discussions are fruitful and key to explore more.

Thanks again!

Webinar participant

deemed 'marriageable', and in some cultures is supported by those who are educated and in power. Medicalisation was discussed, including the way in which this can reinforce and give credibility to FGM when in fact it simply (though not always) addresses short-term harms. Criminalising FGM can lead to these practices going underground.

Conversations on forced marriage explored the associated issues of choice and consent, and the differences between arranged and forced marriage. The subject is complex and practice can differ between families, not just communities. There is sometimes a really fine line between the two – for example, an arranged marriage can in fact be forced if the young person feels they can't say no, or they are caught off-guard by a 'surprise' marriage. Participants also emphasised the pressure on girls and women to conform to looking a particular way, (with fair skin often being seen as "more beautiful") and behaving in acceptable ways - also to remain 'marriageable'. This has wide-ranging impact on women, as they face constant observation to check that they conform and face pressure to whiten their skin, straighten their hair, etc. There was a perception that these pressures are growing, both for girls from a younger age (ie, secondary school) and also for boys/men, and are both in the family and the wider world through social media, popular culture, etc. The role of caste was also explored, as this is deeply ingrained in many aspects of daily life and can impact who you are permitted to marry. At the same time, there was felt to be a 'shift' in

some areas, with girls and women starting to speak out more, and the younger generations feeling that caste is less relevant.

A range of recurring themes were raised during the sessions. Well-being was raised in a number of contexts, in particular a surge in poor mental health during the crisis, and a need for support for these women. The importance of financial issues was also introduced several times, not least the role of women's financial dependence and their inability to leave abusive and/or unhappy situations. This has been exacerbated by the current crisis with men losing their jobs which is impacting the 'male complex', adding to tension in the home and increasing the chances of abuse.

Suggestions for action coming out from the webinars

These included using social media to send private messages when in danger, developing a code for use in pharmacies, etc, when in danger. The group's thoughts on the codes idea was shared with a temporary working group set up by Oxford Against Cutting to consider the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on families affected by FGM and HBA. This working group included local and national support services (including Karma Nirvana, the National FGM Centre and Hestia. Two urgent meetings were held to consider the use of codes, the barriers to reaching support and the messages and action needed to support victims during lockdown. OAC subsequently launched an online poster campaign to help families in the Thames Valley reach support services. The posters will be included in pharmacies in a 'safe spaces' initiative led by another service.

Suggestions were made for future webinar topics, such as running a session for men to explore how to change their attitudes. Some subjects, such as 'caste' drew particular interest and may benefit from longer sessions in future. The webinars were also useful for publicising support services such as the Rose Clinic, for sharing ideas on how to bring about change and also for growing the networks of OAC facilitators enabling them to share our work (with one facilitator already being asked to speak to another group).

In conclusion, the webinars provided valuable meet-ups for initiating new discussions around FGM and HBA, reinforcing existing networks and building new ones to feed into the Jasmine Community and the existing Rose Community². There were also some additional outcomes, for example one participant has since expressed an interest in joining OAC as a volunteer and four participants signed up to our newsletter. The rich subject matter and fascinating discussions have introduced a wide range of potential subjects and learning for future sessions. Feedback on the sessions was positive, it was agreed that creating a shared space to be heard is particularly important at this time. In the current climate of restricted movement and social distancing, it is essential that charities find new and innovative ways

² An existing network, established by OAC, for families affected by FGM and people who care.

to stay connected to affected communities, raise awareness and ensure that victims can reach support.

Appendix 1 – Webinars for Women: ONLINE Meet-Ups – FAQs

What are Oxford Against Cutting (OAC)'s online meet-ups?

We are running online weekly meetings for adult women to talk about FGM and forced marriage/honour-based abuse (HBA). You are welcome to join us if:

- you have been affected by FGM or HBA or you are someone who cares deeply about ending these practices; and
- you are a woman aged 18 or over living in the Thames Valley

The meetings have been set up to share information about harmful practices, as well as friendship and mutual support.

How do I join an online meet-up?

Please email our Project Coordinator, Dot Pritchard at dot@oxfordagainstcutting.org and say how you know our organisation.

Our meet-ups are run using Zoom so you will need to create an account with your email address if you don't already have one.

What if I want to join anonymously?

You will not be anonymous to our charity because we will have your email address for the meetings on Zoom, although you can make yourself less visible (see below).

How will our charity protect your information and support you?

OAC is committed to providing safe, comfortable spaces online

Our charity promises:

- We will not share your email address or anything you say about yourself or your organisation ("your information") with other participants without your permission.
- We will not share your information with anyone outside the group, with the exception of safeguarding concerns. Please note that if you tell us anything that makes us concerned for a child or vulnerable adult then we will have to pass this information on in line with our Child Protection and Vulnerable Adults Policies.
- We will record in writing broad discussion themes for internal purposes only, to report to our funders and develop further resources. No one will be identifiable in these notes.
- The session will not be recorded.
- Please see our Rescue and Helplines pages (on [FGM](#) and ["honour"-based abuse and forced marriage](#)) for further support on issues covered during the session.

- Please notify a facilitator if you need emotional support at the end of a meet-up. Please email dot@oxfordagainstcutting.org and Dot will link you with a facilitator.
- We will hold your email address only for the duration of the project (and longer if you confirm in writing that you wish to join our newsletter circulation list) or until you tell us that you no longer want to join our meet-ups.

You can make yourself less visible to the group by:

- **Hiding your name before the session begins** (Go to 'profile' and edit your name at the top of the page)
- **Changing your name after entering a Zoom meeting**
(Click on the "Participants" button at the top of the Zoom window.
Next, hover your mouse over your **name** in the "Participants" list on the right side of the Zoom window. Click on "Rename".
Enter the **name** you'd like to appear in the Zoom meeting and click on "OK").
- **You can ask questions in the 'chat' box** during the session and there is an option to make your questions and comments visible to **facilitators only**.
- **You can join in without video** and use only audio.

What if I'm worried about joining an online meeting because it will increase my risk of domestic abuse?

- Please only join the webinar if you feel that it is **safe for you to do so**.
- You can find advice on using the internet here: ['Cover your tracks online'](#)

Appendix 2 - Sample webinar flyers



WEBINARS FOR WOMEN

Giving women the chance to discuss sensitive subjects in a safe space

Weekly discussion, friendship and support on the issue of FGM

Monday 4th May

11am - 12

Meeting ID: 458 318 279
Password: 666490

OAC Facilitator, Dr Nesreen Yanni and Research Coordinator of 28 Too Many and OAC Chair, Caroline Pinder will be discussing the challenges of medicalized FGM.

For more info please email:
dat@oxfordagainstcutting.org

Oxford Against Cutting is committed to providing safe spaces in all of our work, including online. Please visit our safe spaces online page for more info: www.oxfordagainstcutting.org/webinars



WEBINARS FOR WOMEN

Giving women the chance to discuss sensitive subjects in a safe space

Weekly discussion, friendship and support on the issue of 'honour'-based abuse (HBA)

Tuesday 5th May

11am - 12

Meeting ID: 161516337
Password: 985517

In this session OAC Facilitator, Monica Majumdar, will be facilitating conversations on 'caste', groups and identity.

For more info please email:
dat@oxfordagainstcutting.org

Oxford Against Cutting is committed to providing safe spaces in all of our work, including online. Please visit our safe spaces online page for more info: www.oxfordagainstcutting.org/webinars



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