

# **Deported to be Mutilated?**

**Make Female Genital Mutilation Grounds for Asylum**

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The Irish government is currently trying to deport women and children under the threat of female genital mutilation (FGM), which frequently results in death. Asylum in Ireland can be sought on the grounds of religious or political persecution. However, the government refuse to acknowledge FGM as a political act and therefore women and children cannot apply for asylum on the basis that they have suffered or will suffer female genital mutilation if deported.

Unlike other European countries, Ireland does not have legislation to protect these women as FGM is not strictly prohibited under Irish law. This urgently needs to be addressed and Comhlamh and the well known Professor of Law Ivana Bacik presented draft legislation to the previous Minister of Health Michael Martin but this was not acted upon. The current Minister for Health Mary Harney seems to be taking the same stance on the proposed legislation as her predecessor.

In an increasingly multicultural Ireland FGM is being encountered by health professionals, anti-racism groups and women's groups from women who have suffered FGM and also from others who want to know where FGM is performed in Ireland.

The group Residents Against Racism (RAR) has, over the past few years, helped women and families who have fled to Ireland due to the threat of FGM and face deportation back to their country by the Irish state. Here are just some of the stories of the people facing deportation.

In 1999, Elizabeth Onasanwo left Nigeria with her children after watching her home being burnt down by tribal elders and family members when she refused to allow her daughters be circumcised. Elizabeth who witnessed her own sister die from FGM, did not want to see her daughters meet the same fate. The Minister for "Justice" ordered the deportation of the Onasanwo family. Elizabeth could not handle the stress and suffered a nervous breakdown. Since then her eldest daughter Christina has reapplied for asylum on behalf of the family but they are still awaiting a decision on their case.

Juliet Imiruaye, a Nigerian midwife, fled from persecution six years ago. Juliet is a survivor of FGM and was working in her community to try to prevent the practice of FGM. Since her arrival Juliet has worked with Comhlamh, anti-racism groups, and other NGO's to highlight the practice of FGM in Nigeria. In Ireland she has also helped raise awareness among Irish health professionals and Irish midwives who may not have dealt with FGM before. This is important as women and children are arriving in Ireland who have been mutilated and they may not wish to talk about their experiences and midwives may not be fully aware of the dangers that arise from FGM which can be life threatening. Juliet has recently received a deportation order courtesy of Michael McDowell. Because of Juliet's amazing work in Ireland she has a lot of support behind her and RAR has vowed to help fight the unjust decision.

Elizabeth Salako fled Nigeria four years ago with her children. Elizabeth feared for the safety of her children because Sharia law (based on strict Islamic principles) is in force in certain parts of Nigeria and would have subjected her daughter to early marriage and FGM. Since arriving the family have settled well into the community in Birr, Co. Offaly and despite having a large amount of local support Elizabeth still received a deportation order. Pressure from the local community and an intervention from a local TD resulted in the family being granted another three years to remain in Ireland on humanitarian grounds.

The government are treating women asylum seekers appallingly. Women flee from persecution for many reasons but one of the most serious is FGM. It is not only a women's issue – it is an issue of human rights. Only two women have ever been granted refugee status on grounds of FGM in Ireland and this is a disgrace. Residents Against Racism has started a campaign for women asylum seekers to gain refugee status on the grounds they have suffered or will suffer FGM if

deported. We hope to work with other groups and organisations to raise awareness and want people to get involved and support the campaign.

by Emma

### **What is FGM?**

Female Genital Mutilation is the removal or part removal of the clitoris. In Nigeria, where most asylum cases of FGM in Ireland are from, there are three main types performed. They are:

Clitoridectomy (also known as sunna) where the clitoral hood with part or all the clitoris is removed.

Excision (the most common practice) where both the clitoris and part or all the labia minora are removed.

Infibulation (the most severe form of FGM but the least common) is where the clitoris and parts or all the labia minora are removed and incisions are made on the labia majora creating a raw surface. These surfaces are sewn or pinned together leaving only a tiny pinhole opening to let out urine and menstrual blood.

### **What are the Dangers of FGM?**

The horrendous conditions of FGM often result in death; the operation in the majority of cases is performed by an untrained midwife in the most appallingly unhygienic circumstances. Blunt and unsterile objects such as razor blades, broken glass and sharp stones are used which can lead to infection and HIV/AIDS. The age of women subjected to FGM varies from a few days old up till marriage or childbirth.

### **Why is FGM practiced?**

It is believed FGM is a rite of passage into adulthood, often in the child's community a ceremony will take place to celebrate her transition into womanhood. It is believed that FGM will promote chastity and help maintain her virginity before marriage and prevent her from becoming sexually active.

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