EQUALITIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION (PROTECTION AND GUIDANCE) (SCOTLAND) BILL
SUBMISSION FROM WOMEN’S SUPPORT PROJECT

The Women’s Support Project has been involved in work to raise awareness of FGM in Scotland, and to improve service responses. This has included: development of resources for training and public education, including the FGM Aware website; trainer development sessions for those involved in delivering practitioner training; information sessions in communities potentially affected by FGM; support for individual women affected by FGM or seeking to protect their daughters from FGM.

These comments draw on our experience over the past 6 years, and have also been informed by recent meetings and discussion with service users who are survivors of FGM.

In general we support the proposed introduction of FGM Protection Orders. Since we are not legal specialists it is difficult to say whether this will be a more effective means of preventing FGM and safeguarding those at risk, compared to existing measures, but the existence of a specific protection order is generally welcomed because it highlights FGM as a specific risk to girls. This view was tempered by the following points:

- Women highlighted that if a family was determined to carry out FGM, then they may well be able to do so in spite of any new legislation. For example a girl might be removed to the home country permanently so as to avoid detection.
- Some women were of the strong opinion that the existence of a Scottish law would not deter their own family back home, should they find out that a girl has not undergone FGM. For this reason some of the women felt that their only completely safe option was not to take their daughters to the home country.
- It would be difficult for girls to speak out against their family in any case, and for some there is the possibility of family breakdown. The women questioned what support would be available for girls and young women should they have to be removed from the family home, e.g. would fostering services have suitable families to care for the girls?

We do not see a need for the following measures:

- anonymity of victims
- failure to protect a girl at risk of FGM
- duty to notify the police of FGM

We have not seen evidence of the need of specific protections relating to vaginal elongation or breast ironing, but believe that it is important that these are included in public education and practitioner training.

The main point we would like to stress, and this was strongly voiced by all who took part in discussions, is that any protective legislation will only be effective so long
*as people know about the law and how to use it*. This applies to community members, practitioners in education, health and social work, and those within the justice system.

Our Glasgow based ‘Rights & Choices’ initiative works with migrant, refugee and asylum seeking women who have experienced violence. We regularly come across women who have experienced FGM who are now aware of the current law, nor of where to access health treatment if needed. Sadly this includes women who have been in the UK for a number of years. Continuing active community engagement is vital, and this is most effective when led by women survivors and members of communities potentially at risk.

A further point which came up in discussion is the need for improved treatment for women survivors, and for survivors to be better informed about where to access health treatment. Reports from women indicate the need for ongoing training for key health professionals, such as GP’s, Sexual Health nurses and Practice Nurses. A question on FGM is included in the national maternity assessment but figures are not collated nationally so there is no means of telling whether this opportunity to engage with women is being used effectively.

One suggestion to improve access was to have a specific clinic for FGM, even if this was only occasional. Women felt that if such a clinic was available, and if it was supported by women from communities affected by FGM, then women would be much more likely to come forward for treatment.

Finally, women commented on the contradiction of having laws to protect girls, whilst at the same women who have fled their country and are claiming asylum to safeguard their daughters from FGM are often told by the Home Office that they can ‘just go back to a different part of their country’. Even when women understood that immigration is not a devolved issue, they felt that this position could undermine respect for the FGM laws.