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Burkina Faso botched FGM leaves 50 girls in hospital

Girls as young as four taken to hospital amid fears that cutters are targeting younger girls and crossing borders to avoid detection.

The Guardian (18.09.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2xjo88s> - About 50 girls, including some as young as four, are being treated in hospital in Burkina Faso after they underwent female genital mutilation.

Two women, along with some of the girls' relatives, have been arrested. Not all the girls who were cut have been traced, the minister of women's affairs, Laurence Marshall Iboudo, told the BBC.

The procedure is reported to have been carried out in Kaya, north-east of the capital, Ouagadougou. Voix de Femmes, an organisation that runs a centre on the outskirts of the capital for survivors, said it had assisted five girls, while many others were taken to local hospitals.

On Tuesday, campaigners in Somalia announced that a third girl had died in less than a week after undergoing FGM in the Puntland region. Suheyra Qorane Farah was cut along with her sister, Zamzam. Both bled profusely and fell into a coma. Zamzam's condition improved, but Suheyra's worsened. She was diagnosed with tetanus and died on 17 September.

Her death follows those of two sisters Aasiyo and Khadijo Farah Abdi Warsame, aged 10 and 11, last week in Somalia. The Somali government recently announced its intention to bring the first FGM prosecution in the country's history, following the death of a 10-year-old girl, but little progress has been made.

Hawa Aden Mohamed, executive director of the Galkayo Centre in Puntland, Somalia, which supports girls affected by FGM, said she hoped the deaths would "serve as a wake-up call for those responsible to see the need to have the law in place to protect girls from this heinous practice".

FGM has been illegal in Burkina Faso since 1996, making it one of the first African countries to outlaw the practice. According to the UN's children's agency, Unicef, three-quarters of women aged 15-49 have undergone the procedure. The vast majority of people oppose FGM, Unicef says.

Jean-Paul Murunga, programme officer for ending harmful practices for the NGO Equality Now, said cutters are targeting younger girls because they are less likely to report it. "Previously, girls were cut at older ages like 13, 14, 15 and 16, but [the age] has now decreased because a girl of 13 and above is able speak out," he said.

School programmes that educate students about the dangers of FGM are making teenagers more likely to approach teachers for help.

However, charities fear that cutters and families are increasingly crossing the border with Mali, where there is no law on FGM, and Ivory Coast, where the law is not enforced as strongly. To avoid detection, those practicing FGM are also moving away from group ceremonies to individual cutting in private, the charity 28 Too Many said.

FGM is practiced across all regions, ethnic groups and religions in Burkina Faso. It is most common in rural areas, where insecurity often prevents civil society groups from reaching communities, Murunga said.

"In urban areas, the rates are lower because the infrastructure is much better, the police are more responsive and more proactive," he added.

He said FGM is becoming less prevalent in Burkina Faso but that prosecution rates remain too low. "The government has not been adequately budgeting the committee that is mandated to [raise] awareness, educate people, arrest and prosecute people who still practice this harmful culture," he said. "That has meant that a lot of work is done by civil society organisations, which also are not very well resourced."

Between January and June 2017, 51 people, including both perpetrators and accomplices, were prosecuted for performing FGM on 49 girls.

One recent case, in which 30 girls were cut, led to the arrest of a cutter and 14 others, including family members who had assisted or failed to report the crime. The cutter was eventually sentenced to four years' imprisonment.

Murunga said he hopes the perpetrators in the case in Kaya are prosecuted and jailed: "This [will] send a strong message to the community that this practice has already been outlawed, and it is illegal and criminal as well."
