

UNITED KINGDOM: Mother of three-year-old is first person convicted of FGM in UK

Ugandan woman from east London was accused of mutilating daughter in 2017

By Hannah Summers and Rebecca Ratcliffe

The Guardian (01.02.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2SmcJQT> – The mother of a three-year-old girl has become the first person to be found guilty of female genital mutilation (FGM) in the UK in a landmark case welcomed by campaigners.

The Ugandan woman, 37, and her Ghanaian partner, 43, both from Walthamstow, east London, were accused of cutting their daughter over the 2017 summer bank holiday.

While the parents were on bail, police searched the mother's home and found evidence of witchcraft, including spells aimed at silencing professionals involved in the case. Police found spells written inside 40 frozen limes and two ox tongues with screws embedded in them with the apparent aim of keeping police, social workers and lawyers quiet.



The 40 frozen limes containing spells aimed at silencing police, social workers officers and lawyers. Photograph: Metropolitan police/PA

The defendants, who cannot be identified for legal reasons, denied FGM and an alternative charge of failing to protect a girl from risk of genital mutilation. The mother cried in the dock as she was found guilty of FGM after the Old Bailey jury deliberated for less than a day. Her partner was cleared of all charges.

FGM was made illegal in the UK more than three decades ago but prosecutors have struggled to secure a conviction.

Lynette Woodrow, of the Crown Prosecution Service, said: "We can only imagine how much pain this vulnerable young girl suffered and how terrified she was. A three-year-old has no power to resist or fight back.

"Her mother then coached her to lie to the police so she wouldn't get caught but this ultimately failed. We will not hesitate to prosecute those who commit this sickening offence."

The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) lead for FGM, Commander Ivan Balhatchet, said: "We have always been clear that prosecutions alone will not stop this abuse, however this guilty verdict sends a strong message that police will make every effort possible to pursue those committing this heinous crime."

Campaigners said they hoped the conviction would encourage other victims to report the crime.

Aneeta Prem, the founder of Freedom Charity, said: "It will give victims the confidence to come forward ... It will give police forces, social services, teachers, frontline midwives the expectation that something can finally succeed."

There have been three other trials involving FGM – two in

London and one in Bristol – all of which ended in acquittals. The crime carries a maximum prison sentence of 14 years.

The judge, Philippa Whipple, warned of a “lengthy” jail term as she remanded the woman in custody to be sentenced on 8 March. She told her: “You have been found guilty of a serious offence against your daughter.”

The two defendants were jointly accused of subjecting the girl to FGM by “deliberate cutting with a sharp instrument” at her mother’s home in the presence of her father. Medics raised the alarm when the girl was taken to Whipps Cross hospital in north London with severe bleeding and a surgeon concluded the child had been cut with a scalpel.

The defendants claimed their daughter had been reaching for a biscuit when she fell and cut herself on the edge of a kitchen cupboard. Medical experts confirmed the cause of her injuries were consistent with cutting rather than a fall.

The victim later told specially trained officers during a series of video interviews played to the court that she had been cut by a “witch”.

Leethen Bartholomew, the head of the National FGM Centre, said he hoped grassroots campaign groups would be given more support to train professionals.

“We know that FGM happens here in the UK and we didn’t need a

conviction to prove that," he said. "There is still a lack of services for survivors of FGM," he said, adding that the victim in the case must be given continual support.

Charlotte Proudman, a leading barrister who specialises in FGM, told the Guardian: "The conviction is hugely significant, securing justice for the girl but also in sending a strong message that this crime will not be tolerated."

She questioned if health workers were fulfilling their mandatory reporting duties, and highlighted a legal loophole that meant professionals only had to report cases in which children had already undergone FGM, rather than those also deemed to be at risk.

Leyla Hussein, a social activist and survivor of FGM, said she had mixed emotions about the conviction.

"We are sending out a strong message that children now come first," she said. "However, the sad thing is we could have helped that mother. That could have easily been me because 17 years ago I did not understand that FGM was wrong."

Hussein, who was born in Somalia and later emigrated to the UK, said it was not until she was 21 and her own daughter was two months old that a practice nurse raised the issue of her FGM.

"It's positive this girl got justice but as an FGM survivor I

can't help thinking the system failed her. Her mother has committed a crime and we need to be honest about that. But she could have been informed about FGM through her GP or midwife."

She explained: "My daughter was at risk, I was that mother. But a brilliant health professional did her job so I made sure my daughter wasn't cut. So I'm blaming teachers, health professionals and the whole system which has failed this child who will live with FGM for the rest of her life."

There are an estimated 137,000 women and girls living with FGM in England and Wales according to City University. The Home Office has identified women from countries including Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia and Nigeria as most at risk.

There have been 298 FGM protection orders issued since they were first introduced in 2015 to safeguard those at risk.

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UNITED KINGDOM: FGM 'increasingly performed on UK babies'

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is increasingly being performed on babies and infants in the UK, the Victoria Derbyshire programme has been told.

By Anna Collinson and Jessica Furst

BBC (04.02.2019) – <https://bbc.in/2RGpRfm> – FGM expert and barrister Dr Charlotte Proudman said it was “almost impossible to detect” as the girls were not in school or old enough to report it.

In one report, in Yorkshire, a victim was just one month old.

The National FGM Centre said it was “not surprised” that victims may be younger now.

Charity Barnardo's and the Local Government Association –

which together run the centre – said its community engagement was “key to protecting girls”.

Their comments follow the first UK conviction for FGM.

The mother of a three-year-old girl was found guilty at the Old Bailey on Friday of mutilating her daughter. Her partner was acquitted.

FGM includes the partial or total removal of the female external genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.

Laws ‘circumnavigated’

Dr Proudman said there was “a lot of anecdotal data which shows FGM is now being performed on babies.

“These girls are not at school, they are not at nursery, and so it’s very difficult for any public authority to become aware,” she added.

“By performing it at such a young age, they’re evading the law.”

In response to a Freedom of Information request, West

Yorkshire Police said a quarter of its FGM reports (17) between 2015 and 2017 involved victims aged three or under.

The National FGM Centre said there was “anecdotal evidence from some communities that FGM laws can be circumnavigated by performing the procedure on girls at a much younger age”.

“The girls are unable to report, the cut heals quicker and prosecution is much harder once evidence comes to light and the girl is older.

“There needs to be much greater recognition of this issue across different areas of the UK.”

‘Worried about being branded racist’

Experts say authorities need a more joined-up approach when dealing with FGM.

It is claimed children’s services can be unsure when to intervene. Doctors are not always reporting it to the police – and even if they do, officers do not always know what to do.

“People are concerned about cultural sensitivities, worried about being branded racist, and it’s being performed on a very private area,” Dr Proudman said, explaining why it has taken many years for the first UK conviction to arrive.

Figures seen by the Victoria Derbyshire programme show that 939 calls were made to emergency services to report FGM between 2014 and 2018.

But the Crown Prosecution Service has only received 36 referrals for FGM from the police since 2010.

One 2015 report by City, University of London estimated 137,000 women and girls in England have been victims of FGM.

Lawyer Linda Weil-Curiel, whose work has led to more than 100 FGM convictions in France, told the Victoria Derbyshire programme the UK should follow the country's tougher stance.

In France, all children undergo regular genital checks until the age of six and doctors are expected to report any cases of physical abuse.

"In [the UK] system you need the victim to come and complain, but how can you expect a child to complain against her parents?," she asked.

"It's for society to protect children, to take the initiative as soon as mutilation is documented – and the only way that happens is to have a medical examination.

“There might be people horrified at the thought of their child undergoing a check. I don’t understand that – we are talking about the health of children and babies,” she added.

But the National FGM Centre said the key way to prevent instances of the abuse was to change “the views of affected communities” and to form “a huge cultural shift in groups where FGM is commonly practised”.

It said it was helping to train professionals to be “aware of how to broach the topic, spot the signs and respond appropriately when there is a concern”.

Home Secretary Sajid Javid said: “We will not tolerate FGM and not rest until perpetrators of this horrific crime are brought to justice.

He said the UK’s first conviction for FGM came after “the government introduced tougher rules to criminalise this medieval practice.”

Hibo’s story

Hibo Wadere was six when she was forced to undergo FGM.

Some may find her words distressing.

Ms Wadere said she was told a special party was being thrown for her.

She described how that morning she was “held down, your legs yanked apart and your genitals being ripped apart.

“You saw the blood, you saw the cutter with blood on her hands,” she added.

“She just kept on cutting as if it was normal for her to hear the screams.

“It was the cruellest thing for a child to experience.

“It stays with you for life. It’s a life sentence.”

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WORLD: Recorded increase in human trafficking, women and girls targeted

By Tharanga Yakupitiyage

IPS (09.01.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2D1vpNb> – Human trafficking is on the rise and it is more “horrific” than ever, a United Nations agency found.

In a new report examining patterns in human trafficking, the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) found that the global trend has increased steadily since 2010 around the world.

“Human trafficking has taken on horrific dimensions as armed groups and terrorists use it to spread fear and gain victims to offer as incentives to recruit new fighters,” said UNODC’s Executive Director Yury Fedotov.

Asia and the Americas saw the largest increase in identified victims but the report notes that this may also reflect an improved capacity to identify and report data on trafficking.

Women and girls are especially vulnerable, making up 70 percent of detected victims worldwide. While they are mainly adult women, girls are increasingly targeted by traffickers.

According to the 2018 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, girls account for 23 percent of all trafficking victims, up from 21 percent in 2014 and 10 percent in 2004.

UNODC also highlighted that conflict has increased the vulnerability of such populations to trafficking as armed groups were found to use the practice to finance activities or increase troops.

Activist and U.N. Goodwill Ambassador Nadia Murad was among thousands of Yazidi women and girls who was abducted from her village and sold into sexual slavery by the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq, a tactic used in order to boost recruitment and reward soldiers.

Murad recently received the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize, dedicating it to survivors of sexual violence and genocide.

“Survivors deserve a safe and secure pathway home or safe passage elsewhere. We must support efforts to focus on humanity, and overcome political and cultural divisions. We must not only imagine a better future for women, children and persecuted minorities, we must work consistently to make it happen – prioritising humanity, not war,” she said.

“The fact remains that the only prize in the world that can restore our dignity is justice and the prosecution of criminals,” Murad added.

Sexual exploitation continues to be the main purpose for trafficking, account for almost 60 percent, while forced labor accounts for approximately 34 percent of all identified cases.

Three-quarters of all female victims are trafficked for sexual exploitation globally.

The report also found for the first time that the majority of trafficked victims are trafficked within their own countries of citizenship.

The share of identified domestic victims has more than doubled from 27 percent in 2010 to 58 percent in 2016.

This may be due to improved border controls at borders preventing cross-border trafficking as well as a greater awareness of the different forms of trafficking, the report notes.

However, convictions have only recently started to grow and in many countries, conviction rates still remain worryingly low.

In Europe, conviction rates have dropped from 988 traffickers convicted in 2011 to 742 people in 2016.

During that same time period, the number of detected victims increased from 4,248 to 4,429.

There also continue to be gaps in knowledge and information, particularly in certain parts of Africa, Middle East, and East Asia which still lack sufficient capacity to record and share data on human trafficking.

“This report shows that we need to step up technical assistance and strengthen cooperation, to support all countries to protect victims and bring criminals to justice, and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals,” Fedotov said at the report’s launch.

Adopted in 2015, the landmark SDGs include ambitious targets including the SDG target 16.2 which calls on member states to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence and torture against children.

SDG indicator 16.2.2 asks member states to measure the number of victims of human trafficking per 100,000 population and disaggregated by sex, age, and form of exploitation, reflecting the importance of improving data recording, collection, and dissemination.

“The international community needs to...stop human trafficking

in conflict situations and in all our societies where this terrible crime continues to operate in the shadows," Fedotov said.

"I urge the international community to heed Nadia [Murad]'s call for justice," he added.

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IRAQ: Slaying of Instagram star shocks Iraq

By Sinan Salaheddin

ABC News (03.10.2018) – <https://abcn.ws/2DTa8b8> – She was a 22-year-old former beauty queen, fashion model and social media star, whose daring outfits revealed tattoos on her arms and shoulder.

Tara Fares won fame and 2.8 million Instagram followers in conservative, Muslim-majority Iraq with outspoken opinions on personal freedom, such as: “I’m not doing anything in the dark like many others; everything I do is in the broad daylight.”

It was also the way she died.

Last week, she was shot and killed at the wheel of her white Porsche on a busy Baghdad street during the day, apparently by a man who leaned in briefly and opened fire before speeding away on a motorcycle with an accomplice.

The killing, caught on security camera video, followed the slaying of a female activist in the southern city of Basra and the mysterious deaths of two well-known beauty experts.

The violence has shocked Iraq, raising fears of a return to the kind of attacks on prominent figures that plagued the country at the height of its sectarian strife.

Iraq is still recovering from its bloody fight against Islamic State militants. The country has been without a government since national elections in May, and riots have repeatedly broken out in the south over the authorities’ failure to

provide basic services.

“These harrowing crimes are worrying us,” said Iraqi human rights activist Hana Adwar. “There are groups that want to terrify society through the killing of popular women and activists ... and to tell other women to abandon their work and stay at home.”

It is not clear whether the deaths of the women are connected, and reports that they knew each other could not be confirmed.

Fares, with an Iraqi father and a Lebanese mother, first became famous in 2015 when she won an unofficial Baghdad beauty pageant organized by a social club. She has become a social media darling, with bold posts and photos of herself posing in elaborate makeup, tight jeans and blouses that showed off her tattoos.

A YouTube channel drew more than 120,000 followers in addition to those on Instagram, where she shared makeup tips.

She gave details of a brief marriage at 16 to an abusive husband who posted intimate photos of her on social media and took away their now 3-year-old son. Fares said the experience taught her “strength ... and how not to let anyone control me in anything.”

Fares also spoke out occasionally against religious, tribal and political leaders.

While many young Iraqis shared her videos and pictures, others criticized her lifestyle as racy and un-Islamic.

She lived in Iraq's self-ruled Kurdish region with her family, visiting Baghdad from time to time. In a TV interview this year, she said her family had converted to Islam in 2002.

Hours after she was gunned down on Sept. 27, a video on social media showed her body being carried away by a group of young people, with her face and white shirt stained with blood. She was buried in the Shiite holy city of Najaf, her grave decorated with a black-and-white photo of her, along with red plastic flowers.

In August, Dr. Rafeef al-Yassiri, a plastic surgeon labeled "Iraq's Barbie," died under mysterious circumstances. Authorities initially called it a drug overdose but have not offered an update in over a month, leading to rumors she might have been poisoned.

Al-Yassiri, a Shiite Muslim with a prominent social media presence, ran the Barbie medical center, which offered cosmetic surgery as well as treatment for war victims and those with birth defects.

She posted photos of herself in full makeup and fashionable clothes, promoting her latest projects to more than 1 million Instagram followers. She also worked with local and religious

charities.

A week after her death, Rasha al-Hassan, the owner of a well-known beauty center in Baghdad, was found dead in her home. Authorities initially said she suffered a heart attack.

On Sept. 25, a gunman killed Soad al-Ali, a prominent activist in the southern city of Basra. Al-Ali had organized protests demanding better services and jobs and decried the growing influence of Iran-backed Shiite militias in the area. Police said the killing was “purely personal” and had nothing to do with the protests.

Last weekend, another former beauty queen, Shaimaa Qassim, posted a video on Instagram in which she tearfully said she had received threats through social media.

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has ordered an investigation into what he called “well-planned kidnappings and killings.” He said organized groups are “carrying out a plan to destabilize the security situation under the pretext of fighting perversion.”

Security agencies have not yet commented on the investigation into Fares’ death and no group has claimed responsibility.

Iraq once boasted a liberal society and progressive laws for women and the family, going back to the 1950s. Those gains were eroded after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, which toppled

Saddam Hussein and led to the emergence of powerful religious parties and a rise in extremism.

Posters on some streets, particularly near shrines, exhort women to cover their hair and wear an abaya – a long, black cloak that covers the body from shoulders to feet.

“After the killing of Tara Fares, I feel speechless,” columnist Mohammed Ghazi al-Akhras wrote on his Facebook page. “We’ve reached the moment of total anarchy. They will kill everyone they don’t like. ... The state of death is taking shape.”

In one of her videos, Fares had chastised a Shiite cleric who she said had sought a temporary marriage with her, a tradition in Shiite communities that critics compare to prostitution.

“I’m not afraid of the one who denies the existence of God, but I’m really afraid of the one who kills and chops off heads to prove the existence of God,” she wrote on Instagram in July.

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WORLD: Family planning is key to a healthy society

HRWF (26.09.2017) – Today is World Contraception Day which highlights the right to family planning and the benefits it brings to society. As part of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, family planning is important because it provides women with the means to decide if, when, and how many children they will have. In addition, unplanned pregnancies and maternal deaths are prevented, the rate of abortion decreases, the risk of STDs (including HIV/AIDS) for both men and women is lowered, teen pregnancy diminishes, girls and women are more likely to receive an education, and more women join the workforce.

“Family planning is central to gender equality and women’s empowerment, and it is a key factor in reducing poverty,” says the United Nations Population Fund.

You can read more about the work that UNFPA is doing here.

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