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London mum gets 11 years in jail after first-ever FGM conviction

The jury heard she had sought help from a prophet to cleanse her daughter.

By Emma Batha

Global Citizen (08.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2WdEWrd> - The first person in Britain to be convicted of female genital mutilation was sentenced to 11 years on Friday for cutting her three-year-old daughter.

"Let's be clear: FGM is a form of child abuse," Justice Philippa Whipple told the Ugandan mother-of-two. "It is a barbaric practice and a serious crime."

The conviction last month came more than 30 years after the practice was outlawed.

Police and anti-FGM campaigners have said it will send a strong message that FGM will be prosecuted.

The maximum sentence for FGM is 14 years.

The judge told the woman, who cannot be named for legal reasons, there were "particularly sickening features" of the case, including that the cutting was done at the girl's home, where she should have felt safe.

"As (her) mother you betrayed her trust in you as her protector," the judge said, adding that the psychological impact could become a "significant and life-long burden".

Commenting on the sentence, Britain's interior minister Sajid Javid tweeted: "A welcome reminder, on #InternationalWomansDay, that we will never tolerate this barbaric medieval practice."

London's Central Criminal Court heard how police launched an investigation after the girl's parents rushed her to hospital on Aug. 28, 2017, following severe bleeding and doctors found three cuts to her genitalia.

The mother, 37, said her daughter had hurt herself falling from a kitchen worktop at their east London flat.

But the girl told police she had been held down and cut by a "witch".

Four doctors, including leading FGM experts, testified that the cuts had been made with a sharp implement and could not be explained by a fall.

Witchcraft

The jury heard how the mother turned to witchcraft to try to silence investigators and the director of public prosecutions.

Police found cows' tongues with nails embedded in them in her freezer and limes containing slips of paper bearing the names of people involved in the case and messages such as "I freeze your mouth".

The former care worker said she did not come from an ethnic group that practised FGM, and no motive was given in court.

However, the jury heard she had sought help from a "prophet" to "cleanse" her daughter, via an online contact in Nigeria.

The woman was also sentenced to two years to run consecutively after she admitted distributing pornographic videos, one involving children.

The girl's Ghanaian father was acquitted of FGM, but sentenced to 11 months for possession of pornography.

Police and prosecutors have faced mounting pressure to secure a conviction for FGM, which was outlawed in 1985. Two previous trials ended in acquittals.

The Crown Prosecution Service's Lynette Woodrow said outside court the sentence underlined that FGM was "an extremely serious form of child abuse".

She expressed hope the conviction would encourage others who have had FGM, or have suspicions about FGM offences, to come forward.

An estimated 137,000 women and girls in England and Wales have undergone FGM, which affects diaspora communities from many countries including Somalia, Sierra Leone, Eritrea and Sudan.

The internationally condemned practice typically involves the partial or total removal of the external genitalia. Campaigners say the ritual - often justified for cultural or religious reasons - is underpinned by the desire to control female sexuality.

World leaders have pledged to end FGM, which affects at least 200 million girls and women, according to U.N. data.

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."

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.

Mother guilty of genital mutilation of daughter

A woman who mutilated her three-year-old daughter has become the first person in the UK to be found guilty of female genital mutilation (FGM).

BBC (01.02.2019) - <https://bbc.in/2GdZMSK> - The 37-year-old mother from east London wept in the dock as she was convicted after a trial at the Old Bailey.

Spells and curses intended to deter police and social workers from investigating were found at the Ugandan woman's home, the trial heard.

Her 43-year-old partner was acquitted by the jury.

Prosecutors said the mother "coached" her daughter "to lie to the police so she wouldn't get caught".

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.

Mrs Justice Whipple warned of a "lengthy" jail term as she remanded the woman into custody to be sentenced on 8 March.

FGM - intentionally altering or injuring the female external genitalia for non-medical reasons - carries a sentence of up to 14 years in jail.

During the trial, the woman claimed her daughter, then aged three, "fell on metal and it's ripped her private parts" after she had climbed to get a biscuit in August 2017.

Medics alerted police to the girl's injuries after they treated her at Whipps Cross Hospital, in Leytonstone.

She "lost a significant amount of blood as a result of the injuries they had delivered and inflicted on her", jurors were told.

'Sickening offence'

While the parents were on bail, police searched the mother's home and said they found evidence of "witchcraft".

Prosecutor Caroline Carberry QC said two cow tongues were "bound in wire with nails and a small blunt knife" embedded in them.

Forty limes and other fruit were found with pieces of paper with names written on them stuffed inside, including those of police officers and a social worker involved in the investigation.

"These people were to 'shut up' and 'freeze their mouths'," Ms Carberry said.

"There was a jar with a picture of a social worker in pepper found hidden behind the toilet in the bathroom," she added.

It is only the fourth FGM prosecution brought to court in the UK. The previous cases led to acquittals.

FGM campaigner Aneeta Prem, from Freedom Charity, said convictions were hard to secure because cuttings were "hidden in secrecy".

"People are scared to come forward, professionals are scared to come forward to report this," she told the BBC.

"The fact that we have a conviction today is a really historic moment."

Home Secretary Sajid Javid said FGM was a "medieval practice".

"We will not tolerate FGM and not rest until perpetrators of this horrific crime are brought to justice," he added.

Lynette Woodrow, from the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), said the "sickening" offence had been committed against a victim with "no power to resist or fight back".

"We can only imagine how much pain this vulnerable young girl suffered and how terrified she was," she said.

"Her mother then coached her to lie to the police so she wouldn't get caught, but this ultimately failed."

Ms Woodrow said FGM victims were often affected physically and emotionally for "their entire life".

The mother was born in Uganda but has lived in the UK for a number of years. FGM is banned in both countries, the CPS said.

Mayor of London Sadiq Khan said the conviction sent "a clear message to those who practise this barbaric act".

"Every woman and girl should be safe and feel safe wherever they are in London, and we will continue our fight to end FGM with every power we have," he added.

UK gives 'landmark' £200m to improve contraceptive access in Africa and Asia

Funding comes as figures show international efforts to expand family planning services by 2020 are falling far short of targets

By Liz Ford

The Guardian (13.11.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2B4BV4P> - The UK government has launched a £200m programme to increase the availability of contraceptives in 27 countries across Africa and Asia, in what has been described as a "landmark" investment.

The women's integrated sexual health (Wish) programme from the Department for International Development will expand services to young and poorer women, and aims to support an estimated six million couples a year. The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) and Marie Stopes International are to implement the programme.

The announcement comes as figures published this week show that international efforts to expand family planning services to millions more women and girls in some of the world's poorest countries by 2020 will fall short.

Simon Cooke, chief executive of Marie Stopes International, said through the DfID funding "we and our partners will be able to bring quality sexual and reproductive health services to millions of women in some of the world's poorest and most marginalised communities. For many, it will be their first chance to access any kind of contraception, empowering them to stay in education, forge a career, stay healthy and pursue their hopes and dreams for the future.

"With this landmark investment in women and girls, the UK government is creating the right conditions to drive multiple other areas of development."

IPPF's director general, Dr Alvaro Bermejo, said the programme would transform lives. "This is a significant investment and a deep commitment to putting women at the heart of healthcare. Women and girls – of all ages, places, income and education – must have access to high quality, voluntary family planning care and information."

The announcement came on Tuesday at the fifth international conference on family planning, held in Rwanda. More than 3,700 delegates from 110 countries are meeting in Kigali to discuss ways to expand services to the estimated 214 million women and girls in poorer nations who want to avoid pregnancy but cannot access modern contraceptives.

Global efforts to speed up and increase access to services have been galvanised in recent years, specifically since the launch of the Family Planning 2020 (FP2020) global partnership six years ago. But stigma, gender inequalities and lack of funds continue to be roadblocks.

According to FP2020, an estimated 317 million women and girls in the world's poorest countries are now using a modern form of contraception, 46 million more than in 2012.

However, in its report published this week, it admitted the figure was way short of its target to reach an extra 120 million women in 69 target countries by 2020.

"Looking at projected trends, the hill is simply too steep to climb in the two short years remaining in this initiative."

While donor funding has increased slightly this year – from \$1.2bn in 2016 to \$1.27bn – it is still below the 2014 figures of \$1.43bn. According to the report, Donald Trump's reintroduction of an expanded Mexico City policy (known as the "global gag rule"), which blocks US funding to organisations whose work touches on abortion, is having an impact on funding, as is his defunding of the UN Population Fund, which the report says will "imperil" a number of programmes.

A central theme of this year's conference is increasing services to young people and about 600 young delegates are attending.

Figures published by the Guttmacher Institute this week show that an estimated 36 million 15- to 19-year-old girls and women in developing countries are married or sexually active, but about 20 million are not using modern contraceptives.

It added that about half of the 9.6 million pregnancies among this age group are unplanned, and complications in pregnancy and childbirth are now this cohort's biggest killer.

Priscilla Nabatanzi, a youth project office for Reproductive Health Uganda, said it was important that young people were listened to, which means including them in the design and implementation of programmes.

"Adults think they know what young people want because they were young once. But each one of us has a unique story. People think we are confused and don't know what we want. But we do know what we want," she said.

UK and US border officials join forces in bid to tackle female genital mutilation

Information from airport interviews to be shared as part of Anglo-US drive to protect potential victims

By Rebecca Ratcliffe

The Guardian (07.09.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2It99Ng> - British police and border security will share intelligence on female genital mutilation with US counterparts as part of a drive to increase prosecutions and prevent abuse.

Information on flight paths and investigations will be shared between the UK authorities and US agencies, including the FBI and Department of Homeland Security.

"We do a lot of work with the US anyway in terms of serious and organised crime – it's one of the best relationships we have. If they [US agencies] have an investigation, intelligence, or tactics that they've used, we'll be able to share that," Ivan Balhatchet, National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) lead for FGM.

There are elements of organised crime involved in FGM, Balhatchet said, but under-reporting and a lack of intelligence are major barriers for security services.

"There are cutters, who are being paid," he said. "People are being paid to commit child abuse. In any other walk of life you would call that organised crime. It's not all like that – there's [also] inter-familial [abuse]."

In May, campaigners welcomed news of two forced marriage convictions in one week. But while FGM has been illegal in the UK for more than three decades, there has not yet been a successful prosecution.

Between January and March this year, there were 1,030 newly recorded cases of FGM in England, according to NHS figures. Figures from the NPCC show that FGM protection orders, which safeguard actual or potential victims under civil law, were granted 220 times between 2015, when they were introduced, to the end of March 2018.

A pilot project investigating how to improve the effectiveness of these orders, which until recently were not collated centrally, has been launched by the Ministry of Justice and the NPCC.

FGM is believed to be taking place both abroad and in the UK, with Border Force staff also tracking suspicious packages. "Sometimes you'll see beads used for ceremonies, razor blades, or different liquids, sometimes you might see sanitary towels," said Amanda Read, national operational lead for safeguarding at the Border Force, who said staff routinely look for indicators of FGM.

To mark the agreement with US agencies, officers held intelligence-gathering operations at airports across the UK, as well as JFK Airport in New York.

Teams from Operation Limelight, which aims to raise awareness at airports and is carried out by border officials, police and charities, targeted inbound flights from countries where FGM and forced marriage are prevalent.

Staff look for anything unusual – a person's demeanour, if they are uncomfortable walking, or if someone else is holding their passport.

During an operation at Heathrow on Thursday, specialist teams identified three people who might be at risk. Their names, addresses and school details will be forwarded to local agencies such as social services. A six-year-old girl's details were taken for referral after staff found that she couldn't or wouldn't speak to them.

Polly Harrar, founder of the Sharan Project, which supports survivors of forced marriages and "honour crimes", said that while teams will focus on particular flights, they approach all travellers so that no community feels they are being singled out.

Speaking from Heathrow, where she was assisting Operation Limelight, she said there should be a far greater focus on prevention. "Part of that is education, part of it is sustainable working within community, so that it's community-led, not dictated," she added.

One mother, Afuwa, who arrived in the UK with her family following a holiday in Uganda, said she welcomed efforts by agencies to raise awareness. She said she was aware of communities practising FGM in northern Uganda. "That's their culture," she said, although she added that it is not something her family believes in.

Dr Leyla Hussein, a trained psychotherapist and founder of the Dahlia project, a counselling service for FGM survivors, said survivors needed existing support was sporadic and needed to be greatly improved.

"We still don't have safe houses that girls can go to. They usually end up in hospital by themselves, extremely isolated, and they end up going back to their families anyway," said Hussein.

"The moment you go against parents you have gone against all your wider family. The battle will just get bigger. We need to ensure they have care."

UK schoolgirls pressured into FGM, campaigner says

British schoolgirls have been pressured by their fellow students into having female genital mutilation, a campaigner against the practice has said.

BBC (07.09.2018) - <https://bbc.in/2wPHZfd> - Leyla Hussein said girls are vulnerable as some see it as a cultural practice despite it being a crime in the UK.

Her warning came as British and US agencies signed an agreement to step up co-operation in tackling FGM.

A police commander said intelligence has to date been "woeful" and the lack of a UK conviction was unacceptable.

Commander Ivan Balhatchet from the National Police Chiefs' Council is appealing to the public, support groups and those who work with children to pass information to police.

The proclamation between law enforcement agencies on both sides of the Atlantic - including the NPCC, the Metropolitan Police, Border Force, the FBI, and the US Department of Homeland Security - pledges to better share intelligence and best practice on identifying victims and prosecuting perpetrators.

It is hoped the new agreement will improve existing operations at airports including London Heathrow and JFK in New York and help spot victims as they are taken to parts of the world to be cut, such as North Africa and the Middle East.

'The pressure is still there'

Dr Hussein, a psychotherapist who had FGM in Somalia when she was aged seven, is backing the UK and US efforts.

She said: "The pressure is still there... some of my clients are 19-year-old girls now who were children or were born in this [country] and they will say to you they were pressured in a playground in a school in London to go and have it done."

Dr Hussein, who moved to the UK aged 12 but said she did not know FGM was wrong until years later, said "education plays a big part, in terms of prevention, because I said if I had some information in my school I might have said something".

She founded the north London-based Dahlia Project to raise awareness and support FGM victims.

NHS figures in England recorded between April 2015 and March 2018 show more than 16,000 women and girls have undergone FGM at some point in their lives.

The 6,195 cases recorded between April 2017 and March this year involved 150 people who were born in the UK and 1,715 born in eastern Africa.

FGM has been illegal in the UK since 1985 and further legislation in 2003 and 2005 made it an offence to arrange FGM outside the country for British citizens or permanent residents. But there is yet to be a successful prosecution.

The government has put increasing efforts into tackling FGM in recent years and it is compulsory for family doctors, hospitals and mental health trusts to report any new cases in their patients.

Government accused of inaction as number of British girls forced into marriages abroad has soared by a third since 2015

By Maya Oppenheim

The Independent (21.08.2018) - <https://ind.pn/2N199G0> - The number of girls being forced into marriage ahead of the summer holiday period has increased by more than a

third in recent years, according to a leading charity which has accused the government of an abject failure to get to grips with the problem.

Karma Nirvana condemned the Home Office for shelving a campaign raising awareness of the practice, which sees girls taken abroad to be married off to strangers, in the "critical" run-up to the summer break – the time of the year when the problem is at its peak.

Speaking exclusively to The Independent, the national charity – which provides training to the police, NHS and social services – revealed it learned of 150 new cases of forced marriage from May to July, a rise of more than a third on the figure seen in the same period in 2015, when it received 99 new cases.

The charity also found cases of forced marriage soared by 40 per cent at the start of the school holidays this year, and revealed it was receiving reports of cases at a rate of two a day in July, more than double the average of 25 seen in the first four months of the year, with 44 cases reported in May and June.

And the figures do not reflect the full scale of the problem, as forced marriage continues to be starkly underreported – with the Home Office describing it as a "hidden crime".

Jasvinder Sanghera, CBE, founder and chief executive of the charity, warned thousands of girls would not be returning to school in September, having had their educations cut off and – in many cases – been left trapped in a cycle of poverty after falling victim to the offence.

Ms Sanghera, who set up the charity in 2008 after escaping a forced marriage by running away from home aged 16, demanded that sex within such unions be treated as rape. She said the Home Office had planned an awareness campaign ahead of the summer holidays but decided to drop it at the last minute, postponing it until later in the year, a strategy she said was "missing the point".

She said the pre-summer holidays campaign had been running for the past few years and would have seen the Forced Marriage Unit work with police and local authorities to raise awareness of the problem. She explained the campaign would have used social media and disseminated posters, literature and information about helplines with the objective of increasing the number of victims coming forward and raising public understanding.

"It was wholly irresponsible of the government to drop a campaign devoted to awareness, pre-summer holidays. This is the most critical time of year," she told The Independent.

"There will be thousands of children across Britain that are now being prepared for engagements and forced marriages in Britain and [who] will be taken out of this country over the summer break. The family use the opportunity of this long holiday to marry them off."

Young girls are often told they are going back to their country of origin to visit family, and remain unaware of what is happening until they arrive.

Forced marriage: Mother jailed for four-and-a-half years

A mother who forced her daughter to marry a relative almost twice her age has been sentenced to four-and-a-half years in prison.

BBC (23.05.2018) <https://bbc.in/2LrdL7E> - The woman from Birmingham, who is in her 40s, duped the then 17-year-old into going to Pakistan in September 2016 to wed the man.

The girl became pregnant by him when she was 13 and he was 29, which her mother saw as a "marriage contract".

The case is the first successful prosecution of its type.

Sentencing the mother at Birmingham Crown Court, Judge Patrick Thomas QC said the victim had been "sold for her passport".

Neither the mother nor daughter can be identified for legal reasons.

Jurors had heard the daughter, now aged 19, was fooled into travelling to Pakistan on the promise of getting an iPhone for her 18th birthday.

'Cruelly deceived'

When the plan to marry her to the relative 16 years her senior was revealed, the girl protested. In response her mother threatened to burn her passport and assaulted her.

"It takes no imagination to understand the terror she must have felt", the judge said.

"You had cruelly deceived her. She was frightened, alone, held against her will, being forced into a marriage she dreaded.

"You must have known that was her state of mind. Yet for your own purposes, you drove the marriage through."

Prosecutor Deborah Gould read a victim statement to the court in which the girl said she was proud of herself for coming forward and wanted other young women who found themselves in similar situations to ask for help.

The court heard how the wedding was the defendant's idea. The victim's father, who is divorced from her mother, eventually found out and told social services and police.

The mother was found guilty on Tuesday of two counts of forced marriage and a count of perjury after she lied to the High Court about the incident.

The man the victim went on to marry, took her virginity while she was 13 when the "marriage contract" was made.

She was then forced to have an abortion upon her return to the UK.

The court was told this amounted to "significant trauma" which "fundamentally affected" her.

The new offence of forced marriage came into effect in June 2014, but prosecutions have been rare.

In June 2015, a man was jailed at Merthyr Crown Court for offences including forcing a woman into marrying him, while there is at least one other live case in the courts.

More than 1,000 cases of forced marriage in UK last year, report says

Official unit says issue is hidden crime and figures may not reflect full scale of abuse

By Nadia Khomami

The Guardian (10.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2rzmyeQ> - Nearly 1,200 possible forced marriage cases were flagged up to a specialist service last year, figures show.

Of the 1,196 reports handled by the government's Forced Marriage Unit (FMU), more than a quarter involved victims below the age of 18, while one in five related to male victims.

The total number of cases registered in 2017 was down by 19% on the previous year, but officials said the fall did not represent a decrease in prevalence of forced marriage in the UK.

Forcing someone to marry against their will is a criminal offence that carries a maximum sentence of seven years. A forced marriage is defined as one in which one or both spouses do not consent to the union, and violence, threats or any other form of coercion are involved.

Established in 2005, the FMU is jointly run by the Home Office and the Foreign Office. Since 2012, the facility has provided support in 1,200 to 1,400 cases a year.

But a report published by the two departments on Thursday stressed that the statistics only represented cases reported to the unit, adding: "Forced marriage is a hidden crime, and these figures may not reflect the full scale of the abuse."

The figures show 355 cases involved victims below 18 years of age, including 186 relating to victims aged 15 or younger.

While the majority (78%) of reports logged in 2017 related to female victims, 256, or 21%, involved male victims. "This demonstrates that men can also be forced into marriage," the report said.

It emphasised that forced marriage is not a problem specific to one country or culture, noting that the unit has handled cases relating to more than 90 nations across Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe and North America.

In 2017, the FMU dealt with cases relating to 65 "focus" countries. This could be the country where the forced marriage is due to take place, or the country that the spouse is currently residing in, or both.

The four countries with the highest number of cases last year were Pakistan (439 cases), Bangladesh (129), Somalia (91) and India (82).

In 120 instances there was no overseas element, with the potential or actual forced marriage taking place entirely within the UK.

A spokesperson for the children's charity NSPCC said the figures echoed reports to Childline, "with children as young as 13 contacting us worried about being forced into marriage yet fearing they will be cut out of their community if they refuse".

The charity said forced marriage was a form of child abuse and the secretive nature of it made it difficult to grasp the true scale of the problem.

"The worry and fears children face in this situation can also lead them to self harm, to run away from home putting them at risk of further abuse, or even to contemplate taking their own lives," the spokesperson said.

Girls as young as 13 have contacted Childline about being forced into marriage, with 205 counselling sessions on the issue in 2016-17, a 12% increase from 2015-16. There were 6,099 visits to the Childline forced marriage page in the same year.

"We would urge anyone worried about a child to speak up before it is too late, so that we can get help and prevent them being bound into something they would never ask for," the spokesperson said.

FGM: More than 5,000 newly-recorded cases in England

BBC (04.07.2017) - <http://bbc.in/2sIqsAK> - The NHS in England recorded 5,391 new cases of female genital mutilation (FGM) in the past year, data reveals.

Almost half involved women and girls living in London, NHS Digital found.

A third were women and girls born in Somalia, while 112 cases were UK-born nationals.

The practice is illegal in the UK and it is compulsory for family doctors, hospitals and mental health trusts to report any new cases in their patients.

FGM - intentionally altering or injuring the female external genitalia for non-medical reasons - carries a sentence of up to 14 years in jail.

It is the second time that NHS Digital has released annual FGM figures for England.

Most of the cases were spotted by midwives and doctors working in maternity and obstetric units.

The majority had originally had FGM done to them abroad and as a young child.

Funding concerns

The NSPCC says more should be done to end the practice: "FGM is child abuse. Despite being illegal for over 30 years, too many people are still being subjected to it and it is right that health services have started to properly record evidence of this horrendous practice.

"It takes courage to report concerns as many feel ashamed or worry they will betray friends and family. But we need to end the silence that surrounds FGM to better protect children."

The National FGM Centre, which is run by the children's charity Barnardo's and the Local Government Association (LGA), tries to prevent the practice, but its director Michelle Lee-Izu is warning it could be at risk of closure if government funding is withdrawn.

Cllr Simon Blackburn, from the LGA, said the government "must act now" to secure the National FGM Centre's "long-term future" by providing guaranteed funding.

He said: "Social work provision to girls and families affected by FGM has been quickly and significantly improved through the intervention of Centre social workers, embedded in council safeguarding teams, and hundreds of referrals have been received in areas that previously only recorded a handful of cases each year.

Mr Blackburn added that the government needed to back its commitment to ending FGM in the UK "with the long-term funding required to make that vision a reality".

Grassroots reporting

Anyone concerned about someone who has suffered, or is at risk of FGM, can contact the NSPCC FGM Helpline anonymously on 0800 028 3550 or visit nspcc.org.uk.

Wendy Preston, from the Royal College of Nursing, said: "Mandatory reporting and compulsory sex-and-relationships education are important weapons in the fight against FGM, and school nurses play a vital role in both educating children and young women, and spotting those who may be at risk.

"The government must act to attract and retain school nurses, to help address the problem at grassroots level, and maintain momentum in the fight to eradicate FGM."

A government spokesman said the start-up money for the centre came from the £200m Children's Social Care Innovation Programme, and was designed to lead to self-sustaining work, not ongoing core funding.

But he added: "Protecting women and girls from violence and supporting victims is a key priority for this government and a personal priority for the Minister for Women and Equalities, Justine Greening."

MP Nusrat Ghani bids to ban 'honour killing' term

An MP is attempting to ban authorities from describing murders as "honour killings".

BBC (31.01.2017) - <http://bbc.in/2kUbnIA> - Conservative Nusrat Ghani said the term was used by abusers as a "pathetic self-justification" for their violence.

She proposed a bill in the House of Commons that would ban the use of the description in official publications.

The move would make it clear that "cultural and religious sensitivities are not a barrier to justice", the MP for Wealden in East Sussex said.

There is no specific offence of "honour-based" violence.

The Crown Prosecution Service describes it as a "collection of practices, which are used to control behaviour within families or other social groups to protect perceived cultural and religious beliefs and/or honour".

'Clear message'

Ms Ghani said police had been put off investigating such crimes because they fear being branded "racist".

"Language matters," she told the Commons.

"The use of the term 'honour' to describe a violent criminal act - sometimes committed against a man, but more often against a woman - can be explained only as a means of self-justification for the perpetrator.

"It diminishes the victim and provides a convenient excuse for what in our society we should accurately and simply call murder, rape, abuse or enslavement.

"I want us in this House to send a clear message that the excuses end here."

Her Crime (Aggravated Murder of and Violence against Women) Bill would also require the UK authorities to fund assistance for British women attacked in other countries and for the bodies of those murdered to be repatriated.

UK nationals guilty of such offences towards other UK nationals overseas would also face prosecution in British courts, her bill states.

MPs agreed the bill should be able to proceed, although Conservative MP Philip Davies - who said it was too focused on women and did not mention honour crime towards men - objected.

Mr Davies said he would continue to oppose legislation "unjustifiably aimed at dealing with just one gender", adding: "Yes, of course women are far more likely to be the victims of honour-based crimes than men, but they are not exclusively the victims of these crimes.

"As far as I am concerned, all these things are just as bad as each other."

The bill will be heard again on 24 March, although it is unlikely to become law without the government's support.

Why the UK government is still failing women and girls

Niume.com (07.11.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2fVATuu> - Combatting violence and domestic violence against women and girls is a big issue, not just in the UK, but internationally. In England and Wales, 2 women a week are killed by a current or former partner. That's 1 woman every 3 days.

Internationally, global figures currently indicate that 1 in 3 women worldwide have experienced sexual or physical violence by a partner or non-partner in their lifetime.

When we look at these worrying statistics, and see the state of current issues within the world, through news stories about the kidnapping of hundreds of schoolgirls, or the attitudes one presidential hopeful has towards his female opponent, we begin to truly understand the plight of women and what women still suffer with in such modern times.

So, what are the UK government doing about gender based violence?

In 2011 The Istanbul Convention (or The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence) was opened for signature in Istanbul. The convention aims at preventing violence against women and girls, protecting the victims of violence, and prosecuting the perpetrators. It has currently been signed by 42 countries, and ratified by 22. Signing the Istanbul convention was a sign

that the UK was stepping up the measures it takes to prevent gender based violence, it was a symbol of great things to come for women, and for the survivors of domestic abuse.

However, the UK has since failed to ratify the document, meaning it is not legally bound to its provisions. Provisions included in the convention include education to boys and girls about equality and non-violent resolution in interpersonal relationships, the criminalisation of things such as honour violence and Female genital mutilation, ensuring professional services are provided for victims of domestic violence and providing safe accommodation for victims subjected to an act of violence, especially for women victims of violence and their children.

The UK government to their credit, has already criminalised most of the offences the convention outlines, forced marriages being the last offence on the list to be criminalised, with the government banning forced marriages in June 2014. David Cameron's promise to ratify the agreement in the coming months after the banning of forced marriages however, never came into effect.

If the government has already criminalised the offences the convention asks it to, then why, almost five years after the UK signed the convention, has the government not set out a committed plan to ratify it?

In February 2016 the government answered that question in Parliament by stating an issue with article 44 of the convention. This article discusses jurisdiction and international law, and deals with territorial issues, such as the measures to take when a perpetrator is in UK territory, and deciding jurisdiction when dealing with an offence. The government stated its aim to investigate this article, and until that investigation is over, they would not ratify The Istanbul Convention.

However, it has still been over four years since we have signed the convention. A government who promised outcomes for women and girls since 2012, a government who promised to ratify the convention in June 2014, a government who gave their excuse in February 2016, is edging closer to 2017 with no sign of progress and with no timeline of when they will finally ratify the convention.

Is article 44 the real issue? Or are the government holding back on the ratification for other reasons?

Since 2010, 17% of women's refuges have been cut. Nearly a third of referrals to women's refuges were turned away in 2013-2014 because of lack of space. Recent cuts to mental health support services have left an estimated 10,000 victims of sexual abuse victims waiting more than a year for vital counselling services.

Is it article 44 of the convention that is stopping a tory government from implicating change, or are the other articles of the convention, such as providing support and accommodation for victims, that are stopping the tory government from ratifying it, are their own cuts to these services preventing the UK from carrying out its promise to women and girls?

Whatever the case, the government needs to act now to ratify the Istanbul convention, this isn't just about politics. I echo Angela Crawley MP the SNP Member of parliament who asked in February of this year why the UK government hadn't signed the convention, when I say, this issue is a human rights issue.

The politics of the convention and its articles may sound confusing to you or I, but it is a short, and relatively easy to read agreement that the government has had over 4 years to debate and investigate.

Women are dying in their hundred's; children are being subjected to abuse and neglect because of gender based and domestic violence. What the government is doing in terms of cuts to services for domestic abuse victims is dangerous, The Istanbul Convention could have prevented these cuts, and if ratified, could mean that the government is legally obliged to spend more money on support services. It's no wonder that a tory government throwing out cuts to the most vulnerable members of society, will not ratify a document that may prevent them from doing so.

We must put pressure on the government to ratify the convention, and we must do so with haste.

No prosecutions for female genital mutilation in Britain, so what is the problem?

The first-ever medical documentation of female genital mutilation cases in England found at least 5,000 cases from April 2015 to March 2016. Despite strict laws in the country, no prosecution has succeeded so far.

By Rhona Scullion

Pass Blue (03.10.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2e9WfnB> - Female genital mutilation has been illegal in England and Wales since 1985. Scotland has similar but separate legislation. Much more comprehensive laws forbidding the practice were introduced in 2003 and again in 2015, creating additional safeguards and stringent punishments for those practicing FGM, as it is known. Yet no one in Britain has successfully been prosecuted for the crime, which suggests that programs to prevent the procedure are failing.

Many reasons account for the lack of prosecution, experts have explained, including the reluctance of family members to report on one another if the procedure is being practiced and the enduring cultural sensitivity of the topic. Globally, revised legal frameworks and growing political support to end FGM have not led to more successful prosecutions either, despite laws against the practice in 26 countries in Africa and the Middle East, as well as in 33 other countries with migrant populations from FGM-practicing countries.

In July 2016, the first-ever recorded figures for the number of FGM cases in England were released, showing that from April 2015 to March 2016, 5,702 cases were documented in England alone, according to NHS Digital, formerly known as the Health and Social Care Information Center, a government body. (Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have not collected figures on rates of FGM separately.) The highest rate of FGM is occurring in London, according to a City University London report in 2015.

Most of the women and girls in the time frame of April 2015 to March 2016 were cut abroad, primarily in Africa, but 43 were born in Britain, with at least 18 cut inside the country. Government figures estimate that 170,000 girls and women living in Britain have undergone excision, as it is also called, and that 65,000 girls under age 13 risk being subjected to it.

Female genital mutilation is a cultural practice that has no medical basis. It is a procedure that intentionally alters or causes injury to female genital organs, according to the World Health Organization, and spans vast geographic areas and different religions and is not condoned by any holy book. It is most commonly carried out in about 29

countries of Africa, some nations in the Middle East and parts of Asia. Somalia, in east Africa, has the highest rate, accounting for a third of all new cases.

Diaspora groups from many of the countries where it is practiced are the most likely to practice FGM in Britain, the UN says, as well as in Australia, Canada and the United States. South America has recorded female circumcision activity in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru.

The World Health Organization describes four types of FGM, with degrees of severity, involving the partial or total removal of external female genitalia. The reasons given for the practice are generally related to ideas of purity and chastity, and it can be seen as a prerequisite for marriage in some cultures, ensuring a woman's virginity. Ignorance or dismissal of related health issues it creates — it can even kill in some circumstances — abounds in those who carry it out.

Yet despite greater social and political awareness of the problem and proof that it is inflicted on British citizens, perpetrators remain unpunished, a situation that has been condemned by advocates campaigning against the practice.

"It is shocking girls born in the UK are still subjected to FGM, despite the practice being illegal here for more than 30 years," said Celia Jeffreys, the head of the National FGM Center, a British public-private entity, to PassBlue.

The failure to produce a single prosecution has induced more government pressure on the Crown Prosecution Service, the principal prosecuting authority for England and Wales, acting independently in criminal cases investigated by the police and others. In 2014, four days before members of the British Parliament were due to question Alison Saunders, the director of public prosecutions as the head of the Crown Prosecution Service, the organization announced it was bringing the first ever charges of FGM against two men, one of whom was a medical doctor. In 2015, both men, however, were cleared of all charges within 30 minutes by jurors in a case that was later deemed a "show trial" by the media.

"There are a number of reasons which affect the prosecution of FGM cases, including the age and vulnerability of victims who may be too scared to report the offence or give evidence in court against their family," a spokesman for the Crown Prosecution Service told PassBlue. "The law has been strengthened to encourage victims to come forward, including giving them lifelong anonymity, being able to give evidence via video or from behind a screen and it is now mandatory for teachers and doctors to report instances of FGM in girls under 18."

The mandatory reporting requirement has been imposed on everyone working in regulated professions, such as teachers and health care workers, since 2015. The duty, however, is narrow in scope and requires professionals only to notify the police about instances of FGM they "discover" on girls under age 18.

Mandatory reporting does not refer to cases where a girl might be at risk of FGM or where FGM has not yet been performed; it also does not apply to cases where a woman older than 18 undergoes female cutting. This gap, advocates say, is important, as these numbers may have a crucial impact on gathering data on those more likely to be at risk.

Jeffreys also pointed to the vulnerability of FGM victims as a crucial barrier to prosecution, saying: "Successful prosecutions of perpetrators are complex, as many of them are family members, making it even harder for survivors to come forward."

Other barriers to successful prosecution can be found in the enduring misunderstanding of female genital cutting in both the public sphere and the specific communities in which it is condoned.

The Crown Prosecution Service noted that it could consider only a charge and prosecution after the police have investigated and referred a case of suspected FGM to the service. If the police do not have enough evidence or are not fully informed of the relevant signs to look for regarding excision, the likelihood of the police referring a case is greatly decreased.

Additionally, the prevailing focus of both anti-FGM campaigners and law enforcers now seems to have shifted to protection and prevention, rather than prosecution. Many activists think that punishment is actually a sign of failure of the national campaign against FGM and that prosecution comes too late.

Adwoa Kwateng-Kluitse leads the partnerships and global advocacy program at Forward (Foundation for Women's Health Research and Development), a British-based, African diaspora campaign and charity focused on gender equality and upholding the rights of African women and girls. She spoke with PassBlue about prosecution being a belated step.

"The lack of a successful prosecution doesn't condone the practice," Kwateng-Kluitse said. "Getting to the point of prosecution means Forward has failed, the law has failed, as a girl has been subjected to FGM — something she will have to live with for the rest of her life."

As to why there has not been a successful prosecution in Britain, Kwateng-Kluitse responded by asking, "How many girls have been saved because of existing legislation?"

This question is particularly pertinent amid the new FGM protection orders that were introduced in the 2015 legislation, called the Serious Crime Act. These orders allow courts wide powers to protect those deemed at risk of undergoing FGM. Judges can revoke passports to prevent parents leaving the country and having their child cut abroad; and they can restrict access to the child or even order the child be taken into state care. Additionally, it is now an offense to fail to protect a girl from FGM if a person has parental responsibility of the child.

Jeffries highlighted in a Guardian article that authorities needed to be "braver" and more proactive in using these new protections, given that only 18 FGM orders were used in the first three months of their being implemented. Jeffries pointed to the need for better cooperation and education on the subject, saying, "Professionals working in education, health and social care need to be better at communicating with each other, to ensure girls at risk are spotted and those who've already been affected by FGM get the necessary support to bring perpetrators to justice."

Several reasons for the hesitant response from many authorities have been suggested. First, there remains a stubborn ignorance of both FGM itself in British society and whether it even occurs. Second, the cultural nature of the practice presents a sensitivity aspect to the issue.

Valentine Nkoyo was a victim of FGM and now runs the Mojatu Foundation in Nottingham, England, which aims to empower women and girls through media, health and education. She told PassBlue, "I think there has been fear, especially among professionals, of not wanting to be seen as racists interfering with other people's 'culture.'"

Yet she was adamant that cultural sensitivities should not undermine the fight to eradicate the practice, saying, "I strongly feel if we all look at this as a purely form of child abuse that violates the rights of girls and women, we can confidently tackle FGM from that angle."

More emphasis is being placed on education and the importance of work in communities practicing FGM — most of which occurs in the country's largest cities, such as Manchester, Birmingham and London boroughs — with many campaigners thinking this is crucial to securing a successful prosecution. Nkoyo thinks that both education and prosecution are needed in equal measure to tackle FGM fully.

"Education and strong laws play a very important role if they go hand in hand, as there is a potential danger to push the issue underground by focusing only on prosecuting without trying to get communities on board," she said.

Kwateng-Kluyitse noted, "More importantly, families and communities need to be made aware of the UK law on FGM, so that we do not end up prosecuting people who are practicing social norms in ignorance."

As to whether the law is effective enough, Kwateng-Kluyitse said that not enough research has been done and that it would be useful to get information from social services, health departments and education departments if they were tracking FGM cases separately, she said.

Laws on FGM should focus, she said, "on the trauma the girl has gone through, looking at providing support and services to her" and not on merely securing a prosecution.

Echoing Nkoyo, she said, "It [FGM] is important because it is not a mainstream issue, so communities must be fully aware of UK position, but we should respond to it as we do to any other child abuse case."

Imams rally against domestic violence in the UK

Imams and social groups have begun providing services for Muslims in the UK to help put an end to domestic violence.

By Philippa H. Stewart

Al Jazeera (18.06.2016) - <http://bit.ly/28KclRT> - Two women are killed each week as a result of domestic violence in England and Wales, and one in four women will experience domestic violence in their lifetime.

On average, police in the UK handle a call about domestic violence every minute, but only about 35 percent of incidents are even reported.

It is a problem that affects every community in the United Kingdom.

Now, several organisations within Britain's Muslim community have started to tackle the cases of domestic abuse occurring within their communities, arguing that Muslim victims sometimes require support services that take their cultural and religious concerns into consideration.

Although rights groups emphasise that domestic abuse is not specifically a Muslim issue, "understanding the cultural needs and religious needs of the person," encourage victims to come forward, help deal with trauma, and find solutions said Shahida Rahman, a spokeswoman for the domestic violence charity Nour.

Deeper issues in domestic violence

On Nour's website, victims share their stories anonymously. One woman describes being spat and screamed at. Another speaks about watching her father abusing her mother, and finally being forced into an abusive marriage herself. A third mentions lying to doctors about how she broke her ribs and how her eyes were blackened.

Founded in 2011, the charity [offers a voice](#) to women and men and helps about 10 people each week. Some are repeat visitors.

The current figures are an increase from a total of 89 in 2011, when the charity first opened its doors, and 227 the following year. Figures for subsequent years were more difficult to obtain as Nour has had to suspend its services from time to time due to a lack of funding.

Rahman puts the increase down to a greater willingness to talk about domestic violence rather than a rise in cases.

"More people are having the courage to come forward... We need to educate people and say that they can come forward and that help is available."

"I think it is down to education," Rahman adds. "It is about educating the perpetrators."

The victims aren't only women, she says, but cultural expectations often stop men from reporting the abuse they suffer.

"We need to reach out to these people and tell them it is not their fault," she says.

Nour is not alone in its work. Several other organisations have also begun to tackle domestic violence.

According to the Muslim Women's Network (MWN), cultural and religious issues can make it harder for Muslim women to share their stories and report their abuse.

According to the group, fear of dishonouring the family and the stigma attached to domestic violence means it is under-reported in the Muslim community.

In January last year, the network set up a helpline designed to give Muslim women advice.

Shaista Gohir, the network's chairwoman, told Al Jazeera that the group was surprised by the vast range of issues women called in with, including domestic abuse, forced marriage and addiction.

Gohir explains that in cases of domestic abuse, religion was often used as a means of justifying the actions of the abuser.

The helpline has actively assisted 335 women since it opened last January.

The MWN has been criticised for bringing religion in to what many see as a cultural issue, but Gohir argues it is impossible to separate the two so distinctly.

"When people try to delink the two, they aren't being realistic. It's very well doing it theoretically, but in reality, you need to look at the lived experiences of Muslim women and girls and, unfortunately, people do bring faith into it.

"If men want to control the lives, minds and bodies of ... women and girls, they will use every tool available to them, and if need be, they will use religion ... [because] it is such a powerful tool," Gohir says.

Imams Against Domestic Abuse

Imams Against Domestic Abuse (IADA) is trying to address this.

It was set up to raise awareness of the dangers of domestic violence and also to "clarify stereotypes on domestic abuse that people have", both in terms of the victims and the perpetrators.

It is taking these lessons directly to men in the community in a bid to prevent domestic abuse, rather than just focusing on those who are already victims.

Abdullah Hasan, the cofounder of IADA, believes domestic abuse is present in all communities and that everyone has to take responsibility for tackling it.

"There are a lot of misconceptions surrounding Islam and domestic violence. People who aren't Muslims think Islam condones violence against women and that is simply not the case.

"When someone who happens to be a Muslim is convicted of abuse, it becomes about his religion; but in other cases that are not to do with Islam, religion is never mentioned. So in the eyes of the media, it is a Muslim problem, which isn't the case," he says.

"What we are doing is raising awareness and educating people in the Muslim community that violence and abuse are not acceptable in any circumstances."

Members of IADA use their Friday sermons to address domestic violence as a way of reaching the wider community, reminding people that the Prophet Muhammad never raised a hand to his wives, and asking them how they could justify doing any differently.

"The fact is that domestic violence is a blight on society. It is a mental and social illness that goes through every part of society and it is important that we address it in the part of the community that we can access," Hasan explains.

"We do get criticised because people think that by talking about the issue, it is almost confirming the negative portrayal of Muslims and Islam. [But] Islam is not the problem; the problem is that abusers will use anything they can to justify what they do."

"We can't ignore it and brush it under the carpet and say it is this community or this person's problem," he adds.

For groups like MWN, part of their role is to explain different interpretations of Quranic passages, which Gohir says can give women the confidence they need to speak out about abuse.

Language and cultural barriers

IADA also gives practical advice to those suffering abuse and is working with the police to help build the community's trust in them.

Hasan says language and cultural barriers can add to the mistrust some feel towards the police.

The imams are trying to bridge that gap as victims feel assured that they don't have "an agenda to misconstrue the teachings of Islam".

Hasan notes that the police are getting better at providing support.

"I think the more we speak about things publicly the more people will be able to empathise, rather than just sympathise, with victims," he says.

"The whole of society needs to come together to tackle these issues."