

# UK: 21,000 Girls at Risk of Genital Mutilation, Say Campaigners

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More than 21,000 girls under 15 in England and Wales are estimated to be at serious risk of being forced into genital mutilation and a further 11,000 over-eights are highly likely already to have been subjected to the practice, according to research.

Parents and guardians in African immigrant communities are thought to be taking their children abroad for female genital mutilation (FGM), but so called "excisors" are also said to be operating in Britain.

Around 66,000 women and girls in England and Wales may have undergone the procedure, in which part or all of their genitalia is cut off and stitched up, without anaesthetic, the campaigning group Forward said yesterday.

Its study, funded by the Department of Health, also found the number of children born to women with FGM rose from an estimated 6,000 in 2001 to a likely figure of 9,000 in 2004.

Areas of Britain with the highest numbers of immigrants from FGM-practising countries include London, Birmingham, Manchester and Leicester.

Forward said the results showed the need for action to prevent FGM being passed on to the younger generation.

It is outlawed under the Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act 1985 and the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003. Practitioners and those sanctioning the abuse can be jailed for up to 14 years, but no one has been prosecuted in Britain.

In July the Metropolitan police offered £20,000 for information which leads to successful prosecution of anyone perpetrating or arranging FGM, in the first reward for a general crime rather than a specific case.

A 36-year-old woman of Somalian origin arrested in east London that month has been released on bail.

Forward, together with researchers from City University and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, came up with its figures using the 2001 census for adult and child women immigrants from 29 countries known to practise mutilation, including Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia and Senegal.

The lead investigator, Efua Dorkenoo, said: "This study represents a major first step to fill the gap in available data on FGM."

Forward's interim director, Maureen Salmon, said work needed to be done in schools to make teachers aware of signs a girl might be at risk, or had already had FGM, and which agencies they should contact with concerns. "If a child has been taken out of school for a long period and taken abroad they can probe to find out the purpose of the trip," she said. "There may also be changes in the child's behaviour if they have had FGM."