

On The Frontline: Tackling FGM in a Western Country

by **WomenPolice** reporter Dan Howard

Getting people talking about female genital mutilation is key to ending the barbaric practice, says leading campaigner Comfort Momoh.

The London-based midwife reverses, on average, two female circumcisions a week. In addition she travels the world advising governments and working with NGOs.

But the sooner communities start talking about the serious health implications for women and girls the better as far as Dr Momoh is concerned. At present she is lobbying for it to feature on the curriculum in schools.



Her work started in 1997 with the creation of the African Well Women's Clinic at a central London hospital, a one stop shop providing support and treatment to women and girls subjected to FGM.

"Before 1997 lots of women were presenting at different hospital departments with problems that had arisen from FGM – infections, problems with pregnancy and labour. Midwives at that time didn't have enough knowledge of how to deal with it," said Dr Momoh.

"A multi-agency group was set up to look at the needs of these women and the recommendation was to have support services in place in one department. In 1997 there was one clinic in the whole of the UK, in London, but there are now 15 clinics across the country."

The biggest change since Dr Momoh began her work has been the attitude of those communities who practice FGM. "It was hush, hush, a topic that wasn't discussed. People didn't talk about it in the family or community. But now the younger generation will talk about their experience. They are able to be voices for the voiceless. We have to be mindful that it will take a long time to deal with FGM but attitudes are shifting among the younger generation.

"When we come to the training and awareness among professionals, we are getting there but slowly. We have a lot of work to do with midwives, doctors, social workers and with teachers and general practitioners."

Health services and awareness among professionals must be complemented by legislation, she says. The relationship with law enforcement is sound but the police's approach to FGM often has to be reactive rather than proactive. Dr Momoh feels there is room for closer working and for a keener strategic approach.

FGM was outlawed in the UK in 1985. The law was updated in 2003 to address the issue of families sending young girls overseas to be circumcised. However, since 1985 there have been no prosecutions. But research suggests 66,000 women and girls have undergone FGM and that each year 24,000 are at risk, predominantly five to 12 year olds.

"I know that the lack of prosecutions frustrates the police. There have been, I think, over 100 reported cases in the last few years but without strong enough evidence for a prosecution. This is something the government needs to look at," said Dr Momoh.

Dr Momoh's campaigning takes her all over the world. Earlier this month she was in Australia at the invitation of the government there.

"You have to take a different approach country by country and sensitivity to the local attitudes is key," said Dr Momoh. "I'm African but I can't arrive in a country and say 'stop that'. All the work I do in Africa is in partnership with governments or NGOs. You need their support and that link in order to change attitudes and mind sets and to make the connection for people between FGM and the health complications that come with it."

Culture is of course a major factor in the prevalence of FGM but it can also be a barrier to tackling it. Dr Momoh cites the example of a health professional in a Western country saying that the West has no right to involve itself in the culture of FGM and that Western governments should be creating a "safe environment" within which it can operate.

Dr Momoh however is very clear on this point: "You have to look at it as a child protection issue and a safeguarding issue, which is what it is and that is everybody's business no matter where you are from in the world.

"There is also the issue of choice and consent," says Dr Momoh and she highlights the case of a 40 year old woman who was forcibly circumcised. "Where is the choice for her, a 40 year old woman. We have done a lot of work but there is still a lot to do. Internationally there are a lot of people working to raise awareness and helping to change attitudes."

COMFORT MOMOH – TIMELINE

- 1981** Began training as a nurse in London
- 1987** Specialised in midwifery
- 1997** Founded the African Well Women's Clinic at Guy's and St Thomas' Hospital London
- 1999** Served as temporary advisor to the World Health Organisation
- 2001** UK representative at the UN Commission on the status of women
- 2008** Awarded the British MBE honour for services to nursing and women's healthcare
- 2008** Honorary doctorate from Middlesex University

