

# Speech: Policy for progress: ending FGM and forced marriage

This weekend, I read some good news about FGM. Now, you might think, quite understandably, that sounds like a contradiction – how can you have good news about FGM?

But I did – at least that's what it felt like.

A study published in BMJ Global Health has suggested that rates of female genital mutilation have fallen dramatically in Africa.

It found that the biggest fall in cutting was in East Africa where the study claimed the prevalence rate has dropped from 71% of girls under 14, that was in 1995, to 8% in 2016.

Now there are several hypotheses for why this has happened. One is that it's all down to the mums. Lots of money has rightly gone into educating more and more women in Africa.

These educated women are then making different decisions for their own daughters to the decisions that their mothers made for them, but I don't think this tells the full story.

I think this apparent decline in FGM – which is reflected in other countries too – is also down to you and other people like you who couldn't join us today. People who work tirelessly to end FGM.

It's thanks to your work as frontline professionals, as campaigners, as policymakers as experts, that the prevalence of FGM has declined in most countries around the world. It is thanks to you that today a girl is about a third less likely to be cut than 30 years ago.

So I want to start by thanking you for all the work that you do fighting this most barbaric crime.

We also have representatives with us today who are working hard to eliminate another crime which disproportionately affects women – and that's forced marriage. I want to extend my welcome to you too.

I know that some of you in the audience have also travelled a very long way to be here: from Canada and Pakistan and Kenya and thank you for taking that very long journey to be with us.

After such a long journey, you'll be pleased to hear there's going to be a fascinating programme planned for the next 2 days.

You're going to hear from a range of people who have been working to tackle FGM and forced marriage across the world, including some survivors.

I want to give particular thanks to:

- Jaha Dukureh
- Hoda Ali
- Sarian Karim-Kamara
- Matt and Zee

I want to thank you for agreeing to share your stories with us all to hear over the next 2 days, because I think being asked to share your knowledge at an event like this is one thing, but being asked to share your experience, is quite another.

Take Jaha for example. She was born in the Gambia in 1989 and was subjected to FGM when she was just one week old. At 15, she was sent to New York and forced to marry a man who was much older than she was. She managed to flee that marriage and later remarried and moved to Atlanta, before returning home to the Gambia in 2018 where she now lives with her 3 children.

She's been a campaigner against female genital mutilation and forced marriage since she was a teenager and she is the founder and CEO of Safe Hands for Girls, an NGO which advocates for the end of FGM and forced marriage. And Jaha's role was instrumental in convincing President Obama's administration to investigate the prevalence and the profile of FGM in the USA and in convincing the Gambian government to outlaw FGM in 2016.

That's quite a life story and an amazing CV! You'll hear from Jaha very shortly.

And tomorrow you'll hear from Zee from the Karma Nirvana Survivor Ambassador Programme. She was born into a traditional Afghan family. She was the youngest of 5 and the only girl. She was promised at birth to another family, and at 13, she was engaged to be married. With a forced marriage looming, she ran away from Bradford and she came to London.

Her family disowned her because she had run away, because she had called the authorities, and because in their eyes they thought and they claimed she had brought shame on the family. Now Zee campaigns so that no-one else has to face what she had to go through.

I would also like to take the opportunity today to pay tribute to Nimko Ali, an FGM survivor and tireless campaigner who I've had the privilege to meet a number of times.

I won't speak for too long because I think it's important that you hear from these campaigners next, but I wanted to take this opportunity to talk to you briefly about what the UK government is doing to tackle FGM and forced marriage.

Because I believe that all governments should take interest in this and they have a crucial role to play in bringing an end to what can only be described as medieval practices.

These crimes in my view are despicable, inhumane and uncivilised. They should

not be dressed up as 'culture', 'tradition' or some kind of 'private family business' – because they are none of these things.

I'm pleased to say that here in the UK, we already have some of the toughest laws in the world against these crimes. We've made it an offence to fail to protect a girl from FGM; we introduced FGM Protection Orders; we created a mandatory reporting duty requiring specified professionals to report known cases of FGM in children to the police; and we're funding the national FGM Centre.

On forced marriage, we're taking action too.

This is the first UK government to make forced marriage a criminal offence and I've been encouraged by recent convictions.

For example, you might have heard or remember there was a conviction earlier this year after a victim was rescued by the British High Commission in Bangladesh. We also run a highly successful forced marriage public helpline which I think is making a real difference to people's lives.

The support offered ranges from providing information and guidance about forced marriage right through to organising repatriation and rescue missions.

Last year, the Forced Marriage Unit handled nearly 1,200 possible cases of forced marriage. And just last month I announced that when women have the courage to come forward and inform the Home Office they are being forced to sponsor a spousal visa against their will, we will not only protect their anonymity, but we will do everything we can to revoke that visa.

Our efforts, of course, extend overseas too. I know that we work with many of the organisations that some of you represent here today.

Recognising that FGM and forced marriage are international issues and this is very much integral to the way we approach this.

We know that people in the UK – particularly children and young people – are at risk of being taken overseas and forced into marriage or subjected to FGM.

To safeguard against those at risk, for example, we have a rolling programme of joint operations by the police and the Home Office's Border Force, that takes place at our airports during school holidays.

These joint operations target inbound and outbound flights to and from these high-prevalence countries to try and stop these crimes.

Our efforts to tackle both FGM and forced marriage have starting paying off.

There's now a greater understanding of these crimes than ever before and more people than ever before are being protected.

Over 1,600 Forced Marriage Protection Orders have been granted and 248 FGM Protection Orders.

Despite all of this we also understand we need to do more. Stories like Jaha's and Zee's are a reminder of that. These horrific crimes are still happening, and perpetrators are still slipping through the net without being brought to justice.

I do think it's time for us in the UK to redouble our efforts.

That's why today I'm pleased to announce that I'm launching a public consultation on how we can strengthen the safeguarding response to forced marriage.

One of the questions we will be asking is whether we should introduce a new mandatory duty requiring professionals to report cases of forced marriage to the authorities.

I'm also pleased to announce following the successful FGM communication campaign that we launched last week that today I'm unveiling a new government communications campaign to educate the public about what constitutes a forced marriage and the fact it's illegal.

Here are 2 of the posters. I would also like to show you a sneak 30-second peek of our campaign video. I think having these videos and using them on all sorts of platforms including social media will really make a difference. But we know government action alone is not going to be enough. We need your help to raise awareness across the UK and around the world. We need you to provide services for survivors and victims and we need you to help us bring more perpetrators to justice.

This conference is a great opportunity for all of us to share knowledge, experience, ideas and best practice with one another.

Over the next 2 days, you'll hear from survivors, from community groups, from young people and from professionals, both here in the UK and from the world.

I'm clear that by working together, we can end these appalling crimes and build a much safer world for our children – and in particular – for our daughters.

Thank you very much