

Safeguarding Against Harmful Practices:

Guidance on Honour Based Violence,
Female Genital Mutilation, Forced
Marriage, Breast Ironing, and
Virginity Testing

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Overview

Safeguarding vulnerable individuals is a fundamental duty for professionals working with children and families. In Cardiff, agencies respond to a range of incidents—both criminal and non-criminal—where Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), Honour-Based Violence (HBV), Forced Marriage (FM), Breast Ironing, and Virginity Testing may be a factor.

These practices constitute serious human rights violations, often resulting in significant physical and psychological harm. They are frequently driven by deep-seated social, cultural, and familial pressures, necessitating proactive intervention and robust safeguarding measures.

Effective safeguarding requires a multi-agency approach, ensuring collaboration between law enforcement, social services, healthcare providers, and educational institutions. Cardiff agencies play a critical role in:

- Identifying individuals at risk through early intervention.
- Responding appropriately to disclosures or indicators of harm.
- Providing comprehensive support to survivors.
- Upholding legal protections to prevent further harm.

This guidance outlines best practices for identifying and responding to these harmful practices, ensuring that professionals can effectively safeguard individuals at risk.

- Key indicators that may signal risk or abuse.
- Safeguarding responses to ensure effective intervention and protection.
- Legal frameworks governing these practices in the UK.

Every professional has a duty to identify and act on safeguarding concerns. By applying this guidance, practitioners can play a critical role in protecting individuals from abuse, ensuring their safety, and advocating for their rights.

Key Points

- **Honour Based Violence (HBV):** HBV is a crime or incident committed to protect or defend the honour of the family and/or community.
- **Female Genital Mutilation (FGM):** FGM involves the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia for non-medical reasons.
- **Forced Marriage (FM):** FM is the act of forcing someone into marriage, including taking someone overseas to do so. A marriage conducted without the valid consent of one or both parties, where duress is a factor.
- **Breast Ironing:** is a harmful practice where young girls' breasts are massaged, pounded, or pressed using heated objects to delay their development.
- **Virginity Testing:** is an invasive and medically unsubstantiated practice used to determine whether a woman or girl has had vaginal intercourse. It typically involves an examination of the hymen, often based on the false assumption that an intact hymen indicates virginity

Victims of HBV, FGM, FM, Breast Ironing and Virginity Testing often face severe consequences if they are not protected in time. The **One Chance Rule** ensures that professionals take swift and decisive action to safeguard individuals at risk.

One Chance Rule

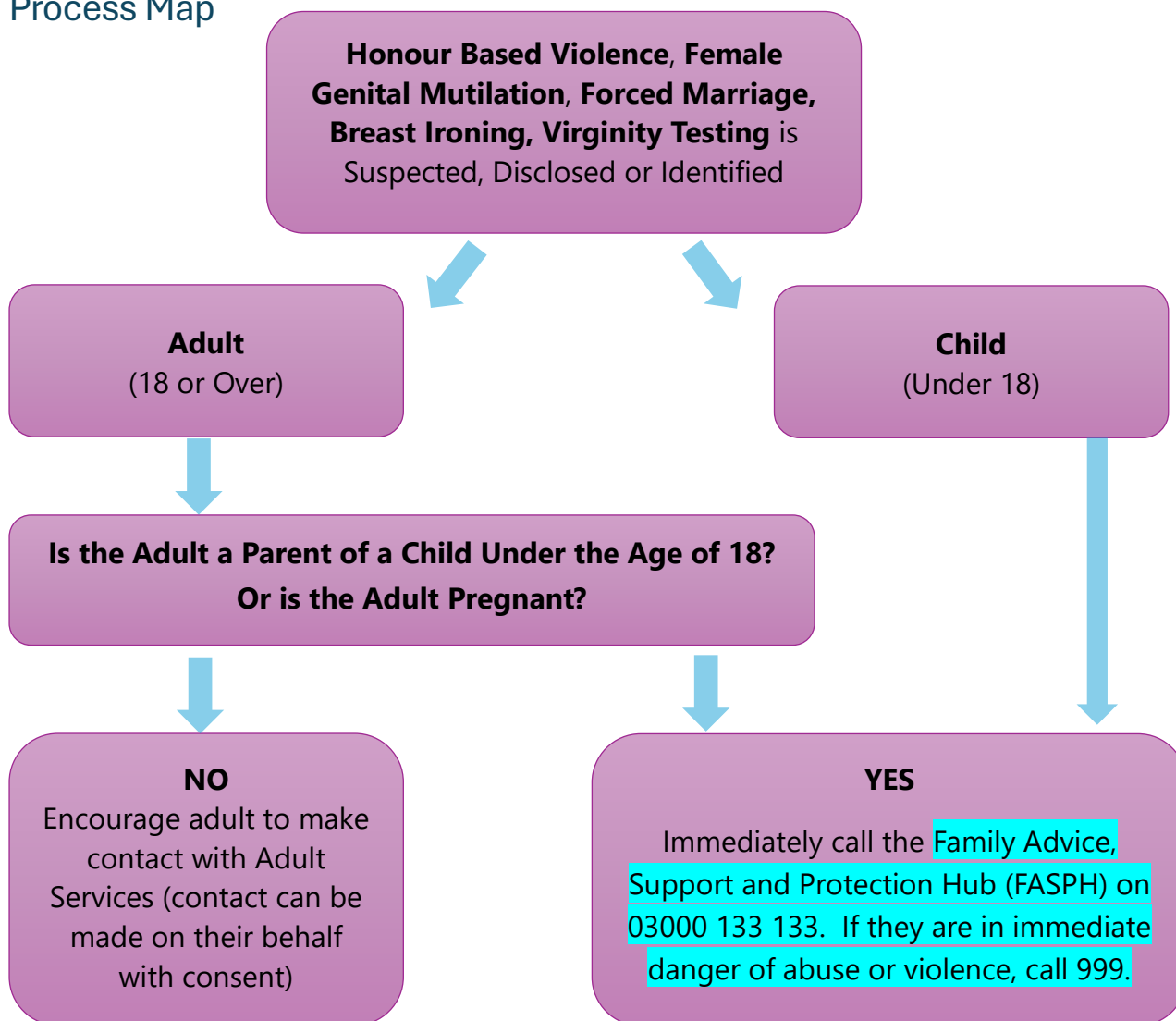
One Chance Rule

A safeguarding principle used when dealing with the above cases. It emphasises that professionals may only have **one opportunity** to speak to a potential victim and take action to protect them. If this chance is missed, the individual may face serious harm or even death

Key Aspects of the One Chance Rule

- **Immediate Action:** If a victim discloses abuse or risk, professionals must act **immediately**—there may not be another opportunity.
- **Listening & Believing:** Victims may be fearful or reluctant to speak. It is crucial to **listen carefully** and **take their concerns seriously**.
- **Private & Safe Environment:** Speak to the individual **alone**, away from family or community members who may pose a risk.
- **Confidentiality:** **Do not share information with family or community members, as this could increase the risk to the victim.**
- **Risk Assessment:** Conduct a thorough risk assessment to determine the level of danger and necessary interventions.
- **Reporting & Referral:** Follow safeguarding procedures and report concerns.

Process Map



Support Services

- [Karma Nirvana - HBV \(0800 5999 247\)](#)
- [Halo Project - FM and HBV Charity \(01642 683 045\)](#)
- [NSPCC FGM helpline \(0800 028 3550\)](#)
- [Live Fear Free helpline \(0808 80 10 800\)](#)
- [BAWSO \(0800 731 8147\)](#)

Further Reading

- [Wales Safeguarding Procedures \(WSP\) Practice Guide: Safeguarding children from harmful practices related to tradition, culture, religion or superstition](#)
- [Female genital mutilation: guidance for professionals | GOV.WALES](#)
- [Honour-based violence and forced marriage | GOV.WALES](#)
- [Tackling FGM in the UK](#)
- [Forced Marriage Guidance](#)

So Called 'Honour' Based Violence

Definition

The term So Called 'Honour' Based Violence (HBV) is the internationally recognised term describing cultural justifications for violence and abuse. It justifies the use of certain types of violence and abuse against women, men and children. The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) defines HBV as: 'A crime or incident, which has or may have been committed, to protect or defend the honour of the family and/or community'.

Honour Based Violence may include abusive behaviours such as Female Genital Mutilation, Forced Marriage, threats to harm or intimidate, denying access to children or family members, sexual abuse and domestic abuse. Abuse may also involve extended family or community members.

There is no, and cannot be, honour or justification for abusing the human rights of others. HBV is normally associated with cultures and communities from Asia, the Middle East and Africa as well as Gypsies and Travellers, but in reality, HBV cuts across all cultures, nationalities, faith groups and communities and transcends national and international boundaries.

Key Indicators

- **Unexplained injuries:** Bruises, burns, fractures, or other physical harm.
- **Depression and anxiety:** Victims may show signs of distress, self-harm, or suicidal thoughts.
- **Withdrawal and isolation:** Avoiding social interactions, school, or work.
- **Fear of family members:** Reluctance to speak openly or express personal opinions.
- **Strict family control:** Limited freedom, excessive monitoring, or restrictions on movement.
- **Forced travel:** Being taken abroad for marriage or punishment.
- **Sudden engagement or marriage:** Unexpected wedding plans, especially at a young age.
- **Pressure to conform:** Forced adherence to cultural or religious expectations.
- **Family disputes:** Escalating tensions over personal choices, relationships, or lifestyle.
- **Disowned or being ostracised:** Fear of being rejected by family or community.

Additional Information

While Honour-Based Violence (HBV) is predominantly associated with women and girls, men are also affected by these harmful practices. However, cases involving male victims are significantly underreported, largely due to societal stigma and expectations around masculinity, which can discourage individuals from seeking help or disclosing abuse.

Male victims of HBV may experience coercion, physical violence, emotional abuse, and social exclusion for various reasons, including:

- Challenging traditional norms or expressing independent personal beliefs.
- Being LGBTQ+, which may lead to targeted abuse within certain communities.
- Supporting victims of HBV, placing them at risk of retaliation.
- Seeking independence or adopting a lifestyle perceived as "Westernized."

Recognising and addressing HBV against men requires greater awareness, tailored support services, and proactive safeguarding measures to ensure that all victims, regardless of gender, receive the necessary protection and assistance.

PRACTICE POINT: Individuals with learning disabilities can be particularly vulnerable to Honour-Based Violence (HBV) due to their dependence on caregivers, difficulty in recognising abuse, and challenges in seeking help

Legal Framework

Honour-Based Violence (HBV) is illegal in the UK. While there is no specific offence named 'honour'-based violence, it is an umbrella term covering various crimes, including assault, coercive control, domestic abuse, forced marriage, and even murder. These offences are prosecuted under existing UK laws, such as the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 (which criminalises forced marriage), and other legislation addressing physical, emotional, and psychological abuse.

Under [Section 47 of the Children Act 1989](#), local authorities have a statutory duty to investigate if they have "reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm." This includes harm resulting from honour-based violence.

Safeguarding Response

- **Follow the One Chance Rule:** You may only have one opportunity to intervene—act immediately.
- **Speak privately:** Ensure the individual is alone and safe when discussing concerns.
- **Listen and believe:** Take disclosures seriously and avoid dismissing concerns.
- **Avoid involving family members:** Contacting relatives may increase the risk to the victim.
- **Risk Assessment:** use your assessment tools – DASH RIC
- **Refer to specialist agencies:** Organisations like Karma Nirvana and the Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) provide expert support.
- **Consider legal protections:** Victims may be eligible for Forced Marriage Protection Orders (FMPOs) or other safeguarding measures.
- **Follow safeguarding procedures for your organisation:** For example schools are instructed to call the [Family Advice, Support and Protection Hub \(FASPH\)](#) on 03000 133 133.

PRACTICE POINT: Honour-Based Violence (HBV) is a serious child safeguarding concern because it can involve physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, and financial abuse. Children and young people at risk of HBV may face severe harm, coercion, and even life-threatening consequences if safeguarding measures are not implemented effectively.

If a child is at **risk of harm** contact Children's Services via the Family Advice, Support and Protection Hub (FASPH) on 03000 133 133.

The risk assessment checklist can be downloaded from <http://www.dashriskchecklist.co.uk/>

Also refer to [The National FGM Centre Risk Assessment tool](#).

Female Genital Mutilation

Definition

The World Health Organisation has classified FGM as: "all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organ for non-medical reasons" (WHO, 2010).

FGM and other terms (see glossary) has been classified by the WHO into four types:

- I. Clitoridectomy: partial or total removal of the clitoris (a small, sensitive and erectile part of the female genitals) and, in very rare cases, only the prepuce (the fold of skin surrounding the clitoris).
- II. Excision: partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora (the labia are "the lips" that surround the vagina).
- III. Infibulation: narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal. The seal is formed by cutting and repositioning the inner, or outer, labia, with or without removal of the clitoris.
- IV. Other: all other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, e.g. pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterizing the genital area

FGM is prevalent in a range of countries from the Atlantic Coast to the Horn of Africa, with significant variations in the percentage of girls and women affected both within and across these countries.

See Appendix A or - [UNICEF - Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A statistical overview and exploration of the dynamics of change](#)

Key Indicators

- Physical indicators: Difficulty walking, sitting, or standing; frequent infections; prolonged menstrual issues, difficulty in passing urine, severe pain, bleeding, complications during pregnancy and labour.
- Behavioural changes: Withdrawal, anxiety, reluctance to undergo medical examinations, PTSD.
- Risk factors: Family history of FGM, discussions about a "special procedure," planned trips abroad.

Child Protection and FGM

FGM is considered to be a form of child abuse (it is categorised under the headings of both physical abuse and emotional abuse). Working Together to Safeguard Children (HM Government, 2010), states that a local authority may exercise its powers under section 47 of the Children Act 1989 if it has reason to believe that a child is likely to suffer or has suffered FGM.

- Under the Children Act 1989, local authorities can apply to the Courts for various Orders to prevent a child being taken abroad for mutilation.
- Any information or concern that a child is at immediate risk of, or has undergone, FGM should result in a child protection referral to local authority children's social care;
- Every attempt should be made to work with parents on a voluntary basis to prevent the abuse.

A local authority must exercise its duty under s47 of the Children Act 1989 if it has reason to believe that a child has suffered, or is likely to experience FGM.

FGM is illegal and a form of child abuse; if you suspect a child may be at risk of this practice or has already undergone FGM you must take action immediately and discuss with your safeguarding lead. You should also the **Family Advice, Support and Protection Hub (FASPH) on 03000 133 133.**

See link below for the Government's FGM Multi-agency Practice Guidelines on GFM 2020 for further details.

[Multi-agency statutory guidance on female genital mutilation - GOV.UK](#)

Legal Framework

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland all forms of FGM are illegal under the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003.

- It is an offence if anyone aids, abets, counsels or procures any form of FGM for a girl or a woman for cultural or non-medical grounds;
- This act makes it an offence to take a UK national or resident overseas for the purpose of or to aid and abet, procure or carry out FGM;
- Any UK National or resident is protected;
- A person is guilty of an offence if he/she aids a girl to carry out FGM on herself;
- There are defences with regard to this Act. No offence is committed by an approved person (i.e. midwife or medical practitioner or person training to fulfil these roles) if they perform such a surgical procedure necessary for the girl's physical or mental health or in relation to a birth or labour;
- The penalty for FGM is up to 14 years of imprisonment.

Applying for a FGM Protection Order

Since July 2015, you can apply to the court for a FGM Protection Order if you are worried about a child or young woman. It is a criminal offence to breach this order (with a maximum five-year prison sentence). For more information and the relevant documentation, [Get a female genital mutilation protection order - GOV.UK](#)

Safeguarding response

- **Follow the One Chance Rule:** You may only have one opportunity to intervene—act immediately.
- **Speak privately:** Ensure the individual is alone and safe when discussing concerns.
- **Listen and believe:** Take disclosures seriously and avoid dismissing concerns.
- **Do not involve family members:** Contacting relatives may increase the risk to the victim.
- **Mandatory Reporting Duty:** If FGM has been performed on a girl under 18, professionals must report it to the police via 101.
- **Refer to social services:** Follow local safeguarding procedures.
- **Consider legal protections:** Victims may be eligible for FGM Protection Orders (FGMPOs).
- **Provide emotional and medical support:** Ensure victims receive healthcare, counselling, and legal assistance.

Forced Marriage

Definition

A Forced Marriage (FM) is a marriage in which one or both spouses do not (or, in the case of some adults with learning or physical disabilities, cannot) consent to the marriage and duress is involved. Duress can include physical, psychological, financial, sexual and emotional pressure (UK Forced Marriage Unit, 2009).

There is a clear distinction between an arranged and forced marriage.

- **An arranged marriage** is entered into freely by both parties, although their families take a leading role in the choice of the partner.
- **Forced marriage** is a form of abuse and should be treated as such.
- An arranged marriage can become a forced marriage if consent is withdrawn by one or both partners at any time.

Forced marriage is a serious human rights violation that affects individuals of all genders. While it is often associated with women and girls, men and boys can also be victims, facing coercion, pressure, and emotional abuse to enter into marriage against their will.

While some forced marriages take place entirely within the UK, others involve a British national being sent abroad or a partner being brought from overseas to marry under coercion.

Similar to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), Forced Marriage (FM) is not linked to any religion. Instead, it is deeply rooted in cultural traditions, societal expectations, and family pressures. Communities practicing forced marriage often do so to uphold perceived notions of honour, financial security, or social cohesion, regardless of religious affiliations.

Key Indicators

- **Signs of distress:** Anxiety, depression, self-harm, or suicidal thoughts.
- **Unexplained injuries:** Bruises, burns, or fractures resulting from coercion or abuse.
- **Withdrawal from social activities:** Avoiding friends, school, or work.
- **Sudden engagement or marriage:** Unexpected wedding plans, especially at a young age.
- **Strict family control:** Excessive monitoring, restrictions on movement, or isolation.
- **Forced travel:** Being taken abroad under false pretences, often during school holidays.
- **Financial control:** Limited access to money or wages being taken away.
- **Pressure from family or community:** Emotional manipulation, threats, or coercion.
- **Fear of dishonour:** Victims may express concerns about bringing "shame" to their family.
- **Multiple perpetrators:** Abuse may involve extended family or community members.

Additional Information

Forced marriage is driven by various motivations, often rooted in cultural, social, economic, or familial pressures. Some common reasons include:

- **Control over behaviour and sexuality:** Families may force marriage to prevent relationships deemed "unsuitable," such as those outside their ethnic, cultural, caste, or religious group. 15% of forced marriage victims are male, with many cases involving individuals coerced into marriage due to their family's knowledge or suspicion of their sexual orientation.
- **Preserving family honour:** Some families believe that marriage maintains their reputation and prevents perceived dishonour.
- **Providing lifelong care:** Families may believe marriage ensures ongoing support for a relative with learning disabilities.
- **Financial and property concerns:** Marriage may be used to ensure land, wealth, or inheritance remains within the family.
- **Strengthening family ties:** Some families arrange marriages to reinforce connections between relatives or communities.
- **Immigration and residency status:** Forced marriage may be used to secure citizenship or residency rights.
- **Providing care for a family member:** In some cases, individuals are forced into marriage to care for a disabled or elderly relative.
- **Peer and societal pressure:** Families may feel compelled to conform to cultural expectations or longstanding commitments.

Legal Framework

Forced marriage is a criminal offence under Section 121 of the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. The legislation explicitly prohibits forcing someone into marriage, including taking an individual overseas for that purpose. A marriage is classified as forced if one or both parties have not provided valid consent, and duress—whether through physical, psychological, financial, or emotional pressure—is a determining factor.

Under this law, victims can seek legal protection through Forced Marriage Protection Orders (FMPOs), which provide preventative and safeguarding measures. Perpetrators

found guilty of engaging in or facilitating a forced marriage can face up to seven years imprisonment, reinforcing the UK's commitment to addressing this serious violation of human rights.

Safeguarding Response

- Be aware of family or **community pressures** that may indicate coercion.
- Look for **planned trips abroad**, especially to countries where forced marriage is prevalent.
- **Follow the One Chance Rule:** You may only have one opportunity to intervene—act immediately.
- **Speak privately:** Ensure the individual is alone and safe when discussing concerns.
- **Listen and believe:** Take disclosures seriously and avoid dismissing concerns.
- Do not involve family members: Contacting relatives may increase the risk to the victim.
- **Police intervention:** If the individual is in immediate danger, call 999.
- If a **child is at risk of harm**, contact the **Family Advice, Support and Protection Hub (FASPH) on 03000 133 133.**
- **Consider legal protections:** Victims may be eligible for Forced Marriage Protection Orders (FMPOs).
- **Follow safeguarding procedures for your organisation:** For example schools are instructed to call the **Family Advice, Support and Protection Hub (FASPH) on 03000 133 133.**

If you are concerned that a child or young person may be (or may have been) forced to marry, you should discuss this with your safeguarding lead. You can also contact the **Forced Marriage Unit** for advice and support.

Email: fmu@fcdo.gov.uk

Tel: 020 7008 0151 between 9am and 5pm Monday to Friday (UK time)
Outside those hours, call **020 7008 1500** and ask for the Foreign Office Response Centre.

See website for further resources: [Forced marriage - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/forced-marriage)

Breast Ironing

Definition

Breast ironing, also known as breast flattening, is a harmful practice where young girls' breasts are massaged, pounded, or pressed using heated objects to delay their development. This practice is often carried out by female relatives with the belief that it protects girls from sexual harassment, early pregnancy, or forced marriage.

Key Indicators

- **Physical indicators:** Burns, scars, tissue damage, or asymmetry of the breasts.
- **Behavioural changes:** Depression, anxiety, withdrawal, aggression, or reluctance to participate in physical activities.
- **Avoidance of medical examinations:** Fear of revealing scars or injuries.
- **Absence from school:** Unexplained absences, particularly after trips abroad.
- **Discomfort discussing puberty:** Girls may avoid conversations about their physical development.

Additional Information

Many perpetrators believe they are acting in the best interests of the child, aiming to deter unwanted attention and enable girls to continue their education. However, the practice causes long-term physical and emotional harm, making it a serious safeguarding concern.

Charities have estimated 1,000 girls in the UK have been affected by the practice, which doctors say can cause breast cancer, scarring, infections, breastfeeding problems, and psychological trauma.

Legal Framework

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) recognises breast ironing as a form of child cruelty and assault, and perpetrators can face up to ten years in prison. Despite the lack of specific legislation, it is treated as a form of physical abuse under existing child protection laws

Safeguarding Response

- **One Chance Rule:** You may only have one opportunity to intervene—act immediately.
- **Speak privately:** Ensure the individual is alone and safe when discussing concerns.
- **Listen and believe:** Take disclosures seriously and avoid dismissing concerns.
- **Do not involve family members:** Contacting relatives may increase the risk to the victim.
- **Consider legal protections:** While breast ironing is not a specific criminal offence, it is recognised as child abuse and can be prosecuted under physical assault laws.
- **Provide emotional and medical support:** Ensure victims receive healthcare, counselling, and legal assistance.
- **Follow safeguarding procedures for your organisation:** For example schools are instructed to call the **Family Advice, Support and Protection Hub (FASPH)** on 03000 133 133.

Virginity Testing and Hymenoplasty

Definition

Virginity testing, also known as hymen examination, is a harmful and medically unsubstantiated practice used to determine whether a woman or girl has had vaginal intercourse. It is often carried out due to cultural or societal pressures, particularly in communities where virginity is linked to family honour.

In the UK, virginity testing is illegal under the Health and Care Act 2022, and professionals must take steps to safeguard individuals at risk. This guidance outlines key indicators, safeguarding measures, and legal frameworks to protect vulnerable individuals.

Hymenoplasty is a procedure undertaken to reconstruct the hymen. There are a number of different techniques to achieve but it generally involves stitching the hymenal remnants together at the vaginal opening. This procedure is to ensure that the woman bleeds the next time she has intercourse.

Virginity testing and hymenoplasty are forms of violence against women and girls and are part of the cycle of so called 'honor abuse'. Women and girls are often coerced, forced or shamed into undergoing these procedures.

Key Indicators

- **Pressure from family or community:** Expectations to prove virginity before marriage.
- **Requests for medical examinations:** Seeking hymen checks from healthcare providers.
- **Emotional distress:** Anxiety, shame, or fear related to virginity.
- **Forced travel:** Being taken abroad for virginity testing.
- **Physical harm:** Reports of invasive procedures or coercion.

Additional Information

The World Health Organisation (WHO) and Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) state that virginity tests have no scientific merit, as there is no known examination that can prove whether a woman has had vaginal intercourse

There is evidence that women and girls from the age of 13 – 30 are most at risk of undergoing virginity testing and or hymenoplasty, but girls as young as 8 can be affected. However, any women or girl at any age, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation religion, disability or socioeconomic status could be subjected to virginity testing or hymenoplasty.

Legal Framework

Virginity testing is illegal in the UK under the Health and Care Act 2022. The law bans carrying out, offering, or aiding and abetting virginity testing, including procedures conducted abroad.

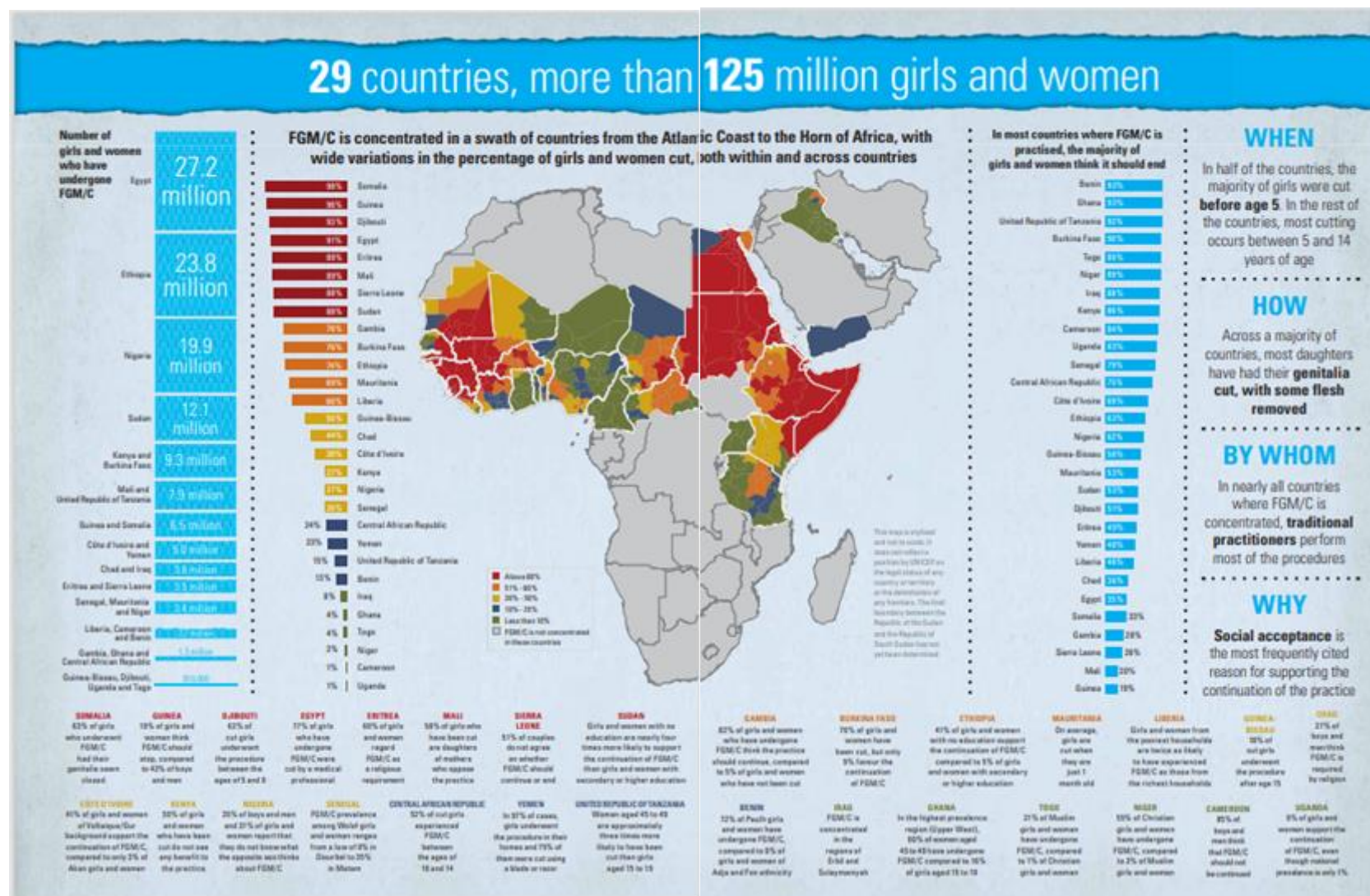
Virginity testing is widely condemned by medical experts and human rights organisations, including the World Health Organization (WHO), which states that the practice is harmful, degrading, and medically unsubstantiated. It is often linked to honour-based abuse, forced marriage, and coercive control, making it a serious safeguarding concern.

Hymenoplasty is illegal in the UK, as part of the [Health and Care Act 2022](#). It is also illegal for UK nationals and residents to do these things outside of the UK.

Safeguarding Response

- **Pressure from family or community** to undergo virginity testing.
- **Concerns about honour**, purity, or marriage eligibility.
- **Fear of repercussions** if the test is "failed."
- Follow the **One Chance Rule**: Act immediately if a disclosure is made.
- **Speak privately**: Ensure the individual is safe and able to speak freely.
- **Listen and believe**: Take concerns seriously and avoid dismissing disclosures.
- **Do not involve family members**: Contacting relatives may increase risk.
- **Provide emotional and medical support**: Ensure victims receive counselling, healthcare, and legal assistance.
- **Follow safeguarding procedures for your organisation**: For example schools are instructed to call the [Family Advice, Support and Protection Hub \(FASPH\)](#) on 03000 133 133.

Appendix A - UNICEF - Female Genital Mutilation: A statistical overview and exploration of the dynamics of change (page 2/3)



Document Control

Approval

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