

Further written evidence from Professor Jeannette Littlemore and Dr Susan Waigwa University of Birmingham [HBA0056] [[HBA0017](#)]

Introduction

In order to reduce the prevalence of female genital mutilation (FGM) in England, educational programmes are offered to school children (Key Stages 3 and 4). Further communication with communities is facilitated by public information campaign. In both the educational and the campaign materials it is important to use language that is accessible and acceptable to the recipients as this promotes agency and empowerment, and allows them to make informed decisions and take appropriate actions. Despite the importance of using appropriate language, there have to date been no investigations into the language used in educational and campaign materials relating to FGM. We have therefore conducted a preliminary analysis of the language used in these materials and have interviewed key stakeholders, from organisations that aim to prevent FGM and who support its survivors, about this language and communication more generally relating to FGM. Our findings are as follows:

Key findings from our analysis of the language used in the materials

- Bodies are often talked about as being ‘intact’, ‘natural’ and ‘perfect’, which may be problematic for people who feel their bodies do not meet these criteria
- Different meanings of the word ‘control’ are used in the materials, which may be confusing for students. Control is presented as ‘controlling oneself’ (e.g. the need to ‘control’ oneself sexually) and ‘controlling others’ (e.g. FGM being practised to control girls and women)
- Insufficient emphasis is placed on the difference between the words ‘tradition’, ‘culture’ and ‘religion’
- Some of the materials refer to the idea that FGM is performed in order to ‘protect’ tradition. All of the other postulated reasons for performing FGM are critiqued in the materials, but not this one
- The word ‘religion’ is not specifically used in the campaign materials, but references are made predominantly to ‘Islam’
- The word ‘marriage’ is only mentioned in relation to women, never in relation to men; men and boys are rarely mentioned and when they are, they are given far more linguistic agency than women and girls
- The images used in the materials are sometimes misleading or may inadvertently represent a reductive view of the role of women in society
- Potentially misleading uses are made of visual metaphors

We also identified some potentially problematic language in the materials, which included: euphemisms and vague or figurative language (e.g. ‘bits down below’; unspecified references to ‘suffering’), strong language (e.g. ‘barbaric practices’; ‘mutilation’; ‘animals in heat’), language with conflicting meanings (‘tradition’, ‘culture’ and ‘religion’ used interchangeably to refer to the same thing), misleading or outdated information (‘FGM is found amongst members of migrant communities’), and unsubstantiated claims (‘people back home are not educated in the topic’; ‘girls do not know where to get help’). All of the issues above have been confirmed as potentially problematic by the stakeholders we spoke to. They also drew attention to a number of practical issues related to the education and communication around FGM more generally.

Key findings from our interviews with stakeholders

Through our interviews with stakeholders, we have identified issues relating both to language contained in the educational and campaign materials, and issues relating to the delivery of the materials.

Through our conversations with **materials developers** we have identified a number of issues and constraints in the development and delivery of FGM educational materials. One common piece of feedback we received was that materials developers are aware of the fact that teachers often lack the confidence to deliver their materials and answer student’s questions relating to FGM due to the limited support they receive in navigating the issue. In particular, our interviewees pointed to the lack of time allocated to FGM education, difficulty accessing appropriate materials, and a lack of training for teachers, as structural barriers to the effective delivery of FGM education. Our interviews with materials developers also revealed a more specific set of challenges regarding the development of the educational materials themselves, and the language which they contain.

These include the following:

- The language that experts in FGM would use to talk about FGM is sometimes inconsistent with the kind of language that is recommended by the PSHE Association.
- The ways in which FGM is talked about, particularly in relation to ‘culture’, sometimes lead to an ‘othering’ of the affected communities.
- The language used needs to accommodate different levels of understanding among students.
- Some of the ‘legal’ language relating to FGM can sound harsh, but it is sometimes necessary to use this language when teaching people about regulation surrounding FGM’

Through our conversations with **representatives from organisations that work with FGM-affected communities**, we have identified a number of issues relating to ways in which language is used in educational and campaign materials relating to FGM. These issues fall into three categories: lack of cultural sensitivity, use of excessively harsh, shocking or otherwise unhelpful language and images, and issues relating to translation.

Culturally Sensitive Communication

- Different language may need to be used when discussing FGM with different audiences; in some communities for example, women may be uncomfortable discussing FGM when men, elders and religious scholars are present.
- There are conflicting views as to whether delivering FGM lessons in single gender groups is more effective than in mixed gender groups.
- Materials sometimes contain a strong emphasis on law and safeguarding, which can work to stigmatise the affected communities
- Communities are sometimes suspicious of ‘professionals’ when they are talking about FGM as they worry about excessive involvement from social services and the police.
- Although it is important to use images when educating people about FGM is important, it is sometimes hard to find materials that do not contain stereotypical portrayals of the affected communities.

Harsh/Unhelpful Language

- Some of the language that is required when talking about FGM can be seen as taboo or offensive to people from the affected communities, especially in mixed gender settings. For example, non-euphemistic terms, such as ‘vagina’ are taboo in some communities.
- Expressions such as ‘mutilation’ itself are sometimes seen as too harsh and may lead to disengagement in the affected communities. One of the professionals who we interviewed reported on how one of the women who she was supporting challenged her with the following words: ‘I’d prefer it if you didn’t say “FGM” because I’m not mutilated’.
- In such cases, euphemistic, more accommodating language may be required.

Translation Issues

- It is important that FGM education materials are translated into the languages used by the communities involved to ensure that it is not presented in an overly ‘western’, and therefore alienating, manner.
- However, various complications arise when key words or phrases are not translated in an appropriate or effective manner. For example:
 - When FGM is translated into other languages, the terms used in those languages are sometimes highly euphemistic or even positive (e.g. circumcision).
 - The Arabic word ‘Sunnah’, which is often used to refer to FGM type one/two, also expresses the idea of ‘a requirement’. This might give the impression that it is an obligatory procedure.

This preliminary study has revealed a number of potential issues that are worthy of further exploration regarding the language that is used in educational and campaign materials relating to FGM. Many of the issues identified in our linguistic analysis arise from the fact that language can never directly express its referents and that there is always a looseness of meaning which is open to different interpretations. The stakeholders raised issues relating to the difficulties in finding language that accords with the ways in which students and communities think and speak about FGM. It is difficult to find language and images that capture the severity of FGM without alienating the students and their communities through the use of language that is too harsh or too blunt.

