



# Susan Bookbinder

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## 23,000 girls in the UK at risk of genital mutilation

**A** FRIEND posted a really kind message on Facebook saying: "You were made for TV and changing the world."

I rarely say it, for fear of sounding delusional, but it has always been my intention to unite my journalism with my campaigning work. But through a cause very dear to my heart, this is actually happening.

For the last 10 years, I have striven to get the harrowing issue of what we now call FGM (female genital mutilation) on the media agenda.

As recently as just over a year ago, my pitches at editorial meetings would be met with a mixture of horror and embarrassment and, in one case, manifested in laughter with words to the effect of, 'please Susan, you can't talk about things like that at break-fast time, people will be spluttering on their cornflakes and retuning'.

The mass media that I have lived and breathed for the last 30 years is ratings-driven, so until recently it seemed impossible that the issue would ever penetrate the conscience of the nation or the world.

Certainly, it is an issue shrouded in secrecy, with young girls, mutilated in their millions across the world and told in no uncertain terms, that they will die if they breathe a word.

Many of them do die. Those who are cut to the roll of drums in rituals carried out by unqualified practitioners with blunt and dirty instruments.

Those who survive are subjected to the most hideous and unfathomable practices, which leave a lifetime of pain, silence and submission.

Some 150 million women worldwide are estimated to be living with the consequences of FGM; alarmingly, 66,000 of them are thought to be in the UK, with 23,000 girls under the age of 15 at risk of it.

Those figures are very likely to be higher, with FGM described as the "hidden phenomenon", due to the taboos within both the communities that practice it and the unfounded fears of treading on cultural or religious sensitivities.

These sensitivities have, for years, unwittingly acted as shields to the mutilators.

But it the last year, these shields are coming down and a quiet revolution is underway. FGM is now a ratings winner and finally we are talking about it.

I am honoured to say that it is a revolution of which I am part and which is gathering pace by the minute, with David Cameron to host a worldwide summit on the issue next month.

I want to tell you how much it means to be on the threshold of seeing real change taking place; change that will improve the lives of women and girls around the



TACKLING FGM: Susan Bookbinder with Dr Mohammed Fahim

world and yes, even save them.

FGM has been illegal in the UK since 1985, but so far there have been no convictions.

The true extent of FGM in the UK is unknown due to the 'hidden' nature of the crime.

The girls may be taken to their countries of origin so that FGM can be carried out during the summer holidays, allowing them

### Circumcision of men is entirely beneficial

time to 'heal' before they return to school.

The Metropolitan Police and other police forces across Britain are working on evidence that girls are undergoing FGM in their thousands across the country.

FGM is an archaic social convention which is often considered a necessary part of raising a girl properly and preparing her for marriage.

Mothers and aunts are known to encourage or force their daughters and nieces to undergo FGM and take part in the rituals surrounding it, believing that the young girls will have a better chance of a good marriage if they

have been cut.

There is also the knowledge that sex before marriage will be further discouraged because of the pain involved in intercourse following any FGM procedure.

FGM is associated with what can only be described as misogynistic ideals of femininity and modesty, including the notion that girls are "clean" and "beautiful" after being cut.

There are no religious scripts prescribing the practice, but the myth that FGM is a Muslim ritual is one which has acted as a very effective barrier to change.

It is a barrier I have seen torn down very effectively by Dr Mohammed Fahim. He is the Metropolitan Police chaplain and head imam of South Woodford and is emphatic on the issue.

"FGM is a crime committed against young women and girls in the name of religion," he said.

Dr Fahim has campaigned against FGM for 30 years and insists: "There is no scripture in the Koran which supports or prescribes FGM. To the contrary there is no authentic Sharia text to approve female circumcision, however it is compulsory in males."

It is a position supported by the British Medical Association and The Muslim Council for Britain.

In a joint statement on Monday they declared: "Some people who practise FGM believe it to be an Islamic practice. This is not true, FGM is not a Muslim requirement".

Dr Fahim is passionate about promoting harmony, cohesion and understanding and leads a Jewish, Muslim and Christian tour of Israel each year.

Being at the forefront of the campaign to end FGM in the UK and being Jewish, people often ask me about what they call 'MGM' (male genital mutilation).

"Isn't male circumcision the same?" they ask. I put this question to Dr Fahim.

"No it is not," he replied. "There are no benefits to the woman, only harm."

"Whereas male circumcision is entirely beneficial. It is cleaner, healthier, due to the non-retention of urine under the foreskin and it can ultimately prevent the risk of cancer. In the woman, it is exactly the opposite."

Smiling, Dr Fahim went on to elude the other benefits of male circumcision . . . which Jewish men and women alike can enjoy.

"Therefore," he continued, "I prefer to call it male genital beautification."

So things are starting to change. Last September, The Royal College of Midwives invited me to chair the Inter Collegiate Symposium — RCM, Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, with the Metropolitan Police.

It led to the powerful report 'Tackling FGM in the UK' launched at the House of Commons in November.

The recommendations within the report were hatched, exchanged and developed at that incredible meeting.

There we heard from an amazing woman called Nimko Ali, who along with Leyla Hussein, formed the FGM survivor's group, Daughters of Eve.

Nimko's story was the heart-breaking, but heroic tale of a little girl who was mutilated, abused, failed, ignored and patronised by every single agency she went to for support.

Social Services, schools, police and GPs; no one wanted to know. The silencing of her Somali community was respected more than her cries for help.

The RCM brought all the agencies together — its own members, the midwives, doctors, nurses, health visitors, teachers, social workers, GPs and the police.

I will never forget the palpable sense of frustration — of caring people with the will and skills to help — facing a minefield of barriers, excuses and disconnection.

There were no systems in place to refer women presenting with FGM in maternity, but there was need to protect their new born daughters from the inevitable mutilation.

The blueprint for a system emerged; to protect women and girls — with a joined up system that starts in maternity and continues through school and university to the grave if necessary.

A system will ensure that an eight-year-old girl like Nimko is never failed, ignored or mutilated again.

The meeting at which Nimko Ali shared her suffering was a catalyst to change and formed the basis of the report launched by Jane Ellison MP at the House of

Commons in November.

Nimko and the many survivors I have met are the bravest women I have ever met. Just by speaking out, they risk their lives and have endured physical and verbal attacks for breaking the silence.

I don't see them as merely survivors. They have changed their victim status to that of warriors; they are the leaders of this movement, which is coming out from the underground and spreading across the world.

Since that meeting, we have seen the barricades coming down and the agencies coming together in the most monumental way.

Last Monday, I chaired the update on that symposium at the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in London.

This time, two government ministers addressed us on the initiatives underway at the Department of Health and the Department of International Development.

Norman Baker MP, Minister of State for Crime Prevention, explained the progress on legislative changes, prosecutions and professional culpability.

Jane Ellison MP is now the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Public Health with Special responsibility for FGM.

She has consistently spoken

### Humbled to be part of this movement

out on FGM and as such is widely respected within the movement. She called it a "revolution".

I must say it is the first time in my life that I have heard any Parliamentarian say that word and somehow it is particularly inspiring to hear a Conservative minister talking in those terms!

In less than a year, we have seen the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Metropolitan police really leading the change, the agencies joining forces to protect and support women and girls and, most significantly, Britain emerging as a world leader in the campaign to eradicate FGM by 2030.

PM Cameron is hosting an international summit on FGM on July 22, which in itself is evidence of the incredible progress made on a subject which only recently was a laughing matter on the editorial breakfast table.

I feel humbled and honoured to have been part of the movement to end FGM. I hope to bring my journalistic work to further this cause in the very near future and yes, change the world.

■ Susan Bookbinder is a journalist, broadcaster and campaigner.

### Sickening vandalism of cemetery

MY grandfather, Percy (Peisach), three of his siblings and my great-grandparents, Hyman and Reisel Bookbinder, are buried in Manchester's Blackley cemetery which was attacked this week.

I don't wish to give any satisfaction to the vile 'people' who carried out this sickening vandalism, but I wish it to be known that it is extremely disturbing that this can take place in 2014.

I hope that Greater Manchester Police find and prosecute those who desecrated the memorials and daubed swastikas on the gravestones of our relatives.



Reisel Bookbinder