



ELFREDA KEBBIE

Engaging Key Communities in Tackling FGM and other Harmful
practices in Bristol

FEBRUARY 21, 2019
FINAL VERSION.

Introduction

Good morning conference.

My name is Elfreda Kebbie. I am a FGM activist, a community volunteer and the chair of the Sierra Women Independent Group (SWIG).

SWIG is a community organisation based in Bristol. We are all female group working to address concerns of women and children in the BAME community in and around Bristol.

I would like to thank Layla and FORWARD for inviting me to address this conference on 'Engaging Key Communities in Tackling FGM and other Harmful practices in Bristol'

Engaging communities in tackling FGM is very important as we are aware that our community like other BAME communities still have girls who are at risk of FGM despite the practise being outlawed in the UK. Parents who still believe in this practice FGM take their children to their home country to undergo FGM.

As some of you may be aware, in June 2018, SWIG hosted a very successful FGM conference in Bristol which brought together community groups and people from different works of life. The theme of the conference was Girls@Risk of FGM and the focus was to highlight or create an awareness of girls at risk in our communities.

I am very proud to say that the conference changed the mind set of some of our members who were finding it very difficult to talk about FGM, because of the cultural barriers and taboo. Most of our members are now talking about the risk of FGM in our meetings. This is the positive impact about our community campaign against FGM.

My personal story

My knowledge and journey into FGM started in my home country.

I am from Sierra Leone in West Africa and in my village my grandmother was the head of the FGM ceremonies. As a six year old growing I had no idea about FGM or that I was to undergo the ceremony myself. The female only secret society was never discussed.

Usually at weekends, my siblings and I would travel to my grandmother's village to visit. I can well remember on a faithful Friday evening, travelling to my grandmother's village with my older sister on what I assumed was a normal visit. Upon arrival, we met some unfamiliar faces of women who were celebrating something unknown to my sister and I. At 5am in the morning, a group of women came to our room singing and chanting in our traditional language and took my sister and I to a bush where I later learned that the FGM ceremony took place. I could see the pain in my mum's face when we left, but her last words to us was " This is our tradition", and she left in tears knowing the gravity of the act. That was the darkest day of my life. I was intimidated and held with my legs wide opened as I was being cut with a blade and left bleeding, in tears and in agony for weeks.

FGM is the worst form of abuse of girls!

FGM is about controlling a girl's sexuality!

FGM is about oppressing girl's body!

Together we can eradicate this barbaric act to our girls.

Engaging our communities

SWIG has taken the lead in educating and creating awareness of FGM within the Sierra Leonean community. We started with the

Girls@Risk conference in 2018 and have made this issue a central theme in our plans for 2019.

How do we engage our members?

- ✓ We speak to parents especially mothers who struggle to talk about FGM because of their cultural and traditional beliefs on the subject matter.
- ✓ We speak to girls who have heard of this term and are unsure of what it means
- ✓ We ensure that members have the space in our meetings and social events to speak up about this subject. It is no longer a taboo.

Our plans for 2019

Ensure members attend FGM conferences and workshops in collaboration with FORWARD, Refugee Women of Bristol, Bristol children's safeguarding board , other community groups and government departments.

Train members who are interested in becoming FGM counsellors and activist like me.

Partner with other communities in Bristol to ensure that the Sierra Leonean community is part of the discussions and the solutions.

Challenges we face as a volunteer organisation

We face the following challenges when tackling a culturally sensitive issue like FGM

Financial!

Launching and sustaining an FGM campaign requires funds. We were able to secure funding for the Girls@Risk conference in 2018 from Big Lottery and are looking for additional funding this year to continue to implement our programs.

Cultural!

How do we change the narrative which we usually encounter that an FGM campaign is an attack on our communities, for example, the Sierra Leonean culture and tradition.

Our first Lady, the president's wife of Sierra Leone, gave an interview yesterday and when asked about FGM her reply was that it is not a priority for her and she underwent the same treatment and could not find any issue with FGM.

Also, when I lunched my website two days ago, as a FGM activist and a community volunteer, some of my community members text me and asked why I am campaigning against my culture and tradition? that I have been brain washed by the west to abandon my culture and tradition.

My reply to such question is simple.

I love my culture as a Sierra Leonean and there is a great difference between the rich culture of Sierra Leone and act of FGM. This why I am campaigning against the act of FGM.

Sustainability!

How sustainable are our campaigns. How do we ensure our members or a new executive does not deprioritise FGM as a key campaign

Training!

How do we ensure we have the resources and expertise to train members

Partnerships!

How do we find partners within our BAME communities in Bristol with shared experiences and goals.

Conclusion

In conclusion I am positive and hopeful that conferences like this ensure that FGM is at the top of the agenda for our communities. By participating we are able to educate, sensitize and

I would like everyone to leave this conference with *one idea! one thought! and one action!* that we as a community can do to ensure that FGM is eradicated.

In Mende there is a saying “.....?” which means ‘United we stand to eradicate FGM’.

Thank you for listening

Elfreda

Timetable

Date	Task	Responsibility	Rag
17 February 2018	Kick off	Elfreda/Delwyn	Completed
18 February 2018	Speech structure	Delwyn	Completed
19 February 2018	1 st draft	Elfreda	Completed
20 February 2018	Review 1 st draft	Elfreda/Delwyn	Completed
21 February 2018	2 nd draft	Elfreda	N/A
22 February 2018	2 nd draft	Elfreda	N/A
23 February 2018	Review 2 nd draft	Elfreda/Delwyn	In progress
24 February 2018	Final draft	Elfreda	
25 February 2018	Review final draft	Elfreda/Delwyn	
26 February 2018	Practice speech	Elfreda	
27 February 2018	CONFERENCE		

