

Workstream 2: Culture & Faith (Beliefs)

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The focus of the **B-MAG Culture, Faith or Beliefs** workstream is the safeguarding of children and young people, including, though not limited to those impacted by mental health, language, domestic abuse, disabilities, exploitation, and trafficking, in addition to safeguarding priorities affecting BME and migrant communities such as FGM, witchcraft & spirit possession, and radicalism.

This workstream report provides an update for 2019 and the contributions of advisory group members to these key objectives;

a) To review and evaluate cases which include PREVENT processes and assess the implications for practice within BME families.

The impact on children has been at the heart of work with families linked to radicalism, where safeguarding processes have encouraged wider debate as to political influence on such cases amid an increasingly hostile environment for social care practice.

Through its legally-based advocacy casework service, VCF – The Victoria Climbié Foundation UK supports a number of families navigating safeguarding processes and beyond, to assist practitioner awareness or to educate within the community. In the majority of VCF cases, parents have exercised their rights to opt out of the voluntary PREVENT programme – which seeks to reform and educate those deemed to be radicalised or supporters of extremist behaviours – particularly where safeguarding concerns have been addressed.

*A seminar entitled *The impact of anti-radicalisation policies on safeguarding practice with children, young people and parents* was held in April 2019. A key question was the suggestion of racial bias implicit in the aims and methods of the policy that affects institutions – in health, education and social care – interacting with and responsible for children.*

A wider study planned for publication in 2020/21, will include summary detail for these cases (some still pending closure), including the impact on affected children, the role of advocacy within child protection, and recommendations for children's services interacting with BME families. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the practice model has not changed in recent years in relation to extremely sensitive safeguarding issues and there remains a lack of effective engagement with the relevant communities and the notion of 'hard to reach'.

b) To promote current knowledge and understanding of FGM and witchcraft and spirit possession, together and separately

Opportunities to promote current knowledge and understanding of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) have increased dramatically for the government-funded national FGM Centre which now includes child abuse linked to faith or belief within its remit; this, in itself has not led to further exploration of possible links between witchcraft, spirit possession, and FGM although there has been fairly extensive work undertaken to-date on accusations of all faith-based abuse. What is being explored is the link between FGM and the underlying issues of domestic abuse, not specifically being addressed within the Violence against Women and Girls policy initiative.

In reporting back to the group, B-MAG members presenting their work at a witchcraft seminar in Lancashire; a 2-day event aimed at a global audience; have been heartened by the UN's continuing to move this topic forward in discussions – particularly the scale of human rights abuses involving harmful practices related to certain beliefs in witchcraft – towards a global definition for witchcraft and spirit possession, commonly known as abuse linked to faith or belief in this country.

Laura Hamblin (PhD student at UEL) presented aspects of her research to determine how it fits within the U.N. Harmful Practices framework. For example, in some of her research cases, children had not been abused yet they had been impacted by parental beliefs.

Leethen Bartholomew (Head, National FGM Centre) attended UK-based panels, which presented differing approaches, some more maverick than others particularly in relation to work around albinism in Tanzania. One of the key concerns, particularly for albinos, is focused around elections; these present a heightened risk of child sacrifice.

However, this is not confined to Tanzania; a similar prospect awaits children in West Africa, during elections in Senegal, particularly the Talibés (street children). Thus, we may need to consider international legislation to attract UN interest.

Advisory group members worked alongside statutory agencies and educators to assist understanding of faith-based abuse; these include such activities as providing input on a policing degree (Laura Hamblin, PhD student at UEL) and delivering training to constables involved in a case of a pastor using 'bath cleansing' to sexually abuse children (Amma Anane-Agyei, African Families Service) and submission of a chapter on Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief for the University of Nottingham who are revising their child protection handbook (Dr Mor Dioum/Dr Stephanie Yorath, VCF).

c) To examine the recent census of cases of witchcraft and spirit possession data to explore implications for practice

Whilst there is a growing body of work and research to inform safeguarding policies and guidance, there is still scope for greater understanding of the nature of local authority recorded cases of witchcraft or spirit possession, more commonly defined as Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief (CALFB).

The most recent Children in Need Census (2018-19) indicates an increase in the numbers of recorded cases (for witchcraft and FGM). Yet there are issues with these recorded figures; namely that (1) the information is provided by practitioners in child in need and child protection cases, and not necessarily being reported by children and families who may be reluctant to speak to children's services, (2) the census contains a significant volume of statistical data yet difficult to obtain information behind the numbers, and (3) the need for examination of the recorded data for abuse linked to faith or belief.

A seminar entitled *Child Abuse linked to Faith or Belief; where do we go from here?* held 30 April 2019, further highlighted and debated these concerns. See the **B-MAG Seminar Series** section of this document.

Various written outputs (blogs/announcements) are available from the B-MAG website and were also distributed across social media and member networks.

In providing an update to the advisory group in January 2020, Dr Lisa Oakley, Chair of the National Working Group on Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief identified areas of potential collaboration for the year ahead – informed by work being undertaken by advisory group individuals or organisations with similar aims – in event delivery,

publications and co-representation of the issues relating to this topic, including wider examination of data.

d) To communicate the impact of current legislation and policy on FGM to improve understanding of the issues in practice

On 1st February 2019, we saw the first conviction of FGM in this country since the introduction of legislation in 1989, updated in 2003 and again in 2015. Considered to be a landmark case, involving the mother of a 3-year-old child, it was important to consider the impact of this conviction and why it was applauded, raising concerns and the need for wider reflection. Leethen Bartholomew (National FGM Centre) and Toks Okeniyi (FORWARD) contributed to the continuing debate with written responses from their perspectives.

As a group, there is a view that there are unanswered questions amid other contributory factors within this case, including the importance of following the right processes, with FORWARD citing the Bristol case and undue haste and desire to get a conviction, and from VCF's perspective the discrepancy between findings in the family and criminal courts; an emerging trend as this is the second known case in recent times where an individual condemned in the family court has gone on to be cleared of criminal charges.

A positive measure for those in need of support and counselling for FGM reversal procedures, was the launch of 6 specialist FGM clinics on 10th September 2019. Fatuma Farah is delivering psychotherapeutic support in Brent, alongside her PhD studies on FGM and will be able to report on developments in due course.

In summary, this workstream will continue its efforts in support of the group's overall priorities to highlight the needs and the quality of care for children, young people and families, within the contexts of their cultural values and beliefs.

Strategic objectives for 2020 building on those set in 2019, are to:

1. Monitor, comment upon and communicate concerning developments in practice and policy regarding cases of witchcraft and spirit possession, including CIN census data (to explore implications for practice, including the prevalence across ethnicities)
2. Actively communicate widely and effectively to promote good practice for cases involving witchcraft and spirit possession, based on current knowledge and understanding
3. Actively communicate widely current practice including developments and findings for FGM reversals within NHS supported clinics, alongside therapeutic and holistic approaches
4. Further explore links between FGM and other policy areas including witchcraft and spirit possession, mental health and domestic abuse cases
5. Build collaborations nationally and internationally