

University secures funding to help combat female genital mutilation

Coventry University is set to lead a Europe-wide project which aims to put an end to the illegal practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), after it was awarded funding to continue research into the issue.

The University has secured funding to head up the European Commission-backed REPLACE II initiative, which will see academics from its Faculty of Business, Environment and Society and the Applied Research Centre in Health and Lifestyle Interventions working with communities affected by FGM in a bid to end the practice across the EU.

Representatives from organisations in six European nations – UK, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands – gathered in Coventry this week to share knowledge and training expertise, and to continue the work of a successful pilot initiative, REPLACE I, which developed a highly-acclaimed toolkit aimed at supporting people who wished to put a stop to the practice of FGM in their communities.

Funded through the European Commission's Daphne III programme, REPLACE II will run for two years and will evaluate the effectiveness of the toolkit developed in the pilot scheme.

The team at Coventry University – headed by Professor Hazel Barrett and Dr Katherine Brown – will collaborate with women's rights charity FORWARD UK in Britain to engage migrant communities originally from Somalia, Ghana and other African regions where FGM is a centuries-old 'custom', in an attempt to understand how to fight the problem more effectively.

A recent government report indicated that as many as 66,000 women in the UK could be living with the consequences of FGM, and that over 20,000 girls under the age of 15 years are at high risk of falling victim to the practice each year.

The issue was put in the public spotlight on primetime TV for the first time last week through the BBC drama *Casualty*, which featured a storyline about a teenage girl who had been subject to FGM trying to protect her younger sister from being forced to have the procedure.

Professor Hazel Barrett from Coventry University said:

“Over the last couple of years there has been some progress in raising awareness of the issue of FGM in Europe, but prevalence rates in the UK and EU remain unacceptably high, and whilst in most EU countries FGM is illegal, few successful convictions have been secured, with none in the UK. As a consequence, many girls and young women in the UK and EU are subject to the abuse and violence of FGM and have to live with the physical and mental consequences for the rest of their lives.

“FGM is embedded in long-standing cultural traditions and is a central tenet of female sexuality in FGM practising groups and is reinforced by overwhelming community support and pressure. The drivers perpetuating the practice are little understood and vary between FGM practising groups. This makes it difficult to tackle FGM using standard public health intervention tools. We hope that REPLACE II, which takes an innovative community-based socio-behavioural change approach to ending FGM will help to change behaviours and attitudes towards FGM.

“The funding from the European Commission’s Daphne Programme for the REPLACE II project is an enormous boost to our quest to understand and tackle the drivers of FGM and to develop a new approach to ending FGM. We look forward to this first meeting of experts in Coventry paving the way for the eradication of FGM in the EU.”

To learn more about the REPLACE II project please visit www.replacefgm.eu.

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For further information, please contact Alex Roache, external press and media relations officer, Coventry University, on 024 7679 5050 or email alex.roache@coventry.ac.uk.