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A human rights approach to training and campaigning to end Female Genital Mutilation

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Subject: FGM video footage and photo-images

Dear ,

The Centre for Applied Childhood studies at the University of Huddersfield asserts a belief in fundamental inalienable human rights and in the inherent dignity and worth of children. We have a particular interest in the needs of children, women and families and in human rights protection. In contacting you, we have given great consideration to outstanding work being done towards ending Female Genital Mutilation by organisations and organisational bodies, such as yours. We fully support these efforts and the potential changes to practices and policy they may bring about.

We want to draw attention to the practice of using video footage and photo-images of FGM being carried out on children and young people. Some organisations in the UK do this as part of awareness raising including, but not limited to, training programmes, through media outlets, as teaching tools and in website campaigns. We recognise this is not the approach of all agencies working on this issue but we are asking all organisations to support our call to reconsider the practice of using video footage and photo-images of FGM being carried out.

As a Centre concerned with raising awareness on a host of issues, including child abuse and gender-based violence, we understand that there are a number of good intentions and considered reasons why video-footage and photo-images might be being used. However, we are concerned about the ethical issues involved in this approach and its contradiction with the human rights principles to which we all subscribe. Our concerns are based on a number of factors which we would like considered:

- However well intended, showing video-footage and photo-images of child abuse can be seen as a form of re-abusing that child. In films that we have seen, the child's face is often recognisable- further victimising the child.
- The issue of 'child' consent is an argument frequently used 'against' FGM. Using video-footage and photo-images of child abuse and torture takes place without consent and can be seen as an exploitation of the child. We suggest that circulating video-footage and photo-images of child abuse and torture silences the child further. Furthermore, child consent to video and photograph their abuse and torture is simply impossible and as such, we suggest it becomes an issue of serious ethical concern.
- We note that over the years there has been a particular use of gender-based violence video-footage and photo-images in training events, media outlets and websites across the UK. These seem to have almost exclusively been about FGM. Training on other areas of gender-based violence (e.g. 'corrective' rape, honour crimes) does not appear to use this approach. As such, this isolates FGM out from other forms of gender-based violence. This is a risky strategy for awareness-raising because all forms of gender-based violence and torture are a violation of human rights.
- The women carrying out FGM on children are frequently recognisable in the video-footage and photo-images; under UK law this results in potentially criminalising those women and may also lead to other sources of risk to them and their families.
- Watching child abuse and torture can be shocking, disturbing and potentially traumatises audiences. Viewing torture is classified as a form of torture and is widely documented by refugees who have frequently been forced to watch atrocities as a way to intimidate and make them feel helpless. Traumatizing (secondary trauma) individuals may result in paralysing them to take any further action and make

individuals feel very helpless rather than powerful to act. We doubt that this is the intention of the film-makers, campaigners, organisations and trainers agendas.

- The objectification and 'othering' of the children being abused is reinforced by video-footage and photo-images taken in countries outside of the UK. As a result, rather than affirming within the UK that action needs to be taken and that UK children are also at risk, the video-footage and photo-images suggest this is a practice that happens in countries far away to children we do not 'recognise'. The result may be that because FGM takes places 'far way' audiences feel it is not necessarily the concern or business of UK citizens and people living in the UK.

To offer clarity about our intentions - the Centre for Applied Childhood Studies undertakes research and policy and practice development which contribute to the well-being of children, young people and families nationally and globally. We use evidence based knowledge and perspectives to strengthen the capacity of families and promote the fullest development of all children. We have extensive experience of promoting rights and freedoms that enable social progress and better standards of life for all children and families, including those affected by immigration controls. We strongly oppose FGM and want to see the end of this gender-based practice against women and girls. We support work being done to eradicate FGM, but we are asking for a change in practice whereby all organisations work to stop the use of video-footage and photo-images of children being abused and tortured regardless of the intention.

We hope we have been clear that our aims may be similar to you own organisation. Please find below a list of the organisations to which this letter has also been sent. Please feel free to pass this letter onto organisations that you think this request may affect.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Adele Jones, Director of the Centre for Applied Childhood Studies.
Kate Smith, Lead on Asylum and Migration Practice and Research, Centre for Applied Childhood Studies.