

## **Don't be a Bystander Campaign – \*Sarah's Story**

When Sarah came to Wales with her husband in 2013, leaving her 8 month old daughter with her family and community in Nigeria, she did not know just how life-changing the move would be for her and her family. Sarah is a mother to three children, a boy and two girls and is a survivor of female genital mutilation (FGM). FGM is the partial or total removal of external female genitalia and is illegal in the UK. Women suffer lasting effects of FGM including importantly for Sarah, complications when giving birth.

Growing up in Nigeria, FGM was common in Sarah's community, the traditional beliefs and practices were so instilled that it was something that every girl endured. Crucially, Sarah did not know that the practice was called FGM.

Therefore, when a midwife asked Sarah if she had ever been subjected to FGM, she did not understand the question at first. Wondering what the midwife meant, Sarah asked her to explain further. It was not until the midwife took the time to explain what FGM is and talked to Sarah about its effects, particularly on pregnancy, that she recognised her own experience.

Sarah sees this conversation as pivotal and the beginning of her story in many ways. Her midwife was the first person who had spoken to her of FGM and she found it difficult to understand what she was trying to explain. She did not realise that what had happened to her was not practiced more widely within other communities. It was a very difficult and emotional conversation, Sarah said:

"I was confused and got upset and angry, it wasn't what I was expecting, in our culture women who are not cut are seen as unclean. I tried to walk away and as I did I was asked by the receptionist, "are you ok?" Thankfully, she helped me to calm down as she realised that I wasn't myself at the time I left the midwife's room and I did want to talk to my midwife. Even though it must have been difficult for her too, she was understanding and helped me."

Since that first step, others have also helped Sarah and her family:

"I was put in touch with the people at \*\*Bawso and they started elaborating more on the issues that I face and helped me with advice and gave me a lot of encouragement that has helped me develop resilience and keep strong. They also directed me to the local council and social services for help and support."

There are still a number of issues that Sarah and her family face. There are difficult relationships with extended family because of the decisions they have made. She brought her daughter to Wales so that she would not be cut after she came to realise what had been done to her. These decisions were really difficult but protecting her daughters is Sarah's priority and the intervention from her midwife means that she now feels really strongly that she must protect her daughters from the practice.

Sarah is especially grateful to those who have supported her:

"I wish I could see those people from the start again, especially my midwife, so that I could say thank you to them. I deeply appreciate their patience, language and tone

when they were helping me, even though at the time I might not have shown that. Most people have been helpful and supportive, there have been some who didn't seem to understand, hopefully, the more awareness is raised that will help develop more understanding about issues around FGM and its effects on people's lives.

FGM is one of the worst abuses and it should not be done to any woman or girl.

I wish the people who helped me could see the impact on mine and my family's lives, I wish they could see the confidence they have given me. I would like them to see how happy I am day to day, my children are not going to go through this, I am a survivor."

Sarah feels passionately that FGM is an abuse against women and child abuse and is sharing her experience as part of the 'Don't be a Bystander' campaign to raise awareness and to help stop FGM.

\*Name has been changed

\*\* Bawso is an all Wales voluntary organisation, providing specialist services to victims and BME people affected or at risk of domestic abuse and all forms of violence including:

Female Genital Mutilation,

Forced Marriage,

Honour Based Violence and

Human Trafficking.

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