Female Genital Mutilation victim opens up about her horrific experience and how she helps others cope

Aisha, from Edinburgh, was just six when she was forced to undergo the barbaric operation.

BY ANNIE BROWN
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Aisha was taken to Sudan when she was six to undergo FGM (Photo: Daily Record)

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Aisha was six when she was taken to Sudan to be “cut”.

She recalls sitting in a sun-soaked yard, in a huddle of chattering women and little girls, dressed in new party frocks.

In front was an outhouse with two green doors and from one emerged a little girl, unconscious and soaked in blood.

Aisha said: “I thought they had slaughtered her. I thought she was dead.”

Aisha, 43, is now part of Edinburgh’s expanding Sudanese community and is working with Bright Choices, a service offering hope to all victims of honour-based violence (HBV), which includes female genital mutilation.

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Angela Voulgari leads Bright Choices for SACRO which works with FGM victims (Photo: Daily Record)

She is both translator and cultural adviser with the support project, which was set up by Sacro, Edinburgh and Lothians Regional Equality Council and the charity Multi-Cultural Family Base.

With funding from the Big Lottery, Bright Choices was established following a rise in HBV and in - consultation with Police Scotland.

In a recent survey of 300 residents from the black and ethnic minority communities in Edinburgh, 63 per cent said honour abuse was a part of their family's belief system.

More than half said "honour" would prevent them reporting a crime to the police.

Up-to-date figures are not available but police dealt with 41 reported incidents in 2012, compared with 31 in the previous two years combined.

Aisha came to Scotland in 2002 after an arranged marriage to her widowed cousin, who was living in Edinburgh. She had come through a divorce and the trauma of a stillbirth.

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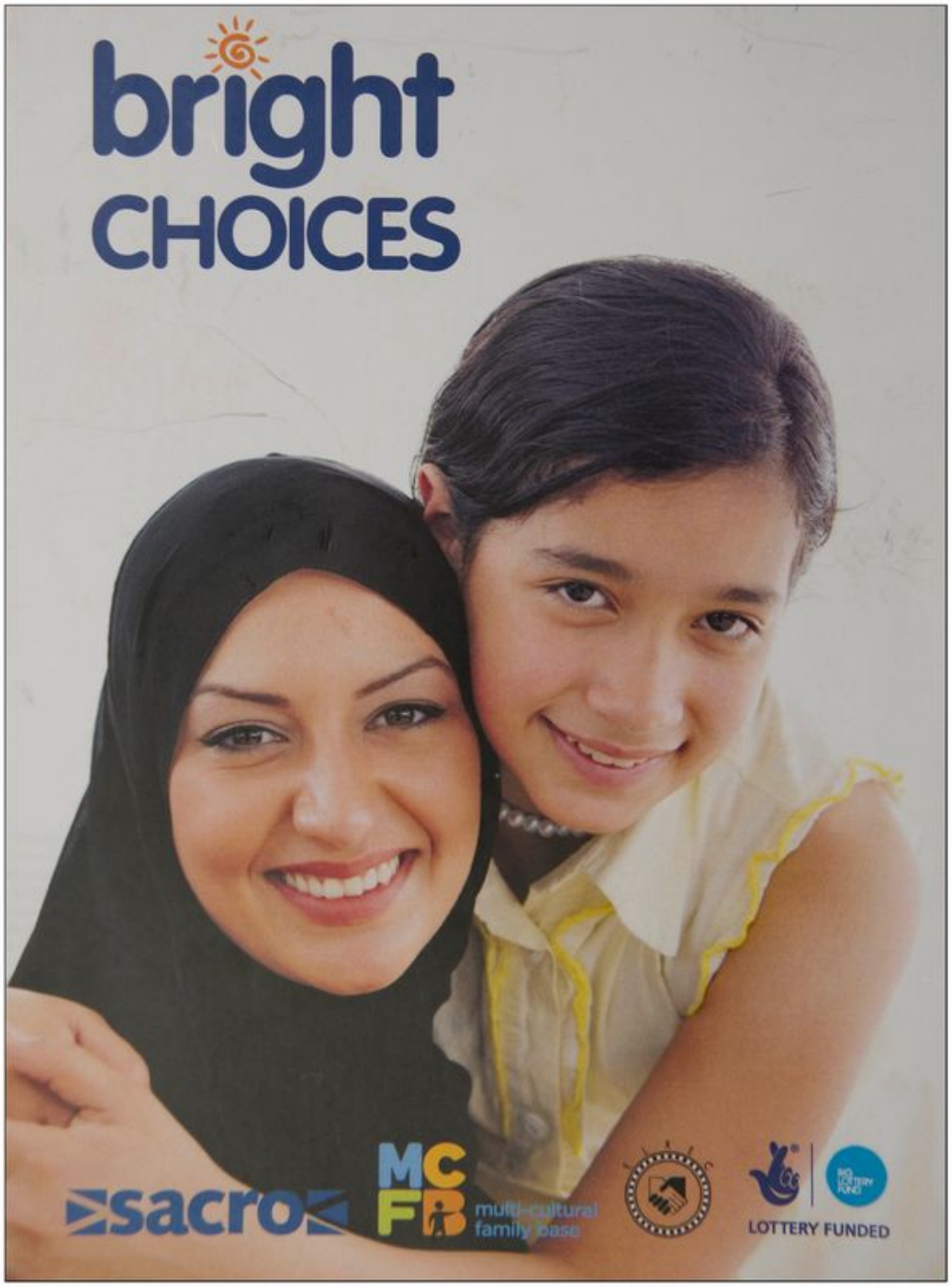

Support group Bright Choices works with all victims of honour based violence

A dentist, she came from a conservative, wealthy family in Sudan and was raised in Saudi Arabia.

When she was six, her mother took her on “holiday” to Sudan, with her cousin, to undergo FGM.

Aisha, as is often the case, was told she was going to a party and she was excited when her mother bought her a pretty, colourful new dress.

There is a “season” when girls travel to a mass circumcision ceremony. The girls are feted like brides, taken to the hairdresser, their hands painted with henna and they are given gifts of money.

In Sudan, Aisha and her cousin were taken to the home of the “cutter” and she was excited by the festive, party atmosphere.

Aisha’s mother chose not to go but her aunt was there with Aisha’s cousin.

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Aisha said: “There were so many girls and women and it seemed happy.

“Then we heard loud screaming but couldn’t tell where it was coming from above the chatter of the crowd. Then I noticed my cousin had gone.”

When she saw a child appear from the hut, limp and her dress saturated in blood, she panicked and ran.

She sprinted towards a nearby river and was about to jump, just as the women caught her.

She said: “I was struggling but I was so little. I just wanted to escape. My mother was not there and I thought they must have lied to her about where I was going.”

They dragged her back to the yard and from the hut her cousin emerged screaming, her dress soaked in red.

Aisha was pulled into the shed and there was a flood of fear when she saw the razors and scissors.

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Women affected by FGM come from many regions, including Sudan, Ethiopia, Gambia and Kenya.

She was pushed to the ground, her pants pulled off and stuffed in her mouth to muffle her cries.

She said: “I couldn’t breathe. The pain was so terrible that I passed out. The pain was like nothing else, far worse than labour.”

She woke first in a taxi, then on a beach where women splashed her with water until she came round.

Aisha was confused. She said: “They told me that I was now a bride but bride of what?”

When she returned to the family’s house, nothing was said between her and her mother.

Aisha said: “My aunt complained when I filled the toilet with blood. The physical pain was horrible. The emotional pain remains, always.”

FGM leads to many complications, painful menstrual cycles, recurring urinary tract infections and the development of abscesses, cysts, or hardening of scars within and around the genital area.

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Aisha developed a cyst after the cutter wrongly sewed the skin to the muscle.

When she attended a gynaecologist in Saudi Arabia, she was advised not to remove it until after marriage in case her husband thought she wasn't a virgin.

She said: "Removing the cyst would mean losing my life because I would be killed if my husband did not believe I was a virgin."

On her wedding night, the pain of sex was so violent that she compared it with rape and she bled heavily.

Now in Edinburgh, she will have surgery to reverse the mutilation, a procedure which has already restored some sense of the self taken from her.

FGM is only one of many types of honour-based violence.

About 40 per cent of those referred to Bright Choices have been affected by FGM and it provides therapeutic and practical support to survivors, including trauma counselling and help accessing appropriate healthcare and medication.

Those affected are of many religions, including Muslims and Christians, from Sudan, Ethiopia, Gambia, Kenya and Sierra Leone.

The service also trains frontline professionals and third sector workers about how to recognise and respond to HBV.

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It has outreach projects in local high schools focusing on FGM and other HBV.

In the year since its foundation, Bright Choices has had 32 referrals from frontline staff, including health visitors.