



The relation between the elimination of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The 2030 Agenda and its centrepiece, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all and form part of a unique, universal and historical call to action to end poverty, inequalities, protect the planet and ensure that everyone can enjoy a peaceful, just and sustainable future. The goals interconnect and in order to *leave no one behind*, each goal must be successfully implemented, and governments held accountable for their success. In order to achieve [all 17 goals](#) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the time is now to address some of the most severe forms of human rights violation that endure to this day, including **FGM**.

FGM: an extreme violation of the female body (SDG 3)



Through its different targets, SDG 3 notably highlights the need to reduce global maternal mortality, end preventable deaths of new-borns and children under five years and ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care service. Yet, the achievement of the aforementioned targets is severely jeopardized by the continuation of the practice of FGM.

FGM has no health benefits and harms women and girls in many ways. It involves removing and damaging healthy and normal female genital tissue and interferes with the natural functions of girls' and women's bodies. Immediate complications can include severe pain, shock, haemorrhage (bleeding), tetanus or sepsis, urine retention and injury to nearby genital tissue. Long term consequences can include recurrent bladder and urinary track infections, cysts, infertility, increased risk of childbirth complications and new-born deaths and the need for later surgeries.

Although the practice of FGM cannot be justified by any medical reasons, in many countries it is executed more and more often by medical professionals. Recent data analysis reported by the United Nations, shows that more than 18% of all girls and women who have been subjected to FGM have had the procedure performed by a health-care provider. In some countries, this rate is as high as 74%. Not only does it mean that medical professionals are actively participating in a deeply harmful and needless aggression girls' body's; this also constitutes one of the greatest threats to the abandonment of the practice.

FGM: a harmful practice reflecting deeply-entrenched gender equality (SDG 5, SDG 10)



The furthering of the practice of FGM across the world poses an insurmountable barrier to the achievement of SDG5, "*Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*" and also SDG10, "*Reduce inequality within and among countries*".

In every society in which it is practiced, FGM reflects deeply entrenched gender inequalities and is often used as a way to control girls and women. Since it is such a powerful social norm, many families have their daughters cut



despite the risk of death and lifelong health complications in fear of social harassment and ostracism. Thus, FGM constitutes a violent and outdated embodiment of deeply-rooted gender inequality and a severe form of violence against women. Violence against women remains one of the most pervasive global human rights violations and is condemned through several international instruments including the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, the International Convention for the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The SDGs explicitly call for an end to FGM by 2030 under goal 5 on Gender Equality, which includes includes Target 5.3 to “eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation” and an indicator and indicator 5.3.2 “Percentage of girls and women aged 15-49 who have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting, by age group”.

Furthermore, as a severe barrier to women’s and girls’ right to education, independence and empowerment, FGM’s consequences go far beyond than the victims themselves and also negatively impact their communities as whole by reducing their potential for development, growth and reduced inequalities. This, consequently, holds back achievements related to SDG 10 which aims to reduce income inequality and progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average¹.



FGM: a severe barrier to girls’ and women’s education with far reaching consequences (SDG 4)



The continuation of the practice of FGM severely impacts the achievement of SDG 4 “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. Through its different targets, SDG 4 notably aims to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical and tertiary education, including university and eliminate gender disparities in education at all levels².

FGM is non-only an extreme violation of human rights, it is also an unsurmountable barrier to girls’ and women’s education in many parts of the world. As a violent rite of passage into womanhood and often prerequisite for marriage, FGM prevents girls from fully exercising their right to education. Women and girls who have suffered through FGM are more prone to be subjected to early and forced marriage, early pregnancies and are more likely to drop out of school early.

This contributes to the fact that women make up more than two-thirds of the world’s illiterate people and prevents women and girls from building a better future for themselves through the transformational power of education. Indeed, the positive correlation between education and overall development is well established. Every additional year of primary school increases girls' eventual wages by 10-20 percent; it also positively impacts their chance to remain healthy, encourages them to marry later and have fewer children, and leaves them less vulnerable to violence. The gains brought by through women’s and girls’ access to education are also proven to beneficiate their communities

¹ Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform, SDG 10, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg10>

² Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform, SDG 4 <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg4>



and the next generations: A child whose mother can read is 50% more likely to live past the age of five, 50% more likely to be immunized, and twice as likely to attend school. Consequently, when girls and women are denied education the whole community suffers.

The link between FGM and education is also crucial in the way that education is a key component for the elimination of the practice. Education significantly supports changes in traditional gender roles and helps reach the individual who practice FGM in order to explain the negative consequences of the practice. Teaching young girls and boys alike, as well as teachers, parents and community leaders about the dangers of FGM is a powerful tool in changing public opinion and reversing the trend. Furthermore, research reported by the International Center for Research on Women³ shows that women are less likely to have their daughters cut as their level of education rises. In addition, a higher level of education also makes fathers less likely to support FGM. Education exposes all students to a variety of different ideas and concept that will significantly broaden their worldview, allowing them to make more informed decisions regarding their own reproductive health and agency.

FGM: a critical violation of women's rights (SDG 16)



The continuation of the practice of FGM also negatively impacts the achievement of SDG 16, “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”. As a blatant manifestation of gender-based discrimination and violence perpetrated on women and girls in their very young age, FGM goes against the realisation of SDG Target 16.1 “significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere” and SDG Target 16.2, “end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence and torture of children”. Furthermore, considering how FGM continues to be practiced in communities where FGM has been legally made illegal and punishable by law, the perpetration of this harmful practice further jeopardizes the realisation of SDG Target 16.3, “Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all. SDG 16 further endeavours to allow every individual to freely access information about and protection of their fundamental rights from any form of violation, including FGM. Five articles from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights form a basis to condemn FGM:

- article 2 on discrimination,
- article 3 concerning the right to security of person,
- article 5 on cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment,
- article 12 on privacy
- article 25 on the right to a minimum standard of living and protection of motherhood.

³ International Center for Research on Women, LEVERAGING EDUCATION TO END FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION/CUTTING WORLDWIDE, <https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/ICRW-WGF-Leveraging-Education-to-End-FGMC-Worldwide-November-2016-FINAL.pdf>



Eliminating FGM and achieving the SDGs: a shared necessity for partnership throughout all societal levels.

17 PARTNERSHIPS
FOR THE GOALS



The elimination of FGM shares with SDG 17, “*Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development*” a shared emphasis on the crucial need to bring together all forces towards their achievement. Indeed, while state responsibility and action in the fight for the elimination of this extreme form of discrimination against women and girls is undeniable, the full spectrum of actors from political and civil society have a crucial role to play in that fight.

FGM is most prevalent in heavily patriarchal societies, where the custodians of traditions and culture - the elders, the religious authorities and community leaders- are the main decisionmakers. It is, thus, crucial to engage community and spiritual leaders, along with elders and other respected authority figures, in the quest for the promotion of girls' education and the elimination of harmful practices such as FGM. GWI understands that it is only by changing the mindset of these communities and altering the status quo that positive change for girls will be realized. GWI, therefore, calls for coordinated and systematic efforts and the engagement of whole communities to promote the abandonment of FGM.

GWI advocates for the total elimination of FGM through tough legislative actions and the implementation of community led solutions where local actors and leaders are fully engaged and approached with cultural respect. Actions to end FGM must be sensitive to the community's socio-cultural background enabling the communities to realize that it is possible to give up hurtful practices without renouncing their distinctive cultural traits. Indeed, local structures of power and authority, such as community leaders, religious leaders, circumcisers, and even some medical personnel can contribute to upholding the practice and must thus in turn, be transformed into the driving force for its elimination.

Eliminating FGM: a crucial step towards the development of just and safe and more modern societies (SDG 1, SDG 2)

1 NO
POVERTY



FGM involves costs at all level of society, including deeply negative social and monetary costs, which place burdens on personal, household, community and state economies. It has been proven that FGM is linked to low levels of economic development⁴, notably due to the way that this practice contributes to robbing women and girls from opportunities for personal development, growth and independence.

As a consequence, the continuation of the practice of FGM jeopardises the achievement of crucial SDGs such as SDG1, End Poverty in all its forms everywhere, SDG2, end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote *sustainable agriculture*⁵, and SDG8,

⁴ ActionAid, ow FGM is linked to poverty and other forms of violence, <https://www.actionaid.org.uk/blog/news/2014/03/18/how-female-genital-mutilation-is-linked-to-poverty-and-other-forms-of-violence>

⁵ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/foodagriculture>



*promote sustained inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.*⁶

FGM directly affects women's ability to contribute to a country's economic development and as a result deprives their households from their contribution, whilst the community as a whole is in turn deprived of women's active economic participation and from the positive returns of women's and girl's education. Indeed, it has been proven that empowering women and girls yields undeniable returns. According to Global Partnership for Education, a dollar invested in an additional year of schooling, particularly for girls, generates earnings and health benefits of \$10 USD in low-income countries and nearly \$4 USD in lower-middle income countries⁷. Additionally, when women work, they invest 90 percent of their income into their families, compared with 35 percent for men.⁸



When women subjected to gender-based violence and manifestations of gender inequality such as FGM, they are more likely to drop out of school and are drawn into early and forced marriage. They are thus left financially dependent on men and are more vulnerable to poverty (SDG1) and hunger (SDG2).

About GWI

Graduate Women International (GWI) is a membership-based international NGO based in Geneva, Switzerland, with presence in over 60 countries. Founded in 1919, GWI is the leading girls' and women's global organisation advocating for women's rights, equality and empowerment through access to quality education and training up to the highest levels. GWI is in special consultative status with ECOSOC since 1947 and is an NGO maintaining official relations with UNESCO and ILO. www.graduatewomen.org

GWI operates with a small yet dedicated staff consisting of an Executive Director, a Junior Office Administrator, and a host of committed interns. Further, our work is possible only with the support of our tireless Board of Directors.

Stacy Dry Lara, Executive Director, sdl@graduatewomen.org

Clémence Mathiaud, Junior Office Administrator, cm@graduatewomen.org

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/sustainable-development/goal8_en

⁷ Global Partnership for Education, Education Data, <https://www.globalpartnership.org/data-and-results/education-data>

⁸ <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures>