
Invest in African women as agents of change in the global movement to end FGM

Nimco Ali OBE, Co-Founder of The Five Foundation, The Global Partnership To End FGM

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a devastating form of violence, and a severe human rights abuse, which has affected over 200 million women and girls around the world. It can have extreme medical consequences such as fistula, infertility, problems urinating, menstruating or giving birth. It can also have lifelong psychological consequences, and can even kill as we have seen on many occasions in recent years.

As an FGM survivor myself – and a women’s rights activist for over a decade – I have seen how those who achieve the most in terms of changing hearts and minds are always from affected communities. Violence against women is sadly a global pandemic but it needs to be ended locally, from the roots up. The top-down approach can disempower women and reduce the potential for grassroots-based women’s groups to build up their own skills and capabilities.

My FGM happened in Djibouti when I was 7 years old. I was betrayed back then directly – but I was failed again a second time as I was not given the support or understanding I needed from my teacher back in the UK when I told her what had happened. While FGM itself could have killed me, my life was put in jeopardy again at age 11, when I had a serious kidney infection, at which point I was also de-infibulated, which means

some of the damage caused by FGM was undone. Since then I tell people that I have survived FGM – and I have made it my mission to do all I can to end it in this generation.

We have achieved a lot in the last decade, particularly in the UK, but there is still much more to do. 70 million girls are at risk of FGM between now and 2030 – so we need to get this right. High population growth in areas of the world where FGM is most prevalent means that we are working uphill all the time. For the most part, the route to success means changing who we fund – and in what way. We have heard time and time again how foundations and other donors are trying to listen and ‘do better’, but in reality this has not always happened. To be blunt, we have also seen that donors are happy to use African women on the covers of their reports, but when it comes to directly funding the groups they represent, they too often look the other way.

In the wake of Covid-19 – which has exacerbated sexual and other forms of violence and discrimination against African women and girls – let’s use this as a once in a lifetime opportunity to build back better. Not only has the entire wellbeing of the African continent been put into jeopardy due to an untreatable virus, weak healthcare systems, and a lack of basic hygiene products, such as antibacterial wipes and other items that the Western world often takes for granted. The global pandemic has also put additional pressure

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in particular on African girls who have found themselves increasingly out of school and at heightened risk of experiencing FGM and early 'marriage' right across the continent, from Somalia to The Gambia.

Since FGM is often the first time a girl is told that she is not enough, preparing her for a life of violence and discrimination, we need to stem the tide from the beginning. But to break this cycle forever we need to empower women themselves and ensure they have economic justice and independence. This will help to accelerate an end to FGM – a major challenge, particularly considering it has been happening for over 4,000 years. We need to ensure that we do not find ourselves in a similar place in decades to come, which is likely to happen unless we change how we have done things in the past.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that FGM costs \$1.4 billion in immediate and lifelong medical complications in 29 high prevalence countries⁴⁷, yet only \$1 is available in funding for each woman or girl affected, and very little funding reaches the frontlines,

where actual change is happening. At this urgent juncture we need high net worth individuals, foundations and corporations to trust and directly fund African women, so we can collectively shift the dial on ending FGM, child marriage and other forms of violence, while addressing economic injustice and fueling Africa's future prosperity. When this happens at scale, entire countries can benefit from investment in women and girls, who are empowered to fully contribute, with less fear of being held back by the violence and discrimination committed against them.

To address these challenges I co-founded The Five Foundation, The Global Partnership To End FGM, with Brendan Wynne in 2019. We are in the process of building the strongest ever global partnership to end FGM and already have 70 leading civil society partners – including the British Red Cross – to drive this work forward in various locations. With the Red Cross, we hope to collaborate to build connected, resilient communities, which really position African individuals at the centre of all our work.

In practical terms, The Five Foundation has made sure to have taken the time over the last 18 months or so to really listen to frontline groups such as Safe Engage Foundation and Msichana Empowerment Kuria in Kenya, which have both been working to protect girls in a remote region where 3,000 recently underwent FGM and were marched down the streets. We have also re-granted significant funding to nearly two dozen grassroots groups and hope to do much more in years to come as the global partnership is scaled up – particularly in Africa.

I want donors and supporters to realise that trusting African women as agents of change and funding their activism means we can change social norms, reduce violence and lift ourselves, our families and our communities out of poverty and into prosperity.

When this happens on a countrywide level, the valued contribution of women and girls – including as leaders – is fully recognised and realised. I know the British Red Cross has experienced similar challenges working in emergency situations around the world, where women are often de-prioritised and cast aside – the real experts who are rarely supported as change-makers and peacemakers in their own right. Fueling frontline community activism and economically empowering women is the best way of making sure Africa can realise its long-promised development potential.

We, at the Five Foundation, hope to continue to work with the Red Cross as part of the global movement to end FGM and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence and injustice. The sheer scale of its network, as well as its focus on kindness and building a more sustainable future for all of us, means we are much stronger together. This is particularly urgent as we find ourselves in a climate emergency, where economically developing countries are likely to bear



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much of the brunt. As we know, women and girls in Africa are particularly affected. Unpredictable weather patterns and food insecurity have meant that already precarious and challenging contexts – including in agriculture where most of the labour is from women – have been exacerbated by the climate crisis. In these scenarios, women and girls often face increased violence and discrimination too, as their basic right to safety and protection from violence decreases. They are more likely to be treated as commodities – to experience sexual violence, FGM, or to be sold off into ‘marriage’ – to help families escape poverty.

In terms of the focus and success that we at The Five Foundation can bring to the table, we have an unparalleled track record of working with local anti-FGM groups as well as heads of state and major international media to influence dramatic

change on this issue. In January 2021 we were pivotal in getting the United States to sign a strong FGM ban, while last Summer, Sudan banned FGM as a result of our activism in a country where nearly 9 out of every 10 women have been affected. It was covered by hundreds of media outlets including the New York Times. We have engaged international media on various FGM cases in Egypt, Kenya and around the world, including a recent case of a father who tricked his three daughters into FGM in Southern Egypt, which helped ensure that country’s government passed amendments strengthening its ban in early 2021. The Five Foundation’s co-founders have also led much of the recent progress on the issue in the UK over the last decade, including major media engagement and changes to law and policy, most recently ensuring the inclusion of FGM in the Children’s Act.



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As it stands, the African continent finds itself in an increasingly precarious position. We have an urgent need to recover from the global pandemic, which has caused devastation, and which has also exposed critical gaps in how international aid is distributed and the need for increased support at the local and national level. It has shone a light on the areas where the system is simply not working. Grantees are often not physically present on the ground to do the urgent and essential work that's needed at this time, leaving underfunded local and national women's groups to do all the heavy lifting, often with limited funding support.

With less than a decade to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals – along with an urgent need to recover from the pandemic – we need to trust and empower women's rights organisations and strengthen movements to deliver the structural changes needed to shift the dial on ending FGM and other forms of violence. At this moment of global change, where the United States has elected its first woman of colour as Vice President and Black Lives Matter has become a global mantra, we need to prioritise funding women as the solution to so many of the world's major problems, including male violence.

We can only achieve gender equality in Africa if we trust African women and show empathy, understanding and responsiveness, by putting funding and power directly in their hands to be able to build a safer, more peaceful, more democratic and more prosperous future for the entire continent – and, consequently, for the entire world.

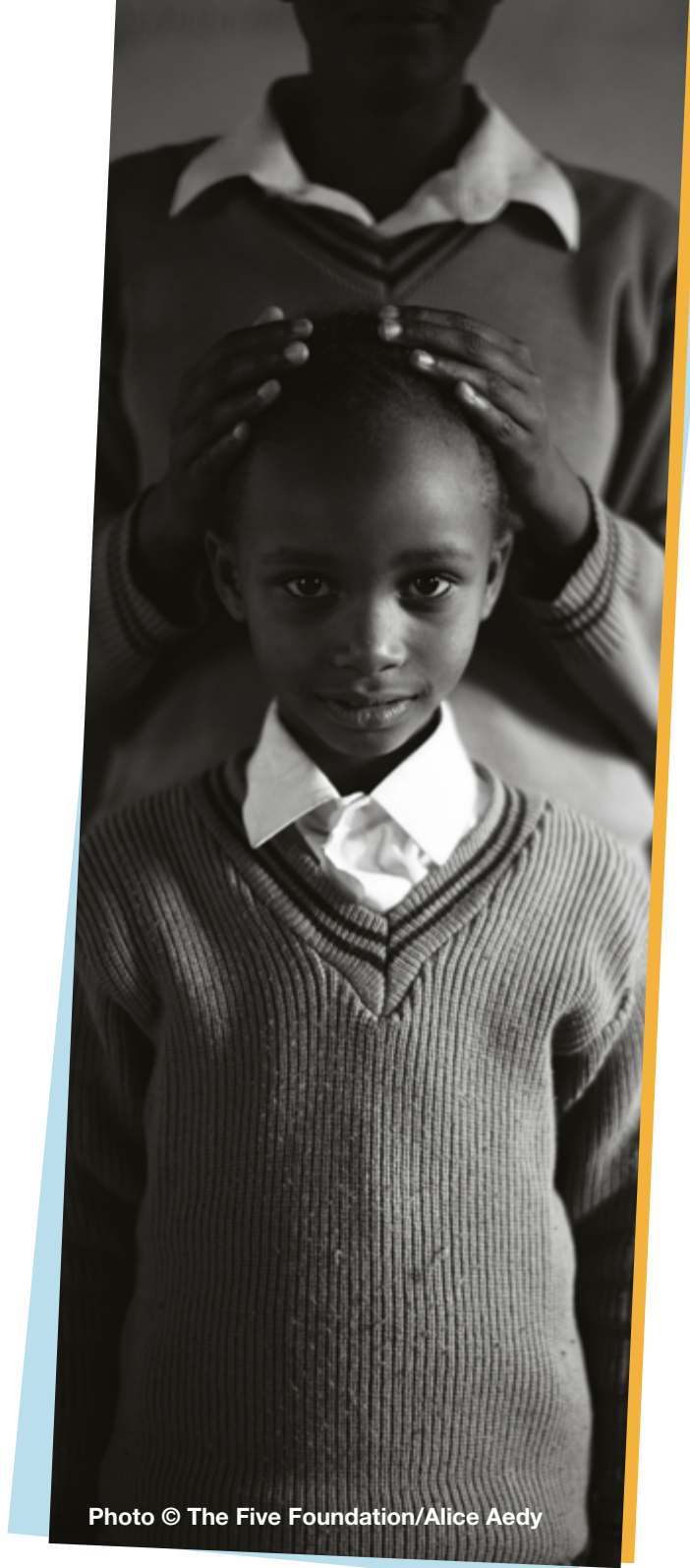


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