



Engaging the Private Sector to End Violence Against Women and Girls Results, Lessons and Promising Practices from the Spotlight Initiative

Photo: UNDP/Honduras

Overview

The Spotlight Initiative developed this knowledge brief to share its results, lessons learned and promising practices in relation to its work on **engaging the private sector to eliminate violence against women and girls (VAWG)**. This brief draws on insights and analysis from a synthesis of 98 reports from 2019 to 2021 across all Spotlight Initiative country and regional programmes, trust funds, as well as a global knowledge exchange held in January 2022 and online discussion following the event on **SHINE – an online hub for global knowledge exchange on ending violence against women and girls**.¹ The brief begins by situating the importance of engaging the private sector in these efforts. It then follows with four lessons learned derived from the knowledge exchange and Spotlight Initiative programming, including: increasing the visibility and awareness of VAWG to strengthen leadership and political buy-in, developing strong protective policies and ensuring workers have access to support mechanisms, developing trust-based and multi-stakeholder partnerships, including with non-traditional actors, and scaling up tools and processes that help companies improve their practices toward greater equality through benchmarking and institutional change initiatives.

Why Engage the Private Sector?

Engaging the private sector is strategic for promoting gender equality and addressing violence against women and girls. The private sector is a key stakeholder to attain the Sustainable Development Goals. Businesses are increasingly aware of their role in promoting human rights, gender equality and implementing global rights agreements. Research shows that violence against women and girls reduces income by 30% due to lost work opportunities and the direct costs of violence. It is also estimated that those survivors seeking services, spend approximately 22% of their income on legal aid, health related support, and other necessities. **In total, the cumulative minimum cost of violence against women and girls is an estimated US \$1.7 trillion globally** (approximately the combined GDP of 100 countries).²

Engaging the private sector, including in the workplace, provides an opportunity to address discriminatory behaviors, social norms and practices that undergird VAWG and gender inequality in social institutions, across companies and the marketplace, and in families and communities. In the workplace, this can include **promoting fair labour practices, facilitating greater numbers of women leaders and managers, ensuring equal pay for equal work, implementing sexual harassment and anti-discrimination policies, and providing access to VAWG services and support** (such as creating safety plans) to advance efforts for ending violence against women and girls.

Businesses play an important role in the economic autonomy and equity of women. Emerging research, both anecdotal as well as evidenced, affirms the power of having diverse leadership and boards and strong positive work cultures that are equitable and correlates with economic growth and innovation in the corporate sector. **Transforming toxic cultures, where gender bias, inequalities, abuse, microaggressions, and discrimination exists into healthy environments is in the best interest of companies.** Investing in gender equality and ensuring that companies are respectful, promoting tolerance and building a positive culture may also have cascading effects, wherein new behaviors and norms learned in the workplace can affect norms in families and communities as well.

Creating a safe and empowering workplace and directly investing in ending violence against women and girls is **critical for companies to prosper**. While violence against women contributes to higher rates of absenteeism and turnover, addressing violence improves the reputations of companies, enabling them to attract and retain employees.³ Specifically, this supports the retention of women staff members, reducing staff turnover and thereby having a positive financial impact on the company. While the evidence is clear, companies may not have the knowledge, skills or practices to do this. **It is thus essential that companies have the necessary support to understand the complexities of violence against women and girls and how to address it.**

¹ SHINE is an online hub for global knowledge exchange on ending violence against women and girls introduced in March 2022. It offers the combined power of a virtual exchange hub, convening platform and multilingual tool to inform global policy, programming, and advocacy on ending violence against women and girls. SHINE aims to connect a range of partners and to co-create, collaborate and amplify knowledge and learning together to end violence against women and girls. SHINE is collaboration of the Spotlight Initiative and UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women. Learn more [here](#).

² Duvvury et al, The impacts of violence against women on choice and agency: Evidence from Ghana and Pakistan, 2021
Raghavendra et al, The Macroeconomic Loss due to Violence Against Women: The Case of Vietnam, Feminist Economics, 2017

³ UN Women and ILO, Handbook: Addressing violence and harassment against women in the world of work, 2019.

Lessons Learned from Engaging the Private Sector

#1: Increasing the visibility and awareness of violence against women and girls can strengthen leadership and political buy-in to address violence in the workplace

The workplace can be a powerful entry point to address VAWG and issues for gender equality related to a toxic and unequal workplace. By surfacing where inequalities exist within a corporation, this information can be used to lay the groundwork for creating a stronger organizational culture that respects people regardless of their gender, racial or ethnic background, class, age, ability status, sexual orientation, geography, or otherwise. Spotlight Initiative programmes in **Belize** and the **Latin American Regional Programme** have been innovating in this area of work, increasing the visibility of VAWG in the corporate space.

Data that surfaces discrimination and VAWG is critical to raising awareness of the problem. This helps to raise visibility so that these issues cannot be ignored. One innovative tool that the **Latin American Regional Programme** developed is called the Diagnostic Tool on Violence against Women. The goal of the tool is to lay bare the sexist behavior in the leadership and culture of an organization, and to identify organizational practices that can be designed and integrated to prevent and address VAWG. The survey is answered online through the [Indic@Iqalqad \(Equality@Work\)](mailto:Indic@Iqalqad) platform. There are multiple sections of the survey that ask staff to report on various areas related to VAWG. From the results, an Organizational Violence Index is created with a score ranging from 0 to 100 – the closer the score is to 100, the greater knowledge of organizational mechanisms and their perceived effectiveness to prevent, manage and refer cases of VAWG.⁵ The diagnosis tool was **implemented in 10 companies** during the pilot phase, where **181 employee surveys were completed and 61 trainings on topics related to organizational violence, gender equality and masculinities benefited 766 employees.**⁶

The Spotlight Initiative in **Belize** engaged **15 private sector companies** in a campaign to raise awareness of VAWG and access to services that were available to women experiencing violence. This included displaying posters with messages on ending domestic violence, child marriage and human trafficking around the premises of companies. These campaign messages were seen by men and women employees with the aim to bring visibility to the issue and **challenge gender roles and social norms that promote family violence.**

Companies are also becoming more transparent about their environmental and social justice commitments through **reporting on environmental, social and governance (ESG), impact metrics and through investing in corporate social responsibility initiatives**

Data and tracking on these areas offer incredible opportunities to ensure gender equality in corporations, although "impact washing"⁷ still remains a key challenge that many Spotlight Initiative programmes have highlighted in their context. This underscores the importance of transparent corporate metrics tracking commitments and actions related to gender equality and VAWG. Lesson 4 shares further details on the Women's Empowerment Principles and UNDP Gender Equality Seal.

#2: Developing strong policies and ensuring workers have access to support mechanisms is critical to transform internal practices in the private sector

Spotlight Initiative countries are mobilizing the development of strong policies that protect women from violence and share critical information to increase their access to support services. In **Zimbabwe** and **Malawi**, sexual harassment policies were developed at multiple levels. In **Zimbabwe**, the Spotlight Initiative in collaboration with the Zimbabwe Gender Commission filled a critical gap by supporting companies to **develop gender-based violence and sexual harassment policies** through the creation of *the Strategy for the Elimination of Sexual Harassment and Gender-based Violence in the Workplace in Zimbabwe - 2021-2025*.⁸ This was developed through a consultative process with feedback from diverse stakeholders including the government, trade unions, private sector, civil society, and employer organizations. The aim of the strategy is to protect all workers against sexual and gender-based violence (GBV) through creating safe spaces to work, and **ultimately contribute to a reduction in GBV and sexual harassment across the country.** In addition, the Initiative and Zimbabwe Gender Commission used the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence in 2021 to raise visibility of the launch of the national strategy and to highlight the development of a **national anti-sexual harassment law.**

Engaging the private sector in strategy development and capacity building with partners was critical to the success of a UN Women programme in the agrarian supply chains of the tea industry in **India**, *Prevention of violence against women and girls in Assam*. Key lessons from the programme were shared with Spotlight Initiative partners during the global knowledge exchange held in January 2022. Key results included the creation of the first of its kind Legal Aid Clinic for women and girls in the tea industry; the development of the Tea Platform for the safety and empowerment of women; the first appointment of a woman Deputy Manager in a tea estate; and having reached **over 19,000 women and girls.** **The importance of being strategic in ensuring the uptake of policy by private sector partners was underscored** through starting with compliance-related issues or another focus area that would be easiest to engage leadership.

For example, this can include looking for opportunities to leverage industry certifications that require compliance with anti-GBV or discrimination policies or any other existing legislation on sexual harassment in the workplace, while ensuring a comprehensive approach.

⁴ The UNDP Business for Equality Program oversees the security and confidentiality of the data collected.

⁵ Including: knowledge and efficacy of existing protocols and mechanisms to prevent and address VAWG, as well as their perceived effectiveness; confidence in the company's response; and identifying cases of labour harassment, hostile environments and sexual harassment.

⁶ 393 men and 373 women.

⁷ *Impact washing* refers to when a company or investors classify or market a business or portfolio as achieving social impact, when they do not really advance positive change and do not have evidence to support this claim.

⁸ The strategy was developed and guided by the ILO Convention 190 on eliminating violence and harassment in the workplace. Read the strategy [here](#).

When the Spotlight Initiative trained workers in **Zimbabwe** to increase their awareness of harassment policies and ending gender-based violence, employees across the supply chain were trained at functional levels, keeping more homogenous groupings within the same job hierarchies (such as managers and tea workers, from the previous example), because they found the presence of senior management affected the interactions and uptake within groups.

In **Malawi**, legal cases were highlighted to stimulate greater attention to the issue of sexual harassment within the workplace with both employees and corporate leaders. The Malawi Commission, with support from Spotlight Initiative, leveraged a 2017 legal case of alleged sexual harassment of employees at the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation,⁹ which offered a significant visibility moment around the occurrence of sexual harassment in the workplace. **Due to the increased visibility that this case brought to the issue, the Commission saw increases in sexual harassment complaints being lodged as well as an increase in requests from the private and public sectors to review sexual harassment workplace policies.**¹⁰ A new sexual harassment policy for the public sector was also supported.¹¹

#3: Developing trust and building multi-sectoral partnerships, including with non-traditional actors, is essential to success for working with the private sector

Building multi-sectoral partnerships was identified by the Spotlight Initiative in **Mexico, Zimbabwe** and **Trinidad and Tobago** as a key strategy to advance EAWG efforts and increase gender equality. One of the most important first steps identified was to **build relationships of trust with the private sector and other stakeholders to foster partnerships and support EAWG.** The Initiative in **Zimbabwe** noted how critical it was to have deeper, comprehensive communications interventions and to better understand the positions and concerns of different local groups and staff working in corporations. For example, factors such as understanding how much they knew about VAWG in the workplace, the extent to which management supported a gender equality agenda, and the level of respect for women in the workplace culture were important for understanding how to best start engaging.

The Initiative highlighted that often with local groups and trade unions, it was important to be aware of how deeply entrenched social norms were related to women's 'honour' or how many employees felt VAWG was a taboo issue and a private matter. **Once companies felt secure and trust had been gained, the demand for partnership to work together increased.** The Initiative in Zimbabwe was successful in its policy making efforts as described in Lesson 2 due to its multi-sector, multi-partnership approach, which involved reaching out to industry regulatory bodies from a sustainability perspective and to set up multi-partner platforms and forums.

In **Mexico, domestic violence related calls to 911 sharply increased by 46%** in the first few months of 2020 due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. There was significant demand for shelters and not enough rooms available. To respond to this, the Spotlight Initiative and national, local governments and a hotel corporation **built a multi-stakeholder partnership to provide free accommodation in hotels for women experiencing violence** as an interim strategy until the government could identify the proper shelter or support networks for longer term stay and support. This was a complex partnership due to the diversity of actors from the public and private sector. To address this, a protocol was developed on how the collaboration would take place and clearly articulated roles, responsibilities, and ways of working between the different actors. Technical guidelines were developed and capacity building of hotel staff and other partners to support equitable care was conducted. Additionally, a key ally was identified - **the Commission for the Prevention of Violence against Women, who created connections with 10 women's justice centers across the country to inform them of this strategy. This increased access for survivors of VAWG to critical support and justice services.** So far, **over 600 survivors of violence have been able to access these services** and significant awareness-raising and training took place with **more than 16,400 people to prevent gender-based violence.** The collaboration and commitment of the private sector to support free accommodation and financial assistance has been critical to the success of this initiative.

Furthermore, the Spotlight Initiative in **Trinidad and Tobago** emphasized the importance of **engaging non-traditional actors** to end violence against women and girls. In this case, the Initiative partnered with the National Trade Union Centre of Trinidad and Tobago (NTUC) and the Employers Consultative Association (ECA) to lead gender-based violence awareness workshops for their members. The Unions developed individual workplace policies and validated them. The two groups were brought together through workshops so the unions could share their individual workplace policies with employers, and areas of agreement and difference were discussed. Through this dialogue, a **Joint GBV Workplace Policy was drafted by both parties and will become legally binding in trade unions to support survivors of violence.** This policy is critical as it covers a range of elements essential to eliminating gender-based violence in the workplace, including organizational commitment to confidentiality and support for survivors through options to safety planning, protection orders, leave, training and education, sanctions and disciplinary measures of workplace harassment or bullying, and monitoring, reporting, budgets and finance.

⁹ The Spotlight Initiative in Malawi adhered to the principles of confidentiality, anonymity and do-no-harm throughout this process, while raising attention of this important issue.

¹⁰ Such as in the Ministry of Forestry and Natural Resources, the Malawi Police Service and the National Youth Council of Malawi.

¹¹ This policy was supported by the Malawi Commission with the Ministry of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare; and the Department of Human Resource, Management and Development (DHRMD) technical working group.

#4: Processes that help companies demonstrate their commitment and improve their practices toward greater equality can be expanded and scaled up through benchmarking and institutional change initiatives

The Spotlight Initiative promoted multiple interventions aimed at supporting deeper institutional change in corporations through the Gender Equality Seal and the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs), such as in the **Latin America Regional Programme, Uganda and Zimbabwe**. Lessons were also shared in the knowledge exchange from the UN Women Multi-Country Office in the Caribbean.





The [Women's Empowerment Principles \(WEPs\)](#) are a set of principles informed by international human rights and labour rights standards that were established by UN Global Compact and UN Women. The WEPs underscore that businesses are responsible for gender equality across the company and its value chain, the marketplace and broader community. Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) demonstrate a commitment to this goal by signing the WEPs and by taking action to support business practices that empower women, such as through equal pay, zero tolerance for sexual harassment, and ensuring gender responsive supply chains. Globally, there are 5,800 organizations that are signatories to the WEPs, and they go through a 6-step process that includes signature and commitment to the WEPs, gathering data, engaging leadership and external stakeholders to address issues through the value chain, as well as reporting.

In **Guyana**, private sector companies are being encouraged and supported in using the Women's Empowerment Principles. First steps in the process included mapping private sector companies, NGOs, and governments that could benefit from the WEPs. Next, a series of webinars were held to increase awareness of the WEPs, which resulted in **18 organizations expressing interest in joining the programme** and developing gender action plans and gender gap analysis tools. Currently, there are **1,600 signatories in the Latin American and Caribbean region**. It was learned that additional data was needed to persuade leaders of the importance of signing the WEPs and why it was essential to create safer spaces and support gender equality, including evidence on the economic costs of VAWG.

Another process to stimulate institutional change that has been developed and promoted by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is the [Gender Equality Seal \(GES\)](#) process, being used across Spotlight Initiative countries. UN country offices and the private sector can engage in a multi-year process to build a gender equality lens and analysis of the organization and implement an organizational change plan to create greater gender equality and women's empowerment.

In **Uganda, 13 companies committed to implement the GES and engaged in the first phases of the process**, including internal assessments of their organizational processes with a lens related to gender responsiveness. Based on this, they developed action plans to address gaps. In the **Latin America Regional Programme**, a strategic alliance was formed, *Strengthening Program Violence against Women in Private companies (GES-VCM)*. This engages the private sector, government and civil society in addressing and preventing the impact of COVID-19 on VAWG, and aims to **strengthen national public policy response** to provide support to networks and access to services for women in the labor market that may face violence at home. Five companies engaged in the programme in 2020 as part of the GES implementation. **The company Cementos Argos was so committed to this work, that they implemented the model in four of its subsidiaries (in Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Panama, and Guatemala).**

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¹² The capacity building process includes workshops on the following topics: a) ABC of violence against women, b) best care practices for cases of workplace and sexual harassment in the workplace, c) best prevention and care practices in VAW matter in the context of COVID-19, d) non-violent leadership, e) positive masculinities, f) strategic planning to strengthen prevention and care mechanisms for cases of violence against women.