

THEMATIC ASSESSMENT

Assessing Spotlight Initiative's contribution to the engagement of civil society, the implementation of 'Leave no one behind', and movement building



What is Spotlight Initiative?

Spotlight Initiative is a United Nations initiative in partnership with the European Union and others, to end violence against women and girls at scale. It set out to promote a comprehensive, rights-based approach to drive transformative change across six interconnected outcome areas (or 'pillars'), with the ultimate objective to ensure that all women and girls – especially those who are structurally marginalised – live free from violence and harmful practices. It is a demonstration fund for action on the Sustainable Development Goals.

Why this Thematic Assessment?

At the end of 2022, Spotlight Initiative commissioned a Thematic Assessment to take an in-depth look at how Spotlight Initiative has performed against three themes that are recognised as critical for more **transformative, intersectional, and sustainable approaches** to ending violence against women and girls (EVAWG) programming.

Hypothesis

The assessment set out to test the following hypothesis within a whole society approach, the best way to contribute to efforts to end violence against women and girls (by a large UN Initiative) is to support and foster feminist movement building, privilege partnerships with civil society organisations, including specifically women’s rights organisations, and local grassroots organisations, and meaningfully implement the principle of leave no one behind. The one-UN system/approach is an appropriate and effective mechanism to achieve this.



Figure 1. Thematic assessment questions

Assessment methodology

Central to the assessment’s feminist and participatory methodology was a desire to conduct an assessment that employed a range of qualitative methods to obtain a variety of perspectives, and which privileged the voices of civil society and women’s rights activists to explore the assessment themes.

The assessment took a case study approach, involving participatory workshops, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, complemented by a global, regional and country level document review, key informant interviews (KIIs), and story collection to gather data against the assessment questions. The figure below illustrates the approach.



Figure 2: Data collection snapshot

Key Findings and Conclusion



CSO Engagement

KEY FINDINGS

AQ 1: To what extent has Spotlight Initiative prioritised partnerships with CSOs including specifically feminist and women's rights organisations and local and grassroots groups?

AQ 1.1 To what extent has Spotlight Initiative's governance mechanisms meaningfully included / engaged a diversity of civil society in effective decision-making and monitoring processes at global, regional, and national level?

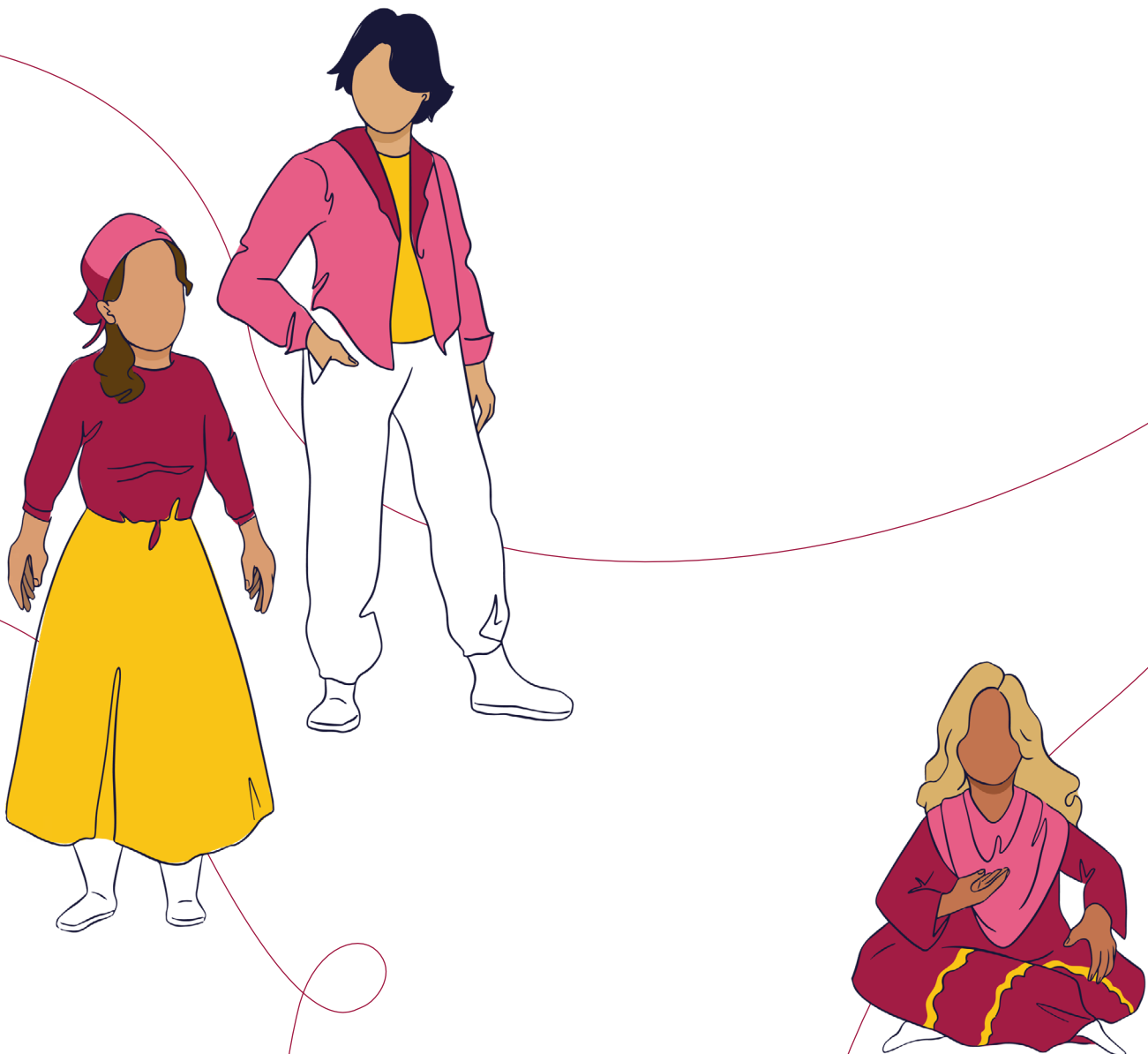
- The Civil Society Reference Groups (CSRGs) established at global, regional, and country level were the primary mechanism used to facilitate the meaningful engagement of civil society in programme governance at these different levels. The CSRGs were found to be highly relevant and valued by civil society and Spotlight Initiative Secretariat and programme teams.
- CSRG's involvement in decision making and their level of influence varied across contexts. Numerous examples were found of CSRGs advocating and influencing decisions within programmes and at the global level.
- CSRGs played an important role in joint monitoring of programme activities and implementation, which was well received in some places. More could have been done to ensure civil society implementing partners understood the CSRG's role, particularly during joint, participatory monitoring visits.
- The extent to which CSRG members were able to engage meaningfully was constrained by the following issues, identified across some programmes:
 - insufficient uptake of available compensation for their role, either due to cumbersome administrative requirements or lack of awareness of the guidance.
 - limited understanding of the role, its responsibilities, and lines of accountability for CSRG members, in relation to the three aspects of the role identified, namely advising the Initiative, holding it accountable and linking it to the broader civil society landscape.
 - unclear or unrealistic expectations regarding the level of effort required to meaningfully engage.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Spotlight Initiative has made significant progress in pursuing an ambitious and bold agenda by collaborating with civil society organisations and women's rights organisations in innovative ways. It has been successful in creating a space for sustained civil society advocacy and influence through the CSRG mechanisms and has demonstrated that new ways of working are possible.
2. The innovative processes that Spotlight Initiative used to address the structural barriers faced by CSOs – particularly women's rights organisations and grassroots organisations – in accessing funding enabled a large number of 'non-usual suspects' to access UN funding.
3. The capacity-strengthening support that CSOs received from Recipient UN Organisations (RUNOs) under Spotlight Initiative programmes, while valued by many, could have been better designed to address CSOs' own identified capacity needs and priorities.

AQ 1.2 To what extent has Spotlight Initiative meaningfully engaged different civil society groups in the implementation of Spotlight Initiative-funded activities?

- Spotlight Initiative reports a high proportion of funding is allocated to CSOs, and there have been a range of deliberate, innovative and successful attempts to reach out to a diversity of civil society actors, including grassroots organisations. These include partnering with the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women (UN Trust Fund) and the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, the establishment of The [WithHer Fund](#) with UN Foundation, small grants mechanisms, consortia arrangements, and, in some cases, amending or adjusting UN processes to widen participation.
- Spotlight Initiative programmes employed a range of capacity-strengthening efforts that benefited some CSOs. However, these were often focused on supporting organisations to meet UN reporting requirements, rather than exploring organisations' identified needs.
- A range of institutional barriers affected civil society's ability to meaningfully engage, including bureaucratic funding processes in regard to disbursement of funds, and onerous procurement and reporting. Short funding cycles coupled with pressure to deliver results were also identified as key challenges.





AQ2: To what extent has Spotlight Initiative supported and strengthened progressive feminist movements?

AQ 2.1 To what extent, and in what ways, is the UN considered a legitimate and relevant entity to support movement strengthening and cross-movement building?

- The UN is seen as a highly relevant and legitimate institution to provide targeted support to movement strengthening, through funding convenings and networking events for different women's rights organisations and civil society, and through advocacy activities, supporting women's rights organisations and civil society groups to access different decision makers at different levels.
- Spotlight Initiative's strategic position enables it to play an important role in bringing women's rights organisations, government stakeholders, and international NGOs together. The convening role was seen as one of the strategic functions the UN can play to support movements, which sometimes entails playing a 'brokering' role and supporting civil society to access strategic spaces, governments, and other decision-makers, to advocate on EVAWG programming and raise their profile. However, this positioning at times was perceived by some civil society representatives as limiting the Initiative's ability to visibly stand in solidarity with oppressed groups in contexts that are more restrictive.
- The collaboration of different UN agencies in Spotlight Initiative reflects diverse mandates and experience levels, coming together under one umbrella with the explicit aim of ending VAWG. While this undoubtedly signifies an important step toward working with women's rights organisations and movements in a meaningful and feminist way within EVAWG programming in the UN, it did present some challenges as not all agencies had the same understanding and experience of, and commitment to, engaging with civil society and movements in this way. The lack of conceptual clarity and guidance contributed to these different levels of engagement by RUNOs in pillar 6.
- The approach used to support movements was not consistently applied across Spotlight Initiative, with some stakeholders reflecting that the absence of a well-defined strategy hampered efforts. At times, the UN was seen as trying 'to take over', 'lead', or 'build' movements, which stakeholders reflected should not be the role of the UN or Spotlight Initiative. Rather the assessment notes that the UN is best placed to support movement building "behind the scenes", convening and funding but not taking the lead.
- The assessment found a common expectation among recipient UN organisations (RUNOs) for women's rights activists to act in the 'spirit of

CONCLUSIONS

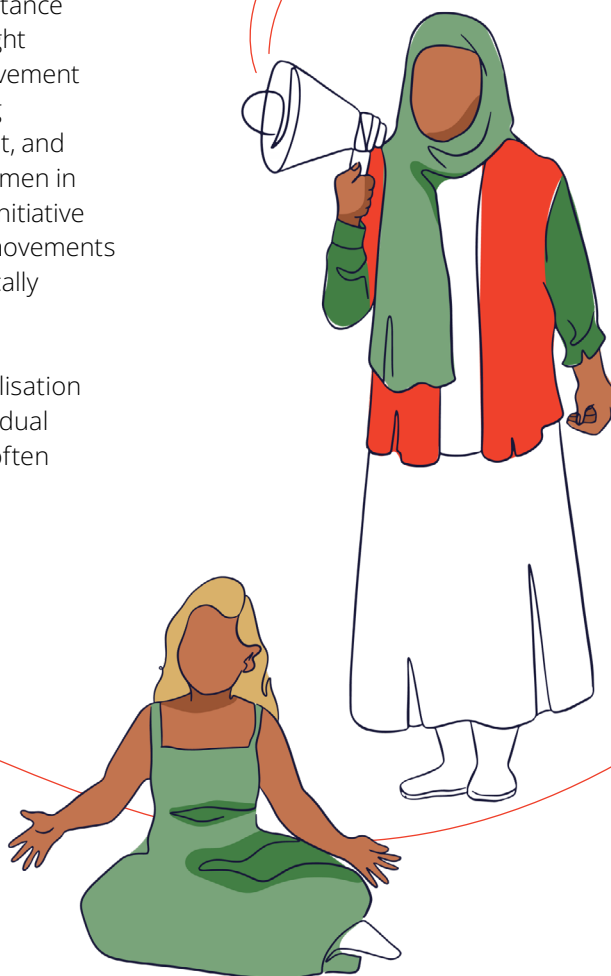
4. Spotlight Initiative played a significant and welcome role in supporting feminist and women's movements where these movements are strong. The more directive role Spotlight programmes played where movements were more fragmented or nascent is not the most appropriate role for the UN to assume, as it limits autonomy, and may undermine ownership and sustainability.
5. The UN's relationship with national governments can be a positive contributory factor for strengthening movements and elevating the issue of EVAWG politically, but can also be a hindering factor. This tension surfaced a number of challenges and learnings for the future.

activism' and 'voluntarism', which is not aligned to feminist principles advocating for fair compensation for people's time and expertise. This discrepancy risks increasing stress and burnout among activists and limits the effectiveness of movement-building efforts.

AQ 2.2 To what extent have the strategies adopted to support and strengthen movements been effective and enabled greater agency of women's movements?

- The strategies used to support women's rights organisations and grassroots organisations, such as funding convening and networking opportunities, provided some much-needed support for these organisations and were an important first step toward broader movement strengthening. However, they fell short in supporting the full range of skills needed for movement building, including for example supporting leadership development, and strategic planning, or providing unrestricted core funding to meet their own identified needs.
- There were notable variations in how Spotlight Initiative engaged with movements depending on their stage of development. Where movements were already established, Spotlight Initiative's support was more aligned to their identified needs. In contexts with fragmented or nascent movements, support tended to be more directive, for example, purposively bringing certain groups together and orchestrating their collaboration, which is a less effective strategy for enabling greater agency.
- In contexts marked by strong anti-gender backlash, including male pushback towards EVAWG programming and government resistance towards working with LGBTQI+ groups and sex workers, Spotlight Initiative faced challenges in supporting feminist and cross-movement strengthening. These challenges included navigating conflicting perspectives among UN organisations, civil society, government, and other stakeholders on addressing the backlash and the role of men in ending violence against women and girls. As a result Spotlight Initiative was not always able to visibly stand in solidarity with feminist movements and structurally marginalised groups in these legally and politically challenging contexts.
- The assessment found a frequent confusion in the conceptualisation of movement strengthening whereby efforts to support individual organisations with funding and capacity strengthening were often equated with strengthening movements.

6. RUNOs engaged with WROs and groups differently due to varying conceptual understandings of Pillar 6, which focuses on both strengthening women's movements and CSOs and linking with other pillar activities. This inconsistency made it challenging for stakeholders to clearly explain how Spotlight Initiative supported women's movements and what its feminist approach entailed.





Leave No One Behind (LNOB)

KEY FINDINGS

AQ3: To what extent has Spotlight Initiative meaningfully involved the most left-behind and discriminated-against women and girls in all their diversity?

AQ 3.1 To what extent has Spotlight Initiative's decision making and implementation processes involved the most structurally marginalised women in all their diversity?

- LNOB was visible as a cross-cutting principle and broadly understood by stakeholders across Spotlight Initiative. It was considered in the formation of CSRGs, and the CSRGs acted as learning spaces and contributed to a stronger focus on LNOB in programmes.
- Structurally marginalised individuals and constituency-led groups were consulted and involved in decision making across Spotlight Initiative, to varied extents, and there is some evidence of their influence on the priorities of Spotlight Initiative's programming. Their involvement was more frequent at the project level through CSOs than at the programme level.
- Partnerships with constituency-led CSOs – including as implementing partners and grantees – emerged as an important approach for engaging structurally marginalised women and groups in implementation. Small grant schemes in particular enabled constituency-led CSOs to access UN funding and address violence against structurally marginalised women and groups, although the grants tended to be short term.
- Contracting constituency-led CSOs to help strengthen the capacity of other CSOs is a promising approach taken by the Initiative as these organisations have expertise and are well placed to provide leadership on LNOB.
- Existing LNOB guidance was not sufficiently contextualised for EAWG programming, which limited the LNOB analysis at the start of some programmes and subsequently the focus on LNOB across programmes.

AQ 3.2 To what extent have Spotlight Initiative's activities and results across the six pillars taken an intersectional approach to reach and / or serve the most structurally marginalised women and girls in all their diversity?

- Spotlight programmes supported the integration of marginalised groups' needs and priorities into mainstream GBV services, this included efforts to provide accessible information to reach marginalised groups of women and girls, and gender-diverse people.

CONCLUSIONS

7. Having LNOB as a cross-cutting principle supported an intentional focus on engaging and reaching structurally marginalised women and girls in Spotlight Initiative.
8. CSRGs were the strongest example of Spotlight Initiative engaging structurally marginalised women and groups in governance mechanisms and decision making, but unclear roles and responsibilities (as noted in AQ1) contributed to these members feeling that their involvement was at times tokenistic or that they could have done more to reach out to their constituency groups to further the principles of LNOB had their roles been clearer.
9. Constituency-led CSOs were engaged in implementation, and projects run by these groups appeared strongest in reaching and addressing the priorities of structurally marginalised women and girls, and groups. Constituency-led CSOs are also well placed to support non-constituency-led CSOs to better integrate and implement LNOB approaches, supporting a twin-track

- Partnering with constituency-led CSOs helped Spotlight programmes better reach structurally marginalised women and girls, and is a more effective approach to mainstream LNOB and reach these populations than mainstreaming LNOB efforts through CSOs that are not constituency-led (when not being sufficiently supported to do so).
- The provision of reasonable accommodations was key in creating inclusive spaces for structurally marginalised women and groups to participate in activities supported by Spotlight Initiative. However, Spotlight programmes did not always reflect inclusion and embrace and operationalise diversity across the entire programme cycle from design to implementation through, for example, supporting not only physical accessibility but also intentionally designing activities to be relevant to members of structurally marginalised groups.
- The extent to which Spotlight Initiative was able to reach marginalised women and groups during implementation varied across programmes. While some Spotlight programmes found innovative ways to reach structurally marginalised groups and women and girls in remote areas, the lack of guidance on how to reach and engage structurally marginalised groups, especially in more restrictive contexts, was a significant gap.
- Spotlight Initiative had some guidance on data disaggregation, but this did not include guidance on whether and how to ethically and safely collect data related to women and girls in all their diversity and structurally marginalised groups reached by Spotlight programmes.

approach of working with constituency-led CSOs and supporting 'mainstreaming' of LNOB (where safe and appropriate) in efforts to end violence against women and girls in all their diversity.

10. Existing guidance on data disaggregation does not sufficiently consider LNOB principles, and the existing level of data disaggregation provides limited insight on who has been reached across intersectional categories, and how constituency-led CSOs have been engaged in Spotlight Initiative.

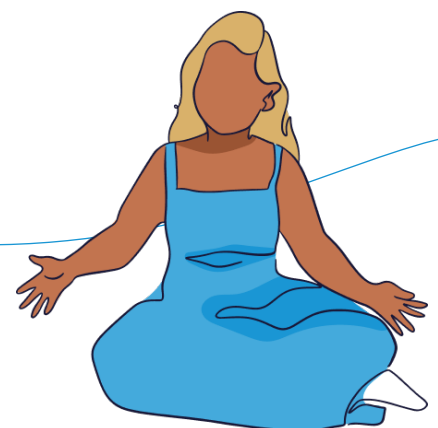




AQ4: What contribution has Spotlight Initiative made to transforming power dynamics and pre-existing structures to allow for sustainable change?

- Spotlight Initiative has demonstrated the potential for the UN to work in more transformative ways, addressing and working to transform power structures including in relation to funding and supporting some of the ‘non-usual suspects’, but these approaches are still on a small scale.
- There has been a positive response to pressure and advocacy from civil society and changes were made to governance and decision-making structures as part of efforts to increase the meaningful involvement of civil society. For example, the inclusion of Pillar 6 was as a result of civil society advocacy, as well as ensuring civil society representation on the Steering Committees at global, regional and national levels.
- As a centrally designed global programme, Spotlight Initiative ensured an evidence-based design at scale and was able to coherently aggregate results and capture global impact. However, many Spotlight programmes felt the framework was ‘imposed’, lacking adequate contextualization and flexibility for localisation and recognising local expertise and knowledge.
- Aspects of UN Reform have been demonstrated by the Initiative, specifically related to inter-agency coordination, and the enhanced role of the Resident Coordinator. However, many existing patterns of engagement and agency and donor dynamics appear to be hampering consistent progress.
- A ‘ripple effect’ of pressure to deliver passed from donor to Spotlight Initiative, and the Initiative to civil society and sub-grantees in certain contexts undermined efforts to rebalance traditional power relationships and led to stress and tension.

11. As a global programme designed and managed from the centre, Spotlight Initiative sought to ensure a comprehensive approach aligned with the evidence-base and the ability to aggregate reporting and impact globally. However, this contributed to a perception that Spotlight programmes had been ‘imposed’, were ‘top-heavy’, and at times micromanaged. This is in part a result of the heavy procedural and reporting burdens, but also the short inception phase, and the perception that the Initiative had not taken sufficient account of the different local contexts and their characteristics at the design (inception) stage. This included not investing sufficient time in understanding the progress already made by local CSOs and their capacity to promote change.



- There is a strong and vocal anti-gender and anti-feminist backlash in many of the contexts where the Initiative is working, which places the lives and rights of structurally marginalised women and girls in all their diversity at risk. Spotlight Initiative is committed to address EVAWG through a human rights based approach - leaving no one behind – but has found it difficult to navigate these dynamics (anti-gender and anti-feminist backlash) in some settings.
- Some seeds for transformative change have been planted, and the Initiative was committed to sustainable change through national ownership, but the ambition of the Initiative and the intensity of implementation over a relatively short time frame may have limited achievement of lasting change in power structures that was anticipated.

12. Spotlight Initiative represents a clear commitment from the UN on the imperative for it to reform the way it works with and funds civil society (within a whole-of-society approach to meaningful partnerships) to address the challenges and opportunities available, but this kind of reform requires time and progress and has been slower than some would like.

13. The donor climate that requires organisations (including UN agencies) to compete for (extremely limited) resources to end VAWG and advance human rights, and therefore the pressure on agencies to ‘sell themselves’, can pit UN agencies against one another, undermining collaboration and cooperation. Furthermore, this works as a disincentive to the open reflection (on what is working and isn’t and on power dynamics) that is critical to advancing relevant, responsive, rights-based programming to EVAWG.

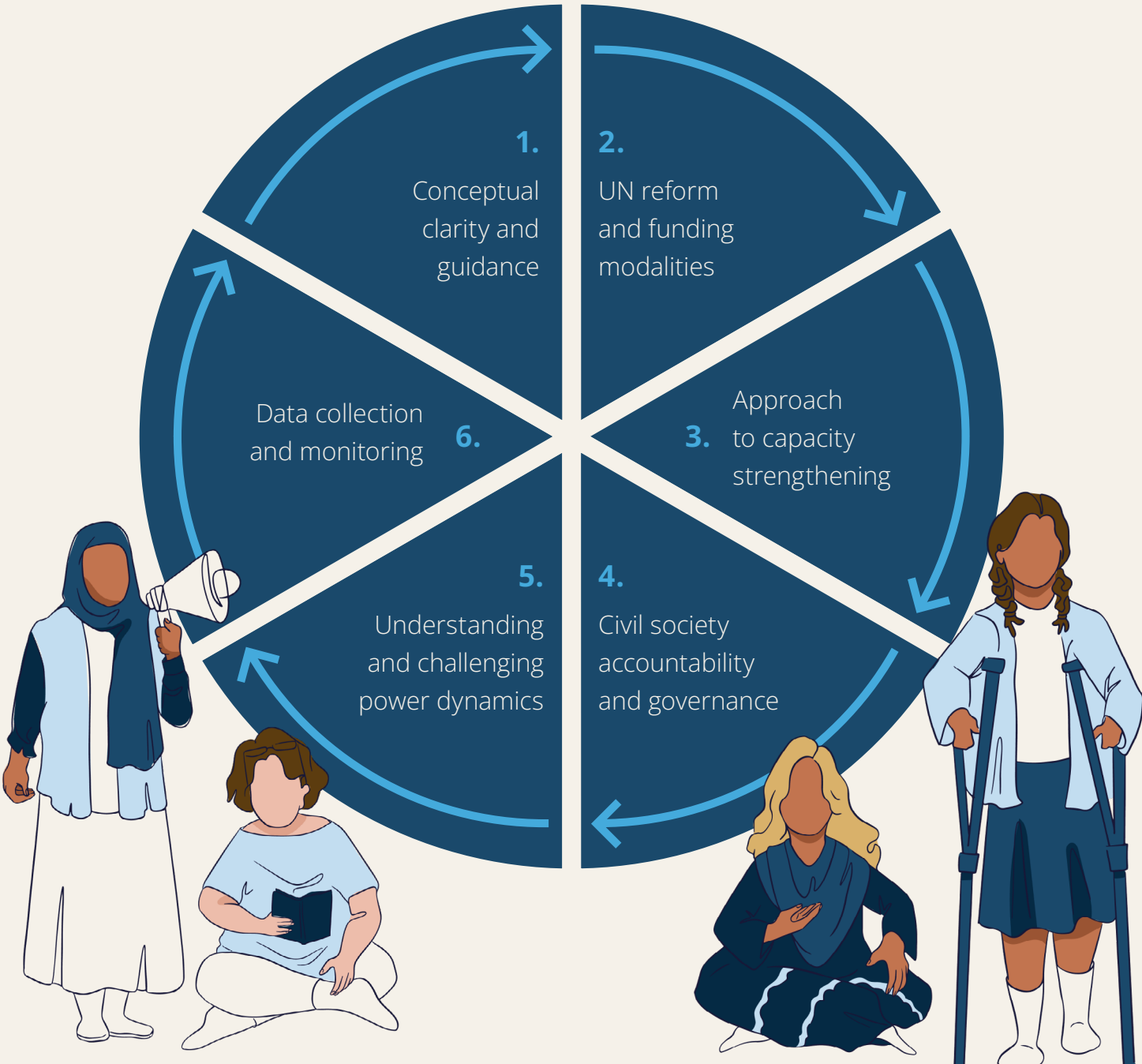


Recommendations

A number of recommendations emerged from the findings and conclusions of this thematic assessment for Spotlight Initiative to consider for future programming. These recommendations are likely to have relevance beyond Spotlight Initiative, as well, and could be of interest for learning across Spotlight Initiative as a whole, RUNOs, the UN system, donors, and others. (In fact, each recommendation can be and is often relevant to different stakeholder groups.)

A high-level summary of the assessment’s recommendations is presented below. Full details are included in the main report.

[CLICK THE TEXT TO NAVIGATE](#)



RECOMMENDATION 1

Conceptual clarity and guidance

A future iteration of Spotlight Initiative should include a much clearer articulation of its feminist and human rights framing and include key definitions and a framework for how to support movement strengthening. Specific programmatic guidance on LNOB tailored to EVAWG programming, and an engagement strategy for how the UN (and Spotlight Initiative more specifically) can better support and work in solidarity with oppressed and marginalised groups particularly in more restrictive contexts, should be developed.

LINKED TO CONCLUSIONS



RECOMMENDATION 2

UN Reform and funding modalities

UN funding, procurement, and reporting systems should be simplified and harmonised across all UN agencies working on future iterations of Spotlight Initiative or other EVAWG programming in the spirit of UN Reform. Future EVAWG programmes should adopt feminist funding principles that recognise the importance of longer-term, flexible, core funding for women-led organisations. Multi-year funding cycles should be the norm, providing a significant proportion of funds as “core” funding (to be allocated flexibly and used institutionally) for CSOs, including women’s rights organisations, grassroots organisations, and constituency-led organisations.

LINKED TO CONCLUSIONS



RECOMMENDATION 3

Approach to capacity strengthening

Spotlight Initiative and the UN more broadly should revisit its approach to capacity strengthening with CSOs and what types of capacity strengthening it prioritises to ensure that support provided is consistently relevant and responsive to the identified needs of CSOs. To do this, participatory, collaborative approaches to capacity needs assessments should be used with partners to identify priorities, strengths, and gaps and explore different options for delivering capacity support, including through constituency led CSOs, collective learning spaces, peer support, and accompaniment.

LINKED TO CONCLUSIONS



RECOMMENDATION 4

Civil society accountability and governance

UN global initiatives should continue to prioritise and facilitate civil society to meaningfully participate in governance and decision-making structures, through reference groups and steering committees. Civil society should be involved in designing their participation within programmes, what financial and other resources will be needed to support it, and how it will be monitored. Where civil society representatives in governance and decision-making bodies are expected to act as a bridge to broader civil society, specific mechanisms will be needed, and the UN agencies involved will need to support this “bridging” role. Separate decision-making and governance structures should be considered to take into account potential conflicts of interest.

LINKED TO CONCLUSIONS



RECOMMENDATION 5

Understanding and challenging power dynamics

The UN, including Spotlight Initiative and RUNOs, and donors should continue to participate in critical collective reflection on power dynamics within the UN and the wider donor funding landscape and systems, and work collectively to develop a set of rights based values and principles to embed in the United Nations' (and the Initiative's) contracts and agreements with civil society partners, in line with the UN Funding Compact. This will allow individuals and organisations who are implementing or receiving funds either directly from a UN agency or an intermediary to hold the UN or contracting partners to account for their commitments.

LINKED TO CONCLUSIONS

- 1.
- 4.
- 8.
- 13.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Data collection and monitoring

Spotlight Initiative should deepen its participatory approach to programme data collection and monitoring to ensure it better aligns with the Initiative's principles (as described in Spotlight Initiative's M&E Strategy), including on implementing LNOB, transparency, and learning. A Spotlight Initiative 2.0, or further EVAWG programmes, should explore how to further embed participatory approaches to M&E, deepen disaggregation (including by the type of CSO funded by the Initiative and the groups reached by that funding), and develop new indicators to track progress and for greater learning on efforts to strengthen movements and integrate LNOB into programming.

LINKED TO CONCLUSIONS

- 10.
- 11.





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Spotlight Initiative is the United Nations high-impact initiative to end violence against women and girls. We are the world's largest targeted effort to end all forms of violence against women and girls.

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