

How can UN programming to end violence against women and girls be more transformative?

Lessons and implications from a thematic assessment of Spotlight Initiative

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a pervasive and widespread human rights violation. Women and girls are disproportionately subjected to violence, including femicide, sexual violence, intimate partner violence (IPV), trafficking, and harmful practices.¹

Estimates based on global evidence show that nearly one in three women has experienced physical and/or sexual IPV, non-partner sexual violence (NPSV), or both of these forms of violence, at least once in their life.² Women, girls and gender diverse people who face intersecting inequalities experience violence at even higher rates.

Responding to this global challenge, Spotlight Initiative set out to promote a comprehensive, rights-based approach to drive transformative change across six interconnected outcome areas ('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.

This brief details what the Initiative did well and what could be improved upon in relation to the assessment's four questions related to: **CSO engagement**, **feminist movements**, **leave no one behind**, and **transforming power dynamics** (the key assessment question under each is shown in the diagram below). Each section starts with top-line findings for the theme, followed by more details on what factors contributed to the Initiative's achievements, as well as barriers to more transformative EAWG programming, with some concrete examples for learning. The hope is that the UN can use this **learning from Spotlight Initiative** to design and implement future EAWG programmes that can contribute to shifting power dynamics, and better tackle barriers to transformative change.

Purpose of the thematic assessment

The purpose of the thematic assessment was to take an in-depth look at how Spotlight Initiative has performed against three themes and four assessment questions that are recognised as critical for driving more **transformative**, **intersectional**, and **sustainable approaches** to ending violence against women and girls (EAWG). The themes were explored through a global document review, participatory workshops and interviews, a story collection exercise, and 10 in-depth case studies which privileged the voices of civil society and women's rights activists. The detailed methodology can be found in the main assessment report – use the **QR code** to access this.

Scan QR code to access the main assessment report:



AQ1

CSO Engagement

To what extent has Spotlight Initiative prioritised partnerships with CSOs, including specifically feminist and WROs and local and grassroots groups?



AQ2

Feminist Movements

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



AQ3

Leave no one behind (LNOB)

To what extent has Spotlight Initiative meaningfully involved the most left behind and discriminated against women and girls in all their diversity, and with what results?



AQ4

Transforming Power

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



CSO Engagement

What worked well with Spotlight Initiative?

Spotlight Initiative has pursued an ambitious and bold agenda to demonstrate how a UN programme can work with civil society organisations (CSOs) – and specifically local and grassroots groups and women’s rights organisations – in new ways in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals’ (SDGs) localisation agenda and the United Nations Development System (UNDS) reform.³ The assessment found that Spotlight Initiative was successful in:

- **Creating a space for sustained civil society advocacy and influence through the civil society reference group (CSRG) mechanism**, demonstrating that new ways of working at programme governance level are possible. The assessment case studies found that CSRGs were sometimes able to advocate and influence decisions within national and regional programmes and advocate at global level through the global reference group (GRG).
- **Employing a variety of innovative processes to enable a high proportion of funding to be allocated to CSOs**, for example through a small grants mechanism and supporting CSOs to apply for funding as consortiums and through sub-grantee partnerships. This enabled a range of new CSOs – particularly women’s rights organisations and grassroots organisations – including those that haven’t traditionally partnered with the UN to access funding. This promoted stronger and more meaningful engagement of CSOs in programme implementation.
- **Employing a range of capacity-strengthening efforts that were found to be beneficial for some CSOs** – however these were often focused on supporting organisations to meet UN reporting requirements, rather than exploring organisations’ self-identified needs. Capacity strengthening efforts that went beyond compliance with UN requirements and focused on the self-identified needs and priorities of CSOs were more sustainable and transformative.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Where Spotlight Initiative’s engagement with civil society was more meaningful, these factors contributed:

- **Strong CSRGs** that involved a diverse range of women’s rights and feminist activists, had **budgeted workplans**, access to **compensation**, and **clarity in mandate** functioned better and were able to fulfil their roles and conduct activities.
- **Flexibility and innovation** by Spotlight programmes addressed some of the structural barriers to accessing funding that CSOs can face, including language barriers (addressed through multi-lingual calls for proposals), and inability of the UN to fund unregistered organisations (addressed through consortiums which allowed unregistered groups to access UN funding).
- **Leadership of civil society organisations** in capacity-strengthening efforts – where CSOs with particular expertise were supported to provide trainings and offer leadership on EVAWG issues to other stakeholders (including other CSOs and government) – proved more relevant to CSOs and sustainable.

BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

The assessment found that the following institutional barriers held back more meaningful engagement with civil society and obstructed the implementation of UN Reform:

- **Insufficient uptake of available compensation** for CSRG members, either due to cumbersome administrative requirements or lack of awareness of the compensation and existing guidance, meant that not all members were equally supported in their participation.
- **Limited understanding** of the role, responsibility, and lines of accountability for CSRG members, and **unclear or unrealistic expectations** regarding the level of effort required by members constrained meaningful engagement.
- **Bureaucratic processes** in regard to disbursement of funds, procurement, and reporting were among the main challenges identified in terms of ensuring meaningful engagement of CSOs in programme implementation.
- **Short funding cycles** put pressures on CSO partners to deliver unrealistic results and posed challenges to the use of more transformative approaches which require donors to commit to longer timeframes.



Feminist Movements

What worked well with Spotlight Initiative?

As a result of lobbying by CSOs and women's rights organisations, Spotlight Initiative's Pillar 6 was created to support strong and empowered civil society and autonomous women's movements. In terms of Spotlight Initiative's engagement with feminist and women's movements, the assessment found that the Initiative was successful in:

- **Supporting feminist and women's movements** in contexts where these movements were already strong. In a few cases, Spotlight programmes were able to provide flexible funding to movements and networks based on their identified priorities. Good practices included funding national and regional feminist forums, as well as supporting women's rights organisations and movements to undertake research and document the state of movements.
- **Engaging differently with movements depending on context and developmental stage.** Where movements were already established, Spotlight Initiative's support was more closely aligned with movements' existing goals and identified needs. In contexts with fragmented or nascent movements, support tended to be more directive, for example, assembling certain groups and orchestrating their collaboration and focus. These approaches missed opportunities to support the full range of skills needed for movement strengthening, including for example supporting leadership development, and strategic planning of movements to self-identify their needs, goals and priorities.
- **Playing an important convening role in bringing together different stakeholders** such as women's rights organisations, government stakeholders, and international NGOs, which provided opportunities for advocacy on EAWG programming. The convening role was seen as one of the strategic functions the UN can play to support movements, which sometimes entail playing a 'brokering' role and supporting civil society to access strategic spaces, governments, and other decision-makers. Thanks to this positioning and relationships with different stakeholders, Spotlight Initiative was also able to support spaces and opportunities for cross-movement building in some contexts, for example between women's movements and LGBTQI+ movements.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Where Spotlight Initiative's support to movements was more meaningful, the following conditions existed:

- **Presence of existing women's and feminist movements** with already established goals and articulated requests enabled Spotlight Initiative to better support existing agendas and priorities.
- Spotlight Initiative's engagement with movements worked better where time and effort were invested **in understanding the state of feminist and women's movements** in the local context, for example through stakeholder mappings and seeking to understand their needs and priorities.
- The UN's relationship with national governments helped to elevate the issue of EAWG politically and supported members of women's and feminist movements to access decision-makers in **contexts that were characterised by some degree of political will for EAWG work and a more open civic space** for women's rights and feminist movements and actors.

BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

- **Lack of clarity** in what feminist movement strengthening meant within Spotlight Initiative, and **insufficient guidance** on what contextualised movement-strengthening approaches would look like, hampered these efforts.
- In some programmes, **insufficient time and resources for understanding local civil society dynamics** limited the potential to work strategically with movements.
- **Short timeframes for project implementation, often focused on**, often focused on delivering activities, were not conducive for movement strengthening efforts.
- **Anti-gender backlash**, including male pushback towards EAWG programming and government resistance towards working with LGBTQI+ groups and sex workers constrained Spotlight Initiative's support to feminist and cross-movement strengthening.
- The UN's relationship with national governments impacted its ability to support and stand in solidarity with movements in **contexts where these movements are restricted or oppressed** by these same governments. This presents a challenge to the UN's ability to be vocal in its commitments to its human rights principles and approach.



Leave No One Behind (LNOB)

What worked well with Spotlight Initiative?

Leave No One Behind (LNOB) was one of Spotlight Initiative's cross-cutting principles, meaning it would be integrated across each pillar of the Initiative through **"specific and targeted efforts to ensure equal access and inclusion for all women and girls"**. The assessment found that Spotlight Initiative lived up to this commitment in the following ways:

- **Engaging structurally marginalised women and girls in Spotlight Initiative's governance mechanisms** and decision making primarily through their roles in civil society reference groups (CSRGs) at national, regional and global levels. Having diverse members in the CSRGs brought a stronger focus on LNOB in programmes, and CSRGs in some cases acted as learning spaces for how to make programmes more inclusive and accessible.
- **Involving constituency-led CSOs in implementation of Spotlight programmes**, and projects run by these groups. They appeared to be the strongest in reaching and addressing the priorities of structurally marginalised women and LGBTQI+ persons, and tackling the violence they faced. Small grant schemes in particular enabled constituency-led CSOs to access UN funding.
- **Engaging constituency-led CSOs in capacity-strengthening efforts with other CSO partners** to support them to meaningfully and safely engage and reach structurally marginalised groups. This emerged as a promising approach as these organisations have expertise and are well placed to provide leadership on LNOB.
- **Integrating LNOB across Spotlight programmes by partnering with constituency-led CSOs as grantees and implementing partners**, and engaging constituency-led CSOs in capacity strengthening efforts with other CSO partners to support their meaningful engagement with structurally marginalised women and groups.
- **Improving accessibility by integrating the needs** and priorities of structurally marginalised groups into service provision to better reach and serve diverse survivors.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

These factors enabled the integration of the LNOB principle across Spotlight Initiative:

- **Centring LNOB as a cross-cutting principle** in Spotlight Initiative supported an intentional focus on engaging and reaching structurally marginalised women and groups.
- **Members from structurally marginalised groups and constituency-led organisations on the CSRGs** contributed with knowledge and advised Spotlight Initiative, leading to more inclusive and intersectional approaches.
- **Contracting constituency-led CSOs to provide capacity support** to other CSOs ensured expertise on different aspects of LNOB and supported the leadership of constituency-led CSOs on LNOB approaches in programmes.
- Where **reasonable accommodations** were provided, this was key in making CSRGs spaces and programme activities more accessible.
- **Conducive contexts** for openly working with and supporting structurally marginalised groups enabled Spotlight Initiative to more easily engage with structurally marginalised groups.

BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

The following structural and contextual challenges limited the full realisation of the LNOB principle:

- Existing LNOB guidance was **not sufficiently contextualised** for EVAWG programming.
- While some attention was paid to the provision of reasonable accommodations, **programmes did not consistently embrace inclusion and 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.
- **Lack of guidance and support** on how to meaningfully engage and reach structurally marginalised groups in contexts where aspects of their lives and identities are criminalised and / or contexts are in other ways hostile – for example, LGBTQI+ persons and sex workers – was among the key challenges identified.
- **Guidance on data disaggregation did not sufficiently consider LNOB** principles and considerations.



Transforming Power

What worked well with Spotlight Initiative?

Spotlight Initiative set out to be transformative, in both what it did and how it did it to prevent and respond to VAWG. The Initiative also intended to demonstrate and align with UN Reform principles, which set out how the United Nations Development System (UNDS) can be more coordinated and coherent, leveraging the expertise of UN country teams under the leadership of Resident Coordinators, and streamlining operating practices for more integrated delivery. The assessment found that Spotlight Initiative made the following contributions towards new ways of working that address power dynamics and model UN Reform:

- **Responding positively to pressure and advocacy from civil society**, for example by adding Pillar 6 (focused on supporting strong and empowered civil society and autonomous women's movements) and making changes to governance and decision-making structures during the global programme design phase. This helped demonstrate Spotlight Initiative's accountability to its commitment to power sharing, by meaningfully engaging and increasing the voice of civil society in decision making within a UN structure.
- **Adapting and innovating funding mechanisms** to increase reach to smaller and community-based women's rights organisations, grassroots organisations and constituency-led CSOs which has involved challenging traditional UN funding structures that have typically privileged more established NGOs and INGOs. While these approaches remained relatively small in scale, they demonstrated the potential for the UN to work in more transformative and feminist ways with civil society.
- **Developing promising examples across Spotlight programmes of UN Reform**, specifically related to inter-agency coordination and the enhanced role of the Resident Coordinator. In many countries, the Resident Coordinator through the Spotlight Country Coordinator established pillar technical coordination groups and galvanised stakeholders at district or provincial level to come together for joint planning and information sharing. Agencies also came together to develop internal agreements, Joint Expressions of Interest or Terms of References, and joint contracts for CSOs that were providing support across pillars and with different RUNOs in order to lessen onerous reporting burdens on partners that receive funding from more than one UN agency.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

The following factors supported more transformative ways of working by Spotlight Initiative and supported UN Reform:

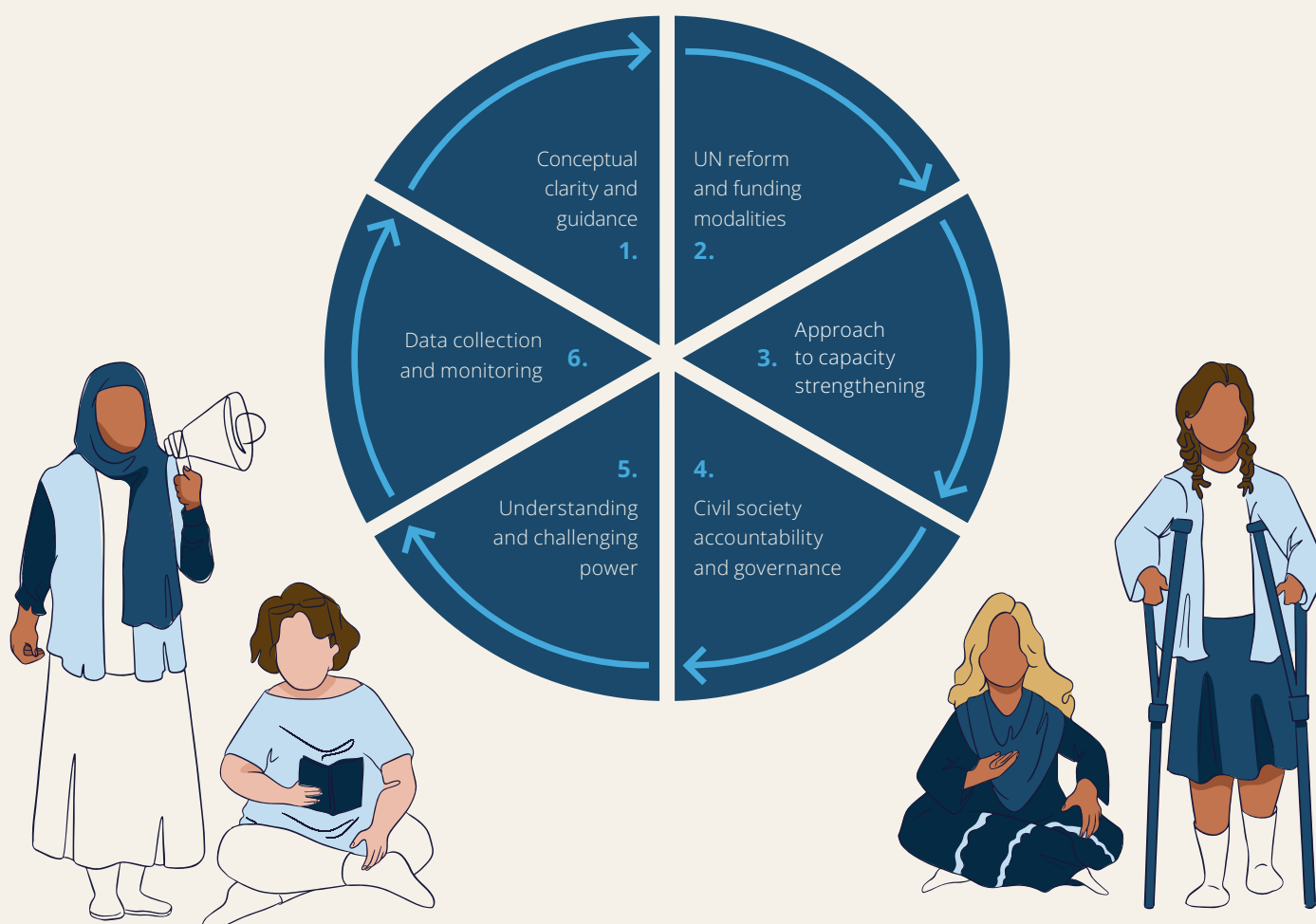
- The **clearly articulated ambition** sets out an agenda for more transformative ways of working in UN EAWG programmes.
- Spotlight Initiative's comprehensive six pillar design set out a **comprehensive approach** to tackling VAWG, which is required to address VAWG in more transformative ways according to existing evidence.
- Mechanisms that ensured **civil society representation** at the highest level of the Initiative's governance structures facilitated civil society influence and voice in the Initiative.
- **Mechanisms to cascade funding** down to smaller, community-based grassroots organisations, including constituency-led groups (e.g. sub-granting mechanisms and consortia arrangements).
- The leadership and oversight **role of the Resident Coordinator** was heralded as improving coordination across several Spotlight programmes.

BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

- The Spotlight Initiative's **timeframe of 5 years is unlikely to be sufficient** to pursue truly transformative approaches which require structural change on multiple levels that take time.
- **The short inception phase** was a significant factor hindering Spotlight Initiative's ability to be more locally led and contextually relevant.
- There is a need to **balance the requirements of a globally designed programme with ensuring adequate contextualised frameworks** and design features for regional and country programmes – this balance was hard to maintain and at times contributed to a feeling that these were 'imposed'.
- While Spotlight Initiative did well in funding beyond the 'usual suspects', the assessment found **few examples of where this funding was for core, institutional support**. Instead it was often short-term, and activity-based.
- Pressures related to **short timelines and reporting requirements were passed down** to sub-grantees at times. This undermined efforts to rebalance traditional power relationships.
- **Sub-grantee partners were less likely to be involved** in design of interventions and decision-making, and not all civil society partners felt they were involved as equal partners.

Implications for Spotlight 2.0

Drawing on lessons learned, the assessment developed six overarching recommendations for Spotlight Initiative to consider for future programming. These could also be of interest for the wider UN system, donors, and others working on EVAWG programming.



1. Conceptual clarity and guidance

A future iteration of Spotlight Initiative could include a much clearer articulation of its feminist and human rights framing, and how this translates into well-defined strategies and approaches for supporting feminist movements, supporting and standing in solidarity with oppressed and structurally marginalised groups, and ensuring accountability to, and protection of, human rights defenders and activists in the context of GBV programming.

The following steps could be taken:

- Develop a **conceptual framework for movement building** that unpacks the meaning of movement strengthening in the context of EVAWG programming, and considers the type of support that might be needed in different contexts – for example, where movements are strong and united and where they are more fragmented, nascent, and / or dispersed.
- Contextualise **LNOB guidance for EVAWG programming** and make sure this is widely shared and communicated with programmes.
- Develop an **engagement strategy** for how to support and work in solidarity with oppressed and structurally marginalised groups, including in the most repressive contexts, in line with a human rights based approach to programming.

2. UN reform and funding modalities

Simplify and harmonise UN funding, procurement, and reporting systems across all UN agencies working on future iterations of Spotlight Initiative or other EVAWG programming in line with UN Reform. Such initiatives should adopt feminist funding principles that recognise the importance of longer-term, flexible, core funding for women-led and other constituency-led organisations.

The following steps could be taken:

- Simplify and ensure **coherent financial and narrative reporting** for implementing partners to report centrally rather than to individual UN agencies, including by using **joint Memorandum of Understandings (MoU)** that allow for a single report to be submitted against the MoU to all UN agencies (where partners are funded across multiple UN agencies).
- **Harmonise processes** for responding to both expressions of interest and full proposals. Continue making calls for proposals available in local languages, with submissions accepted by hand, post, and email, at district level as well as main offices.
- **Award grants and contracts for the full duration of programmes** to ensure the multi-year funding and long-term commitment required to achieve transformative change. Ensure grants are flexible and allow for institutional funding to support organisational stability and sustainability.

3. Approach to capacity strengthening

Spotlight Initiative (and the UN more broadly) should centre its approach to capacity strengthening around CSOs' needs and priorities and implement this in more participatory, inclusive, and sustainable ways through meaningfully engaging CSO partners in the delivery of trainings, accompaniment and other capacity strengthening efforts.

The following steps could be taken:

- Conduct **participatory, collaborative capacity assessments** together with civil society partners to identify areas of strengths and gaps and plan together how to address those.
- Replace one-off trainings with more **sustainable and engaged practices** such as **mentoring and accompaniment** where, for example, different CSOs partner with each other to provide mutual support in recognition of the different experiences and expertise that exist.
- Support the **leadership of constituency-led CSOs** in capacity strengthening efforts (e.g. as trainers, facilitators and advisors) with other programme partners on how to integrate LNOB issues in safe and inclusive ways, in recognition of their expertise in these areas and the complexities of mainstreaming the LNOB principle in programming.
- Prioritise, resource, and incentivise **collective learning spaces** between UN teams as well as CSOs to foster a culture of learning and reflection as a core part of the programme delivery and approach.

4. Civil society accountability and governance

UN global initiatives should ensure governance and decision making prioritises accountability to civil society and rights holders and continue to facilitate civil society's meaningful participation in governance and decision-making structures.

The following steps could be taken:

- Maintain the **CSRG mechanism as a permanent structure** to enable civil society and feminist leaders to hold UN power holders to account, both within Spotlight Initiative 2.0 and the UN system more broadly, with clearer lines of accountability, more accessible compensation, and better-defined expectations and roles and responsibilities, including clear procedures to address potential conflicts of interest. Roles should be more than just advisory and be created to hold programmes to account for their commitments and articulated ways of working.
- Ensure **civil society is equally represented on programme governing bodies and committees** and promote truly meaningful participation by modelling principles of equitable partnership and decision making.
- **Challenge expectations of and avoid volunteerism** by ensuring members of CSRGs are fairly compensated for their expertise, leadership and the work they do, including paying for their time as well as their expenses.
- Systematically **operationalise the LNOB principle** in civil society reference groups, including by consistently considering accessibility requirements for persons with disabilities and by ensuring equal access to laptops, phones, data packages, and other items necessary for meaningful participation.

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.

The following steps could be taken:

- **Recognise and seek to challenge the 'top-down' nature of global programmes** to include space for more contextual knowledge and localisation processes.
- **Co-develop a set of guiding principles of equitable partnership**, ways of working, and power sharing among stakeholders, for all RUNOs and participating agencies to sign up to and model in their partnerships with civil society. This would help strengthen trust and mutual respect, and better value the expertise and contextual knowledge brought by both civil society the UN.
- **Consider joint fundraising efforts** to incentivise harmonised and collaborative processes, reduce competition among UN agencies, and drive more and better (quality) funding to the EVAWG work (the sector) more broadly.
- **Maintain transparency and equity in communication** to ensure sub-grantees have the same information and access to the UN as implementing partner contract holders do, and that timeframes are shared and adequately phased to avoid the 'ripple effect of pressure' being passed down to sub-grantees.

6. Data collection and monitoring

Spotlight Initiative could deepen its participatory approach to collecting programme data collection and monitoring its interventions to ensure it better aligns with the Initiative's principles, including on implementing LNOB, transparency, and learning. A Spotlight Initiative 2.0 and other EVAWG programmes could explore how to further embed participatory approaches to M&E, deepen data disaggregation, and develop indicators for better track progress and on support to feminist movements and partnerships with constituency-led CSOs.

The following steps could be taken:

- Collect relevant (and additional) **disaggregated data** to understand which women and girls in their diversity and structurally marginalised groups are reached by programmes, and to what extent constituency-led CSOs are engaged. Provide guidance on whether and how to collect this data in a variety of contexts, ensuring a 'do no harm' approach.
- Further promote **participatory approaches to the programming cycle, including in monitoring, evaluation and reporting (PMER)** and ensure these principles are embedded across programmes, and that indicators and reporting requirements provide the right incentives (and enough time/resources) to ensure participatory processes.
- Include more **qualitative measures/indicators** in global monitoring frameworks on efforts to strengthen and support movements.
- Ensure Spotlight Initiative 2.0 and other EVAWG programmes are accompanied by a **well-resourced evaluation and research strategy** that sets out how **programme impact** will be assessed that goes beyond verifying programme reporting.

Endnotes

- 1 The Spotlight Initiative [The Spotlight Initiative to eliminate violence against women and girls \(un.org\)](https://www.un.org/spotlight)
- 2 World Health Organization (2018) [Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2018 – Global fact sheet](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women)
- 3 See Overview | [Localizing the SDGs \(sdglocalization.org\)](https://sdglocalization.org) and UN development system reform 101 | [United to Reform](https://www.un.org/development/desa/press/2019/09/20190910-un-development-system-reform-101.html)



Social Development Direct is a UK-based Private Sector Social Enterprise that provides specialised research, evidence and technical assistance related to gender equality, disability and social inclusion for overseas development programming and policy.

[VISIT WEBSITE](#)



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.

[VISIT WEBSITE](#)