

Key Insights from Civil Society on Spotlight Initiative's efforts to engage CSOs, strengthen movements and leave no one behind

Taking a feminist and participatory approach

Spotlight Initiative commissioned Social Development Direct to conduct a feminist assessment of the Initiative, that privileged insights from civil society and women's rights activists and movements. We did that by centering their voices during data collection and providing space for them to contribute to sensemaking and developing recommendations. Consultation, co-creation, and validation processes were a significant part of our approach, engaging with a diverse group of women activists and evaluators across the case studies to participate in the process. We established Thematic Assessment Country Accountability and Advisory Groups, in each of the case study programmes, who supported at key stages.

Listening to civil society, especially women's rights organisations and movements, was central to the assessment.

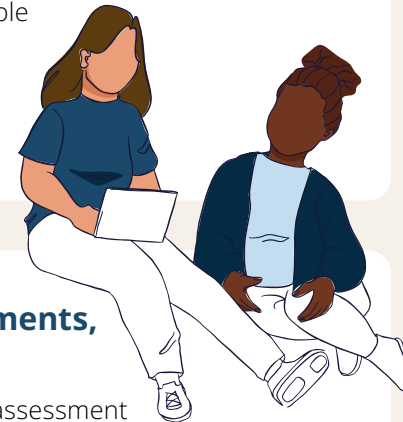
This brief has been designed to share the findings and recommendations which have emerged from the assessment back to civil society and women's movements. The learnings shared in this brief capture the range of voices and perspectives from diverse groups of women, and men, and have contributed to the development of range of recommendations that have been put forward to Spotlight Initiative and the UN System. We have used direct quotes where possible to illustrate these findings. We hope civil society, and women's rights organisations and movements, working to end VAWG, will be able to use this to support advocacy and meaningful engagement with UN, donors and other partners on how to partner more effectively and work in more transformative ways to end VAWG. It complements another brief produced for the UN and donors. The assessment's full findings, conclusions and recommendations are presented in both a summary document and in the full report.

About the thematic assessment

The purpose of the thematic assessment was to look at how Spotlight Initiative has performed against three themes, and four assessment questions, that are recognised as critical to ending violence against women and girls (EVAWG) in a more transformative and sustainable way.



Spotlight Initiative believes that the leadership and engagement of civil society, and in particular women's rights organisations and movements, is essential to achieving transformational and sustainable change to end violence against women and girls.



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 the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) demonstrating that a significant, concerted and comprehensive investment in gender equality and ending violence can make a transformative difference in the lives of women and girls across all SDGs.

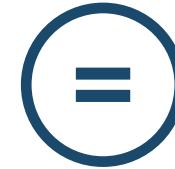
Methodology

The themes were explored through a global document review, participatory workshops and interviews, a story collection exercise, and 10 in-depth case studies of Spotlight country and regional programmes.

The detailed methodology can be found in the main assessment report.

[ACCESS MAIN REPORT](#)

Who we spoke to



506

Total number of people we spoke with



372

Women, including trans and cisgender women



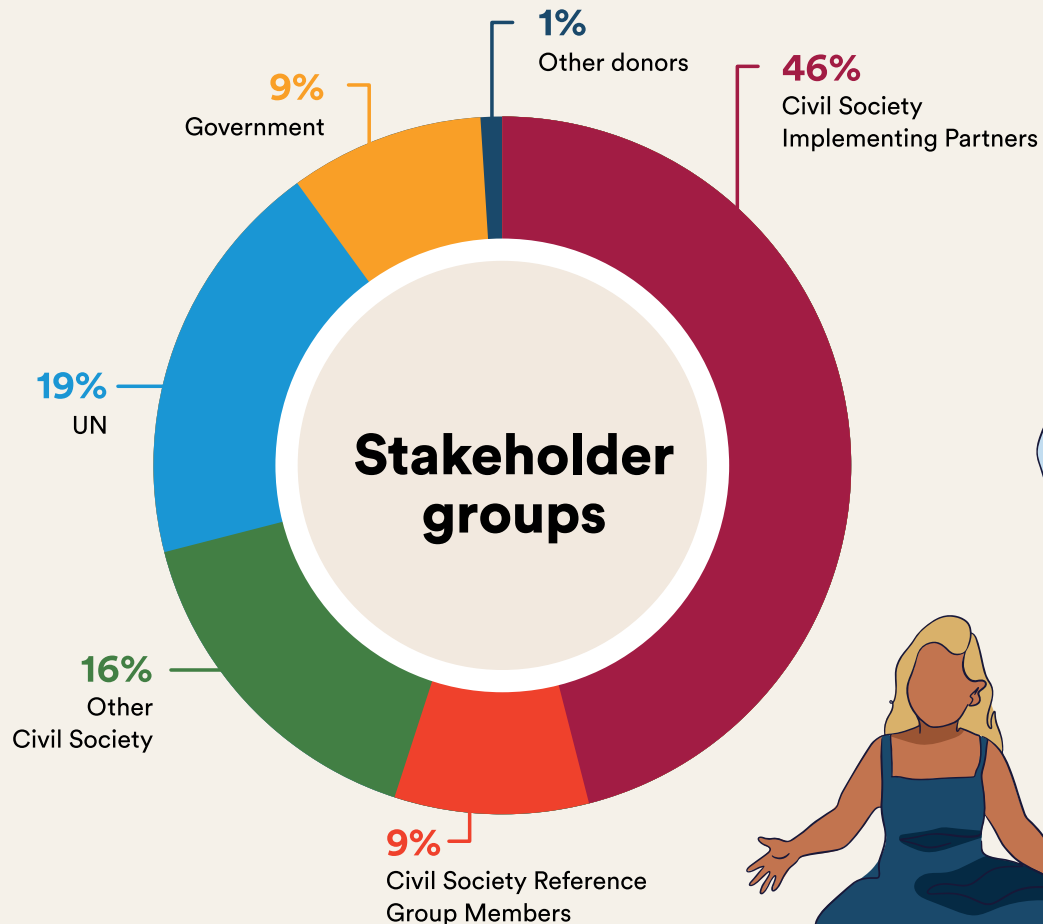
98

Men, including trans and cisgender men



8

Non-binary



What did Spotlight Initiative do to prioritise meaningful partnerships with civil society and ensure they were actively engaged in decision making processes?



CSO
Engagement

We sat in the national Steering Committee – this felt important. We had a voice at the table and amazing co-chairs who wanted to hear our voice – our monitoring role was very important.

— CSRG member

The CSRG mechanism could be improved further in future programmes by:

- **Simplifying and publicising the process for CSRG members to access compensation** by removing excessive administrative requirements and ensuring the compensation guidance is widely known and understood.

- **Providing greater clarity**, in the existing terms of reference, on the role, responsibility, and lines of accountability for CSRG members, and revisit expectations of the level of effort that was needed by members.

It's a good beginning, but there is a lot of room for improvement. This is not where decisions are made. [...] We have been engaging, but not sure of its meaningfulness.

— CSRG member

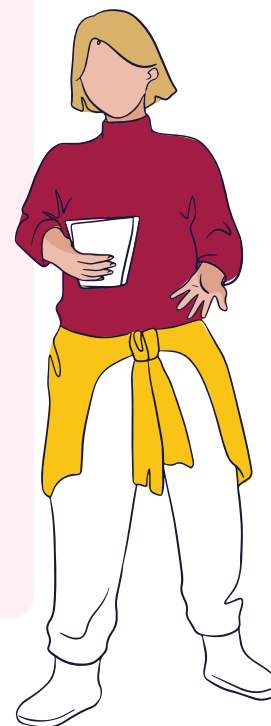
1

Civil society reference groups. CSRGs were the primary mechanism for engaging civil society in decision making and governance. They were widely recognised as a positive innovation and one that should continue. Their role in influencing decisions at programme and global levels and involvement in programme monitoring were viewed positively by stakeholders.

They [CS-NRG] do monitoring and provide some feedback. They give ideas in meetings, things that they observed. If anything needs some improvement from us, they can provide the feedback– we could change things directly.

— Civil Society Respondent

Civil Society Reference Groups were established at Global, Regional and Country level, and were comprised of a group of diverse women's rights and feminist activists. They operated with a triple mandate: to advise on programme implementation; to advocate for the realisation of the Initiative's objectives, and to hold the Initiative accountable to its commitments.



2

Innovative funding mechanisms.

Spotlight Initiative put in place several innovative processes which enabled a range of smaller, grassroots groups to access funding, and led to many more civil society organisations receiving funding. These included small-grants mechanisms, funding through the UN Trust Fund and the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, making application documents available in multiple languages, and providing support during the application process, and in some places amending registration requirements.

Due to the thematic focus of the Spotlight programme, numerous women's NGOs received support from the Initiative. The allocated funding had a significant impact. The funding enabled sustained advocacy efforts, resulting in increased reporting of cases related to female genital mutilation (FGM), rape, LGBTI rights, and more.

— Civil society implementing partner



These mechanisms could be improved further in future programmes by:

- **Extending funding cycles** to match the overall length of the programme or asking donors to commit to longer timeframes. The timeframe of funding for projects was generally too short to enable transformative change to take place at programme or organisational level.
- **Simplifying procurement, contracting and reporting processes** which are currently overly bureaucratic.
- **Providing more core and flexible funds** that can be used in ways that better meet the needs and priorities of the organisations or groups, and foster institutional resilience.

3

Capacity strengthening for civil society organisations.

Spotlight Initiative programmes made efforts to strengthen the capacity of CSOs. Often this was focused on supporting organisations to meet UN reporting requirements. Where constituency-led CSOs provided capacity strengthening support, this was found to be more relevant.



This could be improved further in future programmes by:

- **Revisiting the approach to capacity strengthening** with CSOs and ensuring it prioritises the support that is most relevant and responsive to CSOs' identified needs, through developing participatory, collaborative approaches to capacity needs assessments to identify priorities, strengths and gaps.
- **Exploring options for delivering capacity support** to CSOs through constituency-led, collective learning spaces, peer support, and accompaniment.

How did Spotlight Initiative work with and support progressive women's and feminist movements?



Feminist Movements

Spotlight was very instrumental in giving us that kind of catalytic, out of the box thinking, at a time when everyone was quite isolated. [The Initiative] provided us with energy to think differently and action it.

— Civil Society Respondent

The UN support increased [CSOs] credibility and facilitated access to decision-makers.

— Civil Society Respondent

This support could be improved further in future programmes by:

- **Developing guidance** to provide more clarity on what feminist movement strengthening by a UN programme could look like in different contexts.
- **Ensuring there is an adequate programme inception phase** which allows for civil society stakeholders to be engaged as partners in programme design and supports deeper understanding of local civil society dynamics, existing work and context.
- **Listening to and trusting civil society and women rights organisations** to know what they need in terms of capacity and resources to do the work and meet them where they are.

1

Different types of support to movements were provided depending on the context and stage of development of the movement. Where movements were already established, Spotlight Initiative's support was more responsive and aligned to their identified needs. In contexts where movements were more fragmented or at an earlier stage of development, the Initiative's support tended to be more directive, for example, purposively bringing certain groups together and orchestrating their collaboration and focus, which may have limited their ownership and sustainability.

If there is any other organisation to lead, it should not be the UN. Some of these things - we need them to come from the community. It should grow from the community.

— Civil Society Respondent

2

Spotlight Initiative is well-placed to play a strategic role in supporting movements.

Many civil society stakeholders view the convening role of Spotlight Initiative programmes as the UN's most strategic function. This could involve a 'brokering role,' helping civil society access strategic spaces and opportunities, but not trying to take the lead.

UN has power for influencing governments. We need the UN side by side with CSOs to [help them] claim the advocacy spaces, find the spaces to influence government. UN's advantage is the convening power with the government, and now they try to work more with civil society.

— Civil Society Respondent



This support could be improved further in future programmes by:

- **Visibly standing in solidarity with civil society.** Civil society does not always see what the UN may be doing behind the scenes in these more challenging contexts and wants to see the UN be stronger and more vocal in its commitments to its human rights principles and approach. An engagement strategy for how the UN (and Spotlight Initiative) could better support and work in solidarity with oppressed and marginalised groups in more restrictive contexts could be developed.
- **Providing more targeted support to movements and cross movement building in the face of anti-gender backlash,** including male pushback towards EVAWG programming, and working with LGBTQI+ groups and sex workers. These are growing concerns for women's rights organisations, activists and movements. Programmes like Spotlight Initiative have an important role to play in supporting movements and cross movement building in the face of this backlash.



How did Spotlight Initiative work with the most left behind and discriminated against women and girls in all their diversity?



Leave No One Behind (LNOB)

We were pushing for LGBTQI+ organisations to also be supported by Spotlight because of the high levels of violence that people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, expression and sex characteristics face in the region. We wanted that to be a strong element of Spotlight Initiative. I think we influenced the process a lot. It was there, but we were pushing for it.

— Civil Society Respondent

1

Spotlight Initiative's centring of 'leave no one behind' as a cross-cutting principle meant that there was an intentional focus on engaging and reaching the most structurally marginalised women and groups with programming as well as in the governance mechanisms.

We are thinking about bringing women with disabilities into our regular training, taking an inclusive approach. We are looking at including 2-3 women with disabilities in all trainings, which broadly addresses issues. Women with disabilities are more vulnerable than the ones we call 'vulnerable'. All the training we have said we have 'done to vulnerable' women, but never included women with disabilities before. Thanks to Spotlight, we got into working with women with disabilities.

— Civil Society Respondent

2

Constituency-led CSOs are best placed to reach and address the priorities of structurally marginalised women and LGBTQI+ groups and to support the capacity strengthening of CSO partners to more meaningfully and safely engage and reach these different groups.

They [constituency-led CSOs] know the situation better, and for sustainability also, they work directly with the community-led organisations. They also did the capacity building to CSOs, [they] were invited to participate in capacity building to other partners – [these explained to us] what is disability inclusion and LGBTQI+?

— Civil Society Respondent

This work could be improved further in future programmes by:

- **Providing contextualised LNOB guidance** for EAWG programming in particular, and how to meaningfully engage with structurally marginalised groups in contexts where their lives and identities may be criminalised or discriminated against.

More guidance and understanding were needed from Spotlight Initiative on what that means to unpack that big term [LNOB] you see in documents – what would it mean in the context [of this country], so that we had some more guidance when we deliver on the ground.

— Civil Society Respondent

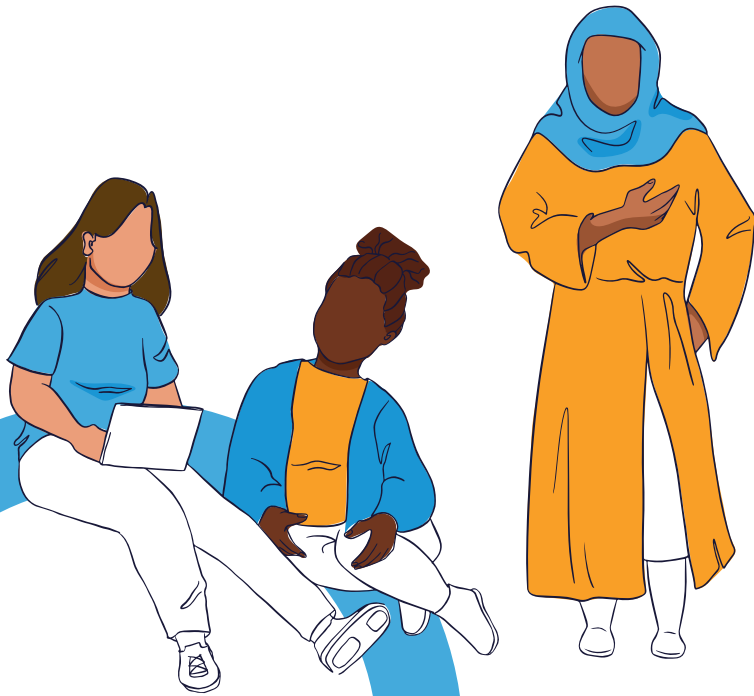
What did Spotlight Initiative do to transform power dynamics and pre-existing structures to allow for more sustainable change?



Transforming
Power

“The Spotlight programme has put new thinking on the table, and this can be transformative over time.”

— Civil Society Respondent



1

Spotlight Initiative demonstrated the potential for the UN to work in more transformative and feminist ways. Spotlight Initiative set out to be transformative, in both what it did and how it did it to prevent and respond to VAWG. We heard from women’s rights organisations, grassroots organisations and constituency-led civil society organisations that they had received funding from UN organisations for the first time through Spotlight Initiative, including through the new funding mechanisms that the Initiative put in place. While these were not widespread, the clearly articulated ambition to do this set the agenda for a more transformative way of working.

This could be improved further in future programmes by:

- **Recognising and challenging the ‘top-down’ nature of global programmes** and including more space and time to generate greater contextual understanding during the design (inception phase).
- **Strengthening the understanding of and removing barriers** for civil society organisations to access UN funds.
- **Creating and prioritising space for a diversity of civil society and feminist leaders at the country, regional and global levels to hold UN power holders to account**, on governance bodies, including the CSRG and other steering committees. These roles should go beyond advisory functions to be able to hold programmes to account for their commitments.
- Addressing the **‘ripple effect’ of pressure** to deliver passed from donor to Spotlight Initiative, and the Initiative to civil society and sub-grantees an ultimately community groups, by working to redesign procurement, reporting and compliances processes.

“The contribution that civil society can make is very limited – they want us there (on the Governing Body), but our power is limited. They do give us space to ask questions, and let us give opinions, but not sure how much we contribute to decision making. I would have liked to see more in terms of them taking our comments more seriously.”

— Civil Society Respondent

“The funding we received was passed down from [grantee partner], which makes it difficult for us to navigate, often with strict regulations come from on top, especially on the finance report.”

— Sub-grantee of Spotlight
Implementing partner

So what next?

We have now completed the Thematic Assessment and have shared these recommendations with Spotlight Initiative who have been considering them as part of the co-design process for Spotlight Initiative 2.0. Many of the representatives from civil society organisations and women's movements that we spoke with were also involved in the co-design process. The Global Civil Society Reference Group has been supporting that process and have developed a set of principles to guide the design of the following phase. We also hope that this brief will be useful to support civil society advocacy and efforts to end violence against women and girls, including by calling on the UN, other international organisations, and donors to work and fund in fairer, more transformational ways.



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.

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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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