

Por una comunidad libre de violencia contra las mujeres y niñas



## Spotlight Initiative: Results, Promising Practices and Lessons on Ending Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

### Introduction

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is an extreme form of violence against women and girls, violating their rights to bodily integrity, safety, health and the right to be free from torture and degrading treatment. Over 200 million girls and women alive today have experienced FGM and COVID-19 has increased the risk of girls undergoing FGM, with 2 million cases that could have been averted. In 2024, nearly **4.4 million girls** - or more than 12,000 each day - are at risk of female genital mutilation around the world.<sup>1</sup> Unless concreted and accelerated action is taken, projections further indicate that 4.6 million more girls will undergo FGM by 2030.<sup>2</sup> Global action to end FGM is greater than ever and a significant investment to end FGM is critical to advance the rights of women and girls everywhere. Spotlight Initiative is working to eliminate FGM across the globe through sustainable approaches.

This knowledge brief shares promising practices, lessons and results from Spotlight Initiative's work to end FGM drawing on insights from an analysis and synthesis of 98 reports from 2019 to 2023 across all Spotlight Initiative country and regional programmes and Trust Funds. The Spotlight Initiative has employed a variety of approaches towards ending FGM, including actively engaging with traditional and cultural leaders, using multiple innovative and community communication channels, and employing community-based strategies to raise awareness and change social norms, attitudes, and behaviors to end FGM, including greater access to sexual and reproductive health services.

### Lesson Learned #1

**Employing community-based strategies that involve community members and networks help shift social norms and embrace cultural traditions towards ending FGM**

Finding ways to meaningfully engage community members and create momentum for networks to engage at the community level **influenced changes in the attitudes and behaviors of FGM practitioners as well as members of the community.**

Spotlight Initiative programmes such as the **Africa Regional Programme** and in **Liberia, Uganda, Niger and Mali** have all engaged in community-based strategies to create and spread new norms around the importance of ending FGM. In **Liberia**, Spotlight Initiative supported the development of alternative rites of passage for girls and young women, recognizing the **importance of celebrating rites of passage** in the community. This provides important culturally-led and relevant strategies to end and replace FGM, increasing its resonance. Ultimately, initiatives driven by communities that are aligned with cultural traditions can support sustainable behavior change to end FGM.

In **Mali**, Spotlight Initiative supported the development of community advocacy platforms to prevent and address cases of gender-based violence in the community. Approximately **1,179 community advocacy platforms** were set up in schools in the Kayes, Koulikoro, Sikasso, Ségou, and Bamako district regions where **4,820 people's awareness was raised** on ending gender-based violence, and **294 cases of gender-based violence were addressed through the community platforms**. An important impact of this initiative so far has been that a total of **1,787 cases of FGM** were avoided.

This case demonstrates the **power of using community structures and networks to end FGM - when action is driven directly by communities, the promotion of ending FGM can become normalized, social norms can shift more quickly, and others become empowered to speak up and raise their voices to end the practice.**

In **Uganda**, the Spotlight Initiative used the Community-based Actions Teams (COMBATs) model, developed under a WomanKind funded project in Mubende District. COMBATs are teams of individuals that mobilize other community members to act and change unfavorable situations in their communities. The Initiative used the COMBATs to combat VAWG and harmful practices, especially to eliminate FGM. The COMBATs worked closely with reformed FGM practitioners who had abandoned the practice. As a result, two former FGM practitioners in Amudat denounced the practice and joined the COMBATs in 2019. Additionally, two cultural leaders that used to champion FGM also denounced the practice. This sets a strong groundwork for influencing community members to end FGM.

<sup>1</sup> UNFPA, 2024, Advocacy Messages

<sup>2</sup> UNFPA, 2023, UNFPA Research on FGM Highlights Increased Risk: A call for Evidence and Action to end Female Genital Mutilation by 2030

Another important innovation in Uganda was for community-based women's groups to become part of the system of a cross-border movement surveillance network, identifying cases where girls were at risk of FGM and child marriage between the border of Uganda and Kenya. **These community-based women's groups have played an integral role in reporting cases to authorities and bringing girls back home and to safety.**

## Lesson Learned #2

### Partnering with traditional leaders and influential stakeholders can scale up efforts to end FGM in policy and in practice

Engaging with traditional and religious leaders is vital, especially in developing support and community resonance to eliminate violence against women and girls and harmful traditional practices. Spotlight Initiative programmes such as those in **Liberia, Niger, and Uganda** are all connecting with traditional leaders and building support for community change, banning FGM and enacting policies to put an end to this harmful practice.

In **Liberia**, the Spotlight Initiative promoted an innovative partnership between national ministries, the National Traditional Council of Chiefs and Elders, the Civil Society Working Group on FGM and traditional leaders in the community. This resulted in the "Seven-Count Policy", signed in 2019 by the Liberian Government and Traditional Chiefs in the 11 FGM practicing counties in Liberia. **This policy suspended FGM for one year and began building a culture of trust** amongst stakeholders. Further support from the programme resulted in the adoption of another policy statement in 2022 **suspending FGM for three years** and, together with traditional leaders, advocated for the passage of an anti-FGM law. Two bills are now before the legislature for review and passage into law. FGM has not only been a cultural practice in the country but has also provided critical income for traditional FGM practitioners (Zoes), which has allowed the practice to continue. Spotlight Initiative identified **other means of income** for Zoes that replaced lost income from FGM, including opportunities in **climate-smart agriculture and cultivating consumable crops**. As a result of the intervention, the head of the Zoe Geh District and the District Zoe Council **pledged their support to ensuring that the practice ends in their area** which culminated in the **release of 48 school-age girls who were being prepared for FGM** from target communities. Currently, **300 FGM practitioners have benefited from these alternative economic interventions**.

Traditional leaders were critical to promoting community outreach and monitoring to ensure the closure of FGM bush schools and support the rollout of alternative streams of income. Through the Initiative's diverse efforts, it appears that there is greater will to listen and support for efforts to end FGM. FGM is now talked about more openly. To this end, many traditional leaders have become agents of change and are supporting continued advocacy.

Another example of the power in engaging traditional leaders for policy change occurred in Uganda. The National Chapter of the Council of Traditional Leaders in Africa (COTLA) was launched by the Uganda State Minister for Gender with Spotlight Initiative's support.

COTLA is a pan-African movement of progressive traditional leaders established for advocacy, policy dialogue, and to scale up their efforts to transform cultural practices and social norms to end FGM and child marriage in Africa. As part of the COTLA Uganda Chapter, cultural leaders from 14 cultural institutions have stated that they will incorporate eliminating violence against women and girls, including FGM, into their institutional agenda. As COTLA opens new chapters, this spurs impact in communities which can lead to wider adoption of new norms. Spotlight Initiative embraces solutions that come from within communities and cultural institutions to end FGM. Furthermore, through the support of Spotlight Initiative in Uganda, customary laws in three chiefdoms were revised to include commitments to end child marriage and teenage pregnancies, and public declarations to abandon FGM and child marriage were pronounced in **200 high-risk communities**.

In addition to traditional leaders, influential leaders also play a key role in creating norms change. In **Niger**, the Spotlight Initiative engaged public figures to spread messages about the importance of ending FGM:

*Today, I appeal to you, so that together we will ban genital mutilation on our daughters. Yes, we know this practice is deeply rooted in tradition, but while some traditional practices can be positive, others like female genital mutilation are harmful and endanger our lives and health, and the lives and health of our girls. **Here I am today, calling on all of you, all of us, to end once and for all, this harmful act of violence against women and girls.***  
- Fati Mariko, artist, anti-FGM activist in Niger

## Lesson Learned #3

### Advocating for governments and institutions to formulate dedicated plans and budgets for the elimination of FGM helps ensure interventions are adequately resourced, and the practice is meaningfully addressed

The importance of ensuring that governments, multilateral and other institutions not only commit to policies to end FGM and harmful practices, but also place dedicated resources behind these actions cannot be underestimated. Many Spotlight Initiative programmes are engaging in institutional and governmental advocacy to ensure budgets are transparent, prioritized, and funded.

Spotlight Initiative in **Uganda** has worked to institutionalise addressing FGM as a political priority and cultivate ownership around ending harmful practices. These efforts resulted in dedicated national budget to end FGM. Spotlight Initiative's commitment to systems strengthening has also cascaded ownership of efforts to end harmful practices to local levels of government. District governments in Uganda have developed dedicated strategies and action-plans to address FGM, with over 5,000 government officials participating in training and mentorship on gender-responsive budgeting to end harmful practices. Village gender-responsive budgeting clubs have also been established to participate in budget-making processes and contribute to decision-making and service delivery.



The **Africa Regional Programme** supported the development of a cost and impact model to determine the level of investment required to eliminate FGM in Africa by 2030. The results of the study revealed it was necessary to invest USD 3.3 billion to avert 25 million cases of FGM and achieve the 2030 target. The programme has leveraged this data to strengthen advocacy and campaigns calling for greater investment in ending female genital mutilation for the region.

## Lesson Learned #4

**Leveraging diverse communication channels increases community awareness and dialogue around FGM is necessary to change social norms, attitudes, and behaviors, and in directing women and girls to essential services.**

Spotlight Initiative has leveraged diverse and innovative channels to raise public awareness around FGM, spanning press, TV, radio, social media, websites, campaigns, competitions, events, newsletters, and influential public figures. Spotlight Initiative programmes have invested in campaigns and events with the aim of shifting social norms around FGM in **Mali, Uganda**, and the **Africa Regional Programme**.

Spotlight Initiative in **Uganda** developed a legal literacy campaign sharing messages on FGM, domestic violence, sexual harassment, child marriage, and sexual and reproductive health to raise awareness on gender-based violence and the services available to survivors. In total, 2,662 messages were broadcast on 14 radio stations in six regions of Uganda. In **Nigeria**, the Initiative embarked on house-to-house sensitization to prevent FGM during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Initiative used existing community media platforms, including town criers and community volunteers to spread messages for an end to FGM and informed families about the critical negative health impacts related to FGM. The practice of using community media platforms supported community buy-in and participation while the integration of COVID-19 messaging ensured community wellbeing was protected. Moreover, jingles on ending FGM and COVID-19 prevention messages were played on 12 community radio stations. Several Spotlight Initiative programmes produced creative television and radio series to raise awareness of the harmful effects of FGM on girls, women, and communities at large. In **Mali**, a TV series on gender-based violence entitled "Dance inlassable" or "Don ni Dongoma" was commissioned. 54 episodes were broadcasted publicly on various themes including FGM, child marriage, girls out of school, sexual violence, and trafficking. Disseminating original messaging which is tailored to the local context can be a successful approach to interrogating and raising awareness on taboo issues, such as FGM. Simultaneously, the Spotlight Initiative programme in Mali worked to secure public declarations of support for the abandonment of FGM by influential public figures. Over the course of the programme, **6,600 public declarations were made** by religious leaders, community leaders, and goodwill ambassadors.

## Lesson Learned #5

**Working with youth allows for innovative solutions to end FGM**





Most Spotlight Initiative programmes work with youth to strengthen intergenerational partnerships and generate youth led solutions to prevent and address harmful practices. Programmes work with students and youth-led organizations, schools, girls and boys clubs sharing resources and good practices, and co-creating strategies together.

The **Africa Regional Programme** launched a social innovation 'HackLab' challenge to find, fund and scale innovative solutions to end FGM. Over 100 submissions were received from young people from 18 countries across Africa during the first call for applications, with over 60 per cent of these originating from young women. The winning submissions benefitted from an initial investment of \$70,000, as well as business incubation for 3-6 months. These included the development of a mobile platform in Uganda to empower survivors of FGM to seek help from service providers; the production of a mobile application in Nigeria that connects survivors anonymously to FGM and GBV services; the creation of a website in Burkina Faso sharing testimonies of survivors and connecting girls with medical and psychological support; and the acceleration of a mobile application in Uganda to collect and analyse crowdsourced, anonymous reports of FGM practices to identify patterns and key insights.

Social innovation challenges, such as the HackLab, are not only effective in raising awareness of harmful practices beyond mainstream communities, but also connect innovators with the financial, technical and professional support required to scale solutions.

Following the African Girls Summit in 2021, the feminist organization Fada de Filles (Girls' Fada) was founded in Niger. A "Fada" is a community space for dialogue, decision-making, and solidarity traditionally reserved for men and boys. **Spotlight Initiative in Niger** supported young girls to "appropriate" this concept and create their own space to raise awareness, and publicly advocate for social norm change. In the spirit of peer-to-peer mentoring, the "Fada des Filles" brings together young girls from various professional and academic backgrounds who lead discussions on a range of intersecting issues - including FGM, gender-based violence, menstrual hygiene management, and climate change and disaster risk reduction - and advocate for gender responsive solutions (i.e. solutions that center gender equality). These girls serve as role models and "elders" for other young girls and boys, helping to transform social norms and promote gender equality in their communities over time.

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