



International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

RESULTS, PROMISING PRACTICES AND LESSONS FROM THE SPOTLIGHT INITIATIVE TO END FGM

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Introduction

In 2012, the United Nations General Assembly declared February 6th as the **International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)** with the aim to eliminate the harmful practice globally. FGM is an extreme form of violence against women and girls, violating their rights to bodily integrity, safety, health, pleasure, and the right to be free from torture and degrading treatment. **Over 200 million girls and women alive today have experienced FGM**, and where data is available, it is estimated that **68 million more girls will undergo FGM by 2030** unless concerted and accelerated action is taken.¹

Moreover, COVID-19 has increased the risk of girls undergoing FGM, with **2 million cases that could have been averted**. Global action to end FGM is greater than ever and yet a significant investment to end FGM is critical to advance the rights of women and girls everywhere. This points to the urgency of the 2022 Theme for the International Day of Zero Tolerance for FGM, *Accelerating Investment to End Female Genital Mutilation #InvestDontRest*.

This knowledge brief shares promising practices, lessons and results from Spotlight Initiative's work to end FGM. This brief draws on insights from an analysis and synthesis of 98 reports from 2019 to 2021 across all Spotlight Initiative country and regional programmes and Trust Funds. This brief focuses on identifying key lessons, promising practices and results from the Initiative's extensive work on ending FGM to uphold the rights of women and girls, establish greater gender equality and to end all forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG). 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.

Furthermore, Spotlight Initiative has prioritised ending FGM with a significant investment in regional work across Africa.² Insights from these initiatives and lessons can contribute to improving programming, policy and future work more broadly to end FGM globally.

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 **165 girls aged 0-9 were able to avoid undergoing FGM**.

¹ Learn more from the [UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation](#) and see the [cost of transformative results by 2030](#).

² In particular through the Africa Regional Programme's Stream I to support and enhance a regional approach to Ending Violence against Women, Sexual and Gender Based Violence/Harmful Practices (HP) and promoting Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), and **most significantly through Stream II on ending FGM**, including through the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation. The programme is anchored in the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063, the AU Gender Strategy to implement the AU Normative Framework and accelerate progress on SDG5 and other related SDG targets.

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.** 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 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, 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.** Currently, **300 FGM practitioners have benefited from these alternative economic interventions, which have generated a total of LD\$2,149,775.00.**

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.**

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 institutions and governments to develop budgets for ending FGM helps ensure targeted initiatives are adequately funded 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, including the **Africa Regional Programme** and in **Uganda**.

The **Africa Regional Programme** supported a cost and impact model to determine the investment required to eliminate FGM by 2030 in Africa. The results revealed it was necessary to invest USD 3.3 billion to avert 25 million cases of FGM and achieve the 2030 targets. This data has provided critical evidence that is necessary to advocate for greater investment in programmes and policies preventing FGM and points to the need to fill the funding gap.

³ Approximately US \$14,814.

At the national level, the Spotlight Initiative in **Uganda** has enhanced government ownership at multiple levels to address FGM. This has resulted in the **allocation of a national budget to end FGM**, a good practice. Ensuring a national budget to end FGM coupled with systems strengthening has cascaded **ownership of efforts around EVAWG down to national districts and lower levels of government, supporting greater sustainability of efforts to end FGM**.

Lesson Learned #4

Using diverse communication channels to increase community awareness and dialogue is necessary to change social norms, attitudes, and behaviors to end FGM and direct women and girls to necessary services

The Spotlight Initiative engages in diverse and innovative forms of communication that crossed multiple channels, including websites, news, TV, radio, social media, campaigns, newsletters, and influential artists and events to engage with the public on ending FGM. Spotlight Initiative programmes such as those in **Nigeria, Mali** and **Uganda** leveraged diverse communication campaigns and events to end FGM.

In **Nigeria**, the Initiative embarked on **house-to-house sensitization to prevent FGM during the COVID-19 pandemic**. Anecdotal reports showed that some families viewed the lockdown as an opportunity to subject their girls to FGM. To prevent FGM, the Initiative responded to concerns that the lockdown had weakened community-based protection systems and placed vulnerable children, especially girls, at greater risk of experiencing violence, including FGM. 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. Through going door-to-door, **659 households and 4,555 household members were reached to raise awareness on ending violence against women, including FGM between 12 May and 13 June 2020**. In addition, the radio messages reached over **300,000 people** in communities, and community dialogues that took place in tandem fostered a sense trust with the community.

Other Spotlight Initiative programmes produced creative television and radio series to increase the impact of these messages. By spreading original messaging in communities to end FGM and violence against women and girls, awareness of often taboo and silent issues are surfaced. Identification of societal problems and speaking out against FGM and VAWG is an important step in the attitude and behavior change process. In **Mali**, a TV series on gender-based violence entitled “*Dance inlassable*” or “*Don ni Dongoma*” was produced. The TV series was broadcasted to reach the public and challenge harmful social norms and gender stereotypes, with 54 episodes on various themes including FGM, child marriage, girls out of school, rape and sexual violence and trafficking.

Furthermore, in **Uganda**, a legal literacy campaign shared messages on FGM, domestic violence, sexual harassment, child marriage, and sexual and reproductive health to raise awareness about gender-based violence and the services available to victims of violence. In total, **2,662 messages were broadcasted on 14 radio and two stations in six regions of Uganda**. These examples demonstrate the impact of using diverse communication channels and engaging the community to bring to light the importance of ending FGM and the harmful effects it has on girls, women, and communities at large.

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