

# Stories of Hope, Courage and Change from Latin America and Africa

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Spotlight  
Initiative



## Acknowledgements

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## In Memoriam



**Dr Olasunbo Abolanle Odebode**

With great sadness, we remember our dear colleague Olasunbo Abolanle Odebode, who passed away on 29 December 2020. Sunbo joined the UNICEF Nigeria Country Office on 13 January 2010 as Gender & Development Specialist. On 30 June 2016, she was reassigned as Child Protection Specialist in Abuja, where she led two major programmes on harmful practices in Nigeria, including the Joint Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) programme and Spotlight Initiative to end violence against women and girls. She was a fervent defender of the rights of women and children, an unstoppable gender advocate, a forthright colleague and a faithful friend.

## Key acronyms and abbreviations

<b>C4P</b>	Correspondents for Protection (the Niger)
<b>COVID-19</b>	Coronavirus disease 2019
<b>CSC</b>	Community Surveillance Committee (Nigeria)
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FGM</b>	Female genital mutilation
<b>GRB</b>	Gender-responsive budgeting
<b>HP</b>	Harmful practices
<b>ISNA</b>	Salvadoran Institute for the Integral Development of Childhood and Adolescence, El Salvador
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>VAWG</b>	Violence against women and girls
<b>VPC</b>	Village protection committee, Niger
<b>WRO</b>	Women's rights organizations

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\* For the safety of the survivors, nicknames were used.

# The Spotlight Initiative



The **Spotlight Initiative**<sup>1</sup> is the world's largest targeted effort to end all forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG). It was launched in 2016 with €500 million in seed funding from the European Union (EU). **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)**,<sup>2</sup> along with other United Nations agencies, is one of the key partners combating VAWG in eleven countries across Latin America and Africa. Fourteen more countries from the Pacific, Caribbean and Central Asia joined the Initiative in 2020, of which UNICEF is involved in thirteen.

VAWG is one of the most widespread, persistent, and devastating human rights violations in the world.<sup>3</sup> It is a major obstacle to the fulfilment of women's and girls' human rights and to the achievement of the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**.<sup>4</sup> VAWG occurs worldwide, cutting across all generations, nationalities, communities and spheres of society, irrespective of age, ethnicity, disability, or background. The Initiative focuses on particular forms of VAWG that are prevalent or prominently emerging in specific regions: femicide in Latin America; and sexual and gender-based violence, including harmful practices, and the violation of sexual and reproductive health and rights in sub-Saharan Africa.

Gender equality is a precondition and driver for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Persistently high levels of VAWG – driven by gender inequality and exacerbated by the global coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic – threaten to disrupt progress against the SDGs, and require dedicated investment and attention.

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1 Spotlight Initiative, [spotlightinitiative.org](https://spotlightinitiative.org)

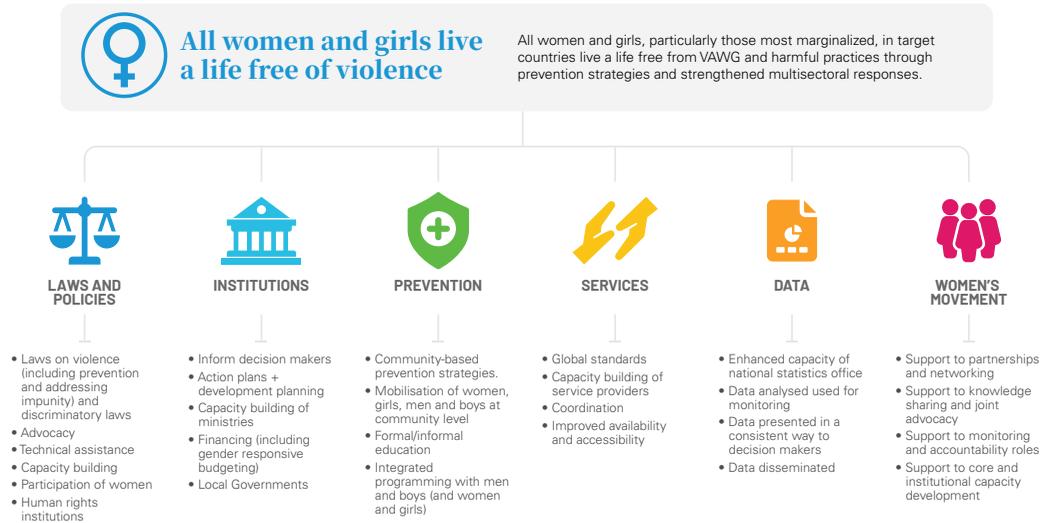
2 United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), [unicef.org](https://www.unicef.org)

3 Multi-Partner Trust Fund, *Annex I c. Regional Investment Plan Africa: Regional and 8 country programme profiles Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Niger, Mozambique, Uganda, Zimbabwe 2018-2023*, Spotlight Initiative, updated September 2020, p. 6, accessed 17 July 2021.

4 United Nations Children's Fund, *UNICEF and the Sustainable Development Goals*, UNICEF, New York, accessed 17 July 2021.

The Initiative's interventions focus on six mutually reinforcing programming pillars:

### Spotlight Initiative's Theory of Change



This report shares stories of change from UNICEF programme interventions in violence prevention, particularly, **changing harmful social and gender norms that underpin all forms of violence**, and **improving access and quality of essential services for survivors of violence**.

# Addressing discriminatory social and gender norms

UNICEF interventions under the Spotlight Initiative predominantly fall under two areas: addressing social and gender norms that perpetuate<sup>5</sup> VAWG; and improving the quality and access to essential services for those affected by VAWG. In this section, we lay out the case for the first.

Norms are informal rules and beliefs that are widely shared across society. Norms inform people's understanding about how they can and should behave, and what practices they can and should engage in.<sup>6</sup>

Norms are pervasive, deeply influencing the behaviour of ordinary people and manifesting in every dimension of society – including law and policy, institutions,

and at the level of communities, households and the individual. It is a major factor that explains widespread VAWG. Recognizing and addressing this web of social rewards and sanctions is key to norms-change efforts,<sup>7</sup> thus making it a core aspect of UNICEF's approach to ending violence. For example, inequitable social and gender norms that condone men's control over women's behaviour are associated with higher levels of domestic violence. Similarly, norms that reinforce male sexual entitlement and power, or prioritize family privacy and reputation, can lead to victim-blaming and discourage survivors, including women, girls and boys, from seeking help.<sup>8</sup>

Childhood and early adolescence (age 10–14 years) are key periods for internalizing social and gender norms<sup>9</sup> making early intervention highly effective and crucial. Parenting, pre-schools and schools are the unique entry points that UNICEF is well positioned to access in order to specifically address norms that influence children and adolescents. We believe prevention interventions must be mutually reinforcing and must engage a broad variety of stakeholders (e.g., men and boys, youth organizations, trade unions, faith-based actors and organizations, civil society and the media) in multiple settings (e.g., sports teams, workplaces).<sup>10</sup>

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5 United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and Social Development Direct, *Transformed Attitudes, Beliefs and Norms, RESPECT: Preventing violence against women strategy summary*, UN Women, New York, 2020, p. 1, accessed 17 July 2021.

6 United Nations Children's Fund and Overseas Development Institute, *Advancing Positive Social and Gender Norms and Socialization through UNICEF Programmes: Monitoring and documenting change*, UNICEF, New York, 2020, p. 7, accessed 17 July 2021.

7 World Health Organization (WHO), *INSPIRE Handbook: Action for implementing the seven strategies for ending violence against children*, WHO, Geneva, 2018, p. 64, accessed 17 July 2021.

8 Heise, Lori L., and Andreas Kotsadam, *Cross-national and Multilevel Correlates of Partner Violence: An analysis of data from population-based surveys*, The Lancet Global Health, vol. 3, no. 6, 2015, pp. E332–E340, accessed 17 July 2021.

9 *INSPIRE Handbook*, p. 69.

10 Multi-Partner Trust Fund, *Spotlight Initiative Terms of Reference 2017–2023*, Spotlight Initiative, 2018, p. 23, accessed 17 July 2021.

Shifting harmful social and gender norms takes time and often meets resistance. After all, we are dealing with stereotypes or values that are deeply embedded in societies. They uphold unequal power relations that benefit some to the detriment of others. However, as the stories in this report show, efforts to change social and gender norms can be effective. Results are tangible in relatively short turnaround times. Across the board, the initiatives in this report have demonstrably introduced shifts in knowledge, attitudes, values, beliefs, and most importantly, in practice.



Kadidia Sow leads a discussion with young people from the village of Gadiaba kadiel. With her picture box, she educates young people against all forms of violence, including child marriage, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and other harmful practices. *Photo: UNICEF/UN0407918/Dicko*

## Providing essential services to survivors of violence

When women and girls face violence, it is crucial to identify their needs quickly and to provide appropriate support that protects them – and those around them – from further harm. Such support is often delivered by child- and women-centred social services, with a significant role played by the health professionals, social services (particularly child protection systems), schools, law enforcement and judicial bodies.<sup>11</sup> Intersectional coordination between these providers is key to keeping survivors safe in the long run and preventing secondary victimization.<sup>12</sup>

As the stories in this report demonstrate, a comprehensive support strategy addresses both the immediate and ongoing needs of survivors.<sup>13</sup> Firstly, it provides them with timely, child-friendly and gender-sensitive care, which addresses their personal needs



Emergency hotel accommodation in Mexico provides safety and empathy for survivors of VAWG. Photo: UNICEF Mexico/Adriana Zehbrauskas.

and facilitates their quest for justice. Secondly, it addresses the detrimental, long-term consequences of the intergenerational impacts of violence:<sup>14</sup> individuals who experience violence without adequate support are more prone to risk-taking behaviour and are more likely to be future victims or perpetrators of violence.

The interventions supported by the Spotlight Initiative<sup>15</sup> consider it pivotal that support services are survivor-centred, well funded, accountable, well delivered, and that a strong legal system underpins the process.<sup>16</sup> UNICEF is a world leader in facilitating intersectional responses that see children and women survivors in the wholeness of their experiences. The following stories illustrate how effective this approach can be.

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women); World Health Organization (WHO); United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA); United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). *Essential Services Package for Women and Girls Subject to Violence*, Module 1, UN Women, New York, 2015, p. 6, accessed 17 July 2021.

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Office for Drug Control and Prevention (UNODC). *Handbook on Justice for Victims: On the use and application of the Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power*, UNODC, New York, 1999, accessed 17 July 2021.

<sup>13</sup> *INSPIRE Handbook*.

<sup>14</sup> *Essential Services Package*, Module 7, p. 10, accessed 17 July 2021.

<sup>15</sup> *Spotlight Initiative Terms of Reference*.

<sup>16</sup> *Essential Services Package*, Module 1, p. 17.



# Are you being served?

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Emergency hotel accommodation bridges gap between survivors and support services in Mexico

Flor\* and Thalia\* fled from domestic violence and were provided emergency accommodation by a private sector hotel chain. *Photo: Gaia Squarci.*

## MEXICO

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In Mexico, a unique cross-sector partnership between 34 public and private institutions offers free, temporary hotel accommodation to VAWG survivors. Over 10,000 hotel employees of the national hotel chain Grupo Posadas and various government employees have been sensitized on VAWG. Plans to expand with additional hotel chains are underway.

“It’s been a relief to spend a few days at the hotel. I feel safe and rested, and the hotel staff treated me with so much respect and hospitality. I now have the strength to deal with what’s next in my recovery process.”

Valentina\*, 38, who survived years of domestic violence until she was assisted as part of the Spotlight Initiative’s hotel accommodation programme

Ten women die of VAWG every 24 hours in Mexico.<sup>17</sup> Urgent action to support those at risk became even more critical during the COVID-19 pandemic, with rates of VAWG spiking dramatically around the world. Mexico was no exception – emergency calls related to VAWG increased by 53 per cent in the early part of 2020.

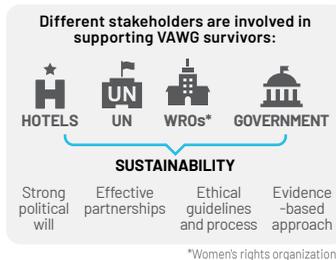
- 38.8 per cent of women aged 15 and older experience sexual violence perpetrated by someone other than an intimate partner at least once in their lifetime
- 26.1 per cent of women aged 20–24 years were married or in union before they turned 18 years old

In Mexico, gender inequality is deeply entrenched, resulting in heightened levels of VAWG. According to the UN Women’s Global Database on Violence against Women, in 2016:<sup>18</sup>

- 24.6 per cent of women and girls experience physical and other forms of intimate partner violence in their lifetime

Travel restrictions, lockdowns, confinement and other measures intended to slow the spread of COVID-19 have further exacerbated a shadow pandemic of VAWG in the home.<sup>19</sup> Access to care and support services has been severely restricted and the maintenance and continuity of such services is endangered, leaving the vulnerable more unprotected than ever before.

**VAWG survivors can access free temporary hotel accommodation**



Hotel staff trained and sensitized by UNICEF’s Safe Accommodation Protocol



It becomes a safe transitional space when moving out of an abusive relationship



17 *Información sobre violencia contra las mujeres* (Incidencia delictiva y llamadas de emergencia 9-1-1), Centro Nacional de Información, Información con corte al 30 de Abril de 2021, accessed 25 July 2021.

18 UN Women Global Database on Violence against Women, *Prevalence Data on Different Forms of Violence against Women: Mexico*, UN Women, New York, 2016, accessed 17 July 2021.

19 United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women); Pan American Health Organization (PAHO); United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA); UNICEF, *Technical Note: Interrelation between violence against women and violence against boys and girls*, UN Women, New York, May 2020, accessed 17 July 2021.

“When a survivor needs to leave a violent situation, there is often a delay in receiving support and shelter, especially if they flee during the night. Sometimes, shelters are full or the shelters cannot accommodate certain demographics. This programme offers survivors some respite in a private, clean and dignified hotel accommodation while their case is reviewed and the appropriate services are organized.”

Francesca Romita, Corporate Social Responsibility Officer,  
UNICEF Mexico

The Government of Mexico eventually declared care and services for VAWG to be essential<sup>20</sup> in nature, allowing service providers to resume operations throughout the country as the pandemic raged on. Thirteen cities in Mexico now offer a time-sensitive solution to the needs of VAWG survivors seeking emergency help, regardless of the time of day or night. The programme was born out of a unique partnership between UNICEF, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), local and federal government departments, women’s organizations and the private sector.

In 13 cities, Grupo Posadas – one of Mexico’s largest hotel chains – offers free accommodation and meals for up to 7 nights to survivors and their children after they are referred by women’s organizations and police stations. Over 10,000 hotel staff and various government employees have been trained on a unique

Safe Accommodation Protocol developed by UNICEF for this initiative. They are now better equipped to assist VAWG survivors in a thoughtful and sensitive way.

The hotel accommodation model of care is unique because it offers temporary, time-sensitive support, which is crucial when shelters are over capacity and while the necessary services are organized for the survivor. This process normally takes days – time that many VAWG survivors do not have. The hotel accommodation programme also welcomes survivors who are considered to be low- to medium-risk cases, male adolescent children, older women, migrants and transgender individuals – all of whom are historically marginalized by women’s shelters.

Between late September 2020 and May 2021:

- 137 women, aged between 19 and 83 years, were provided emergency accommodation in hotels

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20 UNICEF Mexico prepared and published an advocacy note in May 2020. It called for the Mexican Government to guarantee care and response services for children and adolescents in the context of the pandemic. In June 2020, the SIPINNA/EXT/01/2020 AGREEMENT (Federal System to Protect Children) was published, approving essential actions for the protection of children and adolescents during the health emergency caused by COVID-19, [www.unicef.org/mexico/media/3506/file/Nota%20t%C3%A9cnica:%20Protecci%C3%B3n%20de%20la%20ni%C3%B1ez%20ante%20la%20violencia%20.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/mexico/media/3506/file/Nota%20t%C3%A9cnica:%20Protecci%C3%B3n%20de%20la%20ni%C3%B1ez%20ante%20la%20violencia%20.pdf), accessed 17 July 2021.



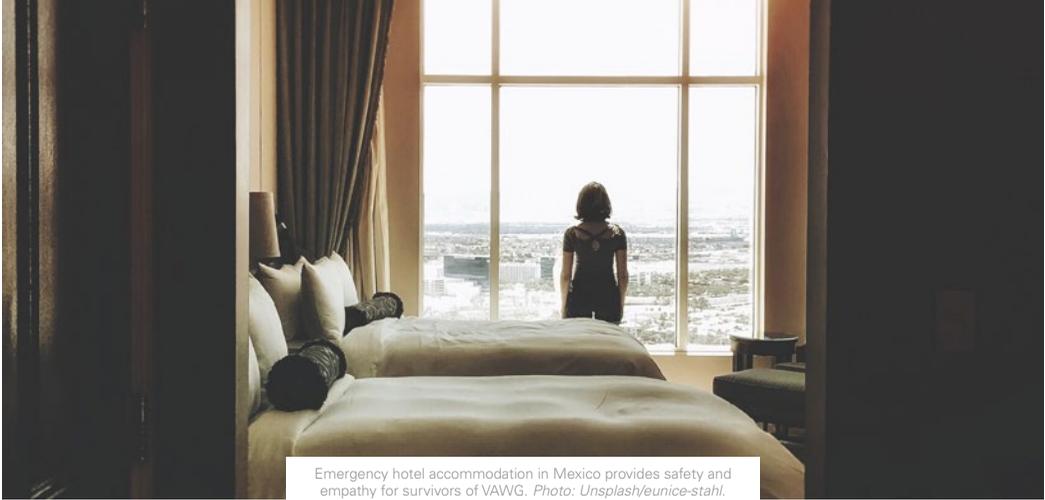
Flor\* and Thalia\* fled from domestic violence and were provided emergency accommodation by a private sector hotel chain. *Photo: Gaia Squarci.*

“Feeling welcome in a place provides a sense of stability. When survivors leave their homes alone or with their children, they are afraid to start from scratch. Having a place where they can spend the night and know they’ll get food makes them feel safe to continue with their process.”

Teresa, social worker, Justice for Women Center, Mexico

- The women were accompanied by 159 children, including 67 girls, 68 boys and 24 adolescents
- Historically marginalized groups such as migrants, transgender individuals, indigenous individuals and those with disabilities were among the beneficiaries

The programme takes a wholistic approach to the support of survivors. Two UNICEF-supported psychologists remain on standby should their services be needed by the survivors in care. The same support is offered to hotel staff. The Grupo Posadas human resources department has reported that staff have come forward for emotional support as they adjust to working with survivors of violence. Some hotel staff have also sought help with their personal lives after the sensitization training they received helped them recognize VAWG in their own families.



Emergency hotel accommodation in Mexico provides safety and empathy for survivors of VAWG. Photo: Unsplash/eunice-stahl.

“All the partners in this initiative together maintain a delicate balance that makes it safe and effective. Over 10,000 hotel workers have been trained, but only one or two in each hotel know the identity of hotel guests who are checking in as part of this initiative. Confidentiality is very important to us.”

Antonio Ruiz, Project Coordinator, UNFPA Mexico

“In the 22 years I’ve worked on human rights, I have never seen such an effective coming together of public and private sector entities on the issue of gender-based violence, particularly where publicity for themselves is not the primary goal. Everyone said this would never work, that there were too many legal concerns and it involved too many stakeholders. Within months, we proved them wrong.”

Leonardo Mier, Child Protection Officer, UNICEF Mexico.

The space that violence survivors find in the hotels is an opportunity to start over, to reflect and to realize that they deserve better:

*“..We are worth it as women. We can get ahead. We are not alone. If we take the first step, we must continue with the following ones... to safeguard our integrity as women, as mothers, as daughters,” said Gloria,\* 52, a VAWG survivor in Mexico.*

With more than 120 locations nationwide, Grupo Posadas is already making plans to expand this

programme beyond the 13 Mexican cities in which it is currently operational. UNICEF continues to refine protocols based on lessons learned so far. There is also an operational manual and an electronic case management platform being built.

UNICEF has now signed a letter of collaboration with the National Association of Hotel Chains in Mexico, with the goal to form additional partnerships with other hotel chains. To date, three have agreed to come on board.



# Violence as an epidemic.

## Trained violence interrupters avert femicide in Honduras

Joel, a community violence interrupter trained by UNICEF partner Barrio Positivo/Cure Violence, works in Chamelecón, a suburb of San Pedro Sula, Honduras. Chamelecón is one of the most violent neighborhoods in Honduras due to gang-related conflicts. *Photo: UNICEF Honduras/2020/Luis Villatoro.*

### HONDURAS

In Honduras, a partnership between UNICEF and Cure Violence Global is helping to identify and interrupt VAWG through rapid response teams of 'violence interrupters'. In 2020, 1,770 violent incidents were averted. A total of 65 per cent of cases involved the prevention of femicide. Violence interrupters spent over 43,402 hours working with women, men, girls and boys on social and gender norms changes.

“Men can do anything they want to women in Honduras. There’s a 90 percent impunity rate when it comes to femicide cases, and a 96 percent impunity rate with sexual violence cases. We are living in an untold war.”

Neesa Medina, analyst with Honduras’ Center for Women’s Rights, in a [media interview](#)<sup>23</sup>

“I don’t care if it’s 1 a.m., 3 a.m., 5 a.m., anytime we get a call, we’re there.”

Flores,\* a violence interrupter in Choloma, northern Honduras.

Following an attack on her home, Alma and her two children found themselves in an unfamiliar neighbourhood, kidnapped and held hostage by a gang that had killed her husband. A common practice of gangs in Honduras, women and children often find themselves in the crossfire between rival gangs, neighbourhood disputes and other conflicts in their community. Honduras remains the most dangerous country for women in [Latin America](#)<sup>21</sup>.

The plight of Alma and her children did not go unnoticed. A neighbour grew suspicious and reported to a local violence interrupter, who had been trained by UNICEF and Cure Violence Global to find ways to protect vulnerable women and children from violent situations. A strategy

was put in place to get closer to Alma through a play activity that she would bring her children to one day. Once contact was made, Alma and her children were swiftly taken to a new home in a different city.

Choloma municipality has long been a hot spot for crime and violence. In 2019, 38 women were reported to have died as a result of violence. In 2020, UNICEF Honduras reported that the number had dropped to 13 because of a committed team of violence interrupters like Flores and her colleagues, Luz and Pastora. Their methodology focuses on strengthening the capacities of individuals and community-based organizations to identify risk factors and to apply techniques that are proven to de-escalate violent situations.

**Trained violence interrupters prevent gender-based violence**

A partnership between UNICEF and Cure Violence Global is helping to identify and interrupt VAWG through rapid response teams



**VIOLENCE INTERRUPTERS**  
UNICEF trains community influencers to intervene and prevent VAWG



Changing social and gender norms by encouraging people to reflect on the effects of gender inequality and harmful masculinity.

<sup>21</sup> Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean, *Femicide or feminicide*, United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Santiago de Chile, accessed 17 July 2021.  
<sup>22</sup> Chang, Juju, Jackie Jesko, Ignacio Torres, and Jenna Millman, *Men can do anything they want to women: Inside one of the most dangerous places on Earth to be a woman*, ABC News, 3 May 2017, accessed 17 July 2021.



Since January 2020, violence interrupters averted 1,770 highly volatile incidents involving more than 724 women and girls, in 25 neighborhoods within Choloma and nearby San Pedro Sula. Photo: UNICEF Honduras/2020.

“We interrupted over 501 femicides through this violence interruption programme in 2020. It is based on a methodology<sup>24</sup> that treats violence as an epidemic. It has been replicated in Mexico and Colombia. More recently, UNICEF has adapted it for combating gender-based violence and femicide specifically.”

Nancy Zúñiga, UNICEF Child Protection Officer, Honduras

The methodology emphasizes changes to social and gender norms and preventing violence by facilitating cooperation between stakeholders, increasing youth engagement and mobilizing the local community.

The way in which women are killed sets Honduras apart. Targeted by narcotic activities,<sup>24</sup> women are reportedly<sup>25</sup> being shot in the vagina, dissected and their body parts distributed in public places; other methods reported were being strangled in front of their children and being skinned alive.

Since January 2020, violence interrupters averted 1,770 highly volatile incidents involving more than 724 women and girls, in 25 neighborhoods within Choloma and nearby San Pedro Sula. The cases have ranged from sexual violence to trafficking and exploitation. The lives of 501 women were saved. Violence interrupters also organized the relocation of 52 individuals, mostly women and children, to safer places.

Flores recalls one night when she received a call from a group of five women who were being harassed by a local gang in their community. They were being

<sup>23</sup> The cure violence methodology was originally developed by the School of Public Health at the University of Illinois (Chicago).

<sup>24</sup> *A Gendered Analysis of Violent Death*, Small Arms Survey Research Notes, No. 63, 2016, p. 4, accessed 17 July 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Nazario, Sonia, *Someone is Always Trying to Kill You*, New York Times, 5 April 2019, accessed 17 July 2021.

“We always begin with the women in a community. They take stock of the extent of violence and work out ways in which the methodology can be implemented. Understanding of local social and gender norms and buy-in from community members is critical to this intensive work. Implementation is also in the hands of local leaders.”

Nancy Zúñiga, UNICEF Child Protection Officer, Honduras.

coerced into narcotic activities to avoid certain death and were given 24 hours to comply. Flores and other violence interrupters managed to transport the women away from the situation, providing them with temporary shelter in the private homes of various violence interrupters before the women were finally relocated to safer, more permanent homes. The women now no longer have to fear for their lives.

Changing social and gender norms forms the bedrock of this programme, particularly by encouraging people to reflect on the effects of gender inequality and harmful masculinity. Violence interrupters engage with their local communities to challenge negative stereotypes and confront discrimination, particularly among the younger population. Their efforts have managed to influence many boys and girls to become agents of change within their spheres of influence.



Violence interrupters have influenced boys and girls to become agents of change within their spheres of influence. Photo: Oliver Trochez.

“Thanks to UNICEF and Cure Violence, through the Recuperando Mi Comunidad programme, we have gained credibility and people’s trust. We have slowly managed to change norms and behaviours.”

Luz, a violence interrupter

In total, Flores, Pastora and Luz’s team spent more than 43,402 hours in 2020 working with their communities on social and gender norms changes. They have also followed up with 4,372 individuals after violent incidents – including 1,033 women and 1,219 adolescents – to ensure long-lasting behavioural change.

# It takes a village.

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Village protection  
committees intercept  
child marriages in  
the Niger



Olabisi, 17, and Aminata, 18, are members of their local village protection committee in Niger. Together, they successfully helped prevent a child marriage in their community. *Photo: UNICEF Niger-Juan Haro.*

## NIGER

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In the Niger, UNICEF partnered with the Government and community members to establish village protection committees (VPC) to prevent child marriage and other forms of VAWG. In 2020, VPCs managed over 509 cases of VAWG. A national committee has also been established to study how customary and religious law disproportionately affect women and girls.

When Olabisi, 17, and Aminata, 18, heard that a friend was to be married at the age of 17, they pleaded with her to resist.

Seeing no other way, the faithful friends alerted their local VPC in the Maradi region. With the help of the village chief and committee members, their friend's marriage was successfully halted.

For thousands of children in the Niger, childhood is cut short by marriage. UNICEF estimates that around 77 per cent of young girls are married before the age of 18, and 29 per cent before the age of 15.<sup>26</sup> Child marriage persists in the country because of multiple factors, including poverty, low levels of education, and social and gender norms to which families feel pressured to conform. Upholding social and religious traditions, and the fear of dishonour from pregnancy outside of marriage is also a major driver of child marriages.

Olabisi and Aminata are part of a movement of young girls working against child marriage in the Niger, supported and funded by the Spotlight Initiative as well as the joint UNICEF-UNFPA Global Programme to End Child Marriage.<sup>27</sup> The girls are called 'Correspondents for Protection' (C4P) and are also members of their local VPC. They received training in life skills, human rights and effective communication, which has increased their ability to protect themselves and other girls at risk of child marriage.

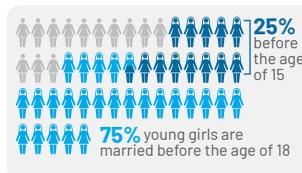
“When she found out that her family had accepted her marriage, she felt so sad. She was traumatized. She even stopped eating and lost weight.”

Olabisi, age 17

“We talked to her. We told her to object by all means. but we know that tradition does not allow us to go against the will of our parents. It is an injustice. Some girls run away from home or commit suicide to avoid a forced marriage.”

Aminata, age 18

**Village Protection Committees intercept child marriages**



**509** cases of violence against women and girls, managed the VPCs in 2020

**The VPCs:**

-  Sensitize communities on the risk of child marriage
-  Monitor the action plan on social change
-  Manage cases of child abuse, violence

<sup>26</sup> United Nations Children's Fund, *Ending Child Marriage: Progress and prospects*, UNICEF, New York, 2014, p. 2, accessed 25 July 2021.

<sup>27</sup> UNICEF-UNFPA Global Programme to End Child Marriage.



Azima, age 15, likes the idea of getting married one day and even has a suitor, but she wants to first fulfill her dream of owning her own business.  
Photo: UNICEF/UNI324115/Haro.

“The girls gain the knowledge they need to act individually or collectively, which enables them to be active in village protection committees. The role of committee members is to continue sensitizing communities on the risks of child marriage, monitoring the implementation of the action plan on social change and managing cases of children who are victims of abuse, violence and exploitation, including child marriage.”

Salmey Bebert, Child Protection Specialist, UNICEF Niger

Dedicated trainers in each region build the capacity of VPC members. Each committee appoints five members who receive a three-day training course at the municipal level before returning to their villages to train the rest of their VPC. Their training is focused on:

- A child’s rights and their needs at different stages of development
- Practices that violate these rights and the means of redress through social services, health professionals, the police and gendarmerie, and the justice system
- Social mobilization and facilitation techniques to equip committee members with skills to continue sensitizing their communities on VAWG issues and effective case management

While a child’s welfare is overseen primarily by parents, and family life is generally governed by informal, traditional laws in Nigerien society, the concept of what is considered acceptable by ordinary people can differ greatly from official government policy. For example, child marriage is internationally recognized as a human rights violation and the Nigerien government has signed international treaties that set a minimum age of 18 for marriage. However, child marriage remains widely accepted in Nigerien society, with great consequence. Married girls and child mothers have limited power to make decisions, are generally less able to earn an income, and are vulnerable to multiple health risks, violence, abuse and exploitation.



Adolescent girls participate in a video workshop to exchange experiences, and to direct and produce a series of videos about the challenges they face. Photo: UNICEF/UNIS24120/Haro.

“I highly appreciate this initiative, which is in line with the commitments of the President of the Republic, Head of State, His Excellency Issoufou Mahamadou, to promote and protect the dignity and rights of women.”

His Excellency M. Brigi Rafini, Prime Minister and Head of Government, when officially launching the Spotlight Initiative in Niger

“It’s just amazing to see young girls feeling empowered in their communities. They say, my community listens to me – even the adults listen! I have a role to play and I will be heard. The training and knowledge these girls have received is changing their own lives and the perception of women and girls in their communities.”

Fatou Binetou Dia, communications specialist, Spotlight Initiative, the Niger.

VPCs serve as a middle ground between government policy and the traditional systems that ordinary people trust. After all, the committee members are from within the same communities, but share the vision of child protection as defined by the Government.

A total of 509 cases of VAWG were managed in 2020 across the 45 villages where VPCs have been established under the Spotlight Initiative programme. Forty-eight cases involved child marriages and 127 were related to physical or psychological violence. In 234 cases, girls whose education was interrupted managed to return to school.



# Change begins at home.

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Respectful parenting practices bring peace at home in El Salvador

Nancy Orellana, mother and academic tutor, says “There are no didactic guides to be a good mother. We must look for the necessary tools to better raise our children.” *Photo: UNICEF El Salvador/ Mauricio Martínez.*

## EL SALVADOR

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In El Salvador, UNICEF trained over 500 parents and community leaders on positive parenting practices to help prevent VAWG. Many have since gone on to spread these practices amongst others in their communities in this peer-to-peer approach to changing harmful social and gender norms.

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“I think adolescents would like to find more understanding, better communication and trust in their families. This training has helped me a lot. I have learned to control my anger before I sit down and speak to my son. We recognise that we all have stress in our lives that can affect our relationships.”

Nancy Orellana, mother and academic tutor

Nancy Orellana, a mother and academic tutor, is one of 500 parents invited to train with the I Am A Person programme, aimed at educating parents on effective, compassionate and respectful communication with their adolescents. The programme, led by UNICEF and funded by the Spotlight Initiative, takes the life-course approach to preventing violence because of the deep intersections between violence against children and violence against women.<sup>28</sup> Both are fueled by social and gender norms that consider physical violence as an acceptable form of ‘disciplining’ women or children. Children who experience violence or witness violence against their mother while growing up are more likely to one day perpetrate or suffer from violence in their future relationships. Children internalize harmful norms, values

and practices from an early age, which makes early intervention through initiatives like this so critical.<sup>29</sup>

Nancy now uses her I Am A Person training to mentor 10 other families that are experiencing intergenerational tension in the home, which is exactly the kind of multiplier effect this initiative had hoped to encourage. The children and adolescents in these families have been classed as “rebellious” by social services and school authorities, and there is a breakdown in parent-child communication.

Orellana’s 14-year-old son, Fredi, is already benefiting. He now sees his relationship with his mother and grandmother as a reference point when relating to girls his age in a healthy and equitable way.

### Respectful parenting practices

UNICEF partnership with core group of 500 parent community leaders



### Early intervention is key



Parents received training to enhance inter-generational communication at home

Families are more receptive to changing social and gender norms when they learn from peers who can share relatable, personal experiences.



<sup>28</sup> Guedes, Alessandra, and Sarah Bott, *Breaking the Cycle: Understanding and addressing the intersections of violence against children and violence against women in Latin America and the Caribbean*, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, 23 September 2013, accessed 17 July 2021.

<sup>29</sup> United Nations Children’s Fund, *Behind Closed Doors: The impact of domestic violence on children*, UNICEF, New York, 2006, accessed 27 July 2021.



Orellana uses her I Am A Person training to support 10 other families, who are struggling with intergenerational tension.  
Photo: UNICEF El Salvador/Mauricio Martínez.

“There needs to be a support network in the community that encourages positive parenting and boosts the self-esteem of caregivers – mainly women – who typically assume this role.”

Marta Navarro, Education Officer, UNICEF El Salvador

“Cultural practices around parenting are relatively violent in El Salvador. There is trouble with guns and gangs, but we cannot protect the affected children and adolescents without involving the family. Parents don’t always cooperate due to the cultural norms around parenting in the home.”

Sandra Aguilar, Child Protection Officer, UNICEF El Salvador

Navarro explains that I Am A Person has also presented an opportunity to promote a change in attitudes towards gendered roles and traditions that persist in communities, particularly around parenting and childcare.

El Salvador has one of the world’s highest rates of violence in the world, with children and adolescents frequently living in insecurity.

The I Am A Person methodology at the heart of this initiative was first institutionalized a decade ago in El Salvador. Developed by the Salvadoran Institute for the Integral Development of Childhood and Adolescence (ISNA), it was aimed at the time at improving parental approaches to the early childhood years. As part of the Spotlight Initiative, UNICEF partnered with ISNA to adapt the concept for families with adolescents aged 10–19 years.

The approach was informed by a study of successful parenting [programmes](#)<sup>30</sup>, which:

1. increased communication between adolescents and parents (the most important factor underlying improvements in other adolescent well-being outcomes, such as reduced experience of violence and improved mental health indicators),
2. increased parental monitoring,
3. reduced neglect of adolescents, and
4. reduced physical and emotional violence against adolescents.

30 United Nations Children’s Fund, *Designing Parenting Programmes for Violence Prevention: A guidance note*, UNICEF, New York, May 2020, accessed 17 July 2021.

A primary group of 500 parents like Orellana, and their families, received training to enhance intergenerational communication at home and to counter harmful practices against children and adolescents, particularly through a VAWG lens. Many volunteered enthusiastically for this training after having experienced the benefits of the first I Am A Person programme 10 years ago.

The volunteer families were chosen based on their family structure (such as multigenerational families with adolescents), their deep-rooted ties within their local communities, their capacity to train others and a track record of community leadership.

In El Salvador, families are more receptive to changing social and gender norms when they learn from peers who can share relatable, personal experiences and those who understand the context of their local community. With the primary group of 500 families trained, the next target is for these families to train many others. The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdown periods have made in-person training challenging, but the programme has successfully pivoted to training parents virtually.

To further amplify the message of positive parenting, 1,000 resource packages were distributed to the families of health-care workers who have been under stress during the pandemic. The packages provide resources on how to improve effective, respectful communication within the home.

“Community service organizations can only reach a certain number of people. We hope that by training and empowering these 500 families, we will achieve a multiplier effect because of the number of others this core group can reach.”

Sandra Aguilar, UNICEF Child Protection Officer





# Can we talk about this?

## Public art provokes community conversations in Honduras

Giant sculptures have appeared in 17 Honduran municipalities, challenging harmful social and gender norms that drive VAWG; 93 per cent of Hondurans recently surveyed believe VAWG is a serious issue in their communities. *Photo: UNICEF Honduras.*

### HONDURAS

In Honduras, UNICEF is partnering with local governments to reach over 400,000 people in 17 municipalities through enormous public art exhibits that challenge harmful social and gender norms and VAWG.

“Over 400,000 people have engaged with these giant sculptures so far. We have 175 volunteers who have been trained to replicate the exhibition in their communities. They spend the first week of each exhibit answering people’s questions and offering more information. Sometimes, the volunteers are attacked by those who find the messages challenging.”

Nancy Zúniga, Child Protection Officer, UNICEF Honduras

In 17 Honduran municipalities, giant sculptures and murals of women and adolescents have been appearing overnight, in unexpected places, as part of a Spotlight Initiative programme. With deeply entrenched narratives around masculinity, gender roles and power relations between men and women in Honduras, VAWG is perpetrated within a framework of cultural normalization and impunity. The situation demands urgent interventions to address its various causes. Public art has proven to be an effective way to promote solutions that break cycles of violence in communities.

Community leaders and activists say they feel emboldened to speak out against harmful practices and discriminatory social and gender norms as a result of the increased public sensitization from this programme.

“After visiting this exhibition, my biggest realization was that I have to stop being afraid. Now I walk in my community feeling free to support other women.”

Pastora, a community leader and Spotlight Initiative-trained violence interrupter

“This journey began with the fact that first, my beliefs changed. This improved my relationship with my family. Now, the next goal is to work with people in my community.”

Darwin, also a community leader and violence interrupter

**Public art provokes community conversations**

Through enormous public art exhibits that challenge harmful social and gender norms, we reached:

**400,000** people

**17** municipalities in Honduras



“By taking these sculptures into the heart of communities, we are engaging people where they are most comfortable. Parks, busy public areas and even streets where many truck and bus drivers pass through. We have managed to open up conversations with them and others who spend much of their day socializing in public spaces.”

Nancy Zúniga, Child Protection Officer, UNICEF Honduras



In a 2016 survey on public perception of insecurity, 93 per cent of the respondents stated that VAWG was a serious issue in Honduras. Between 2005 and 2017, there were over 5,000 victims of femicide, with 389 cases recorded in 2017 alone, not counting the deaths that were not reported or recorded. More

recent reports suggest a woman is murdered every 36 hours.<sup>31</sup> Evidence shows that the individuals that are most affected by violence are young women and girls aged under 24 years, particularly amongst groups facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

31 Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, *Honduras Spotlight Programme: Project factsheet*, United Nations Development Programme, New York, accessed 17 July 2021.



Samuel, age 19, participates in art workshops that encourage young people to reflect on solutions that could break the cycle of violence in their communities. *Photo: UNICEF Honduras.*

According to the National Autonomous University of Honduras Observatory of Violence, there were almost 30,000 requests for forensic medical examinations for sexual offences between 2005 and 2017. From 2005 to 2015, this number increased by 248 per cent.<sup>32</sup>

“We now question the physical punishments and patriarchal beliefs that we all grew up with. They contribute to sexual and domestic violence, and even femicide. We all need to rethink our beliefs and attitudes. I hope my art can contribute to us realizing a society where men and women can participate equally and lead exciting and fulfilling lives.”

Samuel, social activist, age 19

Nineteen-year-old Samuel, a social change activist in the Western Highlands of Honduras, has been volunteering with a local association that uses art to combat harmful social and gender norms. Through workshops, Women in the Arts employs drama and art illustrations to encourage young people to reflect on solutions that could break the cycle of violence in their communities.

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32 Honduras Country Programme Document, November 2018

# See something, say something.

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Community Surveillance  
Committees foster courage  
in Nigeria



Hundreds of cases of VAWG were averted in Nigeria in 2020 following the establishment of community surveillance committees. *Photo: UNICEF Nigeria.*

## NIGERIA

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In Nigeria, UNICEF is partnering with the Government to establish more than 252 community surveillance committees (CSCs) to act as VAWG watchdogs. As a result, there has been an increase in arrests and prosecution of perpetrators, fostering greater confidence in survivors seeking help.

“CSC members are our eyes on the ground. They have helped UNICEF to build trust with local communities. They have been instrumental in convincing traditional leaders to gradually leave behind harmful practices and to follow due process when adjudicating on VAWG cases that are reported to them. Because of the collaborative approach, traditional leaders have become more open to changing social and gender norms.”

Pius Uwamanua, Child Protection Specialist, UNICEF Nigeria

Nine-year-old Yar Auta\* was sitting by herself on a bus headed to a location that is 10 hours away from home. Her father had given her in marriage to a 74-year-old man and she was to make her own way to her so-called husband. A passenger at the bus park, having recently seen campaigns against child marriage and VAWG, became suspicious and telephoned a member of the area’s CSC.

Yar Auta’s case is now being managed by her local CSC, one of 252 established in Nigeria under the Spotlight Initiative. The committees typically consist of 25 local activists and leaders, including members

of existing community social groups. The programme has trained them to be change agents who champion gender equality and act as watchdogs in their communities. The CSC is linked to service providers at the local government level and members work to ensure every case of VAWG receives the support and services it needs.

The existence of the CSCs and the growing numbers of sensitized individuals have helped identify and refer dozens of cases of VAWG in each area in which the programme is active. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the CSCs contributed to a substantial increase in data

### Community Surveillance Committees foster courage

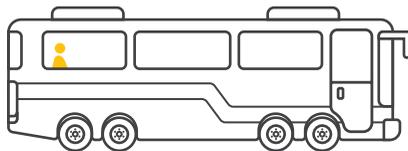
UNICEF’s partnership with the government to establish CSCs to raise awareness about VAWG.



UNICEF is partnering with the government to establish more than 252 CSCs to act as VAWG watchdogs.



notices a child at risk and calls for help



CSC members have helped to build trust with local communities. They work with traditional leaders to leave behind harmful practices and follow due process on VAWG cases that are reported to them

collection as they made use of social media tools like WhatsApp and the mobile app Kobo to report cases of violence. In Yar Auta's case, she is safe and in the care of social services, but the immense social stigma has meant her father refuses to allow her to return home, despite interventions from local district heads. Her marriage, however, is well on the way to being annulled.

Nigeria's 22 million child brides comprise almost 40 per cent of all child brides in the region. VAWG in Nigeria has been described as a pandemic-sized problem. Millions live in fear of being abused, assaulted, or raped. Front-line workers like doctors, lawyers, social workers and counsellors who deal with the daily casualties of this crisis describe the heartbreak of handling cases of women and girls who have been abused or raped.

The lessons learned were from the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme to Eliminate Female Genital Mutilation<sup>33</sup>, which is partly funded by the EU.

Mary, a 38-year-old woman from Eastern Nigeria, said she and her children were living in hunger and hardship despite her being married to a man who owns a block of apartments. Economic violence<sup>34</sup> is a form of VAWG,

**"CSCs engender community participation, which is key to sustaining changes in social and gender norms and the eradication of harmful practices. As the members detect and report cases, this not only places them in positions of power but also entrusts them with the responsibility of working together with the community to ensure that survivors are able to access services."**

Tochukwu Odele, Child Protection Officer, UNICEF, Nigeria

**"There are strong linkages between the CSCs that we established and the model we developed to deal with female genital mutilation (FGM). The FGM model worked very well and we replicated it to tackle VAWG in general."**

Amandine Bollinger, Child Protection Manager, UNICEF Nigeria.



CSCs organize pro bono lawyers and secure the assistance of social services; they even show up as friendly faces when a case is heard in a court of law. Photo: UNICEF Nigeria.

33 UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme to Eliminate Female Genital Mutilation.

34 United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), *Frequently Asked Questions: Types of violence against women and girls*, UN

“There has been a lot of VAWG resulting from economic issues within families. Thanks to regular discussions on gender issues during local community dialogue sessions, women are becoming more aware of their rights and how to officially report cases of abuse. Continual sensitization through these sessions have resulted in a sharp increase in the identification and reporting of such cases.”

Foluke Omoworare, Spotlight Initiative Coordinator, Lagos, Nigeria



CSCs are linked to service providers at the local government level. Members work to ensure every case of VAWG receives the support and services it needs. Photo: UNICEF Nigeria.

“Poverty leads to violence against us women. When a man does not have a means to earn a livelihood, the woman and the children suffer physical, emotional and psychological abuse. My husband lost his job but he also refused to give proceeds from the renting of one of his apartments for the upkeep of our home.”

Mary, age 38

whereby women and children are financially dependent on someone who maintains control over financial resources, withholds access to money and forbids attendance at school or employment.

Her CSC, with the support of the local Human Rights Center, was able to secure the release of one of the apartments so that Mary could finance the upkeep of her children and home.

Survivors of VAWG often do not come forward due to lack of faith in the system and what is perceived to be low prospect of getting justice. Many women and girls suffer in silence and shame because they fear being ostracized by their families and local communities. With CSCs in action, there has been a marked increase in arrests and prosecutions in VAWG cases, empowering more and more previously silent survivors to come forward. CSCs are able to organize pro bono lawyers and secure the assistance of social services; they even show up as friendly faces when a case is heard in a court of law.

# Start Them Young.

Schools empowered to change social and gender norms in Malawi



Over 3 million people, including thousands of boys and girls, can better recognize and report VAWG in Malawi. *Photo: UNICEF Malawi.*

## MALAWI

In Malawi, UNICEF is working with the Government, community organizations and media partners to raise awareness about VAWG, with large-scale collaborations with educators and young people in schools. Three million people were sensitized to VAWG and harmful social and gender norms through media campaigns, literacy sessions and school programmes in 2020. A total of 13,000 boys have been trained to recognize, respond to and report VAWG. Over 100 trained head teachers and other educators in schools have so far identified and referred 941 cases of VAWG to the authorities.

“The programme, Hero In Me (HIM), uses a widely underused entry point on the problem of discriminatory social and gender norms: the attitudes and behaviours of men and boys. We believe that boys possess the ability and desire to treat women respectfully but condone and commit acts of sexual violence in response to immense social and community pressures.”

Janet Liabunya, Child Protection Specialist, UNICEF Malawi

Efforts to eradicate harmful social and gender norms is underway on a large scale in Malawi under the Spotlight Initiative. Malawi is characterized by a high prevalence of VAWG, including child marriage. While some practices that are common elsewhere in the region, such as FGM, are uncommon in Malawi, related practices, such as labia stretching, have a high prevalence in over 50 per cent of Malawian communities. Malawi also features among the 20 countries with the highest incidence of intimate partner violence. The prevalence of traditional practices such as child marriage and sexual initiation rituals have remained mostly unchanged over the last 15

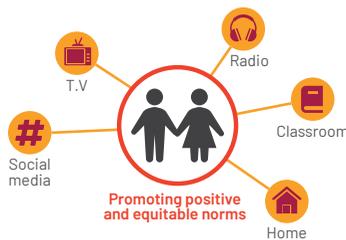
years, even though they have been falling globally.<sup>35</sup>

A large number of mass educational programmes in Malawi under the Spotlight Initiative have reached almost 3 million people through jingles on television and radio, and through schools. Schools are a critical space where children develop social relationships, and where they learn and enact social and gender norms and behaviours. Schools, therefore, hold enormous potential to promote more equitable norms,<sup>36</sup> particularly through the widely neglected entry point: male attitudes and behaviours.

**Schools empowered to change social and gender norms**

-  GOVERNMENT
-  UNICEF
-  COMMUNITY
-  SCHOOLS
-  MEDIA

**RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT VAWG**



**3 MILLION**  
people were sensitised on harmful gender norms through media campaigns

**13,000 BOYS**  
have been trained to recognise, respond to and report VAWG



<sup>35</sup> Spotlight Initiative, *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls in Malawi*, UNICEF Malawi, Lilongwe, 2020, accessed 17 July 2021.

<sup>36</sup> John, Neetu A., Kirsten Stoebenau, Samantha Ritter, Jeffrey Edmeades and Nikola Balvin, *Gender Socialization during Adolescence in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: Conceptualization, influences and outcomes*, Innocenti Discussion Paper 2017-01, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, 2017, accessed 17 July 2021.



Children are learning what their rights are, how to claim and defend their rights and how to identify harmful or violent practices. Photo: UNICEF Malawi.

A total of 18,180 study materials such as booklets and comic books<sup>38</sup> have been distributed to 180 schools in Spotlight Initiative districts, increasing knowledge of child protection among children, teachers, parents and child protection workers. Alongside the materials, children participated in literacy sessions which taught them what their rights are, how to claim and defend their rights and how to identify harmful or violent practices. Children with a strong grasp of these concepts are now educating their peers, increasingly normalizing these concepts.

As the programme has advanced, stories of children who received protection from violent or harmful situations are now being shared during literacy sessions in schools and through booklets distributed in the communities where the children live with their families. As a result, 212,262 adolescents from six districts are now able to recognize violence and can report violence to relevant authorities for action and redress.

Partnering with Ujamaa Pamodzi Africa and the Ministry of Education,<sup>37</sup> the Spotlight Initiative trained 13,308 boys on positive social and gender norms, how to report VAWG and what to expect from the process of making such reports. The boys have learned to recognize violence, abuse and exploitation in their school environments and in their communities. Through preparation and practice, the boys-in-training were taught to cultivate use of their own voice and their personal power to stand up to VAWG. This approach is in striking contrast to the silence they are otherwise raised to maintain while violence is perpetrated around them with impunity.

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<sup>37</sup> The Boy's Transformation Training Programme is implemented by the Ujamaa Pamodzi Africa in collaboration with the Ministry of Education with technical guidance from UNICEF.

<sup>38</sup> These were designed by the Law Commission in collaboration with parents and children; the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare; and the Ministry of Education, with technical guidance from UNICEF.

## Looking to the future – what’s in store for UNICEF and the Spotlight Initiative

This report has captured some of the many **stories of hope, courage and change** that are emerging from the Spotlight Initiative in Latin America and Africa. UNICEF will continue to implement its activities with partners until the end of 2022. UNICEF programmatic priorities to address gender-based violence under the Spotlight Initiative remain social and gender norms change through community engagement and school-based interventions, and developing the capacity of service providers. There are many promising interventions underway; this report was unable to cover all of them due to limited space.

For instance, UNICEF in Zimbabwe is engaged in a unique effort to acquire DNA-processing equipment and scientific expertise. This will resolve thousands of unsolved sexual assault cases currently languishing in the legal system. In Uganda, UNICEF is involved in the development of the National Development Plan III, resulting in a significant step in institutionalizing VAWG interventions and providing a basis to advocate to the Ministry of Finance to allocate direct funding for VAWG interventions. In El Salvador and Honduras, a community symphony and a mobile theatre group are challenging harmful social and gender norms while educating children on their rights.

In 2020, UNICEF began working with 13 more countries as part of the Spotlight Initiative, including countries from the Pacific, the Caribbean and Central Asia. UNICEF has participated in three regional programmes that have been launched in the Caribbean, the Pacific region and Africa.

In future reports, we hope to highlight more positive stories from all Spotlight Initiative countries, as this significant, concerted and comprehensive investment in gender equality and ending violence continues to transform the lives of millions of women and girls.



**Spotlight  
Initiative**