

SESSION TWO - AFRICA AND ASIA

Addressing Harmful Practices and Promoting Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights through Effective Stakeholder Engagement

Key Lessons Learned and Promising Practices

The Spotlight Initiative Cross-Regional Learning Session on **Addressing Harmful Practices and Promoting Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights through Effective Stakeholder Engagement** included a focus on exploring promising practices for addressing harmful practices, including female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage, and gender stereotypes. The session also examined how to promote sexual and reproductive health and rights when addressing harmful practices and changing social norms. This session also included a focus on enhancing stakeholder engagement such as with traditional leaders, governments, civil society organizations, and youth to address harmful practices. This product highlights key lessons and promising practices from Spotlight Initiative programmes in Africa and Asia, which can be used to support quality programming in an effort to eliminate violence against women and girls in the Spotlight Initiative and beyond.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

- Encouraging **ownership of the Spotlight Initiative by the government supports effective coordination, greater impact and sustainability** of efforts to end harmful practices. At times national and local organizations work towards ending harmful practices in their communities without government oversight; however, government engagement is key to coordinating resources and channelling funding through dedicated budget allocations.
- Partnering with **schools is a critical entrypoint** to integrate EAWG efforts, including knowledge on sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), into community-based education programming as well as establish trust with parents, teachers, and local community leaders to engage them in efforts to end harmful practices. However, school closures in the wake of COVID-19 are presenting a serious challenge. Engaging in **remote (i.e. online) and hybrid learning opportunities and disseminating information on harmful practices**, such as through the use of technology as well as megaphones and socially distanced home visits in rural areas, have ensured harmful practices are continuously addressed and SRHR is promoted through the pandemic.
- As child marriage and FGM are deeply ingrained in cultural norms and are practiced at the community level, even when there are efforts to end harmful practices, cases are often left to families to address and are not officially prosecuted at an institutional level. The judiciary has a critical role in **addressing the impunity of perpetrators through enforcing the implementation of legal frameworks established to end violence against women and girls**. Thus, **strengthening the capacity of the judicial system** to conclude cases of harmful practices as quickly as possible is crucial. Furthermore, strengthening broader frameworks, legal systems and institutions is essential to **ensuring the implementation of laws and policies** by the justice system and all stakeholders involved so that perpetrators of violence against women and girls are held accountable.
- It is important to create the **link for governments to work directly with traditional leaders** to ensure efforts to eliminate harmful practices continue in a sustainable way. In this regard, it can be helpful to work with traditional leaders that are well known or already work with the government.

- To address the challenge of pushback and resistance that can come from traditions and religious practices when working to eliminate harmful practices, it is critical to engage in **continuous dialogues** with traditional/religious leaders as well as with authorities to ensure sustained ownership of efforts, including social norms change, as well as accountability to eliminate harmful practices.
- Employing a **multi-faceted approach to address harmful practices is essential**. This includes understanding the cultural importance behind the practices, and finding **healthy, safe and equitable alternatives to continue respecting cultural traditions**, as well as acknowledging the economic incentives behind the practices and providing options to foster **economic independence and support alternate livelihoods**.

“COORDINATION BETWEEN POLICE, TRADITIONAL LEADERS AND SCHOOL MANAGEMENT HAS HELPED TO FREE OVER 1200 GIRLS FROM CHILD MARRIAGES. POLICE INTERVENTION HAS AIDED IN ACCELERATING THE ARREST AND PROSECUTION OF OFFENDERS IN DEFILEMENT AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE.”

Julio Mwenyemkulu
Spotlight Initiative Malawi



PROMISING PRACTICES

The Spotlight Initiative in Liberia engages in promising practices to support a comprehensive, multi-tiered approach to eliminating harmful practices through community consultations, economic empowerment, monitoring, and policy change:

- Through engaging with the National Traditional Council of Chiefs and Elders, the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Civil Society Working Group on FGM and traditional leaders in the community, it surfaced that **traditional leaders recognize FGM as not only a cultural practice, but also an income generating activity** for FGM practitioners. As such, key economic interventions, such as **climate-smart agriculture, business development** (including the Village and Loans Associations) and **literacy skills**, were identified to provide alternate sources of income for FGM practitioners in order for them to debunk the practice of FGM. **300 FGM practitioners have benefited as a result of these efforts** and are now **championing change against the practice of FGM in their communities**. Alternative rites of passage for initiating girls into womanhood rather than through FGM is being developed with key stakeholders.
- In respecting the cultural significance of Sande Societies, the Initiative has supported the development of vocational and heritage centres. These multipurpose centres will undertake positive cultural practices and skills to support cultural sustainability without FGM. The Initiative also provided **motorbikes for traditional leaders to monitor FGM interventions**, ensuring the closure of bush schools. This was especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic and in order to reach the most remote communities.
- An inventory of existing bush schools and FGM practitioners was conducted, and a database developed, documenting about **1000 bush schools**. This informed the alternative economic support to traditional FGM practitioners, community outreach and monitoring by traditional leaders to ensure their closure and support the rollout of alternative rites of passage.
- Through **continuous advocacy at multiple levels**, the Seven Count Policy was developed and signed by Traditional Chiefs in the 11 FGM practicing counties in Liberia. However, it is still a challenge to have authentic buy-in and FGM cases are still not reported officially as there is no existing law at this time. The Seven Count Policy called for a **one-year suspension of FGM**, and a draft Bill on FGM is in place to support long-term efforts to end the harmful practice.
- Through the Initiative's efforts, it has been observed that there is more of a will to listen and support efforts to end harmful practices. No more a 'silent issue', FGM is now talked about more openly. To this end, **many traditional leaders have become agents of change and are supporting continued advocacy**.

The Spotlight Initiative in Malawi is engaging in a promising practice through **weekly mentorship sessions and girls' protective networks on sexual gender-based violence, SRHR, harmful practices, perspectives on gender equality and life skills in safe spaces** at the community level, targeting out-of-school adolescent girls and young women. The objective is to create a **cadre of adolescent girls and young women** with the knowledge and assertive skills to ably negotiate and challenge the harmful practices that fuel gender-based violence in communities, and also offer a supportive system within the communities to challenge, report and help seek services. The programme has trained mentors who have reached **over 11,440 mentees**. Collaboration between the mentees, mentors, and traditional leaders has led these safe spaces to become key for ending child marriages, other harmful practices, for prevention, and to increase uptake of SRHR services among adolescent girls and young women. As part of the Safe Schools programme, **15,000 girls** were trained to actively participate in their own protection and defend others through reporting, which supports sustainability efforts. **13,000 boys were also trained on child marriage and the need to report cases of violence against adolescent girls**. This has led to the **identification of 1,893 child marriages** that were later dissolved by chiefs in collaboration with police, mother groups and child protection workers. As a result, **112 cases were taken to court and 71 convictions have been recorded**.

The Spotlight Initiative in Kyrgyzstan engaged in an innovative practice through supporting the design and dissemination of a mobile phone game, "Spring in Bishkek". The game is designed to **empower users** to learn more about the practice of forced marriage/abduction for forced marriage (Ala Kachuu), how to prevent it, and how to help others who may be targeted, providing real-life referral services. Developed by local activists with input from psychologists and lawyers, this game uses Communication for Development strategies to demonstrate alternative behaviour models for girls, boys, and adults.



With over 117,000 downloads across the region, the Initiative in Kyrgyzstan is in the process of assessing how to meaningfully track social norms change.

The Spotlight Initiative in Uganda:

- Has supported **government ownership in addressing harmful practices** through the **allocation of a national budget to end FGM**, a good practice. This partnership with the government has resulted in systems strengthening, where ownership of efforts to end violence against women and girls is being cascaded down to national districts and lower levels of government as part of the Initiative's **sustainability strategy**.
- Has also innovatively supported **community-based women's groups to become part of the surveillance system of cross-border movement of girls for FGM and child marriage** between the border of Uganda and Kenya. These community-based women's groups now have an **integral role in bringing girls back home** and reporting these cases to authorities.

The Spotlight Initiative in Mozambique is following the good practice of engaging closely with traditional leaders to end harmful practices and has significantly invested in developing the capacities of traditional and community leaders. Through providing the tools necessary to support with the identification of cases of violence against women and girls, traditional leaders are now equipped to report these cases to local authorities. This engagement led to a national forum where traditional leaders agreed on an **action plan to address child marriage specifically, and gender-based violence overall, in their communities**. This level of capacity development has been incredibly successful - when traditional leaders used to celebrate and were custodians of early childhood marriage, **many are now the first to denounce child marriage** by highlighting that it is illegal in Mozambique and have become **true agents of change in their communities**. With more investment, there is more potential to increase commitment and impact.

The Spotlight Initiative in Niger is addressing the generational gap that is usually present when working across stakeholders by **elevating the voice and agency of youth groups**. The Initiative is mentoring young girls in various communities to speak out on issues pertinent to violence against women and girls. The Initiative is engaging in mentorship by creating a circle of women and girls where they can feel comfortable to first share these issues. Then, collectively, cases can be reported to social workers or NGOs. **This style of mentorship and subsequent reporting has become a promising practice that has allowed women to feel like they are heard and listened to, fostering a greater sense of agency within their communities**. The Initiative has also supported **dialogue between youth and traditional leaders** to create consensus on addressing harmful practices and ensure this work is carried forward sustainably beyond the Initiative.

The Spotlight Initiative in Tajikistan is innovatively **harnessing the influence and reach of social media and online communities** to increase public understanding of violence against women and girls. This builds off previous practice where civil society organizations have used Facebook to proactively report and follow up on cases of gender-based violence. In tandem, the Initiative is **mobilizing male celebrities to become gender champions and advocate for men and boys to meaningfully join in the effort** to end violence against women and girls.

The Spotlight Initiative in Zimbabwe has supported an innovative transformation of how the value of cattle is being used. Where cattle were previously given as part of the bride price in early marriages, the request for cattle is **now instead used to impose a penalty for breaking the law when child marriage takes place**. This demonstrates an **understanding and respect for cultural traditions while engaging the community in a practical step** to eradicate violence against women and girls.

“SOCIAL NORMS AROUND MARRIAGE PUT A HIGH PRESSURE ON PROSECUTION OFFICIALS TO USE THE LOWEST POSSIBLE PENALTY, BY NEGOTIATING. OFFICIALS ARE REPORTING HIGH PRESSURE FROM FAMILIES, HOWEVER THE BEST STRATEGY TO PREVENT EARLY MARRIAGES AND TEENAGE PREGNANCY IS COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION.”

Jipara Turmamatova, Spotlight Initiative Kyrgyzstan

Access the Addressing Harmful Practices and Promoting Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights through Effective Stakeholder Engagement presentation, recording, and resources [here](#).