



# A Comprehensive Approach to Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls: Results, Lessons Learned and Promising Practices from Spotlight Initiative

Photo: Think Young Women/Gambia

## Introduction

The Spotlight Initiative implements a uniquely comprehensive approach to preventing violence against women and girls (VAWG). This comprehensive approach to prevention fosters gender equitable social norms, attitudes and behaviours and employs an all-of-society approach across the socio-ecological model to address the root cause of VAWG and underlying discriminatory gender norms. This brief surfaces overarching insights, drawing on analysis from a synthesis of 98 reports from 2019 to 2021 across all Spotlight Initiative country and regional programmes, trust funds, and global learning sessions. The Spotlight Initiative has garnered lessons including on the power of community education and knowledge to prevent VAWG and shift social norms,<sup>1</sup> building community commitment, and scaling up efforts to prevent and end VAWG.

## Background

Violence against women and girls is a severe violation of basic human rights that impairs women's and girls' full participation in social, economic and political spheres of life. Prevention is the only strategy that addresses the structural causes of violence and is key to the long-term changes required to end violence against women and girls. Prevention efforts require context-specific, multi-pronged approaches that shift behaviour and norms. The Spotlight Initiative meaningfully builds on evidence-based approaches, tools and frameworks, including the RESPECT framework and implementation package,<sup>2</sup> and collaborates with established leaders, partners and programmes in the field. **With support from Spotlight Initiative, 60% of targeted countries in 2021 have implemented at least three evidence-based, transformative, comprehensive prevention strategies or programmes that are focused on uprooting the drivers of violence against women and girls.** What is pivotal about Spotlight Initiative's efforts is its **comprehensive approach to the prevention of violence against women and girls.** Prevention interventions engage in a multi-stakeholder approach, build on existing evidence and programmes and are implemented in tandem with activities across the six pillars of the Spotlight Initiative Theory of Change.<sup>3</sup> **The largest percentage of Spotlight Initiative's investment across the six pillars is allocated towards prevention efforts.**<sup>4</sup>

Creating a sense of responsibility and commitment among people who normally do not consider VAWG their concern requires multiple strategies. This includes engaging a diverse group of stakeholders, such as religious and community leaders, parents and family members, teachers and mentors, police and other state actors. The Spotlight Initiative adopts **long-term strategies to ensure the sustainability of efforts to prevent VAWG**, including community-based approaches and educational initiatives in schools, with families and other institutions, as well as advocacy and public information campaigns. These approaches can ultimately influence policy and shift norms and behaviours in the long-term. **The lessons outlined in this brief are interconnected.** The Spotlight Initiative **emphasizes the need for wider accountability and activism** through partnering with civil society organizations, women's rights movements and religious and political leaders (among others), with the understanding that preventing violence against women and girls is everyone's responsibility. The Spotlight Initiative's comprehensive approach to prevention mobilizes actors at multiple levels, such as community organizations and leaders, including traditional and religious leaders, sports organizations, youth, policymakers, influencers and many others. This has been critical towards changing attitudes and behaviours around the acceptability of violence against women and girls, fostering commitment and bringing initiatives to scale for wider and more meaningful impact.

## Lessons learned

**#1: The power of community education and knowledge helps to prevent violence against women and girls and shift social norms.**

Following the Spotlight Initiative's comprehensive approach to addressing all forms of violence against women and girls, a comprehensive approach to preventing violence is of the utmost importance. Spotlight Initiative has accelerated the gains made in this area of work and continues to advance this effort across the globe through its partnerships. In **Liberia**, the Spotlight Initiative has a **Comprehensive Prevention Strategy** that was developed through a **coordinated and multi-stakeholder approach reinforcing government, civil society, and community ownership.**

<sup>1</sup> See Spotlight Initiative's knowledge brief on social norms and behaviour change [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> The UN Women-WHO RESPECT Women: Preventing violence against women framework is available [here](#) and the implementation package is available [here](#).

<sup>3</sup> The six pillars of Spotlight Initiative's Theory of Change include: Outcome 1 – Laws and Policies, Outcome 2 – Institutions, Outcome 3 – Prevention, Outcome 4 – Essential Services, Outcome 5 – Quality, Disaggregated Data, and Outcome 6 – Women's Movements. Learn more from the Spotlight Initiative Impact Report 2020 – 2021 [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> In 2021, 27.6% of Spotlight Initiative's investment was allocated towards Outcome 3 – Prevention. This was followed by 27.4% focused on Outcome 4 – services. 2021 Spotlight Initiative Global Annual Report.

This strategy informs all efforts to prevent sexual gender-based violence (SGBV), harmful practices and promote sexual and reproductive health and rights, and supports implementation of the Rape Law, Domestic Violence Law, and government-led Anti-SGBV Roadmap that protects women and girls from violence. In 2021, a total of **11,247 people from 225 communities** in Liberia have increased knowledge on the Comprehensive Prevention Strategy, the continuum of sexual gender-based violence and domestic violence, referral pathways and how to report cases through Spotlight Initiative's efforts.

Developing educational and awareness raising tools that promote gender equality and challenge patriarchal norms can have a powerful impact on increasing understanding of the roots of VAWG. For example, efforts include improving access to knowledge on sexual and reproductive health rights into community-based education programming as well as establishing trust with parents, teachers and local community leaders to engage them in efforts to end harmful practices. School-based interventions can reach larger populations at a younger age, especially when government-endorsed. Community-based interventions can also have a significant impact, especially when targeting non-school age populations. Spotlight Initiative has implemented curriculum-based approaches to ending VAWG in a variety of settings including in and out of school, community and religious spaces as well as in businesses and in government agencies, including in **Argentina, Belize, El Salvador, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Kyrgyzstan, the Latin America Regional programme, Mali, Malawi, the Caribbean Regional Programme, Nigeria, Tajikistan, Timor-Leste, and Vanuatu**. The Spotlight Initiative has contributed to promoting gender equitable norms, attitudes and behaviours and **comprehensive sexuality education curricula, including by updating existing curricula to meet international standards**.

In **Belize**, significant advances were made in strengthening and scaling up Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) at the secondary school level for in and out of school settings through a partnership with the Ministry of Education. The CSE was revised to meet international standards and scaled up to all secondary schools, sharing important anti-VAWG messages. However, not all adolescents and youth attend school. As such, in an effort to reach out of school youth, the Belize Family Life Association revised the CSE Peer Education Curriculum and Training Resource Manual in line with international standards. The Initiative supported an **expansion of CSE community-level trainers to reach more young people locally** and through popular and youth friendly social media and video conference platforms.

One foundational approach that Spotlight Initiative has implemented across select programmes is SASA! (Start, Awareness, Support, Action), an evidence-based community mobilization approach to prevent violence against women. SASA! has been implemented in at least 30 countries by more than 75 organizations around the world and is a proven community mobilization approach to prevent violence against women and girls. SASA! has a strict methodology requiring long-term commitment, creating change at the community level through a variety of activities and engagement with individuals, leaders, couples and families.<sup>5</sup>

For example, in **Haiti**, the Spotlight Initiative sensitized and trained women and girl leaders using the SASA! approach. In 2021, **26 mentors** were trained to support with healthy relationship and empathy development, self-esteem, and facilitation techniques to implement this approach. In **Uganda**, the Initiative **scaled-up** the SASA! community mobilization and norm change models across districts. The Initiative focused on strengthening the knowledge and practical skills of key stakeholders to support action and change at community levels. In both Haiti and Uganda, the SASA! approach has led to **more structured and longer-term education and mobilization processes in communities related to women's and girls' rights, non-violent education, positive masculinities and overall prevention of violence against women and girls**.

Media and campaigns that build **community commitments also create opportunities for sharing innovative, promising and good practices to strengthen multi-tiered approaches to eliminating VAWG in a comprehensive manner and for sustainable action beyond the Spotlight Initiative**. Given the pervasiveness of VAWG, reaching a large audience is critical to shifting behaviours and norms. Community and religious leaders, leaders in institutions as well as local and national celebrities can help reach larger constituencies to recognize, understand and take action to end violence against women and girls. Efforts that join people and reach the public at large have proven to be a necessary part of education and awareness raising strategies, and when complimented with other prevention strategies such as community mobilization and those that address the root causes of VAWG, can make significant changes at multiple levels.<sup>6</sup>

Media campaigns, public service announcements, advertisements and education are all tools used by the Spotlight Initiative to reach the public, such as in **Argentina, Liberia, Niger, Mozambique, Mali, Samoa, and Uganda**. In 2021, **nearly 130 million people were reached through campaigns in at least 29 languages**. For example, the #YO ME OCUPO initiative in Argentina had the objective of challenging gender roles and stereotypes that promote gender inequality in couples. It sought to **promote conversations among men about their role at home and to make visible the impact that the mental burden of thinking, planning and coordinating household and care tasks has on women**. The campaign produced a series of videos and pieces for social networks, as well as a virtual conversation. The campaign had a very high impact on social networks, and it was a trending topic on the day of its launch, circulated extensively on WhatsApp and was broadcast through traditional media at the national and local level. **It was then launched internationally and circulated across 28 countries including Uruguay, Chile, Mexico, El Salvador, Paraguay, Peru, Colombia, the United States, Spain, Germany and Turkey**.

## **#2: Building community commitment, engaging influential leaders and mobilizing youth can positively influence behavioural changes towards greater gender equality**

Influential community and religious leaders have the power to set an example and majorly influence the eradication of existing discriminatory practices. Leaders who can champion changes from inside institutions are in a prime position to challenge norms that tolerate gender biases.

<sup>5</sup> See SASA Raising Voices for further information, <https://raisingvoices.org/women/the-sasa-approach/>

<sup>6</sup> See 10 Essentials for Prevention of Violence Against Women, UNWOMEN, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2016/Essentials-for-preventing-VAW-en.pdf>

These leaders have visibility, authority and credibility. The Spotlight Initiative has worked with village chiefs, religious authorities, trade union leaders and other individuals responsible for maintaining and reinforcing traditional practices to be catalysts for positive change by shifting their awareness, attitudes and behaviours towards gender equality and VAWG. Through changing the mindsets of community leaders and local authorities, they can then play a long-term role in challenging harmful social norms and attitudes towards women and girls.

In communities where VAWG is normalized, recognizing it as a social problem is one of the first steps towards changing mindsets, norms, attitudes and behaviours. Building community-wide responses to violence against women can have a preventive effect in the long run. **Substantial change occurs when communities see it as their responsibility to intervene in cases of VAWG and declare abusive behaviour towards women unacceptable.** Human rights education and participatory, interactive initiatives that use arts and culture or sports as a means to reach out to younger generations can be effective in establishing a sense of community responsibility. In 2021, **1,402 villages and communities developed advocacy platforms for the prevention of violence** with Spotlight Initiative's support. **6,733 traditional and religious leaders** were engaged and mobilized as allies to promote women and girls' rights and gender-equitable norms, attitudes and behaviours. **Since 2019, more than 15,000 traditional and religious leaders have participated in Spotlight Initiative programming.** The Spotlight Initiative spearheaded initiatives such as these in **Belize, Malawi, Mozambique, Tajikistan, Timor-Leste, and Uganda, as well as Cambodia and Thailand through the Safe and Fair programme.**

In **Tajikistan**, to build the awareness of Muslim religious leaders on methods to prevent violence against women and girls, a draft training module on Islam and Gender was prepared together with the Committee of Religious Affairs and Regulations of Traditions. This comprehensive training module was developed for high-level religious officials, such as province and district Imam khatibs. A more simplified model was developed for rural religious leaders of community mosques to **incorporate tools to end domestic violence into their religious community work.**

In addition to community leaders, young people can play an important role in changing attitudes and behaviours. Fostering young people's awareness, participation and leadership is instrumental for long-term change to prevent VAWG. Youth are often driven to act more than any other constituency, especially when given the knowledge and tools to engage. Recently, Secretary-General António Guterres emphasized the role of youth in achieving the SDGs: "Young people are...leading the way in the fight against climate change, standing up for racial justice and gender equality...holding leaders to account...[and] are at the forefront of our efforts to secure a more inclusive, peaceful, and prosperous future for all".<sup>7</sup>

Since 2019, over 2.5 million young people have participated in programmes promoting gender-equitable attitudes and behaviours. Spotlight Initiative's approaches that focused on youth have affected influential change across a variety of prevention efforts, including stopping early marriages and through key policy and legislative changes.

In **Argentina, Malawi, Niger, Tajikistan, Timor-Leste, Uganda and Zimbabwe**, among other countries, the Initiative has had a particular emphasis on engaging youth as a critical component to preventing violence against women and girls. Mobilizing young people to build momentum around changing beliefs, attitudes and practices to end violence is essential.

In **Niger**, the Initiative effectively engaged youth during the 16 Days of Activism Campaign to End Violence Against Women by using digital platforms to build the capacity of networks of youth organizations for EVAWG. This equipped **70 young people** representing networks across Niger with increased knowledge of VAWG and enabled them to acquire techniques for developing and disseminating messages against VAWG on social networks, such as WhatsApp. **This has allowed youth to become social mobilizers and actors of change at the community level.**

As a comprehensive approach to prevention requires a whole-of-society effort, it is critical to engage men and boys as leading agents of change to end the violence against women and girls that is almost entirely perpetrated by men. In **2021, over 1.3 million men and boys attended community programmes and gender transformative activities in community centres, schools and other relevant spaces to promote gender-equitable norms, attitudes and behaviours, and address violent masculinities** through Spotlight Initiative. In nine Spotlight Initiative programmes, this was done through the formation of **62 men and boys' networks, which actively challenge harmful beliefs and practices and promote positive attitudes and behaviours towards women and girls.**

**#3: Working with institutions, duty bearers and service providers to scale up efforts and reach wider audiences can help prevent and end violence against women and girls**

Weak institutional responses, laws and policies impede prevention of VAWG. As such, the Spotlight Initiative works with police and government agencies to tackle VAWG, for example in **Uganda, Malawi, Liberia, Papua New Guinea, Mozambique, and Kyrgyzstan** to change norms, improve access to services and deter VAWG.

In **Malawi**, in 2021 the Spotlight Initiative worked with the **Malawi Police Service Women's Network, comprised of women police volunteers who empower women and girls to demand their rights and report VAWG incidents.**

<sup>7</sup> Secretary-General's video message to the 2022 ECOSOC Youth Forum: "Youth2030 - Achieving the SDGs with and for Youth," <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2022-04-20/secretary-generals-video-message-the-2022-ecosoc-youth-forum-youth2030-achieving-the-sdgs-and-for-youth>

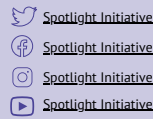
This was achieved through community-focused activities where interventions targeted chief's spouses, primary school girls and members of communities with traditional authorities. These efforts engaged almost **1,500 individuals<sup>8</sup>** and **provided an opportunity for women and girls to network while increasing their knowledge on addressing negative social norms, attitudes and beliefs that perpetuate VAWG.**

In **Niger**, in an effort to build community capacity through the Community Approach to Child Protection, the Spotlight Initiative engaged **almost 50,000 members<sup>9</sup> from 144 villages**. These trainings established community mechanisms through Village Committees and women's support groups to create a bridge between non-formal and formal entities. **Using a door-to-door approach, they handled cases of violence, rape and sexual assault and referred them to the gendarmerie and the judiciary, increasing access to justice and crime prevention.**

In **Kyrgyzstan**, the Spotlight Initiative is working with the Police Academy to develop mandatory police training programmes with the aim of enhancing institutional gender-sensitive and survivor-centered criminal justice practices. Behavioural changes documented through Spotlight Initiative's approaches show that increased awareness of the causes and effects of VAWG at both individual and institutional levels and proactive strategies that help women assert their rights can contribute to ending VAWG. The Spotlight Initiative enables women who experience violence or are afraid that they may experience violence to **have access to crime prevention and criminal justice responses.**

Preventing violence against women and girls requires long-term strategies and approaches. One entry point can include ensuring wide accessibility to information and understanding of the social norms, attitudes and behaviours that underpin and enable violence against women and girls. Equipping women and girls with the knowledge on where to seek help is integral. It is key to ensure that rights holders and duty bearers at multiple levels are aware of the problem and are actively committed to ending violence. Connecting educational initiatives and media campaigns to practical programmes that shift gendered norms, attitudes, and behaviours to promote equality and prevent violence are all part of a comprehensive VAWG prevention strategy. Through multi-faceted approaches, the Spotlight Initiative has planted seeds of change in communities across the globe.

FOLLOW SPOTLIGHT INITIATIVE AT:



<sup>8</sup> A total of 1,491 individuals were engaged.

<sup>9</sup> 47,218 members were engaged.