UNSDG SYSTEM-WIDE EVALUATION OFFICE

The final evaluation of the Spotlight Initiative

1. 1. The Spotlight Initiative to End Violence Against Women and Girls

A joint initiative of the United Nations and the European Union, the Spotlight Initiative to End Violence against Women and Girls, was the first large-scale initiative to systematically address both the drivers and consequences of gender-based violence. The Spotlight Initiative was launched in September 2017 with a funding commitment of 500 million euros from the European Union. Envisioned as a Sustainable Development Goals demonstration fund, the Spotlight Initiative sought to show that a significant, concerted and comprehensive investment in gender equality and ending violence against women and girls (EVAWG) can contribute to the realization of the 2030 Agenda as a whole. As a model for United Nations Development System reform, the Spotlight Initiative sought to leverage the expertise of multiple United Nations entities to address a complex development challenge. The approach was characterized by partnerships across the United Nations entities, governments, regional bodies, civil society and other stakeholders including academia, media, the private sector and religious institutions to advance a whole-of-society approach to EVAWG.

The Spotlight Initiative's theory of change and its associated global results framework presented a comprehensive structure to inform programme design via a six-pillar approach for all regions and countries. A further feature of the theory of change was the identification of cross-cutting principles to be adhered to in all programming: 1) mainstreaming women's empowerment; 2) leaving no one behind (LNOB); and 3) civil society organization (CSO) engagement and participation.

United Nations
Sustainable Development Group
System-Wide Evaluation Office

Six-Pillar Approach

1 Strengthening laws and policies

2 Strengthening institutions

3 Challenging harmful social norms

4 Strengthening services, access to justice and referral systems

5 Strengthening data and tracking systems

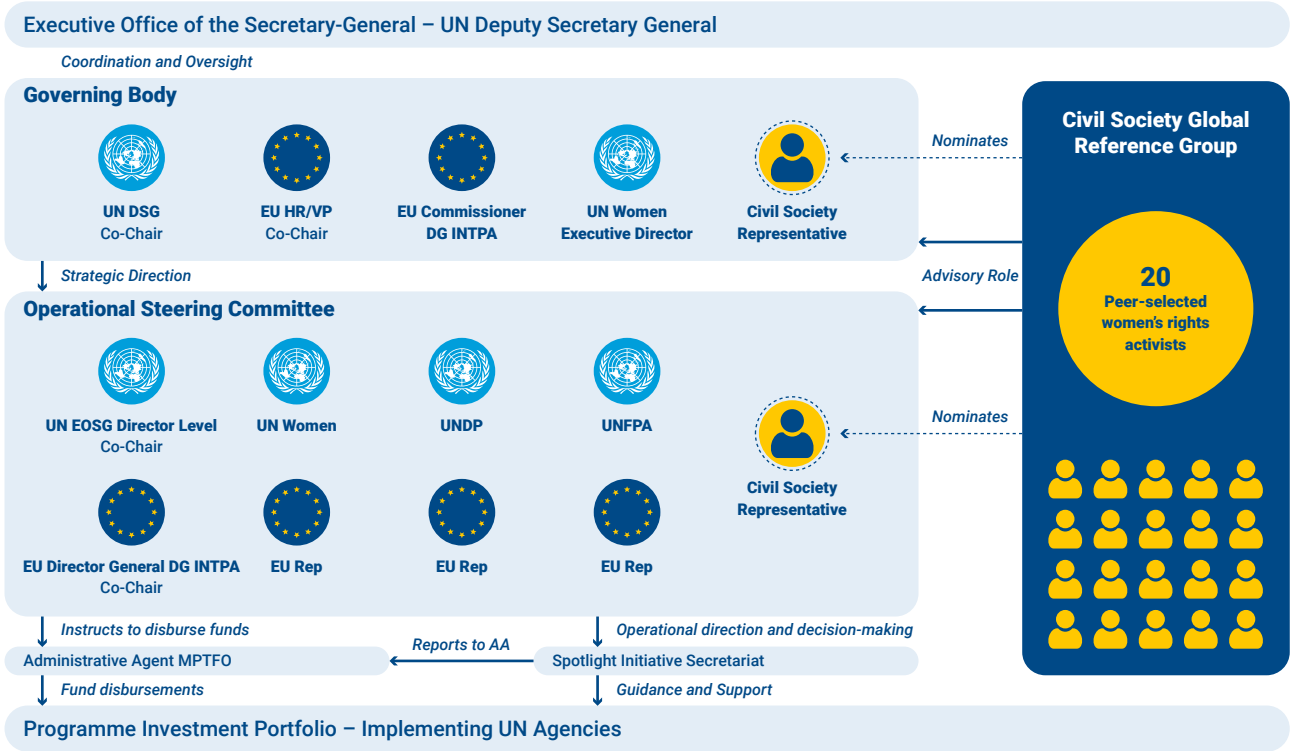**6** Supporting civil society and movement building

The Spotlight Initiative was implemented through 26 country programmes, five regional programmes, one thematic regional programme and two civil society grant-giving programmes in partnership with the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women and the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund.

Regional and country programmes were governed by steering committees chaired by a senior United Nations official and a government representative. Other members included the European Union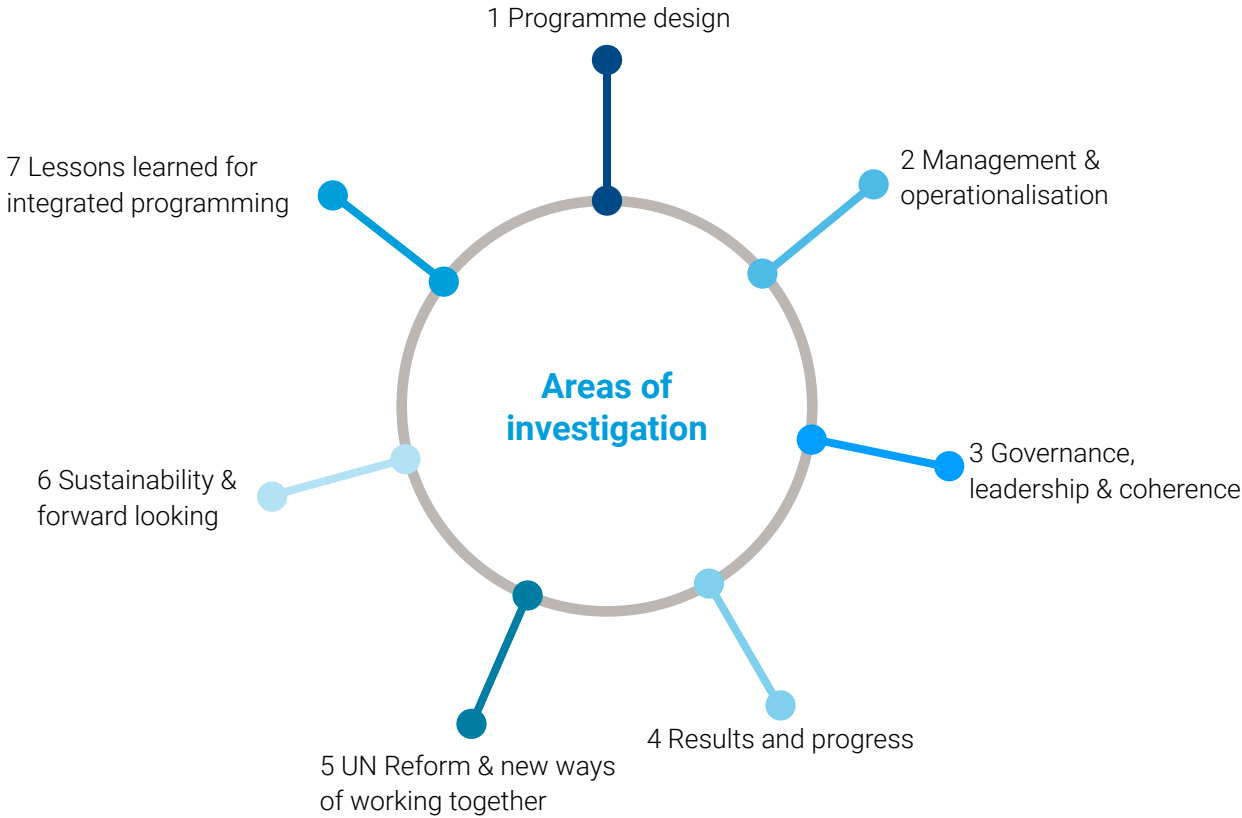 Representative, Heads of recipient United Nations organizations (RUNO) and other government officials. Civil society reference groups played an advisory role with the power to nominate representatives to steering committees.

Executive Office of the Secretary-General – UN Deputy Secretary General

Coordination and Oversight

Governing Body

| UN DSG Co-Chair | EU HR/VP Co-Chair | EU Commissioner DG INTPA | UN Women Executive Director | Civil Society Representative |

Strategic Direction

Nominates

Civil Society Global Reference Group

20 Peer-selected women's rights activists

Advisory Role

Operational Steering Committee

UN EOSG Director Level Co-Chair | UN Women | UNDP | UNFPA

EU Director General DG INTPA Co-Chair | EU Rep | EU Rep | EU Rep

Nominates

Civil Society Representative

Instructs to disburse funds

Administrative Agent MPTFO

Fund disbursements

Reports to AA

Operational direction and decision-making

Spotlight Initiative Secretariat

Guidance and Support

Programme Investment Portfolio – Implementing UN Agencies

2. Evaluation purpose, scope and areas of investigation

The evaluation's purpose is to assess the Spotlight Initiative's overall performance, including its contribution to United Nations Development System reform. The evaluation focuses on seven areas of investigation and covers implementation of the Spotlight Initiative at all levels from December 2017 to December 2023.

Areas of investigation

1 Programme design
2 Management & operationalisation
3 Governance, leadership & coherence
4 Results and progress
5 UN Reform & new ways of working together
6 Sustainability & forward looking
7 Lessons learned for integrated programming

3. Findings

Evaluation findings are presented for each of the seven areas investigation

Programme design

The Spotlight Initiative's theory of change, with its six pillars and three cross-cutting principles, was comprehensive and an essential framework for addressing VAWG holistically. However, the theory of change was ambitious and lacked elaboration on interactions across pillars and across programme levels. The global design structure was complex, leading to challenges in ensuring coherence across components. The process of developing the results framework at the global level was consultative and drew on models and experiences from other programmes. The design was flexible enough to allow for country and regional contextualization, although challenges were faced with localizing the results framework, particularly for regional programmes.

The countries selected for the programme offered diverse testing grounds for the Spotlight Initiative model. Countries in crisis contexts were excluded from consideration, although several of the selected countries faced crisis or emergency situations after the start of the programme. A thematic focus by region provided a strategic entry point and an opportunity to raise the profile of key regional challenges, however, irregular classifications of regions led to programme design challenges.

The design process at global, regional and country levels brought together a broad base of stakeholders, although some stakeholders with specialized expertise were not initially involved in the global design. Challenges were faced at country and regional levels to develop complex programmes within short timeframes in contexts where critical data were often unavailable. The lack of an inception phase did not allow enough time for the diverse stakeholders engaged at country and regional levels to develop relations and structures needed to support implementation. RUNO selections at country and regional levels were in line with mandates and comparative advantages.

Management and operationalization

The lack of an inception phase for country and regional programmes, short implementation timelines and a multi-layered process for releasing funds caused operational challenges and delays.

Adequate human resources were apportioned to enable the global Secretariat and United Nations Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office to operate effectively and support programme implementation, but significant challenges were faced in ensuring adequate human resources to operationalize country and regional programmes.

The Spotlight Initiative demonstrated an ability to be responsive to changing contexts through timely and adaptive actions, including the response to COVID-19 and other crises. Adaptive actions and mitigation measures with a focus on operational agility, including country acceleration plans, were undertaken and had an overall positive impact on implementation. However, the integration of more flexible and responsive strategies into the operational framework would have better anticipated and mitigated the impacts of significant external changes in context.

United Nations systems and procedures presented operational challenges for RUNOs, particularly in reaching grassroots organizations. Over the life of the Initiative, RUNOs increased the involvement of grassroots organizations by utilizing a small grants modality to simplify requirements; providing training to ensure compliance with RUNO requirements; and by enabling working through consortia arrangements with larger civil society organizations. Instances of operational collaboration between RUNOSs such as joint expressions of interest, trainings and joint monitoring missions contributed to operational efficiencies. However, differing United Nations financial and administrative systems and processes hindered coordination and harmonization to collectively deliver, despite a concerted effort to mitigate this challenge.

Centralized performance management, monitoring and reporting systems required extensive human resource investment, with limited evidence of positive impact on programme operational efficiency and performance. Implementation of the global results framework was challenging and there was significant variability in the quality of results reporting. Participatory monitoring and evaluation approaches and mid-term assessments were valuable for accountability and learning and informed decision-making and adaptations in strategies and interventions.

Governance, leadership and coherence

The Spotlight Initiative's governance structures engaged a broad base of high-level stakeholders, although functional challenges were faced at all levels of governance. The inclusion of formal governance structures for civil society engagement was an important and innovative aspect of the programme that nevertheless required adjustments and adaptations along the way to improve functioning. In several programme countries, the governance structures contributed to supporting a more strategic and coherent approach to EVAWG involving key national stakeholders, helping to elevate the issue on the national agenda. Spotlight facilitated the formation of new and strengthened partnerships among various stakeholders, including civil society organizations and other key stakeholders.

The Spotlight Initiative demonstrated mixed results in fostering coherence within and between governance structures, marked by a top-down approach from global bodies that was not well connected to regional and country programmes. A lack of linkages in coordination mechanisms and strategic alignment between country and regional programmes resulted in missed opportunities for synergistic programming.

Interactions between the United Nations and European Union was multifaceted and complex and varied significantly across regional and country programmes.

Results and progress

The Spotlight Initiative achieved notable results across all six pillars. The evaluation found evidence of the Spotlight Initiative's contribution to outcome-level results and higher order changes including raising the visibility of EVAWG on the national agenda, encouraging multi-stakeholder collaboration, strengthening civil society organizations, increasing government ownership (leadership) of a comprehensive approach to EVAWG, raising awareness among communities and supporting changes in mindsets, strengthening response systems and improving referral networks and integrated services for SGBV, and empowering women and girls.

Pillar 1

Strengthened and supported new and existing EVAWG legislation

Pillar 2

Trained parliament members, government officials and traditional leaders to foster effective programmes for preventing and addressing VAWG

Pillar 3

Promoted gender-equitable norms and prevented violence through school initiatives, creative awareness activities and mentorship programmes

Pillar 4

Improved access to services for women and girls by boosting the capacity of service providers

Pillar 5

Contributed to collecting and increasing the usage of qualitative and disaggregated data on gender-based violence

Pillar 6

Empowered women's movements and local feminist organizations, significantly impacting national civil society organizations and grassroots groups

The Spotlight Initiative generated a wealth of learning and knowledge to support efforts to end violence against women and girls. The impact and reach of communications, advocacy and knowledge management to influence change was demonstrated in several contexts, but results were not well evidenced at scale or at all levels.

United Nations Development System reform and new ways of working

The Resident Coordinator system, a key element of the United Nations Development System reform, positively supported the implementation of the Spotlight Initiative. However, there were challenges to delivering reform objectives, several of which were exogenous to the Spotlight Initiative, including factors related to culture, business operations and performance management processes of United Nations entities.

The Spotlight Initiative deepened understanding of United Nations comparative advantages and synergies in EVAWG within country and regional programmes. However, impact on the recipient United Nations organizations' ways of working at the global level was found to be limited. Evidence that the Initiative delivered a more collaborative and coherent United Nations system response to EVAWG is mixed.

In most countries where the Spotlight Initiative was implemented, it positively influenced United Nations country team guiding frameworks to more consistently address violence against women and girls. The Initiative had spillover effects to non-Spotlight Initiative countries and at the regional level.

Sustainability

Efforts were made to consider sustainability during design and implementation, particularly through securing ownership among stakeholders involved in implementation and institutionalization of approaches within government systems and structures. Progress in institutionalizing programme interventions within government and regional bodies was mixed. There were several examples of successful institutionalization of programme interventions at country level in case study countries including increased capacities of government in gender-based violence-related issues, development and implementation of standard operating procedures for service providers, strengthening of legislative frameworks and enhanced capacities among local governments to address cases of VAWG

supported by strategic partnerships between national and local governments and women's networks. The Spotlight Initiative significantly enhanced the capabilities of civil society organizations to address violence against women and girls, but funding shortfalls jeopardized continuation of gains made.

Sustainability strategies, developed in the final year of programme implementation, left uncertainties about ownership and the practicalities of turning strategy into action.

The Spotlight Initiative struggled to secure broad-based financial support beyond the initial European Union funding. However, the Initiative's positively influenced development partner programming and investments in EVAWG in the countries and regions where it operated.

Lessons learned

The evaluation identified several important lessons from the design and implementation of the Spotlight Initiative to inform the development of global programmes that address complex development challenges.

When testing a global design and theory of change in a range of countries and contexts it is important to allow significant scope and flexibility to tailor programmes to diverse settings and changing contexts.

Co-creation of activities with development partners, government agencies and civil society from the design stage supports enhanced ownership but requires significant time investment to plan to the timelines of multiple stakeholders and navigate government and United Nations administrative systems. Incorporating an inception phase within the design of joint or multi-agency programmes that address a complex issue and rely on new partnerships is important to allow time to build relations and instill trust.

The experiences of operationalizing the Spotlight Initiative demonstrated the value of high-level expanded stakeholder engagement in governance structures with enhanced forums for civil society organizations to support ownership and engagement. However, it is important that interactions at governance and technical levels are systematic.

Spotlight Initiative experiences in implementing an inter-agency integrated programme highlighted the importance of an impartial, dedicated coordination unit to deliver a large-scale programme targeting complex challenges.

4. Conclusions

Overall, the evaluation found proof of concept for the Spotlight Initiative model while also highlighting areas for improvement. The comprehensive design demonstrated the ability of an integrated, inter-agency approach to EVAWG to contribute to higher-order changes at regional, national and local levels. The Spotlight Initiative was able to respond to contextual changes to deliver important results across pillars, while deepening understanding across stakeholders of the need for a broad range of actors to work collaboratively to address violence against women and girls, providing proof of concept for the approach. The governance model brought together expanded stakeholders with an elevated role for civil society engagement. While noting these achievements, the evaluation found that programme delivery was significantly challenged by a complicated operational model and by limitations in the compatibility of United Nations administrative and financial systems, which restricted their capacity to function collaboratively. While some elements and activities of the Initiative show signs of continuation, the sustainability of the overarching approach is still to be determined.

Conclusion 1: The conceptual six-pillar model was comprehensive, and the programme played an important role in raising visibility and focusing attention on a comprehensive approach to EVAWG in the countries and regions where it operated. The evaluation confirmed proof of concept for the six-pillar approach with cross-cutting principles of the theory of change while also highlighting a need for clearer elaboration on interactions across pillars and across programme components.

Conclusion 2: The governance model was able to bring together diverse stakeholders in line with the multisectoral approach, with an elevated role for civil society organizations within all levels of governance. However, expanded stakeholder engagement, including civil society reference groups, required time and space to develop new relations and define systems.

Conclusion 3: The operational model was overly complex to efficiently operationalize the Spotlight Initiative at the speed and scale envisioned. Root causes of operational inefficiencies stemmed from the lack of an inception phase, insufficiently flexible funding release and replenishment modalities and human resources that were not commensurate with programme goals and the timeframe for implementation.

Conclusion 4: Aspects of global monitoring, reporting, knowledge management and communication systems contributed to learning and accountability, however, these were not fully effective, efficient or responsive enough to guide programme implementation and communicate results achieved to stakeholders. Overall, the complexity of the results framework and indicator guidance proved challenging to operationalize and the use of standardized indicators across diverse country and regional contexts has not provided a consistently reliable picture of programme performance. The impact and reach of communications, advocacy and knowledge management to influence change were particularly challenging to measure and to demonstrate results at scale.

Conclusion 5: Country and regional programmes demonstrated an ability to be responsive in the face of dynamic environments to demonstrate important results across all six pillars, with evidence of contributing to higher-order changes supported by work across multiple pillars.

Conclusion 6: The Spotlight Initiative has demonstrated a broader influence on United Nations Development System processes and with non-Spotlight Initiative countries that have adapted elements of the model. However, the sustainability of results and the Initiative's overarching approach is influenced by multiple factors including variable degrees of ownership of sustainability strategies, a changing official development assistance landscape, development partner preference for individual over joint entity engagement, and competition for funding among United Nations entities underpinned by incentive structures.

Conclusion 7: The Spotlight Initiative was supported by, and is supportive of, the principles of United Nations Development System reform, positively contributing to clearer understanding of entities' comparative advantages in EVAWG and supporting

more comprehensive approaches to EVAWG in UNSDCFs. However, significant challenges were encountered to working coherently across United Nations entity systems, several of which were exogenous to the Initiative. Individuals and interactions were found to have had equal, if not greater, primacy over processes in the delivery of a coherent United Nations system response to EVAWG at country, regional and global levels.

5. Recommendations

The evaluation made eight recommendations based on the evaluation findings and conclusions.

Recommendation 1: For the Spotlight Initiative 2.0, work with key stakeholders to review the theory of change to simplify the focus to encompass fewer pillars, while still maintaining the comprehensive approach and cross-cutting elements and promoting interaction across pillars and programme levels. Allow for greater flexibility within programmes for prioritizing and adapting to different contexts (including full United Nations entity engagement without core and non-core designations) while maintaining key non-negotiable requirements. Develop a simplified results framework while maintaining the comprehensive framing.

Recommendation 2: For the Spotlight Initiative 2.0, ensure that programme design and operations maintain relevance and dynamic responsiveness to changing contexts in design and operationalization of Spotlight Initiative 2.0 including establishing systems to enable swift and coordinated adjustments to changing contexts so that programming can pivot with agility. Consider how the Spotlight Initiative 2.0 may allow for intervention in existing crises or emergency contexts by establishing simplified operational processes and selective focus interventions to support a comprehensive approach to EVAWG, complementing existing humanitarian-focused gender-based violence systems and structures.

Recommendation 3: For the Spotlight Initiative 2.0, explore alternative phasing and sequencing approaches to implementation and revise aspects of the Spotlight Initiative operational model including the fund disbursement modality. Ensure human resource planning by RUNOs, including staffing of programme management units, is aligned with programme delivery and operational requirements.

Recommendation 4: For the Spotlight Initiative 2.0, strengthen and simplify monitoring, reporting and learning systems in line with a streamlined results framework. Expand efforts to ensure that monitoring systems report on disaggregated data to highlight the programme reach to vulnerable groups. Expand on and systematize utilization of qualitative approaches to capture a richer and more holistic picture of programme results on the ground. Integrate a value-for-money framework to guide data collection and monitoring during implementation and to serve as a key input for value-for-money assessments. Develop stronger systems to enable real-time learning and knowledge sharing to drive the scaling-up of good practices and innovative approaches.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen and extend models of expanded stakeholder engagement in programme governance, while establishing systems that facilitate bi-directional communications across levels. Build on good practice models to support positive momentum for enhanced civil society organization and non-traditional actor engagement in governance structures, including formalizing, expanding and adequately resourcing the civil society reference group structure. Share and expand on good practice models for enhanced civil society organization engagement, including setting budgetary targets, building capacities and facilitating joint and simplified financing and reporting structures to reach grassroots and civil society organizations.

Recommendation 6: Develop a holistic funding strategy for consideration of UNSDG to step up joint United Nations programming at country, regional and global levels for EVAWG and to expand approaches to resource mobilization in line with the Spotlight Initiative comprehensive model, the principals of United Nations Development System reform and the commitments of the Funding Compact.

Recommendation 7: To further support United Nations Development System reform objectives, incorporate learning from the operationalization of the Spotlight Initiative to inform United Nations system-wide and entity-level efforts to harmonize practices and processes to deliver coherent, integrated support and maximize collective results on EVAWG at country and regional levels.

Recommendation 8: Embed the comprehensive Spotlight Initiative approach to EVAWG into the implementation of the United Nations System-Wide Gender Equality Acceleration Plan (2024), United Nations System-Wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (entity level) and the UNCT System-Wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (country level) and other common United Nations Development System processes such as common country analyses and United Nations Cooperation Frameworks to serve as driving forces for collective United Nations work to prioritize a comprehensive approach to EVAWG. This will support extended geographical reach and coverage of comprehensive EVAWG programming across the United Nations development system and expand resource mobilization opportunities.