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Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences

Violence against women and girls is a widespread, persistent and grave human rights violation that affects over 700 million women and girls, which amounts to one in three women worldwide. The epidemic of violence against women and girls results in incalculable human suffering and is a precursor to or an aggravator of other forms of violence and conflict. Timely access to quality services can significantly help break the cycles of violence.

The United Nations “Spotlight Initiative” to eliminate violence against women and girls, supported by the European union and other partners, has led targeted efforts to end all forms of violence against women and girls, countering the high tide of the erosion of women’s rights. Launched with a seed funding commitment of €500 million from the European Union, the Spotlight Initiative has helped ground the reforms of the United Nations and promote the Sustainable Development Goals, namely Goal 5 on gender equality and women’s empowerment.

Among its many achievements, the Initiative’s results include providing gender-based violence services to over 1.6 million women and girls and reaching nearly 130 million people through behavior change campaigns conducted in at least 29 languages. In addition, more than 1.3 million men and boys were educated on positive masculinities and 2.5 million young people joined in-and-out-of-school programmes dedicated to promoting gender equality norms and values.

Studies show that only 1 per cent of gender-focused aid goes to autonomous, grassroots women’s rights activists and groups, while most funding go to international organizations based in donor countries. The Spotlight Initiative addresses this gap by delivering 30 to 50 per cent of its programmatic funds through civil society organizations, targeting national, local and grassroots women’s rights organizations. To date, the Initiative has allocated USD 146 million to civil society organizations.

The impressive results were only possible due to Spotlight Initiative’s unique comprehensive, multistakeholder and whole-of-society approach – armed with a significant funding envelope to deliver change for women and girls at scale.

A recent study of the Spotlight Initiative conducted by Dalberg Global Development Advisors suggests its comprehensive programmes to be 70 to 90 per cent more effective than traditional programmes targeting violence against women and girls. If current funding levels are maintained after 2023, 21 million fewer women and girls may experience violence by 2025.

Additional investments into Spotlight Initiative are also expected to have greater impact on violence against pregnant women and mothers by 2030, preventing 500,000 women from experiencing miscarriages as well as reducing the chance of new-born and infant mortality, saving the lives of 140,000 children.

Despite the far-reaching benefits of the Initiative, the projected European Union investments to sustain the Initiative risk falling short of the required for maximum impact, and rolling back on the achievements obtained so far, with dangerous knock-on impact on women and girls. The climate and COVID-19 crises have demonstrated that short term piecemeal programmes cannot effectively address the new and emerging challenges most acutely faced by women and girls.

I would like to urge the European Union to reaffirm its commitment to ending violence against women and girls through continued and deep investment in comprehensive programmes like the Spotlight Initiative.

I call on the European Union to leverage its unique position to fund and implement the Initiative in partnership with the United Nations. The European Union should also provide strong political messaging, guidance and incentives to its country delegations in support of the Initiative's continuity. Through new and continued investment in the Initiative, millions of women and girls will benefit for generations to come.