

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AT RISK AND UNDERFUNDED: HOW FUNDING CUTS ARE THREATENING EFFORTS TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Ladysmith

UN WOMEN

Funded by the European Union

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This publication is produced by the Ending Violence against Women Section, Policy Programme and Intergovernmental Division, UN Women, New York, in the framework of the "ACT to End Violence against Women" Programme, funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of UN Women and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

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Suggested citation: Zulver, J. & Breimann, L. (2025) *Assessment of the impact of funding cuts on women's rights (WROs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) working on ending violence against women and girls.* UN Women.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was developed by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) under the Advocacy, Coalition Building and Transformative Feminist Action (ACT) to End Violence Against Women Programme, funded by the European Union.

UN Women would like to thank the authors of the report Dr. Julia Zulver and Lily Breimann from Ladysmith Collective and the following colleagues from UN Women for their contributions: Kalliopi Mingeirou, Yeliz Osman, Michelle Boel Krogh of the Ending Violence against Women (EVAW) Section and Shruti Majumdar, Nathalie Pohl and Giulia Pelosi of the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women and Girls (UNTF).

The technical coordination of this report was led by Yeliz Osman, Michelle Boel Krogh, and Debora Albu from UN Women.

UN Women and Ladysmith extend their gratitude to the women's rights organizations (WROs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) worldwide who shared their experiences, challenges, and insights through surveys and interviews.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACT	UN Women's ACT to End Violence against Women and Girls Programme
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EVAWG	Ending Violence Against Women and Girls
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SDG 5	Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls)
UN	United Nations
UNTF	United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women and Girls
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
VAWG	Violence Against Women and Girls
WHRD	Women Human Rights Defender
WRO	Women's Rights Organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) remains one of the most pervasive human rights violations globally, affecting at least one in three women throughout their lifetime. Despite decades of commitments, progress towards eliminating VAWG has stagnated or even reversed, with one in four countries reporting a backlash against women's rights.

At the same time, women's rights organizations (WROs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) – the frontline actors in protection, prevention, and advocacy – face unprecedented financial precarity due to large-scale aid cuts and shifting donor priorities toward security and defence. Worryingly, they report that as their budgets are being slashed, the demand for their services is increasing.

Key Statistics on VAWG[1]



Globally, nearly

1 in 3 women

have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence, or both at least once in their lifetime. This figure does not include sexual harassment.



Women make up

91% of all victims

of trafficking for sexual exploitation.



An estimated

15 million adolescent girls

worldwide, aged 15-19 years, have experienced forced sex.



In 2023, on average,

140 women or girls were killed every day

by someone in their own family.

Evidence demonstrates that VAWG is preventable – and that WROs and CSOs are the single most critical factor to driving domestic and global policy change.[2] WROs and CSOs provide life-saving services to survivors of violence, including shelters, psychosocial support, legal aid, and safe spaces. They are also critical drivers of policy change and accountability, engaging in advocacy, data collection, and initiatives that extend protection to marginalized groups. Despite their proven impact, funding for these organizations has historically remained negligible. Current aid cuts, estimated at US$78 billion as of June 2025, have intensified this fragility, forcing many organizations to reduce services or face closure. The bigger picture reveals that without urgent and sustained investment, decades of progress on gender equality risk being reversed.

This Executive Summary of the report '*At Risk and Underfunded: How Funding Cuts Are Threatening Efforts to End Violence Against Women and Girls*' consolidates emerging evidence on how funding cuts are undermining WROs and CSOs working to end VAWG. It draws upon a rapid literature review, key informant interviews, and a survey with 428 organizations across WROs and CSOs.

MAIN IMPACTS OF FUNDING CUTS ON WROS AND CSOS:

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#1. A widespread and significant funding crisis has already resulted in significant reductions in programming to end VAWG,

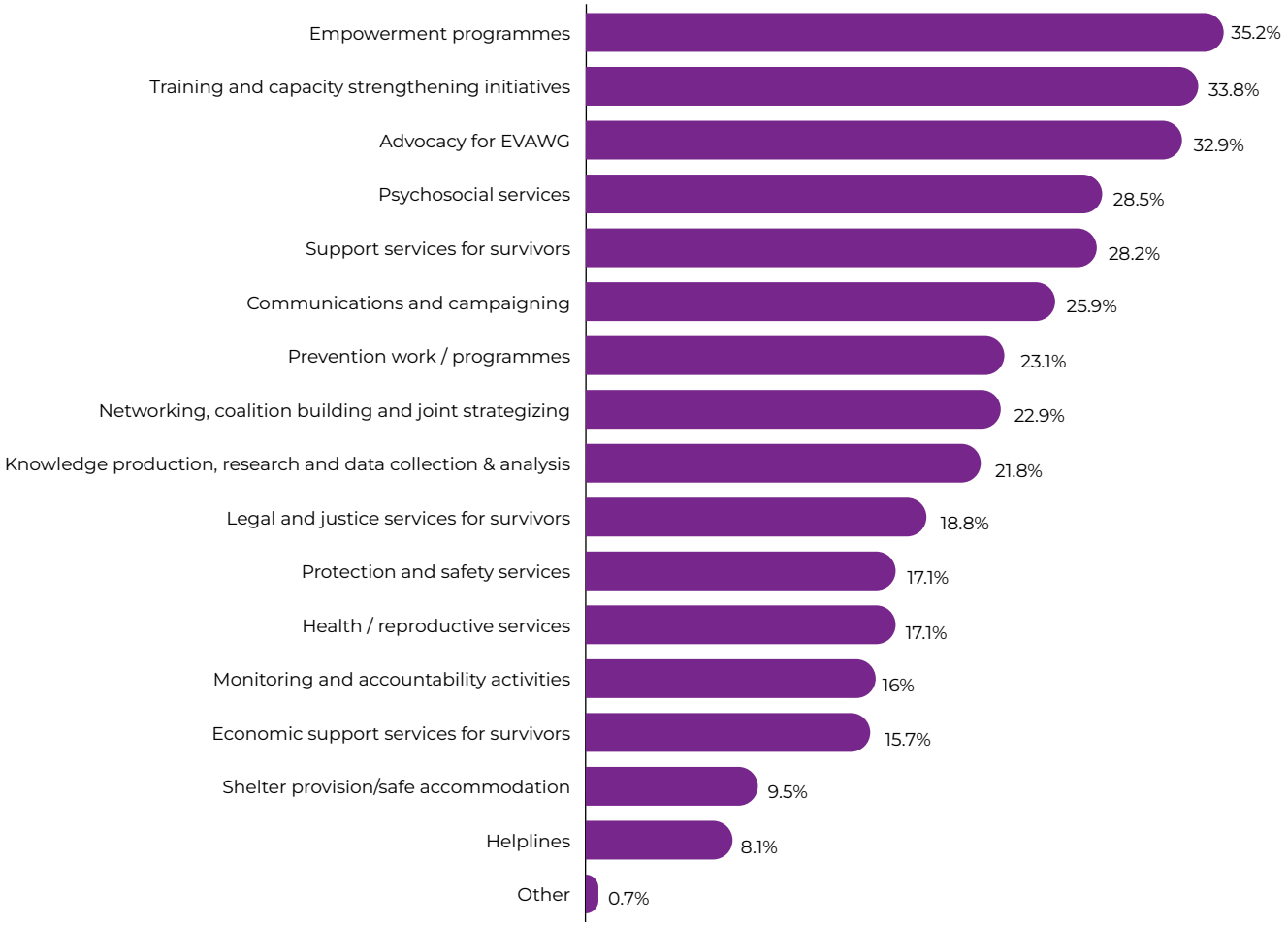


with

34.5% of respondents

reporting that funding cuts have led to programme suspension or termination. Worryingly, states are decreasing their funding both domestically and internationally, at the same time as WROs are reporting an increase in demand for their services.

Graphic 1: Type of EVAWG Work Affected in CSOs (per cent of WROs/CROs that responded affirmatively)



#2. Funding cuts have forced WROs and CSOs offering direct service provision to scale back their essential, life-saving services or shut down entirely.

40.5% of survey respondents

reported service reductions since the funding cuts. They are having to shut down shelters and safe spaces, and let go or reduce the working hours of specialist staff like psychologists and legal experts. Respondents from rural and marginalized communities are particularly concerned, noting that there are often no other places for those experiencing violence to turn to.

#3. Funding cuts are significantly reducing access to protection and critical support for victim-survivors, coupled with growing impunity leaving survivors at risk of intensifying violence.

A staggering

89% of respondents

reported that funding cuts are leading to a high or severe reduction in women and girls' access to support services for survivors, compounded by 82 per cent reporting high or severe limitations on access to safe shelter and accommodation. It is known from the COVID-19 pandemic that a reduction in services to support victims impacted rates and intensity of violence.

#4. Prevention efforts and economic empowerment programmes are being deprioritized, creating the enabling conditions for heightened VAWG in the future.

Investment in prevention has always been weak, and with these cuts it will be even worse.

23% of those surveyed

reported that they are having to interrupt or completely halt their prevention programming in light of the funding cuts. A critical area of prevention programming that has been affected is economic empowerment with

35% of organizations

reporting that the funding cuts are impacting their work in this area. Organizations expressed particular concerns that cutting economic empowerment programmes will impact women's ability to leave violent home lives, and will also increase the risk for sexual exploitation and trafficking.

#5. Funding cuts have limited WROs' and CSOs' ability to engage in important advocacy and accountability work.

33% of respondents

report that the funding cuts have significantly impacted their ability to engage in advocacy and accountability exercises. Without adequate resources, they are no longer able to document violations, collect data, and amplify survivors' voices, diminishing their key role in challenging impunity for VAWG.

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#6. Capacities of WROs and CSOs are severely impacted, undermining feminist leadership and movements.

73 per cent of respondents experiencing funding cuts reported that their organization has been "significantly impacted" by the cuts with



41% reporting

that they do not know how long they will be able to sustain operations or that they will only remain operational for one year or less. Survey respondents from across regions highlighted that they are unable to pay rent for their offices, pay their contractors and staff, or afford their internet and phone bills, Zoom subscriptions, or transport costs.

Only

5% of those surveyed

anticipate being able to sustain their current operations for two years or longer.

#7. Small and grassroots WROs and CSOs face increased exclusion from both national level funds and international funding due to donor preferences for larger NGOs in the current funding climate.

Of the **197 local/grassroots organizations** that responded,



65% (128 orgs)

reported being "significantly impacted." The swift reduction of available funding for organizations working to end VAWG has also resulted in increased competition for smaller pots of money.

#8. Funding cuts take place in a global context of rising backlash against efforts to end VAWG and growing risks for women human rights defenders and activists.

85 per cent of surveyed organizations predicted a high-severe level of backsliding, when it comes to laws and policies that protect women and girls' rights.



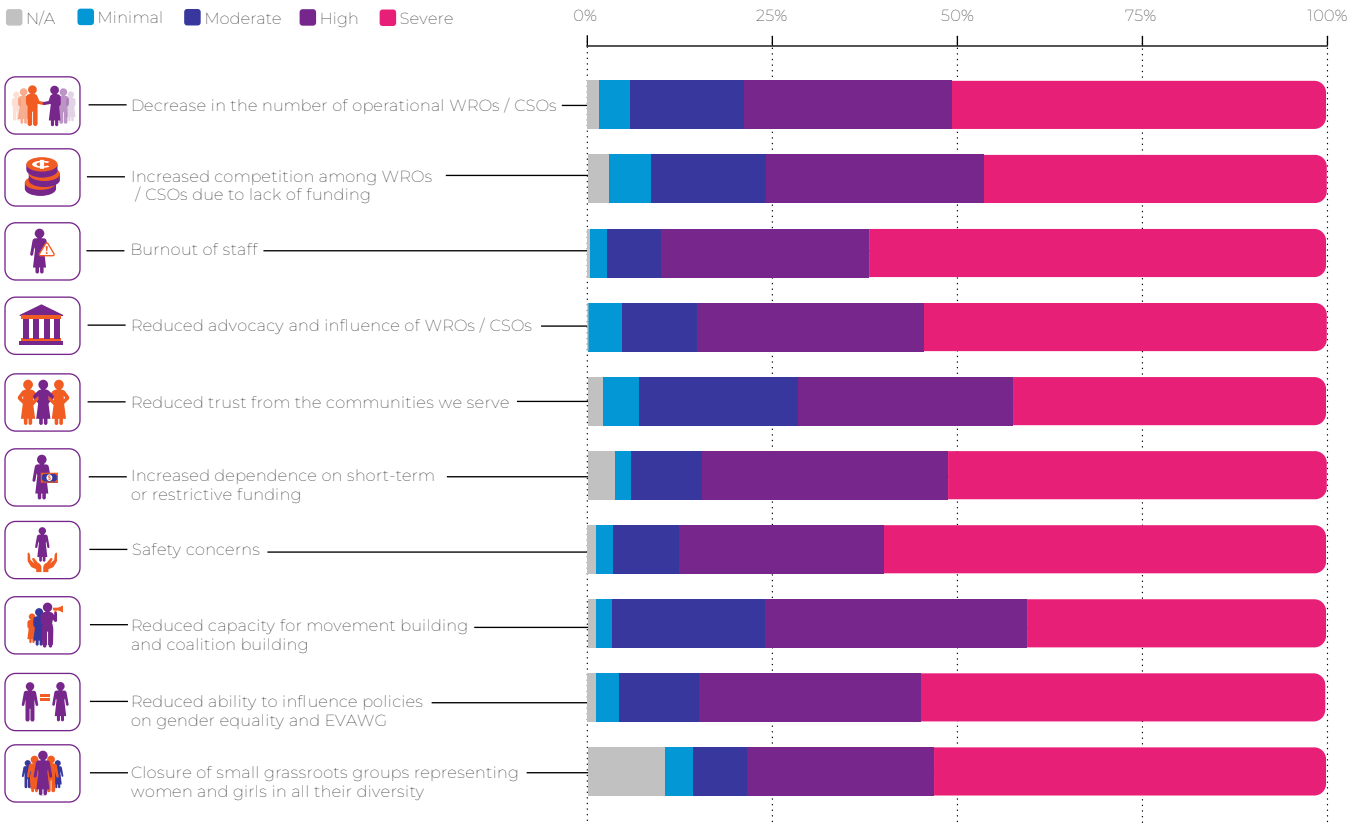
60% of respondents

to the survey reported being severely impacted by the rise of anti-women's rights movements and reduced civic space, and

57% of respondents

expressed severe concerns about increased risks women human rights defenders and activists.

Graphic 2: Impact on the capacities of WROs and CSOs (per cent of response rate per category)



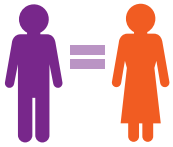
IMPLICATIONS FOR EFFORTS TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS:

The impacts of the funding cuts span from the individual level, where victims/survivors face escalating violence because when they do not have access to the life-saving services they need, to the community level, where a lack of prevention programming creates the conditions for heightened VAWG. Cuts severely weaken organizations' ability to collect data, conduct research, and build evidence for effective interventions.

Without resources to track femicides and other forms of violence, cases go uncounted, impunity grows, and survivors are silenced.

Communities also lose trust in WROs when shelters close or programmes collapse, eroding years of relationship-building.

Ultimately, these funding cuts jeopardize global progress on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, with



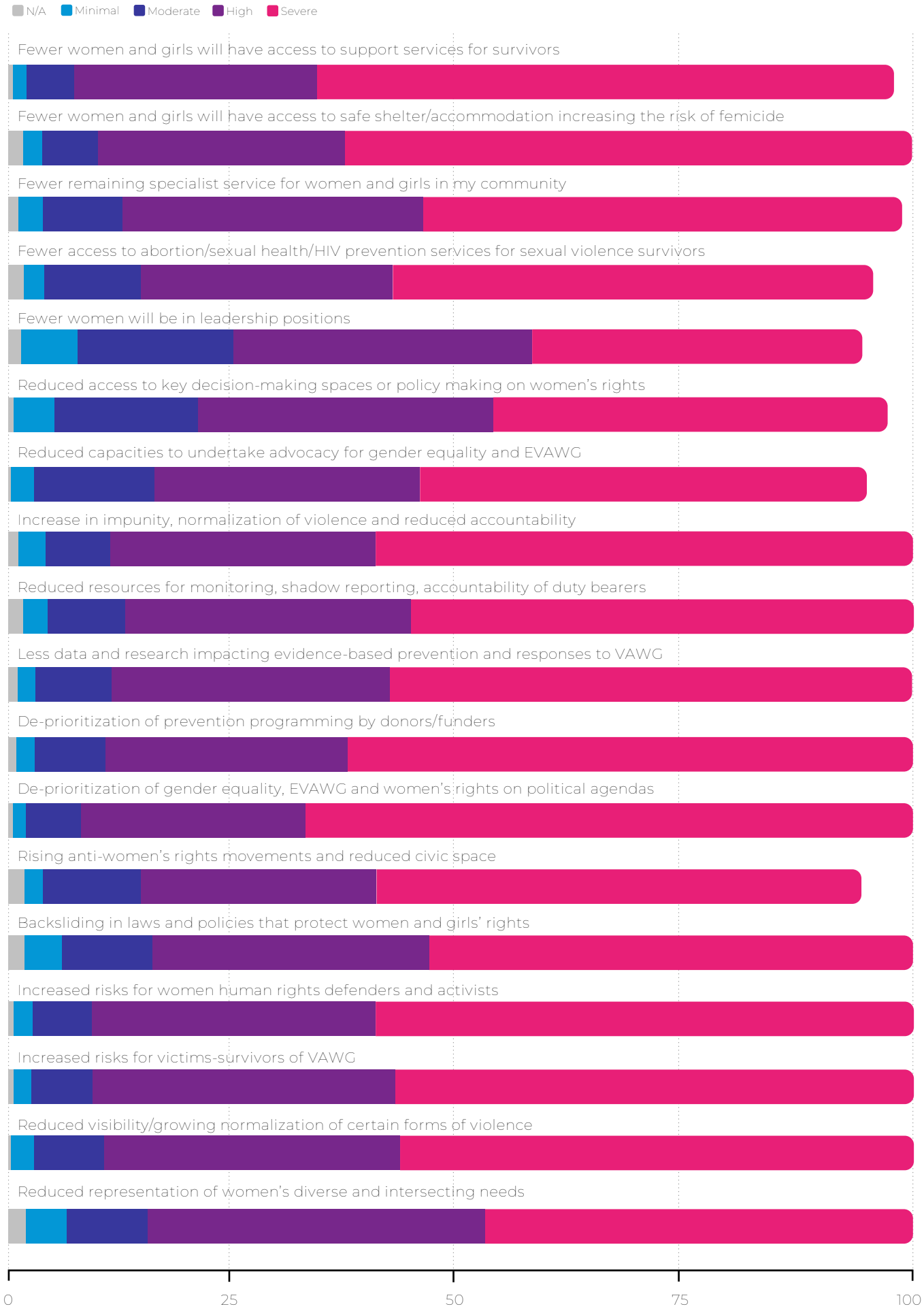
67% of organizations

reporting that they perceive a severe deprioritization of gender equality and EVAWG on political agendas.

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Graphic 3: Impact on the wider EVAWG Ecosystem (per cent of response rate per category)



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:



Secure and safeguard funding for EVAWG both nationally and internationally

- Adopt and implement fully budgeted comprehensive, whole-of-government national action plans on EVAWG.
- Ringfence national EVAWG budgets across key ministries and mainstream EVAWG across health, education, justice, security, social protection, climate change, development, digital policy, and other cross-cutting policy areas.
- Mandate EVAWG services at the country level – such as shelters, hotlines, and legal/clinical aid – as essential, with contingency funding to ensure continuity.
- Sustain and increase dedicated EVAWG funding through Official Development Assistance and earmark a share of funds from intersecting policy areas including security, democracy, climate, digital development and rule of law (amongst others) for EVAWG programming.
- For countries that have already reduced aid, push for retroactive exceptions for EVAWG funding given the life-threatening impact of service cuts.



Reform funding models

- Ensure immediate, core, long-term, flexible, and unconditional funding to WROs/CSOs working on EVAWG to cover operating costs, prevention, and strategic work.
- Prioritize multi-year EVAWG funding moving beyond short-term project-based funding to give WROs and CSOs the stability to continue operations in uncertain contexts.
- Simplify funding and direct resources to grassroots groups, with quotas for youth-led and feminist organizations.



Strengthen resilience of feminist movements

- Support WROs and CSOs to build resilience through investment in digital security, privacy protection, and technology infrastructure to safeguard their work to EVAWG. Further, provide funding for security, safety and protection, and self and collective care, including mental health support.
- Countries leading on gender equality – including those with feminist foreign policies – should use their political capital in multilateral spaces to spotlight EVAWG funding and the role of feminist movements.
- Play a bridge-building role, promoting partnerships between the private sector and WROs/CSOs working to end VAWG and provide support to strengthen capacities of WROs/CSOs on resource mobilization.
- Play a role in strengthening movements and coalitions, and in designing strategies for collective and unified advocacy to resist backlash. Push forward by amplifying and elevating the voices and demands of women's rights movements including through facilitating their participation in decision-making fora, and ensuring representation of youth and marginalized groups.
- Urge states with restrictive legislation on international funding for CSOs to remove barriers, leveraging trade agreements or development aid where appropriate.

ENDNOTES

[1] UN Women. (2024). *Facts and Figures: Ending Violence Against Women.* 25 November. **https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-ending-violence-against-women**; World Health Organization.(2021). *Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2018: global, regional and national prevalence estimates for intimate partner violence against women and global and regional prevalence estimates for non-partner sexual violence against women.* World Health Organization. **https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/341337**

[2] Mama Cash. (2020). *Feminist Activism Works! A review of select literature on the impact of feminist activism in achieving women's rights.* **https://www.mamacash.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/feminist__activism_works_mama_cash.pdf**; AWID (2020) *Moving More Money to the Drivers of Change: How Bilateral and Multilateral Funders Can Resource Feminist Movement* **https://www.mamacash.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/movingmoremoney_mama_cash_awid_cmi.pdf**; Htun, M & Weldon, S.L. (2012) *The Civic Origins of Progressive Policy Change: Combating Violence against Women in Global Perspective,* 1975–2005. American Political Science Review. Vol. 106, No. 3
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UN WOMEN EXISTS TO ADVANCE WOMEN'S RIGHTS, GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS.

As the lead United Nations entity on gender equality and secretariat of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, we shift laws, institutions, social norms and services to close the gender gap and build an equal world for all women and girls. Our partnerships with governments, women's movements and the private sector, coupled with our coordination of the broader United Nations, deliver lasting changes. We make strides in four areas: leadership, economic empowerment, freedom from violence, and peace, security and humanitarian action.

UN Women keeps the rights of women and girls at the centre of global progress – always, everywhere. Because gender equality is not just what we do. It is who we are.

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