

# INVESTING WISELY: MAKING DONOR ASSISTANCE WORK FOR VIOLENCE PREVENTION



## INTRODUCTION

There have been long-standing calls from women's advocates and movements for **more and better money** to help end violence against women (VAW) and their children.

Few would dispute that current funding levels are grossly inadequate to address the dimensions of the need. The Accelerator for GBV Prevention and the Equality Institute estimate that only \$410 million was allocated to VAW prevention in 2022, representing less than 0.2 percent of global aid and development assistance.<sup>1</sup> This falls far short of what is needed to support survivors, transform cultural narratives, address the many factors that perpetuate and promote abuse, and sustain the organisations and feminist movements core to this work. Even with additional funds mobilised annually from private individuals and foundations, the need for **more money** to support VAW prevention remains evident.

Multiple organisations and consortia—including Shake the Table, Count Me In!, AWID, Prospera, and the Black Feminist Fund—have been advocating tirelessly on this issue for decades. They have called for more long-term, unrestricted, core funding to go to women's organisations and feminist movements in the global South.<sup>2,3,4</sup> This is an essential step toward ending VAW, and we lend our voice to these demands.

There is also compelling evidence that much of the money currently dedicated to violence prevention is not being deployed effectively. This is particularly true of funds originating from and funnelled through the foreign assistance architecture of northern donor governments—the largest single source of funding for women's groups and civil society organisations working to end VAW in the global South. **In an era of scarce and diminishing resources, we must supplement our calls for more funding with demands to increase the effectiveness of money that is already being invested.**

It is in this spirit that the Prevention Collaborative launched the "[Investing Wisely Initiative](#)," an effort to document the ways that donor policies and practices often undermine the effectiveness of VAW prevention—the very purpose of these investments. As an organisation working to build, strengthen, and shape the field of VAW prevention, we have both observed and experienced firsthand how bureaucratic rules, organisational imperatives, and unrealistic expectations can derail VAW prevention projects. At best, such investments do not realise their full potential; at worst, they can compromise women's safety and waste precious resources.

**How do development and donor practices impact prevention programming at the local level?** We sought to evaluate the degree to which others' experiences mirrored our own and to document the experiences of anti-violence practitioners as they interact with the international development and humanitarian funding systems. Our goal was to understand the political and bureaucratic forces and

incentives that shape the current aid system, with an eye toward **identifying concrete reforms that could ensure every dollar invested in VAW prevention actively improves the safety and well-being of women and their children.**

To this end, we:

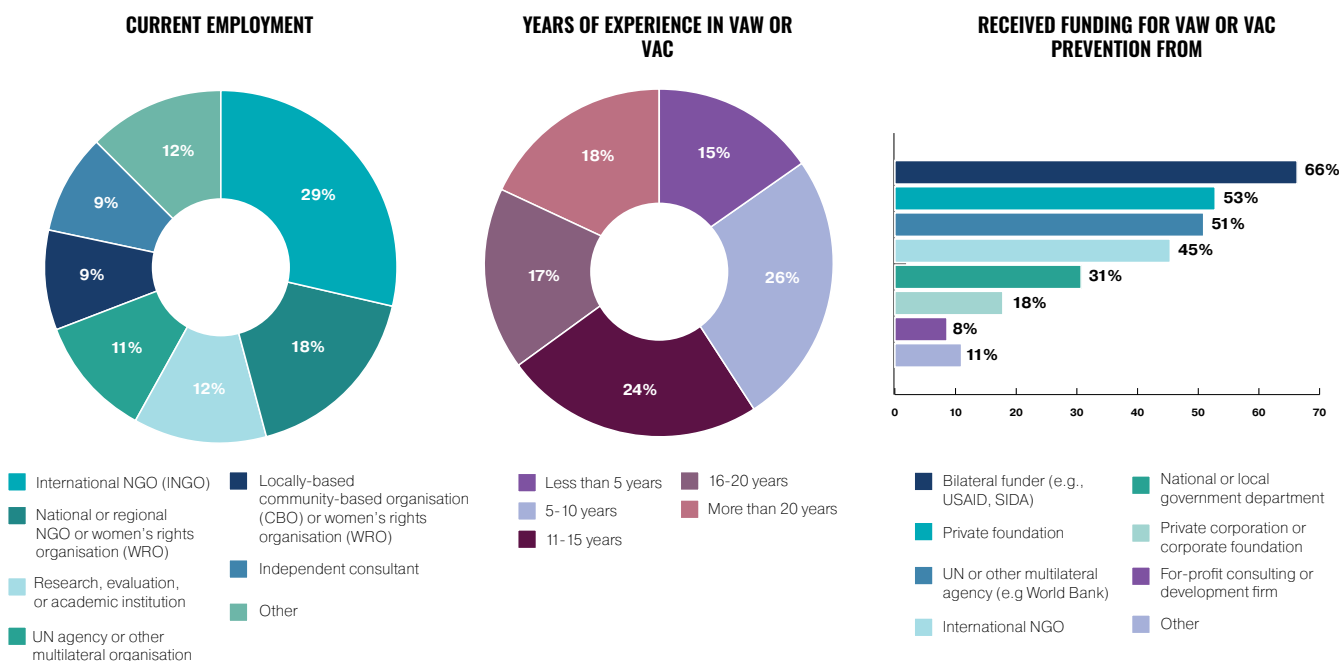
- ▶ Conducted a global internet survey of individuals who have worked to design, advise, fund, or implement programmes to reduce VAW in the global South.
- ▶ Reviewed over 150 articles and research papers that examine current donor practices and efforts to decolonise aid and/or shift more funding directly to local organisations.
- ▶ Commissioned and/or developed anonymised case studies of various large-scale donor-funded projects designed to address violence against women and children in the global South.

In this brief, we present initial results from the Internet survey, including both quantitative findings and illustrative quotes offered by practitioners through the survey or interviews. A forthcoming analytical report will draw on all the above sources to document the challenges within the current donor system and identify promising reforms to facilitate effective VAW prevention.

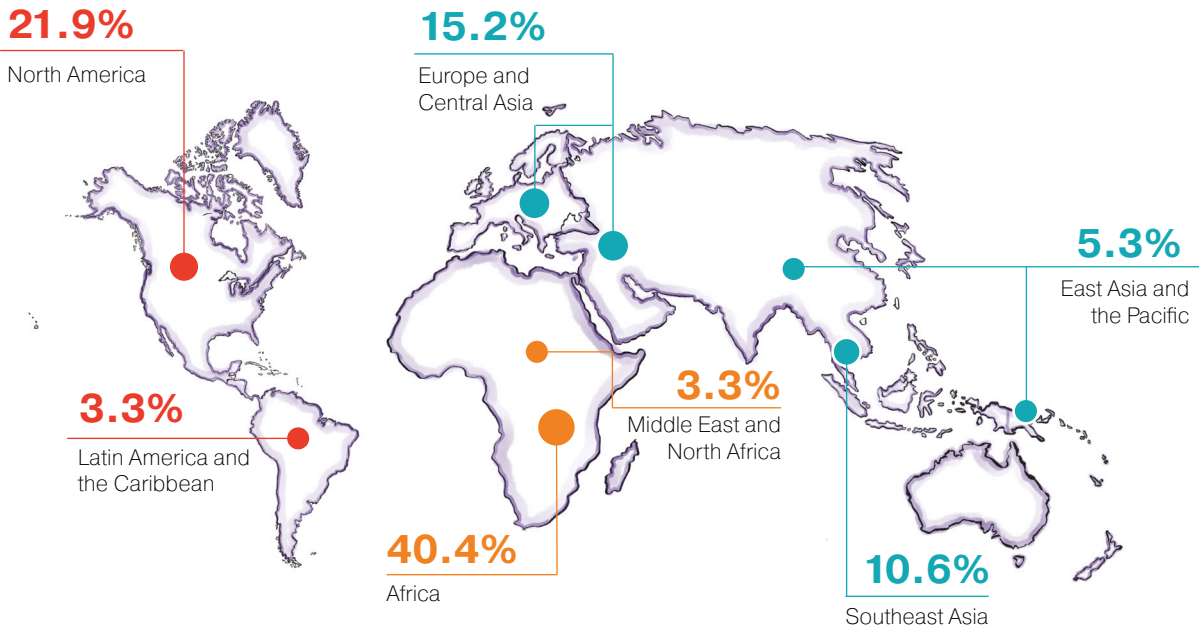
We hope this data will inspire each of us to advocate from our various positions—whether as feminist allies within funding agencies or as researchers, practitioners, or movement activists—to demand concrete reforms that facilitate, rather than impede, our collective efforts. It is our firm belief that many working within donor institutions, UN agencies, and large INGO intermediaries share our desire to end patriarchal violence and are equally dismayed by how often our collective efforts fall short.

## ABOUT THE SURVEY AND OUR RESPONDENTS

As of September 15, 2024, we have collected 163 responses from individuals with experience working on VAW prevention in the global South. The survey was extensively shared through violence prevention networks, listservs, and social media. **If you haven't completed the survey yet, we want to hear from you! Please go to the QR code at the end of this document!**

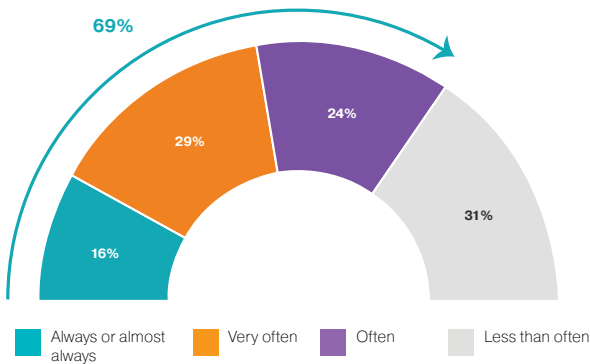


**REGIONAL BASE**

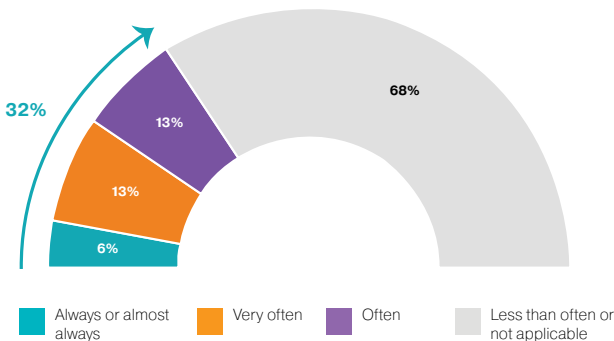


**SOME INITIAL FINDINGS**

**1 Agenda-setting and project design** mostly occur among staff at donor agencies or UN intermediaries, rather than among the people closest to the problem. This squanders local knowledge and expertise while reinforcing unequal power dynamics.



**69%** of respondents reported that, in their personal experience, project priorities, targets, and main activities were primarily driven by the funder.

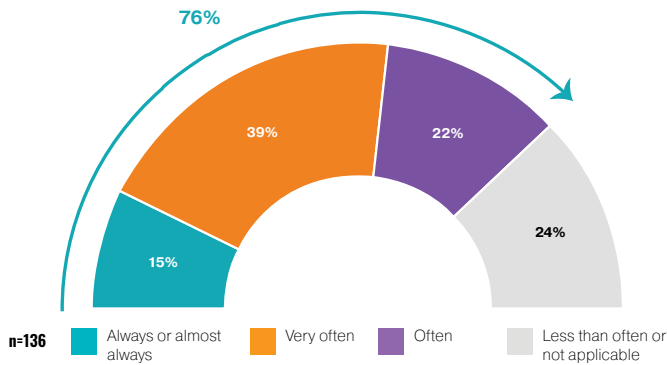


**32%** of respondents reported being asked to implement programme activities or research that they knew from the outset were unlikely to be effective.

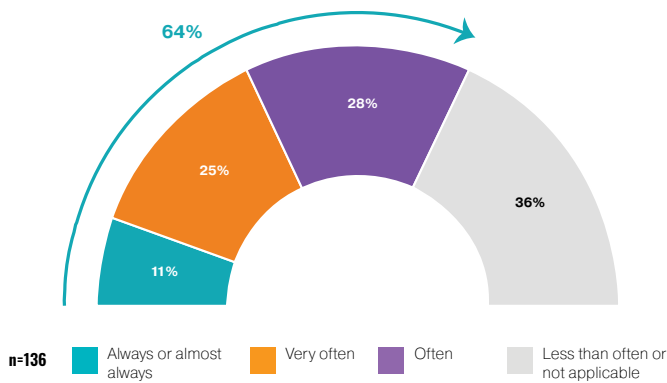
*'Honestly, it's just a form of colonialism. Many of our grants are sub-grants, so we fall squarely into that mess where you are an 'implementing partner.'*

*-Interviewee, Women's Rights Organisation, Kenya*

**2** With limited understanding of VAW prevention, **donors often have unrealistic expectations** around timelines and the number of “participants to be reached,” which compromises programme effectiveness.



**76%** of respondents reported that funders had unrealistic expectations about what could be achieved within a project’s timeframe.

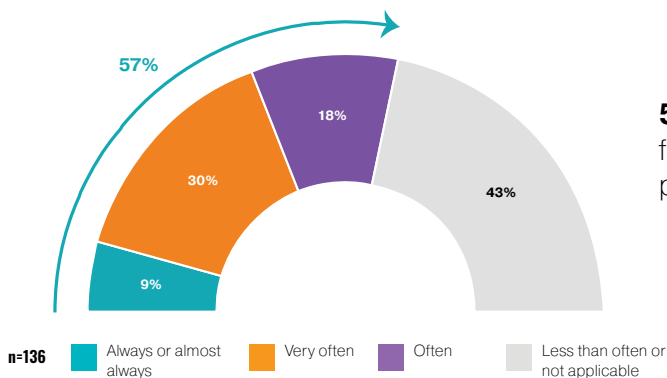


**64%** reported that unrealistic budgets and timelines resulted in major changes in the programme’s design.

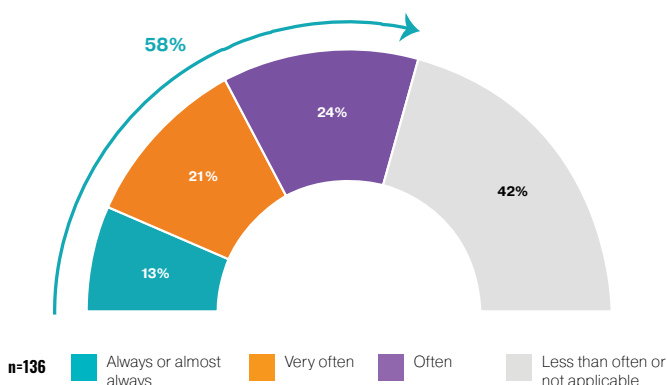
*‘Even though the project period is short, the expectations are to scale up via government.’*

*-Survey respondent, South or Southeast Asia*

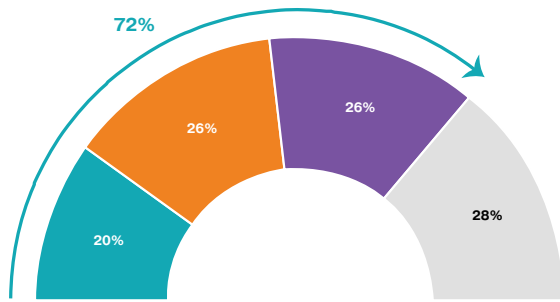
**3** **Unrealistic starting assumptions** force organisations to skip or condense critical steps that research and practice-based knowledge have shown are critical to programme success.



**57%** reported that project implementation moved forward before all partners fully understood the project’s purpose and each other’s roles.

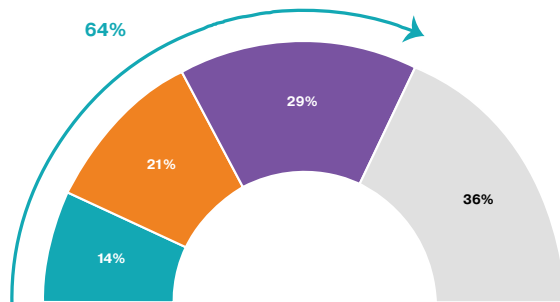


**58%** reported being asked to implement a VAW/VAC prevention programme without adequate time to adapt or design it for the specific context.



**72%** reported that they had insufficient time or resources to test or pilot the programme before implementation.

n=136 Always or almost always Very often Often Less than often or not applicable



**64%** reported insufficient time or resources to adequately train programme staff and/or facilitators.

n=136 Always or almost always Very often Often Less than often or not applicable

***'There is no time allotted for inception and adaptation in most grants - you just have to hit the ground running!'***

*-Interviewee, NGO, Kenya*

***'For the VAWG project we implemented, we used the first year of the project for formative assessment and adapting GBV prevention models that will be implemented at the community level, and we were able to come up with evidence-based prevention models that [were] implemented in the field, but our donor felt we have taken so much time and were putting pressure on the team for speedy implementation.'***

*-Survey respondent, Africa*

## IMPACT ON PROGRAMMES

**Respondents shared that shortcuts taken to meet time and budget constraints end up compromising programme effectiveness.** More than half to three-quarters of respondents reported that these funding experiences described here resulted in moderate to major negative impacts on their programmes' effectiveness.

*In your experience, how often do the following experiences have a moderate to major negative impact on the effectiveness of a prevention programme?*

**Percent who report the issue had a negative impact often or more frequently (n=125)**

Organisations have insufficient time and resources to design, adapt, or test their activities to fit the context.	<b>76.8%</b>
There is insufficient time and/or resources to adequately train programme staff and/or facilitators.	<b>75.2%</b>
Project priorities, targets, and main activities are driven primarily by the funder.	<b>67.2%</b>
Organisations are unable to make changes to the programme's design or targets as needed during implementation.	<b>65.6%</b>
Frequent or intensive financial and programmatic reporting is a burden for staff.	<b>57.6%</b>

### ► **WHY IS IT HAPPENING?**

These problems are largely a function of the complex ways that foreign aid flows from northern governments to civil society, private sector entities and governments in the global South. Rather than directly funding national or sub-national organisations and governments, the majority of overseas development assistance (ODA) flows through a complex chain of intermediary organisations (such as large development contractors, UN Agencies, multilateral development banks, and INGOs), each of which absorbs a portion of the funding along the way. These intermediaries then subcontract to local organisations who are brought on as “implementing partners,” with little to no input into project design or the autonomy to pursue their own agendas.

This practice leads to significant inefficiencies and disempowers organisations in the global South. For example, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates that less than eight percent of development assistance specifically intended for civil society is given directly to national or local CSOs; the rest is funnelled through NGOs in high-income countries.<sup>5</sup>

These problems are also a result of political and structural realities that shape and constrain donor practices, including lower public support for foreign assistance, pressure to “show results,” short budget cycles, a shift from more flexible grants to prescribed contracts, complex procurement regulations, and limited staff capacity to manage thousands of grants to individuals (see Box 1).

Not surprisingly, this “top down,” constrained system does not lend itself to the kind of contextually informed, locally led collaborations necessary for effective violence prevention programming. Instead, programme integrity and true partnership take a back seat to procurement rules and timelines limited by inflexible budget cycles.

*‘Generally, I have found funder representatives to be sympathetic to the issues but constrained by their organisations, so we are all trying to jump through a hoop set by the funding organisation that even the funding staff don’t necessarily agree with.’*

*-Survey respondent, Europe and Central Asia*

## **BOX 1: POLITICAL AND STRUCTURAL REALITIES THAT AFFECT DONOR PRACTICE**

- ▶ Annual budget cycles make long-term planning and multi-year commitments difficult.
- ▶ Weakening support for foreign assistance makes development agencies increasingly risk adverse.
- ▶ Inadequate staffing makes managing smaller grants and contracts challenging.
- ▶ Complex procurement regulations limit staff’s ability to work collaboratively with civil society.
- ▶ Intrusion of business logic and “results-based management” creates pressure to demonstrate quantifiable results within short time frames.

### **▶ WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT THIS AND WHAT’S NEXT?**

All is not doom and gloom. Our research, along with findings from others have identified reforms that could help ensure that future investments in VAW prevention are better positioned to reduce levels of violence and advance gender equity.<sup>4,6</sup> Significantly, many of the proposed reforms fall within the discretion of procurement officers and donors, even without a wholesale restructuring of foreign aid.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Coordination and Co-design**

One of the strongest recommendations from our survey and consultations is that violence prevention programmes should be structured to allow for coordinated planning and co-design with local organisations. This could be achieved through initial planning grants or a mandatory 9- to 12-month **“inception period,”** during which all parties collaborate to build mutual trust, conduct formative work, design and refine the final programme, and hire and train necessary staff. This preparation period is common in research grants that develop and evaluate socio-behavioural interventions but is far less common in development contracts focused on implementation—even though it is equally vital.

#### **Longer timeframes**

Also clear is the need to **lengthen the time horizon of prevention funding.** More than 75 percent of respondents noted that the time allotted in prevention contracts and grants was unrealistic to complete the required work. While nearly two-thirds of respondents (65 percent) reported having been granted a no-cost extension on one or more of their projects, relying on extensions is an inefficient way to address what is clearly a chronic problem in the sector. Too often, programme managers are forced to cut corners early on—condensing or eliminating programme elements or staff training—to meet unrealistic timelines. These early decisions get embedded into the project and generally cannot be “solved” by simply extending the project at the end.

These and other reforms require that more decision-makers understand what is needed for effective VAW prevention and how current funding practice serve no one’s interests. We hope our efforts to document and share the consequences of today’s practices will help build this understanding and inspire change.

## JOIN US!

We invite you to add your voice and experience to the discussion and help us develop specific requests for donors that are actionable, both in the short and long term.

- ▶ Take the [survey!](#)
- ▶ Share your story/experience
- ▶ Join us to advocate for better funding practices for violence prevention
- ▶ Sign up to receive updates and join our future strategy sessions

Global Survey



Sign Up!



### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to all the survey respondents and interview participants who shared their time and experiences.

**Investing wisely** seeks to:

- ▶ Prioritise the **effective use** of increasingly scarce development resources invested in violence prevention.
- ▶ Shift power to set agendas and design prevention strategies from donors and INGOs to groups closer to the problem and its solutions.
- ▶ Help donors understand prevention realities so that unrealistic demands—including timelines and budgets—do not undermine programme effectiveness.
- ▶ Encourage donors and intermediaries (UN Agencies, INGOs, and development contractors) to invest in the organisational health of their partners by paying fair indirect rates, shouldering more financial risk (rather than passing it on), and providing more core organisational support.

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