Forum: United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

Issue: Rising Rates of Femicide in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Introduction

In 2024, an estimated 22,600 women and girls in Africa were killed by an intimate partner or family member, the highest regional total in the world and the highest rate, at three victims per 100,000 members of the female population, two and a half times the global figure of 1.2 (UNODC and UN Women, Femicides in 2024). Killings inside one's home account for 74 per cent of all female homicides on the continent, against 45 per cent in the Americas and 52 per cent in Europe. This makes her home the most dangerous place for an African woman, where the people most likely to kill her are those closest to her. Because only 11 African countries report data on the femicidal category of killing to the United Nations, and because most police forces in the region record no motives when a woman is murdered, these figures serve as a floor rather than a ceiling; the real figures can only be higher.

The countries that have begun counting in earnest report steep increases. Kenya's presidential working group recorded 53 femicide cases in 2022, 82 in 2023 and 127 in 2024; the civil society Femicide Count documented 170 killings of women in 2024, double the annual average of the previous eight years and the worst year on record. Nigeria's national tracker rose from 149 deaths in 2024 to 197 in 2025. In South Africa, the most recent national mortuary study found intimate partner femicide to be up from 4.9 to 5.5 (murders) per 100,000 women between 2017 and 2020/21, with its share of all femicide rising to 60.1 per cent, while the proportion of killers ever identified fell to 55.8 per cent and police recorded 837 women murdered in the first three months of 2025 alone. Behind these deaths stands the second-highest regional prevalence of intimate partner violence in the world: 32 per cent of women in Sub-Saharan Africa who have ever had a partner have suffered physical or sexual violence, and 17 per cent have experienced this in the past year.

Governments and regional bodies have begun to respond, although the response lags far behind the killing. The African Union (AU) adopted the Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and

Girls (CEVAWC) in February 2025, and the Republic of Gambia became its first ratifying state in June 2026. South Africa classified gender-based violence and femicide as a national disaster in November 2025. Kenya's technical working group wrote in the same month a recommendation to write femicide into the Penal Code as a distinct offense. None of these steps has yet been matched to budgets, prosecution protocols or data systems that would make their effects felt.

Definition of Key Terms

Femicide (gender-related killing of women and girls)

The intentional killing of a woman or a girl specifically for a gender-related motive. The Statistical Framework for Measuring the Gender-Related Killing of Women and Girls (prepared by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and UN Women and further endorsed by the United Nations Statistical Commission in March 2022) sorts these killings into three types: killings by intimate partners (Type 1), killings by other family members (Type 2), and killings by other known or unknown perpetrators where at least one of eight indicators of gender motivation is present, such as prior violence, sexual violence before or after the killing, mutilation, or disposal of the body in a public space (Type 3).

Intimate partner femicide

Strictly Type 1 femicide: the killing of a woman by a current or a former spouse, cohabiting (living together) partner, or dating partner. While this is the category most national statistics can actually measure, it should not be conflated with femicide as a whole.

Intimate partner/family member femicide

Types 1 and 2 combined, this is what the annual UNODC and UN Women global estimates count, as data on Type 3 killings exists in very few countries. The 22,600 figure for Africa in 2024 refers to this narrower category.

Female homicide

Usually distinct from femicide, it is every intentional killing of a woman or girl regardless of motive, roughly 83,000 worldwide in 2024. About 60 per cent of these were committed by an intimate partner or family member. At the same time, some sources, including South Africa's Medical Research

Council, use "femicide" to mean all female homicide of women aged 14 and above, the counts for which produce higher numbers than those following the UN definition.

Intimate partner violence (IPV)

Physical, sexual or psychological harm by a current or former partner. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 32 per cent of ever-partnered women in Sub-Saharan Africa have experienced physical or sexual IPV in their lifetime and 17 per cent in the past twelve months. IPV is the most common precursor to intimate partner femicide.

Due diligence

The standard set out in General Assembly resolution 68/191, under which a state must prevent, investigate, prosecute and punish all violence against women and girls even when the perpetrator is a private individual. A state that fails to do so can be held responsible for the killing under international human rights law (IHRL)

Background

Issue in Context

Africa's rate of intimate partner and family member femicide, three per 100,000 women and girls, compares with 1.5 in the Americas, 1.4 in Oceania, 0.7 in Asia and 0.5 in Europe. Of roughly 83,000 women and girls killed intentionally worldwide in 2024, about 50,000 died at the hands of a partner or relative, and Africa accounted for more of those deaths than any other region despite holding under a fifth of the global population. The 22,600 estimate carries a range of 19,300 to 25,800, which reflects how few countries report, and that the true toll is undoubtedly higher still. UNODC and UN Women count only killings by partners and family members, Types 1 and 2 in their framework, because the gender-related killings by acquaintances and strangers that make up Type 3 are not measured anywhere in the Sub-Saharan region.

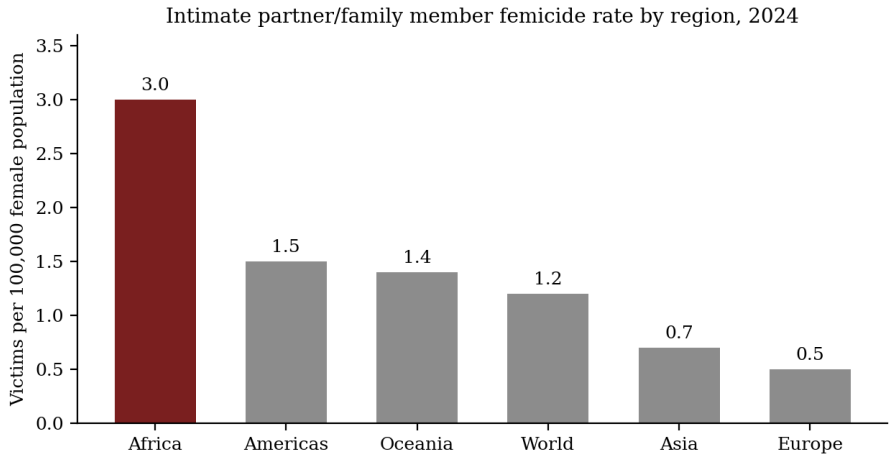

Figure 1: A bar chart comparing the 2024 rate of intimate partner/family member femicide across regions, with Africa at three victims per 100,000 female population (UNODC and UN Women)

The national studies that exist detail who is being killed, by whom, and how. In South Africa, the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) counted 2,409 femicides in 2020/21 from a random sample taken of mortuary files, and found that 60.1 per cent of the women whose killer was known had been killed by an intimate partner, while 44 per cent of all perpetrators were never identified. In Kenya's 2025 cases, intimate partners and family members were, again, the main perpetrators; boyfriends alone accounted for 32 per cent, over 70 per cent of killings happened at home; stabbing and strangulation were the leading methods, and women aged 18 to 35 made up nearly 65 per cent of victims. The government working group found that 77 per cent of victims knew their killer. This pattern is carried all through the Sub-Saharan region: young women, killed at home, by men they knew, usually with weapons that required no purchase and left no trail.

Increasing Femicide

Kenya is the clearest case of a national count moving upward year on year. The government's Technical Working Group on Gender-Based Violence, including Femicide, recorded 53 cases in 2022, 82 in 2023 and 127 in 2024, and the police acknowledged at least 97 women killed between August and October 2024 alone. Civil society counts run higher: Femicide Count Kenya documented 170 killings in 2024, and the Africa Data Hub database, built from media reports and court judgments, recorded 1,069 killings of women between 2016 and 2025, of which 842 met the UNODC definition. That database also found more than 40 murders from 2020 to 2024 that received no press coverage, which means that even the civil society totals would understate the killings. Each new method introduced for counting femicide in Kenya has found deaths that the previous one missed.

Nigeria has no official femicide statistics. The only national series is the DOHS Cares Foundation dashboard, compiled from media reports (which are seen to be reductive estimates in case studies from nearby states), which rose from 149 deaths in 2024 to 197 in 2025. The foundation's own January 2025 report had initially put 2024 at 133, and the total grew as late-reported cases were added, so annual figures tend to rise even after first publication. The Centre for Democracy and Development attributes the increase to weak enforcement of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act of 2015, institutional bias within the police and a culture in which killings of women by partners are treated as regular domestic matters rather than crimes.

South Africa, the sole country in the region with a recurring national mortuary study, shows the killing moving closer to home and the state's grip on it loosening. Between the 2017 and 2020/21 SAMRC studies, the intimate partner femicide rate rose from 4.9 (murders) to 5.5 per 100,000 women, its share of all femicide grew from 56 per cent to 60.1 per cent, and the proportion of intimate partner cases ending in conviction fell from 25.9 per cent to 19.5 per cent. The country's intimate partner femicide rate is five times the global figure. Police recorded 837 women murdered between January and March 2025, more than nine a day, and the National Council on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide created by law in 2024 had still not yet begun operating when the government declared a national disaster in November of 2025.

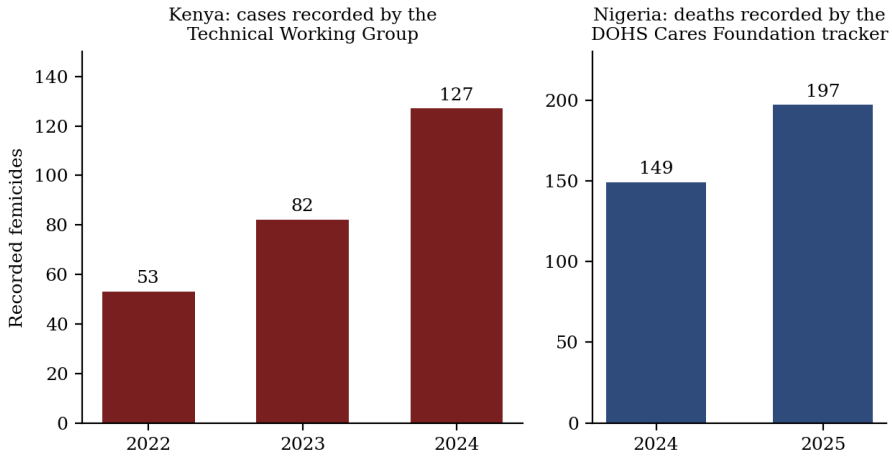

Figure 2: Bar charts of femicide cases recorded by Kenya's Technical Working Group from 2022 to 2024 and femicide deaths recorded by Nigeria's DOHS Cares Foundation tracker in 2024 and 2025 (Republic of Kenya; DOHS Cares Foundation via Centre for Democracy and Development and The Guardian Nigeria)

Causes of Increasing Femicide

The causes operate at several layers at once. WHO's 2025 synthesis lists individual and relationship factors, including harmful alcohol use, childhood exposure to violence, controlling behavior, and socio-culturally influenced beliefs that entitle men to discipline female partners physically, and socio-communal prevalences, including norms of male privilege, economic hardship, child marriage, the availability of weapons, discriminatory property and inheritance law, and weak enforcement of those laws that do exist. IPV is the usual precursor to intimate partner femicide, and Sub-Saharan Africa's lifetime prevalence of 32 per cent means that roughly one woman in three carries that risk.

The states and conditions that the World Health Organization (WHO) identifies as protective for women-enforced law, funded prevention, and economic independence for women are the same conditions that the region's own reports describe as weakest. Kenya's working group found that cases took four years on average to conclude and that informal family or community settlements routinely obstructed prosecution. South Africa's conviction rate for intimate partner femicide has fallen with each study. WHO reports that only 0.2 per cent of global development aid in 2022 went to violence prevention and that the figure fell further in 2025; Kenya's working group described its own sector as severely underfunded and donor-dependent. A man who kills his partner in most of the region faces a small and ever-dwindling chance of being identified, charged, and convicted. Delegates arguing about causes will find the disagreement will revolve around what an international resolution can do about these symptoms and their roots in patriarchal norms, and whether prevention should target norms, economic dependence, alcohol and weapons, or policing.

Hinderances in Data Collection

The scope of killings is often understated due to the lack of accurate data. Where national numbers even exist, they largely come from three kinds of counting systems, each measuring a different thing: police record murders of women, generally without a motive field looked into (thus making the femicide tag ambiguous); health researchers count bodies; civil society counts that the (largely uninformed) press reports. South Africa's police published two figures for women murdered in 2023/24: 3,485 and 5,578, depending on the reporting method used. Further, the police have denied that femicide exists as an official crime code at all; meanwhile, the SAMRC counts every homicide of a woman aged 14 or older. For Kenya in 2023, the working group reported 82 cases while Femicide Count recorded 152. Nechama Brodie's 2026 study of these competing systems argues that the choice of who counts, and how, determines which deaths become visible to the state and, therefore, international bodies. The practical consequence is that any solution asking states to report femicide data without supplying a definition and

accountability will produce numbers that cannot be compared across borders or used to judge whether any measure adopted is working.

Judiciary Approaches

No Sub-Saharan African state currently prosecutes femicide as a crime in its own right; South Africa's National Council on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide Act of 2024 defines the term for policy purposes but creates no specific criminal offense. The case for a distinct crime, made by Amnesty International Kenya and adopted by Kenya's technical working group in November 2025, runs as follows. A gender-neutral murder charge hides the pattern, so the state cannot see, count, or be held accountable for its failures to protect women; a named offense makes the motive highly legally relevant, generates statistics naturally, and forces investigators to look for prior abuse rather than accept a "crime of passion" style of narrative. Eighteen Latin American countries have gone this way since Mexico's 2012 law.

On the other hand, murder already carries the maximum penalty in most of the region, so a new offense adds no additional weight to the sentence, only a new element for the prosecution to prove: gender motive. Pasinato and Pierobom de Ávila's review of the Latin American experience found that criminalization improved awareness and statistics but that conservative politics increasingly reduced it to punishment alone, and that individual criminal liability is a poor tool for claiming institutional failure. South Africa's problem is not the absence of a charge but that 44 per cent of femicide perpetrators are never identified and fewer than one in five intimate partner cases end in conviction. On this view, the scarce resource is investigative capacity and motivation, not statutory language, and a committee that pushes new offenses risks handing governments a symbolic reform in place of a properly funded one.

Other Disputes

Prevention has the stronger evidence base and yet the weaker funding. The ‘SASA! ’community mobilization experiment in Kampala, Uganda, reported past-year physical partner violence 52 per cent lower in intervention communities than in control group communities, and WHO's ‘RESPECT ’ framework builds on trials of this kind. Yet reports from the WHO show that the percentage of global funding going towards violence prevention is minuscule, a view backed by Kenyan reports. Prosecution advocates answer that deterrence and victim confidence collapse when cases take four years to conclude, as Kenya's did on average, and that Kenya's 93 per cent conviction rate in the 84 cases concluded in 2025 shows courts can deliver when cases actually reach them.

Major Parties Involved

South Africa

South Africa has the region's longest record of tracking and measuring femicide and its most developed policy architecture: a National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide adopted in 2020, the National Council on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide Act signed in May 2024 and in force from 15 November 2024, and the classification of gender-based violence and femicide as a national disaster by the National Disaster Management Centre on 21 November 2025 under section 23 of the Disaster Management Act. The classification released no emergency funds, however, and created no new powers, and the National Council it was meant to reinforce was still not operating at the time, with establishment targeted for April 2026. Police recorded 837 women murdered between January and March 2025, more than nine a day. South Africa has shown a tendency to stress implementation, budgets and policing more than novel international law, and to defend its own data even where police and independent research figures conflict.

Kenya

Kenya became the region's most visible case study in femicide after nationwide protests in January 2024 and again on 10 December 2024, when police used tear gas and rubber bullets and detained ten demonstrators. The Technical Working Group on Gender-Based Violence, including Femicide, reported in November 2025, recommending amending the Penal Code to make femicide a distinct offense, a six-month limit on hearing gender-based violence cases, a national femicide observatory and management information system, one-stop recovery centers in all 47 counties, mandatory gender-responsive budgeting and a declaration of national crisis. A cabinet memo to implement the report missed its 26 February 2026 deadline, and civil society has kept pressing for more. Kenya is therefore a state that endorses strong measures on paper, including a dedicated offense, while its own police, courts and (especially) treasury have not yet followed through.

Nigeria

Nigeria has no criminal distinction for femicide offenses and relies on the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act of 2015, which analysts at the Centre for Democracy and Development describe as weakly enforced because of institutional bias and poor policing. The only national femicide series is the DOHS Cares Foundation dashboard, built from media reports, which recorded 149 deaths in 2024 and 197 in 2025. Because criminal law in Nigeria is largely made at the state level under its federal constitution, a resolution urging a single national femicide statute would meet constitutional objections as

well as political ones. Nigeria typically argues for data systems and funding while resisting prescriptive legal templates.

Republic of The Gambia

On 10 June 2026, The Gambia's National Assembly unanimously ratified the African Union Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, becoming the first of the 55 member states to do so; the Convention needs 15 ratifications to enter into force. Gambia is a natural sponsor for clauses encouraging ratification and for language that treats the Convention as the regional standard against which national action is judged.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and UN Women

The two agencies jointly wrote the 2022 statistical framework and publish the annual global femicide estimates. Their institutional position is that comparable data must be a foremost priority: the number of countries reporting intimate partner and family femicide data halved between 2020 and 2023, and the agencies have pressed states to adopt the framework so that national trends can be tracked across Africa as they already are in the Americas and Europe. UNODC also carries the General Assembly mandate from resolutions 68/191 and 70/176 to support states on investigation and prosecution. Delegates can cite both agencies for measurement clauses and for the due diligence standard.

World Health Organization (WHO)

WHO frames femicide as the fatal end of IPV and treats it as a public health problem to be prevented rather than mainly just prosecuted. Its November 2025 estimates put lifetime IPV in Sub-Saharan Africa at 32 per cent and past-year prevalence at 17 per cent, and its ‘RESPECT ’framework, updated in 2025, sets out prevention strategies with trial evidence. WHO's most pointed contribution to debate is monetary: 0.2 per cent of development aid for prevention in 2022, declining since.

African Union (AU)

The AU adopted the Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls at its 38th Ordinary Session in February 2025, the continent's first binding instrument dedicated to the subject, and launched a strategic roadmap for signature and ratification on 6 May 2026, when eight states had signed, and none had ratified.

African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR)

The ACHPR, through its Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa, oversees the Maputo Protocol, which 46 states have ratified. Burundi, Chad, Eritrea, Madagascar, Niger, Somalia and Sudan remain outside the Protocol in Sub-Saharan Africa, and their delegates are the likeliest to raise sovereignty objections to any monitoring clause.

Femicide Watch (Femicide Observatory)

A national body, proposed by the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women in 2015, that collects comparable data on gender-related killings each year and reviews individual cases through a multidisciplinary panel to identify where the law, the police or social services failed to protect the victims.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
July 11, 2003	AU adopts the Maputo Protocol, whose Article 4 obliges states to protect women's right to life, integrity and security of the person.
December 18, 2013	General Assembly adopts resolution 68/191, the first UN resolution devoted to gender-related killing of women and girls.
November 2015	UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women calls on all states to establish a femicide watch.
December 17, 2015	General Assembly adopts resolution 70/176 on taking action against gender-related killing of women and girls.
March 2022	UN Statistical Commission endorses the UNODC and UN Women statistical framework for measuring femicide at its 53rd session.
January 2024	Nationwide protests in Kenya against femicide follow a series of killings of women.
May 24, 2024	South Africa's President signs the National Council on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide Act; it commences on November 15, 2024.
December 10, 2024	Second wave of Kenyan femicide protests; police disperse marchers with tear gas and detain ten.
January 10, 2025	Kenya forms the Technical Working Group on Gender-Based Violence including Femicide.

Date	Description of event
February 2025	African Union adopts the Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls at its 38th Ordinary Session.
November 19, 2025	WHO publishes 2023 prevalence estimates showing 32 per cent lifetime intimate partner violence in Sub-Saharan Africa.
November 21, 2025	South Africa's National Disaster Management Centre classifies gender-based violence and femicide as a national disaster.
November 2025	UNODC and UN Women publish Femicides in 2024; Kenya's Technical Working Group submits its report.
February 26, 2026	Deadline for Kenya's cabinet memo on implementing the working group report passes without submission.
May 6, 2026	African Union launches the strategic roadmap for the Convention; eight signatories, no ratifications.
June 10, 2026	The Gambia becomes the first state to ratify the AU Convention.

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

- Taking action against gender-related killing of women and girls, 18 December 2013 (**A/RES/68/191**)
- Taking action against gender-related killing of women and girls, 17 December 2015 (**A/RES/70/176**)
- **Maputo Protocol:** The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, adopted in 2003. Article 4 obliges States Parties to protect women's right to life, integrity, and security of the person through legal, administrative, and institutional measures. 46 of 55 AU member states have ratified it as of March 2026.

Possible Solutions

A measurement clause would be the foundation for everything else, because states cannot direct prevention or judge prosecution without knowing who is being killed, by whom, and where. Delegates should consider asking member states to adopt a universal statistical framework in national crime and health statistics, to publish annual femicide data disaggregated by type, and to report it to a shared repository; requesting technical assistance from relevant bodies for the roughly 40 African states with no

reported data; and endorsing recurring mortuary-based national studies of the SAMRC kind. A clause that also asks states to reconcile police, health and civil society figures would address the credibility problem.

Given the disagreement over a dedicated offense, delegates could invite states to choose between codifying femicide as a distinct crime, adding gender motive as a statutory aggravating factor in existing law, or adopting a legal definition for data and investigation purposes only. Whichever route is chosen, investigators can be required to document prior IPV in every killing of a woman, and that uncooperative family or community settlement of such cases be treated as obstruction, following the Kenyan working group's recommendation.

Kenya's four-year average case duration and South Africa's falling identification and conviction rates suggest that prosecution clauses need a focus on capacity and time limits. Possibilities include statutory deadlines for hearing gender-based violence cases, specialized investigation units and courts, protection orders that are enforced rather than merely issued, and one-stop centers combining medical, legal and shelter services, funded through a national fund that draws on criminal fines.

To meet sovereignty objections, delegates could design monitoring as peer review rather than external scrutiny: voluntary annual femicide reports on 25 November in the spirit of the femicide watch initiative, scorecards published by the AU Gender Observatory with state participation, and ACHPR reporting under the Maputo Protocol. A companion clause encouraging signature and ratification of the AU Convention, and withdrawal of reservations to the Maputo Protocol, would give the monitoring a legal footing that African states themselves designed.

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