

# The African Union Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls

From Words to Action:  
Feminist Reflections on the  
AU's Commitment to Women and Girls



**FOS FEMINISTA**



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Thirty years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, women's rights, feminist, and civil society organizations (CSOs), funding partners, member states, UN Women, the African Union, and various bilateral and multilateral entities convened at the 69th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) to reflect on the progress made across different areas of action. Together, we strategized on how to build on the progress made, safeguard gains, and achieve Sustainable Development Goal 5, gender equality, by 2030.

The 69<sup>th</sup> Commission on the Status of Women took place against an increasingly challenging backdrop marked by regressive developments, which directly threaten women's and human rights. The rise of the anti-rights and anti-gender movements is not an isolated event. Still, it is intrinsically linked to the broader occurrence, including the backslide of democracy, growing un-constitutionalism, increased militarism, and the shrinking of civic space. In Uganda, for example, in 2023, the government refused to renew the mandate of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), while Kenya in 2024 faced a constitutional crisis and is grappling with an alarming rise of femicide, a challenge shared by Ethiopia. In



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The Gambia, women encountered pushback and threats to repeal the ban on female genital mutilation (FGM). Despite these setbacks, there has been notable progress on our continent.

In 2023, the African Union (AU) and its member states marked 20 years of the Maputo Protocol, hailed as the most progressive women's rights protocol globally. The AU, at the 38th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of States in February 2025, adopted the Convention to End Violence Against Women and Girls (CEVAWG). The Convention aims to provide a comprehensive framework for addressing and eliminating violence against women and girls in Africa. This demonstrates a strong commitment to achieving Aspiration 6 of Agenda 2063, which emphasizes the importance of gender equality in fostering a peaceful, prosperous, and secure Africa for all women and girls.

As feminist and women's rights organizations, we welcome the adoption of this Convention, while recognizing that its language could have been stronger. Despite these shortcomings, when combined and implemented alongside foundational human rights instruments, such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the Maputo Protocol, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), we move closer to our goal of upholding and respecting the human rights of women and girls in all their diversities across Africa.

Drawing on our unwavering commitment to safeguard hard-won progress and advance women's and



girls' rights we conducted a deep analysis of CEVAWG to support advocacy for the ratification and domestication of the Convention by African Member States. It is on this basis, Fòs Feminista Africa

Alliance and Akina Mama wa Afrika, presents this critical feminist analysis of the adopted Convention as starting point in the advocacy and influencing process.

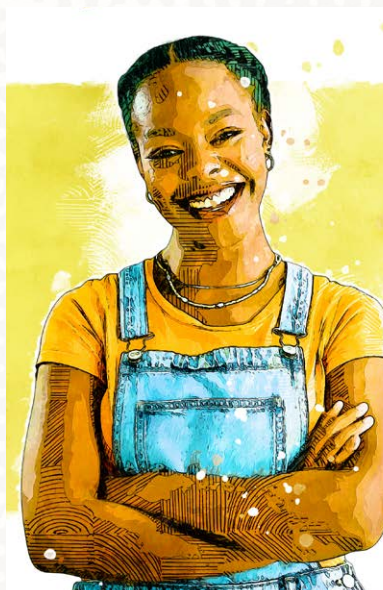
## Unlocking Potential: The Promise of the AU CEVAWG

### Naming and recognizing Femicide as a continental challenge:

Marking a significant advancement since the Maputo Protocol, the Convention explicitly defines and addresses femicide, recognizing these acts as the most extreme forms of gender-based violence. This recognition is crucial in framing femicide not just as a personal tragedy but as a broader societal issue that demands targeted responses.

### Commitment to strengthening coordination amongst diverse stakeholders:

The Convention mandates the establishment of robust coordination mechanisms among government bodies, civil society, and international partners. This strategy is designed to foster a holistic and integrated approach to preventing and responding to violence, ensuring that interventions are comprehensive and culturally sensitive and cater to the specific needs of diverse communities.



For the African Union's High-Level Presidential Initiative on Positive Masculinity to be impactful, it must commit to transparent, inclusive engagement with civil society, feminist, and women's rights organizations. Without this, the initiative risks becoming tokenistic and misaligned with the principles of gender justice and accountability it seeks to advance.

### Embracing positive masculinity and engagement of men and boys:

The Convention names the pivotal role of men and boys in advocating for gender equality. By endorsing initiatives focused on positive masculinity, it underscores the imperative for all genders to participate actively in eradicating violence. This approach involves men and boys in transformative change and shifts societal attitudes toward a more inclusive understanding of gender roles. Nevertheless, this initiative must not overshadow or substitute the structural reforms needed to dismantle patriarchy and systemic inequality. Positive masculinity efforts should involve transformative education and civic engagement that challenge entrenched power dynamics. These efforts must be led in partnership with feminist and women's movements, centering the expertise, leadership, and lived experiences of women and girls. For the African Union's High-Level Presidential Initiative on Positive Masculinity to be impactful, it must commit to transparent, inclusive engagement with civil society, feminist, and women's rights organizations. Without this, the initiative risks becoming tokenistic and misaligned with the principles of gender justice and accountability it seeks to advance.



## Requiring legislative and multisectoral strategies:

By requiring state parties to legislate and enforce protections in all public, private, and cyber spheres, the Convention advocates for a legal framework that transcends traditional boundaries. It also calls for multisectoral campaigns to educate the public and transform social norms, recognizing that legal measures alone are insufficient without cultural and attitudinal change.



## Safeguarding women and girls' rights to be free from violence in the workplace:

The Convention introduces specific protections for girls in the labor market and addresses their unique vulnerabilities in both formal and informal sectors. This focus not only seeks to prevent harmful labor practices but also ensures that young women and girls are safeguarded against workplace violence, reflecting a nuanced understanding of how gender, age, and economic status intersect.

# Bridging the Gaps: Addressing Shortcomings in the AU CEVWG

## Reframing the Foundation: Centering Gender-Based Violence in the Convention


The Convention should have adopted the term *Gender-Based Violence (GBV)* instead of limiting its scope to *Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)*. The use of the term VAWG, which highlights the disproportionate impact of violence on women and girls, risks narrowing the Convention's focus and limits its capacity to address the deeper, structural drivers of violence. ≈ It underscores that such violence is not simply individual or isolated, but deeply embedded in societal structures that devalue, and subordinate people based on their gender. This includes, crucially, the unequal gender norms, roles,

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and expectations that affect all women, including those who are further marginalized due to race, class, age, disability, or geography. By focusing solely on "VAWG," the Convention may miss opportunities to engage with the broader gender dynamics and hierarchies that fuel violence and enable its persistence across different settings and life stages. Using GBV aligns the Convention with international standards, supports a deeper analysis of gendered harms, and ensures that prevention and response efforts are grounded in a comprehensive understanding of gender-based oppression. For the Convention to be truly transformative, it must be built on definitions that reflect the full scope of the problem.







## Strengthening definitions towards a more empowering and inclusive framework in Article 1

Adopting “survivor-centered” language instead of “victim-centered” will promote empowerment and should be consistently used throughout the document. The definition of “harmful practices” should explicitly include practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) and child, early, and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU). The absence of FGM and CEFMU in the definitions and throughout the document is a regrettable oversight, especially given the prevalence of these harmful practices on the continent and the progress made to end them. Additionally, the section does not fully address or recognize women in all their diversity, particularly those in vulnerable situations such as migrants, refugees, or conflict-affected individuals, a key issue faced by many countries on the continent. Finally, the definition of “gender” should be expanded to encompass a spectrum of intersecting social identities rather than simply cultural roles.

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## Recognizing the Diversity of African Families and Addressing the Family as a Site of Gender-Based Violence

The Convention should have adopted language that reflects the lived realities of African families, both in their diversity and in the risks they may pose. Regional human rights instruments, such as the *African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights* and the *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child*, acknowledge the family as a vital unit for protecting and supporting the individuals that make up the family. However, the language of this Convention fails to reflect the complex and varied family structures that exist across the continent, and, more critically, it ignores the family as a site where gender-based violence is frequently reproduced and sustained.

In many African contexts, families are not confined to nuclear models. Households are often headed by women, older persons, children, or persons with disabilities—many of whom live in conditions of multidimensional poverty and social exclusion. These realities are rarely captured in legal instruments that rely on rigid, idealized, or Eurocentric notions of “the family.” Yet, it was precisely these non-traditional family structures, particularly the care and resilience of grandmothers and extended kin, that prevented total social collapse during the HIV/AIDS epidemic and continue to serve as social safety nets today. As articulated in the Maputo Protocol, there is already a precedent for recognizing Africa’s “different family dynamics... defined by traditional and social circumstances.”





At the same time, the Convention must not romanticize the family unit. Homes and family spaces are often where the most severe and hidden forms of violence occur. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed this reality: lockdowns saw a sharp increase in intimate partner violence, child abuse, and other forms of domestic violence. Long-standing practices such as early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and violence against children continue to be perpetuated within families, often under the guise of culture, tradition, or protection. The Convention's failure to explicitly address these dynamics not only erases the lived experience of millions of African women and girls but also undermines its core goal: to ensure the right to live free from violence.

To be effective, the Convention must move beyond a narrow, idealized view of the family and instead adopt language that acknowledges its protective and harmful dimensions. It must also confront the legacy of colonial legal and social constructs that imposed rigid definitions of family, ignoring indigenous systems and marginalizing those who fall outside of dominant frameworks. Recognition of diverse family forms and the complex power dynamics within them is essential to addressing the root causes of gender-based violence in Africa and ensuring that all members of society, especially those most at risk, are seen, protected, and empowered.



Equally concerning is the absence of a strong human rights-based foundation affirming the right of every woman and girl to live free from violence. Without clearly recognizing this right as fundamental and interdependent with other human rights, the Convention risks diluting state accountability and limiting its enforceability.

## Strengthening State Obligations in Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls


The Convention presents a critical opportunity to establish strong and unequivocal commitments to ending violence against women and girls in all its forms. However, its current formulation reflects significant gaps undermining its potential as a transformative legal and policy framework. A core shortcoming is the lack of an explicit obligation for states to condemn and prohibit violence in all contexts, such as public, private, and online. This omission weakens the Convention's ability to provide comprehensive protection and legal clarity, particularly in addressing the increasingly complex realities of violence faced by women and girls.

Equally concerning is the absence of a strong human rights-based foundation affirming the right of every woman and girl to live free from violence. Without clearly recognizing this right as fundamental and interdependent with other human rights, the Convention risks diluting state accountability and limiting its enforceability. A failure to center human rights principles in addressing gender-based violence undermines the coherence and integrity of the Convention's framework.

To be effective, the Convention must explicitly reaffirm the commitments enshrined in the Maputo Protocol, which remains the most comprehensive women's rights instrument on the continent. It should embed a robust human rights approach, recognizing







violence against women and girls as a grave violation of their rights to life, security, and bodily integrity. Without such alignment, the Convention may fall short of existing continental standards and create gaps in protection and enforcement.

In countries where national legislation on gender-based violence is absent, weak, or inconsistently applied, the Convention must serve as the minimum standard for protection. It should take precedence in establishing legally binding safeguards and mechanisms that uphold the dignity, safety, and rights of all women and girls. The Convention must also clearly assert its primacy over customary and religious norms that conflict with its principles. Failure to do so risks reinforcing legal pluralism that undermines women's access to justice and perpetuates impunity for violence.

Another critical omission is the lack of a requirement for cases of violence against women and girls to be adjudicated in formally constituted courts. Without this, survivors may be subjected to informal or traditional systems that often lack due process and fail to ensure accountability. The Convention must promote accessible, effective, and rights-respecting judicial mechanisms that can deliver justice and redress.

The absence of a clause on preventing impunity raises significant concerns, as eliminating this language may weaken enforcement efforts against perpetrators of violence, reducing deterrence and potentially allowing unchecked violence against women and girls to persist.

## Strengthening State obligations for women and girls facing multiple vulnerabilities

Article 7 emphasizes the importance of recognizing disabilities as a critical factor in an intersectional approach to violence against women and girls. However, it should also highlight other aspects of vulnerabilities, including age, marital status, ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexuality, and employment status, to accurately reflect the diverse experiences of women and girls at risk. Additionally, the language regarding violence against women in conflict situations is significantly weaker compared to the Maputo Protocol, which categorizes such violence as war crimes. The removal of the clause to "prevent impunity" raises significant concerns, as eliminating this language may weaken enforcement efforts against perpetrators of violence, reducing deterrence and potentially allowing unchecked violence against women and girls to persist. Stronger, more precise language is necessary to convey the severity of these offenses and ensure accountability. While the inclusion of "disasters" in the first clause is an improvement, the Convention still overlooks the significant impact of climate change on women's security and well-being, missing an opportunity to address the critical intersection of violence and climate justice.





## Creating safe workplaces by addressing violence against women and girls in employment settings

The Convention falls short in its commitment to ensuring safe and equitable workplaces for women and girls by failing to address key forms of gender-based violence in employment contexts explicitly. The omission of terms such as *sexual harassment*, *sextortion*, and *other forms of abuse* significantly weakens its ability to provide a clear, enforceable framework for prevention, accountability, and redress. These forms of violence are pervasive across formal and informal sectors and are well-documented barriers to women's full participation in the workforce and public life. Their exclusion signals a troubling lack of recognition of the realities many women face daily.

Sexual harassment in the workplace is a direct violation of human dignity and a critical obstacle to achieving gender equality. Without naming and condemning it, the Convention undermines efforts to hold perpetrators accountable and to support survivors with appropriate legal, psychological, and economic resources. The absence of clear and specific language further weakens enforcement mechanisms and creates ambiguity in implementation, especially in jurisdictions where legal frameworks are already limited or underdeveloped.



Equally important is the need to recognize and address gendered violence in the informal economy, where the majority of African women work. According to UN Women, 74% of non-agricultural female employment in sub-Saharan Africa is in the informal sector.

The failure to address these issues also contradicts regional and international standards. Article 13 of the Maputo Protocol explicitly calls for the punishment of sexual harassment and protection from exploitation in the workplace. Recognizing this gap, nine African countries have already ratified ILO Convention 190, which defines violence and harassment in the world of work as human rights violations and mandates strong protections. The Convention under review must align with these standards to be effective and credible.

Equally important is the need to recognize and address gendered violence in the informal economy, where the majority of African women work. According to UN Women, 74% of non-agricultural female employment in sub-Saharan Africa is in the informal sector. These women, including domestic workers, market traders, and street vendors, often operate outside the protections of labor laws and social security systems. The Convention's failure to acknowledge the violence and exploitation they face constitutes a serious oversight. Ensuring safe working environments means extending protections to all women, regardless of employment status, and tailoring prevention and redress mechanisms to the unique vulnerabilities of informal work.

The Convention also misses the opportunity to link caregiving responsibilities and care work with workplace violence and discrimination. While Clause 5 recommends paternity leave, it does not address the broader context of care work, such as the need for work-life balance, family-friendly workplace policies, and caregiver support.



These gaps contribute to women's economic marginalization and increase their exposure to stress and vulnerability, which can in turn heighten risks of violence in both public and private spheres.

Moreover, the isolated reference to violence against girls in the workplace raises significant concern. Framing girls primarily in a work context, without parallel discussion of child labor, risks normalizing or legitimizing their presence in unsafe employment. This framing also ignores the urgent and widespread issue of violence against girls in educational settings. Schools, where most girls spend a significant part of their lives, are too often sites of sexual harassment, corporal punishment, and emotional abuse, particularly in relation to menstruation. The Convention's silence on violence within education environments represents a major omission in protecting girls' rights and development.

To be truly comprehensive and transformative, the Convention must explicitly recognize all forms of violence against women and girls in employment, education, and caregiving contexts. It must name and address sexual harassment, sextortion, and abuse across all sectors, including the informal economy. Only then can it serve as a meaningful instrument for gender justice, dignity, and equality in the world of work.

## Enhancing Preventive Measures for Ending



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## Violence Against Women and Girls

The language in Article 9 referring to the “positive aspects of culture” is vague and leaves room for misinterpretation. To ensure the Convention actively supports progress in gender relations, it should focus explicitly on transforming harmful gender norms and promoting fundamental human rights for women and girls. Culture should be aligned with the goals of gender justice and equality, emphasizing that cultural practices must evolve to support, rather than hinder, the rights and dignity of women and girls.

Furthermore, this article would benefit from including Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) and Gender-Transformative Education (GTE) as key preventive strategies. Regional commitments such as the ESA Ministerial Commitment on CSE (2013, reaffirmed in 2021) and the West and Central Africa (WCA) Commitment (2022) have already recognized CSE and GTE as essential tools for addressing gender inequality and preventing violence. Integrating these approaches into Article 9 would significantly strengthen its impact, ensuring alignment with regional priorities and best practices in promoting gender-equitable norms and behaviors.

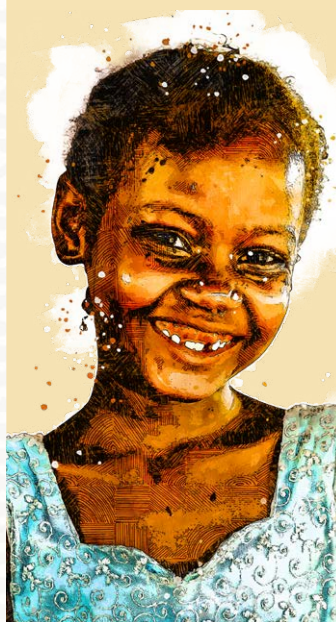
## Ensuring Access to Comprehensive Medical





## and Psychosocial Services for Survivors of Violence

Article 10 of the Convention fails to adequately address the essential medical and psychosocial services required by survivors of violence. It lacks the specificity and strength to ensure that states are held accountable for providing timely, comprehensive, and survivor-centered care. Clear and enforceable language is necessary to mandate access to services such as pregnancy testing, emergency contraception, post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), treatment for sexually transmitted infections and injuries, safe abortion services to the full extent of the law, and trauma-informed psychosocial counseling—all at no cost to survivors. The omission of these critical services represents a missed opportunity to align the Convention with internationally recognized best practices, including the WHO's "Clinical Management of Rape Survivors: Developing Protocols for Use with Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons". This guideline emphasizes the need for integrated, survivor-centered health services accessible, confidential, and provided without discrimination or delay. Adherence to such standards is essential to protecting the health, dignity, and human rights of survivors. Moreover, the Maputo Protocol underscores the importance of comprehensive medical and psychological care for women and girls who have experienced violence. It affirms that survivors must have access to holistic support services without financial or structural barriers, recognizing that recovery from violence requires more than emergency medical treatment—it



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necessitates sustained, coordinated care that addresses both physical and emotional trauma. By failing to commit to these obligations explicitly, the Convention weakens its protective framework and risks leaving survivors without the support they urgently need. The provision of free, state-funded, survivor-centered services must be treated as a core component of the Convention, not an optional recommendation. Without this, the Convention cannot fulfill its promise of upholding the rights, health, and dignity of women and girls across the continent.

## Missed Opportunity for Inclusive and Survivor-Led Monitoring and Accountability

The Convention would be significantly more impactful by including a precise and robust monitoring and accountability framework. Without such a structure, there is a risk of weak oversight, which could result in inconsistent application and enforcement by Member States. Drawing from the lessons of the Maputo Protocol, it is crucial to involve women's rights and feminist organizations in the monitoring and accountability processes. Furthermore, this framework must ensure that survivors of violence are actively included, making their voices central to monitoring efforts.





By prioritizing the experiences of survivors, the Convention could ensure that policies are not only developed but also implemented in a way that genuinely advances women's rights and well-being. The absence of such a survivor-

led mechanism undermines the potential for meaningful engagement and accountability, ultimately diminishing the Convention's ability to create lasting change and hold states accountable for their commitments.

## About the organizations:

### Fos Feminista

Led and governed by the Global South, the Fòs Feminista Alliance unites over 150 organizations worldwide, each committed to advancing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and eradicating gender-based violence (GBV); a core priority of our work. GBV disproportionately affects the most marginalized and vulnerable in our communities, making its eradication not only a matter of justice and equality but also a crucial step toward broader societal advancement.

The Fos Alliance in Africa is made up of 21 organizations working collectively to advance SRHR and gender justice through political advocacy. Working collectively, the Africa alliance produces knowledge, connects and strategizes with other women and feminist organizations, and leverages its political voice to advance SRHJ on the African continent.

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### Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMwA)

AMwA is a feminist Pan-African leadership development organization with headquarters in Kampala, Uganda. Our work is rooted in feminist principles and beliefs guided by the Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists which define our leadership development program and movement-building activities. We envision a world in which African women are politically, economically and socially autonomous and are champions of change in their lives and society.

Our thematic areas of focus include; Women's Political Leadership, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, and Economic Justice and Climate Action. The organization's work is advanced through feminist and transformational leadership development, feminist research and knowledge building, and policy influence and movement building. AMwA provides strategic direction in key Pan-African networks including NGO CSW Africa, Solidarity for African Women's Rights, and the Gender Is My Agenda Campaign. AMwA also has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council.





