



A call to action: strengthening the AU Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls

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Abstract: To turn the AU Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls into meaningful action demands all hands on deck to dismantle violence against women and girls and amplify the voices of survivors. The current call for a structured review highlights the need for stakeholder consultation to address gaps in implementation, particularly concerning Article 14.

During the [38th ordinary session](#) of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union (AU), held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from 15 to 16 February 2025, the AU [adopted](#) the Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls ([AU-CEVAWG](#)). This [stems](#) from a decision of the AU Heads of State and Government in February 2023, following which there was an endorsement to initiate negotiations for the Convention and its eventual [adoption](#) in February 2025. While this marks a significant milestone, feminist litigators and advocates who are active users of the African human rights system call for a pause to review the Convention, particularly to address gaps identified in Article 14 regarding its [implementation](#) by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights ([ACHPR](#)).

Why a Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls in Africa matters?

Globally, almost [one in three women](#) have experienced physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their life. According to [UNICEF's](#) latest estimates, over 79 million girls and women, more than one in five, in sub-Saharan Africa have encountered rape or sexual assault before the age of 18, with the region having some of the highest number of survivors. These figures are not merely statistics; they represent real individuals, women and girls, who possess inherent rights to dignity and respect.

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The statistics become even more alarming in conflict zones, where the impact of crises disproportionately affects women and girls. For instance, in [Sudan](#), the number of those at risk of gender-based violence has tripled to over 12 million since the onset of the war. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, nearly [500 cases](#) of sexual violence were reported within a single week in Goma, including the tragic rape and murder of more than [150 female prisoners](#) during a jailbreak earlier this year. These incidents reflect the persistent and horrific patterns of violence against women and girls that have plagued the region for decades. While many cases remain under-reported, evidence indicates that it is systematically used as a [weapon of war](#) and persists even in times of peace.

Twenty-two years after the adoption of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women—known as the [Maputo Protocol](#)—it remains a landmark instrument. The AU-CEVAWG must build on this foundation by providing a more focused framework to combat violence against women and girls while recalling other relevant regional instruments, including the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child ([ACRWC](#)) as well as various [AU initiatives](#) and commitments aimed at promoting gender equality and eliminating violence against them. Its adoption is now more critical than ever, given the urgent need to address violence in the context of the lived experiences of African women and girls. Guided by the goal to uphold the rights and dignity of women and girls, it is envisioned that the AU-CEVAWG will address various forms of violence against them across the continent.

The AU-CEVAWG defines in [Article 1](#) violence against women and girls as all acts perpetrated against women and girls which cause or could cause them verbal, emotional, physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm, including the threat to take such acts, or to undertake the imposition of arbitrary restrictions on, or deprivation of, fundamental freedoms in the private and public spheres, or cyberspace, in times of peace, armed conflict, transition, post-conflict, disaster and post disaster situations.

Other key provisions include:

- Right to live free from violence ([Article 2](#)): the AU-CEVAWG asserts that every woman and girl has the fundamental right to live free from violence, linking this right to other human rights and fundamental freedoms.
- Scope of application ([Article 3](#)): the AU-CEVAWG applies to all forms of violence against women and girls, whether occurring in public or private spaces, including digital environments. It covers various contexts, such as times of peace, armed conflict and disaster situations.
- State obligations ([Article 5](#)): State Parties are mandated to enact and enforce laws that eradicate violence against women and girls. This includes ensuring effective justice systems, conducting surveys for evidence-based policies and utilising gender-responsive budgeting.
- Guiding principles ([Article 6](#)): the AU-CEVAWG emphasises a survivor-centred approach, the importance of equality and the promotion of positive masculinity. It encourages multi-stakeholder involvement to create sustainable solutions for preventing violence.
- Protection and support services ([Article 11](#)): the AU-CEVAWG outlines the need for comprehensive support services for survivors, including legal aid, medical assistance and safe shelters. It stresses the importance of engaging women's rights defenders and organisations in these efforts.
- Access to justice ([Article 12](#)): the AU-CEVAWG calls for fair and non-discriminatory legal processes, to ensure survivors can effectively pursue justice. This includes timely

investigations, protective measures during legal proceedings and appropriate sanctions for perpetrators.

- Collaboration and cooperation ([Article 13](#)): the AU-CEVAWG advocates for partnerships among government bodies, civil society and international organisations to create a coordinated response to violence against women and girls.
- Implementation and reporting ([Article 14](#)): State Parties are required to report on their progress in implementing the AU-CEVAWG, with oversight from the ACHPR, which will monitor and interpret its provisions.

The AU-CEVAWG matters for women and girls in Africa, to create an enabling environment that eliminates violence against them. This involves establishing and strengthening coordination among government agencies, civil society organisations and international partners to ensure a holistic and integrated response to violence. It also highlights the necessity of offering comprehensive services to survivors, while also stressing the need for systematic collection and use of gender-disaggregated data to guide policymaking and track advancements. It further advocates comprehensive support services for survivors and their families, including emergency assistance and counseling programs. Enhancing enforcement mechanisms within health, social welfare and justice systems allows for effective responses to cases of violence against women and girls, positioning the AU-CEVAWG as a crucial framework.

However, while these provisions are commendable, the call for a structured review is essential. This review, as expressed in the Initiative for Strategic Litigation in Africa's [Briefing Paper](#), will allow for consultations with stakeholders to assess implementation gaps and determine whether to proceed with ratification or to reopen and restart the process. This approach will ensure that the AU-CEVAWG truly serves its purpose and leads to meaningful action for women and girls across Africa.

Ratification: a cup half full

After a structured review with support to proceed with ratification, the ratification of the [AU-CEVAWG](#) by AU member states becomes an imperative call to action in the urgent fight to end violence against women and girls. This is important in translating promises into meaningful change that works for women and girls, but also in the recognition that ratification is only the start. Bridging the gap in addressing violence against women and girls in Africa requires a concerted effort that invests in a culture of respect and equality.

Thus, this should not just be a call for ratification; it should be an urgent plea to prioritise the voices of survivors and those at risk in collective efforts while building a continent where women and girls live free from violence and discrimination, where their rights are upheld and their full potential is realised.

Navigating the roadblocks to action

Ratification is merely the beginning. Even with this commitment, significant obstacles can hinder effective action against violence toward women and girls. These may include inadequate funding, lack of political will and insufficient community awareness of the [AU-CEVAWG](#) provisions. Even so, cultural norms and societal attitudes can create barriers to reporting violence and seeking help. To dismantle these obstacles, there is a need to ignite a powerful coalition among governments, civil society and local communities to ensure that the AU-CEVAWG turns the vision of a violence-free future for women and girls into reality. Most importantly, there is a need to utilise a survivor-centered approach, prioritising the stories of survivors—women and girls who once felt invisible, silenced by fear and stigma.