

TRANSFORMING POLICY INTO POWER — THE CONTINENTAL CALL FOR THE AU-CEVAWG

POLICY BRIEF #01/26

Target: African Union Member States, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and Pan-African Feminist Networks

Theme: Beyond Signatures — Delivering a Unified Machinery of Justice for African Women and Girls

Date: February 2026

I. THE CLARION CALL: A MOMENT OF RECKONING

We stand at a monumental yet precarious crossroads in the history of African gender justice. For decades, the African Union has meticulously constructed one of the most progressive women's rights architectures in the world, with the Maputo Protocol serving as its shining cornerstone. Yet, a haunting reality persists: despite these grand normative achievements, the daily lived experiences of millions of African women and girls remain defined by violence, exclusion, and a profound lack of safety. We have perfected the art of policy, but we have yet to achieve the reality of power. Declarations alone do not stop violence; only enforceable justice can.

The African Union Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (AU-CEVAWG) is not just another addition to this architecture; it is a central turning point—a groundbreaking, specialized instrument designed to dismantle the culture of impunity and move us from "voluntary promises" to "mandatory legal audits." This is our feminist promise of

justice: a vision where legal guarantees finally align with lived realities. We can no longer wait for "perfection" while our sisters remain in a state of legal vulnerability. The time has come to ignite a continental fire of political will, ensuring that no state hides behind symbolic gestures while the demographic most affected by modern violence—our youth and women in the informal sector—continues to suffer in silence.

II. THE CONTINENTAL CONTEXT: CONFRONTING THE YEAR OF STAGNATION

It has been exactly one year since the historic adoption of the AU-CEVAWG in February 2025. While the adoption was hailed as a victory, the pace of movement from signature to legal force is alarmingly slow. Across Africa, the human cost of this delay is staggering. Current data indicates that nearly 36.6% of women on the continent experience physical or sexual violence, and femicide rates continue to climb.

Despite these grim statistics, the continental ratification landscape remains largely dormant. As of February 2026, while a small handful of pioneer states have stepped forward to sign the instrument, we have yet to see a single deposition of the instrument of ratification at the African Union Commission. To reach the threshold of 15 ratifications required for the Convention to enter into force, we need an unprecedented surge in domestic legal action. This delay is not merely a bureaucratic pause; it is a direct threat to the safety of rights-holders. We must move beyond the "ratification pause" and reject any campaigns to delay this process due to perceived textual imperfections.

III. JUDICIAL ACCOUNTABILITY: THE MANDATE OF ARTICLE 12

The true power of the AU-CEVAWG lies in its role as a specialized implementation engine. While the Maputo Protocol defined the *rights*, the Convention provides the *structural innovation* to enforce them. At the heart of this innovation is Article 12, which mandates the institutionalization of justice.

- **Mandatory Specialized Justice Units:** States are obligated to establish specialized courts and dedicated judicial divisions to handle VAWG cases. This removes sensitive cases from overburdened general courts where survivors often face systemic bias, long delays, and re-traumatization.

- **Survivor-Centered Legal Protocols:** Article 12 requires that the judiciary, police, and healthcare providers work within an integrated system that prioritizes the agency, dignity, and autonomy of women.
- **Forensic and Evidentiary Standards:** Accountability relies on evidence. The Convention mandates the provision of forensic medical services to ensure that evidence collection is standardized, free of charge, and legally admissible to improve conviction rates and end the cycle of impunity.
- **Legal Aid and Victim Support:** Recognizing that poverty is often a barrier to justice, states must provide accessible legal aid and psychosocial support to ensure that survivors are not economically or emotionally barred from seeking redress.

IV. THE 'ZERO RESERVATIONS' STRATEGY: PROTECTING NON- REGRESSION

A primary threat to this new legal framework is the potential for States to ratify the Convention with reservations that dilute its most progressive protections. We call for a **'Zero Reservations'** approach to maintain the integrity of the wider human-rights architecture.

- **The Article 15 Safeguard:** Known as the "Legal Anchor," Article 15 (The Safeguard Clause) explicitly prevents any state from using this Convention to lower the standard of

protection provided by more progressive national laws or other treaties like the Maputo Protocol.

- **Supremacy of Protection:** Article 15 ensures that the "highest standard of protection" must always prevail. This effectively bridges any textual silences or "evasive language" in the Convention by importing stronger, more explicit definitions from existing frameworks.
- **The Danger of Renegotiation:** Any attempt to reopen the treaty for "negotiation" during the ratification phase risks the dilution, reversal, or total loss of hard-won gains. Reopening one instrument creates a precedent that invites pressure to revisit more established protections, potentially unraveling the entire African human rights framework. We must work with unity of purpose to safeguard these gains through continued engagement rather than fragmentation.

V. TECHNICAL SOLUTIONS TO DEFINITIONAL GAPS

Critics often point to the Convention's failure to explicitly name harms like Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), child marriage, or marital rape as a reason for delay. However, we proffer technical strategies to bridge these gaps during national domestication:

- **The Power of Domestication:** While the treaty uses the broad umbrella of "harmful practices," national domestication bills can—

and must—utilize the Maputo Protocol's explicit and rigorous definitions to fill these silences.

- **Specialized Infrastructure for Unnamed Crimes:** The mandate for specialized courts (Article 12) provides the infrastructure to prosecute marital rape and other specific harms, provided these are clearly defined in the national penal codes administered by these new divisions.
- **Modernizing Protection:** The Convention is the first to address "new frontiers" of violence, including technology-facilitated abuse, digital harassment, and violence in the informal sector. Implementation must ensure these modern harms are met with modern judicial responses that are currently missing from older frameworks.

VI. STRATEGIC CONTINENTAL ROADMAP: THE PATH TO OCTOBER 2026

To achieve the 15 ratifications required to breathe life into this treaty, a synchronized continental effort is required.

- **High-Level Advocacy Missions:** We must conduct high-level missions across all AU Member States to secure the support of Attorneys-General and Ministries of Justice, following the successful model of engagement with National Human Rights Commissions.
- **Importantly,** we must institutionalize youth leadership

through the integration of feminist solidarity frameworks with regional youth councils. This ensures that the demographic most affected by modern violence—specifically digital harassment—is at the heart of monitoring mechanisms.

- **Data-Driven Accountability:** Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) must provide "Shadow Reports" to the African Commission (ACHPR), using national human rights footprint data to provide real-time updates on state compliance and judicial performance.
- **Regional Peer Pressure:** Regional Economic Communities (RECs) should integrate AU-CEVAWG standards into their sub-regional gender frameworks, creating a "ratification race" among their members to see who will lead the continent into this new era of justice.

VII. CONCLUSION: THE ARCHITECTURE OF LIBERATION

The AU-CEVAWG is not just a document; it is an inheritance of liberation. It represents the collective resolve of states, institutions, and the feminist movement to ensure that our regional commitments move from paper into people's lives. We have built the exceptional normative architecture; we must now find the political will to enforce it.

Let it be remembered that in 2026, the Pan-African feminist movement refused to settle for symbolic gestures or signatures without substance. We chose instead to wield the AU-CEVAWG as a transformative force—dismantling the structures of patriarchy, operationalizing specialized justice, and demanding that every woman and girl on this continent lives free from fear. The architecture of freedom is ready. The feminist promise of justice is within our reach. We must ratify now, with rigor and without reservation, to ensure that policy finally becomes the power that protects us all.

Compiled by: Secretariat, Pan-African Feminist Solidarity (PAFSO) Network

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Dismantling Patriarchy, One Protocol at a Time.

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