



The Public Reading of
**AU Convention on
Ending Violence
Against Women
and Girls**

15 - 17 September 2025

**Concept
Note**



FOS FEMINISTA



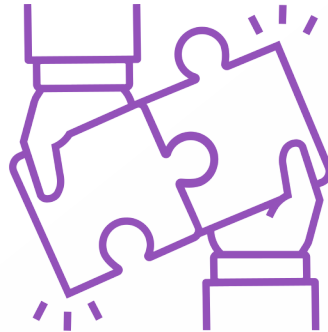


Table of Contents

Introducing the co-convenors	2
ISLA's Working Methods: Strategy	
Consultations	6
Background and Rationale	7
Objectives of the Strategy Consultation	13
Methodology and Approach : Structure and Flow of the Strategy Consultation	13
Expected Outputs	13

This concept note:

- 1. Explains the mandate of the co-convenors and the purpose of strategy consultations:** It introduces the co-convenors, how they come together for this purpose and the role of strategy consultations as a key part of ISLA's working methods.
- 2. Provides the background and rationale for this strategy consultation :** It provides context for the adoption of the African Union Convention on Violence Against Women and Girls (CEVAWG) including its significance in the fight to end VAWG as well as concerns that might limit its effect as a legal instrument.
- 3. Outlines the key objectives:** It sets out the specific goals for this strategy consultation.
- 4. Provides guidance on the methodology and structure of the strategy consultation:** It provides guidance questions that will be answered during the strategy consultation for clarity on the approach and flow of the strategy consultation.
- 5. Highlights the key expected outputs of the meeting:** It outlines the expected outcomes and the products of the expert advisory session.



1. Introducing the co-convenors

This strategy consultation is co-convened by the Initiative for Strategic Litigation in Africa, Fos Feminista and Akina Mama wa Africa.

1.1. The Initiative for Strategic Litigation in Africa (ISLA)

Established in 2014, ISLA is a feminist pan-African organisation focused on the strategic litigation of women's human rights and sexual rights both at national levels and within the African human rights system. Our work is based on the belief that strategic litigation is an immensely powerful tool for social change because it helps to reframe the understanding of entitlements before the law and challenges the legal discourse. ISLA seeks to gain ground by creating domestic and regional jurisprudence in women's human rights and sexual rights; strengthening the capacity

of litigators and NGOs on the continent; and conducting rigorous research.

ISLA has come into being as a much-needed response to the lack of legal developments and a skills deficit relating to feminist strategic litigation in, among others, Women's Socio-Economic rights (WSER) and Violence Against Women (VAW). Our aim is to expand VAW and WSER jurisprudence and establish a cumulative and progressive interpretation of women's human rights resulting in meaningful change in the lives of women. We believe that investment in local institutions and individuals is key, and one of the central functions of both these programs is to strengthen the capacity of lawyers to understand relevant international, regional, and domestic women's rights standards, and to competently engage in strategic litigation. In the long term, this will expand the pool of domestic lawyers engaging

such work. As part of its mandate, ISLA also engages in ways in which feminist organisations can develop sustainable responses against anti-rights actors.

ISLA focuses on partnering with a network of specific institutions across the continent.¹ Our activities include holding litigation seminars at which participants receive litigation support; arranging follow up meetings to these litigation seminars; and providing ongoing assistance to the lawyers and organisation that we work with. ISLA will also carry out a series of in country visits to local partners' offices to assist in the development of strategic litigation plans and to establish institutional support practices.

The following principles inform our work and should be taken into consideration as we develop this project: ISLA aims to:

- **Collaborate with lawyers who are working on similar issues** globally, regionally, and nationally to develop jurisprudence before the African human rights system and national courts.

- **Focus on the development of important principles**, relevant across the board to VAW and specifically on defences for victims of violence and their supporters.
- **Build upon issues in which we have existing experience and expertise** – for example working with the procedural nuances of the regional bodies.²
- **Develop a strategy for locating women's experiences in the law**, by asking the 'woman' question;
- **Work collaboratively** with civil society and avoiding duplicating work undertaken more effectively by others; and
- **Engage in out of court advocacy** to shift the public narrative that is necessary if the litigation is to have an effective role in changing society.³

1.2. Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMWA)

AMWA is a feminist pan-African development organisation established in 1985 by a group of African women in the United Kingdom. AMWA envisions a dignified and equitable feminist society for African women and girls in all their diversities. Our mission is to build feminist leadership

1 Our current cohort has 15 partner organisations and with partners from organisations in Kenya, Malawi, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Zambia

2 Given that admissibility criteria – for example, standing issues, victim status and exhaustion of domestic remedies – often provide severe obstacles for litigation, we believe we have a role in litigating to ensure that these procedural matters are approached with flexibility by human rights bodies.

3 ISLA is currently working with National Arts Festival [NAF], Center for the Study of Race Gender and Class [RGC] at the University of Johannesburg and GALA to develop a Charter for the Arts sector to work as a Model to protect women who speak up against their perpetrators.

and strengthen the collective power of African women and girls to dismantle intersectional systems of oppression and advance gender and social justice. AMWA currently has focused interventions in nine countries, including Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Zambia, Tunisia, Sudan, Ghana, and Nigeria. Our core areas of focus are Economic Justice and Climate Action (EJCA), Women's Political Leadership (WPL), and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR).

Our theory of change, therefore, is that by investing in feminist political consciousness-raising and leadership development, we will have a critical mass of advocates taking collective action to advance a fairer, just, and equitable world.

Specifically:

- Through our Women's Political Leadership (WPL) work, we promote a pan-African feminist agenda being advanced in political and decision-making spaces.
- Our Economic Justice and Climate Action (EJCA) interventions ensure that Feminist alternatives are adopted as viable, sustainable development models and systems at scale for economic and climate justice.
- At the core of this transformation is the ability of African women and girls in all their diversities to safely and autonomously make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR including freedom from all forms of violence.

1.3. Fòs Feminista

Led and governed by the Global South, the Fos Feminista Alliance unites over 130 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.

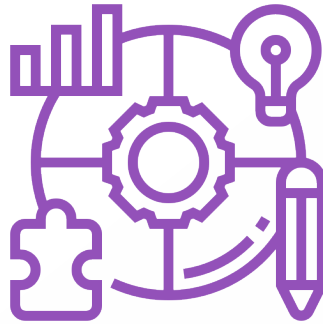
The Fos Alliance in Africa is made up of 21 organizations working collectively to advance SRHR and gender justice through political advocacy. Working collectively, the Africa alliance produces knowledge, connects and strategizes with other women and feminist organizations, and leverages its political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

1.4. How we come together

The co-convenors are feminist organisations interested and invested in the pan African feminist agenda. Although we have different mandates and operate in different spaces, our solidarity is founded on the belief that a Convention that is fit for purpose will create an enabling environment for advancing our missions and realising our visions.

- For Fos Feminista, this process is building on our work of strengthening partner's capacity on leveraging African Political Mechanisms for SRHR & GJ. This is a tool to strengthen national legal and policies frameworks on GBV/VAWG and expanding survivor's access to medical and psychosocial services.

- For AMWA this is part of our commitment to advancing feminist policy and legal frameworks across Africa that enables African women, girls, gender-expansive to exercise voice, choice and agency. We are interested in ensuring the Convention complements, not undermines, the Maputo Protocol. We prioritise work to strengthen feminist legal frameworks and strong accountability mechanisms especially at the regional level.
- For ISLA this process builds on our advocacy work at the African Commission on Human and People's Rights as well as our litigation work seeking state accountability through the courts. This work is connected to our efforts on strengthening regional mechanisms work such as AU reforms campaign and Article 59 Campaign. It is important for us to have a Convention that is fit for purpose because we can leverage it for delivering access to justice for survivors of GBV.



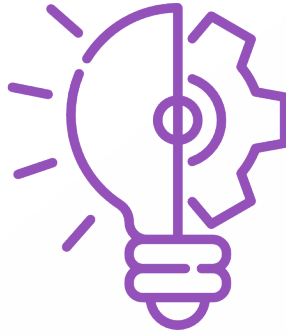
2. ISLA's Working Methods: Strategy Consultations

ISLA conducts strategy consultations as a deliberate method of anchoring legal interventions within movement-led analysis and regional political realities. These consultations are premised on the understanding that strategic litigation cannot be developed in isolation from the broader socio-political contexts in which it operates. In an environment where rights protections are increasingly contested, it is not enough to identify legal violations; one must also build collective consensus on the legal, institutional, and political strategies required to confront them.

Strategy consultations allow ISLA to co-create its litigation priorities alongside partners, communities, and allies, ensuring that the

cases we pursue are not only legally sound, but also politically resonant, movement-driven, and responsive to urgent threats. They serve as moments to pause, assess the terrain, and recalibrate direction, particularly in areas of emerging jurisprudence or escalating backlash.

The process of organising a strategy consultation is as important as its outcomes. ISLA approaches these convenings as iterative, participatory, and feminist in design. We curate a diverse group of thinkers, activists, litigators, scholars, and partners, who bring rich, intersectional perspectives to bear on the issues at hand. Emphasis is placed on knowledge exchange, cross-regional learning, and contextual specificity. In this way, strategy consultations are both sites of legal imagination and platforms for practical coordination across the ecosystem of movement lawyering in Africa.



3. Background and Rationale

In February 2025, the African Union adopted the Convention to End Violence Against Women and Girls (CEVAWG/ the Convention) at the 38th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of States.

The objectives of the Convention, as provided under article 4 are; to create an enabling environment for ending VAWG through fostering coordination among different state and non-state actors; to provide for prevention of VAWG through participation of boys, girls, men, and women from families, communities, cultural, and religious institutions to change negative norms and harmful practices to promote gender equality; to provide comprehensive support services to

victims and enhance enforcement mechanisms relating to health, social welfare, and the justice system to effectively respond to cases of violence against women and girls.

3.1. The Significance of the Convention

The adoption of the CEVAWG is a historical moment, an important step in the fight to end VAWG in Africa.

The Convention, has been celebrated for a number of reasons including: that this is the first legally binding instrument that is exclusively focused on VAWG; It names emerging manifestations of violence such as cyberviolence and persisting forms that have escalated in the recent past – such as femicide; It embraces positive masculinity and the role of men and boys in ending VAWG; It calls on States to foster a coordinated approach to

ending VAWG; It recognises the need to protect women and girls from violence in the workplace.

The Convention comprehensively includes protection from all forms of violence, across a wide range of spheres and contexts including violence in public, private, cyberspace, conflict, post-conflict, and disaster situations. It creates state obligations to strengthen laws to criminalize VAWG, ensure justice, protection, and support services for survivors, promote education and awareness and allocate resources for enforcement. Further, the convention addresses VAWG as a cross-sectional issue tied to peace, justice and development.

The Convention has been received by CSOs and stakeholders in the fight against VAWG as a tool for mobilising the public and building political will to strengthen efforts to end VAWG at the national level.

3.2. Gaps that may limit the effectiveness of the Convention

While this Convention has introduced advancements, there are gaps in process and substance that may hinder the effectiveness of the Convention in practice.

3.2.1. Process of Developing the Convention

Although the Convention was adopted in February 2025, it became publicly available three months later in June 2025. After adoption, the Convention was not available because it was undergoing final edits within the office of the AU legal counsel. Before the Convention was published, the AU announced that Djibouti had signed the Convention.⁴ It remains unclear how a legal instrument that is already adopted by Heads of State could be subjected to further revisions and be opened up for ratification processes before it is made publicly available.

There are diverse perspectives about whether or not the process of adopting the Convention was consultative. Some stakeholders have noted that there were regional consultations which collectively contributed to the pressure needed for states to adopt the Convention. In this way, the Convention is seen as a result of efforts through decades of feminist advocacy across Africa.

On the other hand, there is a concern that the process of developing the Convention was not as transparent and consultative as it should have been. In instances where some civil society organisations were invited to participate in the process, there are important questions around the quality and form of representation. Contrary to other treaty making processes in the African

4 African Union Press Release 'Djibouti Makes History as First Member State to Sign the AU Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls,' 9 April 2025 accessed at <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20250409/djibouti-makes-history->

Human Rights System, draft versions of this Convention were kept secret, circulated only among a coterie of 'insiders'. Many national and grassroots organisations, African citizens, activists and human rights defenders who actively engage in efforts to end GBV were surprised by the announcement that the AU has adopted an African Convention of Ending Violence Against Women and Girls.

This Convention does not comply with basic and established standards of treaty making under international law, which for instance would include having Travaux préparatoires (preparatory works) and documented circumstances of a treaty's conclusion. Travaux préparatoires are important for purposes of legal interpretation of provisions within the Convention.⁵ This additional tool is fundamental because it can be used to resolve ambiguity or where the ordinary meaning of the text in the Convention is obscure, or results in interpretation that is manifestly absurd or unreasonable in terms of human rights protection.

3.2.2. Gaps in the Substance of the Convention

a. Although the Convention names and defines emerging forms of violence such as violence in the cyberspace and femicide, it does not go beyond that to provide a protection and

accountability framework which articulates core rights that emerge in these contexts nor clear state obligations for ending these specific violations.

While the Convention introduces important considerations, it is laden with narrow and limited conceptualisations which will inhibit it from achieving its purpose, for example:

- Recognising 'cyberspace' violence, as opposed to 'technology facilitated GBV' which encompasses broader forms of this emerging violation within and beyond the internet.
- While recognising the multiple and intersecting factors that may exacerbate VAWG, such as disability, this Convention fails to include core factors that affect African women and girls such as race, age, class and the situation of migrant women.
- While the Convention recognises the importance of protecting women from violence in the world of work, it fails to recognise sexual harassment as one of the main manifestations of violence

[first-member-state-sign-au-convention-ending-violence#:~:text=Share:.of%20the%20National%20Gender%20Observatory](#) on 13 August 2025

5 Vienna Convention on the Law and Treaties, 1969 Entered into force on 27 January 1980. United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1155, p. 331. Art 32.

- and provide protections consistent with established standards such as the ILO C190.
- b. The Convention is not grounded on a human rights-based approach that foregrounds gender-based discrimination as the root cause of gendered violence against women and girls. By omitting a gender analysis, the Convention fails to surface the underlying structural drivers of such violence which are embedded in societal systems that subordinate people based on their gender. This includes gender norms, roles, practices and expectations that create and propagate hierarchies of oppression which produce, normalise and facilitate gender-based violence. Including gender in the definition is important because it underscores that such violence is not simply individual or isolated but systematic and deeply embedded in societal structures that devalue and discriminate against people based on their gender. The term 'VAWG' is important to highlight the disproportionate impact of gendered violence against women and girls. Nonetheless, retaining 'gender' as part of the definition is critical to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the gender-based oppression that fuels violence against all women and girls.
- c. The Convention is not reflective of context. It does not address the protections that are needed based on the current realities and persisting challenges in the fight to end gender-based violence against women and girls. This Convention would be an opportune moment to provide authoritative normative clarity on enduring legal barriers, such as : marital rape, which remains exempted in many legal frameworks within Africa such as Kenya, legal definition of consent in sexual violence cases, and the increasingly emboldened efforts to regress legal protections against harmful practices such as FGM in countries such as Kenya and the Gambia.
- d. This Convention lacks consistency with existing AU standards. It is a regression in comparison with the Maputo Protocol (see Articles 4 on state obligations to address VAW, article 8 on Access to Justice and equal protection against the law)) and the African Commission Guidelines on Combating Sexual Violence and its Consequences in Africa. For example, both these pre-existing AU standards have progressive protections calling on state parties to criminalise marital rape, progressive definitions of consent. Contrary to existing standards, this convention fails to comprehensively articulate the nature and scope of state obligations and rights implicated by gender-based violence against women and girls including the elements of

the due diligence framework to prevent, protect, prosecute, punish and provide adequate remedies that are transformative. In addition, although the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights jurisprudence has already entrenched a gender analysis in conceptualising VAWG as a rooted in gender based-discrimination, this Convention, as discussed above fails to integrate this gender analysis. It is a missed opportunity that this Convention fails to integrate and advance significant developments on normative standards regarding state obligations to end VAWG as clarified in international, African regional and other comparative human rights jurisdictions.

- e. There is an Implementation Gap⁶: Article 14 designates the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) as the Convention's monitoring and implementation body. While this may appear procedurally consistent with the African human rights system, it presents substantial challenges. The Commission continues to face serious institutional weaknesses, particularly its restrictive interpretation of Article 59(1) of the African Charter, which enforces blanket confidentiality on decisions and pleadings. This practice severely undermines

transparency; limits access to justice and excludes civil society from meaningful participation. The ACHPR's communications procedure has numerous hurdles that limits access to justice. It should not be mandated to implement another treaty when it is struggling to implement and monitor the treaty that established it, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. Instead of addressing and strengthening the implementation framework, this Convention entrenches existing access to justice challenges within the African human rights system including re-establishing limitations on accessing to the African Court by virtue of article 34(6) of and requiring/ expecting the African Commission to refer cases to the African Court, yet the Commission has only ever referred one case in its 38 years if existence.

- f. This Convention presents opportunities for derogation of rights by anti-rights actors, instead of reinforcing the normative framework through a human-rights based approach - This convention contains language and framing that is often advanced by anti-rights actors to use to derogate from human rights protection in the fight to end GBV. For example, centring 'African values' without providing conceptual clarity is dangerous

6 Briefing Paper: [The Implementation Gap: Unpacking Article 14 of the CEVAWG and Civil Society Engagement Briefing](#), See also [ISLA Conversations on the Article 14 Gap](#)

because this framing has historically been used to justify certain forms of GBV against women and girls, and deny legal protection for people whose vulnerability to violence may increase on the basis of their gender identify or sexual orientation. Another example is the concept of 'family'. The 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.⁷ 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, this Convention defers to states and misses an opportunity set a regional standard and adopt language that reflects the lived realities of African families, both in their diversity and in the risks, they may pose in the context of violence. While anti-rights actors have been attacking this convention, they do so for purposes of derogating and limiting human rights protection to defeat the purpose of the framework - to protect all women and girls

from violence. On the contrary, this feminist critique is a call for ensuring a human rights-based approach is applied to reinforce this normative framework from anti-rights attacks and ensure all people's right to be free from all forms of gender-based violence is entrenched within this Convention.

7 AMWA and Fos Feminista's analysis: *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. 2025*



4. Objectives of the Strategy Consultation

This consultation is an opportunity for in-depth analysis of the Convention so as to generate recommendations on the way forward based on a deliberate, informed, and movement-led approach to the Convention. Specifically, we will seek to:

1. Analyse the Convention - article by article, unpacking the strengths or advancements introduced by the Convention, gaps and challenges that may arise in practice, and recommendations on how to close these gaps.
2. To produce an outcome document which consolidates the findings of the analysis which may be disseminated through various knowledge products for different audiences who are engaging with the Convention at different levels.

