

ECONOMIC DRIVERS OF FEMICIDE IN KENYA: DEPENDENCY, POVERTY AND TRANSACTIONALITY

Executive Summary

Economic inequality is a key structural driver of gender-based violence and femicide in Kenya. Women's limited access to income, property and financial resources increases dependence on partners, trapping many in abusive relationships. Transactional dynamics such as "sponsor" and "Ben 10" relationships, common in urban areas like Nairobi, Kiambu and Mombasa, often reinforce power imbalances, creating conditions for control, jealousy and potential violence.

Economic control through restricting finances or linking provision to authority can escalate abuse, especially where masculinity is tied to financial dominance. Structural barriers such as limited property rights, inheritance access and lower participation in formal employment further heighten women's vulnerability.

Addressing these risks requires multi-sectoral approaches, including economic empowerment, social protection, property rights reforms and community norm change. Strengthening women's financial independence is essential not only for reducing poverty but also for preventing gender-based violence and femicide.

1. Introduction



Economic Inequality as a Driver of Violence

Economic inequality plays a significant role in shaping patterns of gender-based violence. Across many societies, unequal access to resources, employment opportunities and property rights reinforces gendered power imbalances within intimate relationships. Women who lack financial independence may face greater barriers to leaving abusive partners, reporting violence or accessing justice.

In Kenya, gender disparities in employment, land ownership and income distribution remain pronounced. Women are disproportionately represented in informal and low-income sectors, while cultural and legal barriers often limit their control over productive resources such as land and property. These structural inequalities create conditions where financial dependency can translate into relational vulnerability.

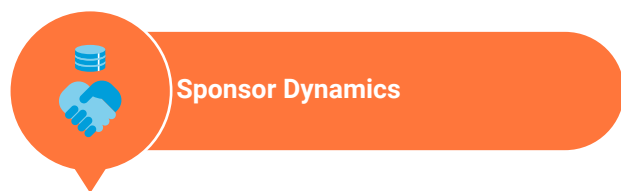
Economic drivers of violence operate through multiple pathways. Financial dependency may create pressure

to remain in abusive relationships, particularly where women rely on partners for housing, food, school fees or childcare support. At the same time, financial stress and economic instability can intensify conflict within households, contributing to escalating patterns of control and aggression.

Urbanisation and changing social norms have also contributed to the emergence of new relationship dynamics shaped by economic exchange. In many urban settings, relationships increasingly involve explicit or implicit financial transactions. These dynamics often referred to as “sponsor” relationships or “Ben 10” arrangements illustrate how economic pressures intersect with gender norms to influence relationship expectations and power dynamics.

Understanding the economic drivers of violence is therefore essential for designing effective prevention strategies. Addressing poverty and economic inequality can reduce structural vulnerabilities that expose women to violence and limit their ability to seek protection.

2. Patterns identified



“Sponsor” relationship refers to arrangements in which an older or financially stable partner provides material support to a younger partner in exchange for companionship or sexual intimacy. These relationships are often shaped by economic inequalities, where younger women rely on older men for financial assistance such as rent, tuition fees, business capital or lifestyle support.

While some participants perceive these relationships as consensual and pragmatic responses to economic realities, they often involve significant power imbalances. Financial providers may feel entitled to control the behaviour, movement or sexual autonomy of the supported partner. When these expectations are challenged, for example, through perceived infidelity or attempts to end the relationship conflict may escalate.



Evidence suggests that disputes within sponsor relationships have contributed to several high-profile cases of violence against women. The underlying dynamic reflects a transactional framework in which economic provision is interpreted as ownership or entitlement.



The “Ben 10” phenomenon refers to relationships in which older women provide financial support to younger men. While these arrangements invert traditional gender expectations, they can similarly produce tensions around control, jealousy and perceived obligations.



Younger partners may depend financially on the older partner, creating relational tensions if the relationship becomes unstable. In some cases, conflicts emerge when financial support is withdrawn or when jealousy arises around other partners. Although less common than sponsor-related cases, incidents involving violence in “Ben 10” relationships illustrate how economic dependency can produce volatile relationship dynamics regardless of gender.



Financial Stress

Economic stress within households also contributes to conflict and violence. Financial instability, unemployment or debt can heighten tensions in intimate relationships. In contexts where masculinity is strongly associated with financial provision, inability to fulfil this role may generate frustration, insecurity and aggressive behaviour.

For women who contribute economically to households, income generation may also provoke conflict if male partners perceive their autonomy as a challenge to traditional authority structures.

3. Mechanisms of risk

Economic drivers translate into violence through several interconnected mechanisms.



Economic Control

Economic control is a common tactic used by perpetrators to maintain dominance within relationships. This may involve restricting access to money, preventing employment, monitoring spending or withholding financial support. By limiting women's economic autonomy, perpetrators can reduce their ability to leave abusive relationships or seek external assistance.

Such forms of control often precede other forms of violence, including emotional abuse, surveillance and physical assault.



Jealousy and Financial Entitlement

Financial provision may generate expectations of loyalty and exclusivity. In relationships framed around economic exchange, providers may interpret financial support as entitling them to sexual access, obedience or emotional commitment.

Perceived violations of these expectations such as suspected infidelity or attempts to terminate the relationship can trigger intense jealousy. In extreme cases, such tensions escalate into lethal violence.

4. Case evidence



Nairobi, Kiambu and Mombasa

Urban counties such as Nairobi, Kiambu and Mombasa illustrate how economic drivers intersect with changing social dynamics.

Nairobi, Kenya's largest urban centre, has seen increased public attention around cases involving sponsor relationships and economic disputes between intimate partners. High living costs and widening income inequality create conditions in which transactional relationships become more common, particularly among young women seeking financial security.

Kiambu County, which borders Nairobi, reflects similar patterns within rapidly urbanising peri-urban communities. Economic opportunities associated with proximity to the capital coexist with rising unemployment among youth. These dynamics have contributed to complex relationship arrangements involving financial dependency and shifting gender roles.

Mombasa presents another context where economic pressures intersect with tourism, informal employment and migration. Economic vulnerability among young women has been linked to transactional relationships that may expose them to exploitation and violence.

Across these counties, case narratives indicate that economic conflict often forms part of a broader pattern of coercion, jealousy and control preceding lethal violence.

5. Structural factors

Structural inequalities continue to shape women's economic vulnerability. One of the most significant factors is limited access to land and property ownership. Although Kenyan law recognises women's inheritance and property rights, customary practices often limit women's ability to exercise these rights.

Widows, for example, may face eviction or property disputes following the death of a spouse. In some communities, women who attempt to assert inheritance claims encounter intimidation, social pressure or violence.

Labour market inequalities also contribute to economic dependency. Women are more likely to work in informal sectors characterised by low wages, job insecurity and limited social protection. These structural conditions reduce women's financial independence and reinforce reliance on partners for economic security.

Without addressing these structural inequalities, efforts to reduce gender-based violence risk focusing only on individual behaviours rather than underlying socio-economic drivers.

6. Recommendations

Economic Empowerment

Strengthening women's economic independence is critical for reducing vulnerability to violence. Key strategies include expanding access to education, skills training and employment opportunities for women and girls.

Financial inclusion programmes such as microfinance, savings groups and entrepreneurship support can also enhance women's economic resilience and decision-making power.

Social Protection Inclusion

Social protection programmes play an important role in reducing economic vulnerability. Expanding access to cash transfers, health insurance and social assistance can help women meet basic needs without relying on abusive partners.

Social protection policies should explicitly recognise survivors of gender-based violence as a vulnerable group eligible for targeted support.

Property and Inheritance Rights

Strengthening enforcement of women's property and inheritance rights is essential. Legal awareness programmes, legal aid services and community mediation mechanisms can help women assert their rights to land and property.

Clear institutional coordination between local administrators, land registries and judicial systems is necessary to prevent property disputes from escalating into violence.

Norm Change and Community Engagement

Economic interventions must be complemented by initiatives addressing social norms around gender, masculinity and financial provision. Community dialogue programmes that engage men and boys can help challenge beliefs linking financial support with entitlement or control.

7. Conclusion

Economic inequality and financial dependency play a central role in shaping women's vulnerability to violence. In Kenya, structural disparities in income, employment and property ownership intersect with evolving relationship dynamics to produce complex forms of economic coercion and control.

Transactional relationships such as sponsor or "Ben 10" arrangements reflect broader socio-economic

pressures but also reinforce power imbalances that can escalate into violence. These patterns demonstrate that gender-based violence cannot be understood solely through individual behaviour; it must be analysed within broader economic and social structures.

Addressing these drivers requires integrated strategies that combine economic empowerment, social protection, legal reforms and community norm change. Strengthening women's economic autonomy not only contributes to poverty reduction but also enhances their capacity to resist and exit abusive relationships.

Ultimately, reducing gender-based violence requires addressing the economic inequalities that sustain it. Policies that promote women's financial independence and secure access to resources are therefore essential components of long-term violence prevention.

References

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