

# MEDIA AND DIGITAL FRAMING OF FEMICIDE IN KENYA

## Executive Summary



Media and digital platforms play a key role in shaping public understanding of femicide in Kenya. While coverage can raise awareness and drive action, it often reinforces harmful narratives such as victim blaming, sensationalism and limited focus on perpetrators. Online spaces further amplify misogynistic views and intergenerational tensions, influencing public opinion and discourse. The framing of femicide in both traditional and digital media can reflect existing gender norms, sometimes obscuring the structural causes of violence against women. This affects how society assigns responsibility, demands accountability and influences policy responses. Addressing these challenges requires strengthening ethical reporting standards, investing in gender-sensitive journalist training and promoting responsible digital engagement. Shifting media narratives toward accountability, prevention and justice is essential for improving public understanding and supporting effective responses to femicide.

## 1) Introduction

Media plays a central role in shaping how societies interpret violence against women. Through news coverage, commentary and online discussions, media narratives influence how individuals understand the causes of violence, who is perceived to be responsible and what solutions are considered legitimate.

The concept of media framing helps explain how particular narratives influence public perception. Framing refers to the ways in which information is selected and emphasised in communication in order to promote a particular interpretation of events. These frames influence how audiences interpret social issues and shape public policy responses.

Media is a powerful driver of public understanding of femicide. The way femicide cases are reported influences:

Public empathy or indifference toward victims.

Policy urgency in addressing gender-based violence.

Social narratives about women's safety and rights.

In Kenya, mainstream media and digital platforms have amplified femicide cases, but often in ways that distort the issue. Headlines frequently sensationalize violence, while coverage disproportionately focuses on victims rather than perpetrators. This framing shapes societal attitudes and can either reinforce or challenge structural inequalities.

## 2) Key issues

### Victim Blaming

One of the most persistent challenges in media and digital discussions of femicide is the tendency to shift responsibility away from perpetrators and onto victims.

Media narratives often imply that victims were responsible for their fate (e.g., being out late, dressing in a certain way).

Such framing shifts accountability away from perpetrators and reinforces patriarchal norms.

Victim-blaming narratives also discourage survivors of abuse from seeking help. When public discourse suggests that women are responsible for the violence they experience, survivors may fear stigma, disbelief or retaliation if they report abuse.

### Sensationalism

Another challenge in media coverage of femicide is sensationalism. News reporting sometimes emphasises shocking details, graphic descriptions or dramatic narratives in order to attract public attention.



- ◆ Graphic headlines and lurid details dominate coverage.
- ◆ Sensationalism increases readership but trivializes femicide as entertainment.
- ◆ It undermines serious policy discourse by reducing femicide to isolated “shocking” events rather than systemic violence.

### Limited Focus on Perpetrators

Media coverage frequently focuses on victims while giving limited attention to perpetrators or the social structures that enable violence. This framing gap reduces public recognition of femicide as a gender-related killing linked to broader patterns of violence against women.

Coverage often neglects perpetrators' accountability, focusing instead on victims' personal lives.

This imbalance normalizes impunity and obscures structural drivers of femicide.

Rarely are systemic failures (policing, justice systems) highlighted in media narratives.

### 3) Digital narratives

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#### Intergenerational Tensions

Digital platforms reveal generational differences in how femicide is understood and discussed.



Younger users on platforms such as X and Reddit are more likely to frame femicide as a structural issue linked to misogyny, institutional failures and systemic gender inequality. These discussions often emphasise the need for stronger laws, improved police accountability and broader social change. In contrast, discussions on platforms used more frequently by older audiences sometimes reproduce traditional gender norms that emphasise women's responsibility for maintaining relationships or avoiding conflict. These differences reflect varying levels of exposure to gender equality discourse, as well as generational differences in digital literacy and participation in public debates.

#### Misogynistic Counter-Narratives

Digital spaces also host counter-narratives that challenge feminist interpretations of femicide.



Some online discussions minimise the severity of femicide or portray it as a private dispute between individuals rather than a systemic issue. Others deny the gendered nature of violence, arguing that femicide is simply part of broader patterns of homicide. These narratives can weaken public

support for gender-focused prevention measures. By framing femicide as isolated incidents or mutual conflict, such narratives obscure the structural drivers of violence and reduce pressure for institutional reform.

#### Desensitisation and Normalisation

Repeated exposure to femicide stories in digital media may also contribute to public desensitisation. According to cultivation theory, sustained exposure to recurring themes in media can shape how audiences perceive social reality. When people encounter repeated reports of violence without meaningful analysis or accountability, they may begin to view such events as normal or inevitable. In digital spaces, rapid circulation of femicide stories can create cycles of outrage that quickly fade as new incidents emerge. Over time, this can lead to reduced public shock and weaker demands for accountability.



### 4) . Impacts on policy and society

The way femicide is framed in media and digital discourse has significant implications for policy responses and public attitudes.

#### **Policy Formation:**

Media narratives influence how policymakers prioritise issues. When femicide is framed as isolated personal tragedy rather than systemic violence, it may receive less sustained policy attention.

### **Digital narratives shape public understanding of gender-based violence:**

Victim-blaming narratives can reinforce harmful stereotypes and discourage survivors from reporting abuse.

### **Justice system:**

When media coverage highlights institutional failures, it can strengthen demands for accountability and reform. Conversely, when reporting focuses narrowly on individual cases, structural weaknesses may remain unaddressed.

### **Social Mobilization:**

Digital discourse can affect survivors and families directly. The circulation of rumours, speculation or private images online can retraumatise victims' families and complicate ongoing investigations.

For these reasons, responsible media reporting and informed digital engagement are essential components of broader efforts to prevent femicide.

## **5) Recommendations**

Addressing the challenges of media and digital framing requires coordinated action across media institutions, government agencies and civil society.

### **Strengthen Ethical Reporting Guidelines**

Media regulatory bodies and journalism associations should strengthen and enforce ethical reporting standards for coverage of femicide and gender-based violence. Guidelines should discourage victim-blaming narratives, sensationalism and the disclosure of sensitive personal information about victims.

### **Invest in Gender-Sensitive Journalist Training**

Journalists and editors should receive specialised training on gender-sensitive reporting. Training programmes should include guidance on contextualising femicide within broader patterns of gender-based violence and highlighting structural drivers rather than individualising responsibility.

### **Promote Responsible Digital Engagement**

Governments, civil society organisations and media institutions should promote responsible digital engagement on issues related to gender-based violence. This includes supporting campaigns that challenge misogynistic narratives and encourage respectful online discussions.

### **Strengthen Data and Research on Media Narratives**

Further research is needed to understand how media and digital narratives shape public attitudes toward femicide. Data collection and analysis can help identify harmful framing patterns and inform communication strategies that support prevention and accountability.

### **Support Survivor-Centred Communication**

Media institutions should adopt survivor-centred approaches that prioritise dignity, privacy and safety. Reporting should focus on justice, prevention and institutional accountability rather than sensationalising violence.

## 6. Conclusion

Media and digital platforms play a critical role in shaping public understanding of femicide. Through the narratives they construct and amplify, these platforms influence how society interprets violence against women and how policymakers respond to it.

Current media and digital framing patterns often reproduce harmful gender norms, shift responsibility away from perpetrators and prioritise sensational storytelling over systemic analysis. These narratives can weaken public awareness of femicide as a structural form of gender-based violence and undermine sustained advocacy for prevention.

However, media and digital platforms also present opportunities for change. Responsible reporting, informed digital engagement and gender-sensitive communication can help reshape public narratives, strengthen accountability and support prevention efforts.

Transforming the way femicide is reported and discussed is therefore a critical component of broader efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls.

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## Acknowledgement

This brief was derived from the report on the Socio-Cultural Analysis of Femicide in Kenya, developed by UN Women Kenya in collaboration with the University of Nairobi. It synthesizes key findings and insights to inform evidence based programming and policy dialogue on ending violence against women and girls. This brief was developed by Mary Wanjiru-UN Women Kenya Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Team Leader; Jack Onyisi Abebe- UN Women East and Southern Africa Knowledge Management and Research Specialist and Emily Mwasame-UN Women East and Southern Africa Knowledge Management Assistant under the overall guidance and leadership of Adama Moussa-UN Women East and Southern Africa Deputy Regional Director; Antonia N’Gabala-Sodonon-UN Women Kenya Country Representative and Dan Bazira-UN Women Kenya Deputy Country Representative.

We gratefully acknowledge the invaluable contributions of Joan Obunga-Legal Expert; Christine Okeno-UN Women Kenya Programme Analyst; Evelyn Okatch and Fatuma Abbas, Programme Associates in the Ending Violence Against Women portfolio. Their technical expertise, strategic insights and unwavering commitment were instrumental in shaping the content, strengthening the analysis and ensuring the relevance and quality of this brief.

UN Women exists to advance women’s rights, gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. As the lead UN entity on gender equality, we shift laws, institutions, social behaviours and services to close the gender gap and build an equal world for all women and girls. We keep the rights of women and girls at the centre of global progress – always, everywhere. Because gender equality is not just what we do. It is who we are.