



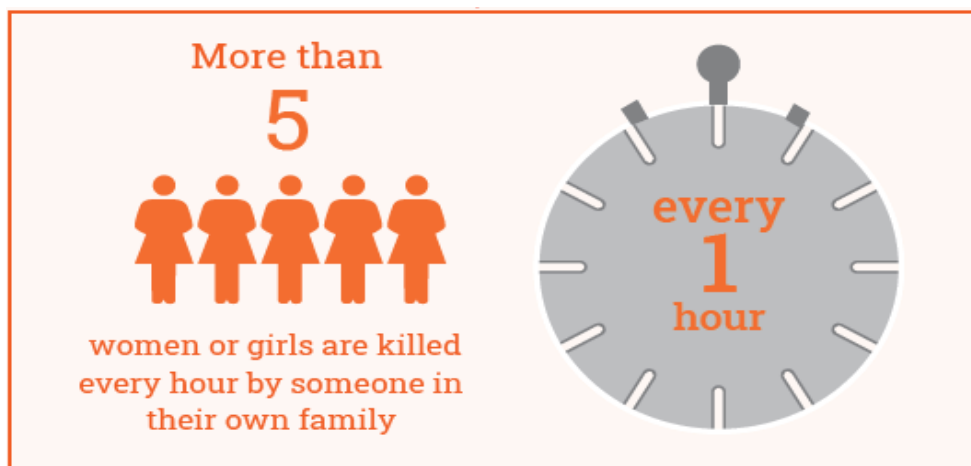
East African Femicide: An Indo-Pacific Humanitarian Crisis

By: Capt. Brendan H.J. Donnelly, USAF | May 10th, 2024



Figure 1: Waihiga Mwaura, "Kenya Femicide: Why men fail to condemn deadly misogyny", BBC, (February 4, 2024), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68178445>

Aside from the continuous military tensions between the United States and China that are often the most prominent events that occur in the Indo-Pacific region, there are also a number of humanitarian crises that impact the people within the region daily. One of these significant crises spread across the continent of Africa but is most prominent on the Eastern Coast. This crisis is the plight of women and girls in East Africa, a crisis known as femicide. Separate from homicide, femicide is defined as the targeted killing of girls and women because of their sex or gender.¹ Femicide is usually also domestic in nature, that the perpetrators of these violent actions against women in East Africa are men that are either spouses, romantic partners, family members or close friends. The violent actions include heinous crimes such as sexual harassment and assault, assault, rape and of course murder.²



The United Nations has been aware of this epidemic for years, but as a domestic issue that seems to only impact a few nations in Africa, the

international response has been meek. This discussion will identify how the femicide humanitarian crisis impacts within East Africa, impacts beyond the borders of East African nations, the strategic impact to the global community and how this crisis could be assisted to then benefit both the women in East Africa and the international community.

³Statistically speaking as you read this discussion, within the hour five women will be killed around the globe. According to Kenya's National Crime Research Center, 133 women are killed every day, roughly 5 per hour.⁴ Of these 133 women globally, two of those will be considered femicide within Kenya.⁵ These statistics also do not cover the rest of East Africa; therefore, it is possible that every day a handful of women are killed in East Africa. These statistics, although helpful to identify a significant issue in East Africa, is also unintentionally misleading. Due to the nature of femicide, many of these crimes go without specific details in their criminal reports. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) only 64% of global female homicide reports have data specifically on the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim.⁶ The report from the United Nations (UN) additionally identifies a critical issue with these statistics. In many countries around the world such as in Asia and Africa, they lack the infrastructure and police force to adequately take reports on femicide or have the reporting process for victims to report such crimes. Therefore, the UN and East African organizations like the Kenyan National Crime Research Center claim that there are potentially hundreds of other cases of femicide that will go unreported

every year. Why these crimes go unreported stems from the normalization of these heinous crimes. The abuse towards women in East Africa and the patriarchal societal norms are the supporting issues.

In East Africa the society is significantly male dominated. While women in the United States have legal freedoms and are free to live independently, women in East Africa are still very dependent on their fathers, male significant others, or men in general. In countries like Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia and Uganda, women have yet to have true legal rights and independence. These countries in a broad definition are controlled by a patriarchy – “control by men of a disproportionally large share of power”.⁷ Control of the government, society and household is the norm in East Africa to the point that crimes against women by men are often overlooked. Many critics of the patriarchal norms in East Africa claim that political and social leaders as well as police in the region downplay femicide, assault against women and very often blame the female victims of these crimes.⁸ Alongside the suppression of violent acts towards women the relationship between men and women domestically is perfectly summarized by the following viewpoint shared by Al Jazeera’s Shola Lawal, “It is commonplace for a Kenyan woman to be ‘disciplined’ by her husband, with some people even seeing this as a sign of affection where a man is taking the time to ‘teach’ his wife [...]”, therefore assault towards women is being justified as a way to show affection when correcting a daughter, spouse, or mother.⁹

This type of normalized violence only gets worse as men in the region do not see issue with femicide or assaulting women, leading to a decrease in human security for half the population purely based on gender. Human security is of course the protection of citizens within a nation to include access to basic human needs, access to resources, social and political empowerment and protection from disease and natural disasters.¹⁰ Women face a wall of human security issues, such as the lack of political empowerment, and of course, femicide. We see these issues in examples that occur daily in East Africa. Recent events include women being stabbed, dismembered, and stuffed away after femicide have occurred. In 2024 alone, 31 women have been killed in Kenya, one of these women was found in Kiganjo, Gatundu with her breast cut off and was tossed into the thickets on the side of the road.¹¹ The same day another woman was found when police responded to a domestic femicide event where before the victim died the police rushed to a scream and found a woman with deep cuts to her buttock and arms but listened to the boyfriend when he claimed that the event was a misunderstanding.¹² Once the victim had reached the hospital she had passed away due to her severe wounds. In the same week, another woman was found decapitated and stuffed into a bag as to hide the body.¹³ Neighboring Kenya, Somalia had another femicide event in January, where the husband of a pregnant woman was set his wife on fire, killing her and the fetus.¹⁴ Each of these events occurred within days of each other, demonstrating that Eastern Africa is plagued with some of the most horrific female mutilation cases and instances of femicide. Yet, every month the trends

continue where domestic violence turns to femicide, and more women are killed in their own homes. The perpetrators, the husbands and fathers are not prosecuted and remain out of prison, this is because of the relaxed laws and poor judicial system in each nation.

The femicide humanitarian crisis is only exacerbated by the systematic corruption in each East African government. Countries such as Djibouti, Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda have long histories where their governments regardless if they are democratic or authoritarian, sustain constant political corruption and corruption in the police force.¹⁵ These governments continuously hold illegitimate elections, host spotty judicial systems, and the police are often bought off, are excessively violent or chose to disregard their duties.¹⁶ Accompanied with a patriarchal society, women victims of femicide, assault, domestic abuse, or any form of mutilation have almost no chance that their perpetrator will be prosecuted through the judicial system.



Figure 2: A protest against femicide in Nairobi after a spate of grisly killings. Daniel Irungu/EPA, via Shutterstock

Even though these events seem bleak, there are still activists in Eastern Africa attempting to alleviate the situation for women. Organizations such as “Usikimye” (Swahili for “Don’t be Silent”) support the legal transformations and regulations like the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights, the National Kenyan Law-Sexual Offenses Act and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).¹⁷ These types of efforts and regulations aim to bring harsher punishment for perpetrators of femicide, ensuring the data tracking of femicide and domestic violence events, and to train police officers in Eastern Africa to handle femicide, and how to report femicide cases.¹⁸ Future changes to regulations require adjustments to femicide reporting procedures and keeping the judicial systems responsible for taking cases and trying cases in a judicious manner. All of these internal government changes will likely spark the societal change moving away from a patriarchal society and will bring the issues of women to the front of politics, equal with the other security issues that are present to East Africa. While a secondary effect might also include regime changes or destabilization in the region.

The Indo-Pacific Impact

The United States has been focused on East Africa to some degree ever since the end of the Cold War in the 1990s. Although most of this focus has been on counterterrorism in Somalia and Kenya, since the mid-2010s this focus has been decreasing as the years went by. Instead, the United States is now

focused on conflict in the Indo-Pacific region, namely combating China, Russia, and North Korea, but East Africa still must be included in the overall understanding of the Indo-Pacific. Countries like Uganda, Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti, and Kenya each hold their own strategic piece to the overall Indo-Pacific picture. U.S. and Uganda relations are diplomatic in nature and are focused on economic development. With Ethiopia, the U.S. also maintains diplomatic relations with the Ethiopians to support counterterrorism operations in Somalia. In Somalia, the strategic relationship with the U.S. support both counter piracy missions, and counterterrorism efforts, protecting maritime trade and degrading the spread of terrorism throughout East Africa. Kenya and Djibouti both host critical naval ports and diplomatic relations that allow the United States to fight against the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). All this being said, each of these strategic security issues impact the United States' grand national strategy, and because of this, the U.S. must understand and at times assist with domestic issues with these friendly nations in order to execute the desired operations.

Clearly, human security in East Africa for women is very low and they are seen beneath the men in the society. Failure to uphold a strong human security directly impacts the national security of a country since with a populace in disarray and misery, the state and the government lack funds, lack support and lack the ability to use its own power to project national power.¹⁹ Therefore, East African nations must focus on the equality between male and female to enhance the ability to act on the global scale in the Indo-Pacific

region. Thus, the impact to the Indo-Pacific and for the United States is, that if East African nations domestically weak, their influence and power to support U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific are also weak. If the U.S. aims to maintain influence in East Africa, maintain military power in the region and use the geographic advantages, then the U.S. should look to support domestic issues in East Africa. This does not mean that the U.S. needs to provide economic support, but diplomatic and potentially private industry support towards the area so to boost the legal rights of women and develop the area to provide education and infrastructure to aid both men and women.

The Eastern African coast , as the farthest western boundary of the Indo-Pacific region, holds countless geo-strategic resources; access to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, the U.S. naval port in Djibouti, maritime lines of communication through the Gulf of Oman and into the Strait of Hormuz, and a large population where counter-terrorism operations have continued for decades.²⁰ Ultimately, East Africa is part of the overarching grand national strategy that the United States employs in the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, the U.S. cannot afford to forget about the domestic issues that impact the national security of the nations that work with the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific, specifically about the inequality of women in East Africa and the continuous purge that is femicide in the region. More specifically this includes Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Uganda. Each of these nations presents some geo-strategic objective for the United States, and disregarding the domestic issues within each of these countries is unwise. In order for the U.S. to fully

execute their grand national strategy across the Indo-Pacific, assisting at the private cooperation level, or diplomatic level with these East African countries is a necessary diplomatic venture.

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Brendan Donnelly is a United States Air Force Intelligence Officer stationed at Langley Air Force Base. He has a Bachelor of Arts and Sciences from Bowling Green State University, majoring in History and Political Science. He has published multiple academic articles with the Journal for Indo-Pacific Affairs and Consortium for Indo-Pacific Researchers and has been a fellow with the Consortium for Indo-Pacific Researchers since 2021.

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