



JOHANNESBURG DECLARATION

2nd HIGH-LEVEL MEETING OF WOMEN JUDICIAL LEADERS OF AFRICA

PREAMBLE

WE, the participants in the 2nd High-Level Meeting of Women Judicial Leaders of Africa, convened in Johannesburg, South Africa, from 20 to 24 April 2026, under the theme “The Maputo Protocol @ 20: Consolidating the Jurisprudence of Equality for the Next Generation”;

RECOGNISING the foundations that were laid from the Declarations adopted in Libreville, Gabon on 4 May 2023.

RECALLING the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol), adopted in 2003, and recognising its enduring significance as a foundational continental instrument for the protection, promotion, and advancement of the rights of women in Africa;

RECALLING FURTHER the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights and the broader constitutional, regional, and international human rights framework within which African judiciaries give effect to women’s rights;

ACKNOWLEDGING the progress made across the continent in developing jurisprudence that advances equality, dignity, substantive justice, and access to remedies for women and girls;

NOTING, however, that although many States have ratified the Maputo Protocol, its provisions have not in all instances been fully domesticated or expressly reflected in national legislative frameworks; particularly in areas in which women’s vulnerability requires specific legal recognition and protection;

REMINDING Member States of the need to fulfil their commitments under the Maputo Protocol.

CONCERNED, however, that despite important normative and jurisprudential advances, women across Africa continue to face violence and harassment, economic exclusion, environmental injustice, unequal access to justice, and emerging forms of vulnerability in rapidly changing legal and technological contexts;

MINDFUL of the rapid development of artificial intelligence and other digital technologies, and of their potential both to expand access to justice and to intensify violence, discrimination, exclusion, and new forms of vulnerability affecting women, unless governed by human rights, transparency, accountability, and effective judicial oversight;

AFFIRMING the importance of women's leadership within judicial institutions, and the need for continued collaboration among African Women Judicial Leaders in strengthening a jurisprudence of equality for present and future generations;

RECOGNISING FURTHER that the advancement of women's leadership in the judiciary requires deliberate institutional action, including fair appointment processes, data-driven accountability, mentorship, peer support, professional networks, and sustained collaboration at national, regional, and continental levels;

DETERMINED to consolidate and deepen the gains made under the Maputo Protocol, and to contribute to the continued development of a distinctly African, rights-based, gender-responsive jurisprudence;

HEREBY ADOPT this Johannesburg Declaration and resolve as follows:

1. ADJUDICATING CASES OF VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT AGAINST WOMEN

Recognising the judiciary's central role in preventing, redressing, and transforming legal responses to violence against and harassment of women, we resolve as follows:

1.1. Judicial interpretation aligned with regional standards

To affirm that courts in all participating jurisdictions should interpret and apply national constitutions, legislation, and customary law in a manner consistent with the Maputo Protocol and other applicable regional and international human rights instruments protecting the rights of women.

1.2 Strengthening substantive, gender-responsive justice

To call for a rights-based, victim-centred, and gender-responsive approach to adjudication in all matters involving violence and harassment against women, ensuring recognition of lived realities, structural inequality, and the need to reject patriarchal stereotypes and harmful norms.

1.3 Legal reform, access to justice, and institutional response

To encourage participating jurisdictions to capacitate their respective judiciaries to reinforce legal and institutional responses to violence against women, including addressing legislative gaps relating to femicide, emotional, psychological and economic abuse, sexual harassment, and other forms of gender-based violence, while enhancing victim-friendly justice mechanisms, access to legal aid, protection of vulnerable witnesses, and improved access to justice in rural and underserved communities.

1.4 Equal recognition and protection of customary and religious marriages

To urge the legislatures of participating jurisdictions, where this does not exist, to review and reform legislative frameworks governing marriage so as to eliminate disparities between customary, religious (where applicable) and civil marriage regimes; particularly, in relation to registration, proprietary consequences, succession, dissolution, and access to remedies; and to affirm that customary and religious marriages (where applicable) must be recognised, protected, and accorded legal status and consequences equivalent to civil marriages, in a manner consistent with constitutional guarantees of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination, and aligned with applicable regional and international obligations.

1.5 *Judicial capacity, accountability, and regional cooperation*

To support continuous judicial education and training and education on gender equality and the Maputo Protocol, the development of clear judicial guidelines to ensure consistency and deterrence, the strengthening of internal judicial policies to prevent sexual harassment, the promotion of women's representation within the judiciary, and enhanced regional collaboration, data collection, and exchange of jurisprudence to improve implementation and deepen the protection of women's rights.

2. ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Recognising that substantive equality cannot be realised without women's effective access to economic resources, opportunities, and protection, we resolve as follows:

2.1 *Economic justice as a constitutional and human rights imperative*

To reaffirm that economic justice is a core component of substantive gender equality, and that women's effective participation in economic and social life requires real and equal access to property, inheritance, housing, employment, credit, and other productive resources.

2.2 *Bridging the gap between formal equality and lived economic reality*

To recognise that formal legal equality is insufficient where women continue to experience economic exclusion in practice, and to call for measures that ensure constitutional guarantees translate into tangible access to economic opportunities and resources.

2.3 *Judicial advancement of women's economic rights*

To affirm the central role of courts in advancing women's economic empowerment through the interpretation and application of constitutional, statutory, and customary law in a manner that protects equality, dignity, autonomy, and economic independence.

2.4 *Recognition of women's unpaid and indirect labour*

To recognise the economic value of women's unpaid and indirect contributions within households and families, where such protections do not exist, and to encourage judicial approaches that take such contributions into account in the equitable division of matrimonial property and related disputes.

2.5 *Strengthening regional and international norms in adjudication*

To encourage increased reliance on regional and international human rights instruments, including the Maputo Protocol, as interpretive tools in the development of domestic jurisprudence on women's economic and social rights, and to support continued legal, policy, and institutional measures that expand women's access to economic resources and opportunities.

3 SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENT PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION

Recognising that women's rights to dignity, health, livelihood, participation, and sustainable development are inseparable from environmental justice, we resolve as follows:

3.1 *Environmental rights as a constitutional and human rights imperative*

To reaffirm that women have the right to live in a healthy and sustainable environment, and to participate meaningfully in environmental planning, management, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation, in accordance with Articles 18 and 19 of the Maputo Protocol. To affirm that environmental justice is a substantive rights issue, closely linked to dignity, life, health, livelihood, culture, land, and sustainable development.

3.2 *Bridging environmental protection and lived realities*

To recognise that environmental harm is not gender-neutral and disproportionately affects women, particularly poor and rural women, caregivers, and those in pollution-affected or resource-dependent communities, as well as other vulnerable groups. To call for approaches that address structural inequality and respond to the lived realities of affected communities.

3.3 *Judicial advancement of gender-responsive environmental justice*

To affirm the central role of courts in advancing gender-responsive environmental justice by interpreting and applying constitutional, statutory, and customary law in a manner that protects women's environmental rights. To encourage courts to adopt context-sensitive approaches that take into account customary law, indigenous knowledge systems, cultural practices, and the lived realities of affected communities, consistent with constitutional and human rights norms.

3.4 *Recognition of participation, customary knowledge, and inclusive processes*

To emphasise the requirement of meaningful consultation and inclusive planning in environmental decision-making, ensuring that women and other marginalised groups are effectively represented and heard. To recognise the importance of indigenous knowledge, cultural practices, and community-based governance in shaping sustainable and inclusive environmental outcomes.

3.5 *Strengthening regional norms, access to justice, and institutional responsiveness*

To encourage reliance on regional and international instruments, including the Maputo Protocol, in environmental adjudication, and to support the development of jurisprudence that balances environmental protection and sustainable development in a rights-based and gender-sensitive manner. To urge judicial officers to ensure that court processes are accessible, respectful, and responsive to women, including through more user-friendly and participatory approaches, and to promote collaboration and knowledge-sharing across jurisdictions.

4 ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, THE DIGITAL FRONTIER & WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Recognising both the transformative potential of digital technologies and the risks they may pose to equality, access to justice, and the rights of women, we resolve as follows:

4.1 Recognition of the need to criminalise technology-facilitated violence

To recognise that AI can intensify violence, discrimination, harassment, and exclusion affecting women, including through deepfakes, online abuse, and other technology-enabled harms, and to urge the legislatures of the different jurisdictions to craft clear legal frameworks that criminalise and effectively address these forms of violence.

4.2 Judicial enforcement and application of existing legal frameworks

To affirm that courts must interpret and actively apply international, regional and domestic legal instruments, where they exist, to address digital harms in a manner that protects women's rights, treats technology-facilitated violence with the same seriousness as physical violence, and ensures effective remedies for victims.

4.3 Human oversight, accountability, and bias prevention in AI systems

To ensure that the use of AI in justice systems and governance remains subject to strong human oversight, transparency, and accountability, with careful scrutiny of underlying data and design to prevent the reproduction of historical bias and discriminatory outcomes, particularly where systems rely on incomplete or non-African data.

4.4 Strengthening access to justice and survivor-centred responses

To support the development and use of survivor-centred, gender-responsive, and contextually appropriate digital and AI tools that improve access to justice, reporting, referrals, and institutional efficiency, particularly for women in rural and underserved communities, alongside accessible support services and coordinated responses.

4.5 Capacity-building, legal reform, and institutional readiness

To call on judiciaries to promote readiness for AI through targeted legal reform, judicial education and training, digital literacy initiatives, ethical guidance, institutional safeguards, and effective remedies, ensuring that judicial officers are equipped to address emerging digital harms.

4.6 Collaboration and prevention of digital harm

To promote coordinated action between jurisdictions, law enforcement agencies, digital platforms, and civil society to prevent and respond to digital violence, enhance accountability, and ensure that technological innovation advances, rather than undermines, women's rights, safety, and equality.

5 LEADERSHIP FOR WOMEN JUDICIAL OFFICERS

Recognising that women's leadership in judicial institutions is essential to legitimacy, accountability, transformation, and the development of inclusive jurisprudence, we resolve as follows:

5.1 Recognition of women's leadership as essential to justice systems

To affirm that women's leadership in the judiciary is essential to institutional legitimacy, representativity, public confidence, and the development of inclusive and gender-responsive justice systems.

5.2 Data-driven accountability and reform

To encourage the systematic collection, disaggregation, publication, and use of data on women's representation and advancement in the judiciary, particularly at senior and decision-making levels, to identify gaps, track progress, and inform targeted reform.

5.3 Advancing women into leadership positions

To urge judicial and other state institutions to adopt fair and transparent appointment and promotion processes, and to remove formal and informal barriers, including structural bias and discriminatory practices, that limit women's progression into leadership roles.

5.4 Strengthening mentorship and support systems

To encourage and support the development of mentorship, peer-learning, and professional networks for women judicial officers and legal practitioners, at national and regional levels, to build leadership capacity and support retention and advancement.

5.5 Sustained institutional action for transformation

To call for deliberate and sustained measures across the justice sector, including institutional support, awareness-building, and collaboration with relevant stakeholders, to ensure that increased representation of women translates into meaningful leadership and decision-making power.

In adopting this Declaration, we commit ourselves to advancing the principles and resolutions set out herein within our respective jurisdictions and institutions, and to promoting the continued development of jurisprudence that gives meaningful effect to the rights of women under the Maputo Protocol and related constitutional, regional, and international instruments.

We call upon African judiciaries, judicial education institutions, regional bodies, and all relevant stakeholders to support the implementation of this Declaration through judicial education and training, institutional reform, knowledge-sharing, and sustained collaboration across jurisdictions.

We further affirm the importance of continued dialogue among Women Judicial Leaders of Africa, the exchange of jurisprudence and good practices, and the strengthening of institutional mechanisms that promote equality, representation, accountability, and access to justice.

We also recognise the importance of proactive judicial engagement with emerging technologies, strengthened data systems, mentorship, and institutional support in ensuring that women's rights are protected in changing contexts and that women's representation within the judiciary is translated into meaningful leadership and decision-making power.

This Declaration shall serve as the outcome document of the 2nd High-Level Meeting of Women Judicial Leaders of Africa and reflects the resolutions adopted across all substantive sessions of the Meeting, including on adjudicating cases involving violence and harassment against women, economic justice and women's empowerment, sustainable environment, participation and representation, artificial intelligence and the digital frontier, and leadership for women judicial officers.

DONE at Johannesburg, South Africa, on 23 April 2026.