

Firearms Briefing: Gun-related femicide in SA over 25 years: A call to action

Introduction

As the world marks International Women’s Day on 8 March, this Briefing focuses attention on the most extreme form of violence against women – their murder. The extent of SA’s femicide crisis is revealed in a recent Medical Research Council (MRC) report analysing 20 years of femicide research in South Africa.¹ This, together with more recent police crime statistics, shows that:

- Women in SA are most at risk of being killed by their intimate partner.
- Firearms are the leading weapon used to murder women, with the proportion of women shot dead reaching the highest rate ever recorded.
- An average of 15 women are murdered every day (as of 2023/4, up from 7 a day in 2020/1) according to crime statistics. Guns are the leading weapon in these murders.
- While women are most at risk of being killed with a legal gun, gun licence applications have increased by 58% since 2016.

Femicide in SA over 25 years

Using mortuary data from 1999, 2009, 2017 and 2020/1 (during Covid-19 restrictions²) the MRC has been able to track changes in the femicide of females aged 14 years and older over 20 years in South Africa. Here’s a snapshot of the findings:

- Overall femicide: Almost halved between 1999 and 2009 and then stabilised (see figure 1).
- Intimate femicide: Large decline between 1999 and 2009, further decline in 2017 and increase in 2020/1 (see figure 2).
- Non-intimate femicide: Significant decline between 1999 and 2009 and then stabilised (see figure 2).

Definition of terms

Femicide: Murder of women

Intimate femicide: Murder of women by current/former romantic partner

Non-intimate femicide: Murder of women by anyone else (family, acquaintances, strangers, etc.)

Figure 1: Femicide in SA (MRC): 1999- 2020/1 (N)

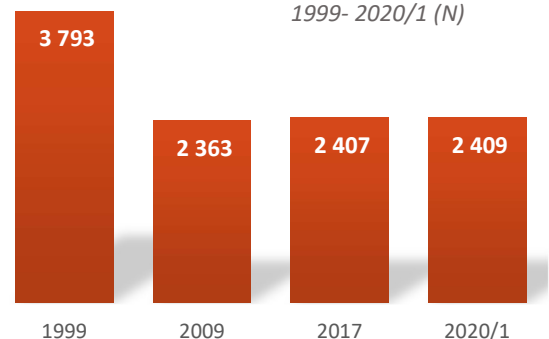
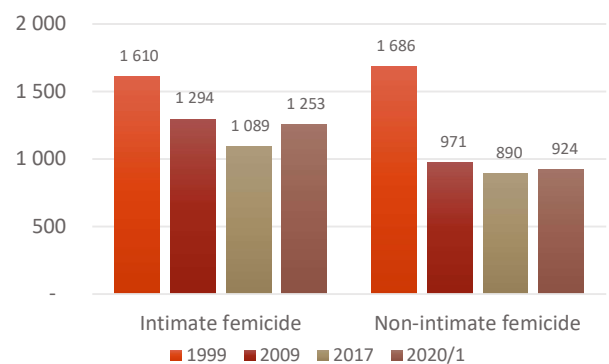


Figure 2: Intimate and non-intimate femicide in SA (MRC): 1999- 2020/1 (N)

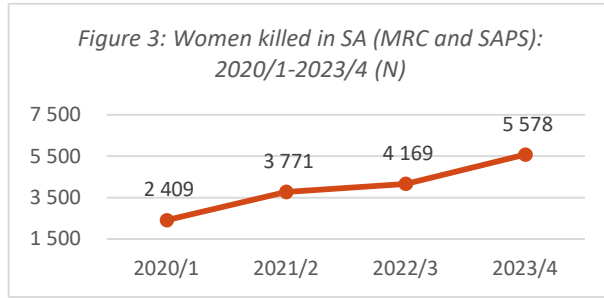


¹ Abrahams, Naeemah; et.al. 2024. 20 years of femicide research in South Africa. Research Brief, September. South African Medical Research Council Gender and Health Research Unit. (Online). Available at <https://www.samrc.ac.za/policy-briefs/20-years-femicide-research-south-africa> (accessed 13 February 2025).

² The researchers highlight the complex relationship between COVID-19 restrictions and femicide rates in 2020/1. They observed fewer femicides and intimate partner killings during periods when alcohol sales were completely banned or heavily restricted. However, despite these temporary decreases, intimate partner femicide actually increased overall during the pandemic year. This finding suggests that without the alcohol restrictions that were in place, femicide numbers might have been substantially higher.



National crime statistics from the South African Police Service (SAPS) show that South Africa’s femicide crisis has significantly worsened since 2020/1.³ As shown in Figure 3, femicide increased 132% from 2,409 in 2020/1 (an average of 7 women a day) to 5,578⁴ in 2023/4 (15 women a day). Quarterly SAPS crime statistics show that guns are the leading weapon used in murder.⁵

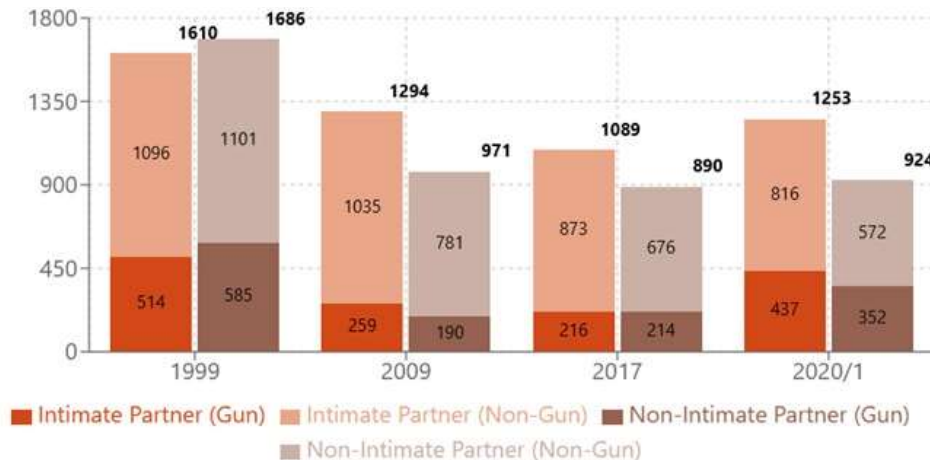


Gun-related femicide in SA over 25 years

As shown in Figure 4:

1999	2009	2017	2020/1
3,296 women killed, averaging 9 a day. Every 6 hours a woman was killed by her intimate partner, averaging 4 women a day. 33% of all femicides were gun-related.	2,265, women killed, averaging 6 a day. More women killed by intimates than non-intimates, a trend that continues for the next 10 years. Every 8 hours a woman was killed by her intimate partner, averaging 3 a day. Over 1,000 women’s lives saved due to fewer women being shot – gun-related femicides dropped from 33% in 1999 to 20% in 2009.	Gun-related femicide rose from 20% in 2009 to 22% driven by an increase in the number of women killed by non-intimates.	Increase in overall femicide, with women killed by an intimate partner rising to an average of 3.4 a day. 84% increase in women shot dead – from 430 (1.2 per day) in 2017 to 789 (2.2 per day) in 2020/1. This means 36% of femicides were gunshots – the highest rate in 20 years.

Figure 4: Femicide in SA by type and weapon (MRC): 1999-2020/1 (N)



³ South African Police Service. 2024. Police recorded crime statistics Republic of South Africa: 2023-2024 financial year – Annual figures (April 2023 to March 2024). Crime Registrar Head Office. (Online). Available at https://www.saps.gov.za/services/downloads/2024/2023-2024%20Annual_Financial%20year_WEB.pdf (accessed 5 March 2025).

⁴ The reported figure of 5,578 women murdered in 2023/24 requires verification and should be treated with caution and checked against other sources. In this regard we note that the total number of women killed in SAPS quarterly reports for 2023/4 totals 3,839.

⁵ South African Police Service quarterly crime statistics for the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 show that firearms were used in 44% of all murders, while knives were used in 15%. (Online). Available at https://www.saps.gov.za/services/older_crimestats.php

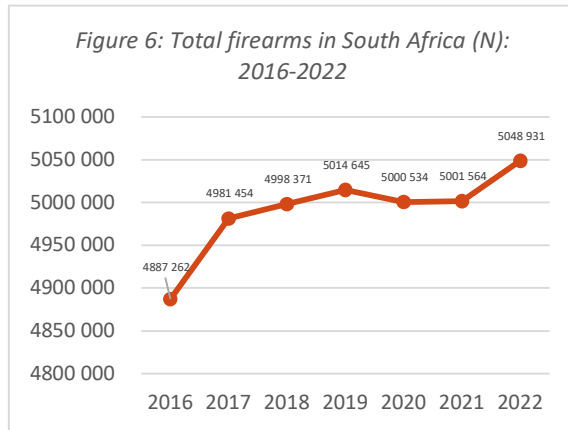
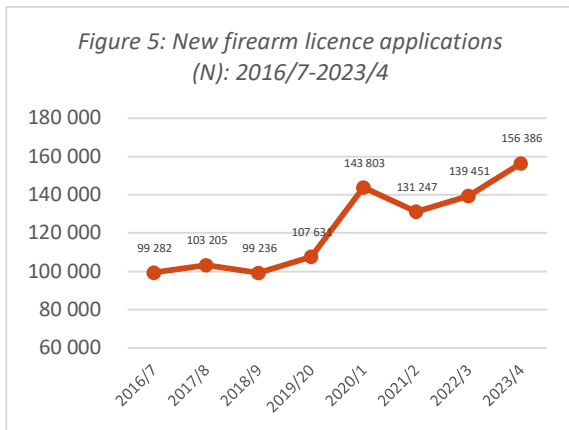


The MRC attributed the significant decline in femicide between 1999 and 2009 to SA’s Firearms Control Act of 2000 (FCA).⁶ In addition to raising the bar for who can own specific firearms and for what purpose, the implementation of the FCA was supported by targeted policing interventions to reduce gun availability such as Intelligence-driven recovery operations and amnesties.

Additional research confirms the MRC’s findings, demonstrating that stricter gun control measures led to reduced gun availability and saved lives. One study documented approximately 4,500 lives saved across five South African cities between 2001 and 2005 as a direct result of these interventions.⁷

However, as this Briefing has shown, gains in lives saved have been reversing, with an uptick in gun-related femicide between 2017 and 2020/1 and overall femicide from 2020/1 to date. Firearms are the leading weapon used in these murders, with the proportion of women shot dead having reached a new high.

At the same time, we’ve seen a 58% increase in applications for new gun licences (see figure 5⁸) and 161,699 more licensed guns (see figure 6⁹) between 2016 and 2023/4. This is significant because national research shows that a legal gun is more likely to be used in intimate-femicide suicides (where the perpetrator of an intimate femicide subsequently dies by suicide).¹⁰



Considering the close relationship between gun availability and femicide,¹¹ we can expect SA’s gun-related femicide rate to continue to rise unless action is taken to save women’s lives.

⁶ "There was a very substantial difference in the rate of homicide from gunshot between [1999 and 2009]. The decrease is most likely explained by gun control legislation (Firearms Control Act)" Source: Abrahams, Naeemah, Shanaaz Matthews, Lorna Martin, Carl Lombard, and Rachel Jewkes. 2013. Intimate Partner Femicide in South Africa in 1999 and 2009. PLOS Medicine, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 1-8, p. 3.

⁷ Matzopoulos, Richard, Mary Lou Thompson, and Jonathan Myers. 2014. Firearm and Nonfirearm Homicide in 5 South African Cities: A Retrospective Population-Based study. American Journal of Public Health, Vol. 104, No. 3, pp. 455-460.

⁸ South African Police Service Annual Reports for 2016/2017 to 2023/2024.

⁹ Central Firearms Registry. 2023. Current number of registered firearms and owners in South Africa. Promotion of Access to Information Act response, 6 December, published in GFSA. 2024. How many guns are in SA? Record-keeping is a crime-fighting tool, not an administrative task. Firearms Briefing 1, 6 September. (Online). Available at <https://gfsa.org.za/download/briefing-1-of-2024-record-keeping-is-a-crime-fighting-tool/?wpdmdl=4774&refresh=67b5adfe47a211739959806>

¹⁰ Mathews, Shanaaz, Naeemah Abrahams, Rachel Jewkes, Lorna Martin, Carl Lombard, and Lisa Vetten. 2008. Intimate femicide–suicide in South Africa: a cross-sectional study. Bulletin of the World Health Organization, Vol. 86, pp. 552–558.

¹¹ Alvazzi del Frate, Anna. 2011. When the Victim is a Woman. Geneva Declaration Secretariat. Global Burden of Armed Violence 2011. Lethal Encounters. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 113-144; Shaw, Margaret. 2013. Too Close to Home – Guns and Intimate Partner Violence. Small Arms Survey 2013: Everyday Dangers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



Policy interventions that can protect women from gun violence

As the data show both globally and in SA, femicide is preventable. There are two types of intervention to uphold women's right to safety by protecting them from gun violence:

<i>Proactive</i>	<i>Reactive</i>
Prohibit at-risk individuals from accessing guns	Remove guns from at risk individuals e.g. by declaring them unfit to own a gun

Research shows that proactively restricting access to guns by at-risk individuals¹² (which includes those with a history of physical and alcohol abuse) is more effective than reactively removing a gun

Proactive: Prevention rather than cure

With global recognition that prohibiting an at-risk individual from owning a gun is more effective at preventing gun violence than removing the gun after the fact, a significant strength of the FCA is that it makes provision to disqualify unfit people from owning guns in the first place. Two key features in the FCA help ensure that only "fit and proper" people are granted firearm licences, these are:

- 1. Two-tier licensing system** which involves establishing competency before being issued with a licence:
 - Competency certificate – sets a minimum standard for owning a firearm.
 - Firearm licence – gives official permission: Having obtained a competency certificate, the person wishing to own a firearm must then apply for a licence. A firearm licence documents the state's recognition that the person has been judged "fit and proper" to own a firearm.
- 2. Renewals:** The FCA requires firearm licence holders to regularly renew their licences (depending on the licence type renewal periods vary between 2, 5 and 10 years). Imposing a limited duration on a gun licence provides for the following:
 - Regular confirmation that the licensed owner is still qualified to have a firearm.
 - An incentive for complying with the law – this places responsibility on the licence holder to maintain "fit and proper" behaviour since there is a risk the licence may be revoked.

Challenges in enforcing the provisions of the FCA

While the FCA contains provisions to prevent at-risk individuals from owning a gun as well as facilitating its removal, there are several challenges in the enforcement of these provision which undermine women's right to be safe from gun violence. These include:¹³

1. Courts failing to make declarations of unfitness. One of the highest profile instances is when the prosecutor had to remind the judge to enter into the court record that Oscar Pistorius was unfit to own a firearm under the FCA after he was found guilty of murdering his girlfriend Reeva Steenkamp with his licensed firearm.¹⁴
2. No clear process to ensure firearms are surrendered by gun owners declared unfit.

¹² Shaw, Margaret. 2013. Too Close to Home – Guns and Intimate Partner Violence. Small Arms Survey 2013: Everyday Dangers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹³ GfSA. 2019. Women under the gun: Actions to protect women from gun violence. Firearms Briefing 4, 3 September (Online). Available at <https://gfsa.org.za/download/briefing-1of-2022-femicide-in-south-africa-over-18-years/?wpdmdl=4273&refresh=67b5adfe932511739959806>

¹⁴ Hess, Lauren. 2014. AS IT HAPPENED: Families happy with Pistorius's 5 year sentence. News24, 21 October. (Online). Available at <https://www.news24.com/news24/xarchive/LIVE-Pistorius-learns-his-fate-20141021> (accessed 4 March 2025). See report for 10:37am.



3. Up to 1 million gun owners exempt from the FCA (including competency certification and licence renewal provisions) due to a 2009 interim court order. This order allows “green” firearm licenses, issued under the apartheid-era Arms and Ammunition Act (1969), to remain valid while a hunting association challenges the constitutionality of certain FCA sections.¹⁵ For 16 years, this interim order has blocked full implementation of the FCA because the Minister of Police has failed to file a response, preventing the case from being discharged.
4. Historic, systemic and persistent dysfunction at the Central Firearms Registry (CFR – the police unit responsible for firearms management, including recordkeeping) despite various government turnaround strategies.
5. Police negligence in upholding the law, this includes failing to undertake proper background checks of firearm applicants and failing to remove a firearm in a domestic violence relationship as ordered by the court under a protection order. The murder of Sasha-Lee Shah tragically illustrates this – see sidebar.

Police negligence killed Sasha-Lee Shah



Sasha-Lee (25 years old) was shot and killed by her ex-boyfriend on 30 October 2022 after the Designated Firearms Officer (DFO) at Phoenix police station failed to remove her ex-boyfriend’s licensed firearm despite a magistrate’s instruction to do so under a Domestic Violence Act protection order. In her application for a protection order Sasha-Lee wrote, “I cannot live a normal life with continuous stalking and threats from this man. I do not know what he is capable of as he has a firearm...I fear (for) my life everyday with his threats.”¹⁶

Priority actions to save women’s lives

This Briefing has identified the particular risk that firearms pose to women in South Africa, as well as problems in enforcing provisions in the FCA which aim at upholding women’s right to safety. Below is a summary of six urgent actions to protect women from gun violence:

1. Streamline and automate the declaration of unfitness process under sections 102 and 103 of the FCA to ensure that i) at-risk individuals are automatically declared unfit, ii) declarations are registered for easy and future reference, and iii) the unfit person’s licences, firearms and ammunition are physically surrendered.
2. Discharge the 2009 interim court order exempting gun owners licensed under the apartheid-era Arms and Ammunition Act (1969) from relicensing under the FCA to ensure nationwide compliance with “fit and proper” and licence renewal provisions in SA’s gun law.
3. Act to transform the CFR into a functional unit, able to fulfil its role and responsibility under the FCA, which could entail outsourcing its management.¹⁷
4. Empower police members dealing with firearm-related issues with knowledge, skills and resources and hold them accountable for fulfilling their responsibility in upholding the FCA. This will ensure that DFOs are both capacitated and obliged to undertake thorough background

¹⁵ Prinsloo, B. 2009. Interim Order of the North Gauteng High Court, Case 33656/09 in the matter between SA Hunters A.O. (Applicant), and Minister of Safety and Security (Respondent), 26 June.

¹⁶ Pillay, Maria. 2022. 'My daughter was stalked and killed by her ex-boyfriend. She lived a nightmare'. News24, 1 December. (Online). Available at <https://www.news24.com/life/relationships/parenting/my-daughter-was-stalked-and-killed-by-her-ex-boyfriend-she-lived-a-nightmare-20221201> (accessed 4 March 2025).

¹⁷ A summary of the CFR’s inefficiency and options to address are summarised in GfSA. 2023. Functional Central Firearms Registry key to dealing with illegal guns in SA. Firearms Briefing 2, 23 October. (Online). Available at <https://gfsa.org.za/download/briefing-2-of-2023-functional-central-firearms-registry-key-to-dealing-with-illegal-guns-in-sa/?wpdmdl=4653&refresh=67b5adfe589c61739959806>



checks of firearm-related applicants and motivate why they have declared firearm licence applicants unfit for gun ownership, so these declarations are not overturned by the Firearms Appeal Board due to poor police work.

5. Make it obligatory for magistrates and police officers to immediately remove a gun in a domestic violence situation, including whenever a temporary or permanent protection order has been issued. This requires the FCA be amended so that magistrates and police officers are mandated to remove all firearms when dealing with or responding to violence or firearm-related offences, even where victims do not request this.
6. Permanently disqualify at-risk individuals from gun ownership – see Box. This requires the FCA be amended so that:
 - A person declared unfit to own a firearm is disqualified for life. This amendment was included in the 2021 draft Amendment Bill of the FCA,¹⁸ and needs to be supported as it upholds the principle that firearm ownership is a privilege, not a right, that a potential or existing firearm owner must show their fitness for this privilege, and that once they have shown themselves to be unfit this privilege is permanently removed.
 - Conviction for driving under the influence is recognised as a reason to prohibit gun ownership. Currently the FCA relies on self-reporting that an applicant is not dependent on any substance with an “intoxicating or narcotic effect.” An obvious way to overcome self-reporting bias (which cannot easily be confirmed) is to permanently disqualify anyone with a drink-driving conviction from firearm ownership.

Identifying at-risk individuals

While past violence remains the best predictor of future violence,¹⁹ global studies show that alcohol misuse commonly precedes aggressive behaviour, and that drinking is associated with being both a perpetrator and a victim of violence.²⁰ South African studies confirm the link between alcohol misuse and violence, including murder, assault, rape, domestic violence, child abuse, property-related crime, and suicide.²¹ Research also confirms the relationship between alcohol misuse and gun violence – including murder and suicide.²² In addition to increasing aggression, alcohol consumption impairs judgment about when it might be appropriate to use a gun and reduces shooting accuracy, thereby placing bystanders at increased risk.²³

¹⁸ Civilian Secretariat for Police Service. (2021). Invitation for public comments: Draft Firearms Control Amendment Bill, 2021. (Online). Available at https://www.saps.gov.za/resource_centre/notices/downloads/invitation_for_public_comment_draft_notice_in_gazette_2021.pdf (accessed 27 February 2025).

¹⁹ American Psychological Association. 2013. Gun Violence: Prediction, prevention, and policy. APA Panel of Experts Report. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. (Online). Available at www.apa.org/pubs/info/reports/gun-violence-report.pdf (accessed 19 February 2025).

²⁰ World Health Organization. 2010. Violence prevention: The evidence. Geneva: World Health Organization.

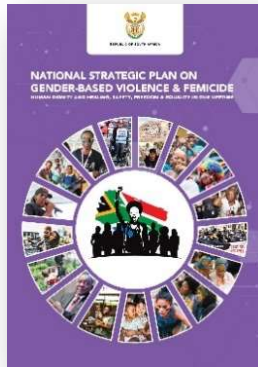
²¹ See research cited in:

- Parry, Charles and Sarah Dewing. 2006. A public health approach to addressing alcohol-related crime in South Africa. *African Journal of Drug & Alcohol Studies*. Vol 5, No. 1, pp. 41–56.
- Matzopoulos, Richard, Brett Bowman, Shanaaz Mathews and Jonny Myers. 2010. Applying upstream interventions for interpersonal violence prevention: An uphill struggle in low- to middle-income contexts. *Health Policy*, Vol 97, pp. 62–70.

²² Branas, Charles, SeungHoon Han, and Douglas Wiebe. 2016. Alcohol Use and Firearm Violence. *Epidemiologic Reviews*. Vol 38, pp. 32-45.

²³ Carr, Brendan, Douglas Wiebe, Therese Richmond and Charles Branas. 2009. A randomised controlled feasibility trial of alcohol consumption and the ability to appropriately use a firearm. *Injury Prevention*, Vol 15, No. 6, pp. 409–412.





In listing these recommendations we note that South Africa's National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide includes no mention of the role played by firearms in driving this crisis.

In response to this glaring omission, we strongly urge that the National strategic Plan be amended to recognise the unique role played by firearms in undermining women's right to safety. We also call on government to prioritise the development of a gender-responsive National Action Plan on firearms. The Small Arms Survey has just published a guide to assist in this process: [How-To Guide: Developing Gender-responsive National Action Plans on Small Arms](#).

Conclusion

South Africa faces a femicide crisis, with firearms playing a central role in the murder of women. The evidence presented in this Briefing demonstrates a clear pattern: Periods of strict gun control and enforcement correspond with fewer women being killed, while periods of poor enforcement and increased gun ownership correlate with more women's lives lost.

Guns are the leading weapon used to murder women, with the proportion of women shot dead higher than it has ever been.

Coinciding with the increase in gun-related femicide is a 58% increase in applications for new gun licences and an additional 160,000 licensed guns in civilian hands, and thus homes across the country. This is significant because national research shows that a legal gun is more likely to be used in intimate-femicide suicides.

President Ramaphosa acknowledged our gun violence crisis in his 2025 State of the Nation Address, stating: "We must tackle the scourge of gun violence that has plagued our society for decades. I have asked the Minister and the National Commissioner of Police to prioritise reducing gun-related crime and violence. This includes preventing the diversion of firearms into the illicit market and recovering illegal firearms in circulation. We know from international evidence and our own experience that this is the most effective way to reduce overall violent crime."

The President's commitment must translate into concrete action on the six priority recommendations outlined in this Briefing. Strengthening enforcement of the FCA, and addressing the gaps that allow at-risk individuals to access and retain firearms, is essential for protecting women from lethal violence.

Femicide is preventable. South Africa has demonstrated this before through effective gun control measures. By implementing these recommendations and recognising firearms as a critical factor in the National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide, South Africa can once again reduce femicide rates and save women's lives. The time for decisive action is now— the lives of mothers, daughters and sisters across the country depend on it.

Note to reader: All data in Figure 2 made visible and footnote 4 added subsequent to first publication.

