



Barriers and Facilitators to Female Death Registration in Kilimanjaro and Katavi, Tanzania

Key Findings

- **Female deaths are deprioritized due to socio-cultural norms that undervalue female legal and economic importance:** families often see “no urgency” or “no benefit” in registering a female death because they hold fewer formal assets, have less documented property, and their deaths are viewed as having fewer administrative consequences
- **Procedural and social deterrents:** Complex administrative steps, weak enforcement, and stigma around sensitive female deaths actively discourage registration.
- **Instrumental triggers drive uptake:** Families register when the certificate is required for something concrete.

Recommendations

- **Challenge socio-cultural norms and explicitly emphasize that female deaths matter equally:** through targeted dialogues with elders, women’s groups, and religious leaders to counter beliefs that female deaths do not require registration
- **Simplify procedures, remove upfront costs, and mandate proactive local follow-up for female deaths:** Streamlining processes, eliminating costs, and requiring ward executive officers/village executive officers (WEO/VEO) outreach directly tackles procedural complexity and reduces stigma through assisted, dignified follow-up.
- **Institutionalize death registration at the point of death:** Embed registration into MPDSR (Maternal and Perinatal Death Surveillance and Response), facility discharge, and burial workflows so deaths are registered routinely, not only when families later need certificates for legal or financial purposes.

Background

Tanzania’s death registration system, governed by the Births and Deaths Registration Act of 2002 and administered by the Registration Insolvency and Trusteeship Agency (RITA), requires that all deaths be registered within 30 days.^{1,5} Despite recent efforts to improve Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) through decentralization, digitization, and public awareness campaigns, registration completeness remains very low.²

Between 2020 and 2023, the completeness rate—deaths both registered and certified in the same year—fluctuated between 4.4% and 6.7%. Female deaths registered at

roughly half the rate of male deaths, reflecting deep social and structural inequities in value, access, and motivation.^{3,4} Families often see male deaths as having greater legal or financial implications such as land, pension, or inheritance claims, so they are more motivated to register them. Female deaths, by contrast, are viewed as carrying fewer formal consequences, reducing the perceived benefit of registration.

Structural barriers deepen this gap: females are more likely to die at home, where no facility documents are issued, and families must navigate longer, more complex, and more

costly registration pathways. Because registration usually happens only when needed to access a benefit and females are less often linked to such benefits, the system's reactive design disproportionately excludes female deaths.

Low death registration weakens Tanzania's ability to measure mortality, plan services, and protect families' legal rights. When female deaths are especially under-registered, their health risks remain invisible, resources

Methods

This data brief draws on a mixed-methods study conducted in Kilimanjaro and Katavi regions to understand factors influencing female death registration. Quantitative analysis used national Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) data from 2013–2024, including sex-disaggregated completeness and timeliness indicators derived from RITA and National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) population projections. These data were used to analyze trends in death registration by sex (male and female) and to examine changes over time in the timeliness of death registration.

The qualitative component included 40 in-depth interviews with household members who experienced the death of a female relative, 31 key informant interviews with local and national stakeholders, including ward executive officers (WEOs), village executive officers (VEOs), RITA officers, health workers, and religious leaders, and 8 focus

are misallocated, and inequities deepen. Strengthening female death registration is therefore essential for accurate data, effective policy, and ensuring female lives are fully counted.

Completeness rate is the proportion of deaths registered and certified within the same year of occurrence out of the expected number of deaths for that year, based on NBS projections, multiplied by 100.

group discussions with VEOs. Participants were purposively sampled to capture variation by registration status, region, and setting.

All interviews followed a semi-structured guide exploring awareness, decision-making, procedural experiences, sociocultural norms, and enabling or constraining factors. Data were analyzed thematically using a social-ecological framework that examined barriers and facilitators at individual, interpersonal, community, institutional, and policy levels. Quantitative and qualitative findings were triangulated to identify converging patterns and explain sex disparities in death registration.

This brief synthesizes key insights from the full study to highlight the drivers of low female death registration and actionable opportunities for strengthening equity within Tanzania's CRVS system.

Limitations

In interpreting this brief, several limitations should be considered. Within the qualitative component, only six households involving a female death under 18 years of age were identified and recruited. As a result, insights into barriers or facilitators specific to the registration of child and adolescent deaths—particularly for girls—may not be fully represented in this analysis.

For the quantitative trend analysis, the study aimed to examine sex-disaggregated registration rates across the entire 2013–2024 period. However, detailed projection data broken down by sex were unavailable for the years 2013–2021, as these were based on the 2012 census and not retrospectively sex-disaggregated. Consequently, sex-specific completeness rates could only be calculated for 2022–2024 using projections from the 2022 census. For earlier years, analysis relied on overall registration rates.



This gap limits our ability to chart the full evolution of the sex gap in death registration over time. However, triangulation of more recent quantitative patterns with consistent qualitative narratives suggests that gendered differences in registration have likely persisted over time.

As with all interview-based research, qualitative findings may be influenced by recall or social desirability bias. Participants' descriptions of their death registration experiences—limited to deaths that occurred within the past five years were self-reported and may reflect imperfect memory or the desire to present themselves or local systems positively. The study mitigated this by cross-checking factual information—such as documents obtained or steps followed—against official processes, and by ensuring

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Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods design—integrating national registration data with in-depth community narratives—provides a robust and credible understanding of the state of death registration in Kilimanjaro and Katavi. The convergence of quantitative and qualitative evidence strengthens confidence in the findings and underscores the practical relevance of the recommendations proposed.

Key Findings

Trends in Completeness and Timeliness

Between 2013 and 2024, Tanzania recorded gradual but uneven progress in completeness rates. Registration completeness increased from less than 1% in 2013 to around 6% in 2021, driven largely by efforts to decentralize registration services. Rates declined to around 4% by 2024. This indicates persistent barriers and limited coverage.

Sex disparities: Sex-disaggregated completeness rates were only available for 2022–2024 due to the absence of sex-specific population projections for earlier years. Although the death registration process is identical for males and females, a clear disparity is observed: male deaths were registered at nearly twice the rate of female deaths, with completeness of approximately 4.5–5% for males compared to about 2.5% for females. This persistent gap suggests that improvements in completeness have not benefited males and females equally, likely due to socio-cultural norms and differences in perceived economic value or inheritance-related incentives for registering male deaths.

Regional differences in Completeness are also pronounced. Dar es Salaam consistently performs best, rising from below 1% in 2013–2017 to over 15% by 2021 before stabilizing at 9% in 2024. Arusha and Kilimanjaro follow with rates above 6% in 2024, while regions such as Simiyu, Geita, Mbeya, Njombe, Katavi, and Songwe remain below 2%. These gaps highlight the need for targeted support to improve access and awareness in low-performing areas.



Timeliness of death registration: Of the deaths that are registered and certified within a same year of occurrence, the proportion registered within 30 days has declined from 99% in 2013 to 48.1% in 2024. This trend should be interpreted with caution, as the apparent drop in timeliness likely reflects the influx of late registrations following sensitization efforts, the decentralization that began in 2018 and the introduction of eRITA in 2023, all of which expanded access and increased the total number of registered deaths. Thus, while timeliness ratios fell, actual timely registrations may have remained stable, indicating both improved coverage and ongoing challenges in prompt reporting.

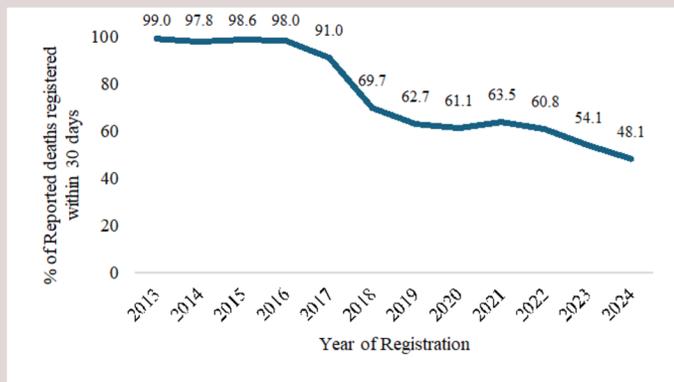


Figure 1. Trends in Completeness rate in Mainland Tanzania, 2013–2024 (Source: CRVS system 2025)

Timeliness of death registration per sex: The proportion of registered deaths within 30 days has declined for both sexes from 2013–2024, mainly due to an influx of late registrations after decentralization and the rollout of eRITA. Although the process is identical for both sexes, females consistently show higher timeliness. This difference may be influenced by cultural practices, where female deaths may be registered more quickly, while male deaths might require broader family involvement, potentially causing delays. This may partly explain the lower male timeliness in 2024 (54.3% for females vs. 45.3% for males).

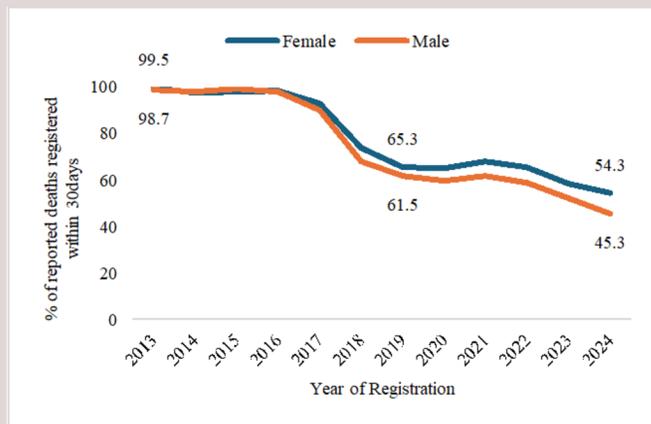


Figure 2. Trend in Timeliness of death registration and certification within 30 days for reported deaths in Mainland Tanzania, 2013–2024 (Source: CRVS system 2025)

Barriers to Female Death Registration

General Barriers

The study identified several overarching barriers that impede timely and complete death registration for all populations in Tanzania, irrespective of sex, these include:



Low Public Awareness: Many community members remain unaware of the need or process for death registration. For most, the funeral marks the end of the matter, with little to no understanding that a separate legal registration is required. Aside from this, there is limited understanding of the practical benefits of a death certificate which contributes to low motivation to pursue registration.



Accessibility and Cost: Registration fees and other indirect costs such as travel costs make death registration unaffordable for many families. Services are often centralized at the district level, making access from rural areas difficult and costly. Even with online systems like eRITA, in-person visits to the districts remain necessary.

For rural or remote households, these barriers make death registration difficult and often deprioritized.



Administrative and Procedural Hurdles: The death registration process is often burdened by complex and unclear procedures, which discourage many families from completing it. Multiple steps, non-consistent guidance, and varying requirements for deaths occurring at home versus in hospitals frequently cause confusion and frustration. Errors or missing documents often force families to make repeated visits, making the process both exhausting and discouraging.



Lack of Active Enforcement or Incentives: While the law requires registration, there is minimal public sensitization or government enforcement. Additionally, a lack of widespread campaigns/promotions to encourage death registration means many citizens are simply unaware that registration is a legal requirement.

Sex-Specific Barriers

In addition to the general challenges, certain barriers disproportionately limit the registration of women's deaths:



Lower Perceived Benefit for Registering Female

Deaths: Families are often less motivated to register a female death when there is no clear financial or legal benefit. Since women are perceived to rarely hold property or formal entitlements, obtaining a death certificate for her, regardless of her age or marital status, is seen as unnecessary. In contrast, male deaths are more frequently registered due to links with inheritance, land, or pension claims.



In our community, people think that since a woman did not own property, they perceive that there is no reason to register her death. (Government Official, Kilimanjaro)



Socio-Cultural Norms and Attitudes:

Traditional views often undervalue the need to register female deaths. When a man dies, inheritance claims and disputes create a stronger need for a death certificate. In contrast, when a woman dies, even if she owned property, assets are usually transferred informally to her spouse, or immediate family if she was unmarried, unless a formal claim is specifically required. The death is handled informally through family or religious rites, without

obtaining a certificate, reinforcing the sex gap in registration.



People will follow up on inheritance because the father is known to own the assets, especially looking at our African or Tanzanian culture. That's why most people follow up on the men's certificates and not the women's. (Household member, Kilimanjaro)



Stigma or Fear Surrounding a Female Death:

Sensitive circumstances such as maternal deaths, unsafe abortions, or deaths resulting from gender-based violence can cause families to avoid registration due to shame or fear of repercussions. In such cases, the families may independently choose to keep the female death "off the record."



Perhaps someone dies in uncertain circumstances, how can you follow up on a death certificate. E.g. a pregnant woman dies visiting a traditional healer, will you have the courage to follow up the certificate? You'll be asked about the cause of death. (Government Official, Katavi)



Facilitators to Female Death Registration

Despite challenges, several enabling factors make successful death registration, especially for females—possible when information, support, and systems align.



Practical Needs and Legal Triggers: Families are most motivated to register a death when a tangible benefit depends on it, such as inheritance,

pension, or education loan access. These triggers make the process a priority.



Prior Knowledge and Exposure: Experience breeds confidence. Families who have previously interacted with RITA or seen others complete the process

know what to expect and are less intimidated. Education and prior exposure transform registration from a confusing bureaucracy into a routine task.



Family and Community Support: Families are most motivated to register a death when a tangible benefit depends on it, such as inheritance,

pension, or education loan access. These triggers make the process a priority.



They (RITA and district staff) didn't ask for a bribe; they just told me what to correct and [to] come back. It made me trust that it was doable. (Household member, Kilimanjaro)



Proactive Local Leadership: Active ward and village executive officers, along with community and religious leaders, bridge knowledge gaps.

Their guidance, especially when offered at funerals or community meetings helps normalize female death registration as both a right and a responsibility.



Supportive and Responsive Officials: Where

RITA or council staff are respectful, patient, and corruption-free, families especially those registering female deaths feel confident continuing the process. Positive service experiences convert skeptics into advocates.

Recommendations

Improving the registration of female deaths in Tanzania requires strengthening both the civil registration system and the social environment in which families make decisions. While norms and perceptions influence how families prioritize registering deaths, this policy brief makes clear that administrative procedures and access barriers remain core drivers of the sex gap in death registration. Progress will therefore require addressing procedural constraints and community awareness together.

Simplifying registration procedures is an essential first step. Families frequently struggle with unclear steps, indirect costs, and lengthy processes—barriers that are especially challenging when a female dies at home without facility-issued documentation. Streamlining forms, removing upfront fees, and ensuring proactive follow-up by ward and village officers can significantly reduce these hurdles and increase the likelihood that female deaths are registered.

Integrating death registration into existing government workflows further strengthens the system. Linking registration to routine processes such as facility discharge, burial permit issuance and MPDSR reviews ensures that deaths are captured automatically rather than relying on families to initiate the process only when legal or financial needs arise. MPDSR is a strong entry point for improving death registration because it requires every maternal death—whether in a facility or at home—to be formally identified, documented, and reviewed. Linking MPDSR to civil registration ensures these deaths are consistently captured and reduces the burden on families, improving completeness for female deaths. This approach creates a more consistent, equitable pathway for documenting deaths by sex and reduces the risk of female deaths being missed.

At the community level, targeted outreach is needed to increase awareness of the importance of registering female deaths. Funerals, women's groups, and village meetings emerged as trusted touchpoints where families can be informed, supported, and encouraged to complete registration. Messaging from religious leaders, community officers, and women's networks can help shift the perception that female deaths carry less administrative value. When

combined with accessible, supportive local services—including assisted digital entry points—families are more willing and able to register deaths regardless of sex.

Taken together, simplified procedures, integrated government workflows, and sex-responsive community communication offer a practical path to reducing disparities and ensuring that every death—male or female—is counted.

Mitigating Steps and Implications for Use

Users of this brief should treat the quantitative indicators (completeness and timeliness) as directional (showing clear gaps and trends) rather than exact population estimates. Where possible, combine these findings with routine facility and administrative records, and prioritize pilot implementation with built-in monitoring (coverage, timeliness and equity disaggregation by sex and age). Future evaluations should incorporate representative household surveys or quasi-experimental designs to quantify impacts of decentralization, assisted eRITA, and service-integration interventions on female death registration.

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