



## In Malawi, gender gaps persist despite popular support for equal opportunity

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 152 | Happy Mickson Kayuni**

### Summary

From a legal perspective, Malawi has made tremendous progress toward eliminating discrimination against women. In addition to passing the Gender Equality Act (2012), the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act (2006), and the Deceased Estates (Wills, Inheritance and Protection) Act (2011), the government has demonstrated its commitment by embracing gender mainstreaming in policy decisions, legislation, and development plans and programs (Kalinde, 2013; Amundsen & Kayuni, 2016; Dulani & Kayuni, 2014). Parliamentary election results reflected similar progress as the number of female members of Parliament (MPs) increased steadily from 5.2% in 1994 to 22.3% in 2009.

But this electoral progress came to halt in the 2014 parliamentary elections, in which the number of female MPs dropped to 16.7%. And according to the Gender Joint Sector Strategic Plan (2013-2017), women occupy less than a quarter of decision-making positions in the civil service (Government of Malawi, 2013).

How do Malawians feel about equality and opportunities for women? A special module on gender in Afrobarometer's Round 7 survey in Malawi sheds light on citizens' perceptions and expectations.

While Malawians express support for equal rights for women when it comes to owning land and getting a job, gender-based discrimination is not a rare experience, according to survey respondents. Many – but far from all – Malawians say girls and women already have access to the same life opportunities as boys and men. Despite the majority view that women should have the same chance as men to be elected, Malawian women continue to trail their male counterparts in engaging in political activities. Overall, survey results suggest a need for strategic and better-coordinated efforts to empower women to become active in politics, as the environment seems conducive to their support.

### Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in Africa. Six rounds of surveys were completed in up to 37 African countries between 1999 and 2016, and Round 7 surveys are being conducted in 2016/2017. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

For Round 7, the Afrobarometer team in Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Malawi, interviewed 1,200 adult Malawians in December 2016 and January 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys have been conducted in Malawi in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, and 2014.

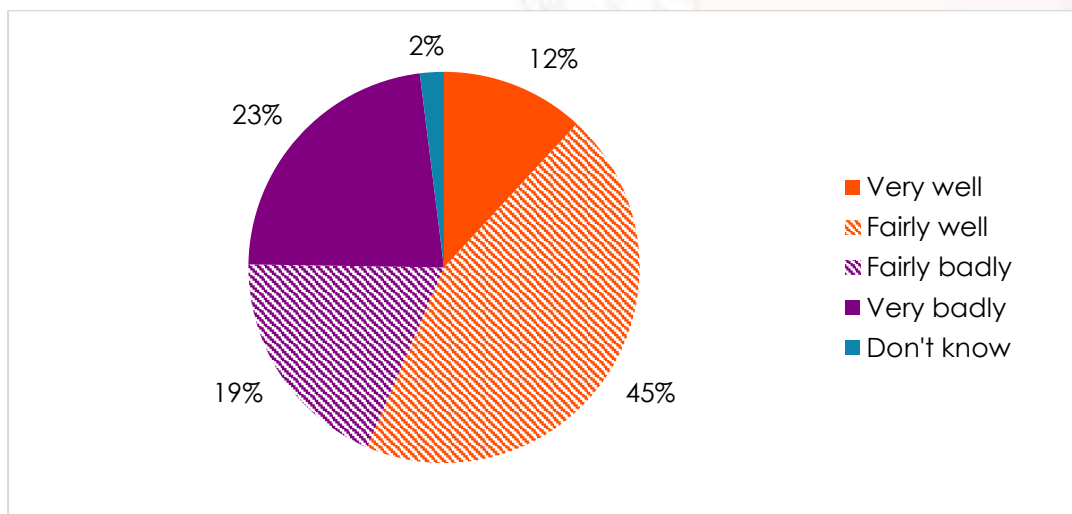
## Key findings

- A majority (57%) of Malawians applauded the government's performance in promoting equality and opportunities for women, but only half (50%) of respondents see real progress on these issues in recent years.
- Strong majorities of Malawians say women should have the same rights as men to own and inherit land (80%), to get a job (68%), and to be elected to political office (72%).
- Regarding current realities, a majority of Malawians say that girls/women do have access to the same life opportunities as boys/men when it comes to getting an education (75%), earning an income (62%), get a paying job (66%), and own/inherit land (62%).
- More than nine of 10 respondents (95%) say wife-beating is "never justified."
- More than one in five Malawian women (22%) say they experienced gender-based discrimination in the past year – double the proportion among men (9%).
- Malawian women are less likely than their male counterparts to engage in political activities, such as discussing politics (39% of women vs. 56% of men who do so at least "occasionally"), joining others to raise an issue (23% vs. 28% in the past year), attending a campaign rally (49% vs. 63%), and contacting an MP (5% vs. 15%).

## Equality and opportunities for women

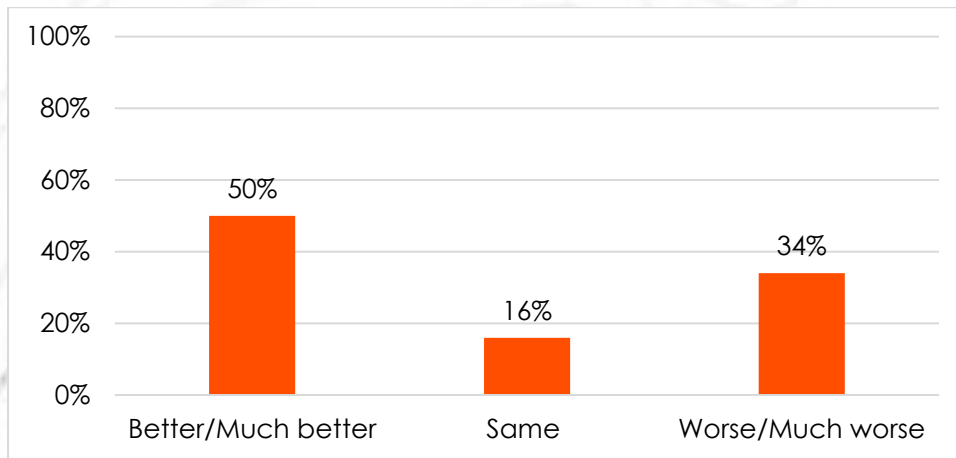
A majority of Malawians approve of the government's efforts to promote opportunities and equality for women: 57% describe its performance as "fairly" or "very" good (Figure 1). However, citizens are more divided as to whether there has been real progress on women's rights in recent years: 50% say things are "better" or "much better," while the other half say they are "worse" or "much worse" (34%) or have stayed about the same (16%) (Figure 2).

**Figure 1: Government performance in promoting opportunities and equality for women | Malawi | 2017**



**Respondents were asked** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Promoting opportunities and equality for women?

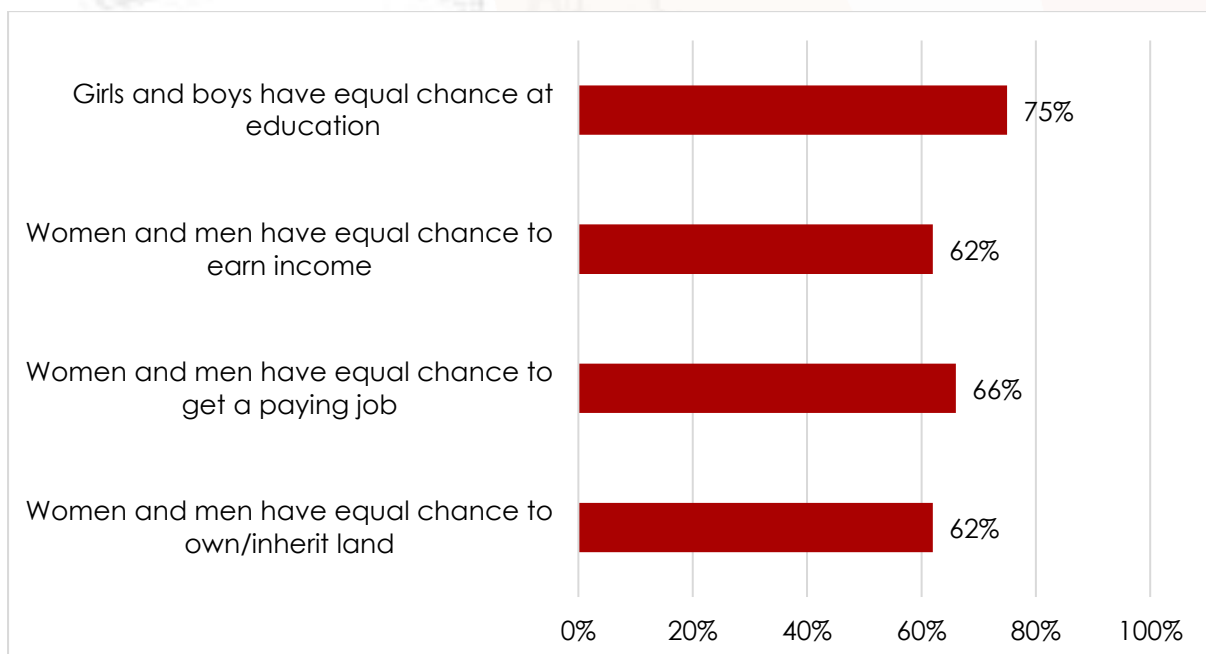
**Figure 2: Progress on equal opportunities and treatment for women | Malawi | 2017**



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me if the following things are worse or better now than they were a few years ago, or are they about the same: Equal opportunities and treatment for women?

Asked about access to certain life opportunities, three-fourths (75%) of Malawians say that girls and boys have an equal chance to get an education. Somewhat weaker majorities “agree” or “strongly agree” that women and men have an equal chance to earn an income (62%), to get a paying job (66%), and to own and inherit land (66%) – in each case leaving more than three in 10 respondents who assert that gender equality has not yet been achieved on these issues (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Equal access to life opportunities | Malawi | 2017**



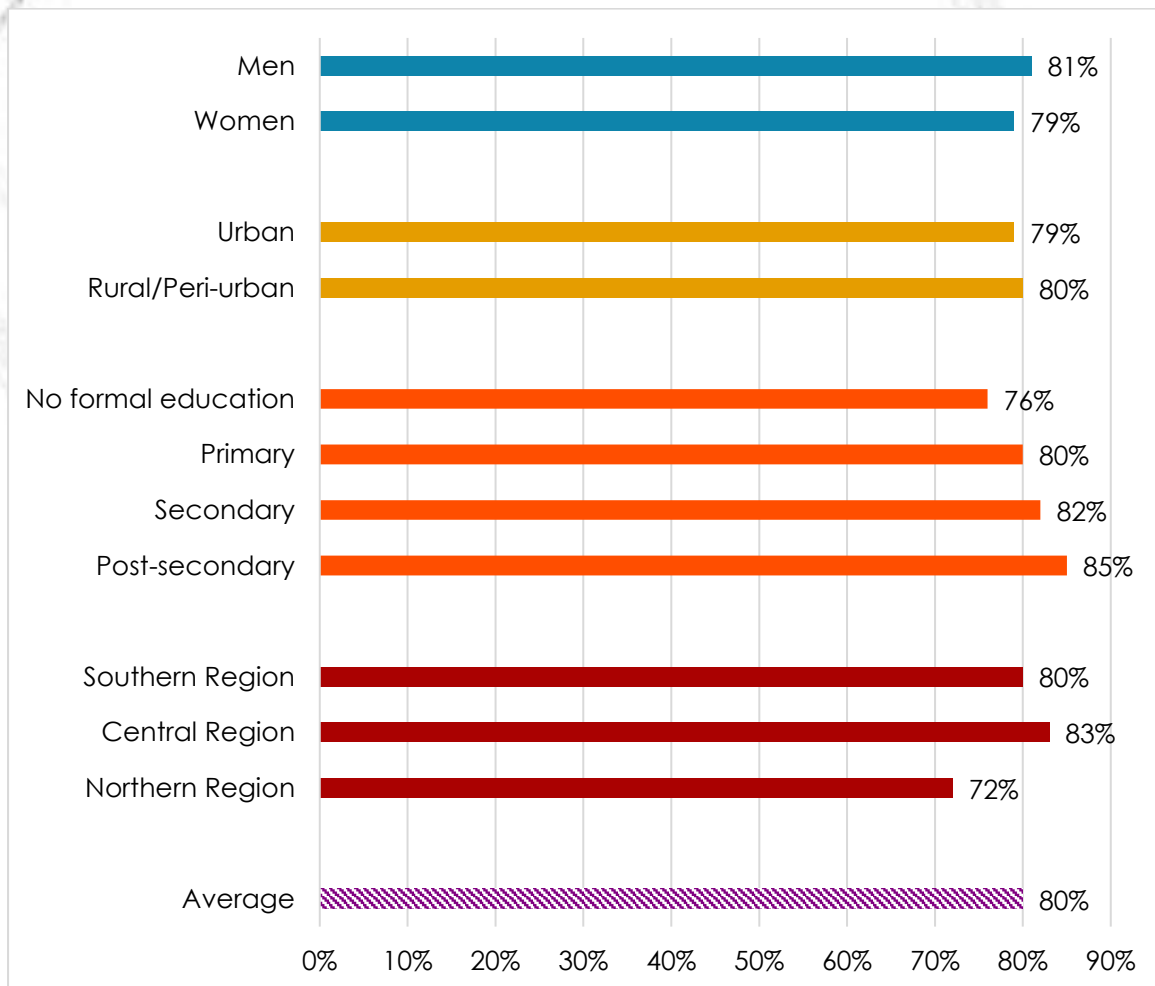
**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say: In our country today:

- Girls and boys have equal opportunities to get an education?
- Women and men have equal opportunities to earn an income?
- Women and men have equal opportunities to get a job that pays a wage or salary?
- Women and men have equal opportunities to own and inherit land?

(% who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

As to which rights and opportunities women *should* have, Malawians express strong support for gender equality in land ownership and jobs. Eight in 10 respondents agree – including 50% who “strongly agree” – that women should have the same rights as men to own and inherit land (Figure 4). Support for equality in land ownership is equally strong among men and women, in urban as well as rural areas. Support increases with respondents' education level, ranging from 76% among those with no formal education to 85% among those with post-secondary qualifications. Although support for women to own and inherit land is high across the nation, it is weaker in the Northern Region (72%) than in the Central (83%) and Southern (80%) regions.

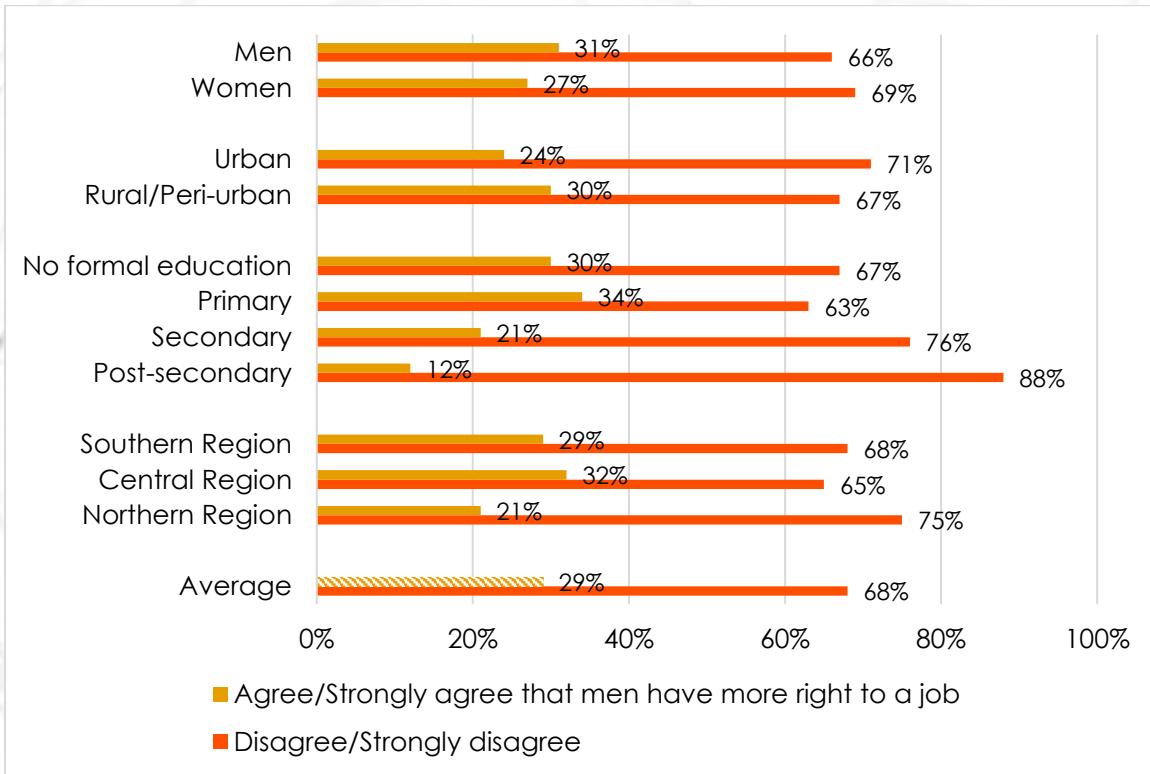
**Figure 4: Women's right to own and inherit land** | by gender, urban-rural residence, education, and region | Malawi | 2017



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say: Women should have the same rights as men to own and inherit land? (% who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

Similarly, more than two-thirds of Malawians support equal rights for women when it comes to getting employment: When asked whether men “should have more right to a job” when employment is scarce, 68% “disagree” or “disagree strongly” (Figure 5). Men (31%) and rural residents (31%) are slightly more likely to prioritize men in employment than are women (27%) and urban residents (24%), and again, support for equality is strongest among those with secondary or post-secondary education.

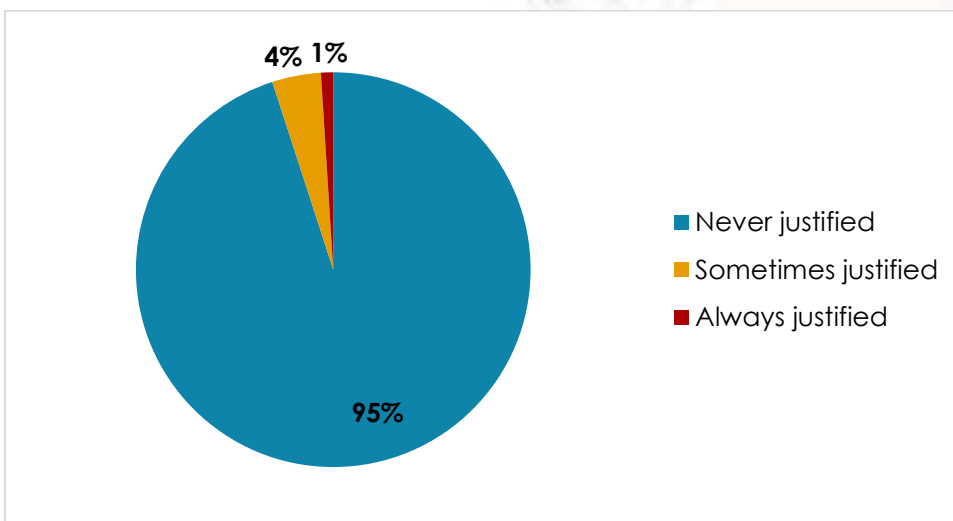
**Figure 5: Should men have priority when jobs are scarce?** | by gender, urban-rural residence, education, and region | Malawi | 2017



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say: When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women?

Also in line with popular support for equal treatment for women, Malawians overwhelmingly (95%) reject wife-beating as “never justified” (Figure 6). Men are no more likely than women to find this practice justifiable.

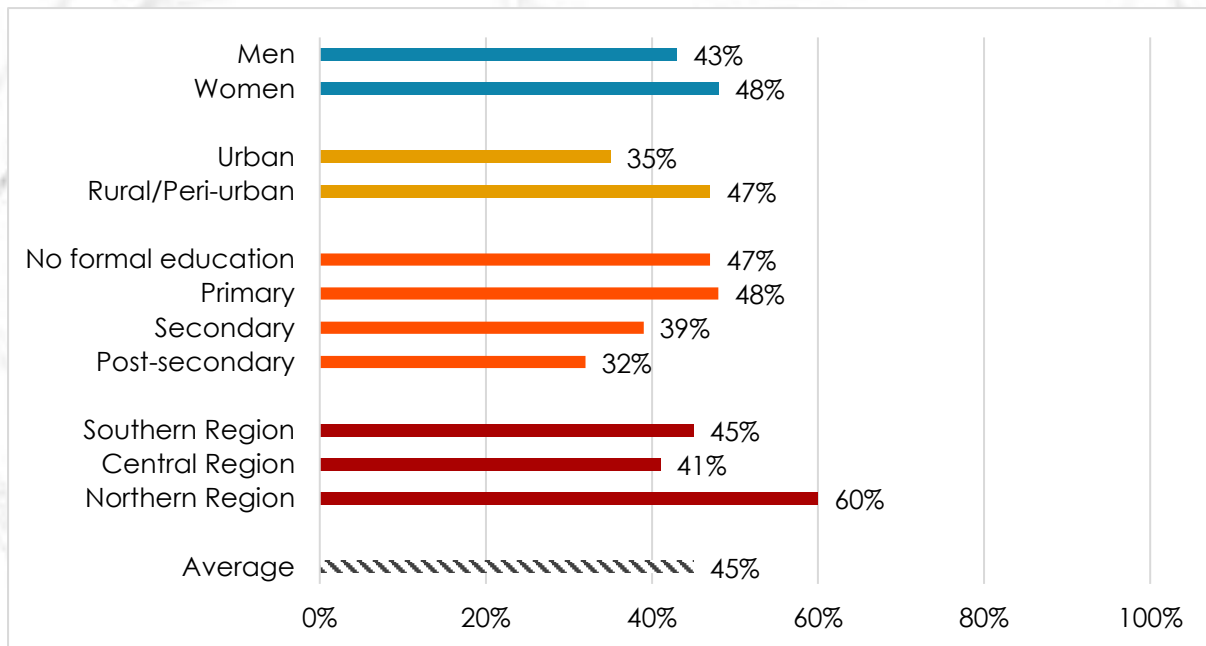
**Figure 6: Wife-beating never justified** | Malawi | 2017



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me for each of the following actions whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For a man to beat his wife?

Fewer than half (45%) of Malawians say that it is better for a family if a woman, rather than a man, has the main responsibility for taking care of the home and children. Interestingly, more women (48%) than men (43%) support this view, which is also more prevalent among rural residents and among less-educated respondents (Figure 7).

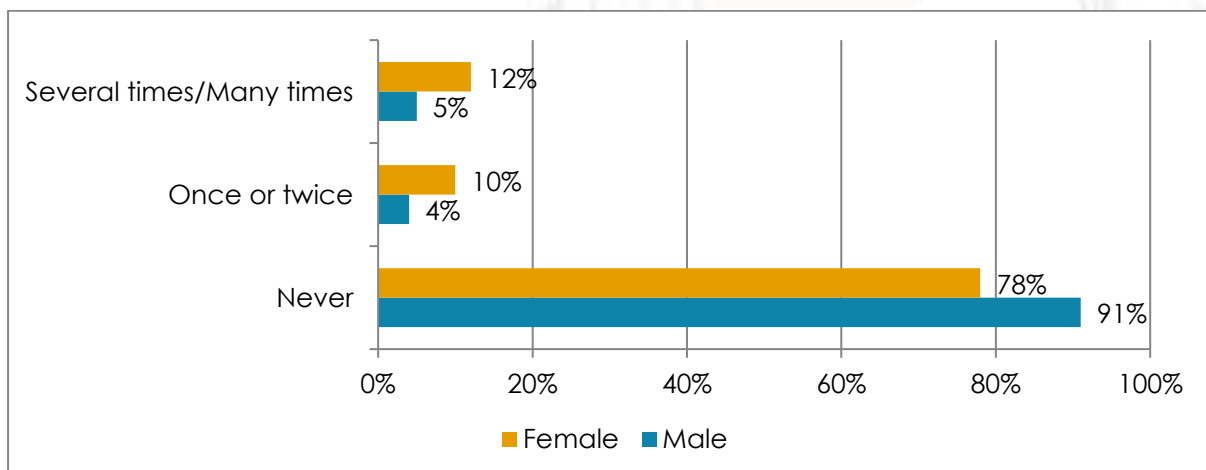
**Figure 7: Better if woman takes care of home and children?** | by gender, urban-rural residence, education, and region | Malawi | 2017



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say: In general, it is better for a family if a woman has the main responsibility for taking care of the home and children rather than a man? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

Despite widespread support for women's equality and rights, more than one in five Malawian women (22%) say they experienced gender-based discrimination during the previous year – more than twice the proportion of men (9%) (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Experience of gender discrimination** | by gender | Malawi | 2017



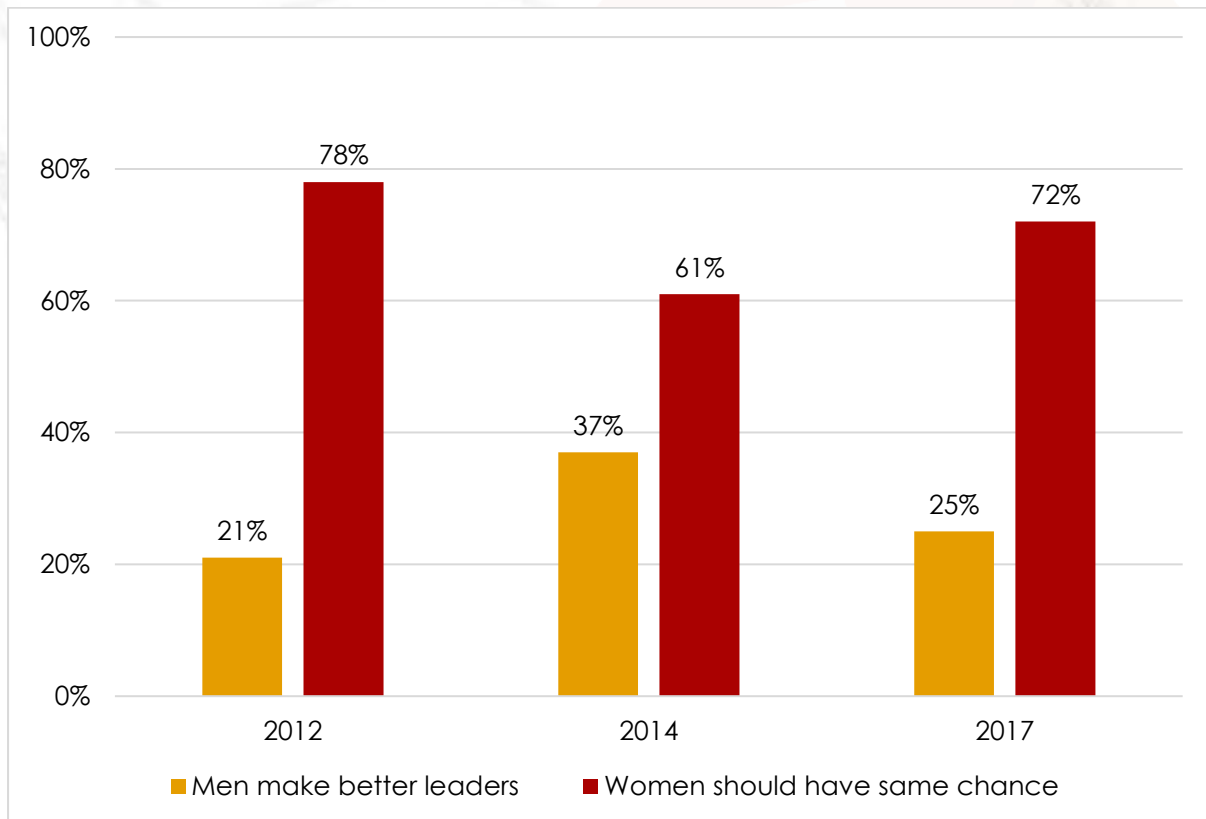
**Respondents were asked:** In the past year, how often, if at all, have you personally been discriminated against based on any of the following: Your gender?

### Support for women in political leadership

Mirroring support for women's rights in land ownership and employment, more than seven of 10 Malawians (72%) “agree” or “agree very strongly” than women should have the same chance as men of being elected to public office. This represents an 11-percentage-point increase compared to Afrobarometer's 2014 survey (61%), although it remains lower than in 2012 (78%) (Figure 9). One in four respondents (25%) maintain that men make better leaders and should be elected instead of women.

Men and women are equally likely to express support for women's political leadership. Remarkably, rural residents are significantly more likely than urbanites (74% vs. 59%) to endorse an equal chance for women – perhaps an indication that recent campaigns aimed at enhancing gender equality in politics have been more effectively packaged for rural than for urban areas. Again, education is associated with greater support for a fair shot for female candidates, ranging from 64% among those with no formal education to 77% of those with post-secondary education (Figure 10).

**Figure 9: Support for women's political leadership | Malawi | 2012-2017**

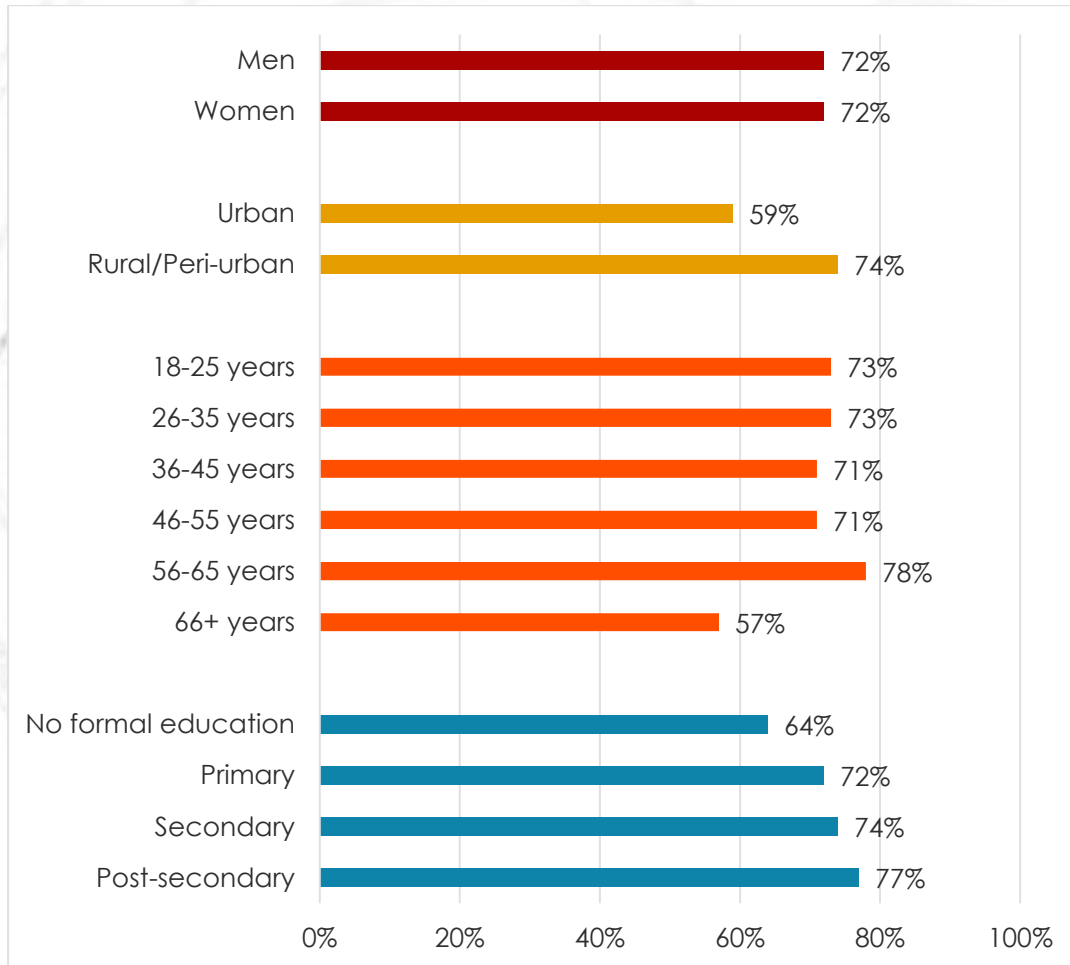


**Respondents were asked:** *Let's talk for a moment about the kind of society you would like to have in this country. Which of the following statements is closest to your view?*

*Statement 1: Men make better political leaders than women, and should be elected rather than women.*

*Statement 2: Women should have the same chance of being elected to political office as men. (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)*

**Figure 10: Support for women’s political leadership** | by gender, urban-rural residence, age, and education | Malawi | 2017



**Respondents were asked:** Let’s talk for a moment about the kind of society you would like to have in this country. Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Men make better political leaders than women, and should be elected rather than women.

Statement 2: Women should have the same chance of being elected to political office as men. (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” that women should have the same chance)

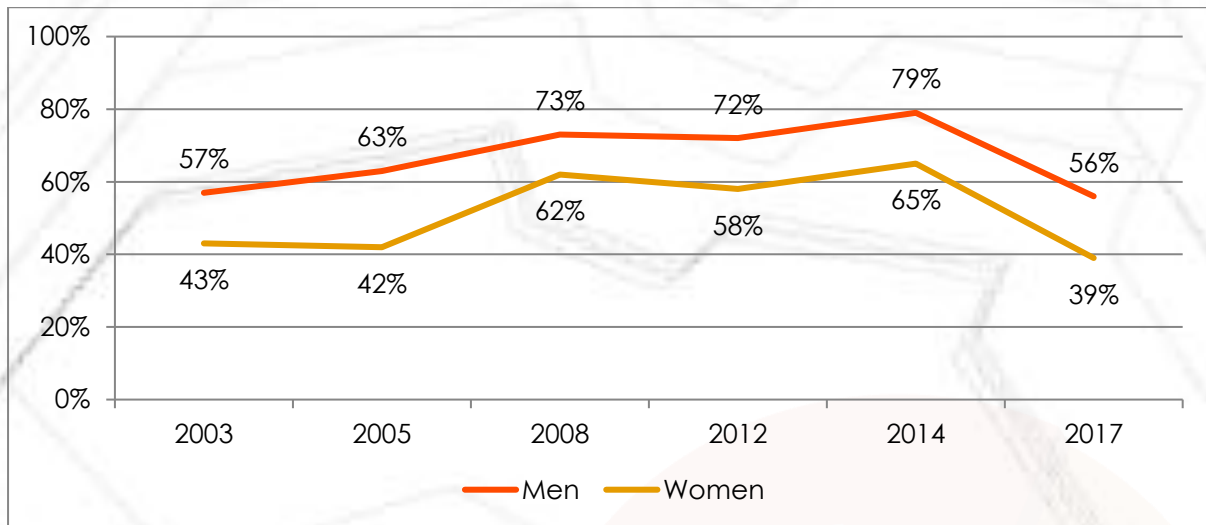
### Women lag in political activism

Despite popular support for an equal chance for women to be elected, Malawian women continue to report lower levels of political activity than men.

Since the 2003 survey, women have consistently lagged behind men in discussing politics with friends and relatives; in 2017, 39% of women say they do so “occasionally” or “frequently,” compared to 56% of men, a 17-percentage-point gap (Figure 11). For both genders, these proportions declined sharply in comparison to the 2014 survey, perhaps reflecting the fact that in 2014, Malawians were involved in local, parliamentary, and presidential elections, which was not the case in 2017.



**Figure 11: Participation in political discussion** | by gender | Malawi | 2003-2017

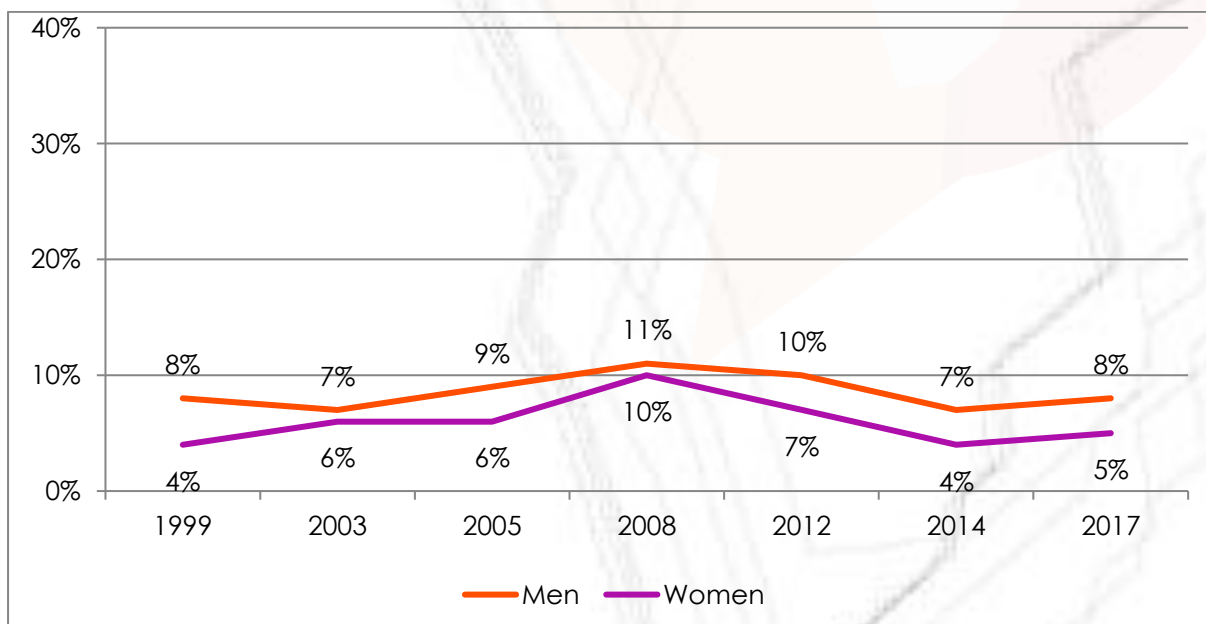


**Respondents were asked:** When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters: Never? Occasionally? Frequently? (% who say "frequently" or "occasionally")

With regard to joining a demonstration or protest march, the gender gap is small (within the survey's margin of error) but has been fairly consistent since 1999 (Figure 12).

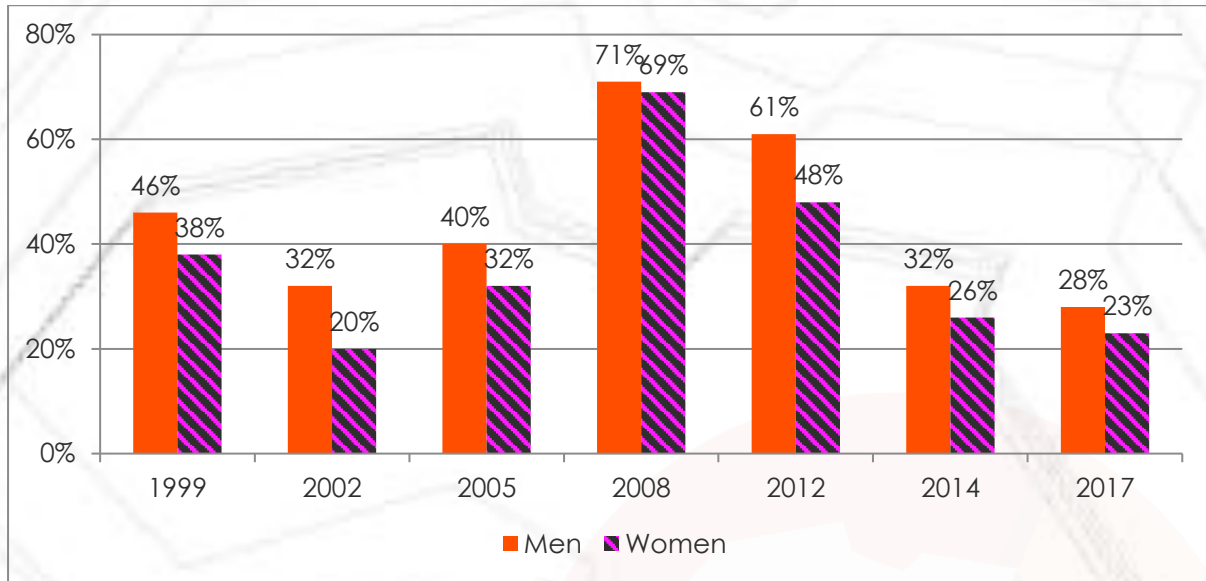
Similarly, women have consistently been somewhat less likely than men to join others in order to raise an issue that affects their community. In 2017, 23% of women say they did so at least once during the previous year, vs. 28% of men (Figure 13).

**Figure 12: Joining in a demonstration/protest march** | by gender | Malawi | 1999-2017



**Respondents were asked:** People sometimes take some action as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government. Please tell me whether you, personally, have: Participated in a demonstration or protest march during the past year? (% who say "once or twice," "a few times," or "often")

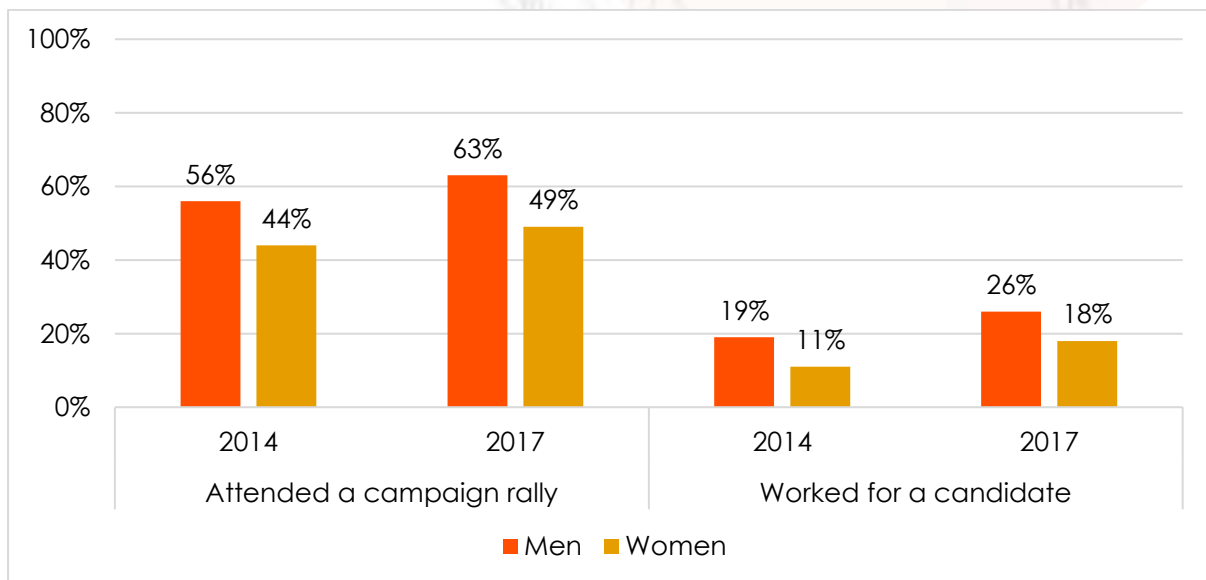
**Figure 13: Joining others to raise an issue** | by gender | Malawi | 1999-2017



**Respondents were asked:** People sometimes take some action as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government. Please tell me whether you, personally, have: Joined others in your community to request action from government during the past year? (% who say “once or twice,” “a few times,” or “often”)

While the proportions of women who attended a political campaign rally or worked for a political candidate increased in the 2017 survey, women continue to trail men on these indicators of political engagement (Figure 14). About half (49%) of women say they attended a rally during the 2014 campaign (the last national campaign before the 2017 survey), compared to 63% of men. Almost one in five women (18%) say they worked for a candidate, vs. 26% of men.

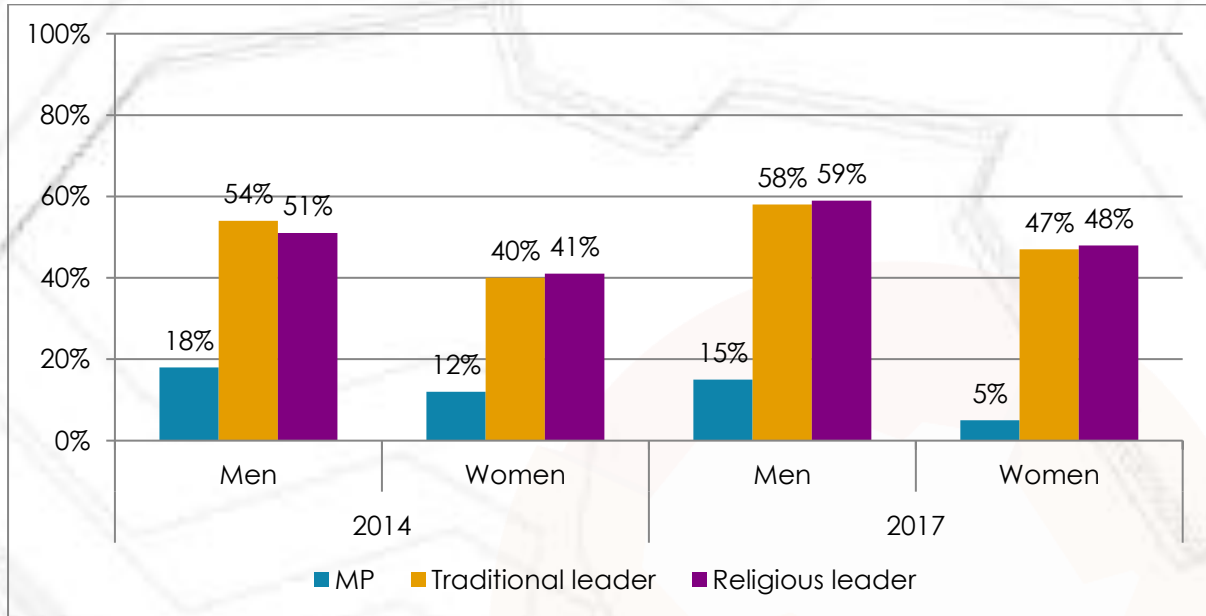
**Figure 14: Attending a campaign rally and working for a candidate** | by gender | Malawi | 2014-2017



**Respondents were asked:** Thinking about the last national election in [2009/2014], did you: Attend a campaign rally? Work for a candidate or party? (% who say “yes”)

In Malawi, men and women are about equally likely to contact traditional and religious leaders. Both genders are far less likely to contact members of Parliament (MPs): Only 5% of women say they did so in the year preceding the survey, vs. 15% of men (Figure 15).

**Figure 15: Contact with leaders** | by gender | Malawi | 2014-2017



**Respondents were asked:** During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views: A member of Parliament? Traditional leaders? Religious leaders? (% who say "once or twice," "several times," or "often")

### Conclusion

In Malawi, support for women's rights and opportunities is strong among both men and women, in rural as well as urban areas. Yet significant minorities – about one in three citizens – say gender equality is not yet a reality when it comes to getting a job or owning land, and gender-based discrimination still affects a substantial number of women.

Despite an ongoing campaign aimed at increasing women's political representation, women continue to lag behind men in political engagement. Strategic and well-coordinated efforts to empower women's participation may find fertile soil in Malawians' broad support for equality.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at [www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis](http://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis).

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