

Despite progressive laws, barriers to full gender equality persist in South Africa

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 324 | Dominique Dryding

Summary

Since May, for the first time in its history, half of South Africa's Cabinet ministers are women (World Economic Forum, 2019). And assessing women's economic participation, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment, the Global Gender Gap Index ranks South Africa 19th out of 149 countries (World Economic Forum, 2018).

But while these may be important markers on the path toward gender equality enshrined in the Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996), activists say they hardly ensure systematic progress or tangible benefits for most women (Patel, 2019). Their point is backed by the country's high rates of gender-based violence (GBV), disproportionately high HIV prevalence among women, higher female unemployment, and a lack of representation of women in top management positions (Commission for Gender Equality, 2015).

In this dispatch, we use Afrobarometer data to explore South Africans' perceptions of the state of gender equality. Findings suggest that a majority of both men and women think equality is already a reality when it comes to education, earning a living, and owning or inheriting land. But fewer than half think equal opportunities and treatment for women have improved in recent years. And only half of men endorse gender equality when it comes to getting a job.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer directs a pan-African, nonpartisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys in 2019/2020 are planned in at least 35 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and Plus 94 Research, interviewed 1,800 adult South Africans in August and September 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, and 2015.

Key findings

- Large majorities of South Africans say that boys and girls have an equal chance at getting an education (83%) and that women and men have an equal chance to earn an income (77%) and to own or inherit land (76%). Men and women differ little in their assessments of these opportunities.

- About one in eight South Africans (12%) say they experienced discrimination based on their gender during the year preceding the survey. Men and women are about equally likely to report discrimination.
- Four in five South Africans (81%) say it is never justified for a man to beat his wife. But the youngest respondents (aged 18-35 years) are least likely to categorically reject domestic violence.
- Fewer than half of South Africans think that equal opportunities and treatment for women have improved in recent years (46%) and that the government is doing a good job of promoting gender equality (46%).
- Three-fourths of South Africans say women should have the same chance as men to be elected to political office (76%) and the same right to own or inherit land (76%). Support for equal opportunity in the job market is considerably weaker (57%), especially among men (49%).
- A majority of both men (53%) and women (55%) say families are better off if a woman, rather than a man, has the main responsibility of taking care of the home and children.

Perceptions of the state of equality

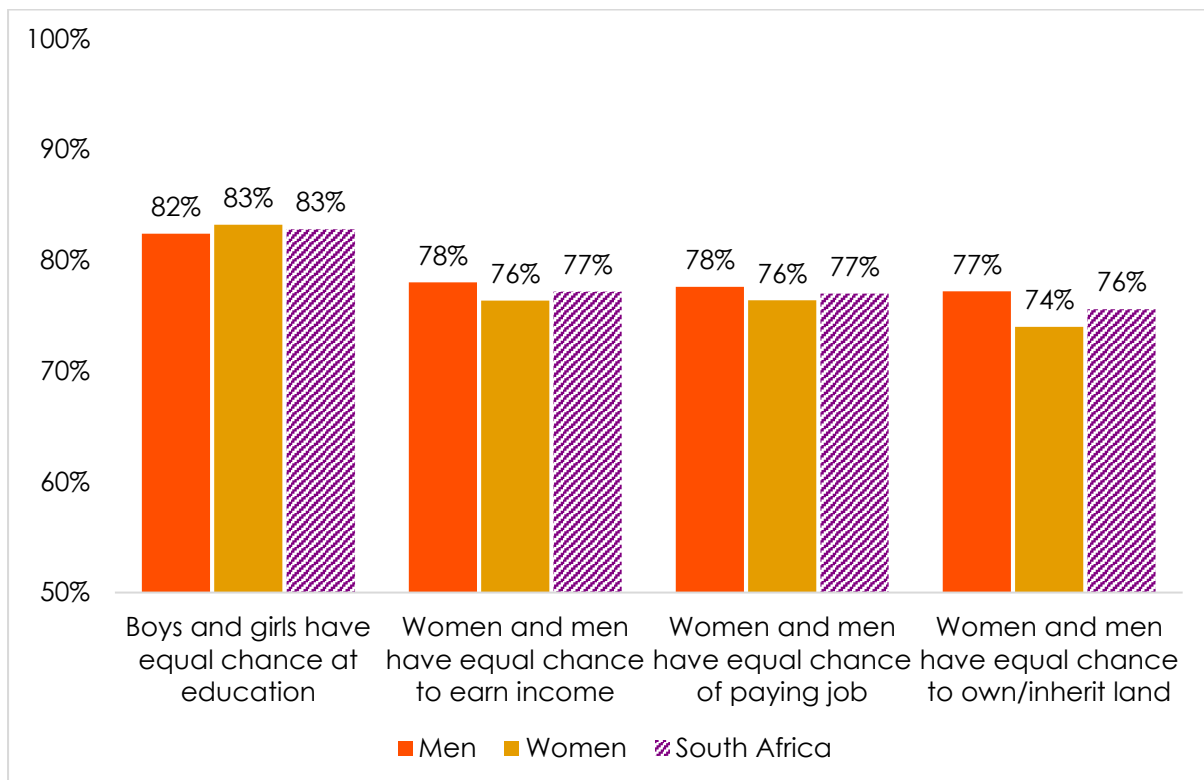
In addition to being enshrined in the Constitution, gender equality is protected and promoted by South Africa's Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act of 2000, Employment Equity Act of 1998, Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Act of 2007, and Domestic Violence Act of 1998, among others. Even so, the South African Human Rights Commission (2017) notes that a number of challenges still hinder the attainment of gender equality in the country, including high levels of GBV, persistent harmful traditional practices, and continued discrepancies in gender representation in top management in both the public and private spheres.

Beyond the state's tracking of compliance with laws, public perceptions can be an important measure of the impact of progressive gender legislation in closing the gender gap. A majority of South Africans perceive the state of gender equality in the country as good, and men and women differ little in their assessments (Figure 1).

More than four in five men and women (82% and 83%, respectively) "agree" or "strongly agree" that boys and girls have an equal chance of getting an education. And about three-quarters of respondents say men and women have an equal chance to earn an income (77%), to get a paying job (77%), and to own or inherit land (76%).

While these numbers might be considered encouraging, they still leave about a quarter of the population who see persistent inequalities between men and women.

Figure 1: Perceptions of gender equality | by gender | South Africa | 2018



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? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

In our country today, girls and boys have equal opportunities to get an education.

In our country today, women and men have equal opportunities to earn an income.

In our country today, women and men have equal opportunities to get a job that pays a wage or salary.

In our country today, women and men have equal opportunities to own and inherit land.

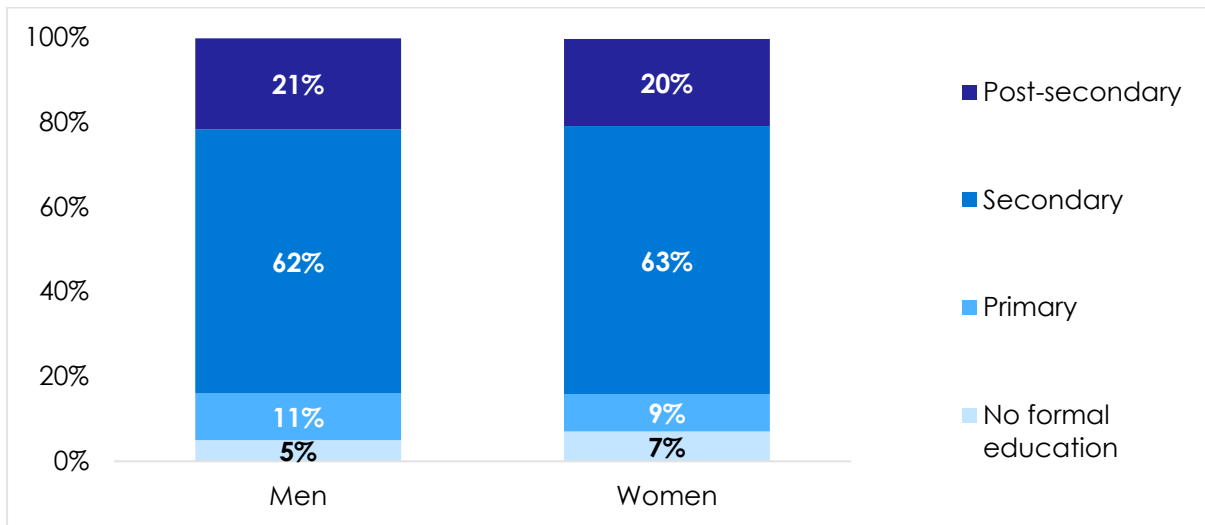
Experiences of gender (in)equality

Educational disparities, gender-based discrimination and violence, and unequal gender roles are among the many ways in which gender inequality can be experienced. While South Africa does well in ensuring equal access to education for boys and girls, citizens' perceptions suggest that the country continues to face challenges on other fronts.

Education

Education is a key component to unlocking the potential of a country, as well as allowing individuals to flourish. According to South Africa's Commission for Gender Equality (2018), more girls than boys now finish secondary school and enter institutions of higher learning. This aligns closely with Afrobarometer findings that South African men and women are about equally likely to have completed secondary school (62% men, 63% women) and some form of post-secondary education (21% and 20%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Level of education | by gender | South Africa | 2018

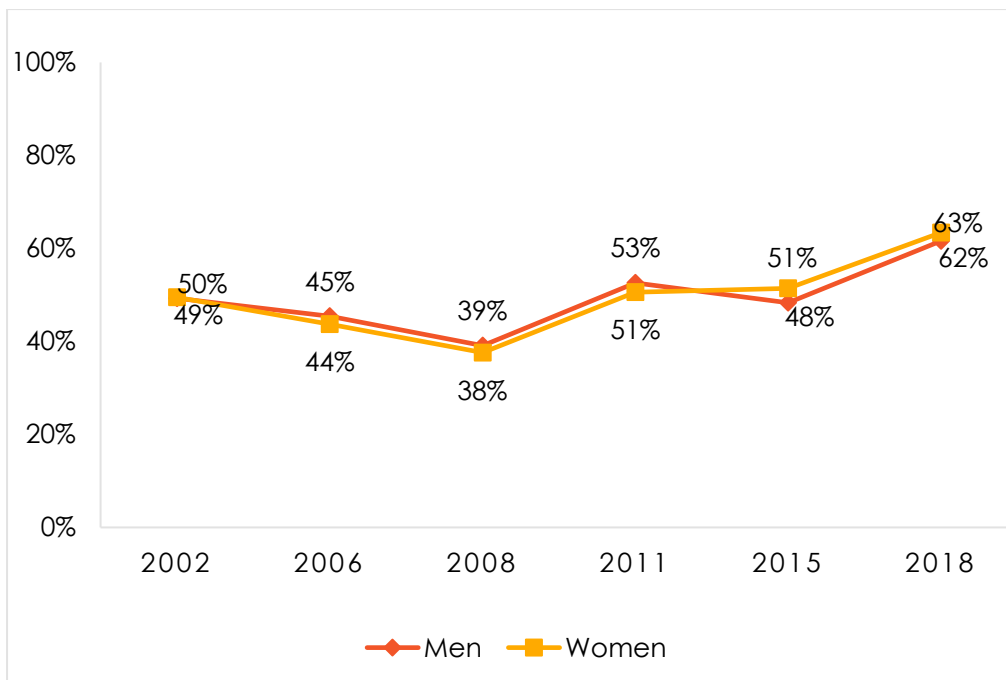


Respondents were asked: What is your highest level of education?

Unequal treatment, discrimination, and GBV

More than six in 10 South Africans say people are “often” or “always” treated unequally under the law, the highest level of this perception in Afrobarometer surveys in the country since 2002. But women and men have consistently reported almost identical perceptions of unequal treatment (Figure 3). This suggests that the steep increase (more than 20 percentage points since 2008) in perceptions of unequal treatment may reflect a wider public awareness and experience of economic and social (rather than primarily gender) inequality since the global economic recession of 2008.

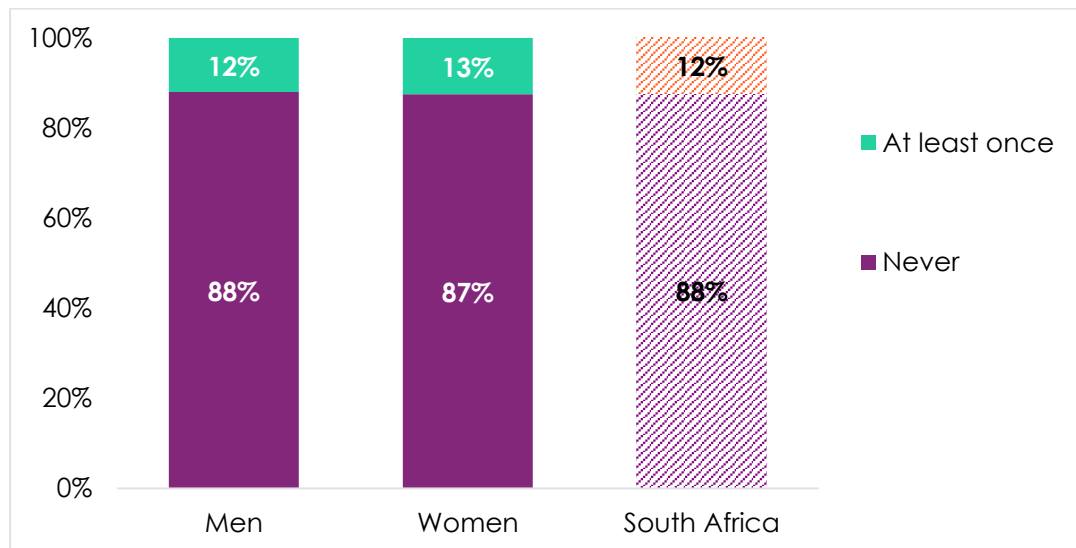
Figure 3: Unequal treatment under the law | by gender | South Africa | 2002-2018



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, are people treated unequally under the law? (% who say “often” or “always”]

Far fewer South Africans report experiencing discrimination based on their gender. About one in eight women (13%) and men (12%) say they suffered discrimination during the year preceding the survey (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Experience of discrimination based on gender | by gender | South Africa | 2018



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

One major indicator of gender inequality in South Africa is gender-based violence. According to the South African Police Service (2018), a woman is murdered every three hours in South Africa. Statistics South Africa (2018) reports that the country has one of the highest rates of sexual violence in the world, and the World Health Organization (2016) estimated South Africa's femicide rate at 12.1 per 100,000, 4.8 times the global average.

The Afrobarometer survey asked South Africans about one aspect of GBV, physical violence by a domestic partner, or "wife-beating." Eight out of 10 respondents (81%) say it is "never justified" for a man to beat his wife, while five in 10 (19%) say it is "sometimes" or "always" justified. Men are somewhat less likely than women to consider physical violence against one's partner unjustifiable (78% vs. 84%) (Figure 5).

Respondents' education level and residency location (urban vs. rural) make little difference in their views on wife-beating, but their age does, in a surprising way: Younger citizens are less likely to agree that beating your wife is never justified. Just 79% of those aged 18-35 reject wife-beating for any reason, compared to 82% of middle-aged and 88% of older respondents.

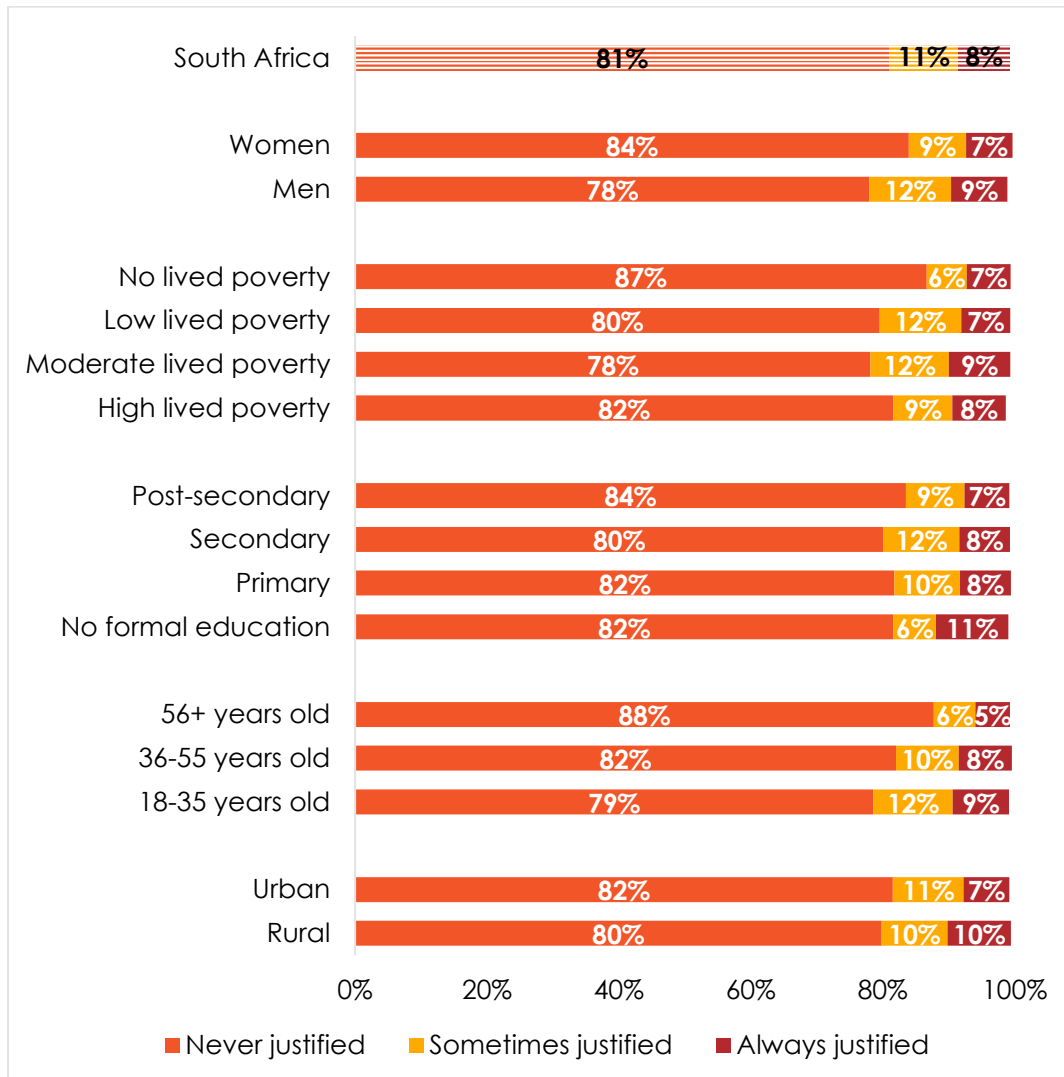
The economically best-off respondents are more likely to reject wife-beating (87%) than their counterparts with higher levels of "lived poverty"¹ (78%-82%).

Despite widespread agreement that beating your wife is never justified, South Africa's 2016 Demographic and Health Survey reported that 21% of women have experienced physical

¹ Afrobarometer assesses respondents' "lived poverty" based on responses to the following questions: "Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?"

violence by a partner (Statistics South Africa, 2017). Further, the 2010 Gauteng Gender Violence Indicators Project found that only 3.9% of respondents who had experienced gender-based violence had reported it to the police (Gender Links, 2011).

Figure 5: Is wife-beating justifiable? | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2018

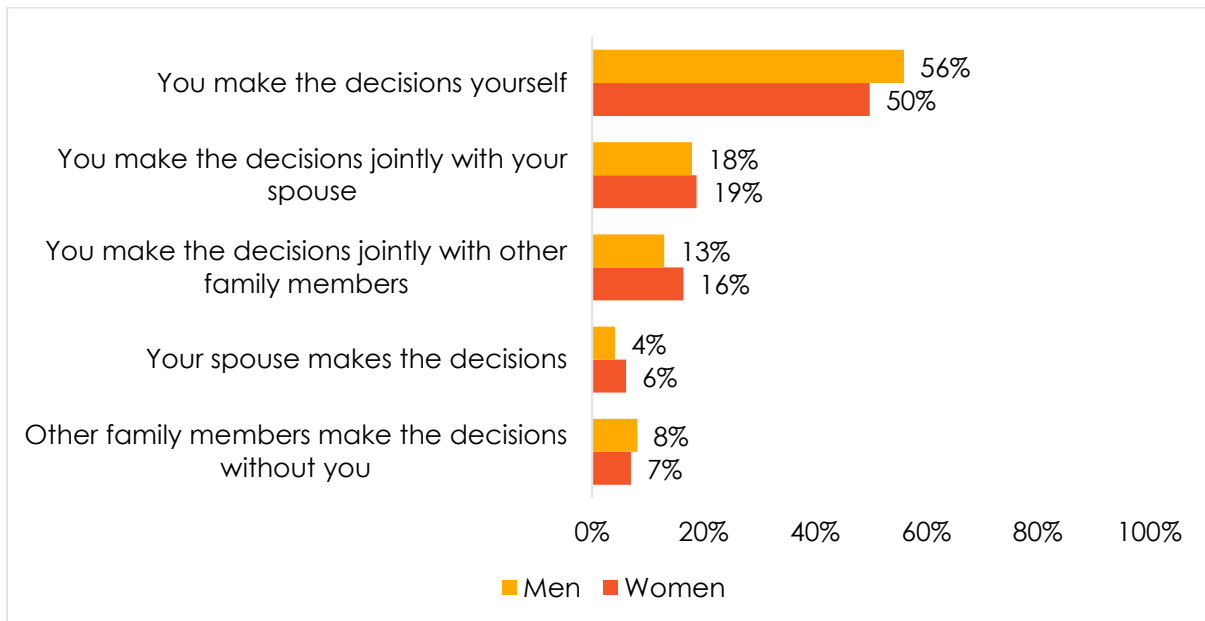


Respondents were asked: Please tell me for each of the following actions whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For a man to beat his wife?

Household decisions

When it comes to monetary decision-making within the household, men are slightly more likely than women (56% vs. 50%) to say they make these decisions themselves (Figure 6). About one in five (18% of men, 19% of women) say they make monetary decisions jointly with their spouse, while about one in 20 (4% of men, 6% of women) say their spouse makes the decisions.

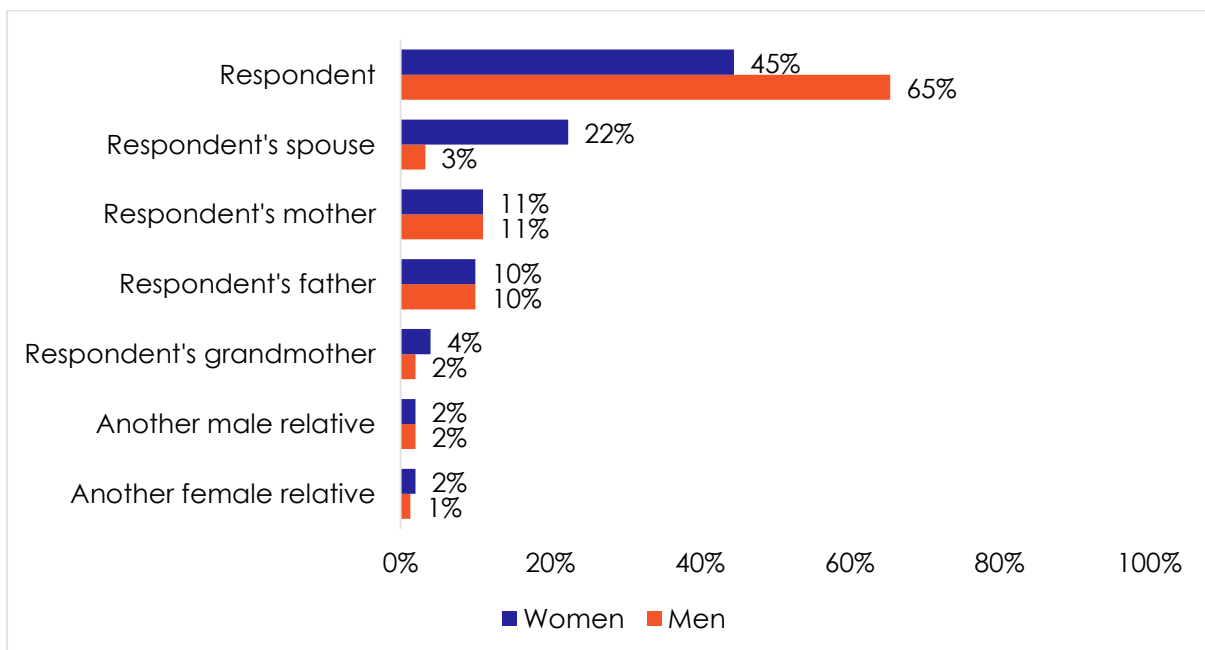
Figure 6: In charge of monetary decisions in the household | by gender | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked: What is the main way that decisions are made about how to use any money that you have or earn, for example from a job, a business, selling things or other activities?

Despite perceptions that both women and men have financial decision-making power in the household, men are far more likely than women to see themselves as head of the household, 65% vs. 45% (Figure 7). One in five women (22%) say their spouse heads the household, compared to just 3% of men.

Figure 7: Head of household | by gender | South Africa | 2018



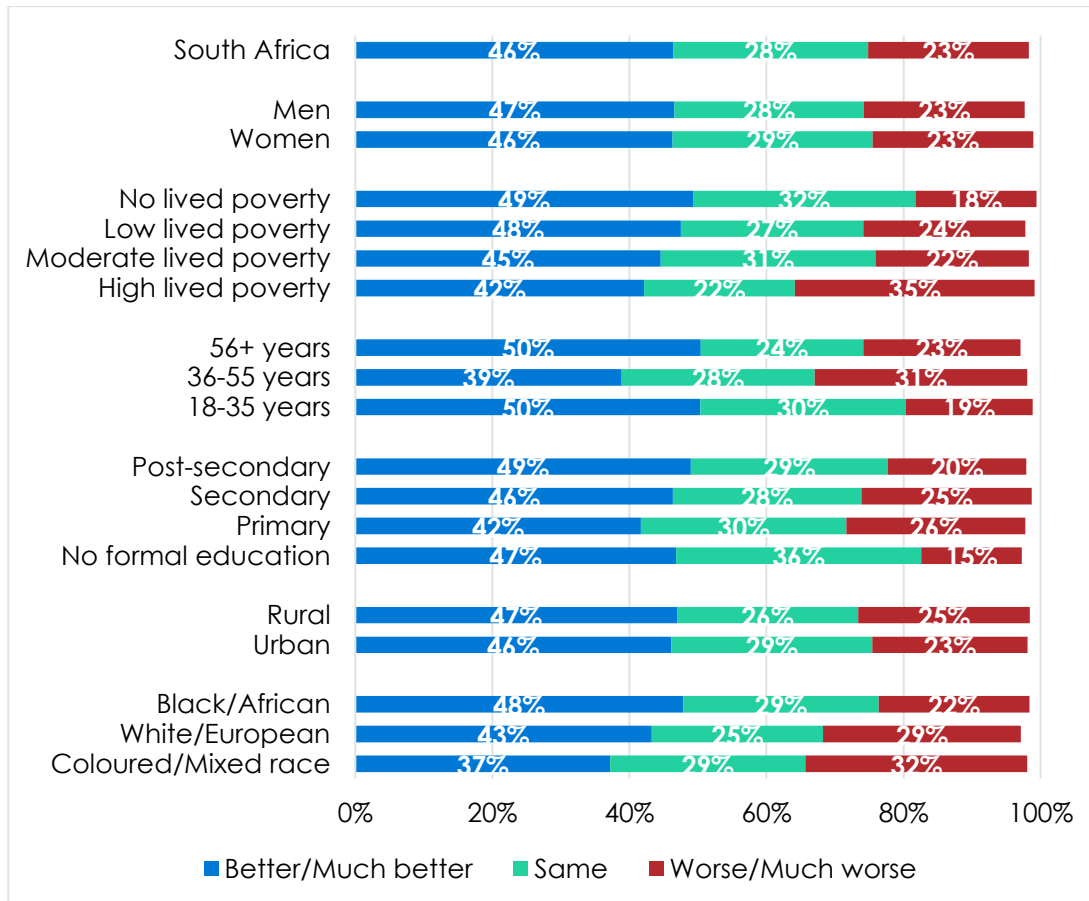
Respondents were asked: Who is the head of this household, that is, the person who has primary responsibility for making decisions on behalf of the household?

Trends and government performance in improving equal opportunity

Despite a handful of new laws over the past two decades promoting gender equality, fewer than half (46%) of South Africans believe that equal opportunities and treatment for women have improved compared to “a few years ago” (Figure 8). More than half of all citizens say things have gotten worse (23%) or have not changed (28%).

Women and men hold the same views on progress toward gender equality. Respondents who are economically better off (48%-49%) and those with a post-secondary education (49%) are somewhat more likely to perceive improvement, perhaps because women in these groups have greater access to jobs and other opportunities than poorer and less-educated women.

Figure 8: Have equal opportunities and treatment for women improved? | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2018



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?

Respondents in the middle age category (36-55 years) are less likely to see gains (39%) than younger and older respondents (both 50%, including 55% of those above age 65). Black/African citizens (48%) are more positive about improvements than members of other racial groups (37%-43%).

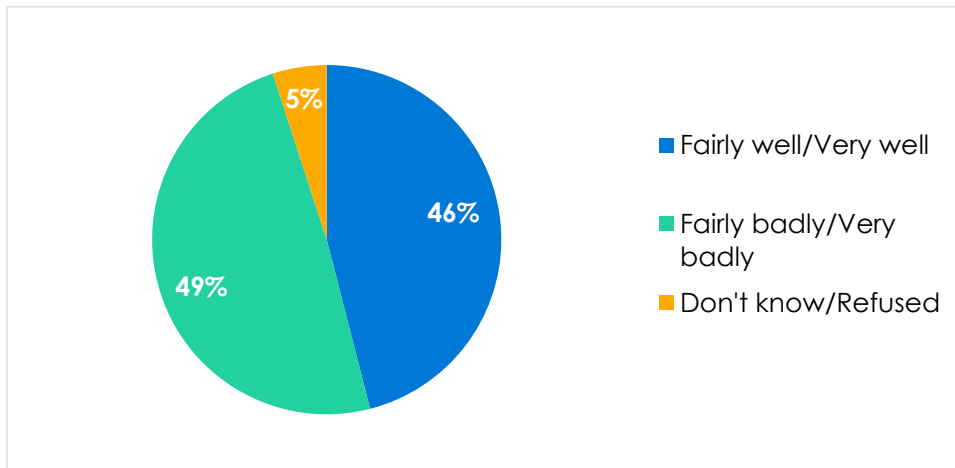
Rural and urban respondents offer similar assessments of progress toward gender equality, despite well-established differences in lived reality and opportunities (see, for example, Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (2016) regarding early and forced

marriages, virginity testing, and female genital mutilation and Mlambo (2018) on causes of rural-to-urban migration).

Views are also mixed on the government's performance in promoting equal opportunities and treatment for women. About half (49%) of South Africans say the government is doing "fairly badly" or "very badly" on this score, while 46% think it is doing a good job (Figure 9).

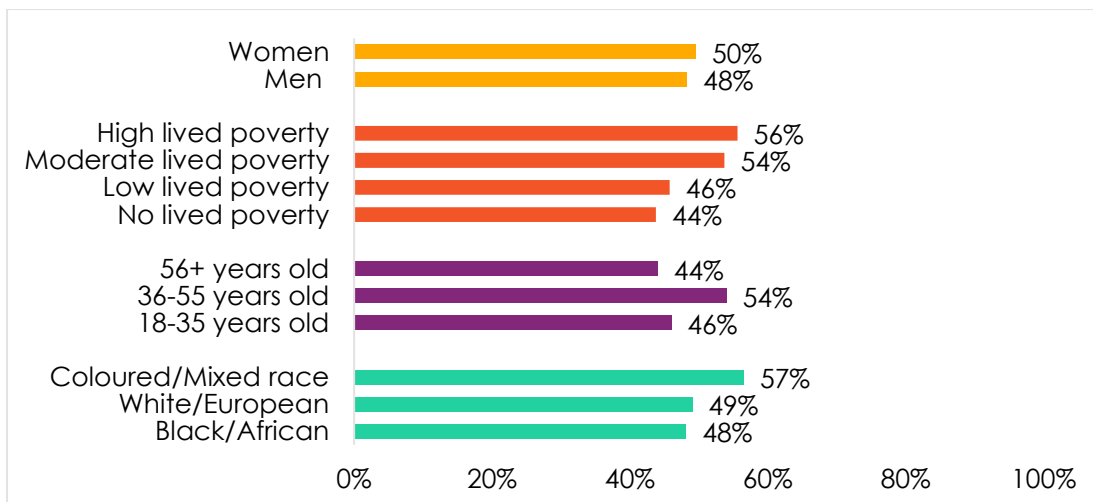
Disapproval of the government's performance is more common among poorer respondents (54%-56% of those with moderate or high lived poverty), those in the middle age range (54%), and Coloured/mixed-race respondents (57%) (Figure 10). Respondents' gender, education level, and urban vs. rural residency location don't seem to make much difference in their evaluation of the government's efforts.

Figure 9: Government performance on promoting gender equality | South Africa | 2018



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 10: Government performing badly on promoting gender equality | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2018



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? (% who say "fairly badly" or "very badly")

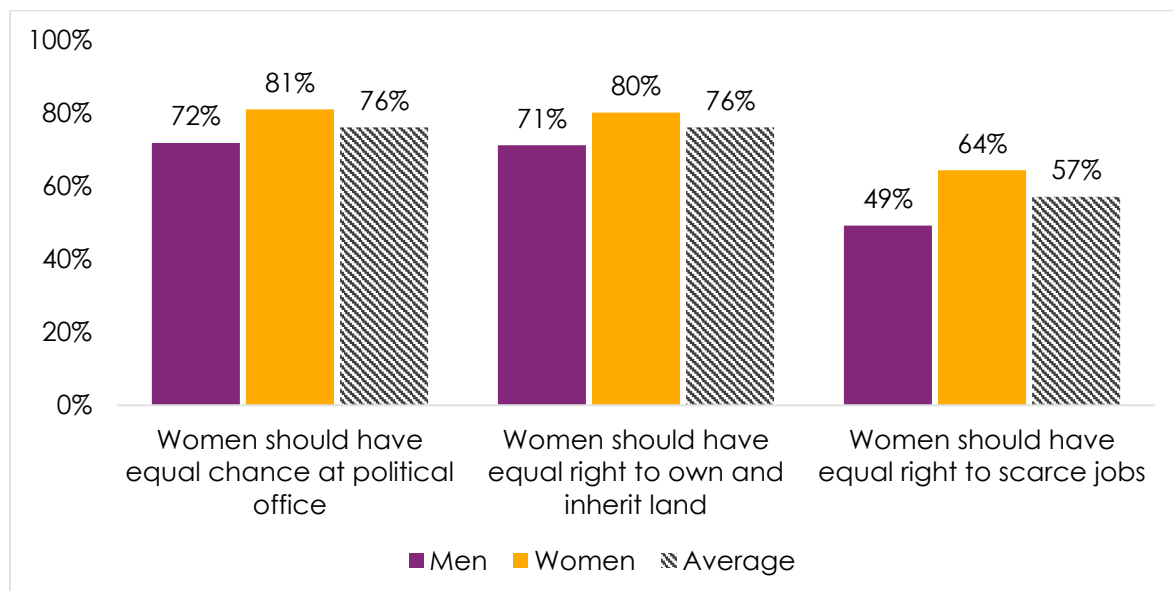
Support for gender equality

While popular assessments of the state of gender equality in South Africa are generally favourable, to what extent do citizens support working toward full equality enshrined in the Constitution? The Afrobarometer survey explores respondents' commitment to gender equality when it comes to running for political office, getting a job even in a tight labour market, owning and inheriting land, and caring for home and children.

Three in four South Africans (76%) "agree" or "strongly agree" that women should have the same chance as men to be elected to political office and to own and inherit land (Figure 11). A smaller majority (57%) affirm that, even when jobs are scarce, a woman should have the same right to a job as a man.

Men are less likely than women to endorse equality when it comes to political office (72% vs. 81%) and land (71% vs. 80%). With regard to getting a job, support among men drops below half (49%), compared to 64% among women.

Figure 11: Support for gender equality | by gender | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked:

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 "strongly agree" that women should have the same chance of being elected)

For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

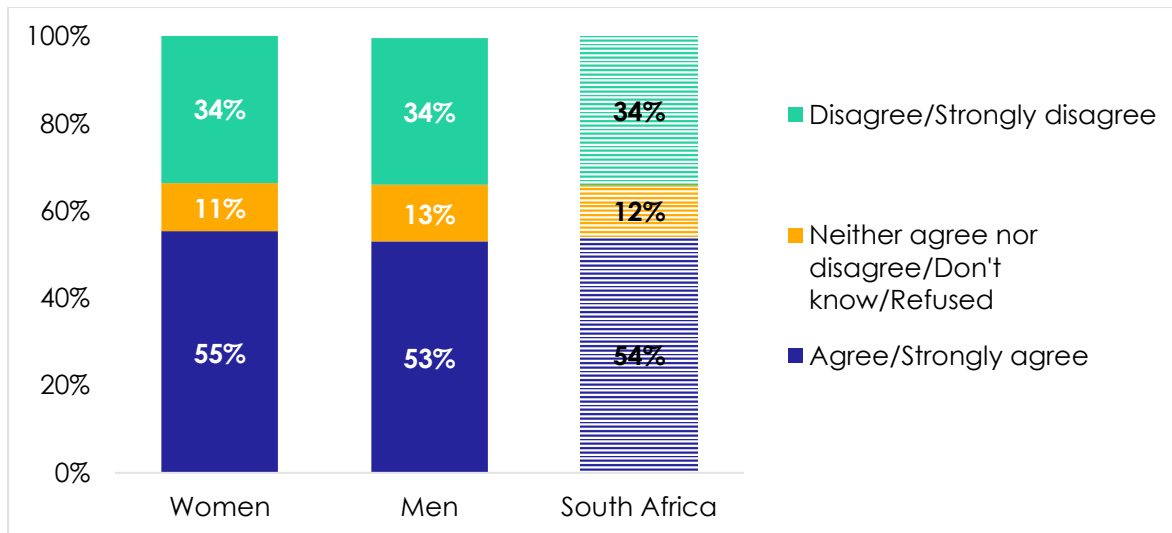
Women should have the same rights as men to own and inherit land. (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women. (% who "disagree" or "strongly disagree")

While men's weaker support for gender equality may be attributable to their perceived or feared loss of inherited privilege within a more gender-equal society, it is important to note that there is also a significant portion of South African women who do not agree that women should be afforded equal rights. About one in six women (16%) think men make better political leaders and should be elected instead of women, and almost as many (14%) say women should not have the same right as men to own and inherit land. And twice as many women (29%) agree that when jobs are scarce, men should have priority.

While most South Africans support women's right to run for office, own land, and get a job, a majority also believe that home-making and child-rearing should be the woman's task. More than half (53% of men, 55% of women) "agree" or "strongly agree" that "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." Only one in three respondents (34%) disagree (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Better if women, rather than men, care for home and children? | by gender | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: 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.

Conclusion

Most South Africans say gender equality has been achieved with regard to jobs, land, and education. But even amid widespread support for women's rights, popular attitudes point to persistent barriers to full equality. Only half of men think women should have an equal right to a job. A majority of both men and women believe that home-making and child-rearing should mainly be a woman's responsibility. And while most South Africans reject domestic violence, one in five still see wife-beating as justifiable.

Half of all South Africans say their government hasn't done enough, and progress has been inadequate, in the promotion of equal rights for women. Near-daily headlines and crime statistics confirm their assessment when it comes to gender-based violence. From policy makers and civil society, more is needed to entrench equality and safety in the lived experience of all women in South Africa.

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.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, directs a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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