



Dispatch No. 424 | 8 February 2021

## Most Sierra Leoneans approve of measures against sexual violence, want more to be done

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 424 | Fredline M'Cormack-Hale and Josephine Appiah-Nyameke Sanny**

### Summary

In 2019, President Julius Maada Bio declared rape and sexual violence a national emergency in Sierra Leone. This followed intense pressure and protest by civil society groups after the rape and subsequent paralysis of a 5-year-old girl (Mitchell, 2020). While such heinous crimes were not new, activists cited an increasing number of rapes (Mules, 2019) and Sierra Leone's history of violence against women.

During the country's civil war (1991-2002), between 215,000 and 257,000 women and girls were victims of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) (Physicians for Human Rights, 2002). While some point to the civil war as the reason for continued high rates of SGBV, others argue that they are the result of deep-rooted patriarchal norms and beliefs that pre-date the war and created a "rape culture" (Africanews, 2019).

Sierra Leone has a robust set of laws to protect women and girls, but research has shown that legislation is not enough (Medie, 2013). Despite three gender laws adopted in 2007 and the Sexual Offences Act of 2012, rates of rape and impunity for these crimes remain high. According to BBC News (2018), rapes in Sierra Leone more than doubled from 2017 to 2018, from 4,000 to more than 8,500, although the actual number of cases likely exceeds this as rape is underreported. The Rainbo Initiative, one of the few organizations in the country that offer free medical treatment and psychosocial counselling for SGBV survivors, received 2,900 survivors of SGBV at its centers in 2018, and this figure increased to 3,701 in 2019 (Mitchell, 2020).

Of particular concern is the age of victims: At least 70% are minors (Kardas-Nelson & Inveen, 2019). Survivors find it difficult to access justice; only 1.2% of the cases Rainbo recorded in 2019 were successfully prosecuted. Reasons for high impunity include a culture of compromise, poorly resourced police and judiciary, and a lack of forensic equipment to strengthen evidence generation (ReliefWeb, 2010; Mules, 2019, Schneider, 2019).

To address these issues, the president called for life imprisonment for anyone found guilty of rape of a minor, as well as a dedicated division in the courts to investigate these crimes, among other measures. However, his declaration did not have the force of the law. In October 2019, Parliament passed the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act of 2019, which incorporated some of the punishments articulated in the president's declaration, mediated by input from women-led and women-focused organizations (M'Cormack-Hale, forthcoming).

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey in Sierra Leone show that most citizens are aware of the declaration of rape as a national emergency and the revision of the Sexual Offences Act, and they approve of both. However, a majority of citizens believe that these

measures will not be enough and point to the need for the government to do more to change sexual attitudes and behaviors in the country.

### **Afrobarometer surveys**

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys in 2019/2021 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 Sierra Leone, led by the Institute for Governance Reform (IGR), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Sierra Leone between 9 and 31 March 2020. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

Previous surveys were conducted in Sierra Leone in 2012, 2015, and 2018.

### **Key findings**

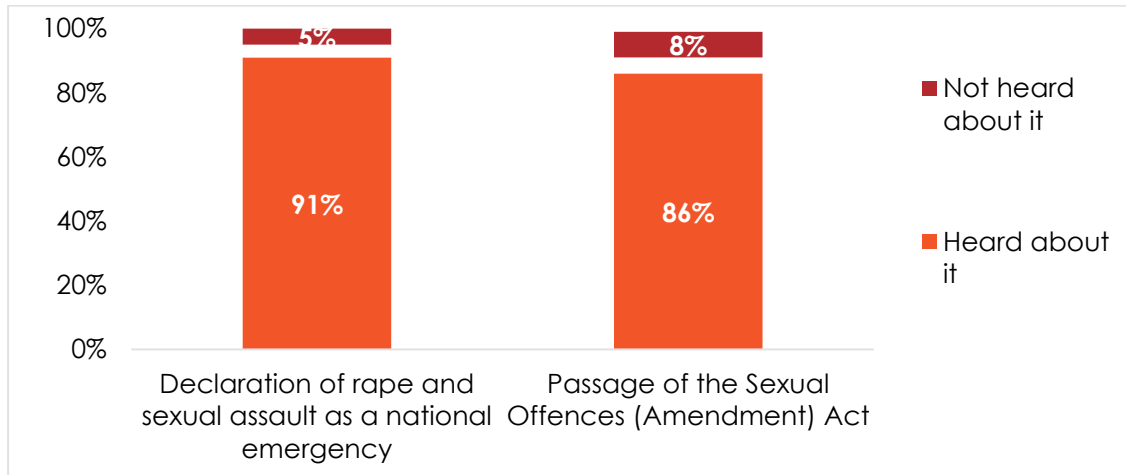
- Most Sierra Leoneans are aware of the president's declaration of rape as a national emergency (91%) and the passing of the 2019 Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act (86%).
- Overwhelming majorities support the president's declaration of a national emergency (93%) and believe the harsher new punishments for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) will help reduce rape and sexual assault (89%).
- However, seven in 10 (71%) say that these changes will not be enough to solve the problem of rape and sexual assault and that government should do more to educate people and change sexual attitudes and behaviors.
- Men are somewhat more likely than women to be aware of the president's intervention, to believe that the harsher punishments will help reduce rape and sexual assault, and to want the government to do more to educate people and change sexual attitudes and behaviors.

### **Awareness of government's SGBV interventions**

Nine in 10 Sierra Leoneans say they have heard about the president's declaration of rape as a national emergency (91%) and the government's passage of the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act of 2019 (86%) (Figure 1).

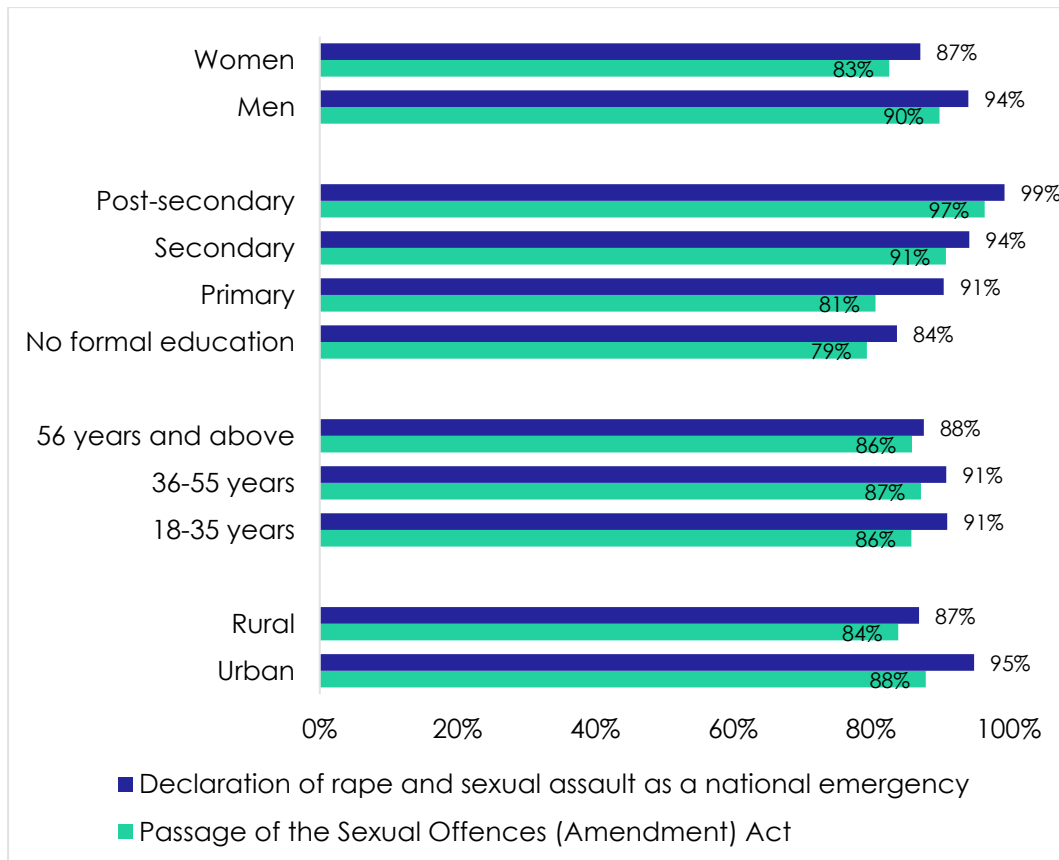
Awareness is higher among men than among women of both the national emergency (94% vs. 87%) and the amended law (90% vs. 83%), and increases with respondents' level of education (Figure 2). More urbanites (95%) are aware of the declaration of the national emergency than rural residents (87%).

**Figure 1: Awareness of government's SGBV interventions | Sierra Leone | 2020**



**Respondents were asked:** Have you heard about:  
 The declaration of rape and sexual assault as a national emergency by the president last year?  
 The government's passage last year of the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act of 2019?

**Figure 2: Awareness of government's SGBV interventions | by socio-demographic group | Sierra Leone | 2020**



**Respondents were asked:** Have you heard about:  
 The declaration of rape and sexual assault as a national emergency by the president last year?  
 The government's passage last year of the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act of 2019?  
 (% who say "yes")

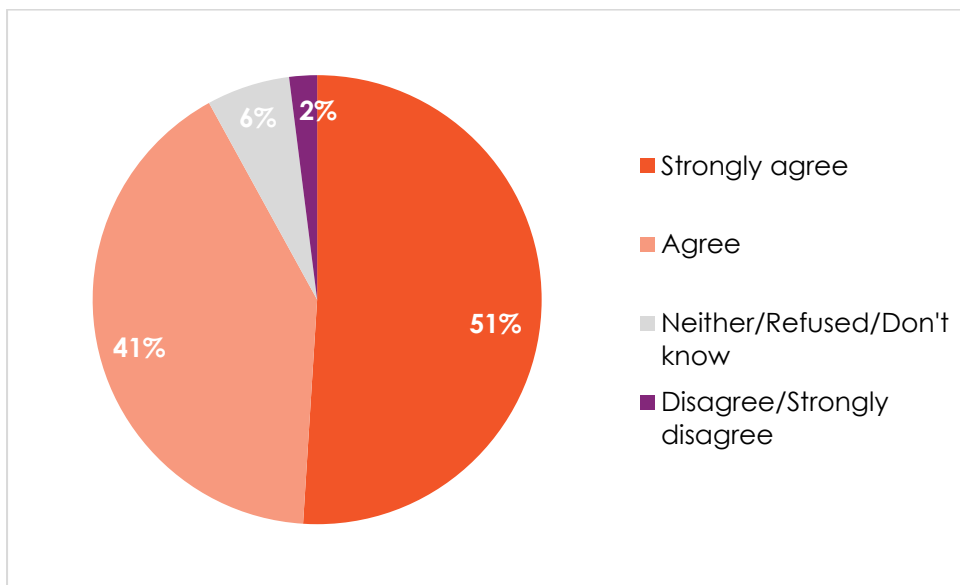
### Views on government's SGBV interventions

An overwhelming majority (93%) of Sierra Leoneans say the president was right to declare rape and sexual violence a national emergency, including 51% who “strongly agree” with this view (Figure 3).

This contrasts with the contentious passage of the declaration in Parliament, where the main opposition All People's Party (APC) was against it out of fear that it could lead to an abuse of power by the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) (Mitchell, 2020). Nevertheless, many civil society activists believe that the president's declaration placed a much-needed spotlight on rape in Sierra Leone and helped to usher in reforms that strengthened punishment of offenders and provided more protection for women (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019; Kardas-Nelson & Inveen, 2019).

It contributed to the development and passage of the revised Sexual Offences Act, which, among other things, extends the maximum penalty for rape from 15 years to life in prison and criminalizes “compromise” actions designed to prevent sexual-assault cases from going to court, such as paying or pressuring victims to drop their complaints (Mitchell, 2020).

**Figure 3: Was president right to declare a national emergency?** | Sierra Leone | 2020

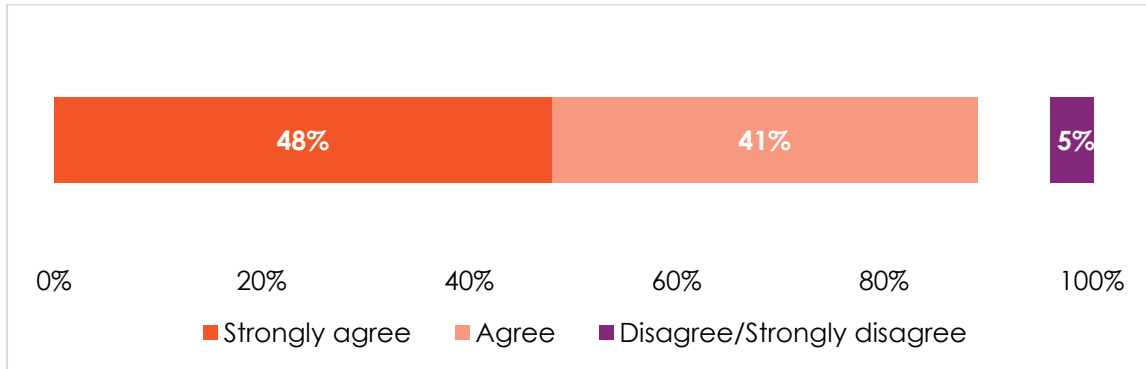


**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements, or haven't you heard enough to say: The president was right to declare a national emergency on rape and sexual violence because this has been a big problem in Sierra Leone? (Due to rounding, the sum of subcategories may differ by 1 percentage point from the reported overall total, e.g. 51% “strongly agree” + 41% “agree” = 93% “agree/strongly agree”)

Nine in 10 respondents (89%) also believe that the new harsher punishments in the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act will help reduce sexual and gender-based violence, including 48% who “strongly agree” with this view (Figure 4).

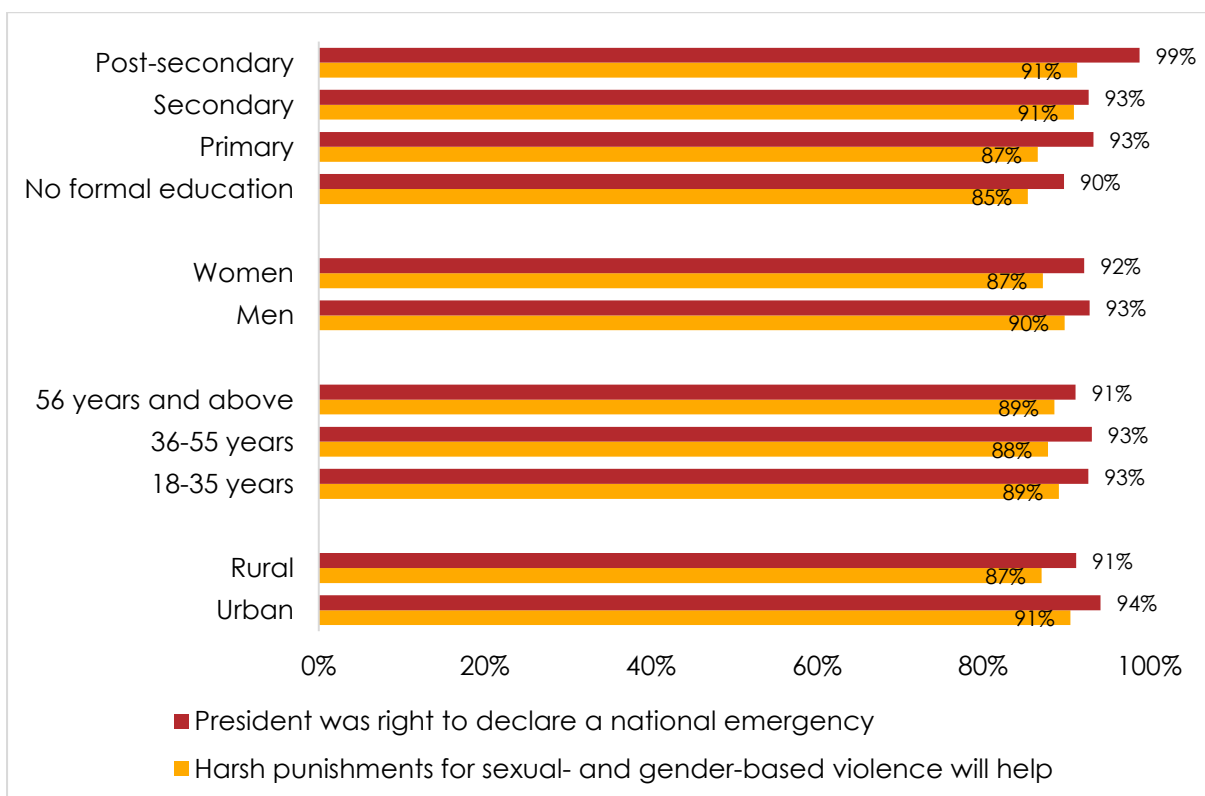
While all key socio-demographic groups endorse the national emergency and the harsh new punishments, support for these views increases with respondents' level of education. Men (90%) and urban residents (91%) are slightly more likely than women (87%) and rural residents (87%) to believe that the harsh punishments will help (Figure 5).

**Figure 4: New harsher punishments will reduce rape and sexual assault | Sierra Leone | 2020**



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements, or haven't you heard enough to say: The new harsh punishments for sexual and gender-based violence included in the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act will help to reduce the problem of rape and sexual assault?

**Figure 5: President was right to declare national emergency; harsh punishments will help | by socio-demographic group | Sierra Leone | 2020**



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements, or haven't you heard enough to say?

The new harsh punishments for sexual- and gender-based violence included in the Sexual Offences Amendment Act will help to reduce the problem of rape and sexual assault

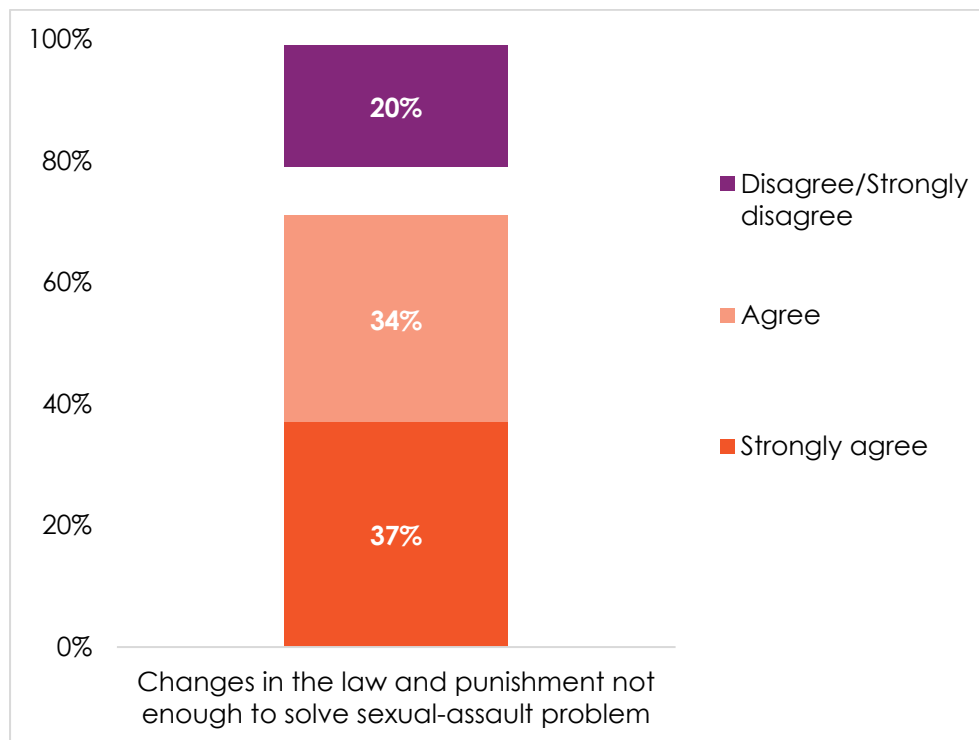
The president was right to declare a national emergency on rape and sexual violence because this has been a big problem in Sierra Leone.

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

Since the passage of the law, the government has taken additional steps to operationalize recommendations in the act. A free national hotline has been set up to report sexual and gender-based crimes, and the newly created Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs (separated from the Ministry of Social Welfare in November 2019) recently launched its male-involvement strategy targeting men as agents of change. The government has also set up several one-stop centers to provide a range of services to support SGBV survivors (Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, 2020).

However, many citizens do not believe that legal reforms are enough. A large majority (71%) of Sierra Leoneans "agree" or "strongly agree" that the changes in the law and harsher punishments are not enough to solve the problem of rape and sexual assault, and that the government should do more to educate people and change sexual attitudes and behaviors (Figure 6). Only two in 10 (20%) think otherwise.

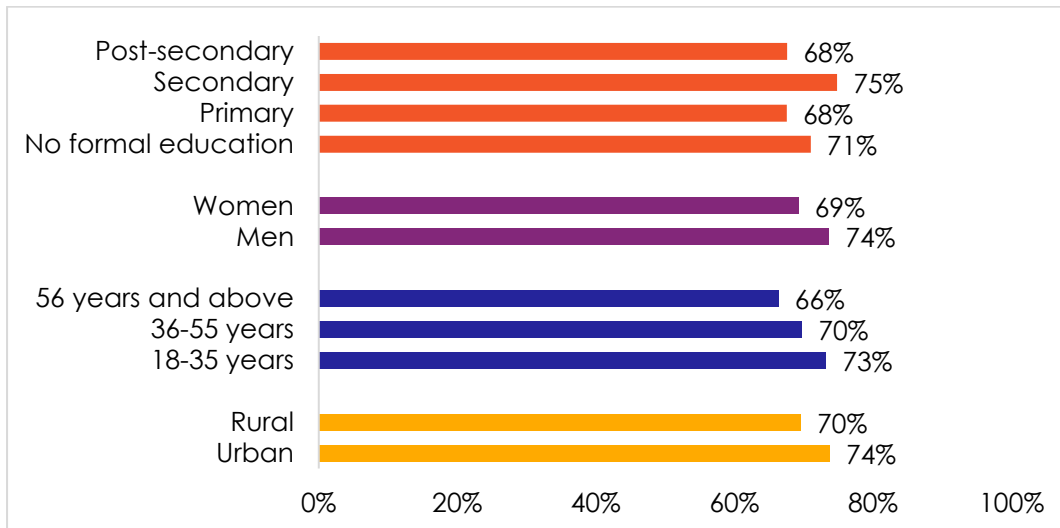
**Figure 6: Changes in law and harsher punishments are not enough** | Sierra Leone | 2020



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements, or haven't you heard enough to say: Changes in the law and harsher punishments are not enough to solve the problem of rape and sexual assault; the government should do more to educate people and change sexual attitudes and behaviors.

The call for government to do more to educate people and change sexual attitudes and behaviors has somewhat stronger support among men (74%), young adults (73%), and urban residents (74%) than among women (69%), older citizens (66%), and rural residents (70%) (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Changes in law and harsher punishments are not enough** | by socio-demographic group | Sierra Leone | 2020



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements, or haven't you heard enough to say: Changes in the law and harsher punishments are not enough to solve the problem of rape and sexual assault; the government should do more to educate people and change sexual attitudes and behaviors? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

## Conclusion

The Afrobarometer survey shows that Sierra Leoneans strongly support the government's actions on SGBV, including the president's declaration of rape as a national emergency and the revision of the Sexual Offences Act. But a majority believe that this is not enough and want the government to do more.

How the new law is implemented will be key. Women need protection and support to come forward, as well as a criminal justice system that is committed to giving them justice.

However, without attitudinal and behavioral change to bolster legal reforms, it is likely that very little will change. While the government has expanded its interventions to address SGBV, more can be done to address the underlying norms, attitudes, and beliefs that contribute to the high rates of sexual violence against women and girls and impunity for these crimes.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is 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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