

# Nigerians condemn physical discipline but see gender-based violence as a private matter

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 534 | Raphael Mbaegbu and Sunday Joseph Duntoye**

## Summary

According to the United Nations Population Fund (2022), “gender-based violence is one of the most prevalent human rights violations in the world [and] knows no social, economic or national boundaries.” In Nigeria, more than 10,000 women a day are believed to suffer gender-based violence (GBV), and many cases go unreported (Ugbodaga, 2021).

Gender-based violence takes many forms, including forced marriage of young girls, rape and attempted rape, homicide, female genital mutilation, violence against people with different sexual identities or orientations, trafficking in persons, and verbal abuse.

Nigeria has an array of legal weapons to fight GBV, including sections 17 and 34 of the Constitution, the Administration of Criminal Justice Act, the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act, the Lagos State Protection against Domestic Violence Law, and the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Law Enforcement and Administration Act. The Nigerian police has had a gender unit since 2012 as part of its efforts to address GBV in the country.

Despite laws, policies, and enforcement bodies, Nigerian women continue to fall victim to GBV. In one recent high-profile case, police arrested the husband of popular gospel singer Osinachi on allegations of domestic violence after her April 9 death in an Abuja hospital (Premium Times, 2022).

This dispatch reports on a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 (2021/2022) questionnaire to explore Africans' perceptions on gender-based violence. Findings show that Nigerians rank GBV as the third-most-important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address, and that views are divided as to whether violence against girls and women is a common occurrence in their community.

Citizens overwhelmingly oppose the use of physical discipline against women. But a majority say domestic violence should be treated as a private matter to be resolved within the family rather than as a criminal matter requiring law enforcement to get involved.

While most Nigerians think the police take GBV cases seriously, many also consider it likely that a woman reporting an incident of GBV will be criticised, harassed, or shamed.

## 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. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2022) are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Nigeria, led by NOIPolls, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,600 adult Nigerians between 5 and 31 March 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage

points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard surveys were conducted in Nigeria in 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2020.

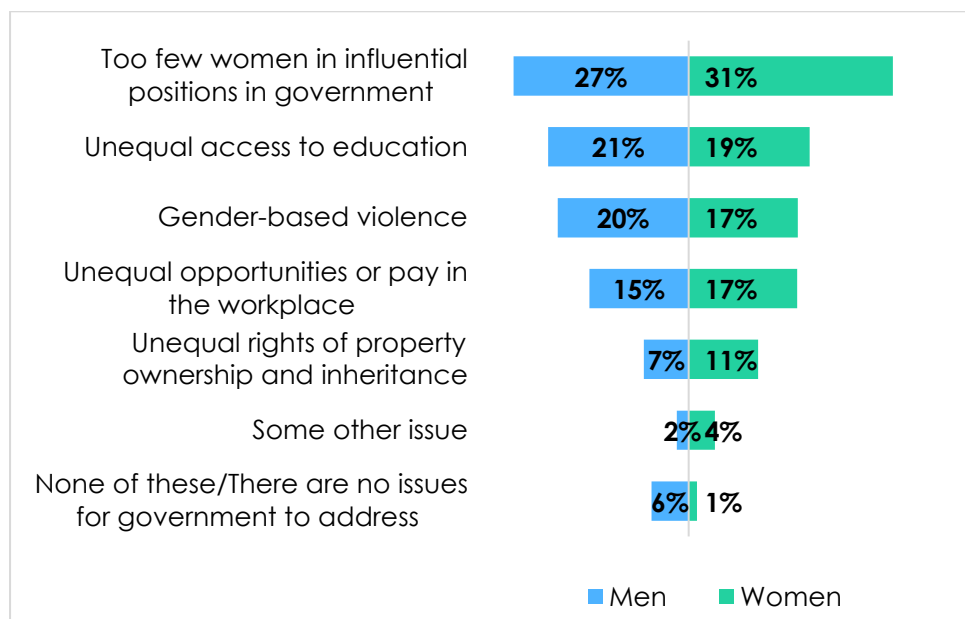
## Key findings

- Gender-based violence (GBV) ranks third among the most important women's-rights issues that Nigerians want their government and society to address.
- A majority (58%) of citizens say violence against women is "not very common" or "not at all common" in their community, but 41% – and 45% of women – disagree.
- About eight in 10 Nigerians (79%) say it is "never justified" for a man to physically discipline his wife.
- Almost half (47%) of respondents consider it "somewhat likely" (28%) or "very likely" (19%) that a woman will be criticised, harassed, or shamed if she reports an incident of GBV to the authorities. Far fewer (24%) say this is "very unlikely."
  - But most respondents (79%) believe that the police are likely to take cases of GBV seriously.
- More than two-thirds (68%) of Nigerians say domestic violence should be treated as a private matter to be resolved within the family rather than as a criminal matter that involves law enforcement agencies.

## Is gender-based violence (GBV) a priority in Nigeria?

In Nigeria, GBV ranks third among women's-rights issues that citizens want their government and society to address, trailing "too few women in influential positions in government" and unequal access to education. More men (20%) than women (17%) see GBV as a top priority (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Most important women's rights issue** | by gender | Nigeria | 2022

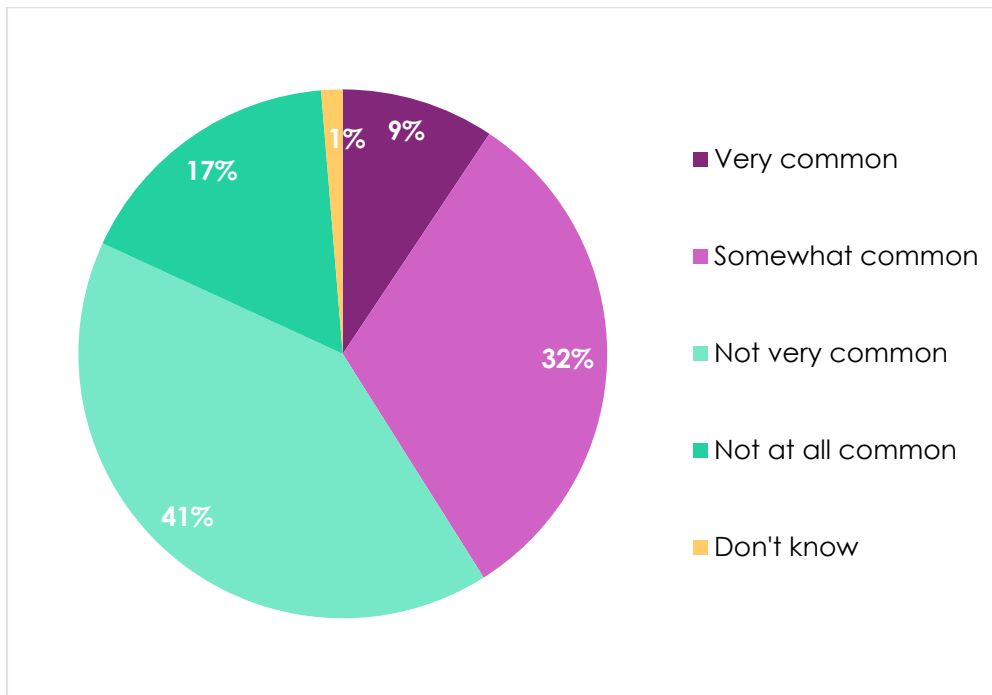


**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, which of the following issues related to women's rights and equality do you think is the most important for our government and society to address?*

## How common is GBV?

A majority (58%) of respondents say violence against women is “not very common” or “not at all common” in their community. But a sizeable minority (41%) describe it as “somewhat” or “very” common (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Frequency of GBV | Nigeria | 2022**

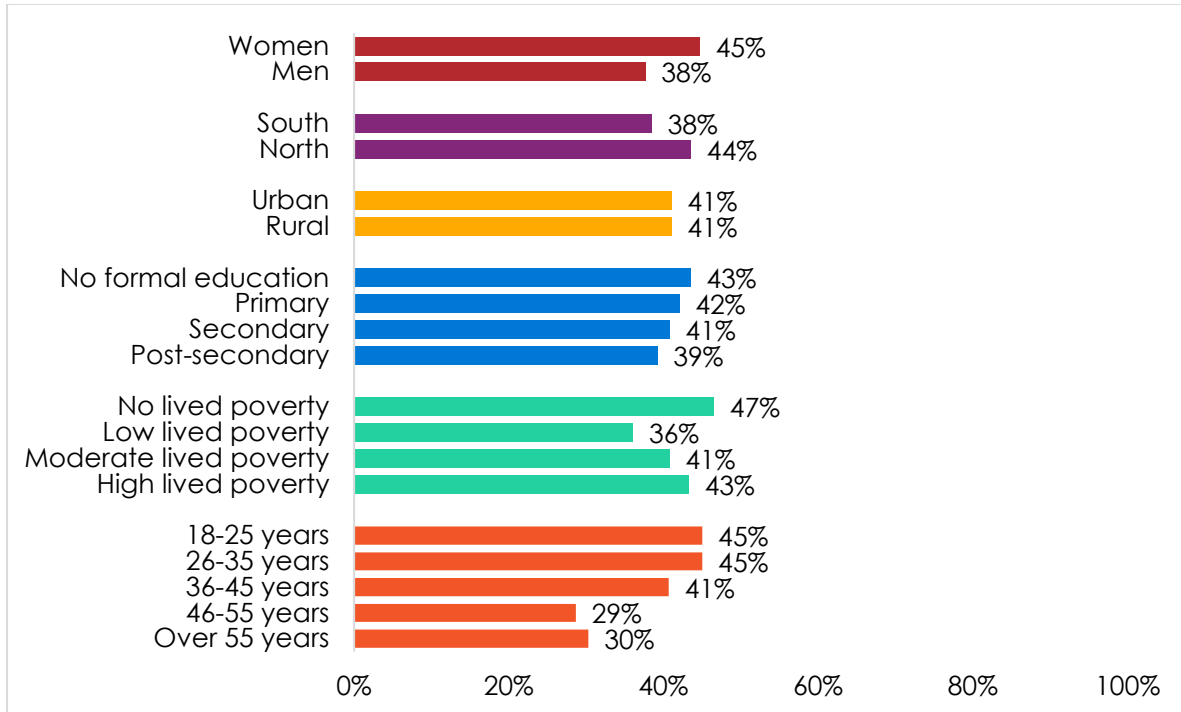


**Respondents were asked:** *In this area, how common do you think it is for men to use violence against women and girls in the home or the community?*

Women (45%) are more likely than men (38%) to say that violence against women is a common occurrence, as are northern residents (44%) compared to their southern counterparts (38%) (Figure 3). This perception is equally common in rural and urban areas but slightly more widespread among the less educated (43%), citizens experiencing no lived poverty<sup>1</sup> (47%), and young respondents (45%).

<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes (2020).

**Figure 3: Frequency of GBV | by socio-demographic group | Nigeria | 2022**

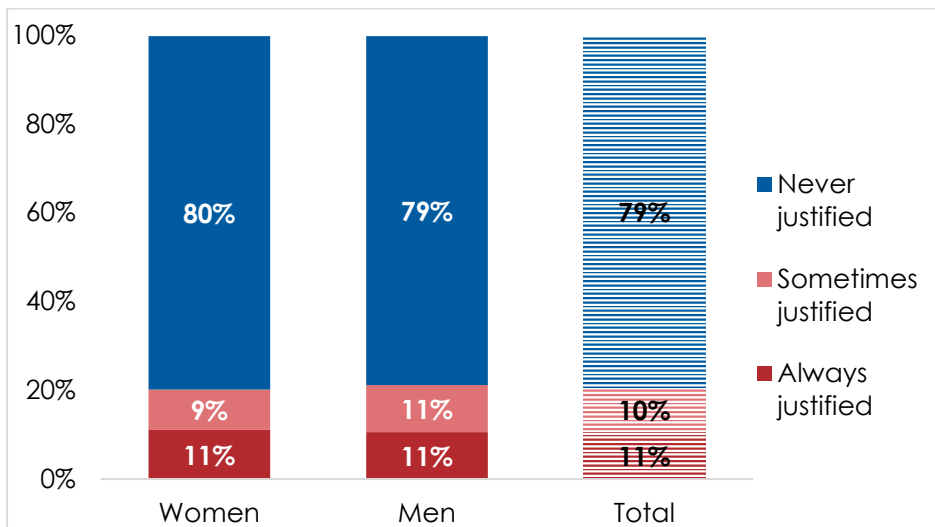


**Respondents were asked:** In this area, how common do you think it is for men to use violence against women and girls in the home or the community? (% who say "somewhat common" or "very common")

### Physical discipline of a spouse

More than three-fourths (79%) of Nigerians say it is "never justified" for a man to physically discipline his wife, while about two in 10 consider it "sometimes" (10%) or "always" (11%) justified. Women and men hold almost identical views on this issue (Figure 4).

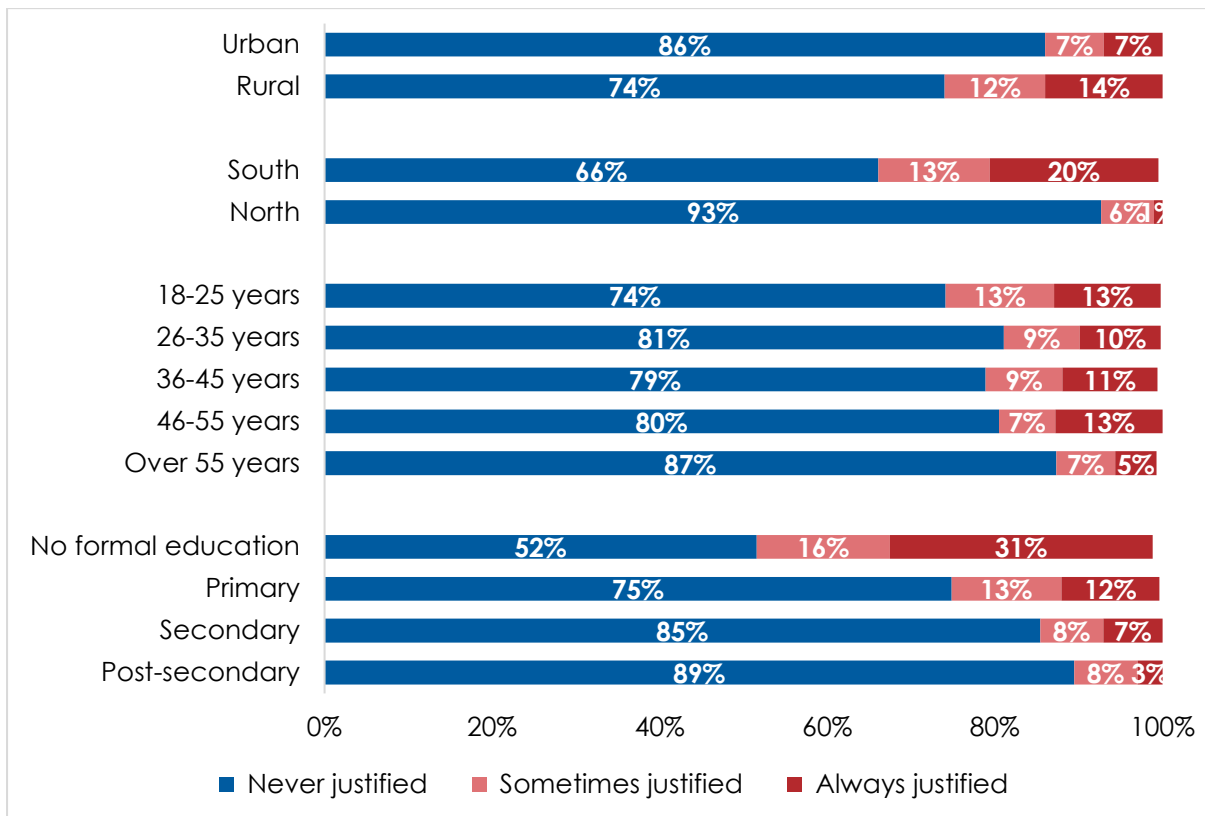
**Figure 4: Is it justified for men to physically discipline their wives? | Nigeria | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For a man to use physical discipline on his wife if she has done something he doesn't like or thinks is wrong?

The view that men are never justified in physically disciplining their wives gathers strength as respondents' education level rises, ranging from 52% of those with no formal schooling to 89% of those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 5). It is more widely held in cities (86%) than in urban areas (74%). More than nine in 10 northern Nigerians (93%) share this attitude, compared to 66% of southern residents. Older folks are more likely than the young ones to say that physical discipline of women by men is "never justified" (87% vs. 74%).

**Figure 5: Is it justified for men to physically discipline their wives? | by demographic group | Nigeria | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For a man to use physical discipline on his wife if she has done something he doesn't like or thinks is wrong?

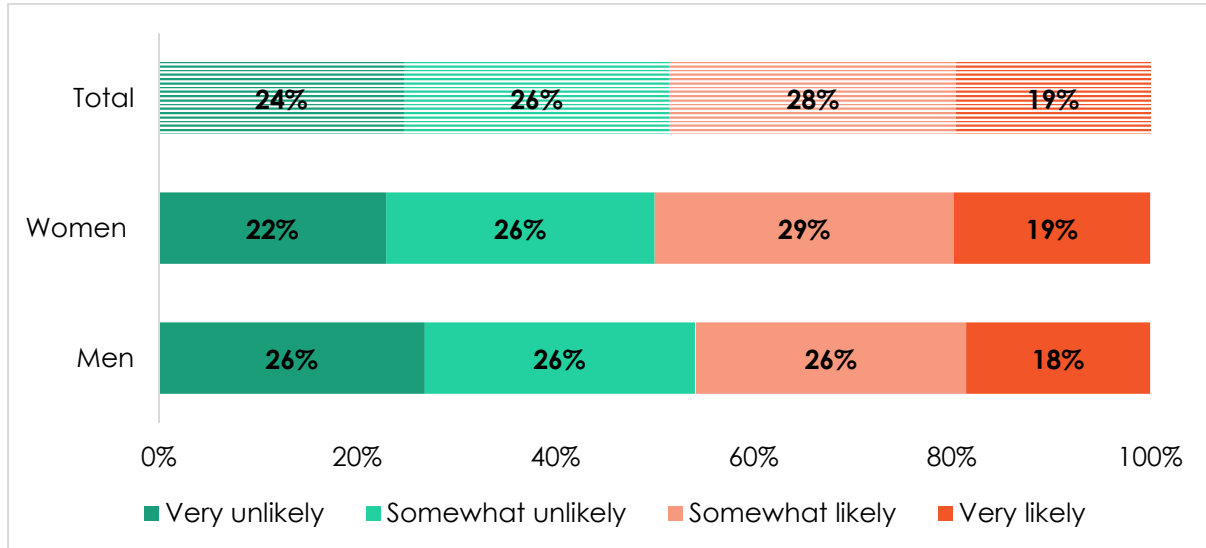
### Response to GBV

Police and scholars agree that the true extent of GBV is unknown because many attacks on girls and women are never reported. Reasons include fear of the attacker, fear of a negative response by others, or the belief that the authorities won't take the case seriously (Palermo, Bleck, & Peterman, 2014).

Asked whether they think a woman who reports being a victim of rape, domestic violence, or other GBV will be criticised, harassed, or shamed by others in the community, almost half (47%) of Nigerians say this is "somewhat likely" (28%) or "very likely" (19%) (Figure 6). A quarter (24%) of respondents consider it "very unlikely," and another 26% see it as "somewhat unlikely." These perceptions – whether accurate or not – may serve as a significant deterrent to reporting GBV.

Women are slightly more likely than men to believe that women who report incidents of GBV will suffer criticism, harassment, or shame (48% vs. 44%).

**Figure 6: Will a woman be criticised, harassed, or shamed for reporting GBV?**  
 | by gender | Nigeria | 2022

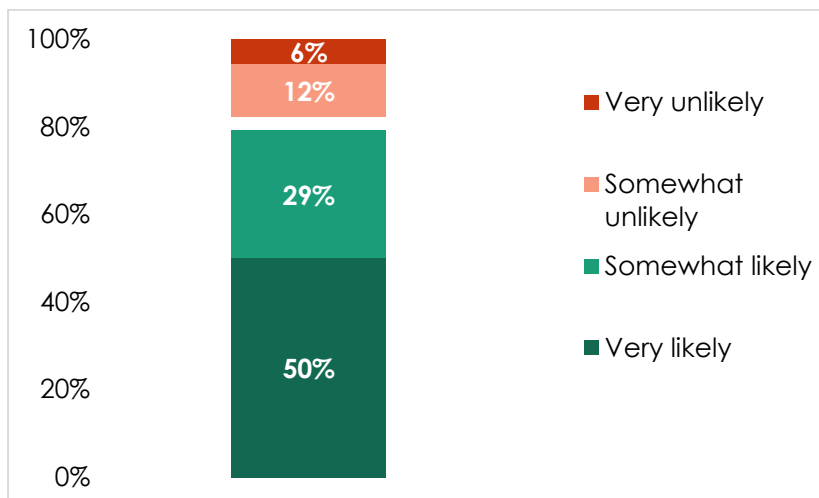


**Respondents were asked:** *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: She will be criticised, harassed, or shamed by others in the community?*

More encouragingly, most Nigerians believe that the police will take reported cases of GBV seriously: 79% see this as likely, including 50% who say it is “very likely”) (Figure 7).

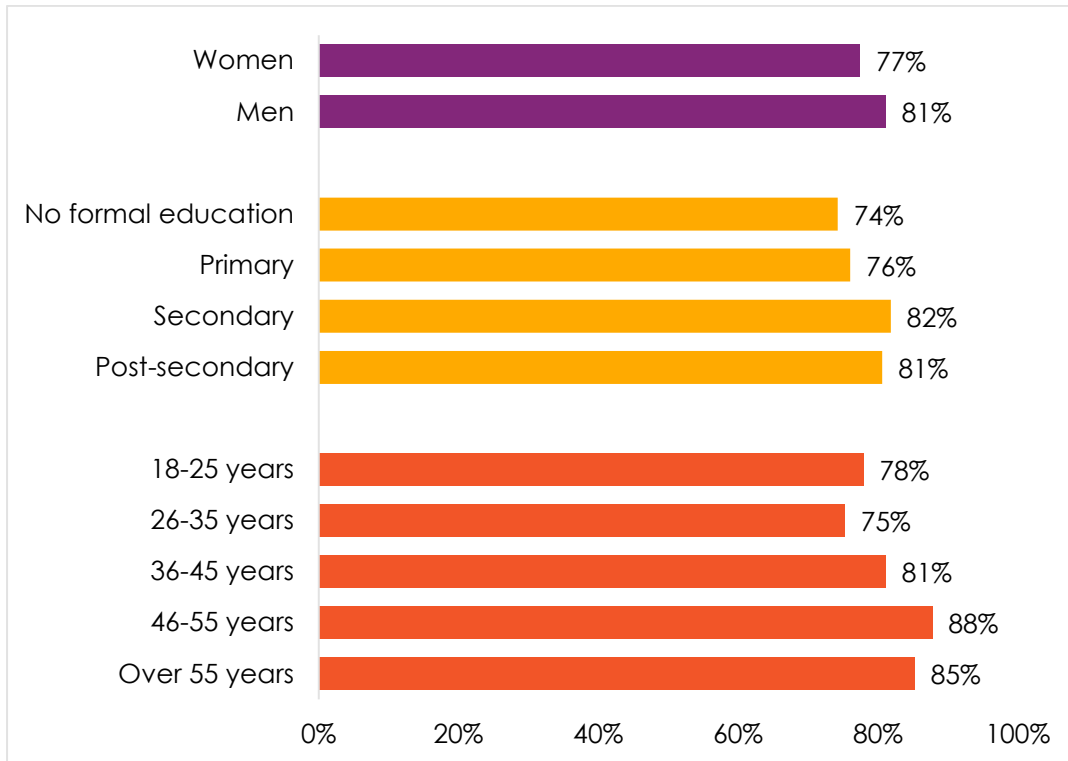
Men (81%) are somewhat more likely than women (77%) to expect that the police will take GBV cases seriously. Citizens with no formal schooling or only primary education (74%-76%) express less confidence in the police response than more educated citizens (81%-82%), as do younger respondents (75%-78%) compared to their elders (81%-88%) (Figure 8).

**Figure 7: Do police take GBV cases seriously?** | Nigeria | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: Her case will be taken seriously by the police?*

**Figure 8: Likelihood that police will take GBV cases seriously** | by socio-demographic group | Nigeria | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: Her case will be taken seriously by the police? (% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")*

### Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter?

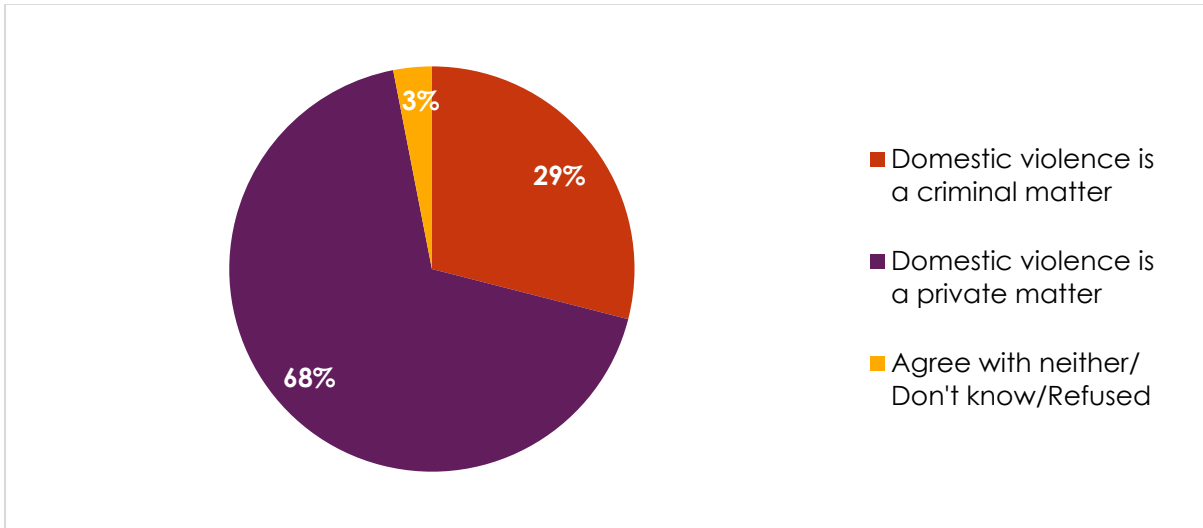
Domestic violence is the most common form of GBV. Even though the perpetrators may be known, many domestic-violence cases go unreported or unresolved, and most present victims and families with complex, wrenching decisions. Do Nigerians see domestic violence as a criminal matter or a private matter?

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More than two-thirds (68%) of Nigerians say domestic violence is a private matter that needs to be handled and resolved within the family. Only 29% believe that domestic violence should be seen as a criminal matter that requires the involvement of law enforcement agencies (Figure 9).

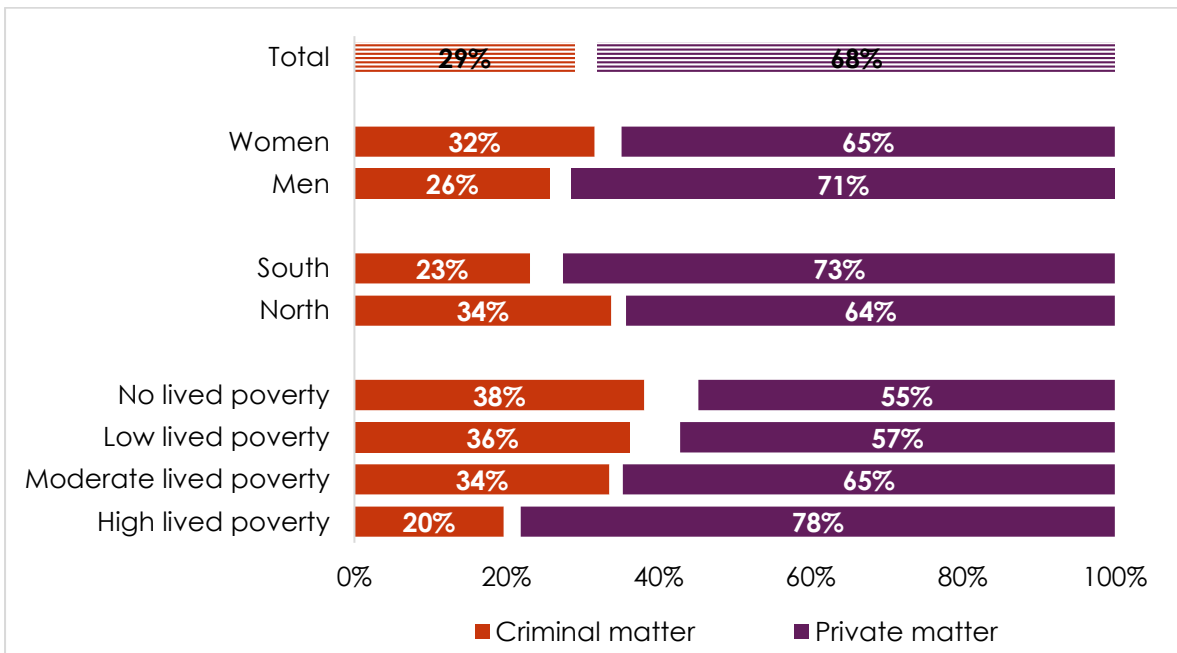
Men are somewhat more likely than women to see domestic violence as a private matter, 71% vs. 65%. Support for this view is higher among southern Nigerians (73%) than their northern counterparts (64%), and increases with citizens' level of lived poverty, ranging from 55% among the economically best-off to 78% among the poorest (Figure 10).

**Figure 9: Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter? | Nigeria | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: Domestic violence is a private matter that needs to be handled and resolved within the family.  
 Statement 2: Domestic violence is a criminal matter whose full resolution requires the involvement of law enforcement agencies.  
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

**Figure 10: Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter? | demographic group | Nigeria | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: Domestic violence is a private matter that needs to be handled and resolved within the family.  
 Statement 2: Domestic violence is a criminal matter whose full resolution requires the involvement of law enforcement agencies.  
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)



## Conclusion

In Nigeria, only a minority consider violence against women a common problem and a top priority among women's-right issues that the government and society should address.

Even though most adults reject the use of physical force against women and believe that the police are likely to take cases of GBV seriously, a majority also say that GBV should be treated as a private matter rather than a criminal matter. And many consider it likely that a women reporting an incident of GBV will be criticised, harassed, or shamed – a perception that probably contributes to continued under-reporting of such crimes.

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**Raphael Mbaegbu** is the head of social research at NOIPolls, the Afrobarometer national partner in Abuja, Nigeria. Email: [rmbaegbu@noi-polls.com](mailto:rmbaegbu@noi-polls.com).

**Sunday Joseph Duntoye** is the head of data analytics/senior survey methodologist at NOIPolls. Email: [sduntoye@noi-polls.com](mailto:sduntoye@noi-polls.com).

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