



Dispatch No. 546 | 31 August 2022

In Lesotho, gender-based violence tops the list of women's-rights issues to be addressed

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 546 | Libuseng Malephane

Summary

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a reality for many women in Lesotho. The Police Child and Gender Protection Unit reports that from January through July 2022, there have been 184 sexual offences and 45 assault cases perpetrated against women. In 2021, at least 47% of women murdered in Lesotho were killed by their intimate partners (Mongoshi, 2021). GBV is a serious threat to the nation both developmentally and economically, recognised as one of the drivers of HIV in a country that has the third-highest prevalence rate in the world at 23.2% (UNAIDS, 2021).

The Gender-Based Violence Indicators Study by Gender Links (2015) reported that 86% of women and 40% of men in Lesotho experienced some form of violence in their lifetime, and that a majority of victims do not report the violence to the police or seek medical attention or legal recourse. Among barriers to reporting, the study identified survivor stigmatisation by the community, feelings of shame, inadequate police response to victims, and the belief that domestic violence is a private matter not to be discussed with strangers. A study by the Commonwealth (2020) reported that about one-third of women in Lesotho suffer sexual or physical violence in their lifetime and that GBV costs the country 5.5% of its gross domestic product in lost income and expenses associated with medical, legal, and police support.

Activists blame patriarchy for fuelling GBV in the country (Sello, 2021). Despite the Sexual Offences Act (2003) and the Married Persons Act (2006) providing for equal rights for men and women in marriage, the Customary Law subordinating women to men is still very much part of society in Lesotho. In June 2022, the Upper House passed the Counter Domestic Violence Bill 2021, but critics say policing and judicial responses will also need to be strengthened to reduce the country's GBV problem (Chikowore, 2022).

This dispatch reports on a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 (2021/2022) questionnaire to explore Africans' experiences and perceptions of GBV.

In Lesotho, most citizens say physical force is never justified to discipline women. But they say that gender-based violence is a common occurrence and constitutes the most important women's-rights issue that the government and the country must address.

A majority of Basotho believe that the police are likely to take GBV cases seriously and that GBV should be treated as a criminal rather than a private matter.

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, and 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 Lesotho, led by Advice Lesotho, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 citizens in February-March 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard surveys were conducted in Lesotho in 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2020.

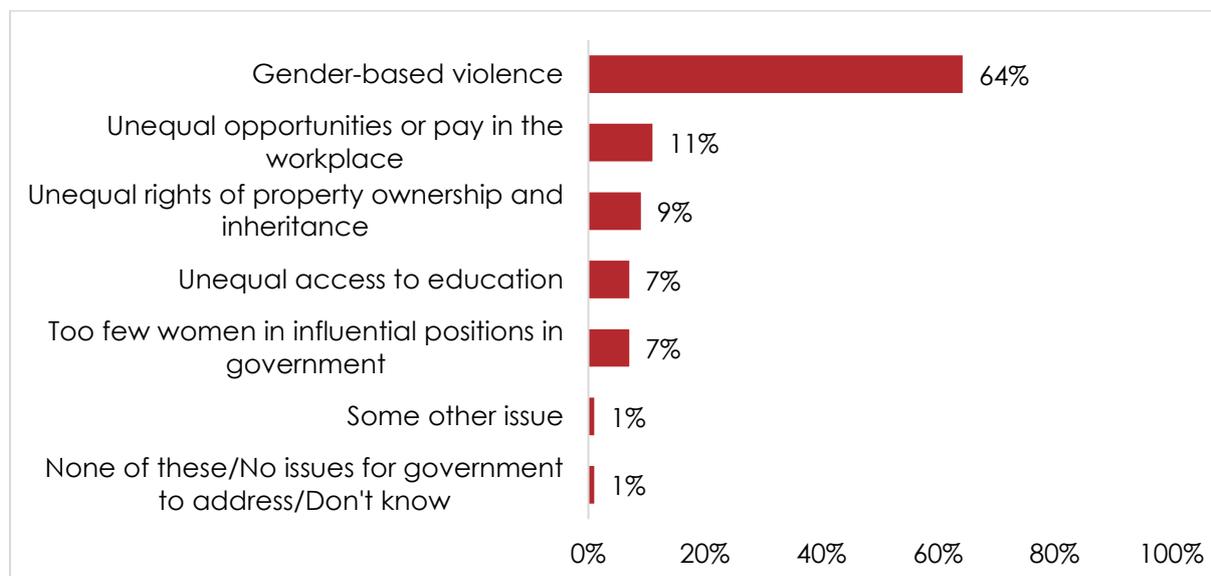
Key findings

- Basotho see gender-based violence (GBV) as the most important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address.
- A majority (53%) of citizens say violence against women is a "somewhat common" (28%) or "very common" (25%) occurrence in their community.
- More than eight in 10 (85%) Basotho say it is "never" justified for a man to physically discipline his wife. About two in 10 think it is "sometimes" (11%) or "always" (4%) justified.
- Almost six in 10 respondents (56%) consider it "somewhat likely" (29%) or "very likely" (27%) that a woman will be criticised or harassed if she reports gender-based violence to the authorities.
 - But most citizens (79%) say the police are likely to take cases of GBV seriously.
- A slim majority (53%) of Basotho say domestic violence should be treated as a criminal matter rather than as a private matter to be resolved within the family.

Is gender-based violence (GBV) an important problem in Lesotho?

In Lesotho, almost two-thirds (64%) of citizens identify gender-based violence as the most important women's-rights issue for the government and society to address. GBV ranks far ahead of unequal opportunities or pay in the workplace (11%), unequal rights of property ownership and inheritance (9%), unequal access to education (7%), and too few women in influential positions in government (7%) as priorities (Figure 1).

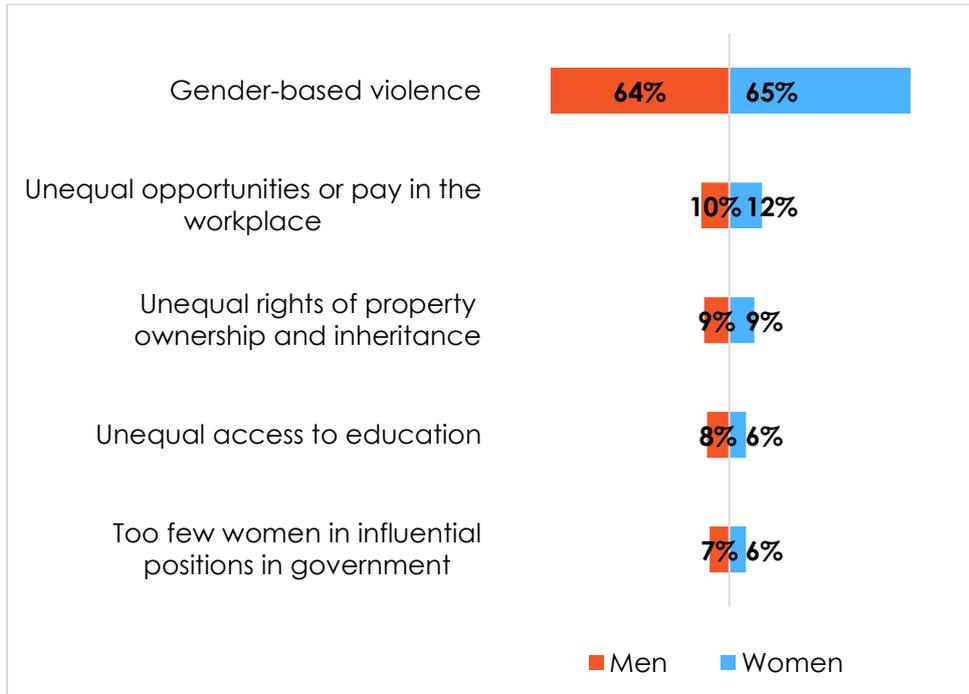
Figure 1: Most important women's-rights issue | Lesotho | 2022



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?

Men and women hold almost identical views on the most important women's-rights issues requiring the attention of the government and society (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Most important women's rights issue | by gender | Lesotho | 2022

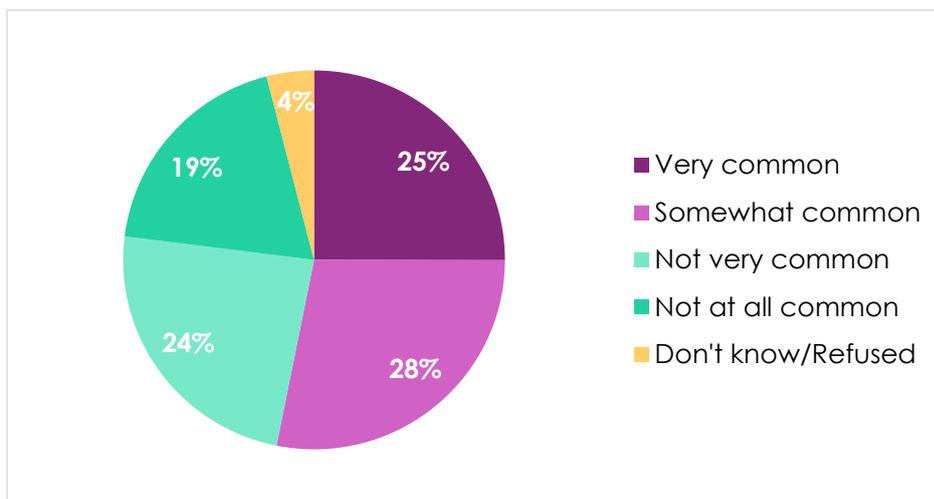


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, which of the following issues related to women's rights and equality do you think is the most important for our government and society to address?

How common is GBV?

One reason that GBV is considered a major issue is probably that many Basotho think it happens frequently: 53% of respondents say violence against women is "somewhat common" (28%) or "very common" (25%) in their community (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Frequency of GBV | Lesotho | 2022

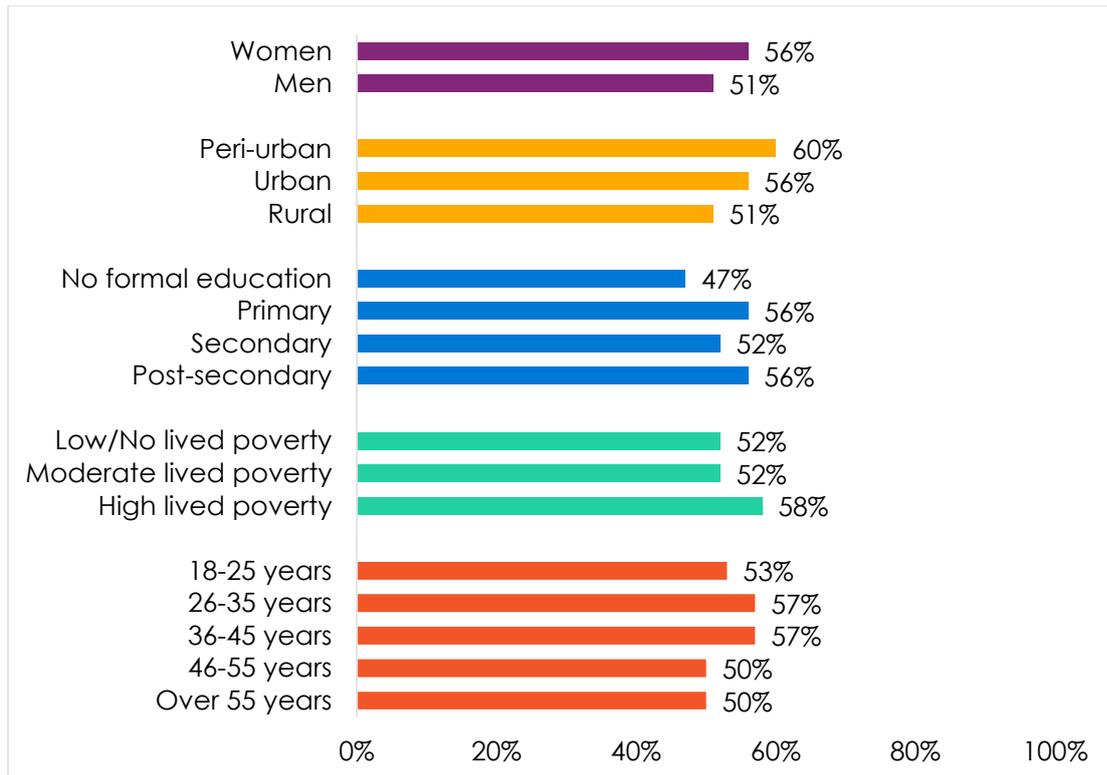


Respondents were asked: In this area, how common do you think it is for men to use violence against women and girls in the home or the community?

Women (56%) are slightly more likely than men (51%) to say that violence against women and girls is a common occurrence, as are urban residents (60%) compared to their rural counterparts (51%) (Figure 4). This perception is also more widespread among poor citizens (58% of those experiencing high “lived poverty”¹) but less common among those with no formal education (47%).

Older respondents (50%) are less likely to report that GBV happens frequently.

Figure 4: Frequency of GBV | by demographic group | Lesotho | 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”)

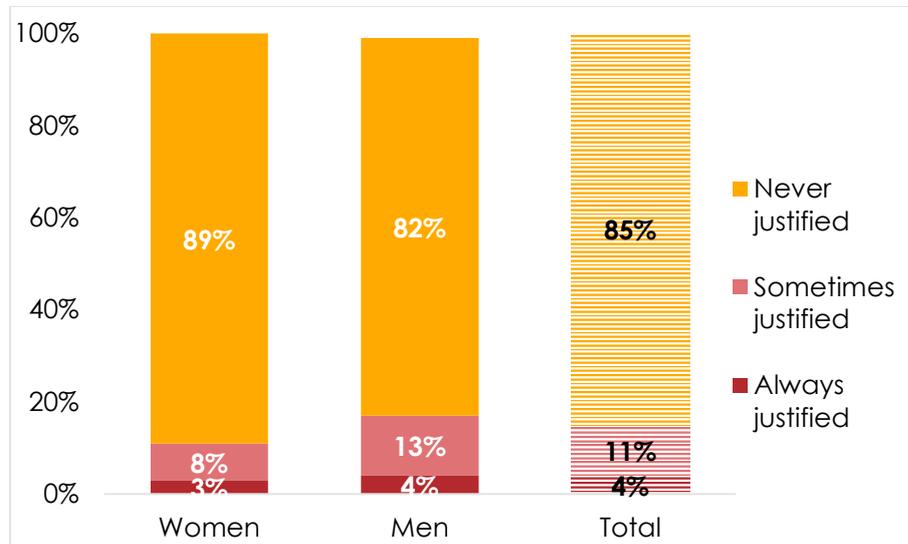
Physical discipline of a spouse

More than eight in 10 Basotho (85%) say it is “never justified” for a man to physically discipline his wife. Fewer than two in 10 consider it “sometimes” (11%) or “always” (4%) justified. Women are somewhat more likely than men to rule out physical discipline as “never justified,” 89% vs. 82% (Figure 5).

The view that men are never justified in physically disciplining their wives gathers strength as respondents’ education level rises, ranging from 77% of those with no formal schooling to 92% of those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 6). Older respondents are a little less likely to share this attitude (83% of those aged over 55 years), compared to 86%-87% of younger respondents.

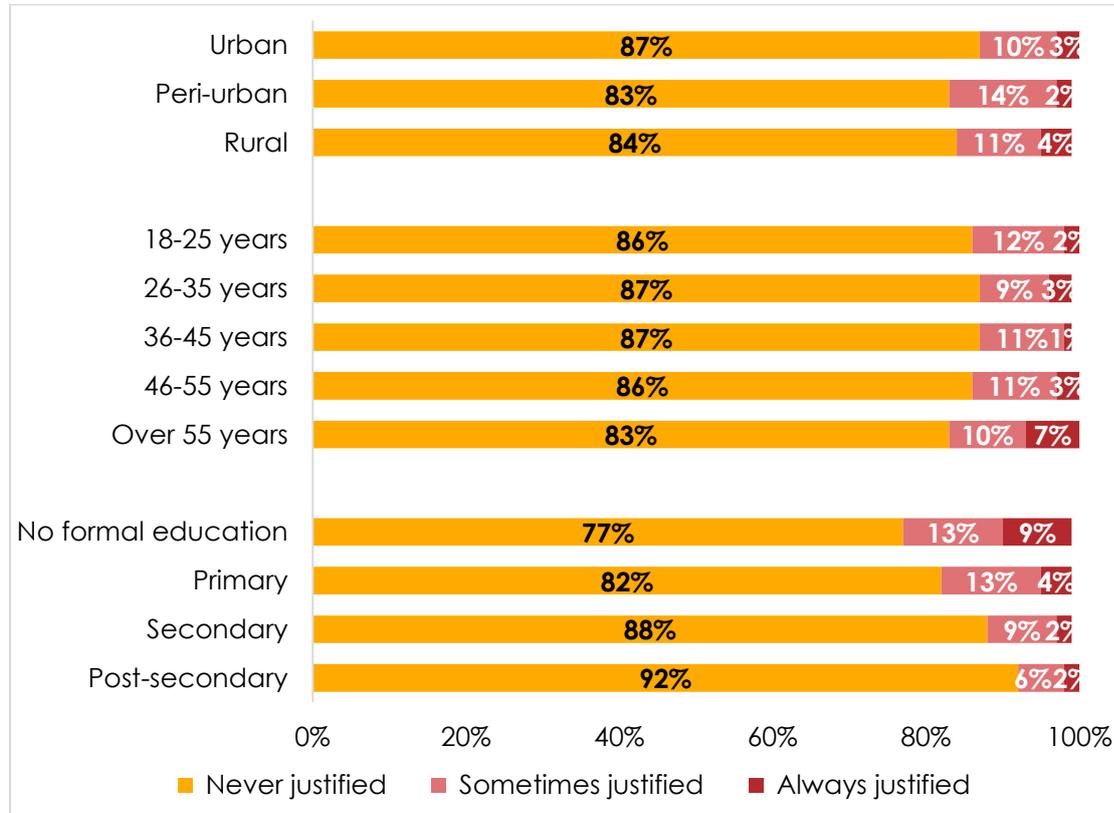
¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty,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

Figure 5: Is it justified for men to physically discipline their wives? | Lesotho | 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?

Figure 6: Is it justified for men to physically discipline their wives? | by demographic group | Lesotho | 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?

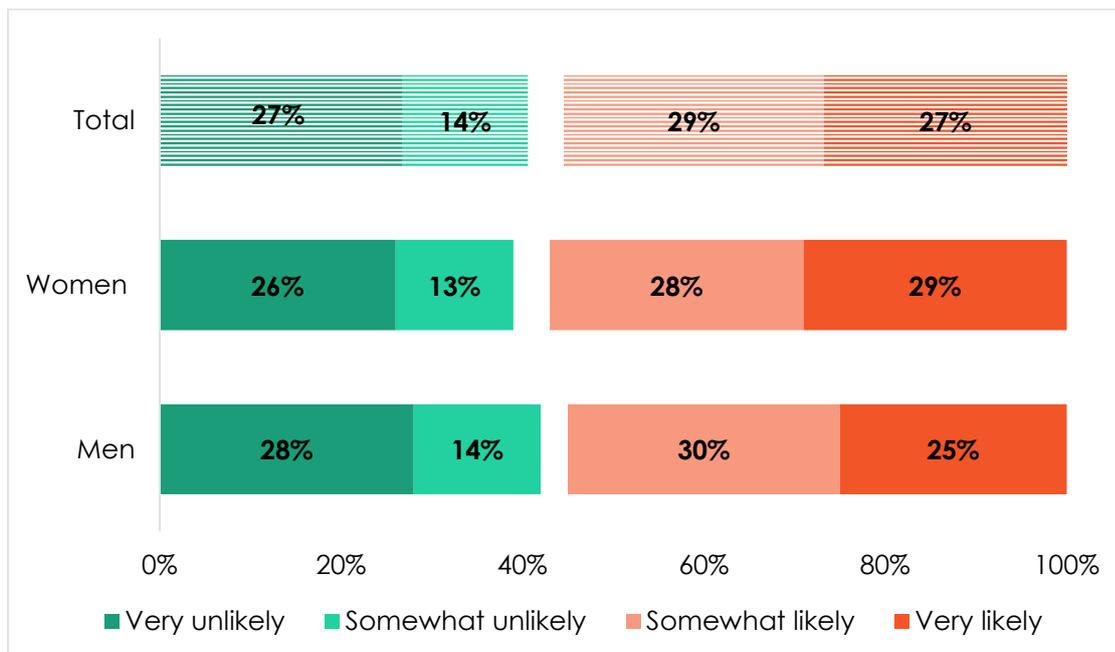
Response to GBV

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 gender-based violence will be criticised, harassed, or shamed by others in the community, only about a quarter (27%) of Basotho say this is "very unlikely" (Figure 7). While another 14% consider it "somewhat unlikely," a majority (56%) say it is "somewhat" (29%) or "very" (27%) likely. These perceptions – whether accurate or not – may serve as a significant deterrent to reporting GBV.

Women and men hold almost identical views on this question, and differences by respondents' age, education level, and urban-rural residency show no clear pattern.

Figure 7: Will a woman be criticised, harassed, or shamed for reporting GBV?
 | by gender | Lesotho | 2022

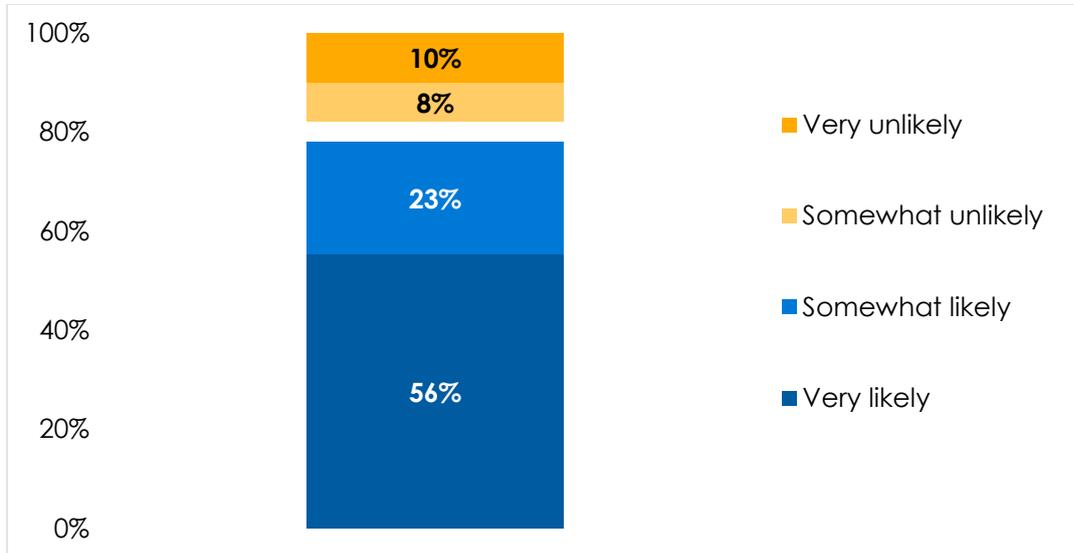


Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: She will be criticised, harassed,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

While expectations regarding the community's response are mixed, Basotho overwhelmingly believe that the police will respond appropriately to reported cases of GBV: 79% see it as likely that the police will take such reports seriously, including 56% who say it is "very likely" (Figure 8).

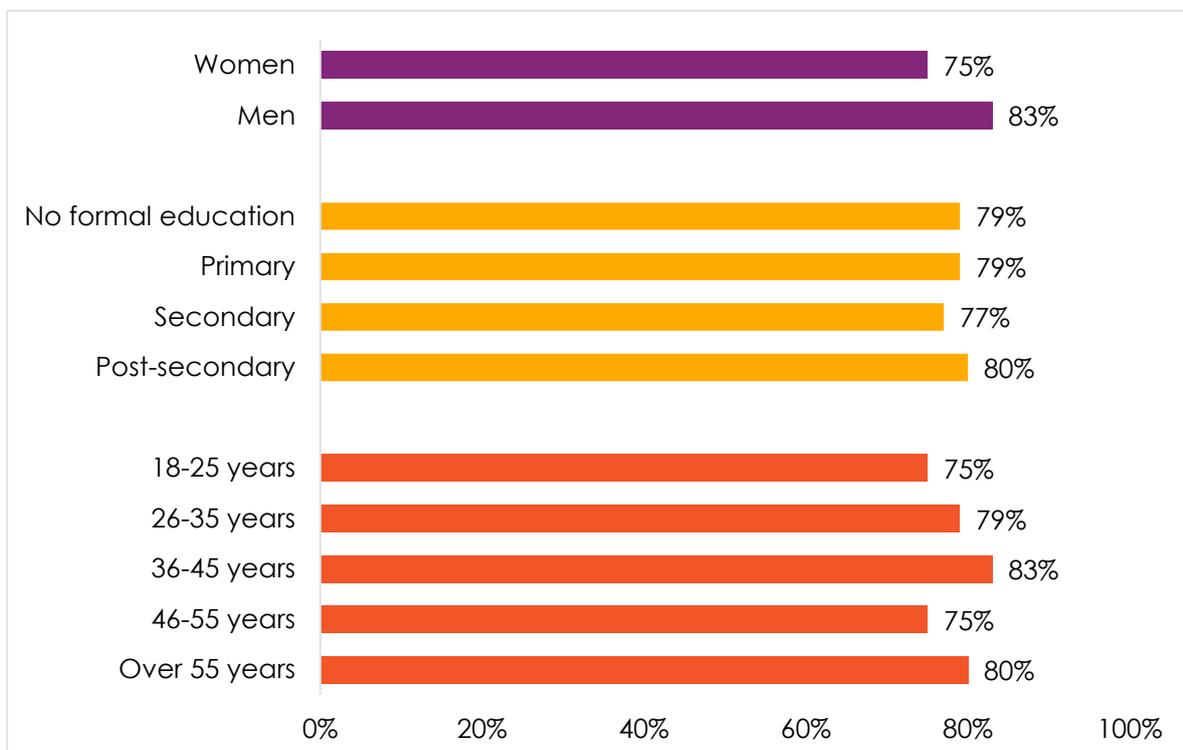
More men than women believe that the police will take GBV cases seriously (83% vs. 75%) (Figure 9).

Figure 8: Do the police take GBV cases seriously? | Lesotho | 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 9: Do the police take GBV cases seriously? | by demographic group | Lesotho | 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")*

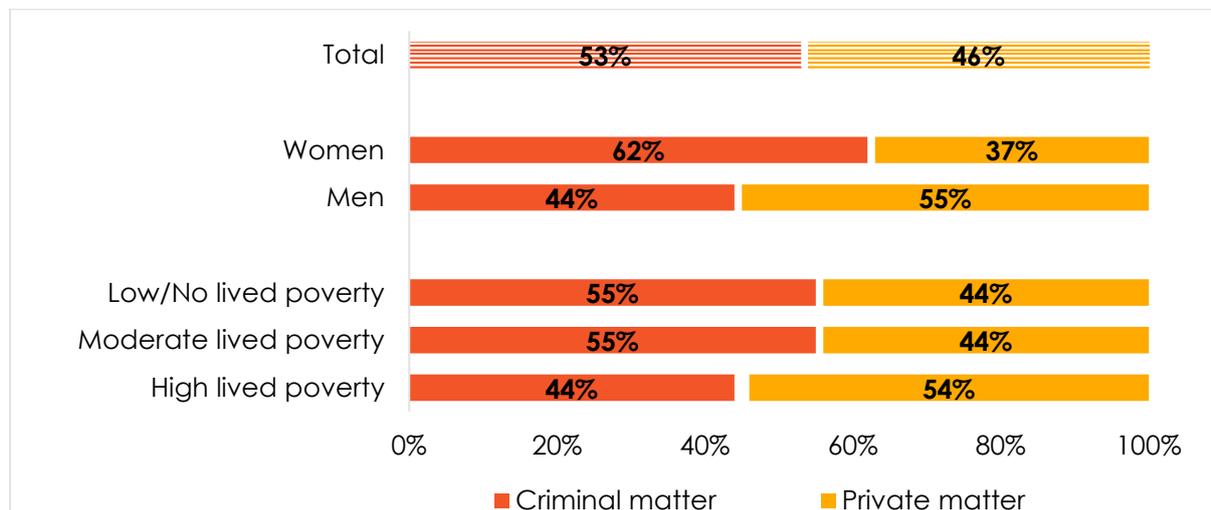
Is domestic violence a criminal or family matter?

One common form of GBV is domestic violence. 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 Basotho see domestic violence as a criminal matter or a private matter?

Basotho are divided in their views: 53% say domestic violence is a criminal matter that requires the involvement of law enforcement, while 46% consider it a private matter that needs to be handled within the family (Figure 10).

Women are much more likely than men to see domestic violence as a criminal matter, 62% vs. 44%. Support for this view is lowest among those with high lived poverty (44%, vs. 55% of better-off citizens).

Figure 10: Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter? | by gender and lived poverty | Lesotho | 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

Basotho consider gender-based violence a serious issue that needs urgent attention. While activists welcome the Counter Domestic Violence Bill, this should be augmented by education and awareness raising. The stigmatisation of victims must be addressed, and communities should play their role of protecting the vulnerable members in their midst.

Basotho express confidence that the police take GBV cases seriously, but the fact that almost half of adults consider domestic violence a private matter, if left unaddressed, will result in the continued under-reporting of GBV cases to the police.

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Libuseng Malephane is the Afrobarometer national investigator in Lesotho, based at Advision Lesotho. Email: libusengmalephane@gmail.com.

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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