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Zimbabweans see gender-based violence as most important women's-rights issue to address

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 557 | Simangele Moyo-Nyede

Summary

High-profile charges of gender-based violence have rocked Zimbabwe in recent years. In 2019, then-Vice President Kembo Mohadi was accused of beating his ex-wife and threatening her with an axe (Pindula, 2019; New Zimbabwe, 2019). Earlier this year, prominent urban groover Stunner was arrested and charged with hitting and kicking his wife and pulling out her artificial fingernails, though he was later acquitted (Kapoor, 2022; Katanda, 2022; Ndoro, 2022).

Gender-based violence (GBV) affects one in every three women globally (World Bank, 2019; Moses, 2020). In Zimbabwe, 40% of women aged 15-49 have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner, including 19% who suffered such violence during the previous 12 months (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency & UNICEF, 2019). Reports suggest that GBV intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps because isolation made it harder for victims to escape abuse and access support (ZimFact, 2021).

Zimbabwe's weapons to fight GBV range from the Constitution and criminal codes to the Zimbabwe Republic Police's (2022) specialised "victim friendly units" and the Zimbabwe Gender Commission. The Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development also works with civil society, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2022), and other UN agencies to increase the availability and utilisation of GBV services and to reduce public tolerance for GBV (International Federation of the Red Cross, 2017; UN Women, 2021).

Nonetheless, GBV remains both prevalent and vastly under-reported, as many survivors decide to suffer in silence rather than risk stigmatisation or an unresponsive legal system (Ahrens, 2006; Spotlight Initiative, 2021; UNICEF, 2021).

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

In Zimbabwe, most citizens say physical force is never justified to discipline women, but they report that GBV is a common occurrence and constitutes the most important women's-rights issue that the government and the society must address. Most consider GBV a criminal matter and believe that the police take GBV cases seriously, but almost half also say it's likely that a woman who reports 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, and Round 9 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Zimbabwe, led by the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Zimbabwe between 28 March 2022 and 10 April 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 Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2021.

Key findings

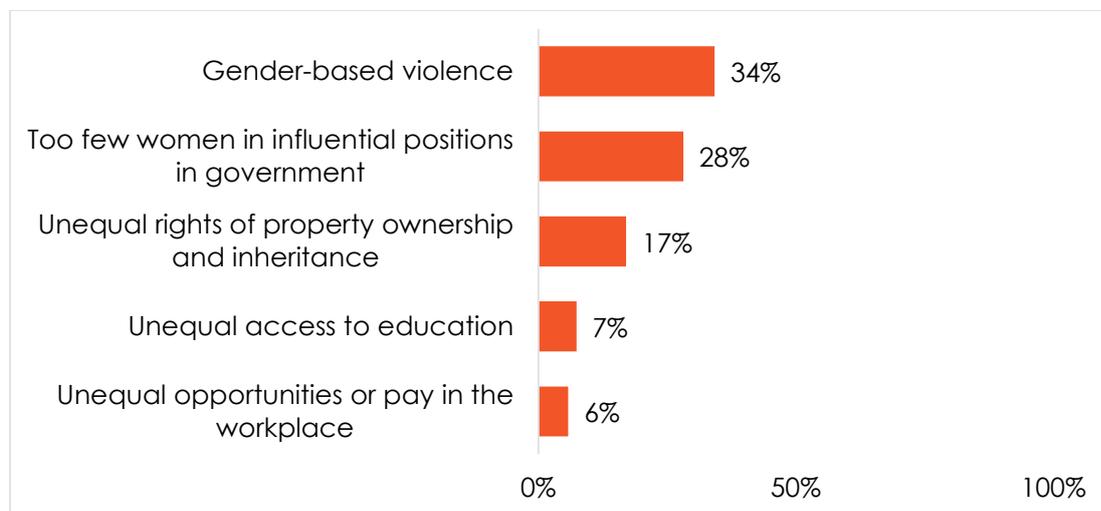
- Zimbabweans see gender-based violence (GBV) as the most important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address.
- More than half (52%) of citizens say violence against women and girls is a "somewhat common" (35%) or "very common" (17%) occurrence in their community.
- Close to eight in 10 Zimbabweans (78%) say it is "never" justified for a man to physically discipline his wife.
- Almost half (45%) of respondents consider it "somewhat likely" (27%) or "very likely" (18%) that a woman will be criticised, harassed, or shamed if she reports GBV to the authorities.
 - But most (78%) believe that the police are "very likely" (50%) or "somewhat likely" (28%) to take cases of GBV seriously.
- Six in 10 Zimbabweans (61%) say domestic violence should be treated as a criminal matter, while 37% see it as a private matter to be resolved within the family.

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

In Zimbabwe, GBV tops the list of important women's-rights issues that citizens say the government and society must address. One-third (34%) of survey respondents cite GBV as their top priority, followed by too few women in influential positions in government (28%), unequal rights of property ownership and inheritance (17%), unequal access to education (7%), and unequal opportunities and pay in the workplace (6%) (Figure 1).

Women and men are equally likely to cite GBV as the most important women's-rights issue.

Figure 1: Most important women's-rights issue | Zimbabwe | 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 critical issue is probably its frequency: 52% of respondents say violence against women and girls is “somewhat common” (35%) or “very common” (17%) in their community (Figure 2).

Women (56%) are more likely than men (47%) to say that GBV is a common occurrence (Figure 3). This perception is also more widespread among poor citizens (62% of those experiencing high lived poverty¹ vs. 43%-49% of better-off respondents). It is less common among the most educated citizens (45%) and older respondents (40%).

Figure 2: Frequency of GBV | Zimbabwe | 2022

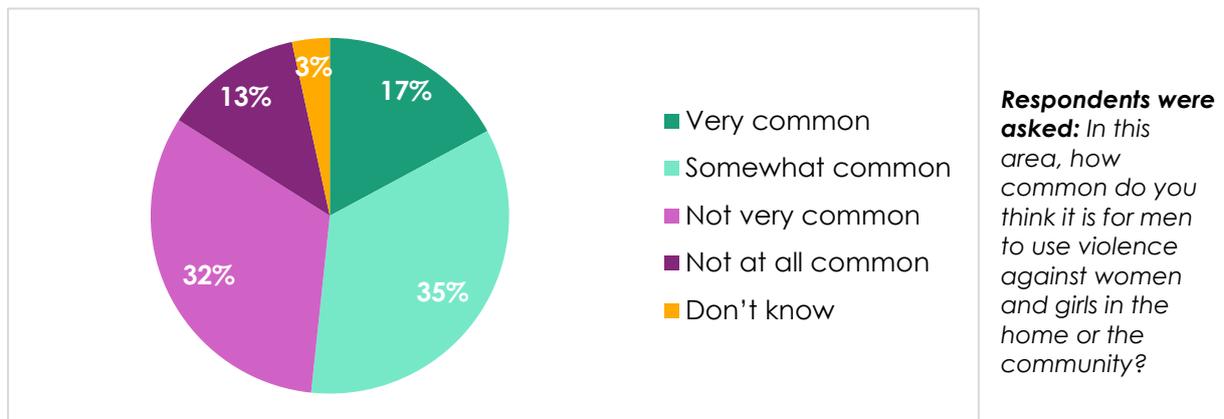
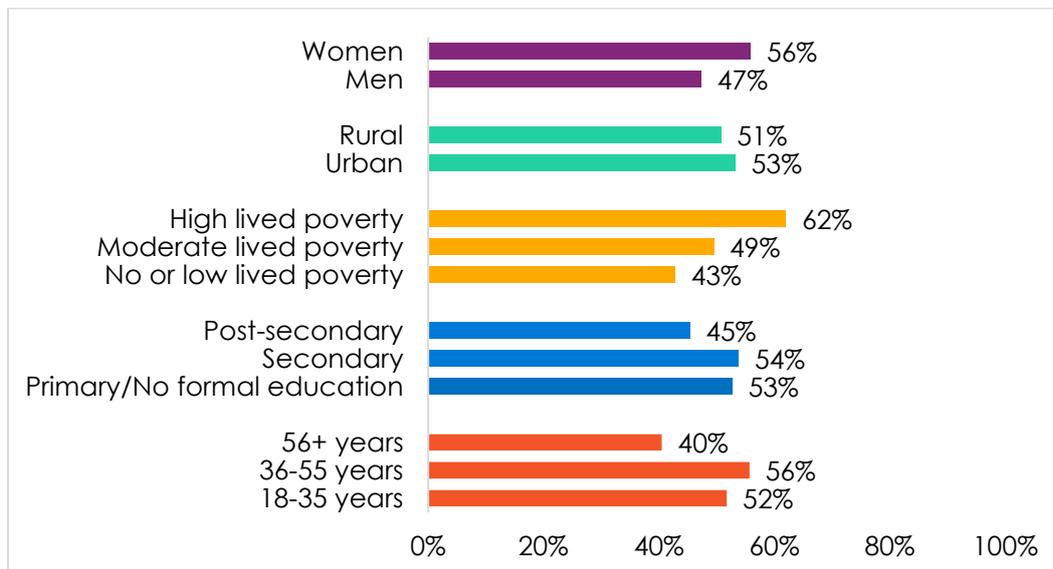


Figure 3: GBV is somewhat/very common | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022



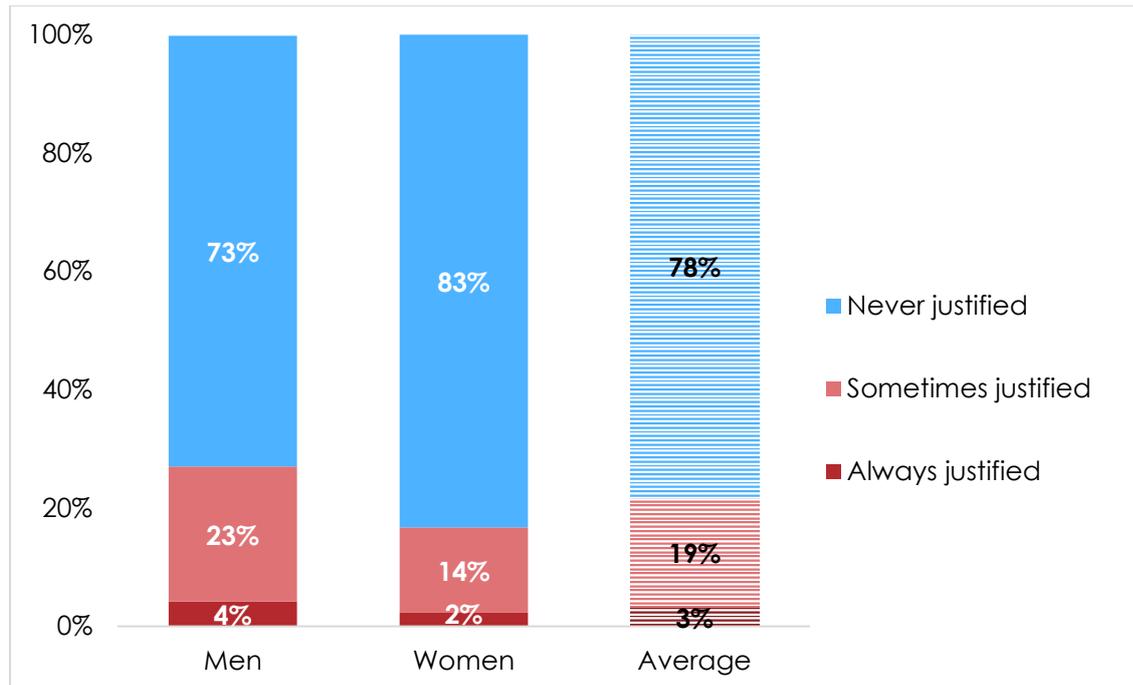
Respondents were asked: In this area, how common do you think it is for men to use violence against women and girls in the home or the community? (% who say “somewhat common” or “very common”)

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).

Physical discipline of a spouse

Close to eight in 10 Zimbabweans (78%) say it is “never justified” for a man to physically discipline his wife, while about two in 10 consider it “sometimes” (19%) or “always” (3%) justified. Women are more likely than men to rule out physical discipline as “never justified,” 83% vs. 73% (Figure 4).

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



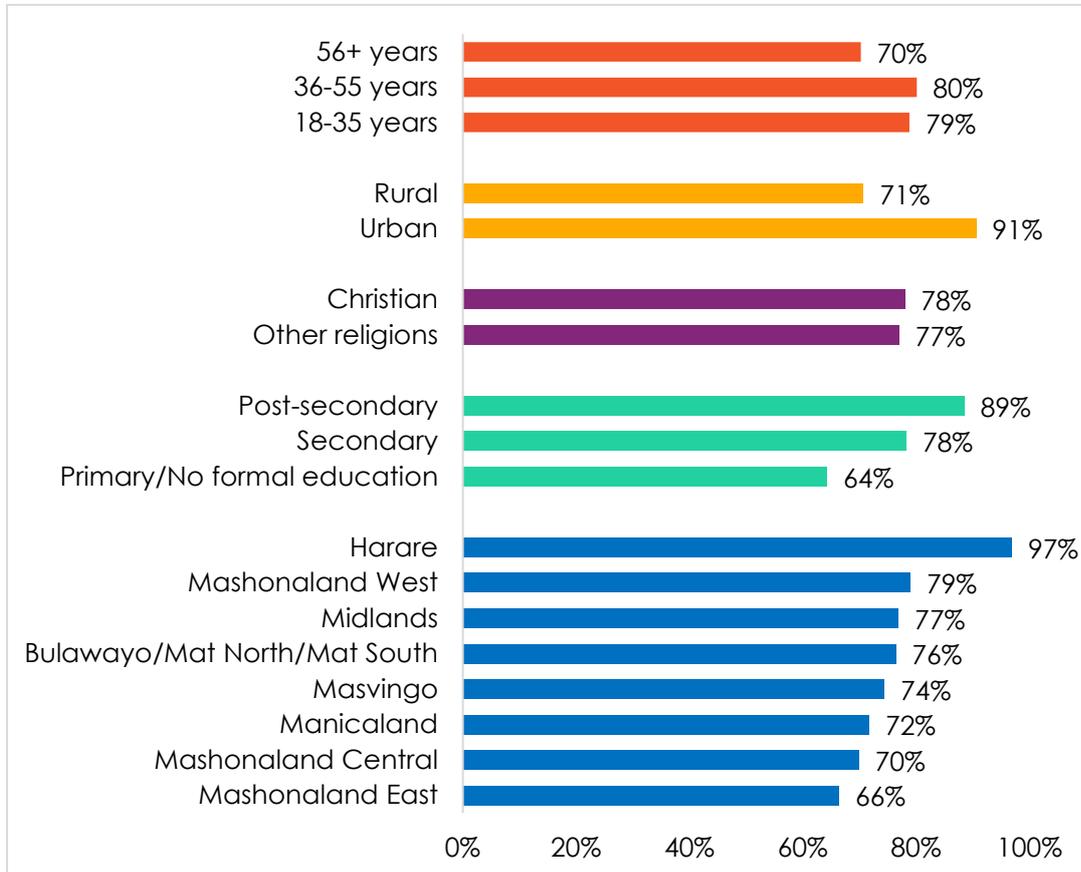
Respondents were asked: For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For a man to use physical discipline on his wife if she has done something he doesn't like or thinks is wrong?

The view that men are never justified in physically disciplining their wives gathers strength as respondents' education levels rise, ranging from 64% of those with primary or no formal schooling to 89% of those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 5).

Urban residents are considerably more likely to reject this form of physical violence than their rural counterparts (91% vs. 71%), as are Harare residents (97%) compared to inhabitants of other provinces.

But older respondents (70%) are less likely to see it as unacceptable than younger respondents (79%-80%). Christians do not differ from citizens professing other religions in their views on the use of physical force against women.

Figure 5: Never justified for men to physically discipline their wives | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 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? (% who say it can "never be justified")

Response to GBV

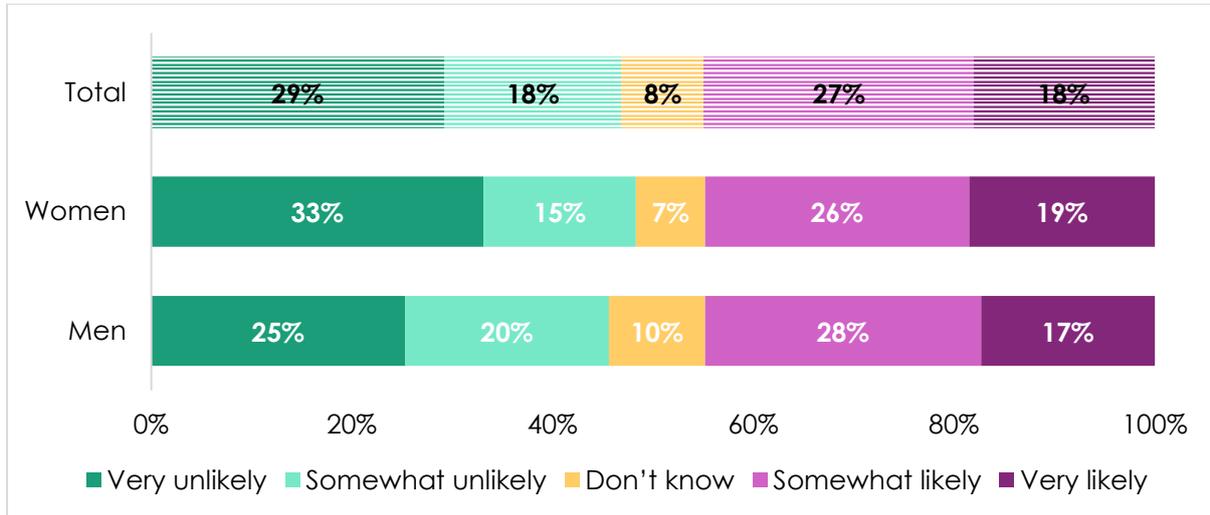
Police and scholars agree that the true extent of GBV is unknown because many attacks on girls and women are never reported. Reasons include fear of the attacker, fear of a negative response by others, and the belief that the authorities will not take the case seriously (Palermo, Bleck, & Peterman, 2014).

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, Zimbabweans are almost evenly split in their opinions: 47% say this is "very unlikely" (29%) or "somewhat unlikely" (18%), while 45% say it is "very likely" (18%) or "somewhat likely" (27%) (Figure 6). These perceptions – whether accurate or not – may serve as a significant deterrent to reporting GBV.

Women are actually somewhat more optimistic than men on this question: 33% of women vs. 25% of men believe it is "very unlikely" that a woman who reports being a victim of GBV will suffer such negative consequences.

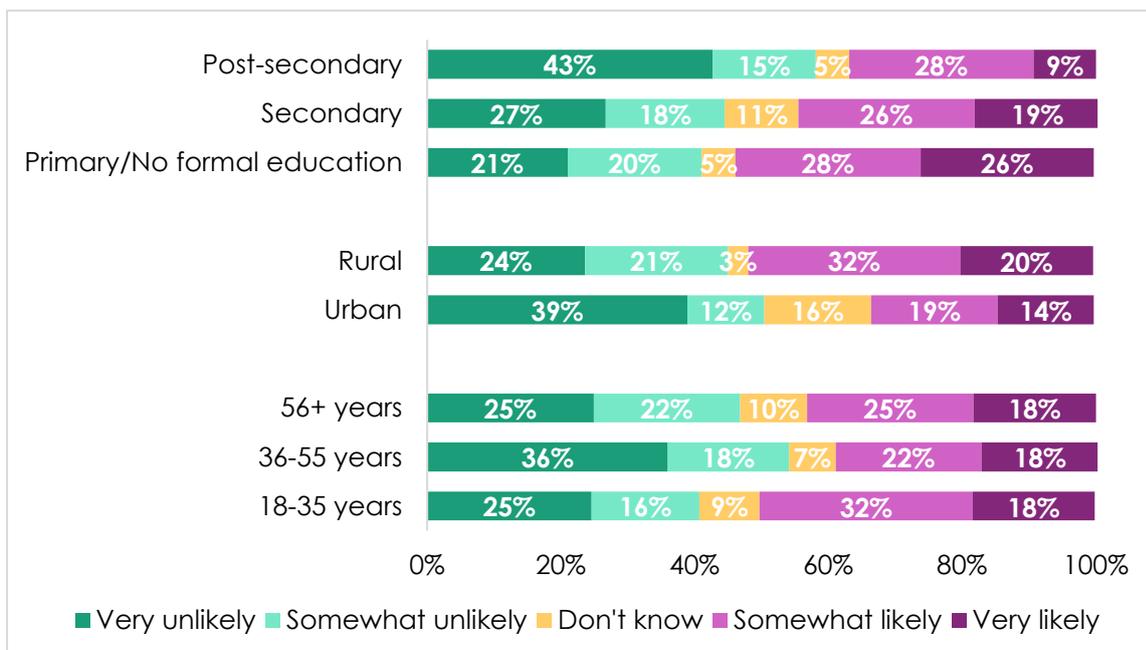
The perception that this is “very unlikely” is less widespread among rural residents (24%) and less educated citizens (21%), as well as among the youngest (25%) and oldest (25%) respondents (Figure 7).

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

Figure 7: Will a woman be criticised, harassed, or shamed for reporting GBV?
 | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022

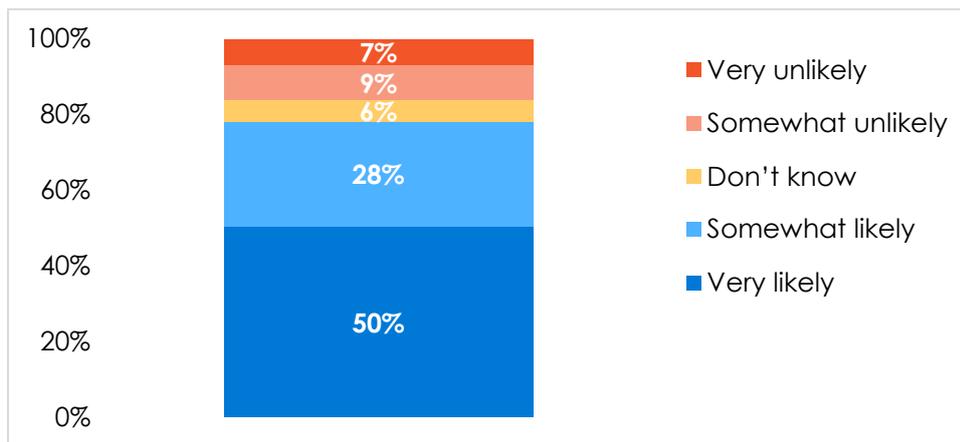


Respondents were asked: If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: She will be criticised, harassed,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

While expectations regarding the community's response are mixed, Zimbabweans believe that the police will respond appropriately to reported cases of GBV: 78% see it as likely that the police will take such reports seriously, including 50% who say it is "very likely" (Figure 8).

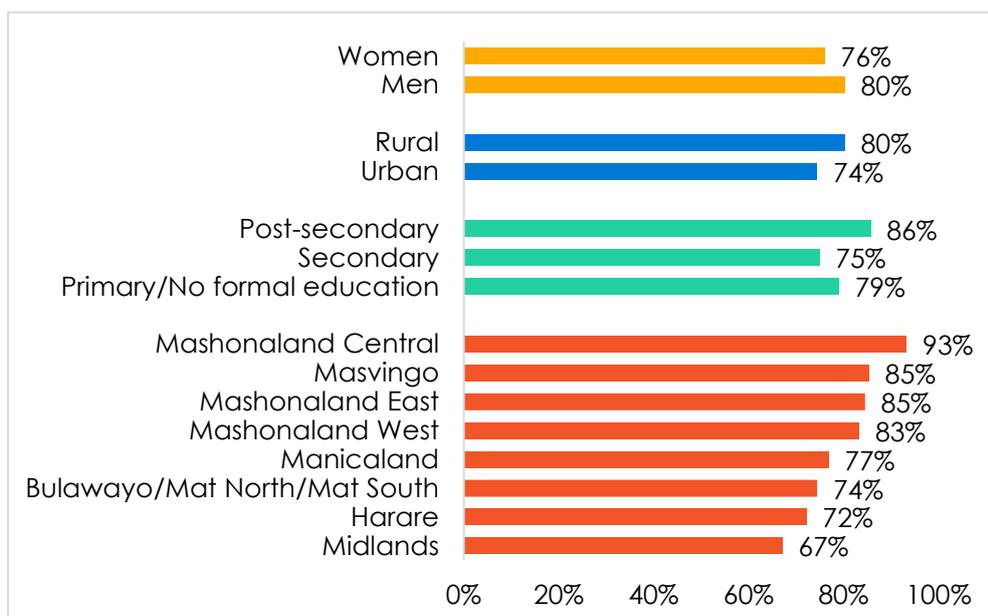
Slightly more men than women and more rural residents than urbanites express confidence in the police response (80% vs. 76% and 80% vs. 74%, respectively) (Figure 9). This confidence is also relatively high among citizens with post-secondary education (86%) and among residents of Mashonaland Central (93%).

Figure 8: Do the police take GBV cases seriously? | Zimbabwe | 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: Police take GBV cases seriously | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 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?

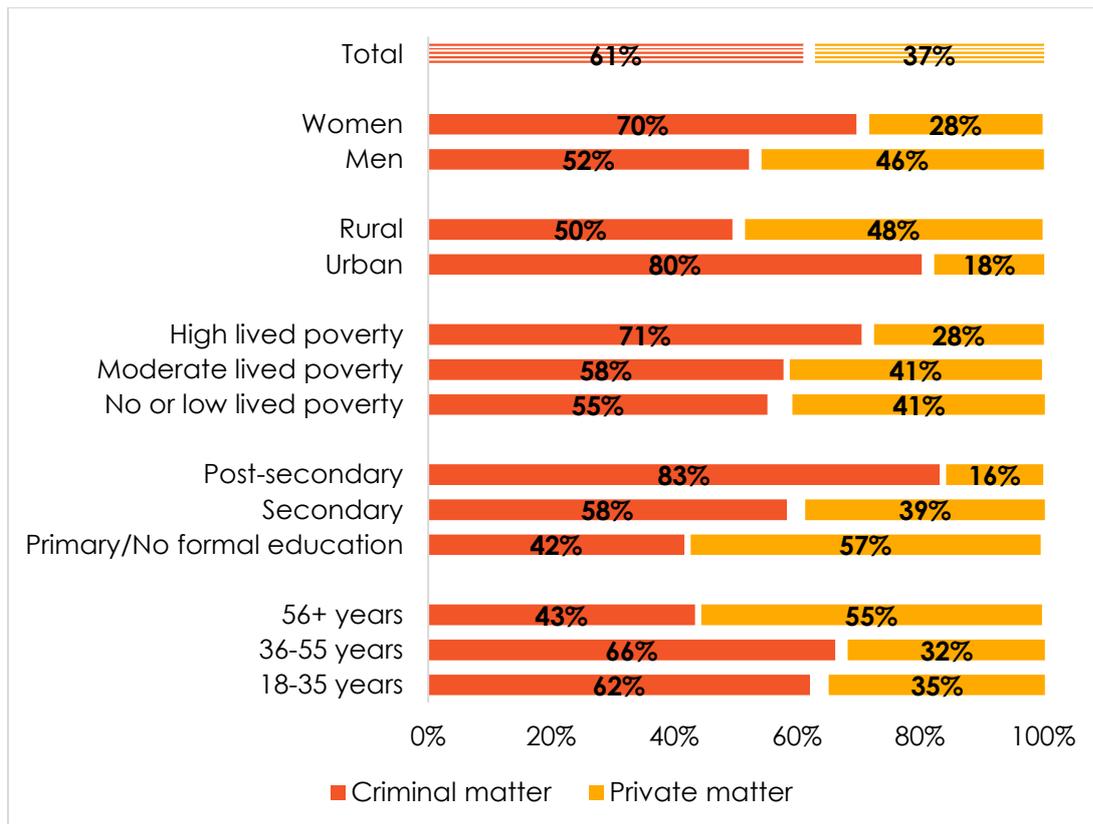
One common form of GBV is domestic violence. Even though the perpetrators may be known, many domestic-violence cases go unreported or unresolved, and most present victims and families with complex, wrenching decisions. Do Zimbabweans see domestic violence as a criminal matter or a private matter?

A majority (61%) of Zimbabweans say domestic violence is a criminal matter that requires the involvement of law enforcement, while 37% see it as a private matter that needs to be handled and resolved within the family (Figure 10).

Women are significantly more likely than men to see domestic violence as a criminal matter (70% vs. 52%). An even larger gap separates the cities, where 80% consider it a matter for law enforcement, from rural areas, where only 50% agree.

The criminal nature of GBV is less accepted by older Zimbabweans (43% among those aged 56 and older) and by those with primary or no formal education (42%). The poorest respondents are most likely to see GBV as a criminal matter (70%, vs. 55%-58% of better-off citizens).

Figure 10: Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter? | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 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

Zimbabweans see GBV as the most important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address. Most reject the use of physical force by a husband, but a majority also say that GBV is at least "somewhat common" in their community. Moreover, almost half consider it likely that a woman will be criticised, harassed, or shamed if she reports being the victim of GBV – a perception that may serve as a significant deterrent to reporting such attacks. This type of stigmatisation may also prevent men who suffer GBV from speaking up (Muga-Odumbe, 2021).

On the plus side, most citizens believe that the police are likely to take cases of GBV seriously, and a majority see domestic violence as a criminal matter whose resolution requires the involvement of law enforcement agencies rather than as a private matter to be resolved within the family.

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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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