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Gender-based violence a high priority in Sierra Leone, but citizens say it is a private matter

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 565 | Fredline M'Cormack-Hale and Maame Akua Amoah Twum

Summary

In late 2018, the alleged rape of a 5-year-old girl by her uncle and her subsequent partial paralysis launched the Black Tuesday movement in Sierra Leone, which many credit with driving President Julius Maada Bio's decision to declare rape a national emergency in February 2019 (M'Cormack-Hale, 2022). The movement initially committed to wearing black every Tuesday to bring attention to the issue of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) with a particular focus on victims who are minors. In 2019, one of every four SGBV cases reported in Sierra Leone was sexual penetration of a minor (Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone, 2020; Sierra Express Media, 2021).

Many saw the president's declaration as bringing much-needed attention to the problem of SGBV, and soon after, in October 2019, Sierra Leone passed an amended sexual offences act. Among other things, the act provides for stronger penalties (up to life in prison) for rape and sexual assault; establishes the Sexual Offences Model Court to fast-track justice; and provides for government one-stop centres where SGBV survivors can receive free services, including treatment and counseling (Martin & Koroma, 2021; Sierra Network Salone, 2020).

These are important steps in a country where, according to the Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey, 61% of married women say they have experienced spousal violence, whether physical, sexual, or emotional (Stats SL and ICF, 2020). However, many SGBV survivors do not report the attacks, for reasons that may include stigma, shame, and economic concerns (Rainbo Initiative, 2021; Schneider, 2019a). Adults are particularly unlikely to report, and for cases that are reported, prosecution rates remain low; many are thrown out or settled out of court (Schneider, 2019a).

Moreover, according to Afrobarometer 2020 data, while 93% of Sierra Leoneans approved of the president's declaration of rape as a national emergency, 71% felt it did not go far enough and the government needed to do more to address SGBV (M'Cormack-Hale & Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny, 2021).

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.

Survey findings show that in Sierra Leone, gender-based violence is the most important women's-rights issue that citizens want the government to address. Most citizens strongly oppose the use of physical force against women. But a majority of citizens also 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.

And while most Sierra Leoneans 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 by other members of the community.

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 Sierra Leone, led by the Institute for Governance Reform (IGR), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Sierra Leone between 13 June and 9 July 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 surveys were conducted in Sierra Leone in 2012, 2015, 2018, and 2020.

Key findings

- Sierra Leoneans see gender-based violence (GBV) as the most important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address.
- Two-thirds (67%) of citizens say violence against women is "not very common" or "not at all common" in their community, while 32% – and 36% of women – disagree.
- A majority (70%) of Sierra Leoneans say it is "never" justified for a man to use physical force to discipline his wife. About three in 10 think it is "sometimes" (27%) or "always" (3%) justified.
- Almost half of respondents consider it "somewhat likely" (21%) or "very likely" (27%) that a woman will be criticised, harassed, or shamed if she reports gender-based violence to the authorities. Only 37% say this is "very unlikely."
 - But most (93%) believe that the police are likely to take cases of GBV seriously.
- A majority (57%) of Sierra Leoneans say domestic violence should be treated as a private matter to be resolved within the family rather than as a criminal matter.

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

In Sierra Leone, gender-based violence (cited by 33% of respondents) outranks unequal access to education (25%) and too few women in influential positions in government (17%) as the most important women's-rights issue for the government and society to address.

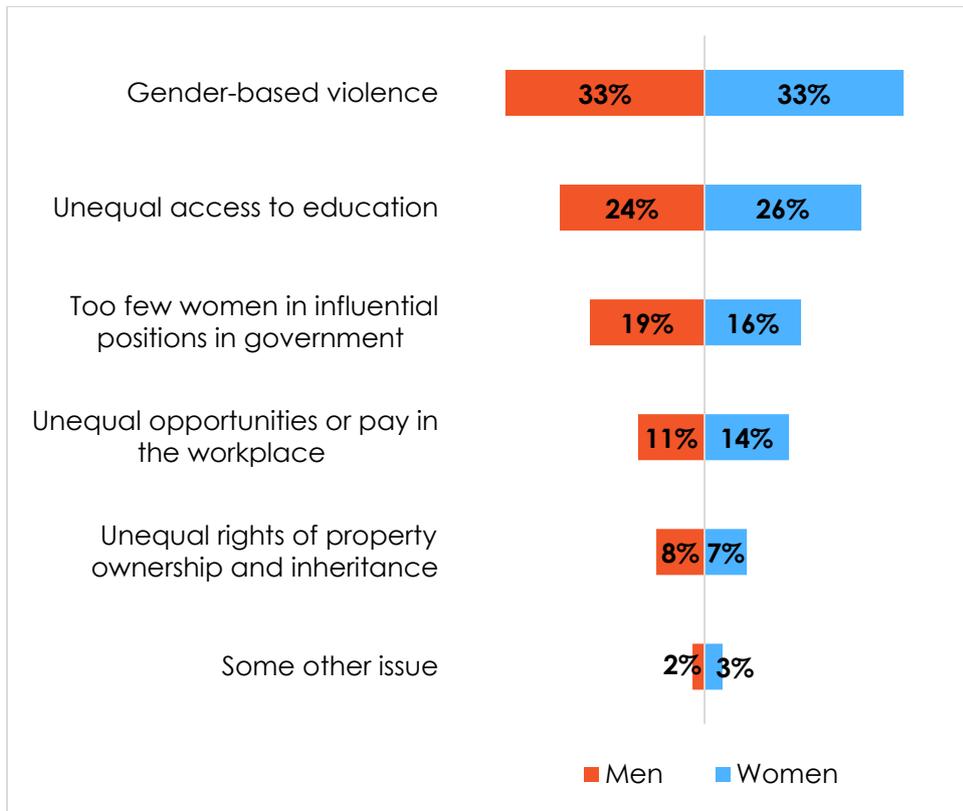
Women and men share almost identical views on the top priorities for action when it comes to women's rights (Figure 1).

How common is GBV?

Even though GBV is considered a major issue in Sierra Leone, many citizens do not think it happens frequently: Two-thirds (67%) of respondents say violence against women is "not very common" or "not at all common" in their community. One-third (32%) describe it as "somewhat" or "very" common (Figure 2).

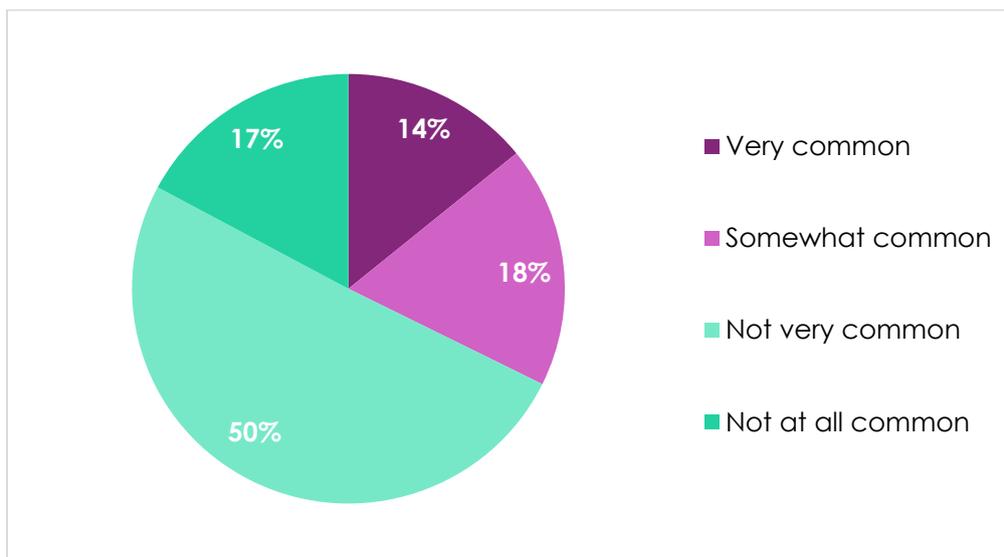
Women (36%) are somewhat more likely than men (29%) to say that violence against women is a common occurrence, as are urban residents (39%) compared to their rural counterparts (27%) (Figure 3). This perception is also more widespread among young adults (39% of those aged 26-35) and more educated citizens (37%-38% of those with post-secondary or secondary education).

Figure 1: Most important women's rights issue | by gender | Sierra Leone | 2022



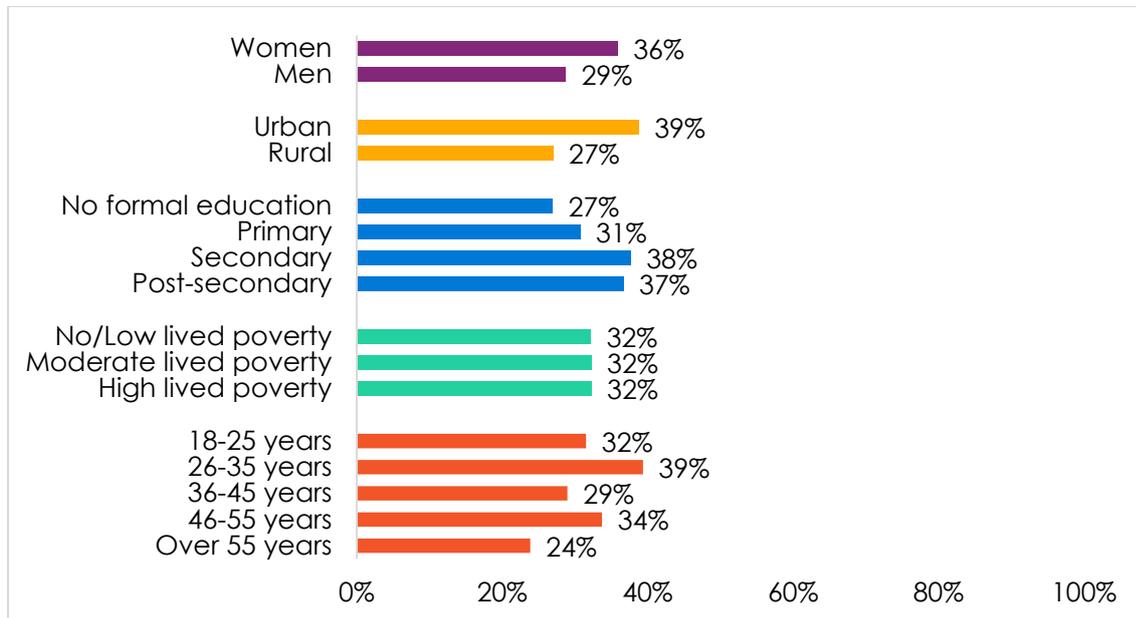
Respondents were asked: In your opinion, which of the following issues related to women's rights and equality do you think is the most important for our government and society to address?

Figure 2: Frequency of GBV | Sierra Leone | 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?

Figure 3: GBV perceived as common occurrence | by demographic group
 | Sierra Leone | 2022

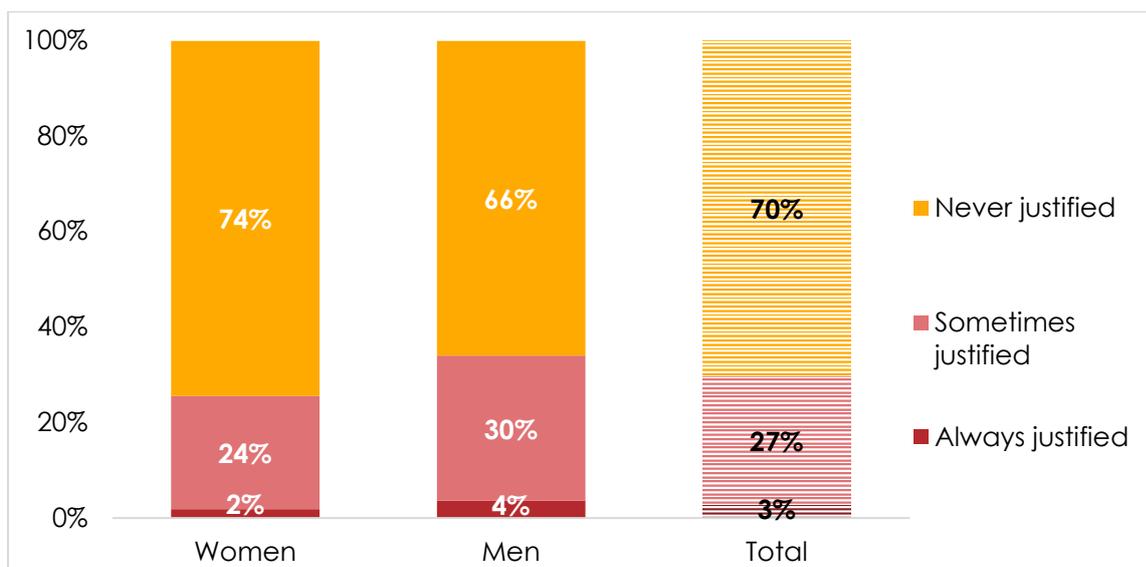


Respondents were asked: In this area, how common do you think it is for men to use violence against women and girls in the home or the community? (% who say “somewhat common” or “very common”)

Physical discipline of a spouse

More than two-thirds (70%) of Sierra Leoneans say it is “never justified” for a man to use physical force to discipline his wife, while three in 10 consider it “sometimes” (27%) or “always” (3%) justified. Women are more likely than men to rule out the use of physical force as “never justified,” 74% vs. 66% (Figure 4).

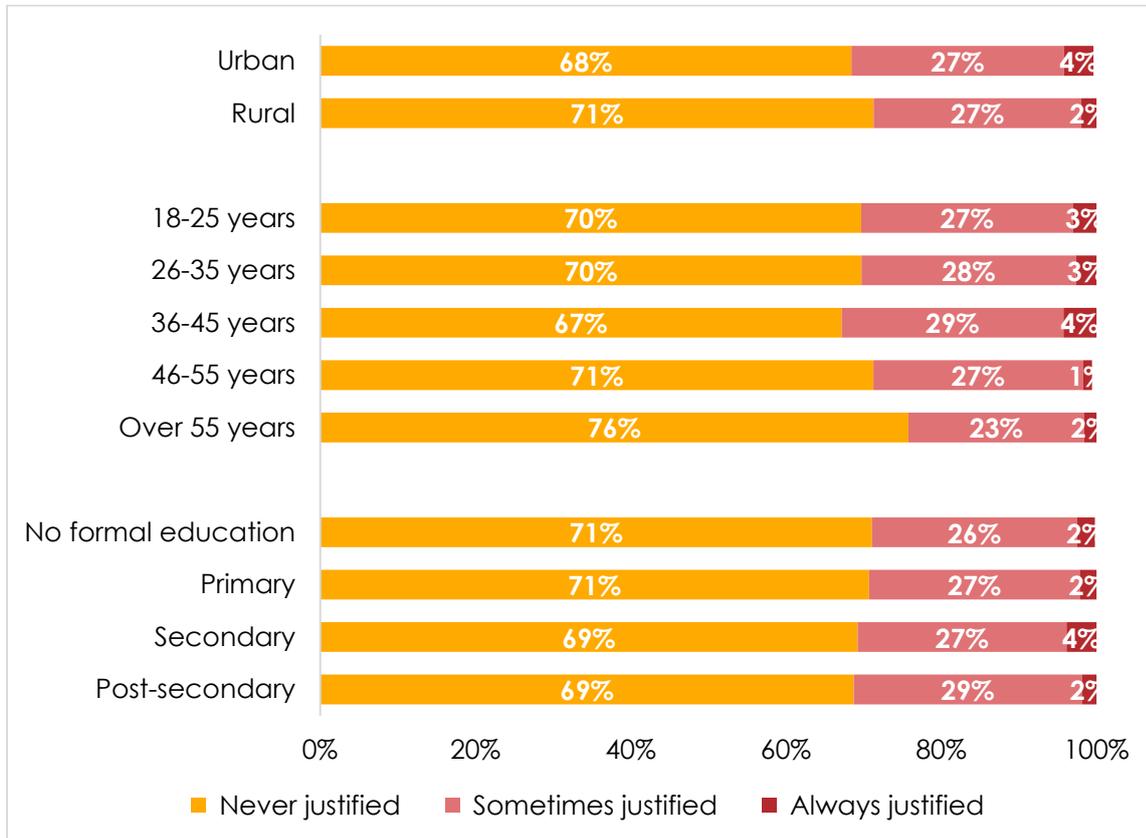
Figure 4: Is it justified for men to physically discipline their wives? | by gender
 | Sierra Leone | 2022



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 is consistently strong in both rural and urban areas and across age groups and education levels (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Is it justified for men to physically discipline their wives? | by demographic group | Sierra Leone | 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?

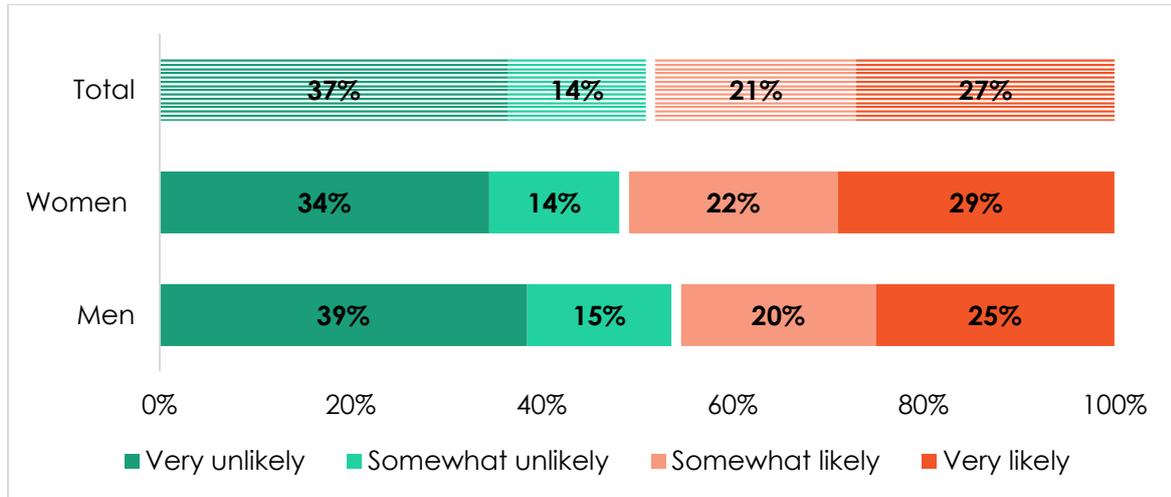
Response to GBV

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, and 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, fewer than four in 10 (37%) of Sierra Leoneans say this is "very unlikely" (Figure 6). While another 14% consider it "somewhat unlikely," almost half (48%) say it is "somewhat" or "very" likely. These perceptions – whether accurate or not – may serve as a significant deterrent to reporting GBV.

Women (51%) are somewhat more likely than men (45%) to believe that women who report incidents of GBV will suffer criticism, harassment, or shame.

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

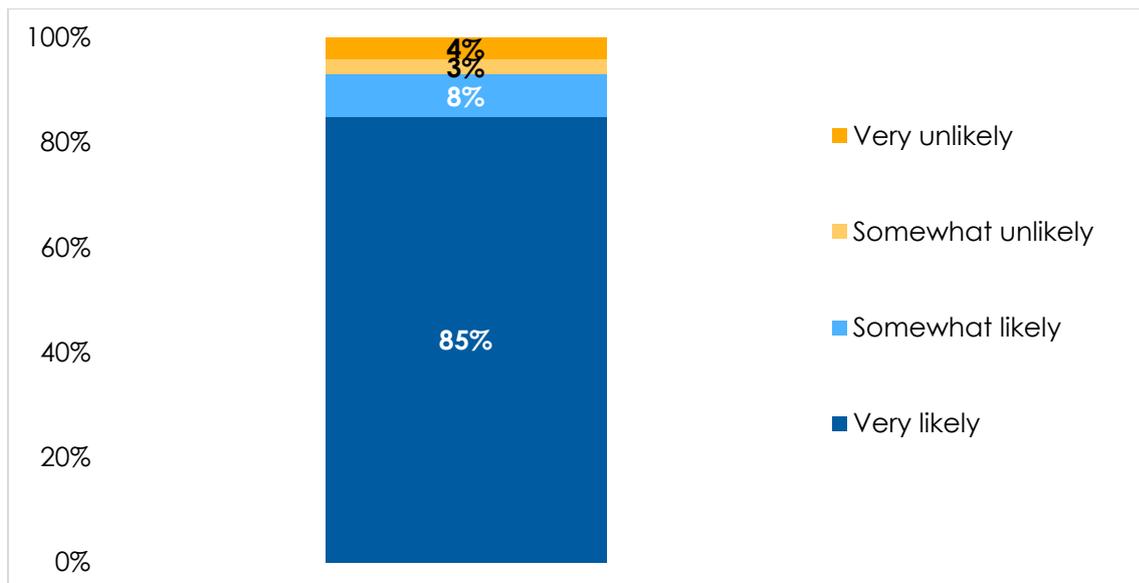


Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: She will be criticised, harassed,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

While expectations regarding the community's response are mixed, Sierra Leoneans overwhelmingly believe that the police will respond appropriately to reported cases of GBV: 93% see it as likely that the police will take such reports seriously, including 85% who say it is "very likely" (Figure 7).

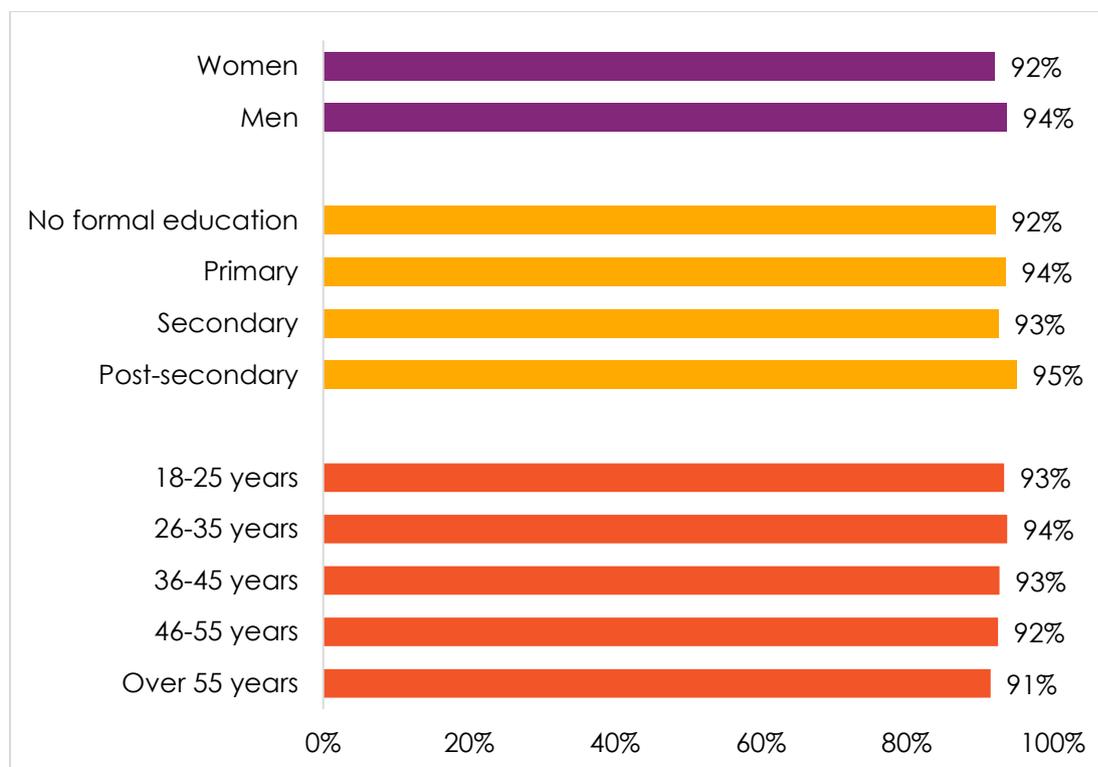
Men and women are about equally likely to believe that the police will take GBV cases seriously, as are respondents of different educational profiles and ages (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Do the police take GBV cases seriously? | Sierra Leone | 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: Police take GBV cases seriously | by demographic group | Sierra Leone
 | 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?

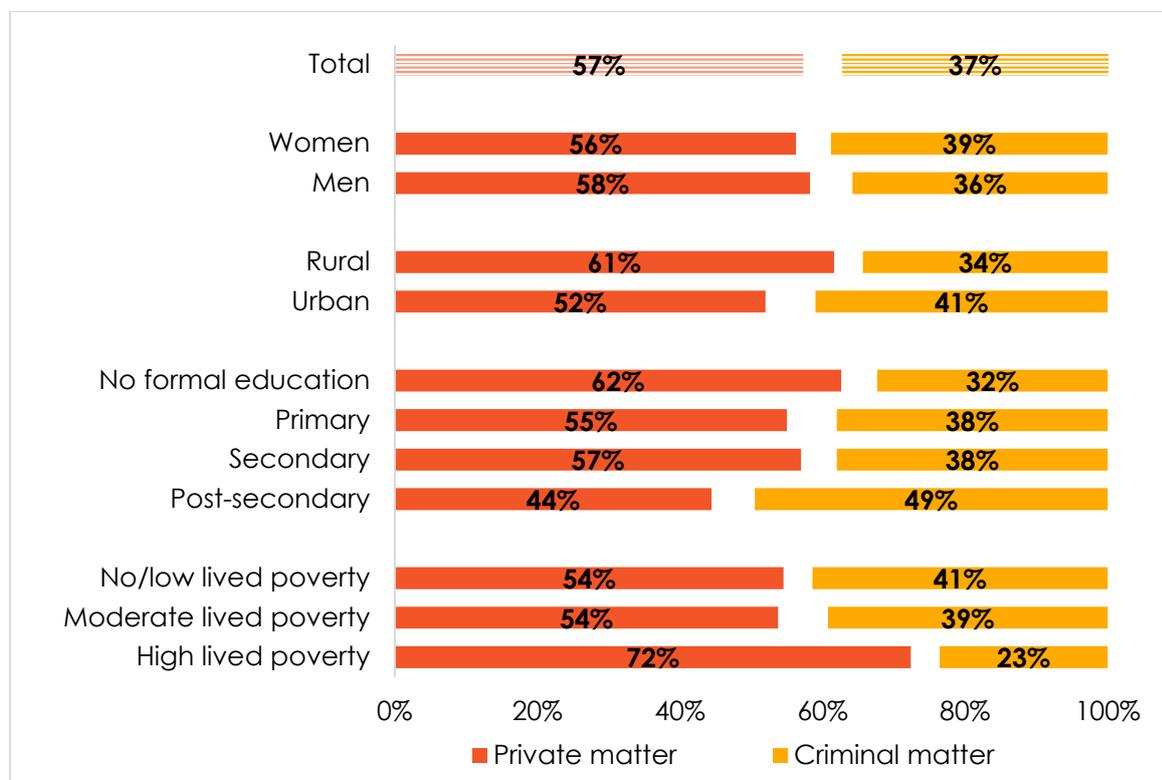
One common form of GBV is domestic violence. Even though the perpetrators may be known, many domestic-violence cases go unreported or unresolved, and most present victims and families with complex, wrenching decisions. Do Sierra Leoneans see domestic violence as a criminal matter or a private matter?

A majority (57%) of citizens say domestic violence is a private matter that needs to be resolved within the family. Close to four in 10 (37%) believe domestic violence to be a criminal matter that requires the involvement of law enforcement agencies (Figure 9).

Poorer citizens (72% of those experiencing high lived poverty¹), less educated citizens (62%), and rural residents (61%) are significantly more likely than better-off citizens (54%), the most educated (44%), and urbanites (52%) to see domestic violence as a private matter. Support for this view is equal among men and women.

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 9: Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter? | by demographic group
 | Sierra Leone | 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

Survey findings portray a society grappling with the complex problem of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and perhaps with its own complex and evolving attitudes.

Sierra Leoneans see gender-based violence as the most important women's-rights issue that government and society must address. Similarly, most citizens welcome the declaration of rape as a national emergency and the provision of more severe penalties, and reject the use of physical force against women. Moreover, most trust the police to take cases of gender-based violence seriously.

However, a majority of Sierra Leoneans also say that violence against women is not common in their community and that domestic violence should be treated as a private rather than a criminal matter. Almost half think that a woman reporting such violence will be criticised, harassed, or shamed.

These seemingly contradictory perspectives may reflect the increased attention that SGBV now commands in Sierra Leone following the president's 2019 declaration and the passage of a stronger sexual offences law. While the president's declaration placed SGBV high on the political agenda, with punitive commitment, it is possible that institutional structures and cultural norms have yet to catch up. To many people, formal institutions, including the police and courts, seem remote and difficult to access (Martin & Koroma, 2020). Economic factors often play a role. Moreover, some forms of domestic violence remain acceptable to a

significant share of the population (Schneider 2019b). Socio-cultural norms make it difficult for women to talk about violence in their marriages (Fofana Ibrahim, Shutt, & Martin, 2021), let alone report these crimes to the police, and women who speak up can be stigmatised (Schneider 2019b). Survey findings suggest this is changing, particularly among more educated citizens – but not overnight.

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