



# Malawians see gender-based violence as a top priority – and a criminal matter

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 576 | Joseph J. Chunga and Raphael Nedi

## Summary

Malawi is party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and has a set of laws and policies aimed at fighting gender-based violence (GBV), including the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act, the Gender Equality Act, the National Gender Policy, and the National Action Plan to Combat Gender-Based Violence in Malawi 2014-2020 (Ahmed, Changole, & Wangamati, 2021; Government of Malawi, 2014; Government of Malawi, 2015 ).

Yet one-third of Malawian women have experienced physical violence since age 15, one-fifth have suffered sexual violence, and 42% of women aged 20-24 were married before age 18 (UNICEF Malawi, 2020; UN Women, 2022; Melnikas, Mulauzi, Mkandawire, & Amin, 2021). The minister of Gender, Community Development, and Social Welfare has repeatedly called for action against GBV (Gausi, 2022; Sabola, 2021), and on assuming the presidency, Lazarus Chakwera announced plans to seek stiffer penalties against those found guilty of committing GBV and to require that human rights be taught in school (Masina, 2020).

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.

Findings show that Malawians see GBV as the most important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address. Citizens overwhelmingly reject the idea that a man is justified in using physical force against his wife and express confidence that the police take GBV cases seriously. A majority consider GBV a criminal matter requiring the involvement of law enforcement rather than a private matter to be handled within the family. But almost half also think it's likely that a woman who reports such violence to the authorities will be criticised, harassed, or shamed by others in the community.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight survey rounds in up to 39 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2022) are currently underway. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Malawians in February 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 Malawi in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2019.

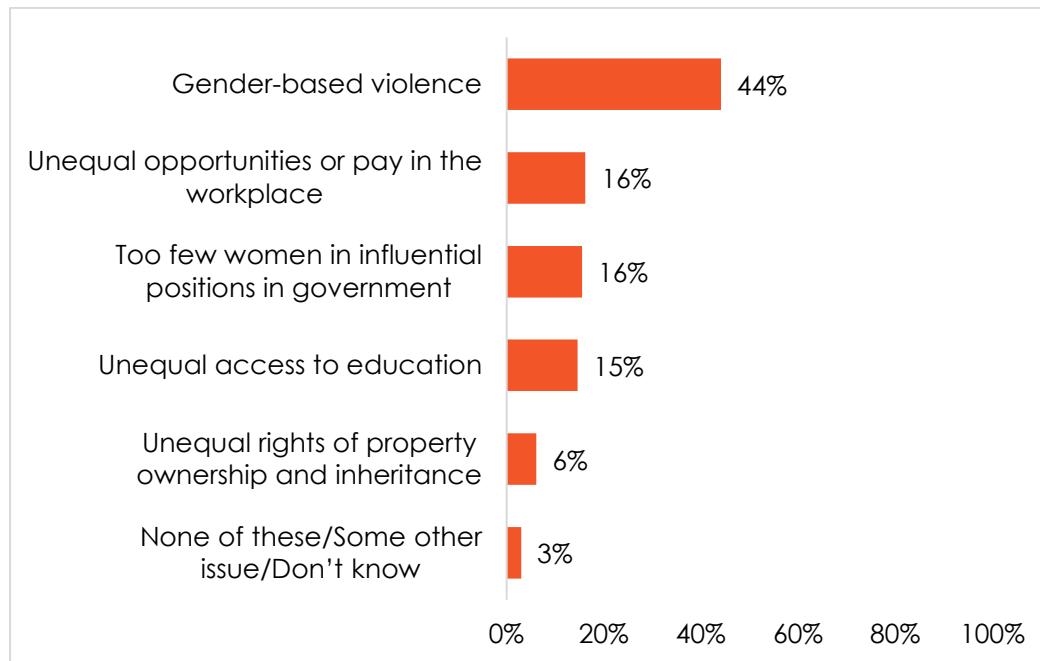
## Key findings

- Malawians see gender-based violence (GBV) as the most important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address.
- But almost two-thirds (65%) of citizens say violence against women and girls is not a common occurrence in their community.
- Malawians overwhelmingly (94%) say a man is "never justified" in using physical force to discipline his wife.
- More than four in 10 citizens (44%) say it is "somewhat" or "very" likely that 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. About the same proportion (43%) consider it "very unlikely."
- Most respondents (90%) believe that the police are likely to take cases of GBV seriously.
- More than six in 10 citizens (62%) say domestic violence should be treated as a criminal matter rather than as a private matter to be resolved within the family.

### GBV tops list of most important women-rights issues

Malawians consider gender-based violence the most important women's-rights issue that the government and society should address. More than four in 10 respondents (44%, including 47% of women) identify GBV as their top priority, almost three times the number who prioritise unequal opportunities or pay in the workplace (16%), too few women in influential positions in government (16%), and unequal access to education (15%) (Figure 1).

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



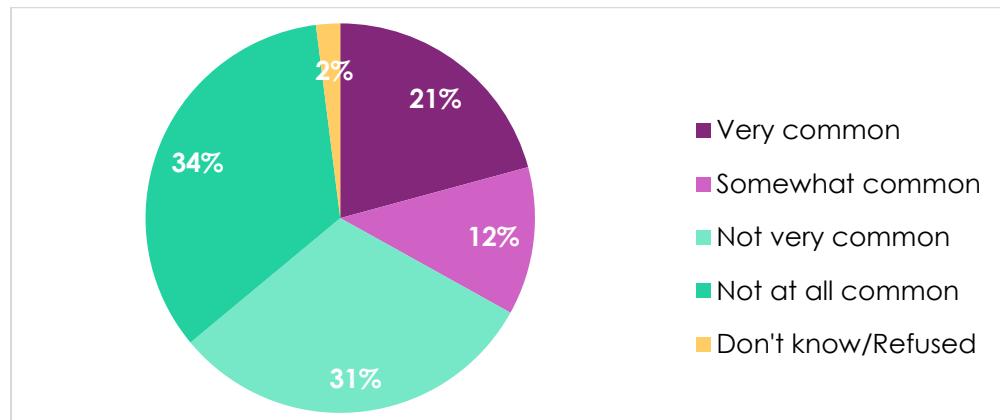
**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, which of the following issues related to women's rights and equality do you think is the most important for our government and society to address?

## How common is GBV?

Despite their view of GBV as the most important women's-rights issue to address, almost two-thirds of Malawians say violence against women and girls is "not very common" (31%) or "not at all common" (34%) in their community (Figure 2). Still, one-third (33%) consider it a widespread problem.

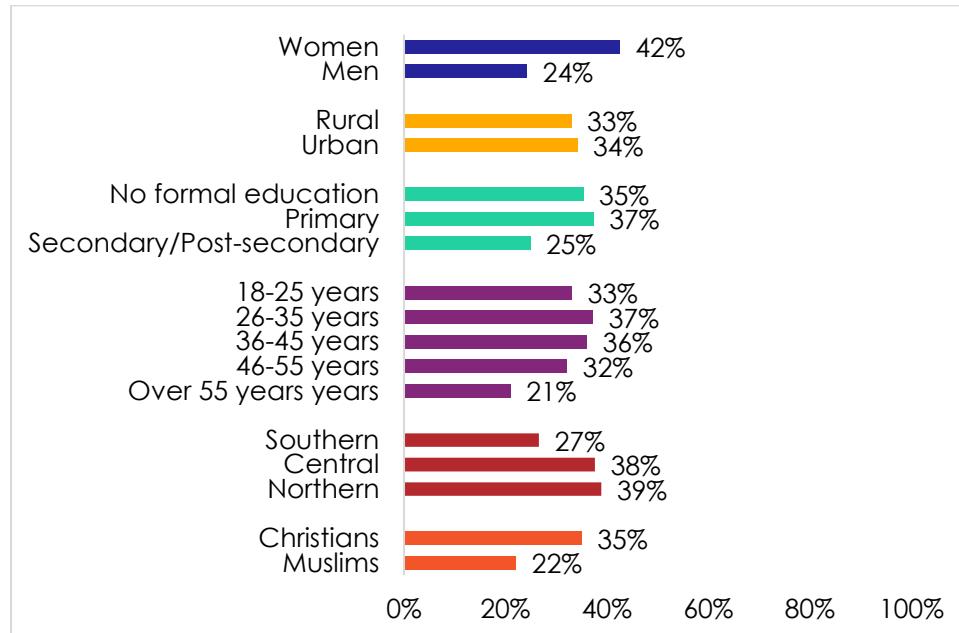
Women are considerably more likely than men (42% vs. 24%) to say that GBV is common in their community (Figure 3). While rural and urban residents don't differ in their assessments, citizens in the Southern Region are less likely to perceive such violence as a frequent occurrence (27%) than those in the Central (38%) and Northern (39%) regions. More educated respondents (25%), older citizens (21%), and Muslims (22%) are also less likely to see GBV as common than their counterparts.

**Figure 2: Frequency of GBV | Malawi | 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 somewhat/very common | by demographic group | Malawi | 2022**

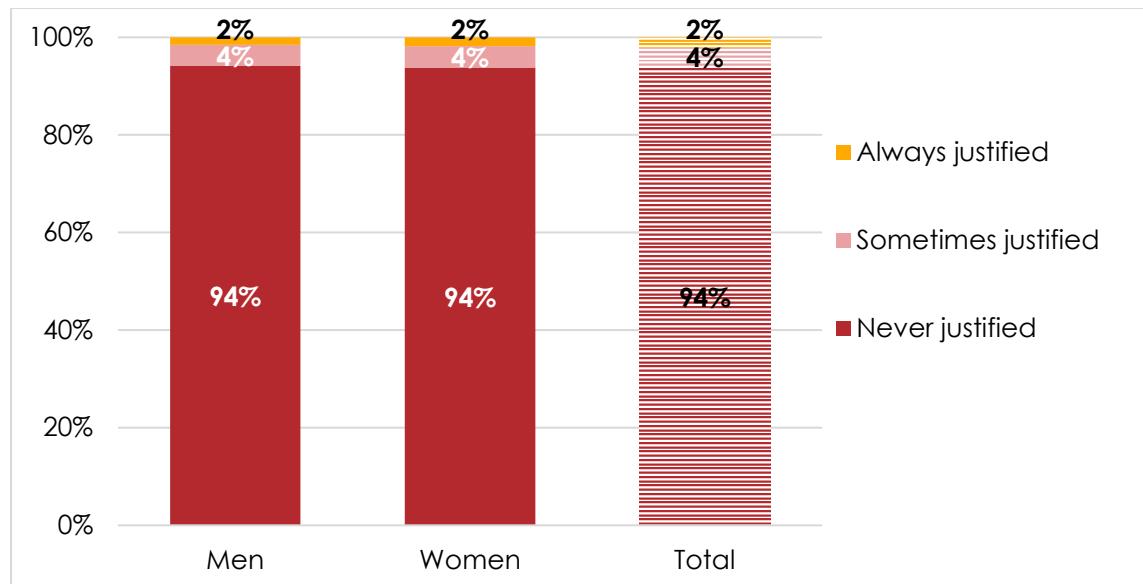


**Respondents were asked:** In this area, how common do you think it is for men to use violence against women and girls in the home or the community? (% who say "somewhat common" or "very common")

## Is physical discipline of wives justifiable?

An overwhelming majority (94%) of Malawians say it is “never justified” for a man to use physical force to discipline his wife (Figure 4). Only about one in 20 consider it “sometimes” (4%) or “always” (2%) justified. These views are almost identical across key demographic groups, including among men and women.

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

## Fight against GBV

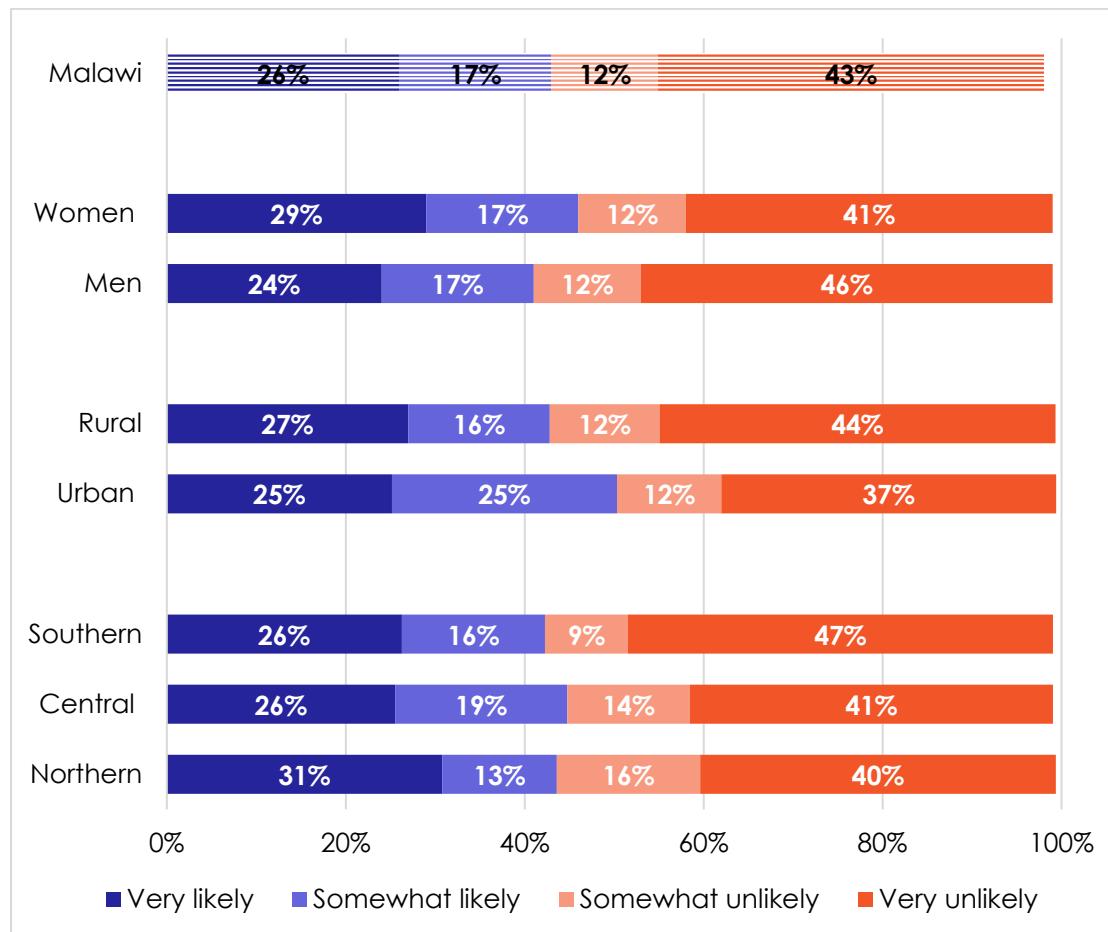
Police and scholars agree that the true extent of GBV is unknown because many attacks on girls and women are never reported. Reasons include fear of the attacker, fear of a negative response by others, or the belief that the authorities won't take the case seriously (Palermo, Bleck, & Peterman, 2014).

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, fewer than half (43%) of Malawians say this is “very unlikely.” While another 12% consider it “somewhat unlikely,” more than four in 10 (44%) say it is “somewhat” or “very” likely.<sup>1</sup> These perceptions – whether accurate or not – may serve as a significant deterrent to reporting GBV.

More women (46%) than men (41%) see it as likely, as do more urban residents (50%) compared to their rural counterparts (43%) (Figure 5).

<sup>1</sup> Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories (e.g. 26% “very unlikely” and 17% “somewhat unlikely” sum to 44%).

**Figure 5: Will a woman be criticised, harassed, or shamed for reporting GBV?**  
 | by demographic group | Malawi | 2022



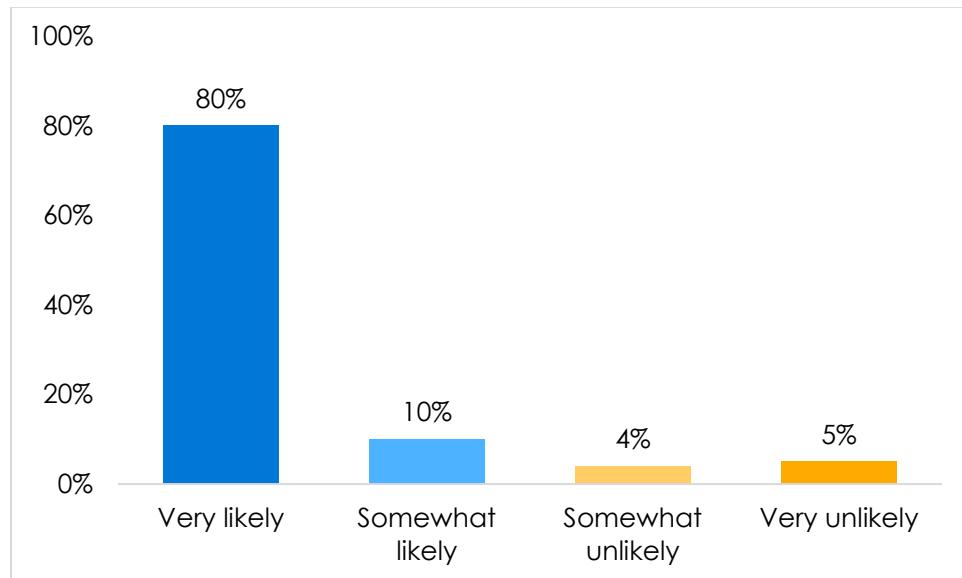
**Respondents were asked:** If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: She will be criticized, harassed,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

While expectations regarding the community's response are mixed, most Malawians say it is "very likely" (80%) or "somewhat likely" (10%) that the police will take reported GBV cases seriously (Figure 6).

Men and women are equally likely to believe that the police will treat GBV cases with appropriate seriousness (Figure 7). Urbanites (87%), economically better-off citizens (87%),<sup>2</sup> and residents of the Northern Region (86%) have slightly less confidence in the police response.

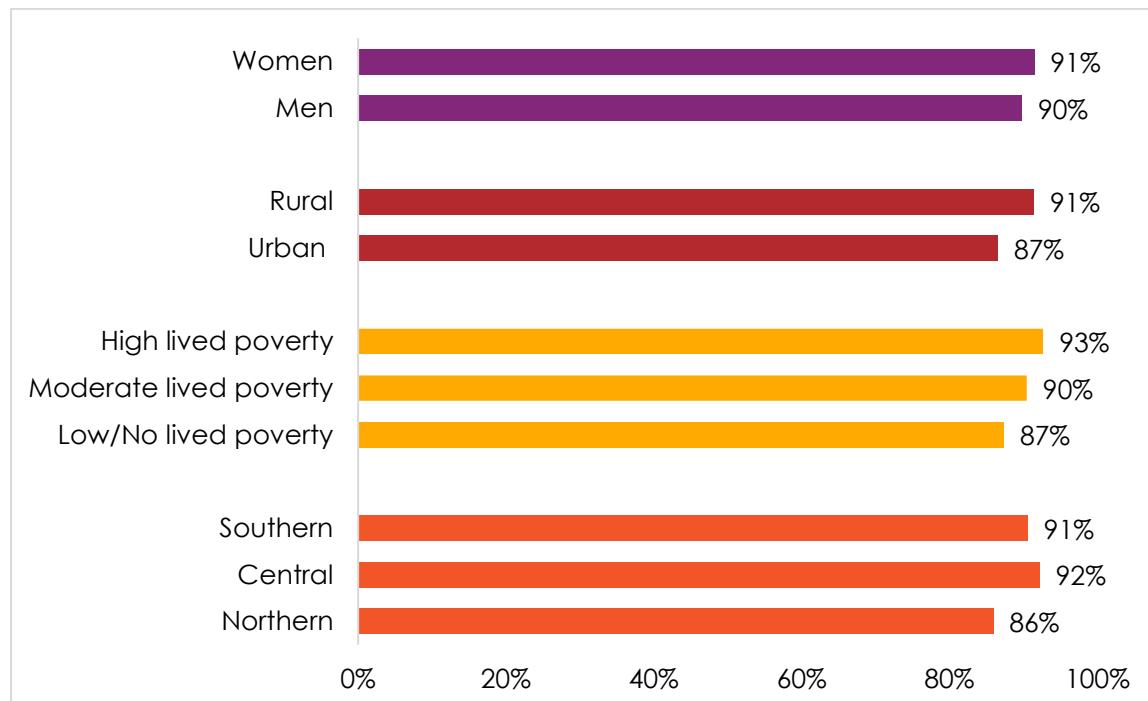
<sup>2</sup> Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes (2020).

**Figure 6: Do the police take GBV cases seriously? | Malawi | 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 7: Police take GBV cases seriously | by demographic group | Malawi | 2022**



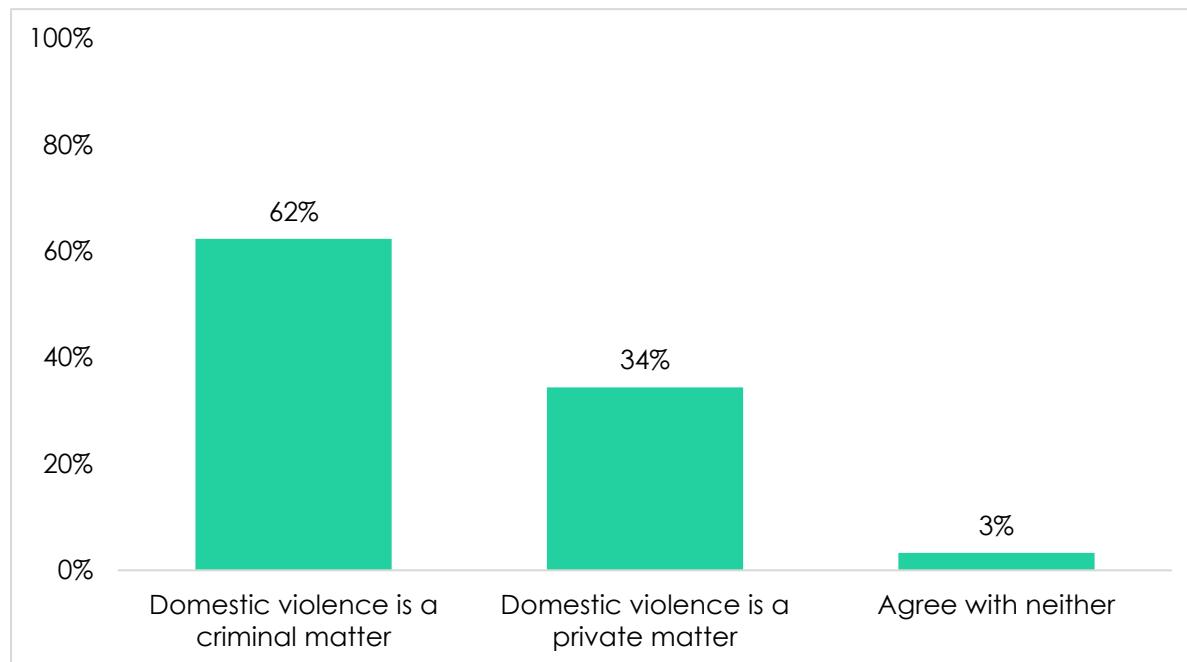
**Respondents were asked:** If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: Her case will be taken seriously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

## Domestic violence: A private matter or a criminal offense?

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 Malawians see domestic violence as a criminal matter or a private matter?

More than six in 10 Malawians (62%) say domestic violence is a criminal matter that requires the involvement of law enforcement agencies, while one-third (34%) believe it is a private matter that should be resolved within the family (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter? | Malawi | 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)

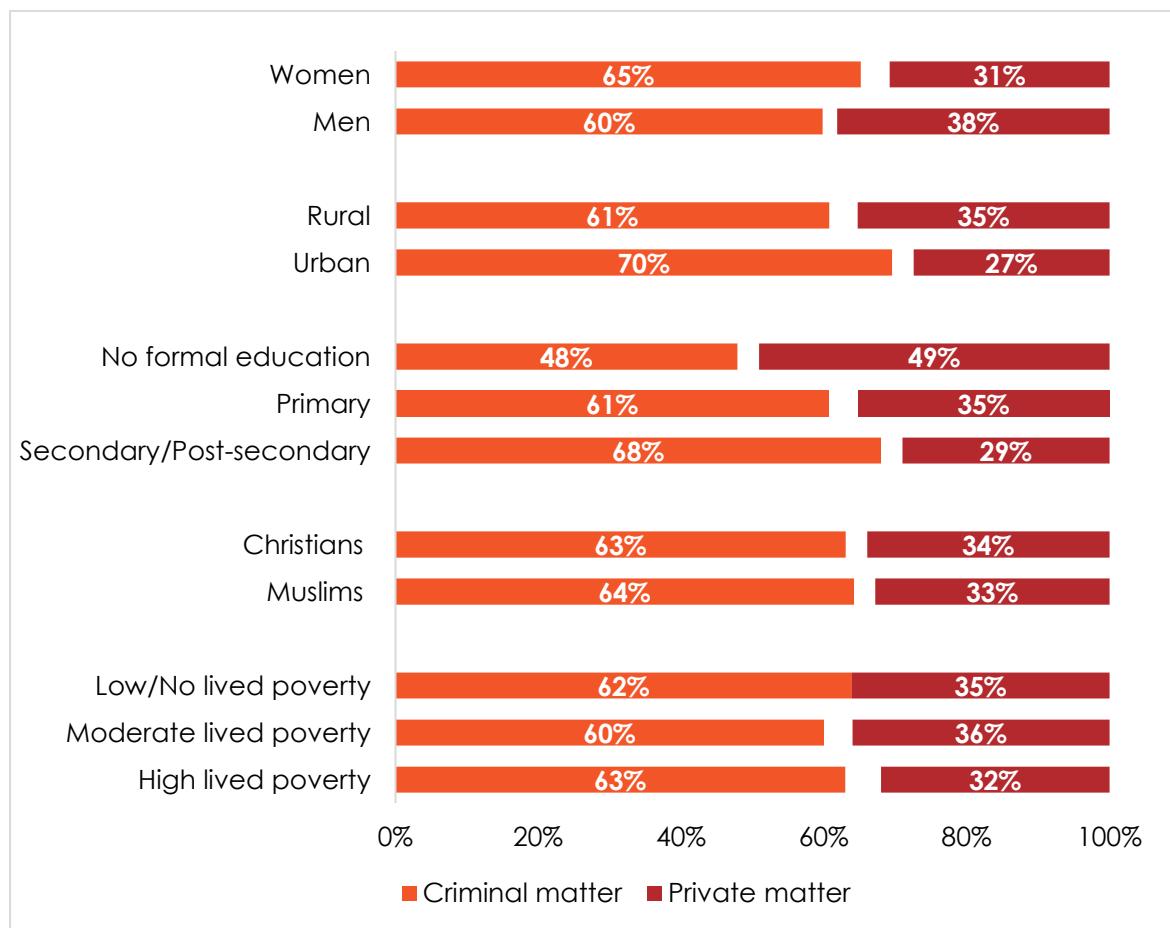
Women are slightly more likely than men to see domestic violence as a criminal matter (65% vs. 60%) (Figure 9). Support for this view is also stronger among urban than rural residents (70% vs. 61%) and increases with respondents' education level, ranging from 48% of those with no formal schooling to 68% of those with higher education.

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**Figure 9: Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter? | by demographic group | Malawi | 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.

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(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

## Conclusion

Malawians consider gender based-based violence the most important women's-rights issue requiring attention from the government and society. Majorities reject intimate partner violence as never justified, consider such violence a matter for the police rather than the family to handle, and think their police take cases of GBV seriously. Activists seeking an end to violence against women and girls may read these as hopeful signs.

But the substantial numbers of Malawians who think of domestic violence as a private family matter and indicate that women who report GBV will probably face criticism, harassment, or shaming from the community suggest that their struggle for an end to GBV is far from over.

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