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# Majority of Ugandans see domestic violence as a private – not criminal – matter

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 593 | Stevenson Ssevume Male, Mir Muhtadi Faiaz, Namratha Rao, and Anita Raj**

## Summary

Gender-based violence (GBV) is an everyday threat for Ugandan women and girls. National demographic data from 2020 reveal that 56% of married women aged 15-49 reported having suffered physical and/or sexual violence by a husband (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2021). More than one in three women (36%) had experienced sexual violence, most often from a partner; 28% reported victimisation by sexual violence in the past year. Child sexual abuse is also pervasive, with 59% of women reporting sexual abuse in childhood. National data also show that 33% of girls below the age of 15 years were forced at first sex. Among women who said they had experienced GBV, only a minority reported it to police.

Uganda Police Force (2016-2021) crime reports document 272,737 GBV cases between 2016 and 2021, including 2,278 homicides attributed to intimate partners. Domestic violence cases account for 33% of the female homicide caseload. Community policing programmes and public awareness campaigns do not appear to have reduced the number of GBV cases over the six-year period.

Uganda has stated its commitment to ending GBV as part of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) No. 5 (UN, 2022) and integrated its targets into its National Development Plan (Republic of Uganda, 2020; Office of the Prime Minister, 2020). Laws and policies that target GBV include the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act (2010), the Domestic Violence Act (2010), the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act (2009), the Uganda Gender Policy (2007), and the National Policy on Elimination of Gender Based Violence in Uganda (2016).

The government and partners have put in place mechanisms to improve the reporting and handling of GBV crimes, including Uganda Police Force (2021b) units and training devoted to child and family protection and sexual offences.

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. (For related findings on gender equality, see Ssevume, Faiaz, Rao, & Raj, 2023).

Survey findings show that GBV ranks at the top of Ugandans' priorities among women's-rights issues that need government and societal attention. Most citizens reject a husband's use of physical force to discipline his wife, but half report that violence against women and girls is a common occurrence in their community. And while they are confident that the police take GBV cases seriously, a majority think that women reporting violence will be criticised and that domestic violence is a private matter to be handled within the family.

## 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 being completed in early 2023. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

With financial support from the Embassy of the Netherlands in Uganda, the Afrobarometer team in Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult Ltd., interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 2,400 adult Ugandans in January 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. This was the 12<sup>th</sup> Afrobarometer survey in Uganda since 1999.

## Key findings

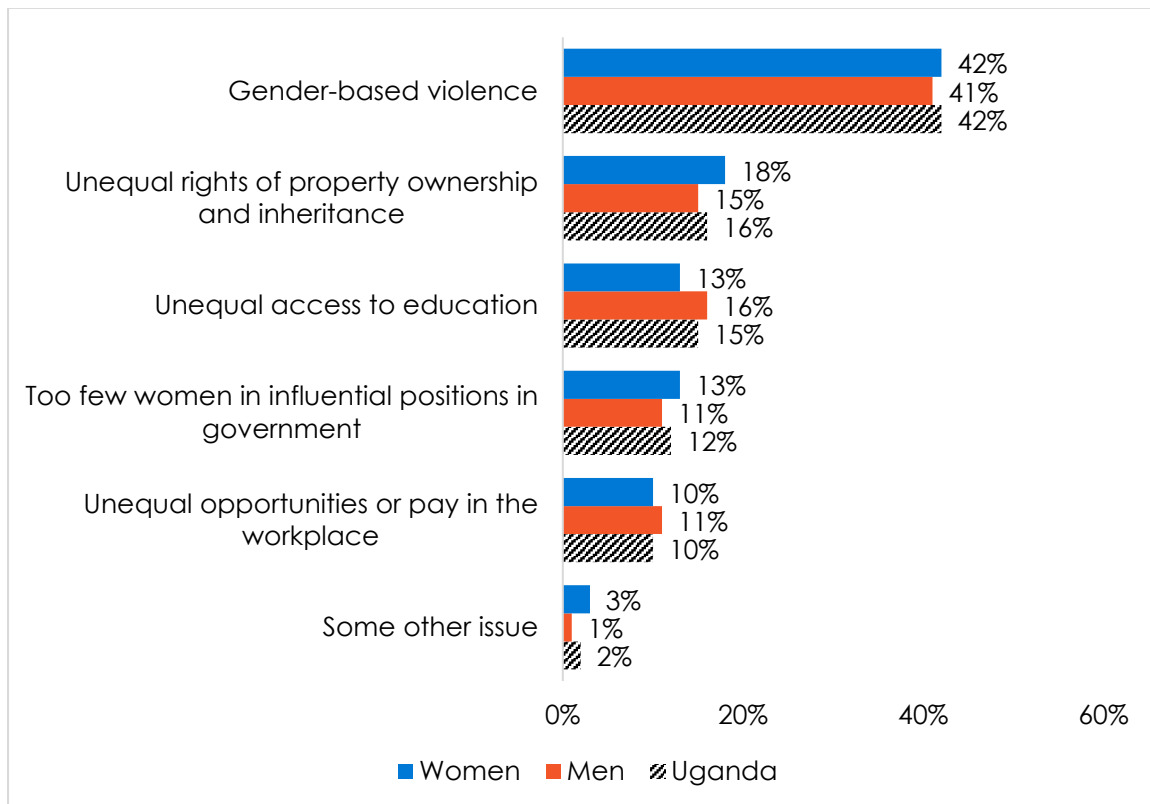
- Among women's-rights issues that Ugandans think their government and society must address, gender-based violence (cited by 42% of respondents) outranks unequal property rights (16%), unequal access to education (15%), too few women in influential positions in government (12%), and unequal opportunities or pay in the workplace (10%).
- About half (49%) of Ugandans say violence against women and girls is a "somewhat common" (28%) or "very common" (21%) occurrence in their community.
- More than seven in 10 citizens (72%) say it is "never justified" for a man to use physical force to discipline his wife. But more than one in four (27%) consider it "sometimes" or "always" justified.
- More than eight in 10 Ugandans say the police are "very likely" (59%) or "somewhat likely" (25%) to take GBV cases seriously.
- But a majority (54%) also think that women who report GBV cases to the police are likely to be criticised, harassed, or shamed by others in the community.
- More than six in 10 Ugandans (62%) see domestic violence as a private matter that should be handled within the family rather than a criminal matter that requires the involvement of law enforcement agencies.

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

GBV ranks as the most important women's-right issue that Ugandans think their government and society must address, cited by 43% of respondents (Figure 1). Far fewer respondents would prioritise unequal rights of property ownership and inheritance (16%), unequal access to education (15%), too few women in influential positions in government (12%) and unequal opportunities or pay in the workplace (10%). Women and men hold similar views regarding the most important issues related to women's rights and equality.

GBV was of equal concern to both men and women surveyed (43%, respectively).

**Figure 1: Most important women’s-rights issue | by gender | Uganda | 2022**

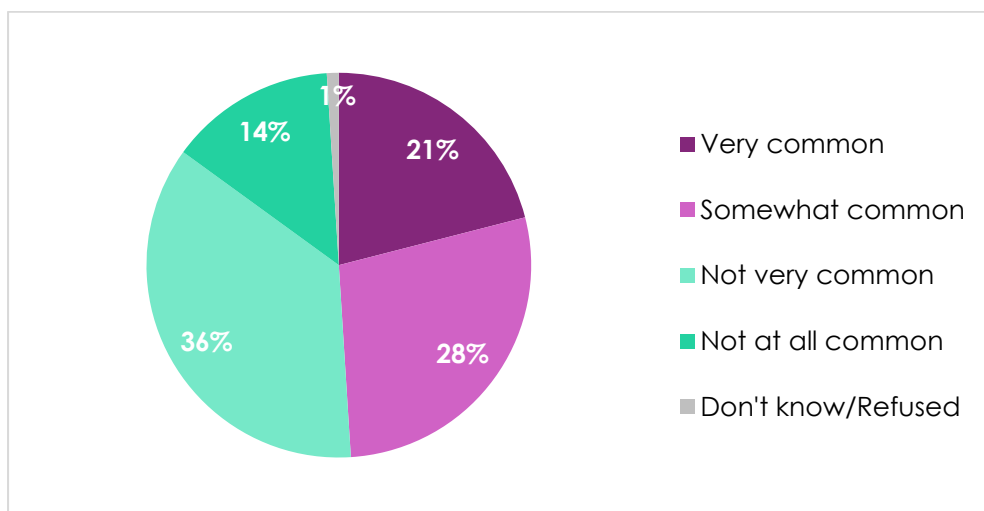


**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, which of the following issues related to women's rights and equality do you think is the most important for our government and society to address?*

**How common is GBV?**

About half (49%) of Ugandans say it is “somewhat common” (28%) or “very common” (21%) for men to use violence against women and girls in the home or in the community (Figure 2).

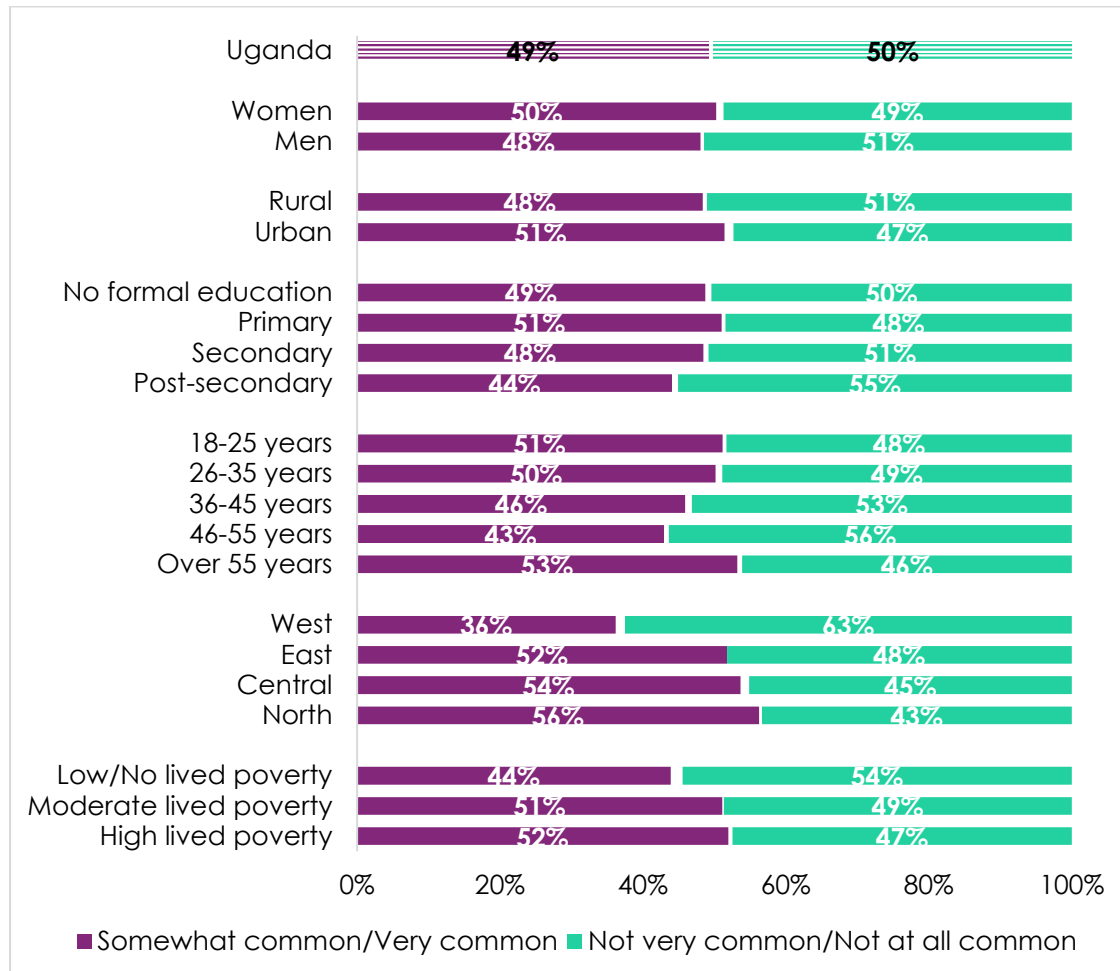
**Figure 2: Frequency of gender-based violence | Uganda | 2022**



**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 in the community?*

Women and men offer similar assessments of the frequency of GBV, as do urban and rural residents (Figure 3). Economically better-off citizens (44%) are less likely than poorer respondents (51%-52%) to report that GBV is a common occurrence in their community.<sup>1</sup> Residents in the Western region (36%) are far less likely to say GBV is common than their counterparts in other regions (52%-56%).

**Figure 3: Frequency of gender-based violence** | by demographic group | Uganda | 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 in the community?*

### Use of physical force

More than seven in 10 Ugandans (72%) say it is “never justified” for men to use physical force to discipline their wives. But more than a quarter of respondents consider the use of physical force “sometimes justified” (20%) or “always justified” (7%) (Figure 4).

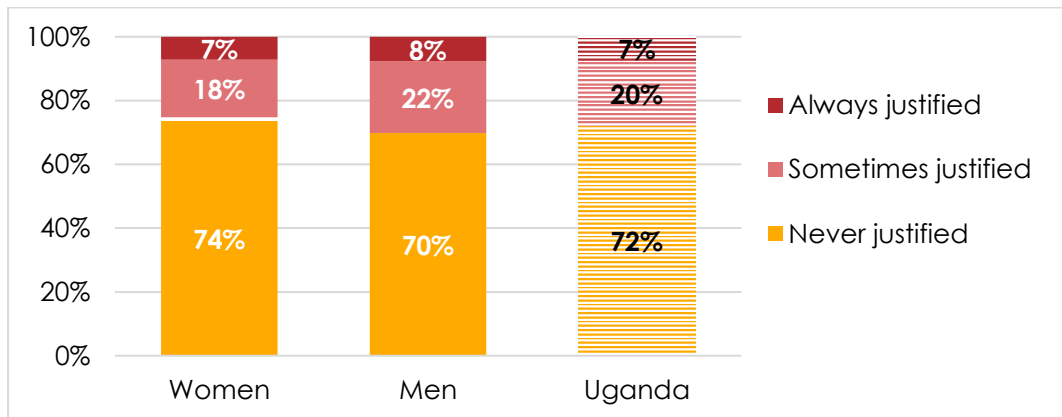
Women are slightly more likely than men to reject a husband's use of physical force as “never justified” (74% vs. 70%). But this view is less widely held in rural areas (69%) than in cities (80%), among less educated citizens (69%-70%) than their more educated counterparts (75%-

<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 and water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the previous year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes (2020).

79%), and among those experiencing high or moderate lived poverty (70%) than those who are economically better off (77%) (Figure 5).

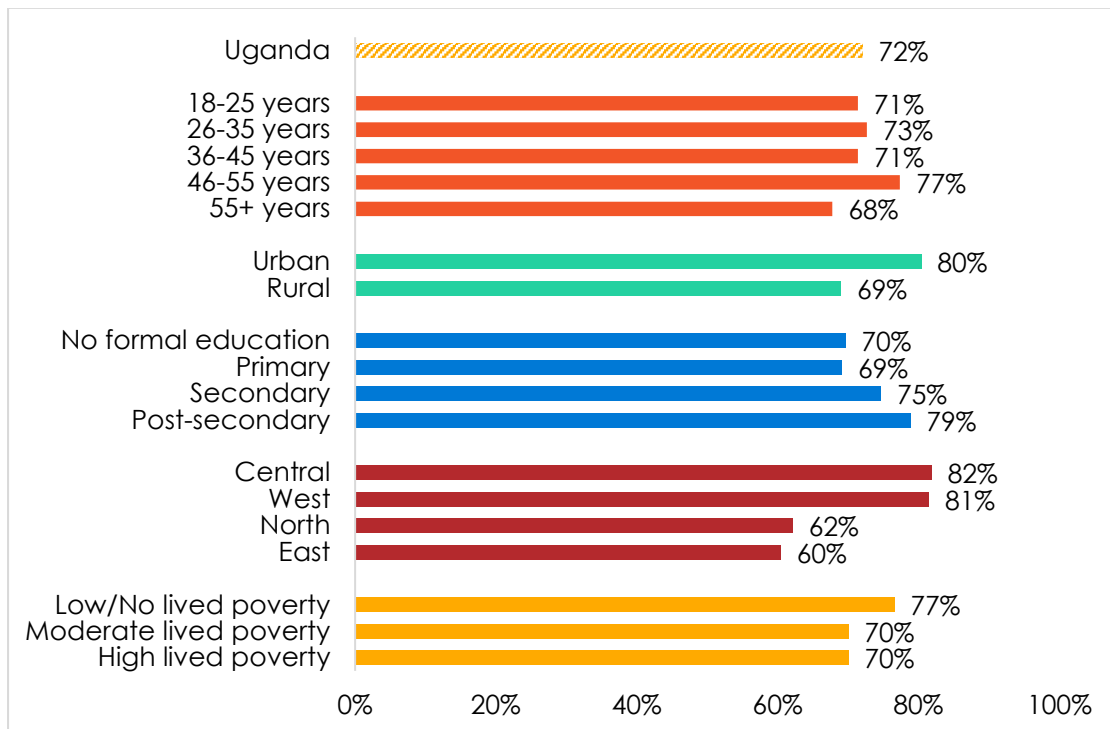
Geographically, views show a striking pattern: Residents in the Central (82%) and West (81%) regions are far more likely to reject physical discipline of a spouse than their counterparts in the North (62%) and East (60%) regions.

**Figure 4: Is it justified for men to physically discipline their wives? | by gender**  
 | Uganda | 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 5: Never justified for men to physically discipline their wives | by demographic group**  
 | Uganda | 2022



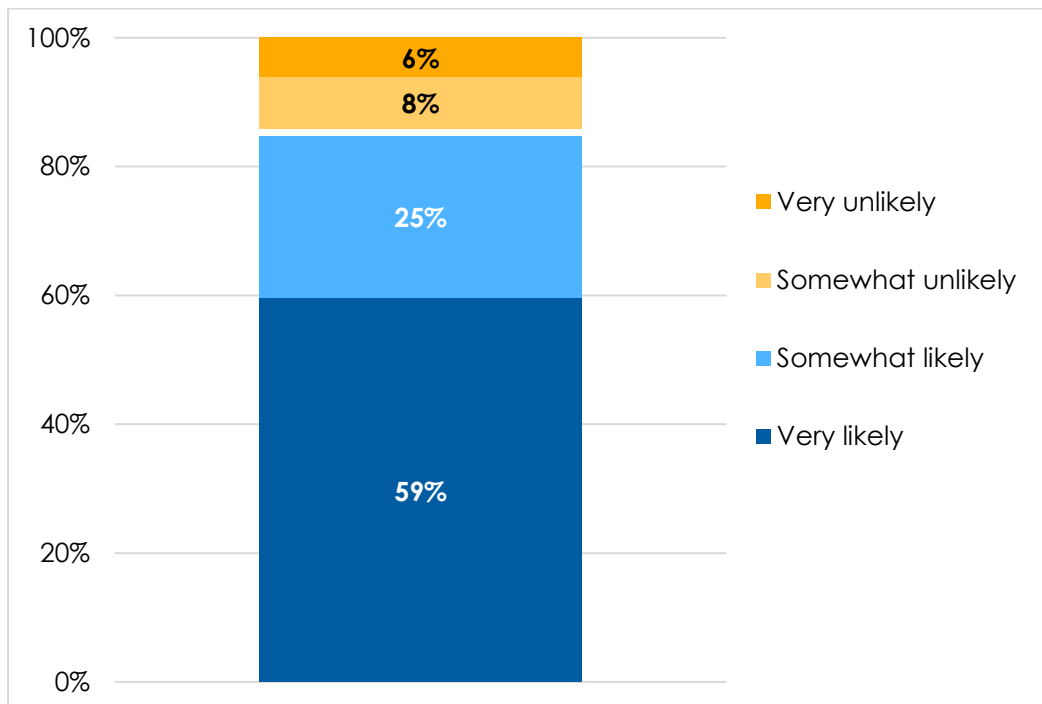
**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For a man to use physical discipline on his wife if she has done something he doesn't like or thinks is wrong? (% who say "never")

## Reporting and responding 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).

In Uganda, most citizens believe it is "very likely" (59%) or "somewhat likely" (25%) that police will take reports of GBV cases seriously. Only 6% consider this "very unlikely" (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Do the police take reported GBV cases seriously? | Uganda | 2022**

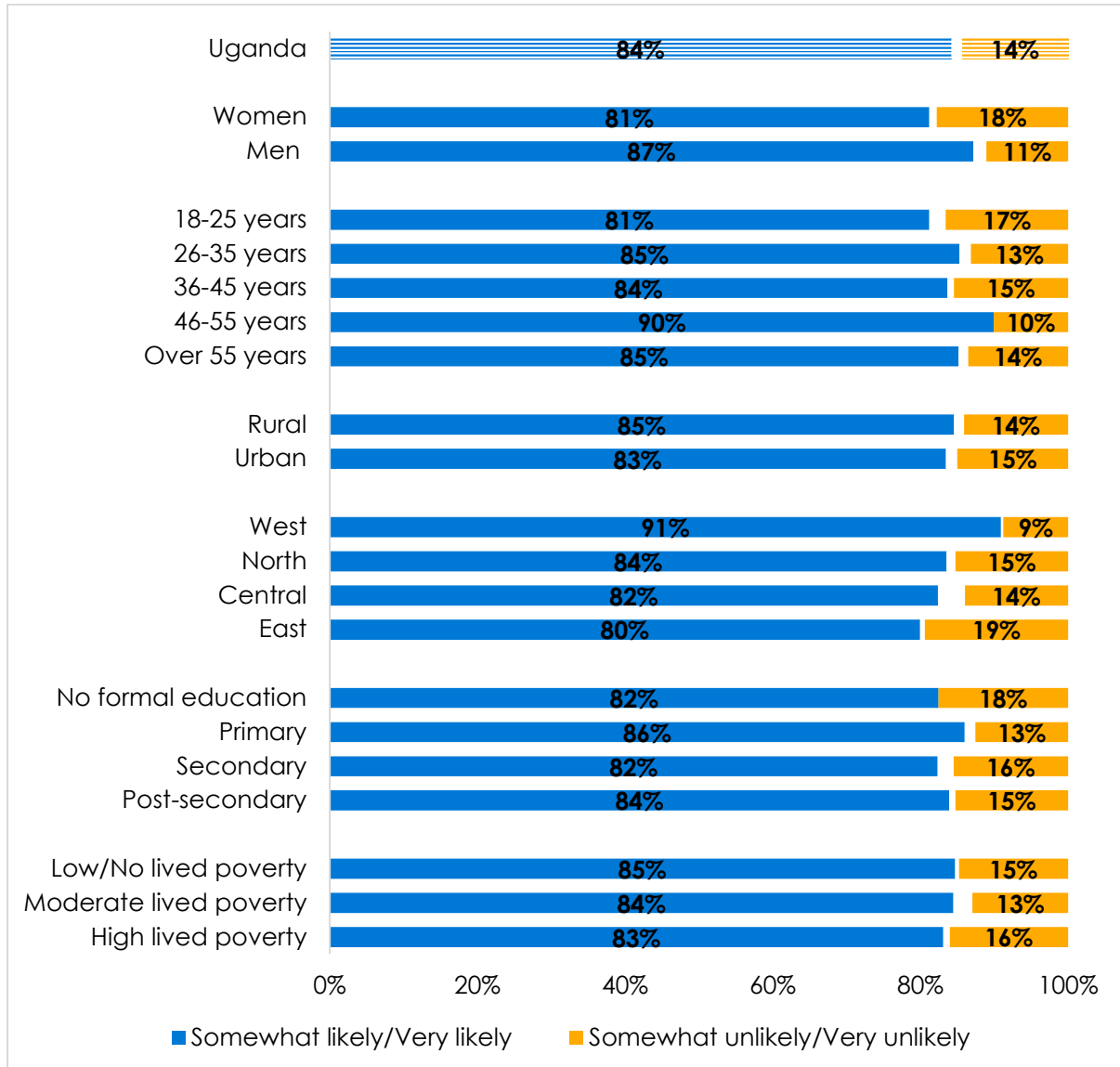


**Respondents were asked:** *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: Her case will be taken seriously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

Confidence that the police will treat GBV cases with seriousness is high (80% or more) across all key demographic groups and regions, though somewhat lower among women than men (81% vs. 87%) and among residents of the East Region (80%) compared to the West (91%) (Figure 7).

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**Figure 7: Police somewhat/very likely to take reported GBV cases seriously | by demographic group | Uganda | 2022**

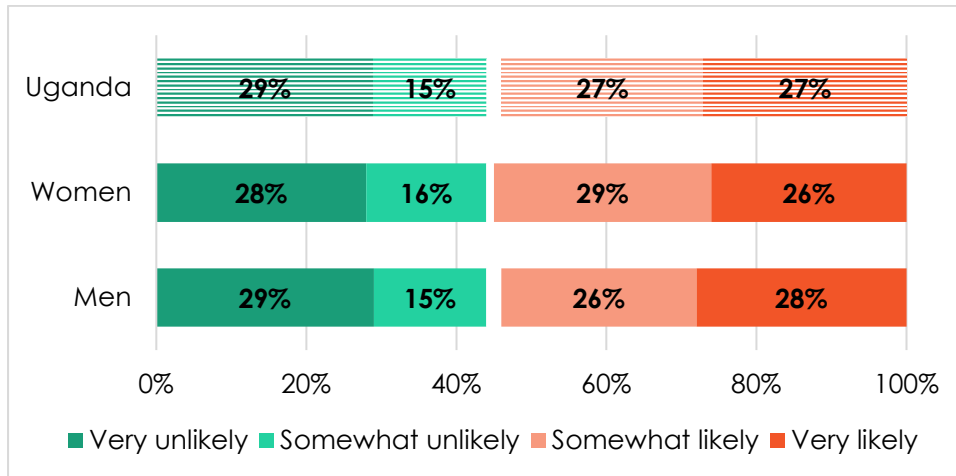


**Respondents were asked:** *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: Her case will be taken seriously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

But while confidence in the police response is fairly high, a majority (54%) of Ugandans also consider it likely that a woman who goes to the police to report being a victim of GBV, such as rape or physical abuse, will be criticised, harassed, or shamed by others in the community. More than one in four respondents (27%) say such a response is “very likely” (Figure 8).

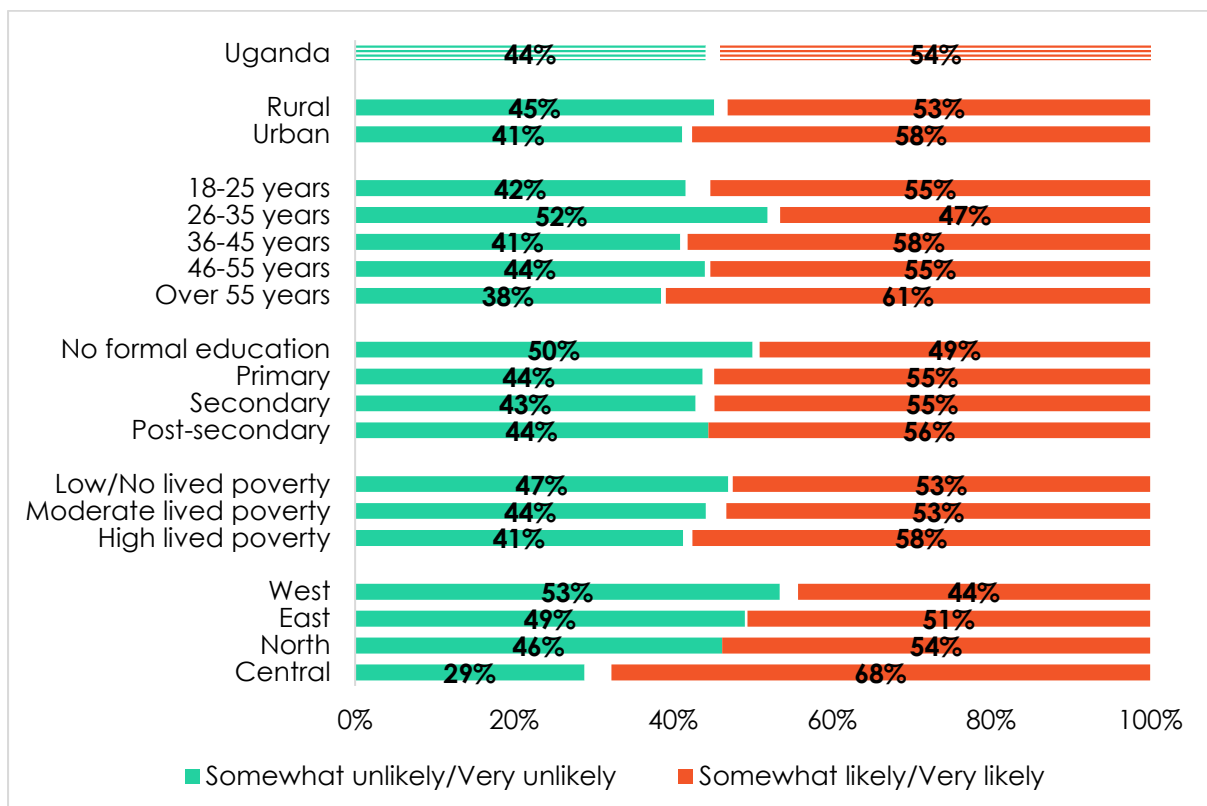
The perception of likely backlash from the community is particularly high in urban areas (58%), among older respondents (61% of those over age 55), among the poorest citizens (58%), and among residents of the Central Region (68%) (Figure 9).

**Figure 8: Will a woman be criticised, harassed, or shamed for reporting GBV?**  
 | by gender | Uganda | 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 9: Will a woman be criticised, harassed, or shamed for reporting GBV?**  
 | by demographic group | Uganda | 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?

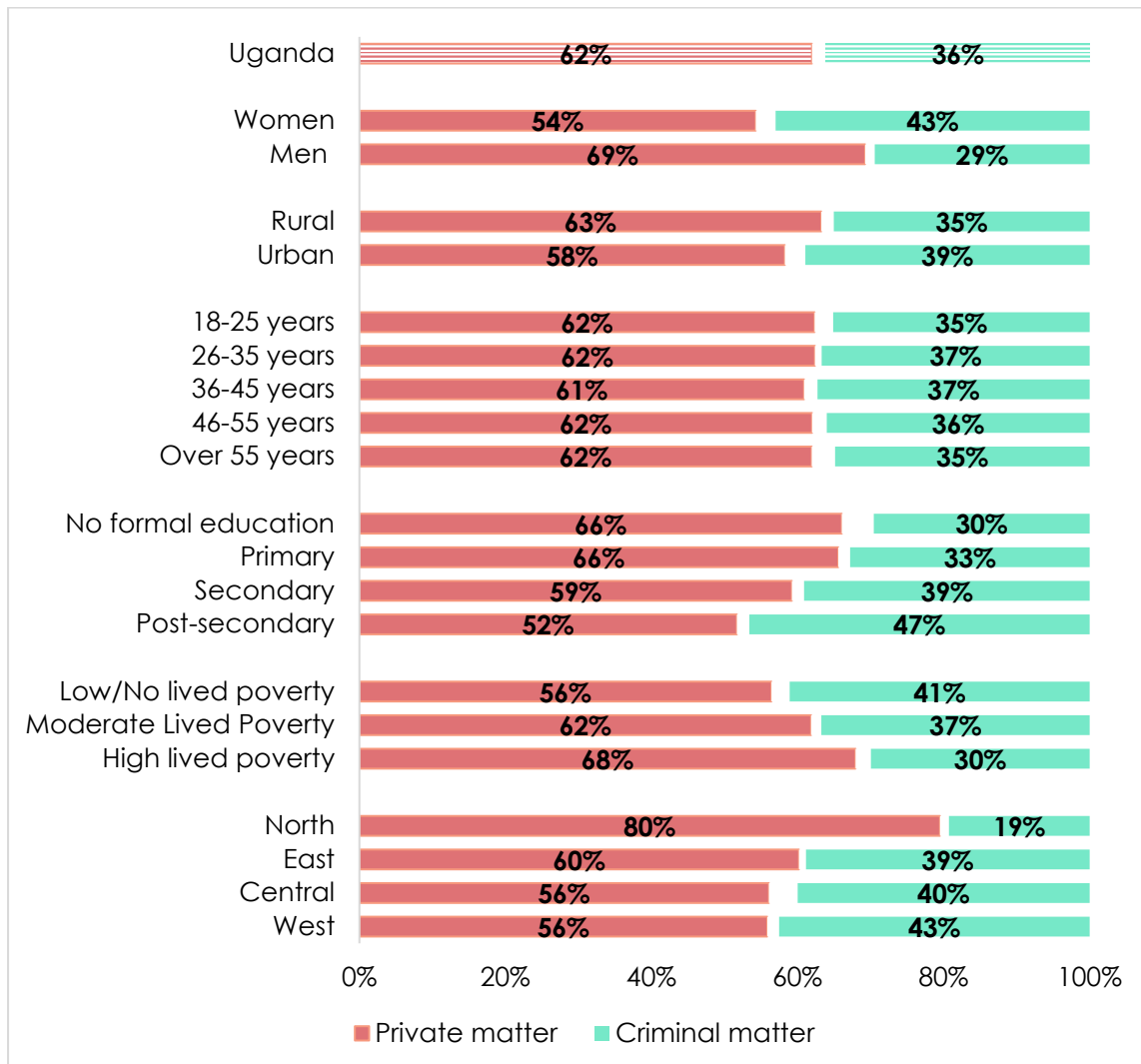


### Is domestic violence a private or criminal matter?

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

More than six in 10 Ugandans (62%) say domestic violence is a private matter that should be resolved within the family, while only 36% see it as a criminal matter that requires the involvement of law enforcement agencies (Figure 10). More women than men consider domestic violence a criminal matter (43% vs. 29%), but even among women, a majority (54%) think of it as a private affair.

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

The perception of domestic violence as a criminal matter increases with respondents' education level, ranging from just 30% of those with no formal schooling to 47% (but still fewer than half) of those with post-secondary qualifications. Similarly, this perception rises with respondents' economic status, from 30% of the poorest to 41% of those experiencing low or no lived poverty.

Residents in the North Region are particularly likely to think of domestic violence as a private matter (80%, compared to 56%-60% in the other regions).

## **Conclusion**

Survey findings show that many Ugandans see violence against women and girls as a common occurrence and an issue that demands urgent attention from the government and society.

In particular, these findings highlight two critical problems that must be addressed to advance gender rights in the country. One is that while most Ugandans think the police take GBV seriously, substantial numbers think that women will be criticised, harassed, or shamed if they report such violence to the authorities. The other is that a majority of citizens consider domestic violence a private matter that should be handled in the family, rather than a criminal matter that requires law enforcement agencies to be involved. Together, these perceptions represent significant barriers to the reporting – and thus the prosecution and deterrence – of GBV in Uganda.

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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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