

# Tunisians see gender-based violence as a top priority, but domestic violence as a private matter

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 601 | Mohamed Najib Ben Saad**

## Summary

In September 2021, Najla Bouden Romdhane became the first female prime minister in Tunisia and the Arab world, another milestone in a country widely seen as a pioneer in the Middle East and North African region when it comes to gender rights (CNN, 2021; AFP, 2018). A series of pro-equality laws dating back to 1956, just months after independence, seeks to guarantee “equality of opportunities between women and men,” as the 2014 Constitution states, “to have access to all levels of responsibility and in all domains” (Constitute Project, 2019; UNFPA, 2018).

In 2017, a wide-ranging law to protect women's rights adopted a broad definition of gender-based violence that included physical, economic, sexual, political, and psychological violence (UN Women, 2017).

However, despite considerable progress, gender-based violence (GBV) remains a serious problem in Tunisia (UNDP, 2022). The United Nations' definition of GBV refers to any form of violence that is directed against someone because of their gender, and includes physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, as well as stalking and harassment.

According to a survey conducted by Tunisia's National Institute of Statistics (2015), almost half (48%) of Tunisian women have experienced some form of GBV at some point in their lives. One in five (20%) reported suffering physical violence, and 14% reported experiencing sexual violence. Other forms of GBV, such as emotional abuse, stalking, and harassment, were also common. Despite government measures to address GBV, enforcement of the laws is often weak, and many victims of GBV do not report the crimes due to fear of stigmatisation or retaliation (UNDP, 2022).

This dispatch reports on a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 (2021/2023) questionnaire to explore Africans' experiences and perceptions of GBV.

Findings show that Tunisians consider GBV the most pressing issue related to women's rights that the government and society must address. More than half of citizens see GBV as at least “somewhat common” in their community. A majority say men are never justified in using physical force against their wives and trust that the police take GBV cases seriously.

However, a majority also believe that GBV is a private matter and should be handled within the family. And almost half of Tunisians think that women who report GBV to the authorities will likely face criticism, harassment, or shaming from the community.

## Afrobarometer survey

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 conducted 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.

The Afrobarometer team in Tunisia, led by One to One for Research and Polling, interviewed 1,200 adult citizens between 21 February and 17 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 surveys were conducted in Tunisia in 2013, 2015, 2018, 2020, and 2022.

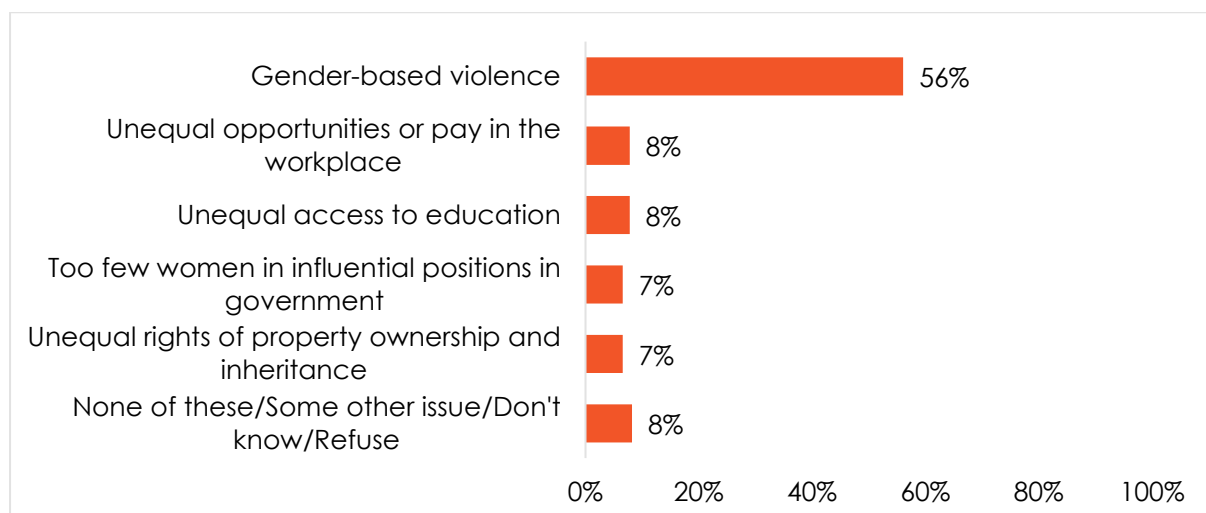
## Key findings

- Tunisians view GBV as the most critical women's-rights issue that the government and society must address.
- More than half (52%) say that violence against women and girls is "somewhat common" (31%) or "very common" (21%) in their community.
- Most Tunisians (86%) believe that a man is "never justified" in using physical force to discipline his wife.
- A large majority (85%) of citizens believe that a woman who runs for elective office will face criticism or harassment from others in the community.
- More than eight in 10 respondents (83%) say the police are likely to take GBV cases seriously. But three-fourths (74%) also consider it likely that a woman who reports being a victim of GBV will be criticised, harassed, or shamed by others in the community.
- More than two-thirds (69%) of Tunisians say domestic violence should be treated as a private matter to be resolved within the family rather than as a criminal matter (24%).

## GBV is the most important women's-rights issue

In Tunisia, a majority (56%) of citizens believe that GBV is the most important issue related to women's rights and equality that the government and society must address. Other issues trail by wide margins, including unequal opportunities or pay in the workplace (8%), unequal access to education (8%), lack of women in influential government positions (7%), and unequal property ownership and inheritance rights (7%) (Figure 1).

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

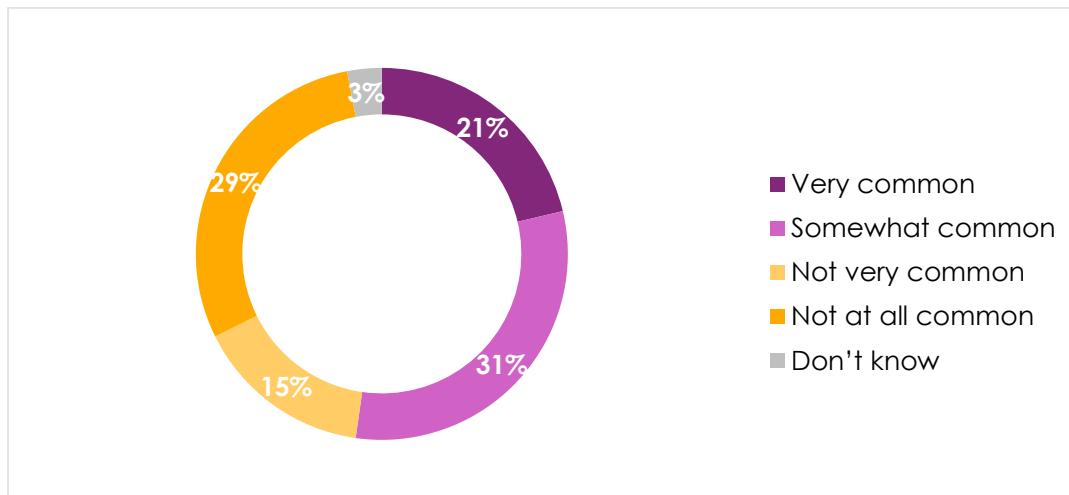


**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, which of the following issues related to women's rights and equality do you think is the most important for our government and society to address?

## Frequency of GBV

One reason that GBV is considered a major issue is probably that many Tunisians believe it happens frequently in their communities. More than half (52%) of respondents say it is “somewhat common” (31%) or “very common” (21%) for men to use violence against women and girls, while only 29% assert that such violence is “not at all common” (Figure 2).

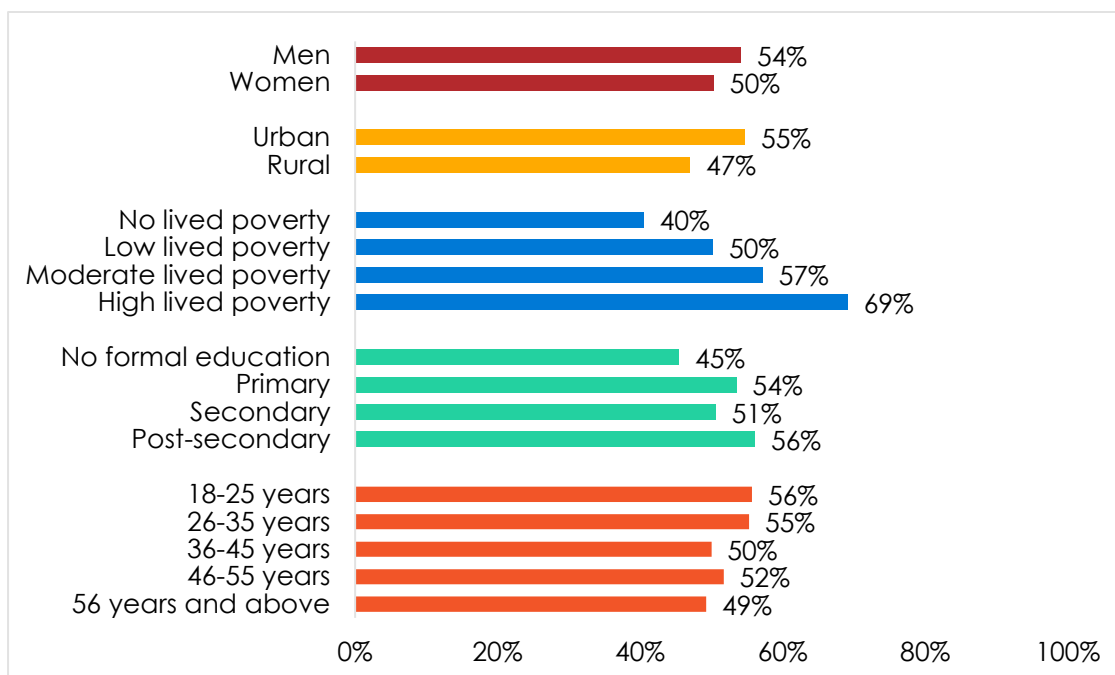
**Figure 2: Frequency of GBV | Tunisia | 2022**



**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?

Men (54%) are slightly more likely than women (50%) to say that GBV is a common occurrence (Figure 3).

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



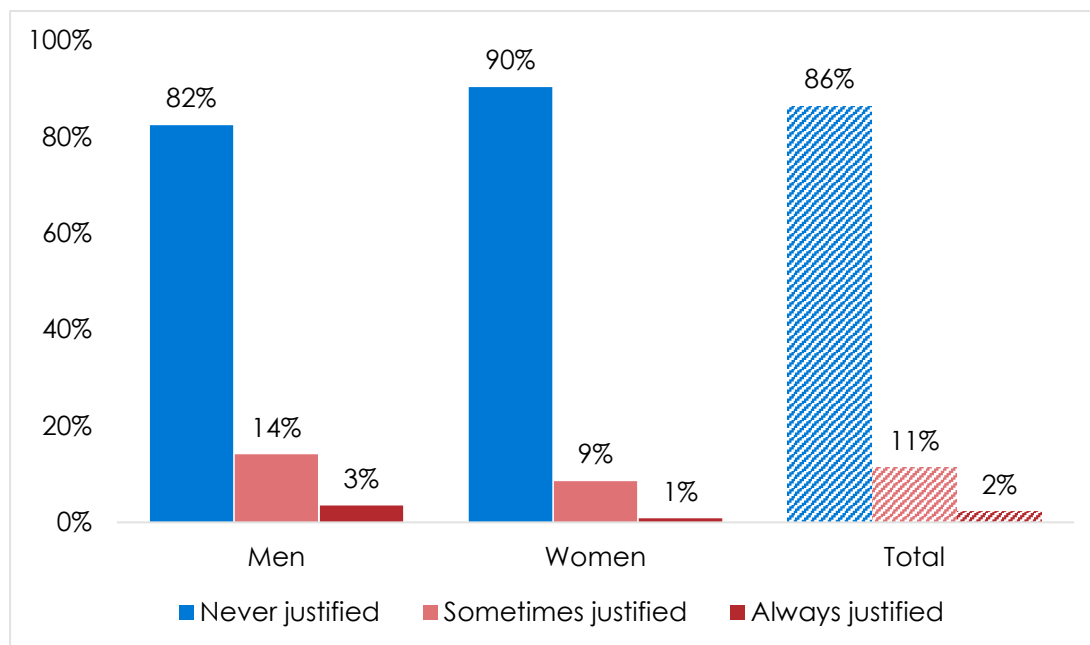
**Respondents were asked:** In this area, how common do you think it is for men to use violence against women and girls in the home or the community? (% who say “somewhat common” or “very common”)

This perception is more widespread in cities (55%) than in rural areas (47%). It increases sharply with respondents' experience of lived poverty<sup>1</sup> (ranging from 40% among the economically better off to 69% among those experiencing high lived poverty) and rises more gradually with respondents' education level (ranging from 45% among those with no formal schooling to 56% among those with post-secondary education). Older respondents (49%) are less likely to report that GBV happens frequently.

### Use of physical force to discipline a spouse

An overwhelming majority (86%) of Tunisians say it is “never justified” for a man to use physical force to discipline his wife. Only 13% consider such violence “sometimes” or “always” justified. Women are more likely than men to reject the use of physical discipline (90% vs. 82%) (Figure 4).

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

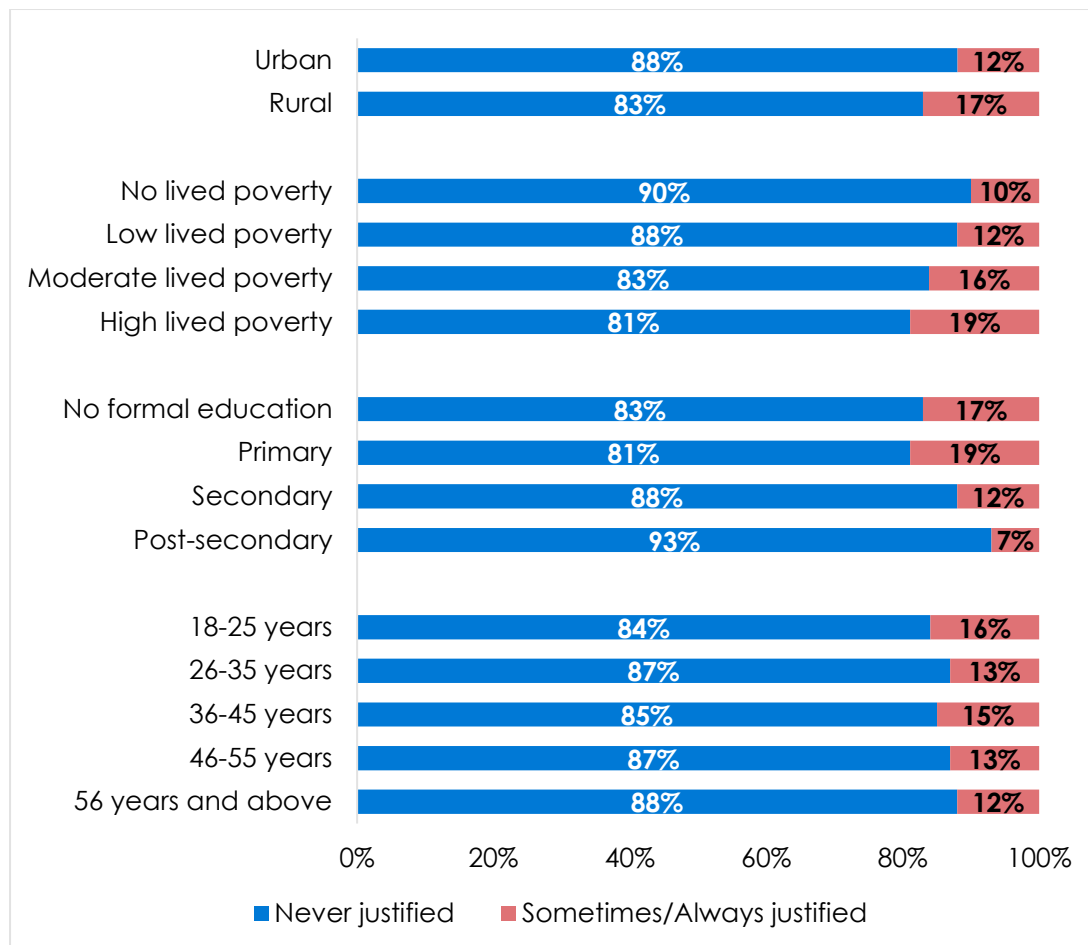


**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For a man to use physical discipline on his wife if she has done something he doesn't like or thinks is wrong?

The belief that men are never justified in physically disciplining their wives is more prevalent among urban than rural residents (88% vs. 83%). The most educated (93%) and economically best-off (90%) citizens are more likely to hold this view than their less educated and poorer counterparts (Figure 5).

<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, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes & Patel (2022).

**Figure 5: Is it justified for men to physically discipline their wives?** | by demographic group | Tunisia | 2022



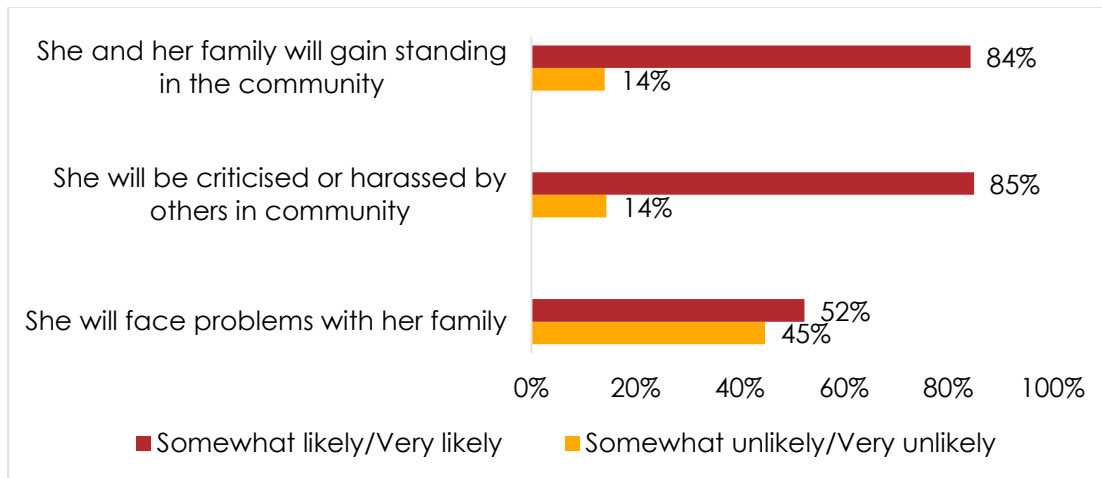
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### GBV in the political sphere

GBV is not only a social issue but can also have political ramifications. While most Tunisians (84%) believe that when a woman runs for elective office, she and her family will gain a higher status in the community, about the same proportion (85%) consider it “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that she will be criticised, harassed, or called names by others in the community – a form of gender-based violence that might well discourage some women from seeking public office (Figure 6).

In addition, more than half (52%) of respondents say that a female candidate will likely face problems with her family.

**Figure 6: For better or for worse: How running for elected office might affect women's lives | Tunisia | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** *If a woman in your community runs for elected office, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur:*

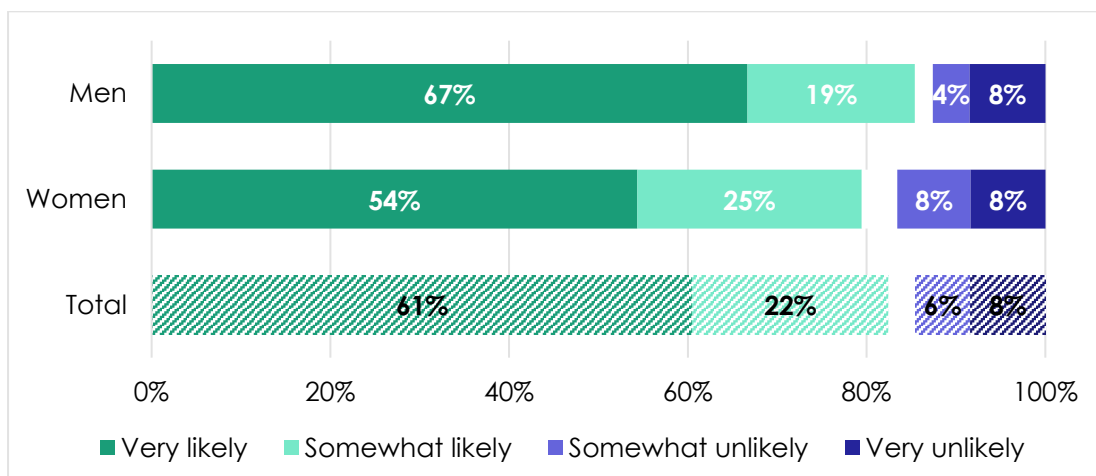
- She and her family will gain standing in the community?*
- She will be criticised, called names, or harassed by others in the community?*
- She will face problems with her family?*

### Response to reporting 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).

Most Tunisians (83%) believe that the police will take reported cases of GBV seriously, including 61% who consider this "very likely." However, women have less confidence in the police response than men; only 54% think it is "very likely" that the police will take such cases seriously, compared to 67% of men (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Do the police take GBV cases seriously? | by gender | Tunisia | 2022**

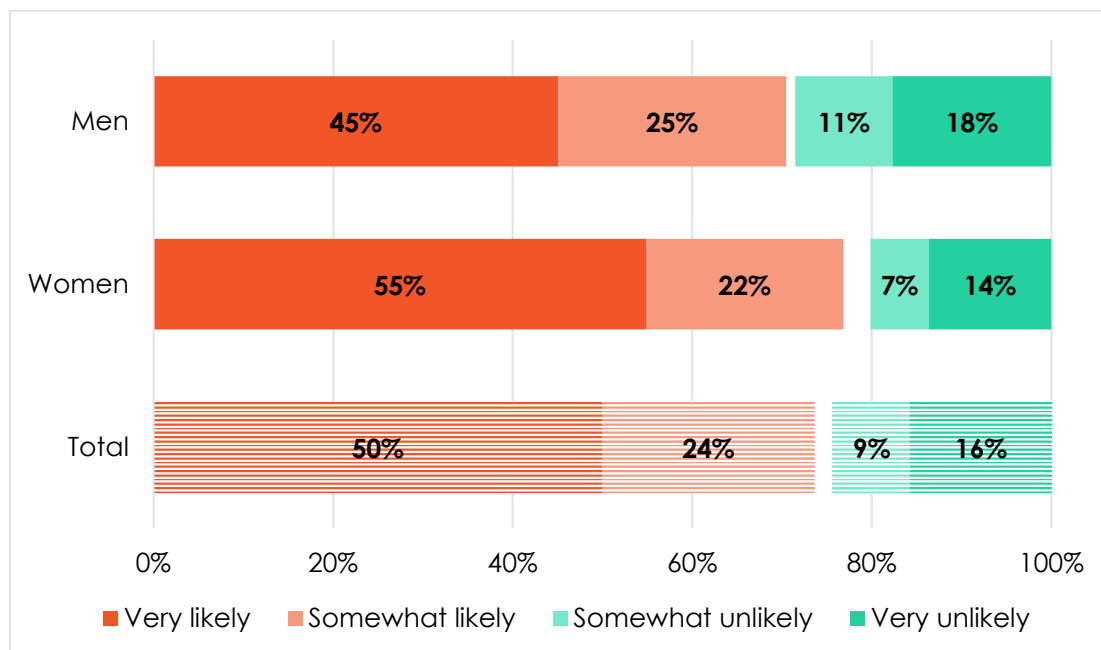


**Respondents were asked:** *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: Her case will be taken seriously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

Although most citizens are optimistic about the police response, when 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, only 16% of Tunisians consider this “very unlikely” (Figure 8). Three-fourths (74%) say such community backlash is “very likely” (50%) or “somewhat likely” (24%). More women (77%) than men (70%) see it as likely.

The belief that a woman might face criticism, harassment, or shaming if she reports a GBV crime would make it even harder for survivors to come forward.

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

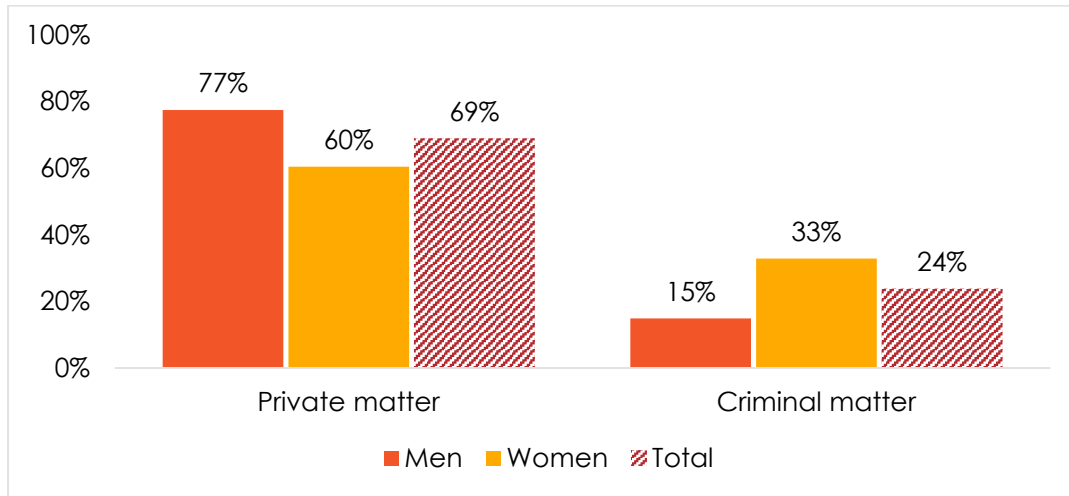
### Is domestic violence a criminal or family matter?

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

More than two-thirds (69%) of citizens say domestic violence should be handled within the family, while only 24% consider it a criminal matter that necessitates the involvement of law enforcement. Men are more inclined than women to think that domestic violence is a private matter (77% vs. 60%) (Figure 9).

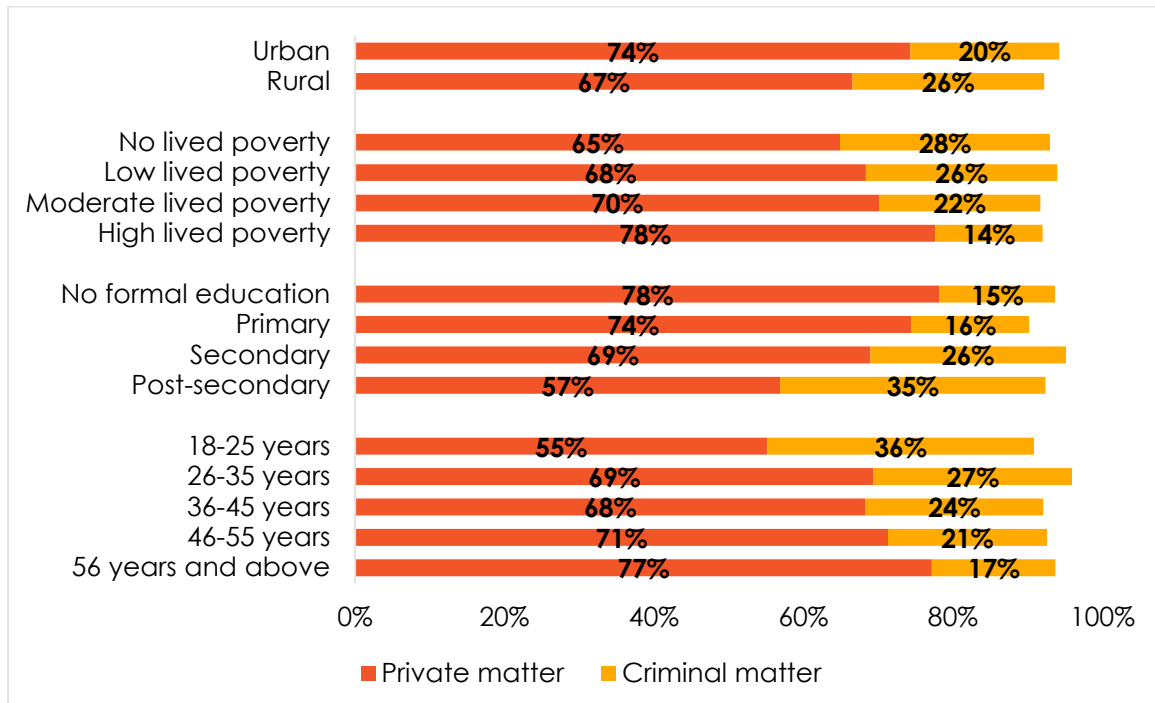
Acceptance of domestic violence as a private matter is more prevalent among urban residents (74%) than rural residents (67%) (Figure 10). Support for this view increases with respondents' poverty level, ranging from 65% of economically better-off citizens to 78% of the poorest, and declines with rising education level, from 78% of those with no formal schooling to 57% of those with post-secondary qualifications. Older Tunisians are considerably more likely to view domestic violence as a private matter (77% among those aged 56 and older) than young respondents (55% of 18- to 25-year-olds).

**Figure 9: Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter? | by gender**  
 | Tunisia | 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)

**Figure 10: Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter? | by demographic group**  
 | Tunisia | 2022



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 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

Tunisians view GBV as a critical concern that the government and society must prioritise. Survey results indicate that violence against women and girls is not an isolated occurrence in Tunisian communities. Even though most citizens reject the use of physical force by a partner and believe that the police take cases of GBV seriously, many also think that survivors will likely face community criticism or harassment if they take their cases to the authorities. But many such crimes seem likely to remain hidden, as most Tunisians see domestic violence as a private matter to be resolved within the family, rather than the legal system.

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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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