



## Ghanaians condemn physical discipline, see gender-based violence as a criminal matter

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 605 | Mavis Zupork Dome and Maame Akua Amoah Twum**

### Summary

About one in three women worldwide experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime (World Health Organization, 2021), a “shadow pandemic” that may have been exacerbated by the social and economic effects of COVID-19 (UN Women, 2020).

In Ghana, the most recent Demographic and Health Survey reported that 36.6% of women had experienced physical violence since age 15, including 17.2% during the previous year (Ghana Statistical Service, 2009). About one in four Ghanaian women have suffered physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner (UN Women, 2022). The Ghana Police Service reported 16,000 cases of domestic violence in 2020 (GBCGhanaonline, 2022a; Ghanaian Times, 2022; B&FTonline, 2022) – almost certainly an under-estimate of the problem, as many cases of gender-based violence go unreported by victims who distrust the legal system or fear stigmatisation or retribution (Ogum Alangea et al., 2018; B&FTonline, 2022).

To fight gender-based violence (GBV), the government established a Domestic Violence and Victims Support Unit within the police service. Under the auspices of the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection, the Department of Social Welfare and the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice provide services to GBV victims. The National Gender Policy, the Domestic Violence Act, and the National Domestic Violence Policy are all under review and expected to be updated (Daily Guide Network, 2022; Graphic Online 2022, Women and Girls Empowered, 2022).

Despite such efforts, GBV incidents continue to make national headlines, such as the shooting death of a 33-year-old woman in Dzodze, in which her boyfriend stands accused (GBCGhanaonline, 2022b); the murder of a 25-year-old trainee nurse whose body was found brutalised and buried, allegedly by a local chief and self-proclaimed pastor (Ghana News Agency, 2022); and the reported gang rape of a university student by six of her peers (GhPage, 2022).

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 Twum & Dome, 2022).

In Ghana, citizens say that gender-based violence constitutes one of the most important women’s-rights issues that the government and society must address. While most consider domestic violence a criminal matter and believe that the police take GBV cases seriously, a significant minority say it is likely that a woman will be criticised or harassed if she reports GBV violence to the authorities.

## 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 conducted since 1999. Round 9 surveys are being completed in early 2023. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Ghana, led by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 2,400 adult Ghanaians in April 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Ghana in 1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2019.

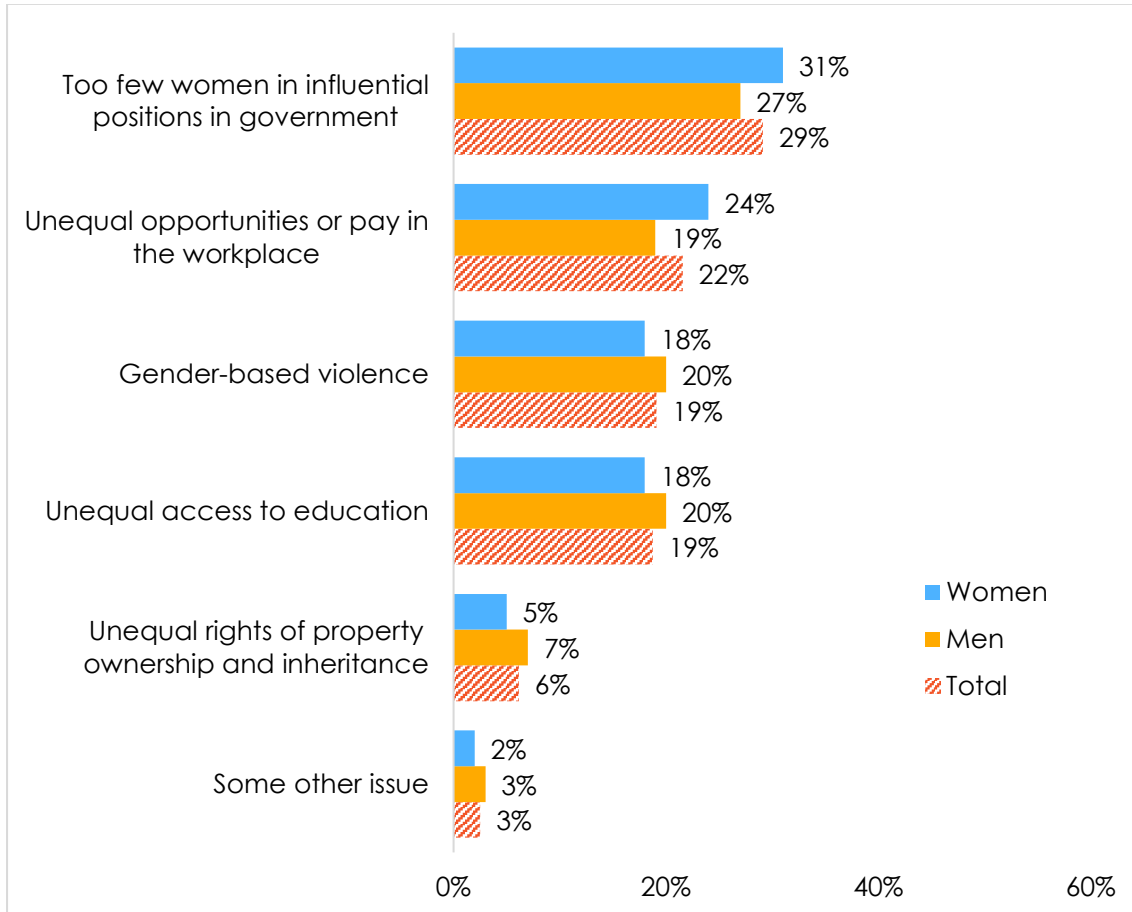
## Key findings

- Gender-based violence (GBV) ranks third among the most important women's-rights issues that Ghanaians want their government and society to address.
- More than three-fourths (78%) of citizens say violence against women is "not very common" or "not at all common" in their community, though 21% disagree.
- More than eight in 10 Ghanaians (85%) say it is "never" justified for a man to use physical force to discipline his wife.
- More than four in 10 respondents consider it "somewhat likely" (24%) or "very likely" (18%) that a woman will be criticised, harassed, or shamed if she reports gender-based violence to the authorities. Only about one-third (35%) say this is "very unlikely."
  - But most citizens (86%) believe that the police are likely to take cases of GBV seriously.
- Almost two-thirds (64%) of Ghanaians say domestic violence should be treated as a criminal matter rather than as a private matter to be resolved within the family.

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

In Ghana, one in five citizens (19%) consider GBV the most important problem related to women's rights and equality that the government and society must address. As a priority on the public's agenda, it trails the scarcity of women in influential positions in government (cited by 29%) and unequal opportunities or pay in the workplace (22%), but matches unequal access to education (19%) (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Most important women’s-rights issue | by gender | Ghana | 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?

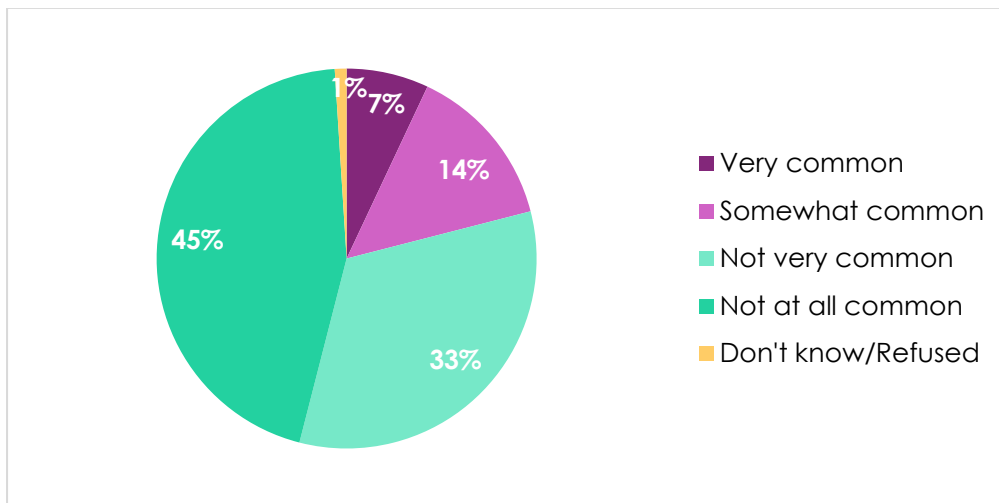
More than three-fourths (78%) of Ghanaians say violence against women is “not very common” or “not at all common” in their community. About one in five (21%) describe it as “somewhat” or “very” common (Figure 2).

Rural residents (25%) are somewhat more likely than urbanites (18%) to say that violence against women is a common occurrence (Figure 3). This perception is also more common among the least educated citizens (27% of those with no formal education) and among the poorest (31% of those experiencing high lived poverty<sup>1</sup>).

The youth (28%) are more likely to report that GBV happens frequently.

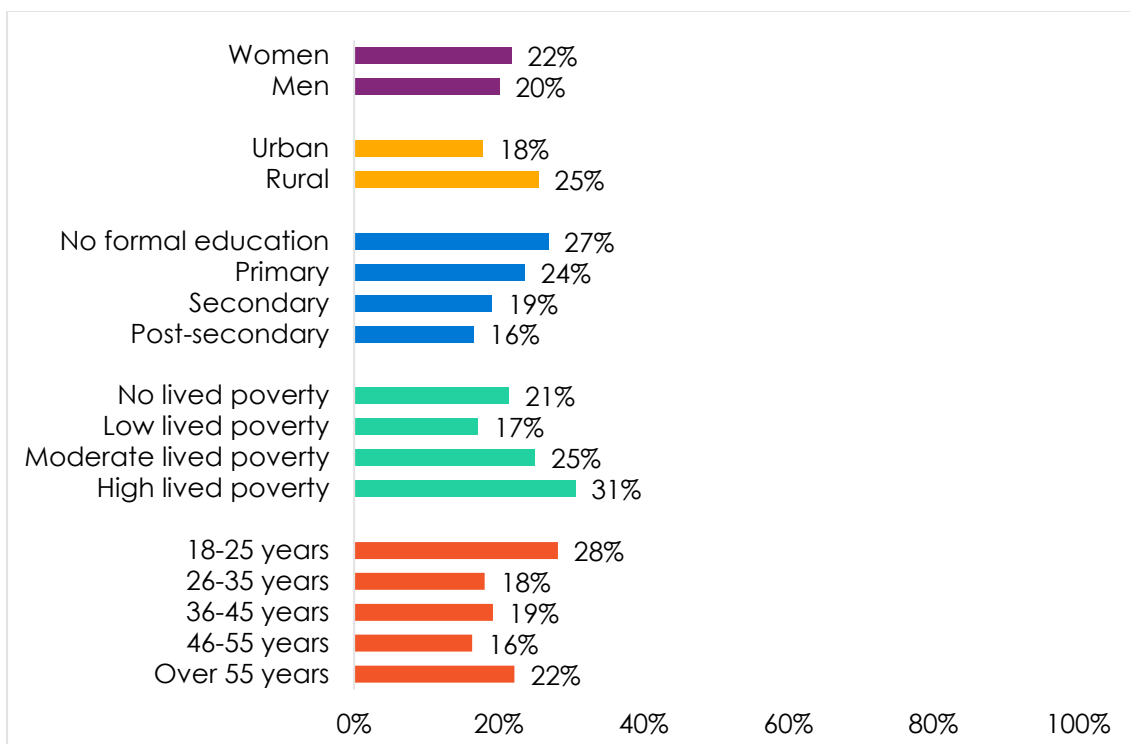
<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes & Patel (2022).

**Figure 2: Frequency of GBV | Ghana | 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: Frequency of GBV | by demographic group | Ghana | 2022**



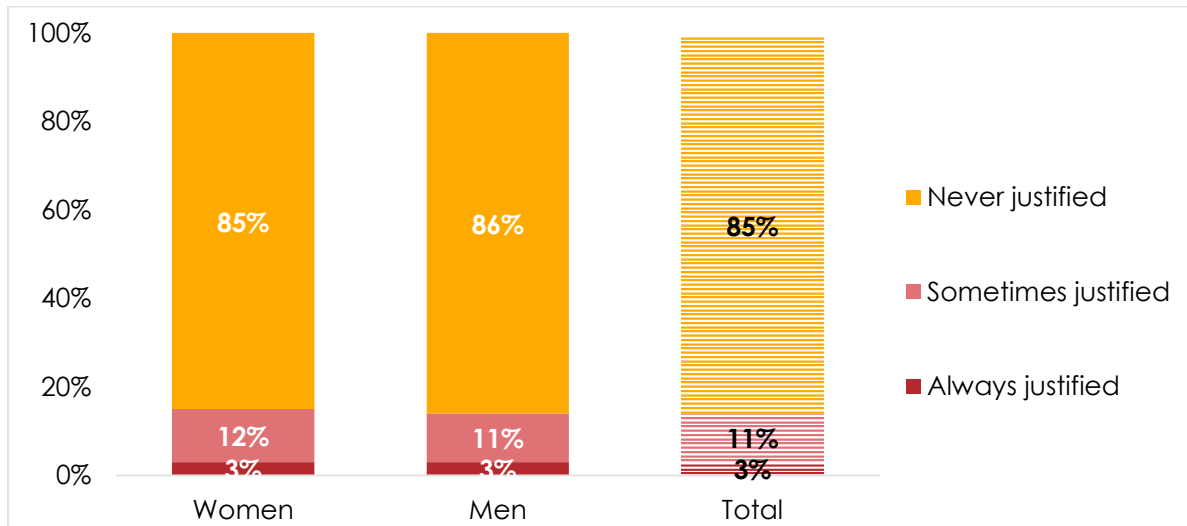
**Respondents were asked:** In this area, how common do you think it is for men to use violence against women and girls in the home or the community? (% who say "somewhat common" or "very common")

### Physical discipline of a spouse

A large majority (85%) of Ghanaians say it is "never justified" for a man to use physical force to discipline his wife, while 14% consider it "sometimes" or "always" justified. Women and men are about equally likely to reject the use of physical discipline (Figure 4).

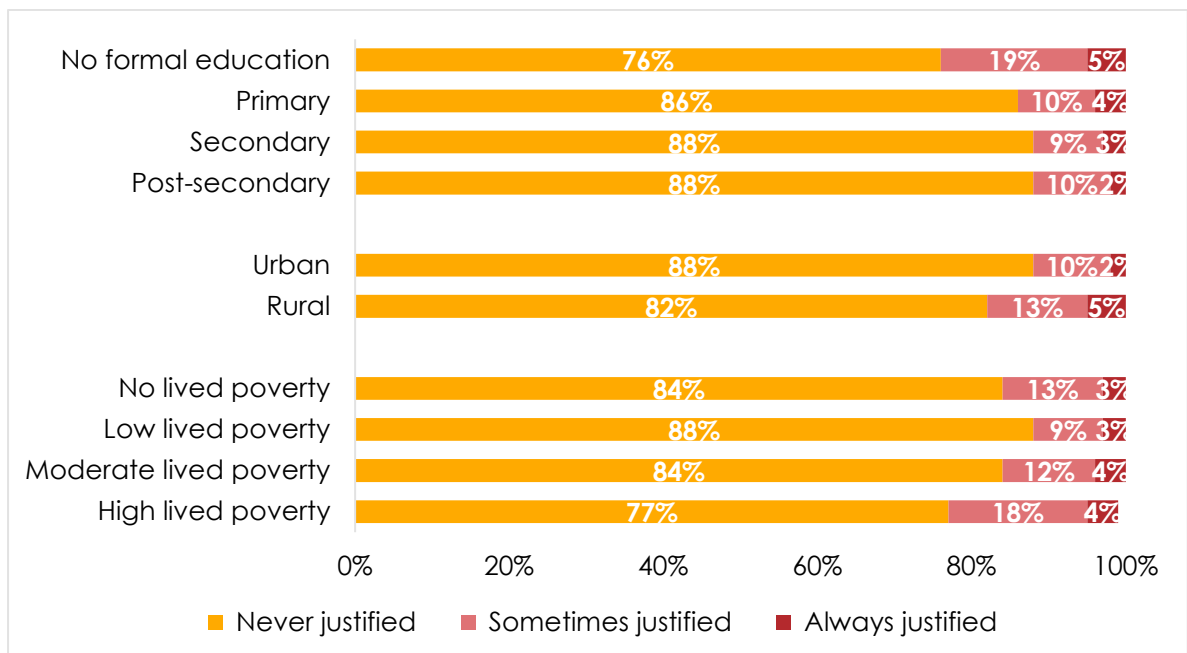
The view that men are never justified in physically disciplining their wives gathers strength as respondents' education level increases, ranging from 76% of those with no formal schooling to 88% of those with secondary or post-secondary qualifications (Figure 5). Rural residents (82%) and poorer citizens (77%) are less likely to share this view than urbanites (88%) and better-off respondents (84%-88%).

**Figure 4: Is it justified for men to physically discipline their wives? | Ghana | 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: Is it justified for men to physically discipline their wives? | by demographic group | Ghana | 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?

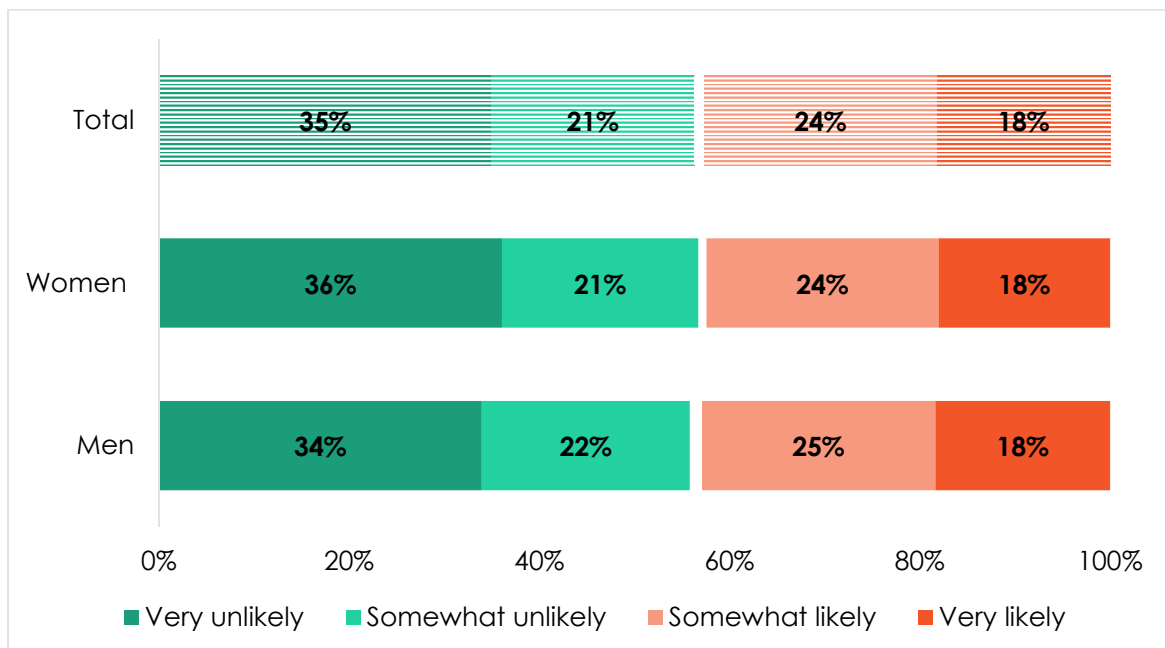
## Response to GBV

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, 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 gender-based violence will be criticised, harassed, or shamed by others in the community, only one-third (35%) of Ghanaians say this is “very unlikely” (Figure 6). While another 21% consider it “somewhat unlikely,” more than four in 10 (42%) say it is “somewhat” or “very” likely. These perceptions – whether accurate or not – may serve as a significant deterrent to reporting GBV.

Women and men hold almost identical views on this question, and differences by respondents' age, education level, and urban-rural residency show no clear pattern.

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

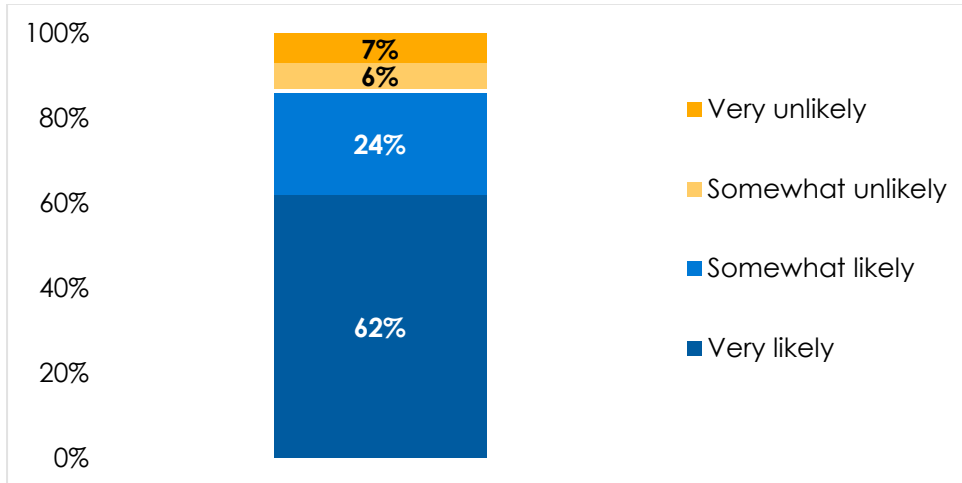


**Respondents were asked:** *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: She will be criticized, harassed,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

Ghanaians overwhelmingly believe that the police will respond appropriately to reported cases of GBV: 86% see it as likely that the police will take such reports seriously, including 62% who say it is “very likely” (Figure 7).

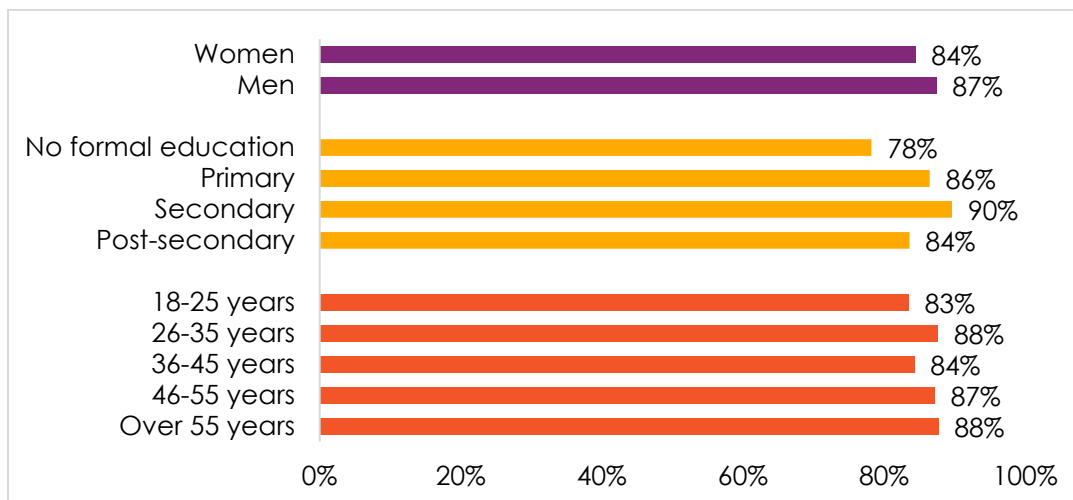
Men (87%) and women (84%) hold similar views on the likelihood of a serious police response. Citizens with no formal schooling express less confidence in the police response (78%, vs. 84%-90% of those with formal education) (Figure 8).

**Figure 7: Do the police take GBV cases seriously?** | Ghana | 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: Likely that police will take GBV cases seriously** | by demographic group | Ghana | 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?

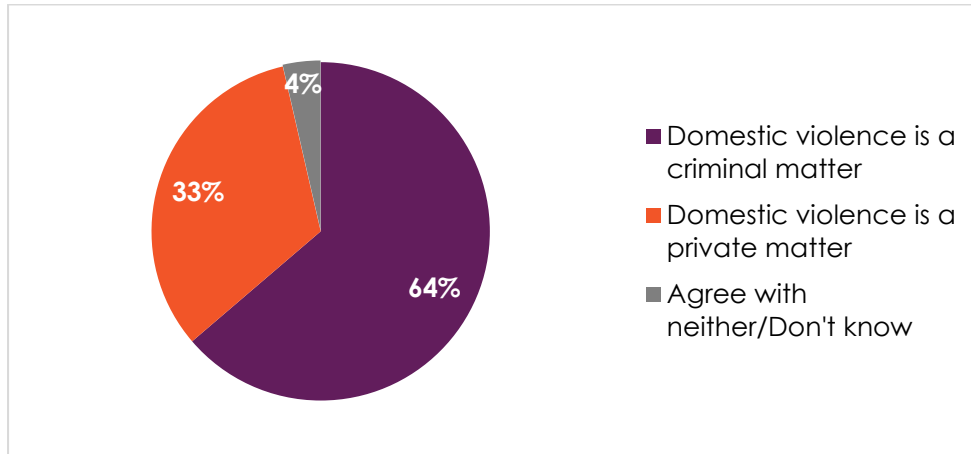
One common form of GBV is domestic violence. Even though the perpetrators may be known, many domestic-violence cases go unreported or unresolved, and most present victims and families with complex, wrenching decisions. Do Ghanaians see domestic violence as a criminal matter or a private matter?

By a 2-to-1 ratio, Ghanaians say domestic violence is a criminal matter that requires the involvement of law enforcement; 64% of respondents share this view, including 52% who feel

“strongly” about it. One-third (33%) believe domestic violence should be seen as a private matter to be resolved within the family (Figure 9).

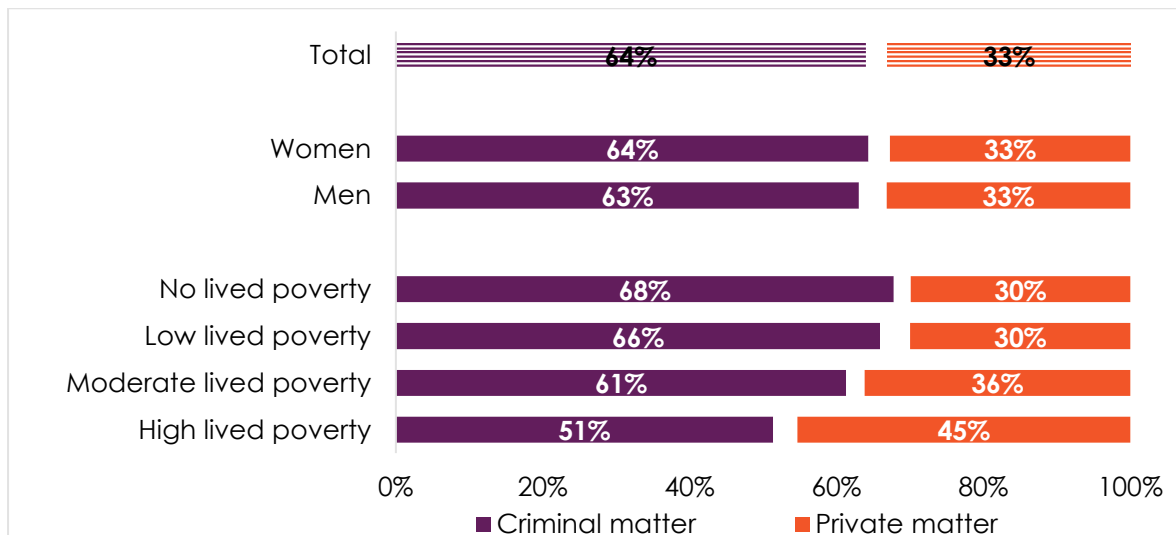
Women and men are equally likely to see domestic violence as a criminal matter. Support for this view increases with respondents' economic status, ranging from 51% of those experiencing high lived poverty to 68% among the best-off citizens (Figure 10).

**Figure 9: Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter? | Ghana | 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 gender and lived poverty | Ghana | 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

The government's efforts to reduce gender-based violence are mirrored in widespread – though not universal – public perceptions that a man is never justified in using force to discipline his wife, that domestic violence is a criminal matter, and that the police take reported GBV cases seriously. Even so, many Ghanaians believe that a woman who reports such a crime to the authorities is likely to be criticised, harassed, or shamed – a barrier to accountability and justice that the fight against GBV requires.

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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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