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# Malawians demand greater government efforts for gender equality

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 633 | Kelechi Amakoh, Mir Muhtadi Faiaz, Namratha Rao, and Anita Raj**

## Summary

The government of Malawi has demonstrated its commitment to advancing gender equality by ratifying international and regional agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development.

The government has also adopted national policies and strategies in pursuit of gender equality, such as the National Gender Policy; the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security; and the National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage (2018-2023) (Republic of Malawi, 2015, 2022; UN Women, 2020). Malawi is a co-leader of the Generation Equality Feminist Movements and Leadership Action Coalition (UN Women, 2022) and has aligned its development agenda with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 5 – “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (United Nations, 2022).

Despite Malawi's stated commitment to gender equality, the country experienced one of the greatest declines in the Global Gender Gap Index 2022, where it now ranks 132<sup>nd</sup> among 146 countries (30<sup>th</sup> among 36 countries in sub-Saharan Africa). While Malawi scores well on health and survival, it rates poorly on economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, and political empowerment, including a total of 15% of legislators, senior officials, and managers who are women (World Economic Forum, 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 gender equality in control over assets, hiring, land ownership, and political leadership. (For findings on gender-based violence, see Chunga & Nedi, 2022).

The findings reveal that most Malawians endorse equal rights for women in employment, land ownership, and political leadership. However, they also show that women face significant obstacles in accessing education, owning assets, and running for office. Citizens give the government good marks for its efforts to promote women's rights and opportunities, but a majority think that more action is needed.

## 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 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.

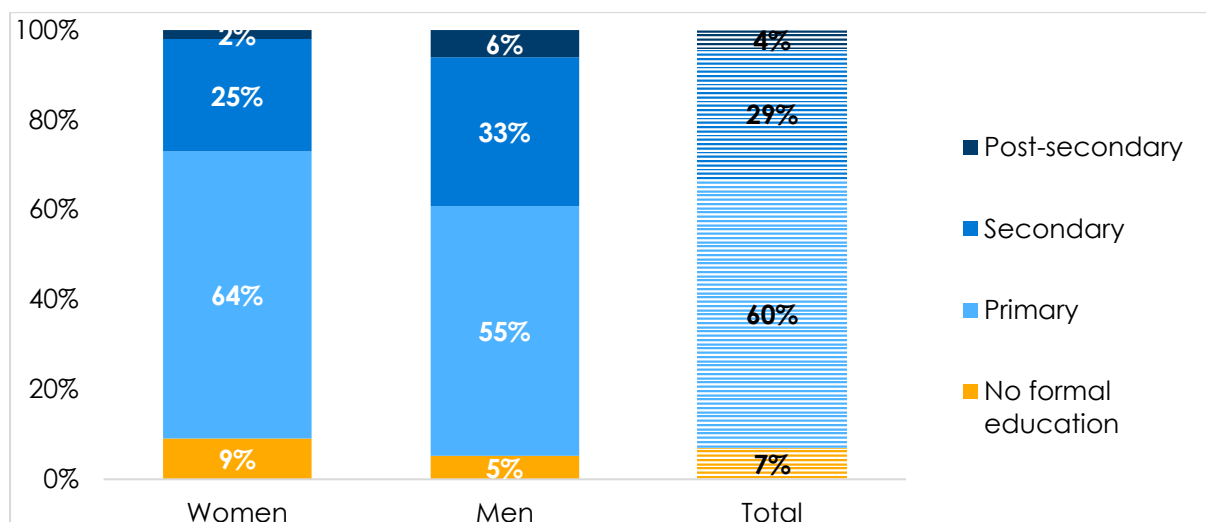
## Key findings

- In Malawi, fewer women than men have secondary and post-secondary education (27% vs 39%), while more women than men lack formal schooling altogether (9% vs 5%).
- Women also trail men in ownership of key assets such as a mobile phone (48% vs. 70%), a motor vehicle (8% vs. 13%), and a bank account (8% vs. 17%), and are more likely than men to lack a voice in household financial decisions (27% vs. 20%).
- Nonetheless, large majorities of Malawians say women should have the same rights as men when it comes to jobs (67%), land ownership (85%), and political leadership (82%).
- More than eight in 10 citizens (83%) think that women who run for public office will gain standing in the community. But substantial minorities also think it's likely that female candidates will be criticised, called names, or harassed (37%) and will have problems with their families (31%).
- Six in 10 respondents (61%) say the government is doing a "fairly good" or "very good" job of promoting equal rights and opportunities for women. Less educated and poor citizens are less likely to approve of the government's performance.
  - Two-thirds (66%) of citizens say the government should do more to promote women's rights and opportunities.

## Education and control of assets

In Malawi, women are less likely than men to complete secondary (25% vs. 33%) and post-secondary (2% vs. 6%) education (Figure 1). More women than men report having no formal schooling (9% vs. 5%).

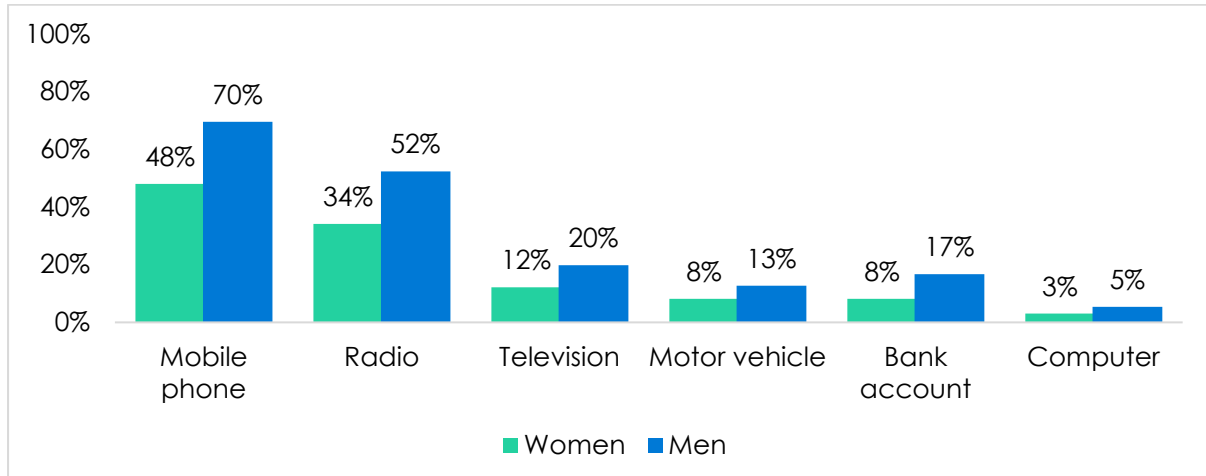
**Figure 1: Educational attainment** | by gender | Malawi | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** What is your highest level of education?

Women are also significantly less likely than men to control key assets (Figure 2). Fewer women than men report ownership of a mobile phone (48% vs. 70%), a radio (34% vs. 52%), a television (12% vs. 20%), a motor vehicle (8% vs. 13%), and a bank account (8% vs. 17%). Only 5% of men and 3% of women say they own a computer.

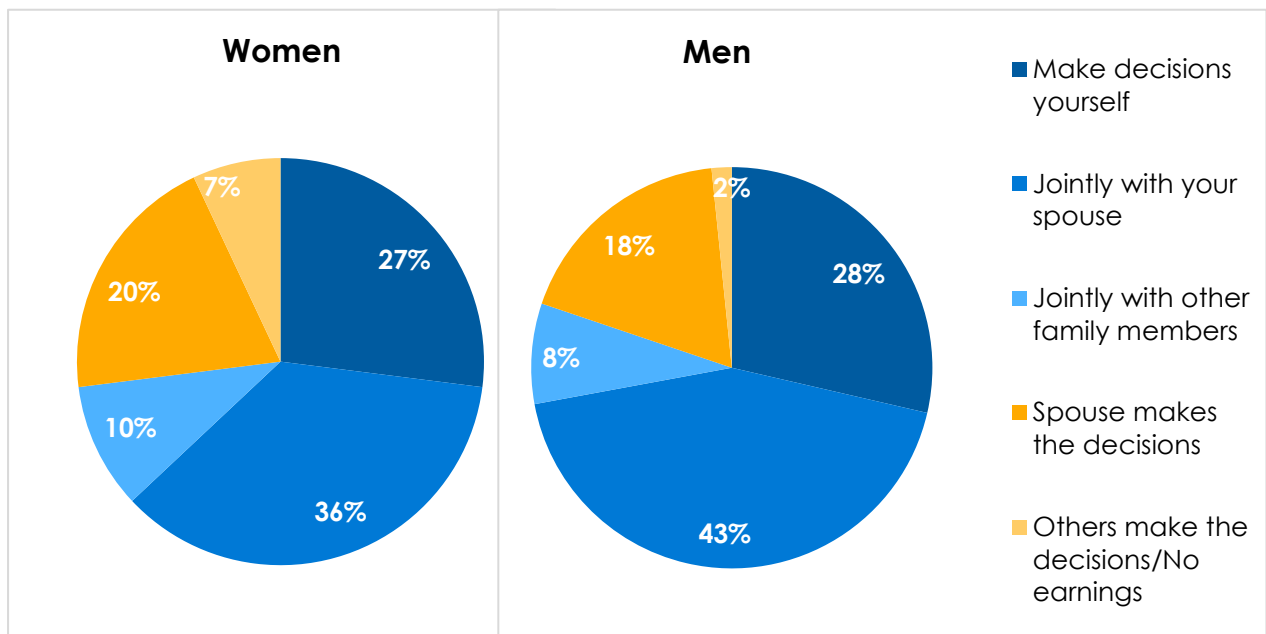
**Figure 2: Asset ownership** | by gender | Malawi | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** Which of these things do you personally own?

When it comes to choosing how to use money in the household, similar proportions of women and men say they make financial decisions by themselves (27% vs. 28%), while 36% of women and 43% of men make financial decisions jointly and 10% of women and 8% of men make decisions jointly with other family members. More women than men report lacking decision-making power: 27% of women (vs. 20% of men) say that their spouse or other relatives make financial decisions or that they have no money to spend (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Who decides how money is used?** | by gender | Malawi | 2022

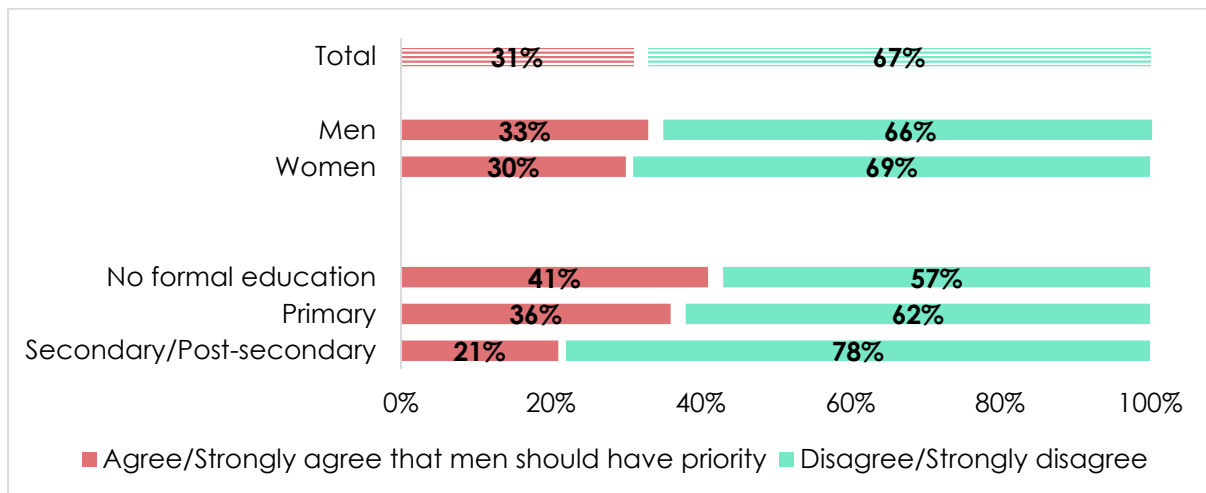


**Respondents were asked:** What is the main way that decisions are made about how to use any money that you have or earn, for example from a job, a business, selling things, or other activities?

### Rights to a job and land ownership/inheritance

Men (66%) are about as likely as women (69%) to insist on gender equality when it comes to jobs. Support for equality in hiring increases with respondents' education level, ranging from 57% of those with no formal schooling to 78% of those with secondary or post-secondary qualifications. About three in 10 Malawians (31%) endorse the idea that men should be given priority over women in hiring when jobs are scarce (Figure 4).

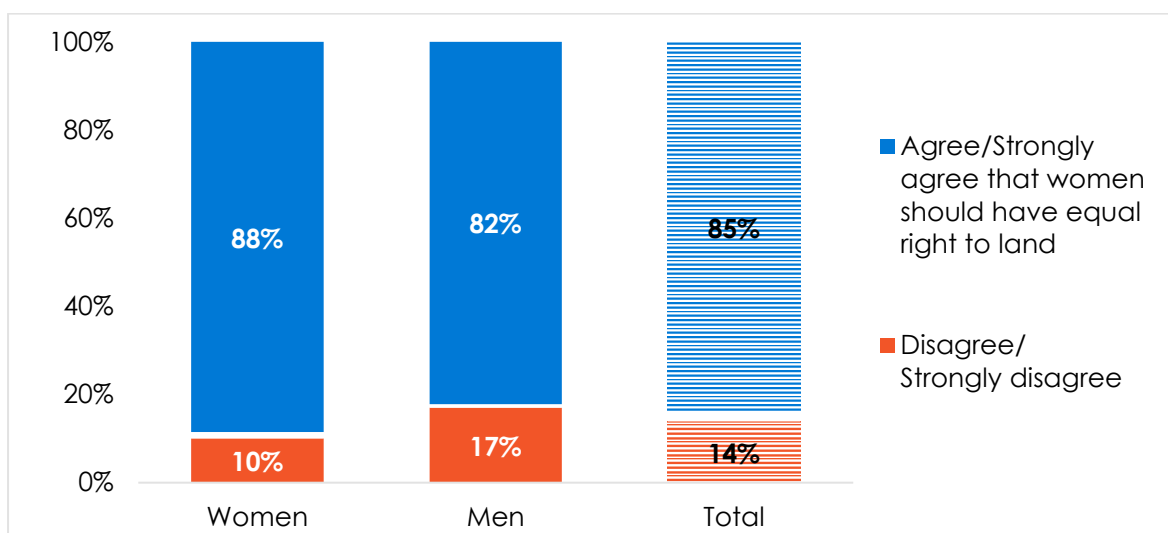
**Figure 4: Should men have priority for scarce jobs? | by gender and education | Malawi | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: When jobs are scarce, men should have more rights to a job than women.

Most Malawians (85%) also think women should have the same rights as men to own and inherit land. Marginally more women (88%) than men (82%) believe in equal land rights (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Should women have equal rights to land? | by gender | Malawi | 2022**

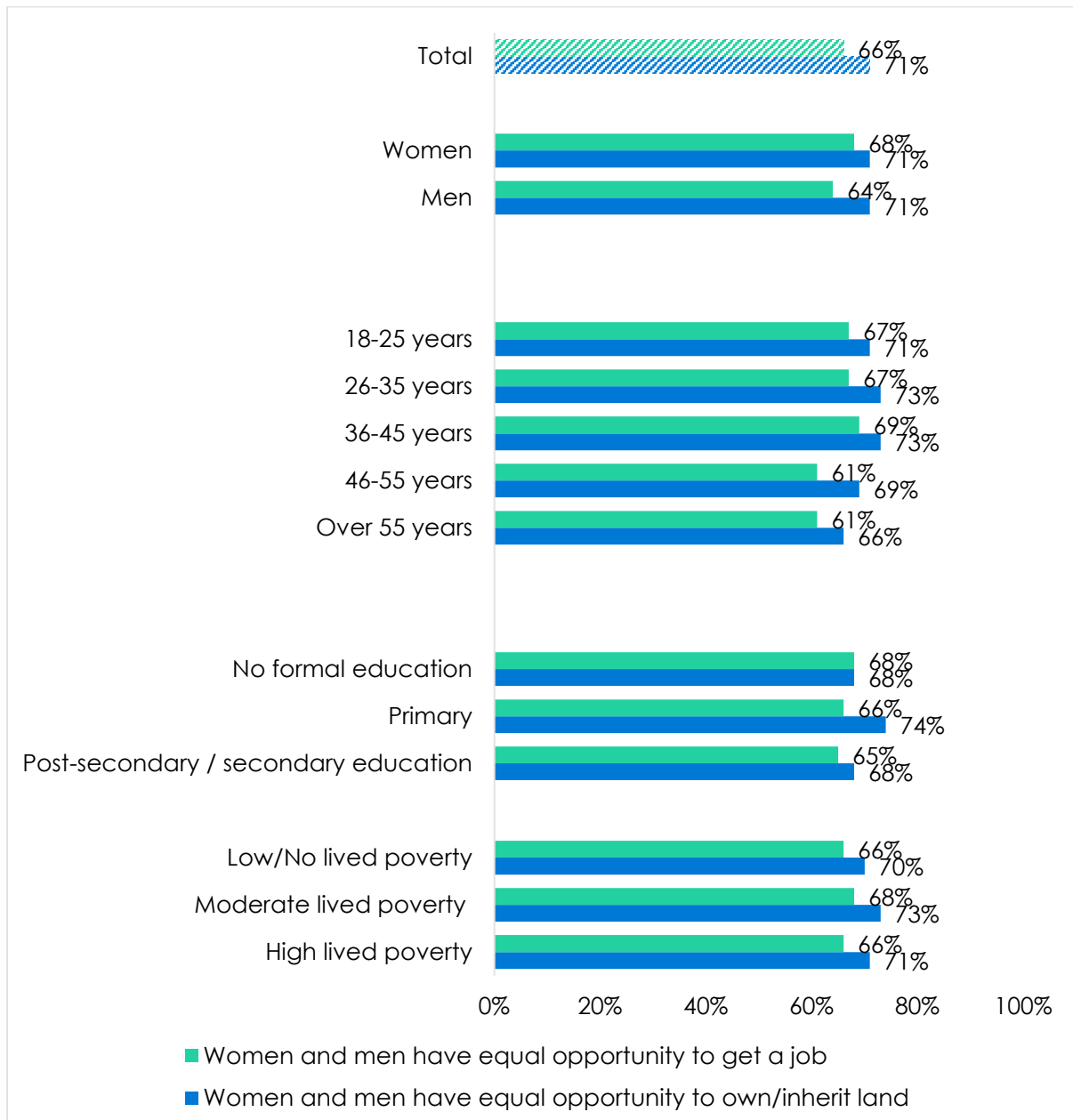


**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Women should have the same rights as men to own and inherit land.

Two-thirds (66%) of Malawians report that women do have the same opportunities as men to get a paying job, and 71% say they have the same opportunities to own and inherit land (Figure 6).

These responses are similar across key demographic groups, with perceptions of equal job opportunities slightly lower among men and older respondents.

**Figure 6: Do women and men have equal opportunities to get a job and to own/inherit land?** | by demographic group | Malawi | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

*In our country today, women and men have equal opportunities to get a job that pays a wage or salary.*

*In our country today, women and men have equal opportunities to own and inherit land.*

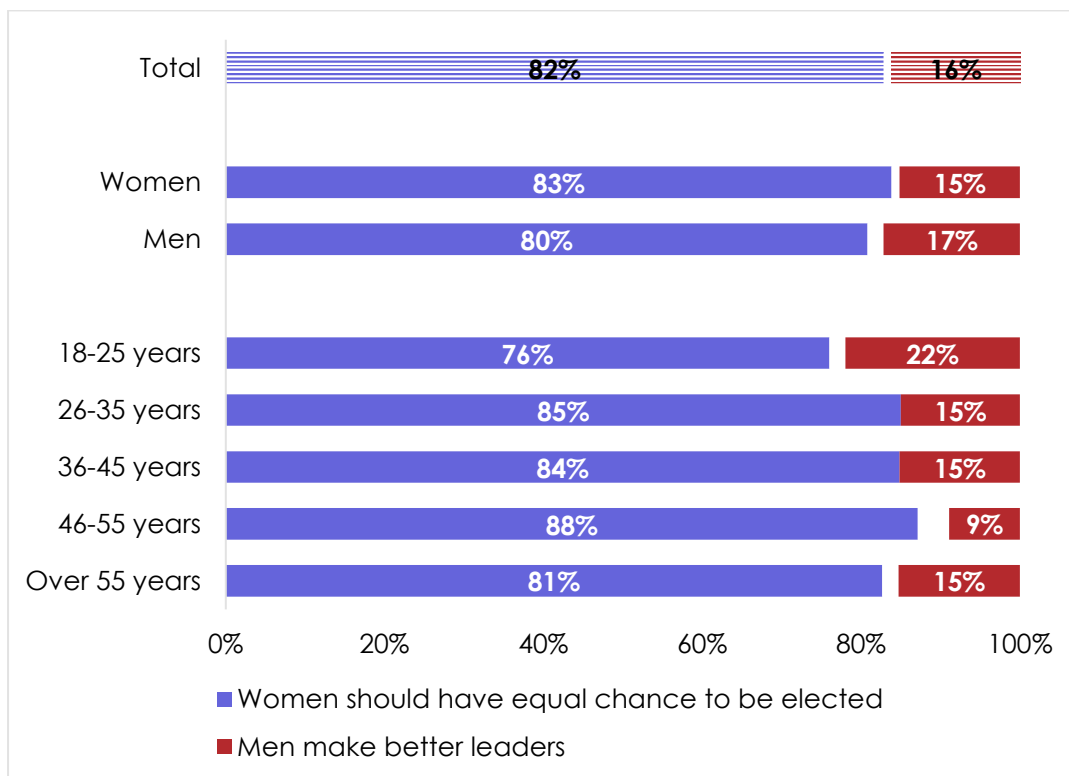
(% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

## Gender equality in political participation

More than eight in 10 respondents (82%) say women should have the same opportunity as men to vie for political office, rejecting the idea that men make better political leaders and should be prioritised as candidates (16%) (Figure 7). Support for gender equality in politics is just about as strong among men (80%) as among women (83%).

The youngest respondents (76% of 18- to 25-year-olds) are less likely to endorse this form of equality than their elders (81%-88%).

**Figure 7: Should women have an equal chance to be elected?** | by gender  
 | Malawi | 2022



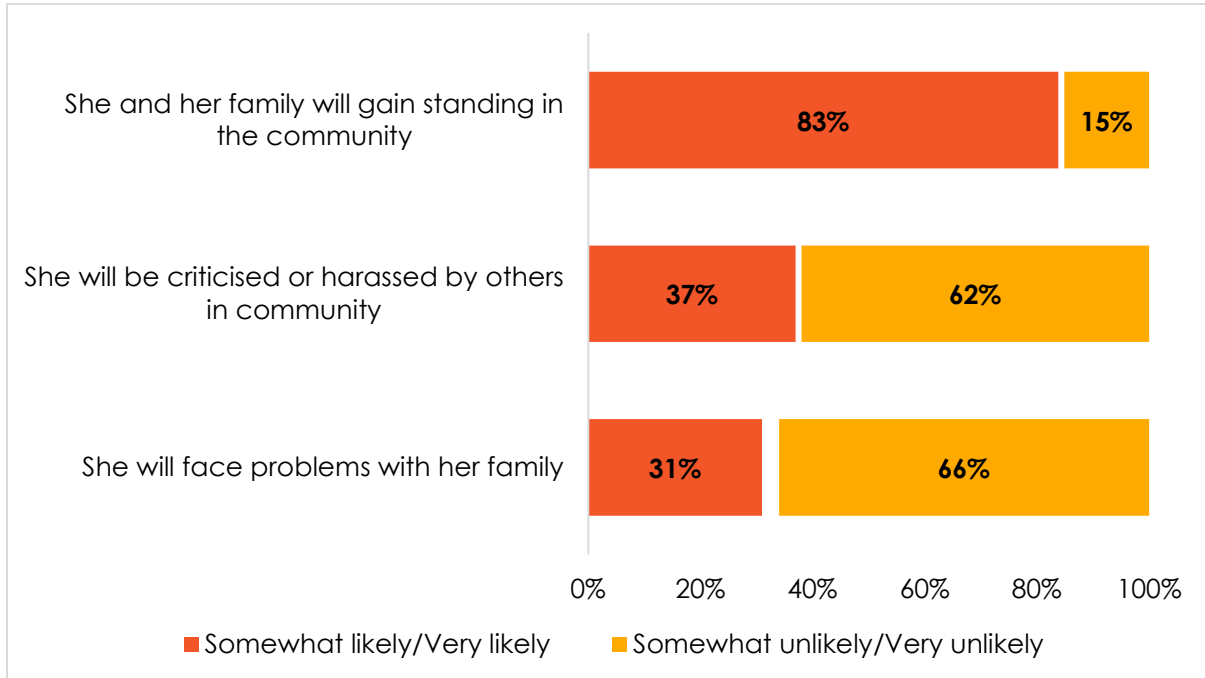
**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: Men make better political leaders than women and should be elected rather than women.  
 Statement 2: Women should have the same chance of being elected to political office as men.  
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

Most Malawians (83%) say it is "somewhat likely" or "very likely" that a woman and her family will gain standing in the community if she runs for elected office (Figure 8).

On the other hand, almost four in 10 respondents (37%) consider it somewhat/very likely that community members will criticise her, call her names, or harass her for seeking public office, while 31% of respondents think she will probably face problems with her family – perceptions that might discourage some women from entering the political arena.

Women are slightly more likely than men to expect criticism/harassment (39% vs. 35%) and family problems (34% vs. 29%) for women who seek public office.

**Figure 8: For better or for worse: How running for elected office might affect women's lives | Malawi | 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 criticized, called names, or harassed by others in the community?*

*She will face problems with her family?*

### Government performance in promoting equal rights and opportunities

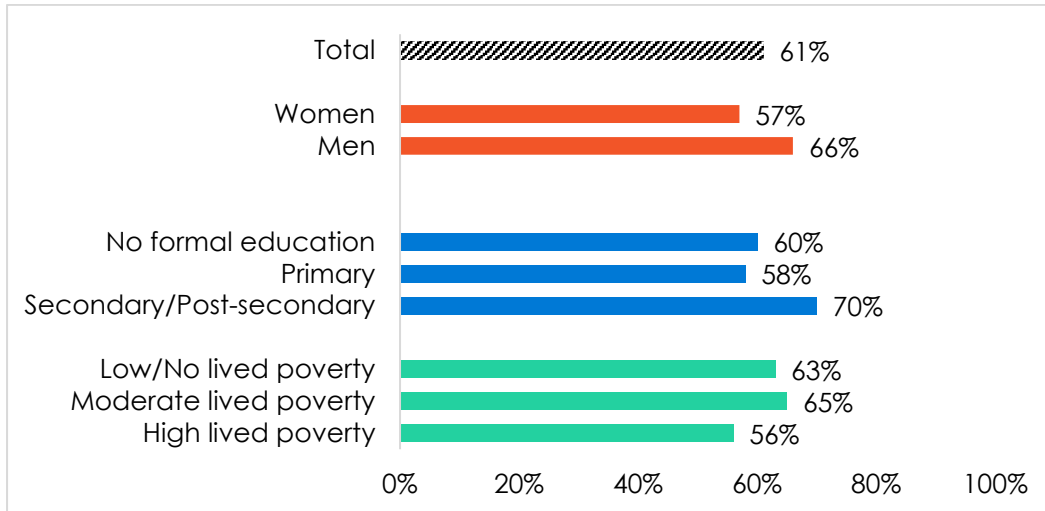
Six in 10 Malawians (61%) say their government is doing a “fairly” or “very” good job of promoting equal rights and opportunities for women (Figure 9), while 35% disapprove of the government’s performance. Fewer women than men see the government as doing well in promoting equal rights and opportunities for women (57% vs. 66%).

Approval of the government’s performance on gender equality is more common among respondents with secondary/post-secondary education (70%) than among those who have primary (58%) or no formal schooling (60%). Respondents reporting “high lived poverty”<sup>1</sup> are less satisfied with the government’s performance (56%) than those who are economically better off (63%-65%).

Despite their positive assessment of efforts to date, two-thirds (66%) of Malawians think the government and elected officials should do “somewhat more” or “much more” to promote equal rights and opportunities for women. More women than men call for greater government initiative (71% vs. 62%) (Figure 10).

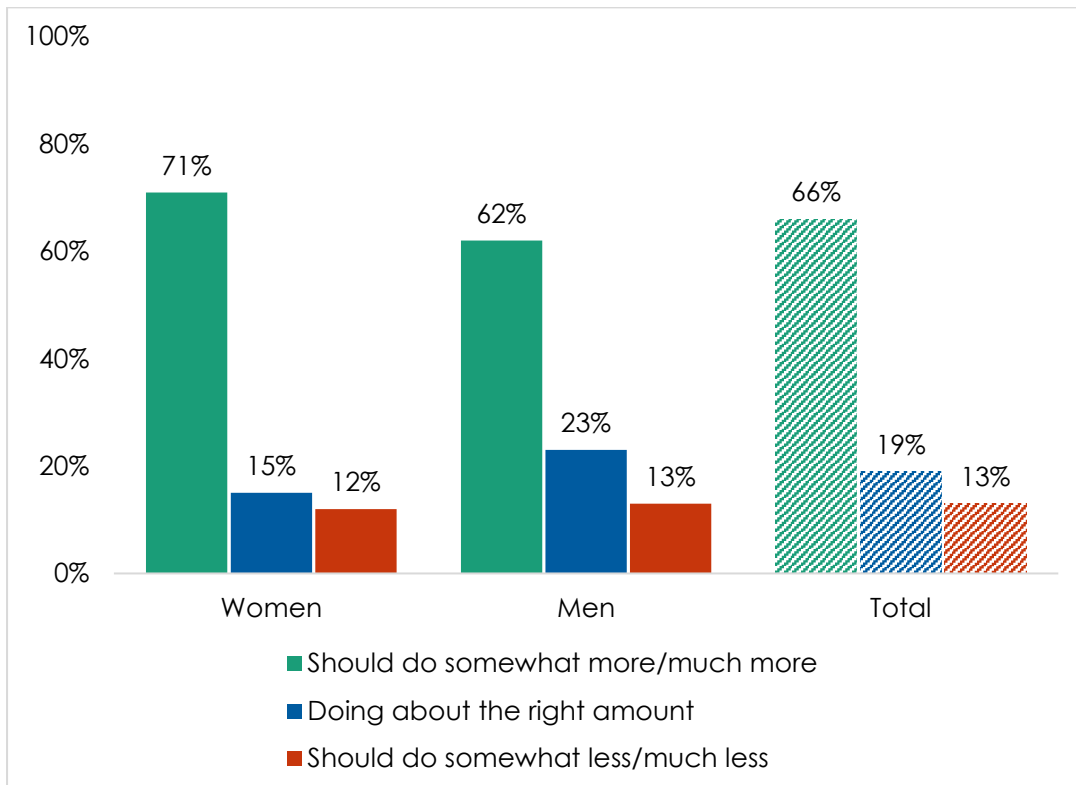
<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on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

**Figure 9: Government performance in promoting equal rights and opportunities for women | Malawi | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Promoting equal rights and opportunities for women? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

**Figure 10: Should the government do more or less to promote equal rights and opportunities for women? | by gender | Malawi | 2022**

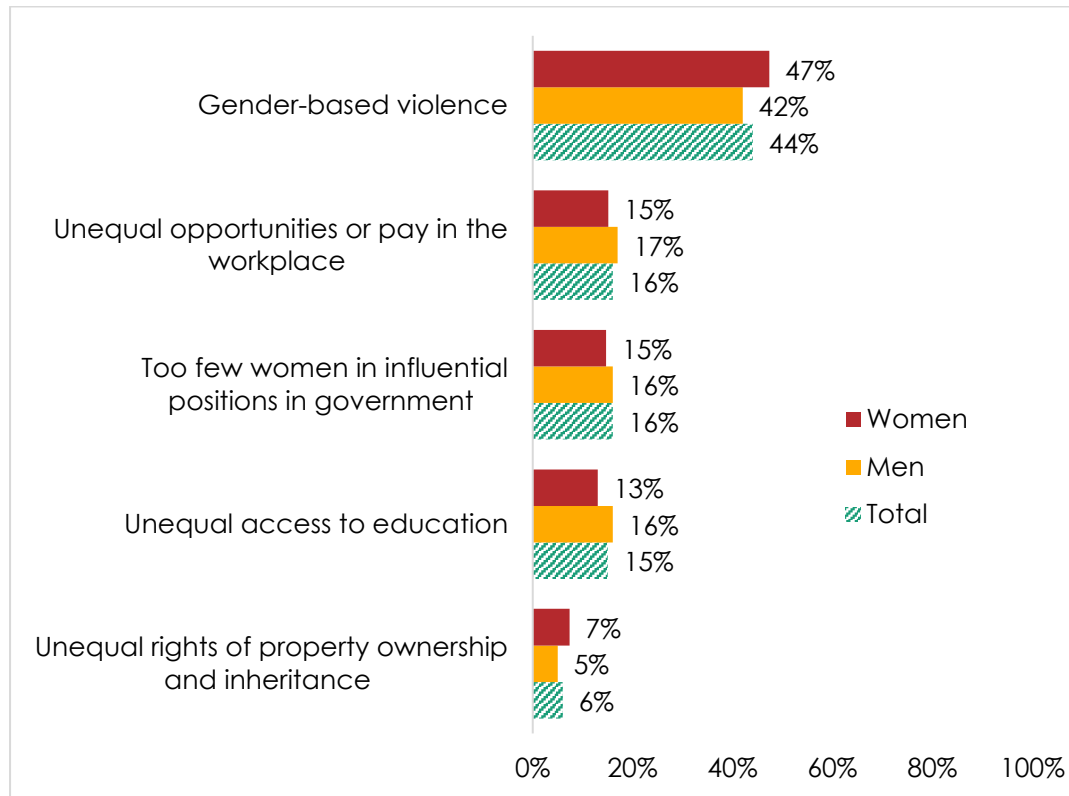


**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, should government and elected officials be doing more than they are doing now to advance the rights and equality of women, or should they be doing less, or are they doing about the right amount?



Asked what they consider the most important issue related to women's rights and equality that the government and society should address, Malawians most frequently cite gender-based violence (44%, including 47% of women respondents) (Figure 11). About one in six respondents cite unequal opportunities or pay in the workplace (16%), lack of women in government positions (16%), and unequal access to education (15%).

**Figure 11: Most important women's rights issue | by gender | 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?

## Conclusion

Survey findings reveal both achievements and challenges on the path toward gender equality in Malawi. While most Malawians support equal rights for women in hiring, land ownership, and politics, there are still significant gaps between men and women in education, asset ownership, political leadership, and financial decision-making power. Moreover, many women face barriers and risks when they pursue public office or exercise their bodily autonomy. Gender-based violence remains a pervasive and urgent problem that requires concerted action from the government and society.

Building a gender-equal society will require that activists and policy makers continue to advocate for and implement interventions that address the root causes and consequences of gender inequality in Malawi. Examples of such interventions might include promoting girls' retention in school, enhancing women's access to and control over productive resources and services, strengthening women's participation and representation in decision-making processes at all levels, and challenging harmful gender norms and stereotypes that undermine women's agency and rights.

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