

Gambians reject men's use of physical force but see domestic violence as a private matter

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 646 | Sait Matty Jaw and Fatoumatta Gassama

Summary

The Gambian government's efforts to reduce gender-based violence (GBV) have taken many forms, from international conventions and national laws to the establishment of a new Ministry of Women's Affairs, Children, and Social Welfare; of gender units in the Gambia Police Force and the Ministry of Justice; and of "one-stop centres" in health facilities to provide medical, legal, and counseling support to victims (National Human Rights Commission, 2022); Foroyaa, 2019).

Along with the Gambian Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (2021), the current government has highlighted the extensive use of sexual violence as a tool of repression, torture, and punishment during the regime of former President Yahya Jammeh and has committed itself to expanding services to survivors (Republic of the Gambia, 2022).

Despite these efforts, violence against women and girls remains a significant problem in the Gambia. According to the Demographic and Health Survey 2019-20, almost half (46%) of women aged 15-49 have experienced physical violence since age 15, including 11% during the year preceding the survey (Gambia Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The 2018 Gambia Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (Gambia Bureau of Statistics, 2019) found that more than one-third of women were married before age 18, and three-fourths of women had undergone some form of female genital mutilation, even though it is outlawed. Half (50%) of women and 26% of men affirmed that husbands are justified in beating their wives.

Systemic challenges remain as well: While the Sexual Offences Act punishes sexual violence, it does not cover marital rape (Nabaneh, 2016; Law Hub Gambia, 2018). Accessing the justice system is difficult for many victims due to high costs and stigma, and the one-stop centres are limited by inadequate resources (National Human Rights Commission, 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-based violence.

In the Gambia, citizens rank GBV among the most important women's-rights issues that the government and society must address. Most say that a husband is never justified in using physical force against his wife and that the police take GBV cases seriously.

But majorities also think that a woman who reports such violence to the authorities will suffer criticism, harassment, or shaming by others in the community and that GBV is a private matter to be resolved within the family rather than a criminal matter requiring the involvement of law enforcement.

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 the Gambia, led by the Center for Policy, Research and Strategic Studies (CepRass), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens between 30 August and 19 September 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 the Gambia in 2018 and 2021.

Key findings

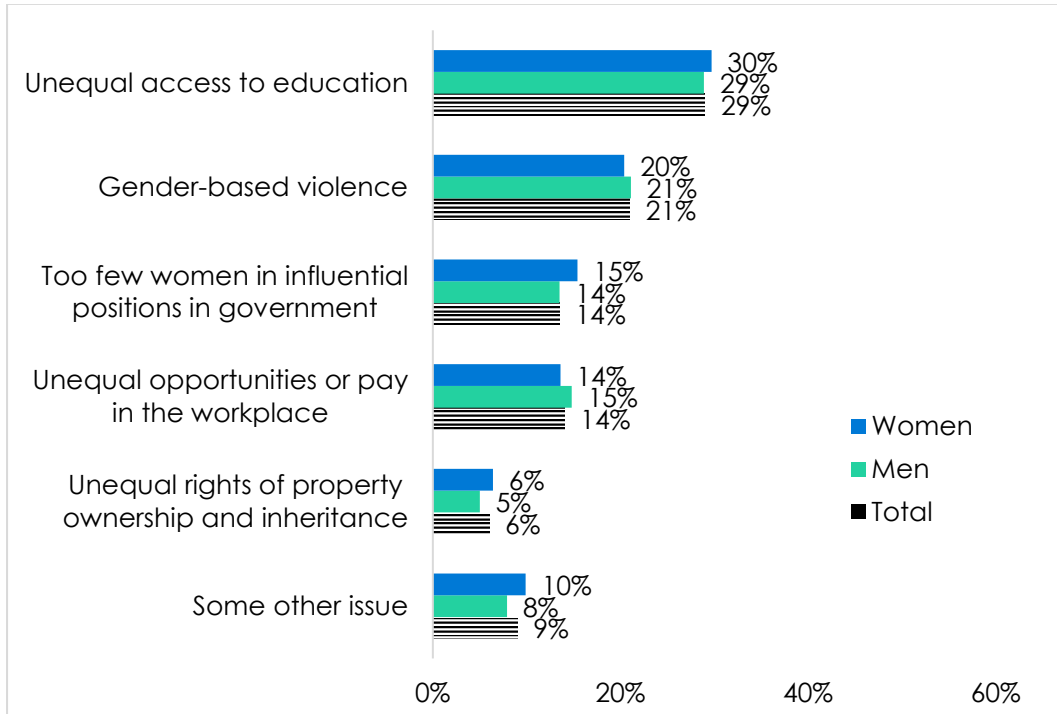
- Gambians rank gender-based violence (GBV) as the second-most important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address, after unequal access to education.
- Three-fourths (76%) of Gambians say GBV is "not very common" or "not at all common" in their community, but 22% disagree.
- More than seven in 10 citizens (72%) say it is "never" justified for a man to use physical force to discipline his wife. Women are somewhat more likely than men to see the use of physical force as justified (30% vs. 25%).
- Almost two-thirds (63%) of Gambians consider it likely that victims of GBV will be criticised, harassed, or shamed by others in the community if they report these crimes to the authorities.
 - But a large majority (82%) believe that the police are likely to take cases of GBV seriously.
- Two-thirds (67%) of respondents believe gender-based violence should be treated as a private matter to be resolved within the family rather than as a criminal matter that involves law enforcement agencies.

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

In the Gambia, gender-based violence ranks second among the most important problems related to women's rights that citizens think the government and society must address (Figure 1). Unequal access to education is cited most frequently, while GBV is followed by too few women in influential positions in government and unequal opportunities or pay in the workplace. Women and men see eye to eye on these priorities.

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

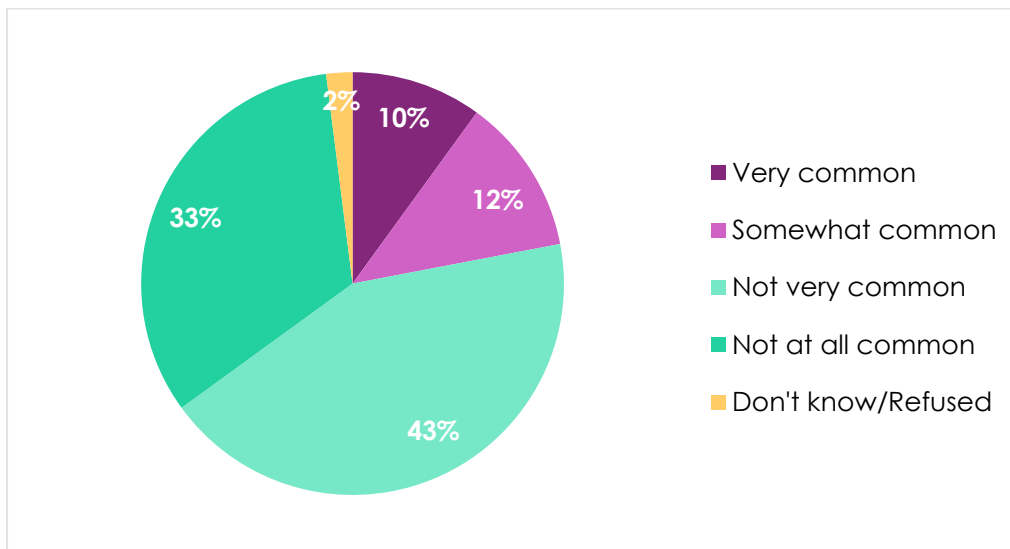


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, which of the following issues related to women's rights and equality do you think is the most important for our government and society to address?

How common is GBV?

Only about one in five Gambians (22%) say GBV happens frequently in their community, while three-fourths (76%) describe it as “not very common” (43%) or “not at all common” (33%) (Figure 2).

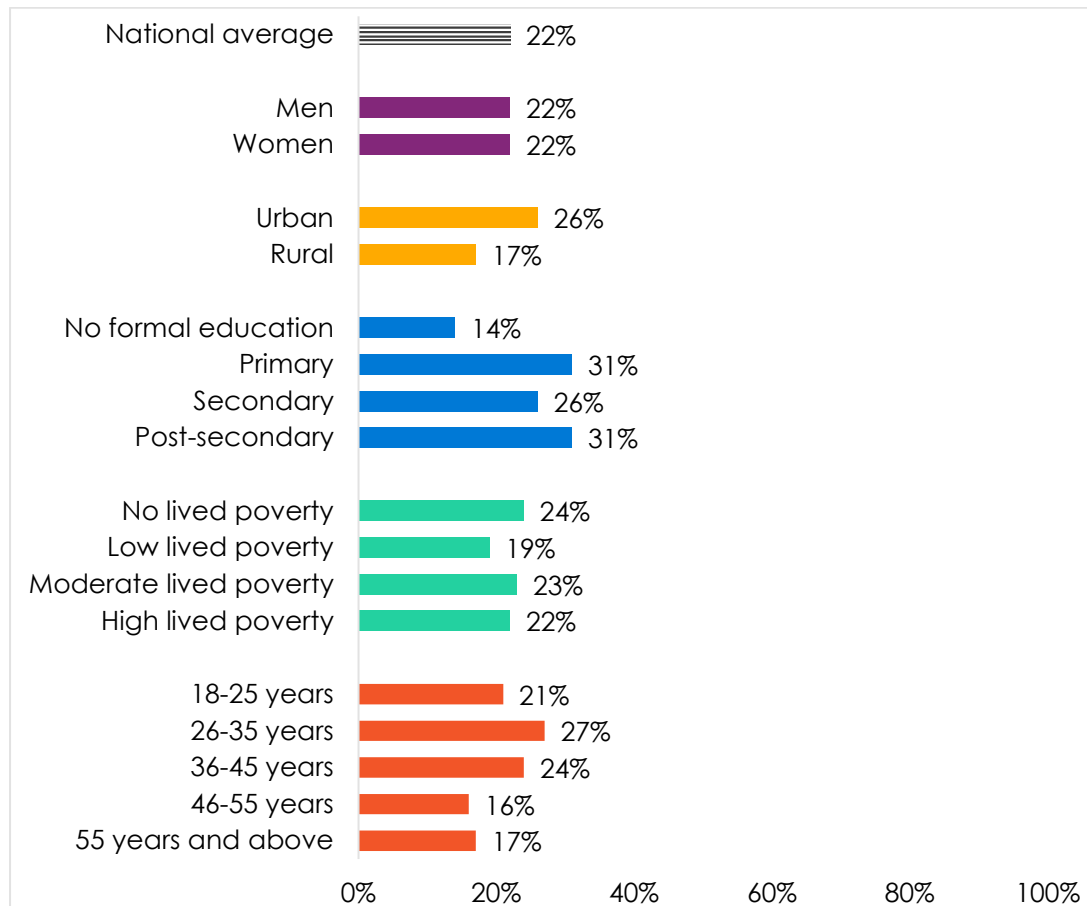
Figure 2: Frequency of GBV | Gambia | 2022



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?

Urban residents (26%) are more likely than rural dwellers (17%) to say that violence against women is a common occurrence (Figure 3). Perceptions of GBV as a common occurrence are less widespread among citizens with no formal schooling (14%) and among older respondents (16%-17% among those over age 45).

Figure 3: GBV perceived as somewhat/very common | by demographic group | Gambia | 2022



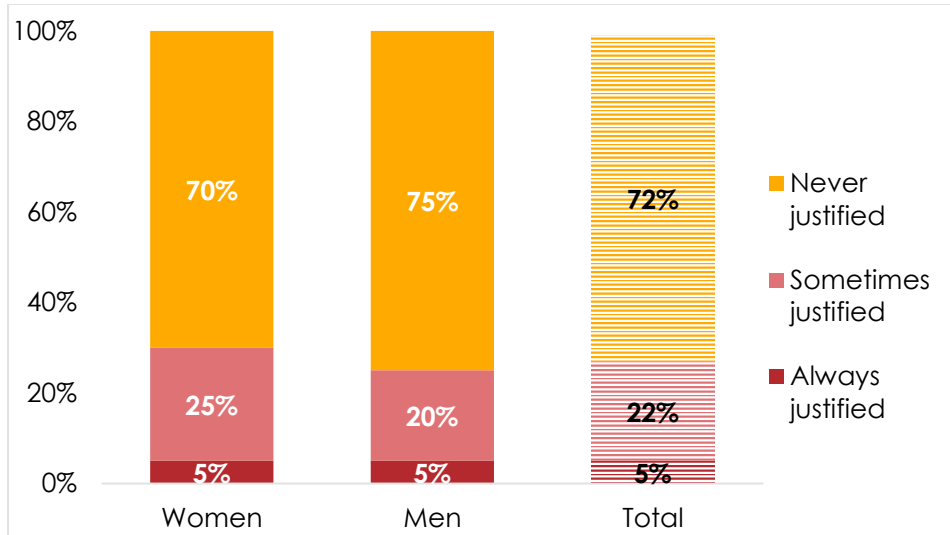
Respondents were asked: In this area, how common do you think it is for men to use violence against women and girls in the home or the community? (% who say "somewhat common" or "very common")

Physical discipline of a spouse

A strong majority (72%) of Gambians say it is "never justified" for a man to use physical force to discipline his wife, while about one-fourth consider it "sometimes" (22%) or "always" (5%) justified. Remarkably, women are somewhat more likely than men to see the use of physical force as justified (30% vs. 25%) (Figure 4).

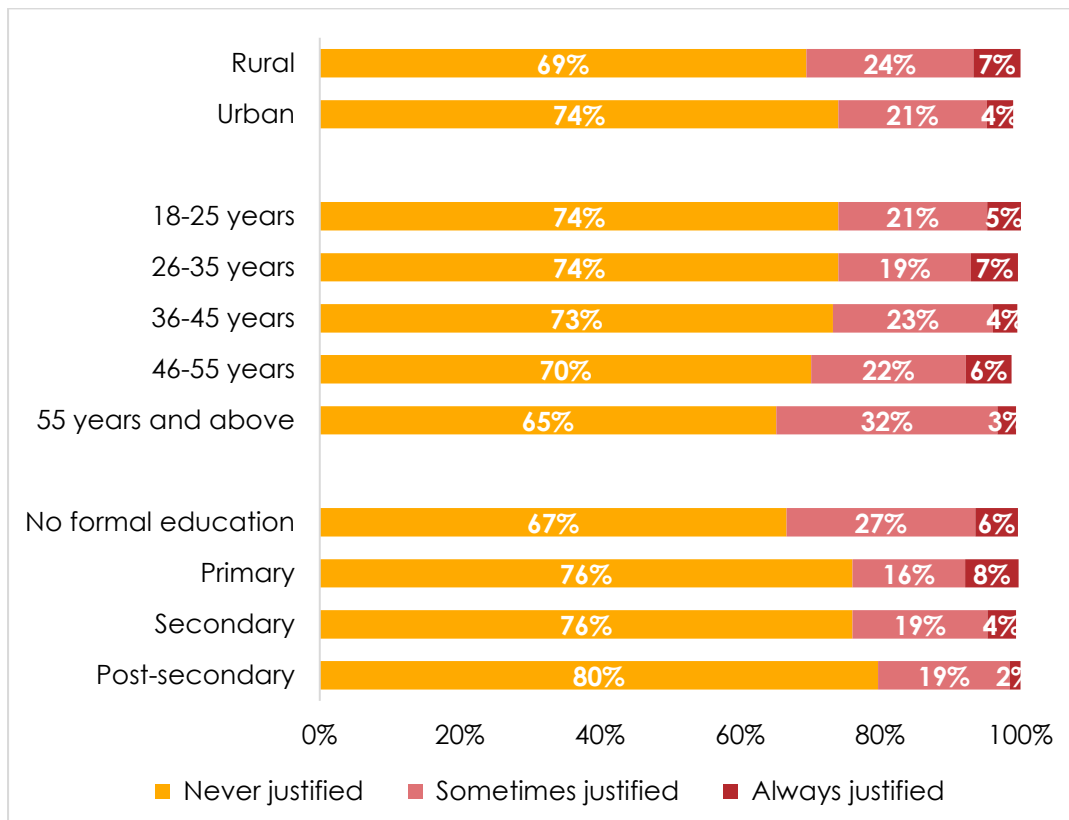
The view that men are never justified in physically disciplining their wives gathers strength as respondents' education level rises, ranging from 67% of those with no formal schooling to 80% of those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 5). Young respondents (74%) are more likely than their elders to reject the use of physical force, as are urban compared to rural residents (74% vs. 69%).

Figure 4: Is it justified for men to physically discipline their wives? | Gambia | 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 | Gambia | 2022



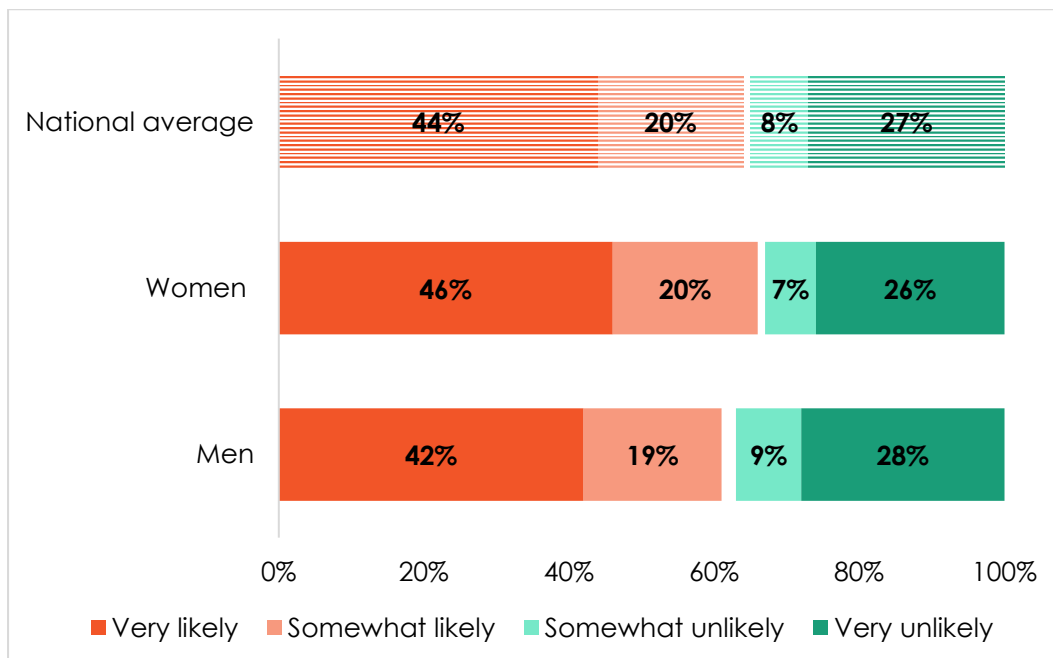
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Response to GBV

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, and the belief that the authorities won't take the case seriously (Palermo, Bleck, & Peterman, 2014).

In the Gambia, almost two-thirds (63%)¹ of respondents consider it likely that 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, including 44% who say this is "very likely" (Figure 6). Only about one-third (35%) see it as "somewhat" or "very" unlikely. Women are somewhat more likely than men to think such a backlash is likely (66% vs. 61%). These perceptions may serve as a significant deterrent to reporting GBV.

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



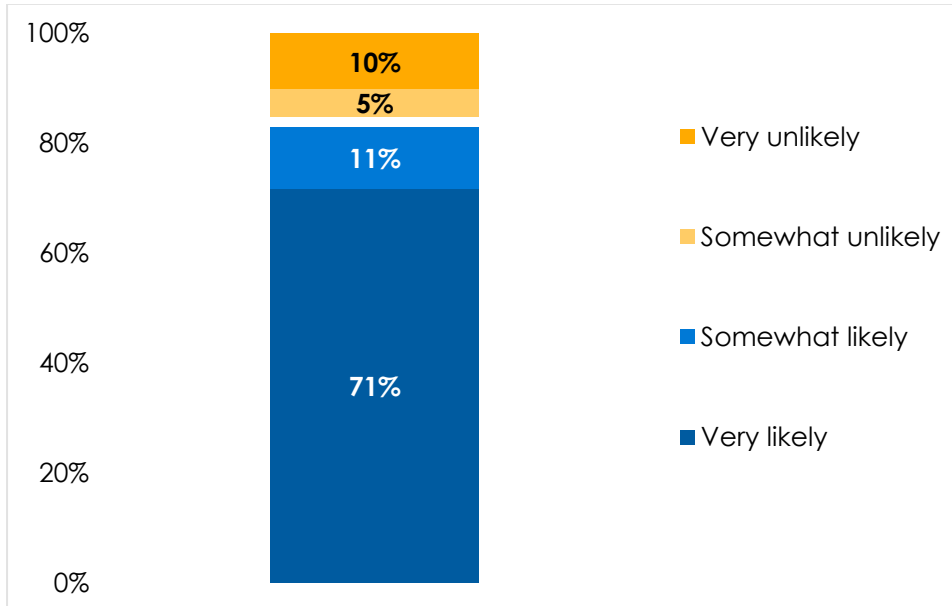
Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: She will be criticised, harassed,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

As for the police, Gambians overwhelmingly believe they will respond appropriately to reported cases of GBV: 82% see it as likely that the police will take such reports seriously, including 71% who say it is "very likely" (Figure 7).

Confidence in the police response is high across key demographic groups, including among women (84%) (Figure 8).

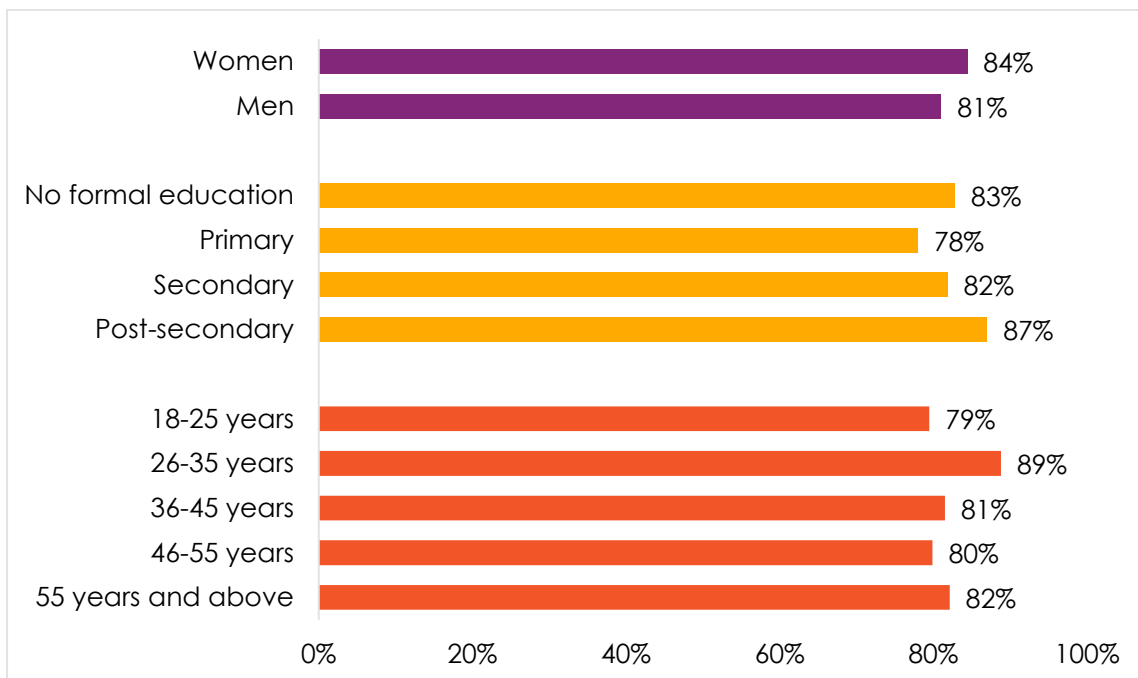
¹ Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. 44% "very likely" and 20% "somewhat likely" sum to 63%).

Figure 7: Do the police take GBV cases seriously? | Gambia | 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: Police will take GBV cases seriously | by demographic group | Gambia | 2022



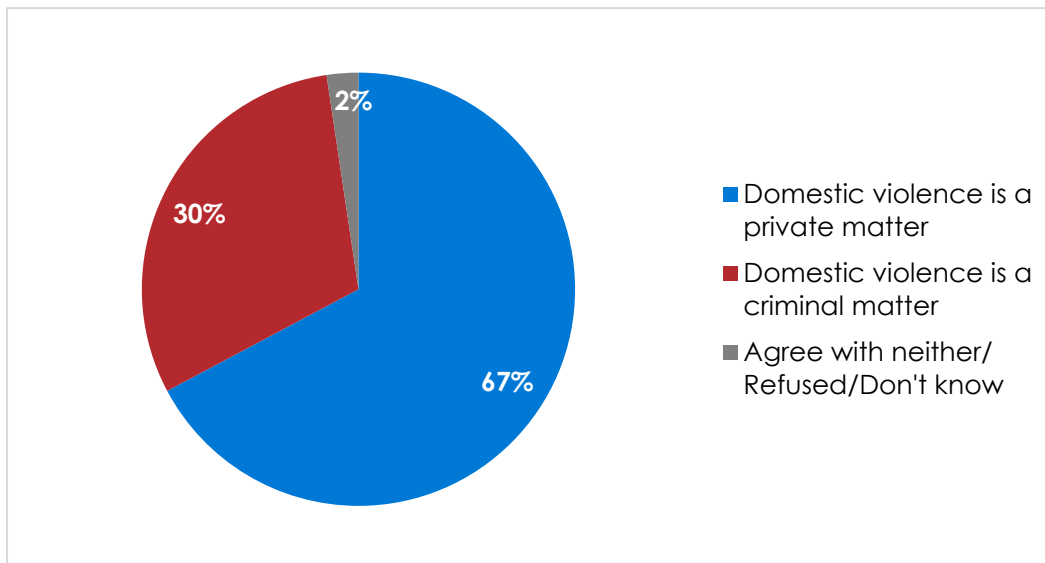
Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: Her case will be taken seriously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

Two-thirds (67%) of respondents say domestic violence is a private matter to be resolved within the family. Only 30% believe that domestic violence is a criminal matter that requires the involvement of law enforcement (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter? | Gambia | 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.

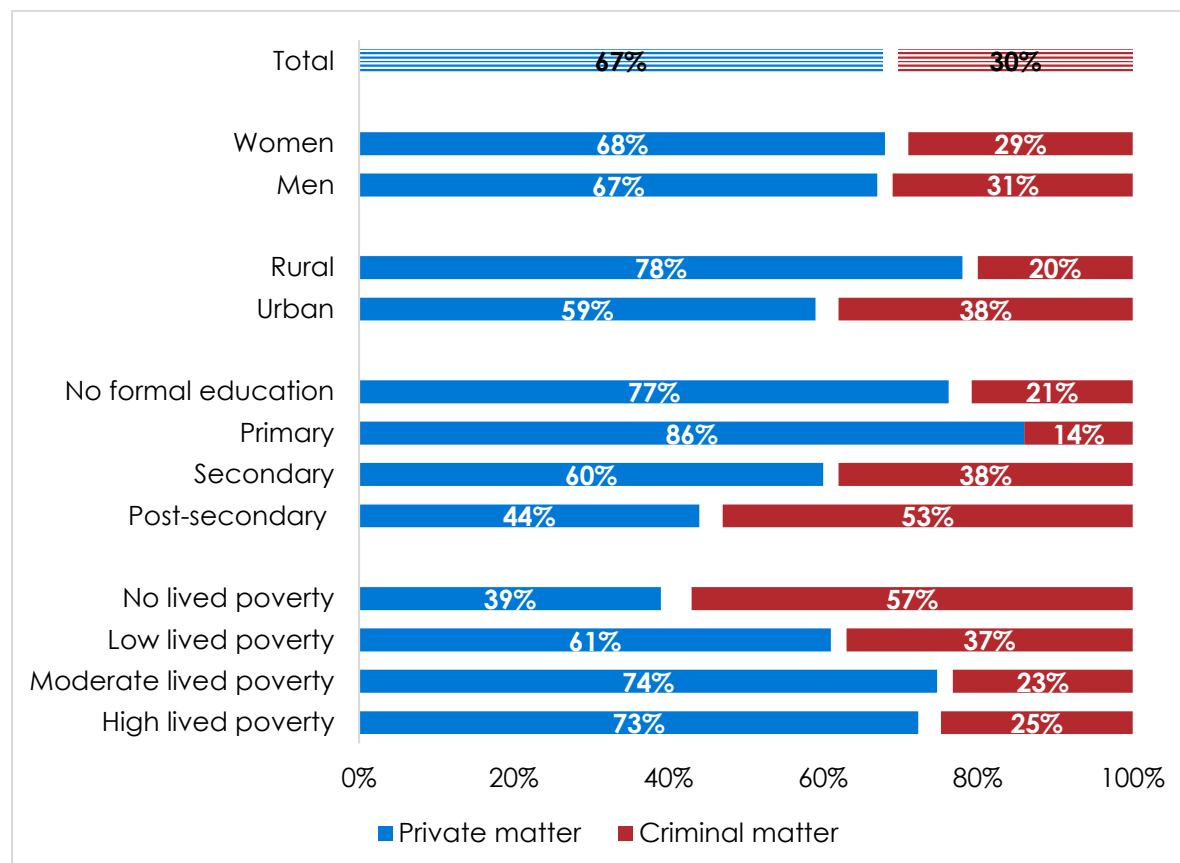
Statement 2: Domestic violence is a criminal matter whose full resolution requires the involvement of law enforcement agencies.

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

Women and men share almost identical views on this question (Figure 10). Perceptions of domestic violence as a criminal matter are about twice as common in cities as in rural areas (38% vs. 20%). They increase with respondents' education and economic levels, reaching majorities among those with post-secondary qualifications (53%) and those experiencing no lived poverty² (57%).

² 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 10: Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter? | by demographic group | Gambia | 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

Survey findings suggest that while Gambians reject domestic violence and consider GBV an important problem, other attitudes may be less conducive to reducing its devastating effects on the lives of women and girls. Expectations that women who report incidents of GBV will suffer public harassment or shaming surely contribute to keeping these violent crimes unreported, unpunished, and undeterred. So does the widespread perception of GBV as a private rather than criminal matter.

While the government will have to strengthen its policy and programmatic efforts if it hopes to reduce GBV, these findings also point to opportunities for civil society, the media, and religious leaders to play a role in making gender-based violence as unacceptable as it is illegal.

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