

## São Toméans see gender-based violence as a top priority, and a criminal matter

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 689 | Maame Akua Amoah Twum and Francisca Sarpong Owusu**

### Summary

São Tomé and Príncipe, an idyllic ecotourism destination in the Gulf of Guinea, is no refuge from a threat to the safety of women and girls everywhere – gender-based violence (GBV). More than one-fourth (28%) of São Toméan women aged 15-49 have experienced intimate-partner physical and/or sexual violence at least once (UN Women, 2023; Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2010), often resulting in severe injuries (Observador, 2023). It was the story of a woman whose arm was severed by her husband in a domestic dispute that sent shockwaves across the island in 2007 and galvanised activists and policy makers, leading to laws against domestic violence (Martins & Corminales, 2022).

In addition to São Tomé and Príncipe's ratification of international treaties and conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, national laws seek to prevent and criminalise violence against women and girls. The country has also updated its national strategy to combat gender-based violence and established a counselling centre against domestic violence and an emergency hotline to support domestic violence victims through its Office of Women's Affairs (Albuquerque & Camblé, 2020; Plataforma, 2021).

GBV persists despite these efforts, enabled by factors such as cultural norms, difficult economic conditions, limited awareness of available resources, and ineffective enforcement of existing laws (White, 2017; Albuquerque & Camblé, 2020; OHCHR, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2022). Reported cases increased during the COVID-19 lockdowns (Carlos, 2022; Plataforma, 2023), though many other cases of GBV go unreported due to fear of retaliation and other socio-cultural norms surrounding family, divorce, and women's autonomy (White, 2017; Albuquerque & Camblé, 2020).

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 São Tomé and Príncipe, citizens consider gender-based violence the most important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address. A majority of respondents say GBV is common in their community, even though most consider it "never justified" for a man to use physical force to discipline his wife.

Citizens believe that GBV should be treated as a criminal rather than a family matter, and they trust the police to take such cases seriously. But a majority also think that women who report such crimes to the authorities are likely to face stigmatisation by community members.

### 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.

Nine rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 42 countries since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

In São Tomé and Príncipe, Ovilongwa - Estudos de Opinião Pública of Angola in partnership with a local consultant and the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) interviewed 1,200 adult São Toméans in December 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 São Tomé and Príncipe in 2015 and 2018.

## Key findings

- São Toméans see gender-based violence (GBV) as the most important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address.
- More than half (52%) of São Toméans say GBV is "somewhat common" or "very common" in their community.
- About eight in 10 citizens (81%) say it is "never" justified for a man to use physical force to discipline his wife, a view shared equally by men and women.
- Almost six in 10 respondents consider it "somewhat likely" (29%) or "very likely" (29%) that a woman will be criticised, harassed, or shamed if she reports gender-based violence to the authorities. Only 24% say this is "very unlikely."
  - But most (85%) believe that the police are likely to take cases of GBV seriously.
- A large majority (81%) of respondents believe GBV should be treated as a criminal matter that involves law enforcement agencies rather than as a private matter to be resolved within the family.

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

In São Tomé and Príncipe, gender-based violence (cited by 41% of respondents) outranks unequal opportunities or pay in the workplace (18%) and too few women in influential positions in government (18%) as the most important women's-rights issue for the government and society to address (Figure 1).

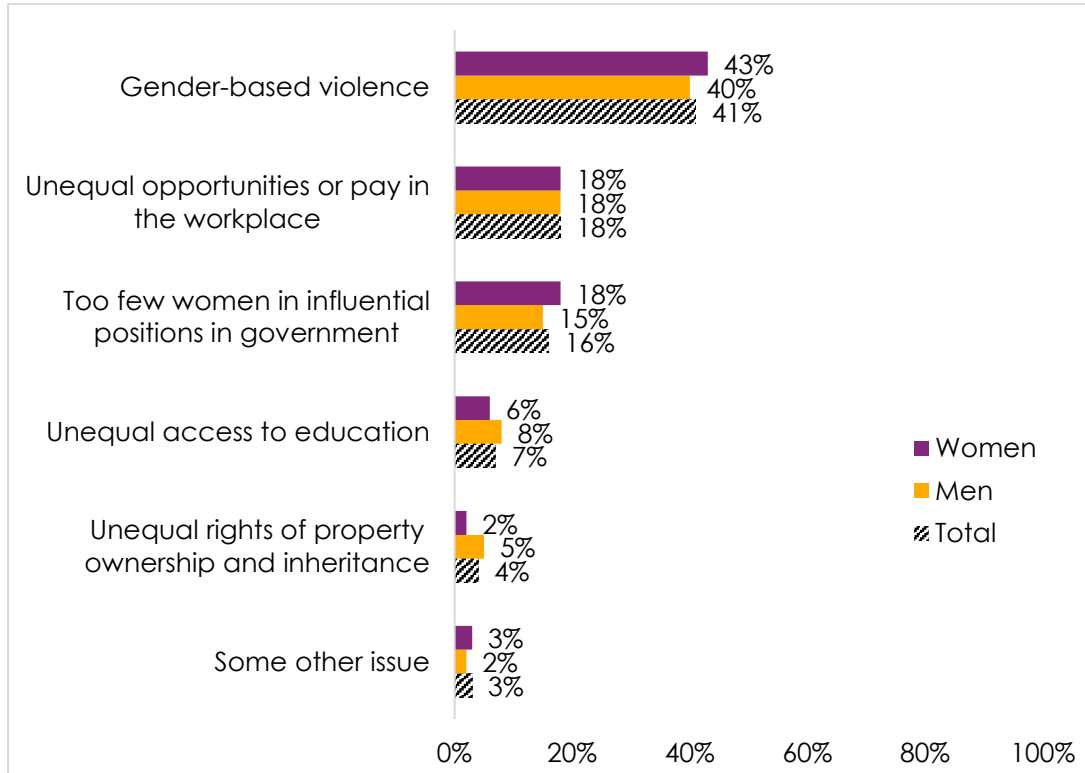
Women (43%) and men (40%) hold similar views on the priority of addressing GBV.

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**Figure 1: Most important women’s-rights issue | by gender | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022**

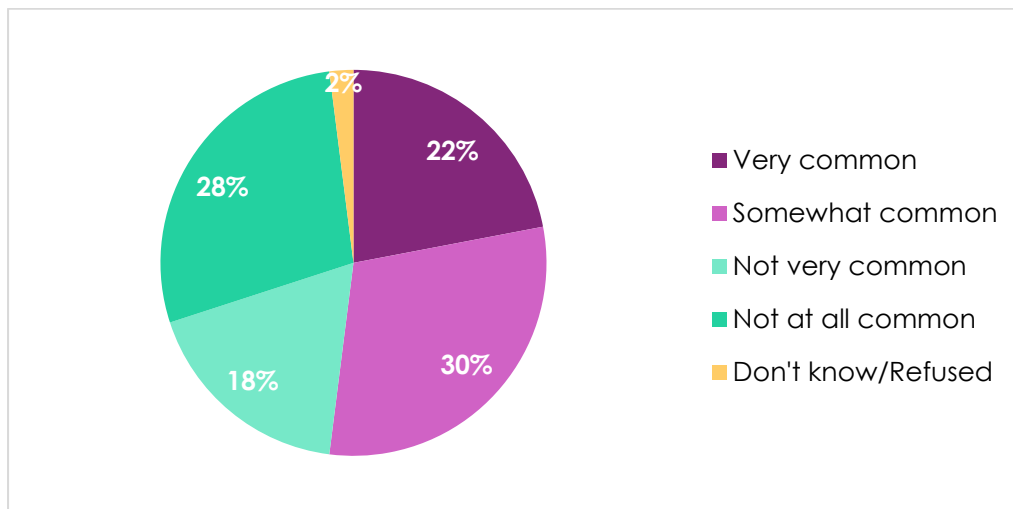


**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, which of the following issues related to women's rights and equality do you think is the most important for our government and society to address?

**How common is GBV?**

More than half (52%) of São Toméans say GBV is “somewhat common” or “very common” in their community, while 46% describe it as “not very” or “not at all” common (Figure 2).

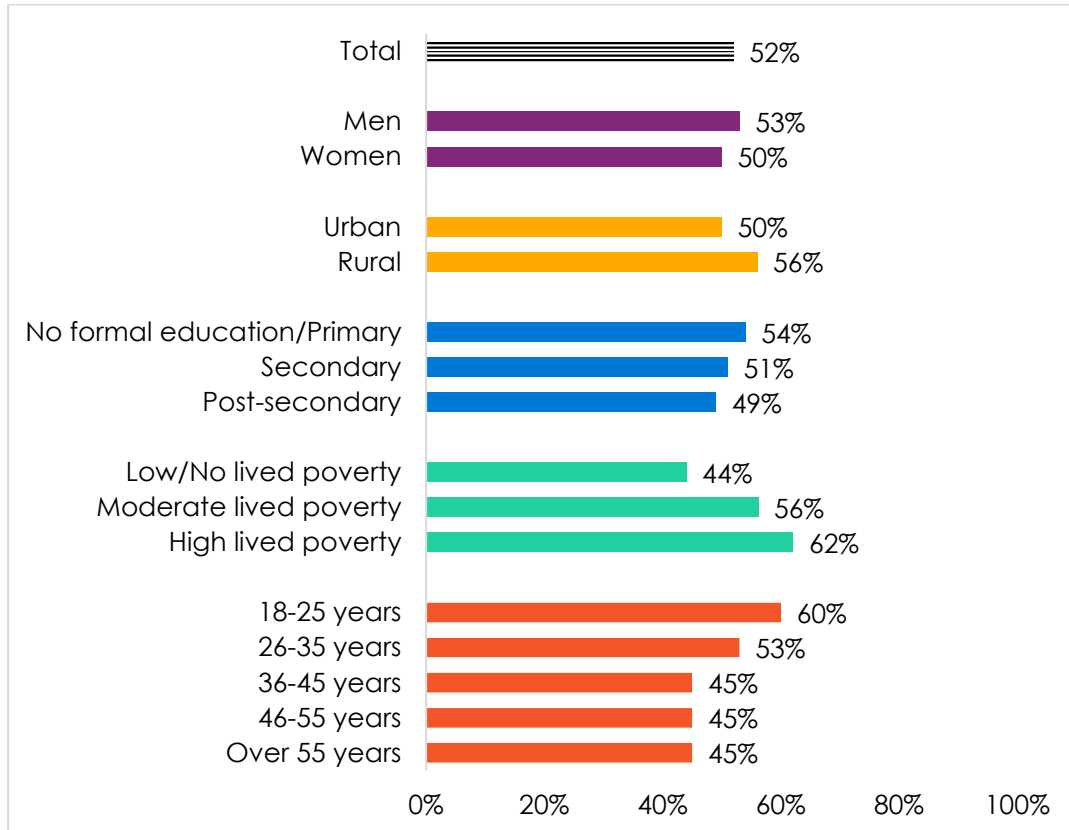
**Figure 2: Frequency of GBV | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022**



**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?

Citizens who experienced high lived poverty<sup>1</sup> are more likely than better-off respondents to say that violence against women is a common occurrence (62% vs. 44%), as are youth (60% of those aged 18-25 years) compared to those over age 35 (45%) (Figure 3). Perceptions of GBV as a common occurrence are also somewhat more widespread among rural residents (56%) and citizens with primary education or less (54%) than among their counterparts.

**Figure 3: GBV perceived as somewhat/very common | by demographic group | São Tomé and Príncipe | 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")*

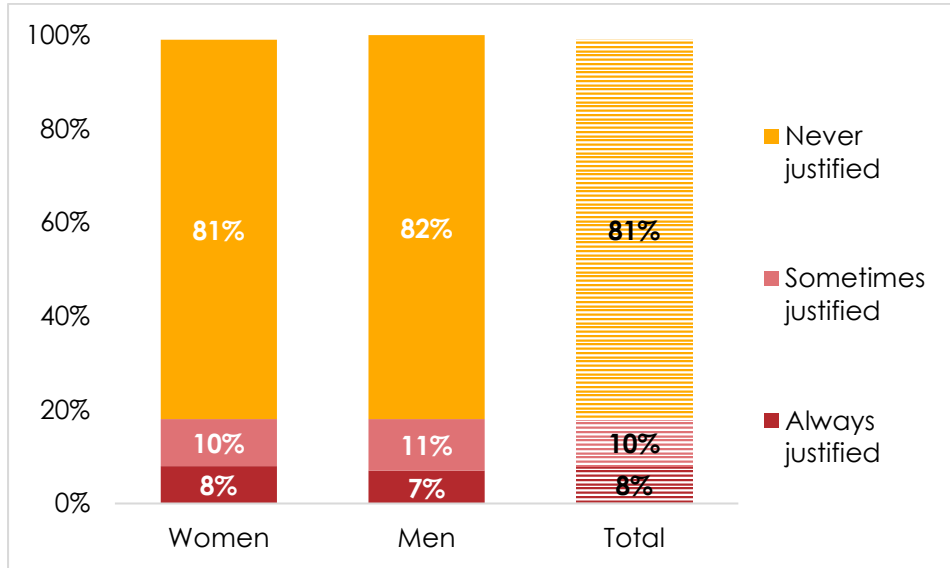
### Physical discipline of a spouse

An overwhelming majority (81%) of São Toméans say it is "never justified" for a man to use physical force to discipline his wife, while 18% consider it "sometimes" or "always" justified (Figure 4).

Women and men hold almost identical views on the use of physical force, as do urban and rural residents. Rejection of this type of violence is somewhat less strong among less educated (76%) and older (73%-76%) citizens (Figure 5).

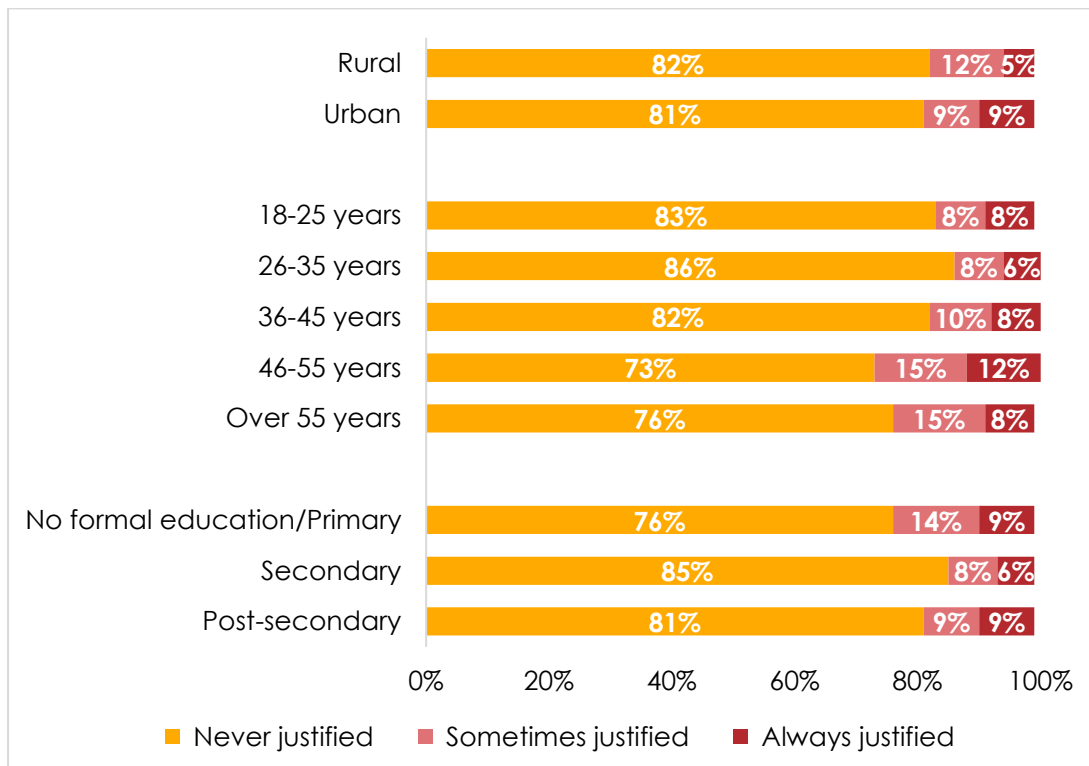
<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on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

**Figure 4: Is it justified for men to physically discipline their wives? | São Tomé and Príncipe | 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 | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022**



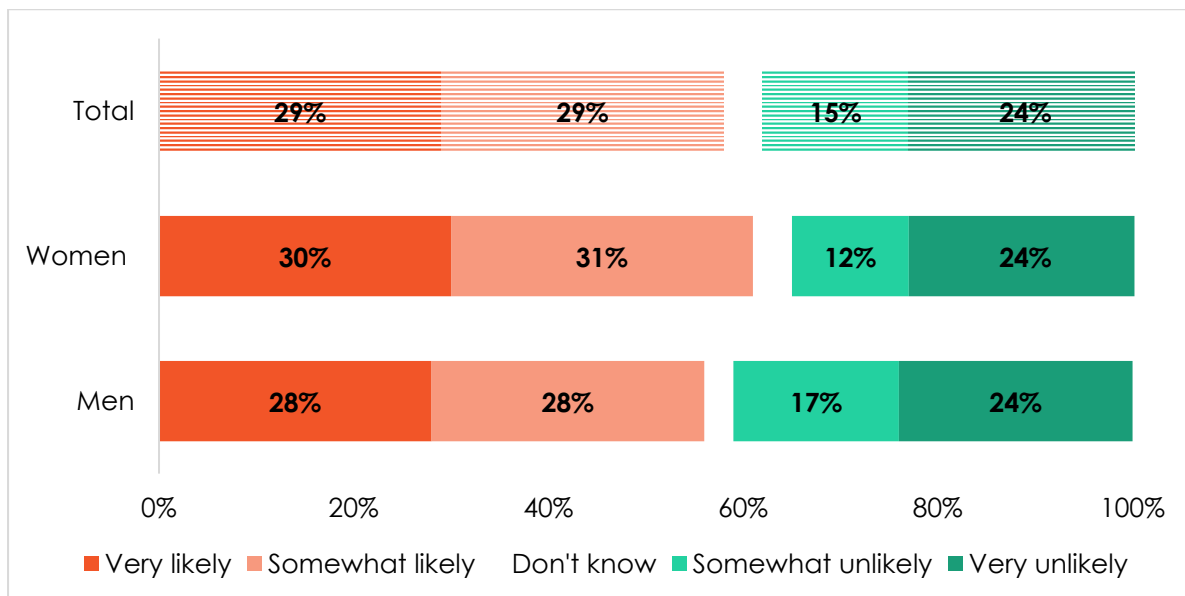
**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For a man to use physical discipline on his wife if she has done something he doesn't like or thinks is wrong?

## 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, and 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, almost six in 10 São Toméans (58%) say this is “somewhat likely” or “very likely” (Figure 6). Only 39% consider such negative responses “somewhat” or “very” unlikely. Women are more likely than men to think such a backlash is likely (61% vs. 56%). 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 | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022

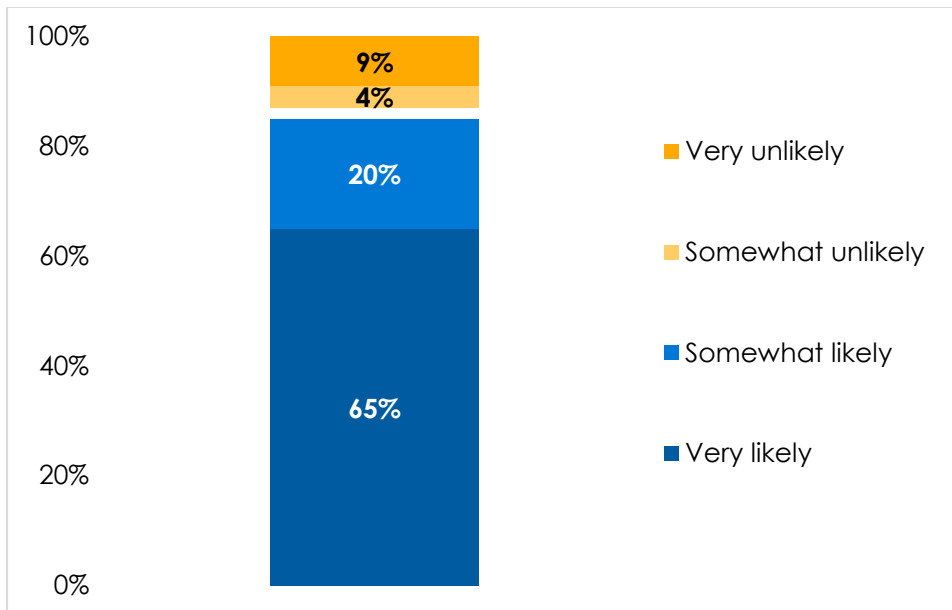


**Respondents were asked:** *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: She will be criticised, harassed,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

But São Toméans overwhelmingly believe that the police will respond appropriately to reported cases of GBV: 85% see it as likely that the police will take such reports seriously, including 65% who say it is “very likely” (Figure 7).

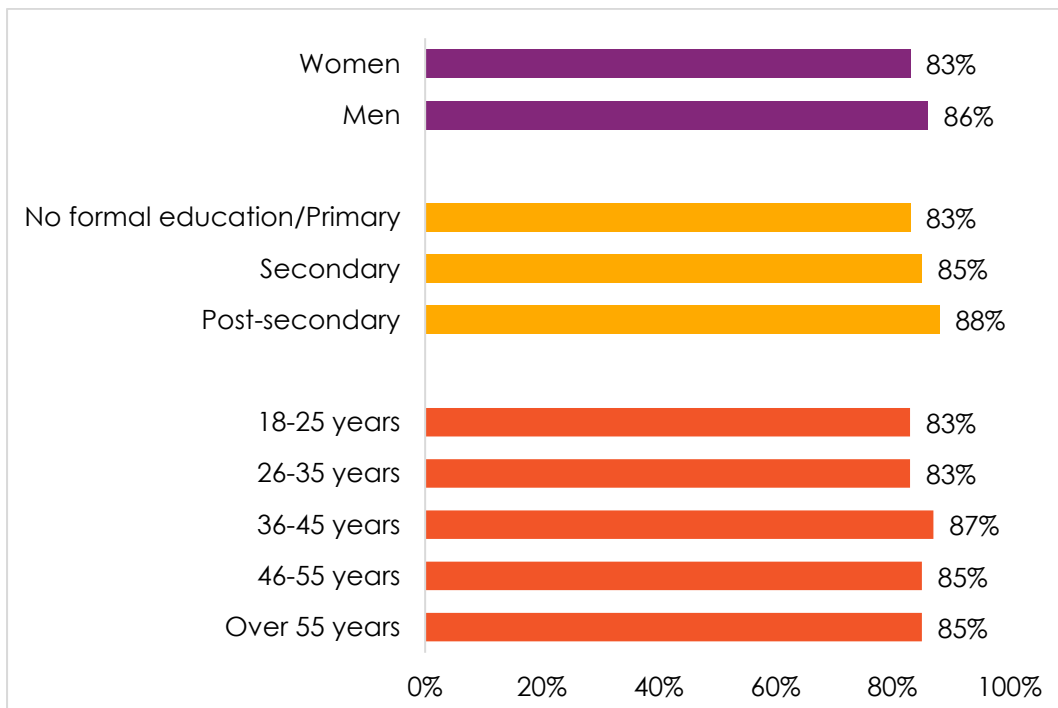
High levels of confidence in the police response are observed across key demographic groups, including highly educated citizens (88%) and women (83%) (Figure 8).

**Figure 7: Will the police take GBV cases seriously?** | São Tomé and Príncipe | 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 | São Tomé and Príncipe | 2022



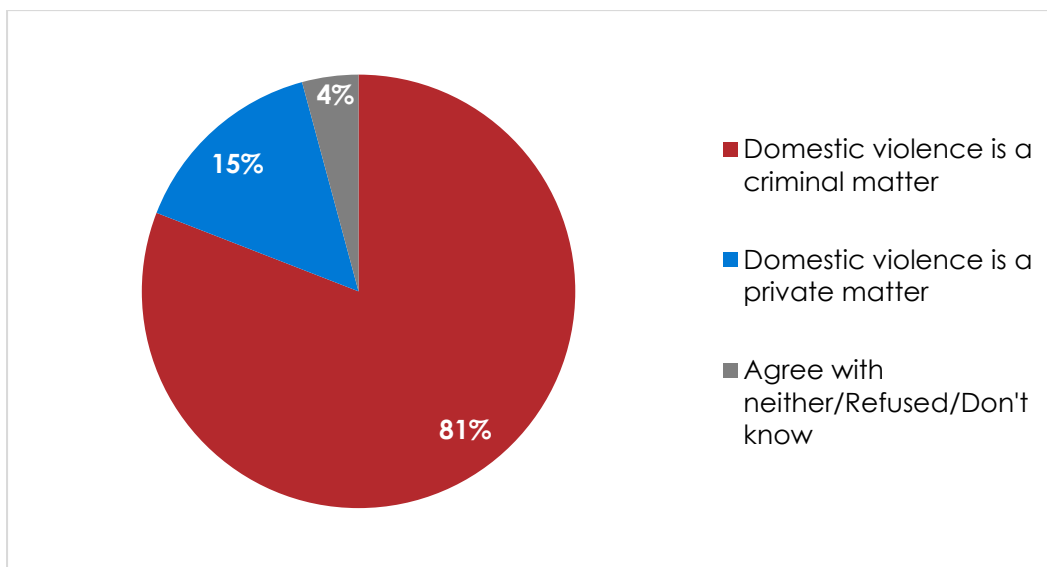
**Respondents were asked:** *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: Her case will be taken seriously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

Eight in 10 citizens (81%) say domestic violence is a criminal matter that requires the involvement of law enforcement agencies. Only 15% see domestic violence as a private matter that should be resolved within the family (Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter?** | São Tomé and Príncipe | 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.

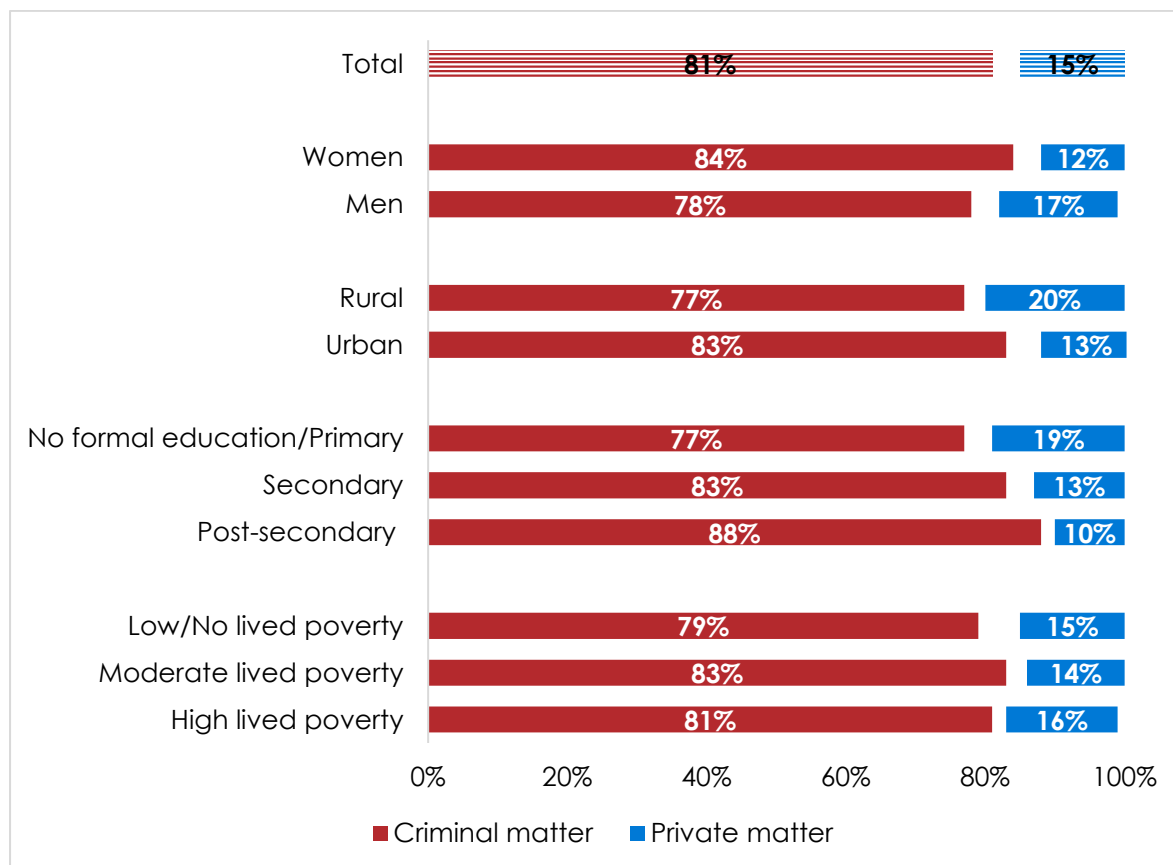
Statement 2: Domestic violence is a criminal matter whose full resolution requires the involvement of law enforcement agencies.

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

More women (84%) than men (78%) see GBV as a criminal matter (Figure 10). Citizens with higher education (88% of those with post-secondary qualifications) and urbanites (83%) are more likely to share this view than less educated and rural respondents.



**Figure 10: Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter? | by demographic group | São Tomé and Príncipe | 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 point to an urgent need to address gender-based violence as a critical women's-rights issue in São Tomé and Príncipe. While most citizens reject the use of physical force against women, a majority of respondents say that GBV is common in their community. And while most consider GBV a criminal matter and trust the police to take such cases seriously, a majority also think that survivors are likely to face community backlash if they report such crimes to the authorities.

These findings underscore the importance of continued government and societal action, such as public awareness campaigns, improved support services, and stringent law enforcement measures, if rights activists hope to address the issue comprehensively.

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