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Gender-based violence tops women's-rights issues in Liberia; citizens say it is a criminal matter

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 695 | Georgina Candy Coker and Maame Akua Amoah Twum

Summary

Liberian President George Weah declared rape a national emergency in 2020, after signing a Domestic Violence Act the previous year (Al Jazeera, 2020; FrontPage Africa, 2019). Despite these steps, rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls persist, perpetuated by traditional social norms as well as social dislocations and a lack of accountability as a legacy of the country's 14-year civil war (Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, 2021; Wilson, 2021).

Liberian women suffer various forms of gender-based violence (GBV), including sexual and domestic violence, early and forced marriage, wife inheritance, and female genital mutilation (Ministry of Gender and Development, 2009).

Liberia's 2020 Demographic and Health Survey found that 60% of women aged 15-49 had experienced physical violence, including 33% who had experienced such violence in the 12 months before the survey. The survey also highlights the underreporting of rape and other forms of GBV, which are often seen as family matters. Only 42% of women aged 15-49 who had experienced physical or sexual violence had sought help (Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, 2021).

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.

In Liberia, citizens rank gender-based violence as the most important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address. Half say GBV is a common occurrence in their communities, and a majority see GBV cases as a criminal rather than a family matter.

More than half say it is never justified for a man to use physical force to discipline his wife, and most trust the police to take cases of GBV seriously. But a majority of Liberians also believe that victims who report GBV cases to the authorities are likely to be criticised, harassed, or shamed by others in the community.

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

The Afrobarometer team in Liberia, led by the Center for Democratic Governance, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult

Liberians between 15 August and 7 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 Liberia in 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, and 2020.

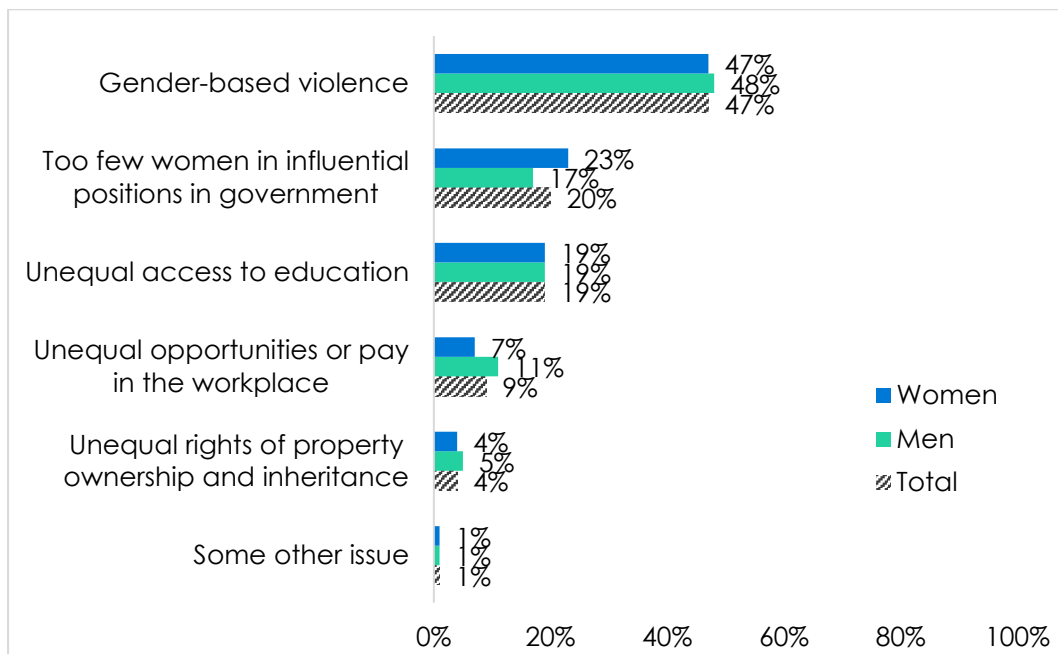
Key findings

- Liberians rank gender-based violence (GBV) as the most important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address.
- Citizens are evenly divided on how often GBV occurs in their community: Half (50%) say violence against women and girls is "somewhat" or "very" common, while just as many disagree.
- A majority (56%) of Liberians say it is "never" justified for a man to use physical force to discipline his wife. But more than four in 10 (44%) think it is "sometimes" or "always" justified.
- Almost two-thirds (63%) of Liberians 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, including 30% who say this is "very likely."
 - But a large majority (89%) believe that the police are likely to take cases of GBV seriously.
- About two-thirds (65%) of Liberians 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 Liberia?

In Liberia, gender-based violence ranks as the most important problem related to women's rights that citizens think the government and society must address (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Most important women's-rights issue | by gender | Liberia | 2022



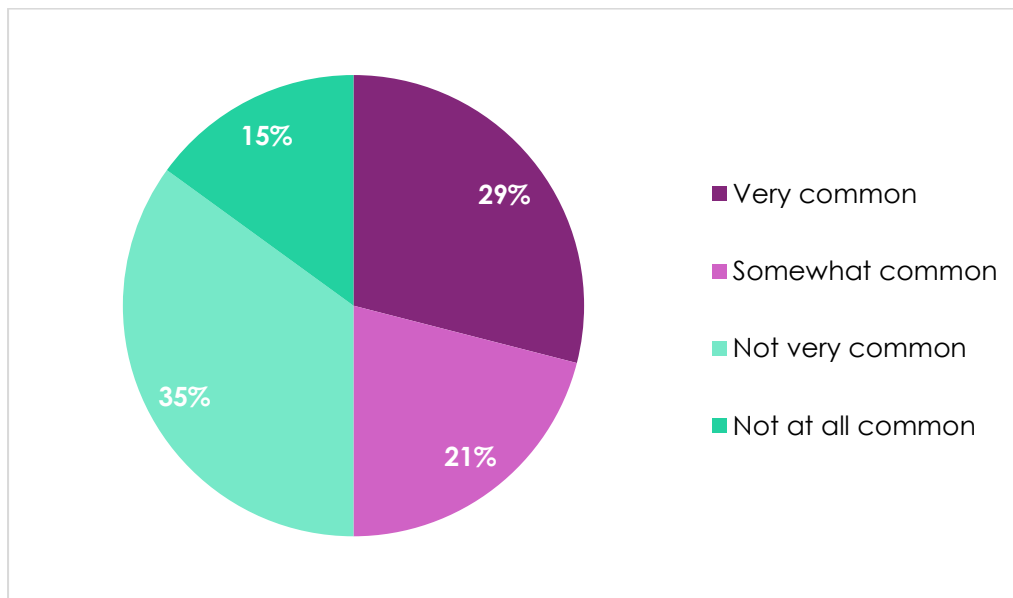
Respondents were asked: In your opinion, which of the following issues related to women's rights and equality do you think is the most important for our government and society to address?

Almost half (47%) of respondents cite GBV as their top concern – more than twice as many as prioritise a lack of women in influential positions in government (20%) and unequal access to education (19%). Unequal opportunities or pay in the workplace (9%) and unequal rights of property ownership and inheritance (4%) rank lower among citizens' concerns. Women and men share similar views on the importance of addressing GBV.

How common is GBV?

Liberians are evenly divided on how often gender-based violence occurs in their community. Half (50%) say violence against women and girls is “somewhat common” (21%) or “very common” (29%), while just as many think it is “not very common” (35%) or “not at all common” (15%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Frequency of GBV | Liberia | 2022

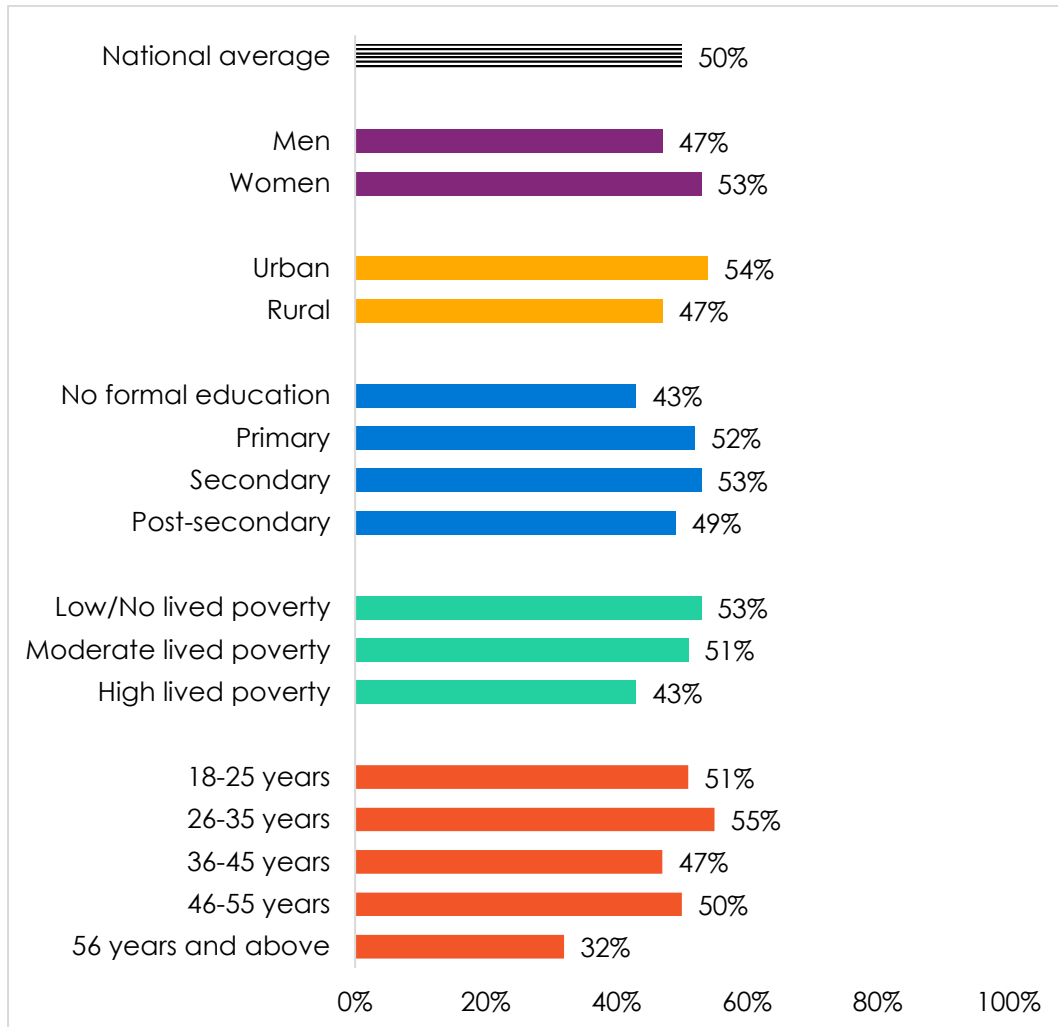


Respondents were asked: *In this area, how common do you think it is for men to use violence against women and girls in the home or the community?*

More women (53%) than men (47%) say that GBV is a common occurrence, a perception that is also more widespread in cities than in rural areas (54% vs. 47%) (Figure 3). The poorest respondents¹ (43%) and those with no formal schooling (43%) are less likely to see violence against women as common than their better-off (51%-53%) and more educated (49%-53%) counterparts. Older respondents are less likely to report frequent GBV (32% among those over age 55) than young cohorts.

¹ 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 3: GBV perceived as somewhat/very common | by demographic group
 | Liberia | 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”)*

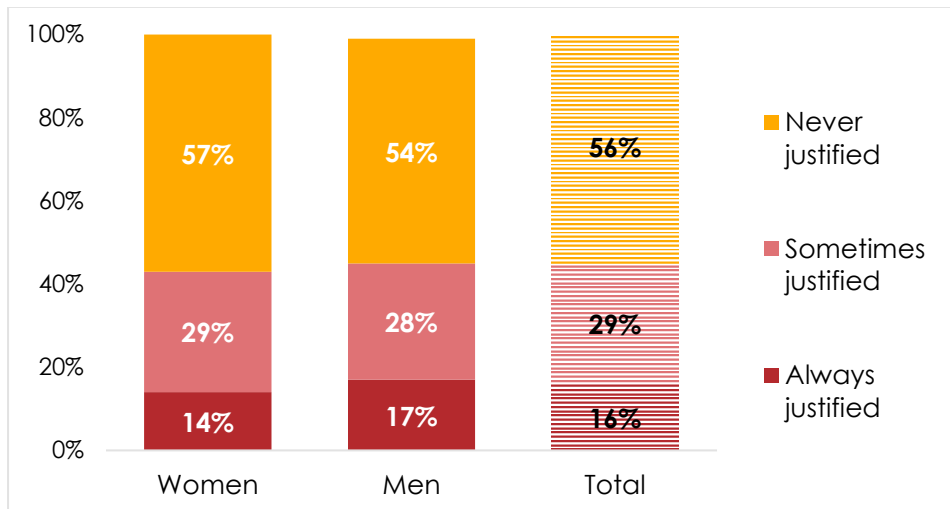
Physical discipline of a spouse

A majority (56%) of Liberians say it is “never justified” for a man to use physical force to discipline his wife, but almost half (44%) consider it “sometimes” or “always” justified.² Men and women see almost eye to eye on this issue (Figure 4).

Educated citizens are more likely to reject the use of physical force (61% of those with secondary or post-secondary education, vs. 48%-54% of those with primary schooling or less) (Figure 5). This perception is also more widespread in cities (60%) than in rural areas (52%). The oldest (49%) and youngest (51%) respondents are less likely to oppose the use of physical force by husbands.

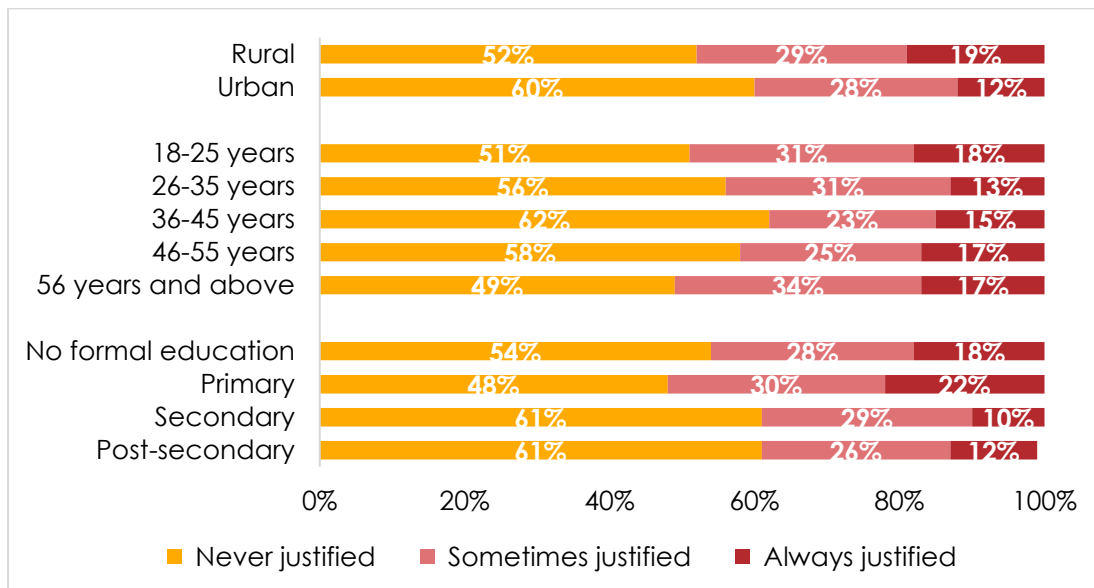
² Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. 29% “sometimes justified” and 16% “always justified” sum to 44%).

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

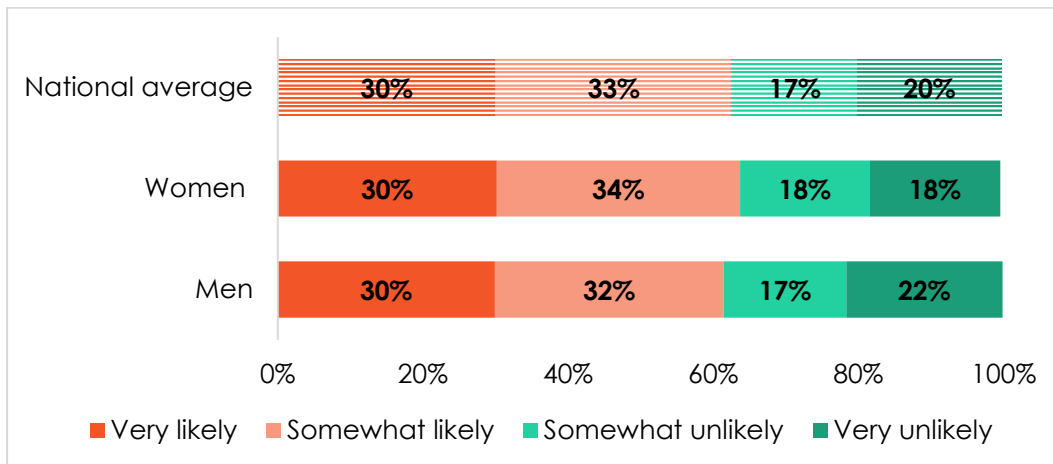
Response to GBV

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).

Almost two-thirds (63%) of Liberians 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 30% who say this is “very likely” (Figure 6). Only 37% say such negative responses are “somewhat” or “very” unlikely. Men and women share almost identical perceptions on this issue, which may serve as a significant deterrent to reporting GBV.

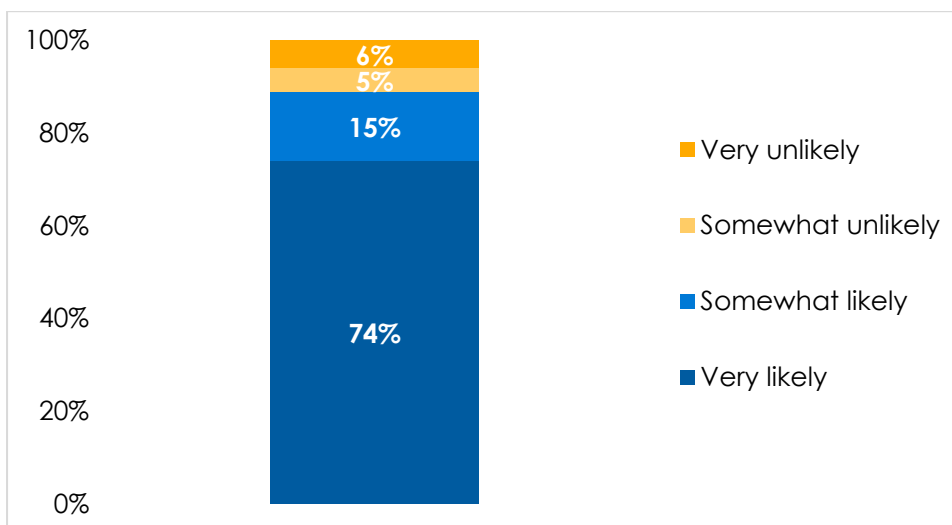
Figure 6: Will a woman be criticised, harassed, or shamed for reporting GBV?
 | by gender | Liberia | 2022



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?*

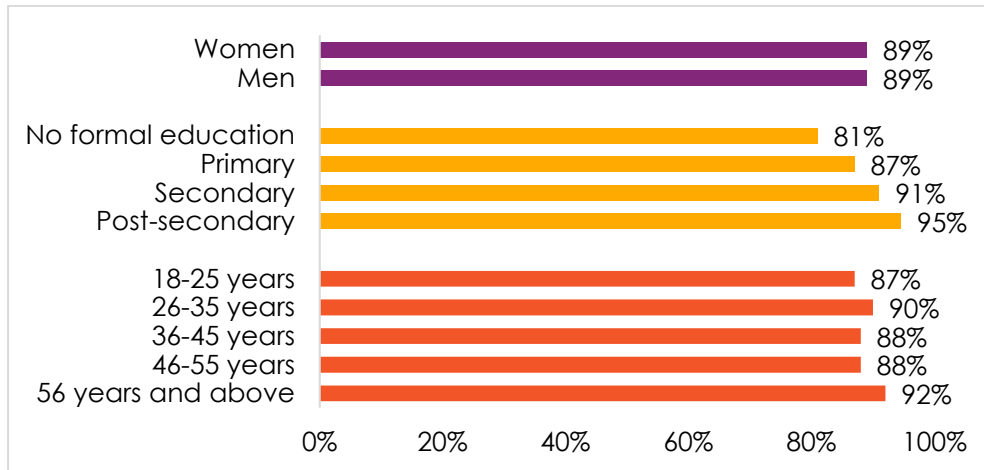
In contrast to their expectations of stigmatisation by community members, nine out of 10 respondents (89%) believe that the police will take cases of GBV seriously, including 74% who see this as “very likely” (Figure 7). Confidence in the police response is high across key demographic groups, and gathers strength as respondents’ education levels rise (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Will the police take GBV cases seriously? | Liberia | 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 | Liberia | 2022



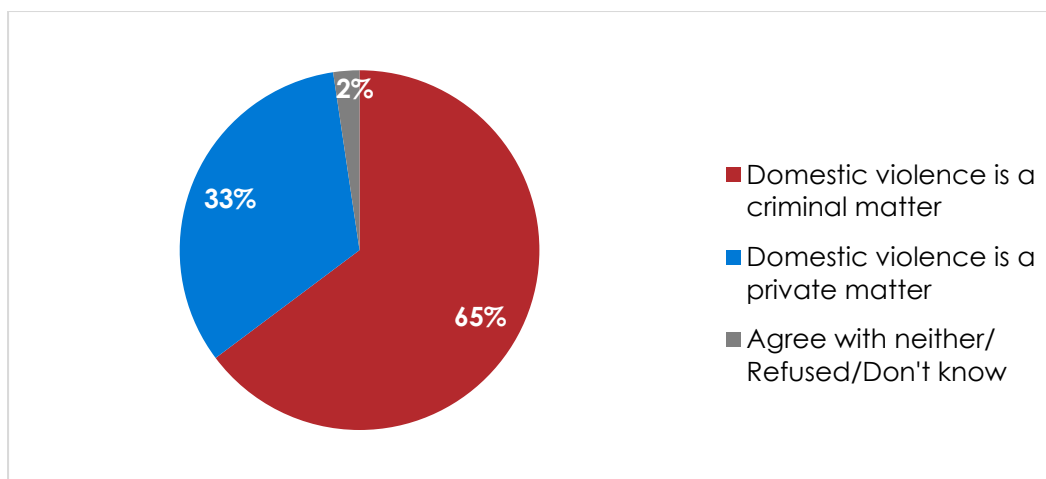
Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: Her case will be taken seriously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

Two-thirds (65%) of respondents say domestic violence is a criminal matter that requires the involvement of law enforcement agencies, while one-third (33%) believe that GBV is a private matter to be resolved within the family (Figure 9).

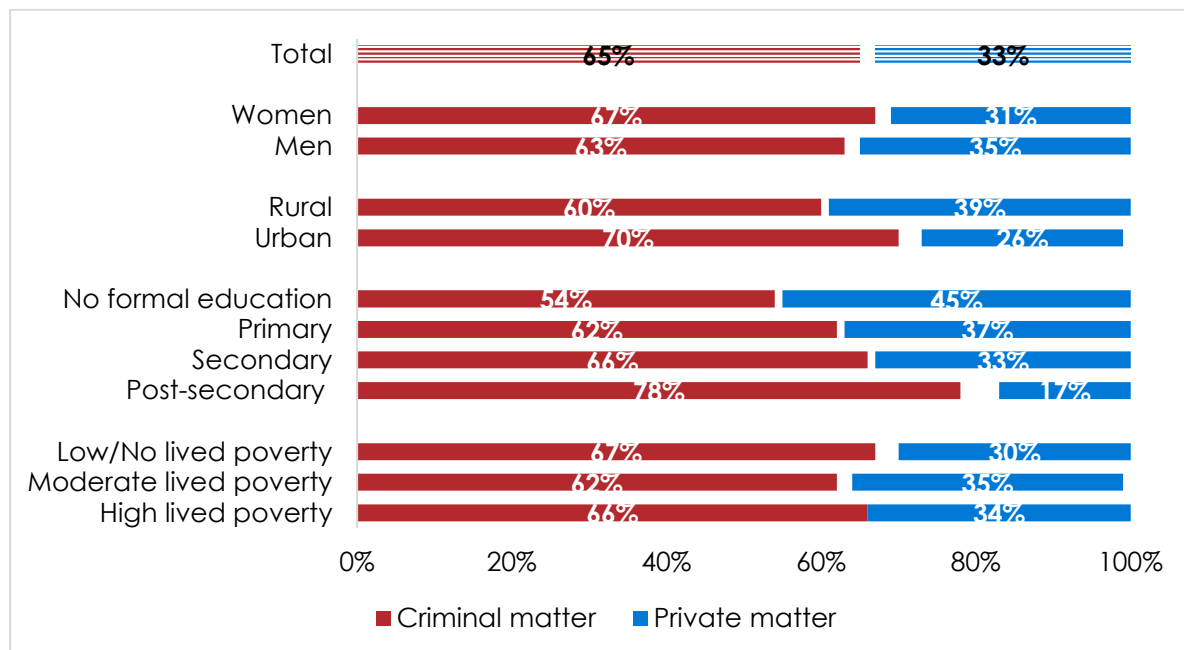
Figure 9: Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter? | Liberia | 2022



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 (67%) and urban residents (70%) are more likely than men (63%) and rural residents (60%) to see GBV as a criminal matter (Figure 10). Perceptions of domestic violence as a criminal matter increase with respondents' educational level, ranging from 54% among those with no formal schooling to 78% among those with post-secondary qualifications.

Figure 10: Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter? | by demographic group | Liberia | 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 show that in Liberia, gender-based violence (GBV) is regarded as the most important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address. Half of adults say GBV is a common occurrence in their communities.

A majority of citizens reject the use of physical force by men to discipline their wives and consider GBV to be a criminal matter. While there is confidence in the police to address reported GBV cases, Liberians believe victims of domestic violence who report such incidents will likely be criticised or shamed.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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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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