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Africans see room to improve well-being of vulnerable children

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 731 | Anyway Chingwete and Richard Houessou

Summary

While Africa is home to the world's youngest population, many of its 650 million children face daunting barriers to their well-being and future prospects. Poverty, limited access to education and health care, child labour, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, armed conflict, and displacement rank among the continent's threats to healthy child development, as do various forms of psychological and physical violence, sexual abuse and exploitation, and neglect (United Nations, 2022; African Partnership to End Violence Against Children, 2021; UNICEF, 2005; Hope, 2005).

Most African countries have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and many have recorded advances in the protection of children's rights and well-being in areas ranging from child survival and school enrolment to efforts to end child marriage and discrimination against girls (African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 2021).

Yet progress remains uneven, falling well short of the aspirations of the United Nations (2023) Sustainable Development Goals and Africa's Agenda for Children 2040 (African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 2016; Fambasayi, 2021; African Child Policy Forum, 2018). Steps forward are often matched by newly emerging problems, such as armed conflicts that produce humanitarian crises in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Mozambique. In Sudan, for example, an estimated 19 million children are out of school and more than 7 million people, including an estimated 3.3 million children, have been displaced by the country's brutal conflict (UNICEF, 2023; New Arab, 2023).

One long-simmering debate concerns the use of physical force to discipline children, a practice that mounting evidence shows is detrimental to children's learning, mental health, and development (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). The African Report on Child Wellbeing 2020 notes that 60% of interviewed children said they had experienced at least one form of physical punishment during the previous year, often by close family members and teachers (African Child Policy Forum, 2020).

This Pan-Africa Profile reports on a special module included in the Round (2021/2023) Afrobarometer questionnaire to explore Africans' experiences and perceptions of corporal punishment, child abuse and neglect, the availability of support services for vulnerable children, and their government's performance on child welfare.

Survey findings show that the use of physical force to discipline children still has solid support among African adults, even if opposition is slowly growing.

Most Africans say child abuse and neglect are uncommon, and more than half – but far from all – report that services are available in their community to support children who are abused or neglected, children with disability, and children and adults with mental or emotional

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problems. But fewer than half think their government is doing a good job of protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children. These assessments vary widely by country and respondents' economic status, suggesting opportunities for interventions to strengthen child welfare.

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. (See Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates.)

Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice. Samples sizes of 1,200-2,400 yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

This 39-country analysis is based on 54,436 interviews. The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples. When reporting multi-country averages, all countries are weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size).

Key findings

Use of physical force to discipline children:

- On average across 39 countries, six in 10 Africans (61%) say parents are justified in using physical force to discipline their children. Approval of corporal punishment has declined modestly over the past five years.
    - While support for physical discipline approaches nine out of 10 citizens in Benin (88%), Cameroon (87%), Burkina Faso (86%), and Niger (85%), 16 countries record significant decreases since 2016/2018, including sharp drops in Tanzania (-31 points), Kenya (-24 points), Botswana (-22 points), and Liberia (-22 points).
    - In practice, 43% of Africans say adults in their community "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently" use physical force to discipline children.

Child abuse, mistreatment, and neglect:

- About one-third (35%) of citizens say child abuse, mistreatment, and neglect are "somewhat frequent" or "very frequent" in their community, while 64% describe these as infrequent occurrences. Perceptions of widespread abuse range from 16% in Tanzania to 63% in Liberia.

- Close to half (48%) of Africans say out-of-school children are a common problem in their community, ranging from 22% in Mauritius to 83% in Liberia.

Lived poverty:

- More than four in 10 citizens (42%) say their household went without enough food to eat "several times," "many times," or "always" during the previous year.

Support services for vulnerable children:

- Majorities say services are available in their community to support children who are abused or neglected (58%), children with disability (56%), and children and adults with mental or emotional problems (52%).

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- These assessments vary widely by country, recording the most positive perceptions in Senegal, Mauritius, Togo, and Mauritania and the least positive in Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Lesotho, Nigeria, and Liberia.

Government performance on promoting child welfare:

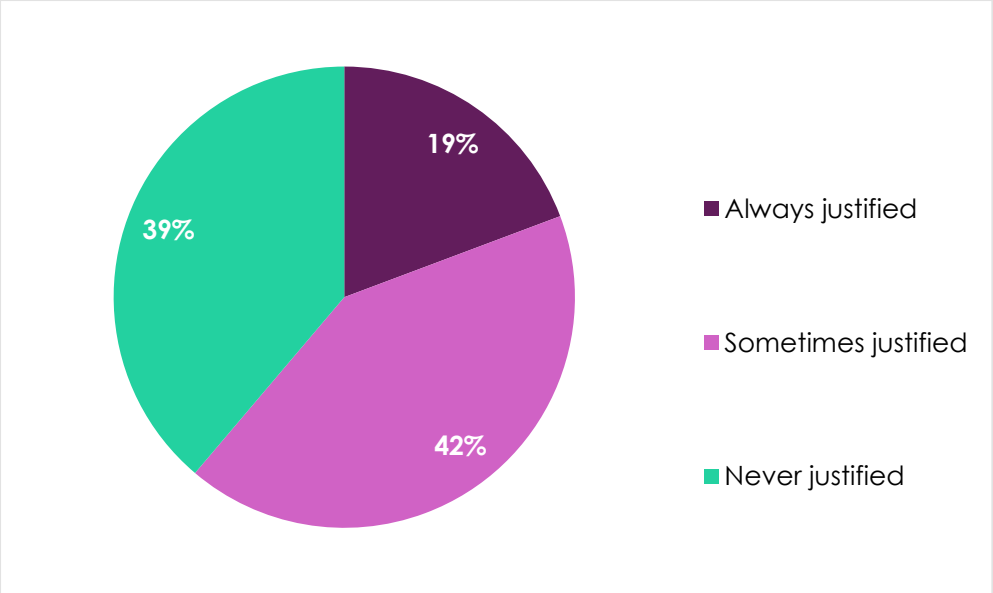
- On average, only 44% of Africans approve of their government's performance on protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children. Economically disadvantaged citizens are least likely to see their government's efforts as adequate.

Use of physical force to discipline children

Discipline is an integral part of raising children. Do Africans think that physical force should be used to discipline children?

Across 39 countries surveyed between late 2021 and mid-2023, six in 10 Africans (61%) say that parents' use of physical force to discipline their children is "sometimes justified" or "always justified" (Figure 1). About four in 10 (39%) reject corporal punishment for children as "never justified."

Figure 1: Use of physical force to discipline children: Justified or not? | 39 countries | 2021/2023



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 parents to use physical force to discipline their children?*

Corporal punishment receives majority support in 30 of the 39 countries, approaching nine out of 10 citizens in Benin (88%), Cameroon (87%), Burkina Faso (86%), and Niger (85%) (Figure 2). In contrast, fewer than three in 10 respondents in Tanzania (28%), Lesotho (28%), and Malawi (26%) express support for the use of physical force to discipline children. Twelve of the 18 countries expressing above-average levels of support for physical disciplining of children are in West or Central Africa.

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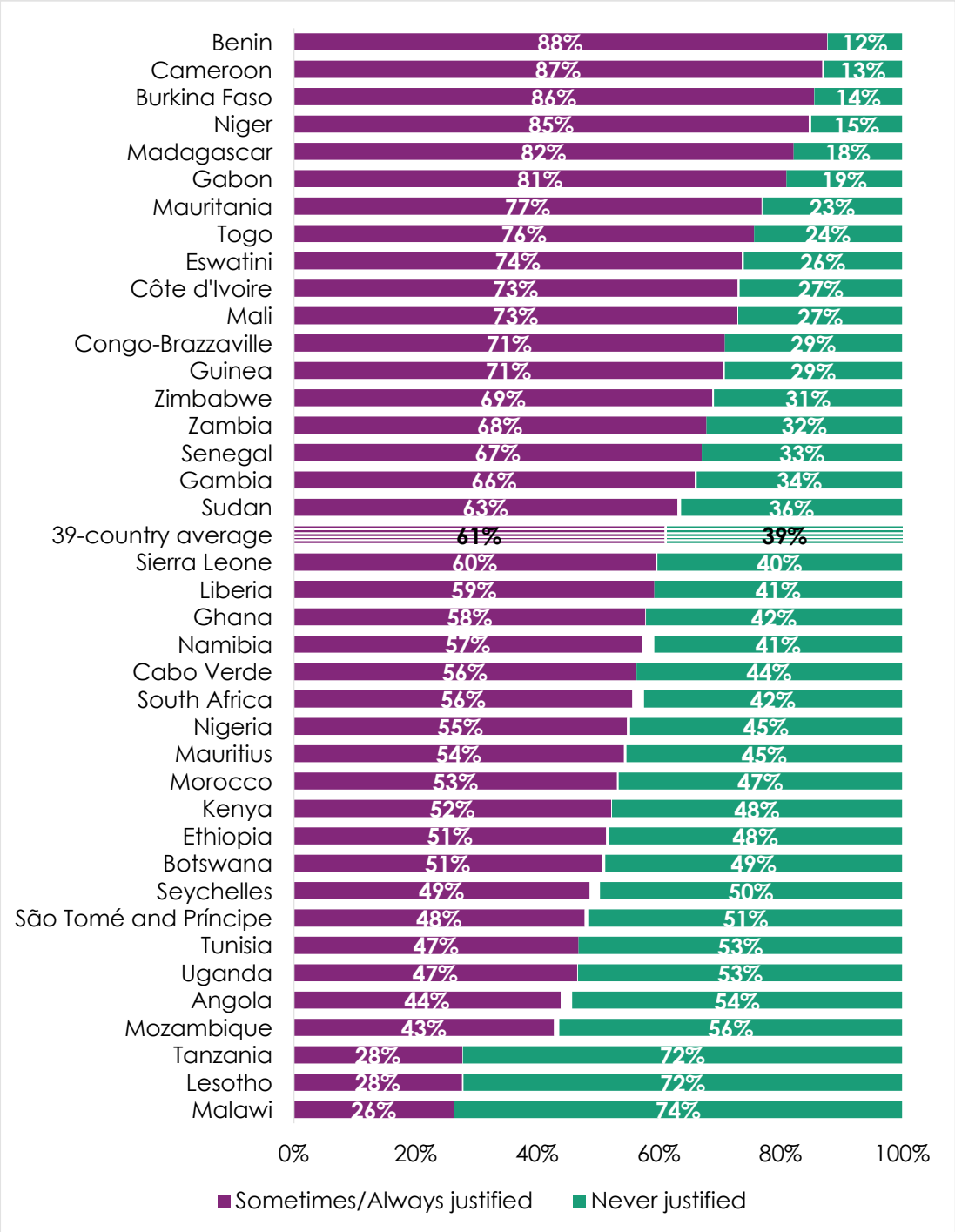
Figure 2: Use of physical force to discipline children: Justified or not? | 39 countries | 2021/2023



***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 parents to use physical force to discipline their children?*

Across 33 countries for which we have comparable data from both Round 7 (2016/2018) and Round 9 (2021/2023), support for the use of physical force to discipline children ("sometimes" or "always") declined by 4 percentage points, from 66% to 62%. This trend, though modest,

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suggests that international condemnation of corporal punishment and an increasing emphasis on children's rights, as endorsed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, may be having an effect.

Sixteen countries show significant declines (of 3 percentage points or more) in support for corporal punishment during the period, including sharp drops in Tanzania (-31 points), Kenya (-24 points), Botswana (-22 points), and Liberia (-22 points) (Figure 3). Increases are recorded in 11 countries, topped by Cabo Verde and Guinea (both +14 percentage points).

Figure 3: Change in support for corporal punishment | 33 countries[1] | 2016-2023

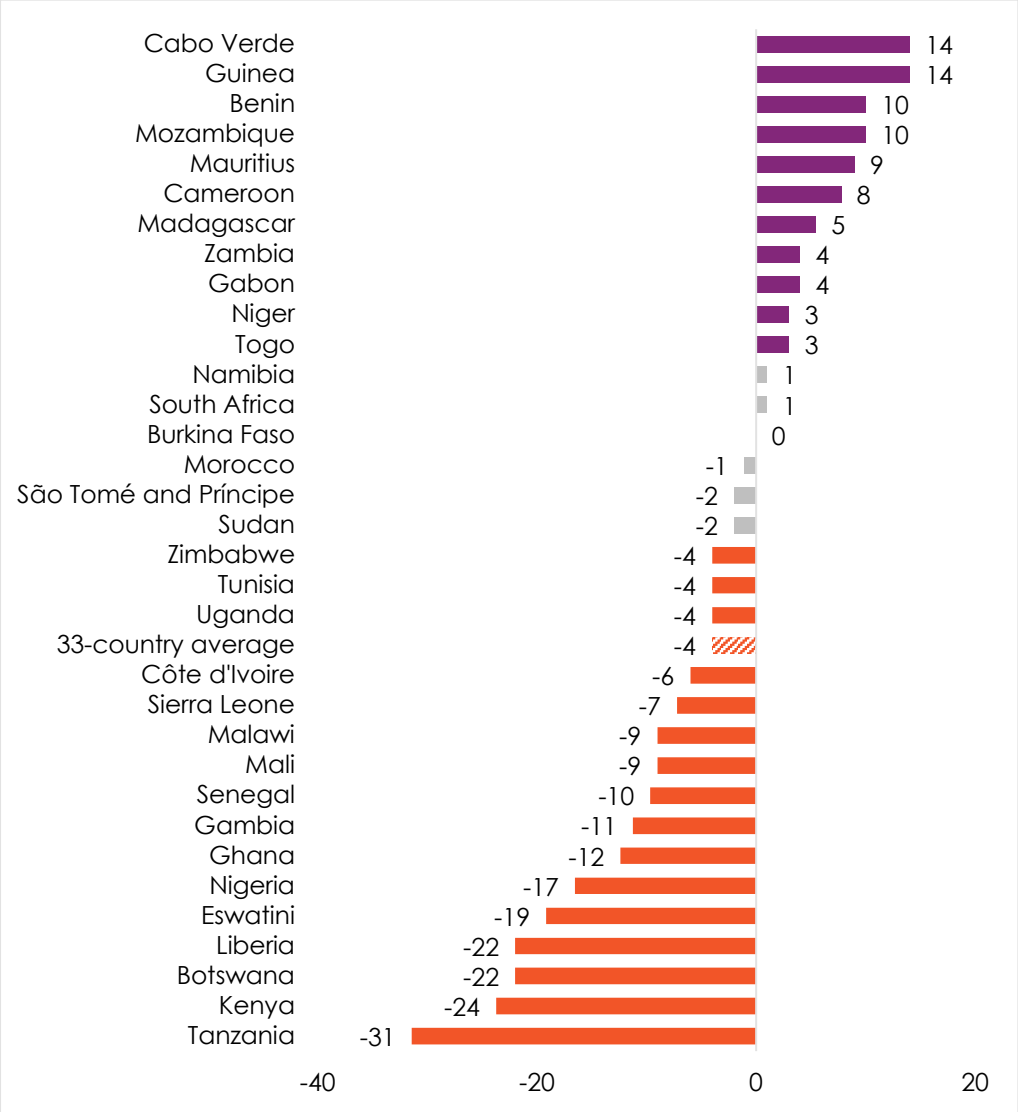

Figure shows change, in percentage points, between survey rounds in 2016/2018 and 2021/2023 in the percentage of respondents who say it is "sometimes" or "always" justified for parents to use physical force to discipline their children.

[1] In addition to countries that were not surveyed in Round 7, Lesotho is excluded from this comparison. When this question was asked in Lesotho in 2017, only 19% said physical discipline is "never" justified, while 81% said it is "sometimes" or "always" justified. But the Sesotho translation of the question used milder terminology to refer to physical discipline in Round 7 than in Round 9, which likely explains at least a portion of the large difference in responses between the two surveys.

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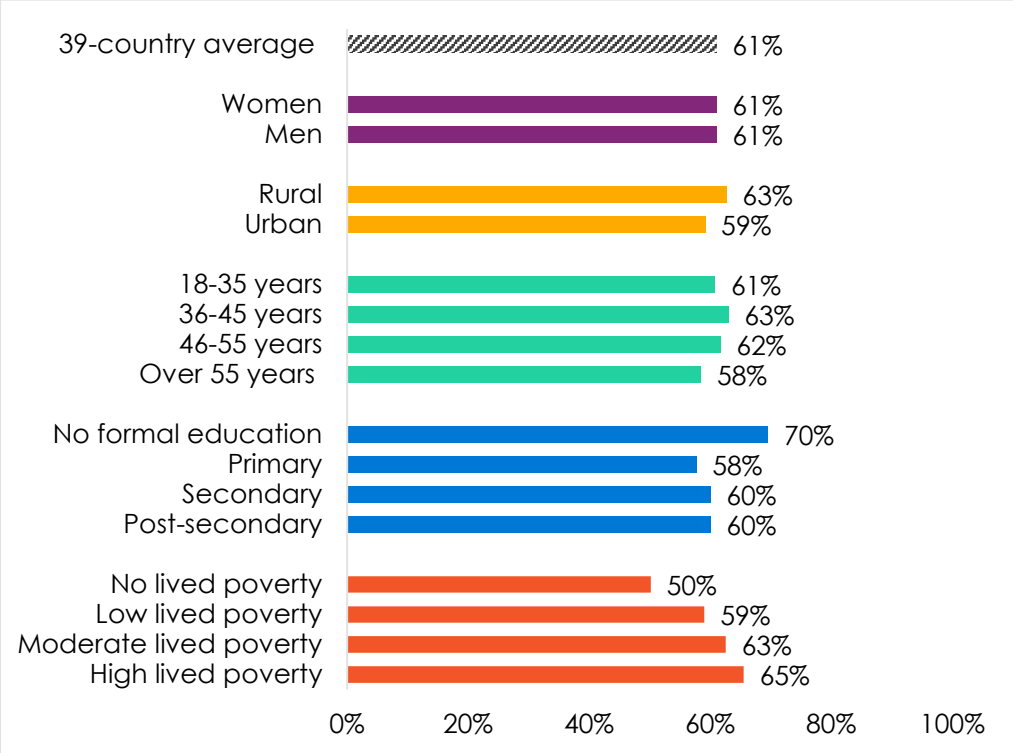
Acceptance of corporal punishment is the majority view across key demographic groups but varies based on social and economic status (Figure 4). While women and men see eye to eye on this issue, support for physical discipline increases along with citizens' experience of lived poverty,[2] ranging from 50% among the best-off to 65% among the poorest. Similarly, respondents with no formal schooling (70%) are considerably more likely to endorse the use of physical force than their counterparts with formal education (58%-60%). The practice is slightly more widely accepted in rural areas than in cities (63% vs. 59%).

Figure 4: Justified for parents to physically discipline children | by demographic group | 39 countries | 2021/2023



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 parents to use physical force to discipline their children? (% who say "sometimes justified" or "always justified")*

In practice, more than four in 10 Africans (43%) say adults in their community "somewhat frequently" (28%) or "very frequently" (15%) use physical force to discipline children, while a majority (56%) say this is "not very frequent" (34%) or "not at all frequent" (22%) (Figure 5).

In 11 surveyed countries, half or more of respondents report that the use of physical force to discipline children is common in their community, including almost two-thirds of Tunisians (65%), Liberians (64%), and Angolans (63%). At the other end of the spectrum, fewer than three in 10 citizens say children are often subjected to corporal punishment in Tanzania (18%), Madagascar (26%), and Seychelles (27%).

[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).

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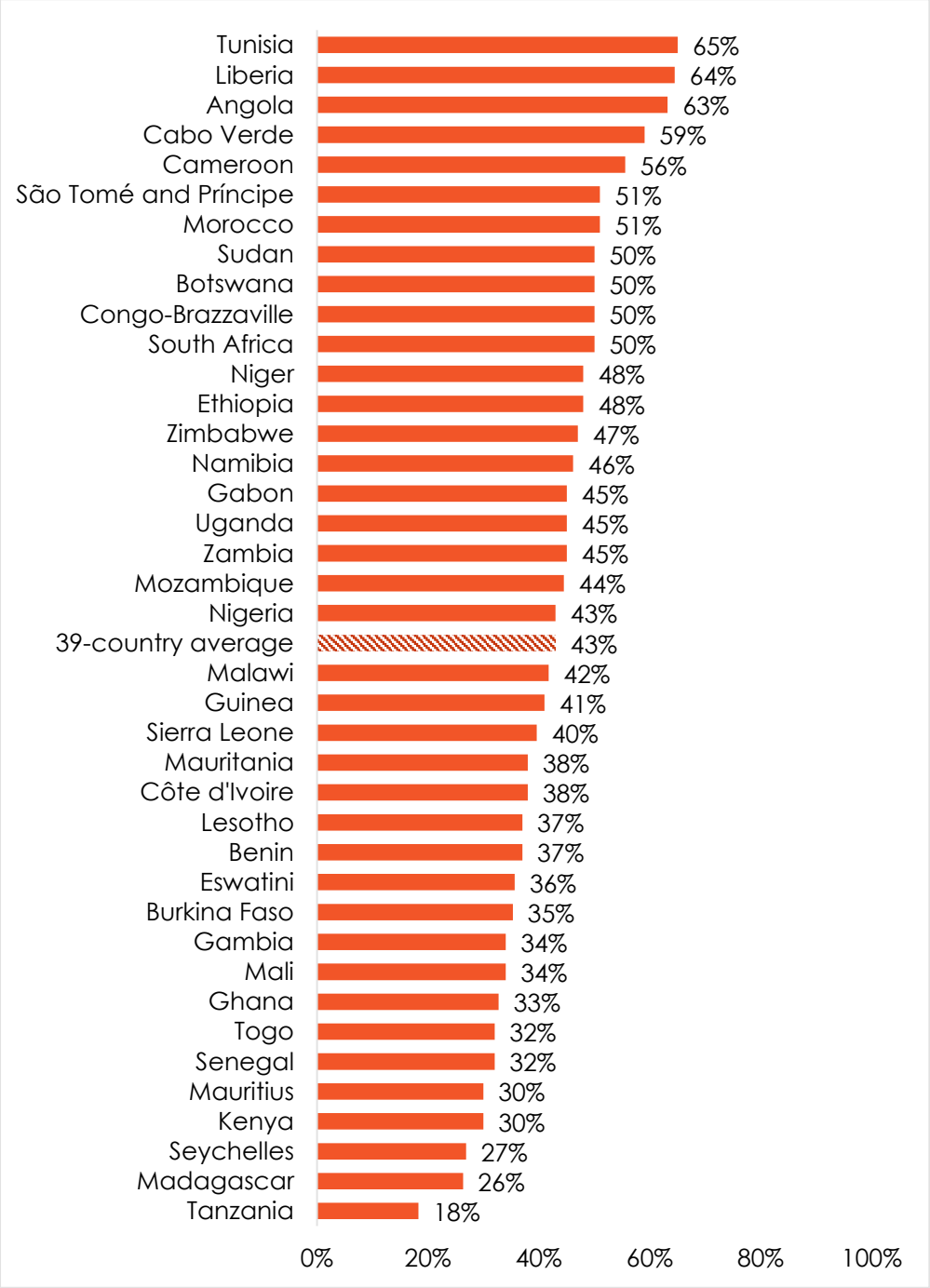
Perceptions that corporal punishment is a frequent occurrence are somewhat more common in cities than in rural areas (45% vs. 40%), and among more educated citizens (44%-45%) compared to those with no formal schooling (39%) (Figure 6). Youth (46%) are more inclined than their elders (37%-40%) to see corporal punishment as common, and a 10-percentage-point gap separates the poorest (45%) and the best-off citizens (35%).

Figure 5: Adults frequently use physical force to discipline children | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: *How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Adults use physical force to discipline children? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")*

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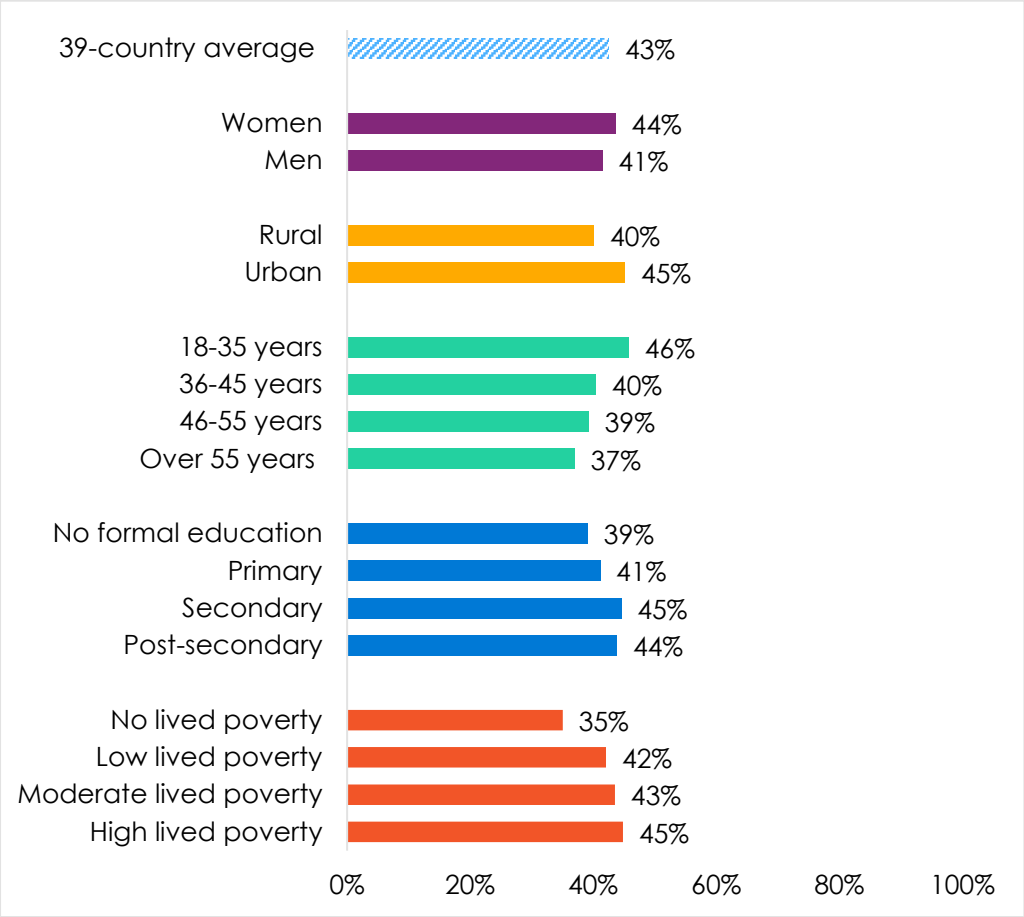
Figure 6: Adults frequently use physical force to discipline children
| by demographic group | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: *How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Adults use physical force to discipline children? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")*

Abuse, mistreatment, and neglect of children

Asked how often children are abused, mistreated, or neglected in their community, about one-third (35%) of adults say this is "somewhat frequent" or "very frequent" (Figure 7), while almost two-thirds (64%) describe it as "not very" or "not at all" frequent.

In three countries, majorities describe abuse, mistreatment, and neglect of children as common: Liberia (63%), Tunisia (57%), and Angola (54%). Fewer than two in 10 say the same in Tanzania (16%) and Ghana (18%).

Residents in cities (38%) are more likely than those in rural areas (31%) to report that abuse, mistreatment, and neglect of children are common in their communities, as are youth (37%) compared to the older generations (31%-33%) (Figure 8). The perception of child abuse, mistreatment, and neglect as a widespread problem increases with respondents' education level, ranging from 28% among those with no formal schooling to 36%-37% among those with at least secondary qualifications. We also see a 10-percentage-point gap between the poorest (38%) and the best-off (28%) citizens.

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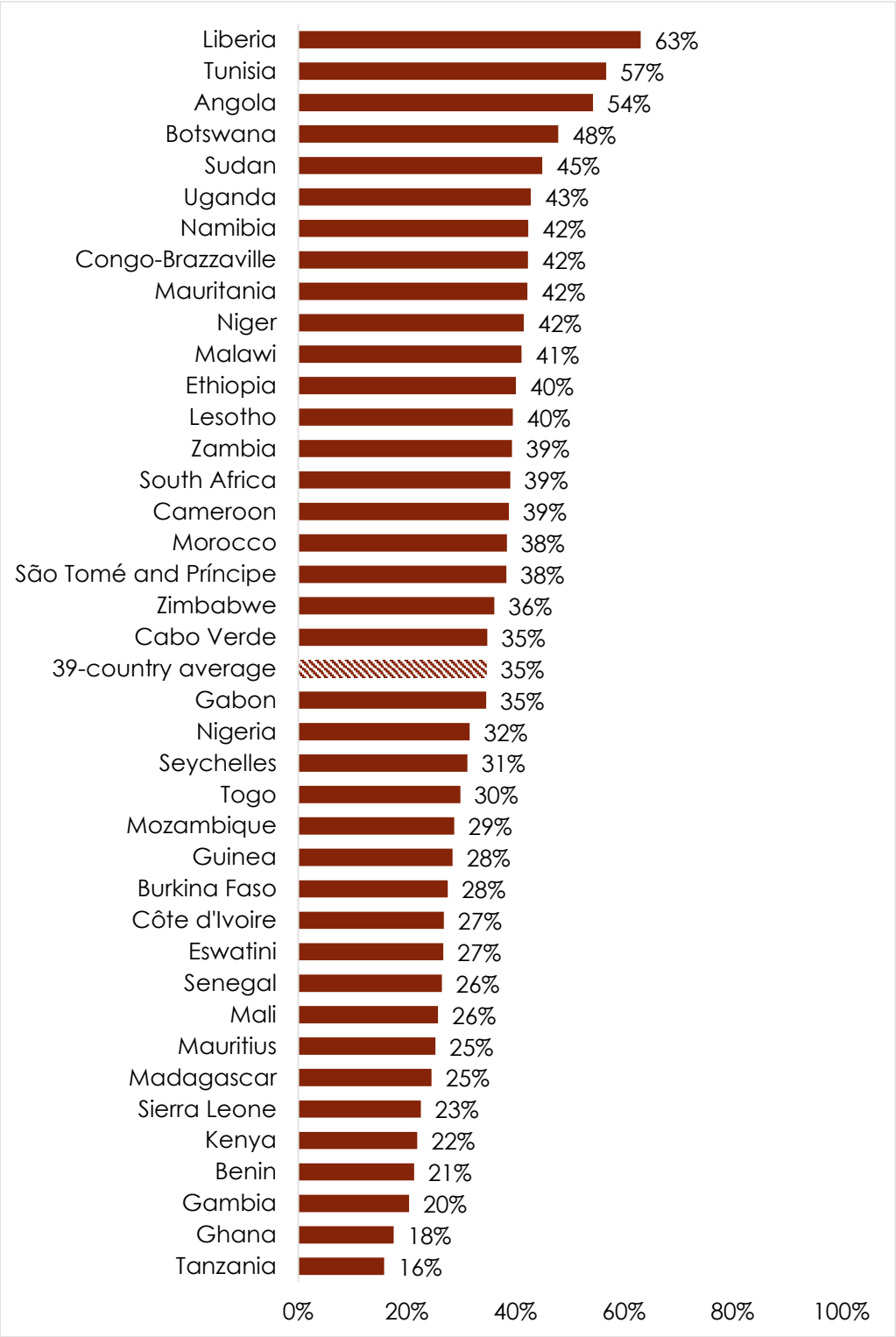
Figure 7: Children are somewhat/very frequently abused, mistreated, or neglected | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: *How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")*

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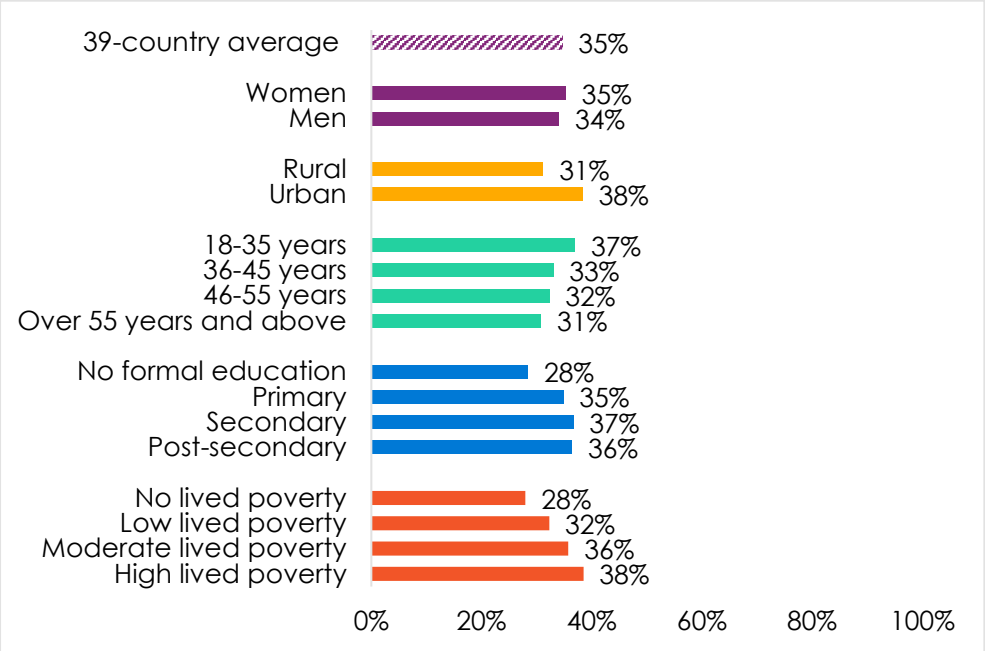
Figure 8: Children are somewhat/very frequently abused, mistreated, or neglected | by demographic group | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: *How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children are abused, mistreated, or neglected? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")*

Research shows that violence against children is deeply intertwined with violence against women (Fulu, McCook, & Falb, 2017). Gender-based violence (GBV) and violence against children often occur in the same homes and are often driven by the same factors (Evans, Davies, & DiLillo, 2008). Afrobarometer data suggest such a link in people's perceptions: On average, respondents who see GBV as common in their community are more than twice as likely to report that children are frequently abused, mistreated, or neglected (54%) than are respondents who see GBV as an infrequent occurrence (23%) (Table 1).

Table 1: Perceptions of the frequency of gender-based violence and abuse/mistreatment of children | 39 countries | 2021/2023

	% who perceive child abuse/ mistreatment/neglect as somewhat/very common	% who perceive child abuse/ mistreatment/neglect as not very/not at all common
Among respondents who perceive GBV as somewhat/very common	54%***	46%
Among respondents who perceive GBV as not very/not at all common	23%	77%***
*Pearson chi-square=3943.307; p=0.000 at ***<1% level*		

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 in the community?

How frequently do you think children are abused, mistreated, or neglected in your community or neighbourhood?

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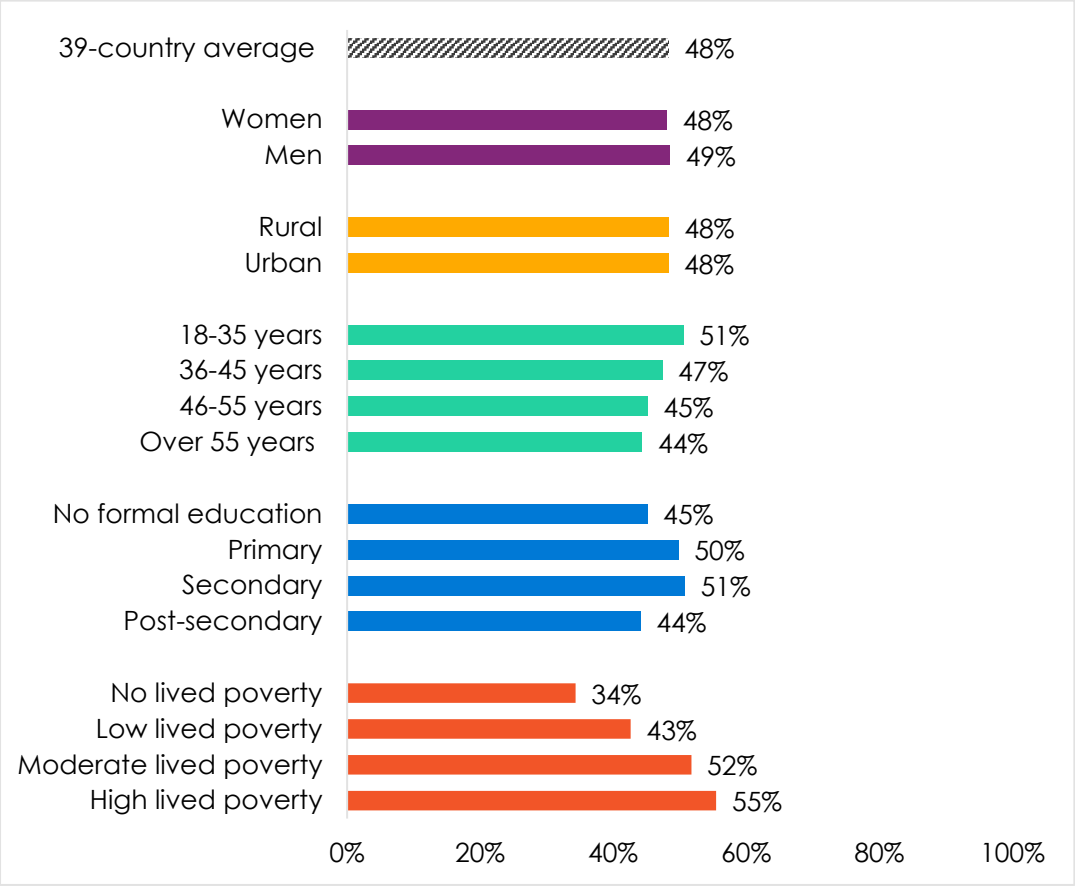
Out-of-school children

One form of neglect is allowing children to grow up without proper education. UNESCO (2022) reports that sub-Saharan Africa has more out-of-school children and youth – 98 million – than any other region in the world and is the only region experiencing an increase in the number of out-of-school children as attendance rates are growing more slowly than the school-age population.

Afrobarometer data show that almost half (48%) of Africans say that out-of-school children are "somewhat" or "very" common in their community, while the other half (50%) say this is an infrequent problem. The perception of out-of-school children as a widespread problem is more common among youth (51%) than among their elders (44%-47%) and is particularly common among citizens experiencing high levels of lived poverty (55%, vs. 34% of well-off respondents) (Figure 9).

Large majorities see out-of-school children as a frequent occurrence in Liberia (83%) and Angola (71%). Concerns that school-age children are not in school are lowest in Mauritius (22%) and Tanzania (26%) (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Children are frequently out of school | by demographic group | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: *How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children who should be in school are not in school? (% who say "somewhat frequently" or "very frequently")*

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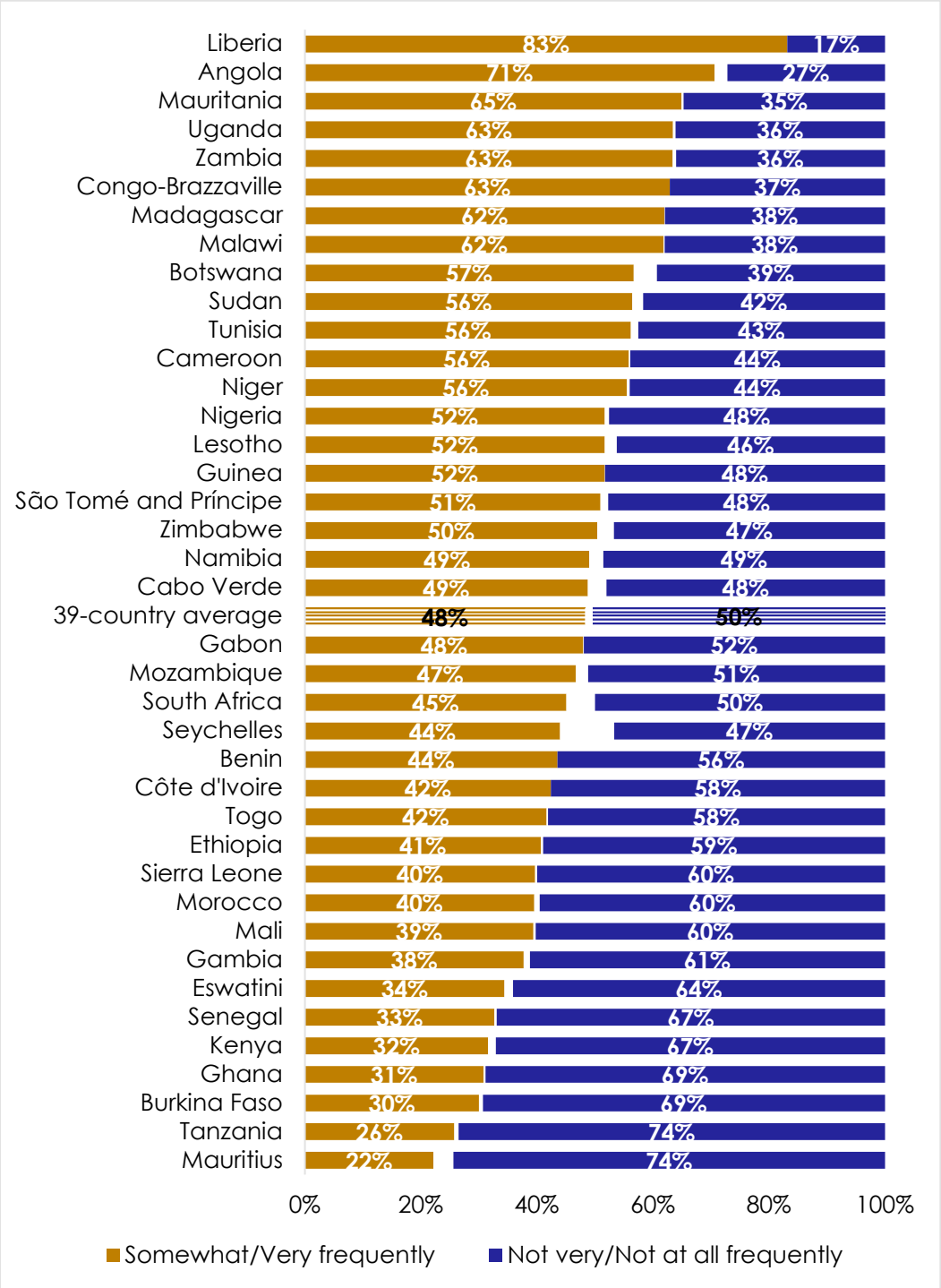
Figure 10: Frequency of children out of school | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: *How frequently do you think the following things occur in your community or neighbourhood: Children who should be in school are not in school?*

Lived poverty

Poverty harms all human beings, but especially children. Effects range from stunting and poor cognitive development to lower self-esteem and reduced educational and professional achievement, limiting poor children's chances of reaching their full potential

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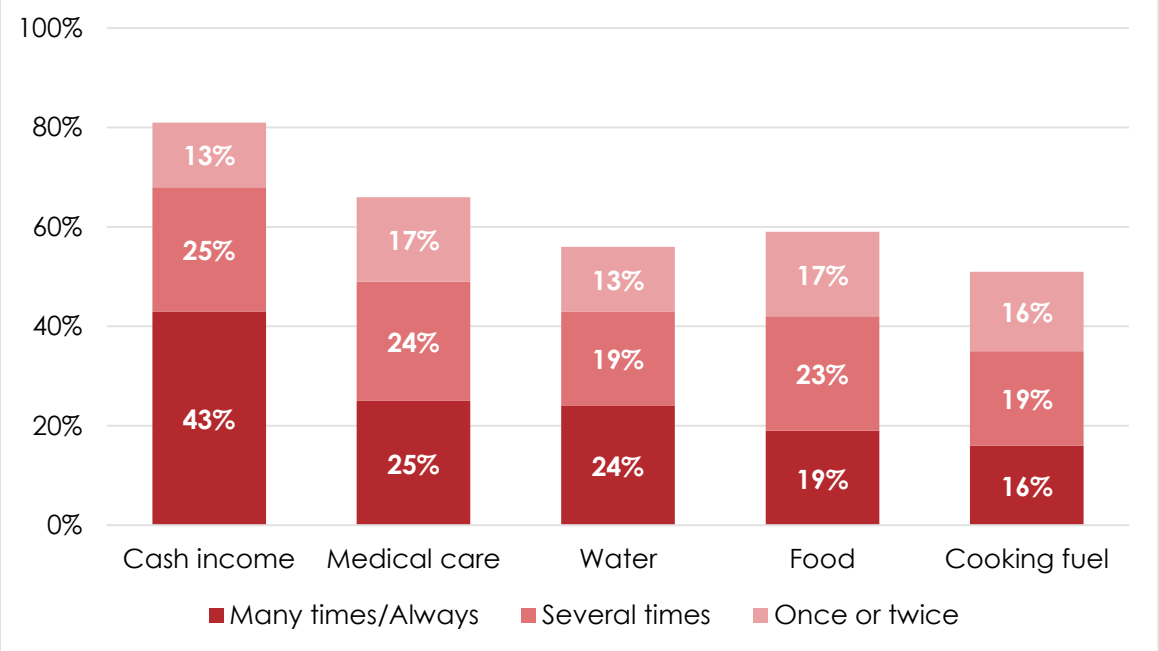
and participating as full members of society (Jones & Sumner, 2011; Greene, 2023). Watkins and Quattri (2019) estimate that by 2030, a staggering 304.7 million children (aged 0-19 years) in sub-Saharan Africa will be living in extreme poverty in 2030, making up 55% of global poverty, a notable increase from 43% in 2018.

Afrobarometer collects data on personal experiences of poverty, or "lived poverty," by asking survey respondents how often they or members of their households went without enough food to eat, enough clean water for home use, medicines or medical treatment, enough fuel to cook, and a cash income over the previous year. Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) combines responses to these five questions about basic necessities to calculate an average lived poverty score for each respondent and for each country (Mattes & Patel, 2022).

On average across 39 countries surveyed in 2021/2023, about one in five households (19%) went without enough food to eat "many times" or "always" during the previous year, in addition to 23% who experienced food shortages "several times" and 17% who did so "once or twice" (Figure 11).

About one-fourth of households report frequent shortages of clean water (24%) and medical care (25%), while 43% often went without a cash income.

Figure 11: Went without basic life necessities | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: *Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?*

Based on these reported shortages, 61% of Africans live in households that experienced moderate or high lived poverty during the previous year, ranging from 9% in Seychelles to 86% in Congo-Brazzaville (not shown). Taking insufficient food as an important barrier to healthy child development, more than four in 10 households (42%) experienced shortages of food "several times," "many times," or "always" (Figure 12). That includes majorities in 11 countries, led by three-fourths of citizens in Niger (75%) and Congo-Brazzaville (74%). Fewer than one in 10 respondents say the same in Mauritius (4%), Morocco (5%), and Seychelles (8%).

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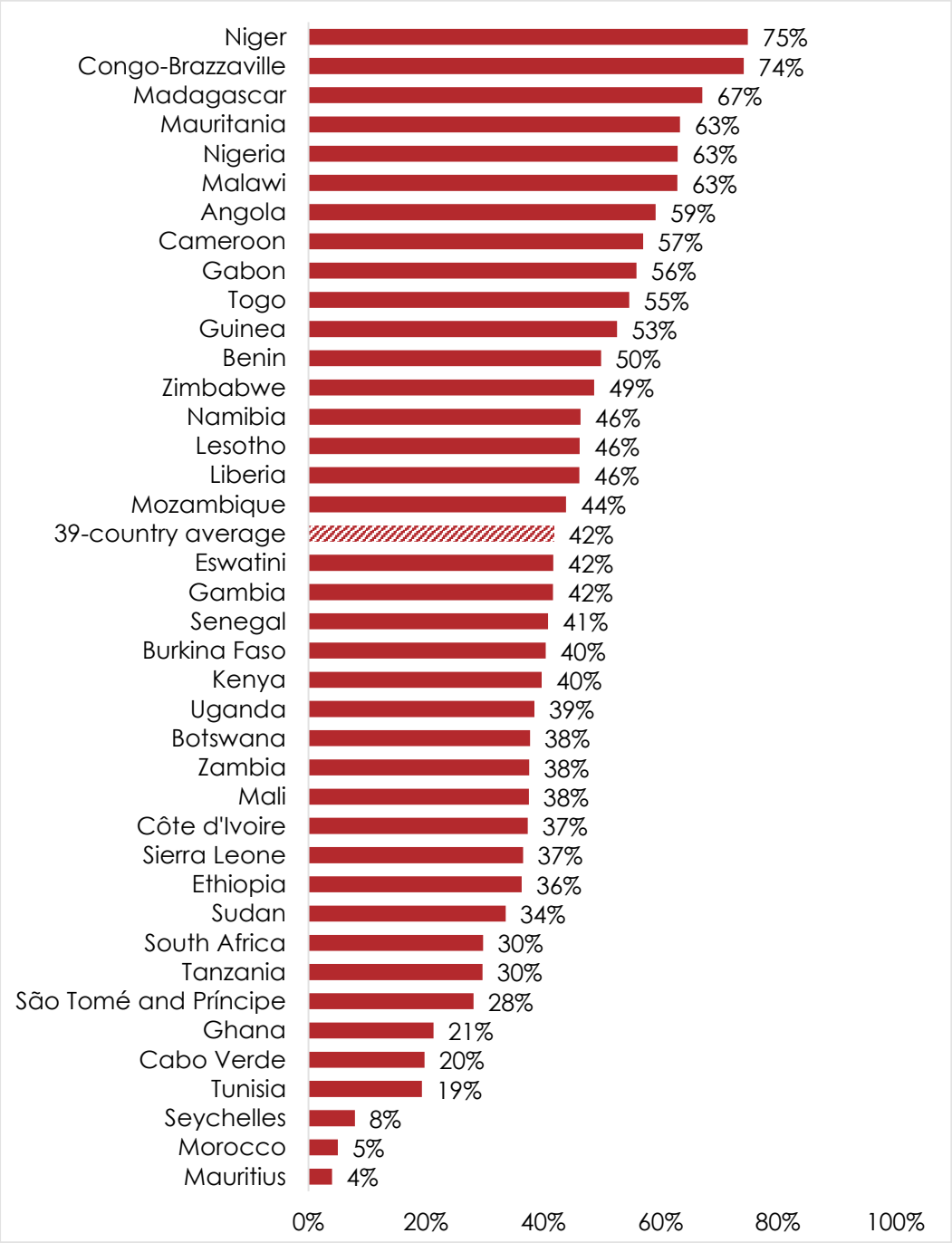
Figure 12: Went without enough food several times, many times, or always | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Respondents were asked: *Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? (% who say "several times," "many times," or "always")*

Support services for vulnerable children

For children facing major challenges, support services can be crucial in preparing them for full, successful lives. To what extent are such services available at the community level?

Based on Afrobarometer field teams' observations in all the enumeration areas (EAs) they visited, 83% of respondents live within easy walking distance of a school, 59% have a nearby

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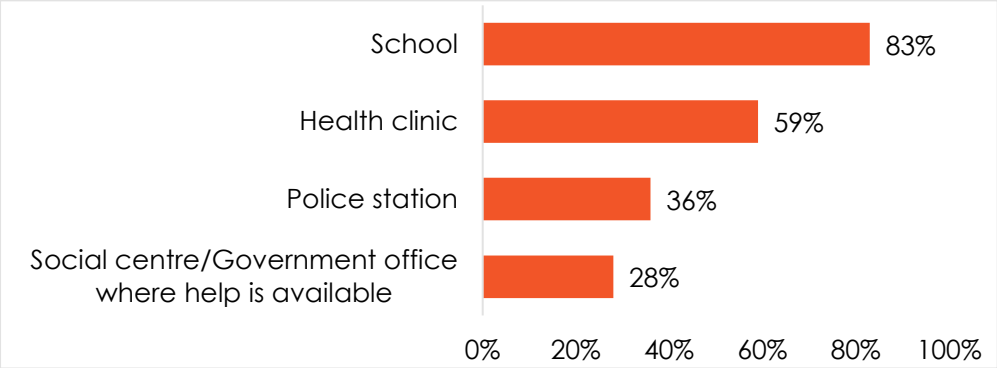
health clinic, and 36% have a police station in the community. Only 28% live within easy walking distance of a social centre or government office where people can request help with problems (Figure 13).

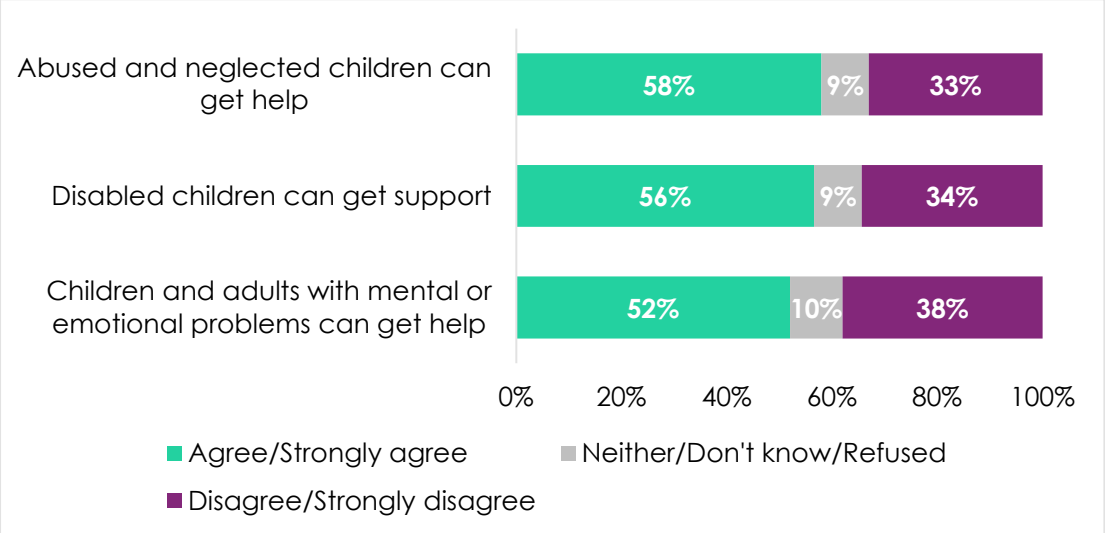
As for more specialised support services, more than half of respondents say that people in their community can generally find help for abused, mistreated, or neglected children (58%), for children with disability (56%), and for children and adults with mental or emotional problems (52%) (Figure 14). While majorities believe that support services for vulnerable children are available, more than four in 10 do not agree with this assessment.

Figure 13: Availability of public services at the community level | 39 countries | 2021/2023



Survey enumerators were asked to record: *Are the following facilities present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area or in easy walking distance: School (private or public or both)? Health clinic (private or public or both)? Police station? A social centre, government help centre, or other government office where people can request help with problems?*

Figure 14: Can vulnerable children find support? | 39 countries | 2021/2023



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

In general, people in this community are able to get help for children who are abused, mistreated, or neglected.
In my community, children who have a physical disability are generally able to get the support they need to succeed in life.
In my community, children and adults who have mental or emotional problems are generally able to get the help they need to have a good life.

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Assessments of whether help for vulnerable children is available at the community level vary widely by country (Figure 15). For example, while eight out of 10 Senegalese (83%) and Mauritians (80%) say support for abused and neglected children is available, only 29% of Sierra Leoneans agree.

Figure 15: Vulnerable children can get help | 39 countries | 2021/2023

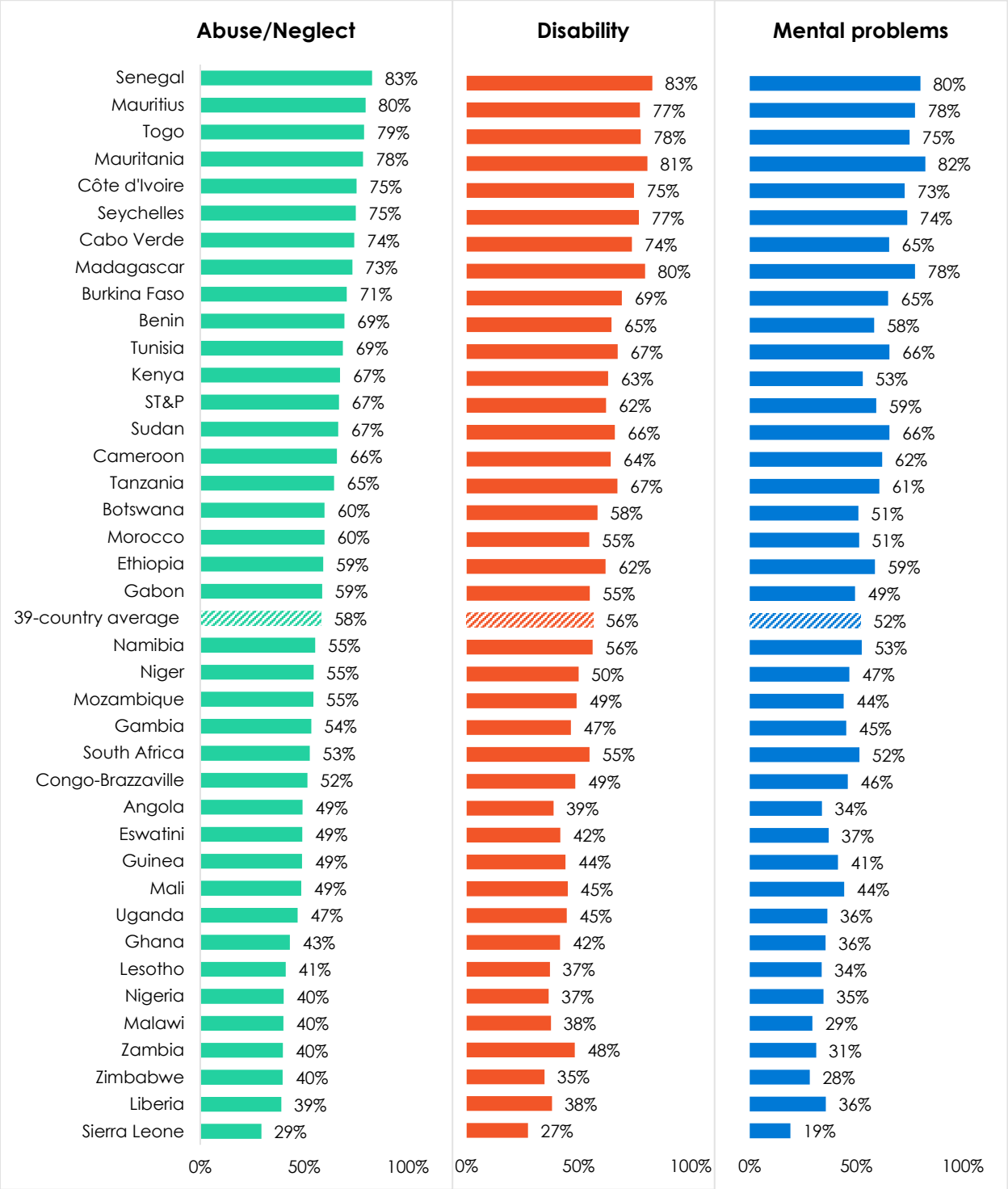

Figure shows percentage of respondents who "agree" or "strongly agree" that support is available in the community.

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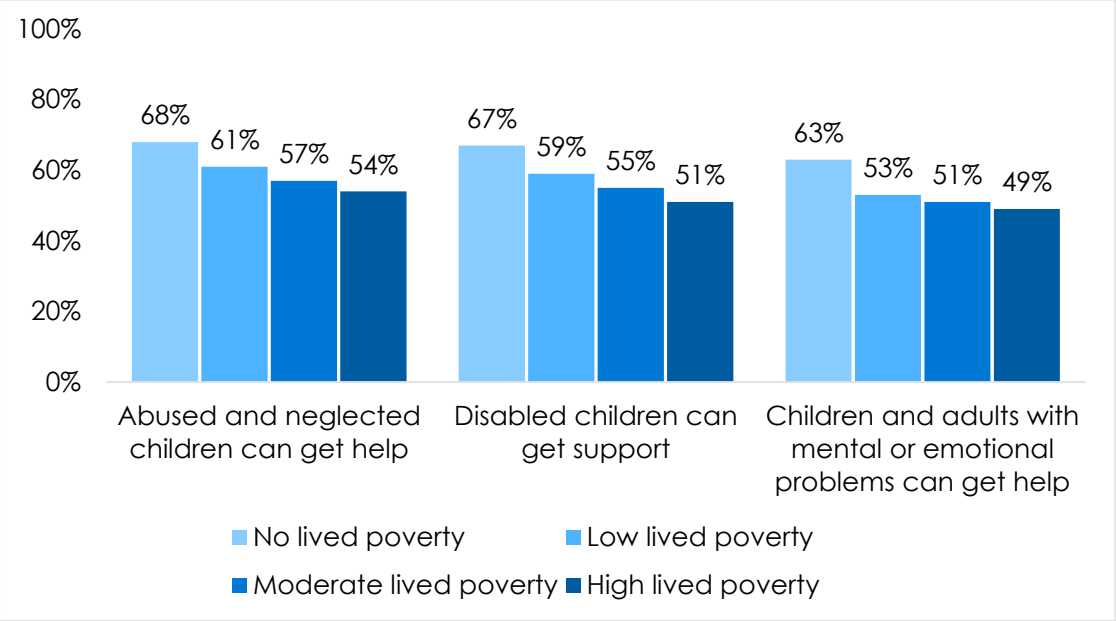
Country-level perceptions tend to align regarding support services for all three types of vulnerability, i.e. countries where large proportions report that help is available for one type of vulnerability (such as abuse/neglect) tend to have widespread perceptions of available help for the other two (disability and mental problems) as well. Thus, with regard to all three groups of vulnerable children, we see Senegal, Mauritius, Togo, and Mauritania at or near the top and Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Lesotho, Nigeria, and Liberia consistently bringing up the rear.

These assessments don't vary much (by 5 percentage points or less) by respondents' gender, urban-rural location, age, or education level. But we see significant disparities when it comes to different levels of economic well-being (Figure 16). The poorest citizens are considerably less likely to say that support for abused and neglected children is available in their community (54%, vs. 68% of well-off respondents). Similar gaps of 16 and 14 percentage points, respectively, separate the poor from the wealthy when it comes to perceived support for children with disability and for children and adults with mental or emotional problems.

Figure 16: Vulnerable children can get help | by level of lived poverty | 39 countries | 2021/2023



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

In general, people in this community are able to get help for children who are abused, mistreated, or neglected.

In my community, children who have a physical disability are generally able to get the support they need to succeed in life.

In my community, children and adults who have mental or emotional problems are generally able to get the help they need to have a good life.

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

Government performance on child well-being

Africans offer mixed reviews of their government's performance when it comes to ensuring their children's well-being and future. On education, the cornerstone of any child's success, fewer than half (46%) of citizens say their government is doing "fairly well" or "very well," while 52% think it is doing a poor job (Figure 17).

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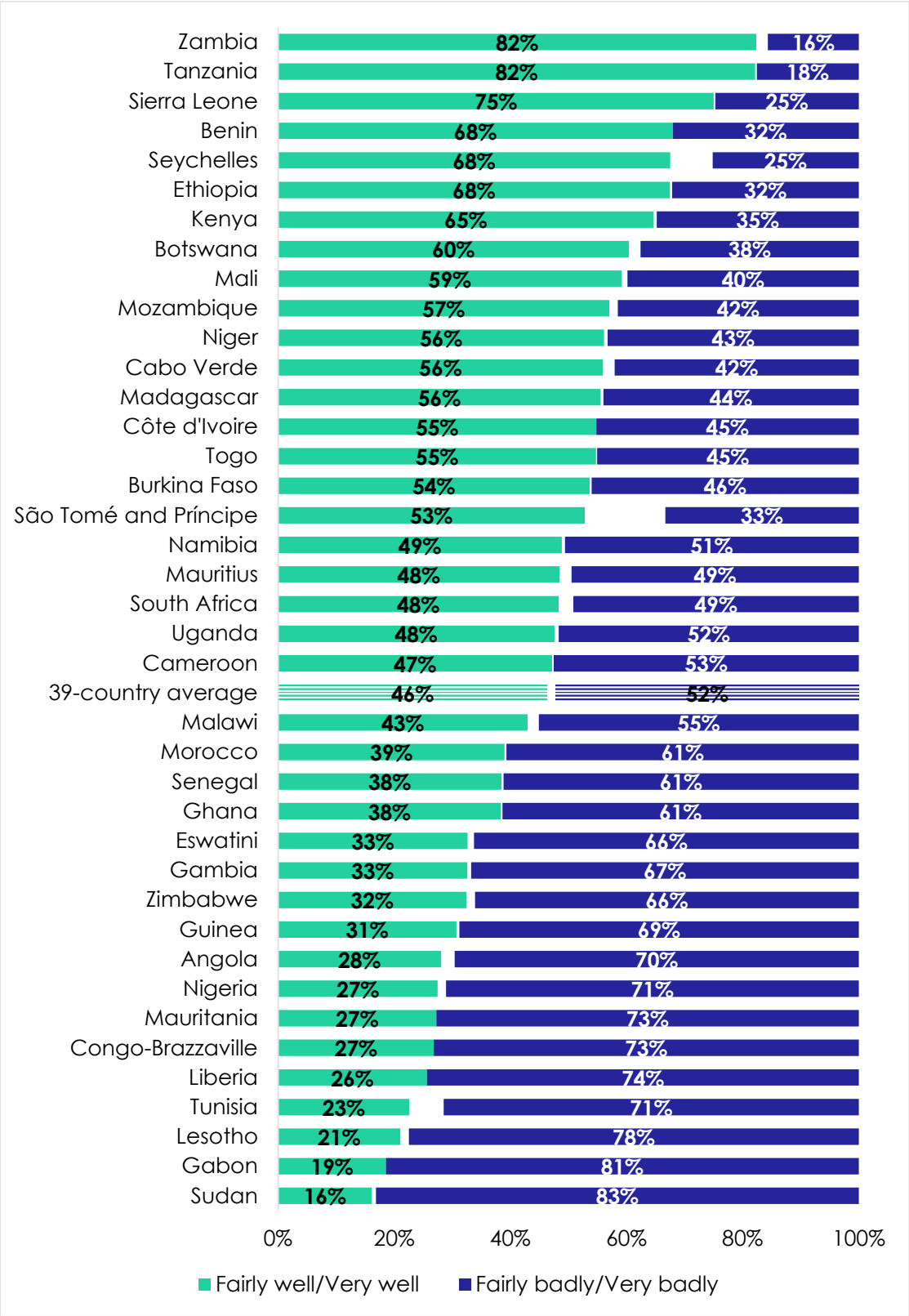
Figure 17: Government performance on education | 39 countries | 2021/2023



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: Addressing educational needs?*

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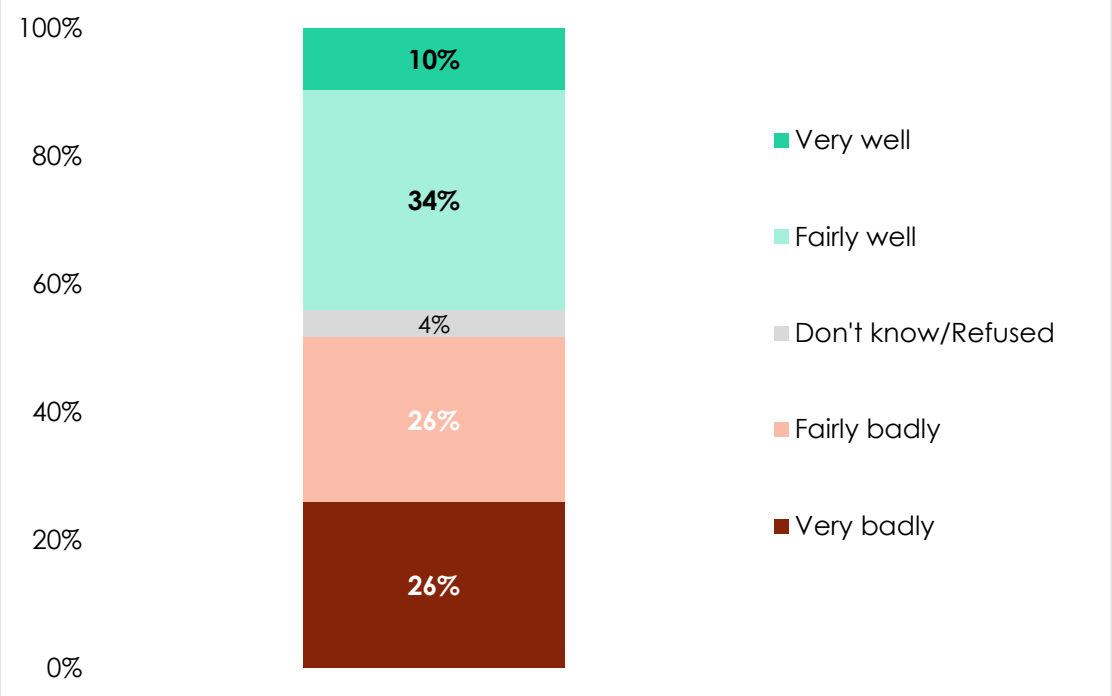
On government efforts to protect and promote the well-being of vulnerable children, assessments are similarly mixed: 44% of respondents think it is performing well, while 52% describe its performance as "fairly bad" or "very bad" (Figure 18).

Majorities in 15 countries give the government a passing grade on child welfare, led by Seychelles (71%) and Tanzania (70%) (Figure 19). In contrast, fewer than two in 10 Sudanese (13%), Liberians (17%), and Nigerians (19%) are satisfied with their government's efforts to protect and promote the well-being of vulnerable children.

These assessments vary little across key demographic groups except by economic status: Approval declines as lived poverty increases, ranging from 53% of well-off citizens to just 35% of those experiencing high lived poverty (Figure 20).

Figure 18: Government performance on protecting vulnerable children | 39 countries | 2021/2023



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: Protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children?*

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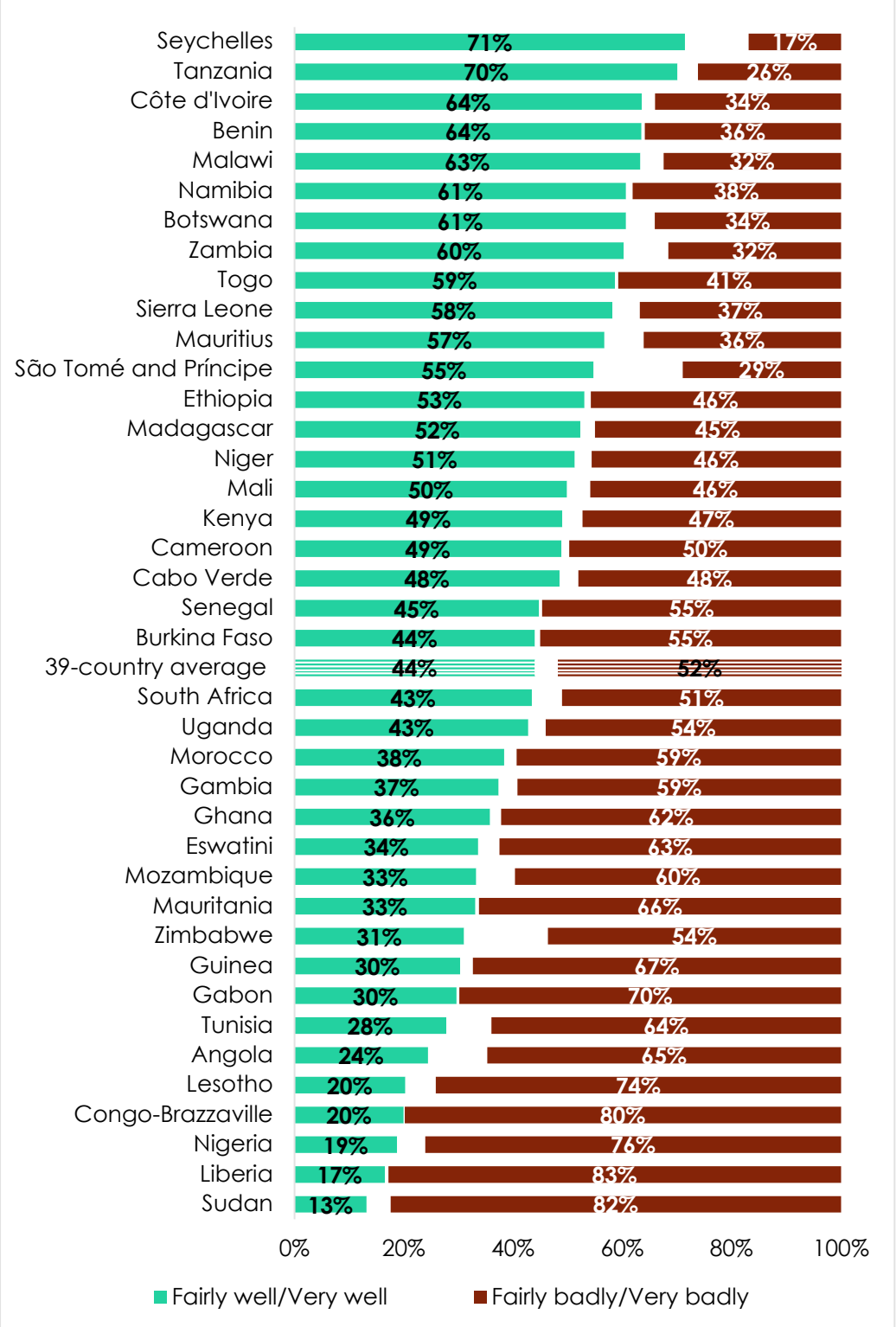
Figure 19: Government performance on protecting vulnerable children | 39 countries | 2021/2023



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: Protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children?*

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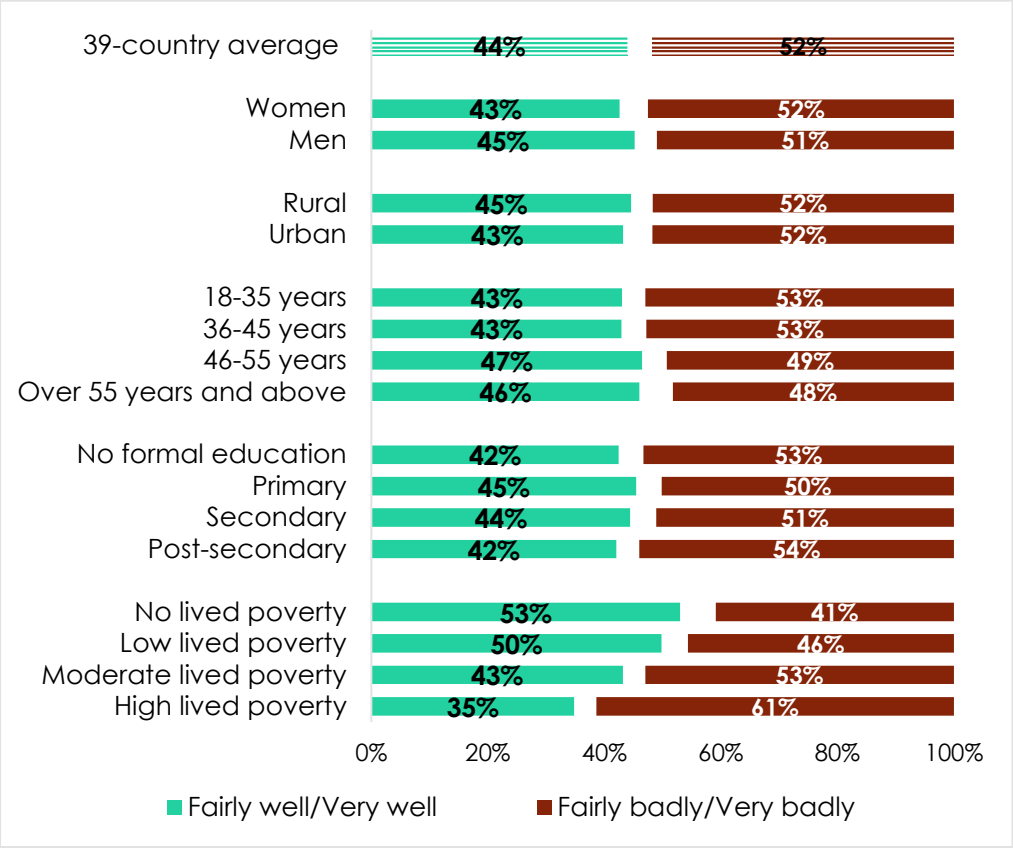
Figure 20: Government performance on protecting vulnerable children | by demographic group | 39 countries | 2021/2023



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: Protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children?*

Overview of child-welfare indicators by country

Table 2 summarises countries' performance on eight indicators related to child welfare, with findings coloured from dark green (best) to dark red (worst). Countries are ordered by citizens' assessments of the government's efforts to protect and promote the well-being of vulnerable children. Without suggesting that all of these indicators are equally important in all contexts, this may highlight some areas of concern to policy makers and activists.

The first two columns indicate whether the country has taken two crucial steps on the path toward effective child protection: ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and, if yes, submitted its initial report on the implementation status of the charter's provisions to the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Union, 2023).

We see that all surveyed countries except Morocco and Tunisia have ratified the charter, starting in 1992 with Seychelles, Mauritius, Burkina Faso, and Angola and continuing up through 2019 (São Tomé and Príncipe and Mauritania). Six surveyed countries that have ratified the charter have so far failed to submit their initial reports.

In the third column, we see the wide range of citizens' evaluations of their government's performance on child welfare, with approval rates ranging from 13% in Sudan to 71% in Seychelles.

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Table 2: Summary of child well-being indicators | 39 countries | 2021/2023

	Ratified African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child	Submitted initial report to Committee of Experts	Gov't performing well on child welfare	Child abuse/ neglect infrequent	Out-of-school children infrequent	Help available for vulnerable children (average)	Discipline using force is never justified	Discipline using force infrequent
Seychelles	1992	Yes	71%	58%	47%	75%	50%	63%
Tanzania	2003	Yes	70%	83%	74%	64%	72%	81%
Côte d'Ivoire	2004	Yes	64%	73%	58%	74%	27%	62%
Benin	1997	Yes	64%	79%	56%	64%	12%	63%
Malawi	1999	Yes	63%	57%	38%	36%	74%	57%
Botswana	2001	Yes	61%	47%	39%	56%	49%	48%
Namibia	2004	Yes	61%	56%	49%	55%	41%	52%
Zambia	2008	Yes	60%	59%	36%	40%	32%	54%
Togo	1998	Yes	59%	70%	58%	77%	24%	68%
Sierra Leone	2002	Yes	58%	75%	60%	25%	40%	60%
Mauritius	1992	No	57%	72%	74%	78%	45%	67%
ST&P	2019	No	55%	60%	48%	63%	51%	48%
Ethiopia	2002	Yes	53%	60%	59%	60%	48%	52%
Madagascar	2005	Yes	52%	75%	38%	77%	18%	74%
Niger	1999	Yes	51%	58%	44%	50%	15%	52%
Mali	1998	Yes	50%	74%	60%	46%	27%	66%
Kenya	2000	No	49%	77%	67%	61%	48%	70%
Cameroon	1997	Yes	49%	61%	44%	64%	13%	44%
Cabo Verde	1993	No	48%	62%	48%	71%	44%	37%
Senegal	2001	Yes	45%	73%	67%	82%	33%	68%
Burkina Faso	1992	Yes	44%	72%	69%	68%	14%	65%
South Africa	2000	Yes	43%	54%	50%	53%	42%	45%
Uganda	1994	No	43%	56%	36%	43%	53%	55%
Morocco	No	No	38%	61%	60%	55%	47%	49%
Gambia	2000	No	37%	79%	61%	48%	34%	65%
Ghana	2005	Yes	36%	82%	69%	40%	42%	67%
Eswatini	2012	Yes	34%	70%	64%	43%	26%	64%
Mozambique	1998	Yes	33%	68%	51%	49%	56%	54%
Mauritania	2019	Yes	33%	58%	35%	81%	23%	62%
Zimbabwe	2018	Yes	31%	57%	47%	34%	31%	47%
Guinea	1999	Yes	30%	71%	48%	45%	29%	59%
Gabon	2007	Yes	30%	65%	52%	54%	19%	55%
Tunisia	No	No	28%	42%	43%	67%	53%	34%
Angola	1992	Yes	24%	42%	27%	41%	54%	35%
Lesotho	1999	Yes	20%	58%	46%	37%	72%	60%
Congo-Brazzaville	2006	Yes	20%	58%	37%	49%	29%	50%
Nigeria	2001	Yes	19%	68%	48%	37%	45%	56%
Liberia	2007	Yes	17%	37%	17%	38%	41%	36%
Sudan	2005	Yes	13%	54%	42%	66%	36%	49%
39-country average			44%	64%	50%	56%	39%	56%
Key:	Over 60%	51%-60%	41%-50%	31%-40%	30% or less			

Column 4 shows that all but four countries have majorities (coloured light or dark green) who say that child abuse and neglect are "not very frequent" or "not at all frequent" in their community. More mixed results are reflected in the columns showing the proportion of respondents who say that out-of-school children are "not very frequent" or "not at all frequent," that help for vulnerable children is available (an average of the three survey questions concerning three types of vulnerability), and that the use of physical force to discipline children is "not very frequent" or "not at all frequent" in their community.

But Column 7 shows few high scores for the share of citizens who say that the use of physical force to discipline children is never justified.

Comparing countries, we see that Tanzania is the only country with green fields (relatively high scores) across all the indicators, followed by Ethiopia with seven light or dark greens. Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, and Togo also score seven greens, but with notably low (dark red) scores on opposition to the use of physical force. Seychelles and Mauritius record relatively high scores on six indicators.

At the other extreme, Liberia registers some of the lowest scores (with five light or dark reds), followed by Tunisia with four and eight countries with three reds.

Conclusion

Despite increasing advocacy against corporal punishment and evidence of its negative effects on children's development, a majority of Africans still endorse the practice. Support for the use of physical force to discipline children has declined slightly over the past five years – including double-digit drops in nine countries – but remains the majority view in most surveyed countries and across key demographic groups.

Activists for an end to corporal punishment may confront both cultural and educational hurdles. Many of the countries recording the greatest support for the practice are in West and Central Africa, and some – such as Benin, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, and Guinea – have relatively low literacy rates (World Population Review, 2023). Survey respondents with no formal education are particularly likely to endorse physical discipline, as are the poorest citizens.

While two-thirds of African adults say child abuse and neglect are infrequent in their community, we note that one in three adults disagree and that even in communities where they are infrequent, cases of child abuse and neglect are serious problems that must be addressed. The intersectionality of violence against children and gender-based violence (GBV) suggests that efforts to improve child welfare should also encompass addressing all forms of GBV.

Out-of-school children are more widely seen as a common problem, especially by citizens experiencing high levels of lived poverty, perhaps reflecting persistent barriers of affordability and accessibility of education.

More than half of citizens say that services are available to support children who are abused or neglected, have a disability, or have mental or emotional problems. The flipside is that more than four in 10 Africans – and in some countries solid majorities – report that such services are not available. Perceptions that support services are lacking are most common among economically disadvantaged people, suggesting a possible need for targeted interventions.

A lack of support services, along with poverty and perceived shortcomings in the education system, may be among the reasons why a majority of citizens are dissatisfied with their government's efforts to protect and promote the well-being of vulnerable children.

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All of these indicators of child well-being show major differences between countries, highlighting both the need for local context and the possibility that some countries could learn valuable lessons from their higher-performing neighbours.

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Appendix

Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 9 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds

Country	Round 9 fieldwork	Previous survey rounds
Angola	Feb.-March 2022	2019
Benin	Jan. 2022	2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017, 2020
Botswana	June-July 2022	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Burkina Faso	Sept.-Oct. 2022	2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019
Cabo Verde	July-Aug. 2022	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017, 2019
Cameroon	March 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021
Congo-Brazzaville	June-July 2023	NA
Côte d'Ivoire	Nov.-Dec. 2021	2013, 2014, 2017, 2019
Eswatini	Oct.-Nov. 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021
Ethiopia	May-June 2023	2013, 2020
Gabon	Nov.-Dec. 2021	2015, 2017, 2020
Gambia	Aug.-Sept. 2022	2018, 2021
Ghana	April 2022	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Guinea	Aug. 2022	2013, 2015, 2017, 2019
Kenya	Nov.-Dec. 2021	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2019
Lesotho	Feb.-March 2022	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2020
Liberia	Aug.-Sept. 2022	2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2020
Madagascar	April-May 2022	2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2018
Malawi	Feb. 2022	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Mali	July 2022	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020
Mauritania	Nov. 2022	NA
Mauritius	March 2022	2012, 2014, 2017, 2020
Morocco	Aug.-Sept. 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021
Mozambique	Oct.-Nov. 2022	2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2021
Namibia	Oct.-Nov. 2021	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019
Niger	June 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2020
Nigeria	March 2022	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2020
São Tomé and Príncipe	Dec. 2022	2015, 2018
Senegal	May-June 2022	2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2021
Seychelles	Dec. 2022	NA
Sierra Leone	June-July 2022	2012, 2015, 2018, 2020
South Africa	Nov.-Dec. 2022	2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018, 2021
Sudan	Nov.-Dec. 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021
Tanzania	Sept.-Oct. 2022	2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2021
Togo	March 2022	2012, 2014, 2017, 2021
Tunisia	Feb.-March 2022	2013, 2015, 2018, 2020
Uganda	Jan. 2022	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019
Zambia	Aug.-Sept. 2022	1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020
Zimbabwe	March-April 2022	1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2021

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Anyway Chingwete is deputy director of surveys for Afrobarometer, based at the University of Cape Town. Email: achingwete@afrobarometer.org.

Richard Houessou is Afrobarometer project manager for francophone countries, based at the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana). Email: rhouessou@afrobarometer.org.

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