

South Africans see gender-based violence as most important women's-rights issue to address

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 738 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma

Summary

South Africa is no stranger to gruesome cases of gender-based violence (GBV). In 2013, 17-year-old Anene Booysen was brutally attacked, raped, and disembowelled in Bredasdorp (September, 2013). In 2017, 22-year-old Karabo Mokoena went missing, and her body was later found burnt in an open field in Johannesburg (Saba, 2017).

In 2019, 19-year-old university student Uyinene Mrwetyana was raped and murdered at a post office in Cape Town (Adebayo, 2019). In 2020, the body of 28-year-old Tshhegofatso Pule, who was eight months pregnant, was found stabbed and hanging from a tree outside Johannesburg (Seleka, 2020). A year later, 23-year-old law student Nosiselo Mtebeni was killed and dismembered, her body found stuffed inside a suitcase (Dayimani, 2021). These crimes left the nation reeling, but they are just a few of many.

Releasing second-quarter crime statistics for 2023/2024, Police Minister Bheki Cele reported that South Africa recorded 10,516 rapes, 1,514 cases of attempted murder, and 14,401 assaults against female victims in July, August, and September. In the same period, 881 women were murdered (South African Government, 2023a; Felix, 2023).

During the global coronavirus outbreak, President Cyril Ramaphosa described GBV as a "second pandemic" (CGTN, 2020; Africa Health Organisation, 2021). Reports suggest that GBV intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic as victims were no longer able to escape their attackers (Eyewitness News, 2020).

South Africa's weapons to fight GBV range from the Constitution, the National Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality, and the National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide to support structures such as the Gender-Based Violence Command Centre, a 24/7 helpline for victims of GBV (Republic of South Africa, 1996; South African Government, 2002; Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, 2020, 2022).

The Department of Social Development works with civil society and other stakeholders to increase the availability of GBV services and to reduce public tolerance for violence against women and girls (South African Government, 2023b). In 2022, Ramaphosa signed into law three bills designed to deliver justice for victims (South African Government News Agency, 2022), and the South African Police Service has accelerated efforts to assist victims through its Policy on Reducing Barriers to the Reporting of Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence (Phillip, 2017; Civilian Secretariat for Police Service, 2017).

As the world marks 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, 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 South Africa, most citizens say physical force is never justified to discipline women, but many report that GBV is a common occurrence in their communities and constitutes the

most important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address. Most consider domestic violence a criminal matter and believe that the police take GBV cases seriously.

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.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, interviewed 1,582 adult South Africans in November-December 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018, and 2021.

Key findings

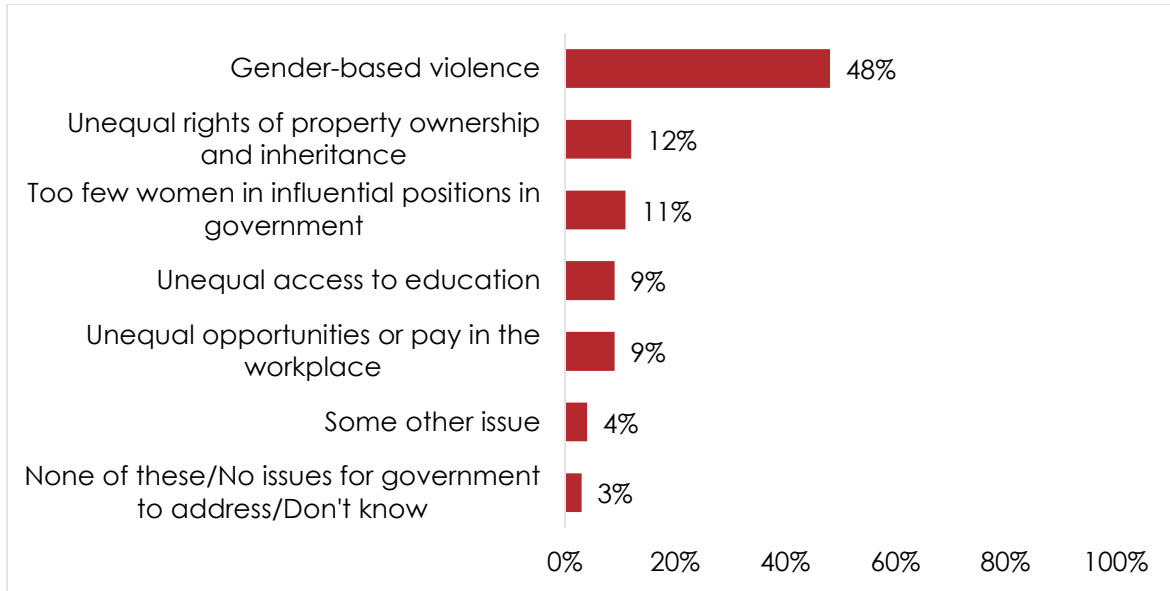
- South Africans see gender-based violence (GBV) as the most important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address.
- Nearly half (48%) of citizens say violence against women and girls is a "somewhat common" (23%) or "very common" (25%) occurrence in their community.
- Close to eight in 10 South Africans (78%) say it is "never" justified for a man to use physical force to discipline his wife.
- More than four in 10 respondents (43%) consider it "somewhat likely" (25%) or "very likely" (18%) that a woman will be criticised, harassed, or shamed if she reports GBV to the authorities.
 - But most (76%) believe that the police are "very likely" (55%) or "somewhat likely" (21%) to take cases of GBV seriously.
- Almost eight in 10 South Africans (78%) say domestic violence should be treated as a criminal matter, while 18% see it as a private matter to be resolved within the family.

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

In South Africa, GBV tops the list of important women's-rights issues that citizens say the government and society must address. Nearly half (48%) of survey respondents cite GBV as their top priority, followed by unequal rights of property ownership and inheritance (12%), too few women in influential positions in government (11%), unequal access to education (9%), and unequal opportunities or pay in the workplace (9%) (Figure 1).

Women and men are equally likely to cite GBV as the most important women's-rights issue.

Figure 1: Most important women’s-rights issue | South Africa | 2022

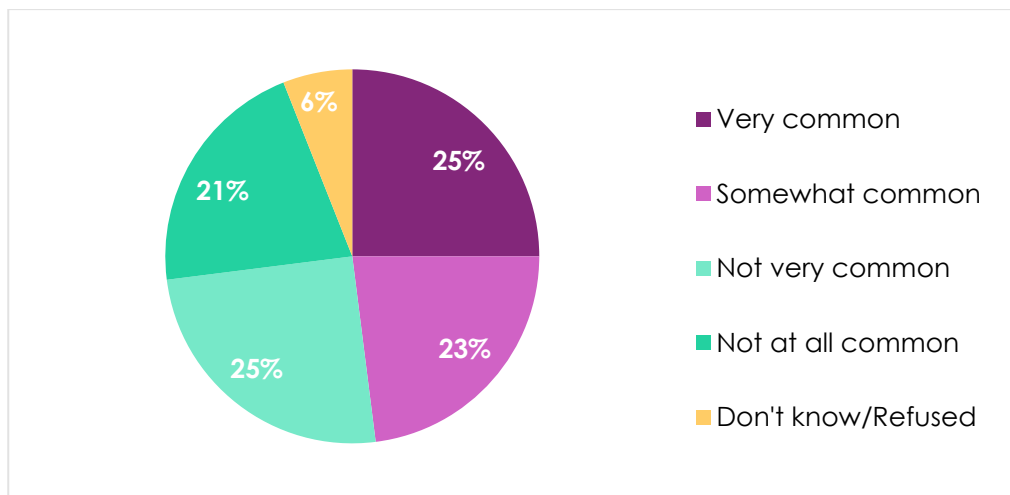


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, which of the following issues related to women's rights and equality do you think is the most important for our government and society to address?*

How common is GBV?

One reason that GBV is considered a critical issue is probably its frequency: 48% of respondents say violence against women and girls is “somewhat common” (23%) or “very common” (25%) in their community, although about an equal proportion (46%) disagree (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Frequency of GBV | South Africa | 2022

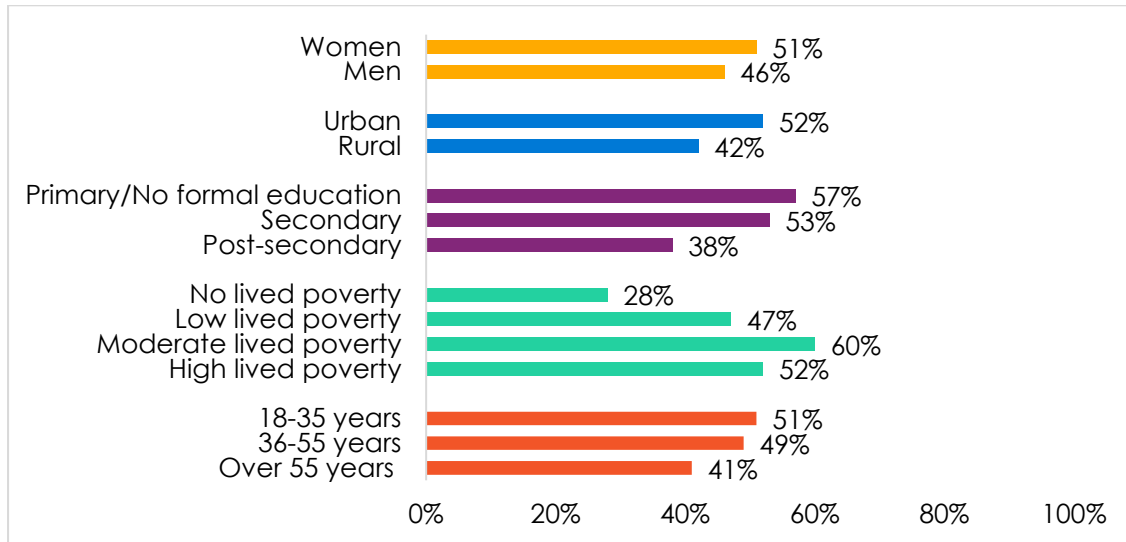


Respondents were asked: *In this area, how common do you think it is for men to use violence against women and girls in the home or the community?*

Women (51%) are more likely than men (46%) to say GBV is a common occurrence, as are urbanites (52%) compared to rural residents (42%) (Figure 3). This perception is less widespread among economically well-off citizens (28%, vs. 52%-60% of those experiencing

moderate or high lived poverty¹), among the most educated (38%, vs. 53%-57% of those with less schooling), and among older people (41%, vs. 49%-51% of those under age 56).

Figure 3: GBV is somewhat/very common | by demographic group | South Africa | 2022

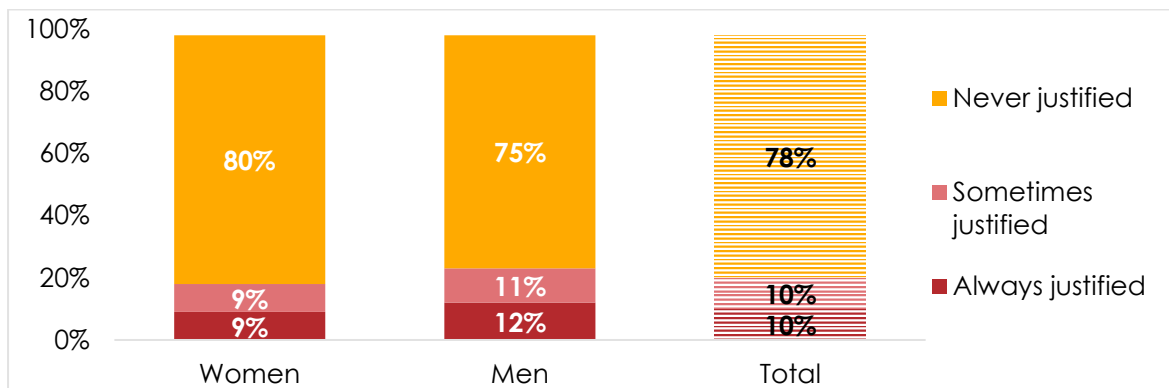


Respondents were asked: In this area, how common do you think it is for men to use violence against women and girls in the home or the community? (% who say "somewhat common" or "very common")

Physical discipline of a spouse

Close to eight in 10 South Africans (78%) say it is "never justified" for a man to use physical force to discipline his wife, while two in 10 consider it "sometimes" (10%) or "always" (10%) justified. Women are more likely than men to rule out physical discipline as "never justified," 80% vs. 75% (Figure 4).

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

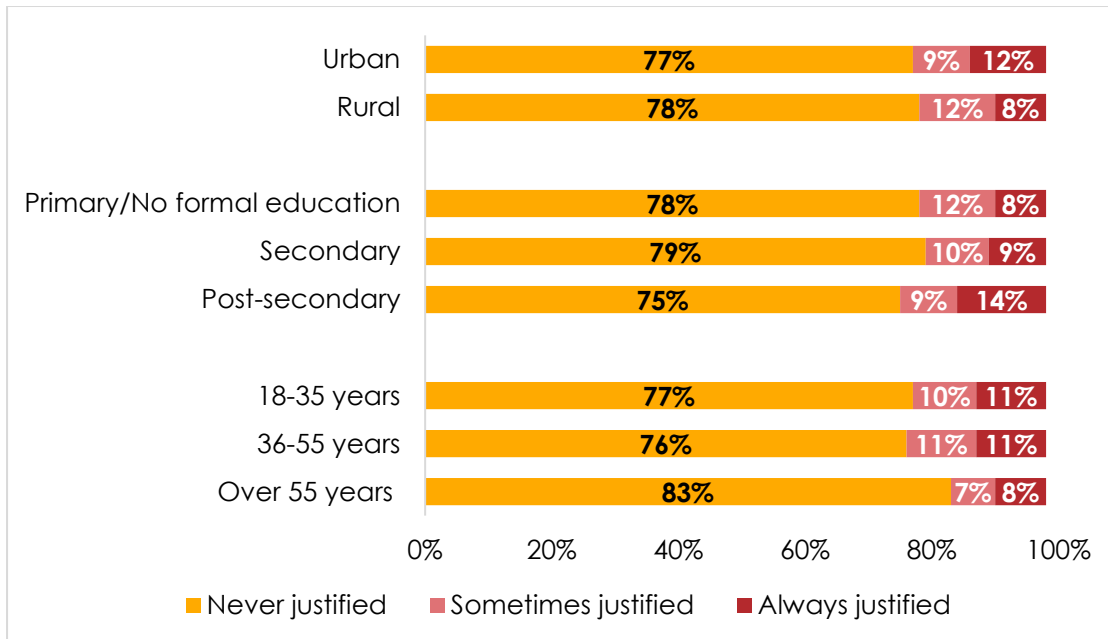


Respondents were asked: For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For a man to use physical discipline on his wife if she has done something he doesn't like or thinks is wrong?

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 (2020).

The view that men are never justified in physically disciplining their wives garners support across the board, although older respondents (83% of those over age 55) are more likely to see it as unacceptable than younger respondents (76%-77%) (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Never justified for men to physically discipline their wives
 | by demographic group | South Africa | 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 will not take the case seriously (Palermo, Bleck, & Peterman, 2014).

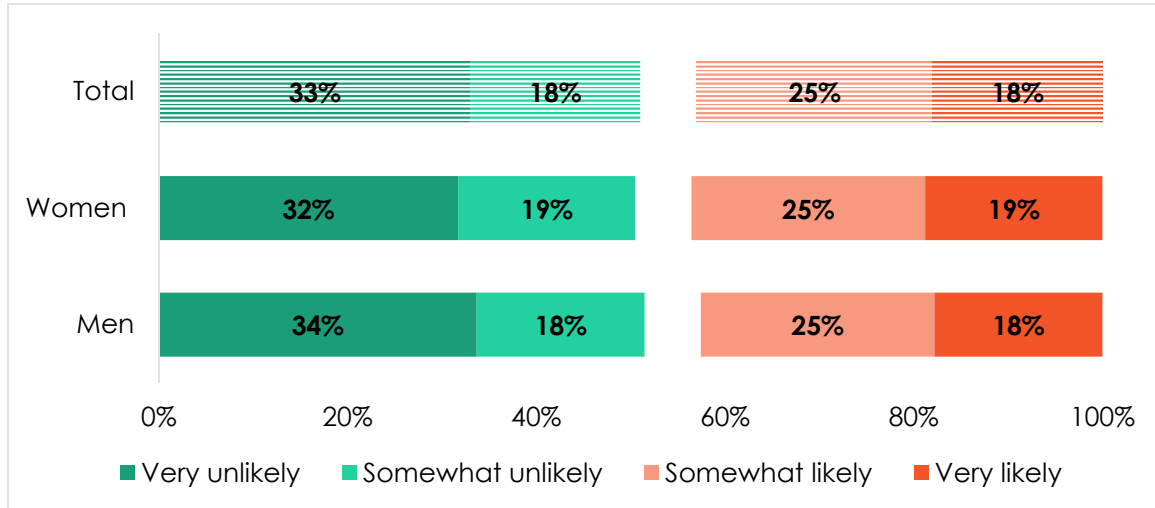
Asked whether they think a woman who reports being a victim of rape, domestic violence, or other GBV will be criticised, harassed, or shamed by others in the community, more than four in 10 respondents (43%) say this is “very likely” (18%) or “somewhat likely” (25%). Only 33% consider such a community response “very unlikely” (Figure 6). These perceptions – whether accurate or not – may serve as a significant deterrent to reporting GBV.

Women and men share almost identical expectations on this question. The perception that community backlash is “very unlikely” is most widespread among young respondents (38% of those aged 18-35), citizens with post-secondary education (37%), and well-off respondents (35%) (Figure 7).

In contrast to their mixed expectations regarding the community response, most South Africans believe that the police will respond appropriately to reported cases of GBV: 76% see it as likely that the police will take such reports seriously, including 55% who say it is “very likely” (Figure 8).

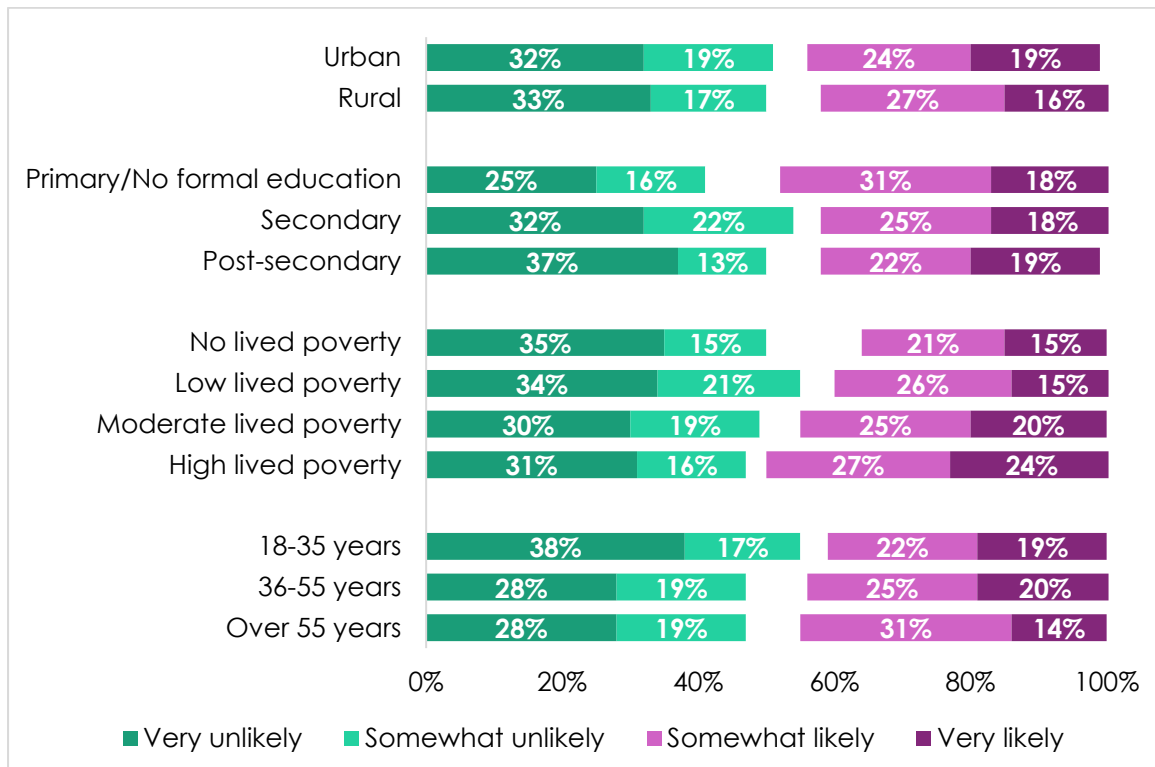
Women (74%) and citizens with primary education or less (66%) express less confidence in the police response than men (78%) and those with at least secondary education (77%-78%) (Figure 9).

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



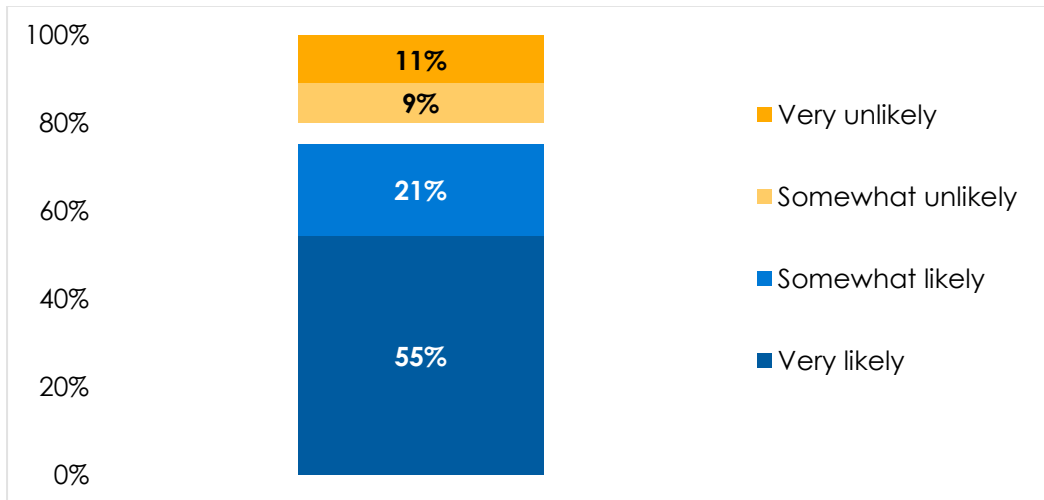
Respondents were asked: If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: She will be criticised, harassed,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

Figure 7: Will a woman be criticised, harassed, or shamed for reporting GBV?
 | by demographic group | South Africa | 2022



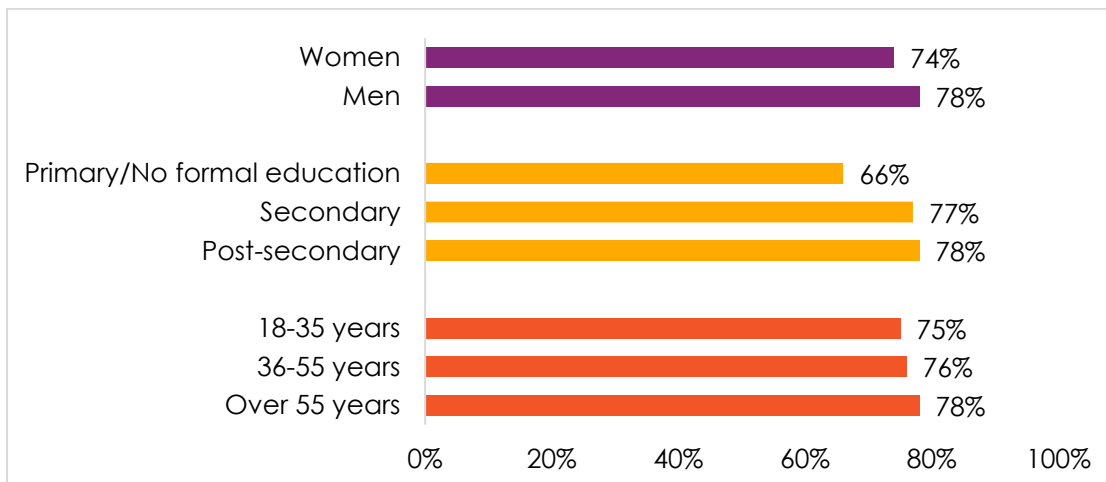
Respondents were asked: If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: She will be criticised, harassed,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

Figure 8: Do the police take GBV cases seriously? | South Africa | 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 9: Police take GBV cases seriously | by demographic group | South Africa | 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?

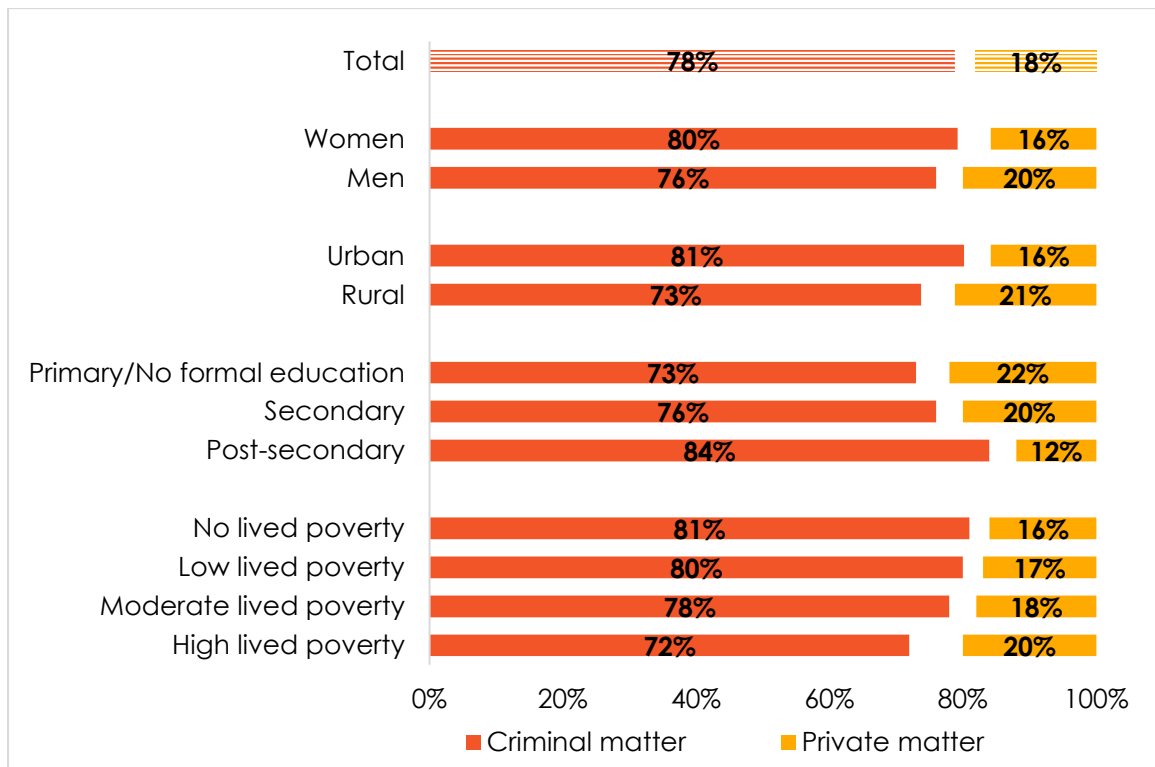
One common form of GBV is domestic violence. Even though the perpetrators may be known, many domestic-violence cases go unreported or unresolved, and most present victims and families with complex, wrenching decisions. Do South Africans see domestic violence as a criminal matter or a private matter?

More than three-fourths (78%) of South Africans say domestic violence is a criminal matter that requires the involvement of law enforcement, while 18% see it as a private matter that needs to be handled and resolved within the family (Figure 10).

Women are somewhat more likely than men to see domestic violence as a criminal matter (80% vs. 76%). Larger gaps separate the wealthy from the poor (81% vs. 72%) and cities from rural areas (81% vs. 73%).

The view that GBV is a criminal matter also increases with respondents' education level, ranging from 73% among those with primary schooling or less to 84% among those with tertiary qualifications.

Figure 10: Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter? | by demographic group | South Africa | 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

South Africans see GBV as the most important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address. Most reject the use of physical force by a husband, but many also say that GBV is at least "somewhat common" in their community. Moreover, almost half consider it likely that a woman will be criticised, harassed, or shamed if she reports being the victim of GBV – a perception that may serve as a significant deterrent to reporting such attacks.

On the plus side, most citizens believe that the police are likely to take cases of GBV seriously, and a majority see domestic violence as a criminal matter whose resolution requires the involvement of law enforcement agencies rather than as a private matter to be resolved within the family.

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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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