

South Africans want to see greater government initiative to promote gender equality

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 740 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma

Summary

In August, South Africa celebrated its annual Women's Day and Women's Month under the theme "Women's socio-economic rights and empowerment: Building back better for women's improved resilience" (South African Government, 2023). Meeting this goal will require a holistic approach anchored in the economic, social, and political empowerment of women (Statistics South Africa, 2022).

In South Africa, the gender gap is steadily narrowing, especially in education, where female students outperform their male counterparts (Ramaphosa, 2023). But despite marked improvement, women's labour force participation rates lag behind men's. The Quarterly Labour Force Survey shows that in the second quarter of 2023, women's participation rate stood at 54.3% compared to 64.9% for men, representing a 10.6-percentage-point gap (Statistics South Africa, 2023). When employed, women are overwhelmingly engaged in precarious forms of work characterised by low pay and difficult work conditions (Teuteberg & Benjamin, 2023).

Significant progress has been made in political representation, with 42% of seats in Parliament now held by women (Brothers, 2023).

But girls and women continue to bear the brunt of violence, abuse, harassment, and discrimination. The Department of Justice and Constitutional Development reports that it handles more than 50,000 cases of domestic violence and femicide annually (Maine, 2023), while many other cases of gender-based violence go unreported. In an attempt to deal with the scourge of violence against women, the government last year passed the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act Amendment Bill, the Criminal and Related Matters Amendment Bill, and the Domestic Violence Amendment Bill (South African Government, 2022; Vallabh, 2022).

This dispatch reports on a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 questionnaire to explore Africans' experiences and perceptions of gender equality in control over assets, hiring, land ownership, and political leadership. (For findings on gender-based violence, see Mpako & Ndoma, 2023).

In South Africa, findings show close to gender-equal educational attainment, but women trail men slightly in control over certain assets and household financial decisions. Large majorities express support for gender equality in hiring, land ownership, and political leadership, but many also consider it likely that a woman will suffer criticism and harassment from the community if she runs for elective office.

Overall, South Africans say the government should do more to promote equal rights and opportunities for women, ranking gender-based violence and women's under-representation in positions of power as the most important women's-rights issues that their government and society must address.

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 survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed 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

- In South Africa, women are just as likely as men to have post-secondary education (30% vs. 29%).
- Gender gaps persist in ownership of some key assets, including a computer (31% vs. 38%) and a motor vehicle (26% vs. 37%).
- Women (45%) are slightly less likely than men (52%) to say they make decisions themselves about how household money is spent.
- Large majorities support gender equality in hiring (75%) and land ownership and inheritance (82%).
- Most citizens (81%) say women should have the same chance as men to be elected to political office.
 - However, six in 10 (59%) consider it likely that a woman running for public office will be criticised, called names, or harassed by others in the community.
- Fewer than half (43%) of South Africans say their government is doing a good job of promoting gender equality.
 - Nearly six in 10 citizens (58%) say the government needs to do more to promote equal rights and opportunities for women.

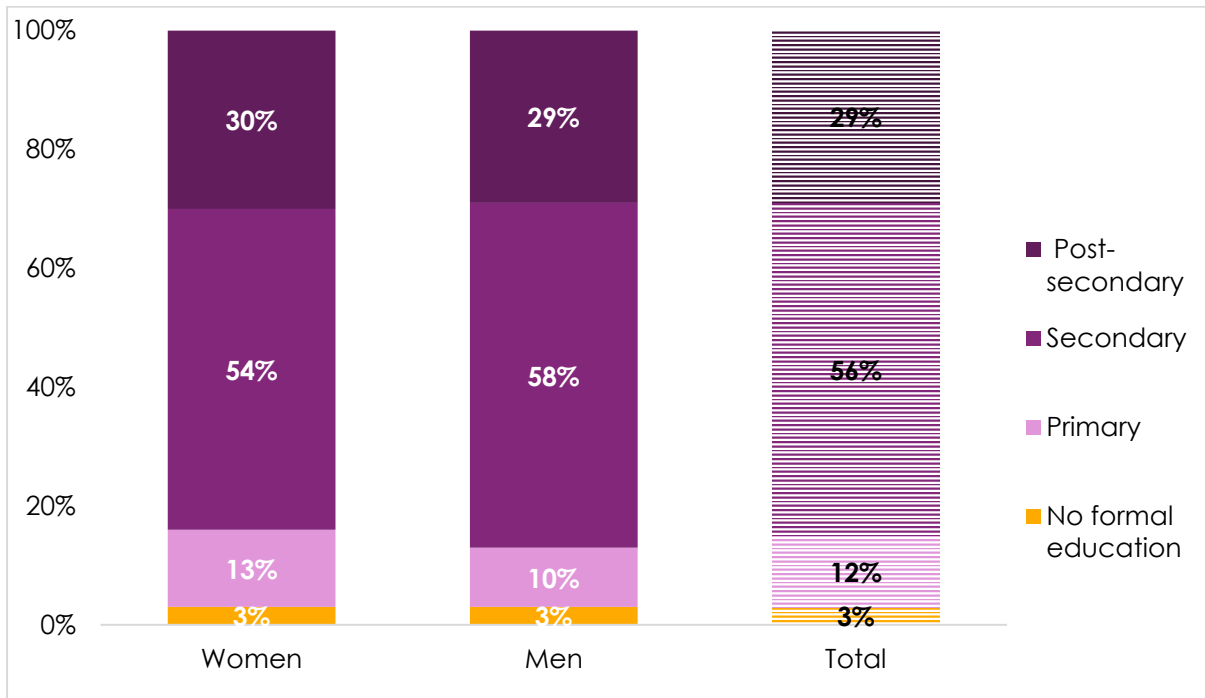
Education and control of assets

Educational attainment is close to gender-equal in South Africa, with slightly more secondary schooling among men (58% vs. 54%) and about the same post-secondary qualifications by both genders (30% women vs. 29% men) (Figure 1).

A look at asset ownership reveals modest gender gaps: Fewer women than men report personally owning a radio (66% vs. 70%), a computer (31% vs. 38%), and a motor vehicle (26% vs. 37%) (Figure 2). Mobile-phone ownership is high among both genders (89% women vs. 91% men), as is ownership of a bank account (89% vs. 90%) and a television (76% vs. 75%).

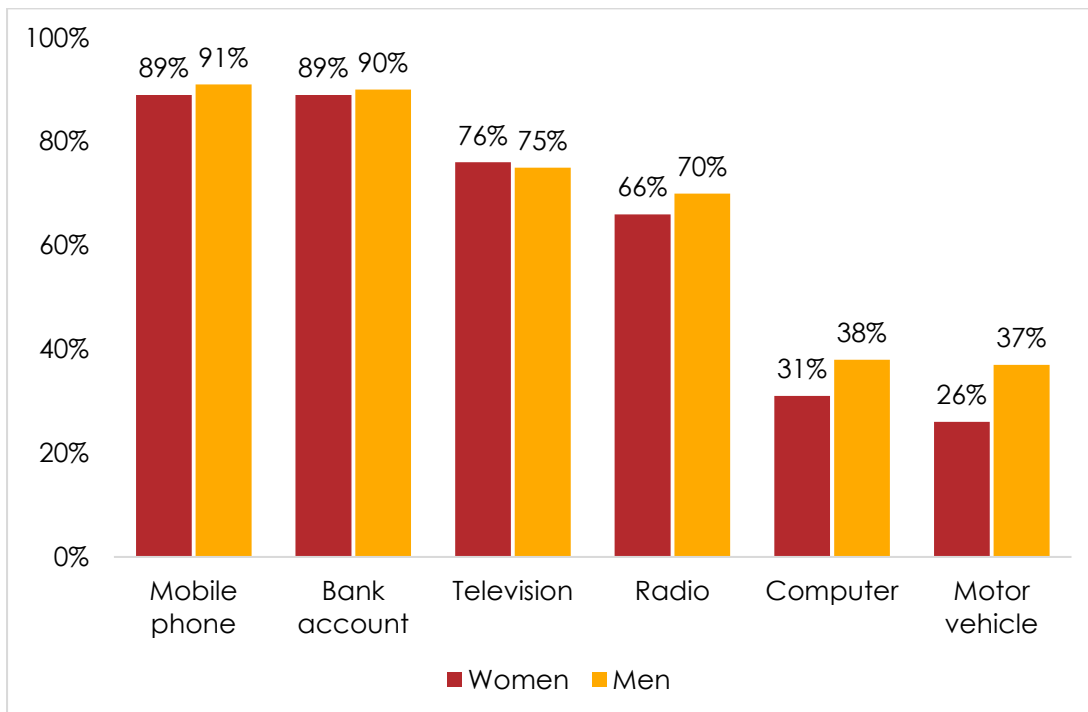
Turning to decisions about how money is used in the household, more men (52%) than women (45%) report making these decisions themselves (Figure 3). About two in 10 respondents (22% of women, 19% of men) say they make financial decisions jointly with their spouse. About one in 10 women and men say their spouse or other family members make the decisions without their input.

Figure 1: Educational attainment | by gender | South Africa | 2022



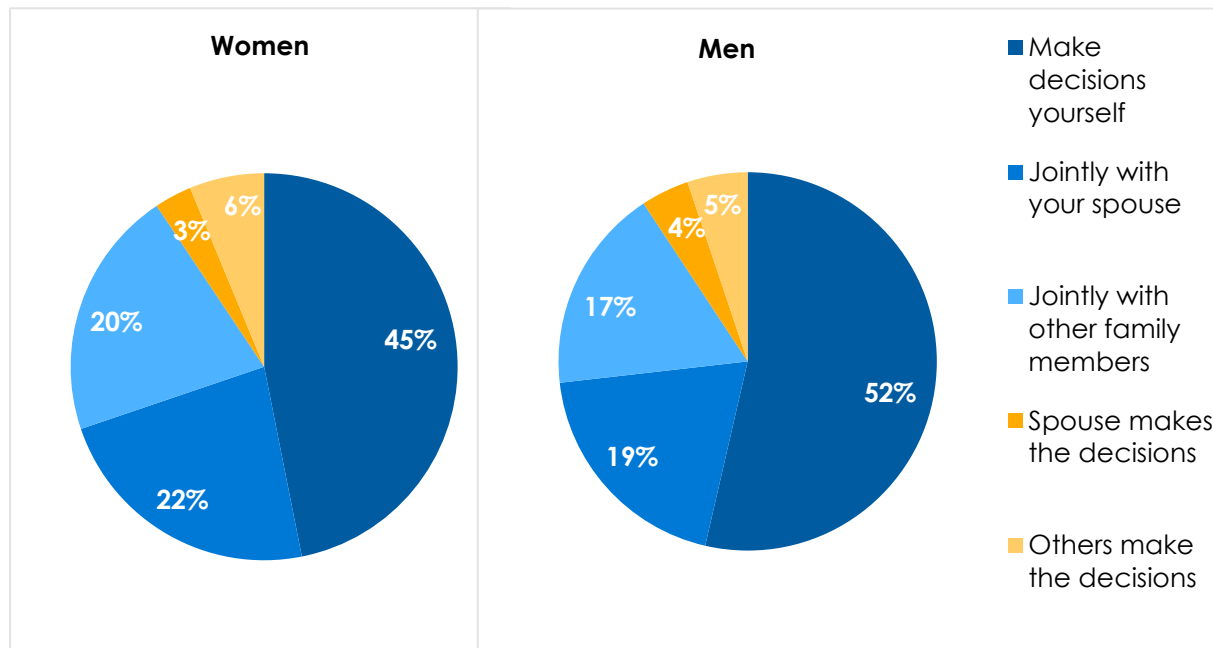
Respondents were asked: What is your highest level of education?

Figure 2: Asset ownership | by gender | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: Which of these things do you personally own?

Figure 3: Who decides how money is used? | by gender | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: What is the main way that decisions are made about how to use any money that you have or earn, for example from a job, a business, selling things, or other activities?

Rights to a job and land

The ability to claim certain rights can be a tool to promote gender equality – or to maintain inequality. Do South Africans want gender equality when it comes to jobs and land? And if so, how close to equality are they?

Three-quarters (75%) of South Africans “disagree” or “strongly disagree” with the idea that men should be given priority over women in hiring when jobs are scarce, while only 19% endorse this form of gender discrimination (Figure 4). Support for gender equality in hiring is weaker among men (67%) than women (82%), and increases slightly with respondents’ education level, ranging from 72% among those with primary schooling or less to 76% among those with post-secondary qualifications.

On the issue of land, more than eight in 10 South Africans (82%) say that women should have equal rights to land ownership and inheritance (Figure 5). Significantly more women (89%) than men (76%) support equal land rights.

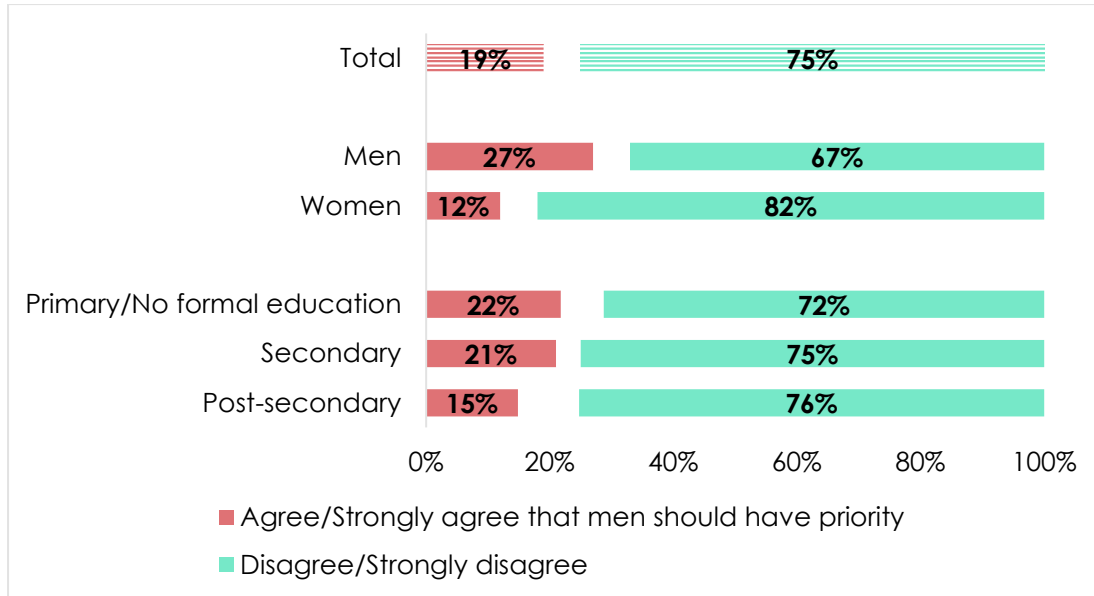
While most South Africans support equal rights to jobs and land ownership for women, Afrobarometer data show that only a slim majority (55%) of citizens believe that women in the country in fact currently have the same opportunities to get jobs as men (Figure 6). This perception is less common among women (52%), urban residents (53%), the least educated (46%), and the economically worst-off citizens (48%) than among their male, rural, more educated, and wealthier counterparts.¹

Somewhat more respondents (61%) say women and men enjoy equal opportunities to own or inherit land. Equal proportions of women and men (61% each) perceive opportunities to own land in South Africa as gender-equal. This perception is more widespread in rural areas

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).

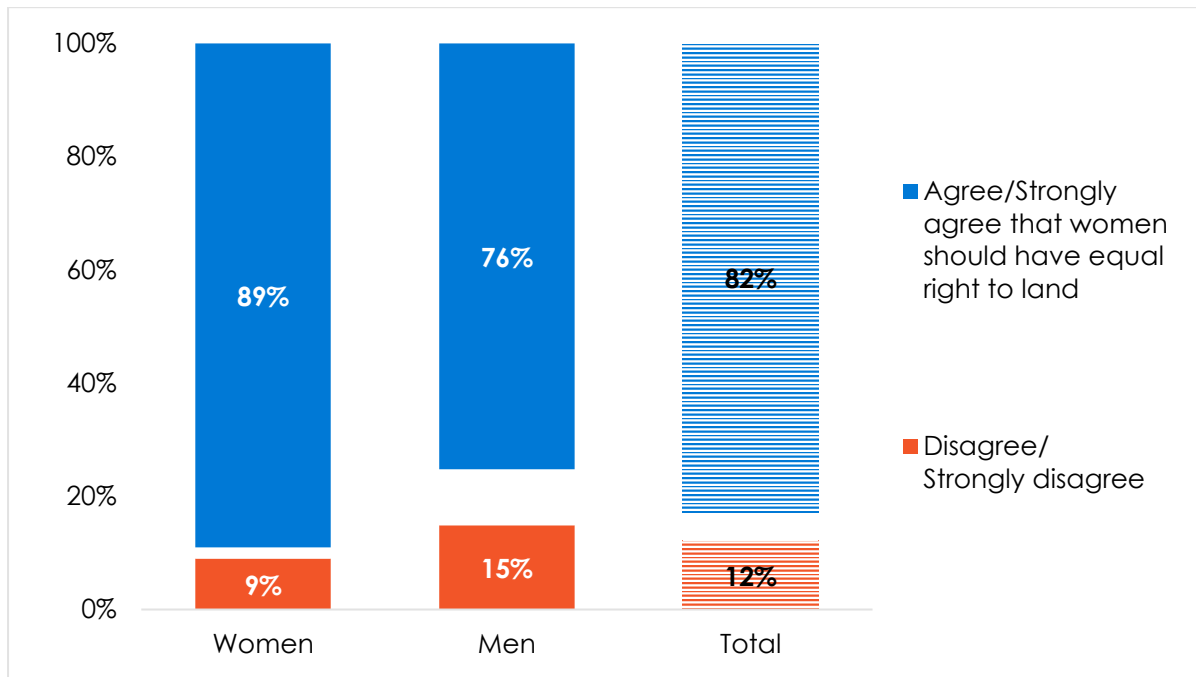
than in cities (65% vs. 59%) and increases with respondents' education level and economic status.

Figure 4: Should men have priority for scarce jobs? | by gender and education | South Africa | 2022



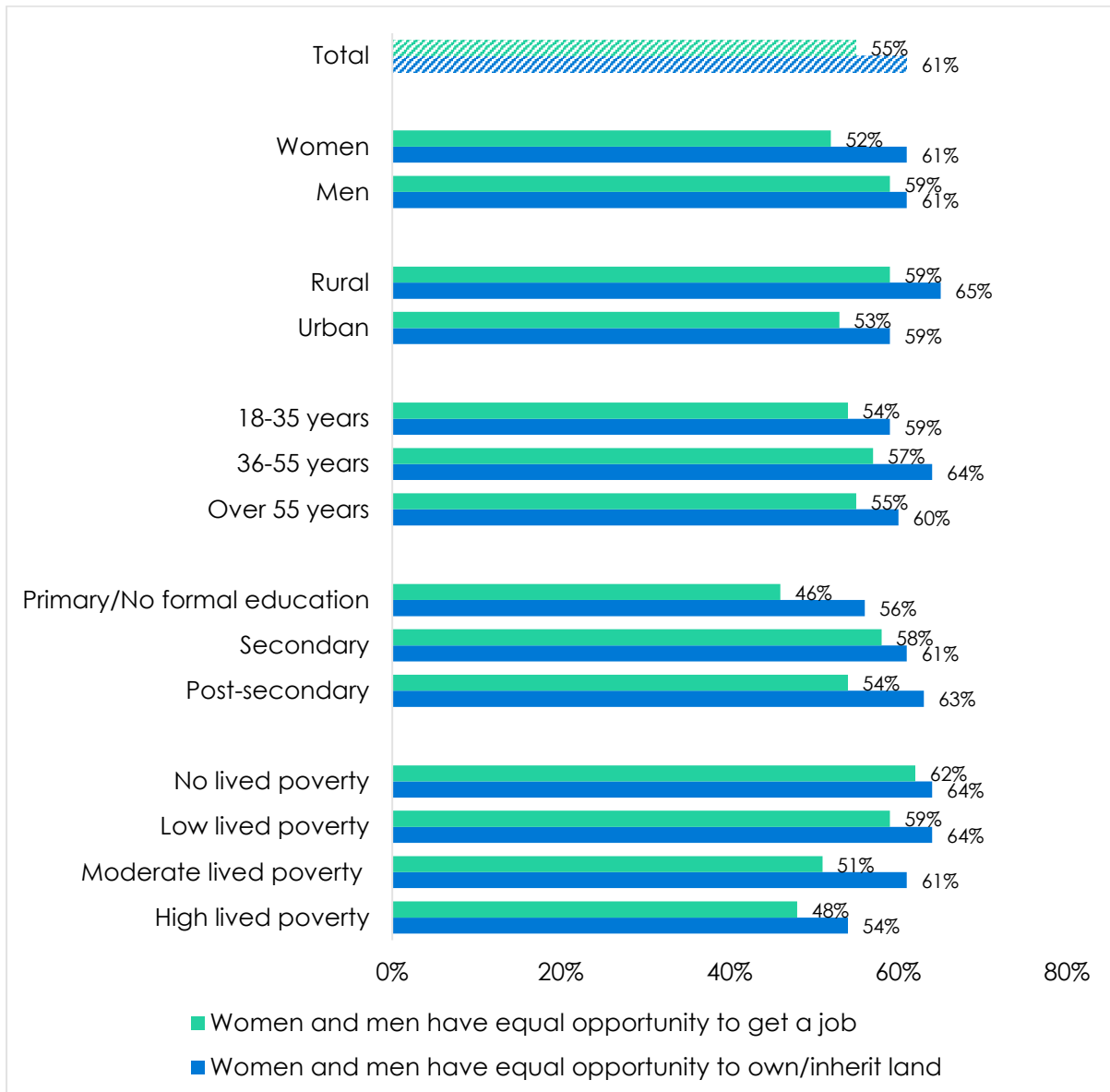
Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: When jobs are scarce, men should have more rights to a job than women.

Figure 5: Should women have equal rights to land? | by gender | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Women should have the same rights as men to own and inherit land.

Figure 6: Do women and men actually have equal opportunities to get a job and to own/inherit land? | by demographic group | South Africa | 2022



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

In our country today, women and men have equal opportunities to get a job that pays a wage or salary.

In our country today, women and men have equal opportunities to own and inherit land.

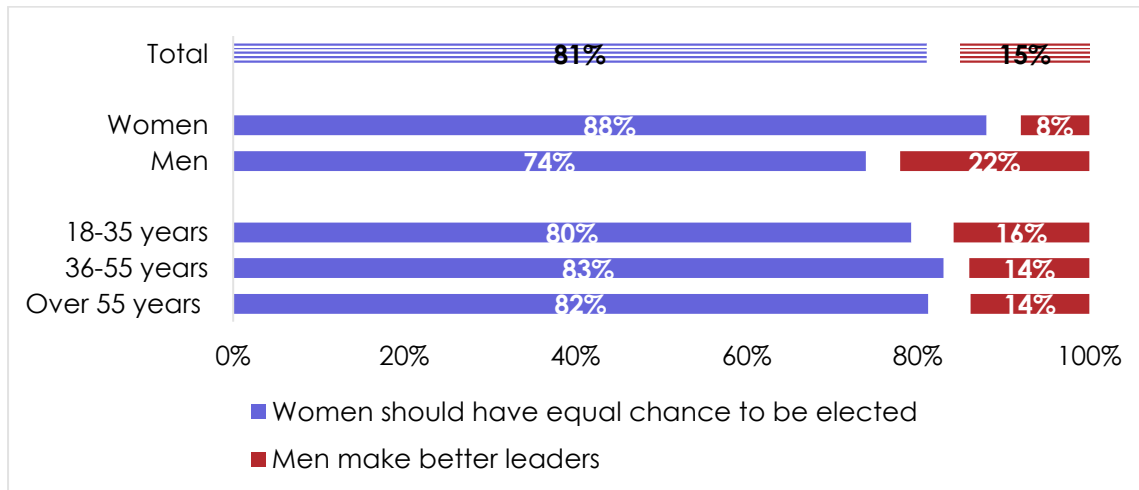
(% who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

Gender equality in political participation

One critical aspect of gender equality is women’s participation in political leadership, which helps ensure that women’s voices are heard in policy making.

More than eight in 10 South Africans (81%) say women should have the same chance as men to be elected to political office (Figure 7). More women (88%) than men (74%) favour gender equality in political participation, but views differ little by age group.

Figure 7: Should women have an equal chance to be elected? | by gender
 | South Africa | 2022



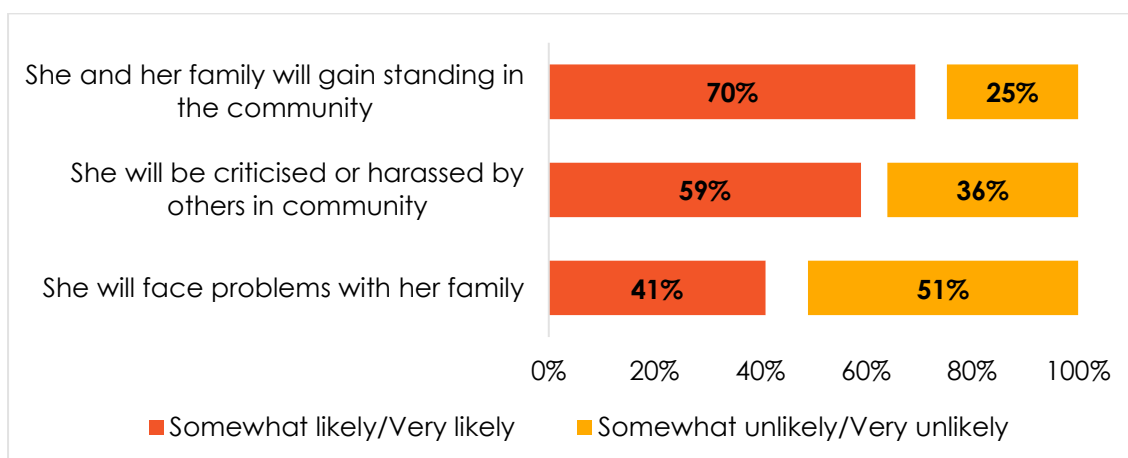
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Men make better political leaders than women and should be elected rather than women.
 Statement 2: Women should have the same chance of being elected to political office as men.
 (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)

Even if she believes that voters will give her the same consideration as a male candidate, a woman may be further encouraged to run for public office – or discouraged from doing so – by other consequences she expects to result from her candidacy.

On the positive side, seven in 10 South Africans (70%) say it is “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that a woman and her family will gain standing in the community if she runs for elected office (Figure 8).

But almost six in 10 respondents (59%) also say that a woman standing for election is likely to be criticised, called names, or harassed by others in the community, while 41% think she will probably face problems with her family – perceptions that might discourage some women from entering a political race.

Figure 8: For better or for worse: How running for elected office might affect women's lives | South Africa | 2022



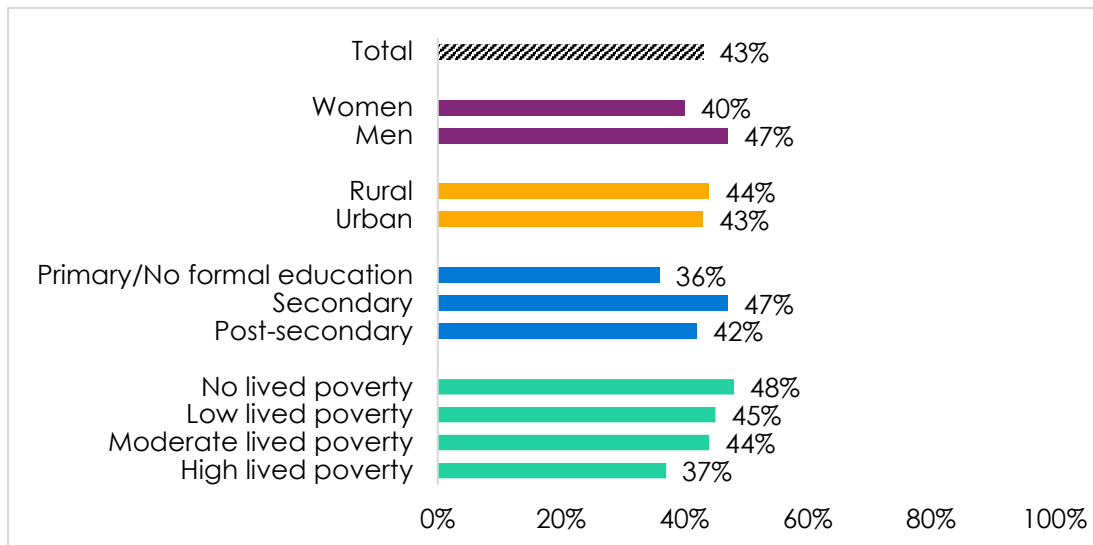
Respondents were asked: If a woman in your community runs for elected office, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: She and her family will gain standing in the community? She will be criticised, called names, or harassed by others in the community? She will face problems with her family?

Government performance in promoting equal rights and opportunities

Overall, fewer than half (43%) of South Africans say the government is doing “fairly well” or “very well” on promoting equal rights and opportunities for women, while 54% say it is doing a poor job (Figure 9). Approval ratings are particularly low among women (40%), the least educated (36%), and the poor (37%).

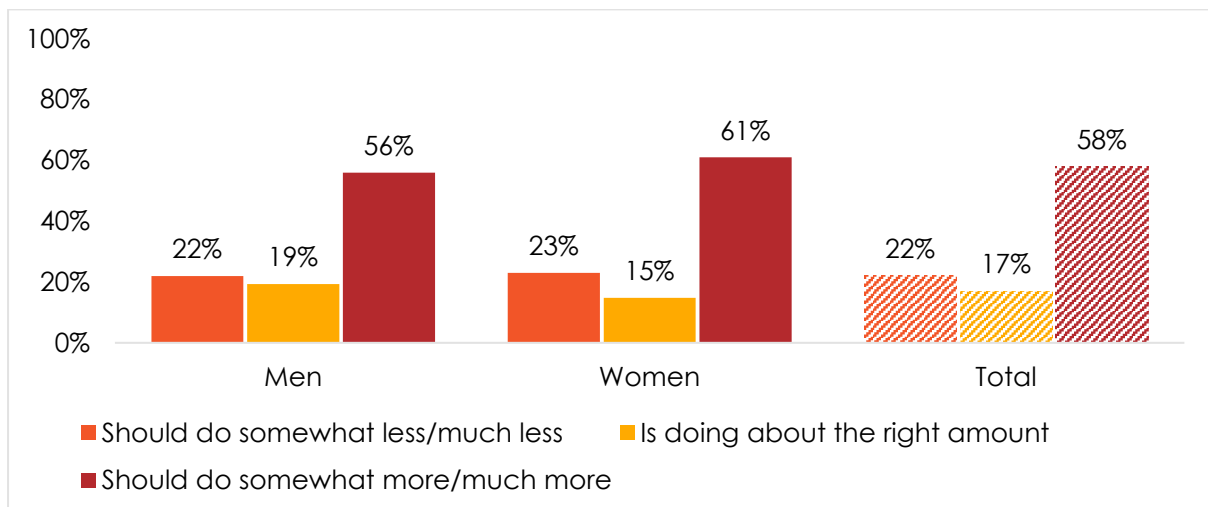
Instead, a majority (58%) of South African citizens say the government should be doing more to promote gender equality in the country. More women (61%) than men (56%) want to see greater government initiative (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Government performance in promoting equal rights and opportunities for women | South Africa | 2022



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: Promoting equal rights and opportunities for women? (% who say “fairly well” or “very well”)

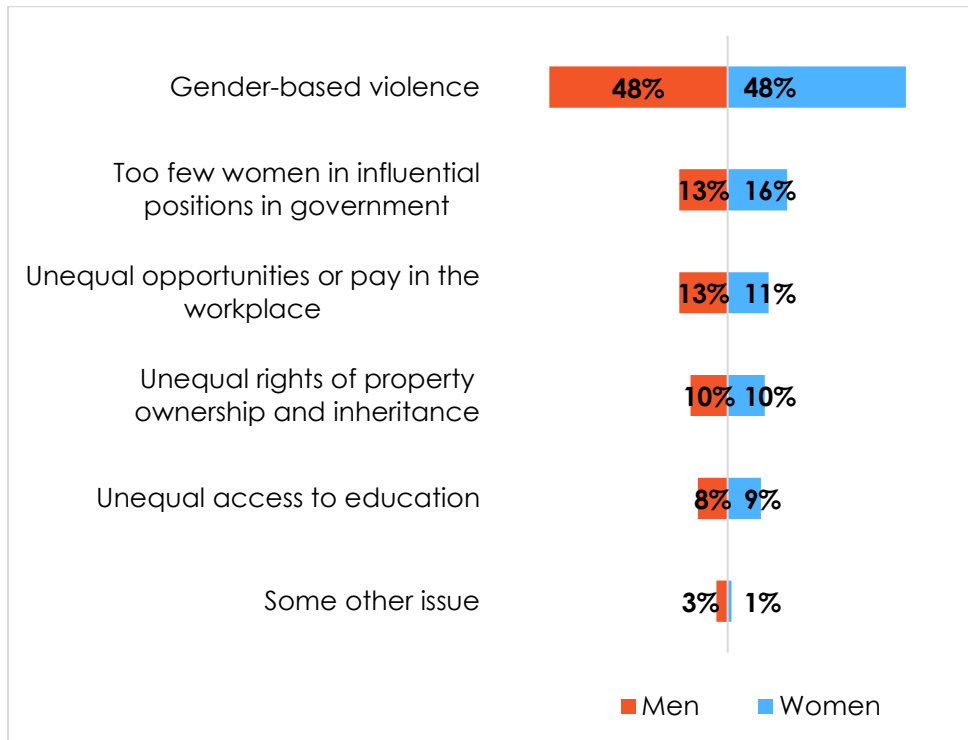
Figure 10: Should the government do more or less to promote equal rights and opportunities for women? | by gender | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, should government and elected officials be doing more than they are doing now to advance the rights and equality of women, or should they be doing less, or are they doing about the right amount?

Asked what they consider to be the most important women's-rights issue for their government and society to address, nearly half of men and women (48% each) cite gender-based violence (Figure 11). In second place is too few women in influential positions in government, followed by unequal opportunities or pay in the workplace, unequal rights of property ownership and inheritance, and unequal access to education.

Figure 11: Most important women's-rights issue | by gender | 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?*

Conclusion

Most South Africans express support for gender equality in access to paying jobs, land ownership, and the right to run for public office. But substantial minorities doubt that equality in hiring and land rights has been achieved, and a majority think women who run for public office are likely to face negative reactions from the community.

More than half of citizens say more needs to be done to promote equal rights and opportunities for women. Among women's-rights issues that their government and society must address, citizens prioritise gender-based violence and the scarcity of women in influential positions in government.

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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