

Tolerance for social differences is high, but not universal, in the Gambia

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 766 | Lionel Ossé and Sait Matty Jaw

Summary

Since its change of government in 2017, the Gambia has undergone significant reforms aimed at promoting reconciliation and healing the wounds left by Yahya Jammeh's two-decade rule (Jaw, 2019). During his presidency, Jammeh adopted divide-and-rule tactics, such as declaring the Gambia an Islamic state in 2015 and attacking the Mandinka, the majority ethnic group in the country (Sommerfelt, 2016).

Despite Jammeh's electoral defeat in 2016, his legacy continues to affect the social fabric of the Gambia, which has historically been known for its tolerance and harmonious coexistence (Courtright, 2018). While previous Afrobarometer survey data have shown generally tolerant attitudes toward different ethnicities, religions, and nationalities (Jaw & Isbell, 2020), economic strains exacerbate challenges such as caste-based friction in the Upper River Region (Point, 2020), religious tensions (National Human Rights Commission, 2023), and tribal rhetoric (Hultin & Sommerfelt, 2020).

The National Human Rights Commission (2023) has played a leading role in efforts to address these challenges, emphasising the importance of ethnic and religious diversity and tolerance as key features of public and social life. Furthermore, the Supreme Islamic Council and Christian Council have established interfaith dialogue groups to promote religious tolerance and understanding, and youth groups such as Activista-The Gambia are intervening to promote religious tolerance (Bah, 2023).

The situation in the Gambia demonstrates the complexities of caste, ethnic, and religious tensions in the country's political landscape. Efforts to address past injustices and promote reconciliation through the implementation of recommendations by the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission and government white paper (Republic of the Gambia, 2022) offer hope for healing and inclusivity, but it remains crucial to monitor and address underlying socioeconomic issues to ensure a more tolerant and cohesive society in the future.

The most recent Afrobarometer survey shows that for the overwhelming majority of Gambians, national identity is either stronger than ethnic identity or equally strong. While still a minority, the share of citizens who say the government treats their ethnic group unfairly has increased significantly in recent years, and most Gambians think the government discriminates against people based on their economic status.

Survey findings show that most Gambians express tolerance toward people of different ethnic, national, and religious backgrounds, but not toward people in same-sex relationships.

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 the Gambia, led by the Center for Policy, Research and Strategic Studies (CepRass), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens between 30 August and 19 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 the Gambia in 2018 and 2021.

Key findings

- For nine out of 10 Gambians (92%), their national identity is at least as strong as their ethnic identity; very few say they feel “more ethnic than Gambian” (4%) or “only ethnic” (3%).
- More than four in 10 Gambians (43%) say the government treats their ethnic group unfairly, including 18% who say this happens “often” or “always.” The proportion of citizens who say the government “never” discriminates against their ethnic group has dropped from 71% to 53% since 2018.
- Three-quarters (75%) of Gambians say the government at least “sometimes” treats people unfairly based on their economic status.
- Overwhelming majorities of Gambians express tolerant attitudes toward people of different ethnicities (95%), different political affiliations (90%), different nationalities (83%), and different religions (76%). But fewer than one in 10 (7%) are tolerant toward people in same-sex relationships.
- More than three-fourths of Gambians say they trust their relatives (82%) and neighbours (78%) “somewhat” or “a lot.” Far fewer express trust in people from other religious backgrounds (56%).

Gambian identity

When asked whether they identify more strongly with their national or their ethnic identities, the largest share of Gambians (42%) say they identify equally with both, followed by the group who identify as “only Gambian” (38%) (Figure 1).

Overall, more than nine out of 10 citizens (92%) identify at least as strongly as “Gambian” as they do as members of their ethnic group; fewer than one in 10 say they feel “more ethnic” (4%) or “only ethnic” (3%).

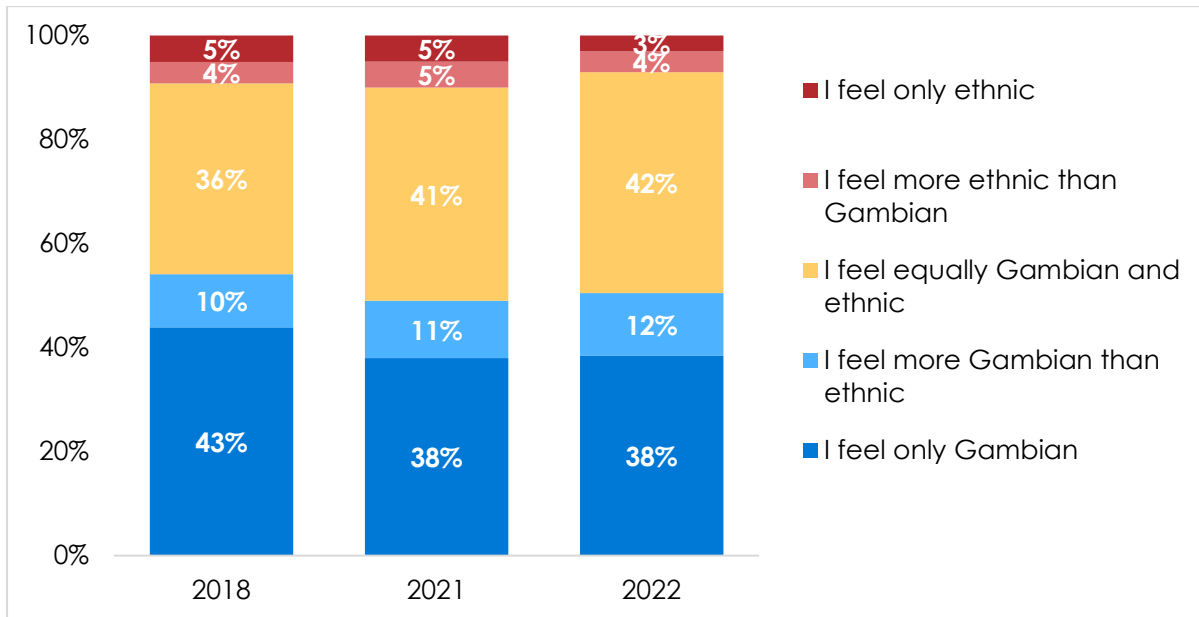
Between 2018 and 2022, strong nationalist feelings decreased (from 43% to 38%) while the feeling of belonging equally to national and ethnic origins has increased (from 36% to 42%).

Identification as “only Gambian” varies widely by region: While more than half of residents in Kanifing (53%) and Kerewan (52%) say they feel “only Gambian,” the same is true of only about one in four respondents in Brikama (25%) and Janjanbureh (23%) regions (Figure 2).

The poorest respondents¹ are more likely to identify as “only Gambian” (45% vs. 32% of those experiencing no lived poverty), as are those with post-secondary education (46%) compared to their less educated counterparts (28%-35%).

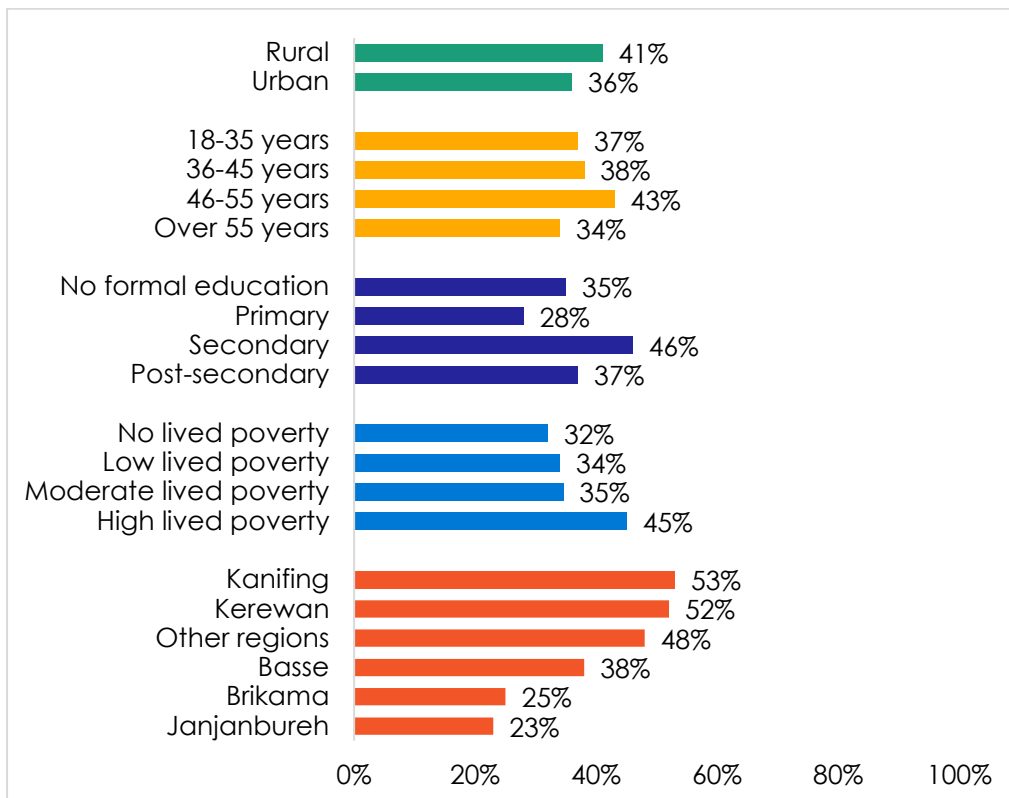
¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty,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

Figure 1: National vs. ethnic identity | Gambia | 2018-2022



Respondents were asked: Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a Gambian and being a [member of respondent's ethnic group]. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings?

Figure 2: Feel only Gambian | Gambia | 2022

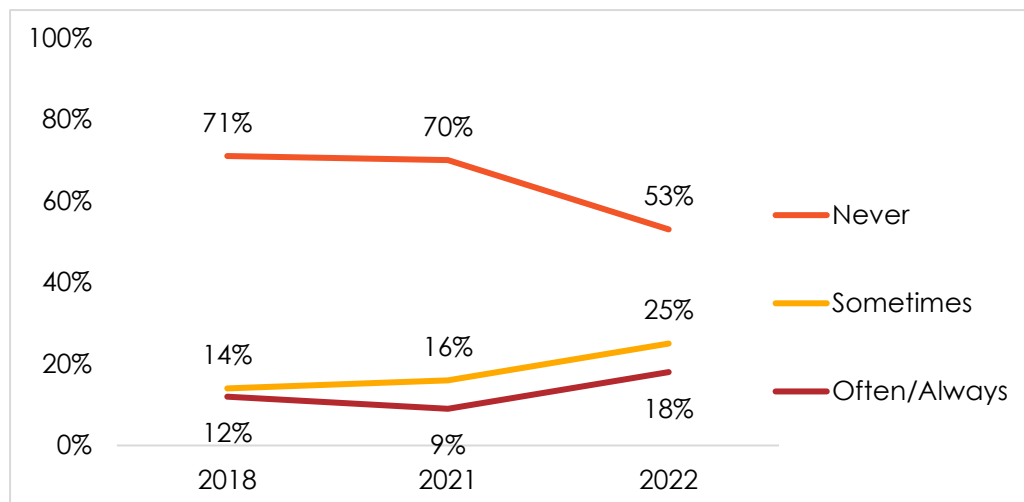


Respondents were asked: Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a Gambian and being a [member of respondent's ethnic group]. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings? (% who "feel only Gambian")

Unfair treatment by the government

The proportion of Gambians who say the government treats members of their ethnic group unfairly has increased significantly over the past four years (Figure 3). Almost one in five (18%) say this happens “often” or “always,” up from 12% in 2018, while the share of citizens who say it occurs “sometimes” has increased from 14% to 25%. Only a slim majority (53%) report that the government “never” discriminates against members of their ethnic group, down from 71% in 2018.

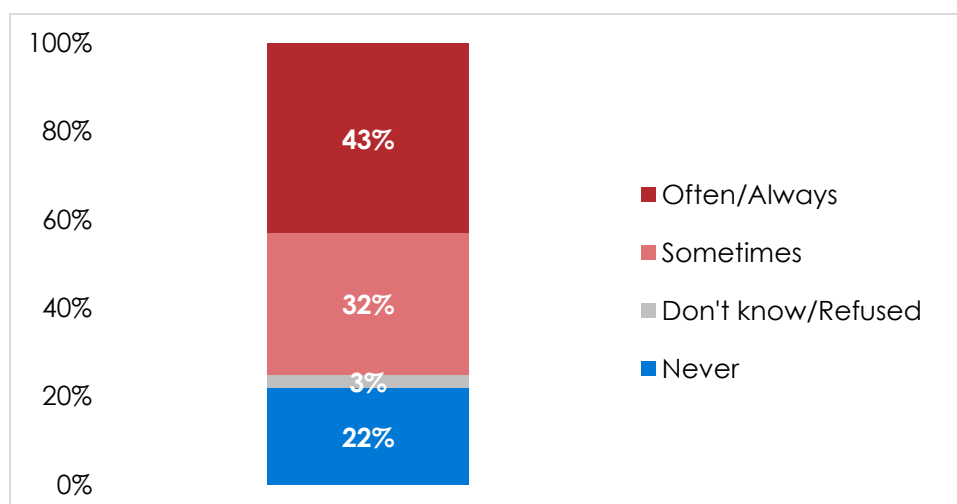
Figure 3: Unfair treatment based on ethnicity | Gambia | 2018-2022



Respondents were asked: How often, if ever, are [members of the respondent's ethnic group] treated unfairly by the government?

Even more Gambians say the government treats people unfairly based on their economic status: Fully three-quarters (75%) of respondents say this happens “often” or “always” (43%) or “sometimes” (32%) (Figure 4).

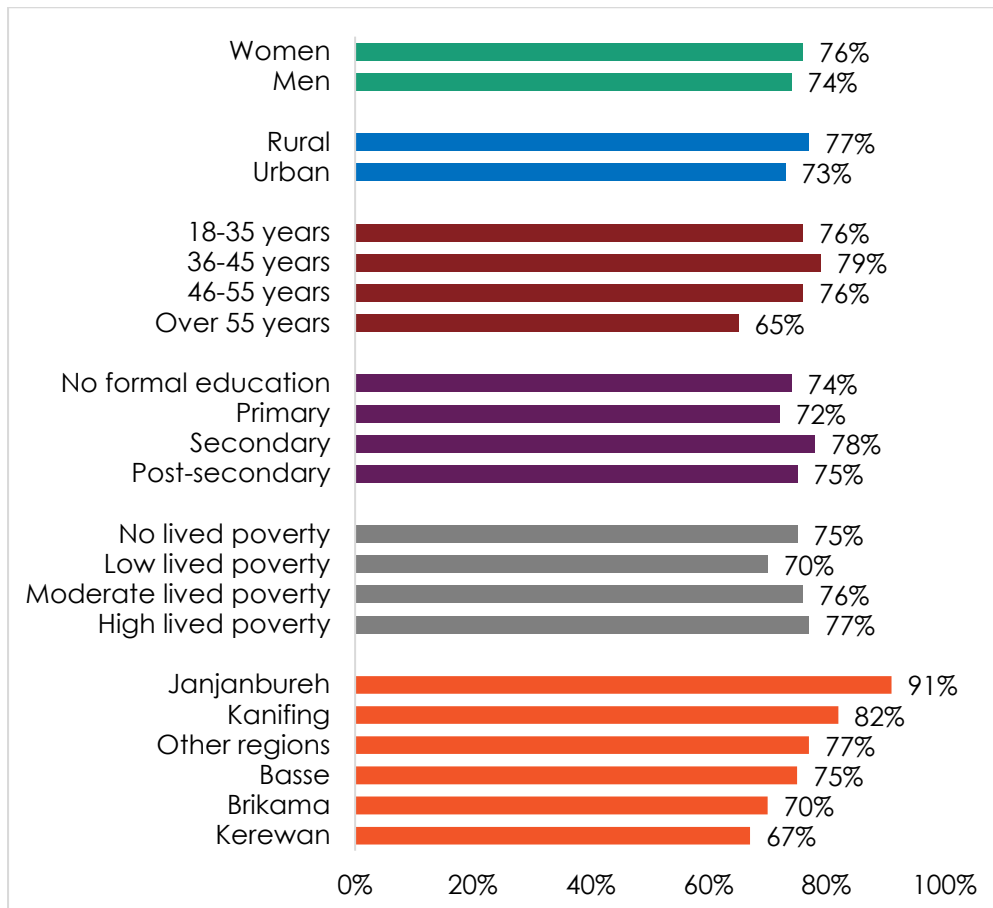
Figure 4: Treated unfairly by government based on economic status | Gambia | 2022



Respondents were asked: How often, if ever, are people treated unfairly by the government based on their economic status, that is, how rich or poor they are?

Perceived discrimination based on economic status is particularly common in Janjanbureh (91%) and Kanifing (82%) (Figure 5). Older respondents are least likely to report this form of unfair treatment by the government (65% of those aged 56 or older).

Figure 5: Treated unfairly by the government based on economic status | by demographic group | Gambia | 2022



Respondents were asked: How often, if ever, are people treated unfairly by the government based on their economic status, that is, how rich or poor they are? (% of "sometimes," "often," or "always")

Tolerance and trust

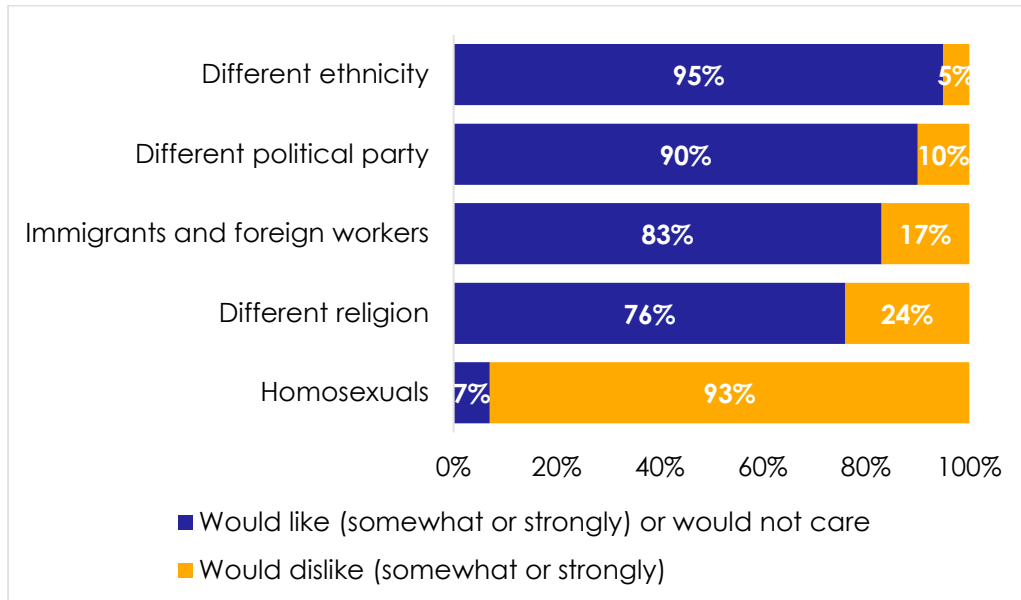
At least nine out of 10 Gambians express tolerant attitudes toward people of different ethnicities (95%) and different political affiliations (90%), saying they would like it or would not care if they had these people as neighbours (Figure 6). More than three-fourths of Gambians indicate the same tolerance toward immigrants and foreign workers (83%) and people from a different religion (76%). But fewer than one in 10 (7%) say they wouldn't mind living next door to someone in a same-sex relationship.

Intolerance toward people in same-sex relationships is pervasive across age groups and genders. Citizens with post-secondary education (86%) and urban residents (91%) are slightly less likely to express intolerance than less educated citizens (94%) et rural residents (95%) (Figure 7).

The 93% who say they would "somewhat dislike" or "strongly dislike" having homosexual neighbours place Gambia near the top in terms of intolerance across 39 African countries

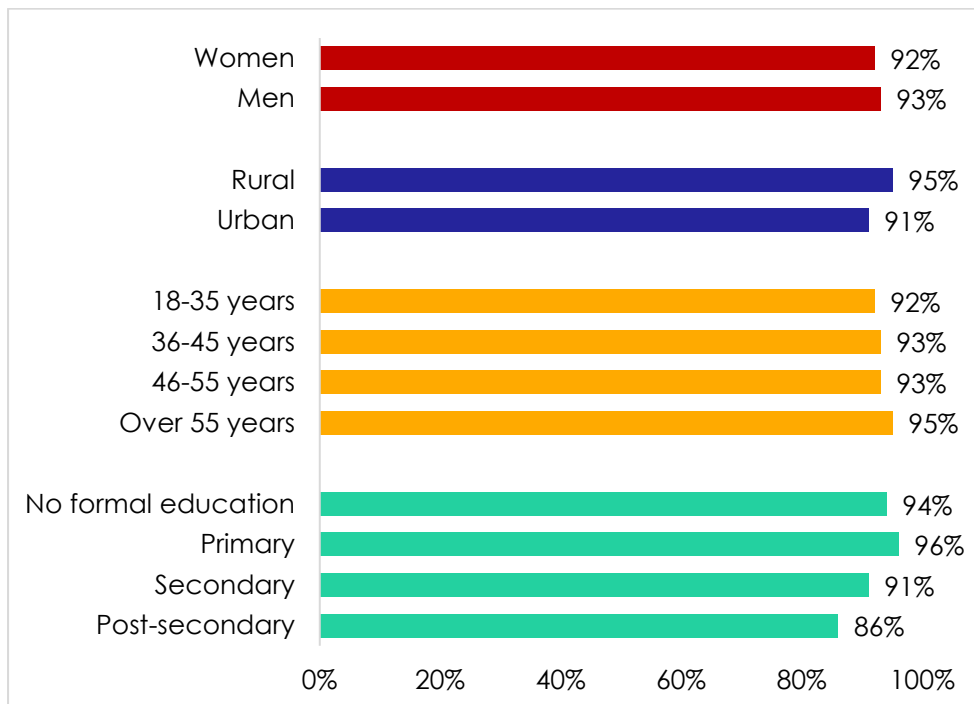
surveyed between late 2021 and mid-2023, well above the 74% continental average (Figure 8).

Figure 6: Social tolerance | Gambia | 2022



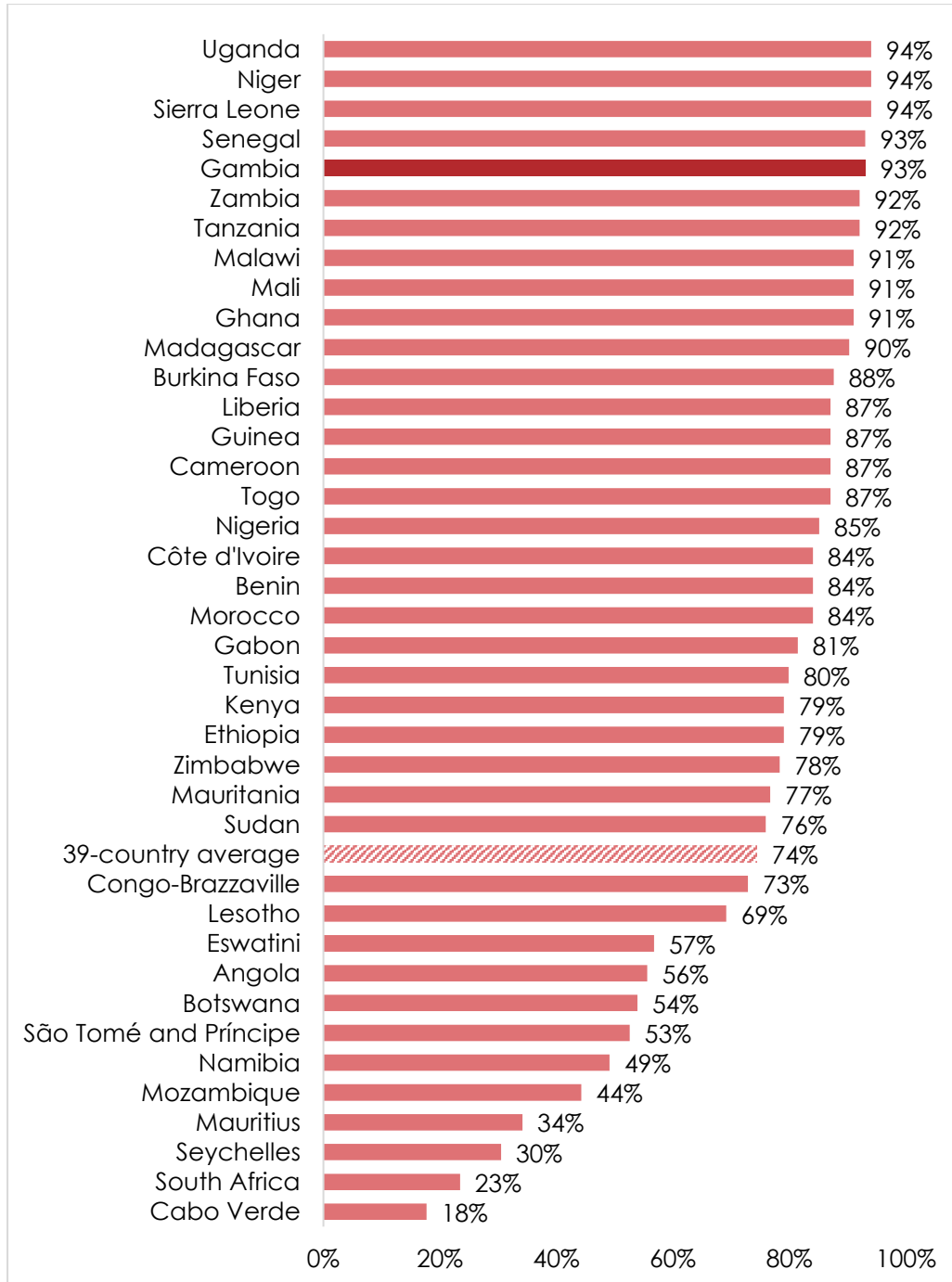
Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care?

Figure 7: Rejection of people in same-sex relationships as neighbours | by demographic group | Gambia | 2022



Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Homosexuals? (% who say "somewhat dislike" or "strongly dislike")

Figure 8: Intolerance toward people of different sexual identity/orientation
 | 39 countries | 2021/2023

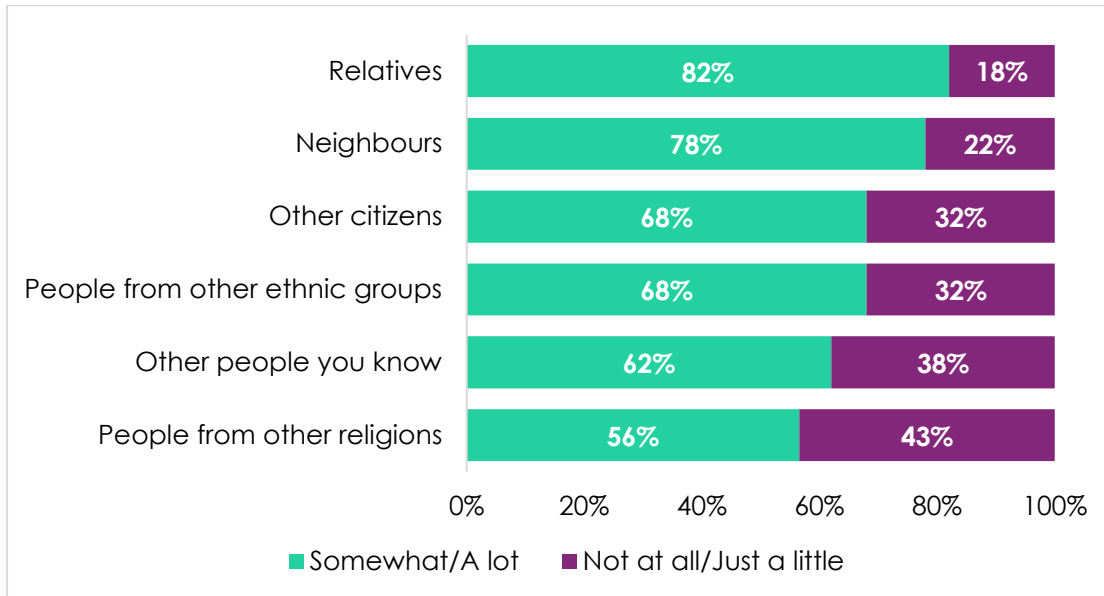


Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Homosexuals? (% who say "would strongly dislike" or "would somewhat dislike")

If Gambians are generally tolerant toward others except for homosexuals, they have mixed feelings when it comes to trusting the people their society is made of. About eight in 10 respondents say they trust their relatives (82%) and their neighbours (78%) "somewhat" or "a

lot," while two-thirds (68%) trust people from other ethnic groups and other citizens. Gambians express less trust for people with other religious beliefs (56%) and "other people you know" (62%) (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Level of trust in society | Gambia | 2022



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following types of people?

Conclusion

While very few Gambians value their ethnicity more strongly than their national identity, many consider it at least equally important. In light of this finding, the fact that an increasing number of citizens complain of government discrimination against their ethnic group is troubling. A majority of Gambians also see the government as discriminating against people based on economic status.

Most citizens – but not all – express tolerant attitudes toward people who differ from themselves in terms of ethnicity, nationality, political preferences, or religious beliefs, but not in terms of sexual orientation.

These findings suggest that public authorities, civil society organisations, religious leaders, the media, and other actors in society still have a role to play in the fight against all types of discrimination and in initiatives to consolidate the Gambia's still-fragile national unity.

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