

Mauritians rank gender-based violence as top women's-rights issue for government to address

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 787 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma

Summary

In Mauritius, one in four women have experienced some form of gender-based violence (GBV) (Government of Mauritius, 2021; United Nations Mauritius, 2021). According to Statistics Mauritius (2020), reported cases of GBV spiked at the height of the COVID-19 lockdown in March-May 2020, jumping five-fold compared to the same period in 2018 and 2019. In addition to violating the basic human rights of countless women, GBV is estimated to cost the state 2 billion rupees per year, 0.6% of gross domestic product, in health care, social services, and lost productivity (UNDP Mauritius & Seychelles, 2020).

The country's weapons to fight GBV range from the Constitution, the National Gender Policy, and the Domestic Violence Act to support structures such as the Police Family Protection Unit, the Parliamentary Gender Caucus, the 139 hotline (available 24/7), the mobile app Lespwar fitted with an emergency button to alert the authorities, and the Gender-Based Violence Observatory, which provides data and evidence to inform policy processes (Republic of Mauritius, 1968; Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare, 2022; Mauritius National Assembly, 2016; Mauritius Police Force, 2024; No Peace Without Justice, 2017; Government of Mauritius, 2022; Australian High Commission Mauritius, 2020).

In 2020, the government launched the National Strategy and Action Plan on the Elimination of Gender-Based Violence (2020-2024), which aims to change societal norms and beliefs that do not align with the principles of gender equality and equity, to prioritise support services for survivors and hold perpetrators accountable, and to identify and address discriminatory practices that perpetuate GBV (Government of Mauritius, 2020).

The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare also works with civil society and development partners to increase the availability of GBV services and to reduce public tolerance for violence against women and girls (UNDP Mauritius & Seychelles, 2023).

In the final year of implementation of the national strategy, 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. (For findings on gender equality, see Darga & Hurroo, 2023).

In Mauritius, GBV ranks at the top of women's-rights issues that citizens say their government and society must address. Most respondents say physical force is never justified to discipline women, and they consider domestic violence a criminal rather than private matter. But while most believe that the police take GBV cases seriously, many also consider it likely that women reporting GBV cases to the authorities will suffer community backlash.

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 Mauritius, led by StraConsult Ltd., interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Mauritians in March 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 Mauritius in 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2020.

Key findings

- Mauritians see gender-based violence (GBV) as the most important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address.
 - Men are just as likely as women to cite GBV as the country's top women's-right issue.
- Nearly three in 10 citizens (28%) say violence against women is a "somewhat common" (24%) or "very common" (4%) occurrence in Mauritius, while 67% disagree.
- An overwhelming majority (83%) of Mauritians say it is "never" justified for a man to physically discipline his wife. About one in six think it is "sometimes" (16%) or "always" (1%) justified.
- Nearly four in 10 respondents (37%) consider it "somewhat likely" (27%) or "very likely" (10%) that a woman will be criticised, harassed, or shamed by others in the community if she reports GBV to the authorities. Only one-fifth (20%) say this is "very unlikely."
 - But most (88%) believe that the police are likely to take cases of GBV seriously.
- Nearly seven in 10 citizens (69%) say domestic violence should be treated as a criminal matter rather than as a private matter to be resolved within the family.

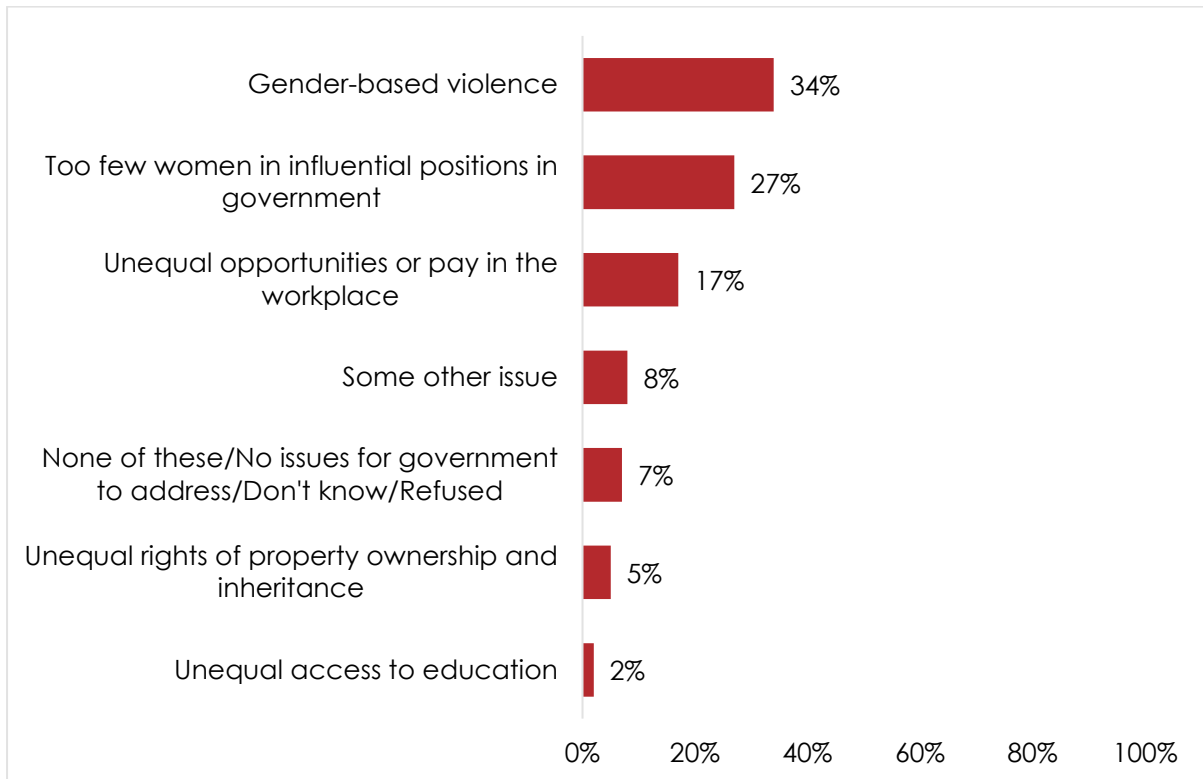
Is gender-based violence (GBV) an important problem in Mauritius?

In Mauritius, gender-based violence (cited by 34% of respondents) ranks as the No. 1 women's-rights issue that citizens say the government and society must address (Figure 1). GBV is followed by the dearth of women in influential positions in government (27%) and unequal opportunities or pay in the workplace (17%).

Men (35%) are just as likely as women (33%) to see GBV as the most important issue requiring the attention of the government and society (not shown).

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Figure 1: Most important women’s-rights issue | Mauritius | 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?

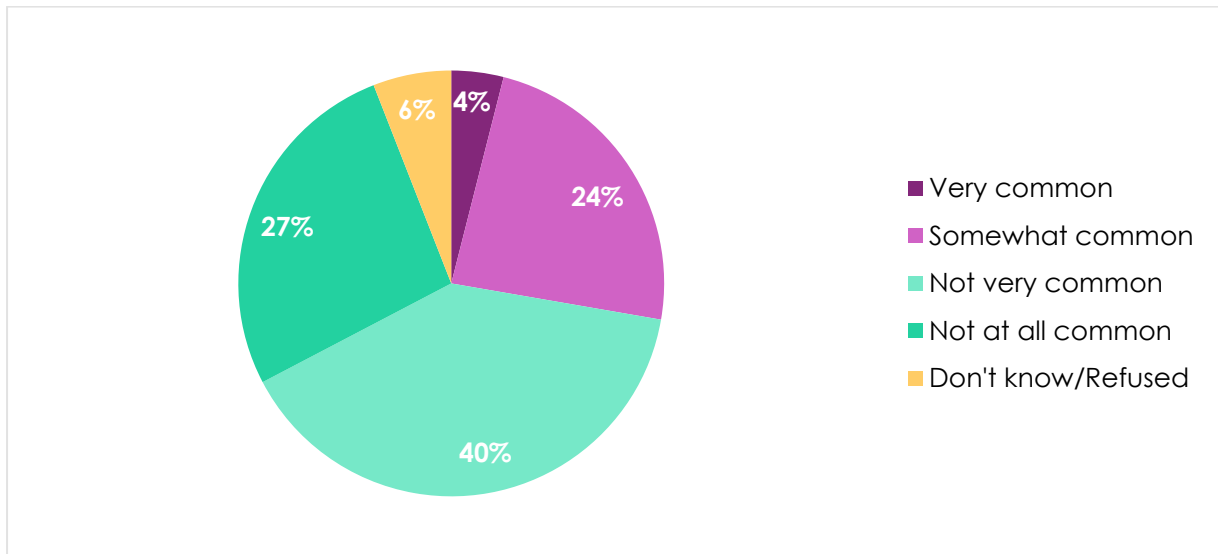
One reason that GBV is considered a critical issue is probably its frequency: 28% of respondents say violence against women and girls is “somewhat common” (24%) or “very common” (4%) in their community, although about two-thirds (67%) disagree (Figure 2).

Women (29%) are slightly more likely than men (26%) to say that violence against women is a common occurrence. This assessment is considerably more widespread among urban residents (35%), citizens with primary schooling or less (33%), and the poorest respondents (57%) than among rural residents (22%), those with post-secondary education (22%), and well-off citizens (17%)¹ (Figure 3).

Younger respondents (31%) are somewhat more likely to report that GBV happens frequently than their elders (23%-28%).

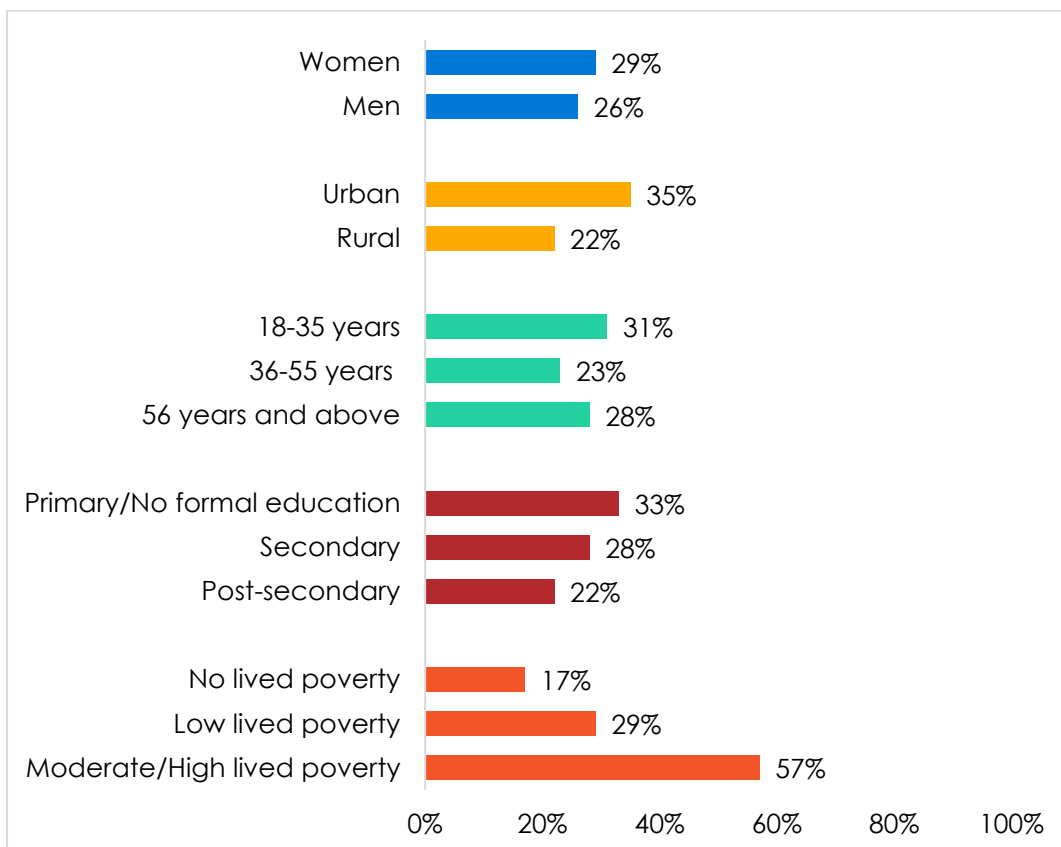
¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty,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

Figure 2: Frequency of GBV | Mauritius | 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?

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



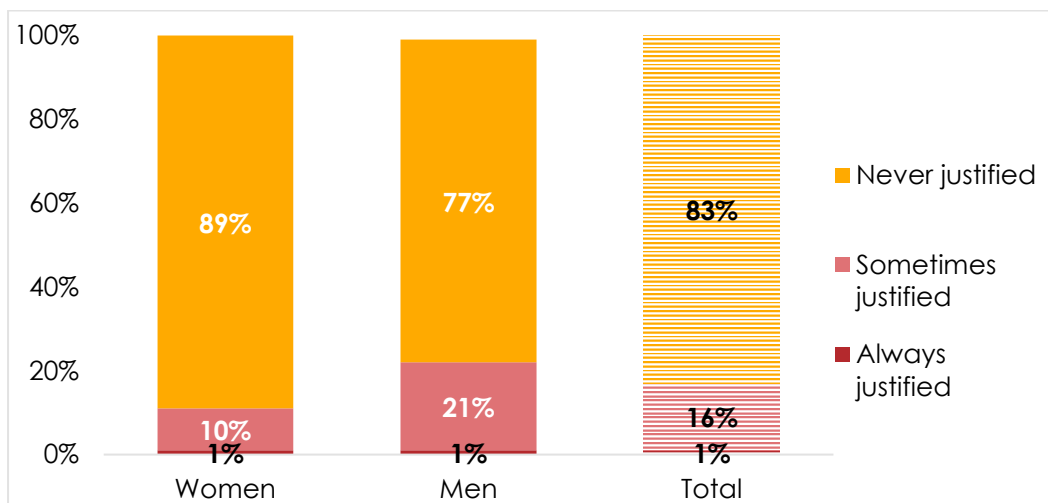
Respondents were asked: In this area, how common do you think it is for men to use violence against women and girls in the home or the community?

Physical discipline of a spouse

More than eight in 10 Mauritians (83%) say it is “never justified” for a man to use physical force to discipline his wife, while about one-sixth consider it “sometimes” (16%) or “always” (1%) justified. Men are less likely than women to rule out physical discipline as “never justified,” 77% vs. 89% (Figure 4).

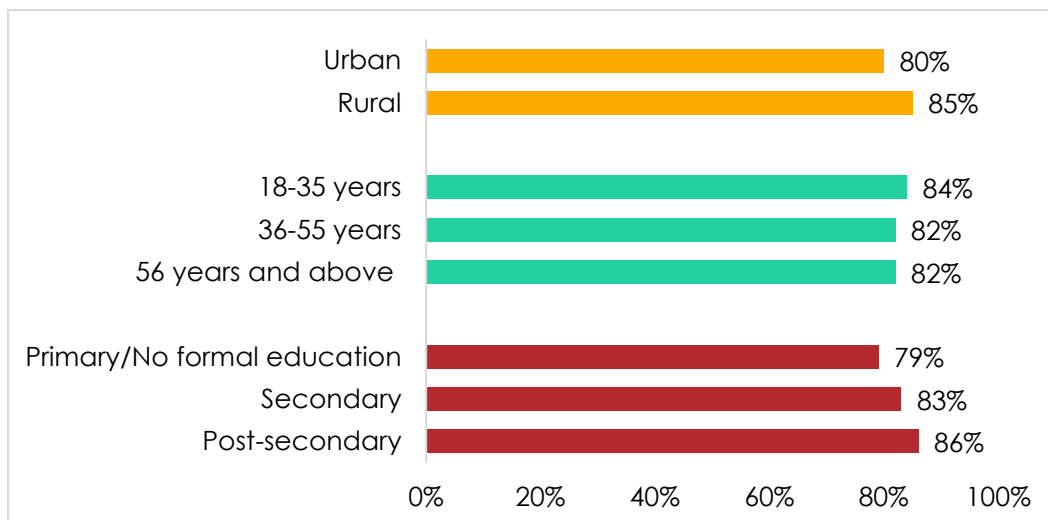
The view that men are never justified in physically disciplining their wives gathers strength as respondents' education level rises, ranging from 79% of those with primary or no formal education to 86% of those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 5). Rural residents (85%) are more likely than their urban counterparts (80%) to share this attitude.

Figure 4: Is it justified for men to physically discipline their wives? | Mauritius | 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: Never justified for men to physically discipline their wives | by demographic group | Mauritius | 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, or the belief that the authorities won't take the case seriously (Palermo, Bleck, & Peterman, 2014).

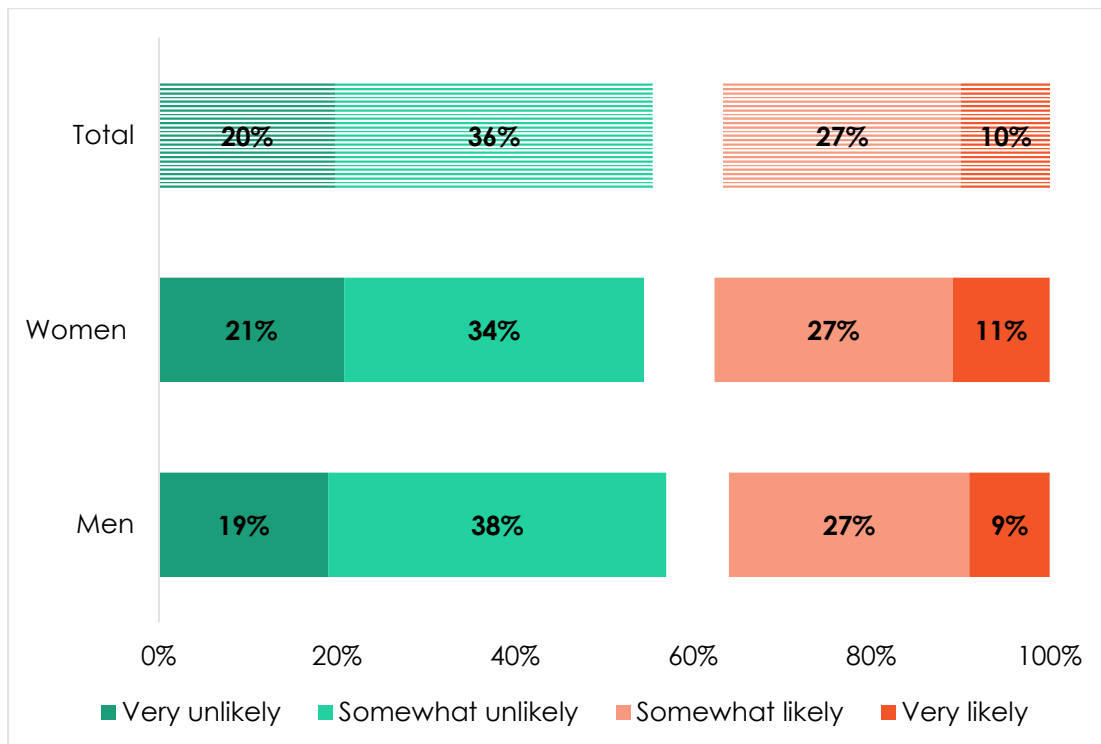
Asked whether they think a woman who reports being a victim of rape, domestic violence, or other GBV will be criticised, harassed, or shamed by others in the community, only one-fifth (20%) of Mauritians say this is "very unlikely" (Figure 6). While another 36% consider it "somewhat unlikely," more than one-third (37%) say such a community response is "somewhat" or "very" likely – a perception that may deter GBV victims from reporting the crimes. Women and men share almost identical expectations on this question.

The perception that community backlash is "very unlikely" is least widespread among urban residents (12%) and poor respondents (14%) (Figure 7).

While expectations regarding the community's response are mixed, Mauritians overwhelmingly believe that the police will respond appropriately to reported cases of GBV: 88% see it as "somewhat likely" (40%) or "very likely" (48%) that the police will take such reports seriously (Figure 8).

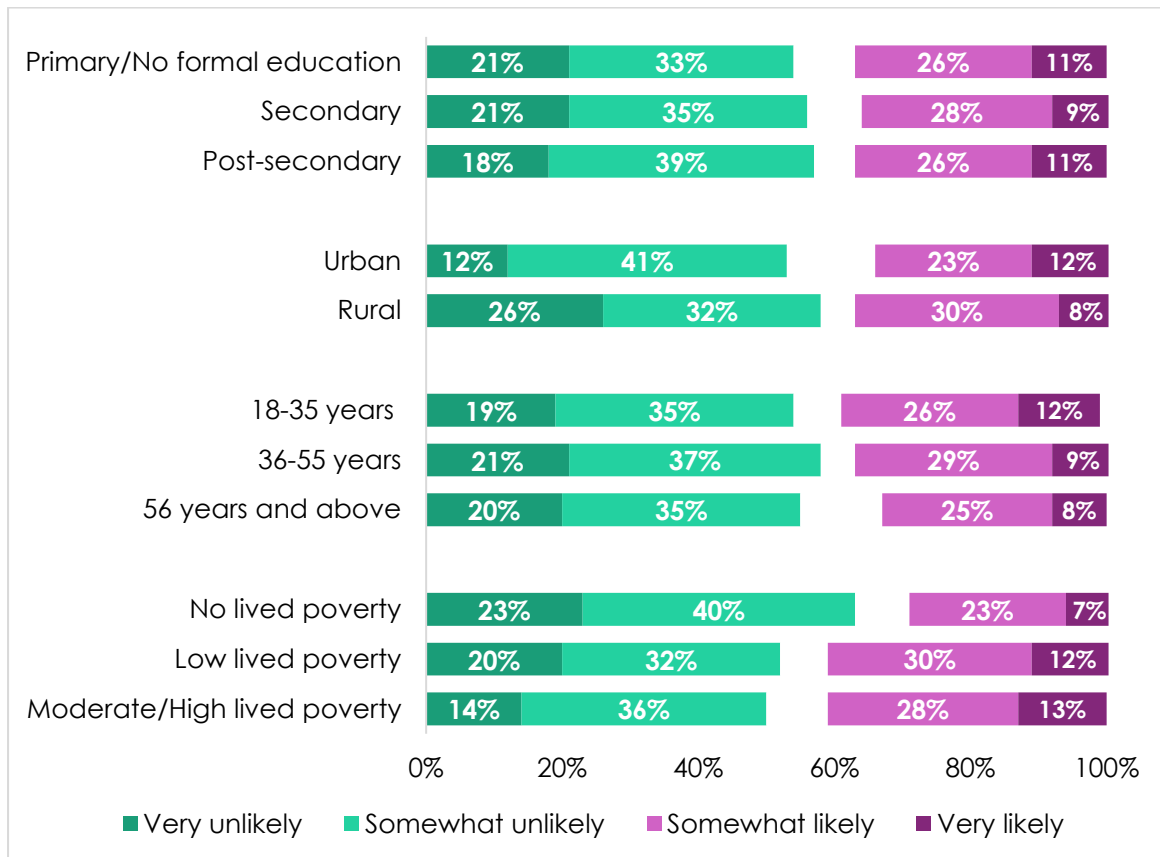
Confidence in a serious police response is high across key demographic groups, though somewhat less solid among the poor (83%) than among their better-off counterparts (88%-90%) (Figure 9).

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



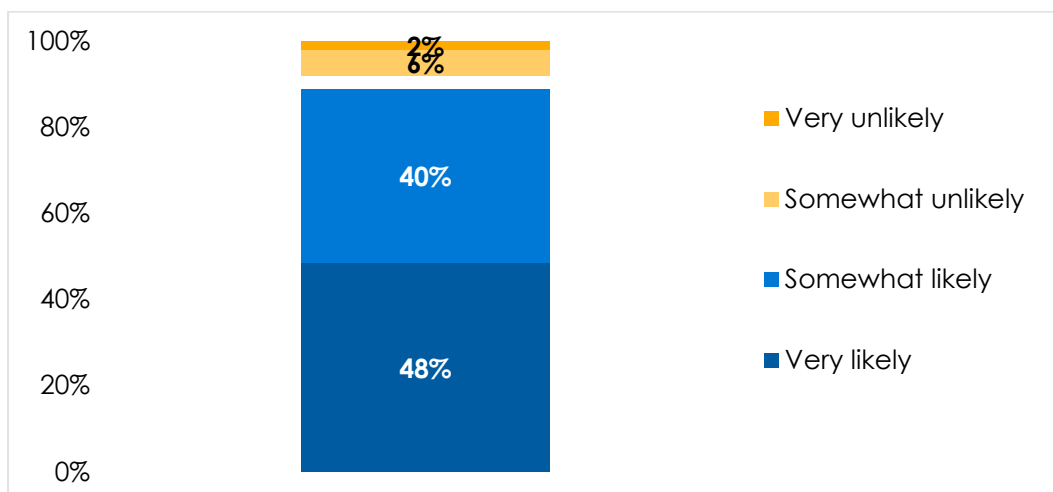
Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: She will be criticised, harassed,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

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



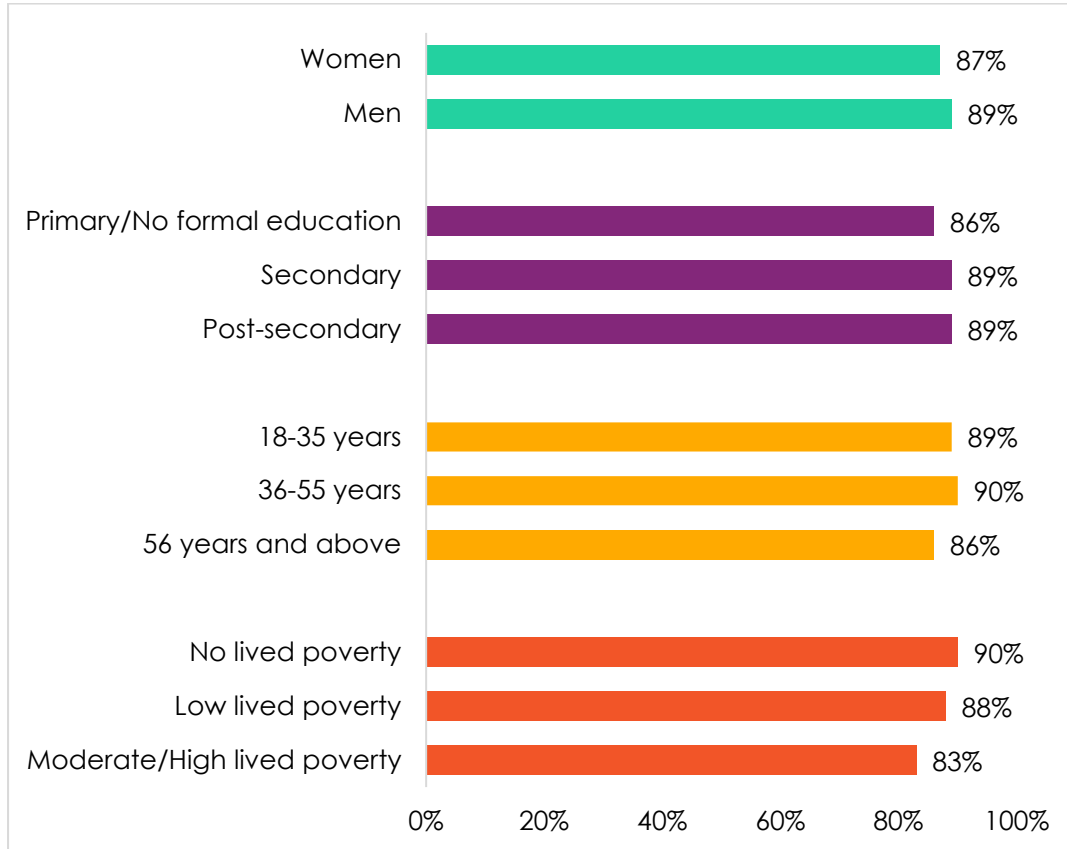
Respondents were asked: If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: She will be criticised, harassed,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

Figure 8: Do the police take GBV cases seriously? | Mauritius | 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 | Mauritius
 | 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")*

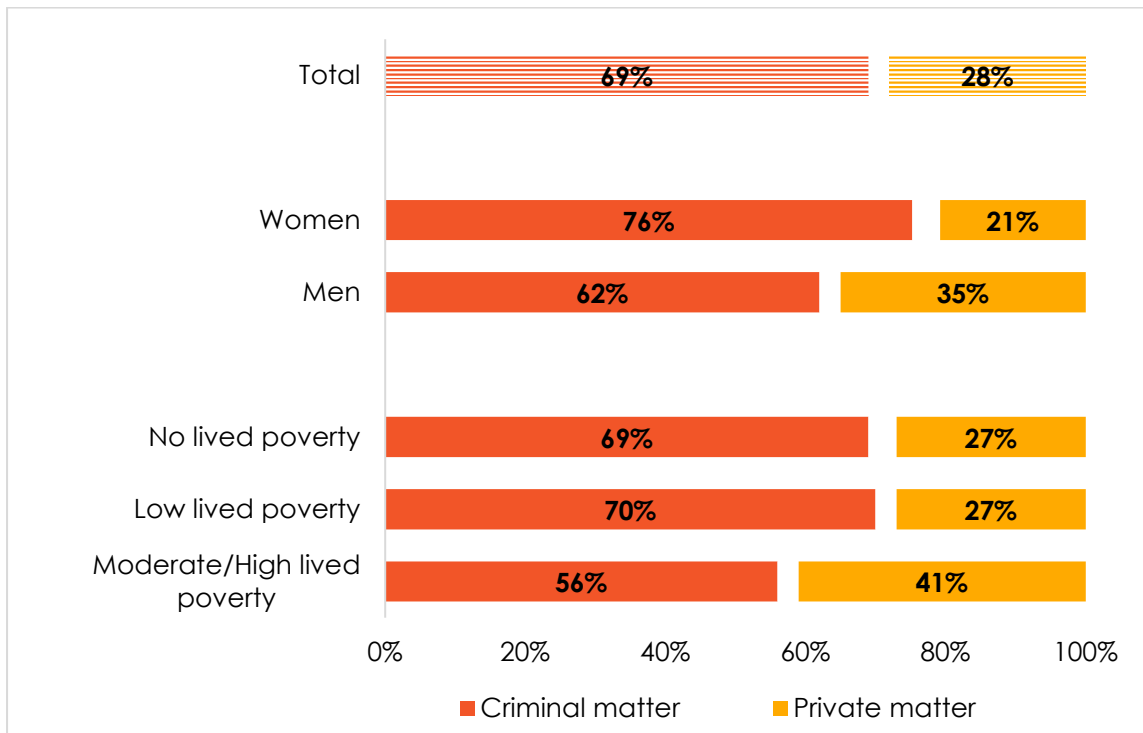
Is domestic violence a criminal or family matter?

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 Mauritians see domestic violence as a criminal matter or a private matter?

Nearly seven in 10 citizens (69%) say domestic violence is a criminal matter that requires the involvement of law enforcement, while 28% believe domestic violence should be seen as a private matter to be resolved within the family (Figure 10).

Women are more likely than men to see domestic violence as a criminal matter, 76% vs. 62%. Poor respondents are least likely to share this view (56%, compared to 69%-70% of those experiencing low or no lived poverty).

Figure 10: Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter? | by gender and lived poverty | Mauritius | 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

Mauritians see GBV as the most important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address. Citizens overwhelmingly reject the use of physical force by a husband.

Most respondents 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. But a substantial minority say that a woman will be criticised, harassed, or shamed if she reports being the victim of GBV – a perception that may discourage some victims from reporting such attacks.

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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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