

Gender-based violence ranks as top women's-rights issue that Ugandans want government and society to address

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 792 | Caroline Nakayiza

Summary

Violence against women and girls is prevalent in almost all countries, widely acknowledged as a major public health and human rights concern (Devries et al., 2013; Nambi, Namuhani, & Kayemba, 2022). In line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5, which calls for eliminating all forms of gender-based violence (GBV), the government of Uganda launched a National Gender-Based Violence Action Plan in 2016 that aims to end practices that promote violence against women and girls and to create a framework to ensure support and access to health services and justice for victims (UNHCR, 2016).

GBV is a critical problem in Uganda. The National Survey on Violence in Uganda reported that 95% of Ugandan women had experienced physical and/or sexual violence (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2021). In 2021, the gender state minister said that GBV led to at least 168 deaths during the previous year (Nabatanzi, 2021). The 2016 Demographic and Health Survey revealed that seven in 10 women who had suffered sexual violence neither sought help nor told anyone (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Globally, fewer than one in 10 women who seek assistance after experiencing violence go to the police, often preferring to turn to family members or to remain silent (UN Women, 2021).

Factors that contribute to under-reporting of GBV include social stigma and shame, fear of reprisal, concerns about confidentiality and being believed, and, in some cultural settings, a high tolerance for violence (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2005; Kishor & Johnson, 2005; Bertram & Crowley, 2012; Sahay, 2021; United Nations, 2010).

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey in Uganda show that GBV is the most important women's-rights issue that citizens say their government and society need to address. Even though a majority of citizens reject the use of physical force against women as "never justified," half say GBV is common in their community.

Most Ugandans think the police take GBV cases seriously, but majorities also see domestic violence as a private rather than a criminal matter and think that women who report GBV to the authorities will face negative reactions from the community.

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 Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult Ltd., interviewed a nationally representative sample of 2,400 adult Ugandans in January 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. This was the 12th Afrobarometer survey in Uganda since 1999.

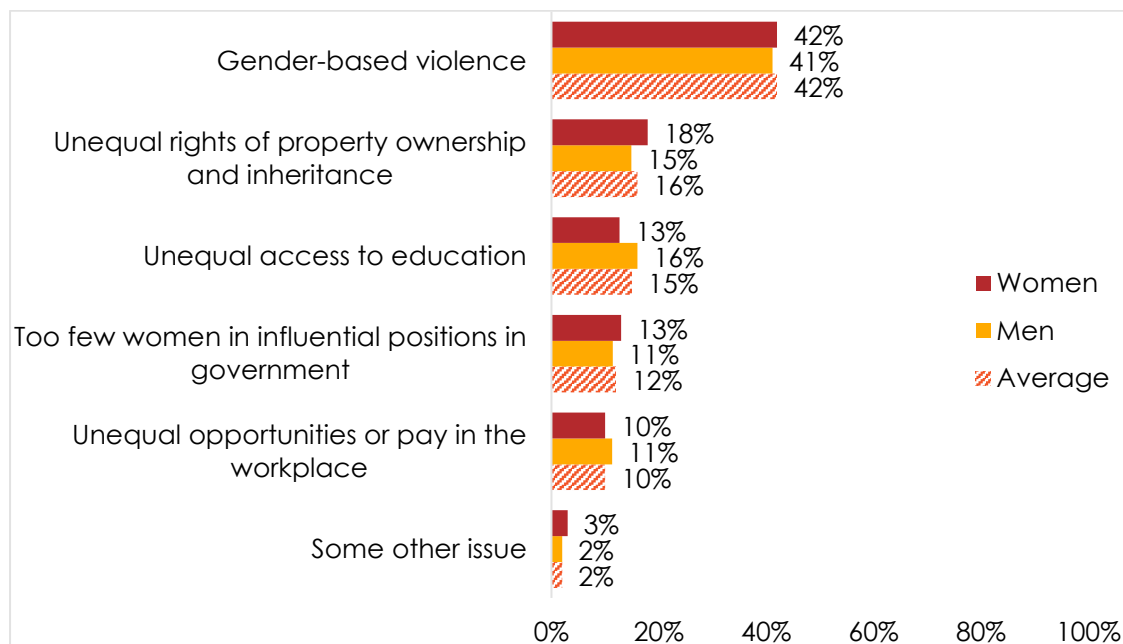
Key findings

- Gender-based violence ranks as the most important women's-rights problem that Ugandans say their government and society must address.
- Half (49%) of citizens say violence against women and girls is a common occurrence in their community.
- More than seven in 10 Ugandans say it is “never” justified for men to use physical force to discipline their wives.
- More than eight in 10 (84%) consider it likely that the police will take reported cases of GBV seriously.
- But 62% see domestic violence as a private matter to be resolved within the family rather than a criminal matter requiring law enforcement to be involved.
- And a majority (54%) say it is likely that a woman who reports GBV to the authorities will be criticised, harassed, or shamed by others in the community.

Is GBV an important issue in Uganda?

In Uganda, GBV ranks as the most important issue related to women’s rights that citizens say their government and society must address, cited by more than four in 10 women (42%) and men (41%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Most important women’s-rights issue | by gender | Uganda | 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?*

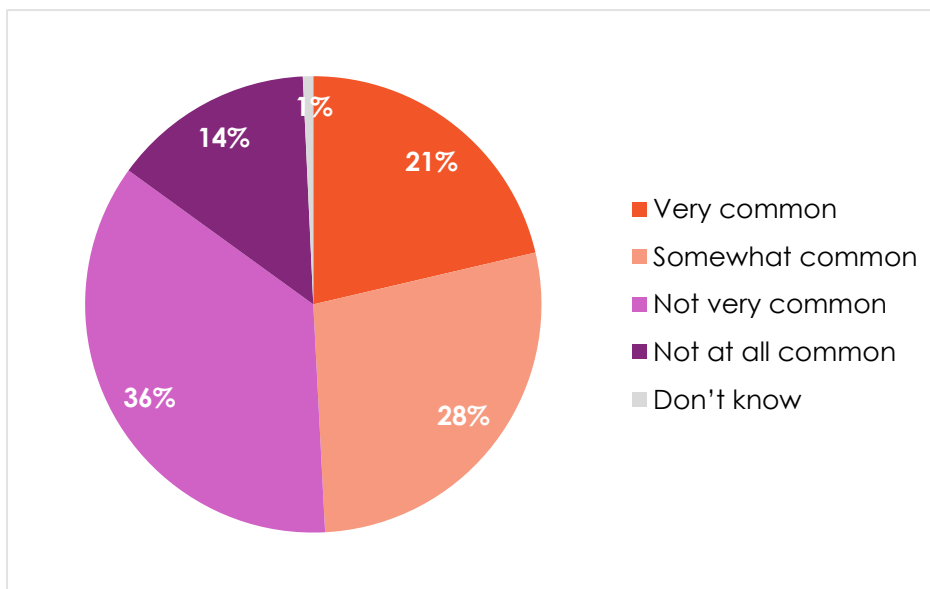
GBV is followed by unequal rights of property ownership and inheritance (16% on average), unequal access to education (15%), too few women in influential positions in government (11%), and unequal opportunities or pay in the workplace (10%) as the key issues to prioritise.

Women and men do not differ dramatically in their prioritisation of issues to address, though women are slightly more likely than men to mention property rights and slightly less likely to cite education.

How common is GBV?

One reason GBV is a high priority may be its frequency: About half (49%) of respondents say violence against women and girls is “very common” (21%) or “somewhat common” (28%) in their community (Figure 2). The other half (50%) describe GBV as “not very common” (36%) or “not at all common” (14%).

Figure 2: Frequency of gender-based violence | Uganda | 2022

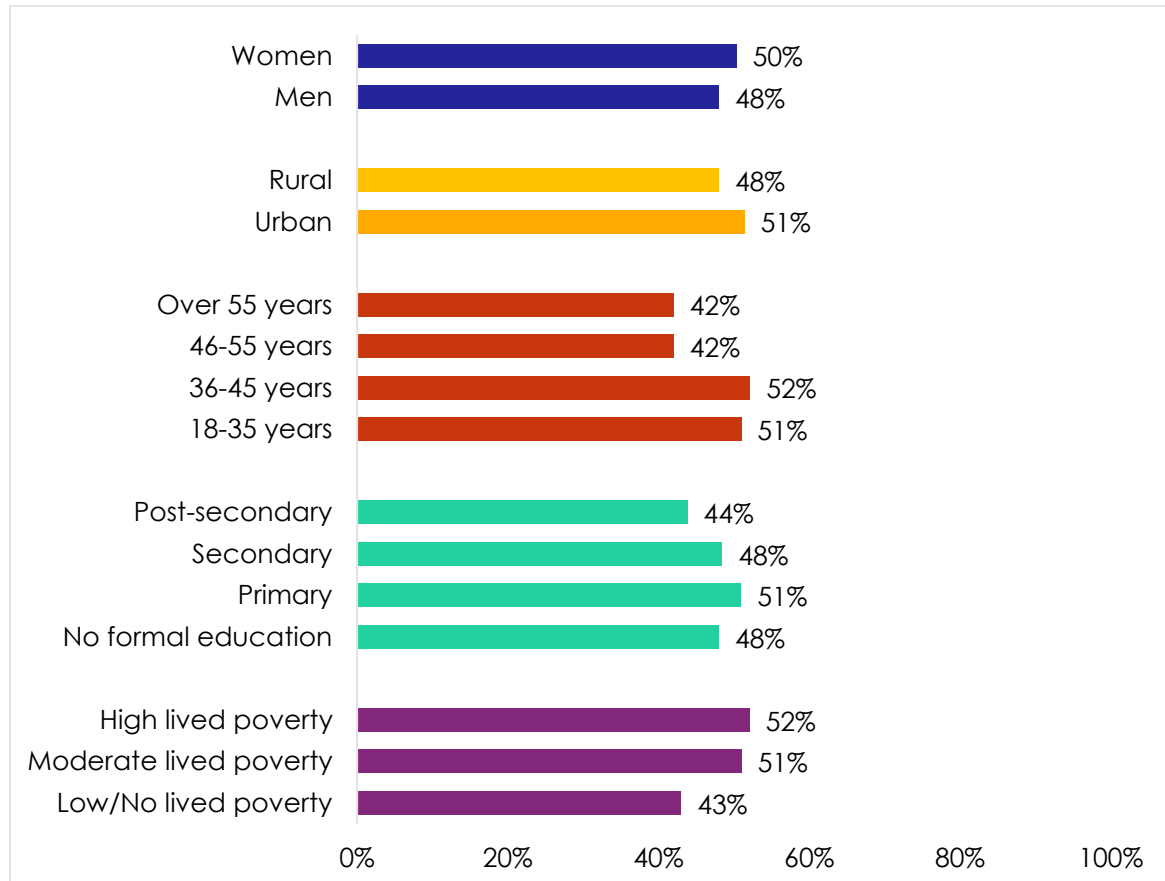


Respondents were asked: *In this area, how common do you think it is for men to use violence against women and girls in the home or in the community?*

Women and men differ little in their assessments of the extent of GBV, and nor do residents in rural areas and cities (Figure 3). Younger respondents are more likely to see GBV as a common occurrence (51%-52%) than their elders (42%), as are citizens experiencing high (52%) or moderate (51%) levels of lived poverty¹ compared to their better-off counterparts (43%).

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 3: Frequency of gender-based violence | by demographic group | Uganda
 | 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 in the community? (% who say “somewhat” or “very common”)

Physical violence against women

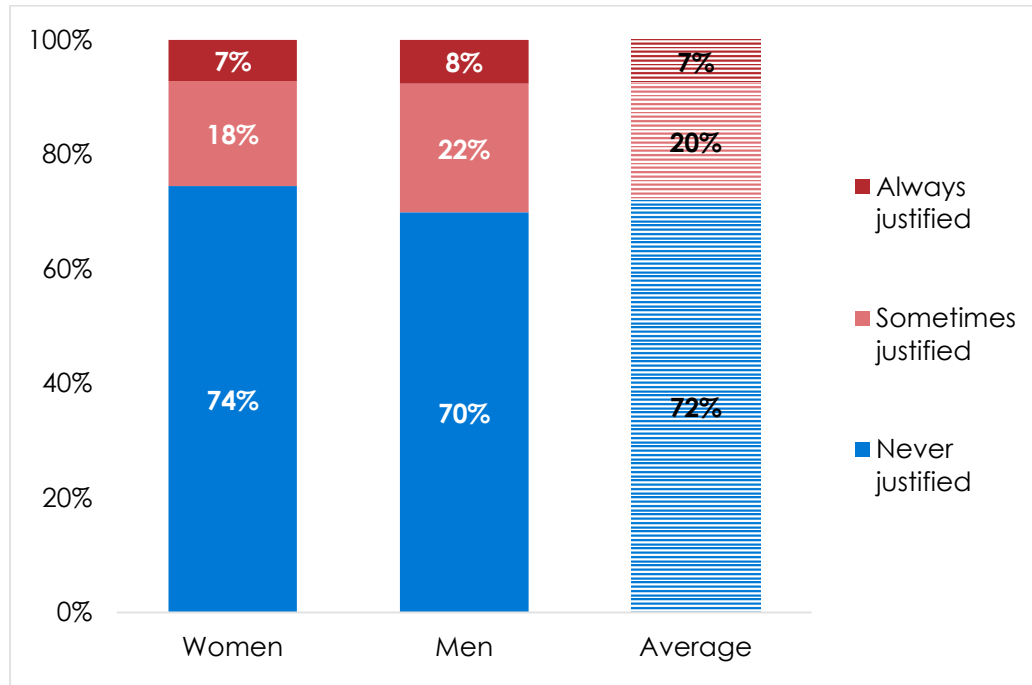
Most Ugandans reject physical violence against women: More than seven in 10 (72%) say it is “never” justified for a man to use physical force to discipline his wife (Figure 4). About one in four (28%) consider this practice “sometimes” or “always” justified.²

Women are slightly more likely than men to reject the use of physical force against women (74% vs. 70%).

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.

² Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. 20% “sometimes justified” and 7% “always justified” sum to 28%).

Figure 4: Is it justified for men to use physical force to discipline their wives?
 | by gender | Uganda | 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?

Reporting GBV cases

Despite police efforts to improve their handling of GBV cases (Asege, 2021), such crimes are vastly under-reported (UN Women, 2021). Do Ugandans think the police take GBV cases seriously?

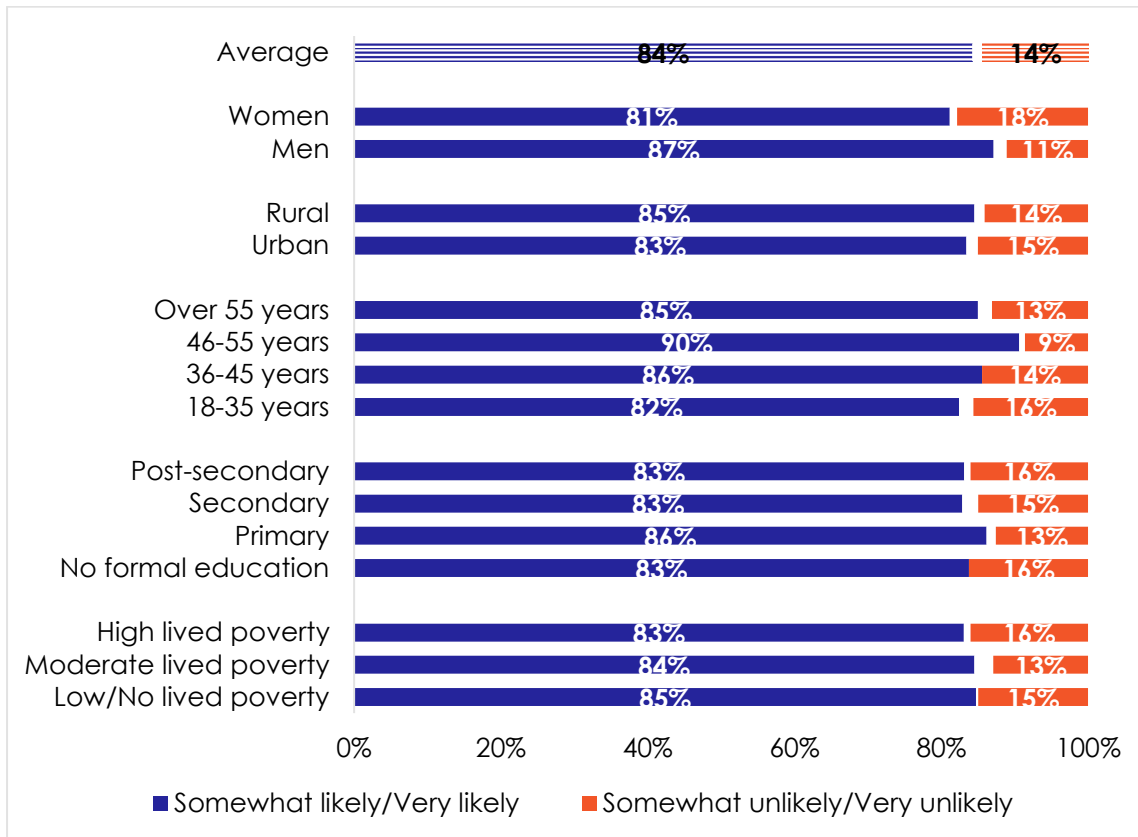
More than eight in 10 (84%) respondents say it is “very likely” (59%) or “somewhat likely” (25%) that the police will treat reported cases of GBV with the appropriate seriousness, while only 14% doubt that this will occur (Figure 5).

Women express somewhat less confidence than men in the police response (81% vs. 87%), as do the youngest respondents compared to their elders.

While most Ugandans think the police will take GBV cases seriously, a majority (62%) consider domestic violence a private matter to be handled within the family, while only 36% say it is a criminal matter that requires the involvement of the authorities (Figure 6).

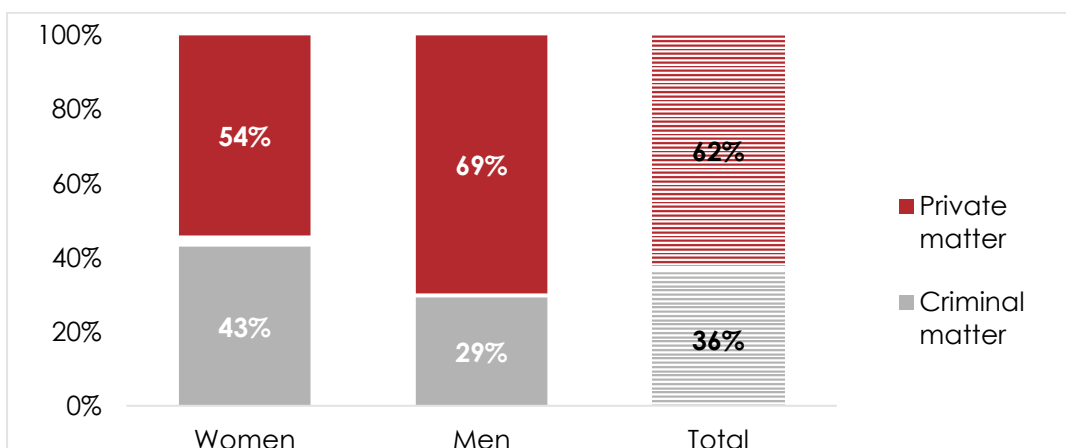
More men than women describe domestic violence as a private matter (69% vs. 54%).

Figure 5: Do police take GBV cases seriously? | by demographic group | Uganda | 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 6: Is domestic violence a private or criminal matter? | Uganda | 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.

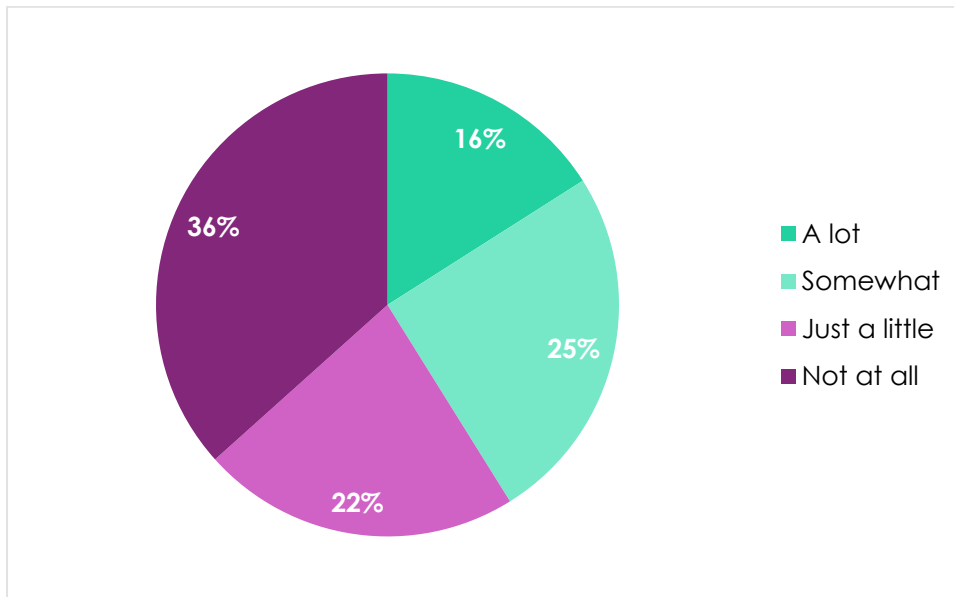
Statement 2: Domestic violence is a criminal matter whose full resolution requires the involvement of law enforcement agencies.

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

Trust in the police

Women's willingness to report violence to the authorities may also depend on how much they trust the police. Overall, only 41% of Ugandans say they trust the police "somewhat" (25%) or "a lot" (16%), while a majority say they trust them "just a little" (22%) or "not at all" (36%) (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Trust in the police | Uganda | 2022



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Women actually express greater trust in the police than men (46% vs. 36%) (Figure 8). Rural residents consider the police more trustworthy than urbanites (45% vs. 30%), and older citizens (48% vs. 50%) hold greater trust than younger cohorts (38%-39%).

Trust in the police is particularly weak among citizens with post-secondary (24%) or secondary (31%) education.

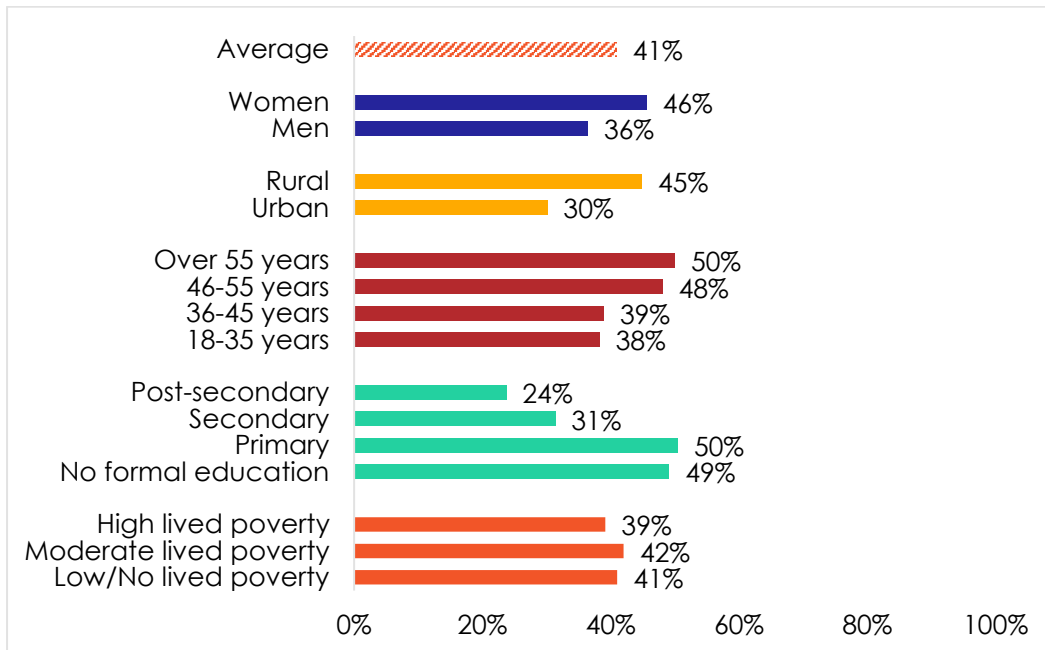
Trust in the police may also be associated with other factors, such as experiences with the police or assessments of police professionalism, though determining the extent and causality of such associations is beyond the scope of this dispatch.

Survey respondents who report that they requested police assistance during the previous year are less likely to say they trust the police "somewhat" or "a lot" than those who did not ask for help from the police (32% vs. 43%) (Figure 9).

Among those who sought police assistance, citizens who say it was "easy" or "very easy" to get the help they needed are more likely to express trust in the police than those who found it "difficult" or "very difficult" to get help (36% vs. 29%).

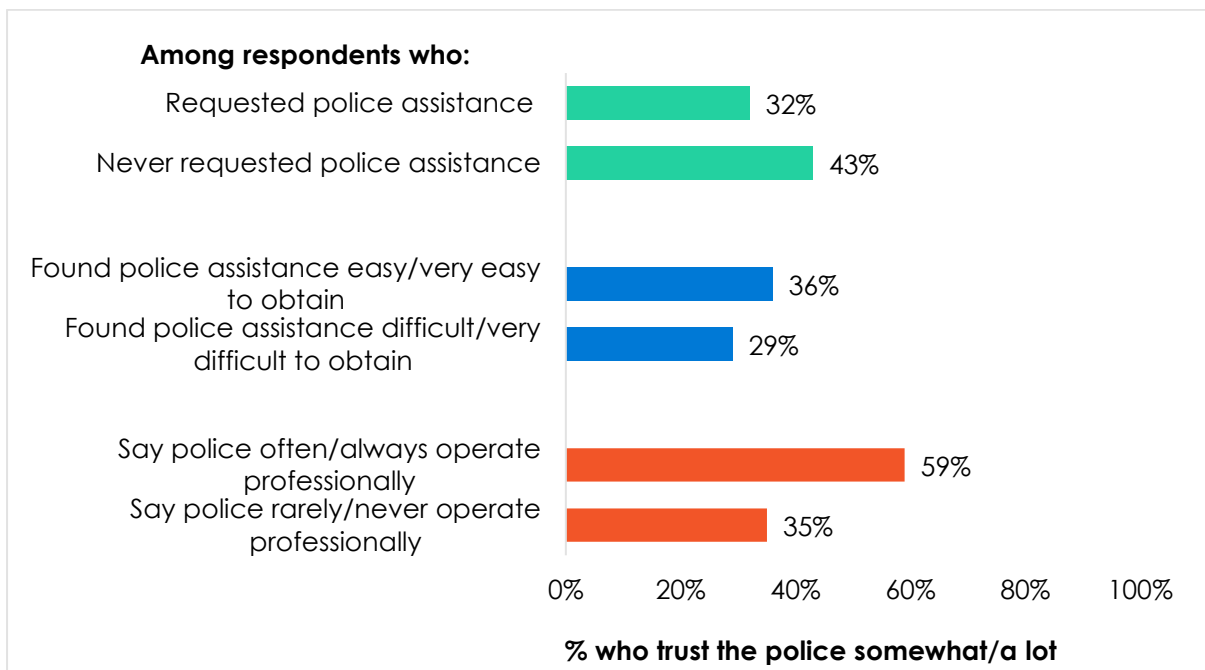
And citizens who think the police "often" or "always" operate in a professional manner and respect all citizens' rights express greater trust in the police than those who think they "rarely" or "never" conduct themselves with professionalism (59% vs. 35%).

Figure 8: Trust the police somewhat/a lot | by demographic group | Uganda | 2022



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Figure 9: Trust in the police | by experience with police assistance and assessment of police professionalism | Uganda | 2022



Respondents were asked:

In the past 12 months, have you requested assistance from the police?

[Asked of respondents who requested police assistance:] How easy or difficult was it to obtain the assistance you needed?

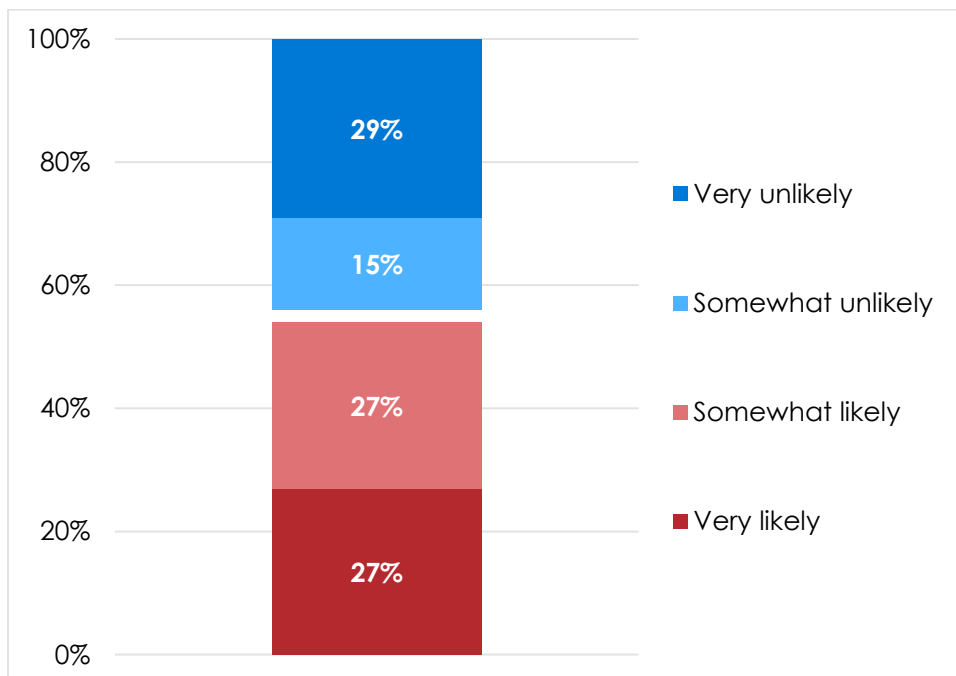
In your opinion, how often do the police in Uganda operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens?

Community response

While most Ugandans expect police to take GBV cases seriously, more than half (54%) consider it “very likely” (27%) or “somewhat likely” (27%) that women who report such crimes to the authorities will face criticism, harassment, or shaming from members of the community (Figure 10).

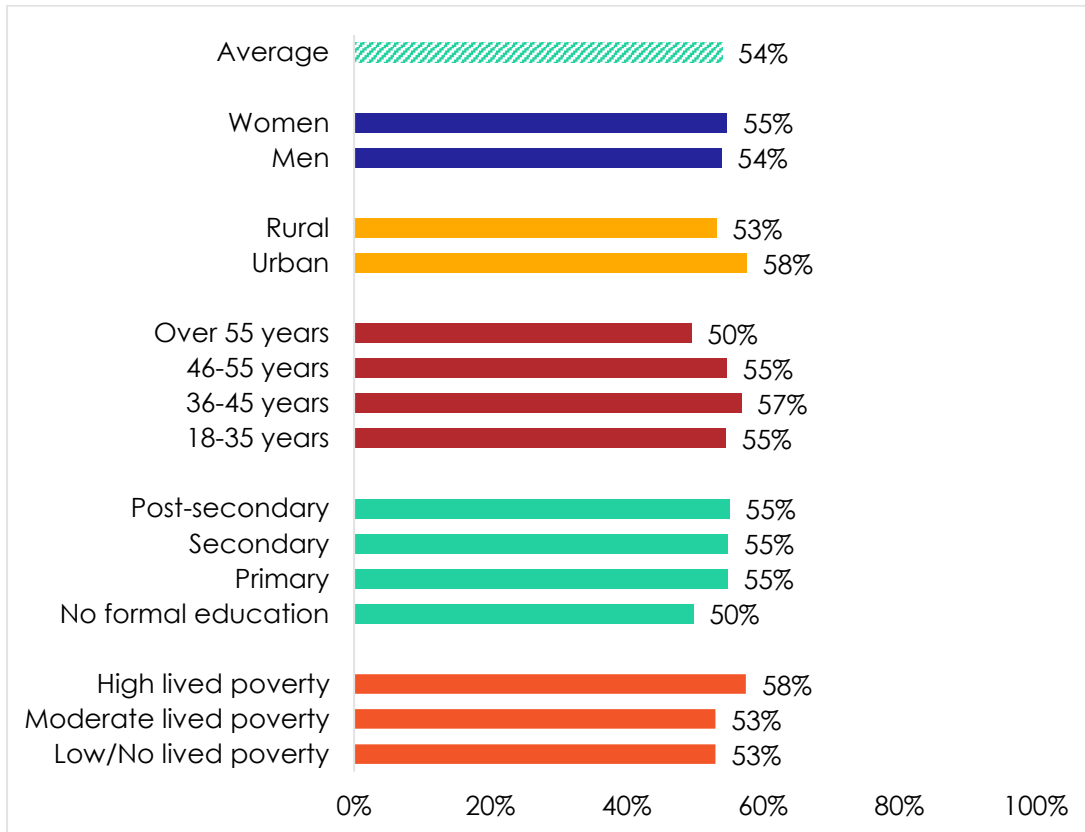
Women and men see eye to eye on this issue, while urban residents are somewhat more likely than rural residents to consider such a backlash likely (58% vs. 53%) (Figure 11). Respondents with no formal education (50%) and senior citizens (50%) are less likely to expect such a community response.

Figure 10: Will women face criticism, harassment, or shaming if they report GBV?
 | Uganda | 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 11: Likely that women will face criticism, harassment, or shaming if they report GBV | by demographic group | Uganda | 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? (% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")*

Conclusion

Even though most Ugandans reject the use of physical force against women as never justified, many say gender-based violence is common in their community and represents the most important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address.

Survey findings point to at least two obstacles that activists against GBV will have to confront: While most citizens think the police are likely to take GBV cases seriously, a majority consider such violence a private matter to be resolved within the family, rather than a criminal matter that requires police involvement. And a majority say that women who report GBV to the authorities are likely to be criticised, harassed, or shamed by others in the community.

References

- Asege, G. (2021). Police seek support in handling GBV cases. New Vision. 13 December.
- Bertram, C., & Crowley, M. S. (2012). Teaching about sexual violence in higher education. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 33(1), 63-82.
- Devries, K. M., Mak, J. Y. T., García-Moreno, C., Petzold, M., Child, J. C., Falder, G., Lim, S., Bacchus, I. J., Engell, R. E., Rosenfeld, I., Pallitto, C., Vos, T., Abrahams, N., & Watts, C. H. (2013). The global prevalence of intimate partner violence against women. *Science*, 340(6140), 1527-1528.
- Garcia-Moreno, C., Heise, L., Jansen, H. A. F. M., Ellsberg, M., & Watts, C. (2005). Violence against women. *Science*, 310(5752), 1282-1283.
- Kishor, S., & Johnson, K. (2005). Profiling domestic violence: A multi-country study. ORC Macro.
- Mattes, R., & Patel, J. (2022). Lived poverty resurgent. Afrobarometer Policy Paper 84.
- Nabatanz, V. (2021). Government worried over GBV cases in Uganda. Sunday Vision. 31 October.
- Nambi, J. S., Namuhani, N., & Kayemba, C. N. (2022). Reporting of sexual and gender-based violence and associated factors among survivors in Mayuge, Uganda. *African Health Sciences*, 22(1), 62-68.
- Sahay, A. (2021). The silenced women: What works in encouraging women to report cases of gender-based violence? World Bank Blogs. 26 March.
- Uganda Bureau of Statistics. (2018). Uganda demographic and health survey 2016.
- Uganda Bureau of Statistics. (2021). National survey on violence in Uganda: Module 1: Violence against women and girls.
- UN Women. (2021). Strengthening police responses to gender-based violence crucial in lead up to generation equality forum in Paris. 25 May.
- United Nations. (2010). Handbook on effective police responses to violence against women.
- UNHCR. (2016). National gender-based violence action plan. The UN Refugee Agency.

Caroline Nakayiza is a sampling assistant for Hatchile Consult Ltd., the Afrobarometer national partner in Uganda. Email: carol@hatchileconsult.com.

Afrobarometer, a non-profit 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 Centre 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.

Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations - Africa, Luminare, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Mastercard Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the European Union Commission, the World Bank Group, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, the Embassy of Sweden in Zimbabwe, the Global Centre for Pluralism, and GIZ.

Donations help Afrobarometer give voice to African citizens. Please consider making a contribution (at www.afrobarometer.org) or contact Felix Biga (felixbiga@afrobarometer.org) or Runyararo Munetsi (runyararo@afrobarometer.org) to discuss institutional funding.

Follow our releases on #VoicesAfrica.



Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 792 | 4 April 2024