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Liberians call for greater government efforts to promote gender equality

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 796 | Maame Akua Amoah Twum and Georgina Candy Coker

Summary

Despite the groundbreaking election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as the country's first female president in 2006, bridging the gender gap in post-civil war Liberia remains a challenge. The Sirleaf government formulated a National Gender Policy in 2009 that aimed at integrating gender policies into national development agendas and ensuring that gender-responsive frameworks enable women and men to benefit equally from development initiatives (Ministry of Gender and Development, 2009).

Yet significant gender disparities persist, glaringly evident in women's under-representation in political leadership: According to the World Economic Forum's (2022) Global Gender Gap Index, which ranks Liberia 78th out of 146 countries, women hold only 11% of parliamentary seats and 22% of ministerial positions. Entrenched socio-cultural norms reinforce male dominance, and gender-based violence remains a national crisis: Liberia's 2020 Demographic and Health Survey found that 60% of women aged 15-49 had experienced physical violence (UN Women, 2021; Al Jazeera, 2020; Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, 2021).

This dispatch reports on a special module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 (2021/2023) questionnaire to explore Africans' experiences and perceptions of gender equality in control over assets, hiring, land ownership, and political leadership.

In Liberia, survey findings show that women trail men in educational attainment and ownership of key assets, though they are equally likely to have a say in household financial decisions. A majority of citizens support gender equality in hiring, land ownership/inheritance, and politics. But many also say that women who run for public office are likely to face negative reactions from their communities and families.

Most Liberians say the government needs to do more to promote equal rights and opportunities for women. Gender-based violence ranks as the most important women's-rights issue that citizens say their government and society must address. (For survey findings on gender-based violence, see Twum and Coker, 2023).

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 Liberia, led by the Center for Democratic Governance, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Liberians between 15 August and 7 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 Liberia in 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, and 2020.

Key findings

- In Liberia, women are less likely than men to have secondary or post-secondary education (42% vs. 61%).
- Women trail men in ownership of key assets, including a mobile phone (72% vs. 86%), a bank account (15% vs. 23%), a motor vehicle (10% vs. 18%), and a computer (6% vs. 11%).
 - But decision making on how household money is spent is fairly equal between women and men.
- Majorities of Liberians say women should have the same rights as men to own and inherit land (85%) and to get paying jobs (59%). But men are less likely than women to support gender equality in land rights and hiring.
 - Large majorities say women in fact enjoy equal rights when it comes to jobs (79%) and land ownership/inheritance (82%).
- More than three-quarters (78%) of Liberians say women should have the same chance as men of being elected to public office.
 - But while more than eight in 10 (86%) think a woman's family will gain standing in the community if she runs for office, 65% consider it likely that she will be criticised or harassed by others in the community, and 54% think she will probably face problems with her family.
- Two-thirds (67%) of Liberians say the government should do more to promote equal rights and opportunities for women.
- Gender-based violence ranks as the most important women's-rights issue that citizens say their government and society must address.

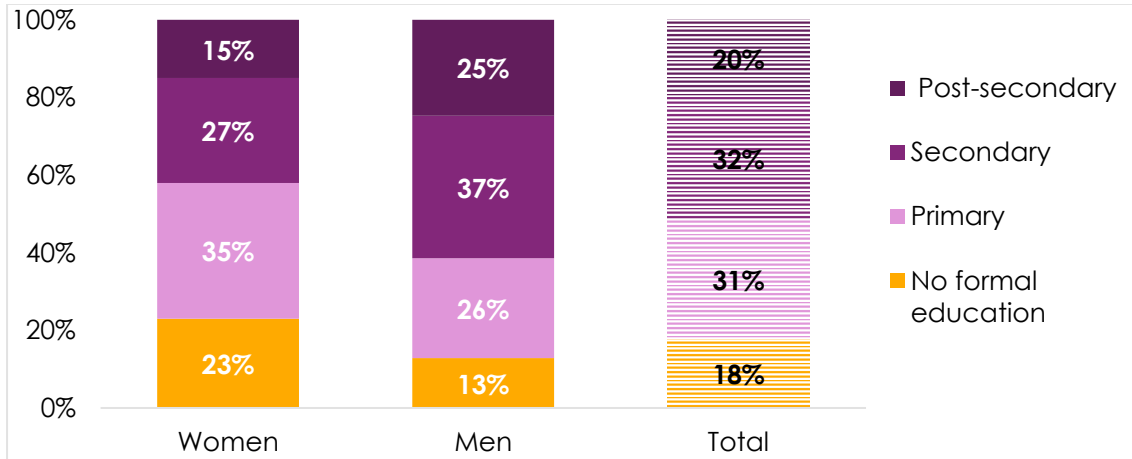
Education and control of assets

In Liberia, significantly fewer women than men have secondary (27% vs. 37%) or post-secondary (15% vs. 25%) education. Instead, women are more likely than men to have only primary schooling (35% vs. 26%) or no formal schooling (23% vs. 13%) (Figure 1).

Women are also less likely than men to own certain key assets, including a mobile phone (86% vs. 72%), a radio (74% vs. 54%), a television (28% vs. 23%), a bank account (23% vs. 15%), a motor vehicle (18% vs. 10%), and a computer (11% vs. 6%) (Figure 2).

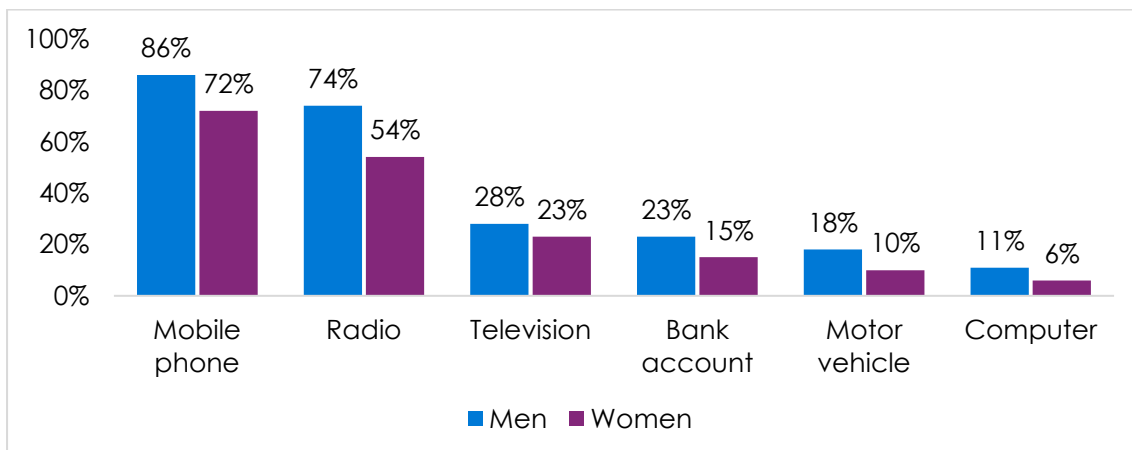
Financial decision making in the household is gender-equal in Liberia. Women and men are about equally likely to say that they make decisions themselves about how household money is spent (35% vs. 37%) or that they make such decisions jointly with their spouse (49% vs. 47%) (Figure 3).

Figure 1: Educational attainment | by gender | Liberia | 2022



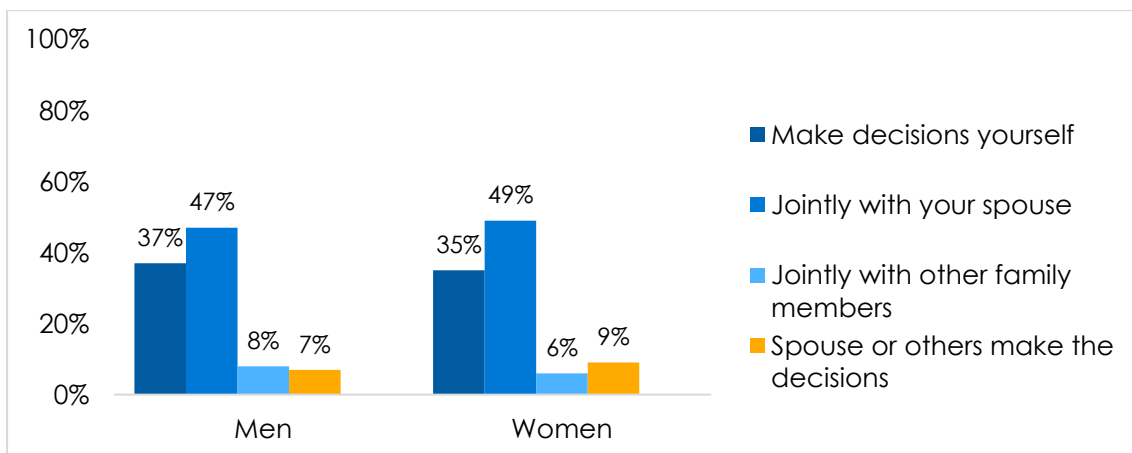
Respondents were asked: What is your highest level of education?

Figure 2: Asset ownership | by gender | Liberia | 2022



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

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



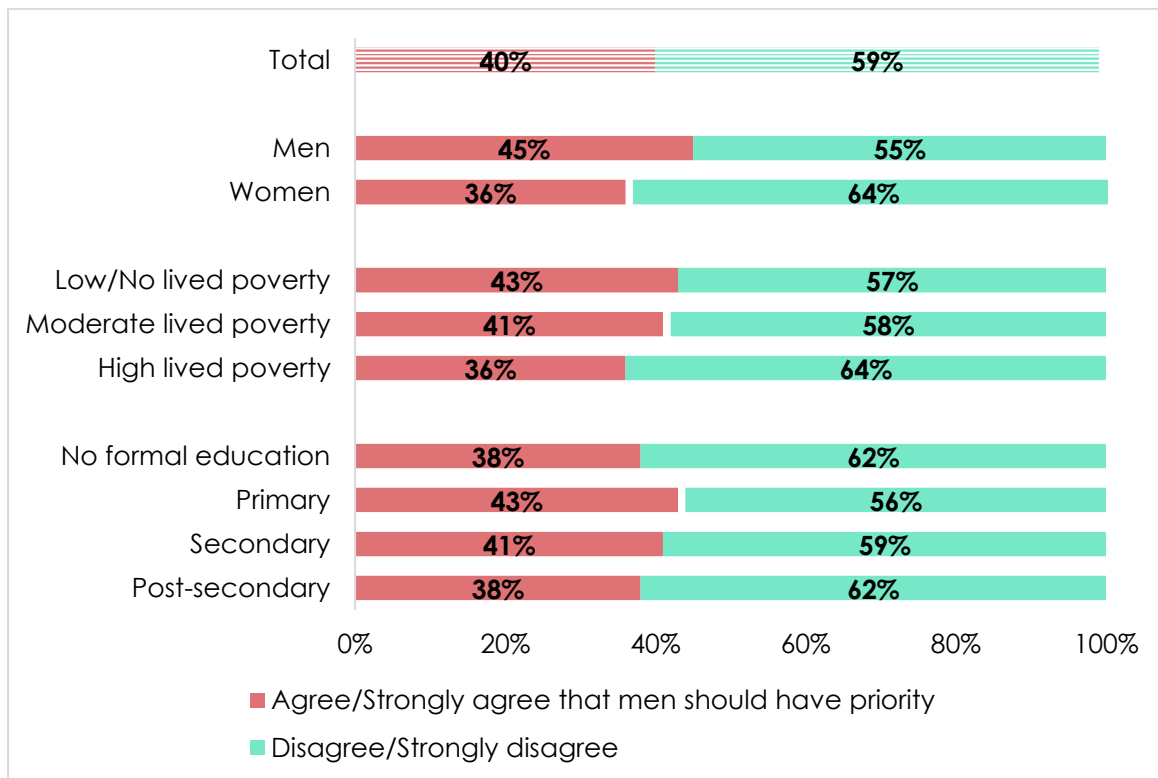
Respondents were asked: What is the main way that decisions are made about how to use any money that you have or earn, for example from a job, a business, selling things, or other activities?

Rights to a job and land

The ability to claim certain rights can either advance gender equality or maintain inequality. Do Liberians want gender equality when it comes to jobs and land?

Four in 10 Liberians (40%) endorse the idea that men should be given priority over women in hiring when jobs are scarce, while a majority (59%) reject this form of gender discrimination (Figure 4). Men (55%) trail women (64%) in insisting on gender equality when it comes to jobs. Poorer citizens (64%) are more likely to support equality in hiring than those experiencing low or no lived poverty¹ (57%). Respondents with post-secondary education and no formal schooling hold identical views on this.

Figure 4: Should men have priority for scarce jobs? | by gender, lived poverty, and education | Liberia | 2022



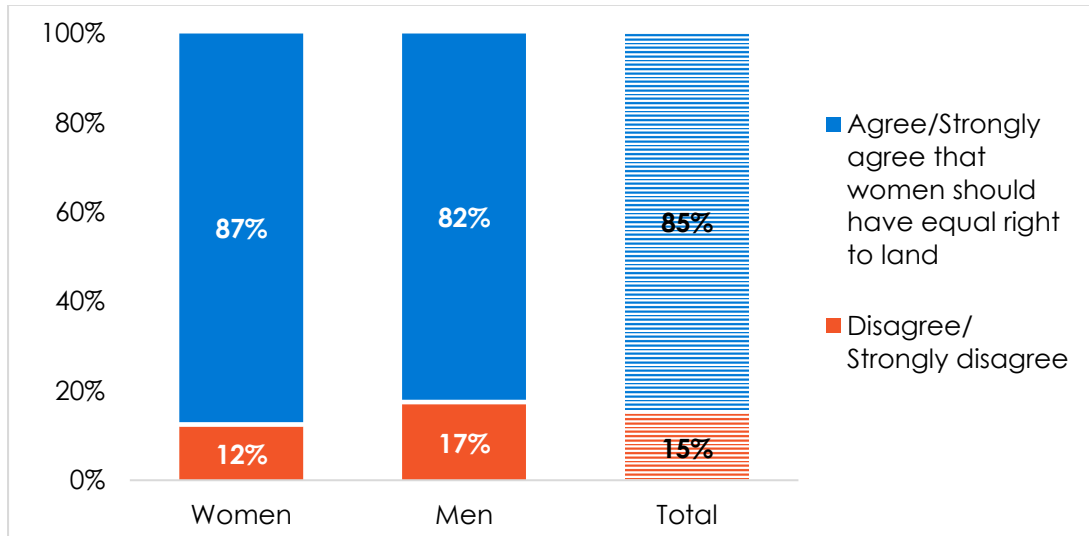
Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: When jobs are scarce, men should have more rights to a job than women.

A large majority (85%) endorse equal rights to own and inherit land. Here, too, men (82%) are less likely than women (87%) to believe in equality (Figure 5).

Urban residents (90%) and well-educated citizens (95%) are more likely to believe in equal land rights than rural residents (80%) and the least educated (76%) (Figure 6).

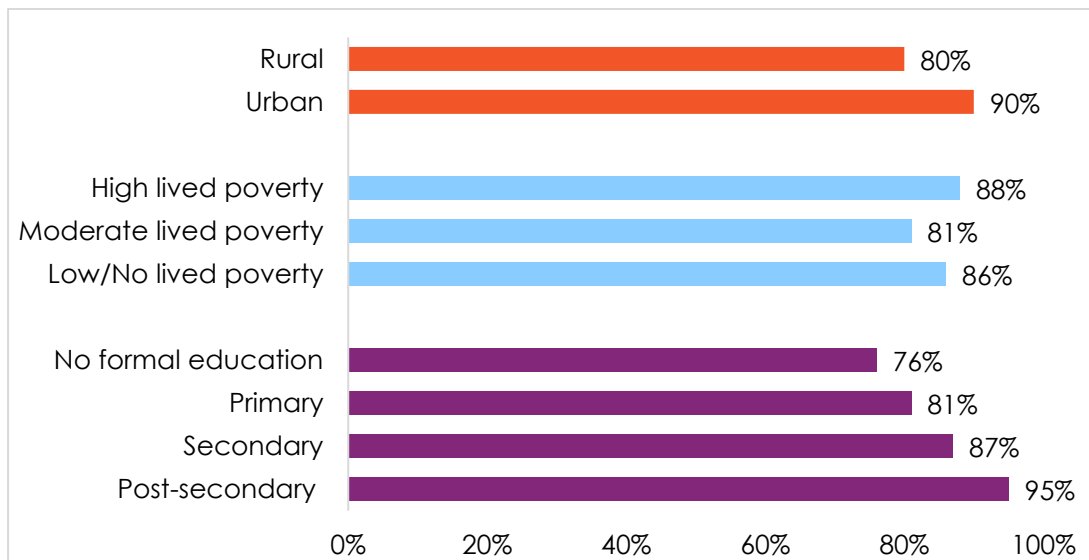
¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty,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

Figure 5: Should women have equal rights to land? | by gender | Liberia | 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: Women should have equal rights to land | by urban-rural location, lived poverty, and education | Liberia | 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. (% who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

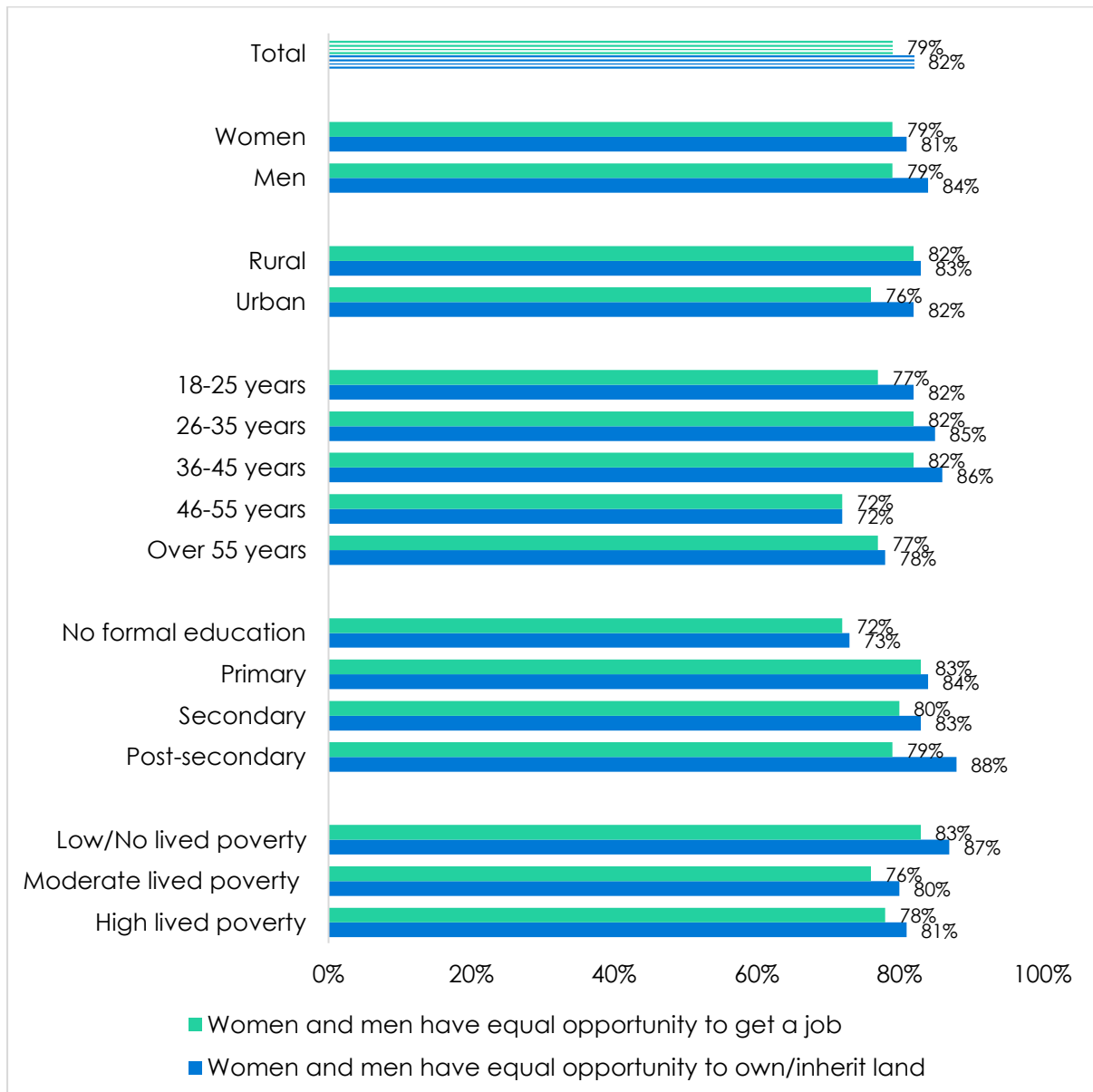
While majorities say women should have equal rights to jobs and land, have they achieved equality? About eight in 10 respondents say women do have the same opportunities as men to get a paying job (79%) and to own and inherit land (82%) (Figure 7).

Women and men don't differ strongly in their assessments of gender equality in hiring and land ownership. While rural and urban residents hold identical views regarding land ownership and inheritance, rural residents are more likely than urbanites to perceive gender equality in employment (82% vs. 76%).

Poor respondents are less likely than their economically better-off counterparts to say that gender equality has been achieved in hiring and land ownership, perhaps suggesting that progress toward gender parity has not benefited all social strata equally.

Perceptions of equal opportunity in employment and land ownership are higher among well-educated citizens than among those with no formal education.

Figure 7: Do women and men have equal opportunities to get a job and to own/inherit land? | by demographic group | Liberia | 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.

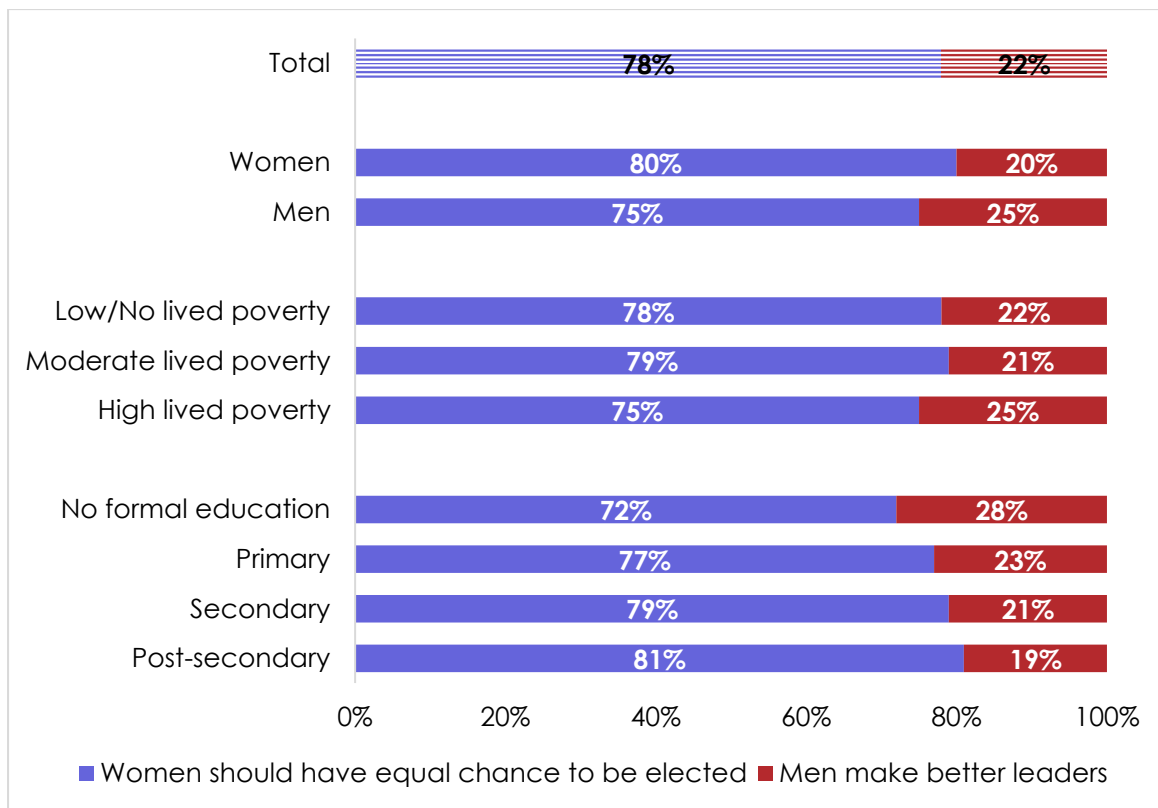
(% who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

Gender equality in political participation

Getting more women into political leadership positions is one way to help achieve gender parity and ensure that their voices are heard in policy development.

In Liberia, almost eight in 10 citizens (78%) say women should have the same chance as men to vie for political office, rejecting the idea that men make better political leaders and should thus be given priority as candidates (Figure 8). More women (80%) than men (75%) endorse equality in politics. Respondents with post-secondary education (81%) are more likely to agree with this view than their less educated counterparts.

Figure 8: Should women have an equal chance to be elected? | by gender, lived poverty, and education | Liberia | 2022

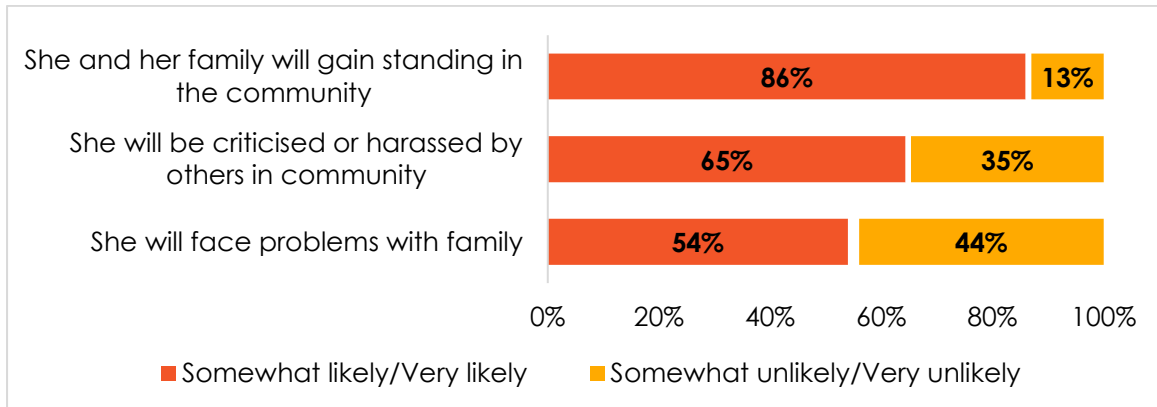


Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Men make better political leaders than women and should be elected rather than women.
 Statement 2: Women should have the same chance of being elected to political office as men.
 (% who “agree” or “strongly 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, more than eight out of 10 Liberians (86%) say it is “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that a woman and her family will gain standing in the community if she runs for elective office (Figure 9). But two-thirds (65%) consider it likely that other people in the community will criticise her, call her names, or harass her for seeking public office, while 54% think she might face problems with her family. The prevalence of these negative expectations may reinforce some women’s reservations about throwing their hats into the ring.

Figure 9: For better or for worse: How running for elected office might affect women's lives | Liberia | 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?*

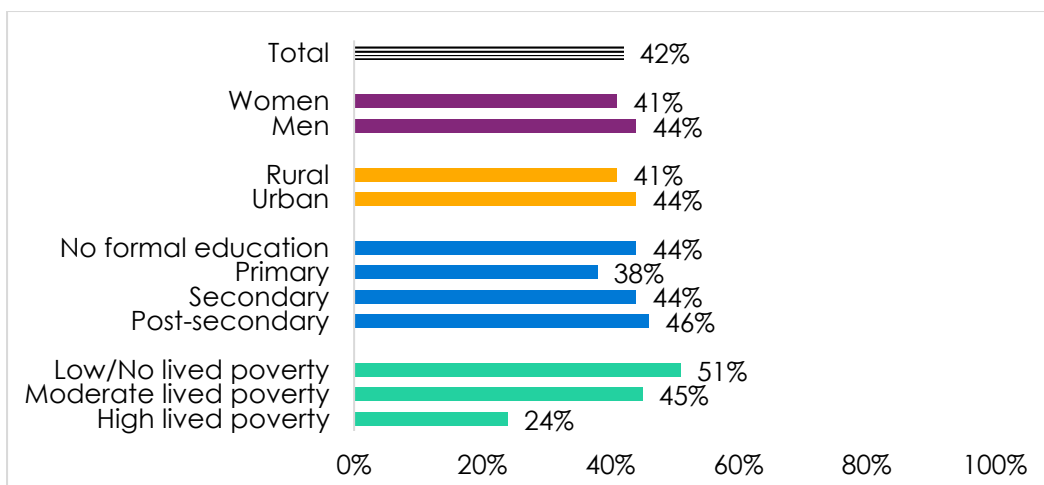
- She and her family will gain standing in the community?*
- She will be criticised, called names, or harassed by others in the community?*
- She will face problems with her family?*

Government performance in promoting equal rights and opportunities

Only four out of 10 Liberians (42%) say their government is doing a “fairly good” or “very good” job of promoting equal rights and opportunities for women (Figure 10), while 57% disapprove of the government’s performance.

Economically better-off citizens (51%) are twice as likely to express satisfaction with the government’s performance on this issue than the poorest respondents (24%).

Figure 10: Approval of government performance in promoting equal rights and opportunities for women | by demographic group | Liberia | 2022

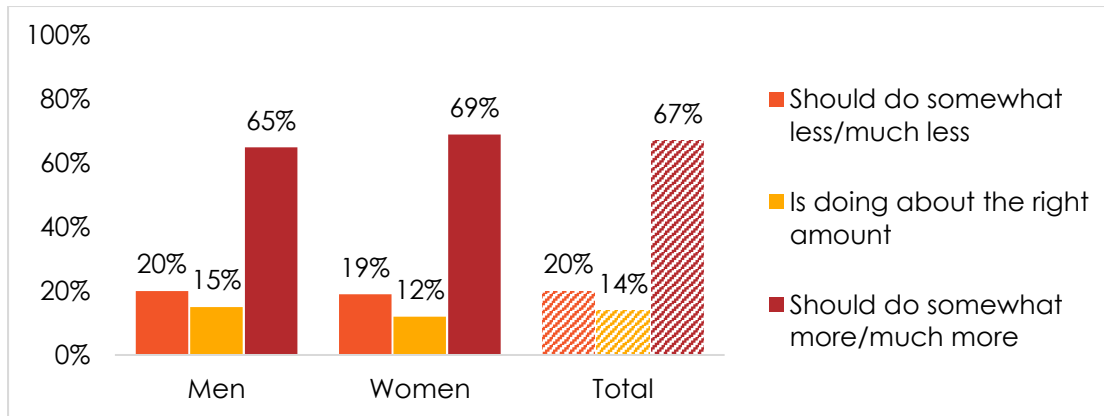


Respondents were asked: *How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Promoting equal rights and opportunities for women? (% who say “fairly well” or “very well”)*

In line with their assessment of the government’s efforts, two-thirds (67%) of citizens think the government should do “somewhat more” or “much more” to promote equal rights and

opportunities for women. About one in seven (14%) say it is doing the right amount, while 20% think the government should reduce its gender-equality efforts. Women (69%) are slightly more likely than men (65%) to demand greater efforts from the government (Figure 11).

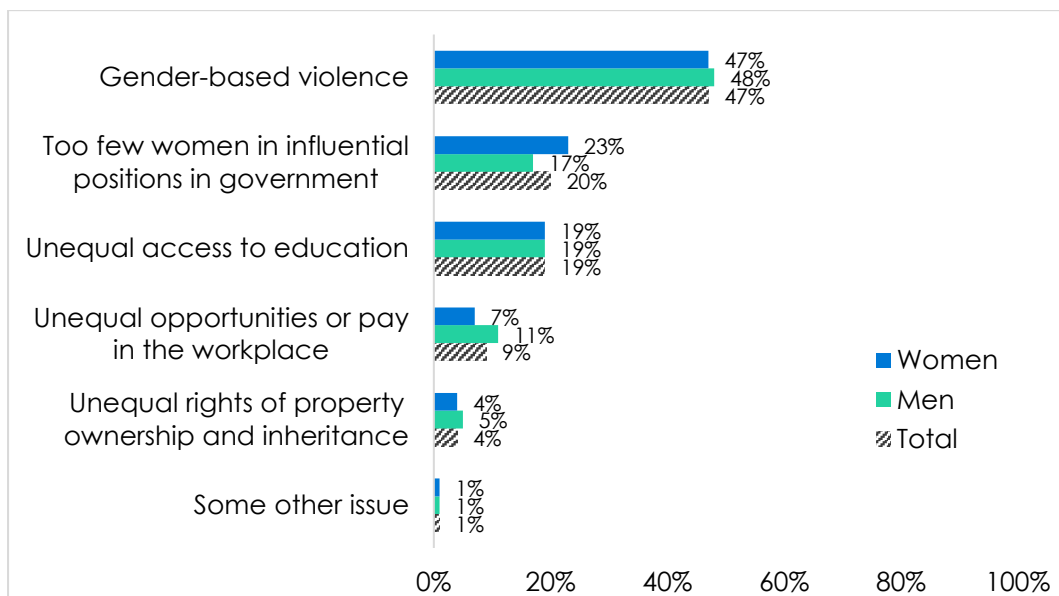
Figure 11: Should the government do more or less to promote equal rights and opportunities for women? | by gender | Liberia | 2022



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?

When asked what they consider the most important issue related to women's rights that their government and society should address, almost half (47%) of Liberians cite gender-based violence (GBV) as their top concern – more than twice as many as prioritise a lack of women in influential positions in government (20%) and unequal access to education (19%) (Figure 12). Unequal opportunities or pay in the workplace (9%) and unequal rights of property ownership and inheritance (4%) rank lower among citizens' concerns. Women and men share similar views on the importance of addressing GBV.

Figure 12: Most important women's-rights issue | by gender | Liberia | 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

Survey findings from Liberia show significant gender disparities in educational attainment and asset ownership. While there is majority support for gender equality in employment, land ownership, and political participation, many also expect women who run for public office to suffer negative reactions from their communities and families.

Overall, Liberians want greater government efforts to promote equal rights and opportunities for women, and they identify gender-based violence as the most pressing problem to address.

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