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# Ugandans support cross-border mobility for East Africans, but want fewer immigrants

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 831 | Maakwe Cumanzala and Rehan Visser**

## Summary

Migration in Africa has a rich and complex history, effectively spanning our species' time on Earth. And while borders separating polities have long existed (and shifted), formal boundaries were first drawn up during the period of European colonialism, often with little regard for people living in or travelling through affected areas (Gashaw, 2017).

Some scholars and advocates argue that a more liberal African migration regime could drive integration, pan-Africanism, and "cultural empathy"; promote cultural and economic ties that traverse national boundaries; and open new avenues for innovation, trade, investment, and employment (Hirsch, 2023; United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2023).

Uganda is a country that faces significant migration challenges, with respect to both inflows and outflows of people. As a major destination for migrants, it is host to an estimated 1.7 million refugees and asylum seekers. Its migration policies have been described as "progressive" thanks to efforts to integrate migrants, but the influx has challenged the country's capacity to respond adequately (GIZ, 2024).

Out-migration is also an important issue for the country. Remittances from labour migrants total nearly US\$1 billion annually (Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, 2022). But many who leave for better opportunities, particularly those working in the Middle East, are subject to human trafficking, sexual abuse, and exploitative labour practices. One study found that 89% of Ugandans working in the Middle East "reported experiences consistent with human trafficking" (Global Fund to End Modern Slavery, 2022).

In response, the government is developing the Better Migration Management Programme, which aims to improve migration governance, strengthen institutions to address smuggling of migrants, and protect victims of trafficking (GIZ, 2024). Practical steps taken so far include a task force dedicated to preventing human trafficking and a guide to travelling and working in the Middle East, along with a training programme (Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, 2022).

Afrobarometer's Round 10 survey sought ordinary Ugandans' perspectives on migration. Findings reveal that while citizens favour the free movement of people to work and trade in East Africa, most want fewer migrants, or even none whatsoever, to come into their own country. This view prevails even though majorities of respondents perceive migrant workers as contributing positive economic value and profess no reservations about living among foreign workers or refugees.

Meanwhile, a large plurality of Ugandans, including nearly half of the labour force, have themselves considered emigration, mostly for economic reasons. Despite the challenges of working in the Middle East, nearly one-fifth of potential emigrants would look to move there. Young and highly educated citizens are especially likely to contemplate moving abroad.

## 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 10 surveys were launched in January 2024. 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 2024. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Uganda in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2022.

## Key findings

- Eight in 10 Ugandans (79%) say East Africans should be able to move freely across international borders in order to trade or work in other countries. Only one in five (20%) think the government should limit people's cross-border movement.
  - But about two-thirds (65%) of respondents say that, in practice, crossing international borders is "difficult" or "very difficult."
- Almost six in 10 citizens (58%) see migrants' economic impacts on Uganda as generally positive.
- And majorities say they wouldn't mind living next door to foreign workers or immigrants (73%) or refugees (64%).
- Even so, three-fourths of Ugandans say the government should reduce the number of foreign job seekers it allows to enter the country (58%) or eliminate such immigration altogether (18%).
  - A similar majority favour reducing (55%) or eliminating (18%) entry by refugees.
- More than four in 10 respondents (42%) say they have considered leaving Uganda.
  - This figure is highest among the most educated (59% of those with post-secondary education) and the youth (51% of 18- to 35-year-olds).
  - Half (50%) of people who are currently unemployed have thought about leaving Uganda, while nearly as many part-time workers (49%) and full-time workers (45%) have considered emigration.
- The most common reasons cited for potential emigration are economic, led by finding work opportunities (56% of those who have considered emigrating).
- The most popular destination among potential emigrants is North America (26%). Almost as many (23%) would move to another country on the African continent. The Middle East (18%) and Europe (15%) are next on the list of preferred destinations.

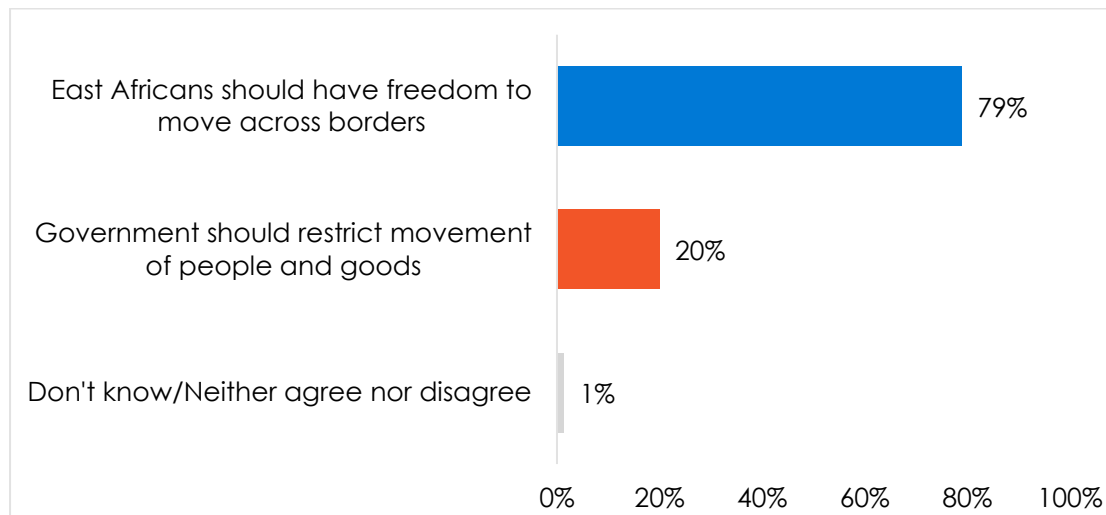
## Freedom of movement and the AfCFTA

Freedom of movement is a basic human right, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Article 13 allows for all human beings to travel across borders, while Article 14

provides for anyone to seek refuge from persecution (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). What do Ugandans think about the free movement of people in the region?

Most Ugandans (79%) agree that “people living in East Africa should be able to move freely across international borders to trade or work in other countries” (Figure 1). One-fifth (20%) of citizens appear to be hardliners: They want the government to “limit the cross-border movement of people and goods.”

**Figure 1: Free movement of East Africans | Uganda | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: People living in East Africa should be able to move freely across international borders in order to trade or work in other countries.  
 Statement 2: In order to protect their own citizens, the Ugandan government should limit the cross-border movement of people and goods.

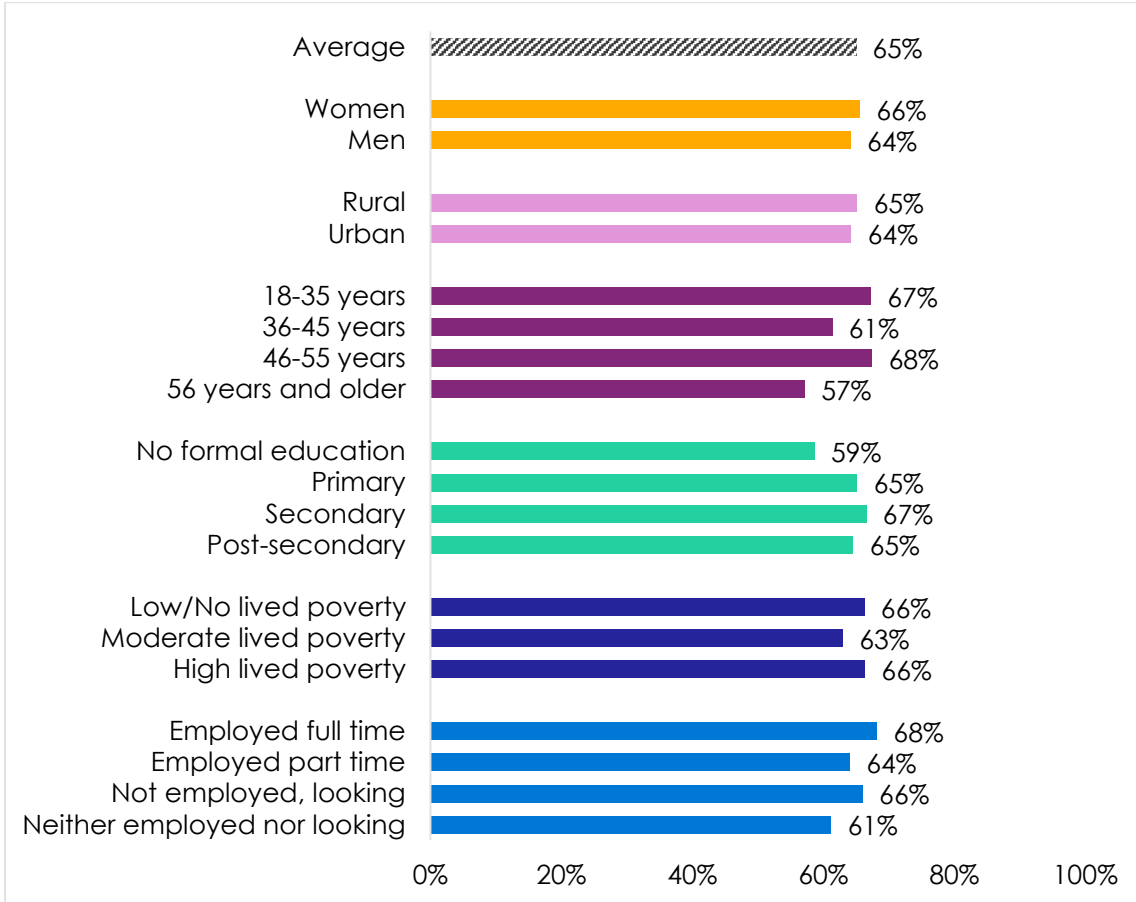
But how easy is cross-border travel in reality? Majorities across various demographic groups say it is “difficult” or “very difficult” for people in East Africa to enter other countries in order to work or trade (Figure 2). Even among senior citizens (those aged 56 or older) and respondents with no formal education, the least pessimistic groups, nearly three-fifths (57% and 59%, respectively) say cross-border travel is hard.

Cross-border movement is a central aspect of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and its complement, the Free Movement of Persons Protocol. The agreement establishing the AfCFTA, signed by 54 African Union (AU) member states, seeks to create a single continental market and boost trade between African countries by eliminating trade barriers, thereby fostering industrialisation, spurring investment, and creating jobs for millions of Africans.

While the AfCFTA focuses on freer movement of goods and services, the free movement protocol, adopted by AU heads of state in 2018, promotes labour mobility across the continent by, for example, eliminating visa requirements for intra-African travelers (Maunganidze, 2022). However, as of 2023, only four countries had ratified the protocol (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2023).

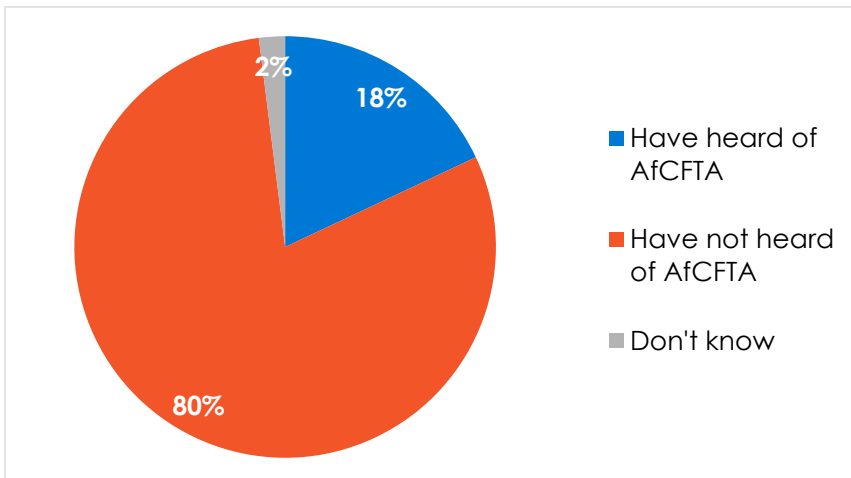
The AfCFTA entered into force in 2019, and trade commenced under the banner of the agreement on 1 January 2021. However, the effects of this agreement don't seem to be felt very widely as yet. Three years after trading began, a vast majority (80%) of Ugandans surveyed have not heard of the AfCFTA (Figure 3).

**Figure 2: Difficulty in cross-border movement** | by demographic group | Uganda  
 | 2024



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how easy or difficult is it for people in East Africa to cross international borders in order to work or trade in other countries, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "difficult" or "very difficult")

**Figure 3: Heard of the AfCFTA?** | Uganda | 2024



**Respondents were asked:** Have you heard about the African Continental Free Trade Area, also known as AfCFTA?

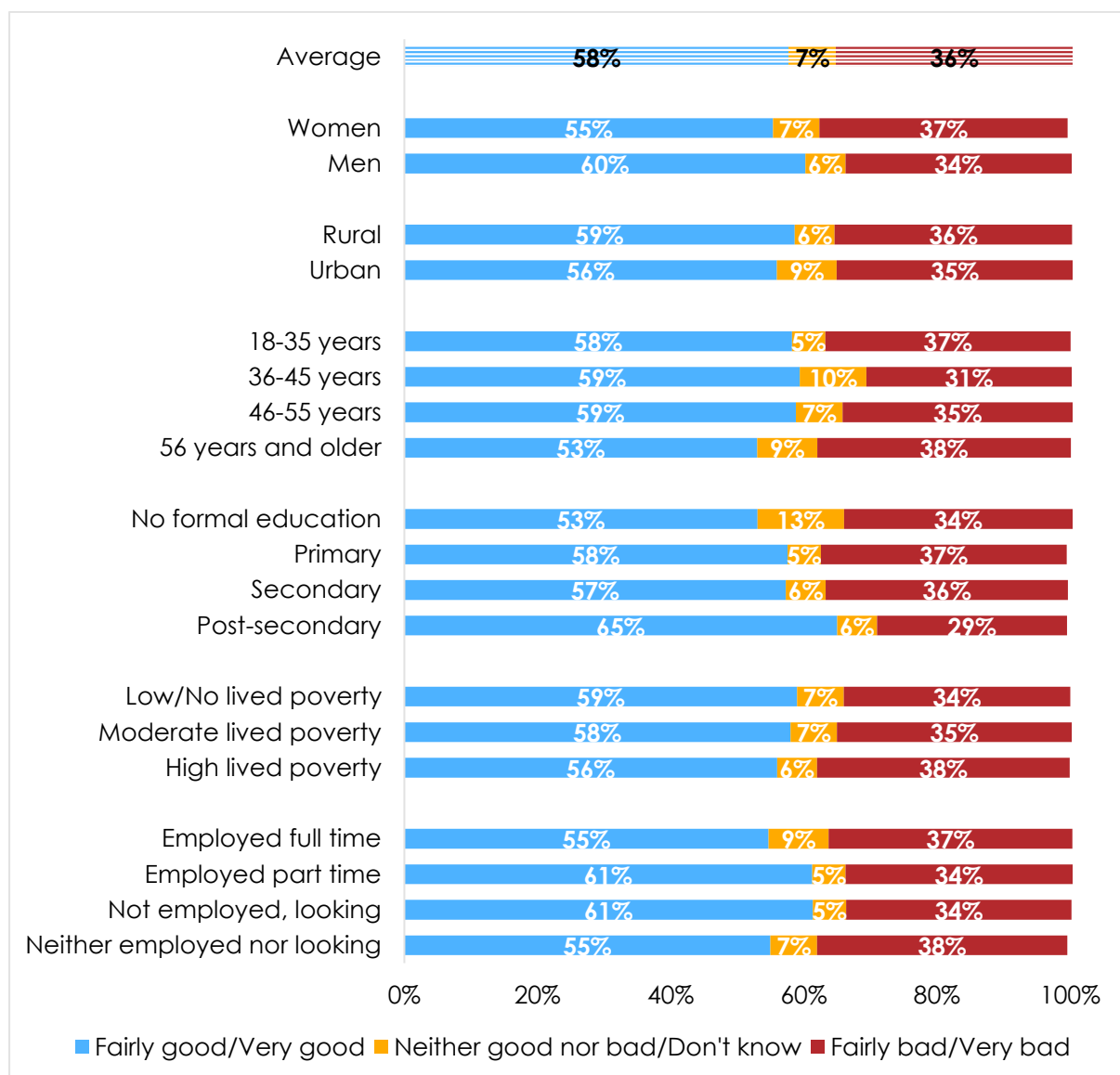
## Attitudes toward migrants

Most Ugandans support freedom of movement, at least for people within the region. Are their views consistent with their attitudes toward immigrants?

A majority (58%) of citizens believe that migrant workers are good for their nation's economy, compared to 36% who say it is "fairly bad" or "very bad" for the economy "if people from other countries come here to live and work for several years" (Figure 4).

Nearly two-thirds (65%) of Ugandans with post-secondary education see the value in having foreign workers, 12 percentage points more than among those who have no formal education. Positive assessments of immigrants' economic contributions are also high among part-time workers and the unemployed (both 61%) and men (60%).

**Figure 4: Economic impact of immigration** | by demographic group | Uganda  
| 2024

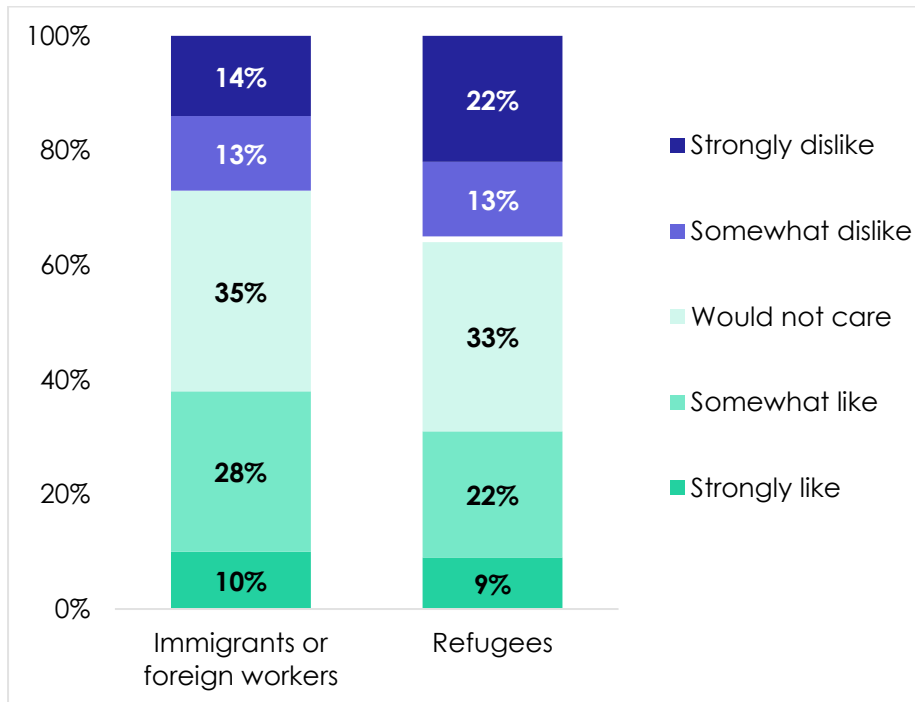


**Respondents were asked:** Would you say it is generally bad or good for Uganda's economy if people from other countries come here to live and work for several years?

Ugandans also express largely tolerant attitudes toward living next door to immigrants. Nearly three-quarters (73%) say they wouldn't mind having foreign workers or immigrants as neighbours, including 38% who would "somewhat" or "strongly" like the idea (Figure 5).

The majority expressing tolerant attitudes toward refugees is weaker (64%), suggesting that some citizens may accept foreigners conditionally, perhaps based on preconceptions about the likely contributions of foreign workers and refugees.

**Figure 5: Tolerance toward foreign workers and refugees | Uganda | 2024**



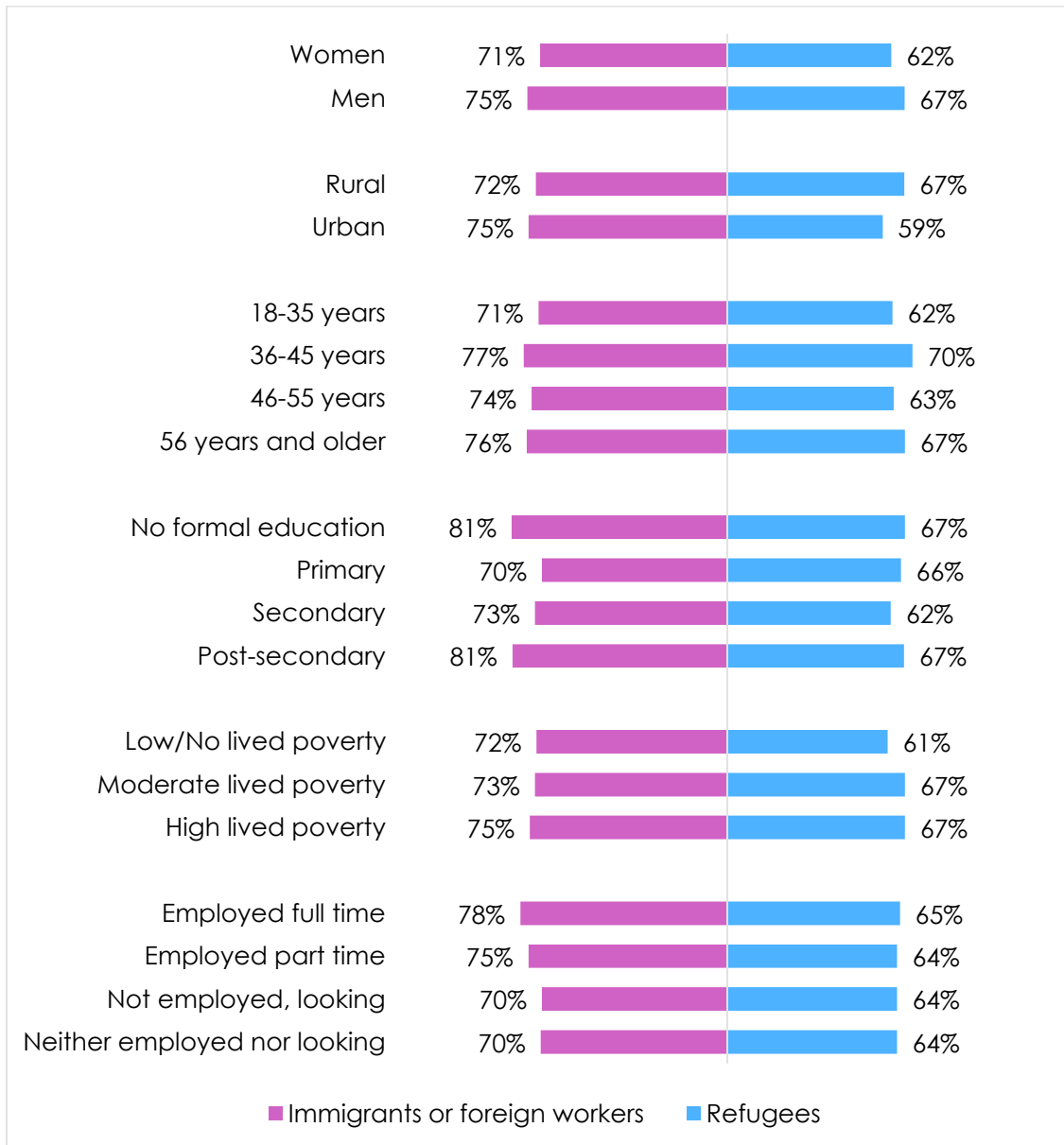
**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Immigrants or foreign workers? Refugees from other countries who are fleeing political violence or persecution?

Men are somewhat more likely than women to express tolerant attitudes toward both foreign workers (75% vs. 71%) and refugees (67% vs. 62%) (Figure 6). Immigrants and foreign workers find more tolerant attitudes among citizens with full-time jobs (78%) than among those without employment (70%).

When it comes to refugees, rural residents are more welcoming than their urban counterparts (67% vs. 59%). And tolerance for refugees is lower among economically better-off citizens (61%) than among those experiencing higher levels of lived poverty<sup>1</sup> (67%).

<sup>1</sup> 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 past year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

**Figure 6: Tolerance toward foreign workers and refugees** | by demographic group  
 | Uganda | 2024

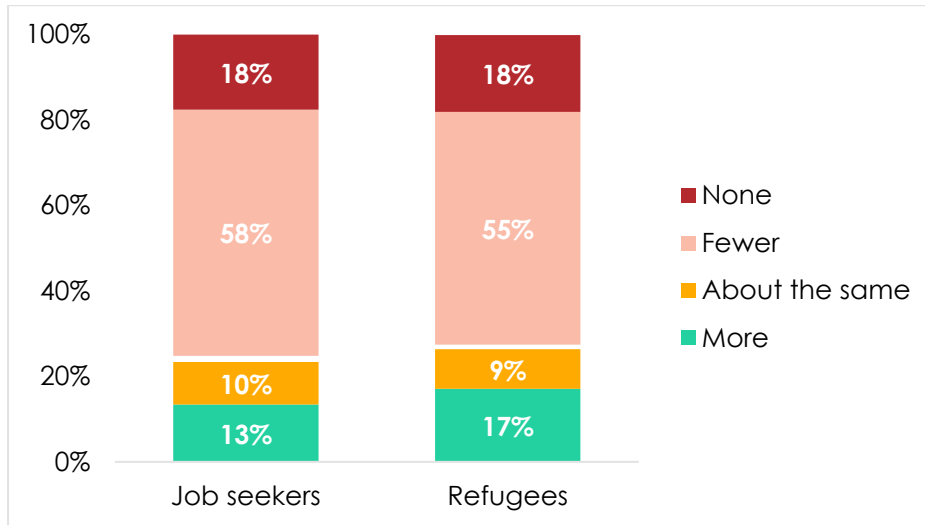


**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Immigrants or foreign workers? Refugees from other countries who are fleeing political violence or persecution? (% who say "strongly like," "somewhat like," or "would not care")

Despite these generally favourable views of immigrants, survey findings show that Ugandans are apprehensive about letting migrants into their country: Fully three-fourths (75%) say the government should reduce the number of job seekers it allows to enter (58%) or eliminate such immigration altogether (18%) (Figure 7). Similarly, 73% favour reducing (55%) or eliminating (18%) entry by refugees.

Fewer than one in five respondents would welcome more prospective workers (13%) and asylum seekers (17%).

**Figure 7: How many migrants should be allowed into the country? | Uganda | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:**

*Do you think Uganda should allow more or fewer job seekers from other countries to come to live and work in this country?*

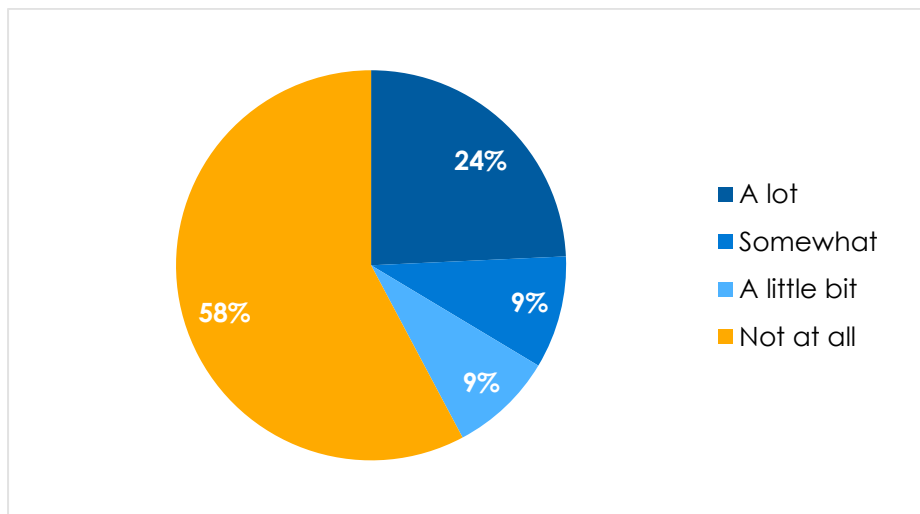
*Do you think Uganda should allow more or fewer refugees from other countries to come and live in this country?*

**Looking abroad: Ugandans' attitudes toward emigration**

People leave home for a variety of reasons: to escape conflict or resource scarcity, to avoid discrimination and oppression, to pursue better economic opportunities, or for any one or more of a myriad other reasons. Do Ugandans think about emigrating? If so, what propels them to do so?

When it comes to leaving their country, more than four in 10 Ugandans (42%) say they have contemplated the possibility, including 24% who have considered it "a lot," 9% "somewhat," and 9% "a little bit" (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Considered emigrating | Uganda | 2024**

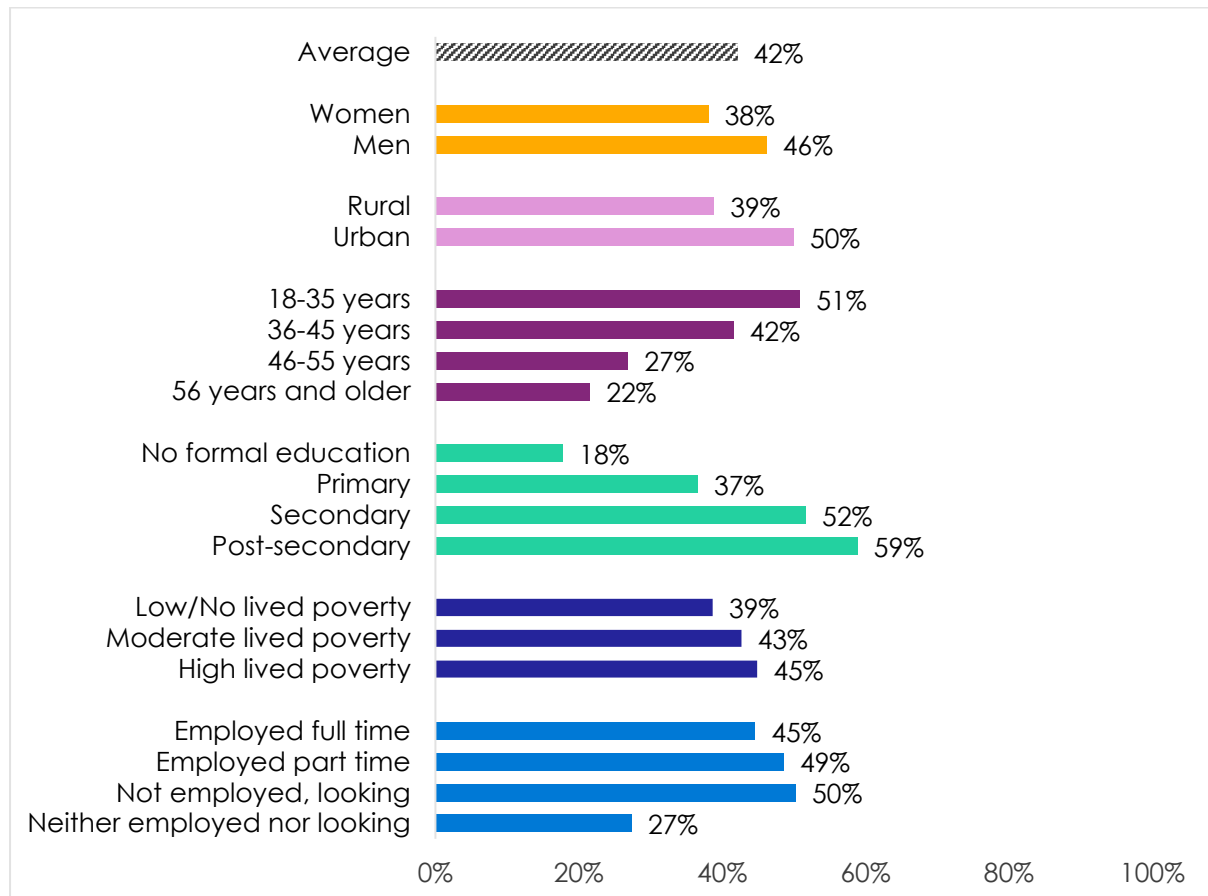


**Respondents were asked:** *How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live?*



Interest in leaving the country increases with education, ranging from just 18% of those lacking formal education to 59% of the most educated, and decreases with age, from 51% of the youth to 22% of the elderly (Figure 9). The poorest respondents (45%) are somewhat more likely than their well-off counterparts (39%) to say they have thought about leaving the country. Around half of both employed (45%-49%) and unemployed (50%) individuals have considered emigrating.

**Figure 9: Considered emigrating** | by demographic group | Uganda | 2024



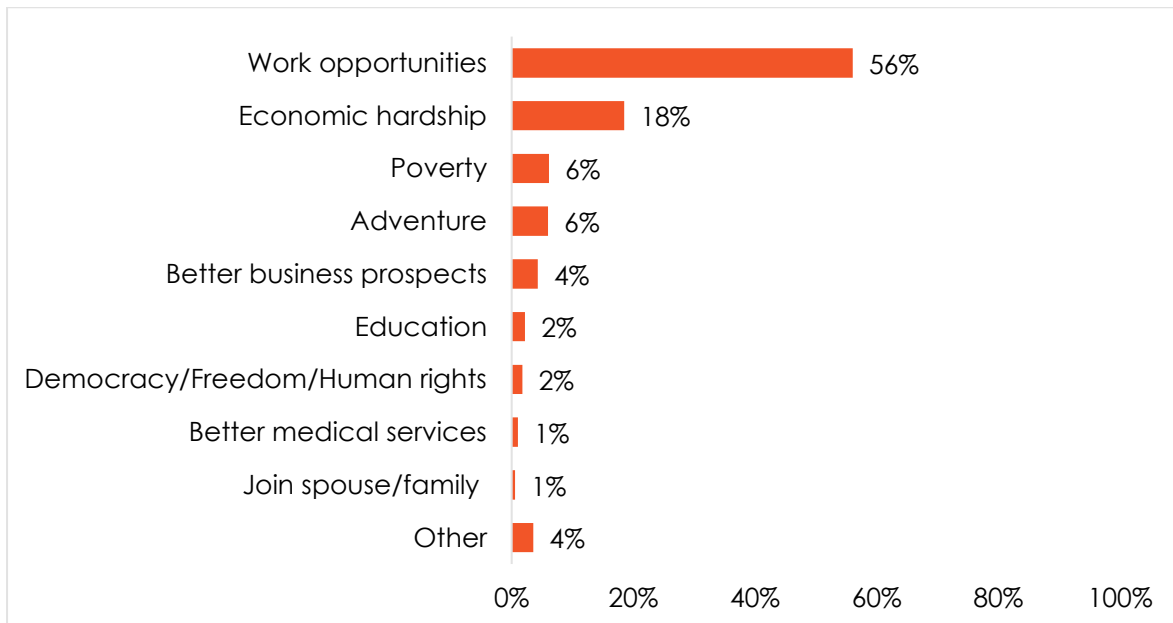
**Respondents were asked:** How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live? (% who say “a little bit,” “somewhat,” or “a lot”)

The most frequently cited reasons among those who have considered emigration are economic: 56% would leave for work opportunities, 18% to alleviate economic hardship, 6% to escape poverty, and 4% in search of better business prospects (Figure 10).

The most popular destination for potential Ugandan emigrants is North America (26%) (Figure 11). But almost as many (23%)<sup>2</sup> would stay in Africa, whether in Kenya (12%), another country in the region (4%), or elsewhere on the continent (6%). Sizeable proportions would opt for the Middle East (18%) and Europe (15%).

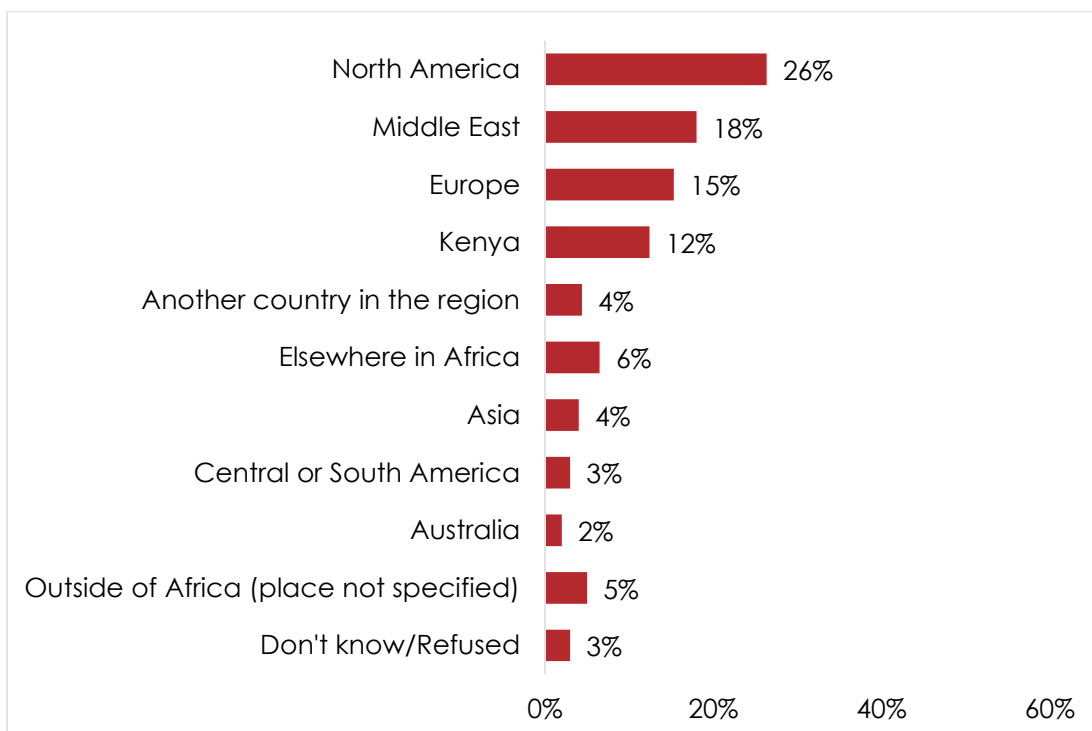
<sup>2</sup> Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. 12% for Kenya, 4% for another country in the region, and 6% for elsewhere on the continent sum to 23%).

**Figure 10: Reasons for emigration | Uganda | 2024**



**Respondents who say they have considered emigrating were asked:** There are several reasons why people leave their home to live in another country for an extended period of time. What about you? What is the most important reason why you would consider moving from Uganda? (Respondents who say they have not considered emigrating are excluded.)

**Figure 11: Preferred destination for emigration | Uganda | 2024**



**Respondents who say they have considered emigrating were asked:** If you were to move to another country, where would you be most likely to go? (Respondents who say they have not considered emigrating are excluded.)

## Conclusion

Migration is an important and multifaceted challenge in Uganda. The government is actively working to accommodate and integrate large numbers of refugees. While ordinary citizens express support for freedom of cross-border movement, they are less inclined to welcome more migrants; indeed, a majority report a desire to have fewer.

Officials are also trying to mitigate problems facing outgoing labour migrants, especially nationals working in the Middle East. Nevertheless, as Afrobarometer's survey data show, many Ugandans are thinking about pursuing greener pastures abroad, including a substantial minority who would consider moving to the Middle East.

Most who have considered emigration cite economic reasons. This suggests that, until Uganda makes progress on deep-seated economic challenges, the desire to leave will remain prevalent among its citizens.

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