

# Namibians support women's autonomy, sex education, and access to contraception, but are divided on termination of pregnancies

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 840 | Christiaan Keulder and Lizl Stoman

## Summary

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are a fundamental aspect of public health and human rights, encompassing physical, mental, and social well-being concerning sexuality and childbearing (Starr et al., 2018). Expressing the right to autonomy over one's body and sexuality, SRHR ensure that individuals can make informed decisions about their sexual health and reproductive choices and access necessary services without facing discrimination, coercion, or violence.

Namibia has made significant strides in promoting SRHR through international commitments and national policy frameworks. Globally, Namibia has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, signalling its commitment to gender equality and child protection in matters of reproductive health. Regionally, Namibia's participation in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Parliamentary Forum (2019) has contributed to agreements such as the Minimum Standards for the Protection of Sexual and Reproductive Health of Key Populations in the SADC Region.

At the national level, Namibia's approach to SRHR reflects a balancing act between international obligations, legal frameworks, societal norms, and educational strategies aimed at promoting sexual and reproductive well-being across its population. The country adopts a life-cycle approach to SRHR, recognising that individuals' needs evolve throughout different stages of life. The government's revised National Guidelines on Family Planning underscore the importance of providing a continuum of care that supports couples and individuals in making informed choices regarding childbearing and contraceptive methods (UNFPA, 2022). This policy framework aligns with global calls for "children by choice and not by chance," advocating for the availability of safe and effective family-planning services and the right to decide the number and spacing of children.

However, Namibia's legal framework surrounding abortion remains restrictive. Governed by the Abortion and Sterilization Act 2 of 1975, abortion is permitted only in cases where the pregnancy endangers the woman's life or health or results from rape, incest, or unlawful intercourse involving severe mental incapacity. The process mandates certification by medical practitioners and imposes penalties of fines up to N\$5,000 or imprisonment for up to five years, or both, for violations. This stringent policy animates ongoing debates regarding women's reproductive rights and access to safe health-care services, as restrictive laws often push women toward unsafe abortion practices, risking their health and lives (Legal Assistance Centre, 2020).

Infantile abandonment, commonly referred to as "baby dumping," remains a poignant SRHR issue in Namibia. Despite legislative amendments allowing for anonymous child surrender in

designated safe places under the Child Care and Protection Act of 2019, cases of abandonment persist (Legal Assistance Centre, 2019; Namibian, 2022; Kuria, 2023).

Namibia integrates Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in its national curriculum through Life Skills Education, mandatory from grades 4 to 12. Aligned with UNESCO guidelines and the National Strategic Framework on HIV, CSE aims to equip students with knowledge and skills to make informed decisions about their sexual health and relationships. However, integrating SRHR services and CSE in the school health programme has faced challenges, particularly from religious and conservative groups. Opposition often cites concerns about promoting sexual promiscuity among young people, leading to governmental withdrawals from specific CSE initiatives (Haidula, 2020).

In cases when pupils get pregnant, the country's Education Sector Policy for the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy advises schools to "endeavour to manage the situation by supporting pregnant learners, expectant fathers, and learner-parents to combine continuation of their education with the responsibilities of parenthood" (Ministry of Education, 2010).

A special question module in Afrobarometer's Round 10 survey explores the opinions and experiences of Namibians related to sexual and reproductive health.

Findings show that Namibians overwhelmingly support women's autonomy in decisions about marriage and childbearing.

Most citizens also favour teaching sex education in school, allowing girls who become pregnant or have children to continue their education, and making contraceptives available regardless of potential users' marital status and age.

Solid majorities say terminating a pregnancy is "sometimes" or "always" justified if the mother's life or health is in danger or if the pregnancy resulted from rape or incest, but views are more divided on termination for economic or other reasons.

## 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 Namibia, led by Survey Warehouse, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult citizens of Namibia in March 2024. 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 Namibia in 1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019, and 2021.

## Key findings

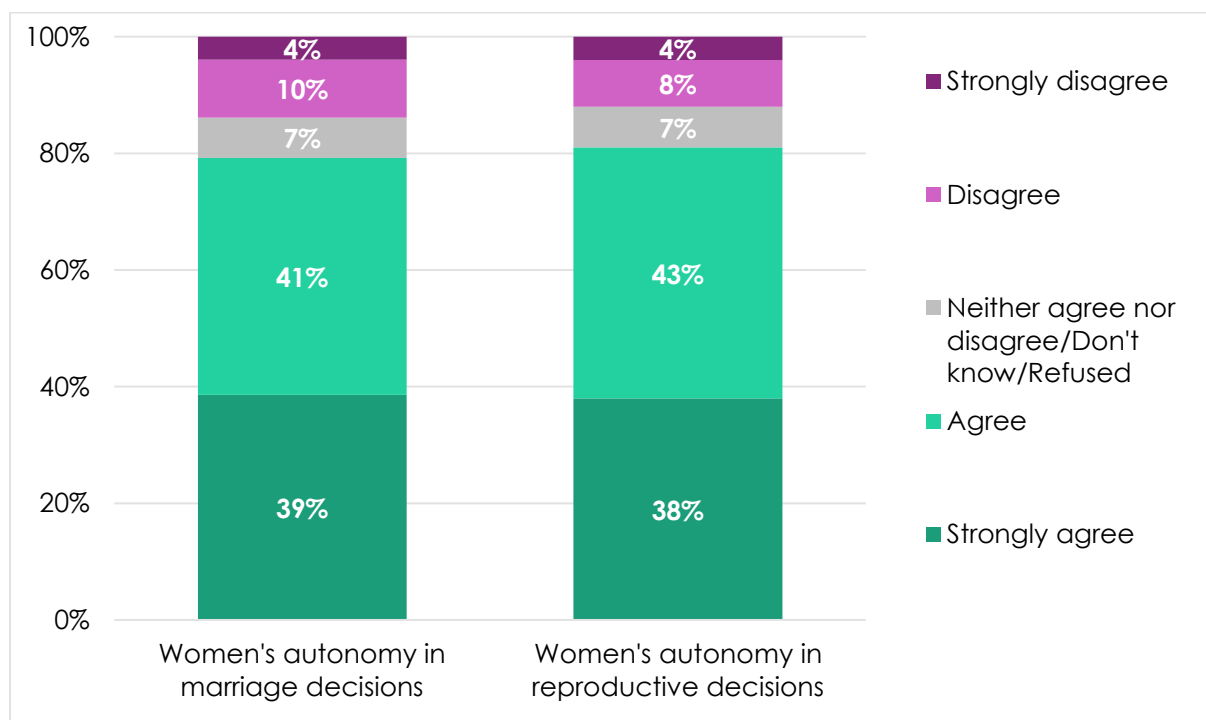
- Namibians strongly support women's and girls' autonomy in making decisions about whether and when they should marry (80%) and about the timing and number of children to have (81%). Support for women's autonomy is particularly strong among women, young citizens, and more educated respondents.
- About three out of four Namibians support access to contraceptives regardless of people's marital status (77%) and age (74%).
- More than eight in 10 citizens (83%) support teaching sex education in schools.

- An overwhelming majority (85%) of adult Namibians say that girls who get pregnant or have children should be allowed to continue their education.
- Namibians are divided in their assessments of how often women or girls in their community terminate their pregnancies: 44% say “rarely” or “never,” while 41% say “occasionally” or “often.”
- By clear majorities, Namibians say terminating a pregnancy is “sometimes” or “always” justified if the mother’s life or health is in danger (72%) or if the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest (60%).
  - Slightly more than half (52%) say termination is “sometimes” or “always” justified if economic hardship would not allow the mother to take care of a child.
  - Fewer than half (47%) see termination as sometimes/always justified if the mother does not want to keep the pregnancy for any reason; a slim majority (51%) consider termination “never” justified in such a situation.

### Women’s autonomy in making decisions about marriage and childbearing

A large majority (80%) of Namibians support girls and women deciding for themselves whether and when they should marry (Figure 1). Similarly, eight in 10 citizens (81%) support women deciding for themselves when and how many children they should have.

**Figure 1: Women and girls should make own decisions about marriage** | Namibia | 2024



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

*Girls and women should decide for themselves whether and when they should marry.*

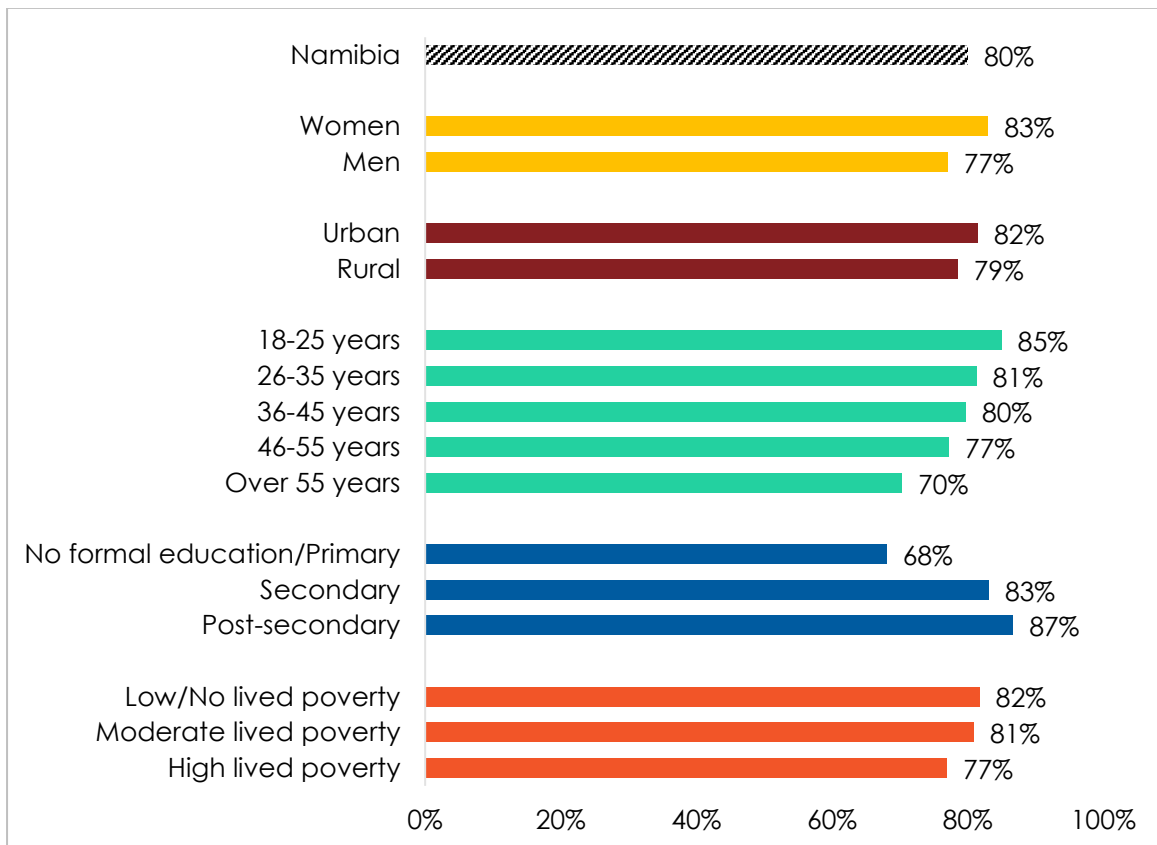
*Women should decide for themselves when and how many children they want to have.*

Support for girls’ and women’s autonomy in decisions about marriage is somewhat stronger among women than men (83% vs. 77%) and in cities compared to rural areas (82% vs. 79%)

(Figure 2). Support is highest among the youngest respondents (85% of 18- to 25-year-olds) and decreases with age, dropping to 70% among those who are 55 years old or older.

Citizens with higher educational attainment report stronger support for girls' and women's autonomy in marriage decisions, ranging from 68% among those with primary schooling or less to 87% among those with post-secondary education. Namibians experiencing high levels of lived poverty<sup>1</sup> are less supportive of women's decision-making power (77%) than their better-off counterparts (81%-82%).

**Figure 2: Women and girls should make own decisions about marriage** | Namibia  
 | 2024

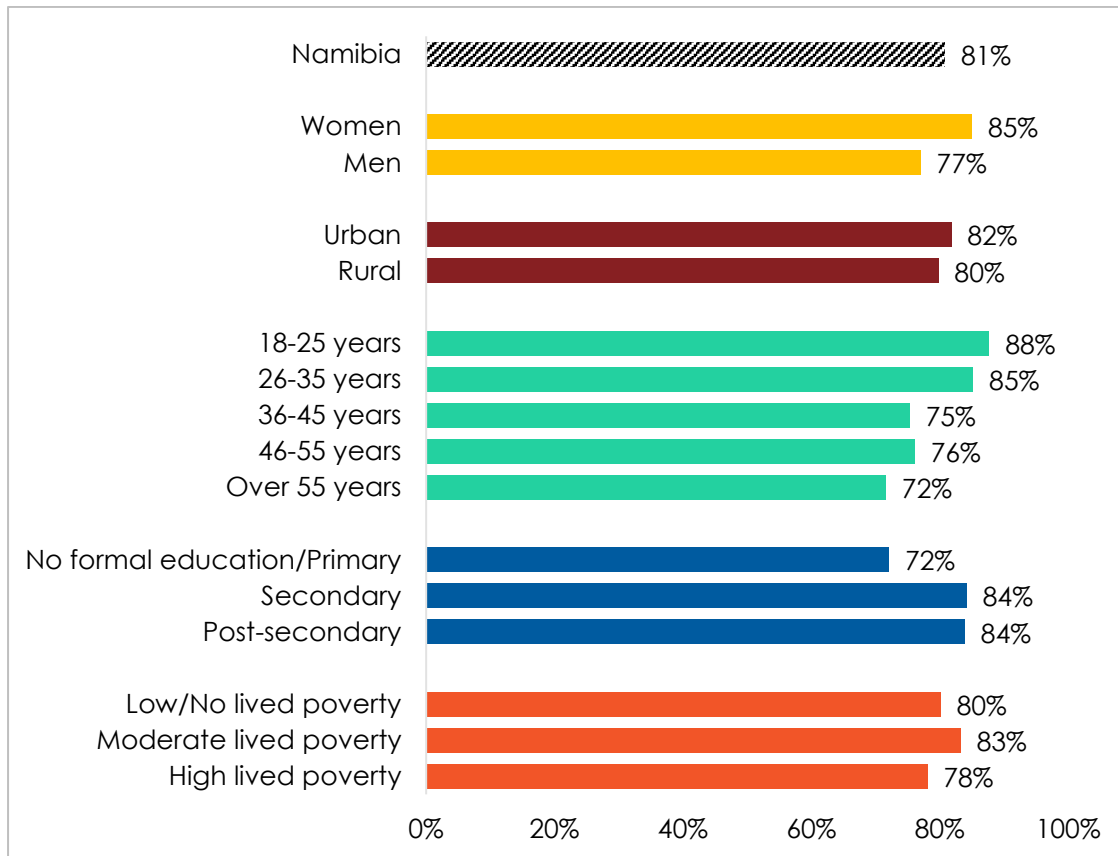


**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Girls and women should decide for themselves whether and when they should marry. (% who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

When it comes to decisions about childbearing, women are again more supportive of their own autonomy than men (85% vs. 77%), as are younger citizens (88% of 18- to 25-year-olds) compared to their elders (72% in the over-55 group) (Figure 3). And citizens with primary schooling or no formal schooling are less likely to support women's autonomy in childbearing decisions (72%) than those with higher education (84%).

<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 preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

**Figure 3: Women should make own decisions about having children | Namibia**  
 | 2024



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Women should decide for themselves when and how many children they want to have. (% who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

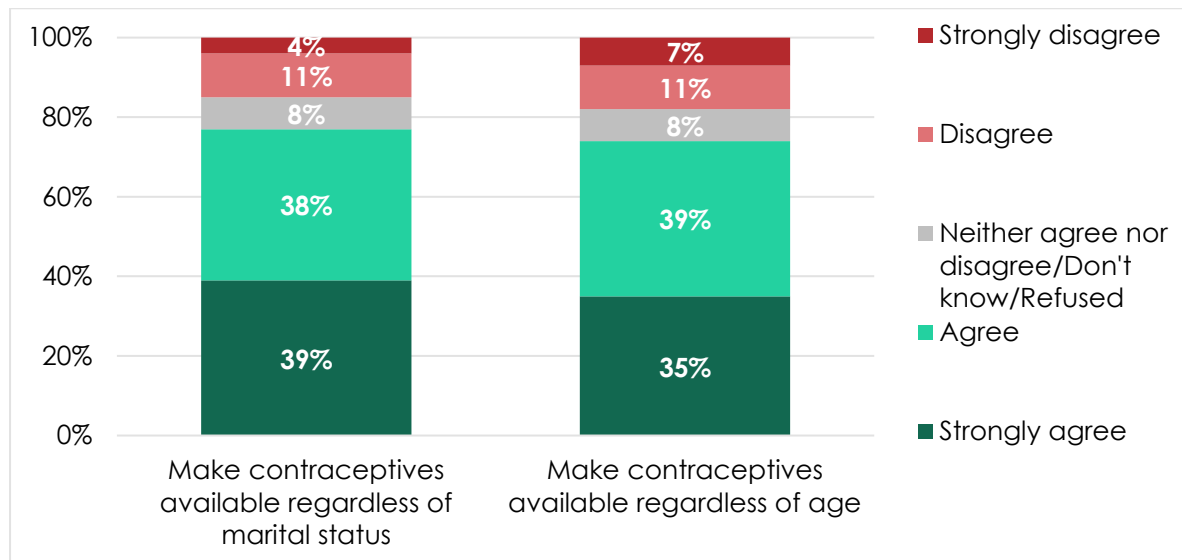
### Access to contraceptives

More than three-quarters (77%) of Namibians either “agree” or “strongly agree” that contraceptives should be available to anyone who is sexually active, regardless of their marital status (Figure 4). Responses are similar when it comes to making contraceptives available to anyone who is sexually active, regardless of age: Almost three-quarters (74%) of Namibians support this approach.

Women are more supportive than men of making contraceptives available regardless of whether an individual is married (81% vs. 74%) (Figure 5). Support for access to contraceptives decreases as respondents’ age increases, dropping from 83% among 18- to 25-year-olds to 66% among those over age 55. And it increases with respondents’ educational attainment, ranging from 67% among those with primary schooling or less to 85% among those with post-secondary qualifications.

The pattern is similar with regard to making contraceptives available regardless of age, reflecting stronger support among women, younger citizens, and those with higher education than among their counterparts.

**Figure 4: Access to contraceptives regardless of marital status, age | Namibia | 2024**

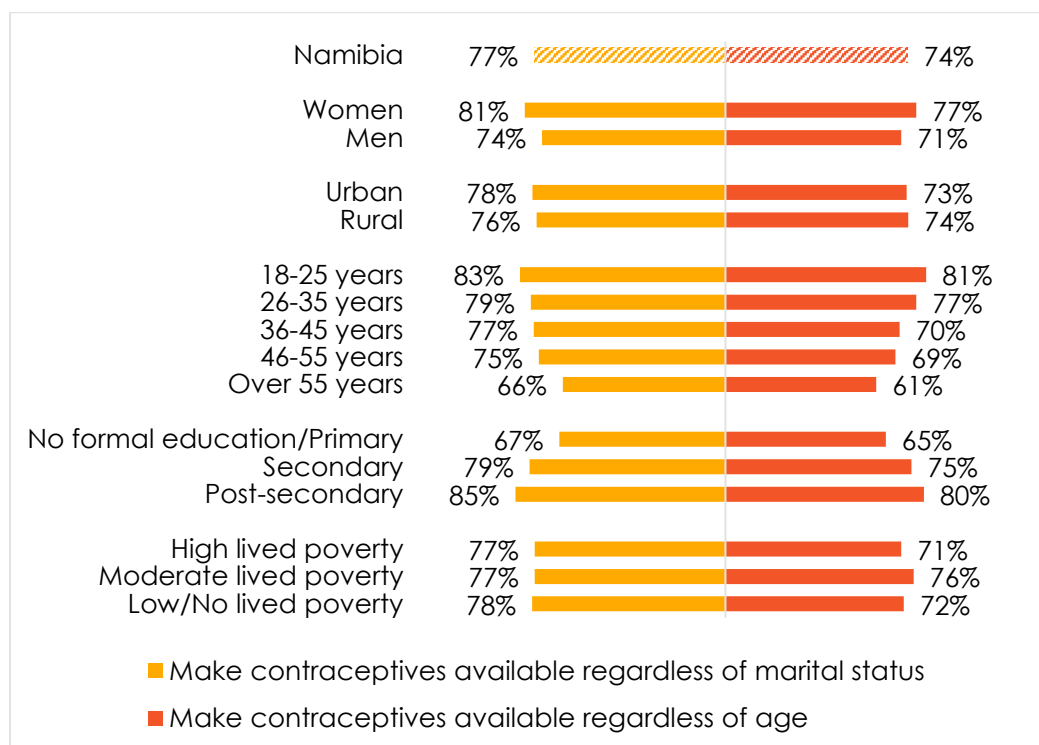


**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree (% who "agree" or "strongly agree"):

Contraceptives should be available to everyone, regardless of marital status.

Contraceptives should be available to everyone who is sexually active regardless of age.

**Figure 5: Access to contraceptives regardless of marital status, age | Namibia | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree (% who "agree" or "strongly agree"):

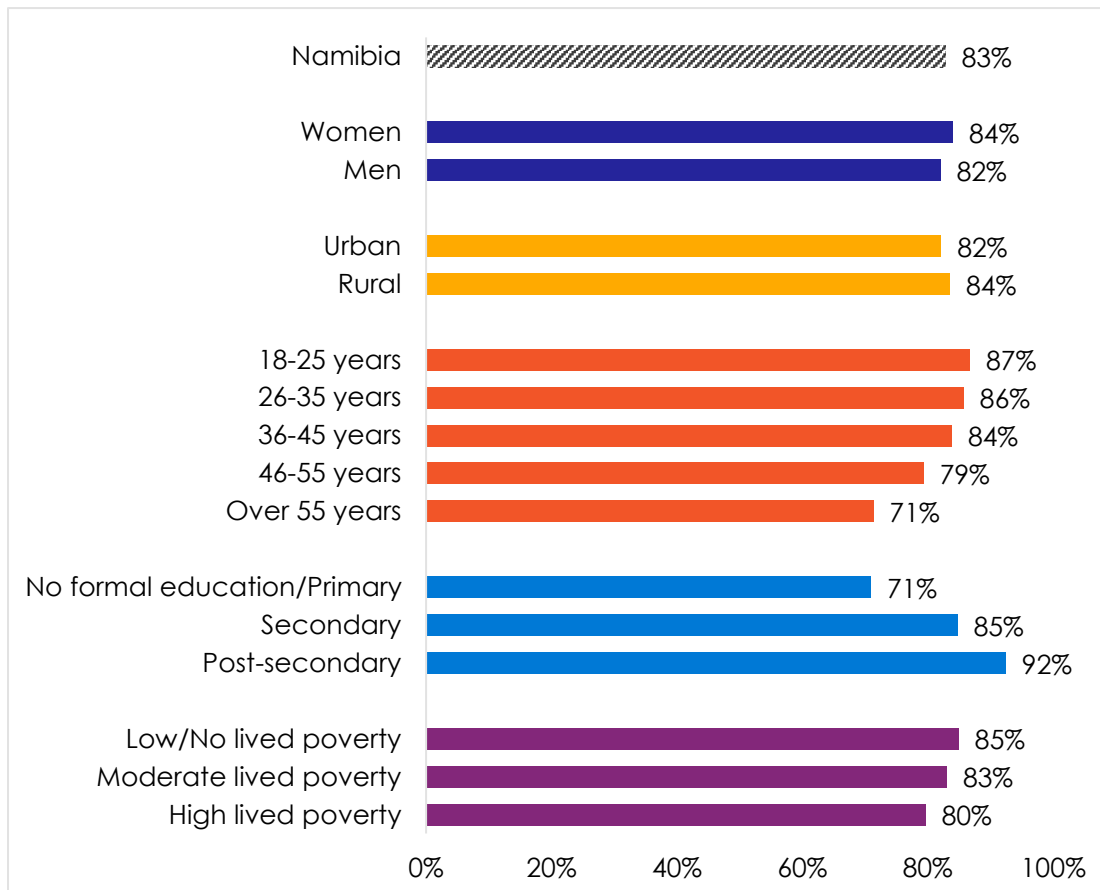
Contraceptives should be available to everyone, regardless of marital status.

Contraceptives should be available to everyone who is sexually active regardless of age.

## Sex education in schools

Most Namibians (83%) are in favour of sex education being taught in schools (Figure 6). This approach is especially popular among youth (87% of 18- to 25-year-olds), the most educated respondents (92%), and economically well-off citizens (85%), but it enjoys strong majority support across all key demographic groups.

**Figure 6: Schools should teach sex education** | Namibia | 2024

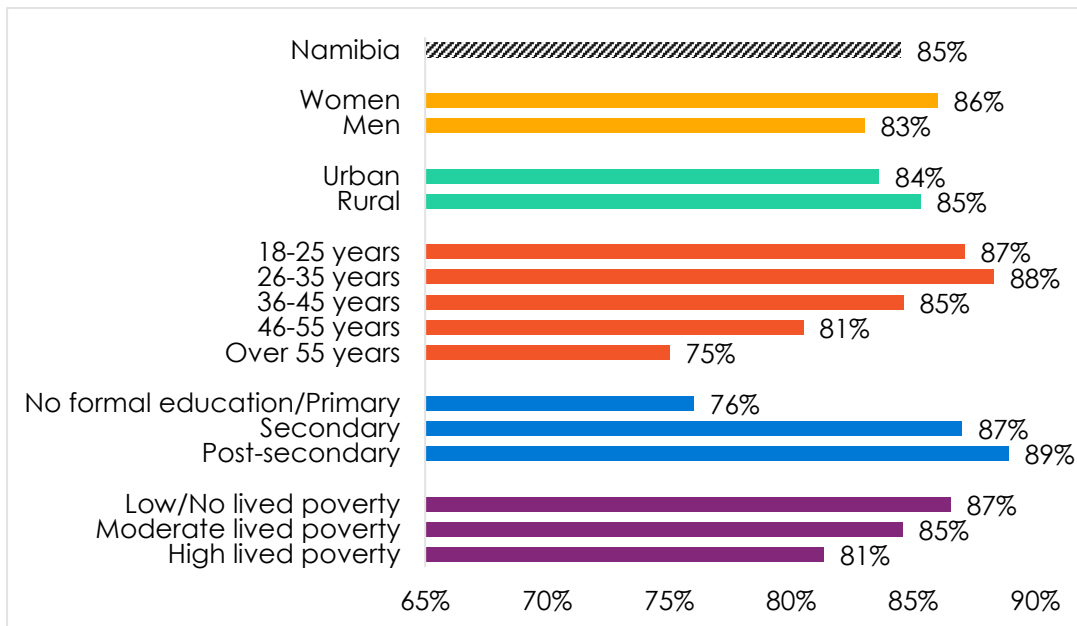


**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Schools should teach sex education to young people to help them make informed decisions. (% who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

## Should pregnant girls be allowed to stay in school?

Namibians overwhelmingly (85%) favour allowing girls who become pregnant or have children to stay in school (Figure 7). While older citizens, less educated respondents and those experiencing high lived poverty are less likely to endorse such a policy, even among these groups, at least three-fourths agree that becoming pregnant or having children should not dictate whether a girl is allowed to continue her schooling.

**Figure 7: Pregnant girls and mothers should be allowed to continue school**  
 | Namibia | 2024

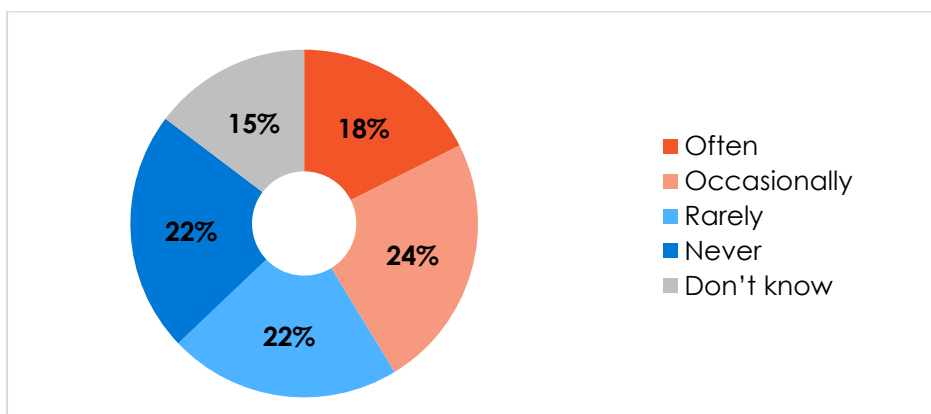


**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Girls should be allowed to continue their schooling even if they become pregnant or have children. (% who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

### Views on terminating pregnancies

Namibians are divided in their assessments of how often women or girls in their community terminate their pregnancies. More than four in 10 (44%) say this happens “rarely” (22%) or “never” (22%), while almost as many (41%) describe it as an “occasional” (24%) or frequent (18%) occurrence<sup>2</sup> (Figure 8). A substantial proportion of respondents (15%) say they don’t know how often pregnancies are terminated.

**Figure 8: Frequency of pregnancy termination** | Namibia | 2024



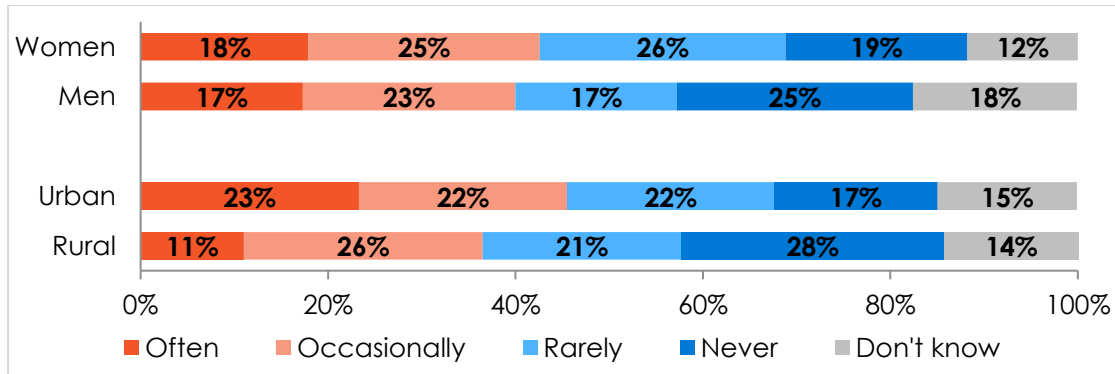
**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how often, if ever, do women or girls in your community terminate their pregnancies?

<sup>2</sup> Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories may differ slightly from the sum of reported sub-categories (e.g. 18% “often” and 24% “occasionally” sum to 41%).



Women and men differ little in their assessments of how often pregnancies are terminated, but urbanites are twice as likely as rural residents to describe it as a frequent occurrence (23% vs. 11%) (Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Frequency of pregnancy termination** | by gender and urban-rural location | Namibia | 2024



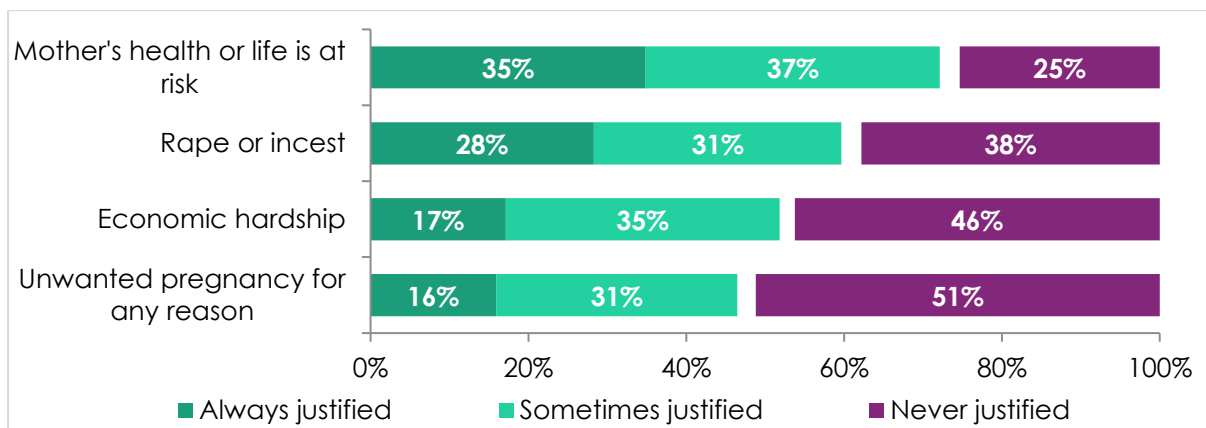
**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how often, if ever, do women or girls in your community terminate their pregnancies?

By solid majorities, Namibians say terminating a pregnancy is “sometimes” or “always” justified under certain circumstances: if the mother’s life or health is in danger (72%) or if the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest (60%) (Figure 10).

Views are more narrowly divided under other circumstances. Slightly more than half (52%) say termination is “sometimes” or “always” justified if economic hardship would not allow the mother to take care of a child, but 46% disagree.

And slightly fewer than half (47%) see termination as sometimes/always justified if the mother does not want to keep the pregnancy for any reason, while a narrow majority (51%) consider it “never” justified in such a situation.

**Figure 10: Is termination of pregnancy justified?** | by reason | Namibia | 2024



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following situations, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified for a woman to terminate a pregnancy if:

The pregnancy is as a result of rape or she has been impregnated by a close relative such as her father or brother?

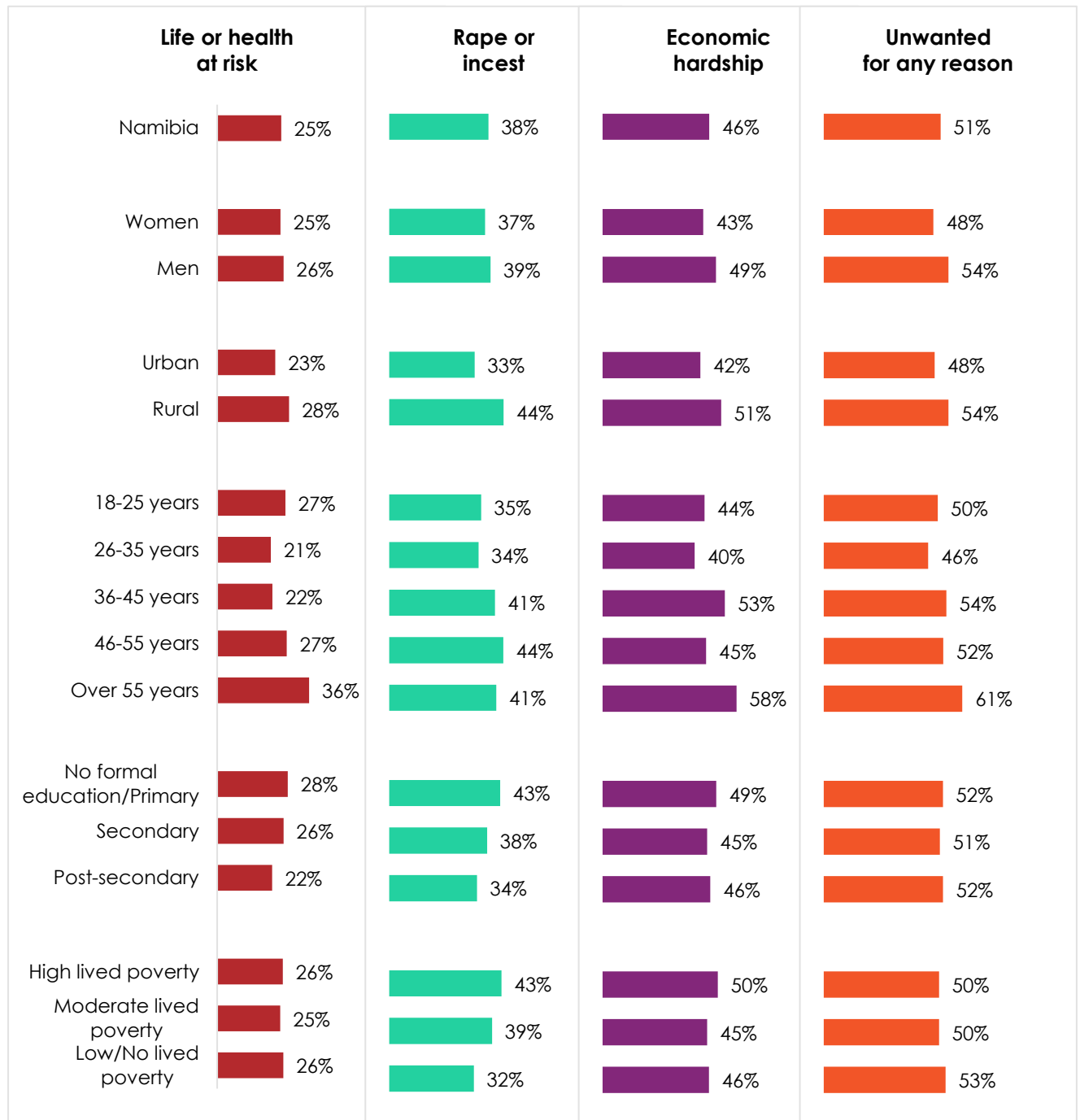
Her health or life is in danger if she keeps the pregnancy?

She is going through economic hardships and cannot take care of a child?

She does not want to keep the pregnancy for any reason?

Perceptions that terminating a pregnancy is “never” justified vary by demographic group as well as by the described circumstances (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Termination of pregnancy ‘never’ justified | Namibia | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following situations, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified for a woman to terminate a pregnancy if:

The pregnancy is as a result of rape or she has been impregnated by a close relative such as her father or brother?

Her health or life is in danger if she keeps the pregnancy?

She is going through economic hardships and cannot take care of a child?

She does not want to keep the pregnancy for any reason?

(% who say “never justified”)

Men are more likely than women to oppose termination in a situation of economic hardship (49% vs. 43%) and for “any reason” (54% vs. 48%). Rural residents express greater opposition than urbanites (by 5 to 11 percentage points) in all four situations.

Older respondents are also more likely than younger respondents to see termination as “never” justified in all four situations.

Less educated citizens express greater opposition than their more educated counterparts to termination if the mother’s life or health is at risk (by 6 percentage points) and if the pregnancy resulted from rape or incest (by 9 points).

Citizens experiencing high lived poverty are more likely to oppose termination if the pregnancy is a result of rape or incest than better-off respondents (43% vs. 32%-39%). Interestingly, the poorest respondents are also in stronger opposition to termination based on economic hardship (50% vs. 45%-46%).

## Conclusion

Namibian attitudes toward sexual and reproductive health and rights reveal robust support for women’s autonomy in decision-making about marriage and childbearing, coupled with strong backing for access to contraception regardless of marital status and age. Citizens express overwhelming support for sex education in schools and the continuation of education for pregnant learners.

Majorities see pregnancy termination as potentially justified in cases where the mother’s life or health is at risk and in cases of rape or incest, but termination for other reasons draws mixed opinions.

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