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# Ugandans support sex education in schools but oppose contraceptives for youth

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 920 | Joseph Makanga and John Martin Kewaza**

## Summary

Adolescent sexual and reproductive health remains a major public health challenge in Africa. Comprehensive sexuality education “about the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social aspects of sexuality” has been hailed as a key strategy to inform young people about sexual health and well-being and to prevent adverse health outcomes (UNESCO, 2018, p. 16). But its implementation on the continent often encounters challenges or falters due to a lack of political will (Wangamati, 2020).

In Uganda, the Ministry of Education and Sports, supported by the United Nations Population Fund (2018), drew up national guidelines for age-appropriate and culturally sensitive sexuality education, but they faced heated opposition from religious groups (Moore, Hirsch, Spindler, Nalugoda, & Santelli, 2021). Issues under contention included the age at which sexuality education should be introduced and the curriculum content (Daily Monitor, 2021). Similarly, in 2023, the Ministry of Health proposed that the eligibility age for accessing contraceptives be dropped from 18 to 15 years, but Parliament voted the proposal down (Muia, 2023). Although some form of sex education is reportedly offered in some schools (Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, 2024), comprehensive sexuality education is yet to be integrated into the national school curriculum (Obeagu & Obeagu, 2024).

Uganda has the highest teenage pregnancy rate in East Africa, at 25% (Government of Uganda, 2022). The 2016 Demographic and Health Survey found that one-fifth of all girls were forced to engage in sexual activity before the age of 15, and nearly two-thirds had had sex before turning 18 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

From a health and wellness perspective, these data are concerning. Young mothers face increased health risks due to their age and, in many cases, a lack of access to proper health care during pregnancy and childbirth. About one in six maternal deaths occur among adolescents aged 15-19 (United Nations Population Fund, 2021).

Sexual violence and sexual harassment are also major problems in Uganda, affecting girls and women across age groups and settings. More than one in five women aged 15-49 report having experienced sexual violence at some point in their lives (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Fear of harassment and abuse is part of many women's daily realities, even in high-profile locales like Parliament, yet these incidents are often disregarded (Ssenkaaba, 2020).

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show that a majority of Ugandans support the inclusion of sex education in school curricula. Support for sex education is fairly consistent across different religious groups. However, few Ugandans agree that contraceptives should be made available to everyone who is sexually active regardless of age.

Findings further reveal a pervasive threat to the safety and dignity of women and girls in Uganda, with significant proportions of respondents reporting that female students often face discrimination, harassment, or requests for sexual favours from teachers and that

women frequently suffer sexual harassment in public spaces. A large majority of Ugandans say the police and courts should do more to protect girls and women from these threats.

## 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-February 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 surveys in Uganda have been conducted in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2021.

## Key findings

- Six in 10 Ugandans (60%) support the inclusion of sexuality education in school curricula.
  - This support is fairly consistent across different religious groups and ranges from 48% in the Eastern Region to 74% in the North.
- A majority (60%) of citizens oppose making contraceptives accessible to all sexually active individuals regardless of age.
  - Muslims (32%) and members of Pentecostal churches (33%) are less supportive of universal access to contraceptives than members of other Christian churches (38%-40%).
  - Regionally, support is highest in the Western Region (47%) and lowest in the Central Region (27%).
- Large majorities say that girls and women should decide for themselves whether and when to get married (78%) and that pregnant girls and teenage mothers should be allowed to continue their schooling (84%).
- More than a third (35%) of Ugandans say girls "often" or "always" face discrimination or sexual harassment in schools, while 30% say women frequently experience sexual harassment in public spaces such as markets and public transport.
- More than three-fourths (78%) of Ugandans say the police and courts need to do more to protect girls and women from discrimination and harassment in schools, workplaces, and other public spaces.

## Sexuality education in schools

Given the widespread debate about sexuality education in schools, what do ordinary Ugandans think about this hotly contested issue?

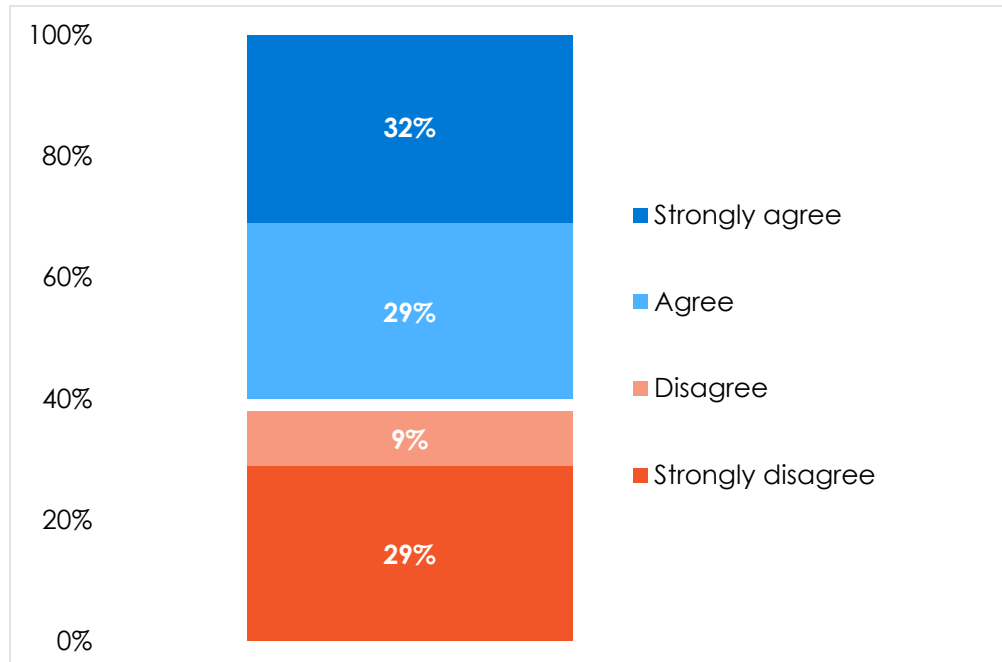
Six in 10 citizens (60%)<sup>1</sup> support the inclusion of sexuality education in school curricula, including 32% who "strongly agree" with the idea, while 38% are opposed (Figure 1). This is a

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<sup>1</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. 32% "strongly agree" and 29% "agree" sum to 60%).

significant endorsement of educational programmes aimed at empowering young people with knowledge to make informed decisions regarding their sexual health.

**Figure 1: Should sexuality education be taught in schools? | Uganda | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Schools should teach sexuality education to young people to help them make informed decisions.

Support for sexuality education is broad across key demographic groups (Figure 2). Approval is fairly uniform across different religious groups (57%-61%), suggesting that despite differences in religious doctrine, there is a common recognition of the benefits of sex education.

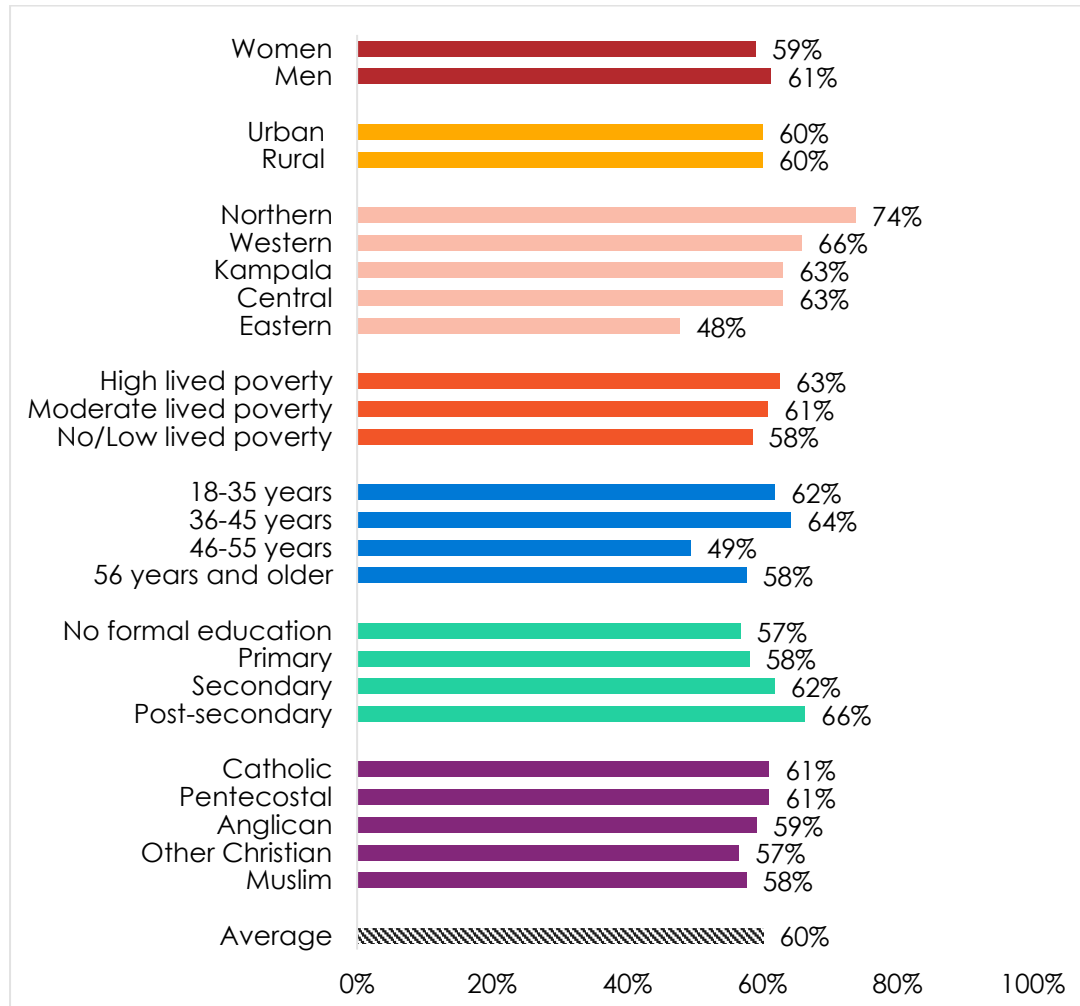
Younger generations (62%-64%) are somewhat more supportive of sexual education than their elders (49%-58%), perhaps indicating a generational shift toward more progressive views on sexuality education.

Men and women are about equally likely to endorse sex education, as are rural and urban residents. Higher educational attainment correlates with greater support, from 57% among those with no formal education to 66% among those with post-secondary qualifications. And the poorest respondents (63%) are somewhat more likely to favour sex education than those experiencing low or no lived poverty<sup>2</sup> (58%).

Geographically, support ranges from 48% in the Eastern Region to 74% in the Northern Region. These disparities are much larger than those in other demographic categories, suggesting that local cultural and social norms might have significant influence on views about sex education.

<sup>2</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 2: Support for sexuality education in schools | by demographic group**  
 | Uganda | 2024



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

### Support for access to contraceptives by all sexually active Ugandans

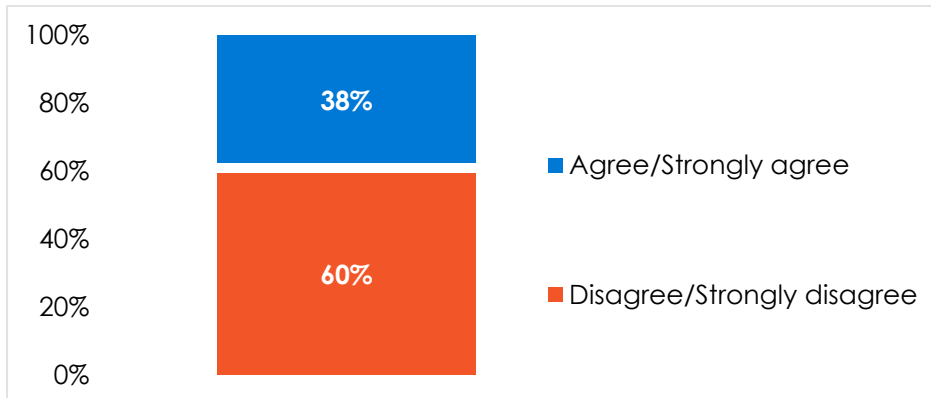
Contrary to their support for sex education, a majority (60%) of respondents reject the proposition that contraceptives should be made available to everyone who is sexually active, regardless of their age (Figure 3). Only 38% support this position. This indicates a cautious or conservative stance toward contraceptive access for young people, possibly reflecting concerns about promoting sexual activity among this demographic.

Support for universal availability of contraceptives is equally common among men and women (Figure 4). Urban residents are somewhat more supportive (39%) than their rural counterparts (34%), which may reflect more progressive attitudes or more significant exposure to sexual health education in urban areas.

Younger respondents (39%-42%) are more likely to support accessible contraceptives than older age groups (30%-31%). Among religious groups, Muslims (32%) and members of Pentecostal churches (33%) are less favourably disposed toward the idea than members of other Christian churches (38%-40%).

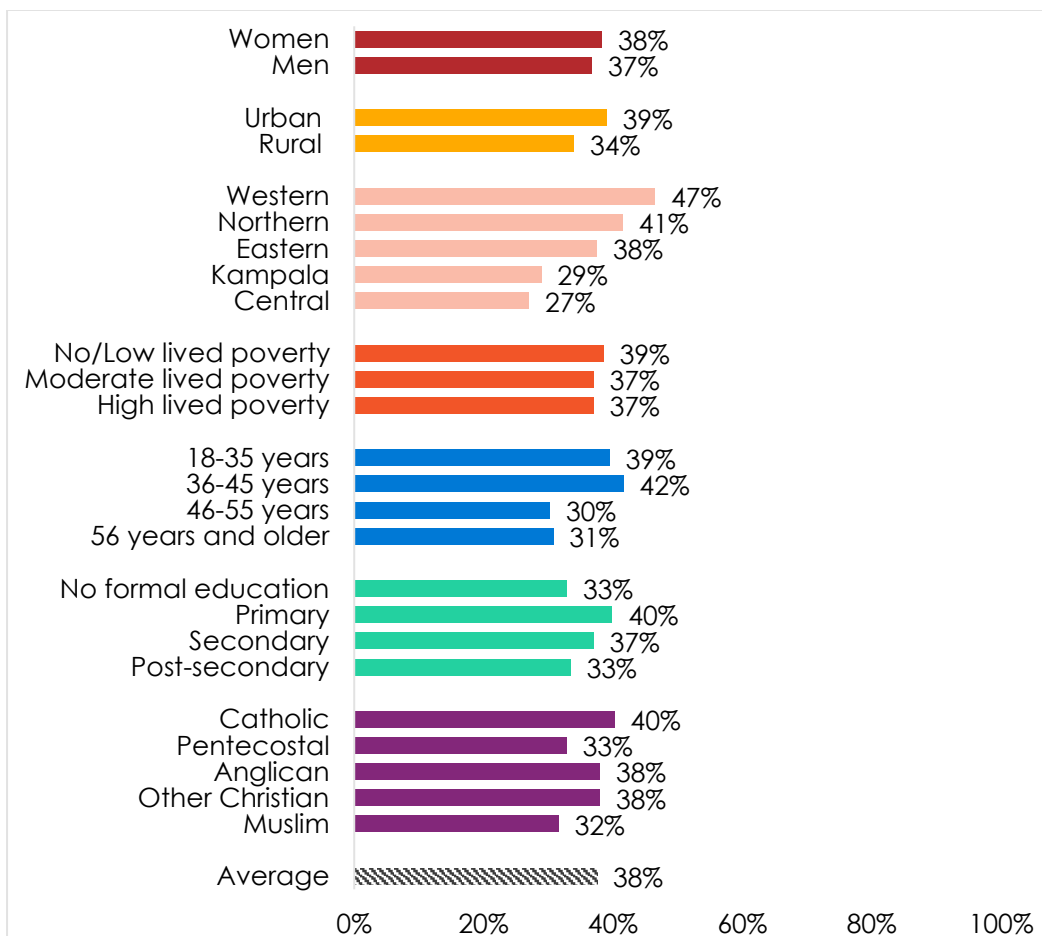
Regional differences are pronounced, with the Western Region (47%) showing the greatest support and the Central Region the least (27%).

**Figure 3: Should contraceptives be available to all ages? | Uganda | 2024**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Contraceptives should be available to everyone who is sexually active regardless of age.

**Figure 4: Support for making contraceptives available to everyone who is sexually active regardless of age | by demographic group | Uganda | 2024**

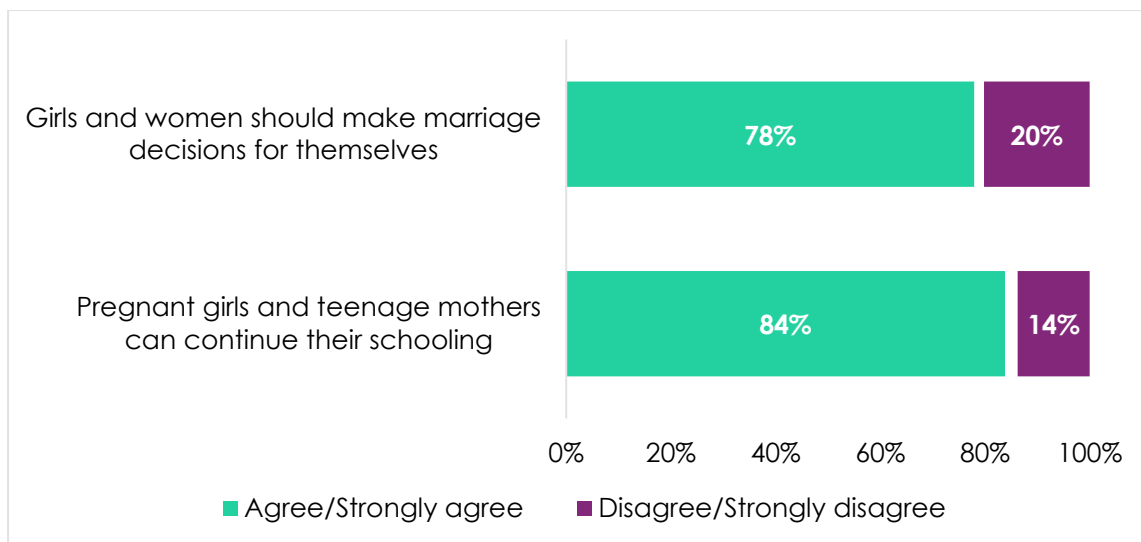


**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree. Contraceptives should be available to everyone who is sexually active regardless of age. (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

## Empowering young women

Amid widespread concern about the high number of child marriages and early pregnancies (Government of Uganda, 2022), a strong majority of Ugandans support empowering girls and women with decision-making authority regarding their futures. More than three-quarters (78%) say that girls and women should decide for themselves when – and whether – to get married, and an even larger proportion (84%) believe that pregnant girls and teenage mothers should be allowed to continue their schooling (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Views on marriage decisions and pregnant girls' education** | Uganda | 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.*

*Girls should be allowed to continue their schooling even if they become pregnant or have children.*

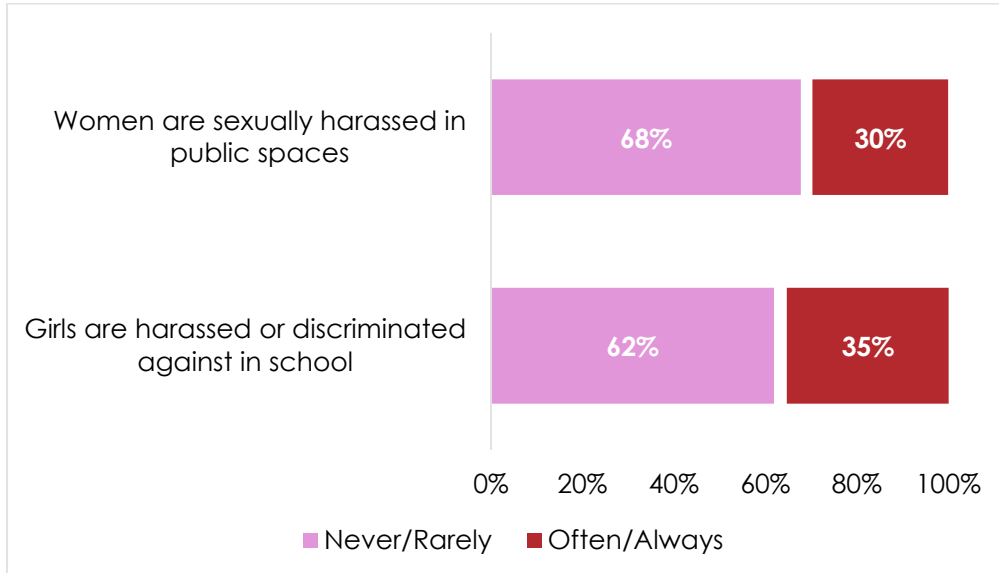
## Sexual discrimination and harassment

Afrobarometer data indicate significant public concern regarding gender discrimination and sexual harassment in educational institutions and public spaces. More than a third (35%) of respondents report that girls are “often” or “always” on the receiving end of discrimination, harassment, or requests for sexual favours from their teachers (Figure 6). Similarly, 30% of Ugandans say that women frequently suffer sexual harassment in markets, on the streets, in public transport, and in other public spaces.

Most Ugandans (78%) say the police and courts are not doing enough to protect women and girls from discrimination and harassment (Figure 7). Nearly half (48%) say these authorities must do “much more.”

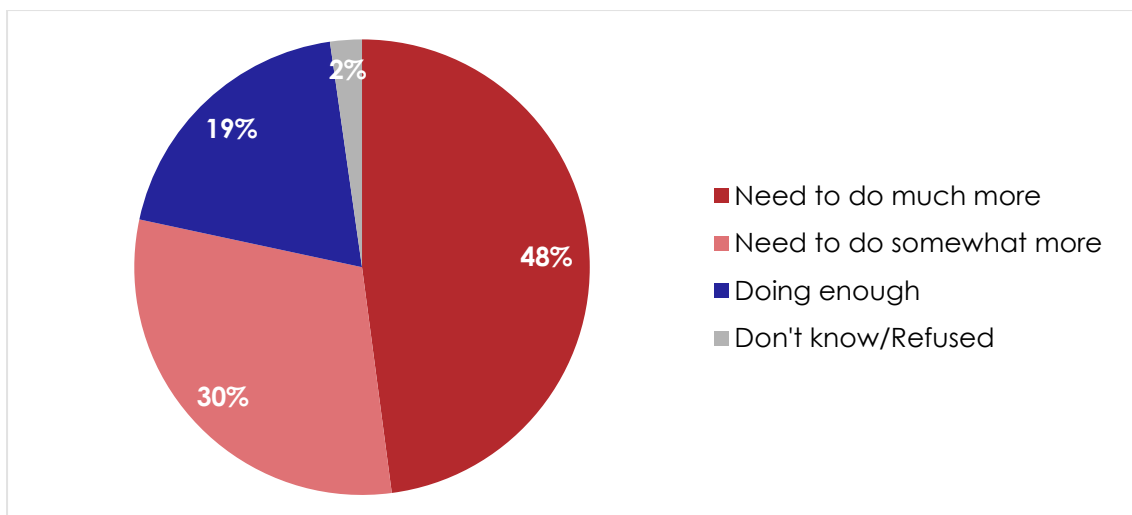
The perception that current efforts to protect women and girls are inadequate is more prevalent among women (81%) than men (76%) (Figure 8). Ugandans with no formal education are least likely to criticise the authorities' measures as insufficient, but a significant majority (62%) still feel this way. The poorest respondents are 8 percentage points more likely than well-off citizens to offer a negative assessment of current efforts (83% vs. 75%).

**Figure 6: Sexual harassment of girls in schools and women in public spaces**  
 | Uganda | 2024



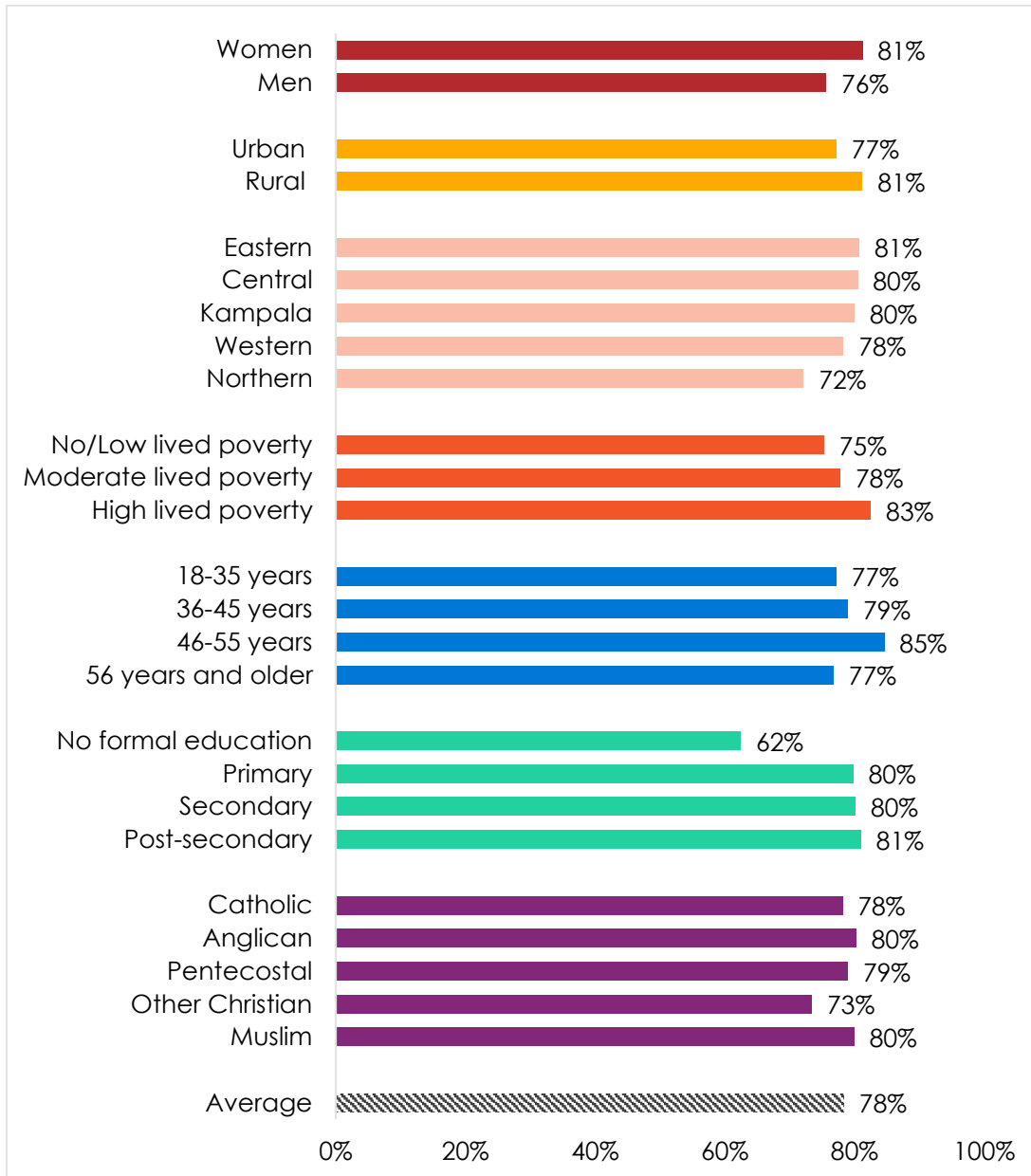
**Respondents were asked:** How frequently do the following things occur in your community?  
 Girl students face discrimination, harassment, or requests for sexual favours from their teachers.  
 Women are sexually harassed in public places such as in markets, on the streets, or in public transport.

**Figure 7: How well are the police and courts protecting women and girls?** | Uganda  
 | 2024



**Respondents were asked:** Do you think the police and courts in this country are doing enough to protect women and girls from discrimination and harassment in schools, workplaces, and public spaces, or do they need to do more?

**Figure 8: Police and the courts are not doing enough to protect women and girls**  
 | by demographic group | Uganda | 2024



**Respondents were asked:** Do you think the police and courts in this country are doing enough to protect women and girls from discrimination and harassment in schools, workplaces, and public spaces, or do they need to do more? (% who say they should do "somewhat" or "much" more)

### Conclusion

Ugandan society continues to debate a variety of issues surrounding sex and gender, including sexuality education, reproductive choices, gender discrimination, and sexual harassment.

Findings from the 2024 Afrobarometer survey reveal that a majority of citizens support the inclusion of sex education in school curricula. This should be a boon to the government's attempts to include such material in children's education.

However, far fewer agree that contraceptives should be available to everyone who is sexually active, irrespective of their age.

As policy makers work to address these critical issues, they must strike a balance that respects popular opinion while promoting the health and rights of young people. Engaging with community leaders and the public will be crucial in implementing effective and accepted policies.

Most Ugandans feel that law enforcement authorities such as the police and the courts are not doing enough to protect women and girls from public abuse. Calls for these institutions to introduce better protective measures highlights a critical area for policy intervention.

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