

Barriers to education, work, and security persist for Liberian women despite support for equal rights

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 997 | Oscar Bloh

Summary

Women and girls in Liberia continue to face significant inequalities that limit their access to education, health care, economic opportunities, and political participation. These disparities are compounded by sexual and gender-based violence and reinforced by discriminatory social norms, values, and practices (Government of Liberia, 2024; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025). Together, these factors undermine women's development and prevent them from reaching their full potential.

According to the 2024 Global Gender Gap Index, Liberia ranks 42nd out of 146 countries on indicators of gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2024). However, the country performs poorly on key sub-indexes: It ranks 134th in educational attainment and 125th in health and survival. Barriers to education remain particularly acute in rural areas and among low-income communities, while limited access to health care, especially reproductive health services, contributes to poor maternal and child health outcomes (Government of Liberia, 2024).

Economic exclusion is also widespread. Women face restricted access to land, credit, and formal employment and are often concentrated in low-wage sectors. In politics, women are significantly underrepresented: As of April 2025, Liberia places 161st out of 183 countries in the Inter-Parliamentary Union's (2025) ranking of women in national parliaments, with women holding just 11% of seats – well below the sub-Saharan African average of 27.2% and even the West African average of 19.2%.

These challenges persist despite a strong legal foundation for equality. Article 11c of the Liberian Constitution guarantees equal protection under the law (Republic of Liberia, 1986). Liberia has also developed a National Gender Policy (2007, revised in 2018) and a National Action Plan to guide its implementation (Ministry of Gender and Development, 2009).

In addition, Liberia is a signatory to multiple regional and international frameworks aimed at advancing women's rights, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Maputo Protocol, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

The government's current five-year development strategy, the ARREST Agenda for Inclusive Development, identifies six pillars (Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, 2025). While Pillar 6 focuses on human capital development and includes a sub-theme on women's empowerment, the lack of a standalone pillar on gender equality raises concerns that gender-related interventions may be overlooked or insufficiently prioritised during implementation.

Findings from Afrobarometer's 2024 survey in Liberia suggest that women continue to face discrimination, sexual harassment, and other barriers to the development of their potential. Most Liberians say women and girls are likely to be believed if they complain of discrimination

or harassment, but most also think the police and courts need to do more to protect them from such treatment.

Liberian women are less likely than men to have higher education and paying jobs. While few respondents say that families still prioritise boys over girls when it comes to education, significant minorities report that husbands and relatives prevent women from taking employment and that sexual harassment of women and girls in public spaces, including schools, is common. And while a majority of citizens support women's equal chance at being elected for public office, the share who espouse this view has declined since Afrobarometer's previous survey in 2022.

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 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 Liberia, led by the Center for Democratic Governance (CDG), interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult citizens between 30 July and 21 August 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 Liberia in 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2020, and 2022.

Key findings

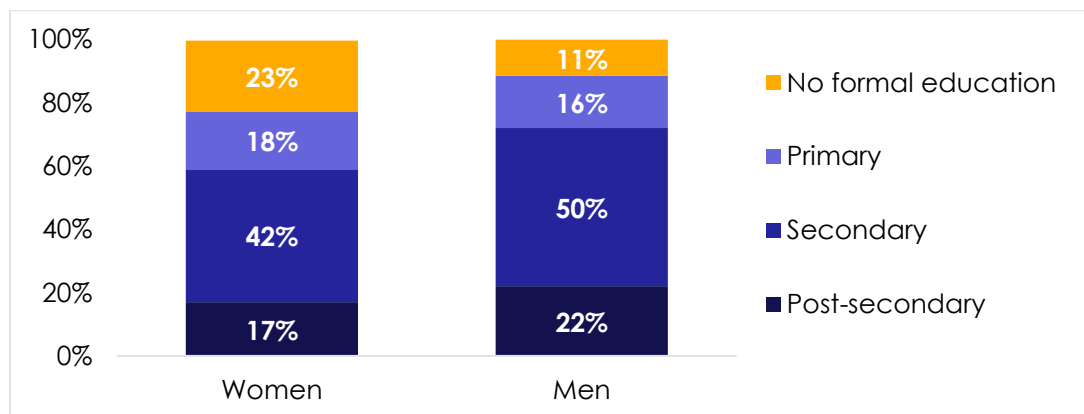
- In Liberia, women are less likely than men to have progressed to secondary school (42% vs. 50%) or post-secondary studies (17% vs. 22%).
 - More than three-fourths (77%) of Liberians say it is rare or unheard of for families to prevent girls from going to school because they prioritise boys' education, but 23% say this happens frequently.
 - More than one-third (36%) of citizens say schoolgirls "often" or "always" face discrimination, harassment, and requests for sexual favours from their teachers.
- Among working-age adults, men are more likely than women to be employed (29% vs. 19%).
 - Women's lack of necessary education or skills and employers' preference for hiring men are most frequently cited as the main barriers to women's entry and advancement in the workplace.
 - Three in 10 respondents (30%) report that women are "often" or "always" prevented from taking paid employment by their husbands or family members.
- More than two-thirds (69%) of Liberians say women should have the same chance as men of being elected to public office.
 - Support for gender equality in politics has fluctuated over the years and is now 10 percentage points lower than it was in 2012.
 - Men are 15 percentage points less likely than women to endorse equal opportunity in politics (62% vs. 77%).

- More than one-third (36%) of Liberians say women “often” or “always” experience sexual harassment in public spaces such as in markets, on the street, and in public transport.
 - Six in 10 Liberians (61%) say women and girls are likely to be believed if they complain of discrimination or harassment.
 - But a larger majority (81%) say police and courts should do more to protect women and girls from discrimination and harassment.

Gender gap: Education

Liberia has a notable gender gap in educational attainment. Compared to men, women are less likely to have secondary schooling (42% vs. 50%) and post-secondary education (17% vs. 22%) (Figure 1). And women are twice as likely as men to lack formal schooling altogether (23% vs. 11%).

Figure 1: Level of education | by gender | Liberia | 2024



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

These disadvantages may reflect vestiges of social norms and behaviours that negatively affect girls’ educational opportunities. More than two in 10 Liberians (23%) say girls are “often” or “always” prevented from attending school because their families prioritise boys’ education, although 77% say this “rarely” or “never” happens (Figure 2).

And more than one-third (36%) of respondents report that schoolgirls are “often” or “always” discriminated against, harassed, or harangued for sexual favours by teachers. About two-thirds (64%) of respondents say this is rare or non-existent.

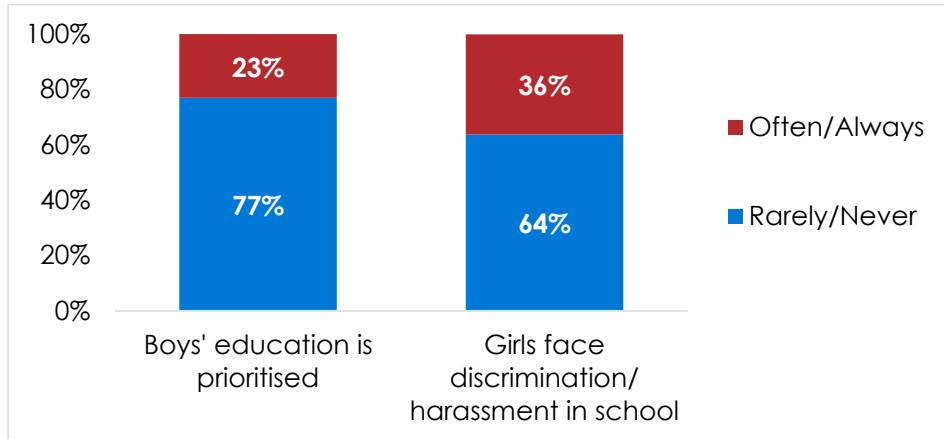
Perceptions that boys are often given higher priority than girls when it comes to schooling are more common in rural areas than in cities (27% vs. 19%) and among younger adults (23%-24%) compared to older people (17%) (Figure 3).

Only 16%-19% of respondents experiencing low or no lived poverty¹ say families often value girls’ education less, compared to 24%-28% of citizens experiencing moderate or high levels of poverty. Similarly, 18%-22% of citizens with higher education say this is a frequent issue, compared to 27%-33% of those with primary schooling or less.

¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without 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 Lekalake (2025).

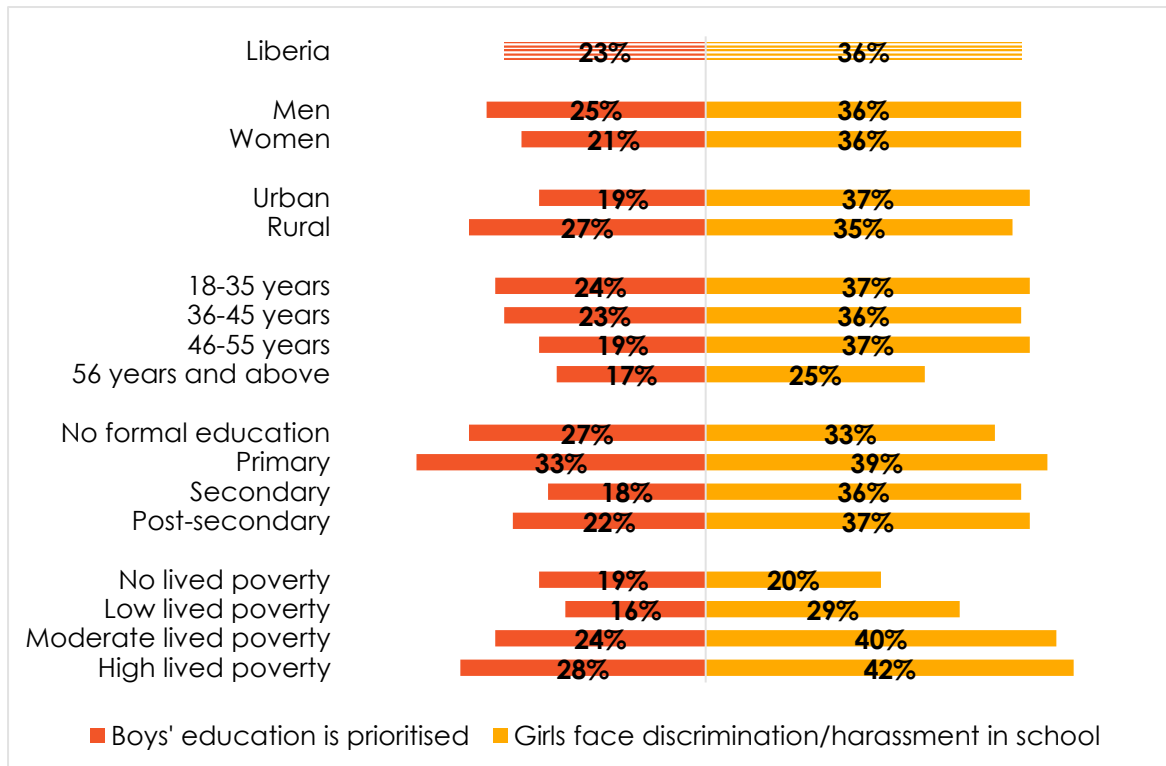
Frequent discrimination and harassment of girls in school is less commonly perceived by seniors (25%) than by younger respondents (36%-37%). These perceptions increase with respondents' experience of poverty, ranging from 20% of those experiencing no lived poverty to twice as many among the poorest (42%).

Figure 2: Discrimination and harassment in education | Liberia | 2024



Respondents were asked: How frequently do the following things occur in your community:
 Girls are prevented from attending school because their families prioritise the education of boys.
 Girl students face discrimination, harassment, or requests for sexual favours from their teachers.

Figure 3: Discrimination and harassment in education | by demographic group | Liberia | 2024



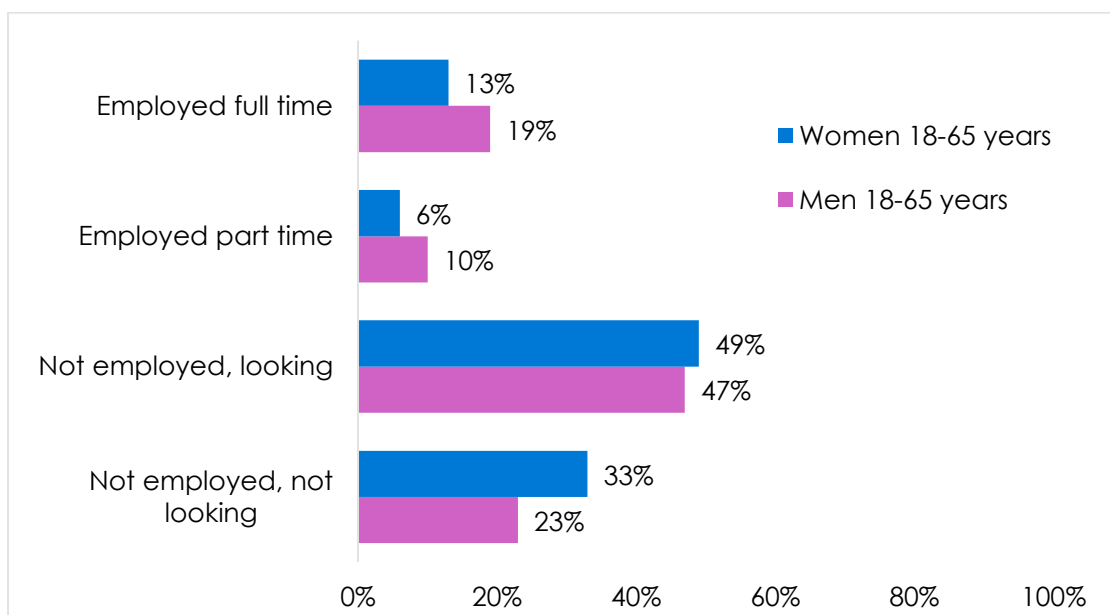
Respondents were asked: How frequently do the following things occur in your community:
 Girls are prevented from attending school because their families prioritise the education of boys?
 Girl students face discrimination, harassment, or requests for sexual favours from their teachers?
 (% who say "often" or "always")

Gender gap: Employment

Among working-age adults (aged 18-65 years), Liberian men are 10 percentage points more likely to have paid employment than women (29% vs. 19%) (Figure 4). Since the share of the unemployed (i.e. those who don't have a job and are looking for one) is similar for both genders (49% vs. 47%), the employment gap is entirely down to those who say they are neither employed nor looking for work: 33% of women vs. 23% of men.

About one in 20 working-age women (5%) report that their main occupation is being a housewife or homemaker, including 3% who say they are also looking for paid employment and 2% who are not.

Figure 4: Employment status | 18- to 65-year-olds | by gender | Liberia | 2024



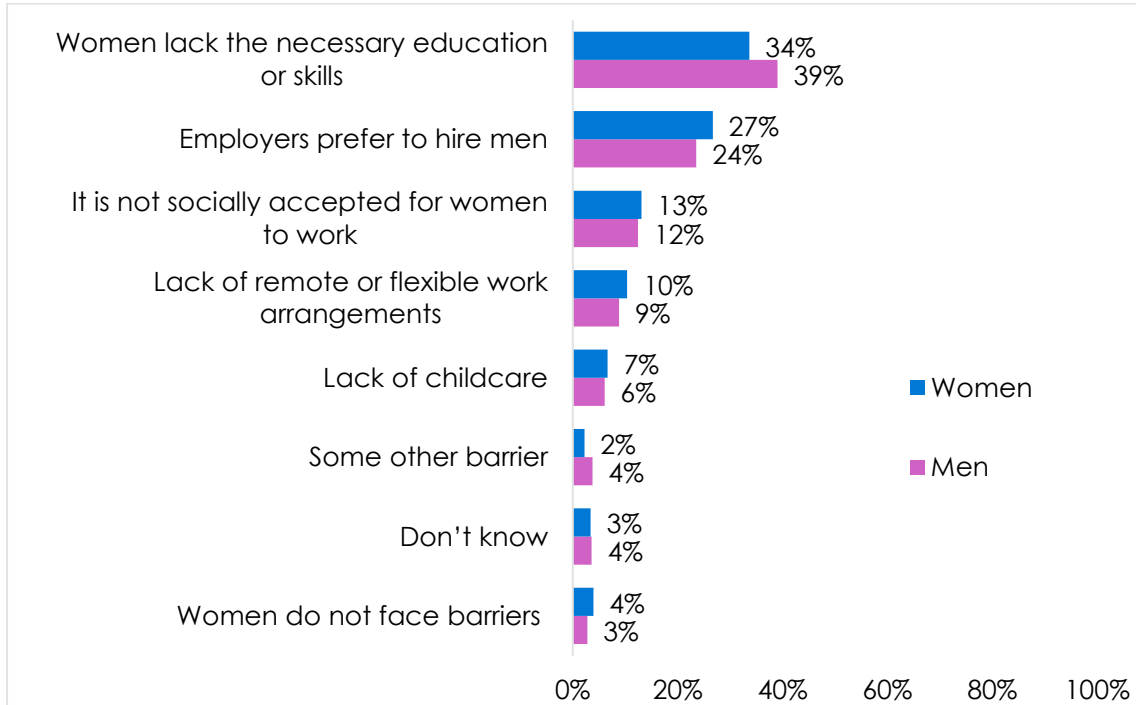
Respondents were asked: Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If yes:] Is it full time or part time? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job? (Respondents over age 65 are excluded.)

When asked what they see as the main barrier to women entering and moving up in the workforce, almost all respondents cite some form of obstacle; only 4% say women don't face any barriers. The type of blockage most commonly cited by women is that women lack the necessary education or skills (34%), followed by the claim that employers prefer to hire men (27%) (Figure 5). About one in eight women (13%) say it is not socially accepted for women to hold jobs, while others see a lack of remote or flexible work arrangements (10%) or a lack of childcare (7%) as the primary barrier.

Men hold very similar views on barriers for women, although they are 5 percentage points more likely to blame women's lack of education or skills (39% vs. 34%).

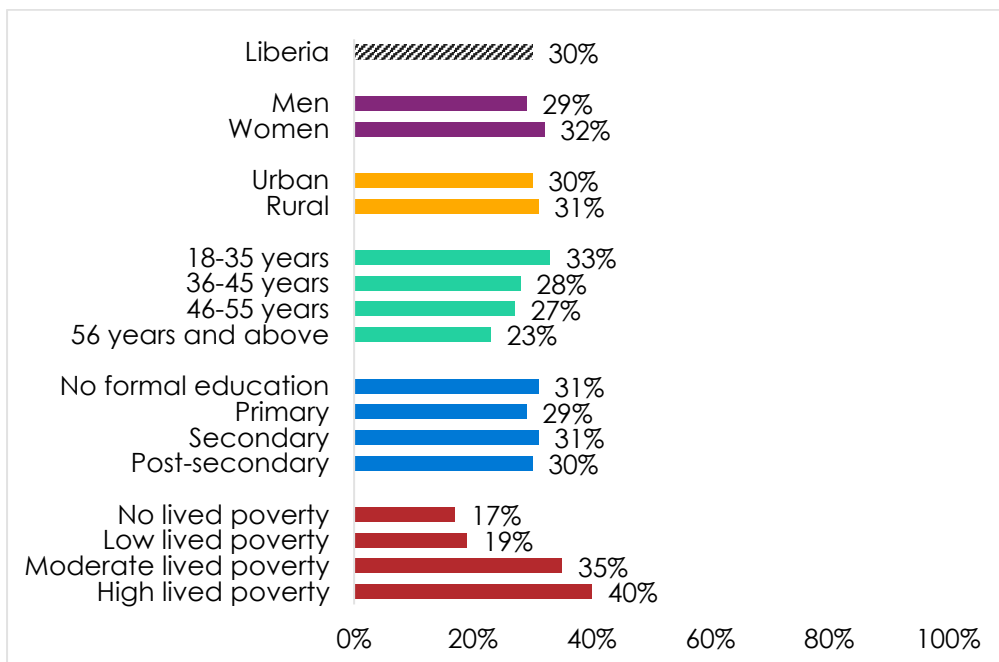
In addition, when asked how common it is that women in their community are prevented by husbands or other relatives from taking paid employment, three in 10 citizens (30%) say this happens "often" or "always" (Figure 6). Respondents experiencing moderate or high levels of lived poverty (35%-40%) and youth (33% of those aged 18-35) are more likely to share this view than their better-off and older counterparts. At the other end of the spectrum, only 17% of well-off Liberians say spouses or families often prevent women from taking paid employment.

Figure 5: Main barrier to women’s employment and advancement | by gender
 | Liberia | 2024



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, which of the following is the main barrier to women entering and moving up in the workforce?

Figure 6: Women are barred from working by spouses/families | by demographic group | Liberia | 2024



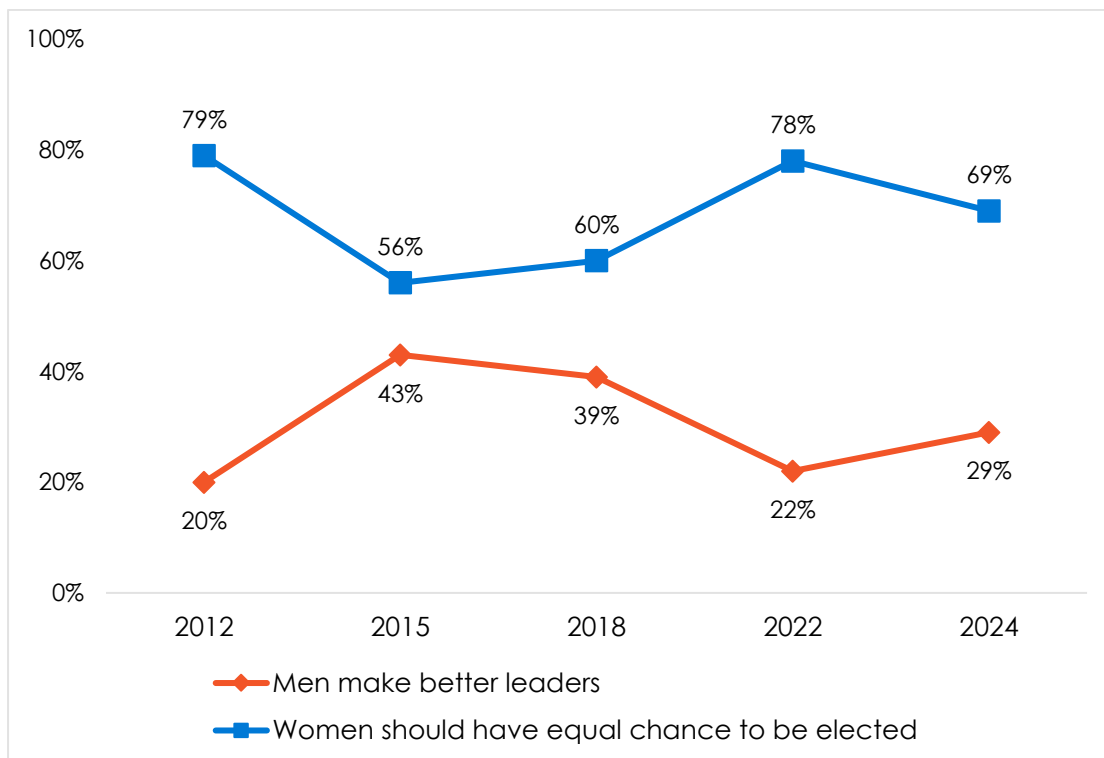
Respondents were asked: How frequently do the following things occur in your community: Women are prevented by their spouses or other family members from taking paid employment? (% who say “often” or “always”)

Gender gap: Leadership

While women make up about half of Liberia's population, they hold only 11% of 103 seats in Parliament (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025). Do Liberians believe in gender fairness in politics?

More than two-thirds (69%) of citizens say women should have the same chance as men of being elected to public office (Figure 7). Support for this view has fluctuated over the years, dropping as low as 56% in 2015. Compared to 2022 survey findings, public support for gender equality in politics has declined by 9 percentage points.

Figure 7: Should women have an equal chance to be elected? | Liberia
 | 2012-2024



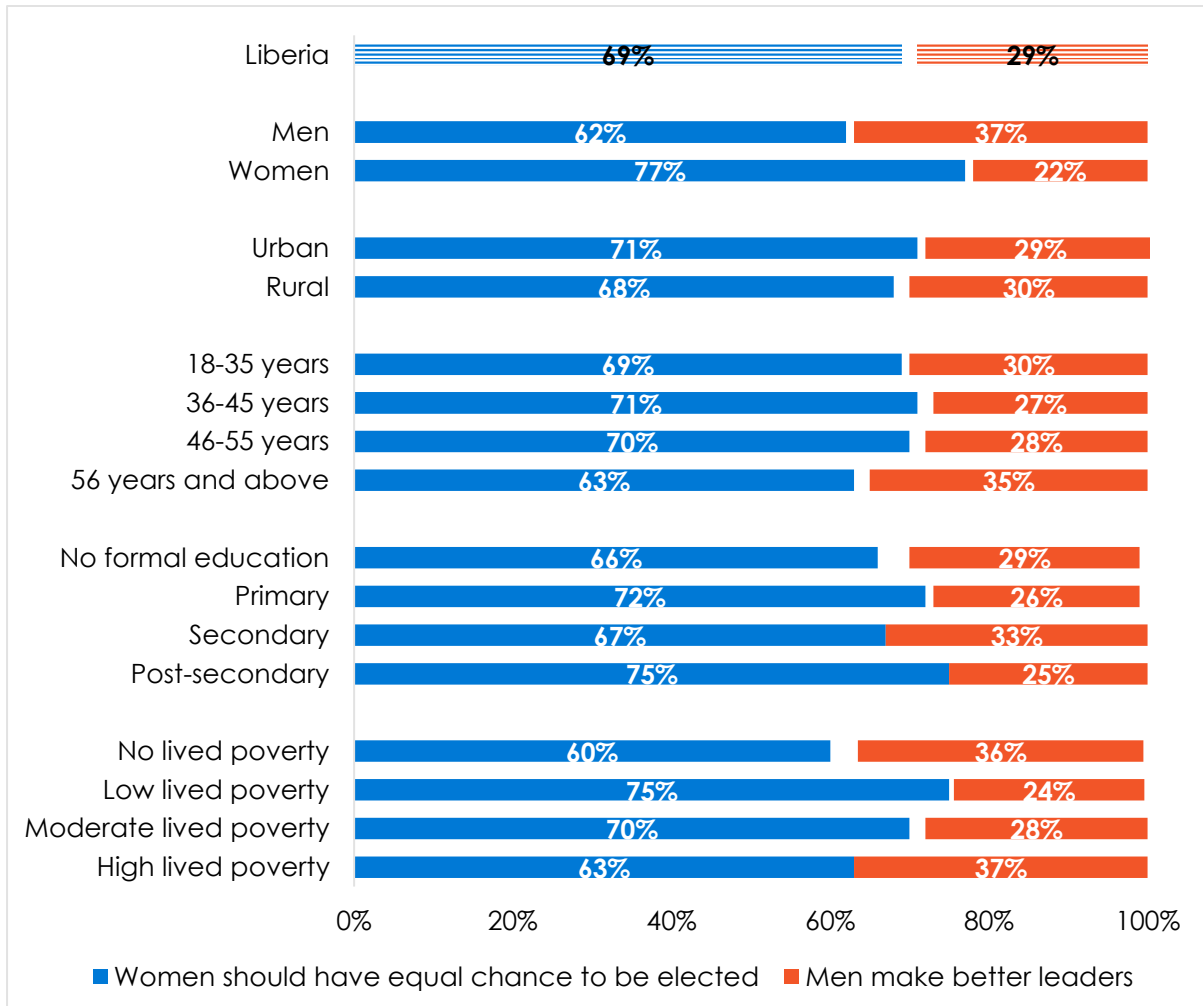
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

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.

Women are 15 percentage points more likely than men to support gender neutrality in political leadership (77% vs. 62%) (Figure 8). The gap in support for gender parity is somewhat smaller – 9 points – between citizens with no formal education (66%) and those with post-secondary qualifications (75%). Well-off respondents (60%) and senior citizens (63%) are less likely to favour gender equality in politics than their better-off and younger counterparts.

Figure 8: Should women have an equal chance to be elected? | by demographic group | Liberia | 2024



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.

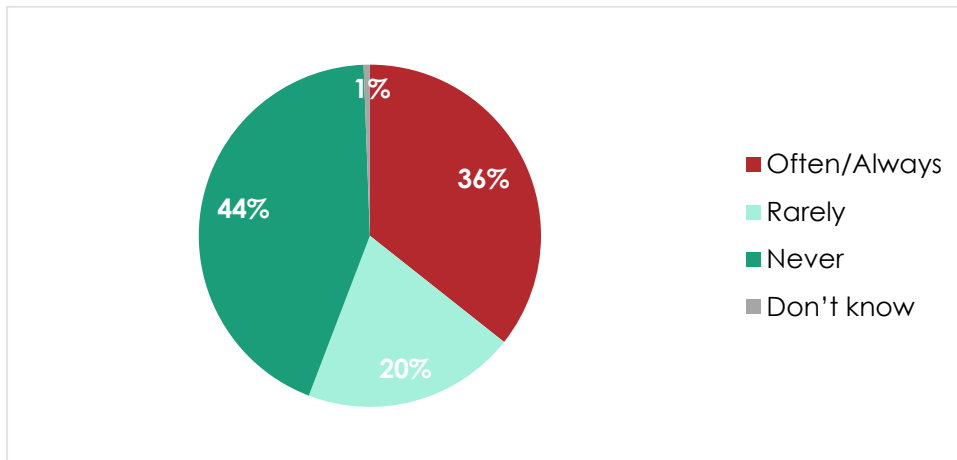
Sexual harassment in public spaces

Sexual harassment can be both psychologically and socially damaging, posing a significant threat to the safety and well-being of women and girls (UN Women, 2020). Eliminating sexual harassment is crucial for ensuring that women and girls can fully participate in public life without fear or intimidation.

More than one-third (36%) of Liberians say women “often” or “always” experience sexual harassment in public spaces such as in markets, on the street, and in public transport (Figure 9). On the other hand, 20% say this is a “rare” occurrence, while 44% say it “never” occurs.

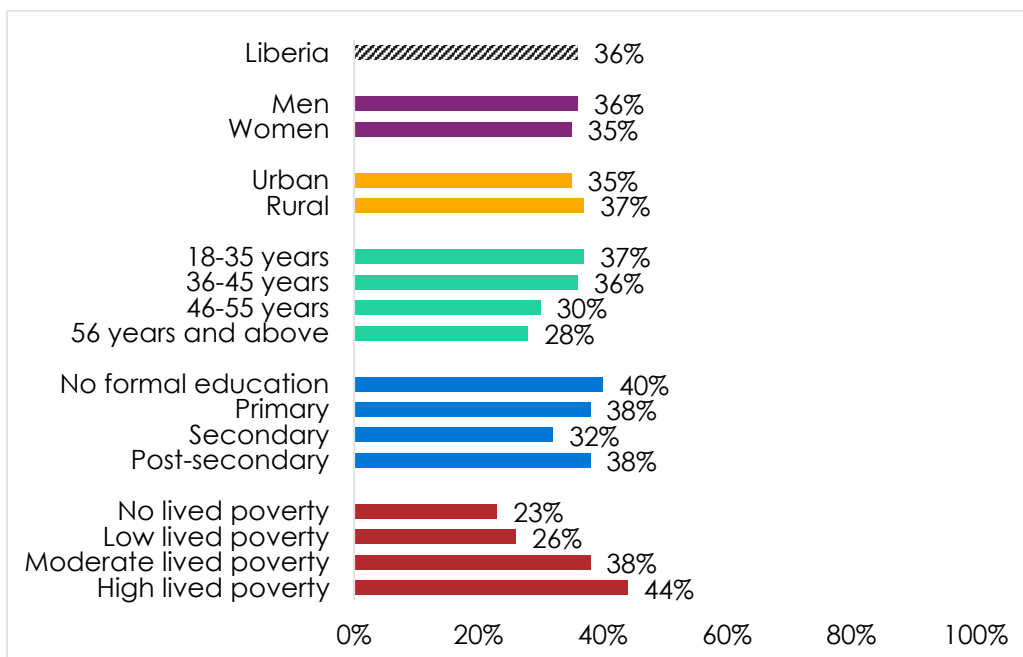
Perceptions of pervasive sexual harassment of women increase with economic vulnerability, ranging from 23% of well-off respondents to 44% of those experiencing high lived poverty (Figure 10). Youth are more likely than the elderly to say such behaviour is common (37% vs. 28%).

Figure 9: How often are women sexually harassed in public spaces? | Liberia
 | 2024



Respondents were asked: How frequently do the following things occur in your community: Women are sexually harassed in public places such as in markets, on the streets, or in public transport?

Figure 10: Sexual harassment of women in public places | by demographic group
 | Liberia | 2024



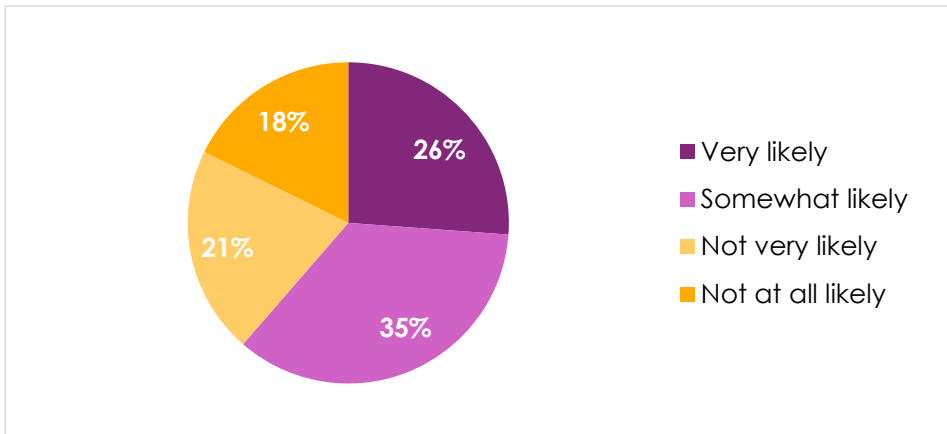
Respondents were asked: How frequently do the following things occur in your community: Women are sexually harassed in public places such as in markets, on the streets, or in public transport? (% who say "often" or "always")

If women and girls complain of discrimination or harassment in public spaces, such as workplaces and schools, a majority (61%) of citizens think they are "very likely" or "somewhat likely" to be believed (Figure 11). However, about four in 10 respondents (39%) are not confident that such complaints will be believed.

Women are more likely than men to express faith in society's view of women's credibility (65% vs. 58%) (Figure 12). The share of those who think women and girls will be believed if they

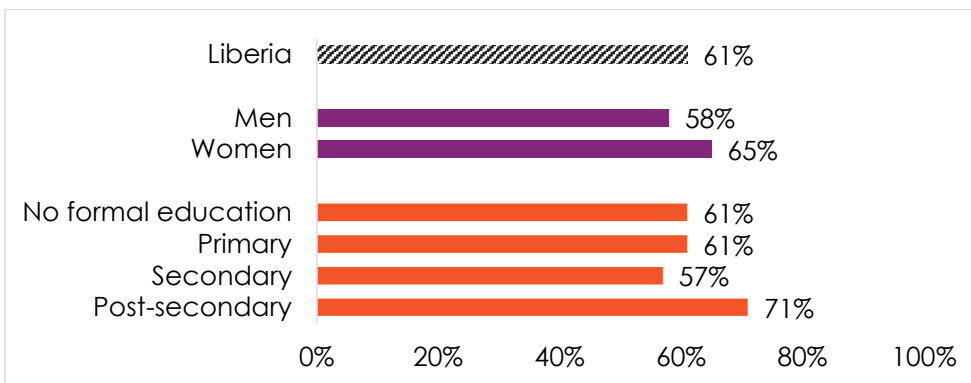
complain of discrimination or harassment goes up with respondents' education level, from 61% among those with primary schooling or less to 71% among those with post-secondary qualifications.

Figure 11: Are women and girls believed when they complain of discrimination or harassment? | Liberia | 2024



Respondents were asked: In your community, how likely is it that people will believe women or girls if they complain about being discriminated against or harassed in schools, workplaces, or other public spaces?

Figure 12: Likely that women and girls will be believed if they complain of discrimination or harassment | by gender and education level | Liberia | 2024



Respondents were asked: In your community, how likely is it that people will believe women or girls if they complain about being discriminated against or harassed in schools, workplaces, or other public spaces? (% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")

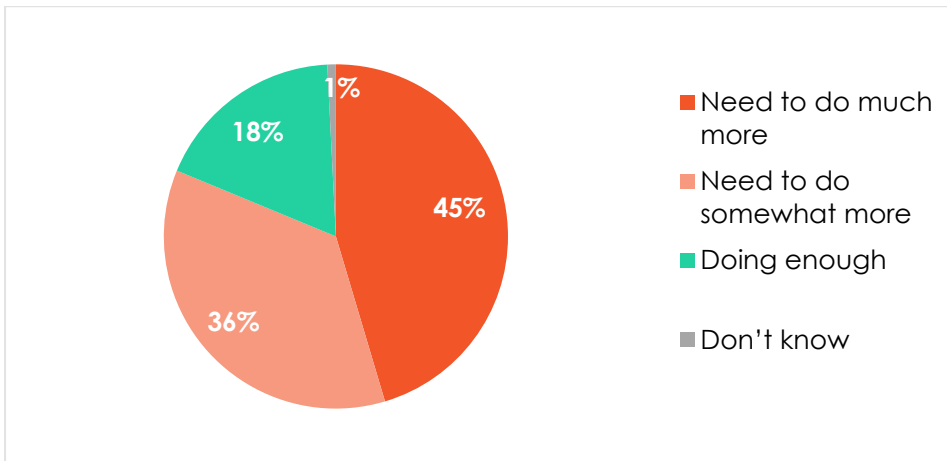
Even if most Liberians don't see gender discrimination and sexual harassment as frequent occurrences, they overwhelmingly (81%) think the police and courts need to do more to protect women and girls against these threats, including 45% who say they need to do "much more" (Figure 13).

Fewer than one in five citizens (18%) say the authorities are "doing enough" to protect women and girls from discrimination and harassment in public areas such as schools and workplaces.

The perception that women and girls need greater protection increases with respondents' level of poverty, from about two-thirds (65%-68%) among better-off citizens to about nine out of 10 respondents experiencing moderate or high lived poverty (88%-89%) (Figure 14).

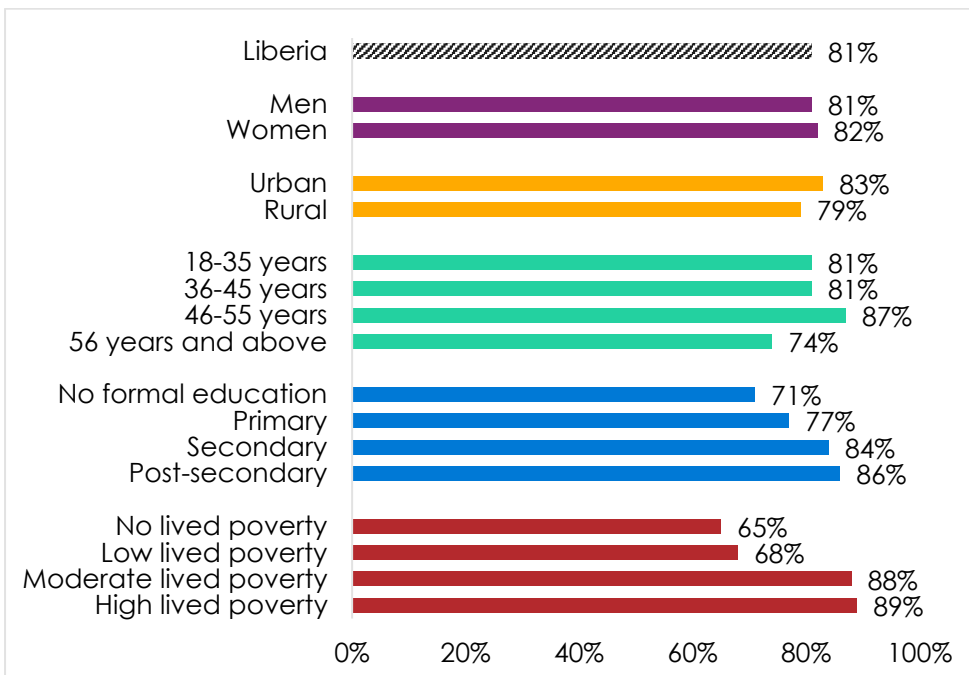
While women and men hold identical views, concern about inadequate efforts to protect women and girls also increases with citizens' level of education, from 71% among those with no formal schooling to 86% among the highly educated. Older citizens are somewhat less likely to be concerned, though about three-fourths (74%) still say the police and courts must do more.

Figure 13: Are police and courts doing enough to protect women and girls? | Liberia | 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 14: Police and courts need to do more to protect women and girls | by demographic group | Liberia | 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 "need to do somewhat more" or "need to do much more")

Conclusion

Survey findings highlight persistent inequalities that continue to limit Liberian women's access to education, employment, and security. Reports of harassment in schools and public spaces, alongside barriers to employment, point to the enduring influence of harmful social norms and structural inequalities.

At the same time, there is public appetite for change. Most Liberians say the police and courts should do more to protect women and girls from discrimination and harassment, and a strong majority believe women should have equal access to elective office, even if this support has fluctuated. These findings suggest an important opportunity for policy makers, civil society, and development actors to invest in gender-responsive reforms that translate public concern into meaningful action.

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