



Dispatch No. 1147 | 11 March 2026

Most Malawians support girls' re-enrolment after pregnancy and women's reproductive decision making, but oppose abortion

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 1147 | Witness Tapani Alfonso and Dennis Samuel Chikoko

Summary

Malawi has made significant strides in promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and improving maternal health (Ibrahim-Nyirenda, 2024; United Nations Population Fund, 2024). For example, according to the National Statistical Office (2024), modern contraceptive use increased (from 53% to 66% for married women aged 15-49) between 2016 and 2024, and maternal mortality declined from 439 to 224 deaths per 100,000 live births. The fertility rate among women aged 15-49 dropped from 4.4 to 3.7 children per woman over the same period.

Despite these achievements, Malawi continues to grapple with significant SRHR issues, especially among the youth. Challenges range from early sexual debut and early marriage to gender-based violence and high rates of teenage pregnancy, school leaving, and abortion complications leading to maternal deaths (Latif, 2020). Among female and male adolescents who are sexually active, only 15% and 31%, respectively, use contraceptive methods (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2005), and about one-third (32%) of young women aged 15-19 have had a pregnancy, an increase from 29% in 2016 (National Statistical Office, 2024).

Despite a longstanding school readmission policy allowing girls to return to school after delivery, the 2024 Malawi Education Statistics Report cites pregnancy and marriage, along with school fees, as leading reasons for high dropout rates among secondary-school students – 60% of them girls (Ministry of Education, 2024), and analysts argue that increasing the availability of contraceptives among adolescents would reduce dropouts due to pregnancy (Ibrahim-Nyirenda, 2024).

Under the 2014 Gender Equality Act, Malawian women and girls have the legal right to decide whether and when to get married, though traditional and cultural practices often play a role in marriage decisions (Mbweza, Norr, & McElmurry, 2008). More than one in three Malawian women aged 20-24 (37.7%) were married before the age of 18 (National Statistical Office, 2021).

Termination of pregnancy is illegal unless the life of the woman is in danger, and violations are punishable by a jail term of up to 14 years (African Population and Health Research Centre, 2023). Despite advocacy for broadening the criteria to include cases of rape, incest, or harm to the woman's well-being (Southern Africa Litigation Centre, 2021), a bill proposing to expand legal justifications twice failed to be tabled in Parliament, in 2016 and 2021. But in a landmark ruling last October, the High Court said that adolescent survivors of sexual violence have a right to access abortion services in public and private health facilities (Ipas, 2025). Religious groups have said they will appeal the ruling (Pansungwi, 2025).

A special module in Afrobarometer's 2024 survey in Malawi explores citizens' opinions and experiences related to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Findings show that Malawians overwhelmingly support woman's autonomy in decisions about marriage and childbearing. They also strongly support allowing girls who become pregnant to continue their education, as well as the teaching of sexuality education in school.

But views on unrestricted access to contraceptives are mixed: More than half of adults favour making them available regardless of marital status, but not regardless of age.

And majorities oppose abortion even if the woman's health or life is at risk and in cases where the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Ten survey rounds in up to 45 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys (2024/2025) cover 38 countries. Afrobarometer's National Partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research at the University of Malawi, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Malawians in 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 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019, and 2022.

Survey questions on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), including questions on contraception, sexuality education, abortion, and women's autonomy, may be sensitive for some countries or groups of respondents, which raises potential challenges for data analysis and interpretation. These questions may generate *non-response bias* if respondents are uncomfortable providing answers or *social desirability bias* if they feel compelled to offer socially acceptable answers, rather than their true opinions.

We urge analysts and users of these data to recognise these challenges in their presentation and interpretation of the findings, especially by examining and reporting item non-response rates ("don't know" or refused to answer) when they exceed acceptable limits (usually 5%) and by conducting appropriate statistical tests of any proposed scales or indices generated. In most countries, non-response rates are well within acceptable limits, but in Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritius, Morocco, and Tunisia, they often rise above these levels. Excluding non-responses in these cases could misrepresent public attitudes on these important issues.

For a detailed analysis of these issues in the Afrobarometer Round 10 SRHR data, and a review of diagnostic tools that can be applied in the interpretation of the findings, we refer readers to [Afrobarometer Methods Note No. 5](#).

Finally, we note that the SRHR module originally included one additional question about potential punishment for women who obtain an abortion. However, early in the implementation of Round 10, Afrobarometer concluded that the question wording was unclear, making the responses difficult to interpret. Since the findings did not meet an acceptable standard for clarity and reliability, this question was dropped from the remaining Round 10 surveys, and the data from those countries where it was asked have been excluded from all final data sets.

Key findings

- Overwhelming majorities of Malawians say girls and women should be able to decide for themselves whether and when to marry (85%) as well as how many children to have and when to have them (84%).
 - Men are less supportive than women of women's right to decide on the number and timing of children (78% vs. 92%).

- More than nine in 10 citizens (92%) say girls who are pregnant or have children should be allowed to stay in school.
- Six in 10 respondents (60%) say schools should teach sex education to help young people make informed decisions.
- More than half (55%) of Malawians think that contraceptives should be available to anyone who is sexually active, regardless of marital status. But only 44% endorse unrestricted access to contraceptives regardless of people's age.
- Half (50%) of survey respondents say girls and women in their communities “often” terminate their pregnancies, while another 33% say they do so “occasionally.”
- Majorities of Malawians oppose abortion even if the woman's health or life is at risk (59%), as well as in cases of rape or incest (82%), economic hardship (87%), or unwanted pregnancy “for any reason” (94%).

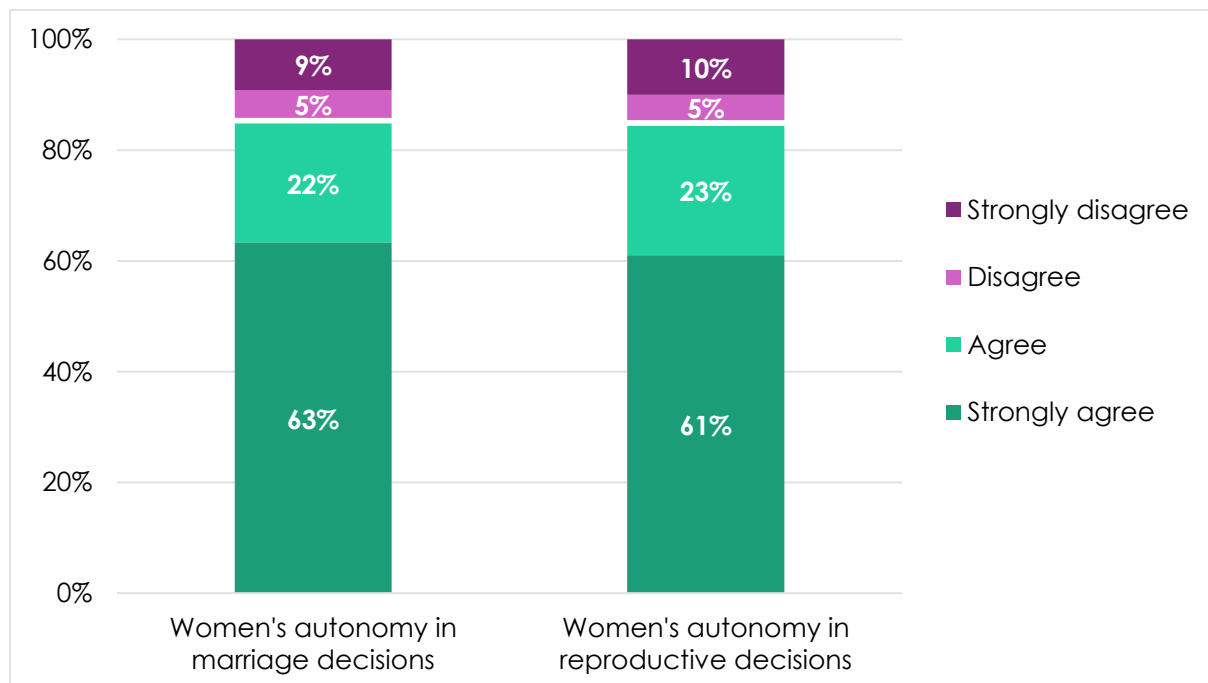
Women’s autonomy in marriage and childbearing decisions

Malawians strongly support the idea that girls and women should have the right to decide whether and when they should marry (85%) (Figure 1).

They also overwhelmingly say women should be free to decide for themselves how many children to have and when to have them (84%).

Figure 1: Women’s autonomy in decisions about marriage and childbearing

| Malawi | 2024



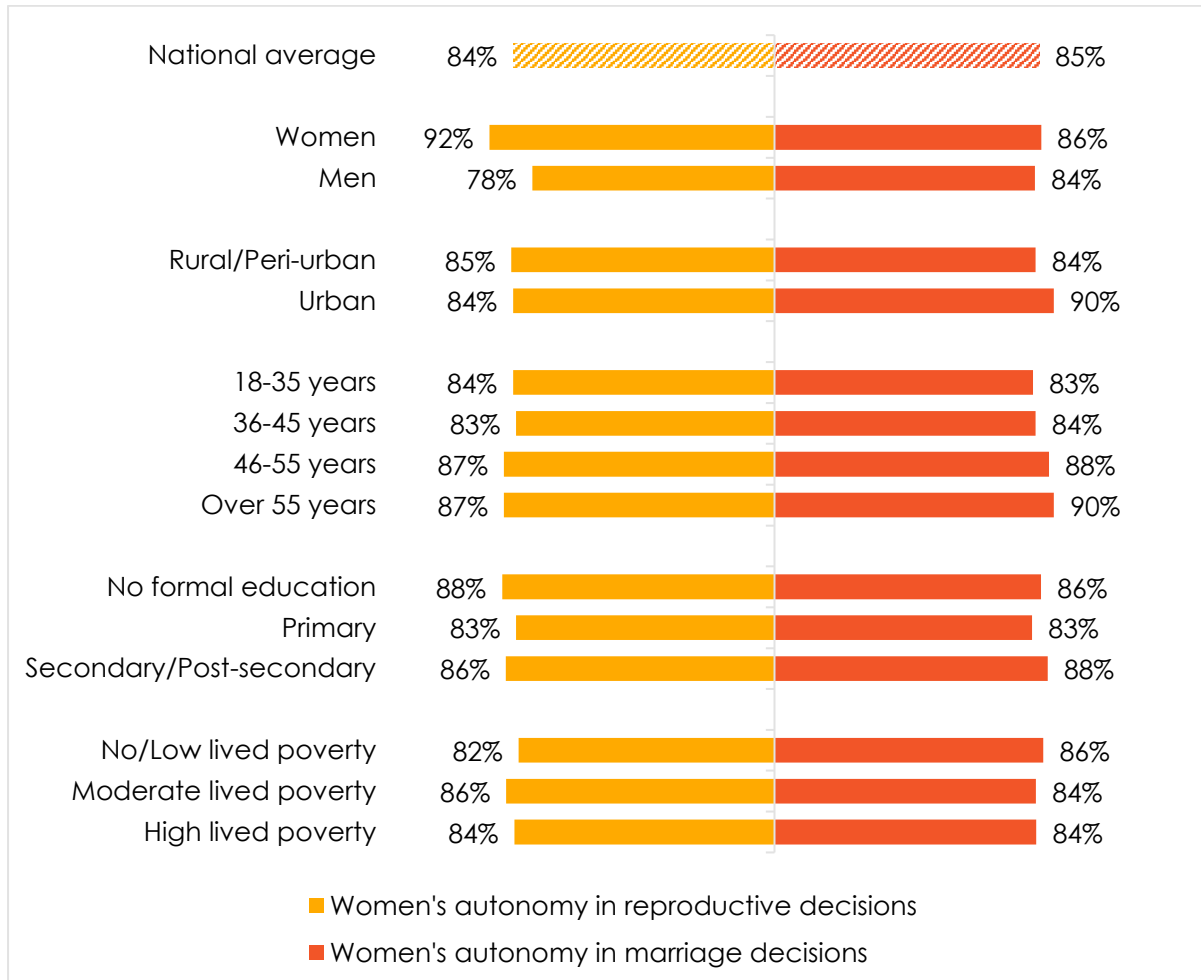
Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

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 women's autonomy in marriage and reproductive decisions is high across key demographic groups (Figure 2). But men are significantly less likely than women to agree that women should be able to decide on the number and timing of children (78% vs. 92%).

Figure 2: Support for women's autonomy in decisions about marriage and childbearing | by demographic group | Malawi | 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.

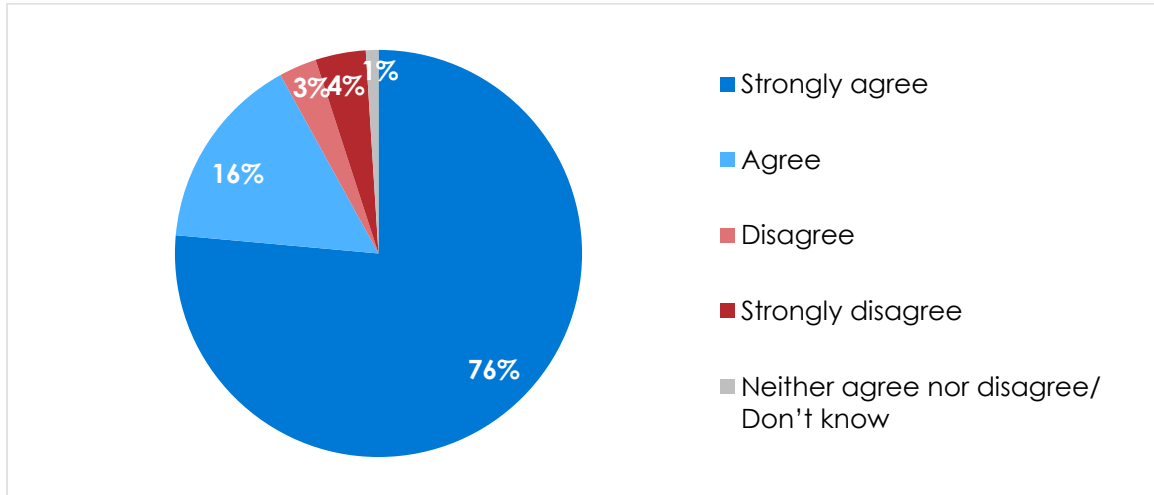
(% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

The role of schools: Education for pregnant pupils and sexuality education

Since 2006, Malawi's school readmission policy has been to require girls who become pregnant to drop out and allow them to return to school six months after delivery. However, many young mothers do not avail themselves of this opportunity, as evidence shows that about 90% of teen mothers do not return to school (Kabiru et al., 2024).

Survey findings show that more than nine out of 10 Malawians (92%) support allowing girls who become pregnant or have a child to continue their schooling, including three-quarters (76%) who feel strongly about this issue (Figure 3).

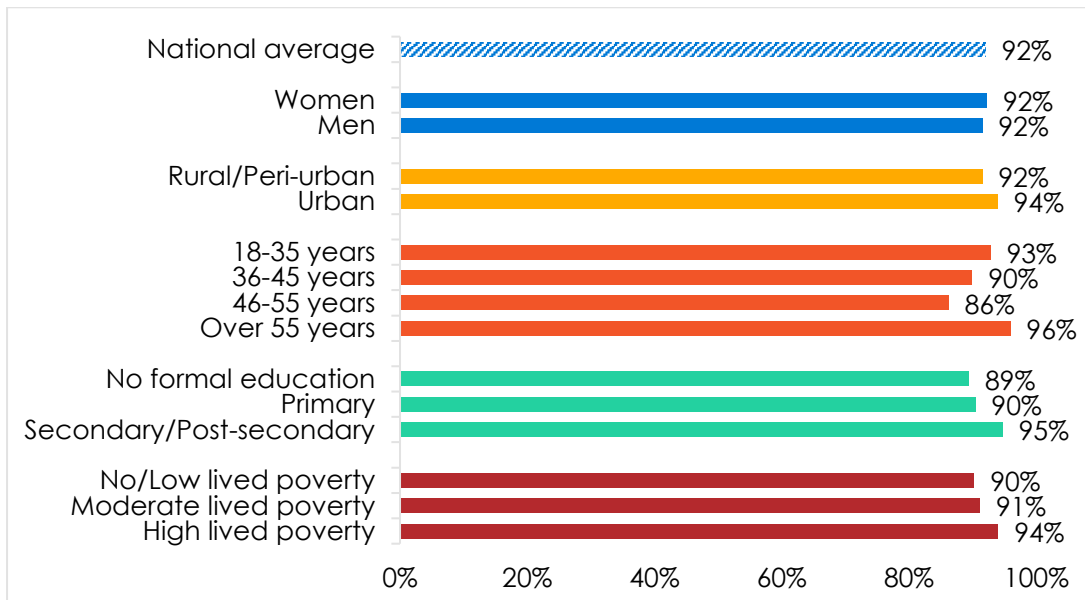
Figure 3: Should girls who become pregnant be allowed to continue school?
 | Malawi | 2024



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.

Support for this policy is overwhelming across key demographic groups, especially among the oldest (96%) and most educated (95%) respondents (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Pregnant girls should be allowed to continue school | by demographic group
 | Malawi | 2024



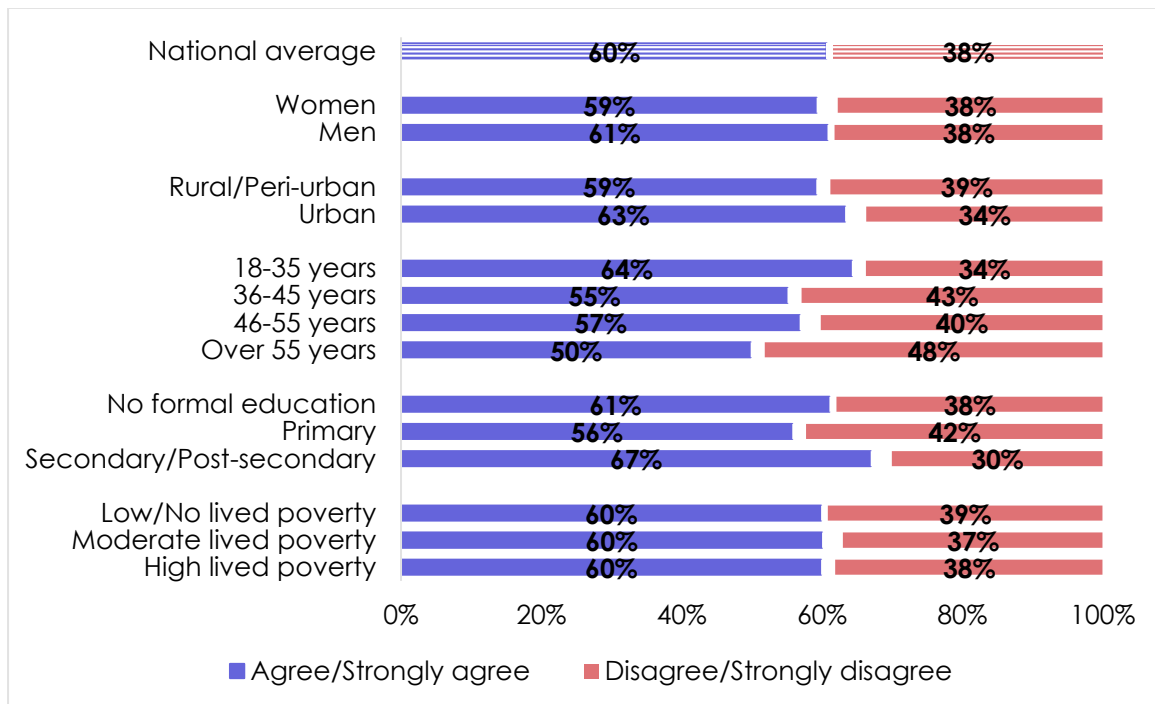
Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Girls should be allowed to continue their schooling even if they become pregnant or have children. (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

In 2021, Malawi reaffirmed its commitment to the Eastern and Southern Africa Ministerial Commitment, a framework established by countries in the region to promote sexuality

education and youth-friendly SRHR services (Center for Health, Human Rights & Development, 2022). But Malawi has yet to implement its directives, including to improve access to SRHR information through sexuality education.

Survey findings show that six in 10 Malawians (60%) support implementing sexuality education in school curricula to help young people make informed decisions, including close to half (46%) who “strongly agree” with this view. About four in 10 (38%) disagree (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Should schools teach sexuality education? | by demographic group
 | Malawi | 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.

Access to contraceptives

Access to contraceptives remains a challenge for many young people. According to the 2024 Malawi Demographic and Health Survey, only 53% of young women aged 15-19 and 66% of those aged 20-24 have access to family-planning methods (National Statistical Office, 2024). The government does not permit the provision of contraceptives in schools.

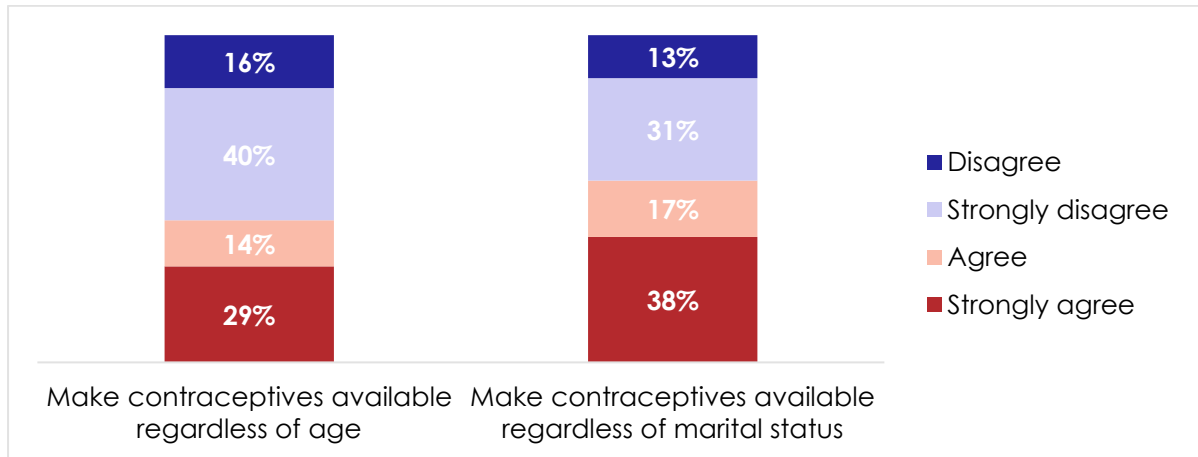
A majority (55%) of Malawians oppose the idea of making contraceptives available regardless of people's age, while 44% endorse the idea (Figure 6).¹ But access to contraceptives regardless of marital status receives majority support (55%, vs. 44% opposition).

Across key demographic groups, none registers majority approval of contraceptive access regardless of age; senior citizens (48%) and the poorest respondents (48%) are most supportive of the proposal (Figure 7).

¹ 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. 40% “disagree” and 16% “strongly disagree” sum to 55%).

As for contraceptives regardless of marital status, support is stronger among seniors (65%) and respondents with no formal education (65%) than among younger and more educated citizens.

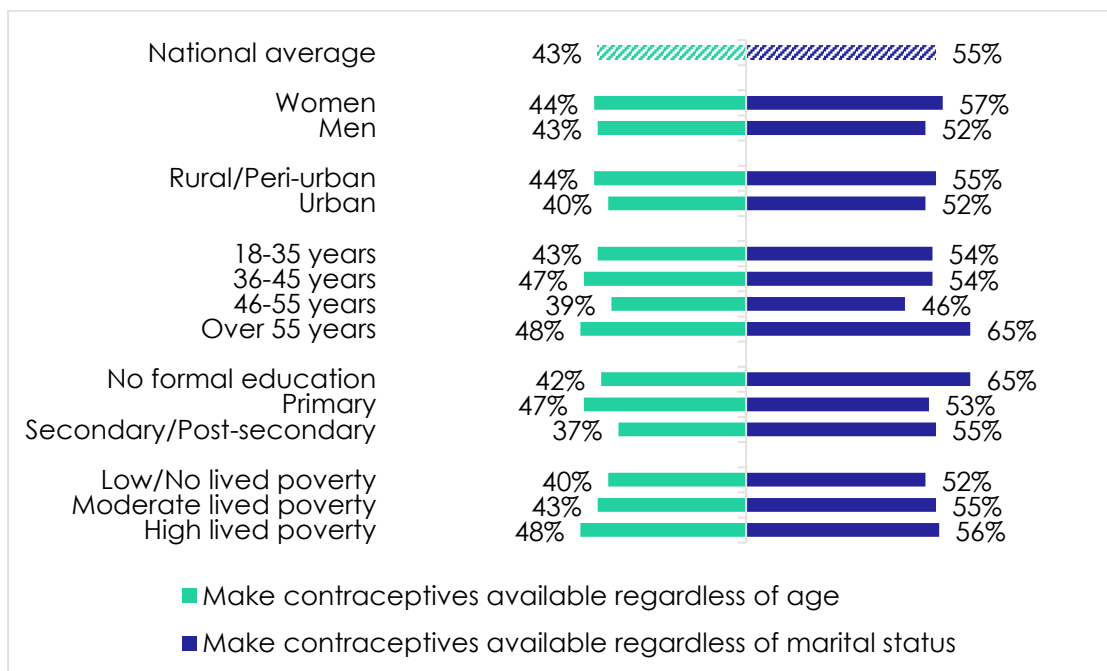
Figure 6: Should contraceptives be available regardless of age and marital status?
 | Malawi | 2024



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

Figure 7: Support for making contraceptives available regardless of age and marital status | by demographic group | Malawi | 2024

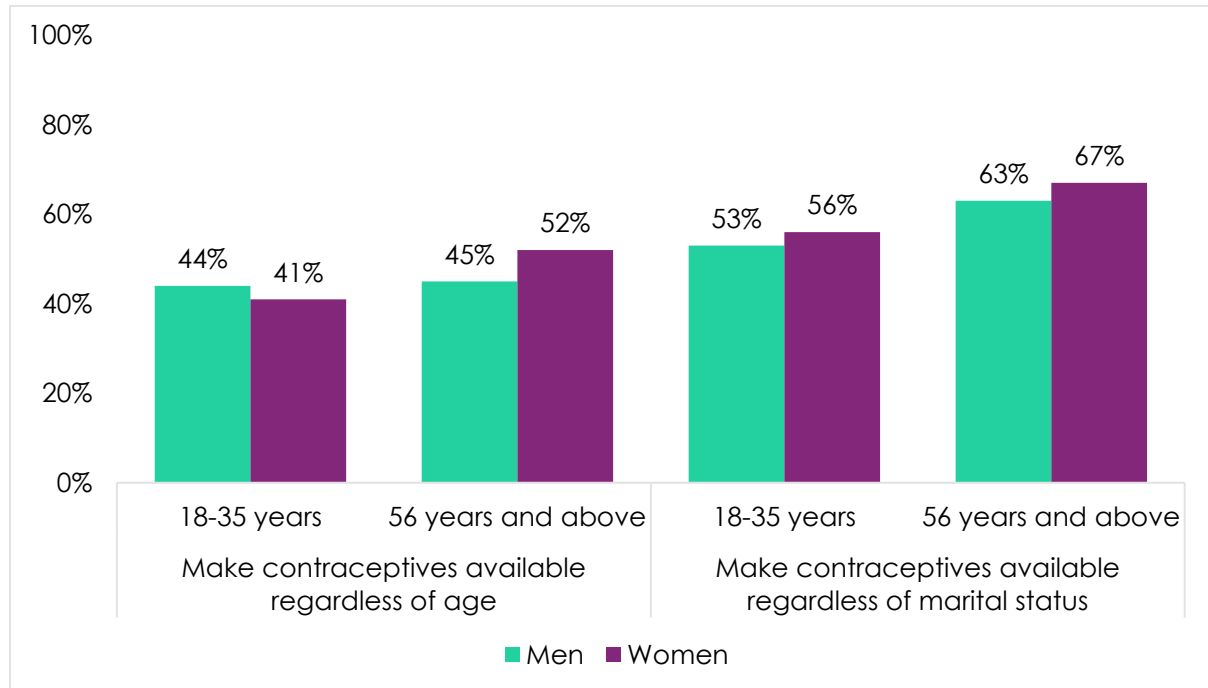


Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

- Contraceptives should be available to everyone who is sexually active regardless of age.
 - Contraceptives should be available to everyone, regardless of marital status.
- (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

Young women and men differ only marginally in their views on contraceptives access (Figure 8). Among senior citizens, more women than men support unrestricted access regardless of age (52% vs. 45%) and marital status (67% vs. 63%).

Figure 8: Support for making contraceptives available regardless of age and marital status | by gender within age cohorts | 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.

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

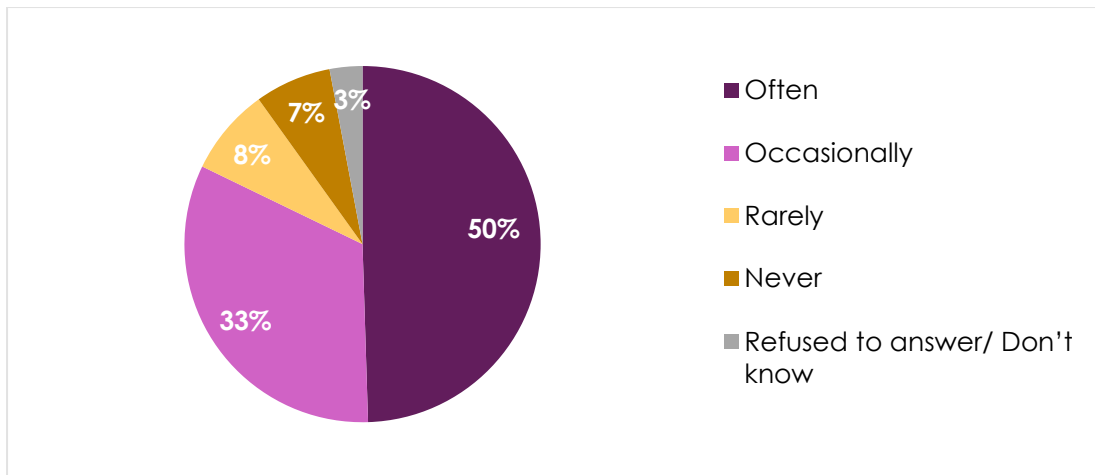
(% who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

Views on pregnancy termination

Globally, about three in 10 pregnancies are estimated to end in induced abortion (World Health Organization, 2024). Although termination of pregnancy is criminalised by law in Malawi unless the woman’s life is at risk, there is a strong perception among Malawians that abortions are not uncommon in their communities. Half (50%) of respondents say girls and women “often” terminate their pregnancies, while another 33% say this happens “occasionally” (Figure 9).² About one in seven respondents (15%) say abortion is rare or unheard of.

² Respondents’ assessments and reports to interviewers of the frequency of abortion are likely to be highly susceptible to their social, cultural, religious, and legal context (Makleff et al., 2019). Whether or not people hear and are willing to talk about abortion depends not only on its prevalence but also on how openly it can be discussed within the society. Consequently, reported views about the frequency of abortion may signal its prevalence but cannot be assumed to reflect accurate prevalence estimates.

Figure 9: Frequency of pregnancy termination | Malawi | 2024

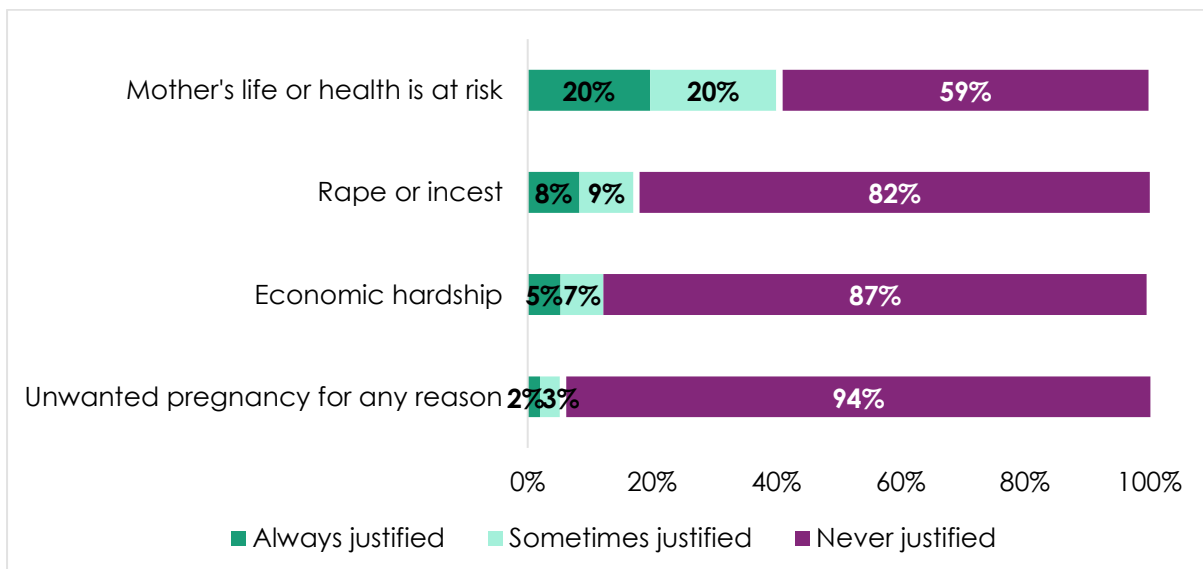


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how often, if ever, do women or girls in your community terminate their pregnancies?*

Most Malawians consider abortion “never justified” in a variety of circumstances (Figure 10). While 40% say terminating a pregnancy is “sometimes” or “always” justifiable if the woman’s health or life is at risk, 59% disagree.

Even larger majorities say abortion is “never justified” in cases where the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest (82%), where the woman is economically unable to care for a child (87%), or where the woman doesn’t want the pregnancy “for any reason” (94%).

Figure 10: Justification of pregnancy termination | Malawi | 2024

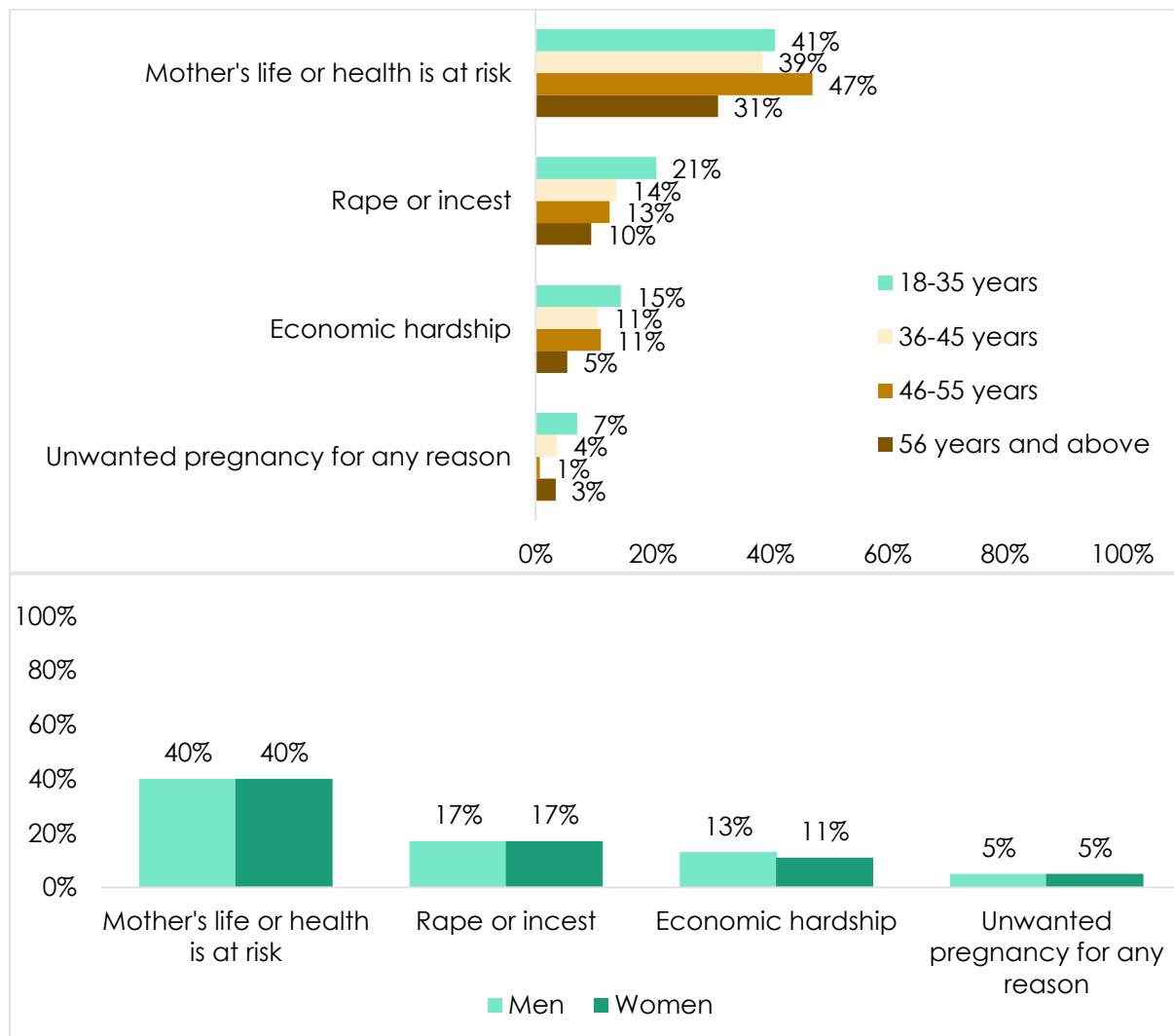


Respondents were asked: *For each of the following situations, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified for a woman to terminate a pregnancy if:*

- 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.*

Young Malawians are somewhat more likely than their elders to consider abortion “sometimes” or “always” justifiable in cases of rape or incest (21%), economic hardship (15%), or an unwanted pregnancy “for any reason” (7%) (Figure 11). Women and men hold almost identical views on justifications for pregnancy termination.

Figure 11: Perception of pregnancy termination as sometimes/always justified
| by age | Malawi | 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 “sometimes justified” or “always justified”)

Conclusion

The results of the most recent Afrobarometer survey show that most Malawians support the right of girls and women to make decisions regarding marriage and childbearing. Most also

want pregnant girls and young mothers to stay in school, and a majority say the schools should teach sexuality education to help young people make informed decisions.

But fewer than half think that contraceptives should be made available to anyone who is sexually active regardless of age, though a majority would not restrict access based on marital status.

While most Malawians say that girls and women in their communities “occasionally” or “often” terminate their pregnancies, a majority oppose abortion even if a woman's life is at risk or if the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest.

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for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at
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Witness Tapani Alfonso is a research fellow at the Centre for Social Research, University of Malawi. Email: walfonso@unima.ac.mw.

Dennis Samuel Chikoko is a research intern at the Centre for Social Research, University of Malawi. Email: dennischikoko@gmail.com.

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