

Amid progress on women's rights, Namibians see gender-based violence as priority issue to address

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 513 | Christiaan Keulder and Kelechi Amakoh

Summary

In 2021, Namibia ranked sixth-best among 156 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index, tops for an African country (World Economic Forum, 2021). Namibia also ranks third among African states (after Rwanda and South Africa) for women in representative positions, including 44% of seats in the lower house of Parliament (IPU Parline, 2022) – not to mention Saara Kuugongelwa-Amadhila, who has been prime minister since 2015.

In line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) No. 5 calling for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, Namibia's National Gender Policy (2010-2020) seeks to ensure that every sector of the economy emphasises the importance of gender and empowerment (Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, 2010; UNFPA, 2012).

The policy also provides a broad definition of gender-based violence (GBV) as referring to "all forms of violence that happen to women, girls, men, and boys because of the unequal relations between them" as well as all acts that could cause people "physical, sexual, psychological, emotional or economic harm," citing among its causes "customs, traditions and beliefs, illiteracy and limited education, unequal power relations and the low status of women" (Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, 2010, p. 29 and p. 53).

The policy was operationalised through a Regional Gender Permanent Task Force and the implementation clusters of the National Gender Plan of Action (2010-2020). The Child Care and Protection Act of 2015 and the National Plan of Action on Gender-based Violence (2012-2016) strengthened the legislative and policy framework for combating GBV and gender discrimination (Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, 2017).

Despite the government's efforts, gender equality remains a goal rather than a reality, and some analysts point to reports of increased GBV during the COVID-19 pandemic as evidence of a "shadow pandemic" (Herestofa, 2021; Sitali, 2020).

In April 2020, the remains of 20-year-old Shannon Wasserfall were found in a shallow grave six months after she went missing (van der Schyff, 2020) – a murder that fueled nationwide #ShutItAllDown protests against GBV (CIVICUS, 2021; Zhakata, 2020; SBS News, 2020; Asala, 2020; Melber, 2020).

In her response to protesters' petition to the National Assembly, the prime minister identified several measures to strengthen the policy and legal environment to deal with GBV, including the establishment of a sex offenders' register and special courts to handle sexual and GBV offences, a review of sentencing laws for sex offenders, and an investigation into the expedition of current murder and sexual offences before the courts (Kuugongelwa-Amadhila, 2020).

This dispatch reports on a special survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 (2021/2022) questionnaire to explore Africans' experiences and perceptions of gender-based violence and of gender equality in control over assets, hiring, land ownership, and political leadership.

In Namibia, citizens say that gender-based violence is a common occurrence and constitutes the most important women's-rights issue that the government and the country must address. Most consider GBV a criminal matter and believe that the police take GBV cases seriously.

On women's rights more broadly, strong majorities express support for women's right to equality in hiring, in land ownership, and in political leadership. But sizeable minorities also consider it likely that female candidates might suffer criticism, harassment, or family problems.

Overall, a majority of Namibians approve of the government's performance in promoting equal rights and opportunities for women, although many say greater efforts are needed.

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. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999, and Round 9 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts 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, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Namibians in October-November 2021. 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, and 2019.

Key findings

On gender-based violence:

- Namibians see gender-based violence (GBV) as the most important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address.
 - Women are more likely than men to cite GBV as a top priority (56% vs. 47%).
- A majority of citizens say violence against women is a "somewhat common" (28%) or "very common" (29%) occurrence in Namibia.
- A majority (58%) of Namibians say it is "never" justified for a man to physically discipline his wife. About four in 10 think it is "sometimes" (26%) or "always" (13%) justified.
- More than four in 10 respondents consider it "somewhat likely" (24%) or "very likely" (18%) that a woman will be criticised or harassed if she reports gender-based violence to the authorities. Only one in three (32%) say this is "very unlikely."
 - But most (82%) believe that the police are likely to take cases of GBV seriously.
- Almost three-fourths (73%) of Namibians say domestic violence should be treated as a criminal matter rather than as a private matter to be resolved within the family.

On gender equality:

- Educational achievement is close to gender-equal in Namibia, with slightly more secondary schooling among women and slightly more post-secondary qualifications among men.
- Women trail men slightly in control over certain assets (bank accounts, radios, motor vehicles) and in participation in household financial decisions.

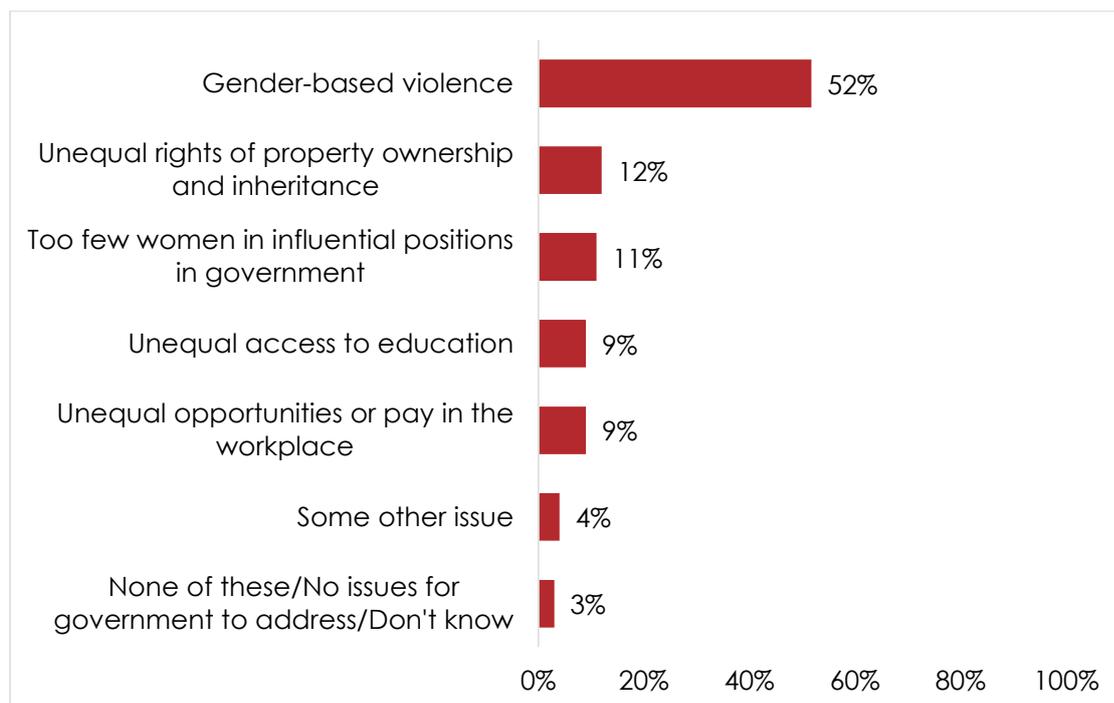
- Strong majorities say women should have the same rights as men to get paying jobs (69%) and to own and inherit land (84%).
 - Three-fourths of citizens say women in fact enjoy equal rights when it comes to jobs (74%) and land (75%).
- More than three-fourths (78%) of Namibians say women should have the same chance as men of being elected to public office.
 - But while more than two-thirds (68%) of citizens think a woman will gain standing in the community if she runs for office, almost half (46%) think it's likely she will be criticised or harassed, and 40% say she will probably face problems with her family.
- Six in 10 respondents (61%) say that the Namibian government is doing a “fairly good” or “very good” job of promoting equal rights and opportunities for women. Less educated and poor citizens are less likely to approve of the government's performance.
 - More than four in 10 (43%) say the government should do more to promote women's rights and opportunities.

Gender-based violence (GBV) in Namibia

Is GBV an important problem?

In Namibia, a majority (52%) of citizens identify gender-based violence as the most important women's rights issue for the government and society to address – more than four times as many as prioritise unequal rights of property ownership and inheritance (12%) and too few women in influential positions in government (11%). About one in 10 respondents cite unequal access to education (9%) and unequal pay in the workplace (9%) as the key issue to be addressed (Figure 1).

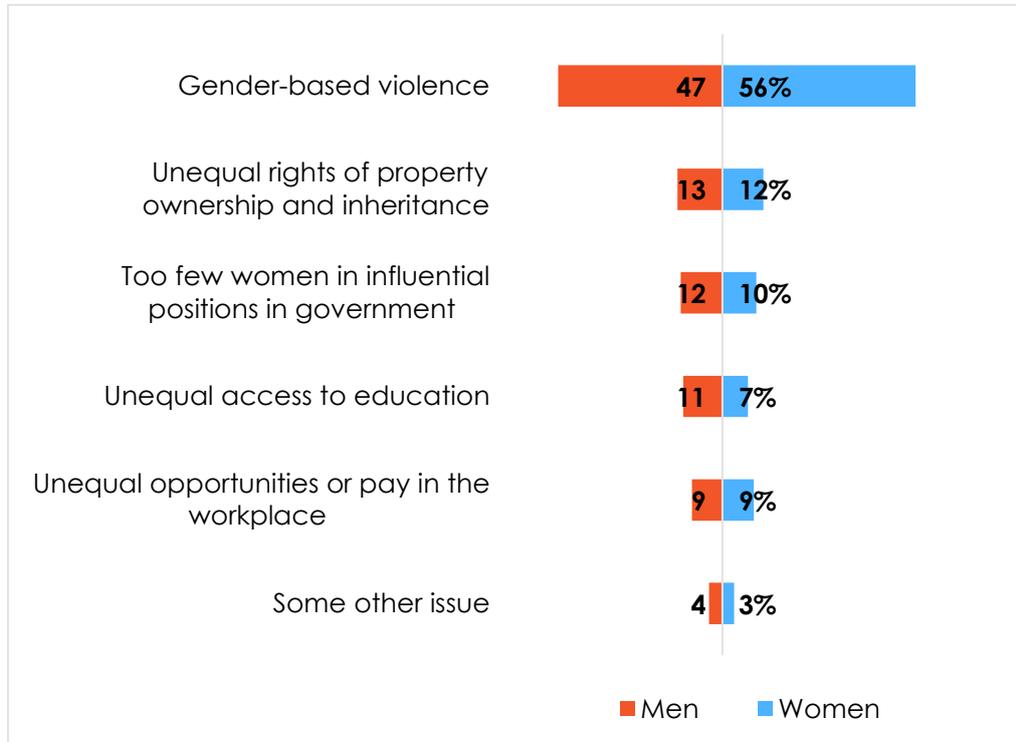
Figure 1: Most important women's rights issue | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, which of the following issues related to women's rights and equality do you think is the most important for our government and society to address?*

More women (56%) than men (47%) see GBV as the most important issue requiring the attention of the government and society (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Most important women’s rights issue | by gender | Namibia | 2021

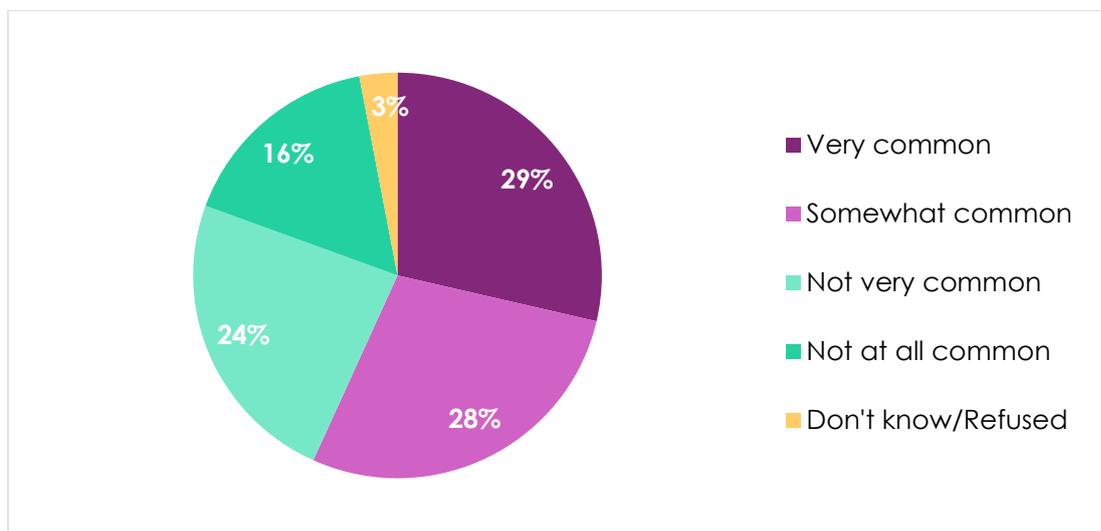


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, which of the following issues related to women's rights and equality do you think is the most important for our government and society to address?

How common is GBV?

One reason that GBV is considered a major issue is probably that many Namibians think it happens frequently: 57% of respondents say violence against women is “somewhat common” (28%) or “very common” (29%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Frequency of GBV | Namibia | 2021

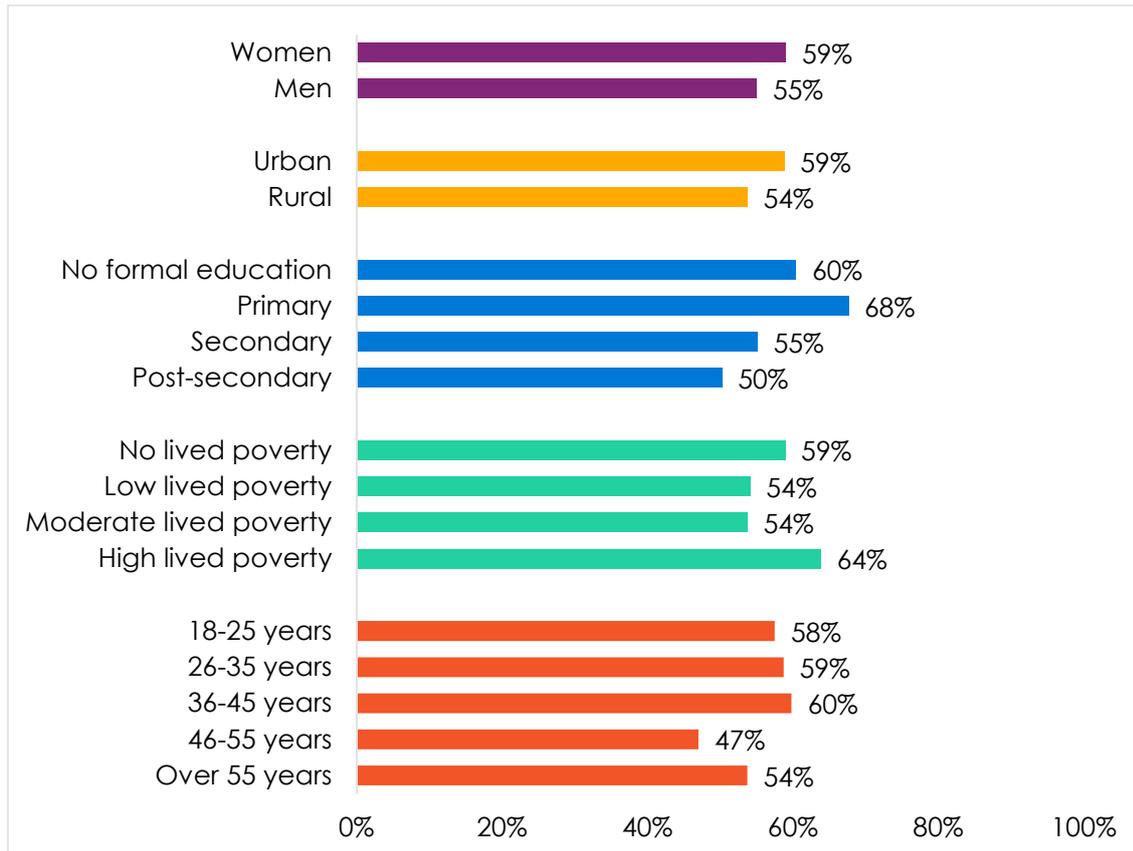


Respondents were asked: In this area, how common do you think it is for men to use violence against women and girls in the home or the community?

Women (59%) are slightly more likely than men (55%) to say that violence against women is a common occurrence, as are urban residents (59%) compared to their rural counterparts (54%) (Figure 4). This perception is also more widespread among poor citizens (64% of those experiencing high “lived poverty”¹) and among those with a primary education (68%) or no formal schooling (60%) (Figure 4).

Older respondents are less likely to report that GBV happens frequently.

Figure 4: Frequency of GBV | by socio-demographic group | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: *In this area, how common do you think it is for men to use violence against women and girls in the home or the community? (% who say “somewhat common” or “very common”)*

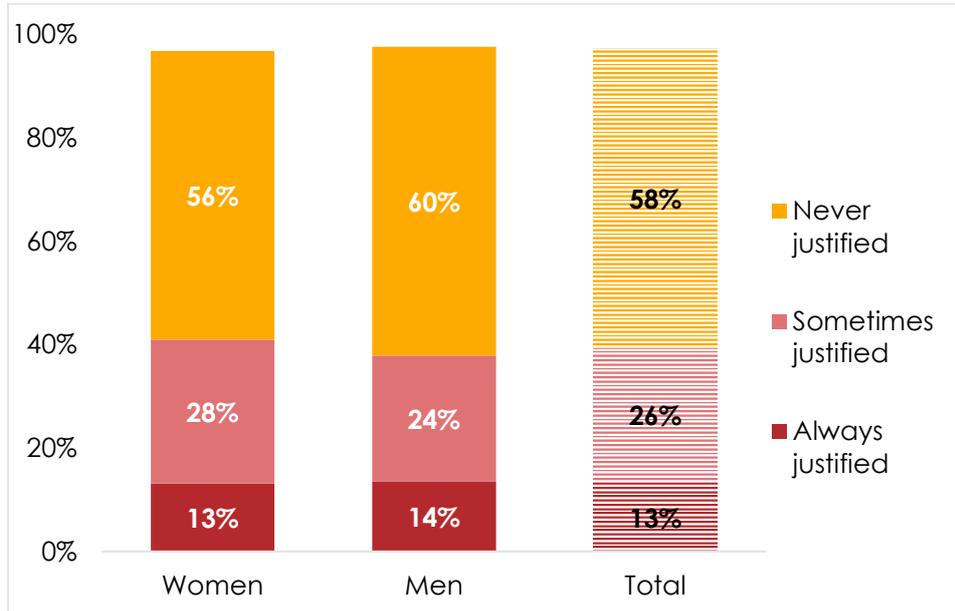
Physical discipline of a spouse

A majority (58%) of Namibians say it is “never justified” for a man to physically discipline his wife, but about four in 10 consider it “sometimes” (26%) or “always” (13%) justified. Women are somewhat *less* likely than men to rule out physical discipline as “never justified,” 56% vs. 60% (Figure 5).

The view that men are never justified in physically disciplining their wives gathers strength as respondents’ education level rises, ranging from 48% of those with no formal schooling to 63% of those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 6). Fewer than half (45%) of 36- to 45-year-olds share this attitude, compared to about six out of 10 respondents of all other ages.

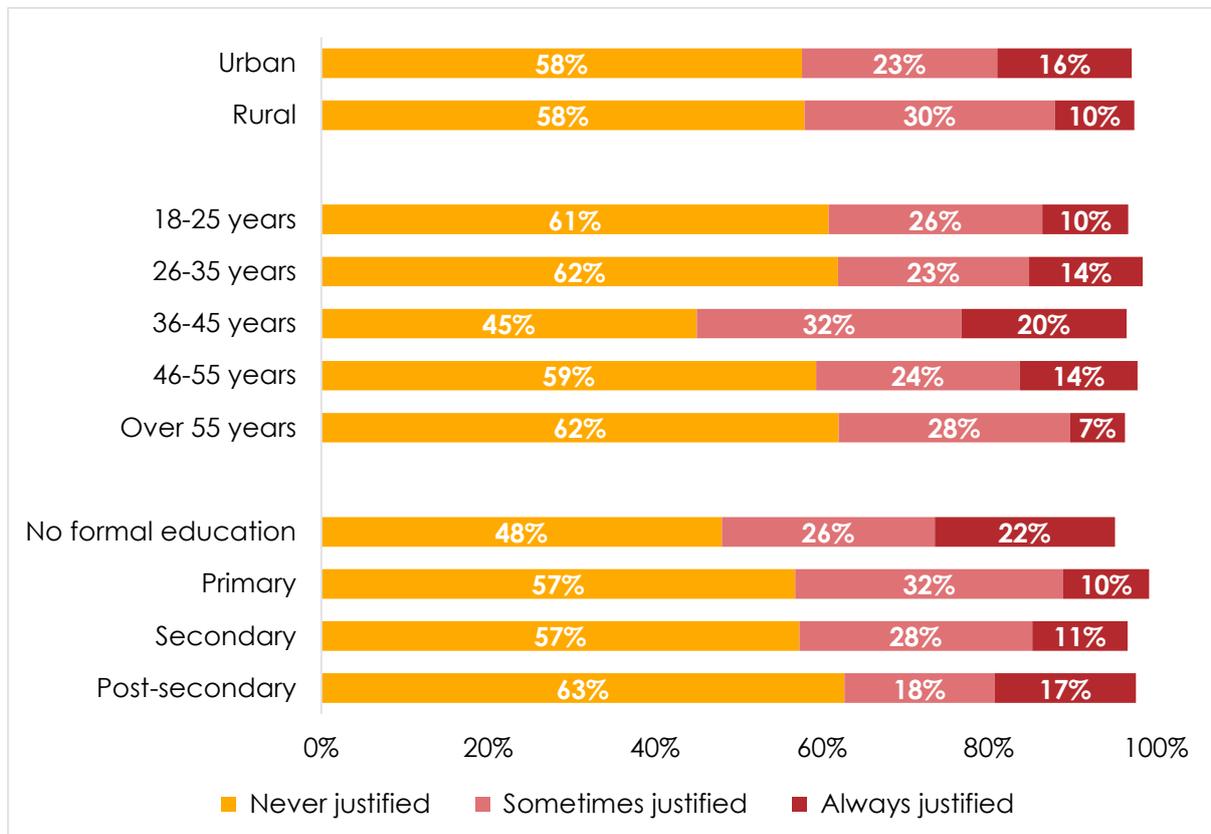
¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes (2020).

Figure 5: Is it justified for men to physically discipline their wives? | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For a man to use physical discipline on his wife if she has done something he doesn't like or thinks is wrong?

Figure 6: Is it justified for men to physically discipline their wives? | by demographic group | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: For a man to use physical discipline on his wife if she has done something he doesn't like or thinks is wrong?

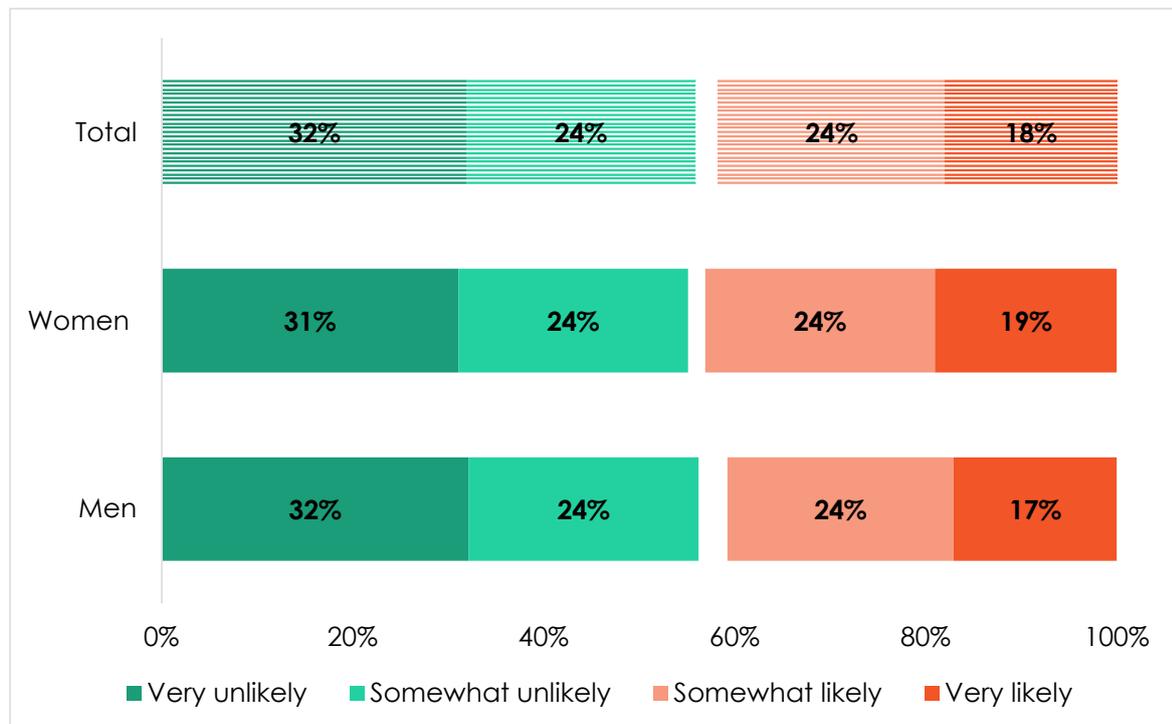
Response to GBV

Police and scholars agree that the true extent of GBV is unknown because many attacks on girls and women are never reported. Reasons include fear of the attacker, fear of a negative response by others, or the belief that the authorities won't take the case seriously (Palermo, Bleck, & Peterman, 2014).

Asked whether they think a woman who reports being a victim of rape, domestic violence, or other gender-based violence will be criticised, harassed, or shamed by others in the community, only one-third (32%) of Namibians say this is "very unlikely" (Figure 7). While another 24% consider it "somewhat unlikely," more than four in 10 (42%) say it is "somewhat" or "very" likely. These perceptions – whether accurate or not – may serve as a significant deterrent to reporting GBV.

Women and men hold almost identical views on this question, and differences by respondents' age, education level, and urban-rural residency show no clear pattern.

Figure 7: Will a woman be criticised, harassed, or shamed for reporting GBV?
 | by gender | Namibia | 2021

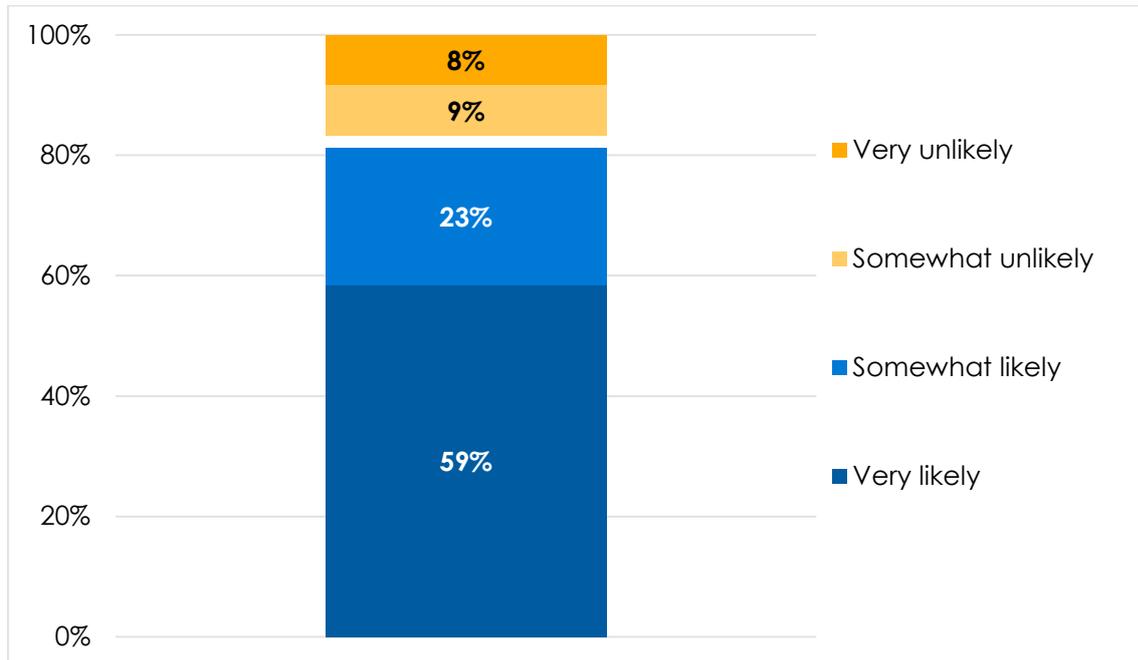


Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: She will be criticised, harassed, or shamed by others in the community?*

While expectations regarding the community's response are mixed, Namibians overwhelmingly believe that the police will respond appropriately to reported cases of GBV: 82% see it as likely that the police will take such reports seriously, including 59% who say it is "very likely" (Figure 8).

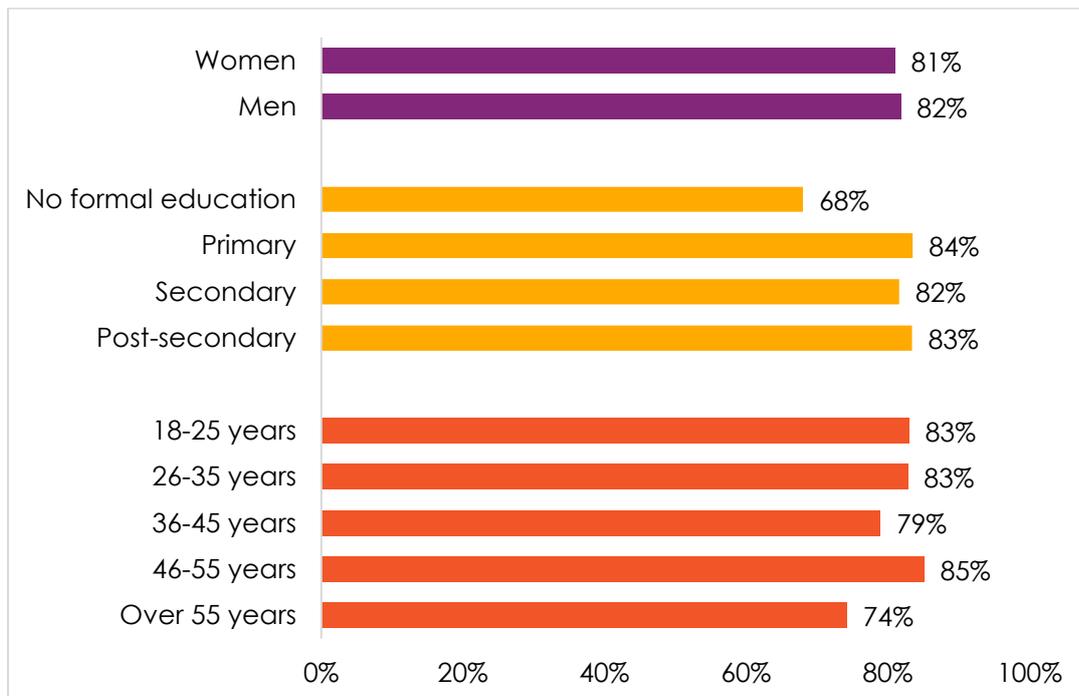
Men and women are equally likely to believe that the police will take GBV cases seriously. Citizens with no formal schooling express less confidence in the police response (68%, vs. 82%-84% of those with formal education) (Figure 9).

Figure 8: Do the police take GBV cases seriously? | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: Her case will be taken seriously by the police?*

Figure 9: Do the police take GBV cases seriously? | by socio-demographic group | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community goes to the police to report being a victim of gender-based violence, for example, to report a rape or report being physically abused by her husband, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur: Her case will be taken seriously by the police? (% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")*

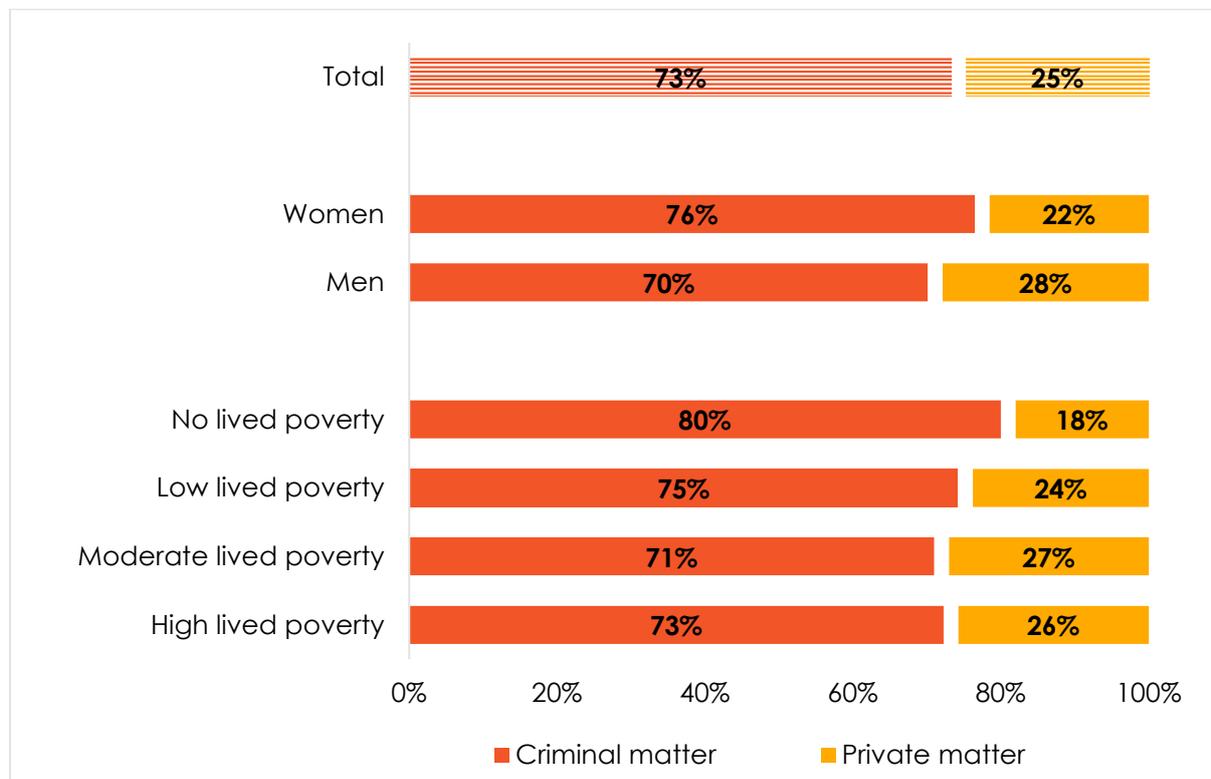
Is domestic violence a criminal or family matter?

One common form of GBV is domestic violence. Even though the perpetrators may be known, many domestic-violence cases go unreported or unresolved, and most present victims and families with complex, wrenching decisions. Do Namibians see domestic violence as a criminal matter or a private matter?

By a 3-to-1 ratio, Namibians say domestic violence is a criminal matter that requires the involvement of law enforcement; 73% of respondents share this view, including 50% who feel “strongly” about it. Only 25% believe domestic violence should be seen as a private matter to be resolved within the family (Figure 10).

Women are somewhat more likely than men to see domestic violence as a criminal matter, 76% vs. 70%. Support for this view exceeds 70% regardless of respondents’ economic status, although it is highest among better-off citizens (80%).

Figure 10: Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter? | by gender and lived poverty | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Domestic violence is a private matter that needs to be handled and resolved within the family.
 Statement 2: Domestic violence is a criminal matter whose full resolution requires the involvement of law enforcement agencies.
 (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)

The quest for gender equality

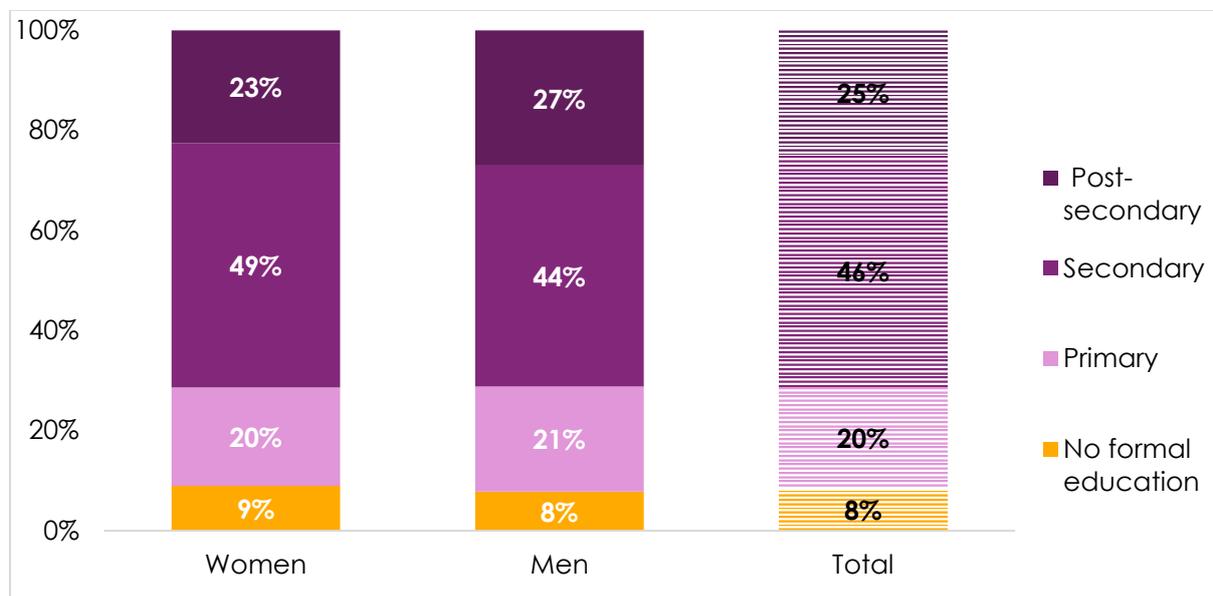
While GBV is on the public’s front burner in terms of issues affecting women, the long struggle for gender equality continues on many other fronts. To what extent is the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare’s five-year strategic plan to combat gender discrimination succeeding?

Education and control of assets

In terms of education, men are somewhat more likely than women to have post-secondary qualifications (27% vs. 23%), while more women than men have secondary schooling (49% vs. 44%). The proportions with no formal schooling and with primary schooling are about equal (20% and 8% overall) (Figure 11).

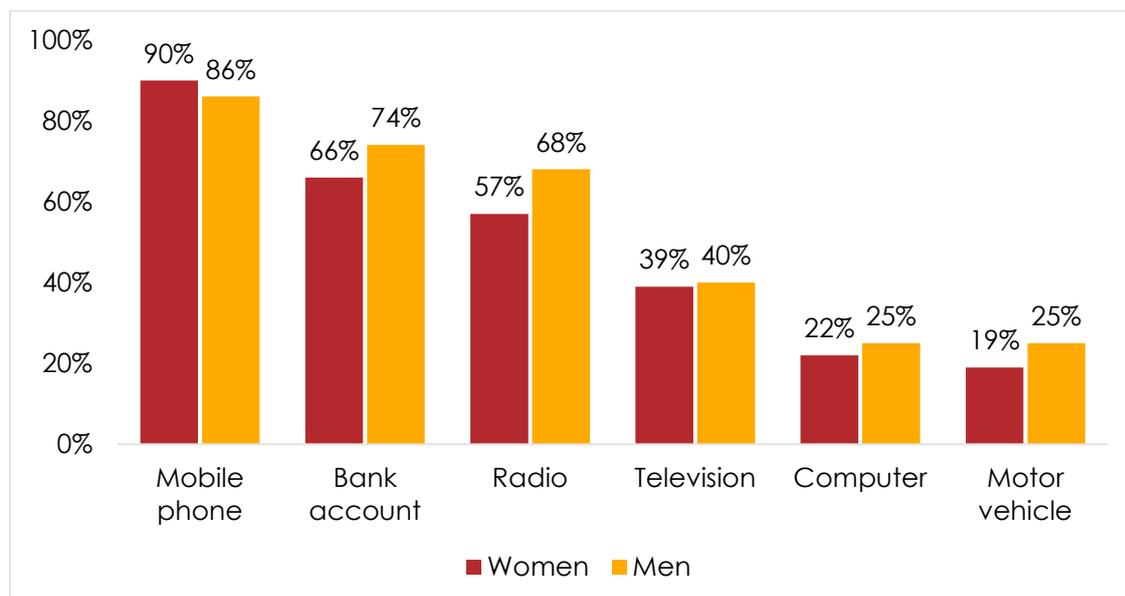
When it comes to control over assets, slightly more women than men own mobile phones (90% vs. 86%), and the two are about equally likely to own a television (39% of women, 40% of men) and a computer (22% of women, 25% of men). Women trail men, however, when it comes to ownership of a bank account (an 8-percentage-point gap), a radio (9 points), and a motor vehicle (6 points) (Figure 12).

Figure 11: Educational attainment | by gender | Namibia | 2021



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

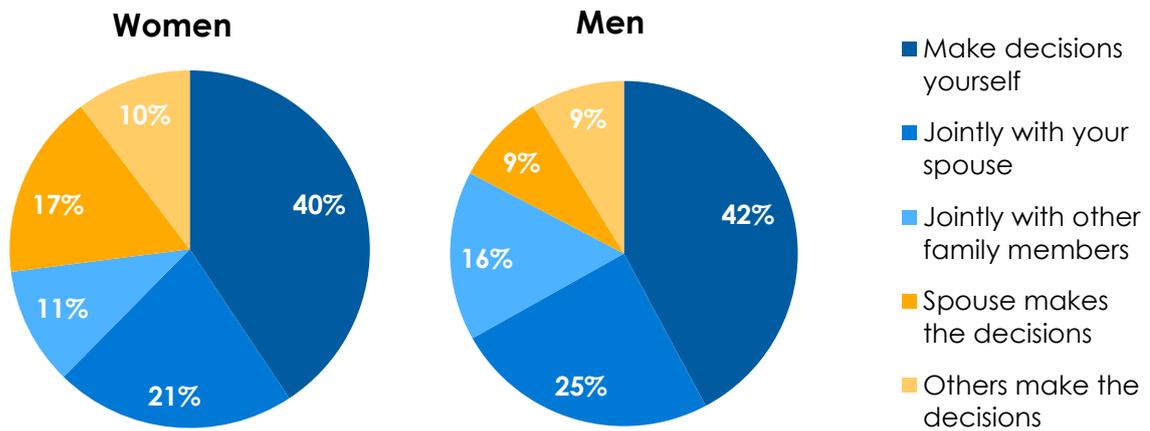
Figure 12: Asset ownership | by gender | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: Which of these things do you personally own?

In decisions about how household money is spent, women and men are about equally likely to say they make the decisions themselves (40% vs. 42%) (Figure 13). But fewer women than men say they make decisions jointly with their spouse (21% vs. 25%) or with other family members (11% vs. 16%), leaving more women than men without a voice in household financial decisions (27% vs. 18%).

Figure 13: Who decides how money is used? | by gender | Namibia | 2021



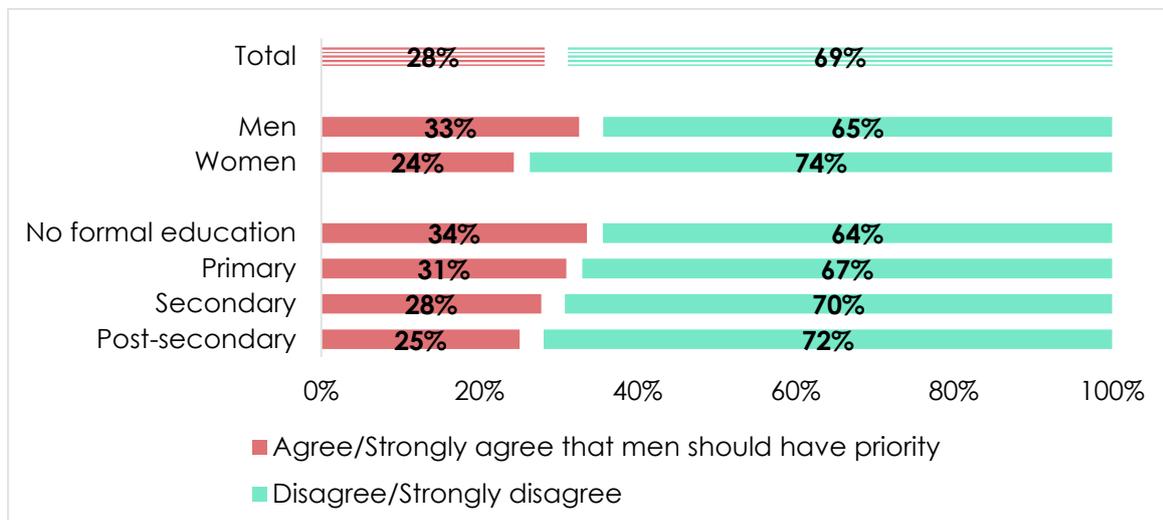
Respondents were asked: What is the main way that decisions are made about how to use any money that you have or earn, for example from a job, a business, selling things, or other activities?

Rights to a job and land

The ability to claim certain rights can be a tool to promote gender equality – or to maintain inequality. Do Namibians want gender equality when it comes to jobs and land? And if so, how close to equality are they?

Fewer than three in 10 Namibians (28%) endorse the idea that men should be given priority over women in hiring when jobs are scarce, while more than two-thirds (69%) reject this form of gender discrimination (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Should men have priority for scarce jobs? | by gender and education | Namibia | 2021

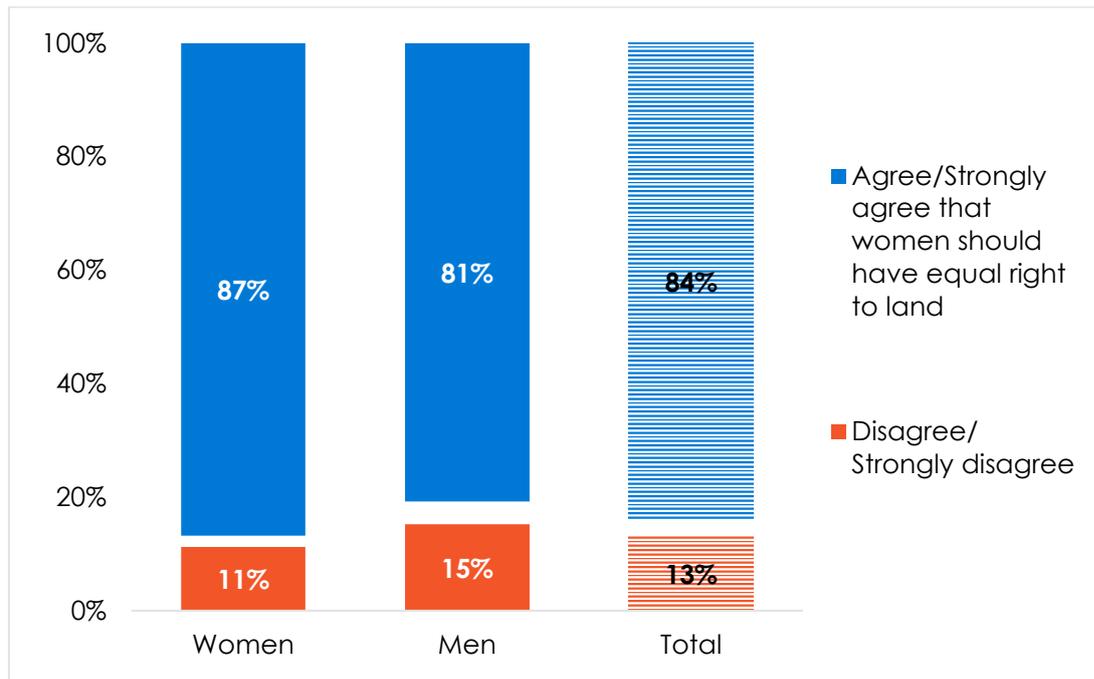


Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: When jobs are scarce, men should have more rights to a job than women.

Men (65%) trail women (74%) in insisting on equality when it comes to jobs. Support for equality in hiring increases with respondents' education level, ranging from 64% of those with no formal schooling to 72% of those with post-secondary qualifications.

An even larger majority (84%) endorse equal rights to own and inherit land. Here, too, men are somewhat less likely than women to believe in equality (87% vs. 81%), while views do not differ significantly by respondents' urban-rural location, education, and economic status (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Should women have equal rights to land? | by gender | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Women should have the same rights as men to own and inherit land.

While large majorities say women should have equal rights to jobs and land, do they already enjoy equality? Three-fourths of Namibians say women do have the same opportunities as men to get a paying job (74%) and to own and inherit land (75%).

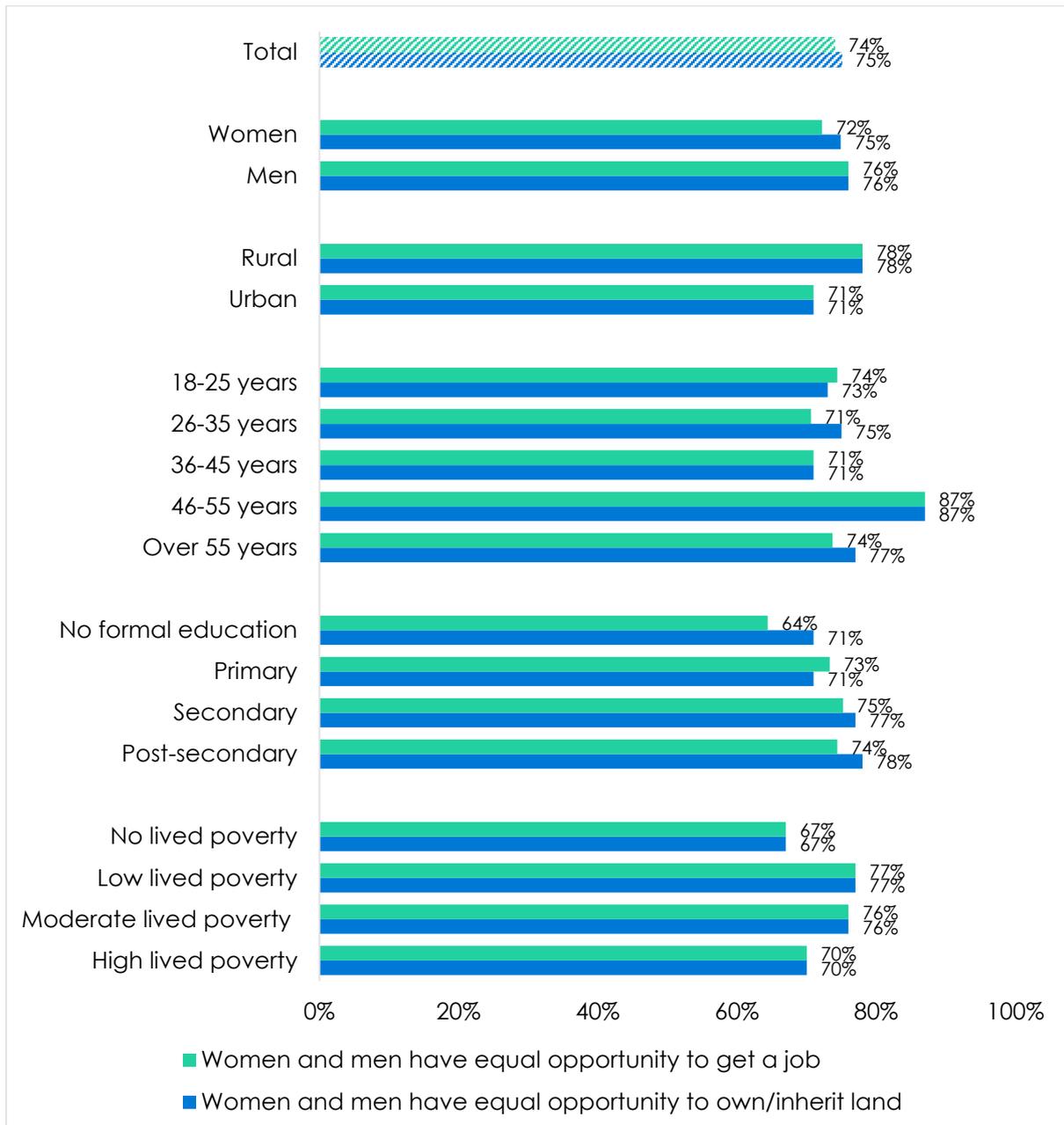
Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

As demographic breakdowns in Figure 16 illustrate, views on the two questions are quite similar, i.e. similar proportions see equal opportunity as a reality for both jobs and land ownership. Differences between demographic groups are also modest. Women are slightly less likely than men to say they enjoy equal opportunities in hiring (72%

vs. 76%), and urban residents are 7 percentage points less likely than rural residents to say equality has been achieved on both counts.

On both indicators, respondents who have no formal education and those who are poor are less likely to perceive gender equality than their more educated and better-off counterparts.

Figure 16: Do women and men have equal opportunities to get a job and to own/inherit land? | by socio-demographic group | Namibia | 2021



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

In our country today, women and men have equal opportunities to get a job that pays a wage or salary.

In our country today, women and men have equal opportunities to own and inherit land.

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

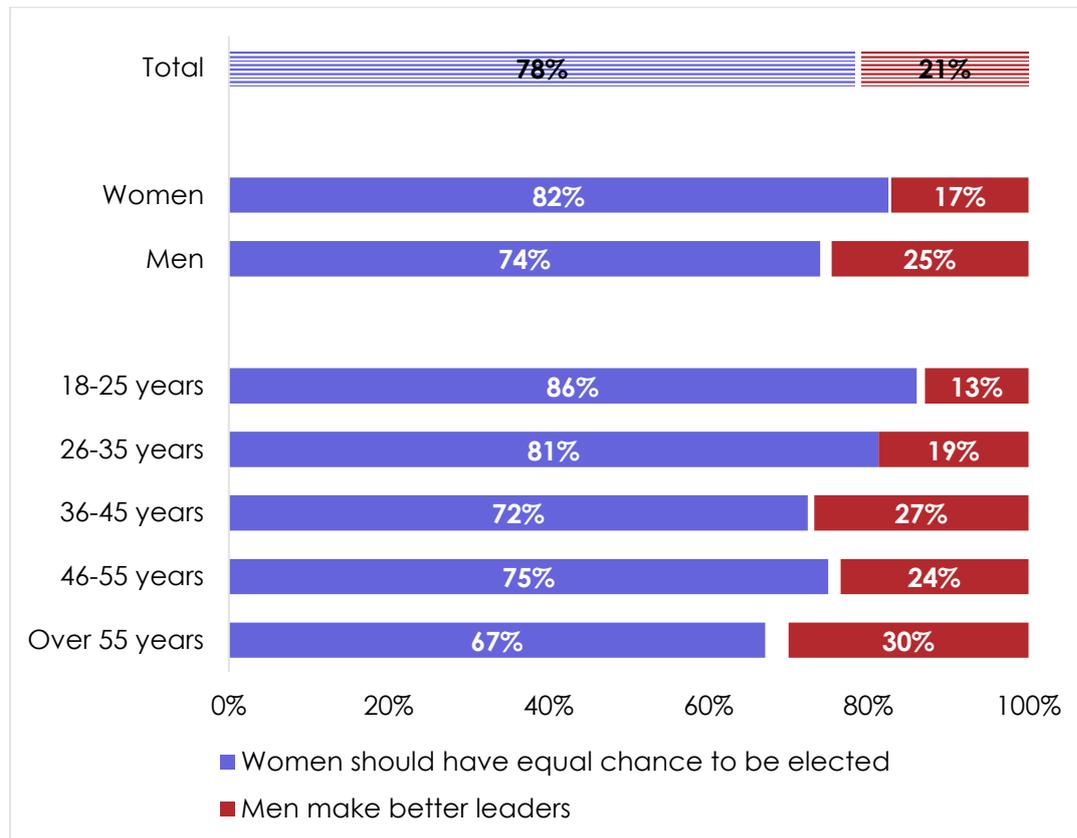
Gender equality in political participation

One critical aspect of gender equality is women's participation in political leadership, which helps ensure that women's voices are heard in policy making.

In Namibia, more than three-fourths (78%) of citizens say women should have the same chance as men to vie for political office, rejecting the idea that men make better political

leaders and should thus be given priority as candidates (Figure 18). More women (82%) than men (74%) endorse equality in politics, and younger citizens are more likely to agree than their elders, ranging from 86% among 18- to 25-year-olds to just 67% among those over age 55.

Figure 18: Should women have an equal chance to be elected? | by gender
 | Namibia | 2021



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.
 (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)

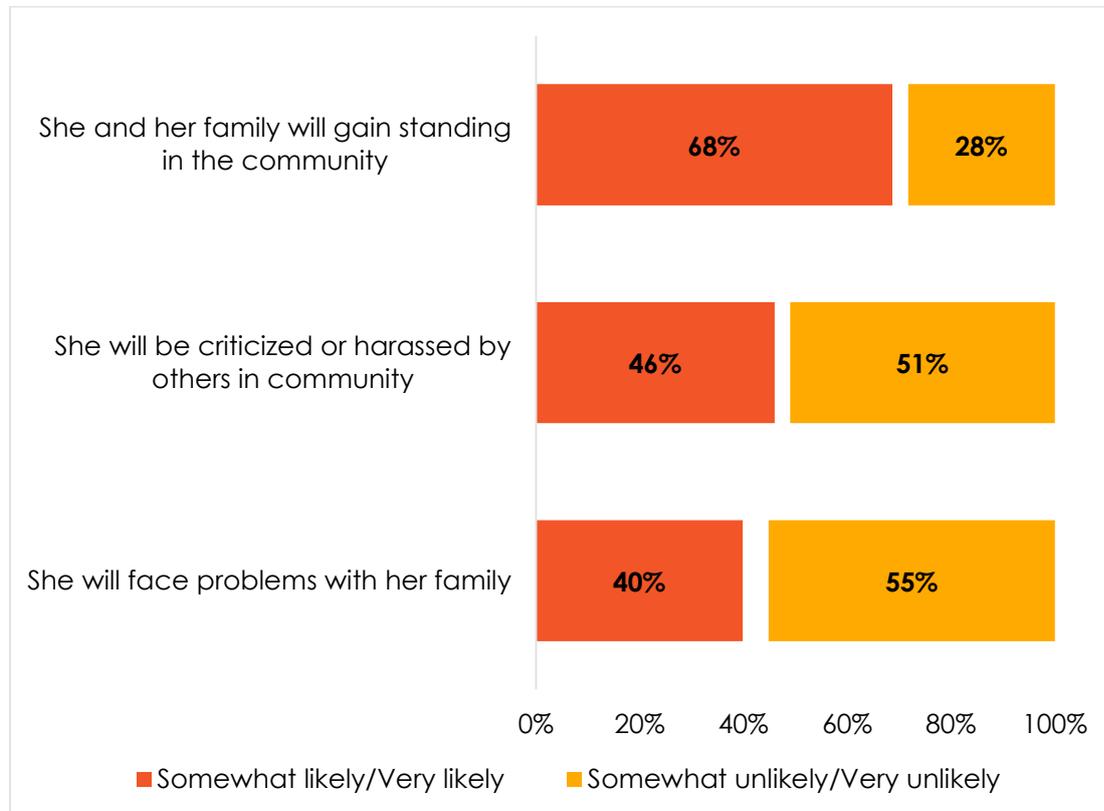
Even if she believes that voters will give her the same consideration as a male candidate, a woman may be encouraged to run for public office – or discouraged from doing so – by other consequences she expects to result from her candidacy.

On the positive side, more than two-thirds (68%) of Namibians say it is “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that a woman and her family will gain standing in the community if she runs for elected office (Figure 19).

But findings are more mixed on other potential consequences. Almost half (46%) of respondents consider it likely that others in the community will criticise her, call her names, or harass her for seeking public office, while 40% think she might face problems with her family. The fact that slim majorities see it as unlikely that a woman will face community criticism/harassment (51%) or family problems (55%) as a result of running for office may or may not be enough to overcome some women’s reservations about throwing her hat into the ring.

Women and men hold very similar views on these questions.

Figure 19: For better or for worse: How running for elected office affects women's lives
 | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: *If a woman in your community runs for elected office, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur?*

She and her family will gain standing in the community?

She will be criticised, called names, or harassed by others in the community?

She will face problems with her family?

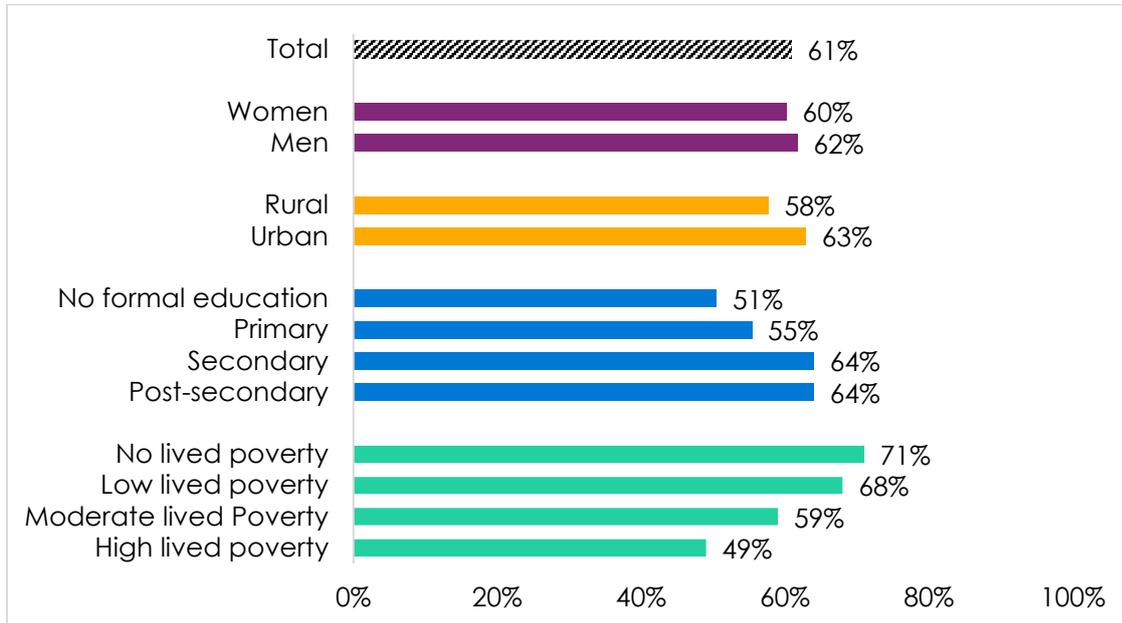
Government performance in promoting equal rights and opportunities

Six in 10 Namibians (61%) say their government is doing a “fairly” or “very” good job of promoting equal rights and opportunities for women (Figure 22), while 38% disapprove of the government's performance. Women and men differ little in their assessments of the government's efforts.

Approval ratings are somewhat higher in cities than in rural areas (63% vs. 58%) but vary more strongly by respondents' education and economic levels. Those with at least a secondary education (64%) are more likely to be satisfied with the government's efforts than those with less education (51%-55%). And approval increases with wealth, ranging from just 49% of those experiencing high lived poverty to 71% of those with no lived poverty. These findings suggest that some of the benefits of growing gender equality may not be reaching less educated and poorer populations.

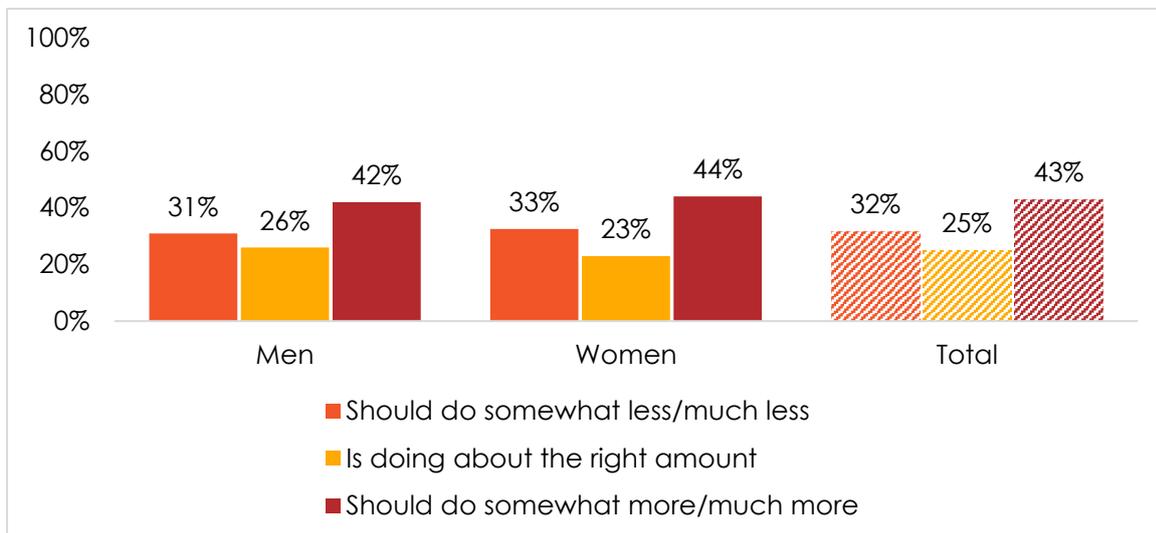
But even if the government's performance ratings are generally positive, a plurality (43%) of citizens think it could do “somewhat more” or “much more” to promote equal rights and opportunities for women. One in four (25%) say it's doing about the right amount, while one in three (32%) think it should reduce its gender-equality efforts. Women and men offer similar appraisals of the government's level of effort (Figure 23).

Figure 22: Government performance in promoting equal rights and opportunities for women | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Promoting equal rights and opportunities for women? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Figure 23: Should the government do more or less to promote equal rights and opportunities for women? | by gender | Namibia | 2021



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, should government and elected officials be doing more than they are doing now to advance the rights and equality of women, or should they be doing less, or are they doing about the right amount?

Conclusion

Despite gains in electing women to representative positions and efforts to promote gender equality in all sectors, a majority of Namibians say that violence against women is a common problem and constitutes the most important women's-rights issue that government and society should address.

Most Namibians believe that the police are likely to take GBV seriously and that GBV should be treated as a criminal and not a private matter. But a significant segment of the population still sees physical force as a justified action to discipline women, which points to an underlying culture of masculinity that could also account for the view that women will be criticised and harassed when they report gender-based violence to the authorities.

The findings on gender equality are more optimistic. Educational achievement is close to gender-equal, and the gender gaps in control over household assets and participation in household financial decisions are small.

Most Namibians support gender equality in accessing paying jobs, ownership of land, and elected public office. Yet a significant proportion of the population report that women may face negative pushback and problems with their families if they run for office.

A majority of Namibians approve of the government's performance in promoting equal rights and opportunities for women, but a significant proportion say that more needs to be done.

References

- Asala, K. (2020). Namibia: Police disperse gender-based violence protest. AfricaNews. 11 October.
- CIVICUS. (2021). Namibia: 'Protests against gender-based violence were triggered by collective hope.' 26 January.
- Herestofa, L. (2021). The legislative plan to fight gender-based violence in Namibia. Borgen Project.
- IPU Parline. (2022). Global data on national parliaments.
- Kuugongelwa-Amadhila, S. (2020). Response to issues raised in the GBV protest, Parliament.
- Mattes, R. (2020). Lived poverty on the rise: Decade of living-standard gains ends in Africa. Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 62.
- Melber, H. (2020). #ShutItAllDown in Namibia – the fight against gender-based violence. Conversation. 29 October.
- Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare. (2010). National gender policy (2010-2020).
- Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare. (2017). Strategic plan 2017-2022.
- Palermo, T., Bleck, J., & Peterman, A. (2014). Tip of the iceberg: Reporting and gender-based violence in developing countries. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 179(5), 602-612.
- SBS News. (2020). Namibia will establish special courts to fight violence against women after #ShutItDown protests. 20 October.
- Sitali, N. (2020). Gender-based violence: What are we missing? Namibian.
- UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund). (2012). Namibia launches new gender policy with UNFPA input. 19 April.
- van der Schyff, E. (2021). Remains of missing girl found at Narraville – Missing person's case of Shannon Wasserfall turns into murder inquiry. Namib Times. 9 October.
- World Economic Forum. (2021). Global gender gap report 2021: Insight report.
- Zhakata, L. (2020). #ShutItAllDown: Here's why I marched for my life against gender violence in Namibia. Global Citizen. 24 November.

Christiaan Keulder is the owner of Survey Warehouse and national investigator for Afrobarometer in Namibia. Email: c.keulder@surveywarehouse.com.na.

Kelechi Amakoh is a data analyst for Afrobarometer and a PhD student in the Department of Political Science, Michigan State University. Email: amakohke@msu.edu.

Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the European Union, the National Endowment for Democracy, the Mastercard Foundation, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the University of California San Diego, the Global Centre for Pluralism, the World Bank Group, Freedom House, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, GIZ, and Humanity United.

Donations help Afrobarometer give voice to African citizens. Please consider making a contribution (at www.afrobarometer.org) or contact Bruno van Dyk (bruno.v.dyk@afrobarometer.org) to discuss institutional funding.

Follow our releases on #VoicesAfrica.



Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 513 | 7 April 2022