



# POLICY BRIEF

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## Gender-based violence: The main challenge in the fight for women's rights in South Africa

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### Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) is one of the most pressing issues in South Africa – an urgent public health concern and a human rights violation. GBV is defined as ‘any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will and that is based on socially ascribed (i.e., gender) differences between females and males’ (Interaction, 2021). GBV is pervasive throughout the society, occurring in many homes, workplaces, churches and spaces of socialisation, as well as across race, class, ethnicity and age. GBV manifests in various forms that include physical, emotional, psychological, financial or structural harm, most frequently perpetrated by intimate partners, work colleagues, strangers and even institutions (Govender, 2023). GBV has direct negative consequences, for example, injuries, morbidity and death. Women are usually on the receiving end and have to bear the brunt of unwanted pregnancies, diverse health risks, mental illness and sexually transmitted infections.

In 2013, 17-year-old Anene Booysen was brutally attacked, raped and disembowelled in Bredasdorp in the Western Cape (September, 2013). In 2017, 22-year-old Karabo Mokoena went missing, and her body was later found burnt in an open field in Johannesburg (Saba, 2017). In 2019, 19-year-old university student Uyinene Mrwetyana was raped and murdered at a post office in Cape Town

(Adebayo, 2019). In 2020, the body of 28-year-old Tshegofatso Pule, who was eight months pregnant, was found stabbed and hanging from a tree outside Johannesburg (Seleka, 2020). A year later, 23-year-old law student Nosiselo Mtebeni was killed and dismembered, her body found stuffed inside a suitcase (Dayimani, 2021). These crimes left the nation reeling, but they are just a few of many.

The rate at which women are killed by intimate partners in South Africa is five times higher than the global average (Govender, 2023). During the global coronavirus outbreak, President Cyril Ramaphosa described GBV as a ‘second pandemic’ (CGTN, 2020; Africa Health Organisation, 2021). Reports suggest that GBV intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic as victims were no longer able to escape their attackers (Eyewitness News, 2020).

South Africa has a robust set of instruments to fight GBV, which range from the Constitution, the National Policy Framework for Women’s Empowerment and Gender Equality and the National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide, to support structures such as the Gender-Based Violence Command Centre, a 24/7 helpline for victims of GBV (Republic of South Africa, 1996; South African Government, 2002; Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, 2020, 2022).

The Department of Social Development works with civil society and other stakeholders to increase the availability of GBV services and to reduce public tolerance for violence against women and girls (South African Government, 2023). In 2022, Ramaphosa signed into law three bills designed to deliver justice for victims (South African Government News Agency, 2022), and the South African Police Service has accelerated efforts to assist victims through its Policy on Reducing Barriers to the Reporting of Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence (Philip, 2017; Civilian Secretariat for Police Service, 2017). But despite the existence of all these instruments to fight the GBV scourge, the number of reported cases continues to rise and most incidents of GBV remain underreported, undocumented and unaccounted for within the country's national statistics (Oosthuizen et al., 2024). In many countries around the world – with South Africa being no exception – the reluctance to report sexual and domestic abuse is spurred by societal norms, a culture of impunity, and in some cases, by public authorities who are inadequately trained to deal with GBV and/or are dismissive or insensitive to the plight of victims.

In a 2021 Afrobarometer survey in South Africa, citizens most frequently cited alcohol abuse (25%) and drug abuse (20%), followed by unemployment (16%), poverty (9%), previous exposure to violence (8%), and cultural and traditional values (2%) as the main drivers of GBV. About one-fifth of respondents (18%) pointed to “all of the above” as contributing factors (Dryding & Mpako, 2021).

This policy paper draws chiefly from a survey module included in the Afrobarometer Round 9 (2021/2023) questionnaire to explore Africans' experiences and perceptions of GBV and women's rights in general. Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, interviewed 1,582 adult South Africans in November–December 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

In South Africa, most citizens say physical force is never justified to discipline women, but many report that GBV is a common occurrence in their communities and constitutes the most important women's rights issue that the government and society must address. Most consider domestic violence a criminal matter and believe that the police take GBV cases seriously. Worryingly, a plurality think that a woman is likely to suffer negative consequences for reporting GBV to the authorities. But importantly, a majority agree that domestic violence should be treated as a criminal matter rather than a private matter to be resolved within the family.

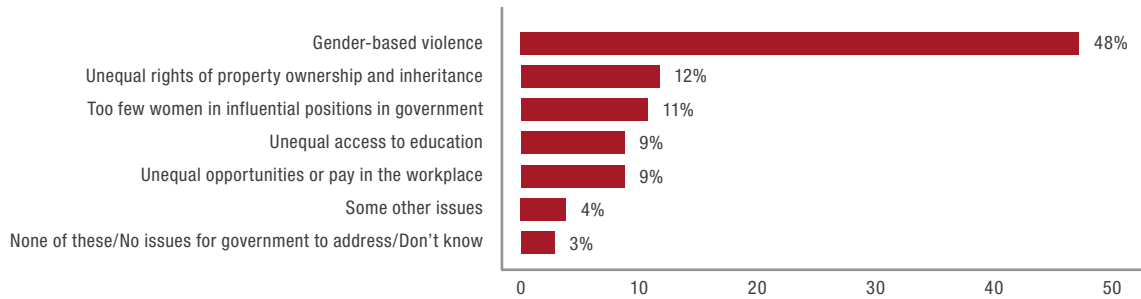
## Key findings

- GBV ranks first on the list of women's rights issues that citizens want the government and society to address.
- Close to half (48%) of South Africans say violence against women and girls is 'somewhat common' (23%) or 'very common' (25%) in their community.
- Nearly eight in ten (78%) say it is 'never' justified for a man to physically discipline his wife.
- More than four in 10 respondents (43%) consider it 'somewhat likely' (25%) or 'very likely' (18%) that a woman will be criticised, harassed or shamed if she reports GBV to the authorities.
- Most (76%) believe that the police are 'very likely' (55%) or 'somewhat likely' (21%) to take cases of GBV seriously.
- Almost eight in 10 South Africans (78%) say domestic violence should be treated as a criminal matter, while 18% see it as a private matter to be resolved within the family.

## Is GBV an important problem in South Africa?

In South Africa, GBV tops the list of important women's rights issues that citizens say the government and society must address. Nearly half (48%) of survey respondents cite GBV as a top priority, followed by unequal rights of property ownership and inheritance (12%), too few women in influential positions in government (11%), unequal access to education (9%), and unequal opportunities or pay in the workplace (9%) (Figure 1). Women and men are equally likely to say that GBV is the most important women's rights issue.

Figure 1: Most important women’s-rights issues, South Africa, 2022



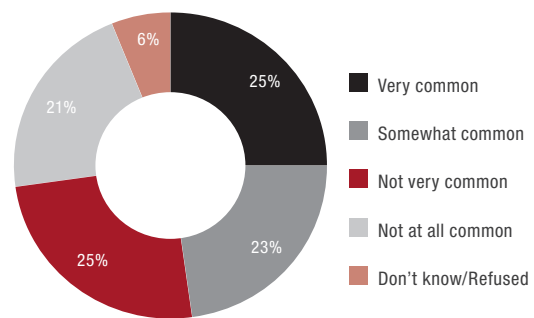
**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, which of the following issues related to women’s rights and equality do you think are the most important for our government and society to address?*

## How common is GBV?

One reason that GBV is considered a critical issue is probably its frequency: 48% of respondents say violence against women and girls is ‘somewhat common’ (23%) or ‘very common’ (25%) in their community, although about an equal proportion (46%) disagree (Figure 2).

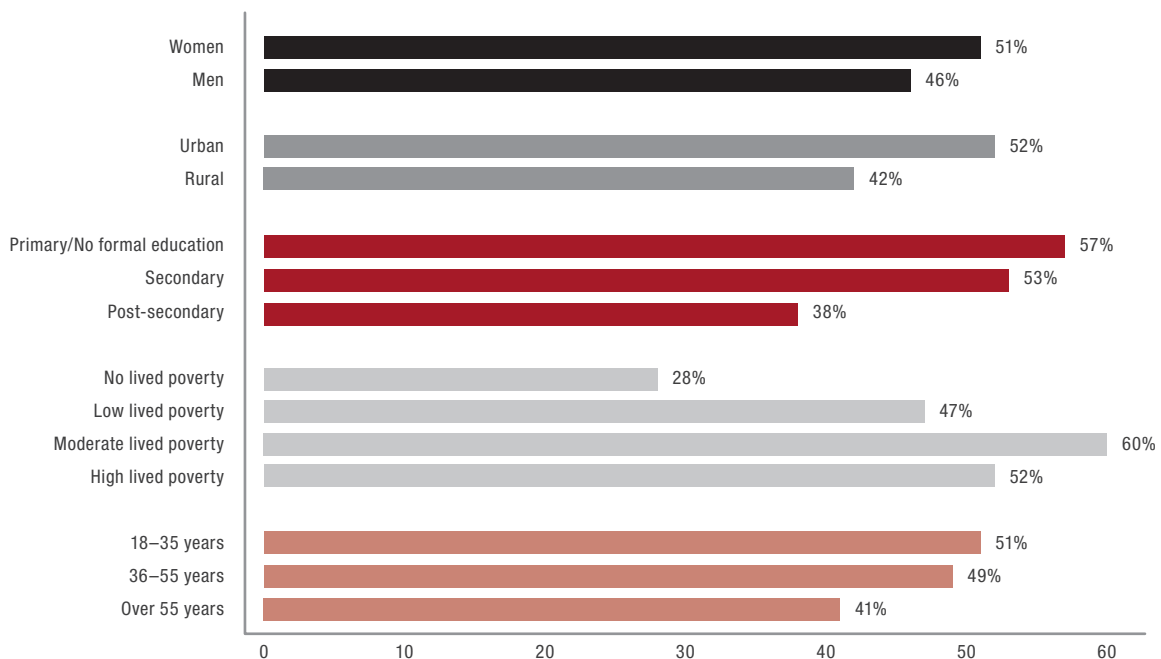
Women (51%) are more likely than men (46%) to say GBV is a common occurrence, as are urbanites (52%) compared to rural residents (42%) (Figure 3). This perception is less widespread among economically well-off citizens (28%, vs. 52%–60% of those experiencing moderate or high lived poverty<sup>1</sup>), among the most educated respondents (38%, vs. 53%–57% of those with less schooling), and among older people (41%, vs. 49%–51% of those under age 56).

Figure 2: Frequency of GBV, South Africa, 2022



**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?*

Figure 3: GBV is somewhat/very common, by demographic group, South Africa, 2022



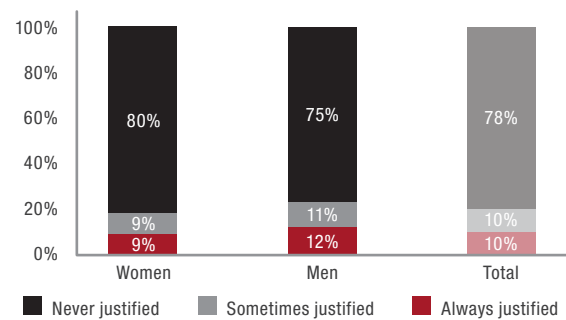
**Respondents were asked:** *In this area, how common do you think it is for men to use violence against women and girls in the home or the community? (% who say ‘somewhat common’ or ‘very common’).*

## Physical discipline of a spouse

Close to eight in 10 South Africans (78%) say it is 'never justified' for a man to use physical force to discipline his wife, while two in 10 consider it 'sometimes' (10%) or 'always' (10%) justified. Women are more likely than men to rule out physical discipline as 'never justified' (80% vs. 75%) (Figure 4).

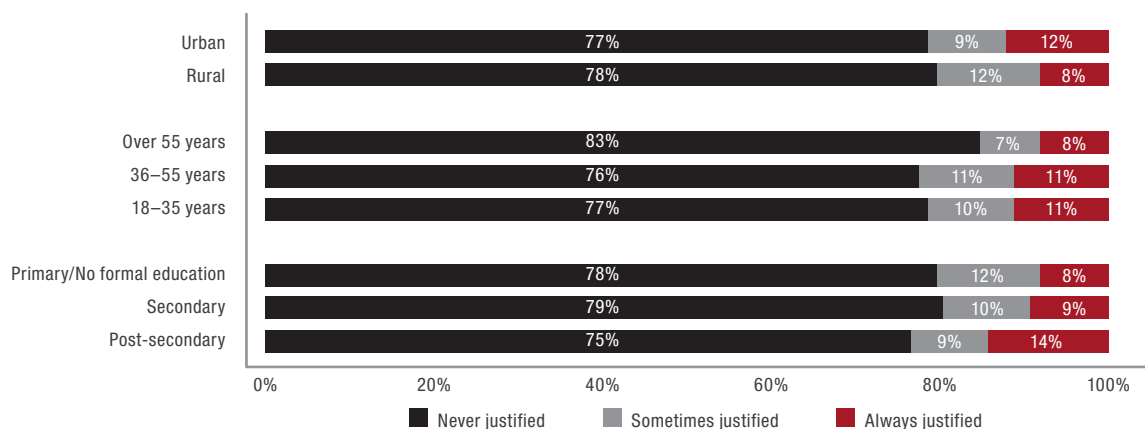
The view that men are never justified in physically disciplining their wives garners support across the board, although older respondents (83% of those over age 55) are more likely to see it as unacceptable than younger respondents (76%–77%), perhaps suggesting that as women's vulnerability to domestic violence becomes more pronounced with age (Kotze, 2018), so does opposition to the practice (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Is it justified for men to physically discipline their wives?, South Africa, 2022



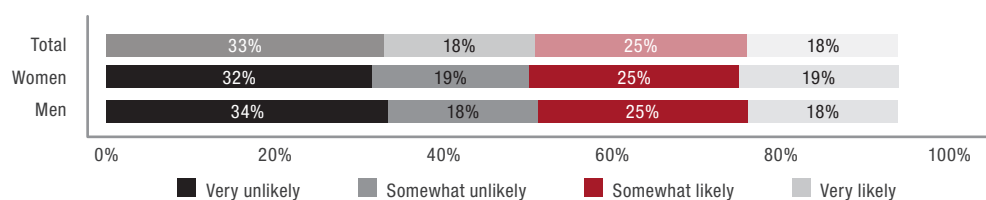
**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For a man to use physical discipline on his wife if she has done something he doesn't like or thinks is wrong?

Figure 5: Never justified for men to physically discipline their wives, by demographic group, South Africa, 2022



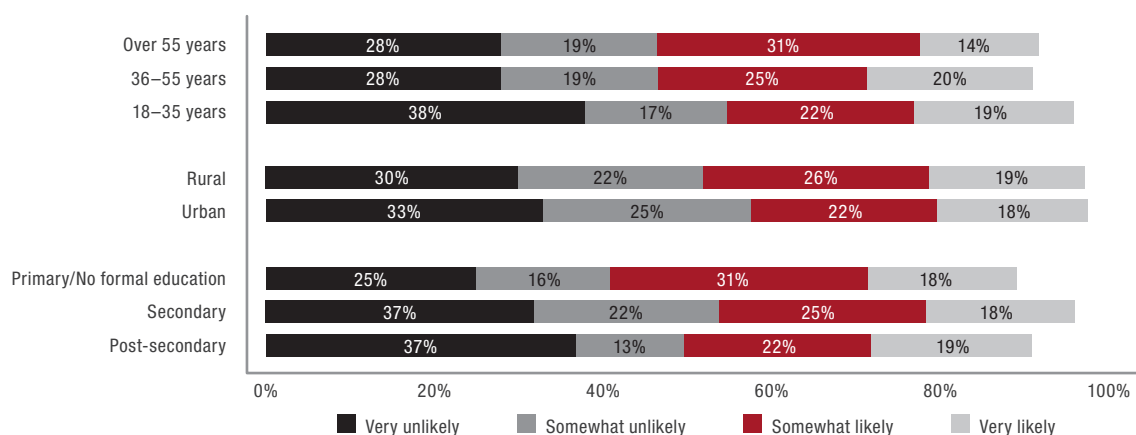
**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, sometimes be justified, or never be justified: For a man to use physical discipline on his wife if she has done something he doesn't like or thinks is wrong?

Figure 6: Will a woman be criticised, harassed or shamed for reporting GBV?



**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?

**Figure 7:** Will a woman be criticised, harassed or shamed for reporting GBV?, by demographic group, South Africa, 2022



**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?*

## 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, and the belief that the authorities will not take the case seriously (Palermo, Bleck & Peterman, 2014).

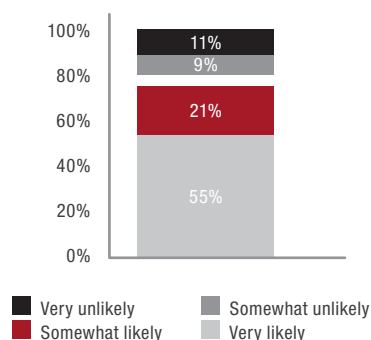
Asked whether they think a woman who reports being a victim of rape, domestic violence or other GBV will be criticised, harassed or shamed by others in the community, more than four in 10 respondents (43%) say this is ‘very likely’ (18%) or ‘somewhat likely’ (25%). Only 33% consider such a community response ‘very unlikely’ (Figure 6). These perceptions – whether accurate or not – may serve as a significant deterrent to reporting GBV.

Women and men share almost identical expectations on this question. The perception that community backlash is ‘very unlikely’ is most widespread among young respondents (38% of those aged 18–35) and citizens with post-secondary education (37%) (Figure 7).

In contrast to their mixed expectations regarding the community response, most South Africans believe that the police will respond appropriately to reported cases of GBV: About one-quarter (76%) see it as likely that the police will take such reports seriously, including 55% who say it is ‘very likely’ (Figure 8).

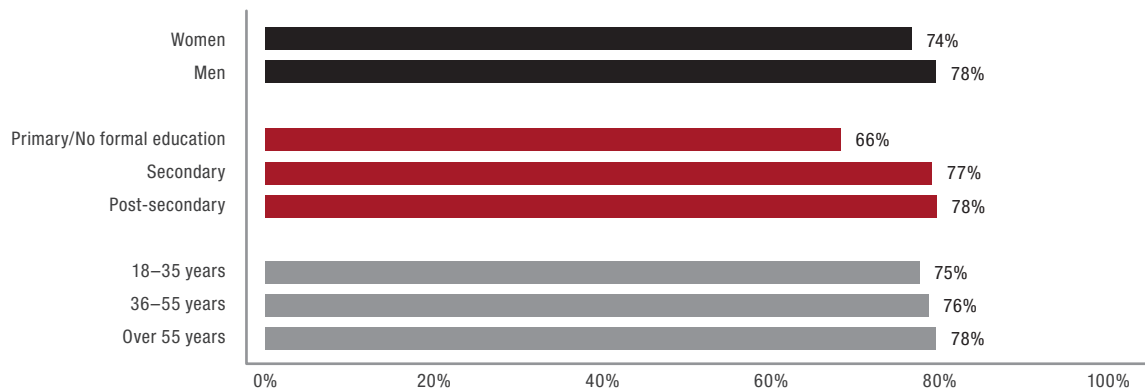
Citizens with primary education or less (66%) and the youth (75%) express the least confidence in the police response (Figure 9).

**Figure 8:** Do the police take GBV cases seriously?, South Africa, 2022



**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: Police take GBV cases seriously, by demographic group, South Africa , 2022



**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?

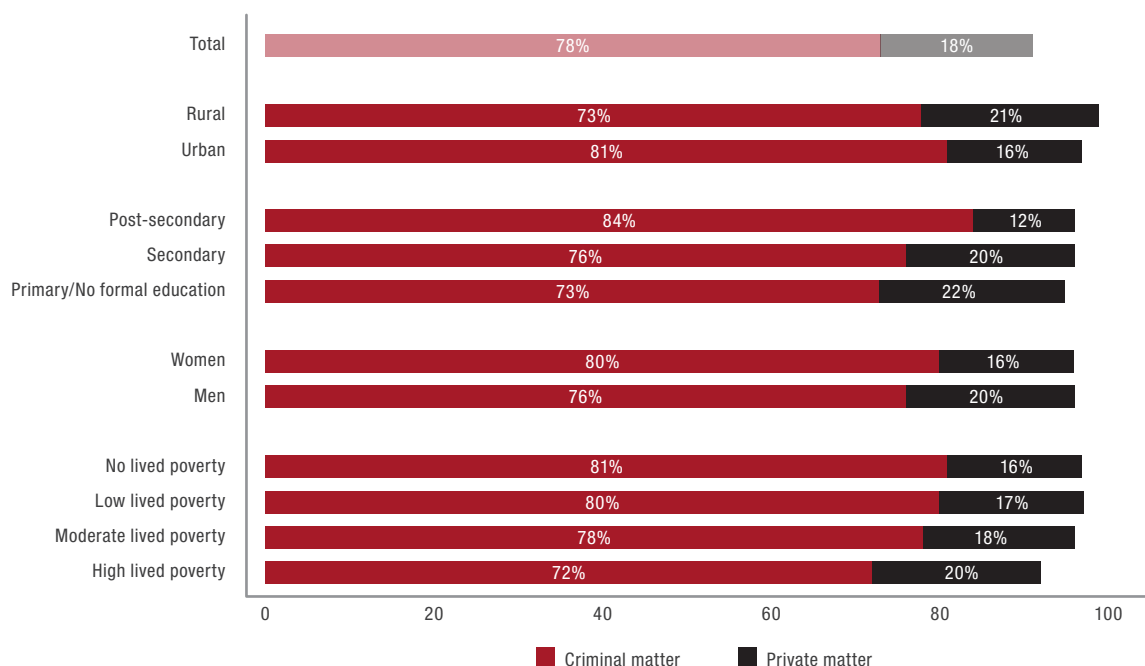
One common form of GBV is domestic violence. Even though the perpetrators may be known, many domestic violence cases go unreported or unresolved, and most present victims and families with complex, wrenching decisions. Do South Africans see domestic violence as a criminal matter or a private matter?

Women are somewhat more likely than men to see domestic violence as a criminal matter (80% vs. 76%). Larger gaps separate the wealthy from the poor (81% vs. 72%) and cities from rural areas (81% vs. 73%).

The view that GBV is a criminal matter also increases with respondents' education level, ranging from 73% among those with primary schooling or less to 84% among those with tertiary qualifications.

More than three-fourths (78%) of South Africans say domestic violence is a criminal matter that requires the involvement of law enforcement, while 18% see it as a private matter that needs to be handled and resolved within the family (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Is domestic violence a criminal or private matter?, by demographic group, South Africa, 2022



**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).*

## Conclusion

South Africans see GBV as the most important women's rights issue that the government and society must address. Most reject the use of physical force by a husband, but many also say that GBV is at least 'somewhat common' in their community. Moreover, almost half consider it likely that a woman will be criticised, harassed or shamed if she reports being the victim of GBV – a perception that may serve as a significant deterrent to reporting such attacks.

On the plus side, most citizens believe that the police are likely to take cases of GBV seriously, and a majority see domestic violence as a criminal matter whose resolution requires the involvement of law enforcement agencies rather than as a private matter to be resolved within the family.

## Recommendations

Because legislation is not enough, we proffer the following recommendations for both state and non-state actors on the basis of the survey findings:

- First, women's space in socio-economic and political arenas should be expanded. Inclusionary processes will strengthen women's participation in designing laws and policies and making decisions that impact on community life. Women need to be part of the matrix to decide on matters that affect them. Crucially, intersectionality needs to be at the forefront of discussions around women's vulnerability to

GBV as a lens of inquiry to see the myriad ways in which the problem of gender-based violence manifests in the lived experiences of different women. For example, for poor women, a key policy question should revolve around how to ensure that economic vulnerabilities are removed and economic justice is achieved in order to enable women to be economically independent of a man.

- Second, survivors of GBV must be able to access justice. If impunity for sexual crimes is allowed to continue unabated, underreporting will remain prevalent and the scourge of violence will continue. The police and the judiciary need to be adequately trained and capacitated to deal with cases of GBV with the sensitivity and care they deserve. Dedicated divisions at police stations and in the courts to investigate these crimes would be a step in the right direction. Investment in forensic equipment to strengthen evidence generation and victim protection are other areas of improvement.
- Thirdly, government needs to engage extensively with its stakeholders to draft a plan to change sexual attitudes and behaviours in the country. Citizen perceptions that women who report domestic violence may suffer negative consequences are shared by significant proportions of the South African population, an indication that society crucifies women for reporting incidences of GBV. The survey finding is a strong indicator that there is a need for stakeholders to address destructive societal attitudes that keep citizens locked in a cycle of GBV.

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## Endnotes

- 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, water, medical care, cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes (2020).

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