

Mauritius strong – but far from perfect – on gender equality and social tolerance

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 225 | Thomas Isbell and Sadhiska Bhoojedhur

Summary

Since its independence in 1968, Mauritius has taken pride in promoting its development based on democracy, good governance, human rights and freedoms, and the rule of law. Its Constitution affirms that all Mauritians should benefit from the right to equal protection and assistance of the law against any form of discrimination.

The country has shown its commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights by being a party to all major international human-rights instruments, including conventions and optional protocols on the rights of women, people with disabilities, and children, including children involved in armed conflict, trafficking, prostitution, and pornography (Varma, 2013). The government's Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC), established in 2012, handled more than 1,000 discrimination complaints between 2012 and 2014, most related to ethnic origin and political opinion (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2014).

On International Women's Day 2018, Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth praised progress on women's empowerment in the public sector but highlighted the need for the private sector to be more sensitive to gender equality, adopt a more proactive approach, and eliminate barriers and discrimination against women (Republic of Mauritius, 2018).

According to the latest Afrobarometer survey, most Mauritians do not experience ethnic, religious, or gender discrimination and harassment, but some still do – especially Afro-Mauritians, Muslims, and women.

Most Mauritians express tolerance for people of a different ethnicity, religion, or nationality. A majority – less strong but growing – also express tolerance for people of a different sexual orientation, adding popular strength to recent calls by government and religious officials to respect the rights of members of the LGBT community to conduct legally authorized marches (France24, 2018).

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys are being conducted in 2016/2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Mauritius, led by StraConsult Ltd, interviewed 1,200 adult Mauritians in October 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Mauritius in 2012 and 2014.

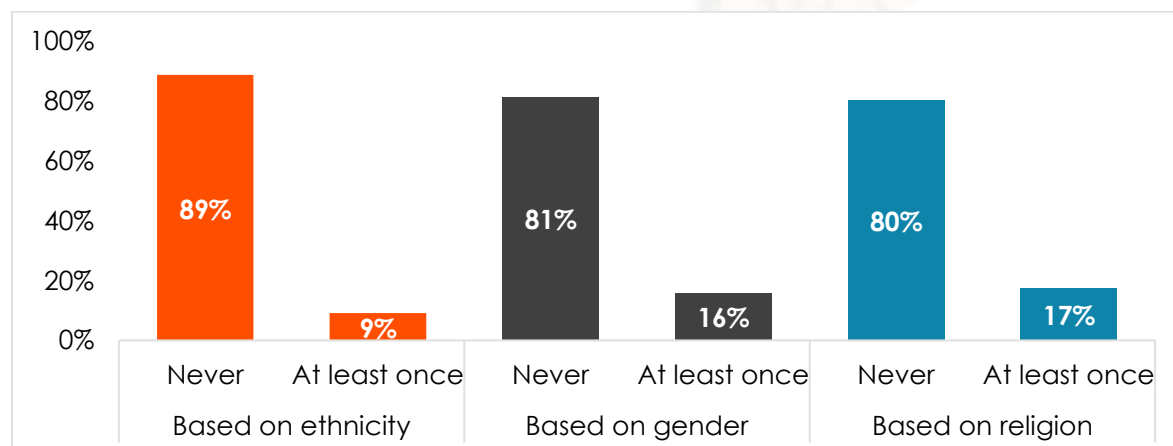
Key findings

- While most Mauritians say they did not suffer discrimination or harassment during the previous year, substantial proportions of the population did on the basis of their ethnicity (9%), gender (16%), and religion (17%).
- Afro-Mauritians (31%) and Muslims (22%) are more likely than average to say they experienced discrimination or harassment based on their ethnicity during the previous 12 months.
- Similarly, while two-thirds (66%) of Mauritians say their ethnic group is “never” treated unfairly by the government, more than four in 10 Afro-Mauritians (47%) and Muslims (42%) say this happens “sometimes,” “often,” or “always.”
- Women are more likely than men to suffer gender discrimination or harassment (11% vs. 7%), and religious discrimination or harassment is more likely to affect Christians and Muslims than Hindus.
- More than nine out of 10 Mauritians express tolerant attitudes toward people of a different ethnicity (94%) or religion (94%), and smaller majorities do the same with regard to immigrants/foreign workers (67%) and people in same-sex relationships (56%). Tolerance for homosexuals increased by 7 percentage points since the 2014 survey, placing Mauritius at the top among 21 African countries surveyed in 2016/2017.
- Most Mauritians say both genders have equal opportunities to get an education (98%), to inherit and own land (93%), and to get a paying job (92%), although they are evenly split as to whether men should be given preference when jobs are scarce.
- Eight out of 10 Mauritians (82%) say women should have the same chance as men to be elected to public office.

Experience of discrimination and harassment

Overwhelming majorities of Mauritians say they did not experience discrimination or harassment based on their ethnicity (89%), gender (81%), or religion (80%) during the year preceding the survey. However, that still leaves substantial proportions of the population who suffered such treatment “once or twice,” “several times,” or “many times” during the past 12 months: 9% based on ethnicity, 16% based on gender, and 17% based on religion (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Experience of discrimination or harassment | Mauritius | 2017

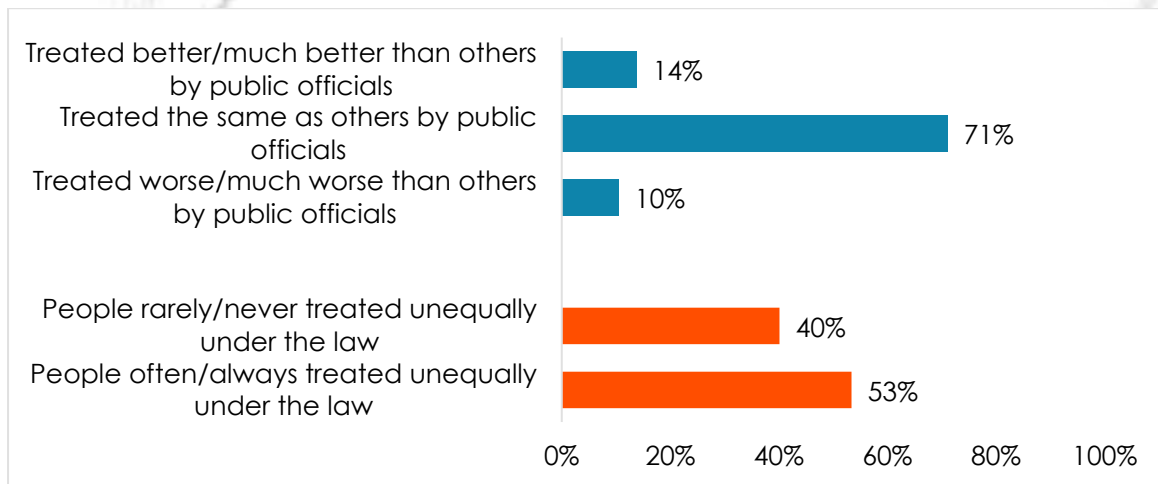


Respondents were asked: *In the past year, how often, if at all, have you personally been discriminated against or harassed based on any of the following: Your ethnicity? Your religion? Your gender?*

Similarly, one in 10 respondents (10%) say public officials treat them “worse” or “much worse” than they treat other people, though the question does not explore whether perceived reasons for this might include ethnicity, religion, gender, or any number of other factors. Most respondents say they are treated the same as (71%) or better than (14%) others (Figure 2).

When asked how often people are treated unequally under the law, more than half (53%) of Mauritians say this happens “often” or “always,” although again possible reasons for such unequal treatment are not explored.

Figure 2: Perceptions of fair treatment | Mauritius | 2017



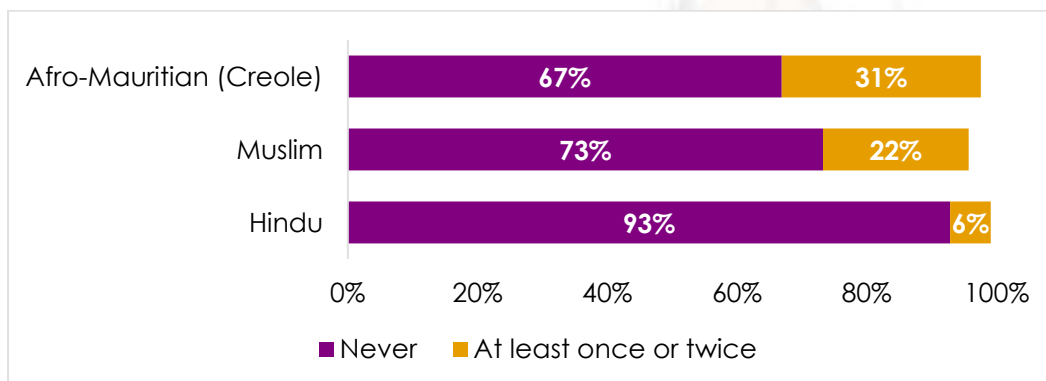
Respondents were asked:

- In general, when dealing with public officials, do you think that they treat you better, the same, or worse than other people?
- In your opinion, how often, in this country, are people treated unequally under the law?

Ethnicity

While about one in 10 Mauritians say they experienced discrimination or harassment during the previous year, Afro-Mauritians are far more likely than other ethnic groups to report having experienced this “once or twice” (21%), “several times” (6%), or “many times (4%). More than one in five respondents who identified their ethnic group as Muslim also report suffering discrimination or harassment (22%), vs. 6% of self-identified Hindu (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Experienced discrimination or harassment based on ethnicity | by ethnic group | Mauritius | 2017

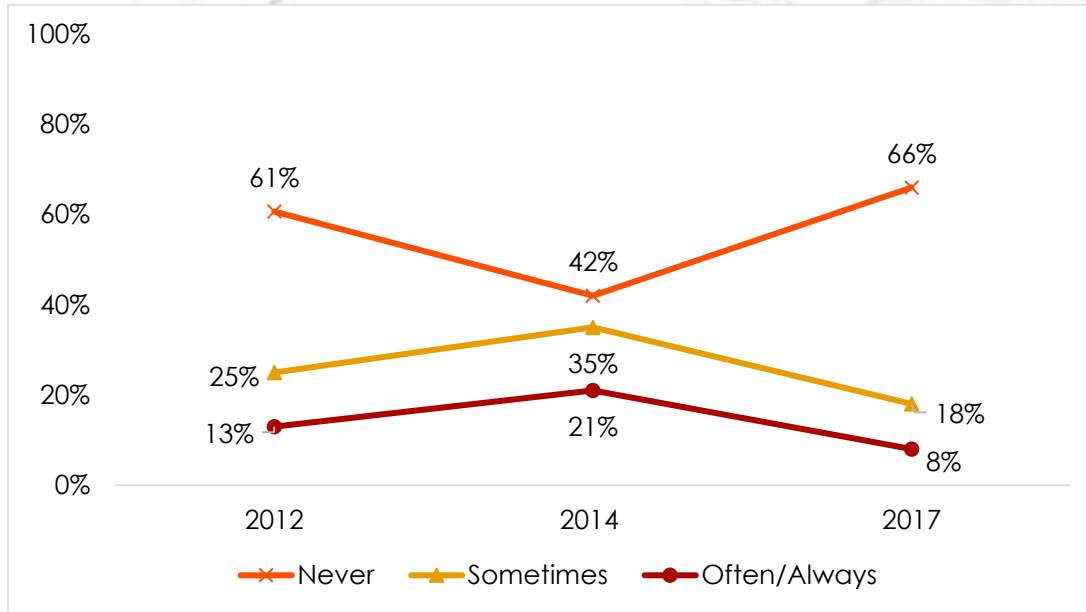


Respondents were asked: In the past year, how often, if at all, have you personally been discriminated against or harassed based on any of the following: Your ethnicity?

When asked how often, if ever, members of their ethnic group are “treated unfairly by the government,” two out of three Mauritians (66%) say this “never” happens, but one in four (26%) report that it occurs “sometimes,” “often,” or “always” (Figure 4).

This represents a marked improvement compared to 2014, when only 42% reported that their ethnic group was “never” treated unfairly.

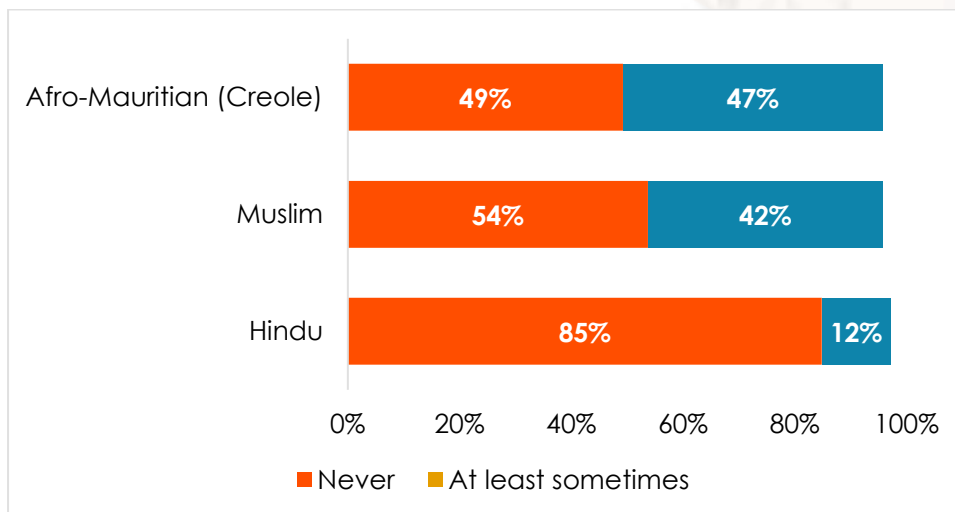
Figure 4: Ethnic group treated unfairly | Mauritius | 2012-2017



Respondents were asked: How often, if ever, are [members of your ethnic group] treated unfairly by the government?

But again, ethnic groups differ widely in their perceptions of unfair treatment. Almost half of Afro-Mauritians (47%) and Muslims (42%) say their group is at least “sometimes” treated unfairly by the government, compared to 12% of Hindus (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Ethnic group treated unfairly | by ethnic group | Mauritius | 2017

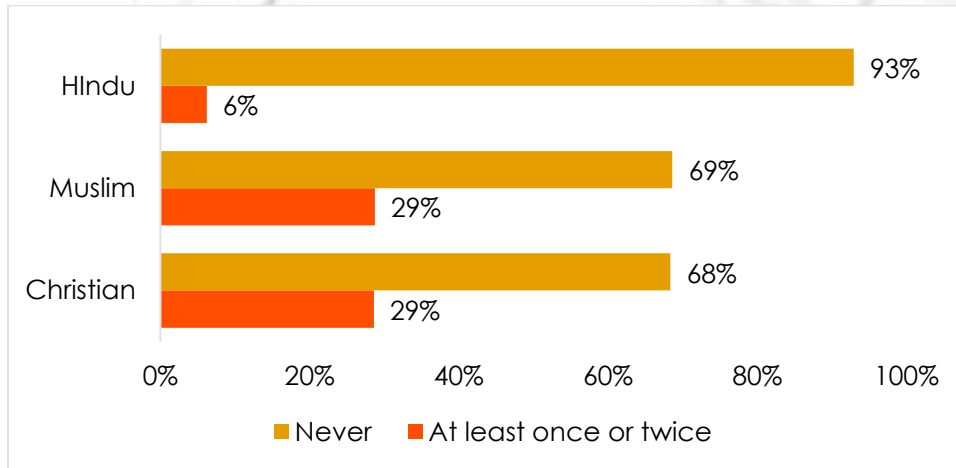


Respondents were asked: How often, if ever, are [members of your ethnic group] treated unfairly by the government?

Religion

Among the 17% of Mauritians who say they suffered discrimination or harassment based on their religion at least “once or twice,” during the previous year, Christians and Muslims (29% each) are far more likely than Hindus (6%) to report having this experience (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Experienced discrimination or harassment based on religion | by religious group | Mauritius | 2017

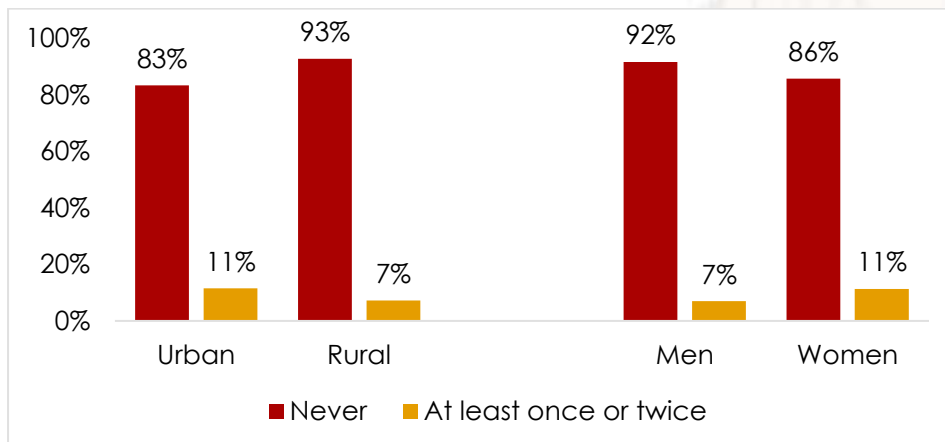


Respondents were asked: In the past year, how often, if at all, have you personally been discriminated against or harassed based on any of the following: Your religion?

Gender

While the majority of Mauritians (89%) say they have never been discriminated based on gender, one in 10 Mauritians feel that they have been discriminated “once or twice” (6%), “several times” (3%) and “many times” (1%). According to the survey, women are somewhat more likely to experience discrimination or harassment based on their gender than are men (11% at least once vs. 7%) (Figure 7). Moreover, urbanites are more common to report having experienced gender-based discrimination (11% at least once) than are rural dwellers (7%).

Figure 7: Experienced discrimination or harassment based on gender | by location and gender | Mauritius | 2017



Respondents were asked: In the past year, how often, if at all, have you personally been discriminated against or harassed based on any of the following: Your gender?

Tolerance

In addition to Mauritians' experiences and perceptions of how they are treated, Afrobarometer explored their attitudes toward people who are different from themselves.

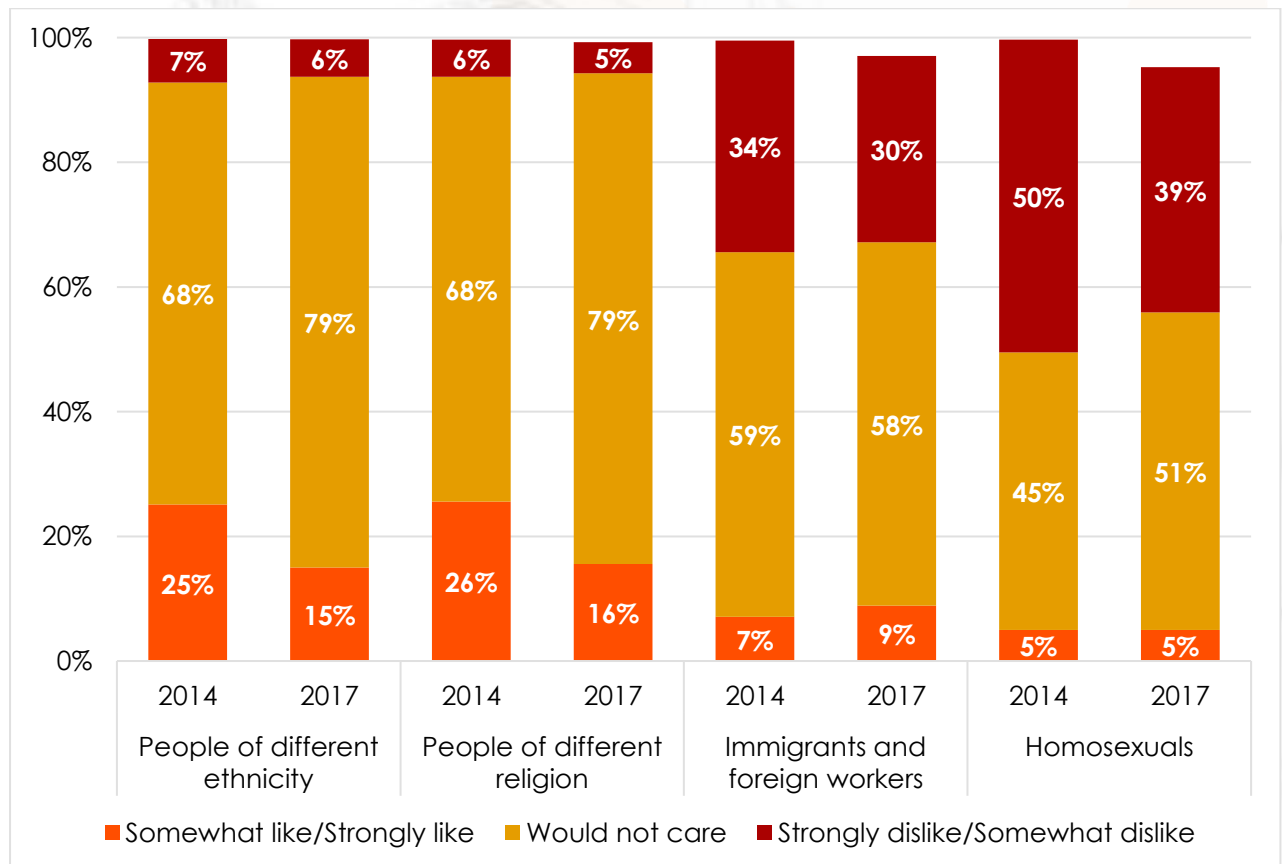
More than nine out of 10 respondents express tolerant attitudes toward people of a different ethnicity or religion, and smaller majorities do the same with regard to immigrants/foreign workers and homosexuals (Figure 8).

About one in six (15%) say they would "somewhat like" or "strongly like" living next door to people of a different ethnicity, while 79% say they "would not care" – making a total of 94% whose attitudes toward other ethnicities can be described as tolerant. About the same proportions say they would like or not mind having neighbours of a different religion. These findings are similar to those recorded in the 2014 survey.

Tolerance for immigrants or foreign workers remains lower: Two-thirds say would like (9%) or not mind (58%) having them as neighbours. The proportion of respondents who say they would "somewhat dislike" or "strongly dislike" living next to immigrants decreased by 4 percentage points from the 2014 survey.

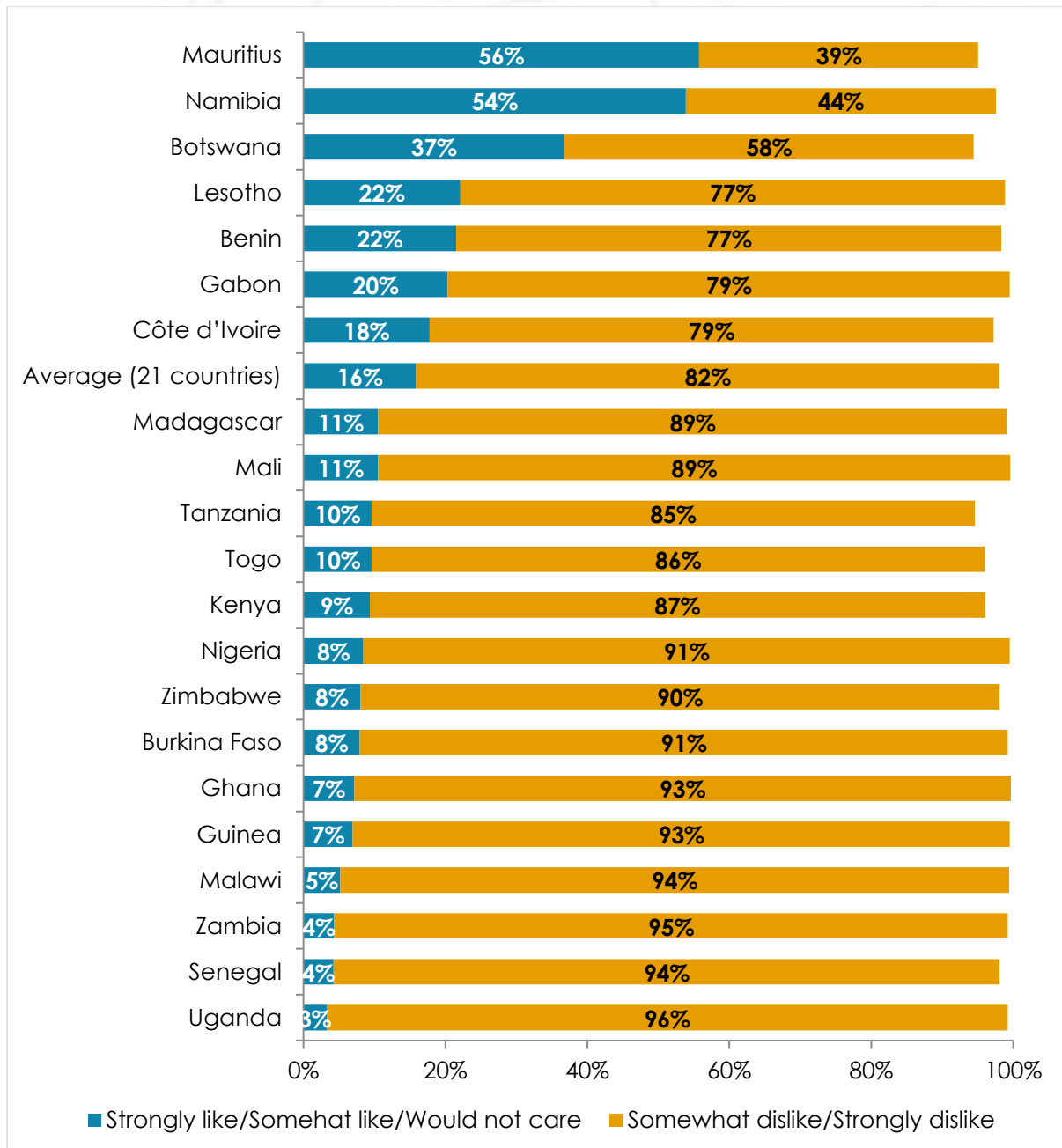
A majority (56%) of Mauritians also express tolerance for people in same-sex relationships: 5% say they would like and 51% say they would not mind having homosexuals as neighbours. This is an increase from 49% in 2014 and places Mauritius at the top among 21 African countries for which Round 7 data are available (Figure 9).

Figure 8: Tolerance | Mauritius | 2014-2017



Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbors, dislike it, or not care: People from other ethnic groups? People of a different religion? Immigrants or foreign workers? Homosexuals?

Figure 9: Tolerance toward homosexuals | 21 African countries | 2016/2017

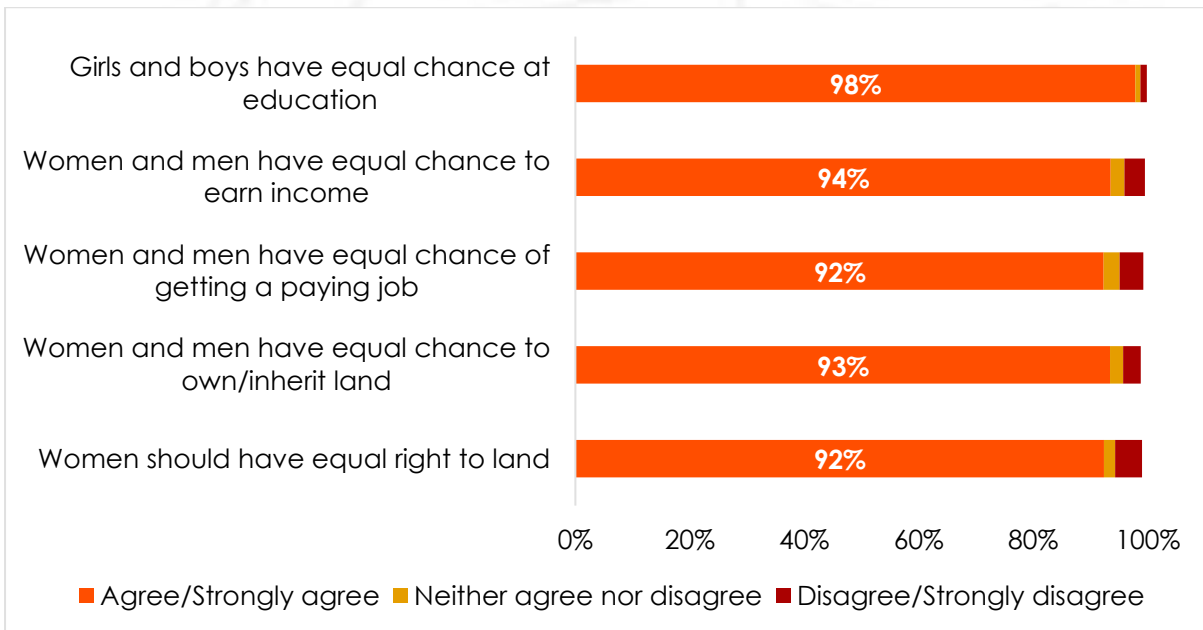


Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbors, dislike it, or not care: Homosexuals?

Views on gender equality

Mauritians overwhelmingly say that equal opportunity for both genders is already a reality when it comes to education, jobs, and land (Figure 10). Fully 98% say that girls and boys have an equal chance at getting an education, and more than nine out of 10 believe that women and men have an equal chance to earn an income (94%), to get a paying job (92%), and to own and inherit land (93%). Most Mauritians also support gender equality when it comes to owning and inheriting land, saying women should have the same right as men (92%).

Figure 10: Views on gender equality | Mauritius | 2017

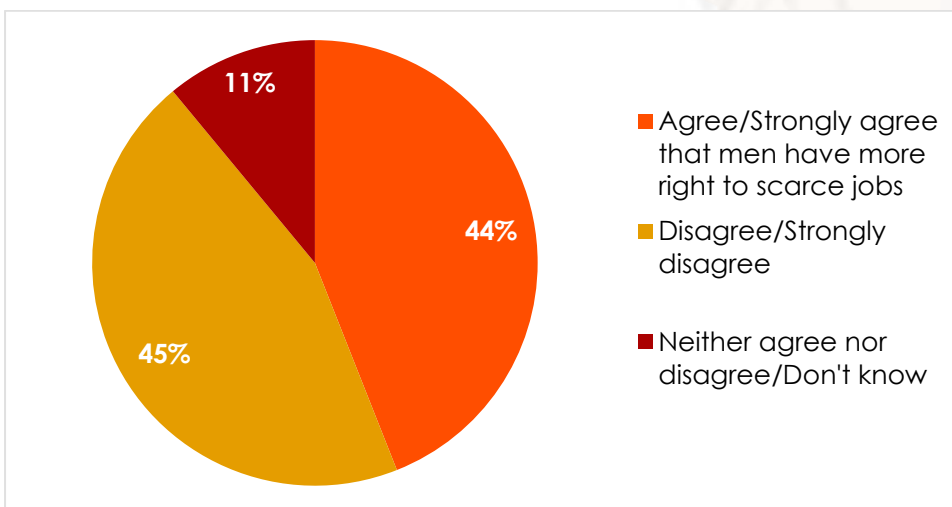


Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say:

- In our country today, girls and boys have equal opportunities to get education?
- In our country today, women and men have equal opportunities to earn an income?
- 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?
- Women should have the same rights as men to own and inherit land?

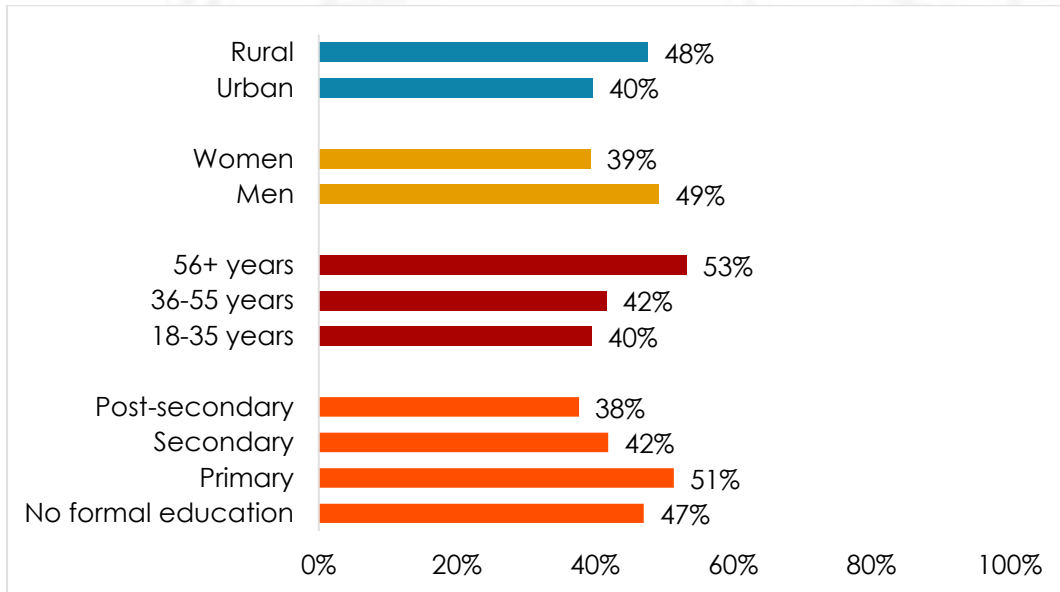
However, when jobs are scarce, Mauritians are divided on whether men should have more rights to jobs than women (45%) or not (44%) (Figure 11). Support for men having preference when jobs are scarce is especially strong among rural residents (48% vs. 40% of urbanites), men (49% vs. 39% of women) and older and less-educated respondents (Figure 12).

Figure 11: Should men be given preference when jobs are scarce? | Mauritius | 2017



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 right to a job than women?

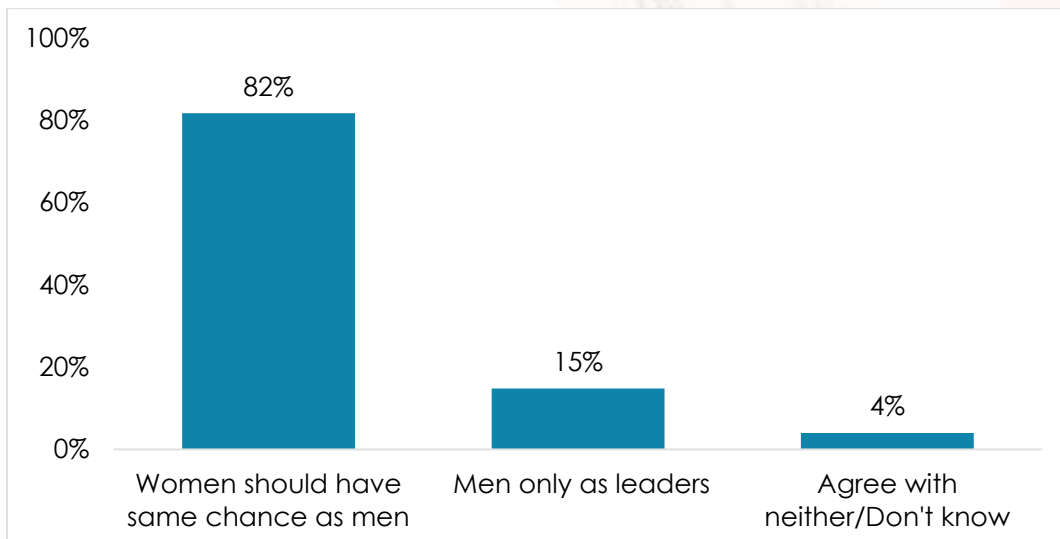
Figure 12: Men should be given preference when jobs are scarce | by socio-demographic group | Mauritius | 2017



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 right to a job than women? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

In political matters, Mauritians widely support gender equality: 82% say women should have the same chance as men to run for public office, while only 15% say men make better leaders and should be elected instead of women (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Should women have the same chance as men to be elected? | Mauritius | 2017



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 "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Conclusion

Survey findings suggest that gender equality and social tolerance are among Mauritius' strengths, but that work remains to be done. While most Mauritians do not personally experience discrimination or harassment based on their ethnicity, religion, or gender, significant numbers of them still do. This experience is particularly common among Afro-Mauritians, Muslims, and women.

Similarly, while Mauritians are overwhelmingly tolerant of people of different ethnicities and religions, they are less tolerant of immigrants/foreign workers and people in same-sex relationships. Expressions of tolerance for members of the LGBT community have increased since 2014, and Mauritius is ahead of its neighbours on this count, but for four in 10 citizens, it's still an issue.

When it comes to women's rights, Mauritians overwhelmingly believe that gender equality has been achieved in education, jobs, and land ownership, and support a fair shot at being elected, but about half would still favour a man over a woman when jobs are scarce.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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