

South Africans say gender-based violence worsening, blame substance abuse

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 494 | Dominique Dryding and Asafika Mpako

Summary

In June 2020, the body of 28-year-old Tshegofatso Pule, who was eight months pregnant, was found stabbed and hanging from a tree outside Johannesburg (News24, 2020).

The brutality of the murder shocked the nation. But the crime was one of many.

South Africa suffers from exceptionally high levels of gender-based violence (GBV). One in every four South African women will experience intimate partner violence in their lifetimes, and a woman is murdered every three hours in the country (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2017, 2019; Africa Check, 2020).

Lockdown measures intended to curb the spread of COVID-19 may have exacerbated this crisis, leaving many women and girls vulnerable at home and unable to access help from organizations fighting GBV (Amnesty International, 2021).

During the first three weeks of the lockdown in April 2020, the government's GBV Command Centre received more than 120,000 calls from victims of violence (Global Risk Insights, 2021), and news of gender-based violence cases frequently dominated both traditional and social media.

The South African Police Service (2020) reported 53,293 sexual offenses between April 2019 and March 2020, an average of 146 per day and a 2% increase from the previous year. A majority (42,289) were rape cases. The number of actual cases is almost certainly higher, as sexual violence often goes unreported (Global Risk Insights, 2021; Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2017).

The most recent national Afrobarometer survey indicates that most South Africans believe that GBV in the country has increased over the past year, and they cite alcohol and drug abuse and unemployment as major factors contributing to this crisis. Women report feeling less safe than men at home and in their neighbourhood.

Most South Africans say that domestic violence is a legal matter that requires the involvement of law enforcement, rather than a personal affair that should be handled within the family.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans' experiences and evaluations on democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) cover 34 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and Plus 94 Research, interviewed 1,600 adult South Africans in May-June 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95%

confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, and 2018.

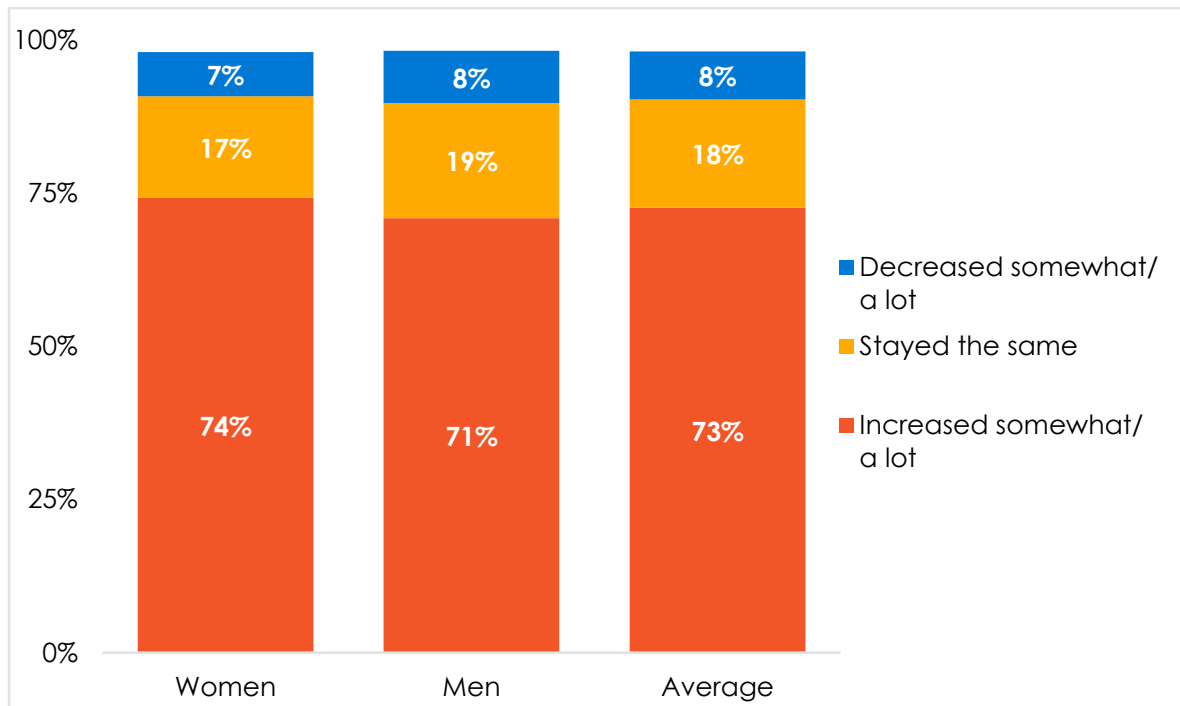
Key findings

- Almost three-quarters (73%) of South Africans believe that GBV increased “somewhat” or “a lot” over the past year.
- More than seven in 10 (72%) say that domestic violence is a criminal matter requiring the involvement of law enforcement agencies, while just 26% see it as a private matter to be handled within the family.
 - Perceptions of domestic violence as a criminal matter are more common among women (75%) than among men (68%) and increase with respondents’ level of education and economic status.
- Alcohol abuse (25%), drug abuse (20%), and unemployment (16%) are most widely seen as the main cause of domestic violence in South Africa.
- Women are somewhat more likely than men to report feeling unsafe walking in their neighbourhood and fearing crime in their home.

Level of GBV in South Africa

Almost three-fourths (73%) of South Africans say the level of gender-based violence in the country increased “somewhat” or “a lot” over the past year (Figure 1). Men (71%) are about as likely as women (74%) to hold this view. Only about one-fourth of respondents think GBV levels stayed the same (18%) or decreased (8%).

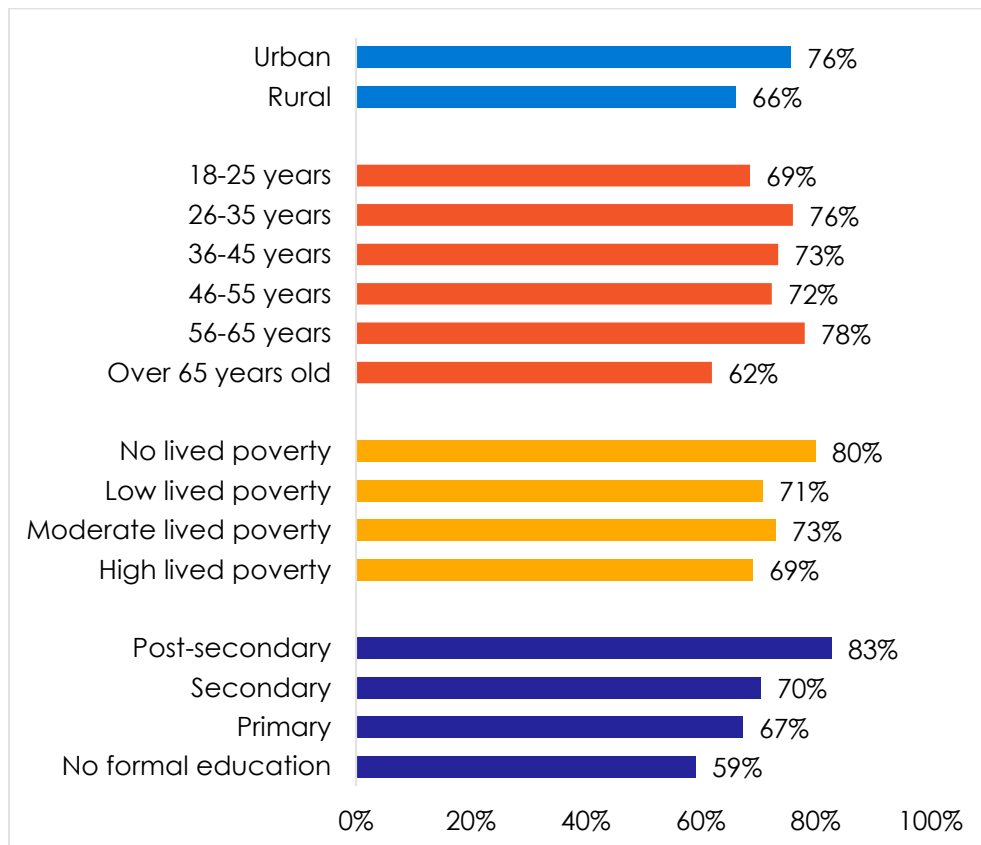
Figure 1: Level of gender-based violence | South Africa | by gender | 2021



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, has the level of gender-based violence in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same over the past year?*

Urban residents (76%) are more likely than rural residents (66%) to see GBV as having increased (Figure 2). Perceptions of higher levels of GBV are also more common among wealthier respondents (80% of those with no lived poverty) and those with more education (83% of those with post-secondary qualifications) than among their poorer and less educated counterparts.

Figure 2: Increased level of gender-based violence | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, has the level of gender-based violence in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same over the past year? (% who say “increased somewhat” or “increased a lot”)*

Domestic violence: A criminal or private matter?

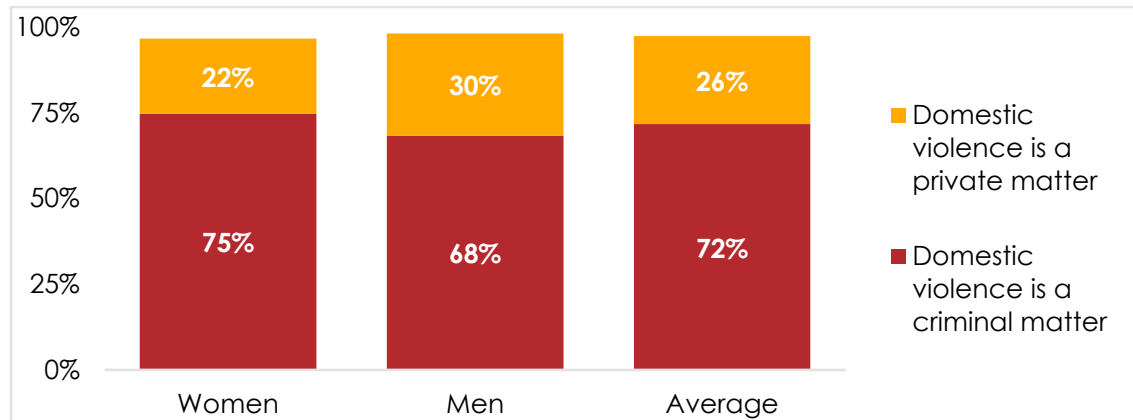
More than seven in 10 South Africans (72%) say domestic violence is a criminal matter that requires the involvement of law enforcement agencies to resolve. Only one in four (26%) instead see domestic violence as a private matter that should be handled within the family.

Women (75%) are somewhat more likely than men (68%) to see domestic violence as a criminal matter (Figure 3).

Perceptions of domestic violence as a criminal matter increase with respondents' education level, ranging from 58% of those with no formal schooling to 83% of those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 4). Similarly, wealthier individuals (80%) are more likely to hold this view than those who are economically less well off (65%-72%).

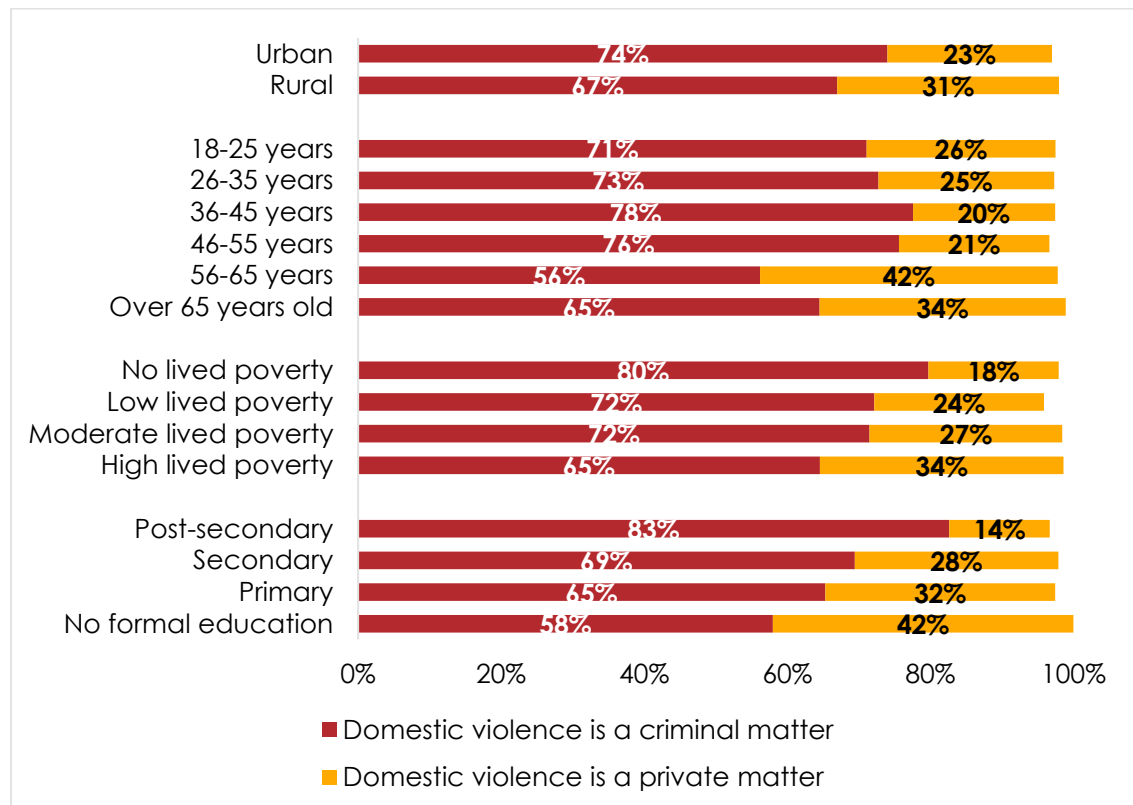
This perception is also more common in cities (74%) than in rural areas (67%). But older citizens are less likely to agree (56% of those aged 56-65, 65% of those over age 65).

Figure 3: Domestic violence as a criminal or private matter | by gender | South Africa | 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 agency.
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

Figure 4: Domestic violence as a criminal or private matter | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2021



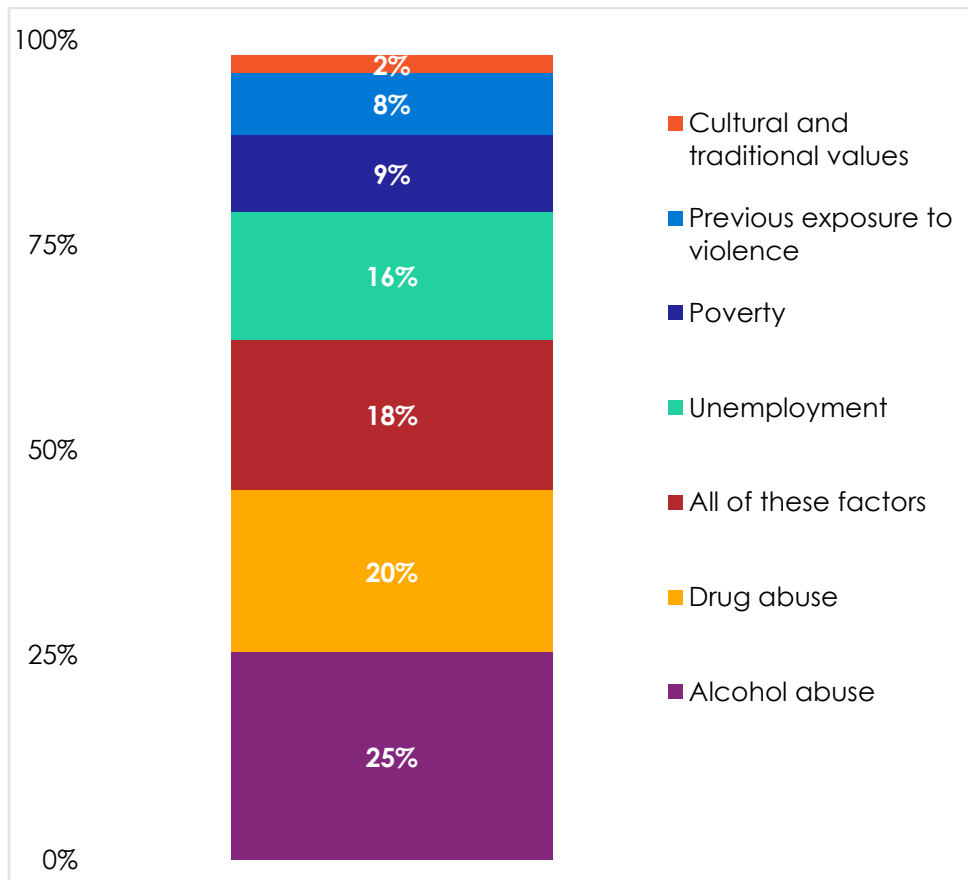
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Causes of GBV

Researchers have studied a variety of factors that may contribute to GBV, including alcohol and drug abuse, unemployment, poverty, and previous exposure to violence (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2017).

When provided a list of such factors and asked to identify which they think is “the main cause” of GBV in South Africa, respondents most frequently cite alcohol abuse (25%) and drug abuse (20%), followed by unemployment (16%), poverty (9%), previous exposure to violence (8%), and cultural and traditional values (2%) (Figure 5). About one in five (18%) point to “all of the above” as contributing factors.

Figure 5: Main cause of domestic violence | South Africa | 2021



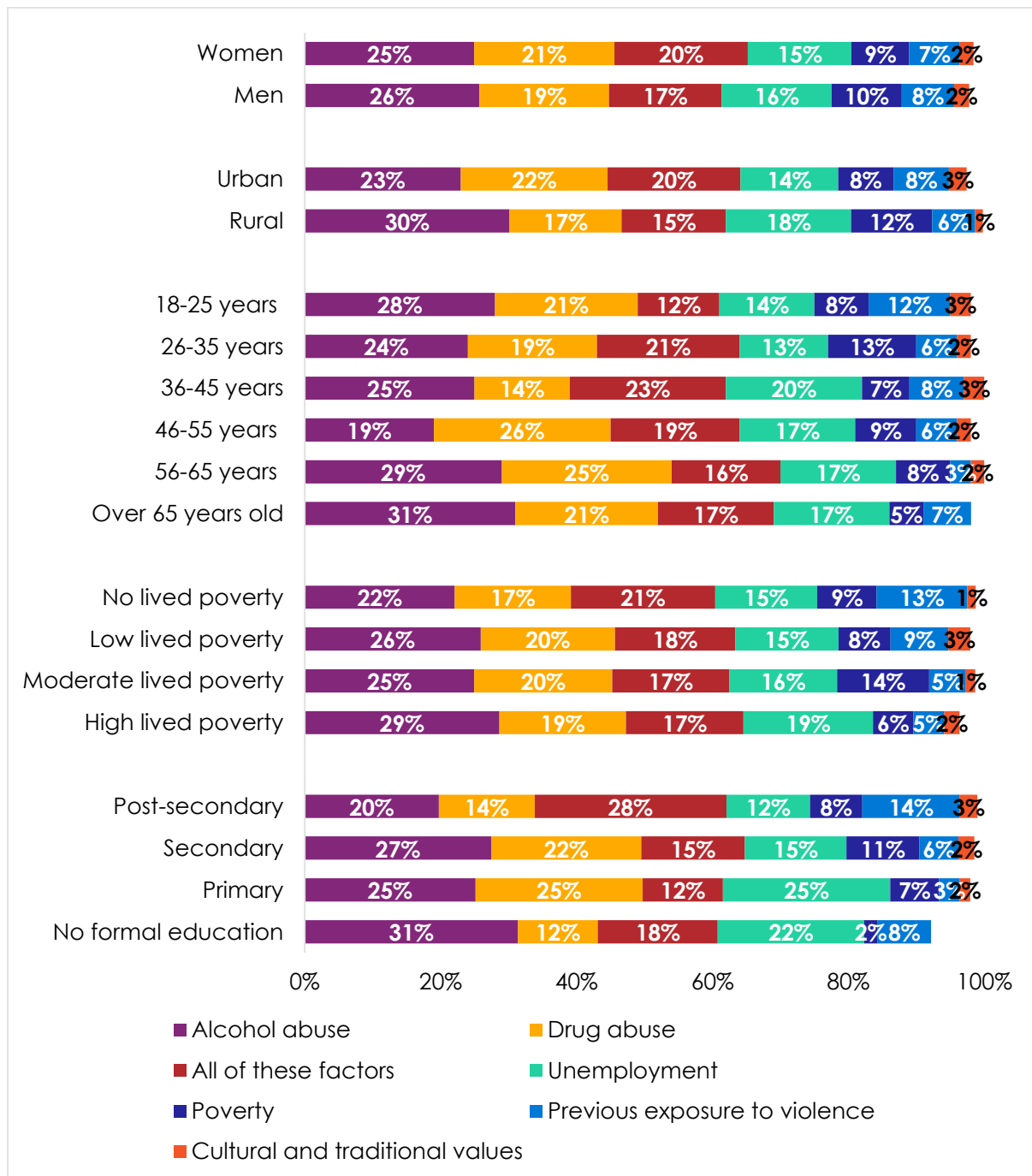
Respondents were asked: *There are several factors that contribute to domestic violence. In your opinion, which of the following factors would you say is the main cause of domestic violence in South Africa today?*

Men and women offer almost identical assessments of the main cause of GBV (Figure 6). Indeed, key socio-demographic groups vary little in the relative importance they assign these factors, with alcohol abuse, drug abuse, and unemployment generally topping the list irrespective of respondents' socio-economic status, age, residency location, or education level.

Alcohol abuse is a particularly frequent response among the poorest (29%) and least educated (31%) respondents, as well as rural residents (30%) and the elderly (30%).

Respondents with post-secondary education are most likely to cite “all of the above” (28%) as causes of GBV.

Figure 6: Main cause of domestic violence | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2021



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Safety and security in South Africa

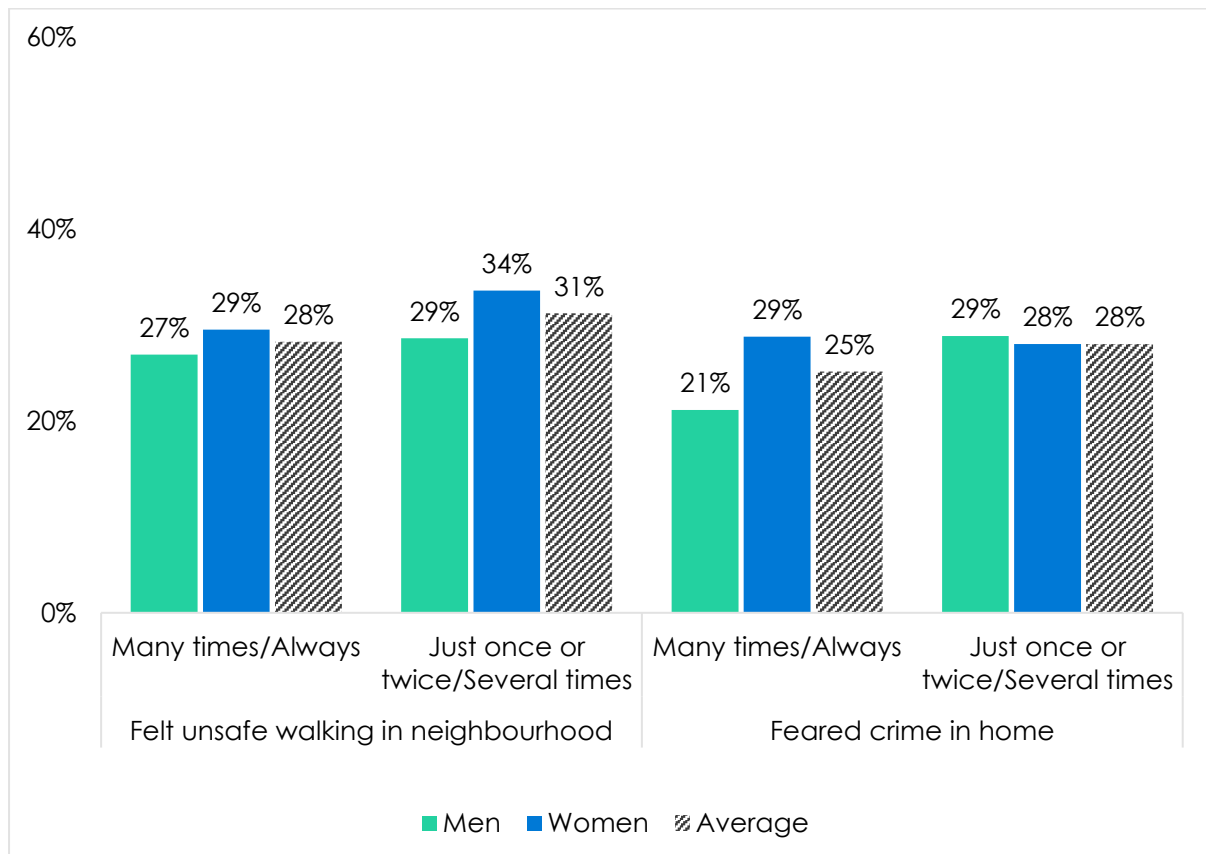
South Africa is notorious for extremely high levels of violent crime, including rape and murder (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2017). South Africa ranked as the fifth-most-dangerous country in the world in the 2020 Gallup Law and Order Index, a poll that measures experiences of crime and personal security in 144 countries (Business Tech, 2020). In

all three Afrobarometer surveys in the country since 2015, crime/security has ranked behind unemployment as the second-most-important problem that citizens want the government to address (Afrobarometer, 2021).

Women are more likely than men to report having felt unsafe walking in their neighbourhood (63% vs. 56% at least “once or twice” during the previous year) (Figure 7).

Similarly, more women than men say they feared crime in their home during the past year (57% vs. 50%), including an 8-percentage-point gap in those who report experiencing this form of insecurity “many times” or “always.”

Figure 7: Fear of violence and crime | by gender | South Africa | 2021

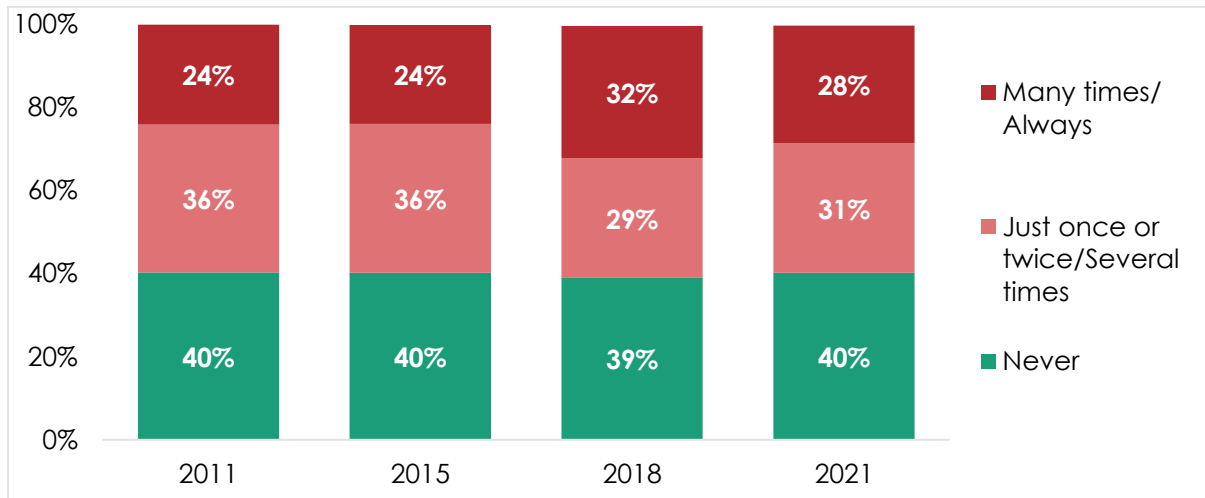


Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Felt unsafe walking in your neighbourhood? Feared crime in your own home?

Consistently over the past decade, about six in 10 South Africans (59% in 2021) have reported feeling unsafe walking in their neighbourhood at least once during the previous year (Figure 8). About half of those who report feeling unsafe say this happens “many times” or “always,” a proportion that has increased somewhat since 2015.

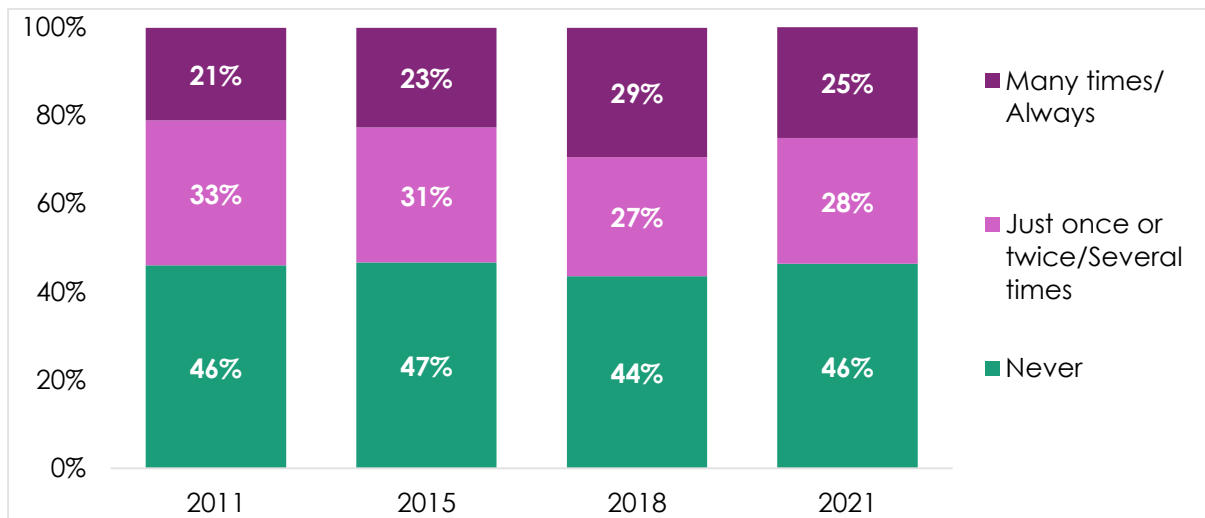
Similarly, more than half of South Africans have consistently reported fearing crime in their homes (53% in 2021). And the proportion who say this happens “many times” or “always” (25% in 2021) has increased somewhat over the past decade (Figure 9).

Figure 8: Felt unsafe walking in neighbourhood | South Africa | 2011-2021



Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Felt unsafe walking in your neighbourhood?

Figure 9: Feared crime in home | South Africa | 2002-2021



Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Feared crime in your own home?

Conclusion

South Africans see their country's GBV crisis as worsening. And they overwhelmingly want GBV treated as a criminal matter rather than a family affair.

How GBV cases are handled is critical to administering justice, encouraging survivors to report attacks, and deterring or preventing future violence.

So is addressing underlying causes. Survey respondents point to alcohol and drug abuse and unemployment as primary contributing factors, though many also note the multifaceted nature of this crisis.

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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.

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