

# Concerns about inequality and lack of integrity in the courts leave access to justice out of reach for many Africans

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## Introduction

Access to justice is a cornerstone of democratic governance. It shapes citizens' ability to claim their rights, hold their leaders accountable, and resolve their legal disputes fairly, effectively, and in accordance with their country's laws and the principles of justice, whether through formal or informal institutions (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime & OECD, 2025). Achieving it requires laws and institutions of justice that are understandable, affordable, impartial, effective, and accountable (OECD, 2019).



Access to justice has been described as a fundamental human right (Ncube, 2017; United Nations, 2025) and, even more significantly, as an essential tool that “unlocks all other human rights” (South African Human Rights Commission, n.d.). This critical goal is captured in the United Nations' (2026) Sustainable Development Goals Target 16.3, which calls for all nations to “promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all.” Access to justice is also recognised as a key driver of inclusive economic growth, helping to reduce inequality and social unrest while contributing to stability and predictability, thus fostering economic investment (OECD, 2019).

But access to justice is still not assured for many citizens across the continent, especially for women, the poor, and other vulnerable groups (Malik & Maghani, 2023; United Nations, 2025). Efforts to expand access have been stymied by persistent barriers to ensuring affordability and equitable access to legal representation (United Nations Development Programme, 2024). Declining trust in police and justice institutions have also discouraged citizens from engaging in legal processes (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Hague Institute for Innovation in Law, 2025). And democratic backsliding and retreat from respect for the rule of law in many countries over the past decade have undermined confidence in the integrity of the courts and expectations of fair outcomes (Mo Ibrahim Foundation & Hague Institute for Innovation of Law, 2026). Recent enquiries into delayed prosecution of apartheid-era crimes in South Africa, for example, highlight how prolonged judicial processes and gaps in accountability can undermine citizens' confidence in the justice system (South African Human Rights Commission, 2024; Amnesty International, 2023).

Afrobarometer reported almost a decade ago on some successes, but also many remaining challenges, on the way to achieving access to justice across the continent, including low levels of trust, poor court performance, and lack of confidence in equal treatment for all citizens (Logan, 2017). We revisit these issues now based on new data captured in a special module on access to justice that was included in Afrobarometer's Round 10 (2024/2025) questionnaire.

The findings reveal that universal access to justice is still a distant dream on much of the continent. While there is wide variation across countries, and some record significant achievements, others appear to be facing crises of both public access and public confidence. This mixed outcome is captured in the finding that only half of Africans believe they could obtain justice in their country's courts of law, leaving an equal number still cut off from secure access to this critical right.

Citizens across Africa report a number of pervasive barriers to accessing justice, from high costs to unequal treatment and lack of integrity in the courts. The findings reveal widespread concern about double standards in the legal system that favour the wealthy and powerful over ordinary citizens.

While more democratic countries tend to perform somewhat better than non-democracies on providing access to justice, there are gaps and exceptions. Presidential respect for the rule of law provides stronger predictors of positive access-to-justice outcomes.

In the sections that follow, we will review findings on where Africans turn for justice, on confidence and equality in the courts, on affordability and access to legal services, and on court integrity. Finally, we will briefly review attitudes regarding equitable and acceptable punishment.

## 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. (See Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates.)

Afrobarometer's National Partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice that yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

This 38-country analysis is based on 50,961 interviews. The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples. When reporting multi-country averages, all countries are weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size).

## Key findings

- Formal and informal justice systems continue to coexist: Across 38 countries, almost half of citizens see the police (41%) or local courts (7%) as their first point of contact for resolving legal problems, but 26% would go first to traditional leaders, traditional courts, or elders. Preference for informal mechanisms is much higher among rural inhabitants (47%), the poorest respondents (41%), and the least educated (53%).
- On average, only half (50%) of Africans express confidence that ordinary citizens can obtain justice in the courts. Perceptions of fairness and timeliness in courts are similarly weak: A bare majority (51%) believe they could obtain a fair court outcome, while only 43% think cases are likely to be resolved in a reasonable time.
- Perceived inequality in the courts is also a widespread problem: A majority (59%) of Africans believe people are "often" or "always" treated unequally under the law.
- Cost presents a significant barrier to using the courts to resolve problems. Only one in four Africans (25%) are aware of available legal-aid services, although 53% think they

could find legal help if they needed it. But only 46% think they could afford such assistance, and just 44% believe they could afford court costs.

- Concerns about court integrity may also limit access to justice. Trust in courts (44%) and police (44%) is low, and perceptions of corruption among judges and police are higher than for other institutions. A majority (51%) of citizens also believe that judges often base their decisions on influence from politicians and other powerful people, rather than the law.
- Confidence in the courts is strongly associated with perceptions of court integrity and equal treatment. In contrast, high costs may keep people from using the courts, but they do not appear to undermine confidence in just outcomes and the rule of law.
- The largest differences in access to justice are related to individual economic status: The wealthiest are much more confident that they can obtain justice (61%) than the poorest respondents (43%).
- Although women may face particular challenges related to violence, harassment, and discrimination in society, and large majorities say the legal system should do more to protect them, there are only minor gender differences on key indicators of access to justice.
- On average, more democratic countries do modestly better than non-democratic countries in providing their citizens with access to justice, but there are also gaps and stark exceptions. A stronger indicator of local access to justice is respect for the rule of law at the national level: When presidents honour the courts and Parliament, this respect for the law appears to permeate the justice system.
- Concerns about inequality are also widespread when it comes to the penalties imposed by courts: Almost half (48%) of respondents say the powerful get off too lightly, while only 13% say the same is true for ordinary people.

### Preferred pathways of accessing justice

Where do people go when they need help with a legal problem? They most commonly turn to the police (41%), making this the dominant entry point into the formal justice system (Figure 1). Other entry points play a much smaller role: local courts (7%), lawyers (3%), legal-aid services (2%), and mediation or arbitration services (1%).

But informal and traditional dispute resolution mechanisms are also popular. More than one in five citizens (22%) would turn to traditional leaders or traditional courts, and another 4% would consult community elders. Others would go to family members (6%) or religious leaders (2%). A handful would approach either political leaders (5%) or government officials (2%). These patterns highlight the continuing coexistence of formal and informal justice systems where citizens navigate multiple institutions to resolve their disputes.

At the country level, the formal justice system – especially approaching the police – is the overwhelmingly preference for resolving legal disputes in São Tomé and Príncipe (92%), Cabo Verde (90%), Gabon (81%), and Mauritius (80%) (Figure 2). It is the starting point for two-thirds or more of Africans in 10 countries.

But informal justice mechanisms still dominate in several countries. In Lesotho (68%), Nigeria (59%), and Sierra Leone (59%), traditional leaders/courts or elders are the most commonly cited first point of contact. At least one-third of respondents would turn to traditional authorities first in 15 countries, underscoring the continued importance of customary systems

across the continent. More than one in five would turn to other informal mechanisms such as family or religious leaders in Chad (25%) and The Gambia (22%).

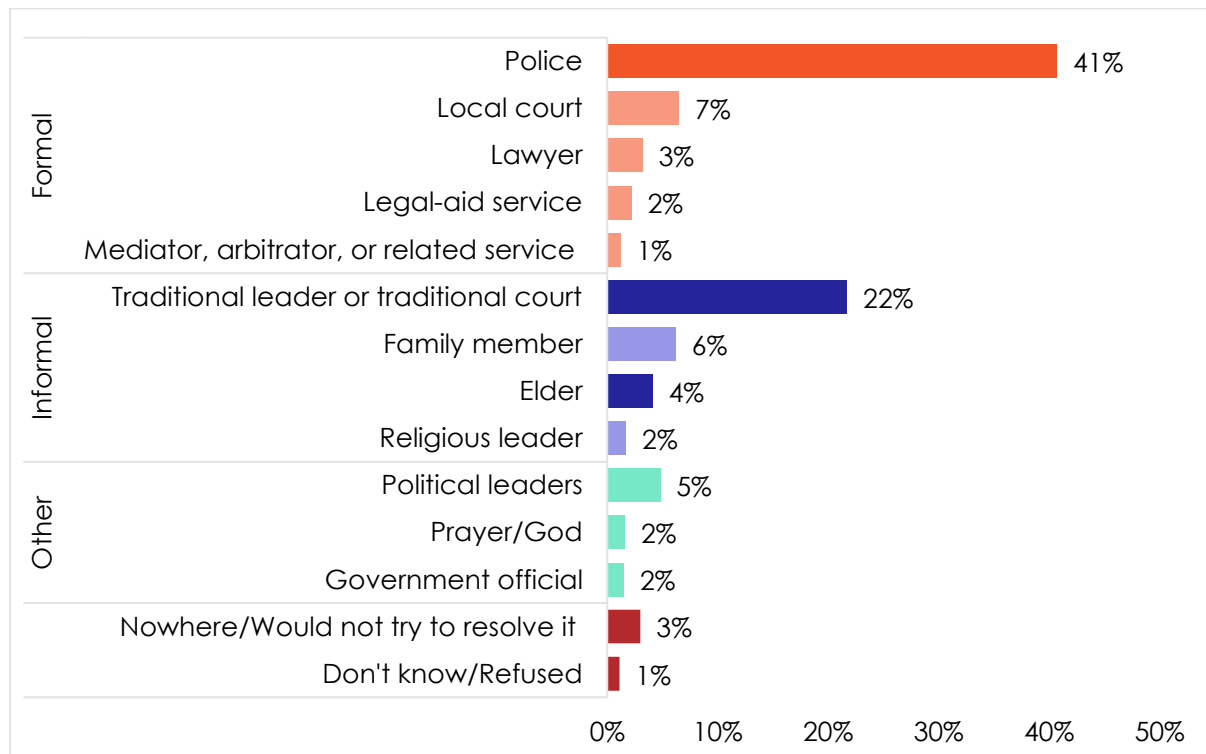
Tanzania stands out in that 69% of respondents say they would approach a political leader or governmental official, far more than in any other country, although reliance on political pathways is also notable in Madagascar (38%), Benin (23%), and Uganda (19%).

Gender and age groups differ little in preferred venue, but geography, wealth, and education are all associated with large differences (Figure 3). Rural residents are significantly more likely to seek out traditional leaders or elders (38%) and to use other informal mechanisms (9%) compared to their urban counterparts (14% and 7%, respectively). Urban residents instead show a much strong preference for going through formal institutions (67%) than rural inhabitants (40%). This likely reflects both the greater availability of formal services in urban areas and the continued strength of customary authority structures in rural settings.

Socioeconomic status also shows strong associations with justice preferences. Respondents who experience high levels of lived poverty<sup>1</sup> are more likely to rely on informal justice mechanisms (41%, vs. 9% for the wealthiest), while those with higher economic status are much more likely to turn to formal institutions (72%, vs. 47% for the poorest).

Education is similarly associated with a much higher likelihood of turning to the police and other formal justice institutions (71%, about twice the level (36%) among those with no formal education). Among the least educated, a majority (53%) would turn to informal mechanisms.

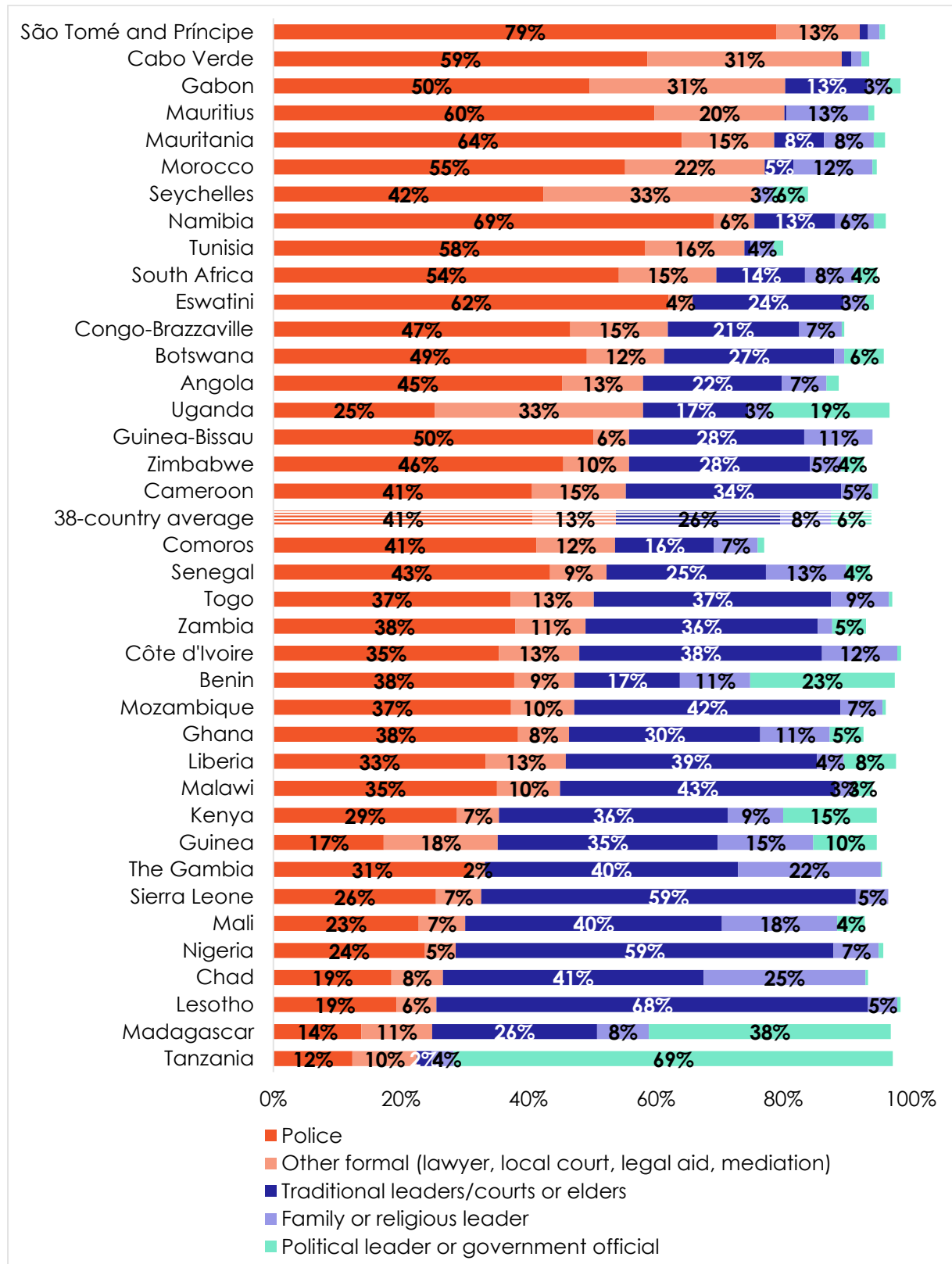
**Figure 1: First place people go to resolve legal problems | 38 countries | 2024/2025**



**Respondents were asked:** *If you had a legal problem like a serious complaint against a business or member of your community, where would you be most likely to go to try to find a resolution?*

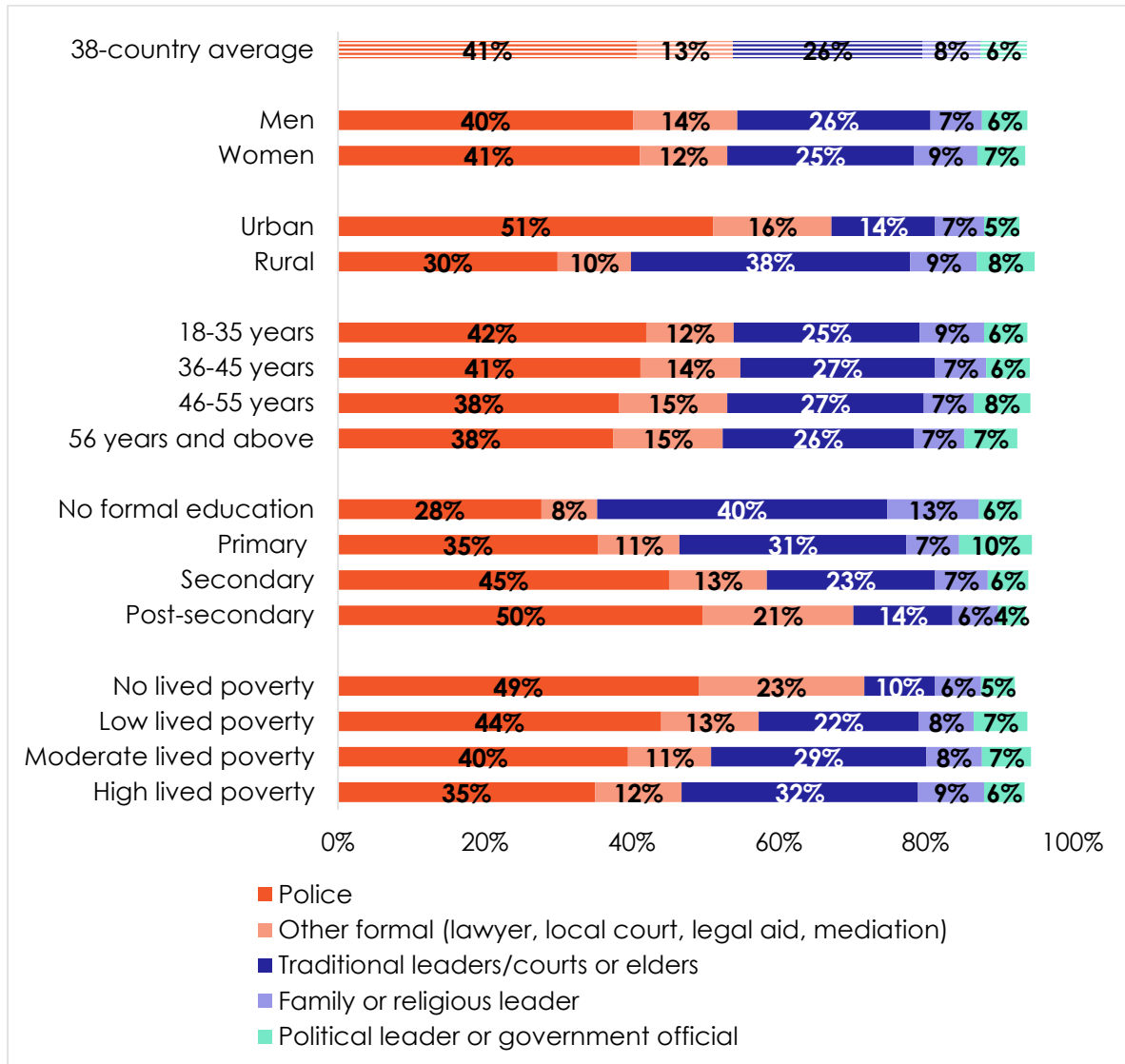
<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Lekalake (2025).

**Figure 2: First place people go to resolve legal problems | 38 countries | 2024/2025**



**Respondents were asked:** *If you had a legal problem like a serious complaint against a business or member of your community, where would you be most likely to go to try to find a resolution?*

**Figure 3: First place people go to resolve legal problems | by demographic group**  
 | 38 countries | 2024/2025



**Respondents were asked:** *If you had a legal problem like a serious complaint against a business or member of your community, where would you be most likely to go to try to find a resolution?*

These findings highlight that how people seek justice, and especially whether they use formal or informal institutions to meet these needs, is deeply stratified within societies. For the remainder of this report, we will focus on the formal court system and how people access, perceive, and experience it.<sup>2</sup> How effective are judges and courts in serving the dispute-resolution needs of ordinary Africans, at enforcing the law, and at instilling a sense of fairness? As we shall see, a great deal of work remains to be done to build the public's confidence that the rule of law serves ordinary citizens, as well as the powerful and well-connected, across the continent.

<sup>2</sup> For more in-depth reporting on police services across Africa, see Krönke, Isbell, and Kakumba (2024). More reporting on roles and perceptions of traditional leaders can be found in Logan and Amakoh (2022).

## Do courts produce just and timely outcomes?

Are Africans confident that they can obtain justice in the courts? Barely. Across 38 countries, just 50% say they are “somewhat confident” or “very confident” that “ordinary citizens who are wronged can obtain justice in the courts,” compared to 48% who are “not very” or “not at all” confident (Figure 4).

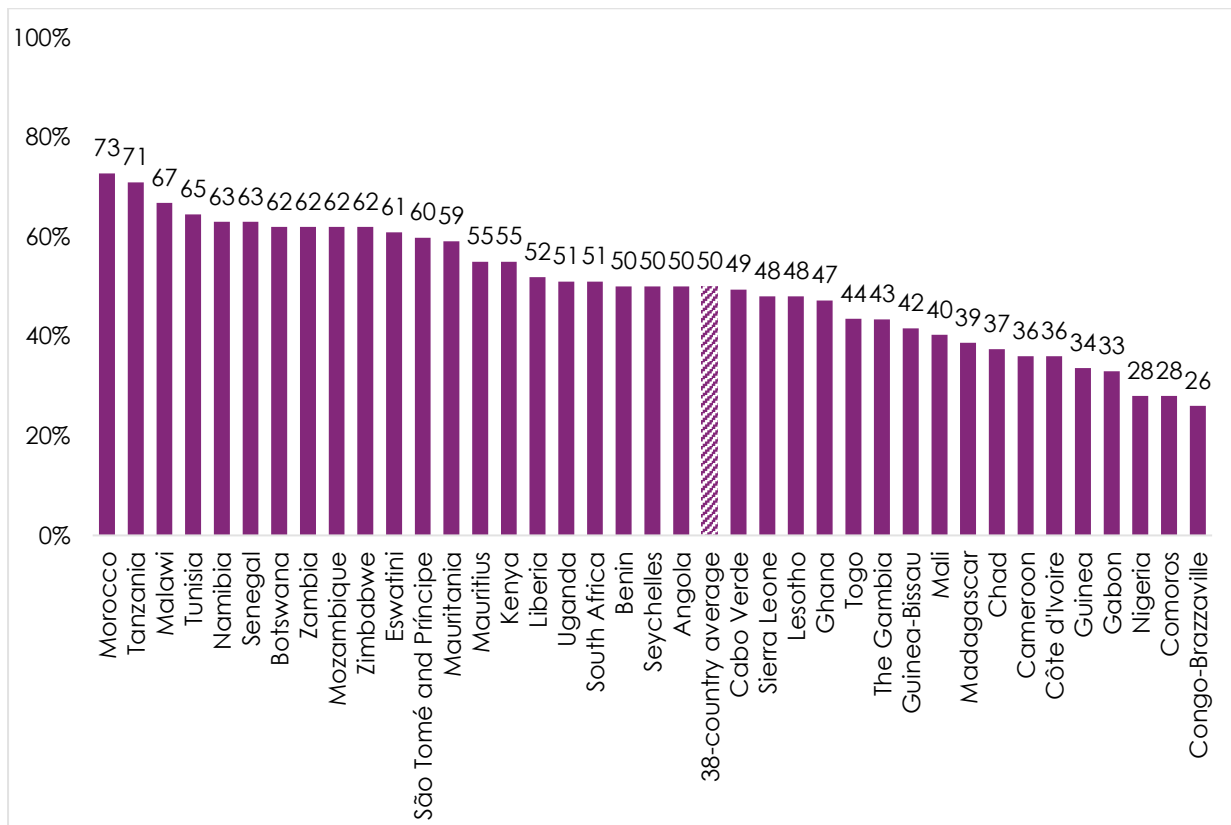
Morocco (73%), Tanzania (71%), and Malawi (67%) report the greatest confidence. But fewer than one in three see it this way in Nigeria (28%), Comoros (28%), and Congo-Brazzaville (26%).

We can dig a bit deeper into these perceptions to look at specific aspects of how courts handle cases, including the fairness of case resolutions and the timeliness of the process.

On average, we find that it is again about half (51%) of respondents who believe that it is “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that they will receive a fair resolution if they go to court, while 44% think it is unlikely (Figure 5). Morocco (72%) again tops the list, followed by Senegal (67%) and Tunisia (67%). But sizeable majorities would *not* expect a fair resolution in Guinea (62%), Comoros (59%), and Nigeria (59%).

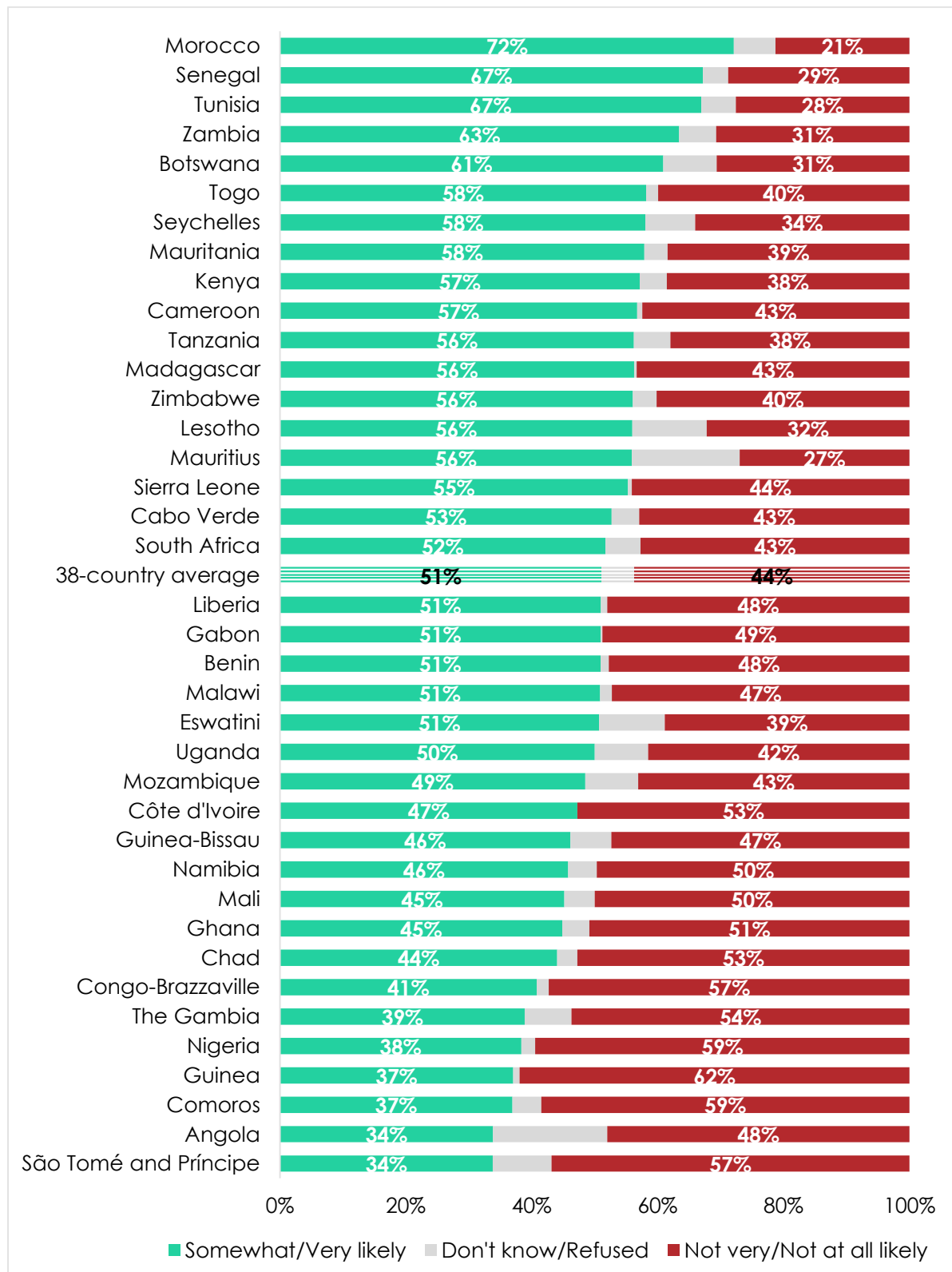
The public expresses even less confidence that court cases can be resolved in a timely way: Across 38 countries, just 43% say that cases are “somewhat likely” or “very likely” to be resolved in a reasonable amount of time, while a majority (52%) find this unlikely (Figure 6). Majorities are confident of timely case resolution in just six countries, led by Senegal (64%), Zambia (60%), Morocco (58%), and Mauritania (57%). In contrast, only about one in three Chadians (34%) and Angolans (34%) feel the same.

**Figure 4: Confidence in obtaining justice in the courts (%) | 38 countries | 2024/2025**



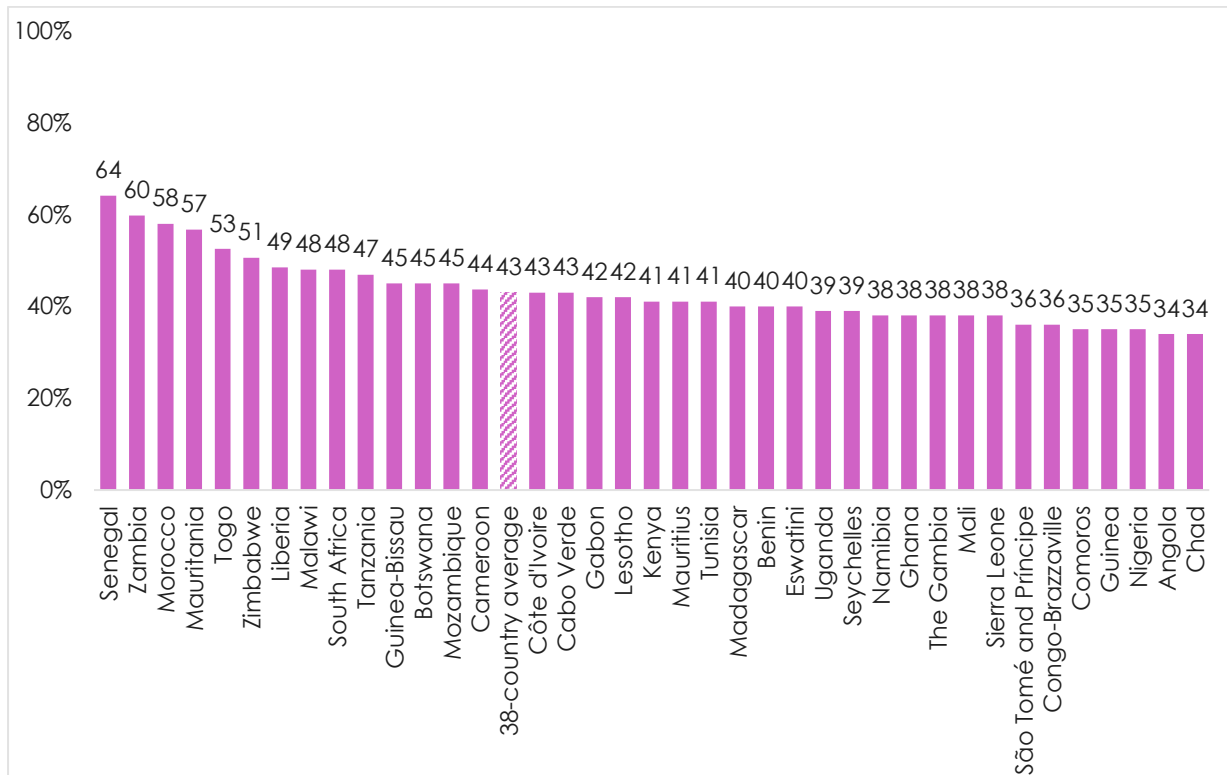
**Respondents were asked:** In general, how confident are you that ordinary citizens who are wronged can obtain justice in the courts? (% who say “somewhat confident” or “very confident”)

**Figure 5: Likelihood of fair resolution | 38 countries | 2024/2025**



**Respondents were asked:** *If you had a case that needed to go to court, how likely do you think it is that you could get a fair resolution in the courts?*

**Figure 6: Timeliness of court case resolution (%) | 38 countries | 2024/2025**



**Respondents were asked:** *If you had a case that needed to go to court, how likely do you think it is that the case could be resolved in a reasonable amount of time? (% who say “somewhat likely” or “very likely”)*

### Equal treatment for all?

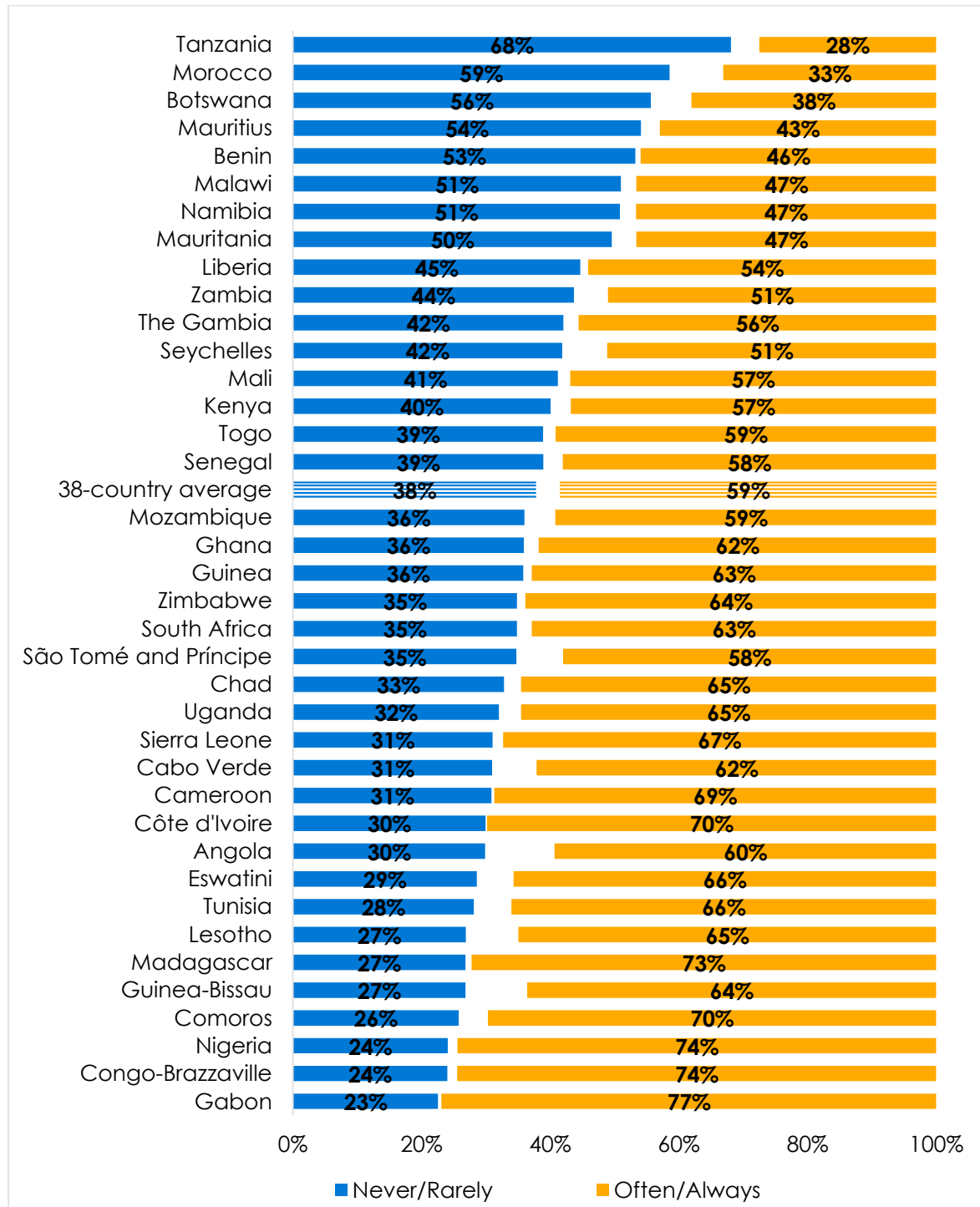
Confidence in the courts may also be affected by the extent to which citizens believe that everyone is treated equally under the law, but the news here is even less encouraging. Across 38 countries, only 38% believe that citizens are “never” or only “rarely” treated unequally under the law, while a sizeable majority (59%) instead report that unequal treatment happens “often” or “always” (Figure 7). This could explain why many citizens turn to informal institutions to access justice. Tanzanians are most likely to believe the law is applied equally to all (68%), followed by Moroccans (59%). But fewer than a quarter of Nigerians (24%), Congo-Brazzavillians (24%), and Gabonese (23%) would say the same. In eight countries, two-thirds or more think unequal treatment is commonplace.

These reports of unequal treatment are likely driven at least in part by a perceived double standard when it comes to the treatment of powerful people compared to ordinary citizens. A majority (56%) of citizens believe that officials who commit crimes frequently go unpunished, compared to 34% who think that ordinary people can get away with wrongdoing, suggesting a high degree of impunity for those with influence (Figure 8).

Country patterns further underline this perception of selective accountability. In several countries, very large majorities say officials frequently escape punishment, including Tunisia (76%), South Africa (73%), Ghana (73%), and Gabon (72%). By contrast, the share saying ordinary people go unpunished is often substantially lower – fewer than half as many in Tunisia (31%) and Ghana (26%). These gaps suggest that many Africans do not see impunity as a generalised failure affecting everyone equally, but rather as a problem that disproportionately benefits politically connected or socially powerful actors.

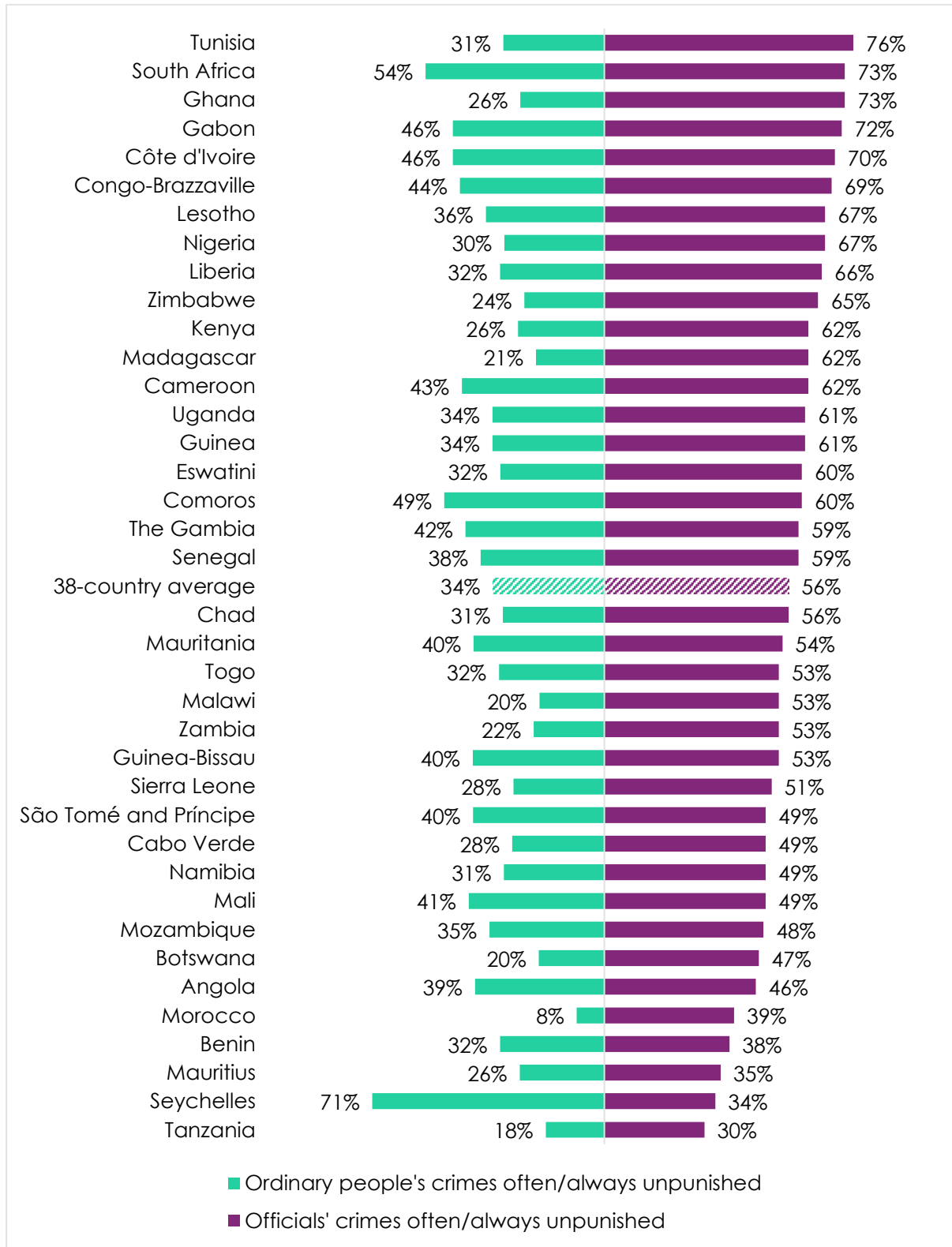
There are, however, a few exceptions, that is, countries where the gap between elites and ordinary people is much smaller. These include Mali (8-percentage-point gap between 49% for officials and 41% for ordinary people), Angola (7-point gap, 46% vs. 39%), and Benin (6-point gap, 38% vs. 32%). Seychelles stands out as the only country where respondents are far more likely to say that ordinary people go unpunished (71%) than officials (34%).

**Figure 7: People treated unequally under the law? | 38 countries | 2024/2025**



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how often, in this country, are people treated unequally under the law?

**Figure 8: Crimes go unpunished: Officials vs. ordinary people** | 38 countries  
 | 2024/2025



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how often, in this country: Do ordinary people who break the law go unpunished? Do officials who commit crimes go unpunished? (% who say "often" or "always")

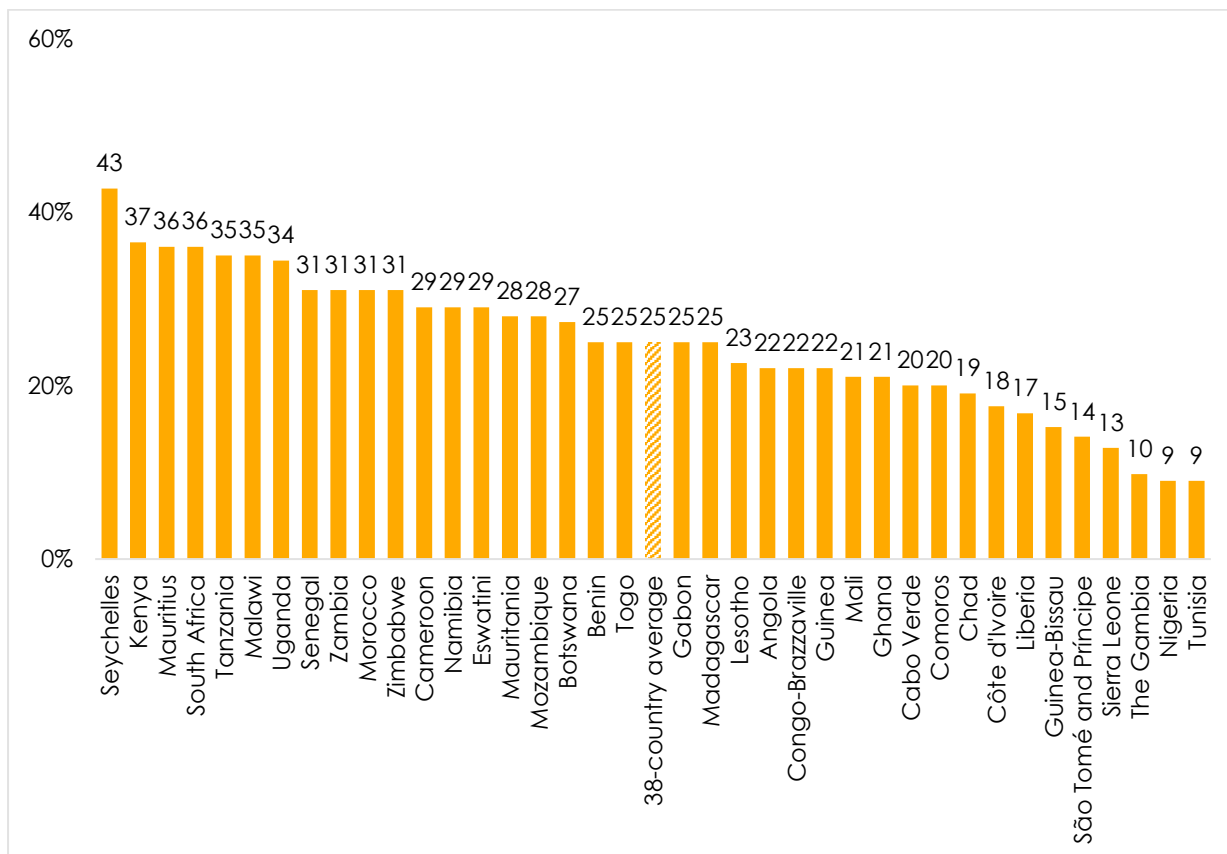
## Barriers to accessing justice

What stands between citizens and their desire to obtain justice? We consider several practical factors in this section, including costs and access to essential legal support services (Okoro, 2022; Mo Ibrahim Foundation & Hague Institute for Innovation of Law, 2026). In the following section, we will consider the integrity of judges and the legal system.

### Availability of legal assistance

Only one in four Africans (25%) are aware of any legal-aid services that might be available to them (Figure 9). Seychelles (43%) records the highest awareness, followed by Kenya (37%), Mauritius (36%), and South Africa (36%). Fewer than one in 10 are aware of such services in Nigeria (9%) and Tunisia (9%).

**Figure 9: Awareness of legal-aid services (%) | 38 countries | 2024/2025**

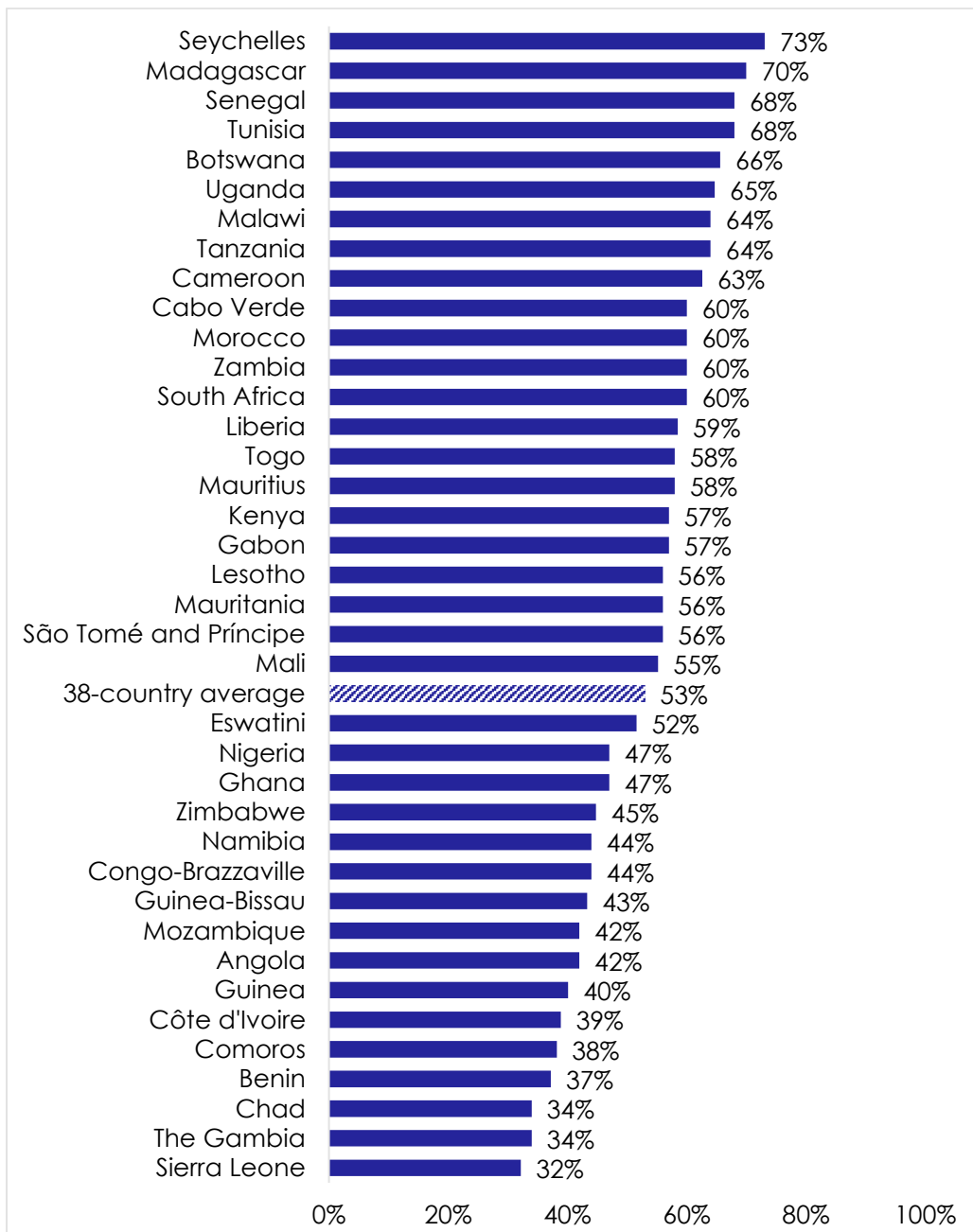


**Respondents were asked:** Are you aware of any legal-aid services available to you and others in your community? (% who say "yes")

While awareness of the availability of legal aid remains limited across Africa, a slim majority (53%) of respondents nonetheless say it is "somewhat likely" or "very likely" that they could find the advice or support they would need to resolve a legal problem, while 43% think it would be unlikely (Figure 10).

There is, however, considerable variation across countries. At the high end, more than two-thirds in Seychelles (73%), Madagascar (70%), Senegal (68%), and Tunisia (68%) report that they believe they would be able to access legal support if needed. By contrast, only about one in three agree in Chad (34%), The Gambia (34%), and Sierra Leone (32%).

**Figure 10: Can find legal advice or support when needed** | 38 countries | 2024/2025

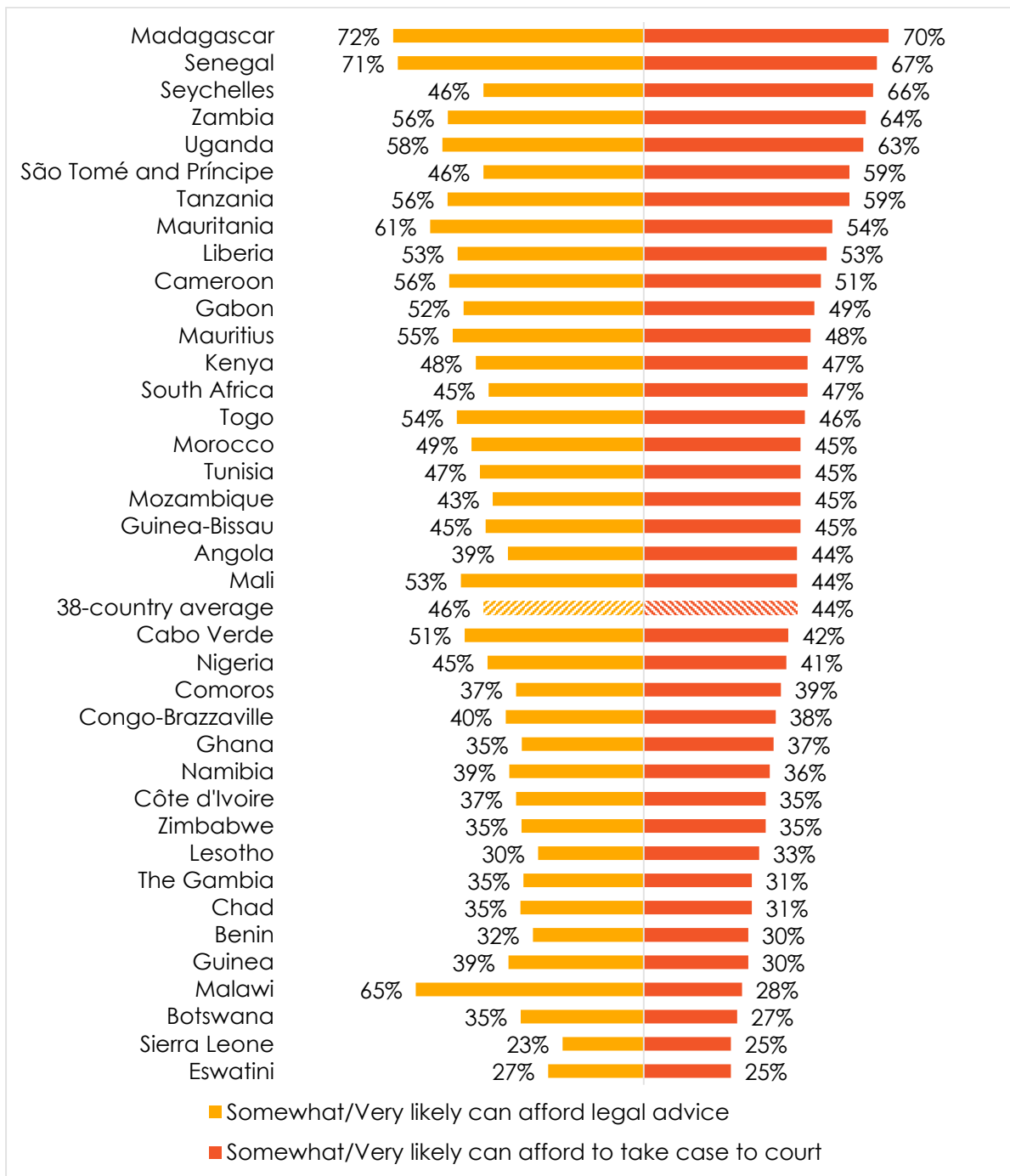


**Respondents were asked:** *If you had a legal problem like a serious complaint against a business or member of your community, how likely do you think it is that you could find the advice or support you need from lawyers or legal services to address or resolve the problem? (% who say “somewhat likely” or “very likely”)*

### Financial constraints

Affordability is another potential barrier to accessing justice. This challenge may be especially salient in low- and middle-income countries, where high levels of poverty and unemployment may limit citizens' ability to pay for legal services or take their cases to court. In fact, fewer than half of Africans see it as likely they could afford either legal advice (46%) or the costs of taking a case to court (44%) (Figure 11), potentially putting access to formal justice mechanisms out of reach for a majority of Africans (Manuel, Manuel, & Sharp, 2025).

**Figure 11: Affording access to justice | 38 countries | 2024/2025**



**Respondents were asked:**

*If you had a legal problem like a serious complaint against a business or member of your community, how likely do you think it is that you could afford to obtain the legal advice or support that you need? (% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")*

*If you had a case that needed to go to court, how likely do you think it is that you could afford to take the case to court? (% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")*

Madagascar (72% and 70% can afford legal advice and a court case, respectively) and Senegal (71% and 67%) significantly surpass all other countries when it comes to affordability. Many Malawians believe they can afford legal assistance (65%) but not court costs (28%).

Just one in four think they could afford either type of legal expense in Sierra Leone (23% and 25%) and Eswatini (27% and 25%). In a later section, we will return to the question of the differences in access to justice between Africa's poorest and wealthiest citizens.

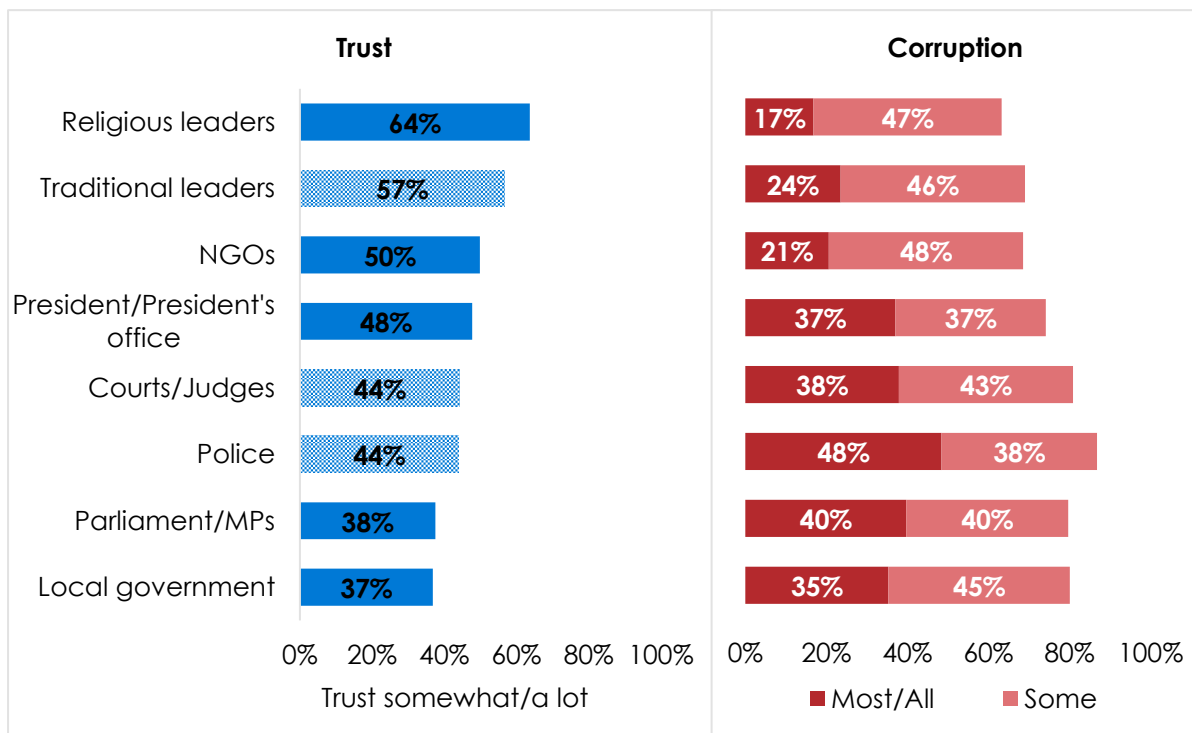
### Integrity in the courts

We saw above that only the slimmest of majorities (51%) believe it is likely they will receive a fair resolution if they take a case to court. That could in part be related to lack of access to legal support services and the necessary financial resources. But another critical factor driving this low level of confidence in the judicial system may be widespread doubts about the integrity of judges and courts.

When we compare trust in a range of institutions, we find that the formal institutions of justice fare relatively poorly. On average across 38 countries, fewer than half of citizens say they trust courts (44%) and the police (44%) "somewhat" or "a lot" (Figure 12). The courts fall well behind other potential sources of justice, including traditional leaders (57%), as well as religious leaders (64%).

This lack of institutional trust in the courts is matched by perceptions of widespread institutional corruption. Eight in 10 citizens (81%) say at least "some" judges and magistrates are corrupt, including 38% who see "most" or "all" of them as corrupt. Perceptions are even worse for the police (86% at least some, 48% most/all).

**Figure 12: Institutional trust and perceived corruption** | 38 countries\* | 2024/2025



**Respondents were asked:**

How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% "somewhat" or "a lot")

How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% "most of them" or "all of them")

\*Trust in president and corruption in office of the president were asked in 37 countries (not asked in Namibia). Trust and corruption in local government were asked in 35 countries (not asked in Angola, Seychelles, and Tunisia). Trust and corruption in traditional leaders were asked in 32 countries (not asked in Cabo Verde, Comoros, Mauritius, São Tomé and Príncipe, Seychelles, and Tunisia).

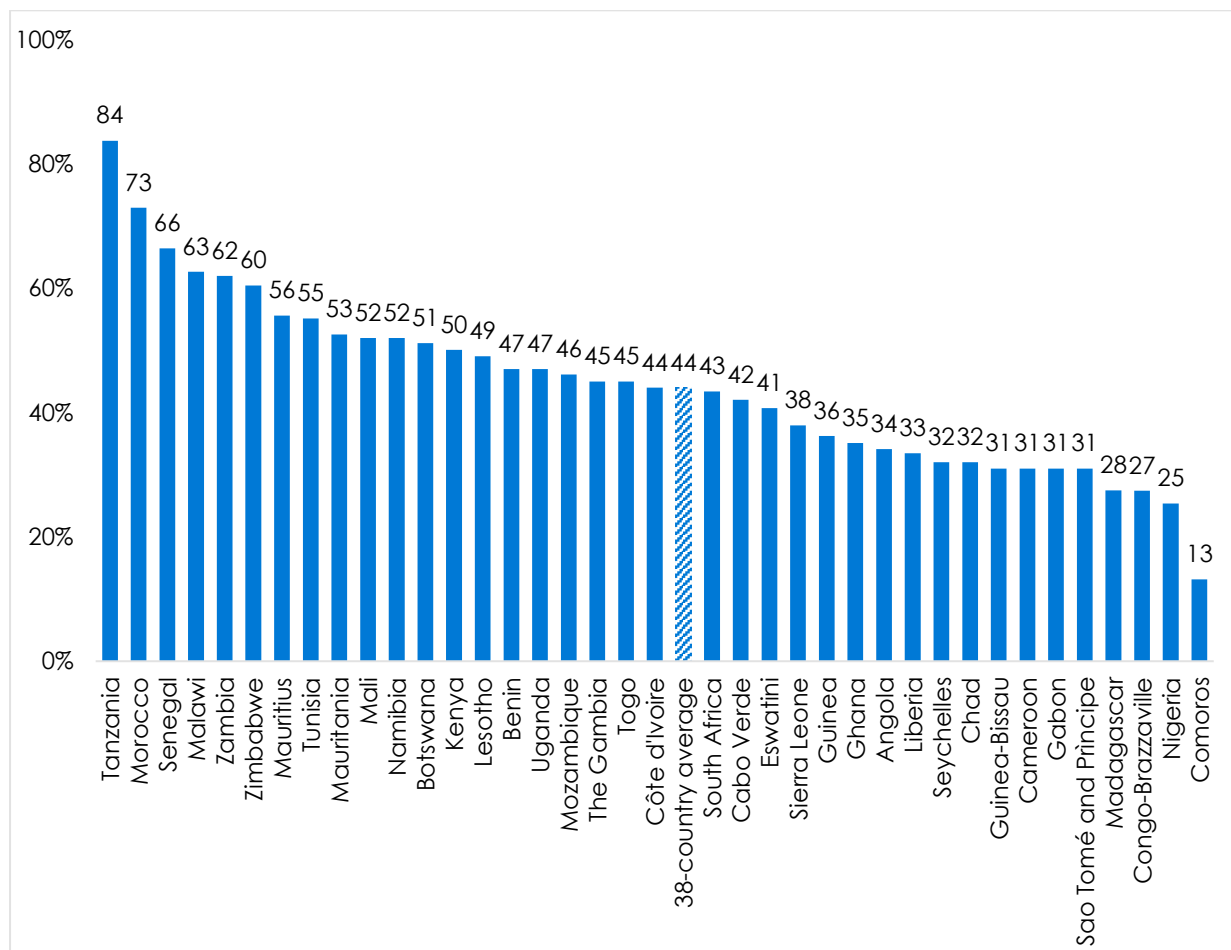
Trust in courts (as well as other institutions) has been in decline in Africa for more than a decade. Analysis of Afrobarometer data from previous rounds shows that across 30 countries tracked from 2011 to 2023, the proportion who trust courts “somewhat” or “a lot” dropped 10 points, from 59% in 2011/2013 to 49% in 2022/2023 (Adaba & Boio, 2024).

While trust in courts is, on average, quite low, some countries report much more positive findings. In Tanzania, a remarkable 84% say they trust the courts “somewhat” or “a lot,” followed by Morocco (73%) and Senegal (66%) (Figure 13). But fewer than one in three trust courts in 11 countries, with the lowest levels recorded in Madagascar (28%), Congo-Brazzaville (27%), Nigeria (25%), and Comoros (13%).

Citizens also reveal widespread concerns that judges frequently decide cases based not on the law, but rather on “the influence of political leaders, government officials, or other powerful people.” A slim majority (51%) believe this happens “often” or “always,” compared to just 41% who think it happens infrequently (Figure 14).

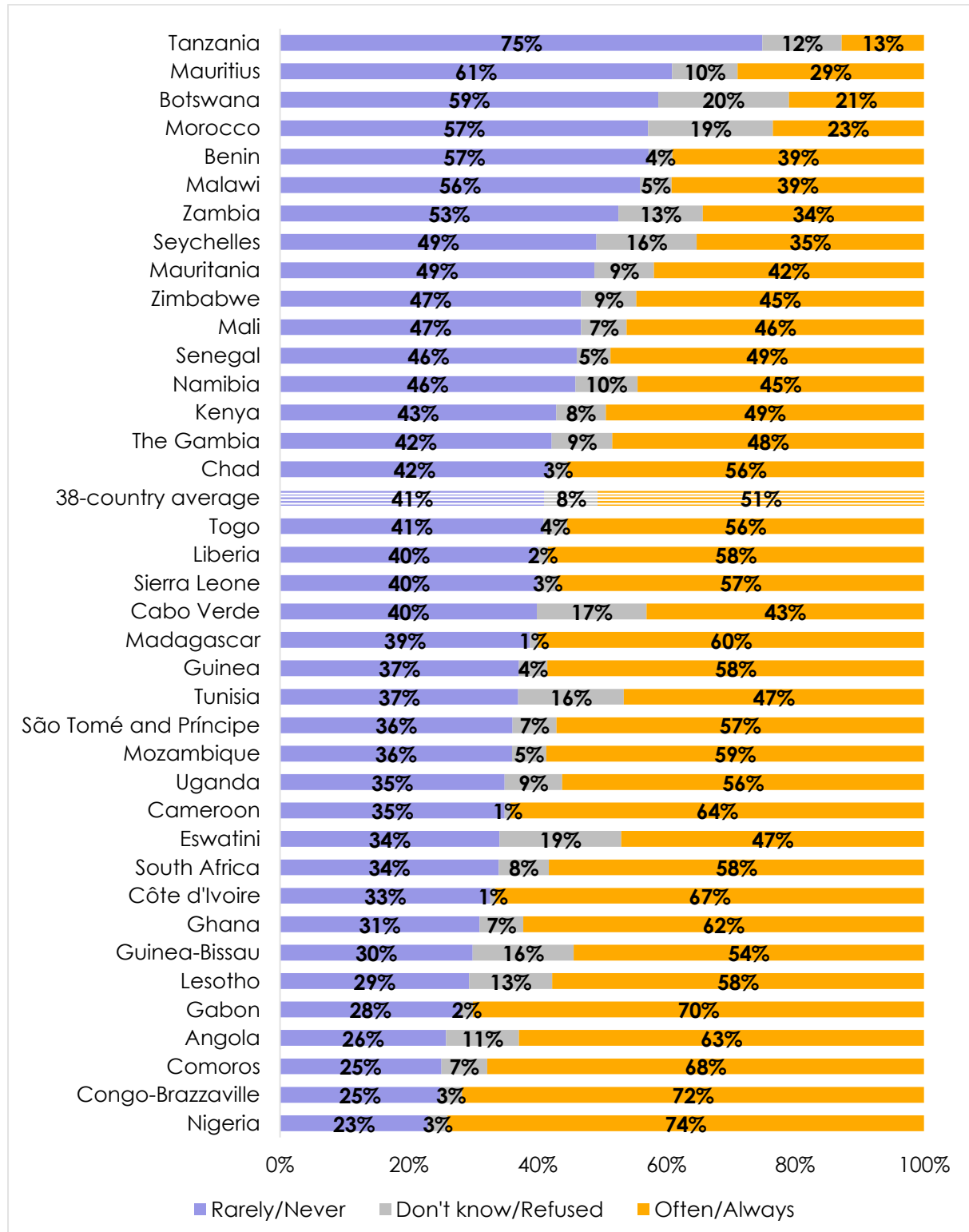
Tanzanians are again most bullish on their judiciary, with fully three-quarters asserting that judges make their decisions based on the law, not the influence of powerful people. They are joined by majorities in just six other countries: Mauritius, Botswana, Morocco, Benin, Malawi, and Zambia. Fewer than one in three agree in nine countries, with Congo-Brazzavillians (25% rarely/never), Comorians (25%), and Nigerians (23%) expressing least confidence in the rule of law.

**Figure 13: Trust in the courts (%) | 38 countries | 2024/2025**



**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Courts of law? (% who say “somewhat” or “a lot”)

**Figure 14: Are judicial decisions influenced by powerful people?** | 38 countries  
 | 2024/2025



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how often, in this country, do judges and magistrates decide cases based on the influence of political leaders, government officials, or other powerful people, rather than based on the law?

## Interconnected indicators of access to justice

It seems reasonable to expect that many of these indicators of access to justice will be interconnected. Lack of judicial integrity or unequal treatment by the courts, for example, would seem likely to undermine individuals' confidence in their ability to obtain justice.

The findings in Table 1 confirm these expectations. The table shows the correlation coefficients (Pearson's *r*) for each pair of indicators, which can range from 0, indicating no relationship at all, to 1, indicating that two variables are identical. In addition to the size of the coefficient, we use statistical tests to determine whether the relationship is "statistically significant," indicated by one or two asterisks, with \*\* indicating a higher level of significance, that is, a stronger relationship. The table only shows the coefficients for relationships that are statistically significant.

We can highlight a few key findings based on this table. First, as expected, our primary indicator, confidence in obtaining justice (the first column), is strongly related to many of our other indicators. The strongest relationships are with the judicial integrity indicators, especially trust (Pearson's  $r=0.793^{**}$ ), and with equal treatment under the law (Pearson's  $r=0.657^{**}$ ).

Interestingly, however, we can see that although lack of affordability may play a significant role in limiting access to the courts, it does *not* undermine confidence in obtaining a fair outcome if a case makes it that far. In fact, we can see that affordability for the most part is not associated with other indicators related to integrity, equality, or outcomes. The lone exception is that people who can afford legal aid are somewhat more likely to expect a fair resolution (Pearson's  $r=0.368^*$ ).

But aside from affordability, these findings confirm that trust and corruption, unequal treatment, and lack of legal services all interact to undermine confidence in the formal legal systems across Africa.

**Table 1: Correlation among key indicators (Pearson's *r*) | 38 countries | 2024/2025**

	Confident in obtaining justice	Fair resolution likely	People are treated equally by courts	Officials who commit crimes are punished	Ordinary people who commit crimes are punished	Can find legal services	Can afford legal services	Can afford court case	Trust courts	Low corruption among judges/magistrates	Judges decide based on law, not political influence
Confident in obtaining justice											
Fair resolution likely	.569**										
People are treated equally by courts	.657**	.380*									
Officials who commit crimes are punished	.349*		.726**								
Ordinary people who commit crimes are punished	.410*	.378*	.425**								
Legal support is available	.410*	.630**									
Can afford legal aid		.368*				.705**					
Can afford court case						.648**	.759**				
Trust courts	.793**	.624**	.721**	.372*	.530**	.350*					
Low corruption among judges/magistrates	.673**	.586**	.578**	.420**	.416**				.693**		
Judges decide based on law, not political influence	.658**	.528**	.917**	.752**	.485**	.338*			.777**	.648**	

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). Correlations shown are between country-level averages for each indicator.

## Access to justice: A country-level summary

Now that we have seen how interlinked many of these indicators are, we can turn to summaries of findings at the country level across a range of indicators. In Table 2, we have ordered countries according to our key indicator, the degree of confidence in obtaining justice, which ranges from a high of 73% in Morocco to just 26% in Congo-Brazzaville. In the table, green cells indicate positive findings of 50% or higher, and red cells indicate findings below this threshold. Darker green cells represent the best outcomes, and darker red cells the worst.

We see that in line with Table 1, the correlations among different indicators are strong, but still with much room for variation across countries. Overall, the top third of the Table 2 has significantly more green cells than red, while the bottom third has mostly red cells. As Table 1 also indicated, we can see that the two affordability indicators are not consistently related to the other indicators (i.e. there are a lot of red, “not affordable” cells even in the greener top third of Table 2).

In terms of overall country performance, we note that only Tanzania has positive (green) cells for all indicators. In several countries that score quite highly on indicators of confidence, trust, and equal treatment, affordability is nonetheless a major issue, including in Morocco, Malawi, Botswana, and Mauritius.

In contrast, nine countries do not score 50% or higher on any indicator, including Ghana, which, despite being rated as one of the continent's most democratic countries, still ranks as one of the lowest performers on access to justice, just as it did a decade ago (Logan, 2017). Nigeria, Comoros, and Congo-Brazzaville stand out as countries where access to justice faces especially serious crises.

## Who can access justice?

We have seen profound differences across countries in levels of confidence in the legal system and other indicators of access to justice. We now address the question of how access to justice may vary based on individuals' socio-demographic status. Do people in rural areas, women, and the poor differ from men, city dwellers, and the wealthy in their perceptions of the justice system and their confidence in just outcomes?

### *Rural vs. urban justice*

In Figure 3 above, we saw that people who live in rural areas are far less likely to rely on the formal justice system (police, lawyers, courts) than those in urban areas, by a margin of 40% to 67%. Rural inhabitants are instead more likely to turn to informal mechanisms such as traditional leaders or elders, religious leaders, or family (47%). Does this large gap in the preferred source of justice reflect perceptions of the fairness or function of justice institutions?

In fact, we find only a minimal gap between urban and rural inhabitants in their confidence in obtaining justice, with rural residents actually 2 percentage points higher than urbanites (51% vs. 49%), while urbanites are 2 points more likely to expect a fair resolution (52% vs. 50%) (Figure 15). Rural residents are also somewhat more likely to expect that everyone will be treated equally in the courts.

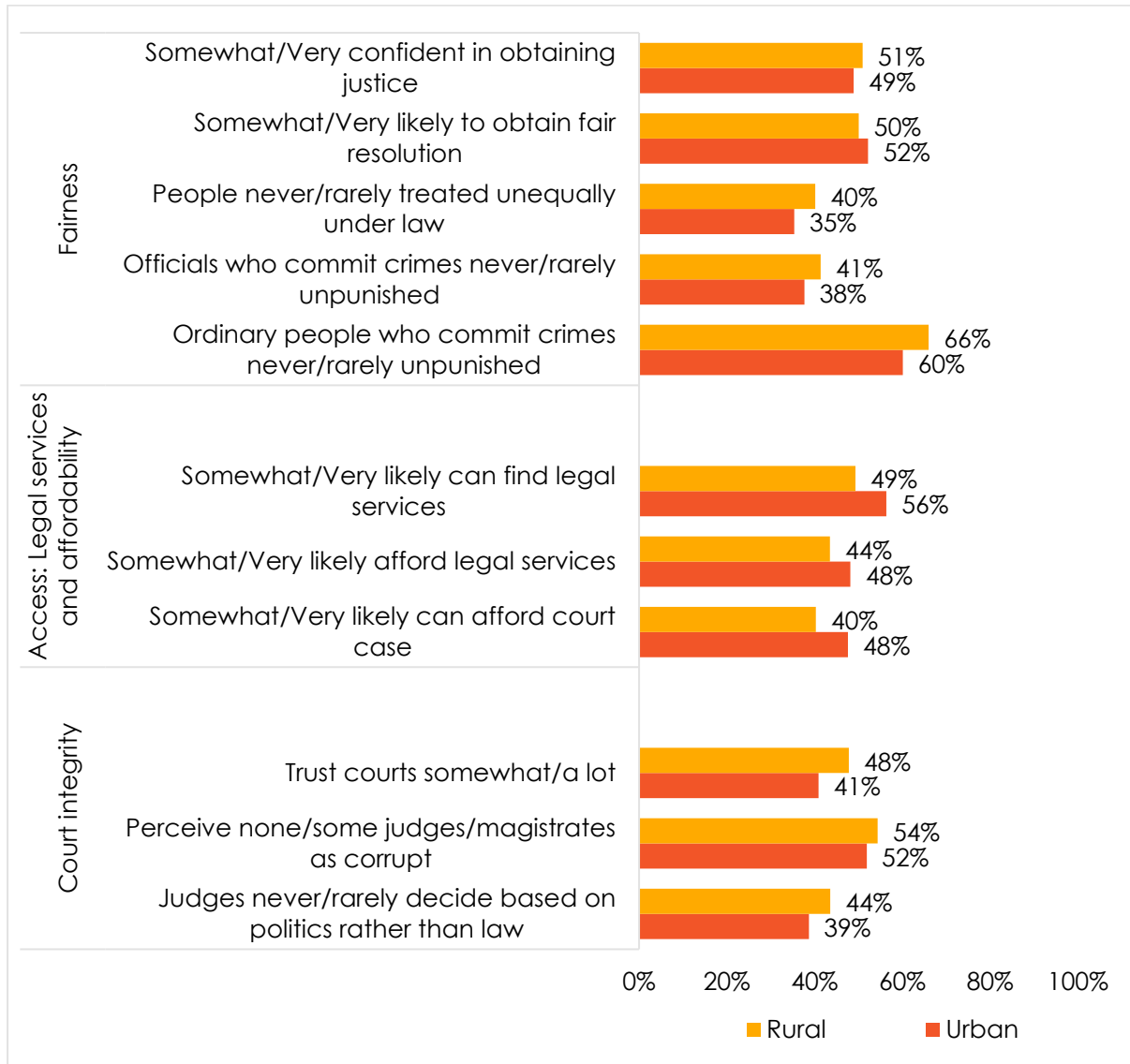
On the other hand, those living in rural areas are somewhat less assured of finding access to legal support (-7 percentage points) or being able to afford legal support (-4 points) or a court case (-8 points). But they are more likely to trust courts (+3 points) and to think that judges do not succumb to political influencers (+5 points).

**Table 2: Summary of key access-to-justice indicators | 38 countries | 2024/2025**

	Somewhat/ Very confident in obtaining justice	Somewhat/ Very likely fair resolution	People never/ rarely treated unequally	Somewhat/ Very likely can find legal services	Somewhat/ Very likely can afford legal services	Somewhat/ Very likely can afford court case	Trust courts somewhat/ a lot	Judges never/ rarely make decisions based on influence rather than law
Morocco	73%	72%	59%	60%	49%	45%	73%	57%
Tanzania	71%	56%	68%	64%	56%	59%	84%	75%
Malawi	67%	51%	51%	64%	65%	28%	63%	56%
Tunisia	65%	67%	28%	68%	47%	45%	55%	37%
Senegal	63%	67%	39%	68%	71%	67%	66%	46%
Namibia	63%	46%	51%	44%	39%	36%	52%	46%
Mozambique	62%	49%	36%	42%	43%	45%	46%	36%
Zimbabwe	62%	56%	35%	45%	35%	35%	60%	47%
Botswana	62%	61%	56%	66%	35%	27%	51%	59%
Zambia	62%	63%	44%	60%	56%	64%	62%	53%
Eswatini	61%	51%	29%	52%	27%	25%	41%	34%
São Tomé and Príncipe	60%	34%	35%	56%	46%	59%	31%	36%
Mauritania	59%	58%	50%	56%	61%	54%	53%	49%
Kenya	55%	57%	40%	57%	48%	47%	50%	43%
Mauritius	55%	56%	54%	58%	55%	48%	56%	61%
Liberia	52%	51%	45%	59%	53%	53%	33%	40%
South Africa	51%	52%	35%	60%	45%	47%	43%	34%
Uganda	51%	50%	32%	65%	58%	63%	47%	35%
Angola	50%	34%	30%	42%	39%	44%	34%	26%
Seychelles	50%	58%	42%	73%	46%	66%	32%	49%
Benin	50%	51%	53%	37%	32%	30%	47%	57%
Cabo Verde	49%	53%	31%	60%	51%	42%	42%	40%
Lesotho	48%	56%	27%	56%	30%	33%	49%	29%
Sierra Leone	48%	55%	31%	32%	23%	25%	38%	40%
Ghana	47%	45%	36%	47%	35%	37%	35%	31%
Togo	44%	58%	39%	58%	54%	46%	45%	41%
The Gambia	43%	39%	42%	34%	35%	31%	45%	42%
Guinea-Bissau	42%	46%	27%	43%	45%	45%	31%	30%
Mali	40%	45%	41%	55%	53%	44%	52%	47%
Madagascar	39%	56%	27%	70%	72%	70%	28%	39%
Chad	37%	44%	33%	34%	35%	31%	32%	42%
Cameroon	36%	57%	31%	63%	56%	51%	31%	35%
Côte d'Ivoire	36%	47%	30%	39%	37%	35%	44%	33%
Guinea	34%	37%	36%	40%	39%	30%	36%	37%
Gabon	33%	51%	23%	57%	52%	49%	31%	28%
Nigeria	28%	38%	24%	47%	45%	41%	25%	23%
Comoros	28%	37%	26%	38%	37%	39%	13%	25%
Congo-Brazzaville	26%	41%	24%	44%	40%	38%	27%	25%
<b>38-country average</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>41%</b>
<b>Legend</b>	<b>70% or more</b>	<b>60%-69%</b>	<b>50%-59%</b>	<b>40%-49%</b>	<b>30%-39%</b>	<b>&lt;30%</b>		

All in all, these small differences suggest that the fact that rural residents are much less likely to engage in the formal justice system is *not* driven by more negative attitudes toward that system. Instead, it is likely that familiarity and easier access to traditional and informal justice mechanisms drive this difference.

**Figure 15: Urban-rural location and access to justice** | 38 countries | 2024/2025



*Gender and access to justice*

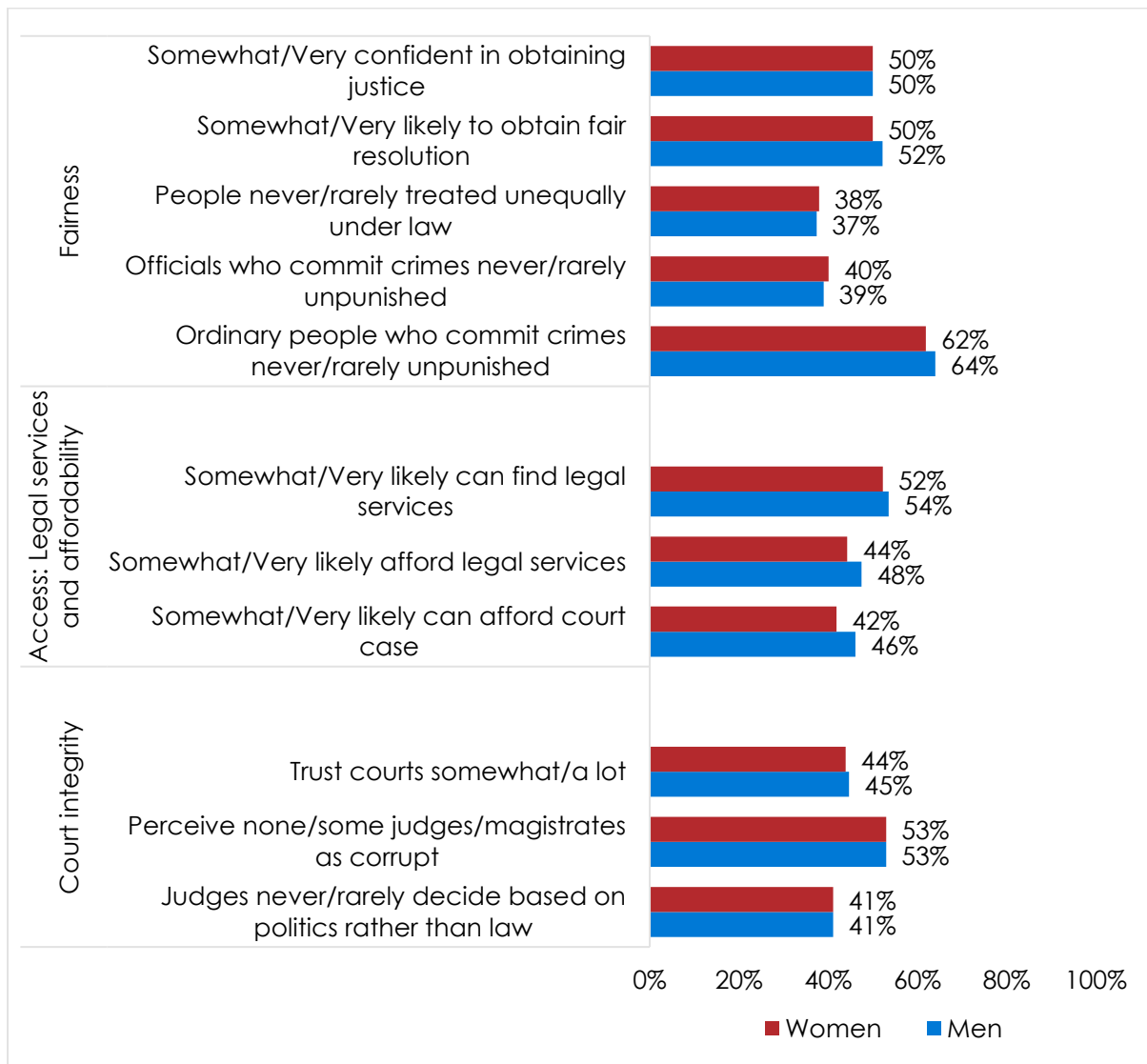
Are African women receiving the same level of justice services (flawed as they may be) from their formal legal systems as African men? This question is particularly pressing given some of the particular legal and justice challenges that women face, for example with respect to dealing with gender-based violence, discrimination, and harassment. Nearly one in three women (29%) say that women frequently face sexual harassment in public places, and 28% say that girl students face discrimination and harassment in schools. And 79% of women, as well as 77% of men, say that the police and courts need to do more to protect women and girls in schools, workplaces, and public spaces.

But do women have equal access to just outcomes when they enter the legal system? Overall, when we disaggregate results for our key indicators by gender, we find that in most cases, there are either no significant differences (using a threshold of +/-2 percentage points) or the differences are extremely modest.

Women and men express equal confidence – 50% each – in their ability to obtain justice (Figure 16). And there are only marginal differences in gender-specific views on fairness and equal treatment from the courts. Men and women also are virtually identical in their perspectives on the integrity of judges and the court system. The largest differences are modest 4-percentage-point gender gaps with respect to affordability of legal support (48% for men, 44% for women) and a court case (46% vs. 42%).

All in all, it would appear that men and women are served nearly equally – whether equally well or equally poorly – by the court system. However, the fact that more than three-quarters of both women and men believe that courts need to do more to protect women's rights suggests that there are nonetheless other gender-based gaps when it comes to serving women's legal needs that need to be addressed.

**Figure 16: Gender and access to justice** | 38 countries | 2024/2025

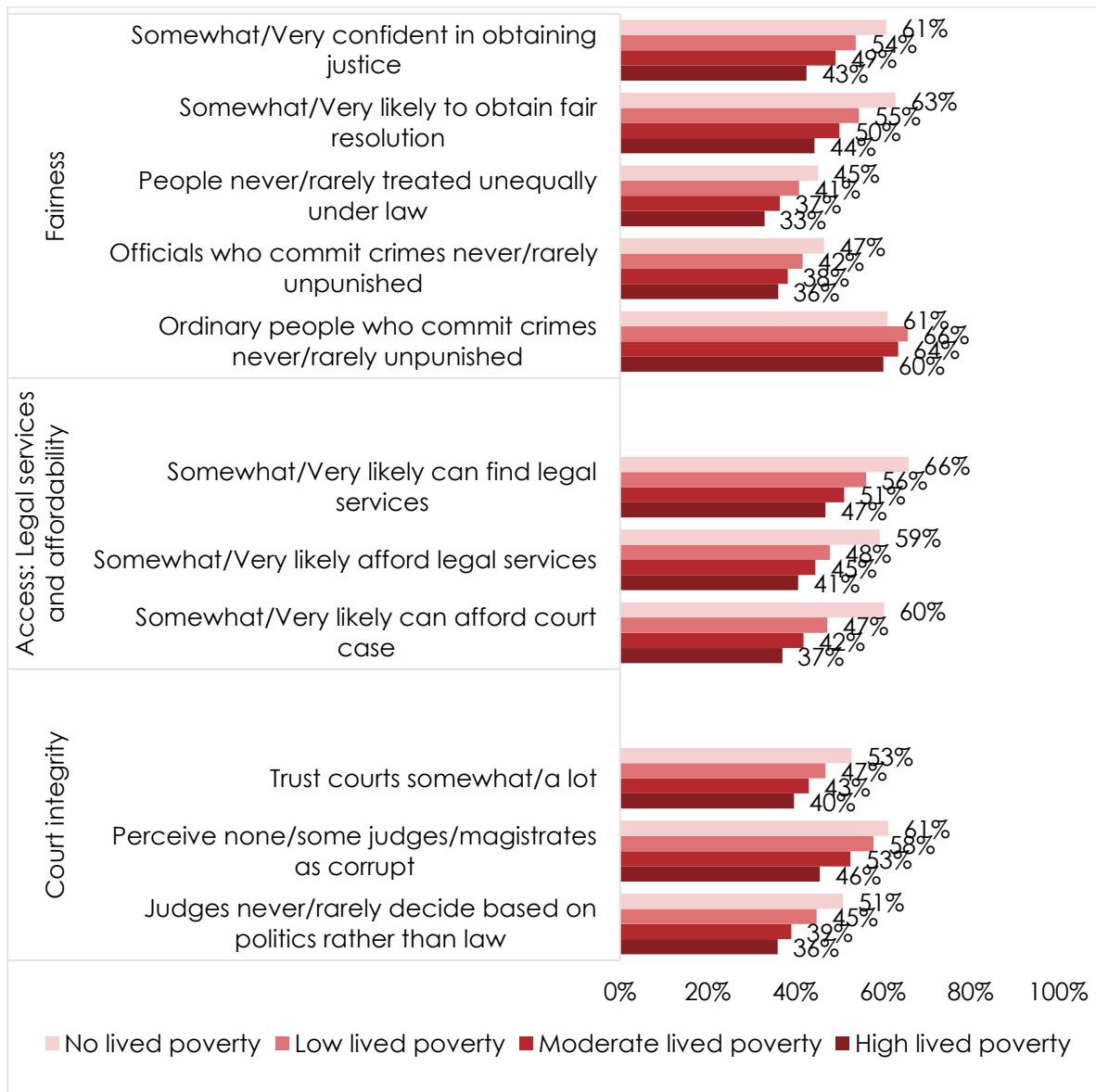


### Wealth and justice

We have seen (Figure 11 above) that affordability is a fundamental challenge for a majority of Africans when it comes to addressing legal challenges. And although lack of affordability does not appear to directly undermine confidence in the legal system (Table 1), we need to examine more closely the relationship between economic status and access to justice.

It turns out that perceptions of the justice system are strongly and consistently associated with economic status: While a solid majority (61%) of Africa's wealthiest citizens (those who experience "no lived poverty") are confident that they can obtain justice from the legal system, only 43% of the poorest (those with "high lived poverty") feel the same, a stark 18-percentage-point gap (Figure 17). Similar gaps are evident across nearly every indicator, from perceptions that unequal treatment is uncommon (45% for the wealthiest, 33% for the poorest) to belief in the integrity of the courts (gaps of 13-15 points on all three indicators). Poorer citizens are also far less likely (by 19 points) to believe they will be able to access legal support.

**Figure 17: Wealth and access to justice** | 38 countries | 2024/2025



These findings suggest that another reason poorer people may choose informal justice mechanisms (see Figure 3) is that they see the formal court system as likely to serve the wealthy and well-connected, but not themselves.

## Democracy and access to justice

Are democracies better at providing justice for their citizens? In principle, we would expect this to be the case. Democratic governments should promote the rule of law both at the national institutional level and in the local courts that serve ordinary citizens (Mbanje & Okoloise, 2024). But we saw above in the country summaries (Table 2) that in practice, this is not always true, as Ghana, one of the continent's most democratic countries (Freedom House, 2026), is a poor performer on most indicators of access to and quality of justice via the legal system.

Still, when we group countries according to the Freedom House categories of "free," "partly free," and "not free," we can see that on many indicators, more democratic countries do, on average, perform somewhat better. Most significantly, a majority (55%) of those living in "free" countries are confident of obtaining justice in the courts, compared to 46% of those in "not free" countries (Figure 18), a 9-percentage-point gap. People in democratic countries are also slightly more likely to trust the courts (+3 points), to believe that people are treated equally in the courts (+5 points), to believe that most judges are not corrupt (+8 points), and to believe they can find legal support services (+8 points). However, democracies perform no better than non-democracies with respect to affordability of legal support, and only marginally better (by 3 points) when it comes to affordability of court cases.

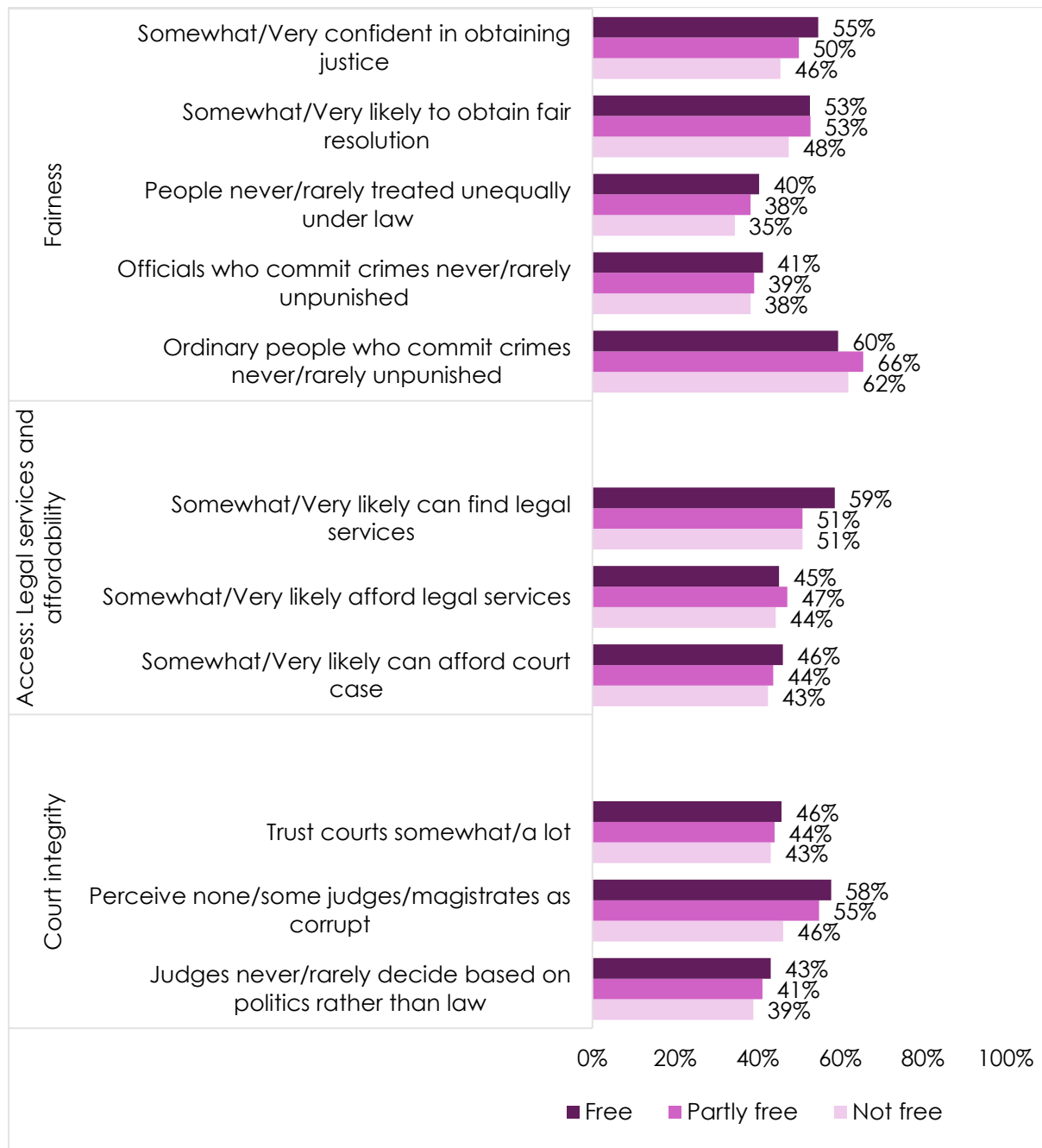
We find stronger predictors of access to justice, regardless of countries' overall democracy scores, when we look at specific indicators of the extent to which governments observe the rule of law. If we compare attitudes about whether the president honours or ignores the courts and laws, and about whether s/he honours or ignores Parliament,<sup>3</sup> with individuals' confidence in their ability to obtain legal justice, the findings are much clearer. People who think that their president respects Parliament and/or the courts are much more likely (57% in each case) to be confident in their ability to achieve justice than those who think their president ignores Parliament and/or the courts (41% in each case) (Figure 19).

These positive findings about respect for the rule of law should not distract us, though, from recognising the lack of perceived access to justice even in many of the continent's most democratic countries. Ghana is by no means the only democracy on the continent facing profound access-to-justice challenges. Substantial majorities perceive unequal treatment in the courts in Lesotho (65%), South Africa (63%), Ghana (62%), Cabo Verde (62%), Senegal (58%), and São Tomé and Príncipe (58%), all countries that are rated as "free." Similarly, 62% in Ghana, 58% in Lesotho and South Africa, and 57% in São Tomé and Príncipe think that their judges frequently make decisions based on political influencers rather than the law. And majorities do not trust the courts in São Tomé and Príncipe (64%), Ghana (62%), Seychelles (60%), Cabo Verde (55%), and South Africa (55%). So while the continent's democracies may, on average, perform better than the non-democracies, they have enormous room to improve when it comes to ensuring that their citizens have access to justice in their country's courts.

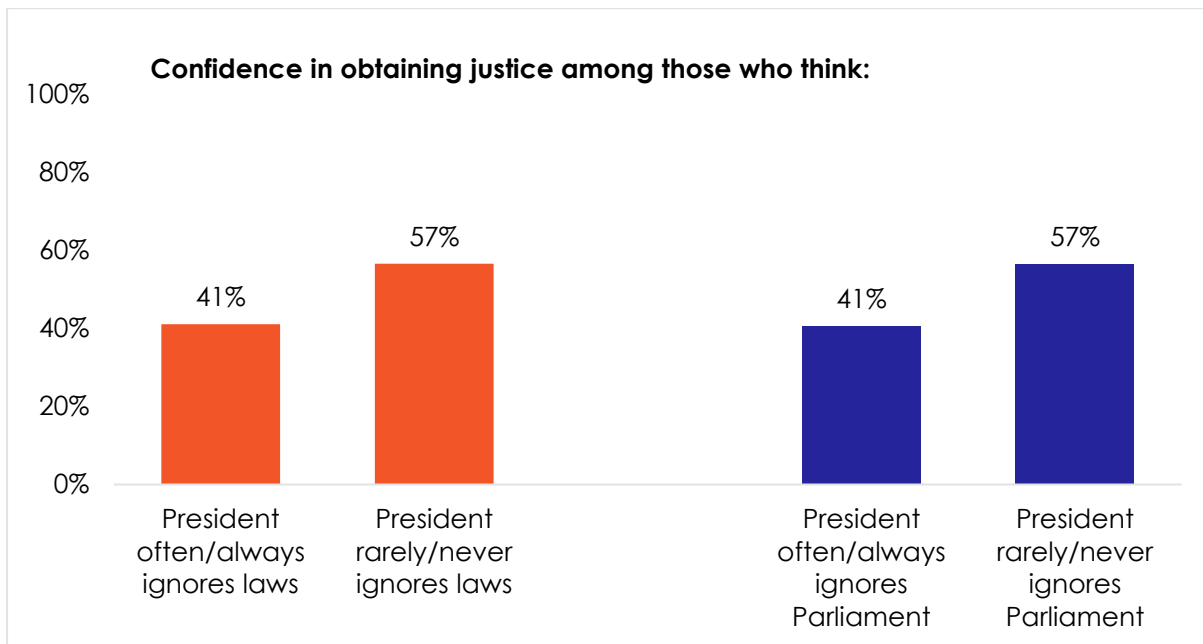
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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the country averages for these Afrobarometer indicators of respect for courts and for Parliament are *not* correlated with Freedom House scores for political rights and civil liberties.

**Figure 18: Extent of democracy and access to justice** | 38 countries | 2024/2025



**Figure 19: Rule of law and justice for ordinary citizens | 38 countries | 2024/2025**



**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, how often, in this country:*  
 Does the president ignore the courts and laws of this country?  
 Does the president ignore Parliament and just do what s/he wants?

### Colonial legacy and access to justice

Does a country's colonial legacy make a difference in citizen access to justice, for example due to differences in inherited legal frameworks? Former French and Portuguese colonies retain civil law systems, for example, while former British colonies rely on common law. These different legal traditions may be linked to differences in legal codes and practices, the quality of protection for human rights, and the provision of equitable access to justice (Malik & Maghani, 2023).

We note striking differences in where people turn for access to justice across these different groups of countries.<sup>4</sup> Citizens of former Portuguese colonies are much more likely to turn to the police (54%) and the formal justice system generally (68%) than those in former French colonies (40% and 56%) and former British colonies (35% and 45%) (Figure 20). Traditional systems are, conversely, much more preferred in former British colonies (35%) with their legacy of indirect rule than in former French (21%) or Portuguese (19%) territories.

<sup>4</sup> Countries asked about former colonial powers were aligned as follows:

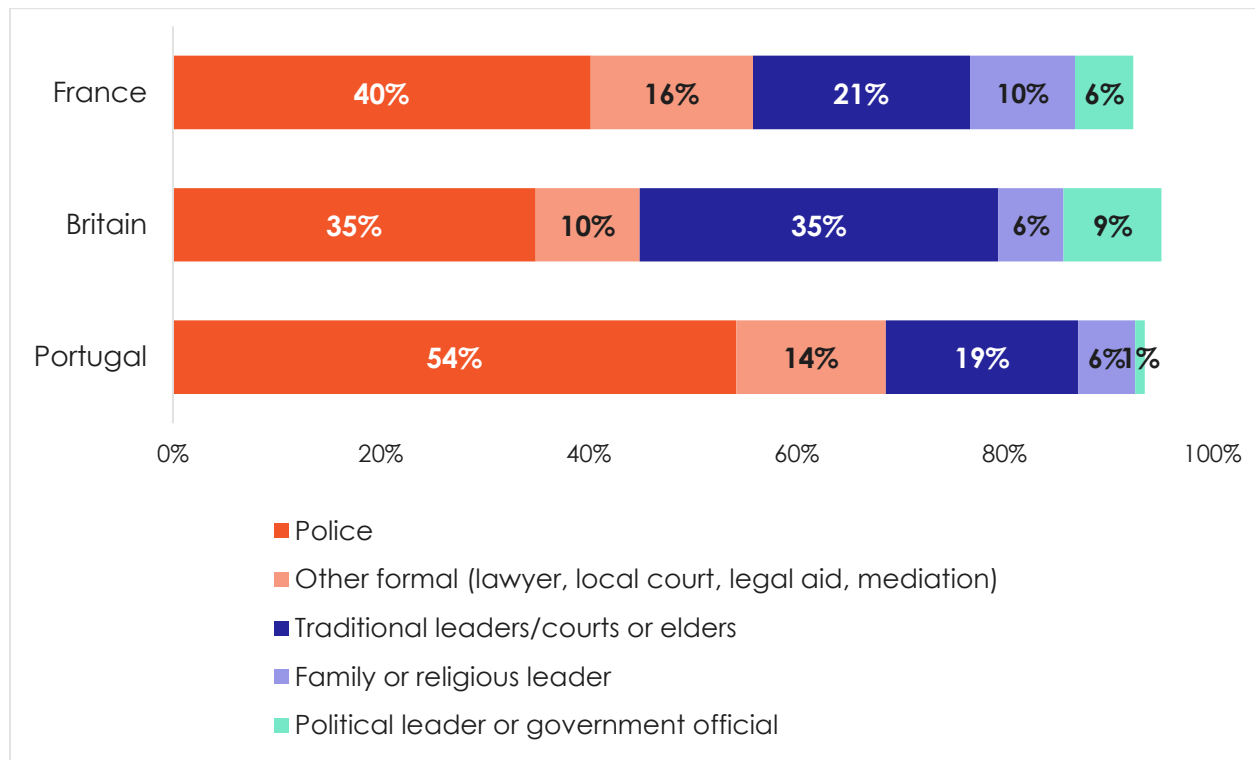
**Britain:** Botswana, Eswatini, The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe

**France:** Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Comoros, Congo-Brazzaville, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Guinea, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Senegal, Seychelles, Togo, and Tunisia

**Germany:** Namibia

**Portugal:** Angola, Cabo Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and São Tomé and Príncipe

**Figure 20: Preferred legal resolution across colonial regions | 38 countries | 2025**



**Respondents were asked:** *If you had a legal problem like a serious complaint against a business or member of your community, where would you be most likely to go to try to find a resolution? X What is the primary language you speak in your home?*

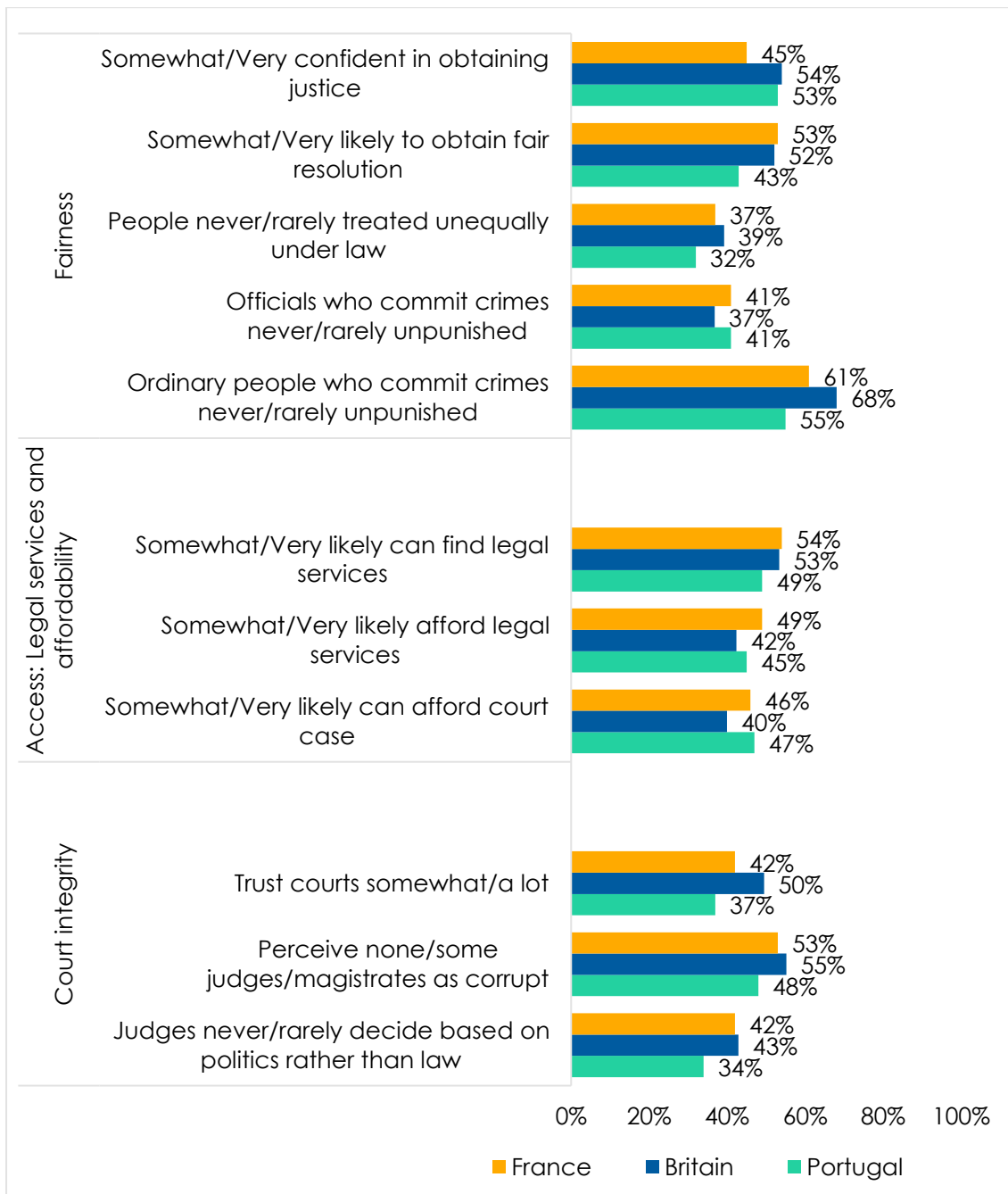
But when it comes to differences in accessing justice, there are few clear patterns. Confidence in obtaining justice is somewhat higher in former Portuguese (54%) and British (53%) colonies than in former French colonies (45%) (Figure 21). Yet on many other indicators, the former Portuguese territories perform less well, while the former French and British holdings do somewhat better. For example, 43% of those in former British colonies, and 42% in former French colonies, believe it is uncommon for judges to be influenced by politics, while only 34% say the same in the former Portuguese territories. While a full analysis of these issues is beyond the scope of this report, the general lack of a clear pattern suggests that more than 60 years after many countries achieved independence, the impacts of colonial legacies in the continent's legal systems may have been superseded by other factors.

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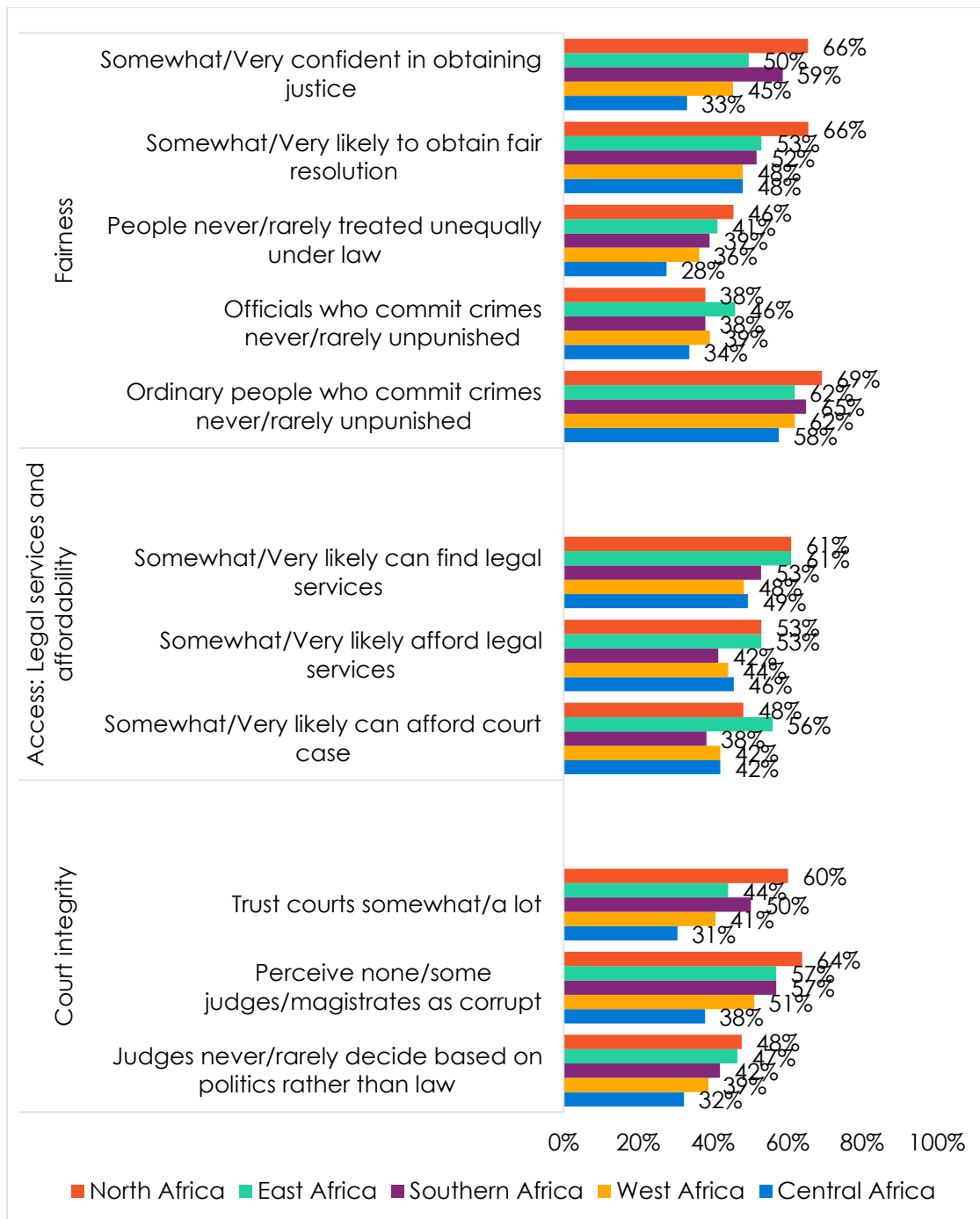
**Figure 21: Colonial legacy and access to justice** | 38 countries | 2024/2025



### Subregional differences in access to justice

A brief look at subregional differences suggests a distinct and fairly consistent pattern. North Africa fares best on most indicators, especially confidence in obtaining justice (66%, fully double the level in Central Africa) (Figure 22). The gap is nearly as wide for trust in courts (60% vs. 31%). Overall, East Africa and Southern Africa follow North Africa, while West Africa and especially Central Africa fall behind.

**Figure 22: Subregion and access to justice | 38 countries | 2024/2025**



### Punishments

Finally, we turn our attention in a slightly different direction, to look at how people perceive the punishments meted out by their court systems. The findings take us back to the concerns described above about unequal treatment in the courts.

We asked whether punishments such as fines or jail or prison sentences for ordinary people are generally too harsh, too lenient, or about right, and then we asked the same about

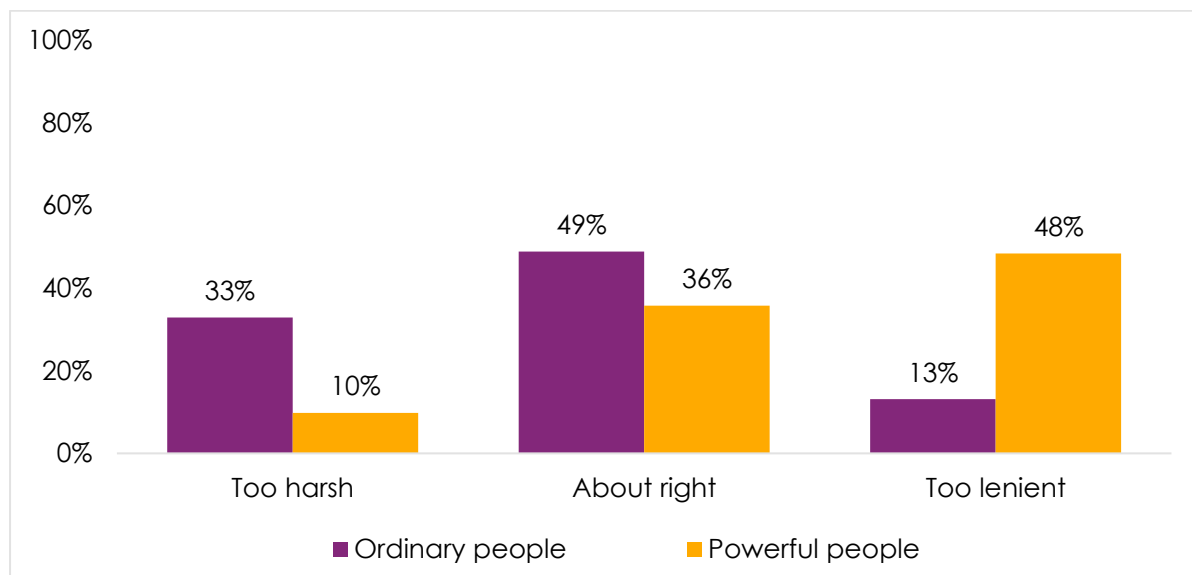
punishments for “political leaders, government officials, or other powerful people.” The message from citizens is clear: The courts are too lenient with powerful people.

Across 38 countries, 33% say punishments for ordinary people are too harsh, while just 13% say they are too lenient (Figure 23). The findings are reversed when it comes to the powerful: Only 10% say punishments are too harsh, while nearly half (48%) say they are too lenient. In fact, in every surveyed country, ordinary people are more likely than the powerful to be seen as treated too harshly, and the powerful more likely than ordinary people to be seen as getting off too lightly (Figure 24).

Focusing just on the treatment of ordinary people, we find that in 33 countries, more people say penalties are too harsh than say they are too lenient – by more than 50 percentage points in Liberia (66% too harsh, 10% too lenient) and Senegal (58% and 5%). Only in Botswana (20% too harsh, 28% too lenient), South Africa (15% and 34%), Mauritius (9% and 33%), and Seychelles (5% and 43%) do those who want harsher punishments for ordinary people outnumber those who think more leniency is in order. And there is *no country* where more people want greater leniency for the powerful, rather than harsher punishments.

Lastly, we find fairly widespread support for imposition of the death penalty in response to very serious crimes: Across 37 countries, 57% say it is a fair punishment in such cases, while 40% say it should never be used (Figure 25). Majorities endorse the death penalty in 21 countries, with overwhelming support in Tunisia (85%), Senegal (83%), Comoros (82%), Botswana (82%), Nigeria (81%), and The Gambia (80%). In sharp contrast, fewer than one in three support this option in two countries: Cabo Verde (30%) and Seychelles (24%).

**Figure 23: Fairness of penalties for crime** | 38 countries | 2024/2025

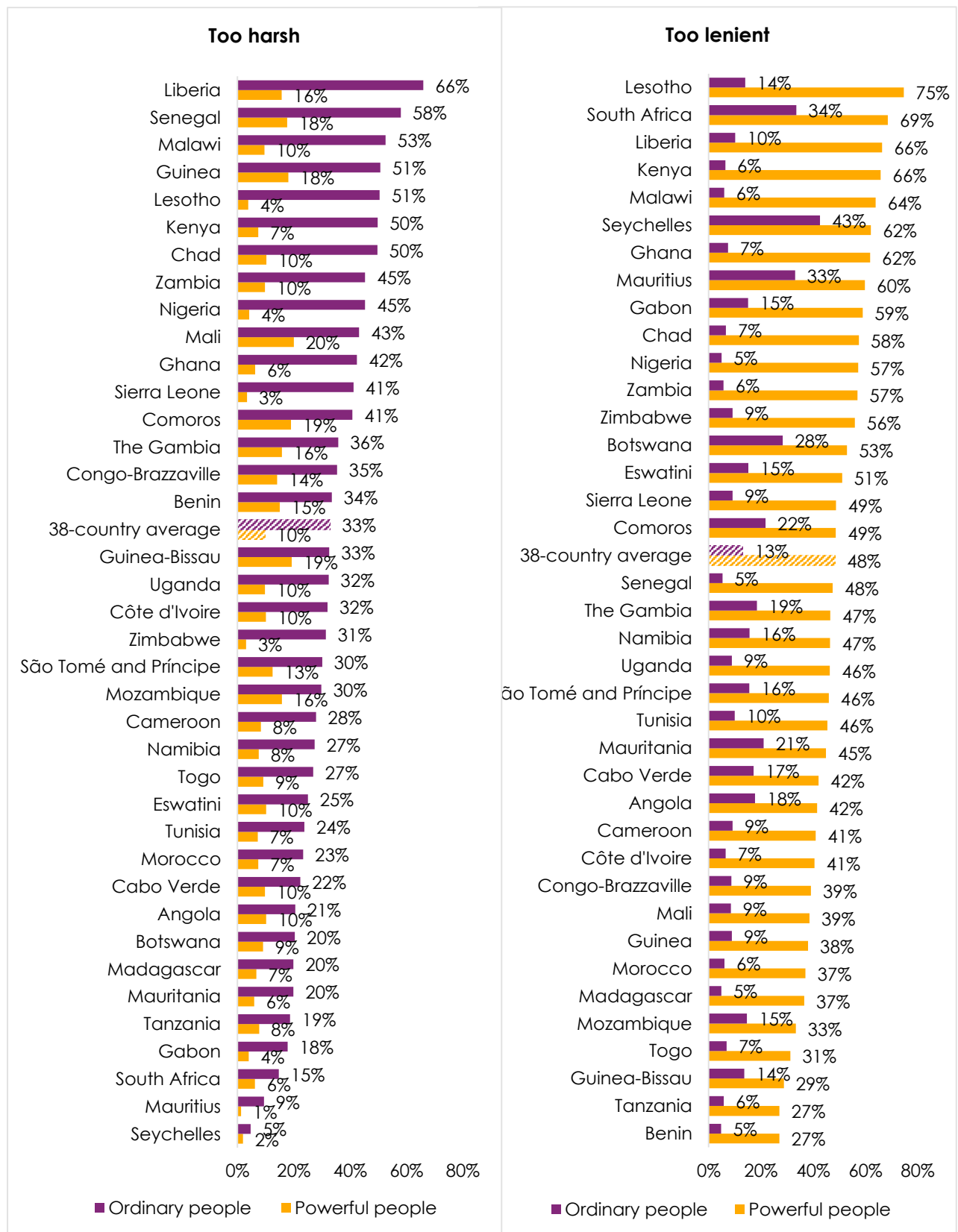


**Respondents were asked:**

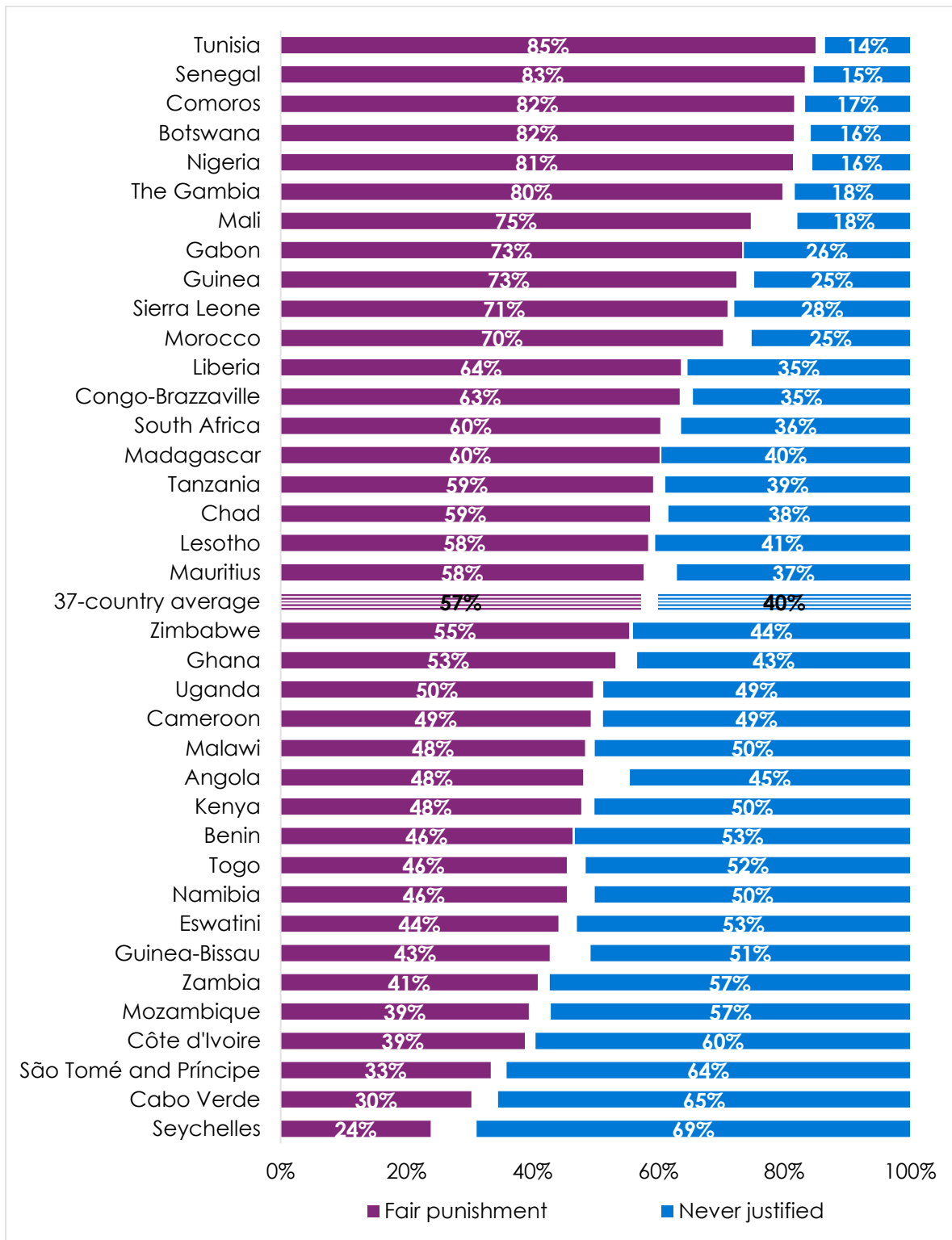
*In general, when ordinary people are convicted of crimes in this country, do you think that the punishments handed down to them, such as fines or jail or prison sentences, are too harsh, too lenient, or generally about right, or haven't you heard enough to say?*

*In general, when political leaders, government officials, or other powerful people are convicted of crimes in this country, do you think that the punishments handed down to them, such as fines or jail or prison sentences, are too harsh, too lenient, or generally about right, or haven't you heard enough to say?*

**Figure 24: Fairness of penalties for crime | 38 countries | 2024/2025**



**Figure 25: Attitudes toward the death penalty | 37 countries\* | 2024/2025**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: The death penalty is a fair punishment for people who have committed the most serious crimes, such as murder.

Statement 2: There is no crime for which the death penalty can be justified.

\* Question was not asked in Mauritania.

## Conclusion

Securing access to justice for all remains an elusive goal across much of Africa. Just 50% of citizens say they are confident they could obtain justice in the courts, leaving half of Africans without secure access to this critical human right. And there is deep stratification in who enjoys access to justice. In particular, those who are economically worse off are substantially less confident that Africa's justice systems will serve them fairly.

Overall, the results are at best mixed across virtually all indicators. Of particular concern are low confidence in the integrity of the courts and widespread perceptions of unequal treatment under the law. Affordability and access to legal services also remain significant issues in most countries. Even in the continent's most democratic countries, many see judges as bowing to political influence.

One encouraging finding is that presidential respect for the rule of law may permeate the legal system and promote access to justice down to the local level. It is clear that work at all levels remains to be done to make justice accessible and build public confidence that the rule of law serves ordinary citizens as well as the powerful and well-connected.

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## Appendix

**Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 10 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds**

Country	Round 10 fieldwork	Previous survey rounds
Algeria	N/A	2013, 2015
Angola	March-April 2024	2019, 2022
Benin	Jan.-Feb. 2024	2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017, 2020, 2022
Botswana	July 2024	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019, 2022
Burkina Faso	N/A	2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2022
Burundi	N/A	2012, 2014
Cabo Verde	Aug.-Sept. 2024	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017, 2019, 2022
Cameroon	Feb.-March 2024	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021, 2022
Chad	Feb.-April 2025	N/A
Comoros	May-June 2025	N/A
Congo-Brazzaville	Sept.-Oct. 2024	2023
Côte d'Ivoire	Jan. 2024	2013, 2014, 2017, 2019, 2021
Egypt	N/A	2013, 2015
Eswatini	April-May 2025	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021, 2022
Ethiopia	N/A	2013, 2020, 2023
Gabon	April-May 2024	2015, 2017, 2020, 2021
Gambia, The	April-May 2024	2018, 2021, 2022
Ghana	Aug. 2024	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019, 2022
Guinea	May-June 2024	2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2022
Guinea-Bissau	July-Sept. 2025	N/A
Kenya	April-May 2024	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2019, 2021
Lesotho	March 2024	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2020, 2022
Liberia	July-Aug. 2024	2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2020, 2022
Madagascar	Oct.-Nov. 2024	2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2018, 2022
Malawi	Aug. 2024	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019, 2022
Mali	Oct.-Nov. 2024	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020, 2022
Mauritania	Dec. 2024-Jan. 2025	2022
Mauritius	April-May 2024	2012, 2014, 2017, 2020, 2022
Morocco	Feb.-March 2024	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021, 2022
Mozambique	July-Sept. 2025	2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2021, 2022
Namibia	March 2024	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019, 2021
Niger	N/A	2013, 2015, 2018, 2020, 2021
Nigeria	June-July 2024	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2022
São Tomé and Príncipe	Sept.-Nov. 2024	2015, 2018, 2022
Senegal	Feb.-March 2025	2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2021, 2022
Seychelles	Aug. 2024	2022
Sierra Leone	March-April 2025	2012, 2015, 2018, 2020, 2022
South Africa	June-Aug. 2025	2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018, 2021, 2022
Sudan	N/A	2013, 2015, 2018, 2021, 2022
Tanzania	June-July 2024	2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2021, 2022
Togo	July 2024	2012, 2014, 2017, 2021, 2022
Tunisia	Feb.-March 2024	2013, 2015, 2018, 2020, 2022
Uganda	Jan.-Feb. 2024	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2022
Zambia	July 2024	1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020, 2022
Zimbabwe	June 2024	1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2021, 2022

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