



# SIERRA LEONE: Violence Women and Elections

## ABSTRACT

Although the electoral system has a greater implication of participation of women and minorities in governance, 81% of women don't know which electoral system Sierra Leone is practicing. While nearly one in four (24%) Sierra Leoneans said they heard about violence in 16 bye elections in the last 24 months, 6% saw incidences of violence, and 1% said they actually experienced violence themselves.

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Ambasáid na hÉireann  
Embassy of Ireland

# Violence, Women and Elections

@Institute for Governance Reform

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## 1. Background

IGR collected opinions on Violence in Bye-Elections held within the last 18 months in Sierra Leone between July and September 2022. We utilised the experiences of citizens bye-elections over the last one year to understand the trends and patterns of electoral violence and the implications for women. While questions covered electoral violence generally, surveys also examined components in the Public Elections Act (PEA) that had potential implications for women in politics given our focus on advocating for an enabling environment for women in elections. This builds on our past SierraPolls and reports that have established a strong desirability on the part of citizens for women's political participation. We looked at citizens understanding of two electoral systems that have been discussed recently in Sierra Leone in light of the upcoming elections, the proposal for reserved seats for women that would have necessitated a constitutional amendment, and for 30% of parliamentary candidates to be women. These discussions stemming from the PEA overtook those around the GEWE Bill, and for some gender proponents, was seen as a potential mechanism to ensure that women would have 30% seats in parliament, outside of the GEWE Bill Provisions. Finally, the survey also looks at results on domestic violence and teenage pregnancy, which can also be seen as dealing with violence against women.

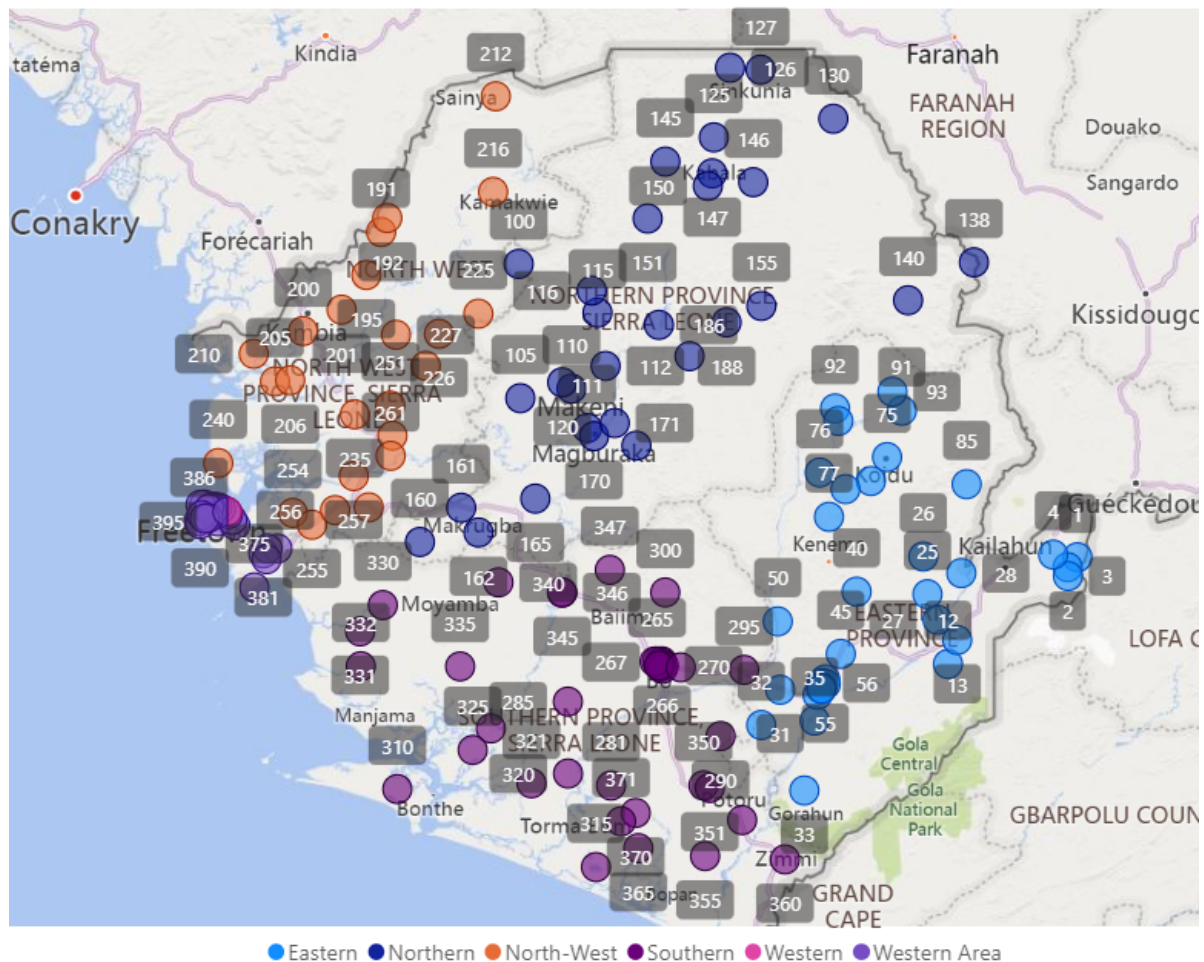


Figure 1: Locations (Wards) where IGR collected surveys

## 1. Analysis

### 1.1. Perceptions of Violence during bye-elections held 2020-2022

Violence is a typical phenomenon in elections in Sierra Leone, and women are disproportionately affected when electoral violence occur. To understand the nature, effects and implications of violence on women, the survey asked respondents generally about fears of violence, experiences of violence, and what forms this violence took, before asking whether violence was a particular concern for women running for political positions in their community. Respondents were asked to reflect on the most recent bye-elections in their community as a reference point.

Overall, concerns around violence seems low. Over 6 in 10 (64%) respondents said they were not afraid of violence when going out to vote (Figure 4). However, slightly more females expressed fear about voting than males (Figure 3).

A majority of respondents (68%) noted that the community was largely peaceful on the day of the bye-election. While nearly one in four (24%) said they heard about violence, only 6% actually saw incidences of violence, and just 1% said they actually experienced violence themselves (Figure 4). There was little difference by gender. The most common forms of violence are: people quarrelling (43%), fighting (16%), one group attacking another (16%) and arson – a house being burnt (6%) (Figure 5).

On the specific question of violence against women, the data showed that for a majority of respondents (67%), violence against women is not seen as a significant concern for the forthcoming elections. There was only a two-percentage point variation by gender – 66% of women compared to 68% of men said that violence is not an issue for women who run for political positions in their community (Figure 6).

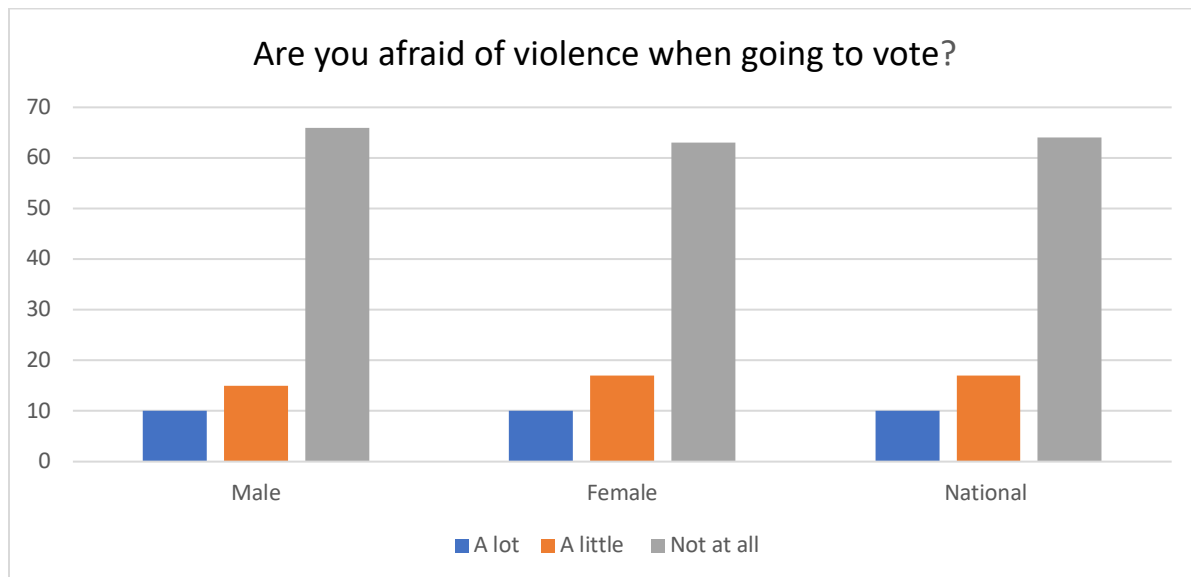
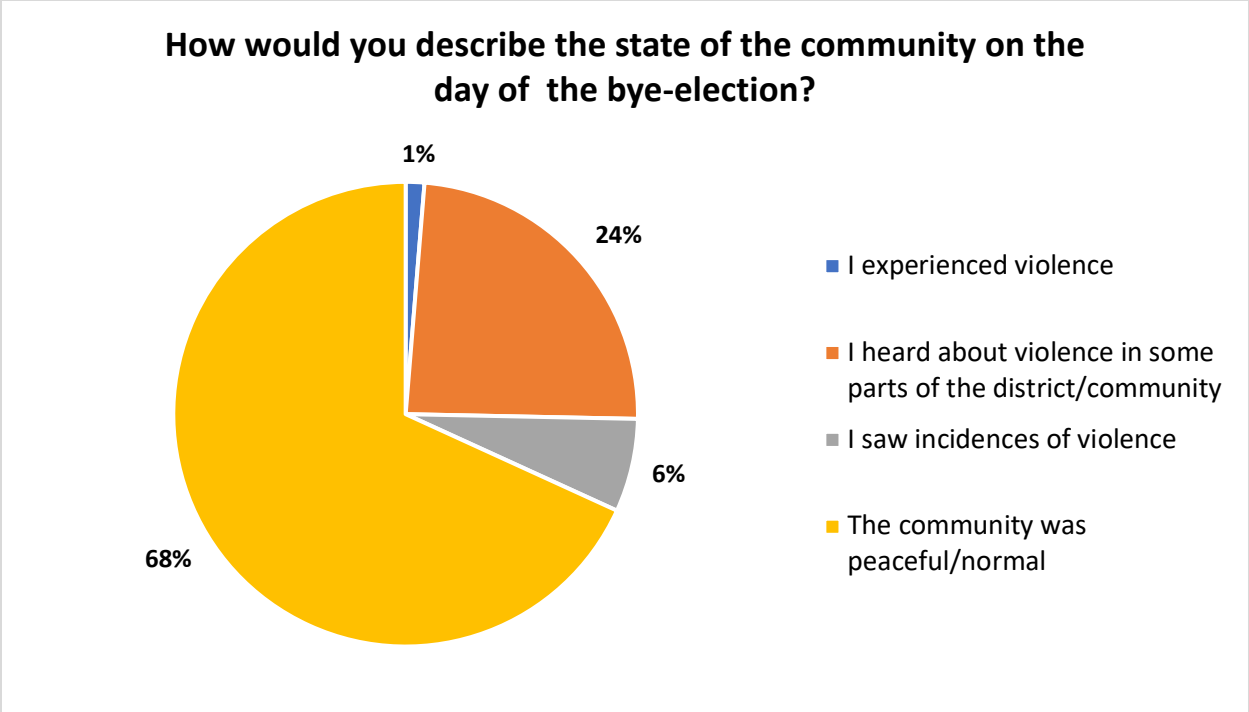
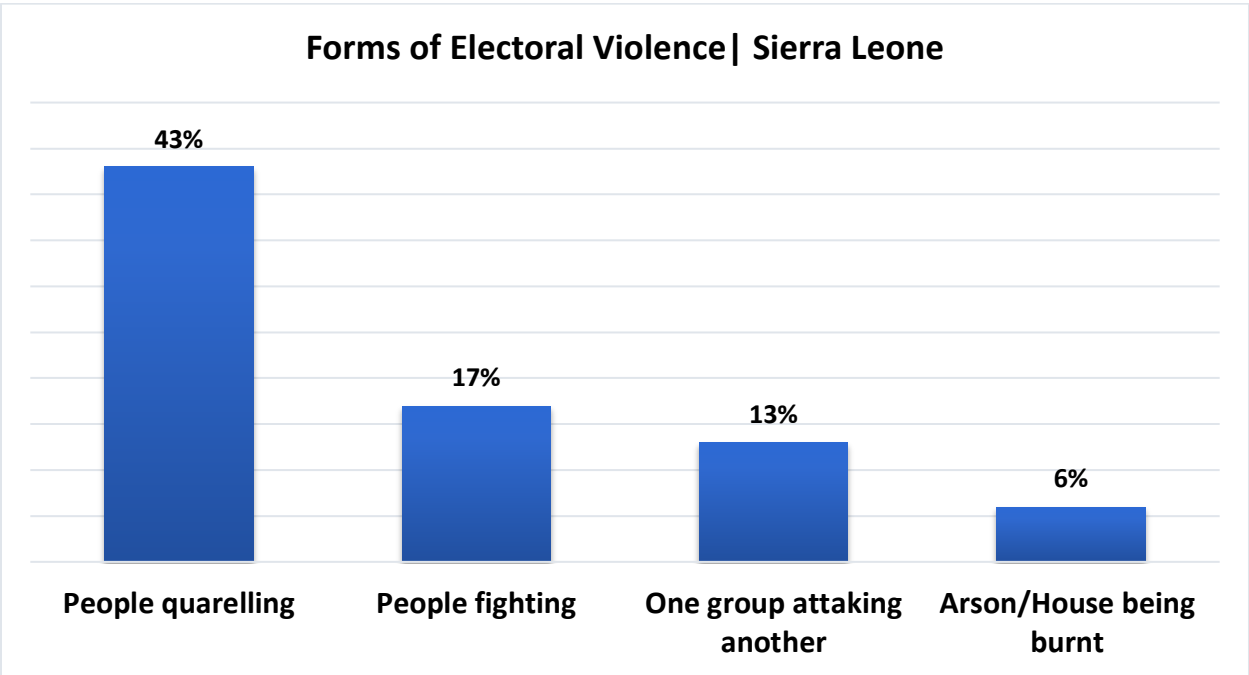


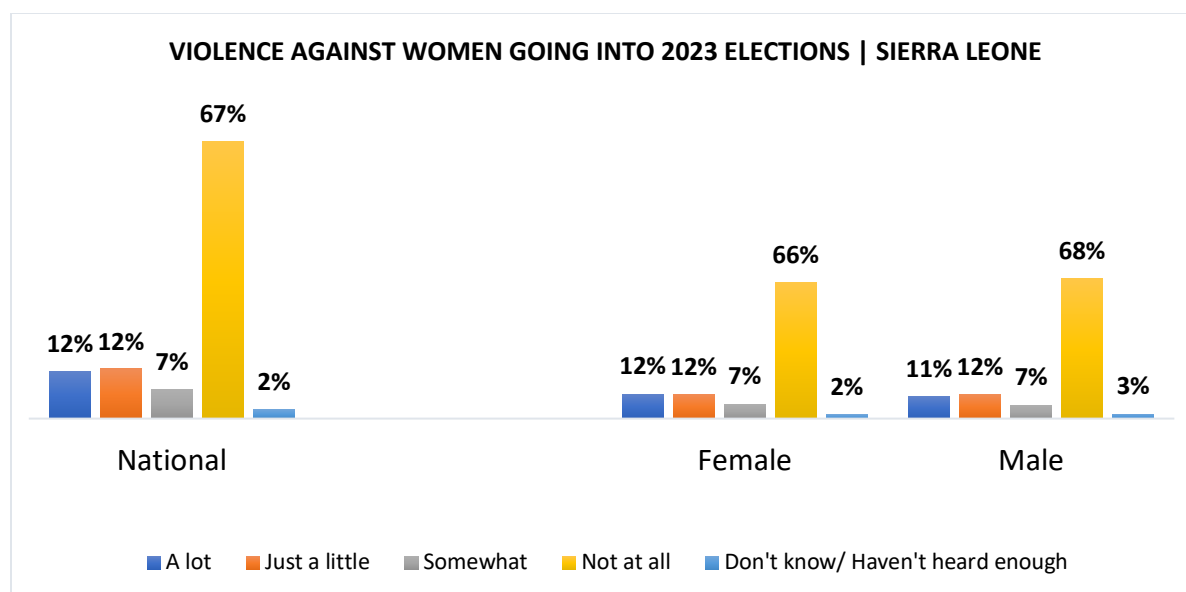
Figure 3: Respondents were asked: Were you afraid of violence when going to vote?



*Figure 4: Respondents were asked: how would you describe the state of the community on the day of the bye-election?*



*Figure 5: Respondents were asked: If you experienced or saw incidence of violence, what form did it take?*



*Figure 6: Respondents were asked: Going into the 2023 elections, do you think violence against women is an issue for women who run for political positions in your community?*

## 1.2. Public Elections Bill and Implications for Women's Political Participation

In addition to examining the potential of violence to impact women's political participation, survey questions also looked at the enabling environment or conditions that would increase women's political participation. In past SierraPolls, we have examined citizens' appetite to vote for women candidates,<sup>1</sup> as well as for legislation that would set aside reserved seats for women.<sup>2</sup> In a 2017 survey carried out before the elections, results showed that 72% of respondents would be willing to vote for a woman.<sup>3</sup> In a more recent survey focusing on citizens' perceptions of components of the GEWE Bill, Citizens overwhelmingly supported a 30% quota for women in parliament and in appointed positions, with 82.4% citizens saying they agree or strongly agree. Similarly, 8 in 10 respondents said that parties should have to nominate at least 30% women in every district.<sup>4</sup>

While prior SierraPoll research focused on the GEWE Bill, given the debate around the Public Elections Bill presented to parliament in July 2022, we wanted to ask additional questions to citizens on key provisions that had potential implications for women's political participation to inform the parliamentary debates and our advocacy to increase women's political representation. We considered two sections of the PEA in particular: the proposed provision for reserved seats for women; and Section 59 (2) calling for at least 1/3 of MP nominations to be women (the PR system).

<sup>1</sup> Institute for Governance Reform. 2017. Manifesto for Sierra Leone's 2018 Elections: Baseline Study of Citizens' Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices Toward Politics.

<sup>2</sup> Institute for Governance Reform. 2022. Gender Bill Opinions, 7 January 2022

<sup>3</sup> Institute for Governance Reform. 2017. Manifesto for Sierra Leone's 2018 Elections: Baseline Study of Citizens' Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices Toward Politics.

<sup>4</sup> Institute for Governance Reform. 2022. Gender Bill Opinions, 7 January 2022

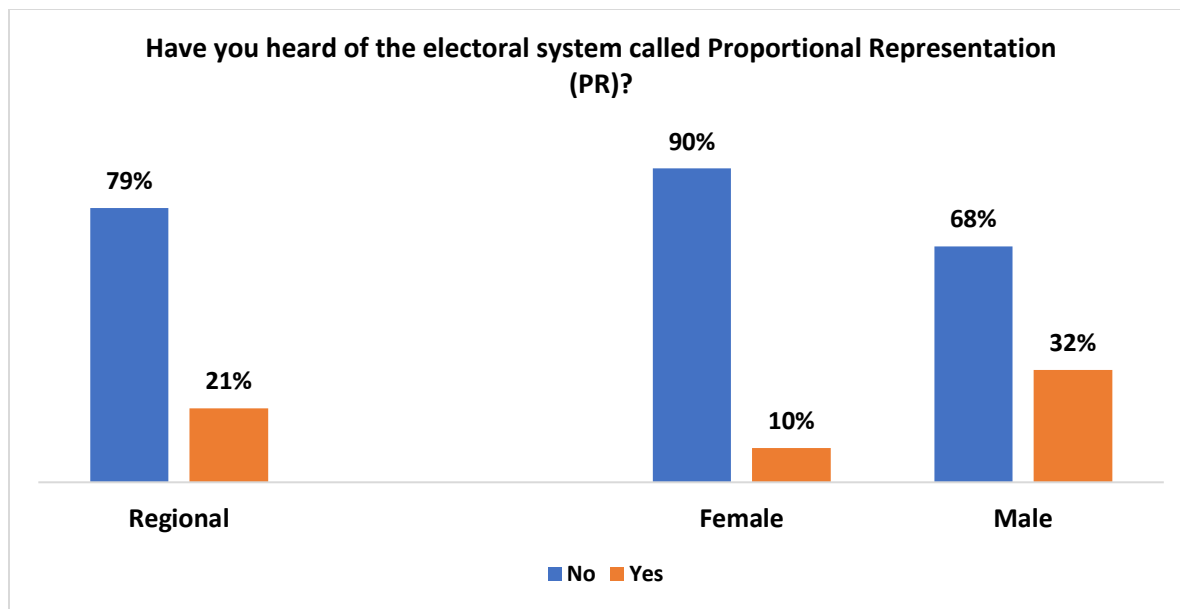
The reserved seats clause generated intense debate in parliament and among civil society leaders about which political system would be best for Sierra Leone: First Past the Post (FPTP), or Proportional Representation (PR). However, survey results show that citizens who would be the ones voting are mostly removed from these discussions. It appears citizens are out of touch with the conversations on the electoral system reform as large majorities of citizens say they have neither heard of PR system (79%) (Figure 9) nor FPTP (82%) (Figure 7).

Although knowledge of these systems is overall low, men are more familiar with them than women (Figures 8 and 9), and older respondents than younger ones (Figure 10). At least 32% of men had heard of PR compared to just 10% of women (Figure 8). Similarly, over one quarter (26%) of men had heard of FPTP compared to only 11% of women. More citizens (34%) aged 55 and above had heard of PR compared to respondents between 35-54 years (23%) and those aged 18-34 (14%) (Figure 9).

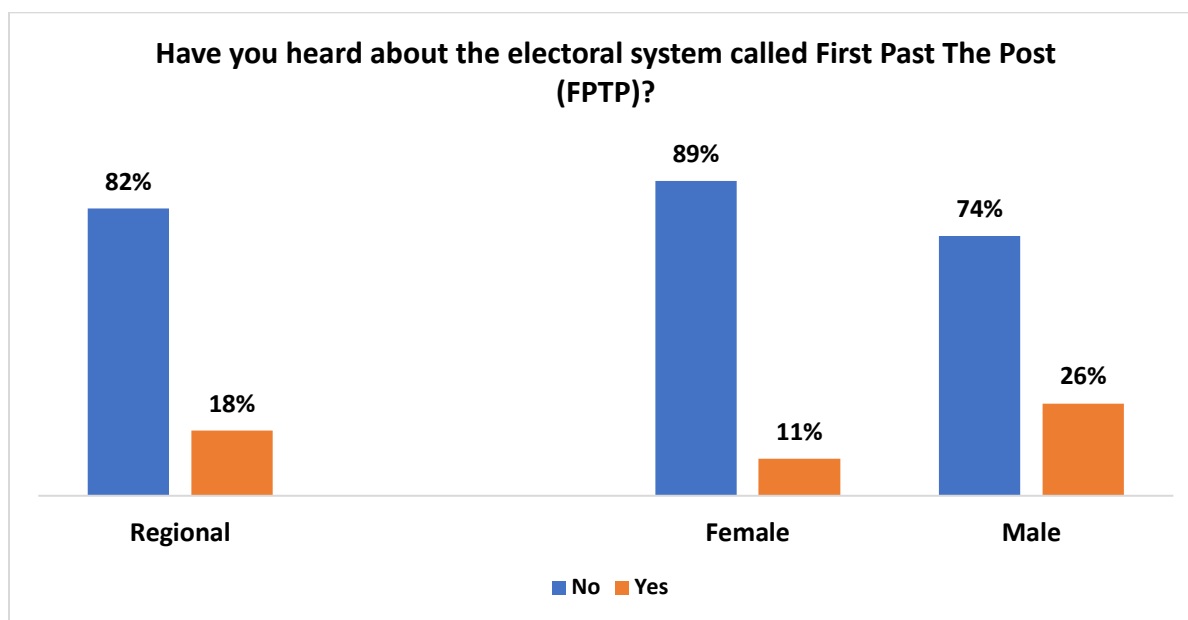
Not only had few respondents heard about FPTP and PR, but they are also largely unaware of which electoral system Sierra Leone is using. Nearly 3 in 4 respondents (74%) said they did not know which political system Sierra Leone was using, including 81% of women and 67% of men (Figure 10). Again, there were differences by age, with older respondents more likely to know the political system compared to younger ones (Figure 11). Even for those citizens who said they knew what system Sierra Leone had, 6% did not name it correctly, suggesting that lack of knowledge is even higher than these figures suggest (Figure 12).

While the reading of the bill had led to vigorous debates around which political system the country should have, it appears that these debates were limited to just elite voices. Most (70%) citizens had not heard these debates (Figure 13), and largely appeared not to care which system the country should adopt (Figure 14). It is clear that many citizens do not know about the differences inherent in the two political systems, with more research as well as sensitization necessary before citizens can make an informed judgement about the two.

Finally, respondents were also asked about whether 30% of seats should be reserved for women in the constitution, as suggested in initial drafts of the PEA. A majority of respondents (81%) agree that 30% of seats should be reserved for women in the constitution, with more women (83%) than men (79%) agreeing (Figure 15). This is in line with best practices that suggests that women's political participation should be enshrined not just within legislation, but within the constitution representing the highest law of the land.

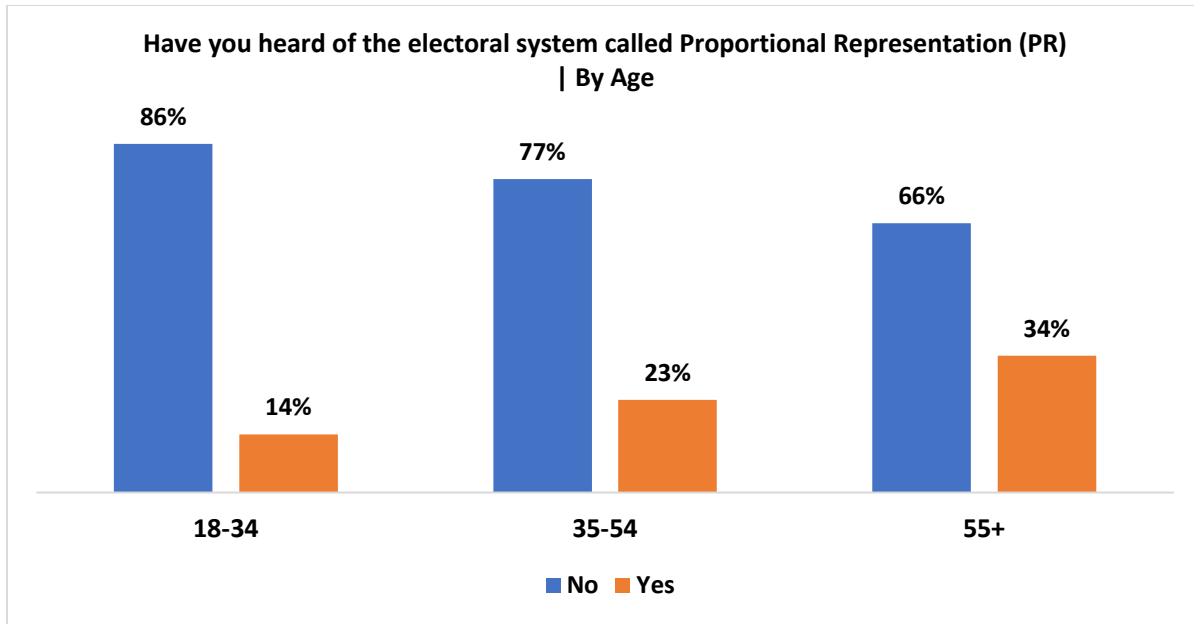


*Figure 7: Respondents were asked: Have you heard of the electoral system called Proportional Representation (PR)?*

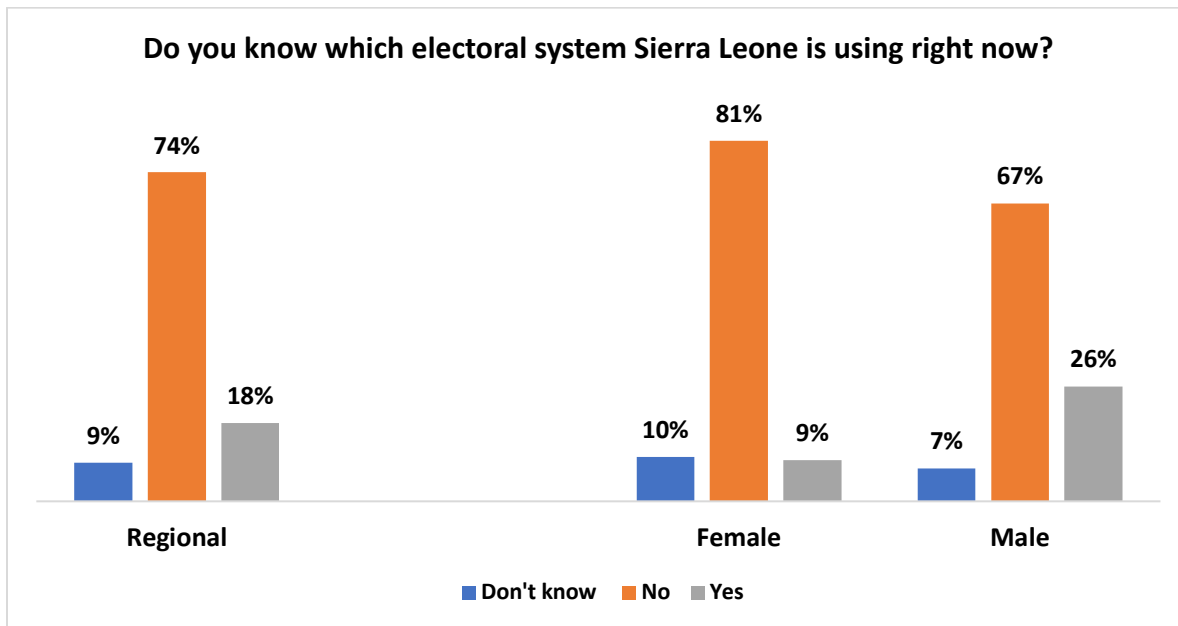


*Figure 8: Respondents were asked: Have you heard about the electoral system called First Past the Post (FPTP)?*





*Figure 9: Respondents were asked: Have you heard of the electoral system called Proportional Representation (PR)?*



*Figure 10: Respondents were asked: Do you know which electoral system Sierra Leone is using right now?*

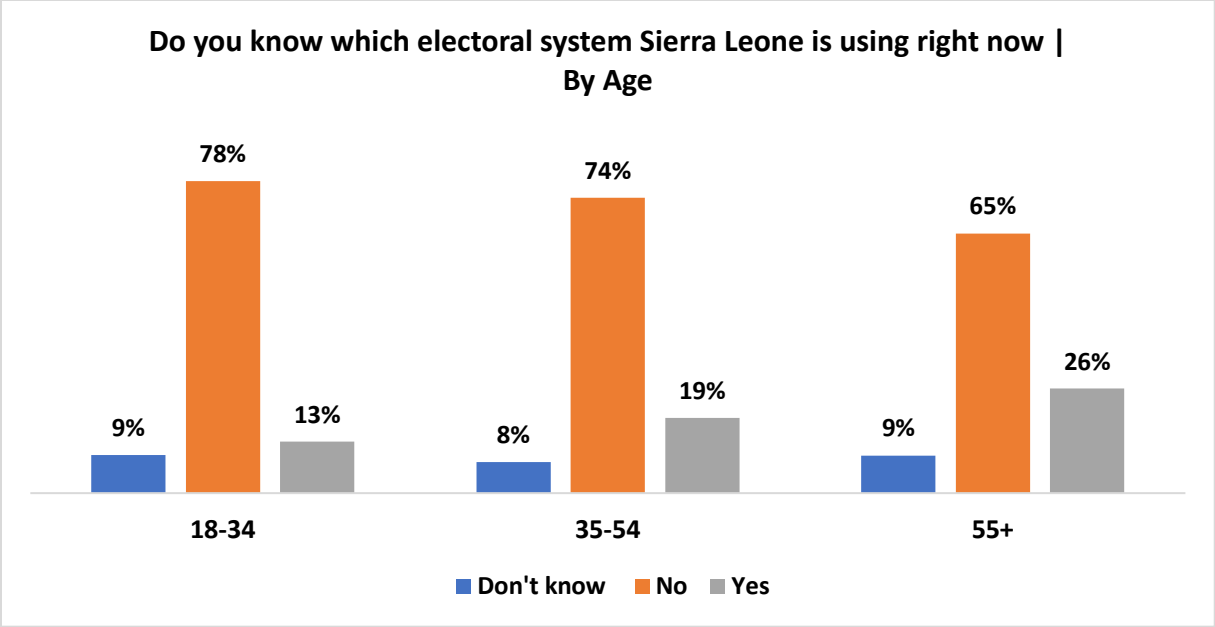


Figure 11: Respondents were asked: Do you know which electoral system Sierra Leone is using right now?

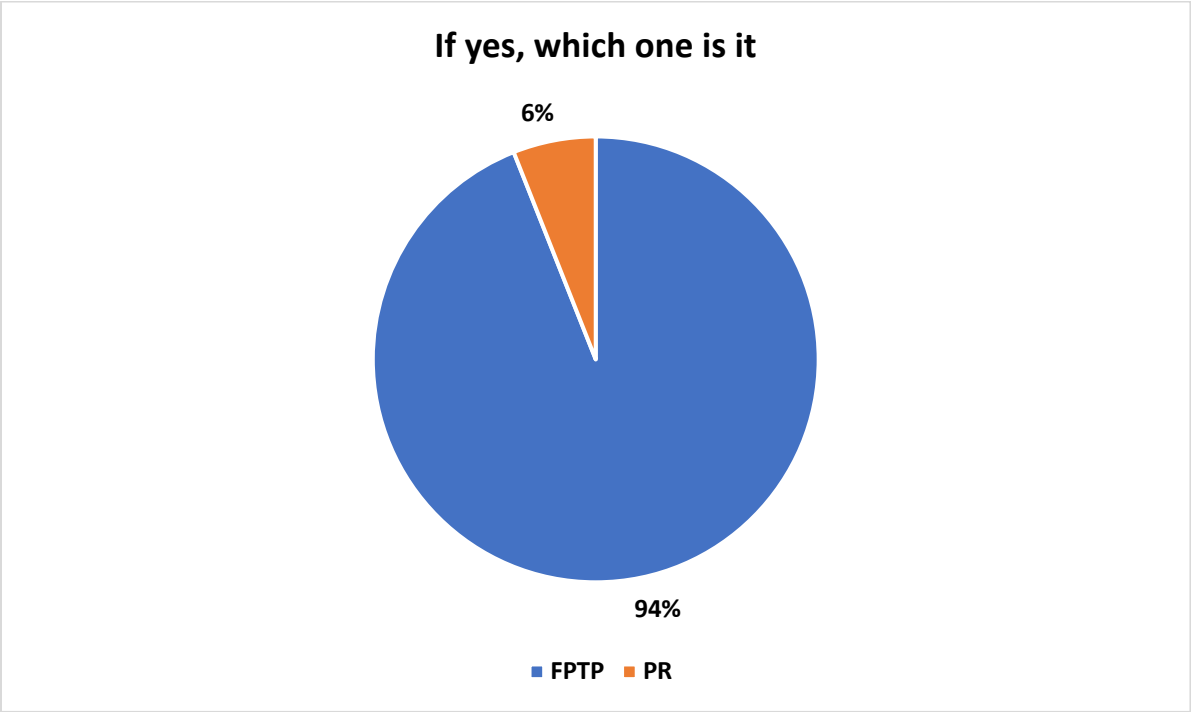
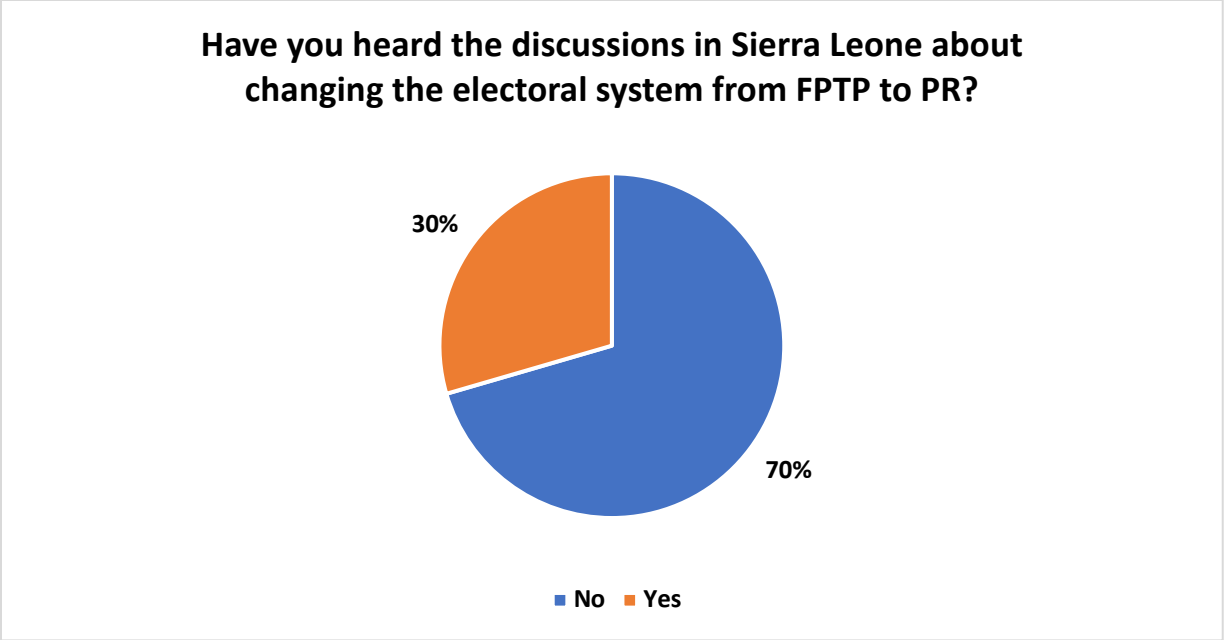
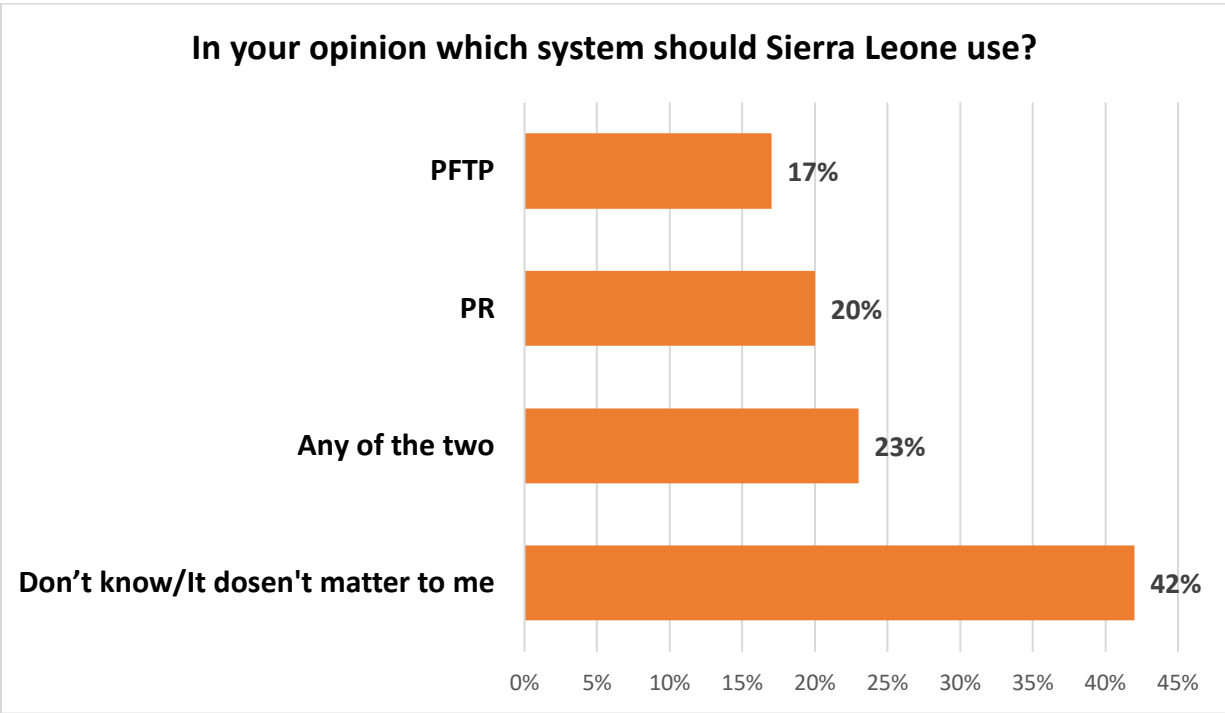


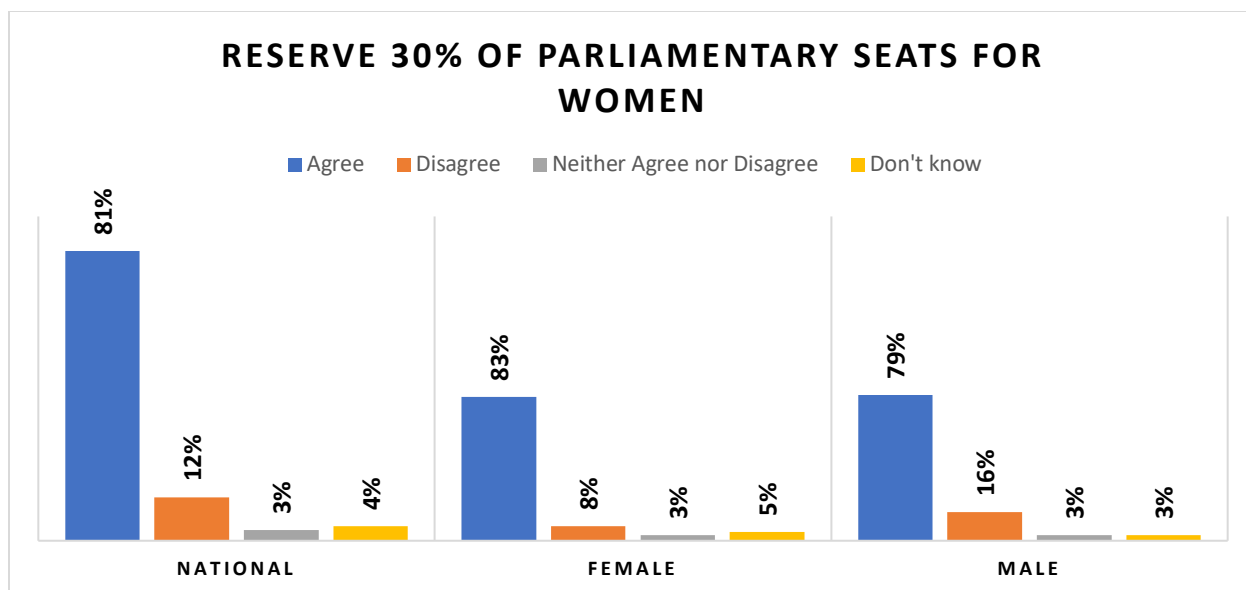
Figure 12: Respondents were asked: If yes, which one is it?



*Figure 13: Respondents were asked: Have you heard the discussions in Sierra Leone about changing the electoral system from FPTP to PR?*



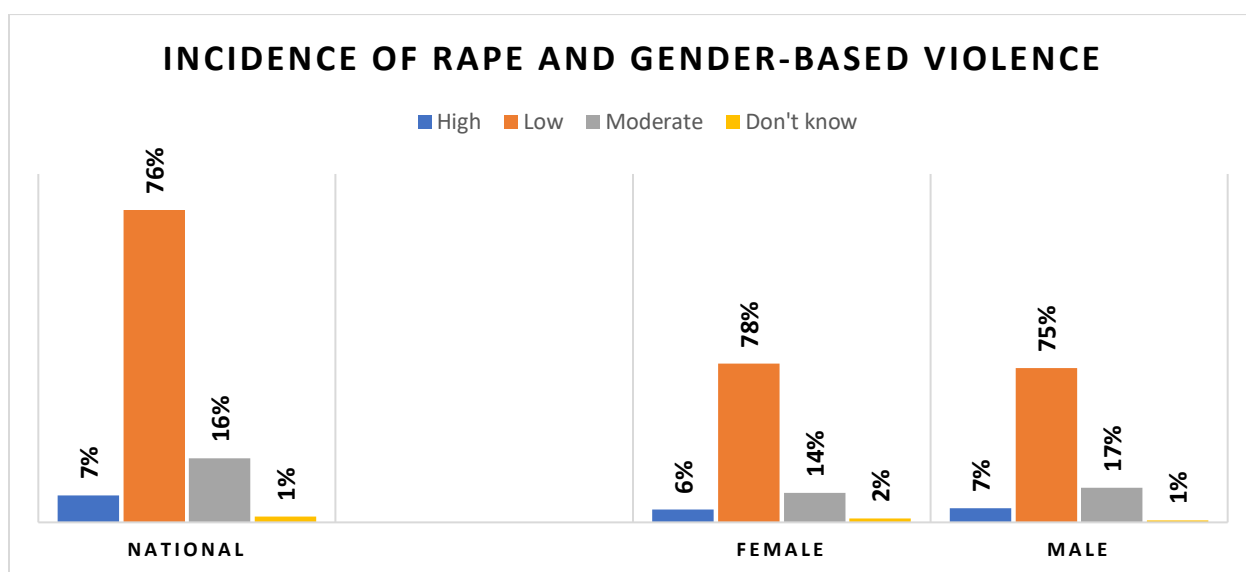
*Figure 14: Respondents were asked: In your opinion which system should SL use?*



*Figure 15: Respondents were asked: The Constitution of Sierra Leone should reserve 30% of parliamentary seats for women*

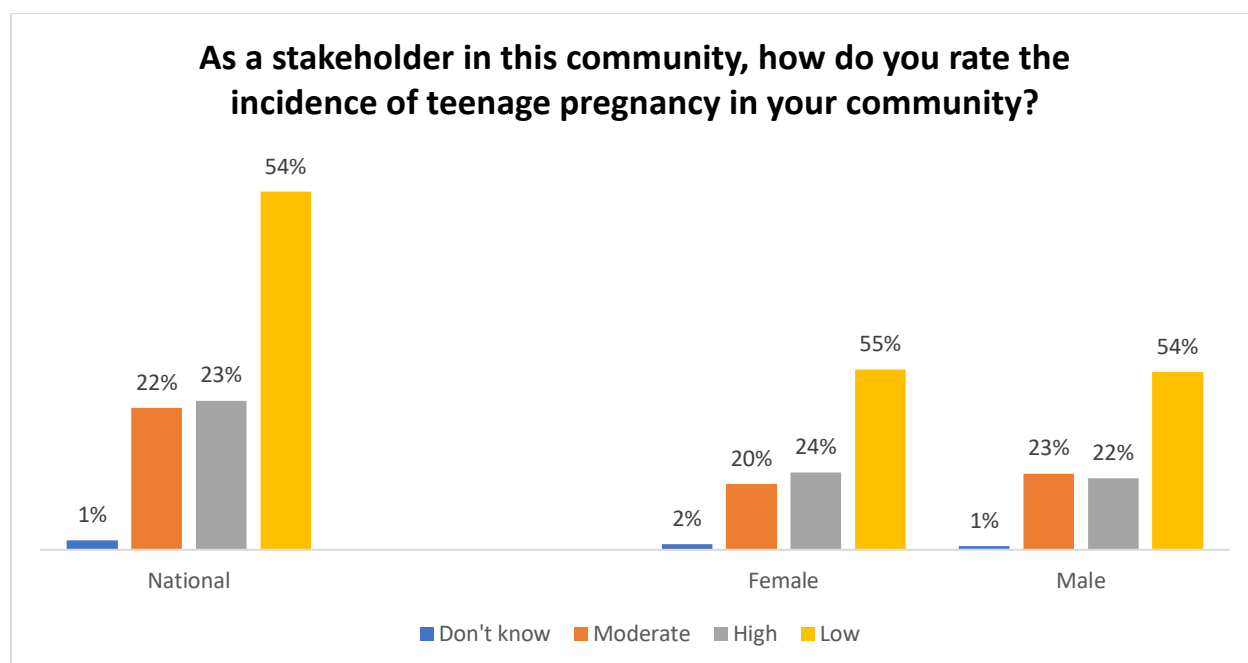
### 1.3. Violence against women generally

IGR has also been tracking violence against women generally as well as concerns about teenage pregnancy. We are including these results with this poll given its thematic focus on women more generally, and women and elections specifically. In line with past research, we continue to note that over  $\frac{3}{4}$  (76%) of respondents largely say that the incidence of rape and gender-based violence is low (Figure 19). Just over half (54%) of respondents ranked teenage pregnancy as high (Figure 20).



*Figure 16: Respondents were asked: As a stakeholder in this community, how do you rate incidence of rape and gender-based violence in your community?*





*Figure 17: Respondents were asked: As a stakeholder in this community, how do you rate incidence of rape, gender-based violence and teenage pregnancy in your community?*

## 2. Methodology

The survey data was collected through in-person interviews at all bye-election wards and some wards that were bye-elections did not take place. Data reported draws on two sets of surveys. In the first, conducted in July and September 2022, surveying 1,176 individuals. Both surveys provide a margin of error at the national level of  $\pm 3\%$ . IGR collected 8 observations from each ward that is within the sampling frame. The total number of wards covered in the survey was 147 within 94 constituencies.

IGR assigned survey collectors (i.e., “enumerators”) to at least 6 wards in each district. The enumerators then collected data from eight households around each ward. The enumerators collected data electronically using tablet computers and smart phones. The enumerators alternated respondents’ gender, used a random assignment for the member of the household to interview, and applied a “random walk” approach (usually interviewing every fifth house) to establish the distance between households.



3.