

What Papua New Guineans think about Sorcery Accusation Related Violence (SARV) and what the government should do about it

August 2026

Public opinion on SARV: filling the evidence gap

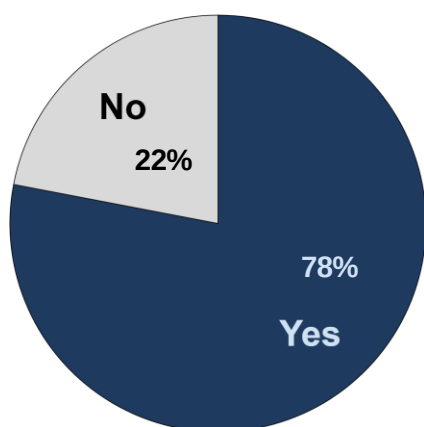
- Policymakers in PNG have had no national data on public attitudes towards SARV to inform their policymaking... *until now*.
- In May 2026, the Melanesian Institute (MI), based in Goroka, conducted a **nationwide survey of 2,000 ordinary Papua New Guineans, asking them in Tok Pisin about their views on SARV.**
- The people we surveyed live in villages, towns and cities across the National Capital District, Bougainville and all 20 Provinces of PNG. Approximately half were men and half were women. They were all aged 18 to 86. Three quarters of them were parents. Almost all of them (99%) were Christian, drawn from a wide range of mainline churches and other denominations.
- The survey was carried out via mobile telephone by experienced enumerators at our partner organisation for the project, Digicel.
- This document presents a headline analysis of what we heard, capturing authentic Papua New Guinean voices.

Before we begin, a note on definitions

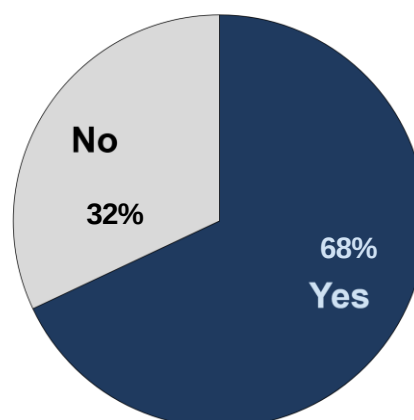
- It is important to distinguish carefully between:
 - Believing sorcery is real
 - Believing it is acceptable to accuse someone of sorcery
 - Believing it is acceptable to attack someone who has been accused of sorcery
- We made sure, when conducting this survey, to draw those distinctions explicitly and to be clear in each question whether we were asking about belief in sorcery, making accusations, or committing violence.
- In our headline analysis presented here, we strive for that same clarity. So, for example, the acronym 'SARV' is never used in this document to refer simply to belief in sorcery. Instead, it always refers to *violence* related to an accusation of sorcery.

Most Papua New Guineans believe in sorcery

Growing up, were you taught that sorcery exists and is real?



Do you now, personally, believe that sorcery exists and is real?



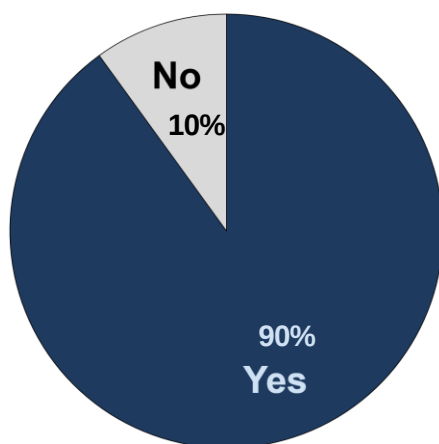
The majority of Papua New Guineans – from all walks of life – believe in sorcery. That is not the case in many other countries. For our friends overseas to understand the challenge posed by SARV here in PNG, it is crucial to recognise this fundamental difference.

In PNG, widely held beliefs in sorcery can complicate efforts at tackling SARV

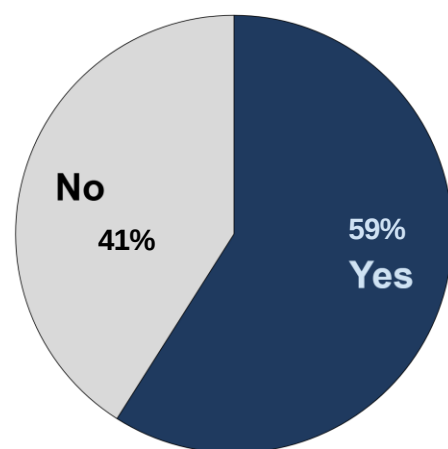
- Here are some of the views we heard directly from a minority of respondents:
 - *“Sorcery is real. There must be no law to stop people killing sorcerers.”*
 - *“Government must remove laws to protect sorcerers because sorcery is real.”*
 - *“Sorcery is real. We are all Papua New Guinean and we know what is going on in our country.”*
 - *“My idea is to hold the people who are doing sorcery and put them behind bars.”*
 - *“Sorcery is real and here to stay. Penalize the possessed people so they do not spread it.”*
 - *“To stop this we must get rid of the sorcerers.”*
 - *“Sorcery is real and the people who practise it kill a lot of innocent people. Government must deal with the sorcerers.”*
 - *“Most people say that the government is now supporting the sorcerers.”*
- Some respondents said we must tackle not only SARV perpetrators but ‘sorcerers’ too.
- Others support people making accusations of sorcery, provided the accusations are ‘true’.

When it comes to SARV, people's views are based on real experience

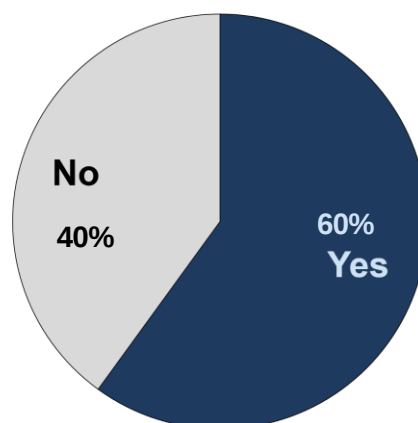
Does SARV sometimes
happen in the community
where you live?



Do you know anybody who
has ever attacked someone
else accused of sorcery?



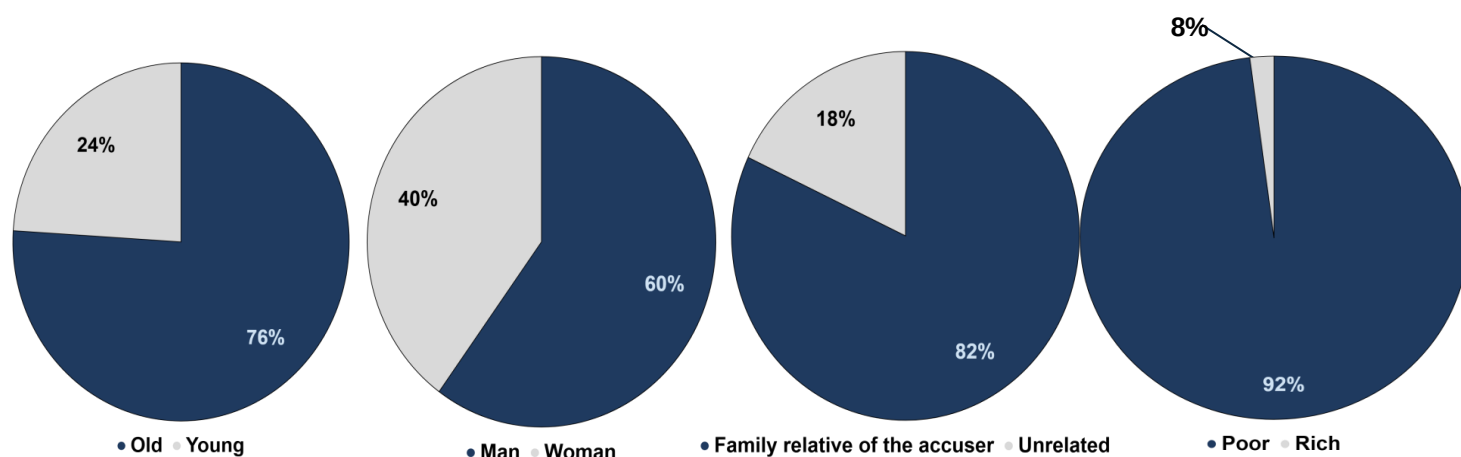
Do you know
anybody who has had to change where
they live because of SARV?



Most Papua New Guineans have some first-hand experience of SARV in their communities. They often know both perpetrators and victims. SARV is not a distant or theoretical concern.

Victims and survivors

What type of person would you say is most commonly accused of sorcery?

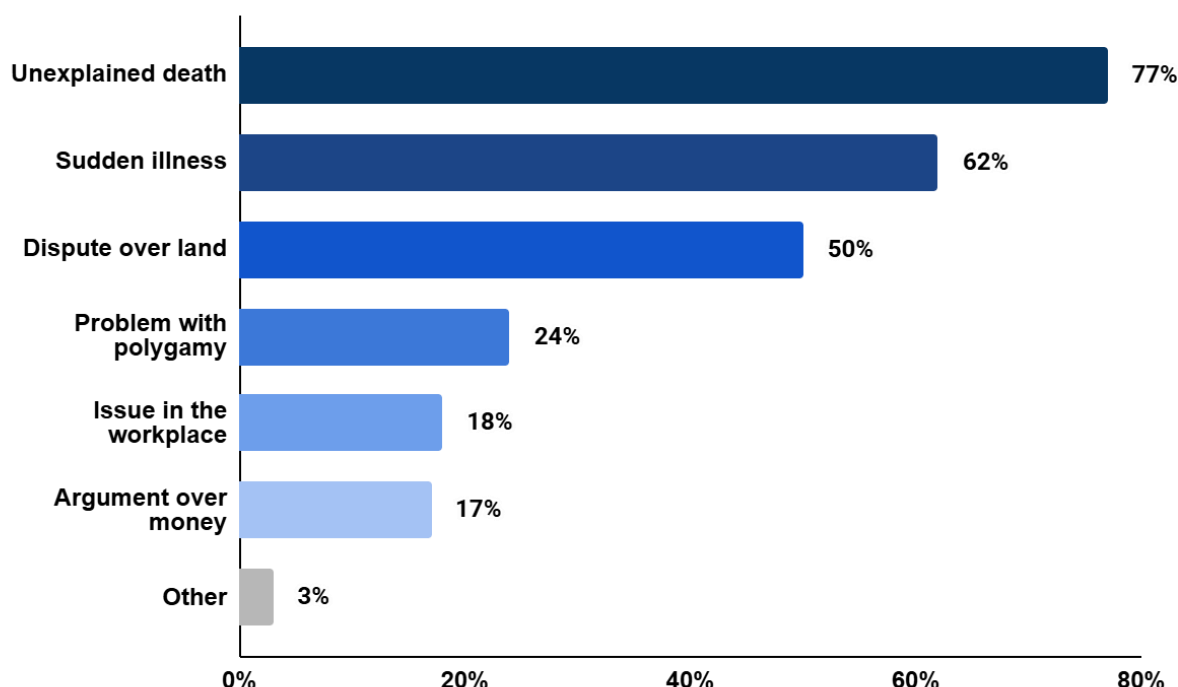


We were told that the people who are accused of sorcery are: both men and women; usually related to their accusers; mostly older; and almost always poor.

Triggers for sorcery accusations

Which of these situations would you say make accusations of sorcery more likely?

(multiple choices were possible)



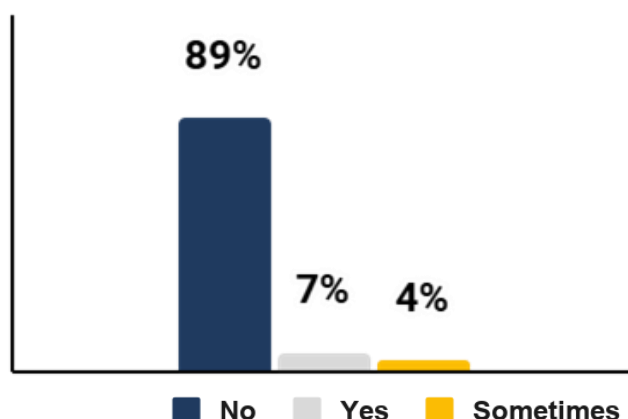
Respondents said the five most likely triggers for accusations of sorcery are:

- 1) Unexplained death
- 2) Sudden illness
- 3) Dispute over land
- 4) Problem with polygamy
- 5) Issue in the workplace

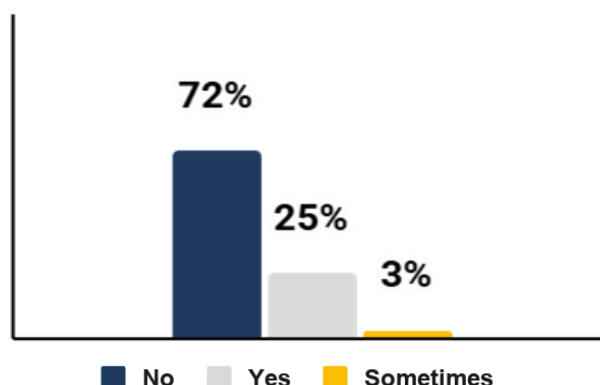
Ethical perspectives on SARV

Most people think SARV is immoral and violates Melanesian values. Almost everybody believes SARV is against Christian teaching.

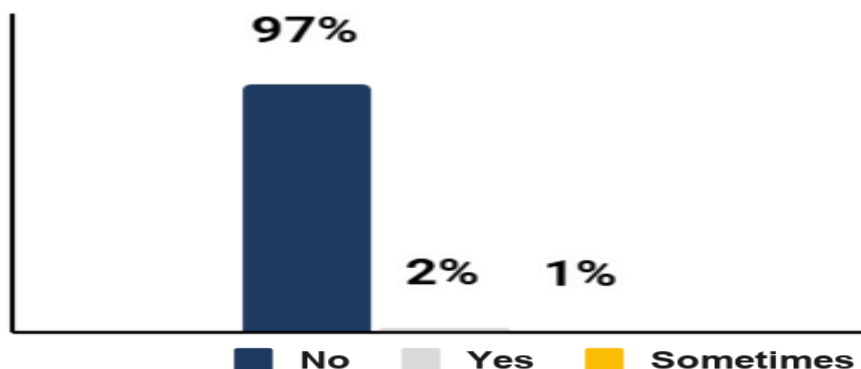
Do you think Sorcery Accusation Related Violence is morally right?



Do you think Sorcery Accusation Related Violence is in keeping with Melanesian values?



Do you think Sorcery Accusation Related Violence is Christian?

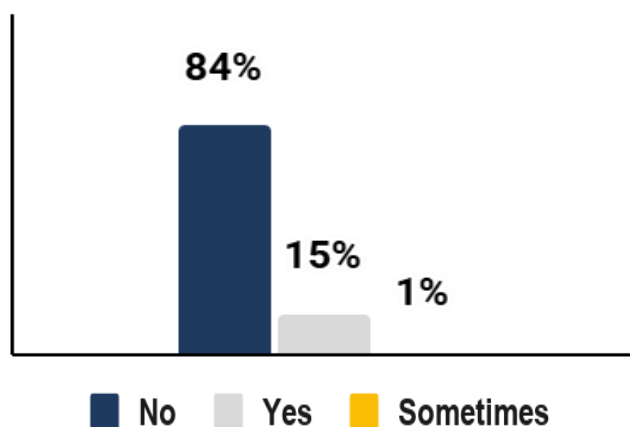


1 in 7 people still believe SARV is legal

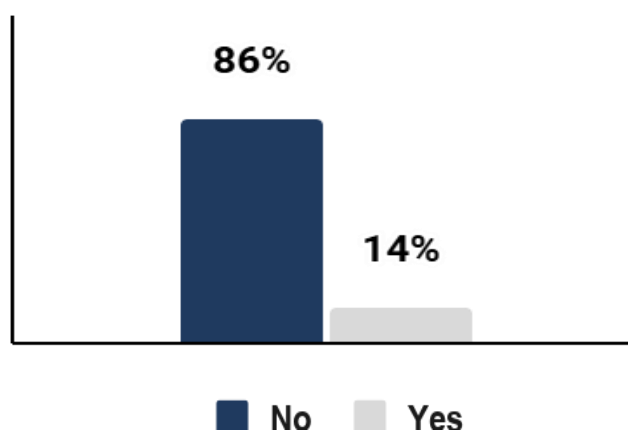
15% of people think (wrongly) it is legal to accuse someone of sorcery.

14% of people think (wrongly) it is legal to attack someone accused of sorcery.

Do you think it is legal in PNG to *accuse* someone of sorcery?

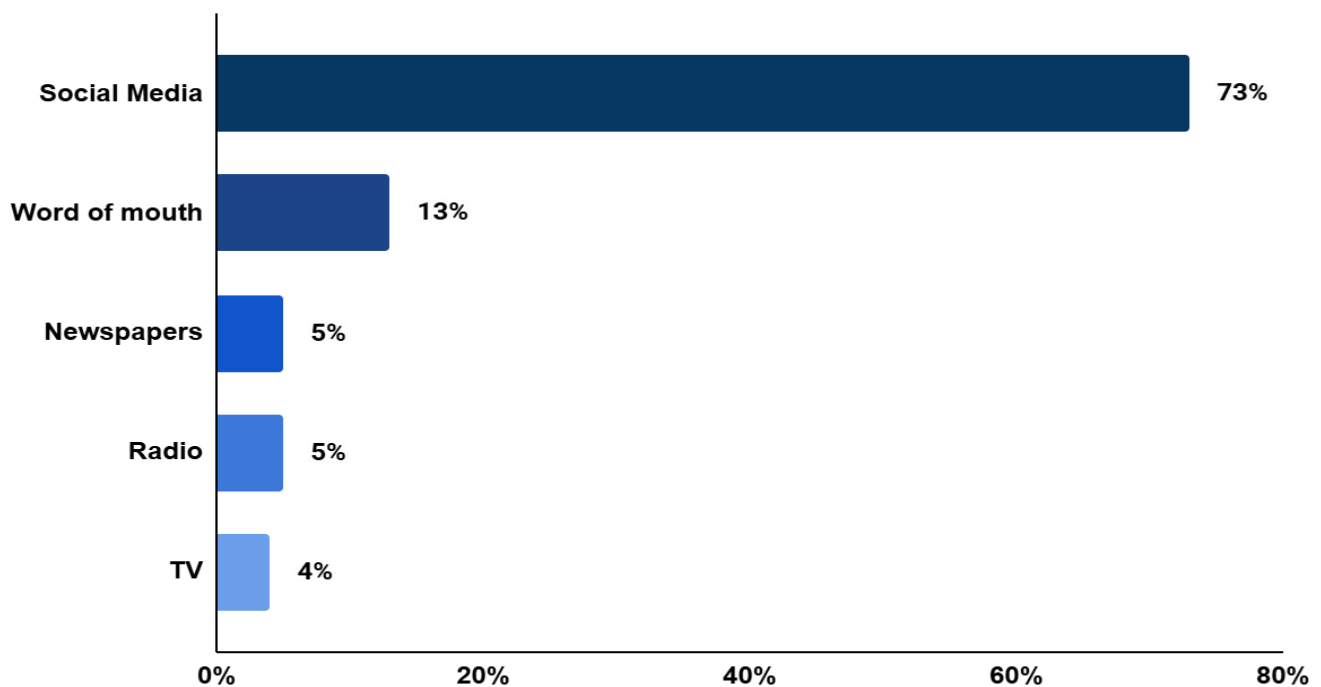


Do you think Sorcery Accusation Related *Violence* is legal?



Sources of information

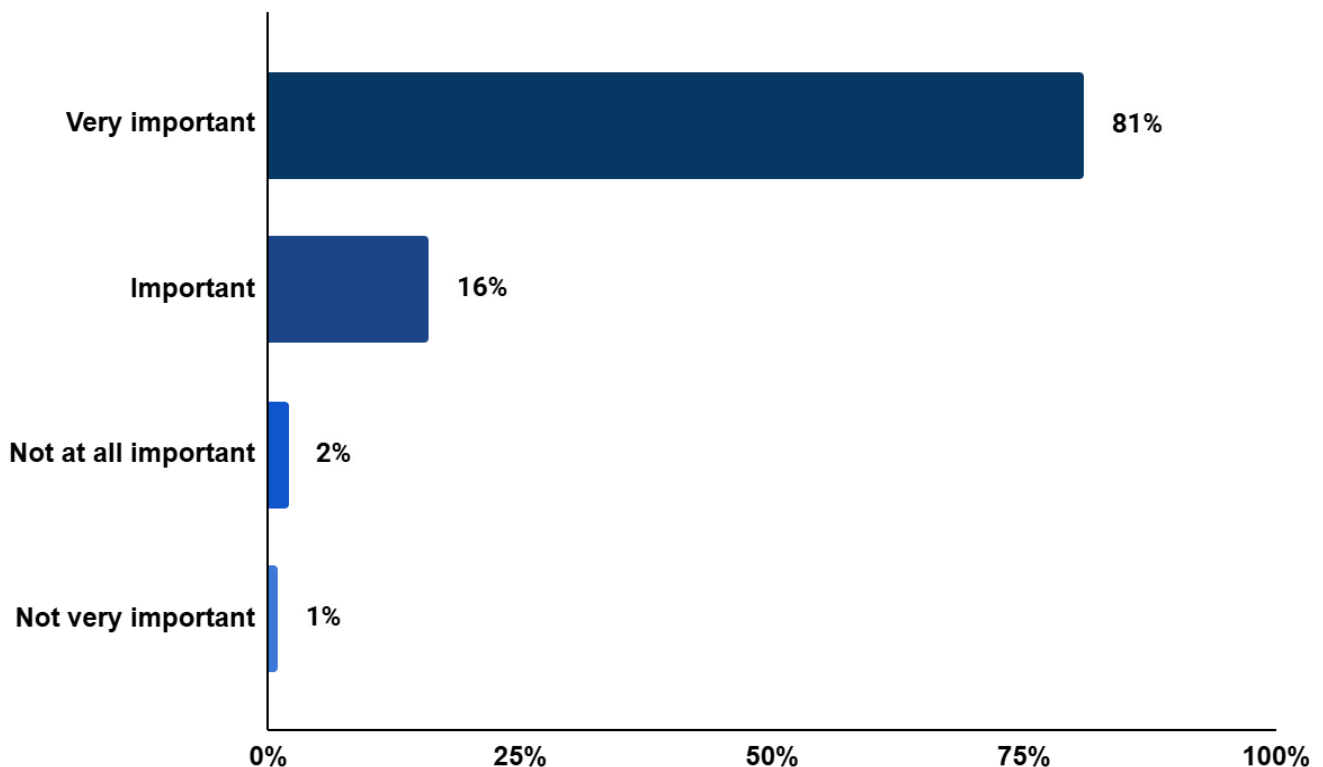
What is your main source of news and information?



3 in 4 people say Social Media is their primary source of news and information.

Papua New Guineans want SARV to be addressed

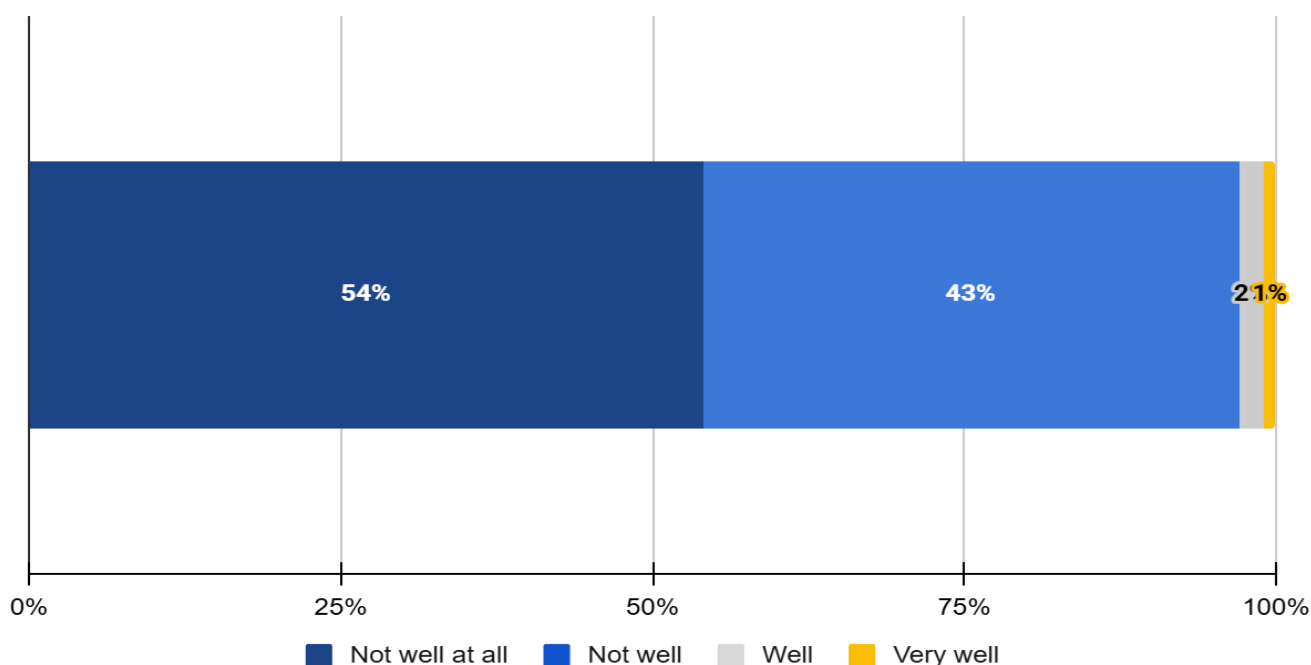
How important is it to you that PNG addresses the challenge of SARV effectively?



97% of people think it is 'important' or 'very important' that PNG addresses the challenge of SARV effectively.

Government's role in *preventing* SARV

Do you think the government has a role in *preventing* SARV?
If so, how well do you think it is currently playing that role?

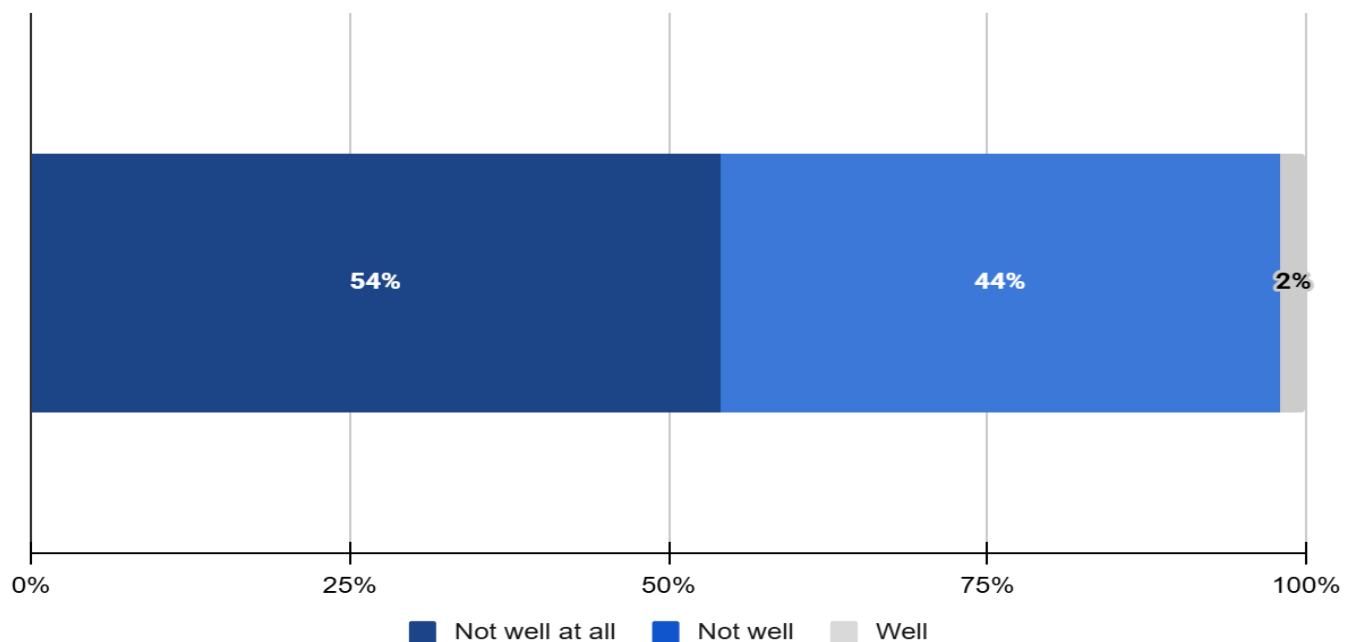


Almost everybody (98%) thinks the national government has a role to play in *preventing* SARV.

Of them, 97% say the government is currently playing that role 'not well' or 'not well at all'.

Government's role in *supporting* SARV survivors

Do you think the government has a role in *supporting* SARV survivors? If so, how well do you think it is currently playing that role?

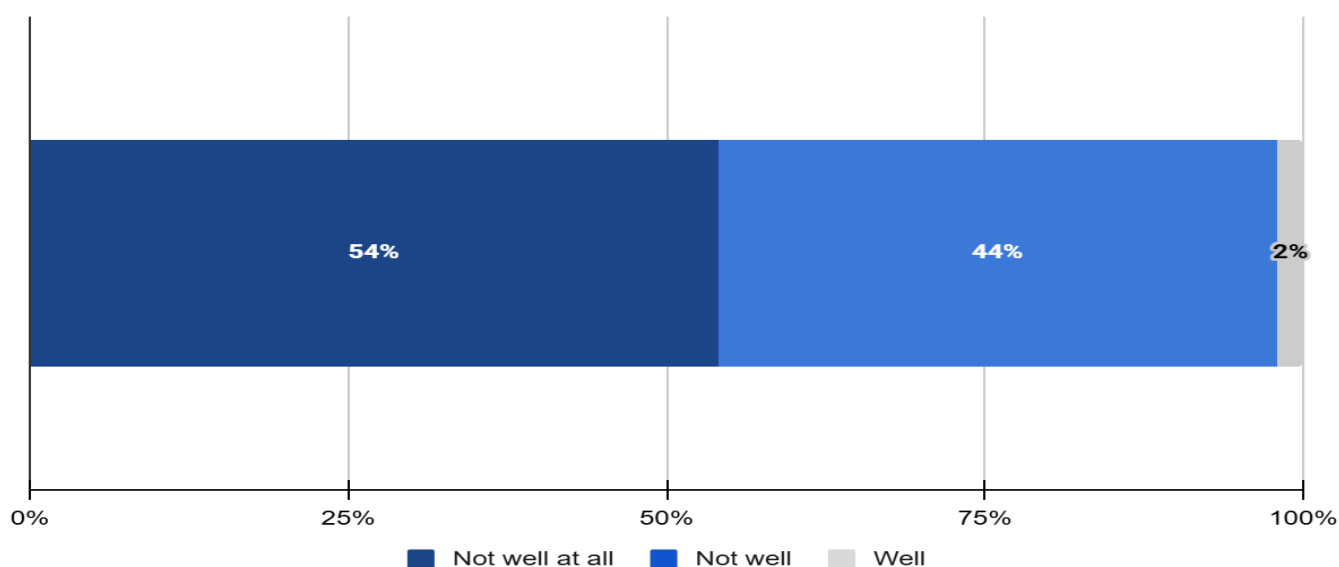


Almost everybody (98%) thinks the national government has a role to play in *supporting* SARV survivors.

Of them, 98% say the government is currently playing that role 'not well' or 'not well at all'.

Government's role in *securing justice* against SARV perpetrators

Do you think the government has a role in *securing justice* against SARV perpetrators? If so, how well do you think it is currently playing that role?



Almost everybody (98%) thinks the national government has a role to play in *securing justice* against SARV perpetrators. Of them, 98% say the government is currently playing that role 'not well' or 'not well at all'.

What Papua New Guineans say the government should do to tackle SARV

- To address SARV in PNG, Papua New Guineans think the government should:
 - Provide the funding needed to implement its SARV National Action Plan (99%)
 - Do public health awareness work to promote wider understanding of medical causes of illness and death (99%)
 - Establish police-led SARV rapid response teams in the provinces most affected by SARV (99%)
 - Do legal awareness work to promote wider understanding of the law on SARV (98%)
 - Include teaching against SARV in the school curriculum (98%)
 - Provide funding for more safehouses exclusively for SARV survivors (90%)
 - Ensure all clinics, hospitals and healthcare facilities provide free medical treatment for SARV survivors (90%)
 - Ban the posting on social media of photos and videos of SARV (86%)
- When asked for any other ideas for tackling SARV more effectively, people suggested:
 - Enforce existing laws against SARV properly
 - Deploy more police in rural posts
 - Support churches to address SARV in remote communities

Conclusion

- Widespread belief in sorcery means that tackling SARV in PNG is not simple or straightforward.
- However, our survey shows that levels of public support for trying to address SARV are extremely high, right across the country.
- Almost every Papua New Guinean thinks that the government should do more to deal with SARV. In particular, they say it should provide funding to implement its recently revised SARV National Action Plan. This would boost efforts to tackle SARV in multiple policy areas, including health, criminal justice, policing and education.
- At the Melanesian Institute, we have long argued that SARV violates Papua New Guinean law, Melanesian values and Christian teaching. This survey shows, for the first time, that the vast majority of Papua New Guineans agree with us. Now, we all need our government's backing to step up the fight against SARV. It should start by publishing, funding and implementing the SARV National Action Plan.

About the Melanesian Institute

- MI is an independent, ecumenical research and training institute based in the Eastern Highlands of PNG. Our team studies social, cultural, religious, political and development issues. MI is one of the country's longest-running and most-respected applied social research institutions, with deep roots in anthropological enquiry, community fieldwork and public policy engagement.
- MI has a track record of 45 years of research, [publications](#) and advocacy on SARV.
- Website: www.melanesianinstitute.network
- Social media:
 - Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/melanesian.institute>
 - Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/melanesianinstitute/>
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