

Afghanistan crisis update

Women and girls in displacement

Factsheet III - May 2023



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency



**WOMEN
COUNT**

The fall of Afghanistan to Taliban rule in August 2021 continues to contribute to the deterioration of the rights and freedoms of Afghan women and girls¹. Existing limitations on their freedom of movement and access to secondary education, livelihoods and work have worsened in the past few months, as the erosion of freedom has extended further into the suspension of university education for women and the bans on female staff working with humanitarian organizations, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and UN Agencies. This continues to have significant consequences on women's livelihoods and limits the delivery of protection and humanitarian assistance for women and girls in most parts of the country. Available data are presented in this factsheet to shed light on some of the specific challenges that Afghan women in displacement are already facing. In particular, evidence shows that women remain in displacement longer than men, they struggle disproportionately to access livelihoods to support themselves and their children, and, given the lack of alternatives, they tend to cope with not having insufficient income by reducing food intake.

This factsheet is the third in a series that examines the changing situation in Afghanistan. It was produced by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), using 2022 data from UNHCR and other sources as indicated. Given the rapidly shifting situation in the country, estimates will change over time. Trends or events taking place after December 2022 will be reflected in future factsheets of this series. As such, the majority of 2022 data presented in this factsheet were collected prior to the ban on women NGO workers issued by the De Facto Authorities on 24 December 2022, as well as the order issued to ban Afghan women employees of the United Nations staff from working throughout Afghanistan in April 2023.

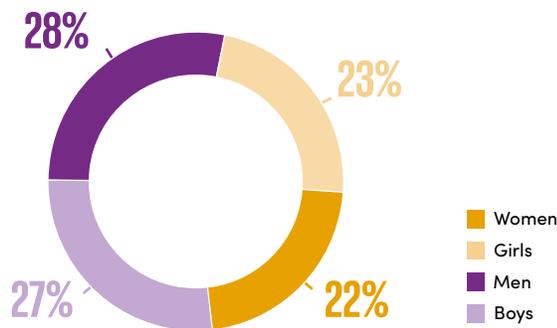
In late December 2022, the Taliban issued two consecutive orders to further restrict the rights of women and girls – an indefinite banning of university education for female students and a restriction of female non-profit humanitarian organization staff from working, which was further extended to female staff of UN Agencies on 4 April 2023. The ban on university education affects more than 100,000 women and girls attending public and private institutions. The other bans not only deprive female humanitarian workers of their rights and livelihoods, but also raise significant barriers to support women, girls and marginalized groups on the ground. While female staff in the health and education sectors have since been allowed to return to work, many other activities remain suspended or hindered by having to adjust implementation modalities to meet the operational requirements imposed by the bans. UNHCR and UN Women are strongly concerned about the current situation and the impact of the bans on the protection of women and girls. In coordination with other actors, both agencies are looking at workarounds to ensure that they reach women and girls to the fullest possible extent.

Men and boys are more likely to flee to neighbouring countries

An estimated 55 per cent of refugees that arrived in Iran and Pakistan from Afghanistan in 2021 and 2022 were men and boys, a disproportionate share considering men and boys make up 51² per cent of the total Afghan population (**figure 1**). The bulk of these refugees (55 per cent of those arriving in Pakistan and 43 per cent of those arriving in Iran) moved as households³ with two or more adults and children, although in many instances, single⁴ women and single men also moved across the border. Women were more likely than men to take children with them when fleeing (46 per cent of women who fled to Pakistan without a partner brought children along, compared to 10 per cent of men while these figures for refugees who fled to Iran were 37 per cent and 7 per cent, respectively) (**infographic 1**). These differences in household composition often result in increased challenges for women to access sufficient income, food and other resources to sustain their families.

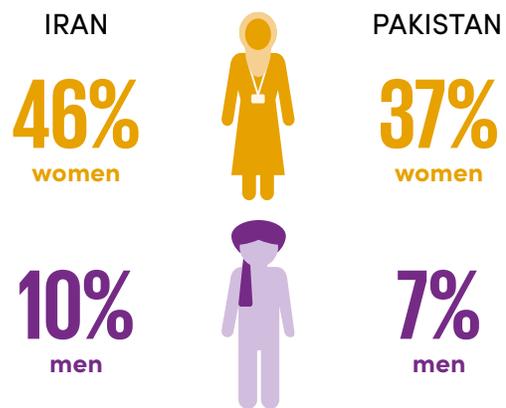
FIGURE 1

Proportion of women, men, girls and boys among arrivals in Iran and Pakistan, December 2022



INFOGRAPHIC 1

Who fled with children?



Women are more likely than men to cite causes of displacement other than armed conflict

An 88 per cent of Afghans who remained internally displaced in 2022 cited armed conflict as the key reason for their displacement. Despite the de-escalation of the armed conflict since August 2021, the situation in Afghanistan continues to claim numerous lives, and the country and its neighbours remain among the world's most affected by terrorism.⁵ According to Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED),⁶ there were 4,014 fatalities in Afghanistan during 2022, among which 2,416 were

3. According to UNHCR, a household is defined as a group of persons who share the same living accommodation/shelter and food. The household may share sources of income with others, but make independent expenditure decisions (indicating they are an independent household). The household has separate and independent forms of accommodation (which could be as small as a room in a shared house) and have a separate food budget.

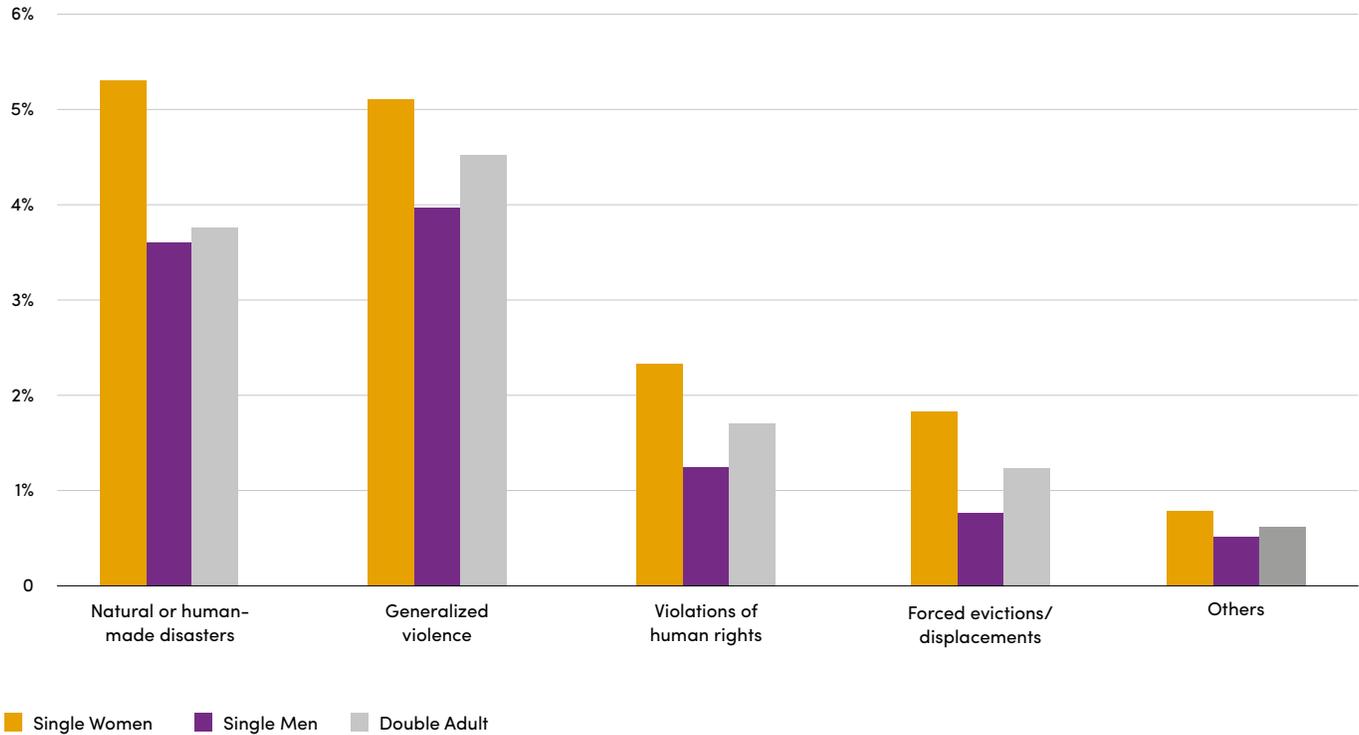
4. Single women and single men refers to households in which only one adult was present, regardless of their marital status.

5. In 2023, Afghanistan was ranked as the country most affected by terrorism for the fourth consecutive year, according to the Global Terrorism Index.

caused by battles, 839 by explosions/remote violence⁷, 728 by violence against civilians, 24 by riots and a handful by protests. Furthermore, there are an increasing number of accounts of the Taliban’s repression and violence, especially towards women. As a result, among those who fled without a partner, women have been more likely than men to cite reasons for displacement other than conflict, such as natural and human-made disasters, violence, violations of human rights and forced evictions (figure 2).

FIGURE 2

Proportion of people who cited reasons for internal forcible displacement other than armed conflict, by type of household



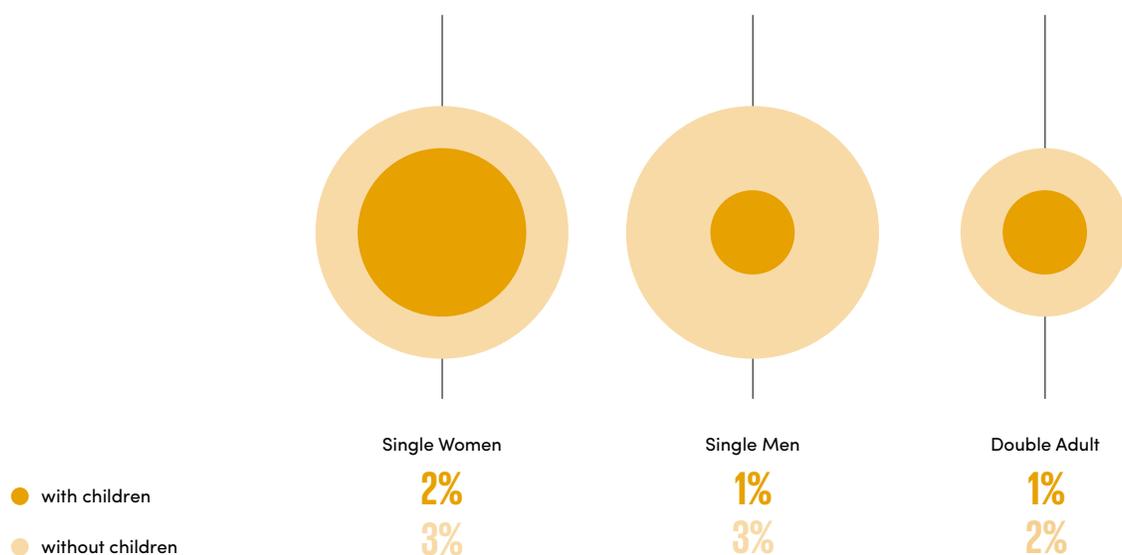
Note: The graph showcases proportions of double adult households, single men households, and single women households, respectively, that chose each of the key reasons. In absolute figures, the total number of double adult households was larger for all categories.

Double adult households make up the bulk of the internally displaced population in Afghanistan, but the likelihood of citing reasons other than armed conflict was higher among households without men. For instance, women fleeing without a male partner were likely to cite forced evictions as a key reason. Fleeing with children reduced slightly the likelihood of experiencing forced evictions (figure 3), both for women and for men. Ethnicity data are not available for disaggregation, but accounts from the ground indicate that ethnic minorities may have been targeted for forced eviction, including for the purposes of redistributing land among regime supporters.⁸

7. ACLED classifies Explosions/Remote violence events as asymmetric violent events aimed at creating asymmetrical conflict dynamics by preventing the target from responding. A variety of tactics are considered Explosions/Remote violence including bombs, grenades, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), artillery fire or shelling, missile attacks, heavy machine gun fire, air or drone strikes, chemical weapons, and suicide bombings.

FIGURE 3

Proportion of internally displaced population fleeing as a result of forced eviction, by type of household



Note: The graph showcases proportions of adult households, single men households, and single women households, respectively, that chose forced eviction as a key reason for their displacement. In absolute figures, the total number of double adult households was larger.

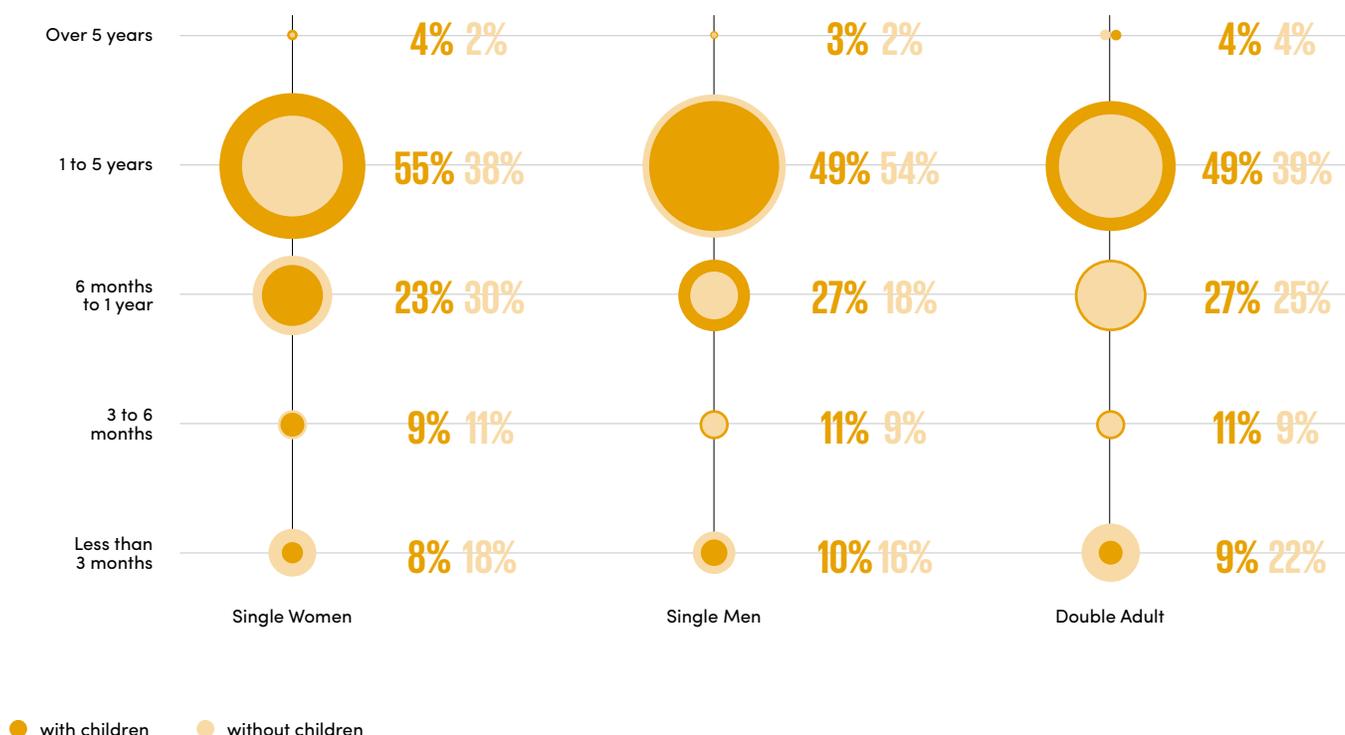
Women remain in internal forcible displacement longer than men, especially those that flee with children but without a partner

Most internally displaced people remain in displacement for years. An estimated 55 per cent of women who fled without adult partners but who took their children with them indicated that they had been in displacement from one to five years, compared to 49 per cent of men in the same situation and 38 per cent of single adults without children (**figure 4**).

Single adult women overall were also more likely than single men to remain in displacement for more than five years. Besides key challenges associated with maintaining livelihoods in displacement settings and reintegration in host communities, displaced people also face additional challenges such as heightened risk of gender-based violence. Despite this, lack of access to basic services, particularly access to health, education and other critical services in their places of origin still prevent many from returning, especially women and men with children, who were overall more likely to remain in displacement longer than childless adults. The recent bans on women humanitarian workers, may further exacerbate barriers to access basic services for displaced populations.

FIGURE 4

Average length of displacement, by household composition

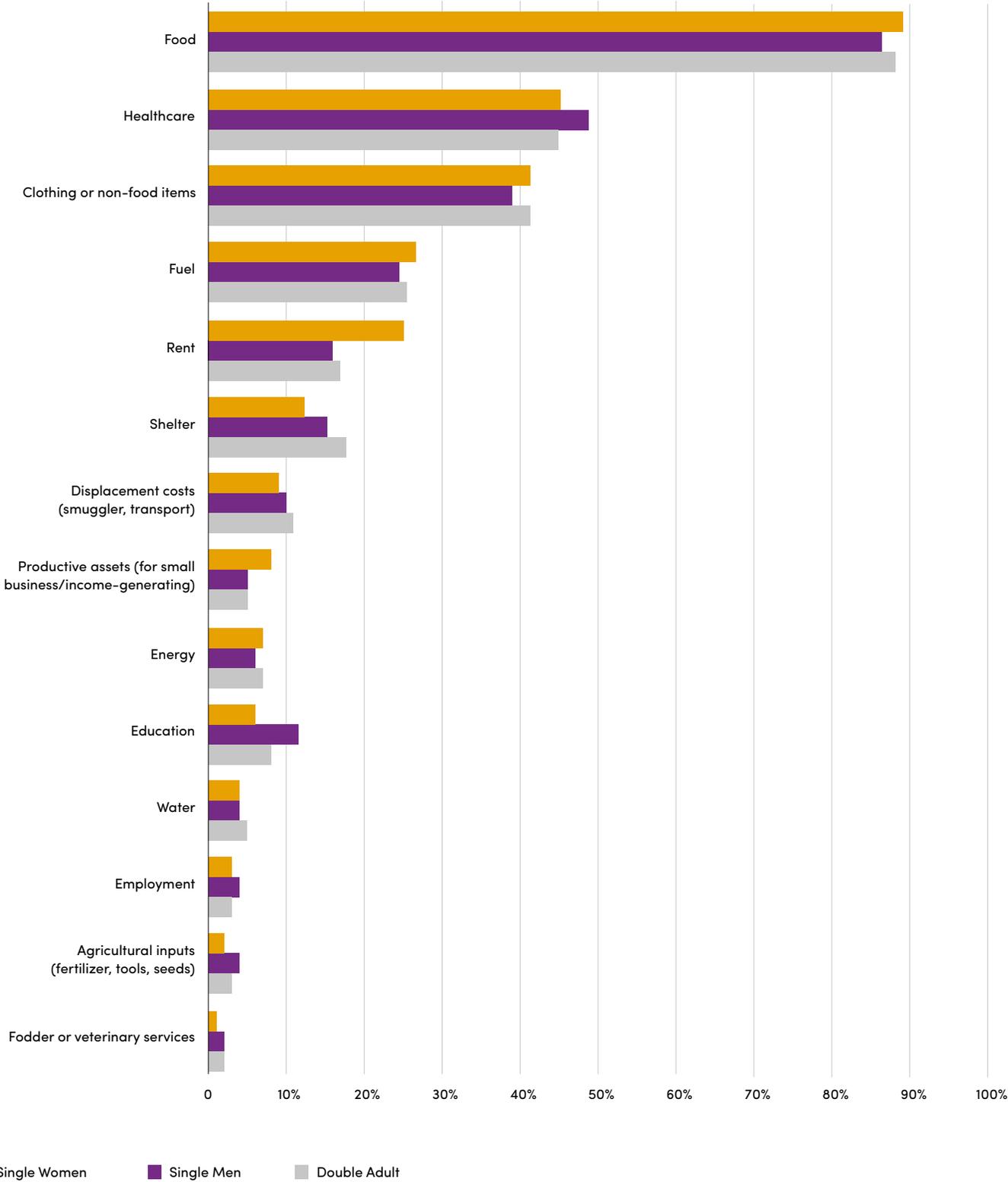


Food and health care assistance are key priorities for internally displaced people. Women with children also prioritize income-generating assets for small businesses

Covering basic needs remains a key priority for the Afghan population in displacement. A total of 88 per cent of them selected food as a priority area for assistance, followed by health care (45 per cent). They also prioritized clothing or non-food items (39 per cent of people) and fuel (24 per cent of people) (**figure 5**). Gender differences in needs are apparent across some categories. While single women, especially those living with children, are more likely than men to prioritize rent, single men with children are more likely to prioritize education. Single women with children are more likely than their male counterparts to prioritize income generating activities such as productive assets for small businesses (8 per cent of women compared to 4 per cent of men). As women in displacement are more likely than men to take children with them, income generating activities can represent a lifeline for themselves and their families, especially if they lack access to subsidies, credit, land or other collateral for loans. Single men with children, in turn, are more likely to prioritize agricultural inputs, such as fertilizer, tools and seeds, as income generating choices (4 per cent of men compared to 2 per cent of women).

FIGURE 5

Proportion of people who prioritized selected forms of support, by type of household

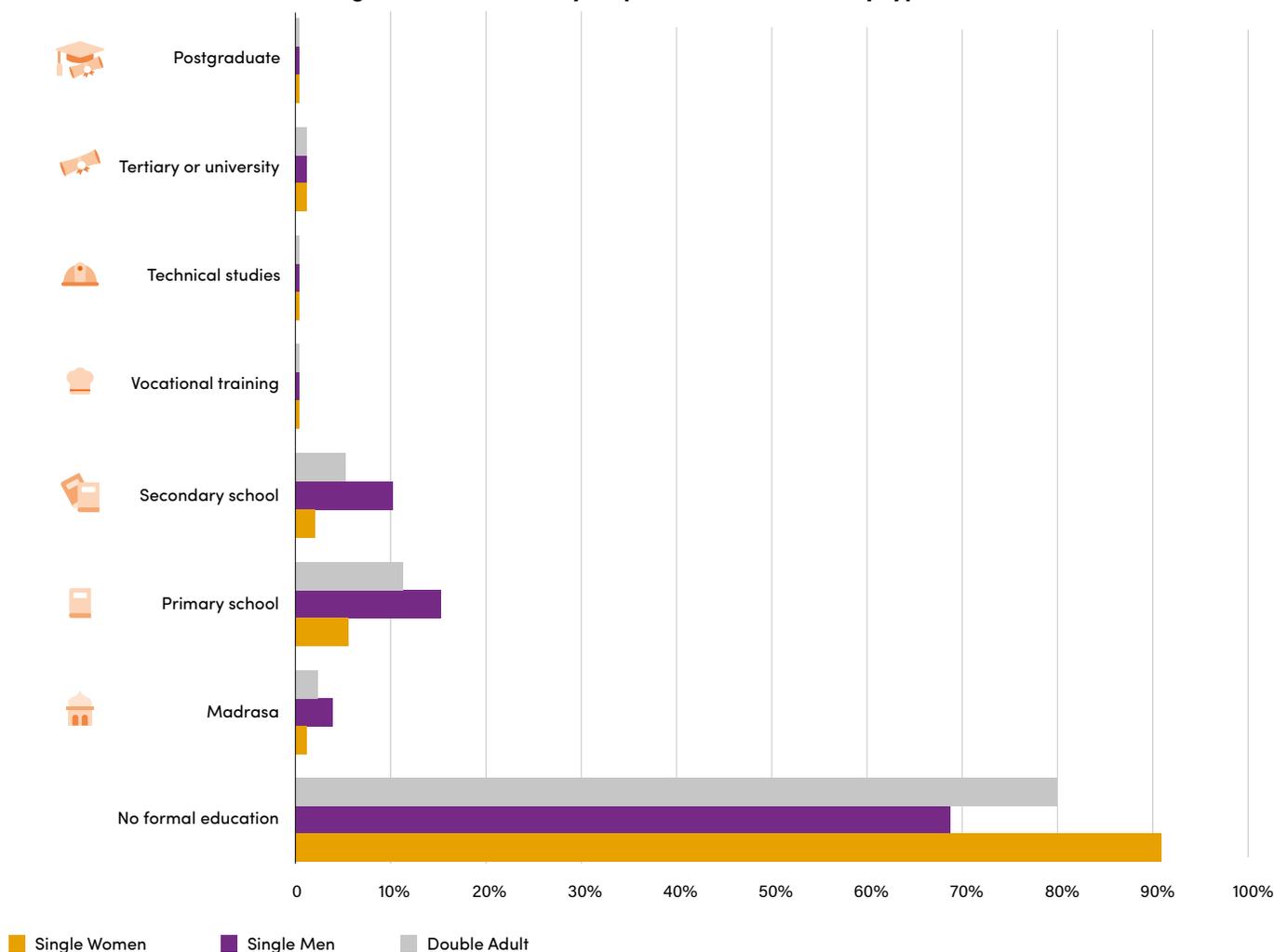


Most internally displaced people, especially women, are uneducated, which limits their resilience

Nine out of ten women who fled their homes without a partner have no formal education, compared to 60 per cent of single men and 80 per cent of double adult households (figure 6). Single men are overall more likely than single women to have completed primary, secondary and even tertiary education. Even attending Madrasa⁷ instead of regular schooling is more common among men than women. Education, including pre-primary and primary schooling, plays a crucial role in enhancing people's basic health, agency, access to information and income generating opportunities later in life. When displaced parents, guardians or other household leads were asked about the main topics they would like to learn more about, many selected how children could attend school. A look at the number of girls and boys in the households that selected this option indicates that there are more girls than boys in the households where parents or guardians would like to have more information on how their children can attend school (infographic 2).

FIGURE 6

Educational attainment among heads of internally displaced households, by type of household

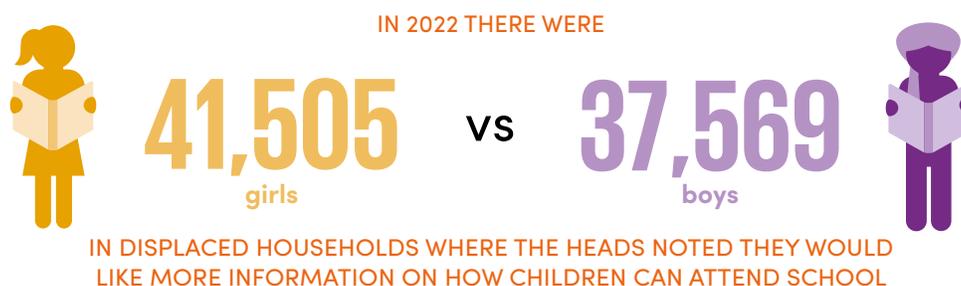


Note: Education refers to the educational attainment of the head or lead of each household.

7. Typically refers to a religious educational institution.

INFOGRAPHIC 2

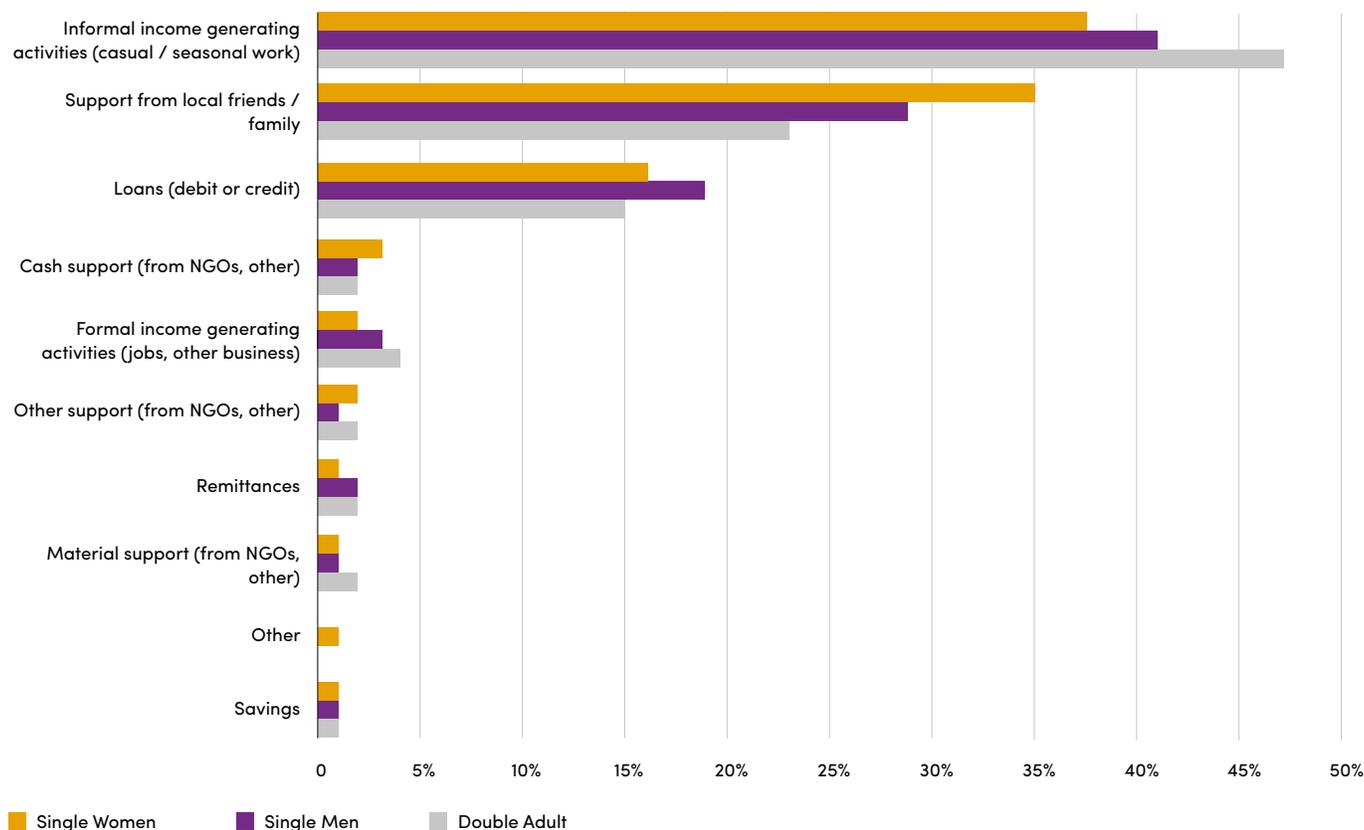
Parents or guardians of girls in displacement are more likely to seek information on how children can attend school



Partly due to women’s limited access to education, men and double adult households are more likely than women to note that formal jobs are key sources of income for the household. **Figure 7** shows that the most commonly cited source of income are informal activities (37 per cent single women, 41 per cent single men and 47 per cent of double adult households). Single men are also more likely than women to access loans and credit. Given the lack of education, social norms, lack of assets and other barriers to access credit, women tend to rely on sources of income other than formal and even informal jobs. For instance, 35 per cent of single women cited support from local friends and family members as a key source of income, compared to 29 per cent of single men and 23 per cent of double adult households. Slightly more women than men also received support, such as cash and other forms of support, from NGOs and other agencies.

FIGURE 7

Proportion of people who cited different resources as a key source of income, by type of household



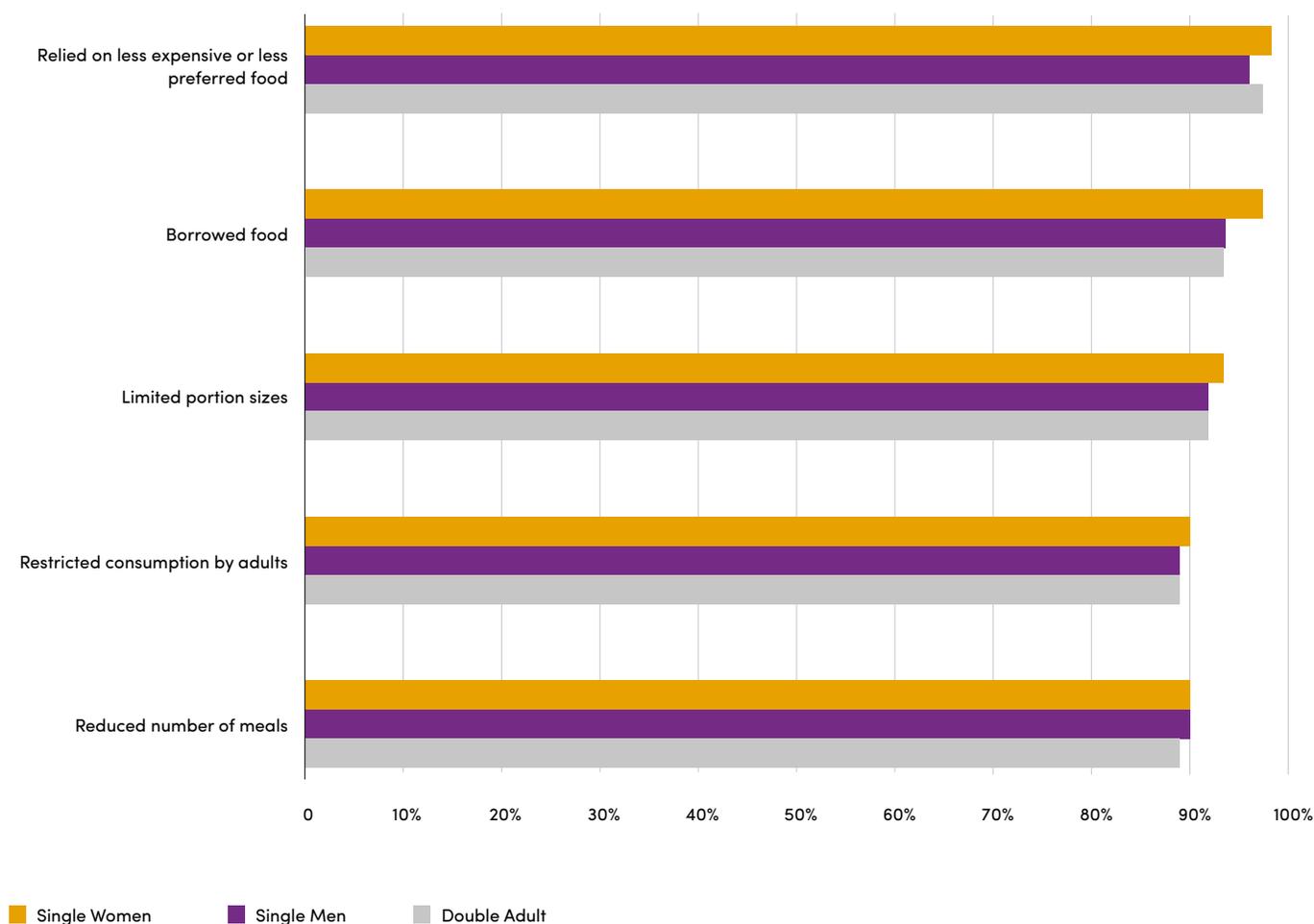
Note: The graph depicts responses to a multiple-choice question that allowed respondents to select more than one answer. As such, rates may add up to more than 100.

Due to a lack of alternatives, women cope with insufficient income by reducing their food intake

Given the lack of access to other coping strategies, many women turned to adjusting their food intake or that of their family members. Food-related coping strategies were widespread across the displaced population, as almost 90 per cent of each household type mentioned this strategy (figure 8). Still, single women households, with or without children, were disproportionately likely to use food-related coping strategies, compared to other types of households. As many as 98 per cent of single women, 96 per cent of single men and 97 per cent of double adult households noted they relied on less expensive food at least once in the past week. Almost all single women (97 per cent) cited borrowing food at least once a week as a coping strategy, compared with 94 per cent among the rest of the displaced population. In addition, 94 per cent of single women limited their portion sizes at least once in the past seven days, compared to 92 per cent in other households.

FIGURE 8

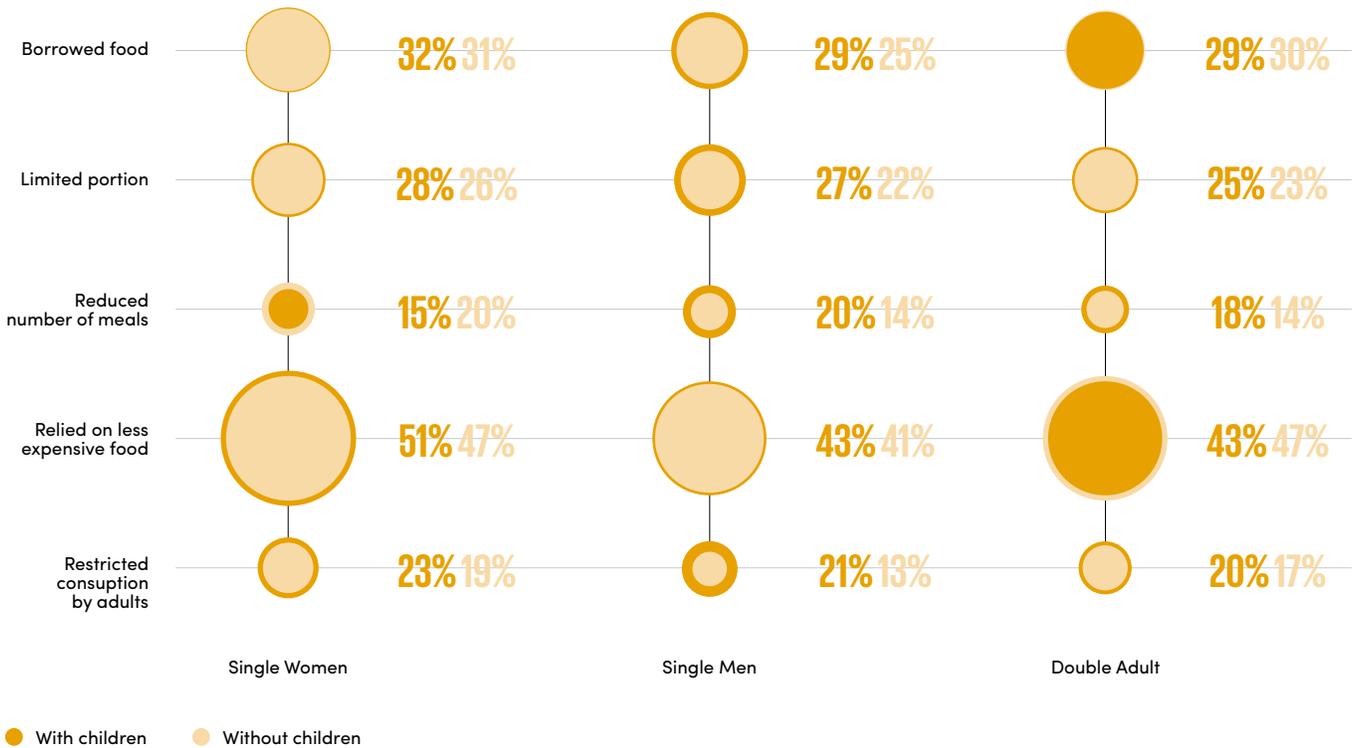
Proportion of displaced population who adopted food-related coping measures at least once a week, by type of household



The gender gaps become more noticeable among those who are forced to adopt more severe food-related coping strategies, many of which are households with children. An estimated 51 per cent of single women with children, for instance, had to rely on less expensive food at least half the time in the past week (compared to 43 per cent of other households with children) (figure 9). In turn, 41 per cent of single men households without children relied on less expensive foods at least half the time. Roughly 32 per cent of single women with children borrowed food at least half the time, compared to 29 per cent of single men with children and 25 per cent of men without children. Many adults overall restricted their amount of food consumption in favour of feeding children (23 per cent of single women, and roughly 20 per cent in all other households restricted the amount consumed at least half the time).

FIGURE 9

Proportion of internally displaced population who adopted coping measures at least half the time, by households composition



Analysis of data on other coping strategies employed by displaced population reveals that single men and double adult households have access to additional coping strategies that single women are less likely to access, which could explain why so many households led by single women turn to adjusting food intake to cope. The second most commonly cited coping strategy is delaying seeking medical attention for critical health problems (figure 10). This strategy is employed by more than 70 per cent of people, and it is particularly widespread in households with children. Coupled with food restrictions, this strategy can have devastating consequences for the health and well-being of displaced populations, and it is a critical cause for concern. Many households with children (more than 65 per cent) are also very likely to stop sending children to school so they can take up activities such as collecting firewood, fetching water or engaging in paid work. Dropping out of school will likely have long term consequences, as it is known to limit future decent work opportunities in adulthood for these children. Single men and double adult households, in addition, are more likely than single women households to find additional income sources in the form of day labour, street vending or migrant work. Double adult households and women without children, in turn, were the most likely to receive government assistance, although this only reached 21 per cent and 19 per cent of them, respectively, along with 16 per cent of single men households.

FIGURE 10

Main coping strategies employed by displaced population (besides food-related strategies), by household composition



Note: Even though the response about not sending children to school appears irrelevant for households without children, a number of these households chose this answer category. It is possible that their responses refer to children that may be living elsewhere/not in displacement. No additional information was collected at the time of the survey to clarify this finding.

The lack of water and electricity disproportionately affect women and girls in internal displacement

In addition to challenges associated with livelihoods, asset ownership and reintegration, many displaced people face challenges stemming from living in shelters. When asked about key concerns about their living conditions, many displaced people in shelters noted they lack access to clean water or electricity – essential services for hygiene, safety and performing household chores – thus increasing the burden of unpaid domestic work.

Overall, women and girls were slightly more affected than men and boys by the lack of these services. For instance, 51 per cent of women noted they live more than 500 metres from their water source, compared to 50 per cent of men. The share of girls and boys that live far from water sources stands at 47 per cent (figure 11). Globally, living far from water sources has disproportionate consequences for women and girls in general, who are in charge of water collection in 80 per cent of the world’s households where clean water is not available on the premises. In addition, social norms typically put women in charge of cleaning and cooking, activities that benefit from access to clean water and energy. Similar gaps can be observed regarding electricity access. An estimated 43 per cent of women live in displacement locations that lack electricity; along with 42 per cent of men, 42 per cent of girls and 41 per cent of boys (figure 12).

FIGURE 11

Proportion of displaced people living more than 500 meters from their water source, by sex and age



FIGURE 12

Proportion of displaced people that live in households and/or shelters without electricity, by sex and age



The safety of displacement shelters for women and girls remains a key concern

Roughly one in every six people living in internal displacement settings noted that the safety of women and girls was a key issue with their current shelter. Single women, in particular, were more likely to raise this concern (an estimated 22 per cent of single women with children noted shelter safety concerns for women and girls, along with 18 per cent of single women without children) (figure 13). Men and double adult households were less likely to note this concern, although the issue remained a worry for those with children, as 20 per cent of single men and 18 per cent of double adult households with children raised this concern. Enhancing the safety of women and girls in displacement settings remains a key priority, but obstacles including their limited access to education, jobs and decision-making power, continue to render them vulnerable. Empowering women and promoting their participation in shelter management or humanitarian assistance, for instance, could contribute to enhancing related safety measures, including setting up enhanced counselling and referral systems for survivors of gender-based violence. The recent ban on women NGO workers, however, is expected to hinder some of these activities.

FIGURE 13

Proportion of internally displaced population noting concerns about the safety of women and girls in their current shelter, by household composition

