

Life in the shadows:

protection and assistance needs of
Afghan children and youth in Pakistan

MMC Research Report,
May 2026



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Afghan returnees arrive at the Torkham border with their belongings after returning from Pakistan.

Nangarhar, Afghanistan, 2025.

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MMC is a knowledge centre engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programming on mixed migration. MMC has regional hubs in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America, with a global team headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, and based in several countries worldwide.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). While its institutional link to DRC ensures MMC's work is grounded in operational reality, it acts as an independent source of data, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration for policy makers, practitioners, journalists, and the broader humanitarian sector.

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About IDAC

The International Data Alliance for Children on the Move (IDAC) is a cross-sectoral global coalition that aims to improve data and statistics and support evidence-based policymaking for migrant and displaced children. With the European Union as its main donor and jointly led by Eurostat, IOM, OECD, UNHCR and UNICEF (Secretariat Chair), IDAC brings together governments (including experts from national statistical offices and migration- and displacement-related ministries), international and regional organizations, non-governmental organizations, think tanks, academics, civil society and youth.

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Key findings

Drivers of mixed movements to Pakistan:

- Afghan mixed movements to Pakistan remains predominantly driven by insecurity and lack of rights, though economic drivers are also an important factor, in particular among men and boys.
- More than half of unaccompanied children made the decision to leave Afghanistan alone. Unaccompanied boys more commonly report that their journey was part of a family strategy.

Basic rights and services in Pakistan:

- Undocumented Afghans are unable to access basic rights and services such as formal education and healthcare; financial barriers can further limit access to services even for those with the requisite documentation. Fear of deportation compounds these issues; irrespective of legal status, Afghans are increasingly afraid to go out.
- Over three quarters of children surveyed had been unable to access education or training in Pakistan, with limited variation across genders. Access to health services is also severely constrained: close to half (49%) of girls and 40% of boys surveyed had no access to healthcare.
- Precarious housing arrangements are common among unaccompanied children, a quarter of whom were living in the street or in makeshift accommodation. Unaccompanied girls more commonly lived in a shared house or apartment, suggesting other protection concerns.
- Close to three quarters of unaccompanied children surveyed were earning an income, compared to a third of those in the care of a parent or guardian. Casual or occasional work is the most common source of income among all children surveyed. More than half of children who work report experiencing verbal abuse.
- Although men and boys more commonly report some form of income generation than women and girls, a majority of unaccompanied girls were working, in opposition to cultural norms.

Protection in Pakistan:

- Detention is the biggest danger identified by children surveyed, in particular for boys. Children also identify a high risk of deportation, with girls somewhat more commonly perceiving deportation as a threat.
- Youth and caregivers similarly identified a high risk of detention for boys and young men; the risk of insults and harassment was perceived to be common to children and youth of both genders.
- Though mentioned by few youths or caregivers, kidnapping emerges as one of children's top concerns. Girls and unaccompanied children feel most at risk.
- Children – particularly boys and unaccompanied children – identify the military and police as the most common perpetrators of dangers faced in Pakistan.
- As a result of protection risks, close to a fifth of children are afraid to leave the house or move around, and 70% feel depressed.

Assistance in Pakistan

- 85% of children reported that they had not received assistance in Pakistan. In an emergency, youth would most commonly turn to nearby relatives or neighbours – just one youth surveyed said he would reach out to an NGO.
- More than three quarters of youth and caregivers surveyed felt in need of additional assistance.
- Reflecting the challenges posed by lack of documentation, legal assistance was the most widely reported need by youth and caregivers. Three quarters of children similarly identify documentation as one of their greatest needs.
- Whereas children in the care of a parent or guardian often prioritise the need for education, unaccompanied children have a greater need for lifesaving assistance including food, water, sanitation, and shelter.

Intentions and aspirations

57% of children intend to move to another country with many expressing hope for resettlement.

Introduction

Pakistan has for more than four decades been a place of refuge for Afghans fleeing conflict, persecution, and poverty in their country of origin. In recent years, however, the protective environment in the country has significantly deteriorated, as long-standing hospitality has given way to uncertainty, fear, and vulnerability for Afghan refugees and migrants.

In October 2023, at a time when the UN Refugee Agency estimated the number of Afghans in the country at around 3.7 million, Pakistan launched its ‘Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan’. The Plan, comprising of three phases, takes a hardline stance against Afghans in Pakistan, mandating the expulsion of millions of Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) and Proof of Registration (POR) card holders to Afghanistan.¹

As a deadline for undocumented Afghan nationals and ACC² holders to voluntarily leave Pakistan passed on 31 March 2025, implementation of the plan intensified.³ Under phase three of the Plan announced in July and enforced from September 2025, attention has shifted to more than a million PoR⁴ card holders now also at risk of arrest and deportation – notwithstanding the serious risks and deprivation of rights returning refugees and migrants may face in Afghanistan.⁵

As a result of these measures, some 839,900 returns and 70,600 deportations have taken place between 1 April and 29 November 2025 accounting for over half of all returns and close to two thirds of all deportations since mid-September 2023.⁶ According to UNHCR, PoR cardholders now account for over two-thirds of returnees, up from just 7 per cent in April 2025.⁷

While Afghan refugees and migrants have long faced challenges and risks in Pakistan⁸, the recent uptick of deportations has drastically exacerbated their vulnerability, forcing them into the shadows. This is particularly the case for children and youth, whose specific assistance and protection needs remain unmet.

Drawing upon 1,109 interviews with Afghan refugees and migrants in Pakistan, including over 250 children, and complemented by twenty key informant interviews, this report examines the experiences and vulnerabilities of Afghans in Pakistan in the current policy context with a particular focus on children and youth, with the aim of informing evidence-based responses to strengthen protection and access to assistance.

- 1 UNHCR (2023) [Afghanistan Situation: Regional Refugee Response Plan – Summary](#); EUAA (2023) [Pakistan: Situation of Afghan Refugees](#)
- 2 ACCs were issued from 2017 by the Government of Pakistan to document unregistered Afghans and temporarily regularise their stay; it does not represent a recognition of refugee status. See: IOM Pakistan (n.d.) [Undocumented Afghans](#); EUAA (2023) [Pakistan: Situation of Afghan Refugees](#)
- 3 ReliefWeb (2025) [Pakistan–Afghanistan Returns Emergency Response \(29 November 2025\)](#)
- 4 PoR cards were issued to Afghans following the 2005 Census of Afghans in Pakistan; registrations stopped in 2007. Since then, verification and re-validation exercises have been conducted to extend the validity of existing PoR cards, but only children born to registered parents have been newly registered. UNHCR also issues asylum certificates or refugee cards, but these do not grant the same legal status under Pakistani law as a PoR card. See: UNHCR Pakistan (n.d.) [Asylum System in Pakistan](#) ; EUAA (2023) [Pakistan: Situation of Afghan Refugees](#)
- 5 UNHCR (2025) [UNHCR Urges Pakistan to Exempt Afghans with International Protection Needs from Involuntary Return](#); OHCHR (2025) [UN Experts Sound Alarm over Looming Deportations of Afghans from Pakistan](#)
- 6 ReliefWeb (2025) [Pakistan–Afghanistan Returns Emergency Response \(29 November 2025\)](#)
- 7 ReliefWeb (2025) [Pakistan–Afghanistan Returns Emergency Response \(29 November 2025\)](#)
- 8 United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (2001) [Afghan Refugees in Pakistan at Risk](#)

Methodology

The report draws upon a total of 1,109 survey interviews conducted in Pakistan in September and December 2025 with Afghan children (14-17 years old), youth (18-24 years old), caregivers (travelling or living with children), and non-caregiving adults⁹. These survey findings are complemented by twenty key informant interviews conducted with Afghan community leaders, humanitarian actors and NGO representatives, government officials, and child protection experts.

Table 1. Survey interviews by population group, locations, and gender¹⁰

	Children	Youth	Caregivers	Other adults
Attock		31	38	
Charsadda				45
Islamabad		51	52	
Nowshera	69	11	25	11
Peshawar	137	75	149	50
Pishin				11
Quetta	48	59	128	44
Rawalpindi		15	60	
Total	254	242	452	161
Women/girls	98	118	227	81
Men/boys	156	124	225	80

A non-probability sampling approach was used to identify survey respondents, including purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Respondents were identified through community contacts, local NGOs, and referral chains, with quotas by age and gender and a targeted subset of unaccompanied children.

Data collection with youth, caregivers, and non-caregiving adults was conducted using the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC)'s standard 4Mi survey, with the addition of specific modules for caregivers (travelling or living with children at the time of data collection) and youth. A specific survey was developed for data collection with children, as detailed below.

Limitations

As a result of the non-probability sampling approach, the data collected is not representative of all Afghan children, youth, or caregivers in Pakistan, and findings are therefore not generalisable.

Gender-level disaggregation has been included wherever possible and relevant in the analysis; in the case of smaller sub-samples such as unaccompanied children however, numbers of respondents are reported in lieu of percentages for added transparency.

⁹ The non-caregiving adults included in this analysis are respondents age 25 and above who are not currently travelling or living with children; they are a sub-sample of a wider 4Mi survey conducted with 904 Afghan refugees and migrants in the aftermath of data collection with children, youth, and caregivers.

¹⁰ Due to insecurity at the time of data collection for the children's survey, interviews were conducted in fewer locations than for the survey with caregivers and youth. See here: BBC News (2025) [Afghan Taliban and Pakistan agree short truce after deadly clashes](#).

Data collection with children

In line with international standards¹¹ and DRC's "do no harm" principle, strict ethical and safeguarding measures were applied throughout data collection with children.

Survey tools were designed to be child-friendly, and questions were carefully designed to avoid distress or re-traumatisation. Enumerators received dedicated training on child rights, safeguarding, effective communication with children, basic psychosocial support, and referral procedures in cases of disclosure.

Informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians prior to children's participation, with caregivers fully informed about the purpose, content, and potential risks or benefits of the survey. Children's assent was also sought using clear, age-appropriate language. For unaccompanied children, assent was obtained from the child alongside consent from a responsible adult, such as a community elder, focal point, or social worker. Participation was voluntary, and no pressure was applied.

Data collection with children took place in safe, visible, and comfortable environments. Enumerators were instructed not to be alone with a child in private or closed spaces; instead, interviews were conducted in locations that were visible to others while still ensuring adequate privacy for children to respond openly. Data collection was closely monitored by supervisors, with spot checks conducted to ensure compliance with ethical and safeguarding standards.

The journey

Drivers of mixed movements to Pakistan

"Everyone in Afghanistan has seen war with their own eyes. Afghanistan is a country where there are many problems. People are very worried; it seems their life is always at risk."

Afghan community leader in Rawalpindi

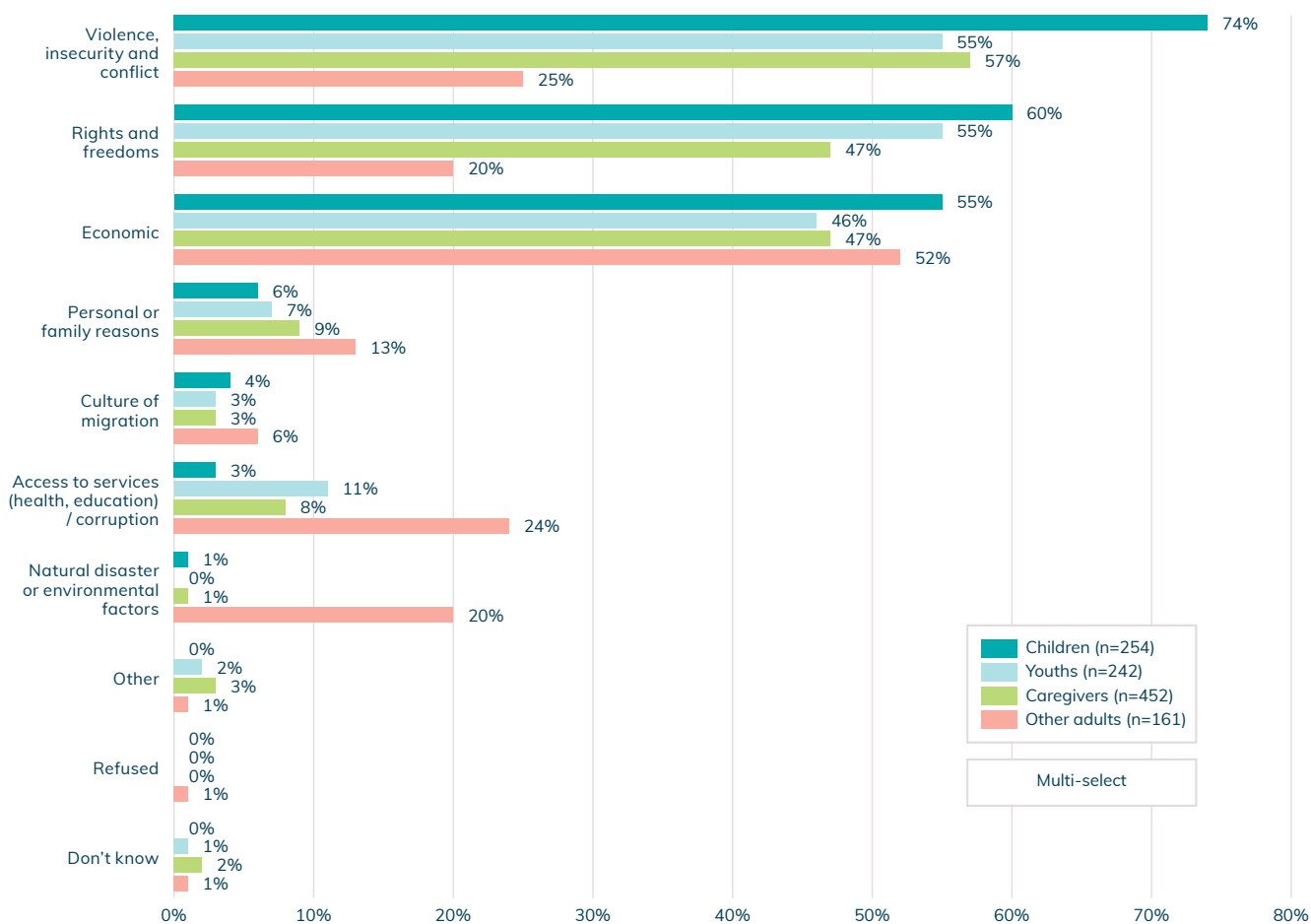
"War and insecurity, which threatened everyone's lives, forced people to leave."

17-year-old Afghan boy in Peshawar

Afghan mixed movements to Pakistan are driven by worsening conditions in Afghanistan, compelling many to seek refuge abroad. Among Afghan children surveyed (n=254), 74% identify violence, insecurity, and conflict as a driver of their movement to Pakistan; among youth (n=242) and caregivers (n=452), this is the case for 55% and 57% respectively. Rights and freedoms are the second most common driver cited by these respondents, highlighted by 60% of children, 55% of youth, and 47% of caregivers.

¹¹ UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), UNICEF's Ethical Standards for Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis (2021), Save the Children's Child Safeguarding Policy (2019), the OECD-DAC Evaluation Criteria (2019), the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) Commitments

Figure 1. For what reasons did you leave Afghanistan?



Suggesting that caregivers' decisions to move are shaped by concerns for their children, non-caregiving adults (n=161) are less driven by violence, insecurity and conflict (25%) or rights and freedoms (20%). Rather, for non-caregiving adults, economic factors are the most common driver, cited by 52%.

Economic drivers also play an important role in driving the movement of children, youth, and caregivers to Pakistan, as cited by 55%, 46%, and 47% respectively. Whereas limited gender differences were observed with regards to insecurity and rights as drivers, economic drivers were more commonly cited by young men (n=124) than young women (n=118), at 56% compared to 36%; the same was observed among boys (n=156) and girls (n=98), with economic drivers more commonly reported by boys, at 63% compared to 42% of girls.

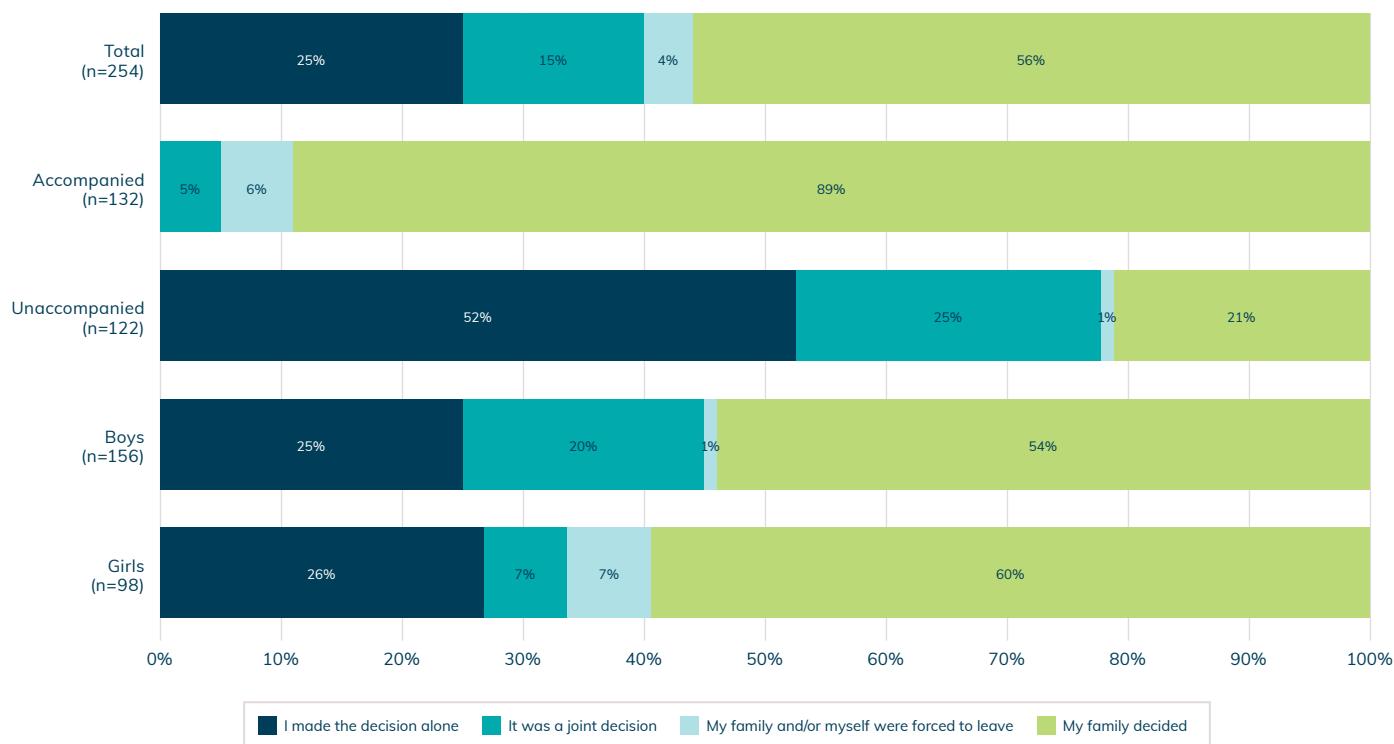
"Many come due to threats and fear. Some also come for education and a better future."
Humanitarian actor/NGO representative n°3 in Quetta

"Afghan children come due to the situation in Afghanistan, including war and insecurity. They also come due to economic problems and poverty. Some come for education and a better future."
Child protection expert in Islamabad

Though a quarter of children of both genders said decision-making to move took place independently, for more than half (56%) of children surveyed, it was their family who decided they should leave Afghanistan. This was the case more often for girls, 60% of whom said their family made the decision compared to 54% of boys. Reflecting cultural norms, boys more commonly reported being involved in a joint decision, at 20% compared to 7% of girls.

Unsurprisingly, none of the accompanied children (n=132) made the decision to leave Afghanistan independently. Conversely, among those currently unaccompanied (n=122), more than half (52%) made the decision to leave Afghanistan by themselves. Big differences emerge between unaccompanied boys and girls: likely reflecting the fact that few Afghan families would willingly send their daughters to Pakistan unaccompanied, 25 out of 34 unaccompanied girls (equivalent to 74%) had made the decision alone, compared to 39 out of 88 unaccompanied boys (equivalent to 44%) for whom movement is more often a family strategy.

Figure 2. Who made the decision for you to leave Afghanistan?



Risks on the move

The journey from Afghanistan to neighbouring Pakistan can expose refugees and migrants to risks. Around three quarters of youth (n=242), caregivers (n=452), and non-caregiving adults (n=161) reported experiencing no risks en route.¹² However some did report negative experiences: the most common was physical violence, experienced by 13% of youth and 9% of caregivers, followed by robbery, experienced by 10% of youth and 7% of caregivers. Among non-caregiving adults, robbery was experienced by 14%, but just 3% reported experiencing physical violence.

In terms of the risks faced by children on the move, 16% of caregivers felt that girls faced a risk of harassment during the journey, and 14% mentioned a risk of forced marriage. For boys, 12% of caregivers perceived a risk of harassment, and 10% reported a risk of physical violence.

Key informants indicate that unaccompanied children can face greater risks. To mitigate these risks, many seek to travel in a group. Among unaccompanied children, 57% started the journey with friends or peers of their age. This was the case for 26 out of 34 unaccompanied girls (equivalent to 76%) and 43 of 88 unaccompanied boys (equivalent to 49%), who more widely reported starting the journey with family (24 boys) or alone (26 boys).

¹² This includes those who reported not travelling through any dangerous locations.

“During the journey, the children face many problems. [...] On the border, there are strict checks; and they face threats. [...] sometimes they have to face violence.”

Child protection expert in Peshawar

“A difficult and hard journey without family, for a young girl, is not without danger”

23-year-old young woman in Attock

“When I started the journey from Afghanistan to Pakistan I didn't have enough money so I begged to pay for my travel expenses.”

17-year-old Afghan boy in Peshawar

Limited smuggler use

Smuggler use was low among survey respondents. Around three quarters of both caregivers (76%) and youth (74%) and over two thirds (68%) of non-caregiving adults did not use a smuggler during their journey to Pakistan. Among all those who did use a smuggler (n=186), 44% felt they had been intentionally misled about the journey by their smuggler; nonetheless, 69% still felt smugglers had helped them achieve their goal of migrating to another country.

In Pakistan

Legal status and documentation

Once in Pakistan, the situation of Afghan refugees and migrants is in large part dictated by their legal status, as documentation is key to accessing basic rights and services. Key informants widely emphasise documentation as the most prominent concern for Afghans in Pakistan, especially for women and children.

“ACC cards started in 2017. Before that, PoR cards existed; then ACC registration started. Those who have PoR/ACC are considered documented; those without are undocumented. The main problem is undocumented people; they face issues in accessing services.”

Government representative in Nowshera

“Those who have PoR and ACC cards, they are considered registered. And those who do not have them are unregistered. So they face difficulties in Pakistan. [...] In Pakistan, there is no service for undocumented people.”

Government representative n°2 in Quetta

“The most serious issue is that most people are undocumented. Because of this, they face many problems. Women and children face more difficulties. They cannot access services, and they face discrimination. They also face mental stress and psychological effects.”

Humanitarian actor/NGO representative n°2 in Peshawar

Beyond access to services, documentation was perceived by key informants to offer some protection against deportation. However, opportunities to gain regular status through an ACC and PoR card are currently unavailable and UNHCR documentation alone does not confer legal protection under Pakistani law. Further, since the IFRP, documentation no longer protects holders from deportation. Under the current repatriation policy, ACC and PoR card holders are also exposed to forced return. As a result, fear of detention and deportation further undermines access to services, as Afghans seek to remain undetected, effectively living in the shadows.

“Documentation/legal status is the main issue. Because of fear of police and deportation, people do not go out. This affects children’s education and families’ daily life.”

Humanitarian actor/NGO representative n°3 in Quetta

“The country has security concerns; therefore policies are strict.”

Government representative in Quetta

Basic rights & services

Education

The combined impact of lack of documentation and fear of deportation is most felt in terms of education.

“One big problem is that Afghan children do not have documentation, and because of this they face problems in school enrolment.”

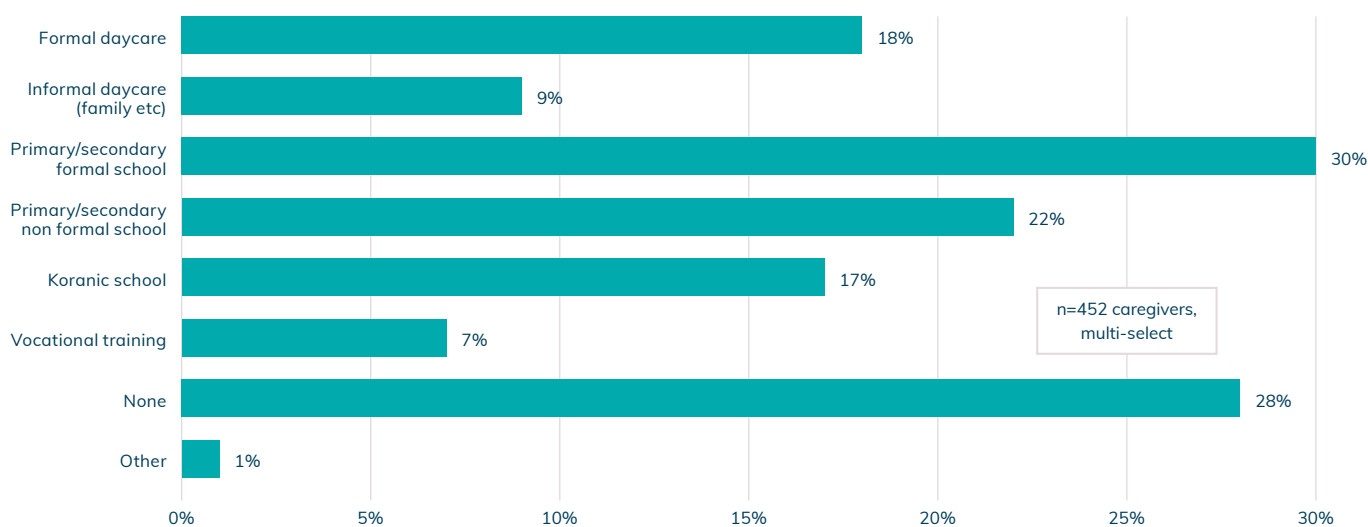
Afghan community leader in Rawalpindi

“Especially in education, they face a lot of difficulties. Because there is no proper documentation, they face problems; because of this they are deprived of education.”

Afghan community leader in Quetta

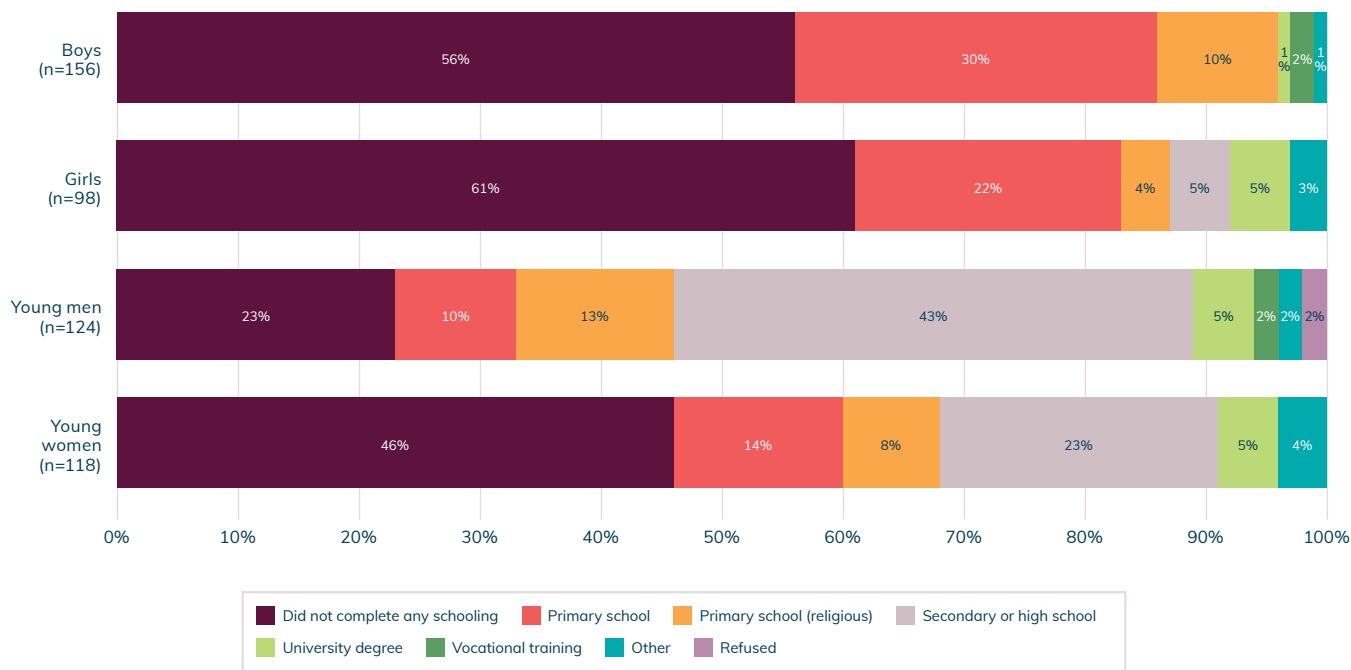
Among caregivers (n=452), only 30% reported having children attending formal primary or secondary school; 18% had children enrolled in formal daycare. Alternatives such as non-formal schools (22%) and Koranic schools (17%) were relatively widespread, compensating for barriers to enrolment in formal facilities. Just over a quarter (28%) of caregivers said their children did not benefit from any childcare/education services.

Figure 3. Do the children/youth in your care attend any of the following childcare/education services?



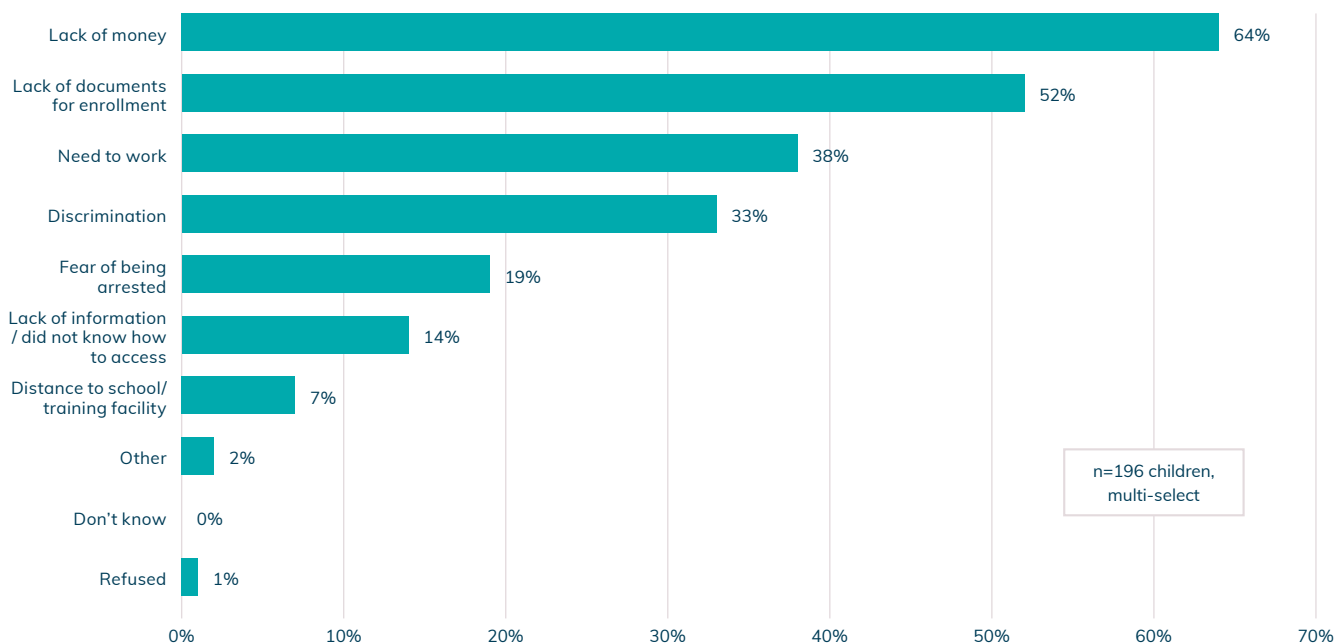
Education levels among boys (n=156) and girls (n=98) surveyed were low, with 56% of boys and 61% of girls having not completed any schooling. Youth had benefited from somewhat more schooling, although it is unclear from the survey whether this education was received in Afghanistan or Pakistan. Among young women (n=118), 46% had not completed any schooling; among young men (n=124), this was the case for 23%.

Figure 4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?



Over three quarters (77%) of children surveyed had been unable to access education or training in Pakistan, with limited variation across gender or presence of caregivers. Among children who have not accessed education or training in Pakistan (n=196), 64% cite lack of money as a key barrier, and 52% mention lack of documents for enrolling. Boys (n=119) and girls (n=77) face different barriers. Among boys, 47% mentioned the need to work, whereas this is the case for only 18 out of 77 girls (equivalent to 23%). Meanwhile, girls are more likely to face discrimination, reported as a barrier by 37 out of 77 girls (equivalent to 48%) but only 24% of boys.

Figure 5. Why have you not been able to access any education or training?

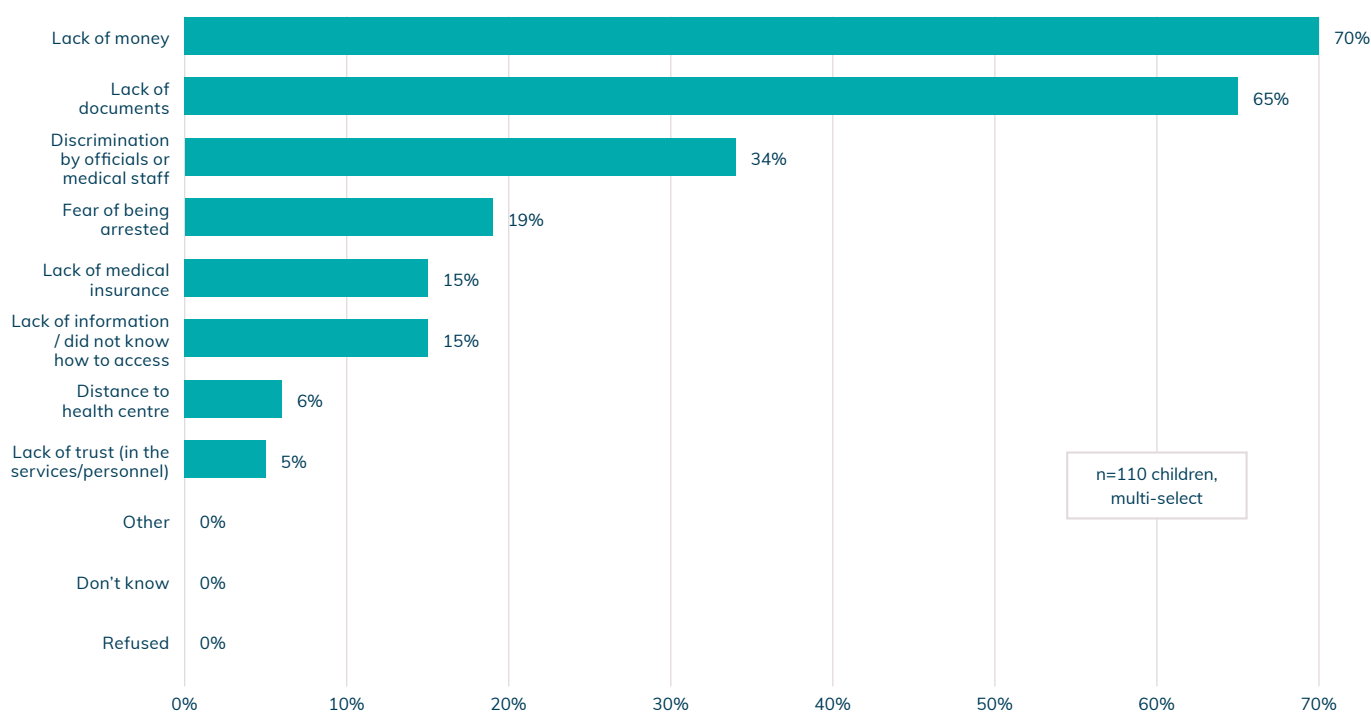


Healthcare

Afghan children in Pakistan face similar challenges with regards to healthcare: among children surveyed (n=254), 43% reported having no access to health services when they need them. Girls (n=98) were disproportionately affected, with close to half (49%) reporting no access to healthcare compared to 40% of boys (n=152).

Reflecting barriers also faced in accessing education, among those unable to access health services (n=110), the main reported barriers were lack of money (70%) and lack of documents (65%). More than a third (34%) also identified discrimination by officials or medical staff as a barrier to healthcare.

Figure 6. Why were you not able to access health services?



Housing

Compounding the problems of Afghans in Pakistan and exacerbating the vulnerability of children is the issue of housing, which is often unaffordable.

“They face serious problems in living conditions. Rent is expensive and difficult to manage.”

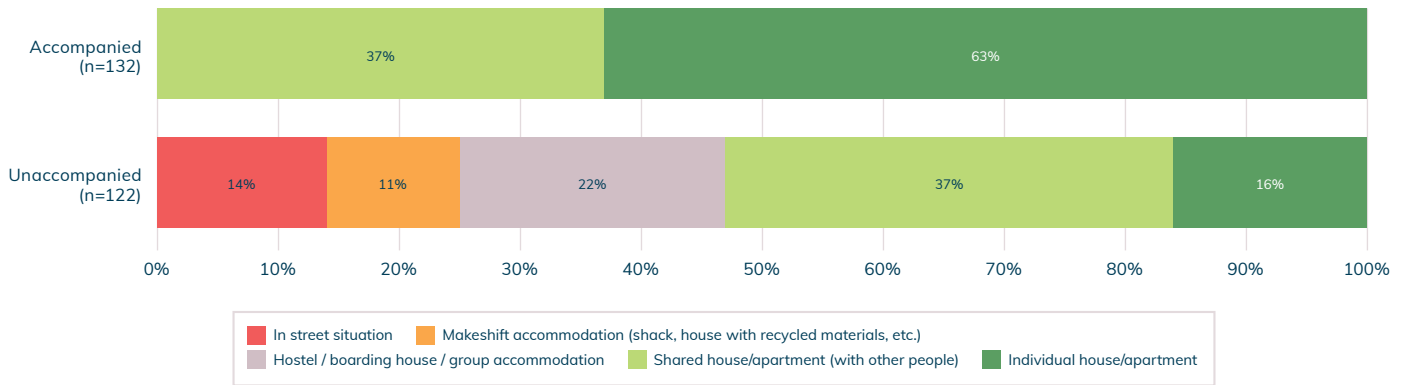
Humanitarian actor/NGO representative n°3 in Quetta

Unaccompanied children are particularly affected. Among children cared for by a parent or guardian (n=132), 63% live in an individual house/apartment and the remaining 37% in a shared house/apartment. Unaccompanied children (n=122), however, report much more diverse housing arrangements, with many in precarious conditions: 11% report living in makeshift accommodation and 14% in the street. This was less common among unaccompanied girls (n=32), most of whom (21 out of 32) were living in a shared house or apartment – a situation nonetheless not without risk.

“I saw days that no human, no woman alone, deserves. Staying on the streets without even five rupees, standing behind every door, being moved from house to house repeatedly, street harassment, and people who don't understand the meaning of humanity. This has been the hardest migration for me.”

28-year-old single mother in Rawalpindi

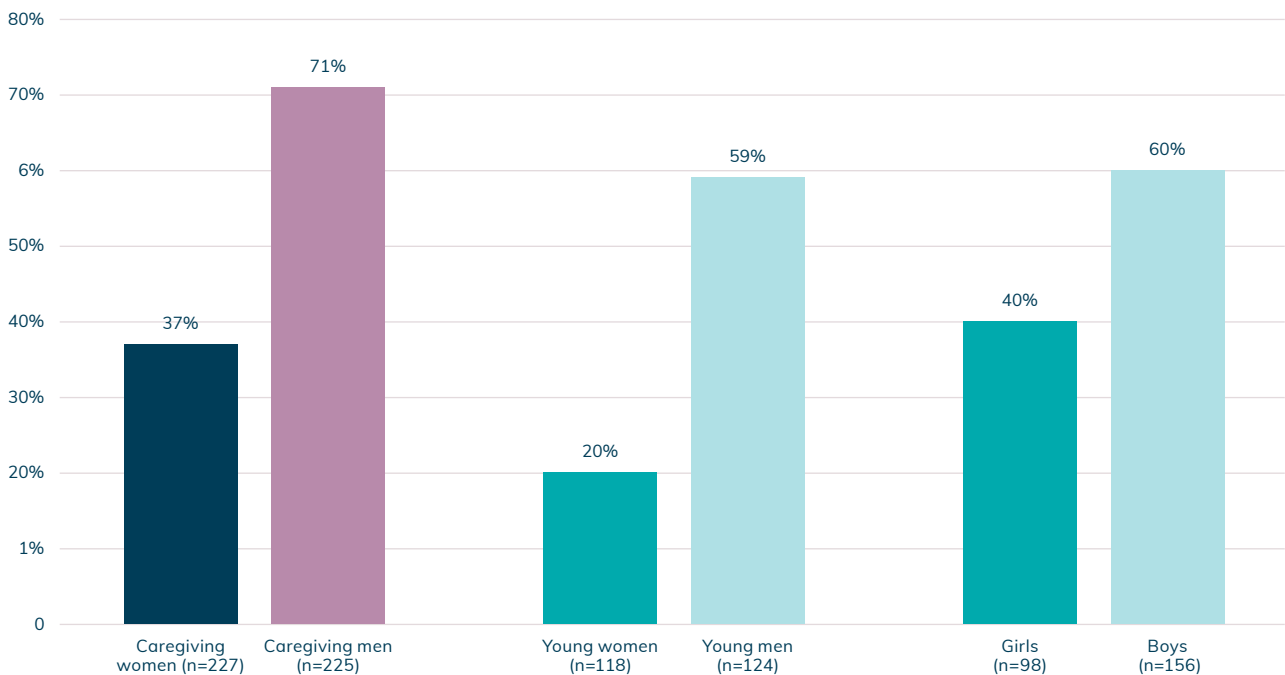
Figure 7. What kind of housing do you currently live in?



Livelihoods

Reflecting cultural norms within the Afghan community, income generation is more widespread among boys and men than women and girls surveyed, as shown in the figure below. Male caregivers (n=225) most commonly had a source of income, at 71%; among young women (n=118), conversely, just 20% were generating an income. Girls (n=98) report higher rates of income generation than women, at 40% - however, as discussed below, a majority of the girls who are generating an income are unaccompanied, undermining the comparison.

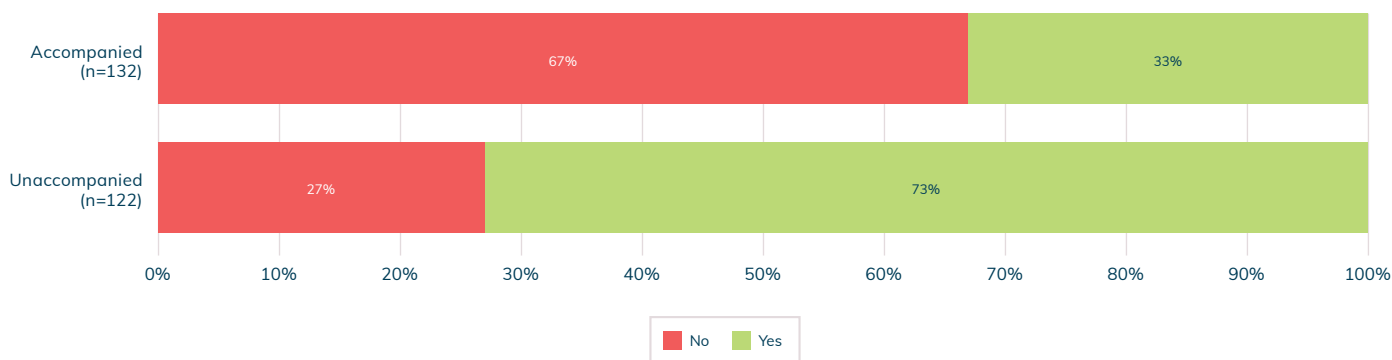
Figure 8. Percentage of respondents with a source of income



Income generation is more prevalent among unaccompanied (n=122) than accompanied (n=132) children, at 73% compared to 33%. This points to the lack of support available for unaccompanied children, forced to work to make ends meet. Raising important protection concerns, the difference is particularly stark among girls: despite cultural norms, 28 out of 34 (equivalent to 82%) of unaccompanied girls work, compared to 11 out of 64 (17%) of those under the care of a parent or guardian.

"I sell books and pens in the market. People treat me harshly in many ways. I only do this work out of necessity, and here, boys touch me and try to play with me."
14-year-old Afghan girl in Nowshera

Figure 9. Do you currently have a source of money?



Among those earning an income (n=244 caregivers, n=97 youth, n=133 children), just 9% of caregivers, 4% of youth, and not a single child had a regular paid job. Most (48% of caregivers, 36% of youth, and 48% of children) engaged in casual or occasional work; another common source of income for children was street selling (39%), and 8% resorted to begging.

Domestic work/cleaning, construction, and small businesses were the main reported sectors of employment overall. According to unemployed youth, the most common barrier for young women was taking care of the home/children, whereas young men reported being unable to find a job.

"We no longer know how to live here—there is no work, no livelihood, and our mother is ill. Whenever we try to find work, the police arrest us."
15-year-old Afghan boy in Nowshera

"My only wish is to work freely outside without being harassed. I have come out of necessity to support my family, but here people harass me and don't let me work."
17-year-old Afghan girl in Nowshera

"I have six children, but all are unemployed and we are in a very difficult situation. One of my children is disabled and was born here in Pakistan. We often face hunger [...]. Despite this, we try to continue living, but the conditions of migration are extremely hard."
41-year-old Afghan mother in Rawalpindi

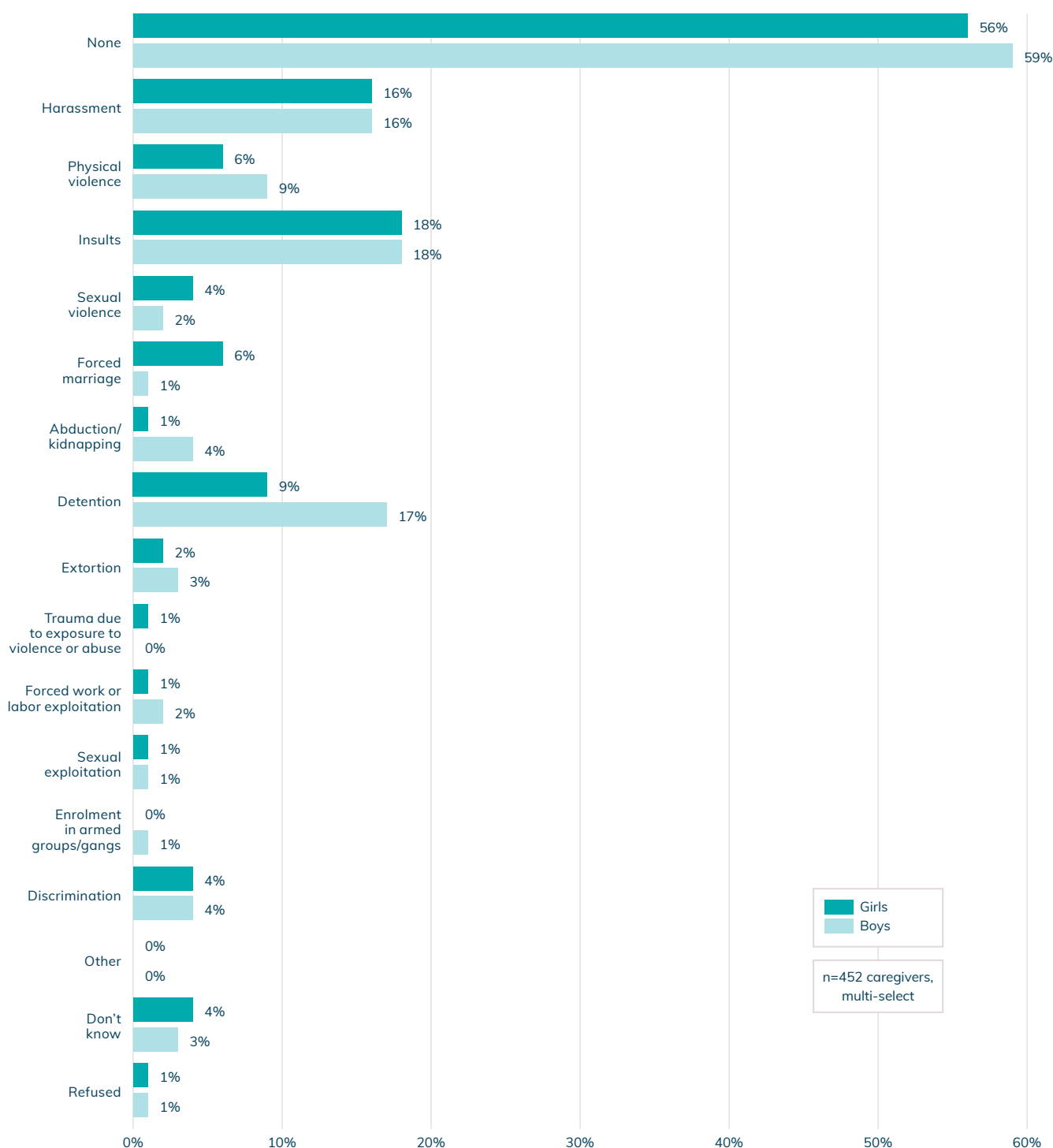
Among children earning an income through work (n=75), 29 children (equivalent to 39%) report not making enough money to cover their needs, while 42 (equivalent to 56%) make enough to cover their needs, but no more. Just four children, all boys, make enough money to also send money to relatives in Afghanistan or save for the future. Yet 21 of these children (equivalent to 28%) report working 40 hours per week or more, suggesting many are underpaid for their services. These children also experience major challenges, such as verbal abuse (42 children), delayed wages (25), lack of job security (24), safety challenges (15), and even physical abuse (13).

Protection risks

Perceived risks for children and youth

Despite children's reports of protection challenges in the workplace, among caregivers (n=452), over half feel that girl (56%) and boy (59%) refugees and migrants face no risks in their daily lives in their current location.¹³ Insults (18%) and harassment (16%) are seen to affect boys and girls in equal measure; the risk of detention, however, is perceived to be much higher for boys (17% vs 9%). Meanwhile, forced marriage is a greater concern for girls (6% vs 1%).

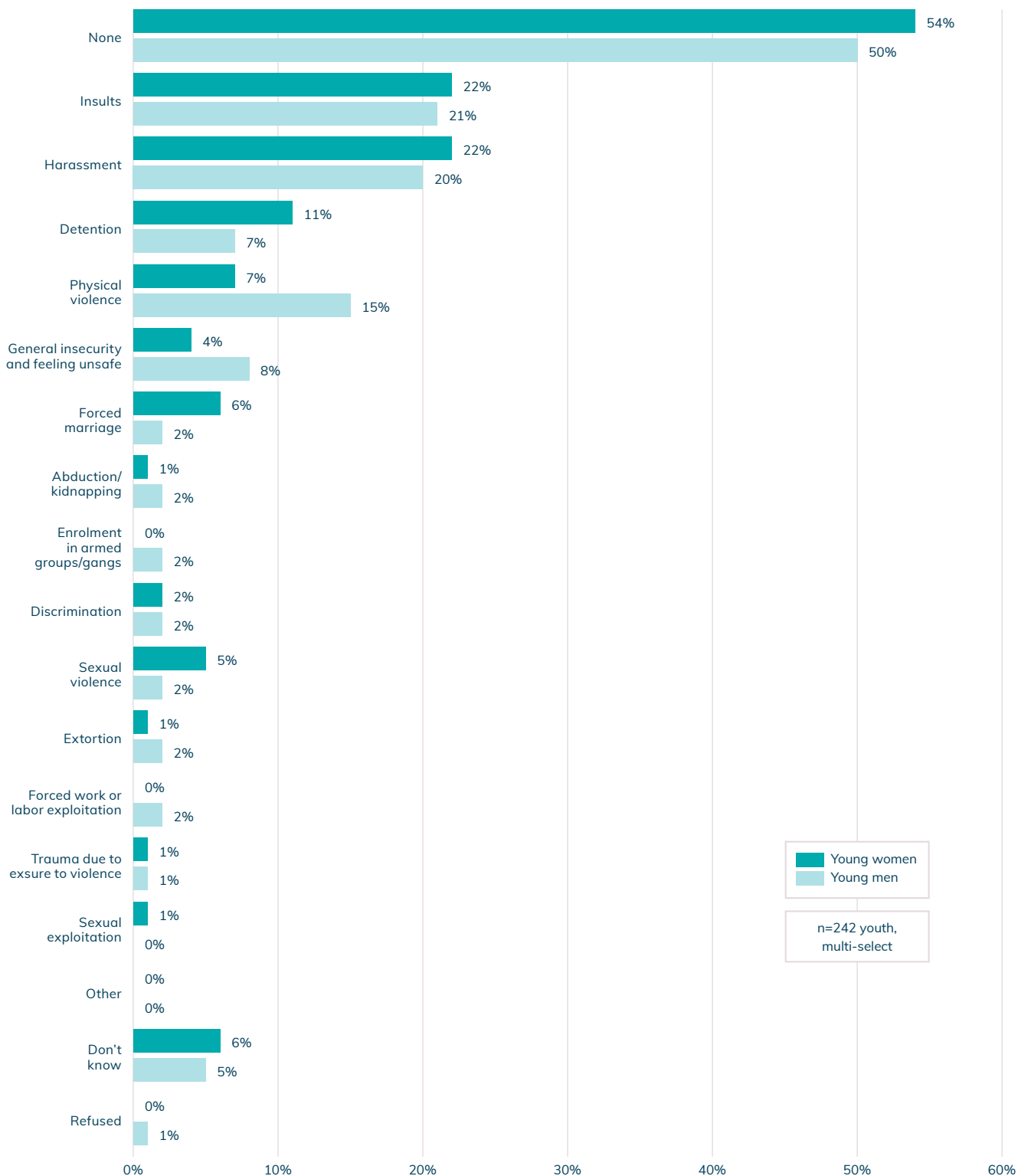
Figure 10. What risks do girl/boy refugees and migrants face in your current location?



¹³ Unfortunately, deportation was not listed as a response option.

Youth (n=242) have similar perceptions to caregivers in terms of the risks faced in Pakistan: 54% estimate that young women refugees and migrants are not exposed to risks in their current location, and 50% perceive no risks for young men. Insults and harassment are the most common risks identified for both young men and women, cited by around a fifth of respondents. The risk of detention is seen to disproportionately affect young men (17% vs 11%), as is the risk of physical violence (15% vs 7%). Young women, conversely, are seen to be at higher risk of forced marriage (6% vs 2%) and sexual violence (5% vs 1%).

Figure 11. What risks do young women/young men migrants face in your current location?



Children (n=254), meanwhile, are more pessimistic: just 21% of girls and 13% of boys identify no dangers or problems for themselves as Afghans in Pakistan. Children in the care of a parent or guardian feel less exposed than unaccompanied children, with 21% of accompanied children identifying no risk compared to 11% of unaccompanied children.

Reflecting the current hostile climate, the biggest danger in Pakistan reported by Afghan children is detention. This is the case for all groups, though – as illustrated in the graph below – it is a bigger concern for boys than girls (58% vs 47%) and worries unaccompanied children somewhat more than those in the care of a parent or guardian (57% vs 51%).

Kidnapping is the second most reported risk, much more widely reported by unaccompanied than accompanied children (48% vs 30%). Girls are most affected, with 46% feeling at risk of kidnapping compared to 34% of boys.

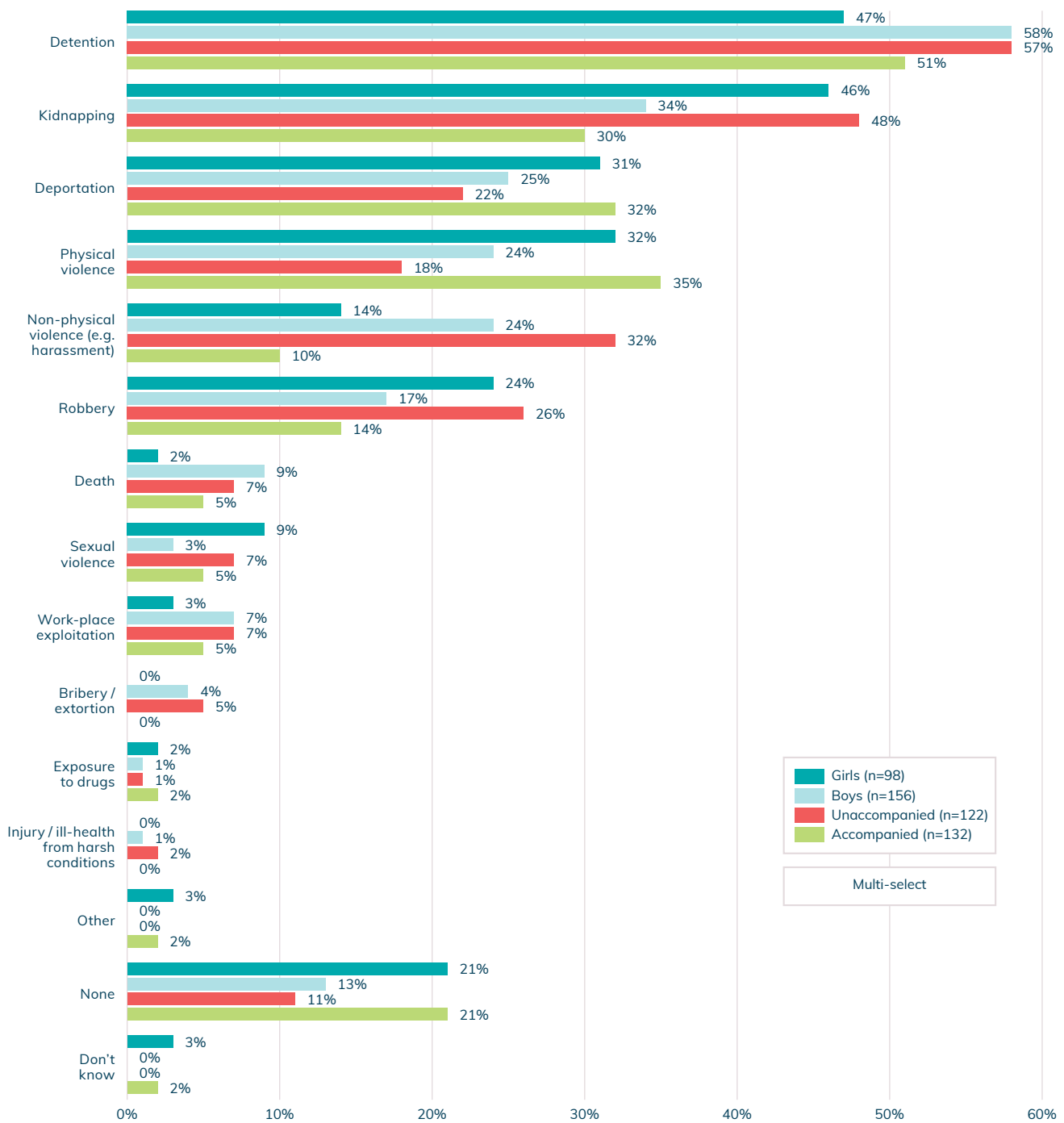
Given the current risk of deportation, this is the third most reported risk. Unlike detention, it concerns girls (31%) somewhat more than boys (25%): one explanation could be that girls have a greater fear of deportation given the implications of return to Afghanistan, even though girls are not necessarily at greater risk of deportation than boys. Deportation is also perceived as a greater risk by accompanied children (32%) than unaccompanied children (22%), perhaps because they have heard it discussed by their caregivers, or because they are more 'visible' than their unaccompanied peers.

"My biggest fear in Pakistan is being sent back. I want to go to school and live my life freely."
17-year-old girl in Nowshera

While accompanied children otherwise perceive fewer risks than unaccompanied children, they do report greater risks of physical violence than unaccompanied children (35% vs 18%), suggesting potential risks posed by caregivers themselves. Unaccompanied children conversely report much higher risks of non-physical violence such as harassment (32% vs 10%).

While the risk of workplace exploitation is perceived as relatively low, this may be due to a lack of awareness among children, since this contradicts earlier findings related to key challenges faced at work.

Figure 12. Overall, what do you think are the biggest dangers or problems for you as a young Afghan in Pakistan?



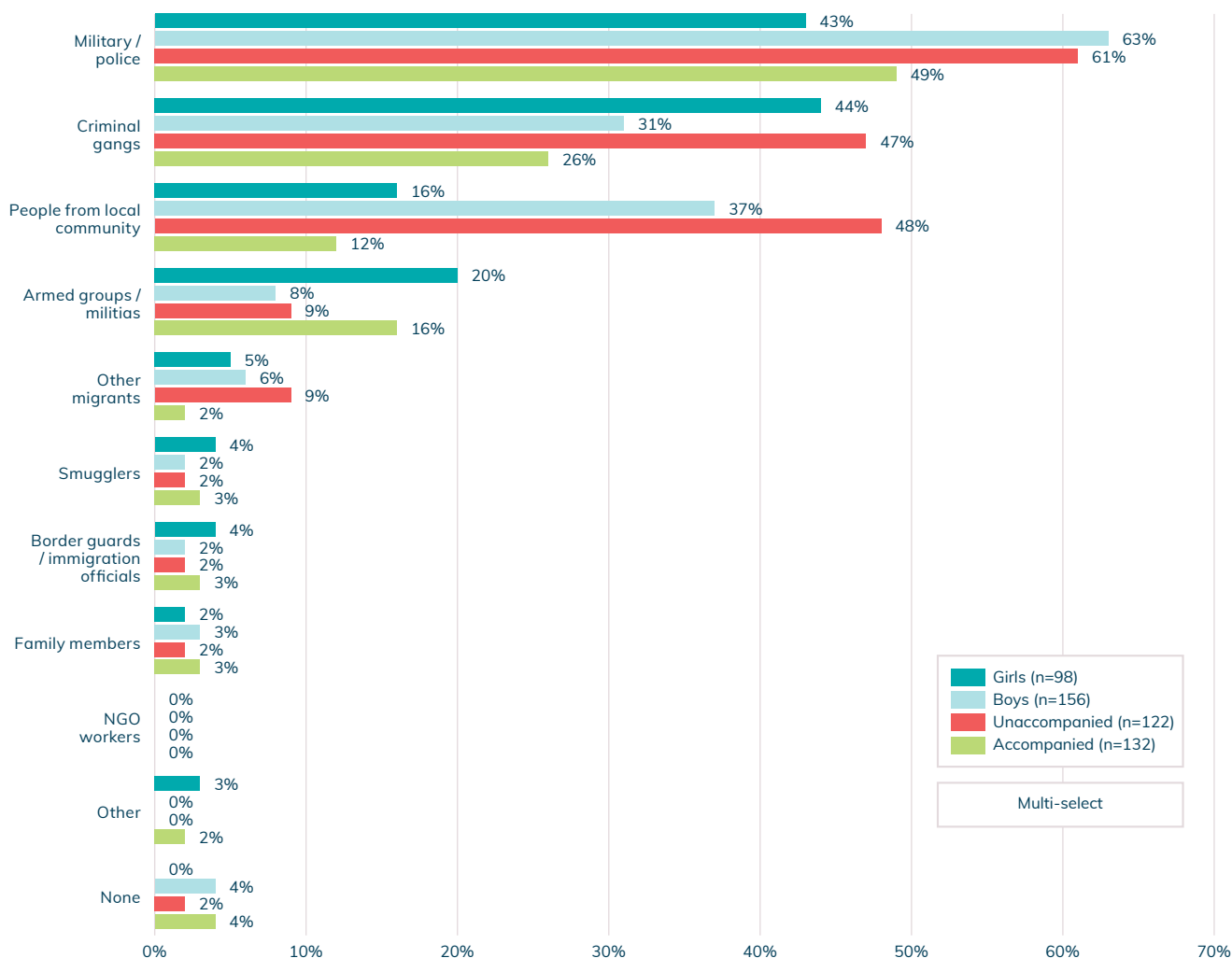
Children’s perceived perpetrators

According to children surveyed (n=254), the greatest risk is perceived to be caused by the military/police, with 63% of boys and 43% of girls identifying them as perpetrators. Research conducted by UNICEF in late 2023–2024 found “an increase in discrimination and harassment by law enforcement agents associated with the implementation of the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan (IFRP)”¹⁴. This is likely to have increased in recent months in line with stricter implementation, contributing to perceptions of the military and police as perpetrators.

When examining gendered perceptions of risks, girls more commonly see criminal gangs (44% vs 31%) or armed groups/militias (20% vs 8%) as perpetrators. Given that girls report a greater risk of kidnapping than boys, it is possible that these are the perpetrators responsible for it. In contrast, boys much more commonly report people from the local community as perpetrators (37% vs 16%) – perhaps linked to the fact that more boys report harassment and other forms of non-physical violence.

The local community comes across as a more commonly reported perpetrator among unaccompanied children (48%) than those in the care of a parent or guardian (12%). Unaccompanied children also perceive greater risks coming from the military or police, with 61% listing them as perpetrators compared to 49% of accompanied children. Finally, unaccompanied children appear more exposed to criminal gangs, with 47% reporting them as perpetrators compared to 26% of those in the care of a parent or guardian.

Figure 13. Who do you think is usually causing these dangers or problems?



14 UNICEF Innocenti (2025) [Increasing Access to and Quality of Child Protection Services for Children on the Move in Pakistan](#)

Impact on children's wellbeing

As mentioned previously, fear of arrest and deportation – combined with lack of documentation – impact access to livelihoods and basic services: among children surveyed (n=254), close to a fifth (19%) are afraid to leave their house or move around.

"We are very distressed here because we cannot go outside the house with confidence."

16-year-old girl in Nowshera

"If they go outside, they have problems, and they cannot go out freely. [...] There is fear of police and arrest. And there is also fear of being sent back."

Afghan community leader in Peshawar

"Government policies and restrictions have increased. And due to this, Afghan families face more fear."

Government representative in Nowshera

Fear of deportation among children surveyed (n=254)

Over a quarter (27%) of children report deportation as a key danger or problem they are facing in Pakistan. Nearly a fifth (19%) of both those unable to access health services (n=110) and those unable to access education or training (n=196) say this is due to fear of arrest.

8 of the children working fear being reported because of their status in Pakistan

The protection risks faced in Pakistan also have a profound impact on children's wellbeing: 70% of children surveyed reported feeling depressed, and 44% feeling anxious. Unaccompanied children (n=122) are particularly affected, with feelings of depression reported by 77%, compared to 64% of accompanied children (n=132).

"The current situation in Pakistan is very depressing for us, and the situation in Afghanistan is very bad."

17-year-old Afghan boy in Quetta

"Afghan families who are living here are under a lot of pressure."

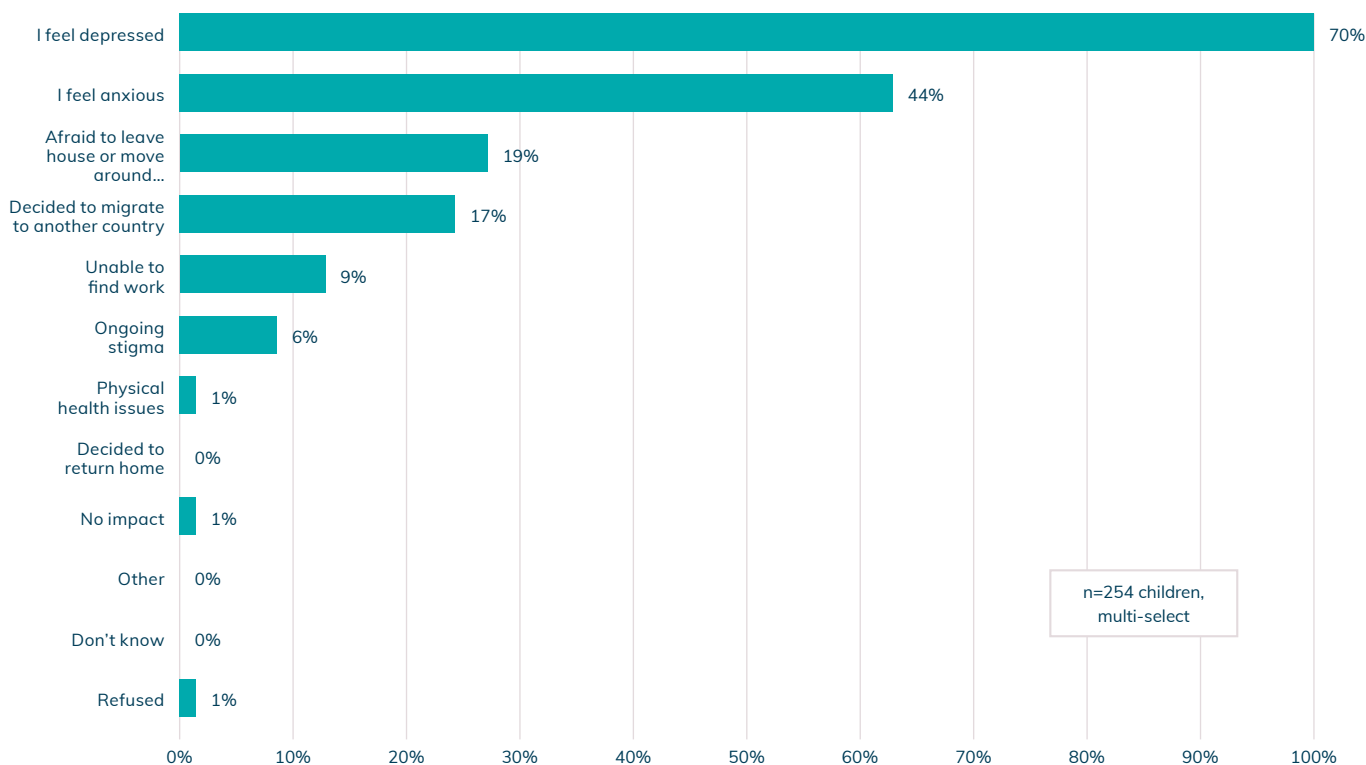
Humanitarian actor/NGO representative in Peshawar

When questioned about how the problems or dangers they face affect them, 17% of children say they have decided to move to another country (see graph below); when explicitly asked about their onward movement intentions however, this proportion increases to 57%, as will be discussed further below.

"My only hope is to get a visa, because I work outside and I'm afraid of being caught and deported."

17-year-old girl in Nowshera

Figure 14. How do these problems or dangers affect you?



Assistance

Availability of assistance

To respond to the challenges faced by Afghans in Pakistan, key informants indicate that assistance is available through non-governmental organisations (NGOs), focusing notably on access to livelihoods, legal assistance, child protection, and education.

“NGOs and local organisations do many activities. Generally they work on skills training, handicrafts training, sewing, etc.”

Afghan community leader in Quetta

“We are providing legal assistance for families, women and children. In addition, we provide child protection-related services.”

Humanitarian actor/NGO representative n°2 in Peshawar

“We help in skills development and business support. [...] These programmes can improve refugees’ economic condition and self-reliance.”

Humanitarian actor/NGO representative n°2 in Quetta

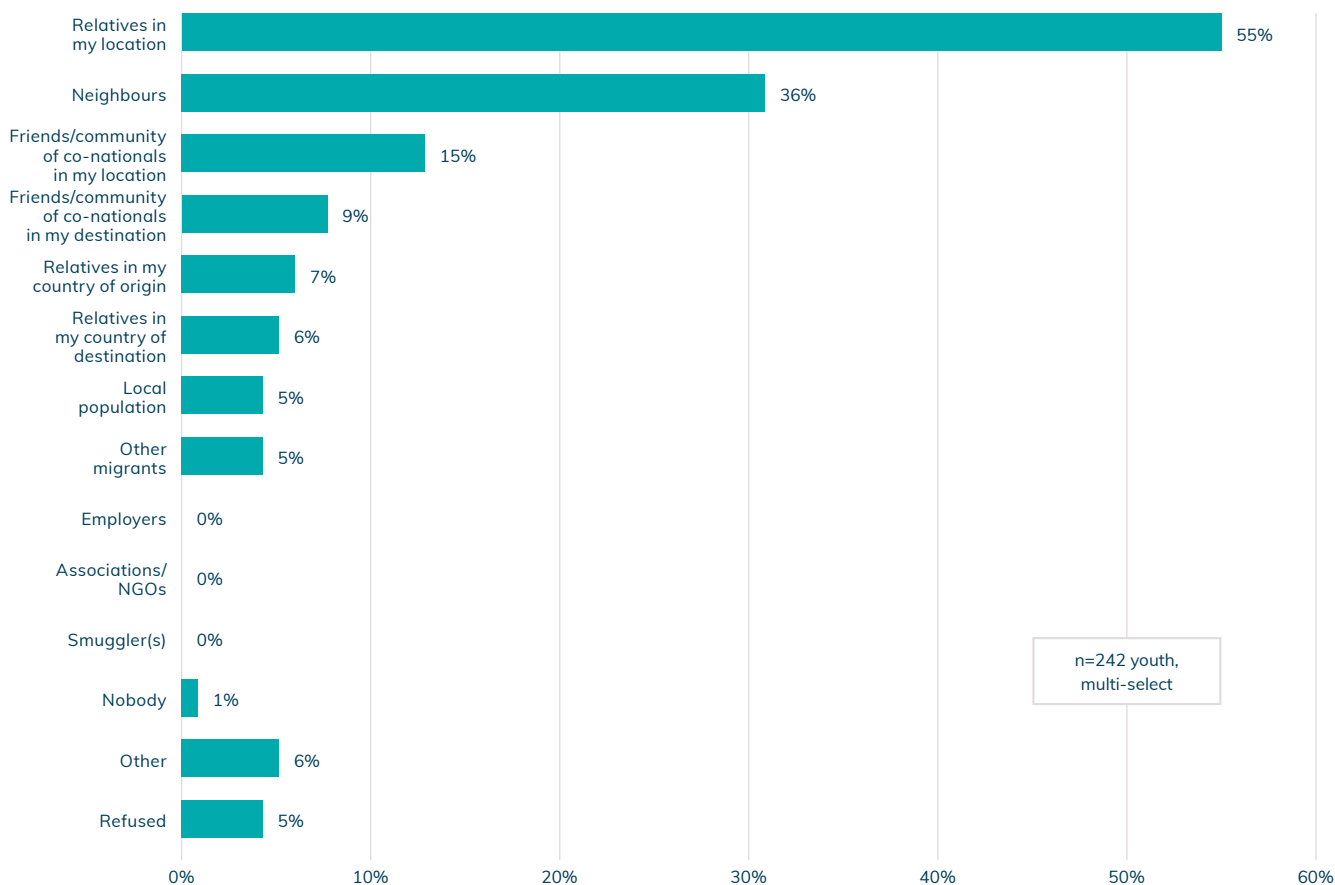
“We provide education-related support and activities. [...] Our aim is to bring children, especially Afghan children, into school. Because those who do not have documentation are not admitted to school.”

Humanitarian actor/NGO representative n°3 in Peshawar

However, of all children surveyed (n=254), 85% reported that they had received no assistance in Pakistan, with no difference observed across genders. Unaccompanied children (n=122), though more vulnerable, received somewhat less support, with 87% having received no assistance compared to 83% of those cared for by a parent or guardian (n=133). Among those who had received assistance (37 children), the three most common forms of assistance received were medical assistance (20), food (17), and water (12). This assistance was provided mostly by NGOs (18) and the UN (12).

Lack of awareness of available assistance may be part of the problem. In an emergency, among all youth surveyed (n=242), only one respondent said he would turn to NGOs for support. Most commonly, youth said they would reach out to relatives in their location (55%), neighbours (36%), or other nearby members of the Afghan community (15%).

Figure 15. In an emergency, who could you reach out to?



Assistance needs

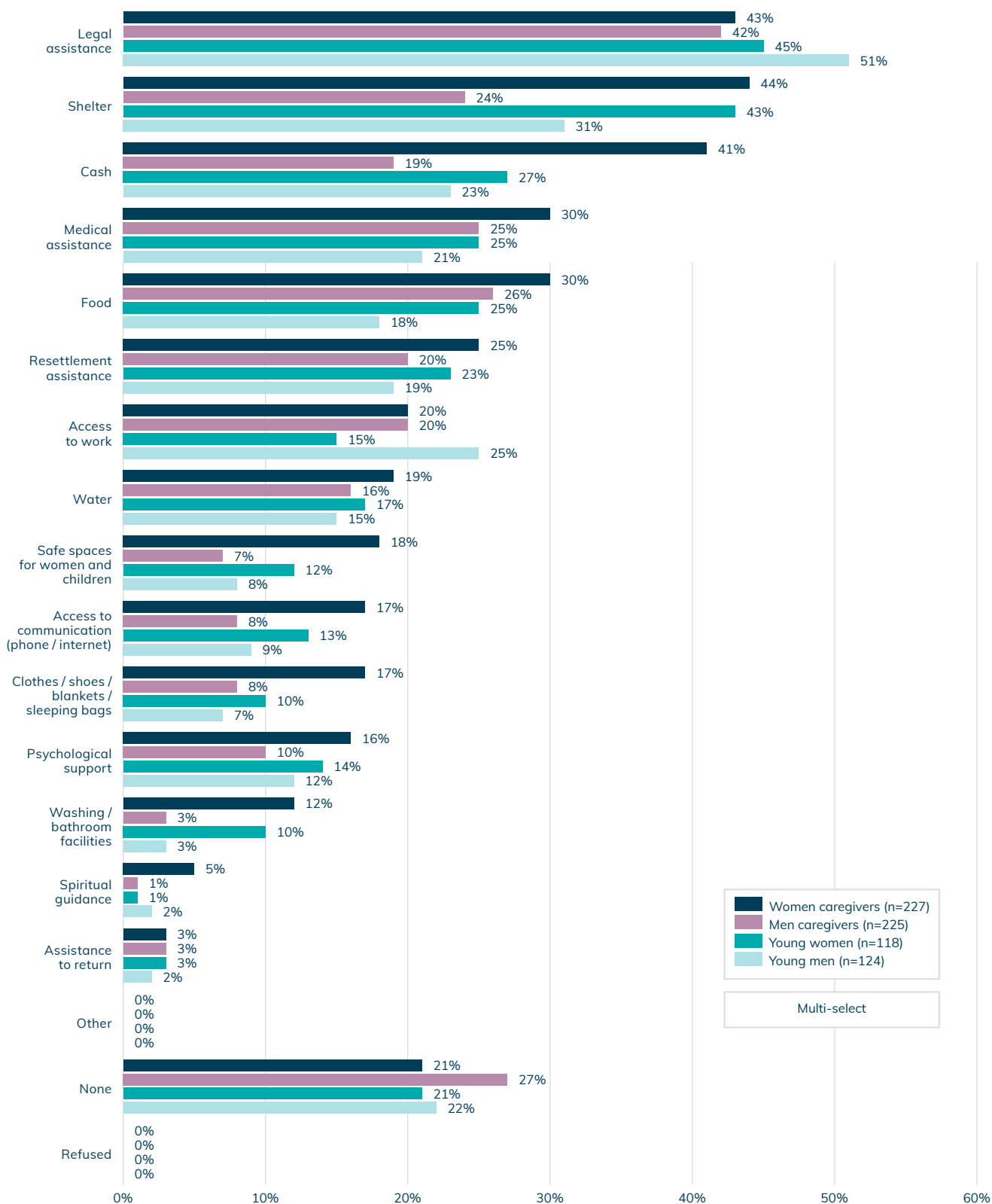
Reflecting the challenges faced by Afghan refugees and migrants in Pakistan, three quarters of caregivers (75%) and youth (79%) say they need additional assistance now; this is the case for 66% of non-caregiving adults, indicating greater needs for children, youth, and their families.

Among caregivers and youth, legal assistance is the greatest need, in particular for young men (51%). Shelter is also a high priority, especially for women: 44% of women caregivers and 43% of young women identify it as a need, compared to 24% and 31% of men caregivers and young men respectively. Women report greater needs than men in all other areas, with the exception of access to work which is identified as a need by a fifth (20%) of both men and women caregivers, 25% of young men, and 15% of young women.

“The most serious issues are lack of education and health services. Women and children are the most affected. Due to poor conditions and poverty, they face hunger and malnutrition. [...] There is a need for registration and documentation so they can access services. Education, health, and basic needs support is required. Especially for women and children, services should be increased.”

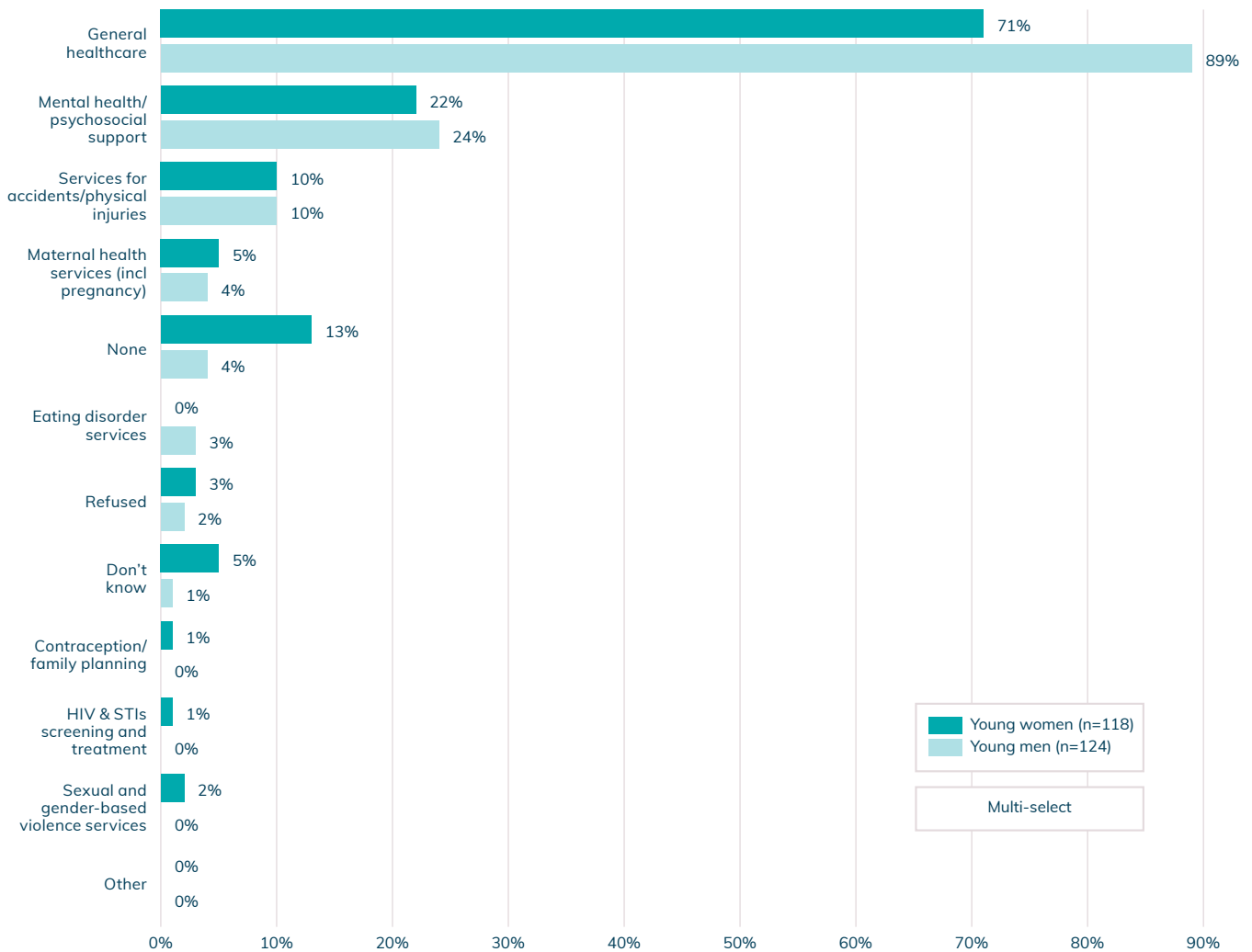
Humanitarian actor/NGO representative n°3 in Peshawar

Figure 16. What kind of assistance do you need?



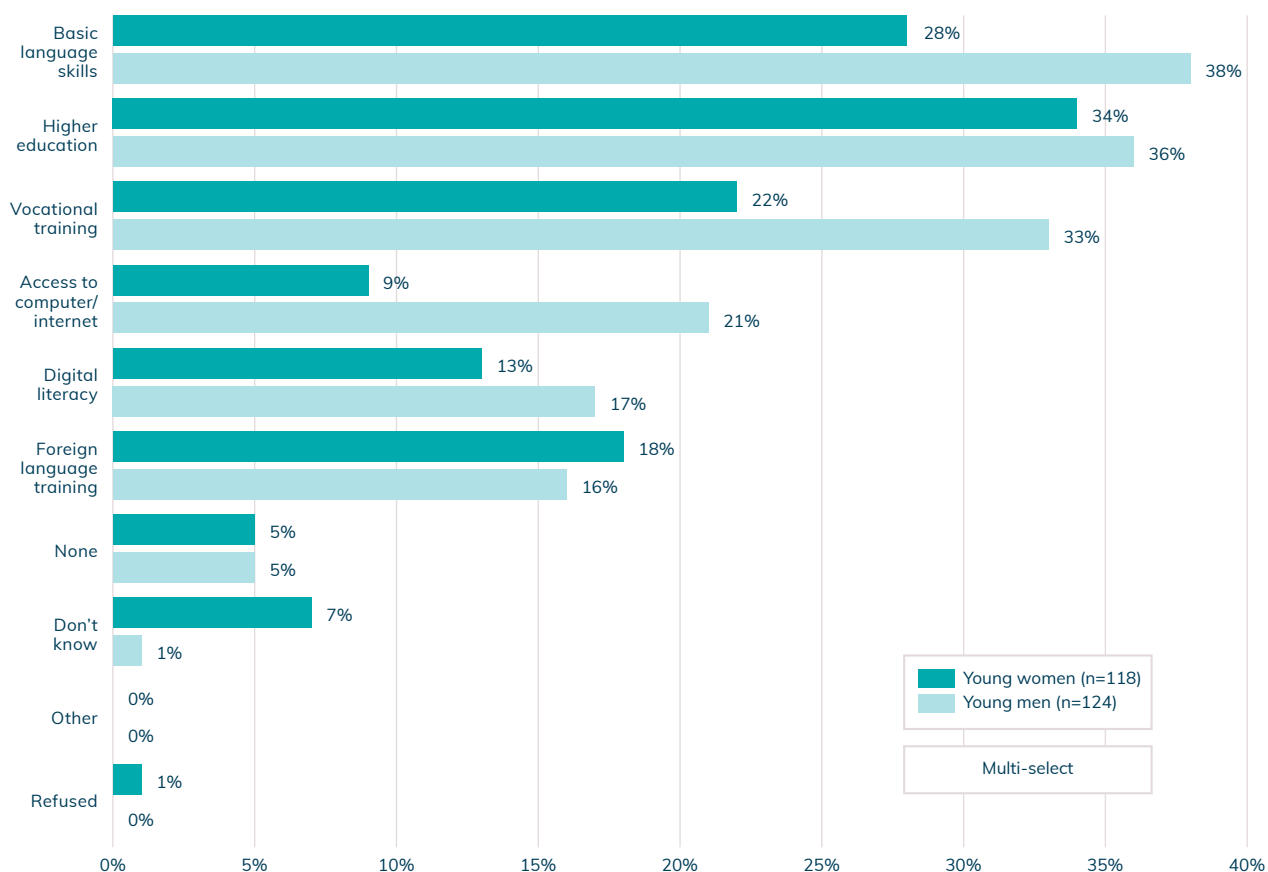
With regards to youth’s specific needs in terms of healthcare services, young women (n=118) and young men (n=124) mostly reported a need for general healthcare (71% and 89% respectively), followed by mental health/psychosocial support (22% and 24% respectively). Just 13% of young women and 4% of young men did not feel the need for any type of healthcare services.

Figure 17. What type of healthcare services do you currently need the most?



In terms of education, basic language skills and higher education are reportedly the services most commonly needed by both young men (cited by 38% and 36% respectively) and young women (28% and 34% respectively). Young men identify much greater needs in terms of vocational training (33% vs 22% of young women) and access to a computer/internet (21% vs 9%). Among those identifying a need for vocational training (41 young men and 26 young women), financial literacy is the professional skill most commonly needed (by 20 men and 10 women), followed by IT/communications (19 men and 3 women).

Figure 18. What type of services related to education do you currently need the most?



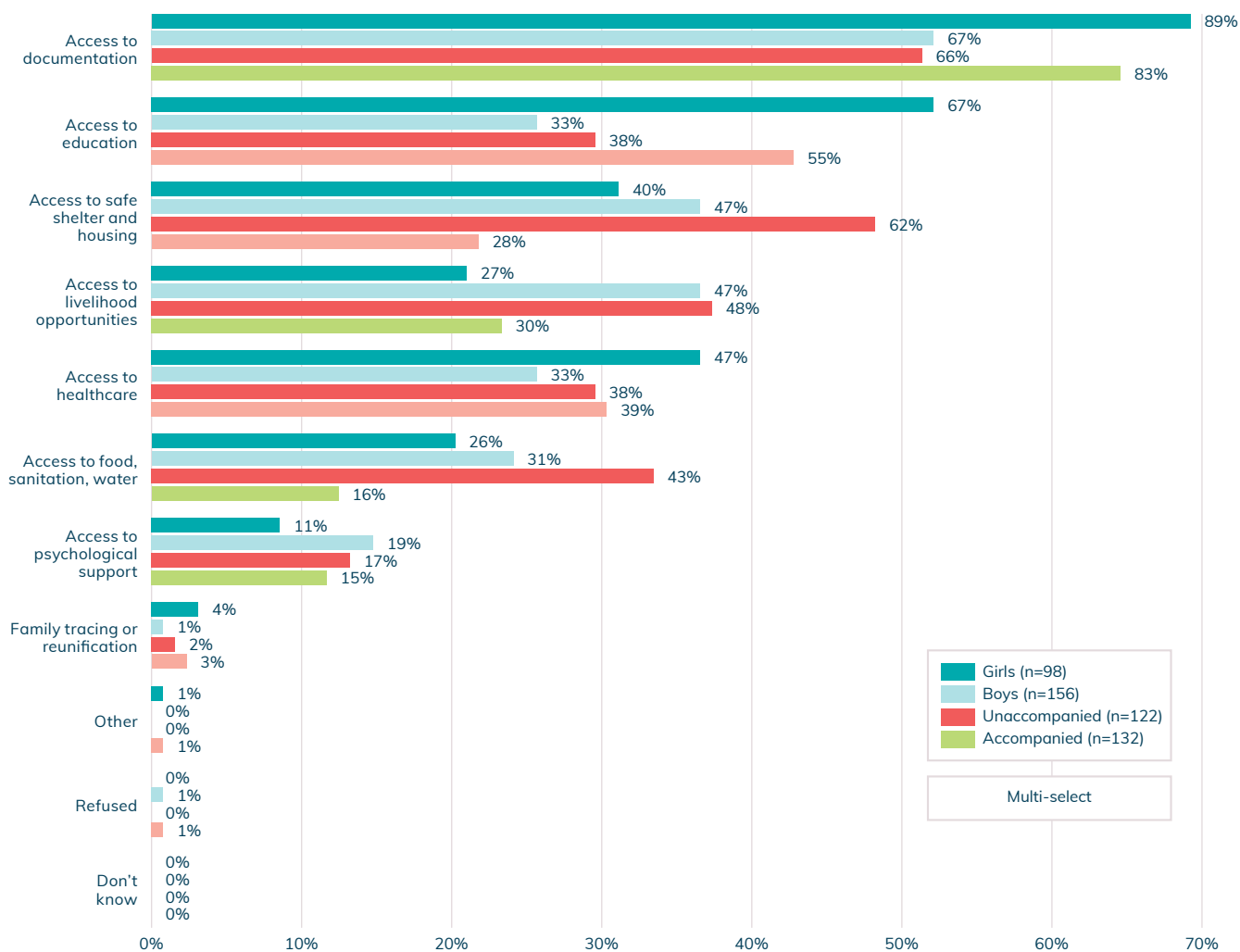
Specific needs of children

Indicating a high-level of awareness among children of the legal challenges faced by Afghans in Pakistan, and reflecting the priorities of elder respondents, access to documentation is indicated by 75% of children to be one of their greatest needs. This is followed by access to education (46%) and safe shelter and housing (44%).

Girls (n=98) and boys (n=156) report differing needs: notably, 89% of girls highlight a need for documentation (compared to 67% of boys) and 67% emphasise the need for education (compared to 33% of boys). In contrast, while 47% of boys flag a need for livelihood opportunities, this is the case for just 27% of girls.

Big differences also emerge between unaccompanied children (n=122) and those being cared for by a parent or guardian (n=132). Documentation remains the greatest need in both groups, but it is identified by 83% of accompanied children compared to 66% of unaccompanied children. While children cared for by a parent or guardian more often prioritise the need for education (55% vs 38%), unaccompanied children report much greater needs in terms of access to food, sanitation, and water (43% vs 16%) and safe shelter and housing (62% vs 28%) – essential basic needs requiring emergency humanitarian assistance. Unaccompanied children also have a greater need for livelihood opportunities (48% vs 30%), reflecting their need to fend for themselves in the absence of adult support.

Figure 19. What are your greatest needs currently in Pakistan?



Intentions & aspirations

The challenges and risks faced in Pakistan, including the rising risk of deportation to Afghanistan, are prompting many to consider onward movement. As mentioned previously, 57% of children surveyed intend to move to another country, potentially exposing them to further risks on the move. This is also the case for 45% and 42% of youth and caregivers respectively, but just 28% of non-caregiving adults, who more commonly intend to remain in Pakistan.

While there are no differences observed in terms of gender, children who are currently being cared for by a parent or guardian more commonly report intending to move to another country, at 66% compared to 48% of unaccompanied children. This may reflect the more limited options available to unaccompanied children given their acute financial vulnerability, as well as the role of family members in decision-making.

“We cannot go outside the house. We are all extremely distressed. We just want the relocation process to move forward so we can be transferred to another country.”

15-year-old Afghan girl in Nowshera

"We only wish to be relocated from this country to another one, where we can study, work, and live without the fear of being arrested by the police. This is our hope and request."

17-year-old Afghan boy in Nowshera

"All I ask is that either we are allowed to stay here, or arrangements are made for us to move to another country."

16-year-old Afghan girl in Nowshera

Other children aspire to remain in Pakistan (35%), expressing hope that they will be given permission – and documentation – to stay.

"I hope to get permission to stay in Pakistan so that I can live my life, pursue education, and be allowed to work — and so that the elders in my family can work hard without fear."

15-year-old Afghan girl in Nowshera

Conclusion

This report highlights significant gaps in access to basic rights and essential services for Afghans in Pakistan and in particular, highlights the issue of lack of documentation that has emerged as a cross-cutting protection issue of serious concern. Without documentation, Afghans in Pakistan find themselves all but excluded from basic services; they are also at greater risk of workplace exploitation and detention. It comes as no surprise, then, that legal assistance and access to documentation are among the greatest needs reported by the caregivers, youth, and children surveyed.

"PoR program and ACC registration should be started again. Children should get documents and registration. Without documents, families have problems in all services. Therefore legal status is the main issue."

Humanitarian actor/NGO representative in Peshawar

"Legal registration and documentation is needed so they can access services and live without fear."

Child protection expert in Quetta

Under the current repatriation policy, ACC and PoR card holders are now exposed to forced return. This further undermines access to basic services, livelihoods, and social life for Afghans in Pakistan, who seek to remain in the shadows out of fear of being deported.

Children are particularly affected, as they are unable to enrol in formal education: over three quarters of children surveyed have been unable to access education or training in Pakistan. The problems and dangers children face also have particularly negative impacts on their mental health, prompting 70% of those surveyed to describe themselves as depressed. Unaccompanied children are especially vulnerable.

Implications for policy and programming

What is needed is a shift in government policy away from indiscriminate detention and deportation to enable Afghans in Pakistan – and particularly children and youth – to live without fear and access basic services and livelihoods.

"We need to be given a legal document here to stay here permanently."

14-year-old Afghan boy in Peshawar

Clear commitments are required to uphold international child protections standards, particularly the prohibition of child detention and the prevention of child labour. This includes expanding alternative livelihood opportunities and safeguarding education pathways for children and youth.

In the absence of a fundamental policy shift away from indiscriminate detention and deportation, humanitarian actors must improve efforts to provide access to basic services, livelihoods, and protection for all Afghan children and youth irrespective of their legal status. Key actors should consider scaling up outreach-based supports to reach children and families who are afraid to leave their homes or access formal services due to the nation-wide crackdowns. Financial barriers, in particular to accessing healthcare, should be addressed through the expansion of free or low-cost health clinics.

Targeted programmes for unaccompanied children, who remain among the most vulnerable, are critical given the reported high levels of homelessness, child labour, and exposure to protection risk reported among this group.

Additionally, investments in informal education and mental health and psychological support for children and youth are necessary to address immediate needs while supporting longer-term wellbeing and development.

In the absence of protection within Pakistan, pathways for resettlement should also be considered where determined to be protection appropriate for particularly at-risk children, including for some unaccompanied children.

“My hope and request is that we be helped to move from this country to another, because we are suffering greatly here.”

16-year-old Afghan boy in Nowshera

