

Afghans in Pakistan: drivers, risks and access to assistance

As of October 2024, Pakistan hosted approximately three million Afghans,¹ including around 700,000 Afghans who fled following the takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021.² However, the journey to Pakistan and the conditions many Afghans face upon arrival are fraught with risks. Significant visa requirements, particularly after August 2021, have forced many to travel irregularly and upon arrival, Afghans face limited prospects for long-term settlement, restricted access to protection services, and insufficient support to rebuild their lives.³ Pakistan's deportation plan,⁴ has further exacerbated already precarious conditions and put pressure on many to consider returning to Afghanistan, despite the continued risks awaiting them on return. By November 2024, a year after the plan's implementation, 591,500 Afghans had returned to Afghanistan, including 34,700 who had been deported.⁵ This snapshot examines the drivers of Afghan migration to Pakistan, the risks faced en route, and assistance needs upon arrival.

Key findings

- **Violence, insecurity and conflict** were reported by the majority of respondents (71%) as the primary driver of their migration to Pakistan. This was followed by **economic reasons** cited by 61% of respondents.
- Notable gender disparity is observed in the reasons for leaving Afghanistan, with **women respondents more frequently identifying** lack of access to rights and freedoms (45%), personal or family reasons (27%), and access to services (15%) as key drivers, than men (who reported 30%, 15% and 7% respectively).

1 UNHCR (2024) [Islamic Republic of Pakistan | Global Focus](#)

2 HRW (2023) [Pakistan: Drop Threat to Deport Afghans](#)

3 ICMPD (2023) [Migration Insights: Understanding onward migration dynamics among Afghan nationals in Pakistan](#)

4 Under this plan announced on 3 Oct 2023, all “illegal foreigners” will be repatriated from 1 Nov 2023 onwards. See UNHCR RBAP (2023) [Emergency update #7: Pakistan-Afghanistan returns response](#) for the key events timeline.

5 UNHCR (2024) [Pakistan-Afghanistan: Returns Emergency Response \(as of 5 November 2024\)](#).

- More than half of the respondents (57%) reported experiencing protection incidents along their journey to Pakistan (n=536), with **physical violence** (67%), **bribery/extortion** (33%) and **injury or illness** (20%) being the most reported incidents.
- A higher proportion of women reported experiencing physical violence, bribery, extortion, and sexual violence, while men more commonly reported detention, trafficking, exploitation, and robbery, underscoring the **need for targeted, gender-responsive interventions**.
- Most respondents (78%) highlighted assistance needs in Pakistan (n=755), **particularly for economic support** (55%), **access to work** (49%), and **resettlement assistance** (40%).

Profiles

This snapshot is based on 962 4Mi surveys conducted with Afghans in Quetta (28%), Islamabad (27%), Karachi (27%), and Peshawar (18%) between November 2023 and June 2024. All respondents arrived in Pakistan within 24 months of the date of interview. Of the respondents, 24% were women, and 76% were men.⁶ The majority of the respondents were between 18 and 35 years old (62%). Most respondents came from a rural background (58%) and had a secondary or high school level of education (36%) or a university degree (30%). Nearly half of the respondents (43%) were undocumented or without a valid permit, and the rest were asylum seekers (21%), refugees (18%) or held some form of documentation (18%) (see Table 1). Nearly half (45%) of respondents were travelling to Pakistan with children in their care.

6 The gender distribution of respondents aligns with recorded migration trends of Afghans to Pakistan from January to September 2024, however comprehensive data on overall migration trends is lacking. See IOM (2024) [Afghanistan - Flow Monitoring Quarterly Report 3 \(July - September 2024\)](#). There are also additional challenges in accessing Afghan women during fieldwork further contributing to the gender imbalance among respondents.

Table 1. Profile of respondents

		Women (n=230)	Men (n=732)	Total (n=962)
Age group	18-25	33%	29%	30%
	26-35	37%	30%	32%
	36-45	20%	21%	20%
	46-55	5%	12%	11%
	55+	4%	8%	7%
	TOTAL	100%	100%	100%
Education level	Did not complete any schooling	13%	10%	11%
	Primary school	10%	19%	17%
	Secondary or high school	38%	35%	36%
	Vocational training	0%	7%	6%
	University degree	38%	28%	30%
	TOTAL	100%	100%	100%
Migration status	Irregular/no legal documents to stay in this country	24%	47%	41%
	Asylum seeker	28%	18%	21%
	Refugee	18%	18%	18%
	Temporary protection	3%	2%	2%
	Permanent resident (with permit/visa)	0%	1%	1%
	Temporary resident (with permit/visa)	13%	5%	7%
	Regular migrant with no need for permit	3%	1%	1%
	Permit is no longer valid/expired	2%	2%	2%
	Applied for permit/visa	9%	4%	6%
	Don't know	0%	2%	1%
	TOTAL	100%	100%	100%
Residence background	Rural	40%	43%	42%
	Urban	60%	57%	58%
	TOTAL	100%	100%	100%

Violence and insecurity as well as economic reasons reported as the main drivers of migration

The majority of the respondents (71%) stated that they were driven to migrate due to violence, insecurity and conflict. Since the takeover in August 2021, while widespread armed conflict stopped, pockets of violence due to the presence of armed groups such as Islamic State – Khorasan Province (IS-KP) and National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF), are increasing threats to security⁷ and exacerbating the risks faced by already marginalized groups, including, women and girls, former government affiliates, ethnic and religious minorities, people with diverse sexual orientation and gender identify, among others.⁸

Economic reasons were also identified as another key driver by 61% of respondents. While economic drivers have historically influenced Afghan migration patterns to Pakistan,⁹ the Afghan economy has contracted by 27% since August 2021, plunging the country further into severe economic crisis, leading to widespread poverty and unemployment.¹⁰ Following violence, insecurity and conflict and economic reasons, deprivation of rights and freedoms were the third most reported driver (36%).

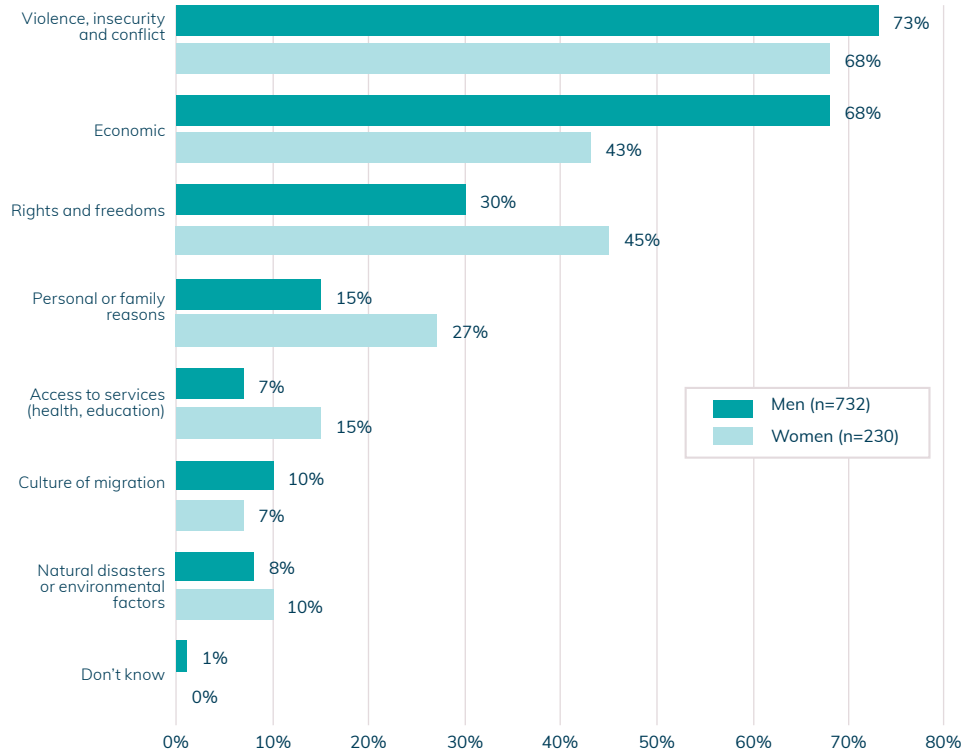
7 Crisis Group (2022) [Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban](#)

8 HRW (2022) [Afghanistan: ISIS Group Targets Religious Minorities | Human Rights Watch \(hrw.org\)](#)

9 Qaisrani, A. (2023) [Migration Insights: Understanding onward migration dynamics among Afghan nationals in Pakistan](#)

10 UN News (2024) [Afghanistan's Economy has 'Basically Collapsed': UNDP.](#)

Figure 1. For what reasons did you leave Afghanistan?



Deprivation of rights and freedoms were reported as a driver of migration more commonly for women, than men

Among respondents, notable gender disparities emerged in the reasons for leaving Afghanistan (see Figure 1). A higher share of men (68%) reported economic reasons as a driver compared to women (43%). For women, however, a lack of rights and freedoms was a more pressing concern, with almost half (45%) identifying it as one of the drivers for leaving (compared to 30% of men) – an outcome that aligns with the severe restrictions imposed on women and girls following the takeover.¹¹ Additionally, a larger proportion of women reported personal and family reasons (27%) and access to services (15%) as one of the reasons for leaving, compared to men (15% and 7% respectively). These gendered differences reflect the heightened personal, family and rights-related challenges women currently face in Afghanistan.

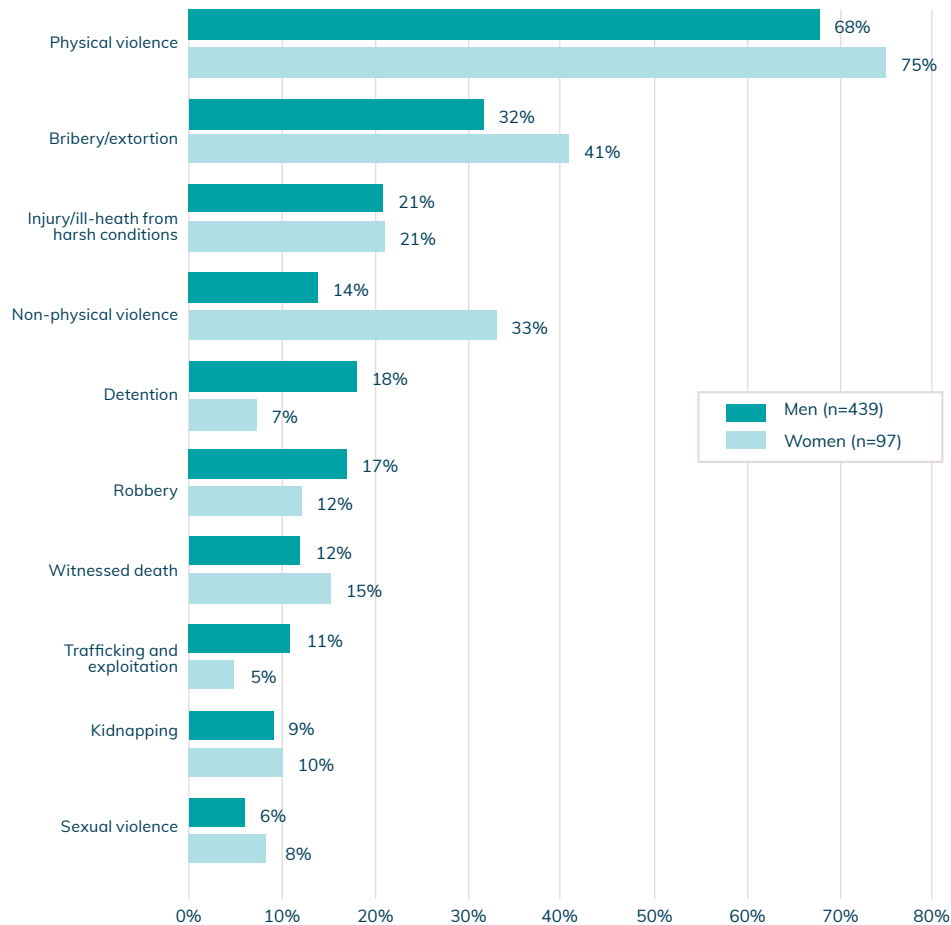
Physical violence, bribery/extortion and injury or illness are the three most commonly reported risks en route

Most respondents (93%) travelled to Pakistan overland, while 4% travelled by air, and 3% used a combination of air and land. Nearly all respondents (95%) arrived in Pakistan directly from Afghanistan, while 5% transited through Iran. Despite the close proximity of Afghanistan to Pakistan, over half of the respondents (57%, n=536) reported experiencing risks on their journey. This most frequently included physical violence (67%), bribery or extortion (33%), and injury or illness (20%),

A slightly higher proportion of women reported experiencing physical violence (75%), bribery and extortion (41%), witnessing death (15%), kidnapping (10%) and sexual violence (8%), (see Figure 2). More than double the share of women (33%), compared to men (14%), reported experiencing non-physical violence. Men, on the other hand, reported more commonly to have experienced detention (18%), trafficking and exploitation (11%), as well as robbery (17%). These findings highlight the need for targeted and gender responsive interventions that address the specific challenges faced by men and women on their journeys to Pakistan.

¹¹ MMC (2024) [Quarterly Mixed Migration Updates, MMC Asia and the Pacific, Quarter 2.](#)

Figure 2. Have you personally experienced any of the protection incidents on your journey?

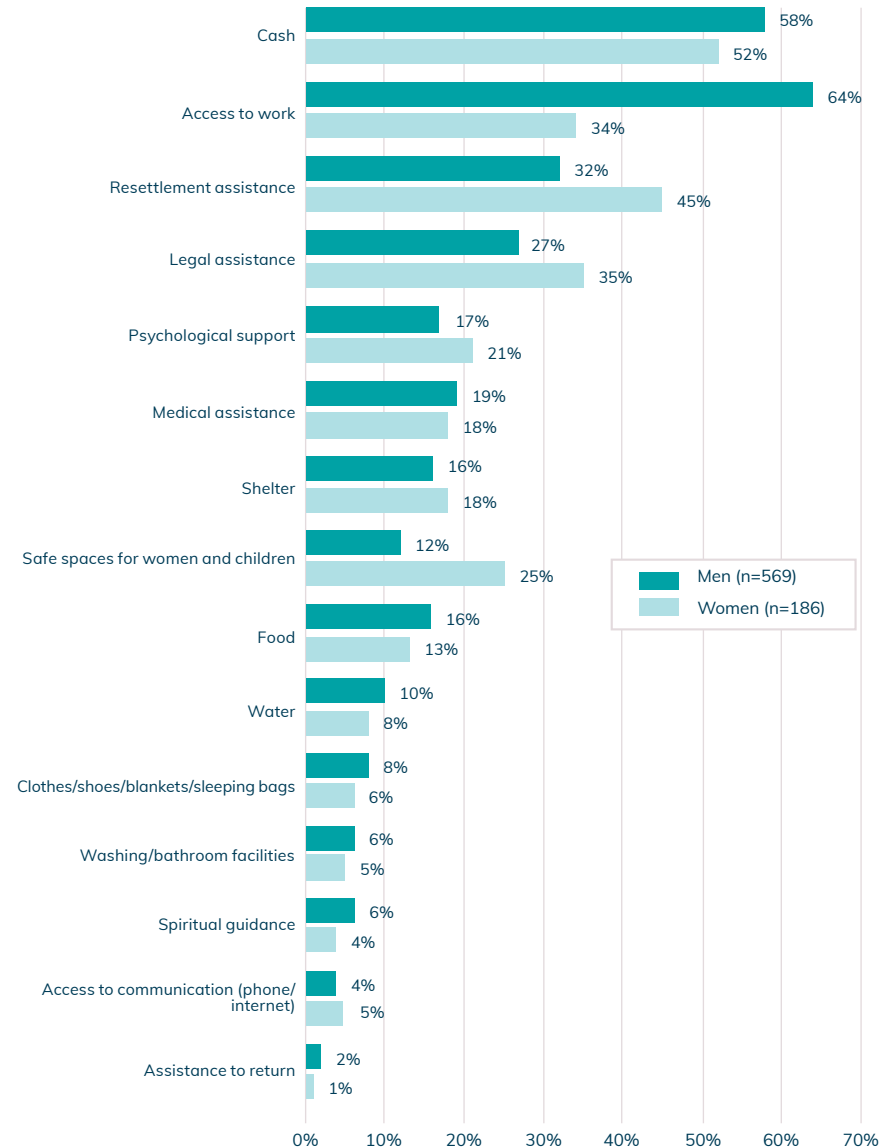


Assistance needs among Afghans persist upon arrival to Pakistan

In addition to the perilous journey, the need for assistance remains high among Afghans upon arrival in Pakistan, with 78% (n=755) of respondents reporting that they needed additional assistance at the time of their interview. The primary needs identified were related to economic support and integration, with cash (55%) being the most reported need, followed closely by access to work (49%), particularly among men, see Figure 3. This finding underscores the ongoing challenges faced by Afghans in Pakistan. Specifically,

the ban on employment for people without documentation has exacerbated economic precariousness for many Afghans, leaving them unable to work and at risk of arrest when seeking informal work.¹²

Figure 3. What kind of assistance do you need now?



12 Relief International. (2023). [“They Left Us Without Any Support”: Afghans in Pakistan Waiting for Solutions.](#)

Besides economic support, respondents reported resettlement assistance (40%), legal assistance (32%) and psychological support (18%) as other top needs in Pakistan. Resettlement assistance and legal assistance needs were more commonly reported among women than men (45% vs 32%, and 35% vs. 27%, respectively). These findings are consistent with the observations by MMC's 4Mi enumerators based in Pakistan, as well as other reports, which note an increased demand for resettlement and legal assistance since August 2021, as more Afghans are seeking protection through entities such as UNHCR in Pakistan and other neighbouring countries.¹³ Correspondingly, there is a greater need for legal support during their asylum application processes. The high reported need for legal assistance is also likely related to the lengthy resettlement processes for applicants in Pakistan.



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4Mi data collection

4Mi is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps, and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migratory movements and the protection risks for migrants on the move. 4Mi field enumerators are currently collecting data through direct interviews with migrants in Eastern and Southern Africa, North Africa, West Africa, Europe, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Note that the sampling approach means that the findings derived from the surveyed sample provide rich insights, but the figures cannot be used to make inferences about the total population. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at: www.mixedmigration.org/4mi

13 UNHCR (2024) [Pakistan-Afghanistan: Returns Emergency Response \(as of 5 November 2024\)](#).