



Engaging women in the humanitarian response in Afghanistan

Perspectives from people with low literacy levels

January 2024



Overview

Between August and September 2023, Ground Truth Solutions and Salma Consulting spoke with almost 2,000 people across every province of Afghanistan to understand their views on the aid they need or receive. The quantitative interviews and qualitative consultations sought to explore how people view humanitarian assistance, how they would like to participate in decisions around aid provision, and how they cope when aid is unavailable. We surveyed women (46%) and men (54%) in rural, urban, and peri-urban areas, the majority of whom (66%) self-identified as having difficulties reading or writing. Of those with literacy challenges, over half (35%) were women.

People with lower literacy levels are more likely to need aid but find accessing it more difficult. In this bulletin, we share their perceptions of the humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan.

Read the full report and methodology [here](#).


People with lower literacy levels refers to those with limited ability to read and write. Individuals with lower literacy levels may struggle to understand written texts, follow written instructions or engage with written material.

Who we talked to

1,897 people through face to face quantitative surveys and 68 people in ten focus group discussions (FGDs) and fifteen in-depth interviews (IDIs).

Quantitative sample (n=1,897)

 880 (46%) women  1,017 (54%) men

 652 (34%) 18-34 years old

 544 (29%) 35-44 years old


 701 (37%) 45+ years old

 399 (17%) persons with disabilities

 1,578 (83%) persons without a disability

Status

 1,434 (77%) host community

 286 (16%) Internally displaced people (IDPs)

 56 (3%) refugees

 76 (4%) returnees

Aid received

 1,025 (54%) aid recipients

 872 (46%) non aid recipients

Location

 Balkh  Khost

 Jawzjan  Kunduz

 Kabul  Nangarhar

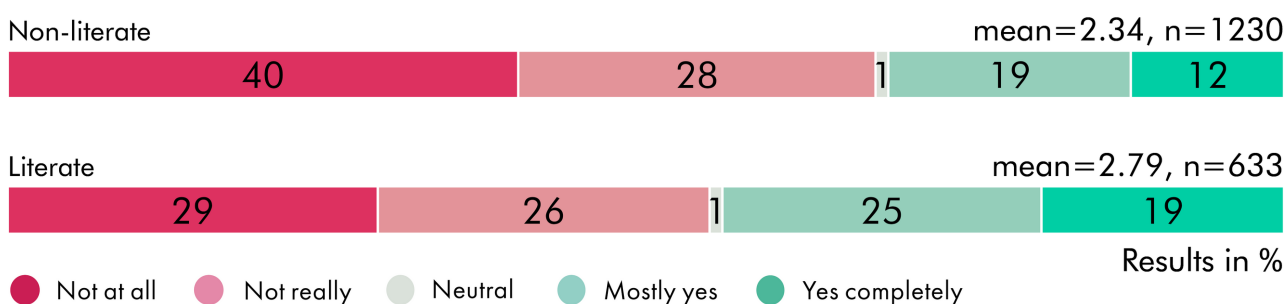
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Key findings

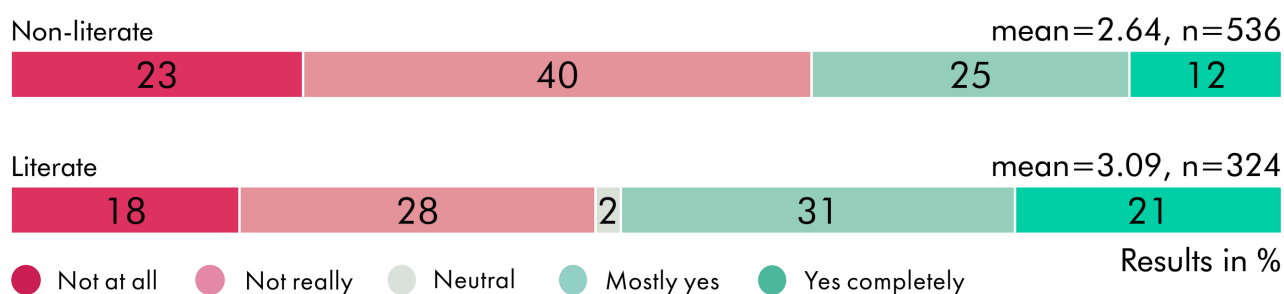
People with lower literacy levels find it harder to access information about aid

Only 31% of people who cannot read and write know how and where to register for humanitarian services, compared to 44% of people who can read and write. In addition, only 37% of people who cannot read or write know the exact dates and times of aid distribution, compared to the majority (52%) of people who are literate.

Do you feel informed about how and where to register for humanitarian aid/services?



Do you feel informed about distribution dates and times?



Even if they are able to register, people with lower literacy levels are generally less aware of when and where the distributions will take place. Women with lower literacy levels face higher barriers accessing information about aid. Only 23% of these women know where and how to register for humanitarian support compared to 41% of men with low literacy levels. In addition, only 26% of women with lower literacy levels know about the dates and times for aid distribution compared to 51% of men with lower literacy levels.

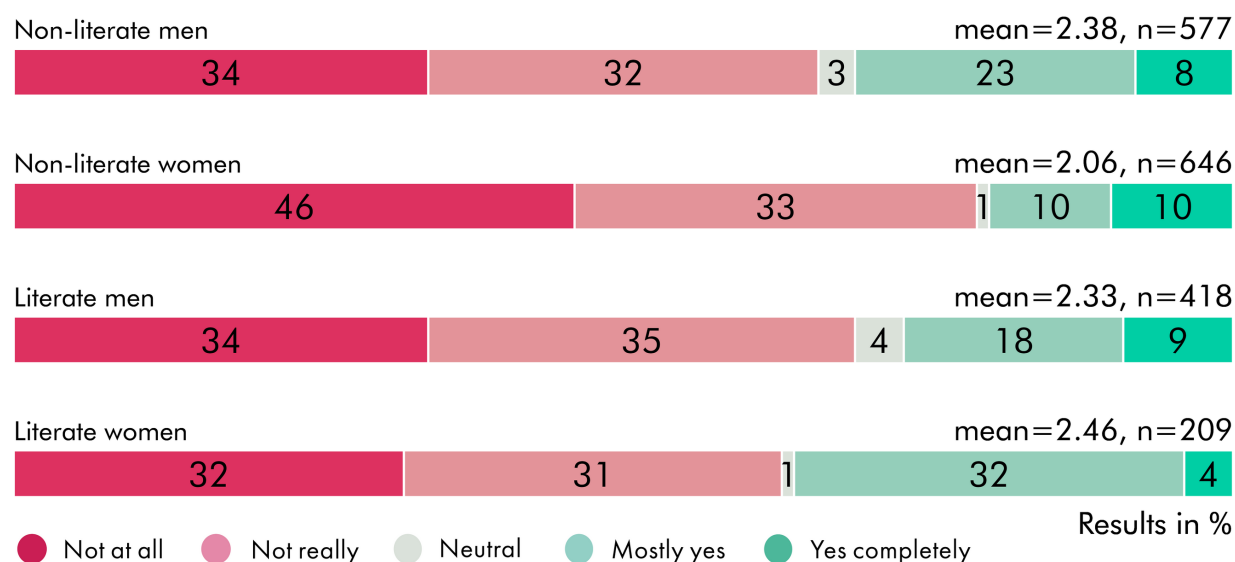
In focus groups and interviews, women consistently mentioned feeling unable to access information about aid directly and having to rely on informal social networks, rather than on information they actively sought or received from aid providers or civil society actors. In Nangarhar, Kabul, Balkh, and Kunduz provinces, women said they relied on their husbands, immediate family members, or neighbours. Women with no or limited access to such networks are more likely to be left out, including widows and women-headed households.

Women with lower literacy levels face more barriers accessing aid than men in the same category

Only 20% of the women who are unable to read and write find accessing aid easy, compared to 31% of men. Women report physical distance (29%), lack of clear information (22%), and the absence of women aid staff (18%) as the three major barriers that prevent them from accessing humanitarian support. Women in Nangarhar said they relied on one another and their local community to identify opportunities to access aid.

Since December 2021, women in Afghanistan have been required to be accompanied by a mahram when travelling distances greater than 72 km. Although most women can adhere to this requirement, those who do not have a mahram sometimes choose to travel alone, which causes considerable stress over potential harassment or abuse during the journey, particularly around checkpoints. Longer distances, paired with the lack of clear information, can make aid access harder for women, especially for those who have lower literacy levels.

How easy or difficult do you find it to access humanitarian assistance?



A widow with lower literacy in Kunduz also confirmed that the lack of information is a major barrier to accessing aid, because she is constantly at home and has limited connection beyond the home. She told us, "I am a woman, and it is hard for me to access information at outside of my house."



People with lower literacy feel less resilient

Only 38% of individuals who have difficulty reading and writing say that the aid and services available in their community helps them make long-term plans compared to 52% of those who are fully literate. Irrespective of their literacy level, all respondents prioritise work in strengthening their resilience and independence from aid. However, individuals with lower literacy levels specifically emphasise the importance of having access to cash (37%), tools for work (36%), infrastructure (25%), training (23%), shelter (17%), and microloans (12%) as essential to enable them to live independently without requiring assistance in the future.

Do you think the aid and services in your community help you to make long-term plans?

Non-literate mean=2.88, n=534

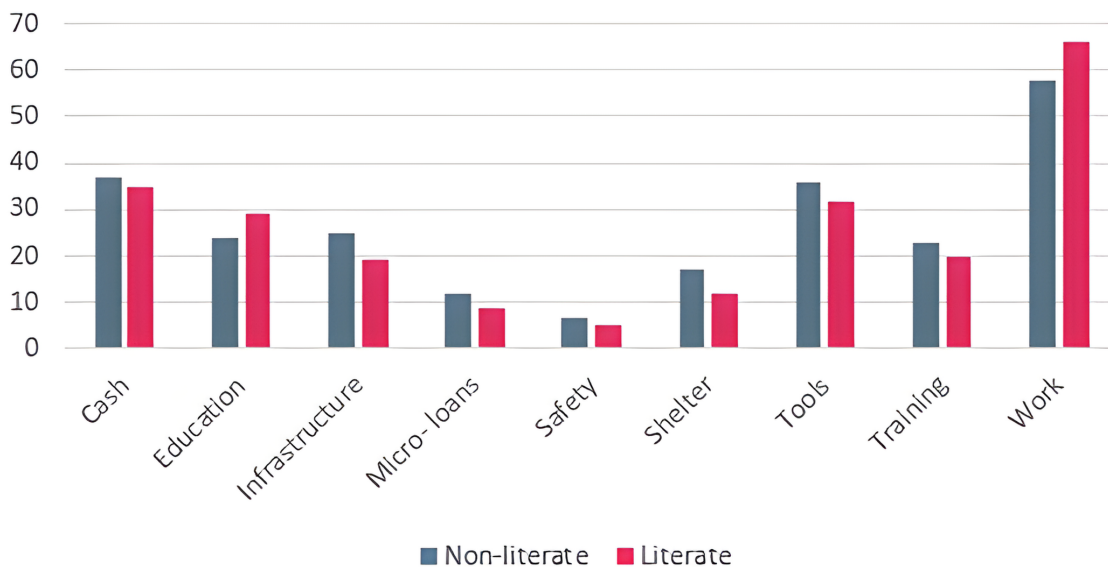


Literate mean=3.16, n=314



● Not at all
 ● Not really
 ● Neutral
 ● Mostly yes
 ● Yes completely
 Results in %

What would enable you to live without aid in the future? (Values in percentages)



* Percentages do not total 100% because respondents could choose multiple options.

Recommendations

Humanitarian organisations should:

- 1 Develop communication strategies and create communication tools, such as brochures, posters, and audiovisual contents, that use simple language, clear visuals, and culturally appropriate messaging to ensure accessibility of information for people with lower literacy levels.
- 2 Use more than one communication channel. Alternative communication channels such as local radio stations, community gathering/community events, and word of mouth can help to reach people who have difficulty reading and writing.
- 3 Work with informal social networks within the community. These informal networks may include women's group, community leaders, and local organisations. They can play a crucial role in identifying and reaching marginalised groups such as those with lower literacy levels who may otherwise be overlooked.
- 4 Train humanitarian staff on effective communication strategies and techniques to adequately reach and interact with people with lower literacy. This includes using simple language and active listening to ensure effective information sharing.
- 5 Promote education opportunities that go beyond basic literacy skills. Provide access to programmes that focus on financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and life skills to empower individuals, especially women, to make informed decisions and plan for their future.
- 6 Establish and support community-based women's groups and identify and support women community volunteers who can act as a bridge between women's community and aid agencies. Collaborate with these groups to better understand the needs and priorities and to facilitate aid access.

It was hard for me to find the distribution point, and nobody helped me reach it.

- a widow with lower literacy levels in Kunduz

My brother is a teacher, and he always gives me information about aid. I can talk very easily with my brother. But I do not know any other ways.

- woman in Balkh



We are grateful to the thousands of people in Afghanistan who spoke to us and shared their views.

For more information about our work, please contact kai.kamei@groundtruthsolutions.org and lee@salmaconsulting.com, or visit groundtruthsolutions.org and salmaconsulting.com.

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Illustrations : Anina Takeff / UN Women

Read our report [here](#).