



Safeguarding the right to live

THE SILENT REFUGEE CRISIS

THE REFUGEE AID PROJECT RESEARCH REPORT

2 May 2021

Learn more at www.thinkpeace.in/project/refugee-aid-project



REFUGEE AID PROJECT



"Refugees are incredible people. They have the resilience to face adversities, unparalleled commitment to their families and loved ones, and the courage to restart their lives. A handful of refugee crises around the world are well-acknowledged, but there are refugee groups that receive much less attention and consequently less humanitarian aid. The Hindu and Buddhist refugees from Pakistan & Bangladesh top this list of neglected crises, with their displacement situation worsening with time. Women and children suffer the most. These refugees are victims of forced poverty, homelessness, and lack of legal status. Their journeys through hatred, persecution, despair, corruption, confusion, and loneliness are unsettling but inspire action, This is an urgent crisis - we need to promote greater dignity and transform the way refugees are seen.

Humanity should take precedence over everything"

-Kiran Chukkapalli

"Success is loving humanity - it is striving to hear people, to include and celebrate them while restoring the dignity and justice when denied to them "



We are extremely grateful to the Refugee communities from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka for giving us time and sharing their insights with us. The overwhelming participation of the refugees made it easier for us to realistically understand their socioeconomic living conditions, their hopes and aspirations of a new life.





THE BHARAT REFUGEE CRISIS



Over the years, India has seen a continuous influx of refugees from neighboring nations. These are people who have faced a threat of life and liberty in their countries and have fled in search of a new home in India. Since independence, India has mostly adopted a non-refoulment policy, not forcing these refugees to get back to a place where they have been persecuted or lived under fear of persecution, resulting in a large refugee population.

While some of the refugee groups have received global attention, some of them have remained silent, unnoticed, and neglected. This weighs very unfair on a massive proportion of refugee population, who continue to live a life of hopelessness and despair. For these **silent refugees**, there have been no efforts to measure their quality of life, no standard ways of collecting data, and consequently, no humanitarian aid.



A HUMANITARIAN RIDE

A Bharat Refugee Yatra was undertaken by Kiran Chukkapalli, from 05 November 2020 to 26 January 2021, covering about 12 states with the purpose of providing a context to the scale of the Silent refugee crisis, highlighting the standard of their lives, finding their most urgent problems, their battles, their strengths, their weakness, and their endless resolve to provide a safe and secure life to their families



3 months



12 states



80 camps



11,000 kms

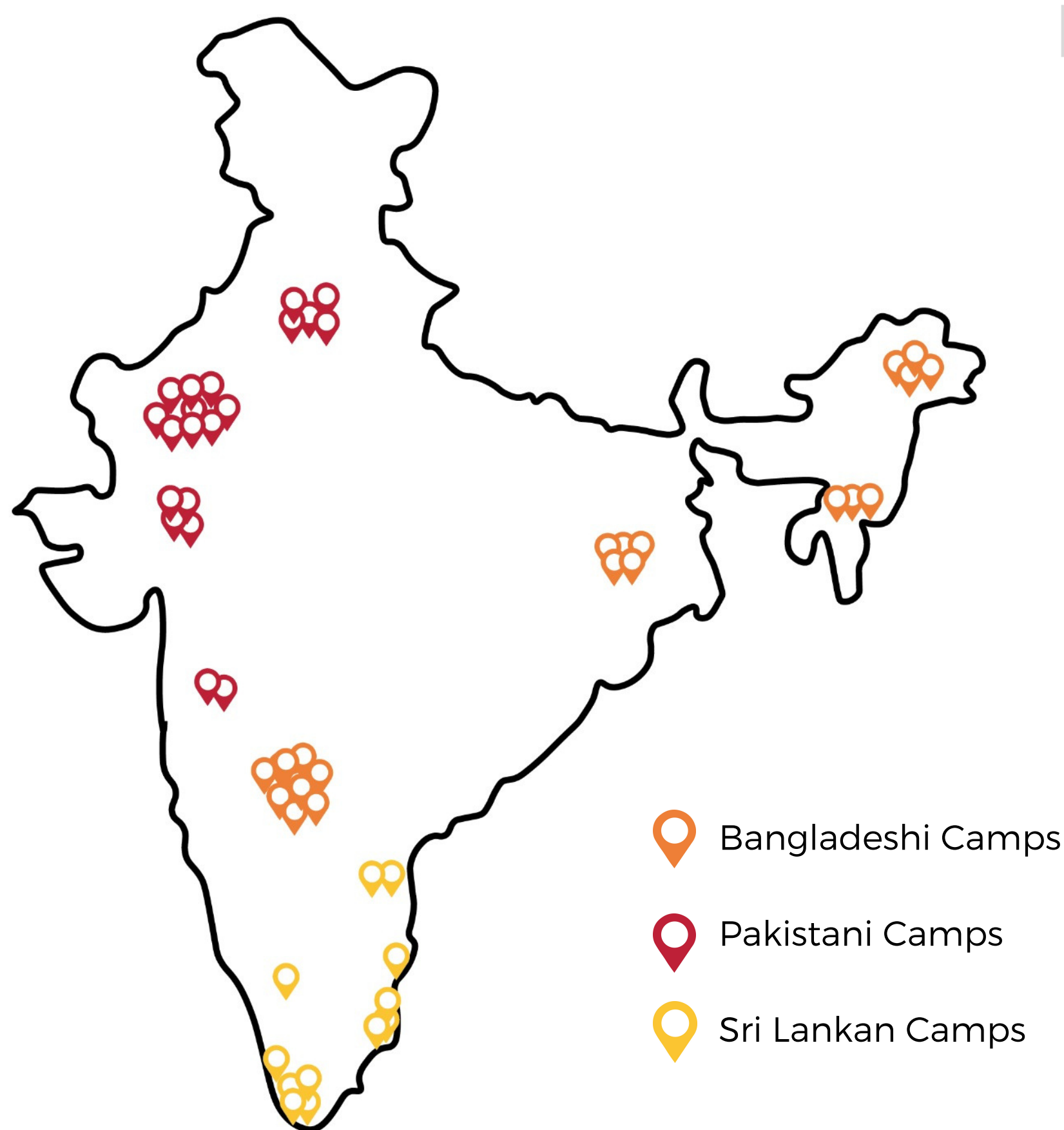


36,000 families

DATA COVERAGE & REPORT CONTENTS



In this report, we have highlighted some of the most pressing concerns of silent refugee groups living in camp and non-camp settings in India. Our survey covered about 36,000 refugee families (about 1,95,000 refugees) from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka living in the different Indian States. Primary data was collected by administering an interview schedule with a pre-defined questionnaire



Of the camps surveyed, 58% were from Pakistan, 39% were Bangladeshis and 3% were from Sri Lanka

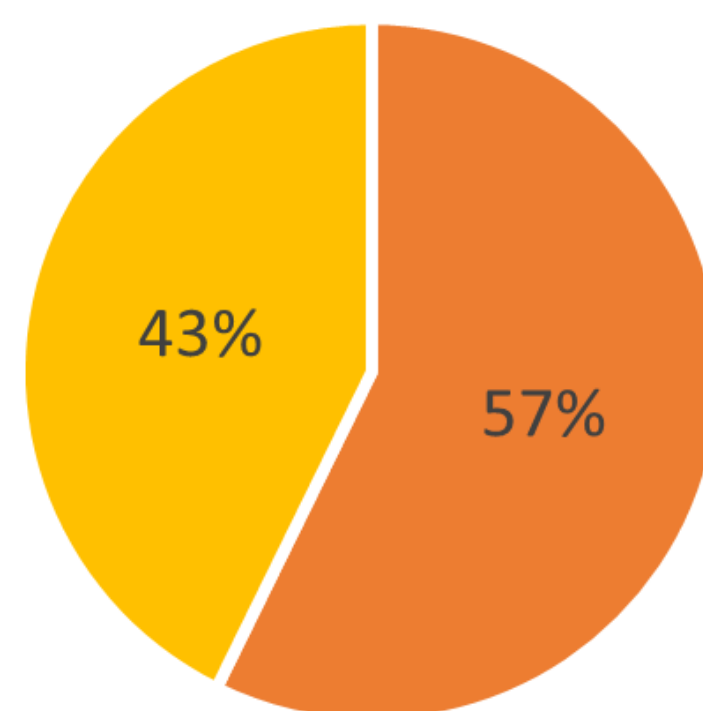


REFUGEE SETTLEMENTS



Refugee settlements are both urban and rural, as well as camp and non-camp. In urban areas, refugees live in camp settings as well as dispersed and intermingled with the local population. In rural regions, the refugees more or less live in a camp-like setting. The challenges faced by these groups differ tremendously and hence we have looked at these groups separately to measure their quality of life.

Distribution of refugees in urban-intermingled & camp settlements



■ Camps/Settlements ■ Urban-intermingled

57% of refugees live in camps

HINDUS, CHAKMAS & HAJONGS FROM BANGLADESH



Through the report, the reader may note that the living conditions and issues in the Bangladeshi camps in Sindhanur, Karnataka & Arunachal Pradesh are very distinct from those of Pakistani refugees scattered all over north and west India. These Bangladeshi camps were rehabilitation camps that were established by the government of India.

The refugees in Sindhanur were brought to India in 1971 when East Pakistan was carved out to form a new nation, as thousands of Hindus faced religious persecution and violence. The Chakma Buddhist & the Hajong Hindu communities fled Bangladesh in 1964 due to the Kaptai dam tragedy and religious persecution. They were rehabilitated in Arunachal Pradesh. Both these groups were well received by the Indian Government and given land to live and benefit from.

While their housing, electricity, water, and sanitation are fairly well provided, the groups in the northeast face challenges of integration into the Indian communities, education access, and healthcare facilities. The Chakmas have been fighting their citizenship battle since 1970, but have remained stateless despite the Supreme Court's direction to accord citizenship to them.

QUALITY OF LIFE INDICATORS



The refugees are a vulnerable community, irrespective of where they are. The number of people involved, and the amount of human suffering is enormous. In addition to looking into absolute indicators of measuring the quality of life like wealth, employment, environment, physical and mental health, education, recreation and leisure time, social belonging, religious beliefs, safety, security, and freedom, we also focused on a preliminary question – ***“Is life getting better for the refugees?”***. We asked the refugees what would make their struggle and journey worthwhile. We collated their responses to find a set of quality of life indicators, although Citizenship remains their prime concern.



HOUSING



7500 refugee families live with a constant fear of eviction

Inadequacy in Housing

Right to adequate housing is about having a safe home to live in, a place that offers the security of tenure, peace, an ability to earn a living, and free from the fear of forced eviction. A safe shelter can provide a space for families to rebuild their lives, cope up with their displacement, and provide a ray of hope for a brighter future.

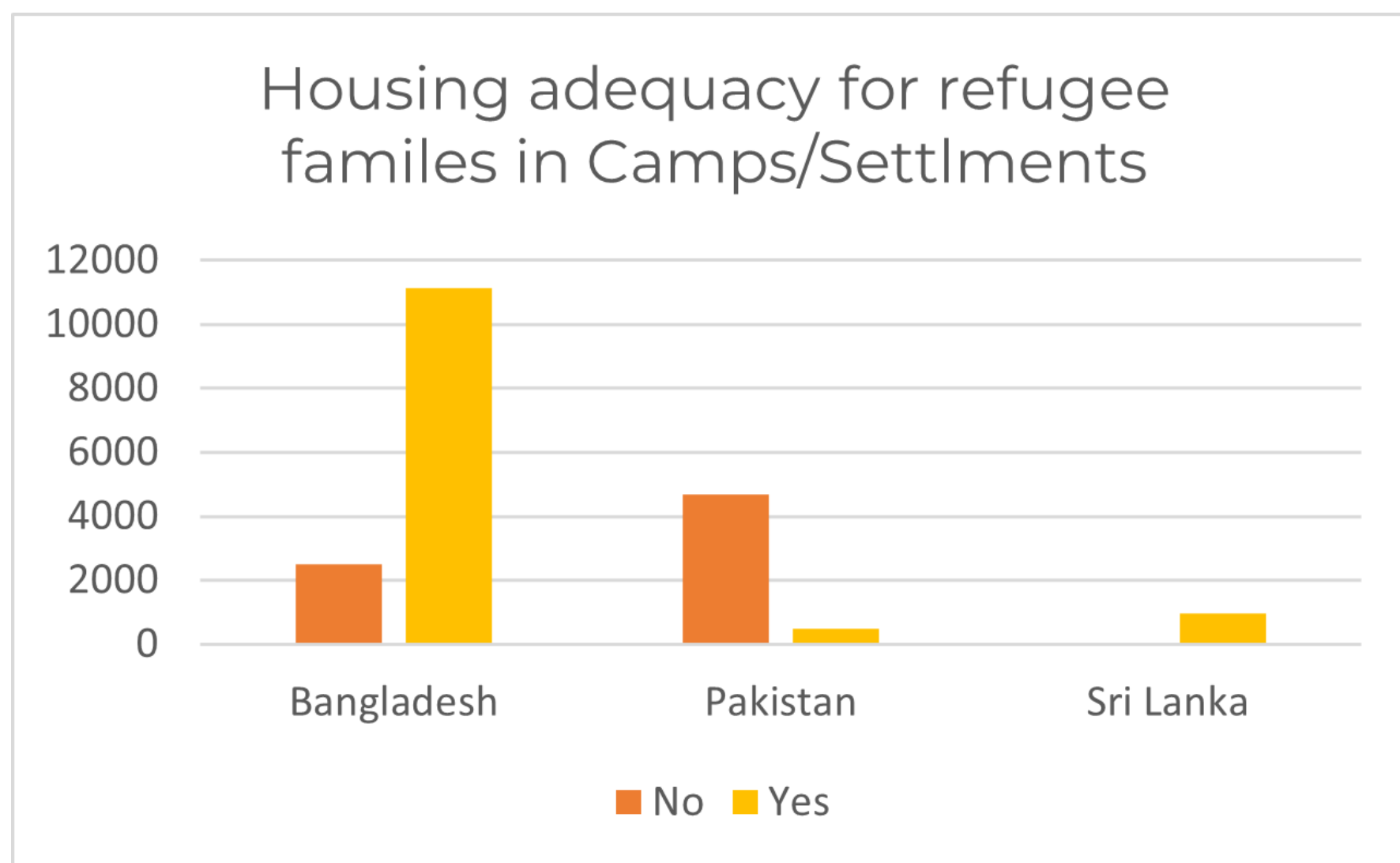
With no proper roof, walls, or doors, poor housing increases the vulnerability of an already vulnerable population. In addition to the infrastructural issues, they live in constant fear of being forced to leave their shelters due to stigmatization, economic vulnerability, and environmental threats. This fear of eviction creates anxiety, gives sleeplessness, and hopelessness to those who are the most vulnerable.



HOUSING



Housing in Camps/Settlements



About 90% of the refugees from Pakistan living in camps do not have access to a safe shelter to start their lives again.

We evaluated housing adequacy based on basic infrastructures like walls, roof, ventilation, structural stability including the ability to withstand weather conditions, adequate security, and security of tenure. The Pakistani refugees in western and north India live in the most inhumane conditions and under a constant threat of eviction.

Housing in urban-intermingled settlements

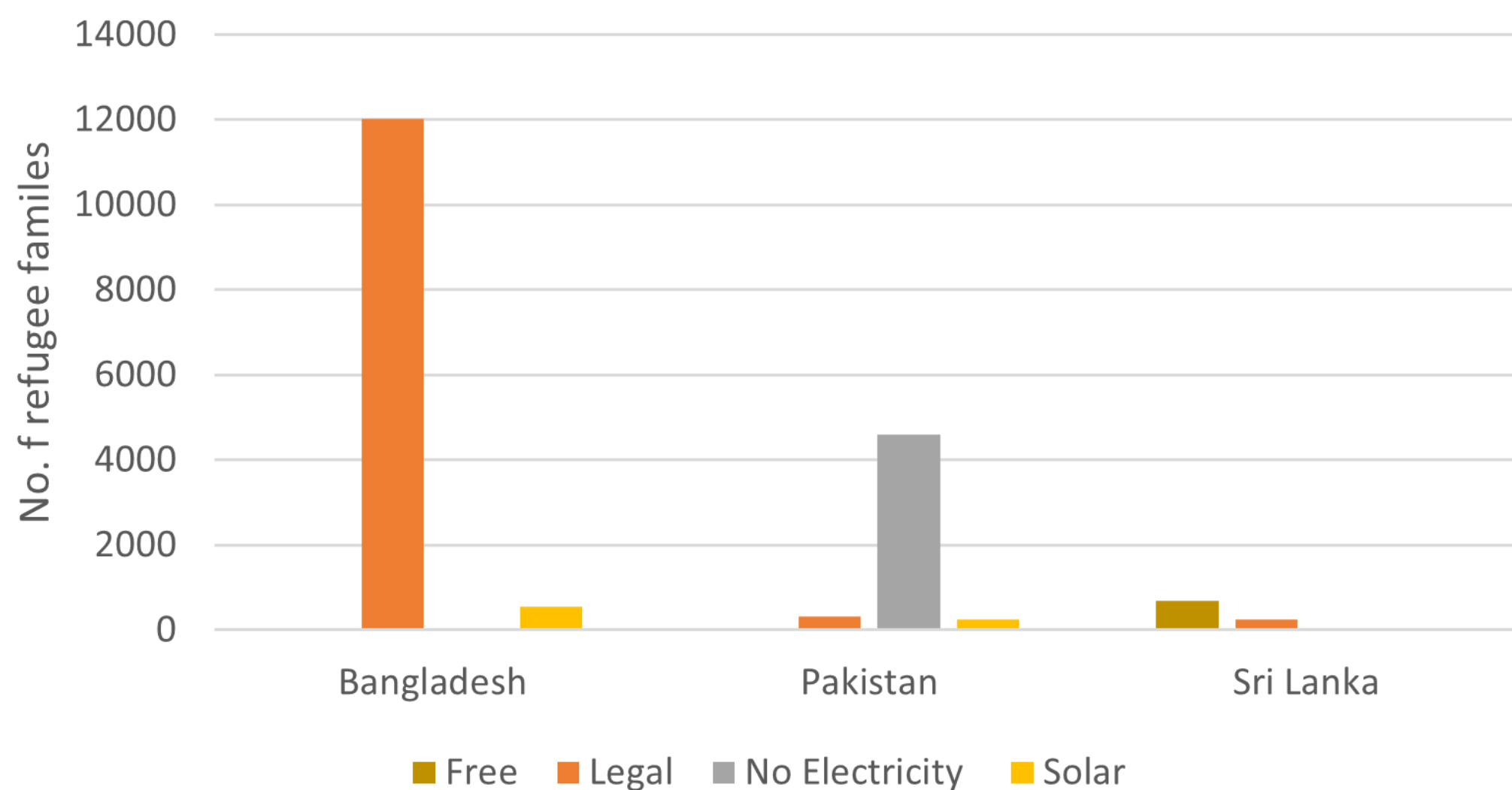
The urban refugees are faced with the challenges of overcrowded spaces, increased cost of living, and low incomes. With no collaborative measures taken to house the refugees, urban refugees are pushed into living below the poverty line. Accessing secure and affordable permanent housing is their most difficult challenge.

ACCESS TO ELECTRICITY WATER & SANITATION



The refugees from Pakistan live in extremely inhumane conditions and their plight has been completely neglected over the years. The lack of solidarity is the major reason which forces these families into poverty. Excessive heat, no electricity, lack of toilets and sanitation, no water for drinking is nothing short of making a disaster for these refugees.

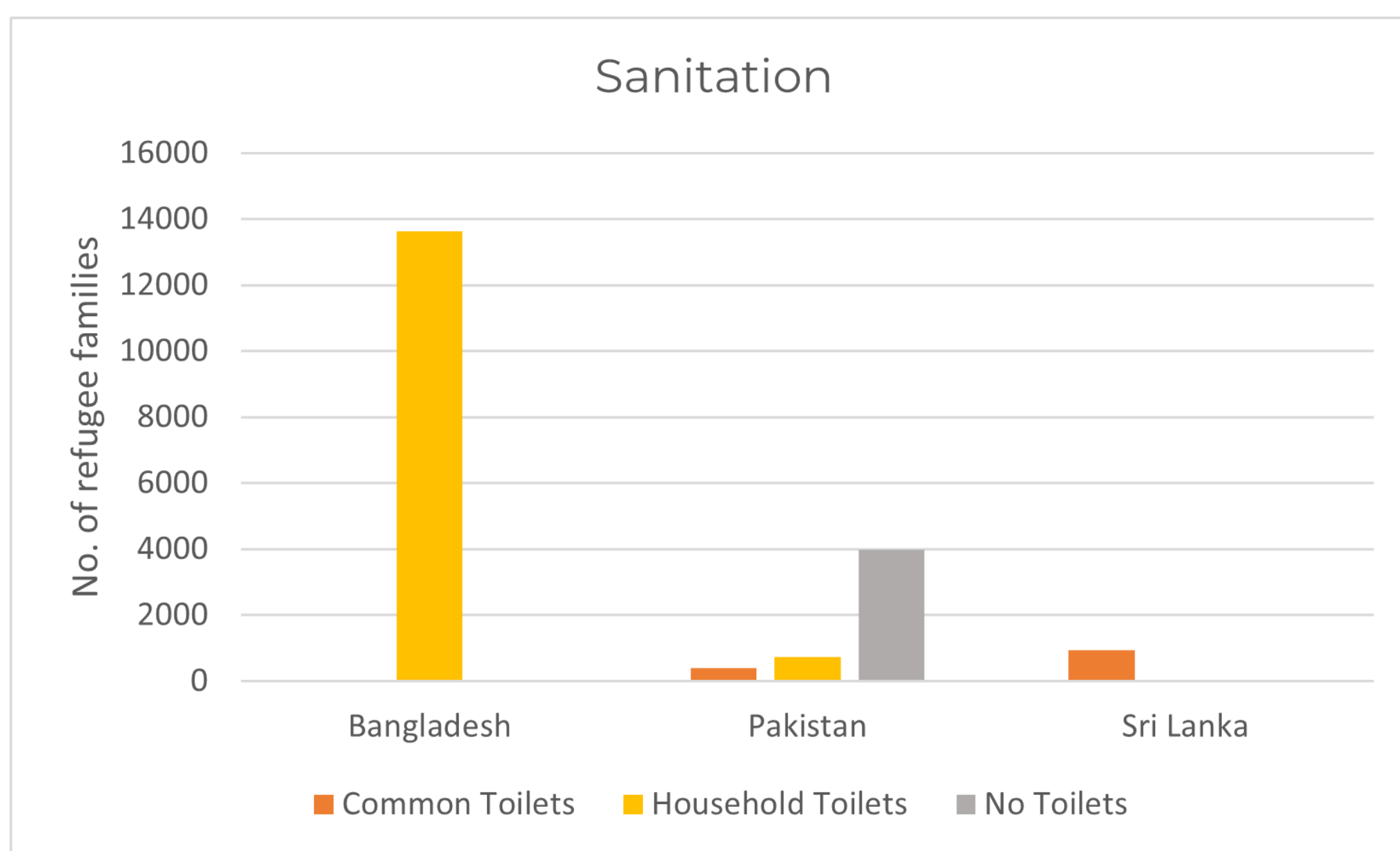
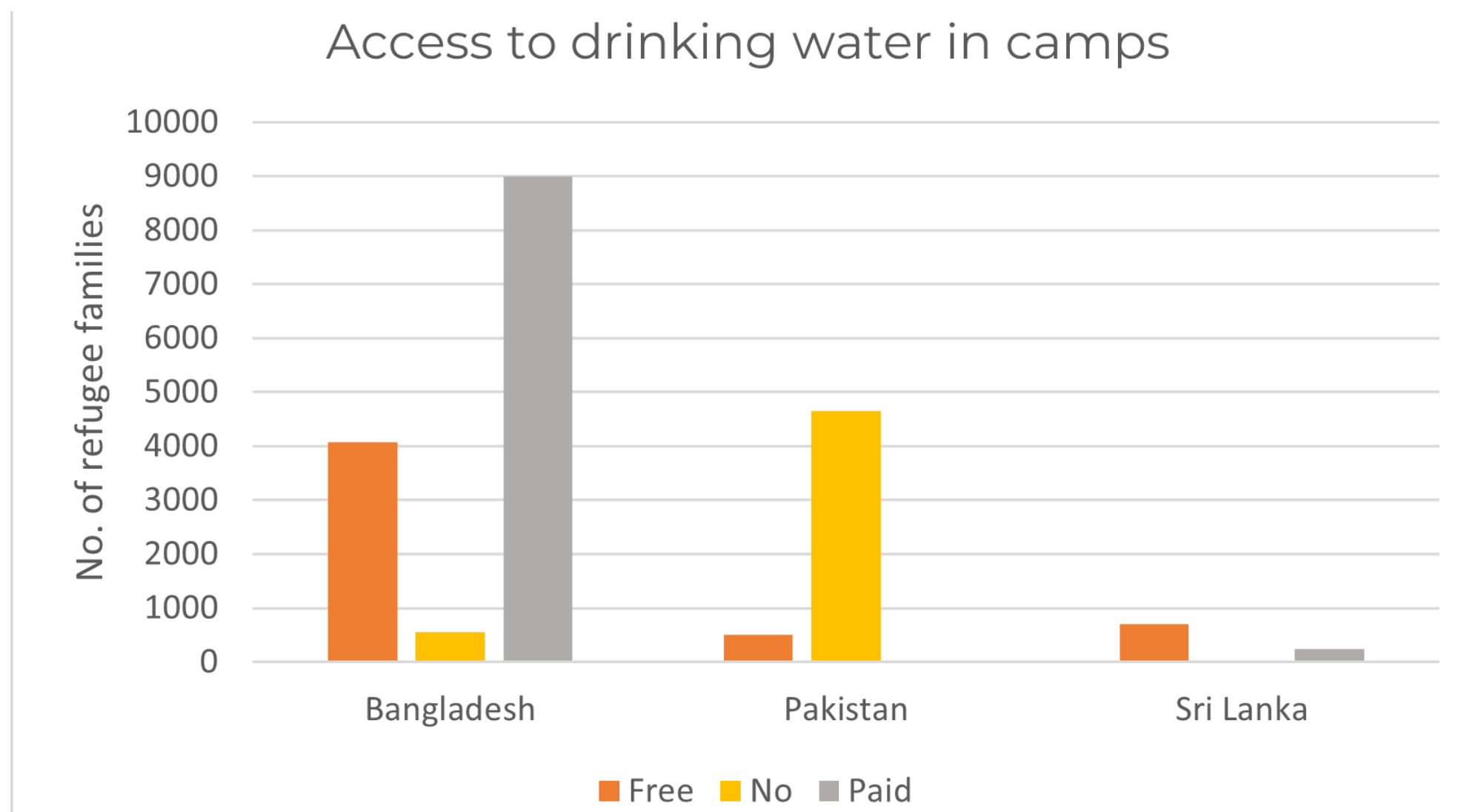
Access to electricity in refugee camps



90% of the Pakistan refugees camps have no access to electricity or water ; 80% do not have toilets



LIVING CONDITIONS



The poor conditions in the camps along with the continuous influx of refugees are alarming. Almost every family who lives in the camp is desperately waiting to unite with its other half – soon to arrive in India. With no coordinated support, no international recognition, and no aid, their efforts to liberate themselves from their miserable lives is a far-off dream.



EDUCATION



Education is a universal right and is a critical tool for refugee communities to a bright good future. However, when young children become refugees, they face tremendous challenges in completing their education.

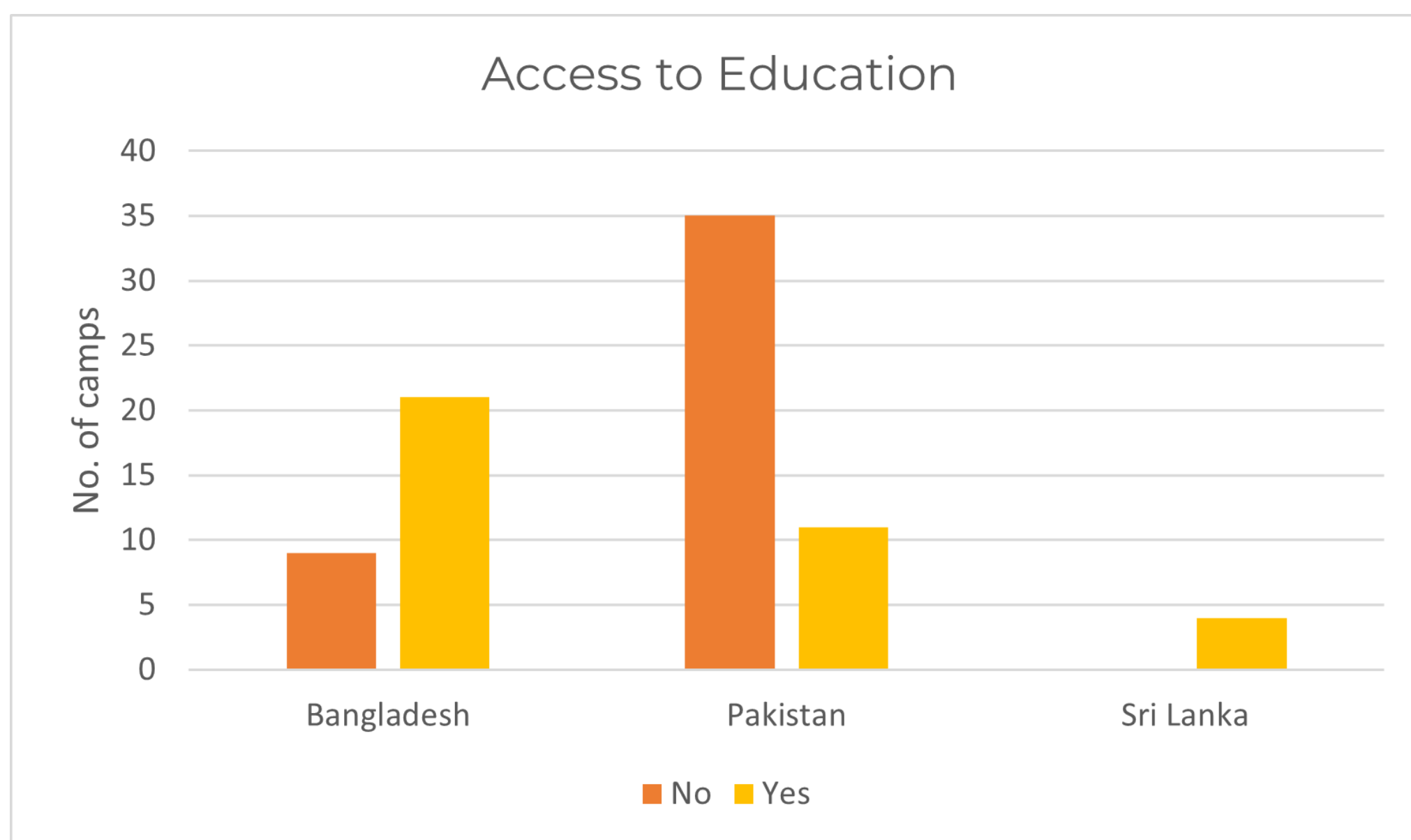
Lack of schools and improper documentation sets back the learning process. Even if the children gradually take to formal schooling, they tend to drop out early to earn a living for their families. A large number of refugees from Pakistan flee their country for the safety of their girls, who faced abduction, rape, and conversion so that they can get them educated here in India and live a life of dignity.

For all these children, having access to a school plays a critical role in helping them stay safe, and maximize their learning potential.

About 76% of the Pakistani refugee camps do not have access to education



EDUCATION



The refugee settlements from Pakistan, have no access to primary or secondary school. For a few, govt. schools are at least an hour and a half from their homes, and an overwhelming majority of the children, especially the girls, end up staying home. High school education for older children poses a challenge of non-recognition of 10th-grade certificates from countries like Pakistan.

Some refugee settlements, like the Chakmas, where there is a deep appreciation of the value of learning have pooled community funds to employ private teachers. These teachers try their best to provide quality education, but the resources are so stretched to breaking point, that it becomes difficult to hire high-quality teachers.





HEALTHCARE



Access to healthcare means that those who need a healthcare service should be able to obtain it irrespective of their status, nationality, gender, religion, or socioeconomic conditions. It is the heart of humanitarian aid, includes physical and mental wellness, and is a basis for the successful resettlement of refugees. The healthcare access to refugees and the challenges in receiving this care depend on multiple factors like camp location, type of shelters, living conditions, the extent of overcrowding, sanitation, nutrition, proximity from city centers, and so on.

Healthcare in camp settings

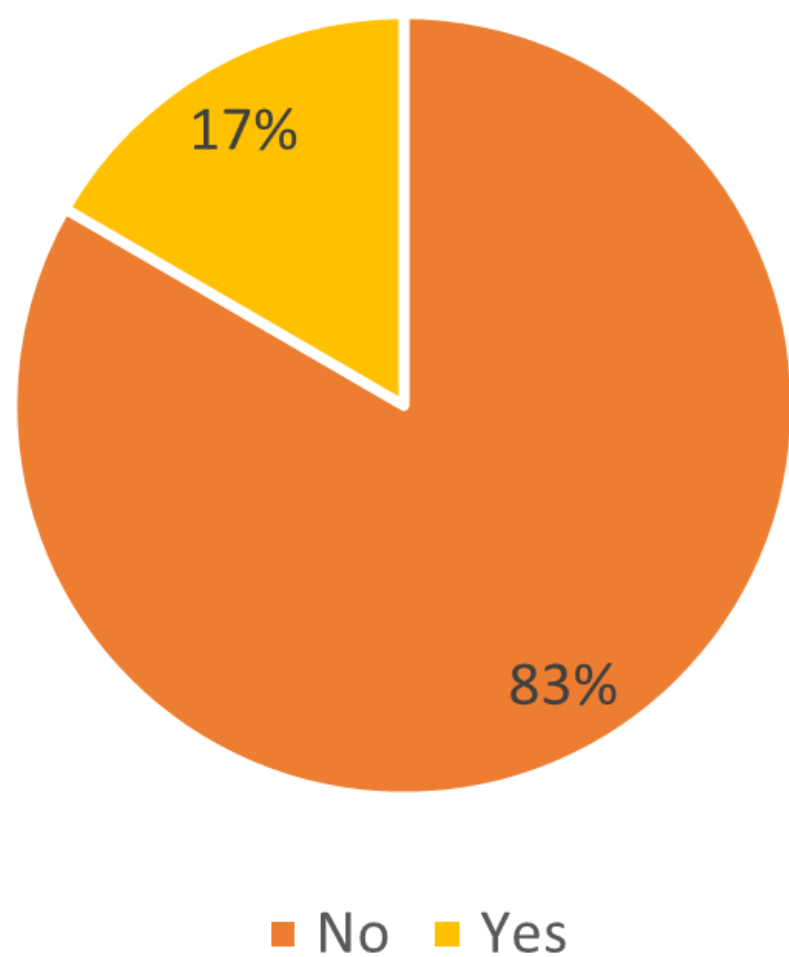
In camp settings in remote and isolated regions, the only alternative for the refugees is to have a parallel primary healthcare system implemented by agencies that are involved in refugee aid work. In absence of such a mechanism, refugees scramble for healthcare services.

About 83% of refugees do not have access to any healthcare facilities, the refugees from Pakistan being most neglected ones.

HEALTHCARE



Access to healthcare in camps/settlements



**At least
16,300
families have
no access to
healthcare
facilities.**

The Chakma and Hajong communities residing in the northeast suffer a further disadvantage of difficult terrain and no access to primary healthcare, emergency services, and maternity care. Emergency services in these regions take a minimum of 24 hours, maternity and infant deaths are common and the costs to transport patients to nearby hospitals (about 4-5 hours) are exorbitant by private transport.

Healthcare in urban settings

For those in urban settings, or having access to local healthcare facilities, the increasing costs of healthcare increase the economic burden on the refugees. They face numerous disadvantages as compared to the urban-poor, due to uncertain legal status, stigma, and already overstretched public health systems.

LIVELIHOOD



Despite an uncertain legal status, thousands of refugees try to make a meaningful life and meet the basic needs of their families. The forced migration pushes them into poverty. Most refugees work as farmers, daily wage workers, farm labor, skilled employment, or have vendor carts for selling mobile phone covers, vegetables, etc. Many of the refugee women are skilled in embroidery and other handicrafts like doll making etc. Some refugees move to the city to have access to diversified employment opportunities, and a better quality of life. Some of them make it, but a majority fall into the poverty traps of the cities and struggle to make ends meet.





IDENTITY CRISIS



Refugees are ordinary people who have left their lives behind and waiting to rebuild from the start in a new country. They want to lead a peaceful safe life. They want to educate their children, make a living, and contribute to their communities. They were rejected and persecuted in the country they were born in for being Hindus, or Buddhist – In India they face social and cultural isolation for being Pakistani or Bangladeshi. They are disturbed by the fear and violence of their past, the family they have left behind, their day-to-day concerns, and developing a sense of belonging in their new environment – all of this resulting in alienation that weighs heavy on the mental state of their mind. As the influx of refugees continues to rise with no quick resolution to this matter, this has become an urgent crisis.

The longingness to belong is human. Satisfying this need is the only sense of real protection.