Displacement and Development: Gender Heterogeneity in a Graduation Program for Somalia's Ultra-Poor

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Motivation

- The number of displaced people is rising rapidly worldwide, and the majority live in protracted, precarious conditions in low-income countries.
- Humanitarian aid to date has largely focused on short-term relief (cash, food, vouchers), without addressing the underlying drivers of poverty.
- Despite the scale of global displacement, there remains a striking lack of rigorous evidence on the effectiveness of livelihood interventions targeting IDPs (Rozo and Grossman, 2025).

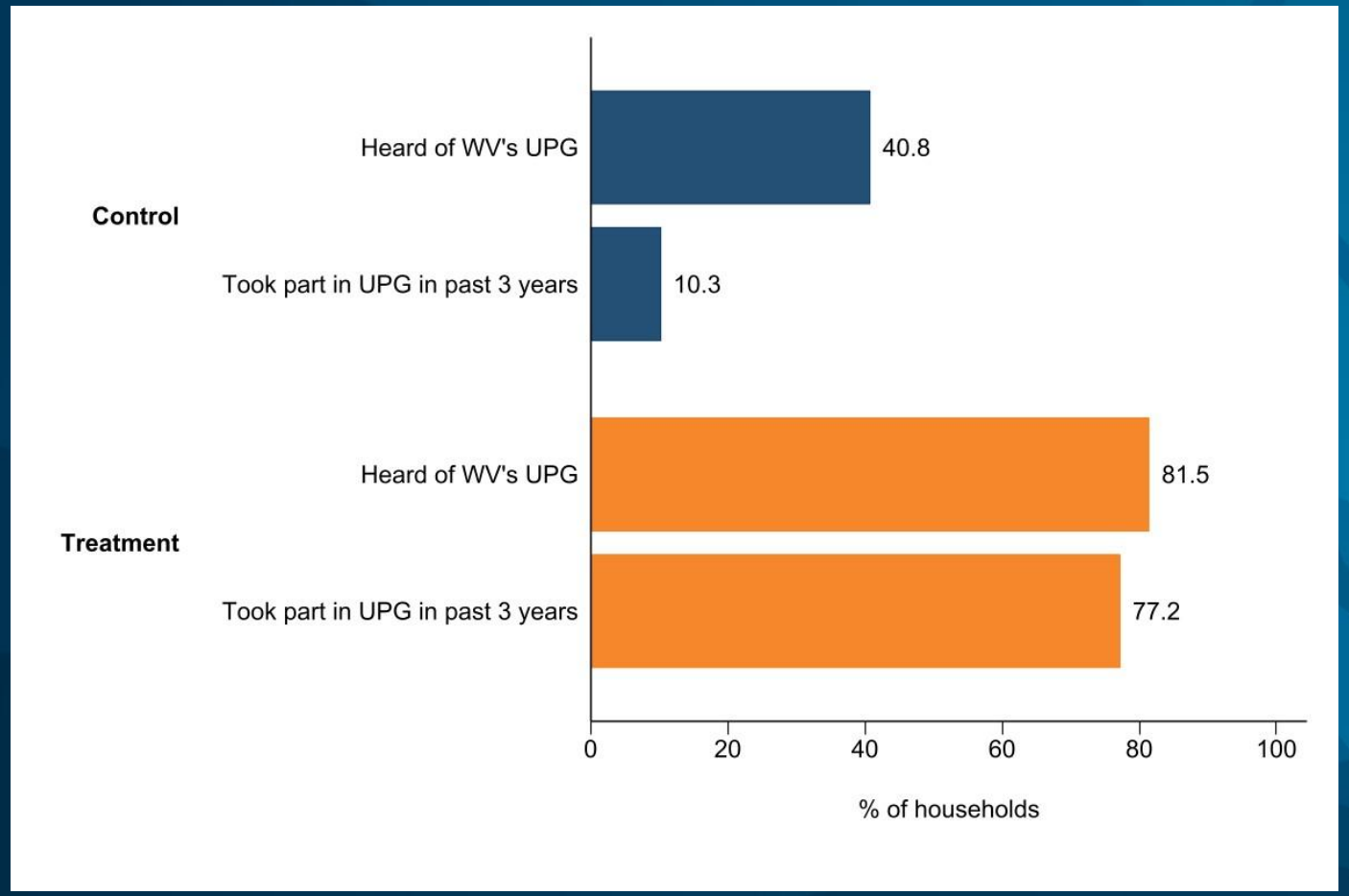
Objective and setting

- This randomized trial was conducted with internally displaced households in Baidoa, Somalia.
- The objective was to provide extremely poor households with a pathway out of poverty and enable them to build resilient livelihoods.
- The key elements of the Ultra Poor Graduation (UPG) program implemented by World Vision included:
  - Cash transfers (approximately $240 over one year)
  - Asset transfer or technical and vocational training
  - Formation of savings groups and provision of coaching throughout the program

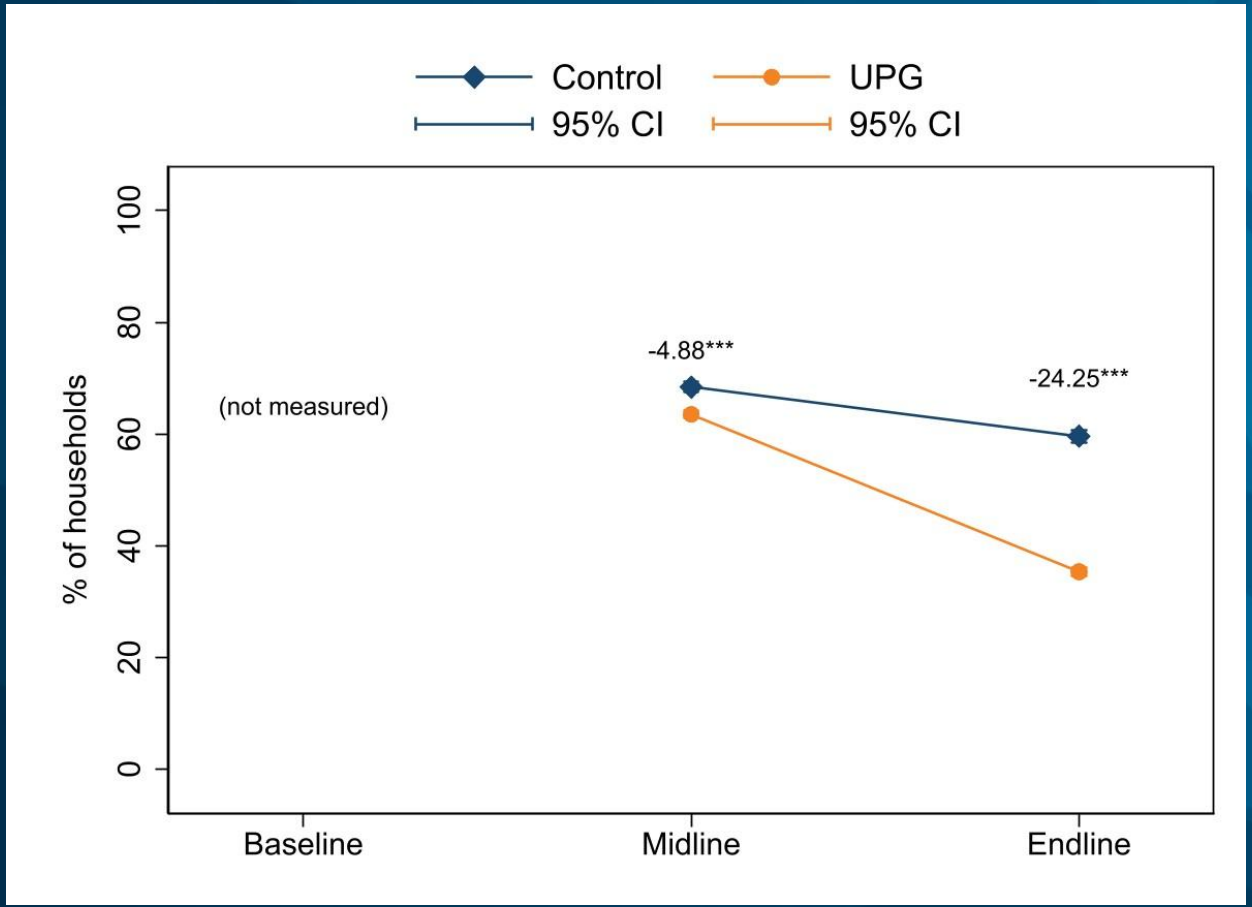
Trial design

- The study sample was drawn from eligible households in 24 IDP sites served by the program.
- Eligible households were those who reported at least moderate or severe hunger at baseline, and had been resident in the site at least one year at baseline.
- Randomization to treatment was conducted at the household level.
- We tracked a sample of 4,116 households over three years.
- Our goal today is to understand when the effects of the program varied depending on gender dynamics in the household at baseline: in particular, whether an economically active woman was present.

High fidelity of implementation

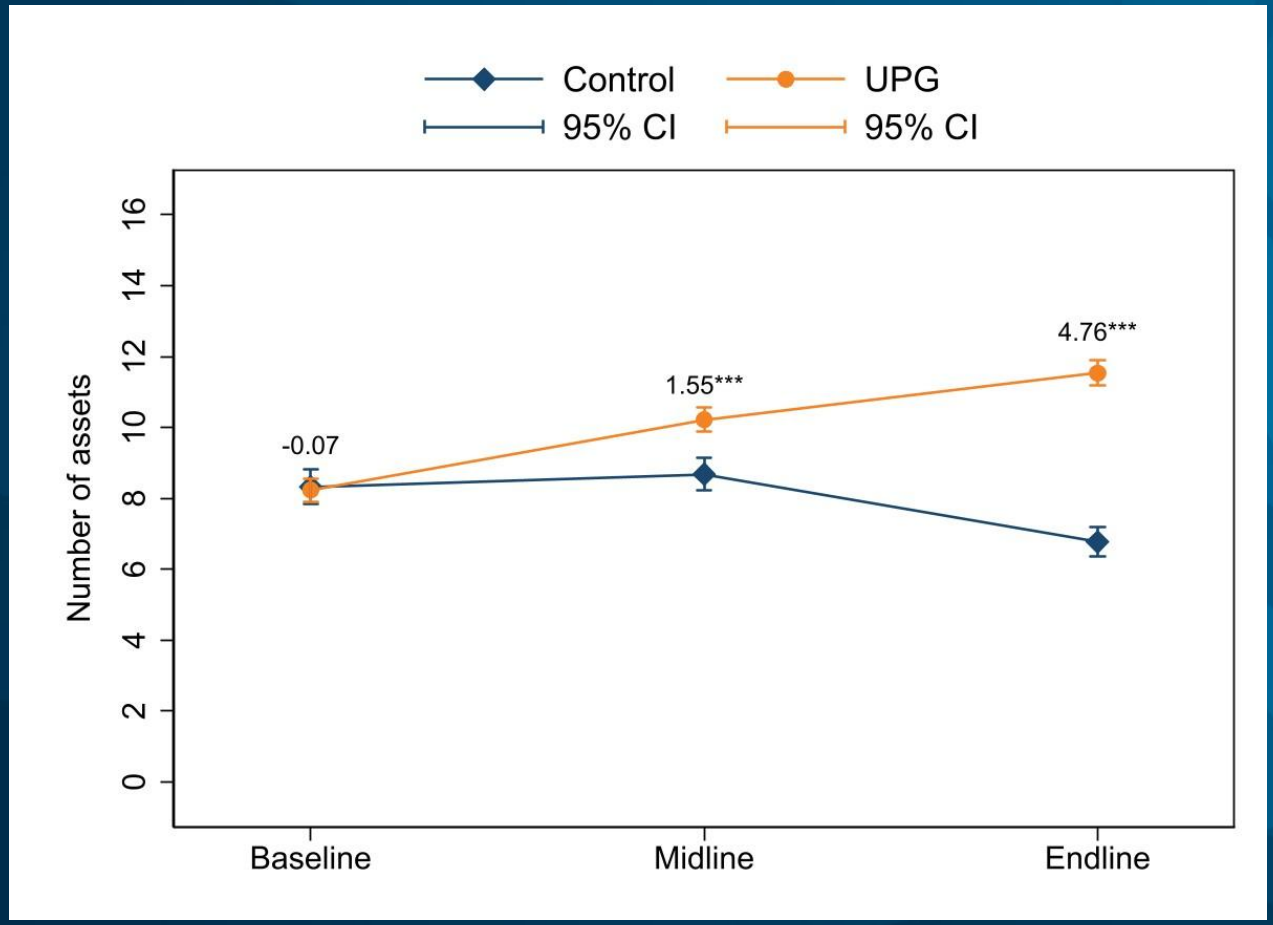


Effects of UPG: Households living in extreme poverty



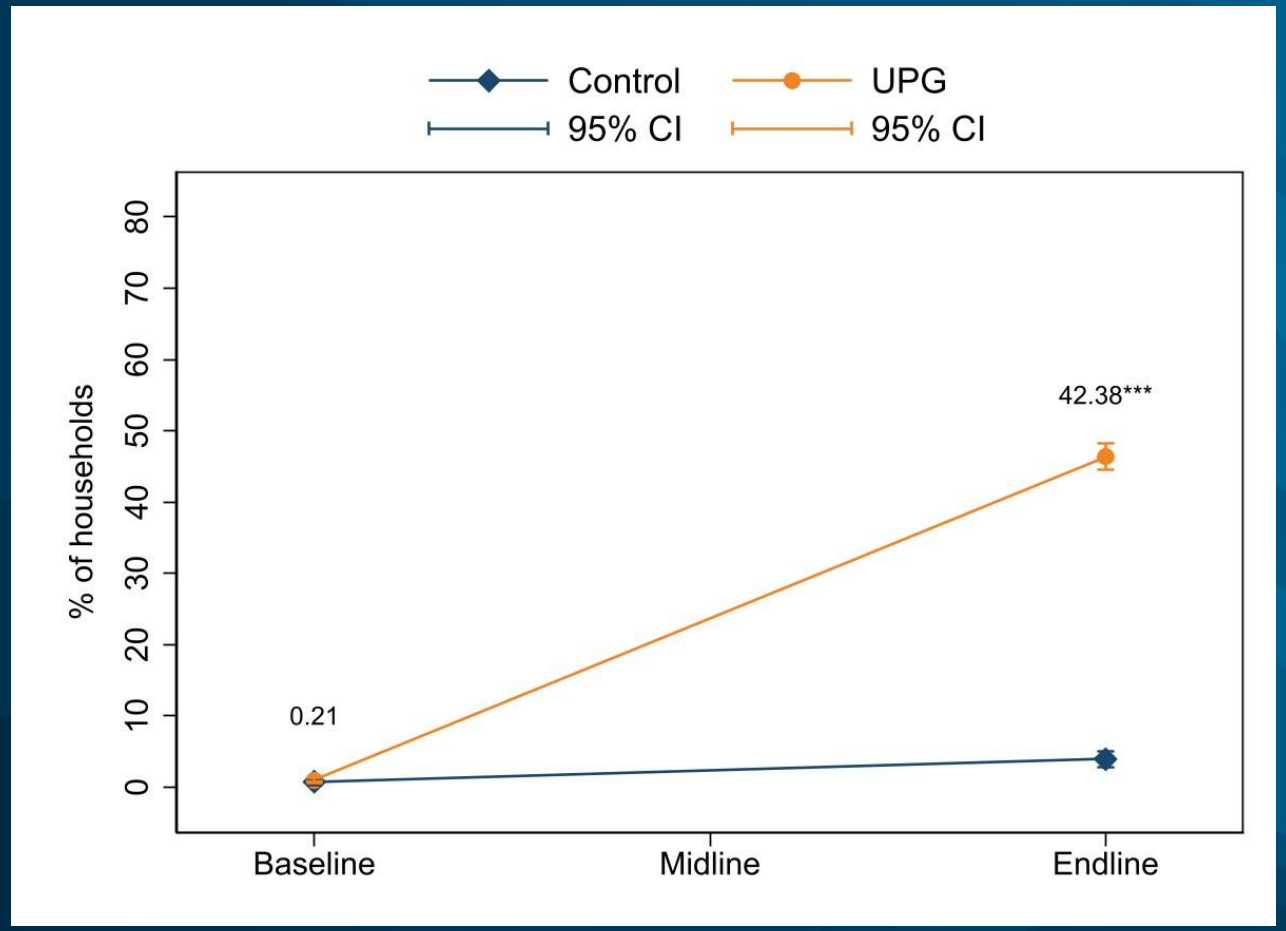
*Note: ***, **, and * indicate significance at the 1, 5, and 10 percent critical level.*

Effects of UPG: Household assets



*Note: ***, **, and * indicate significance at the 1, 5, and 10 percent critical level.*

Effects of UPG: Any savings

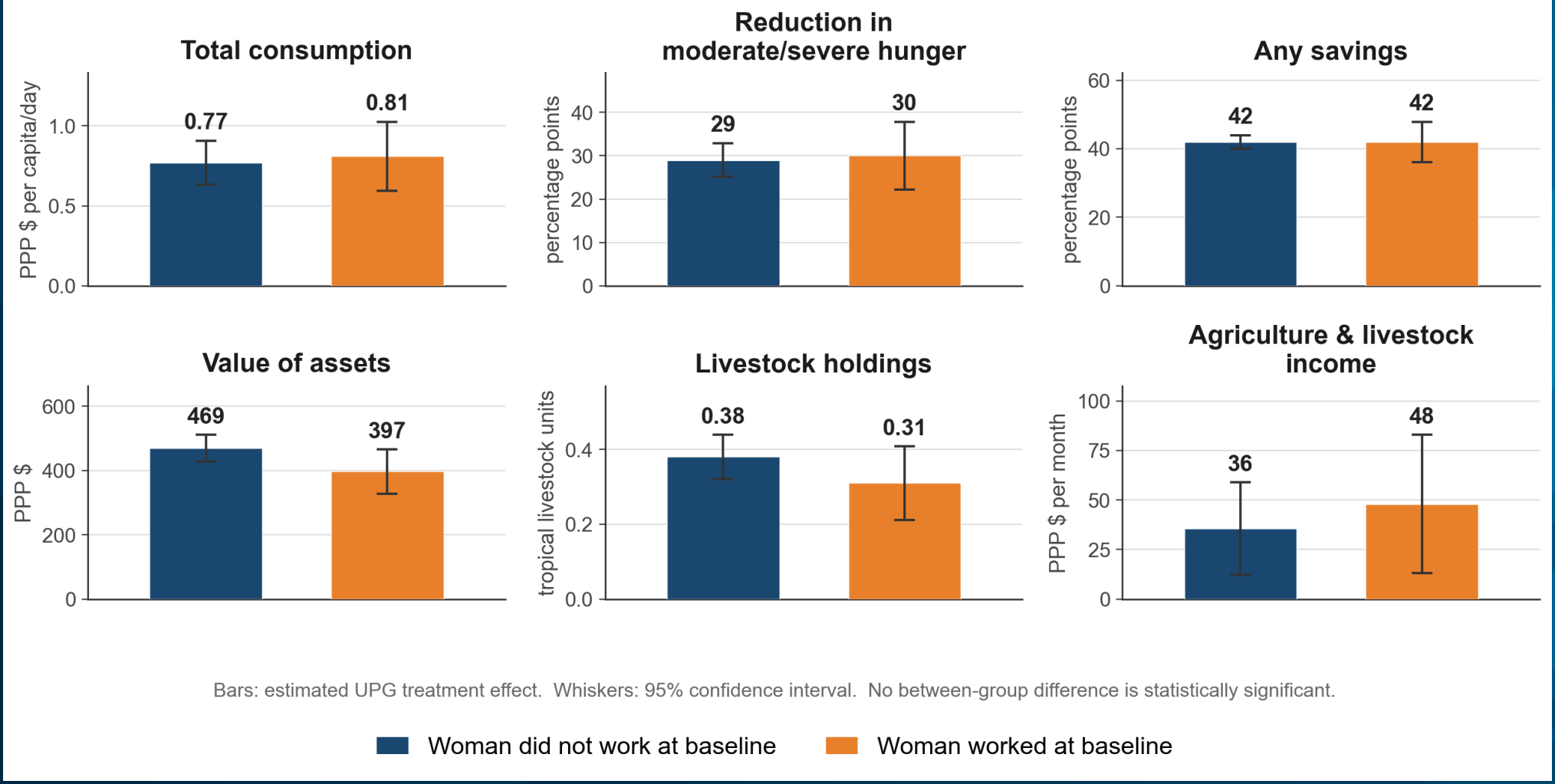


*Note: ***, **, and * indicate significance at the 1, 5, and 10 percent critical level.*

Do the benefits depend on women's economic role?

- A central question for graduation programs is whether gains are shared across household types, and in particular whether they depend on women's prior economic engagement.
- We examine heterogeneity by whether the household's co-resident spouse (typically the woman) had done any work in the twelve months before the program.
  - The analysis is restricted to households with a co-resident spouse (roughly 75% of the sample).

Effects of UPG are broadly similar by women's baseline economic activity



Gender heterogeneity: key takeaways

- Across consumption, food security, savings, assets, livestock, and income, the UPG effects are large and statistically indistinguishable for the two groups.
- The one qualified exception is distress coping.
  - The reduction (improvement) in magnitude in the livelihood coping score is somewhat smaller where the woman already worked, plausibly because such households relied less on distress strategies to begin with.
- Bottom line: the program delivered comparably large treatment effects regardless of women's prior economic role, suggestive of broad-based gains.

Conclusions

- The ultra-poor graduation program had large positive effects on multiple measures of household welfare in an IDP setting in urban Somalia.
- Further exploration of livelihoods patterns suggests these gains in the short-term were driven entirely by increased income from livestock (limited diversification).
- Program benefits were broadly shared: effects were similar for households with and without an economically active woman at baseline, consistent with limited gender heterogeneity in this setting.

Count on me: Shocks and formal versus informal assistance in Somalia

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Motivation

- Poor households in fragile settings face frequent, often correlated shocks and can insure against them only partially.
- When prevention fails, they draw on two sources of support: formal (governments, donors, humanitarian agencies) and informal (relatives, neighbors, the diaspora).
- Households with access to neither absorb shocks through costly coping — cutting meals, withdrawing children from school, selling productive assets.
- Identifying whether formal and informal support reach the same households is central to designing effective safety nets.

Somalia: a setting of compounding shocks

- Somalia is characterized by overlapping crises of displacement, drought, and food insecurity.
- As of 2017 (the year in which this data was collected), humanitarian partners reached about 3 million people a month, against 6.2 million assessed as in need.
- Remittances were large — about US$1.3 billion in 2017 — but concentrated within particular lineages and families.

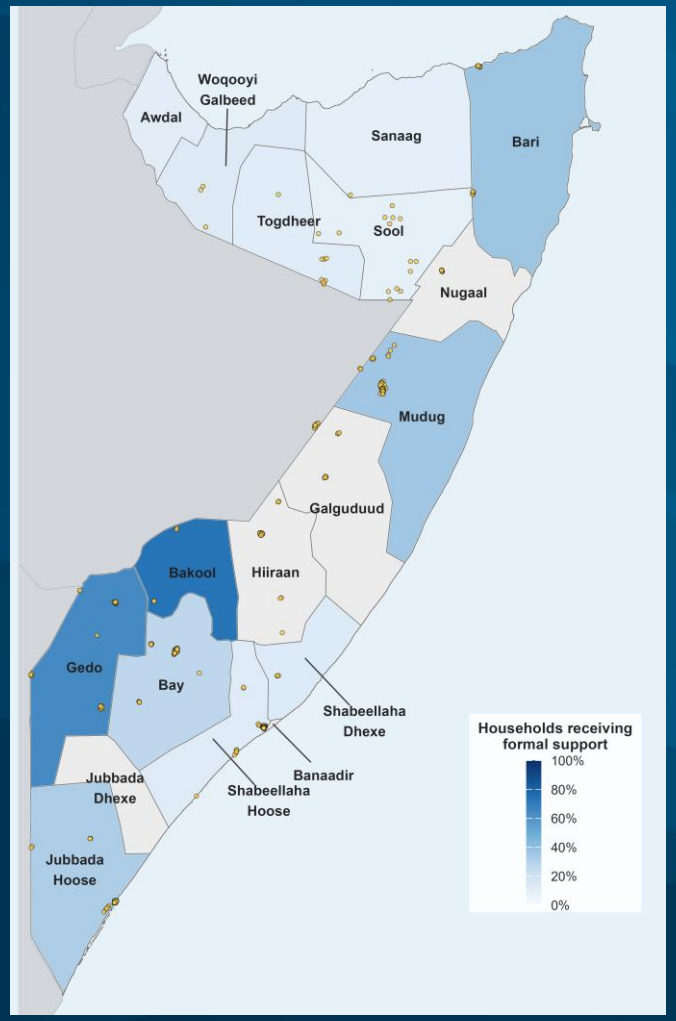
Research questions and approach

- Prior work typically studies one channel and one shock at a time, and rarely asks whether multiple sources of support reach the same households.
- We link the 2017 Somali survey to external data on conflict, food prices, drought, and displacement to answer the following questions.
  - What household characteristics predict uptake of formal versus informal support?
  - Do these patterns differ in households that include an economically active woman, since these households may have different social networks or be characterized by different levels of resilience?
- Throughout, we treat the estimated associations as descriptive rather than causal.

Data and measurement

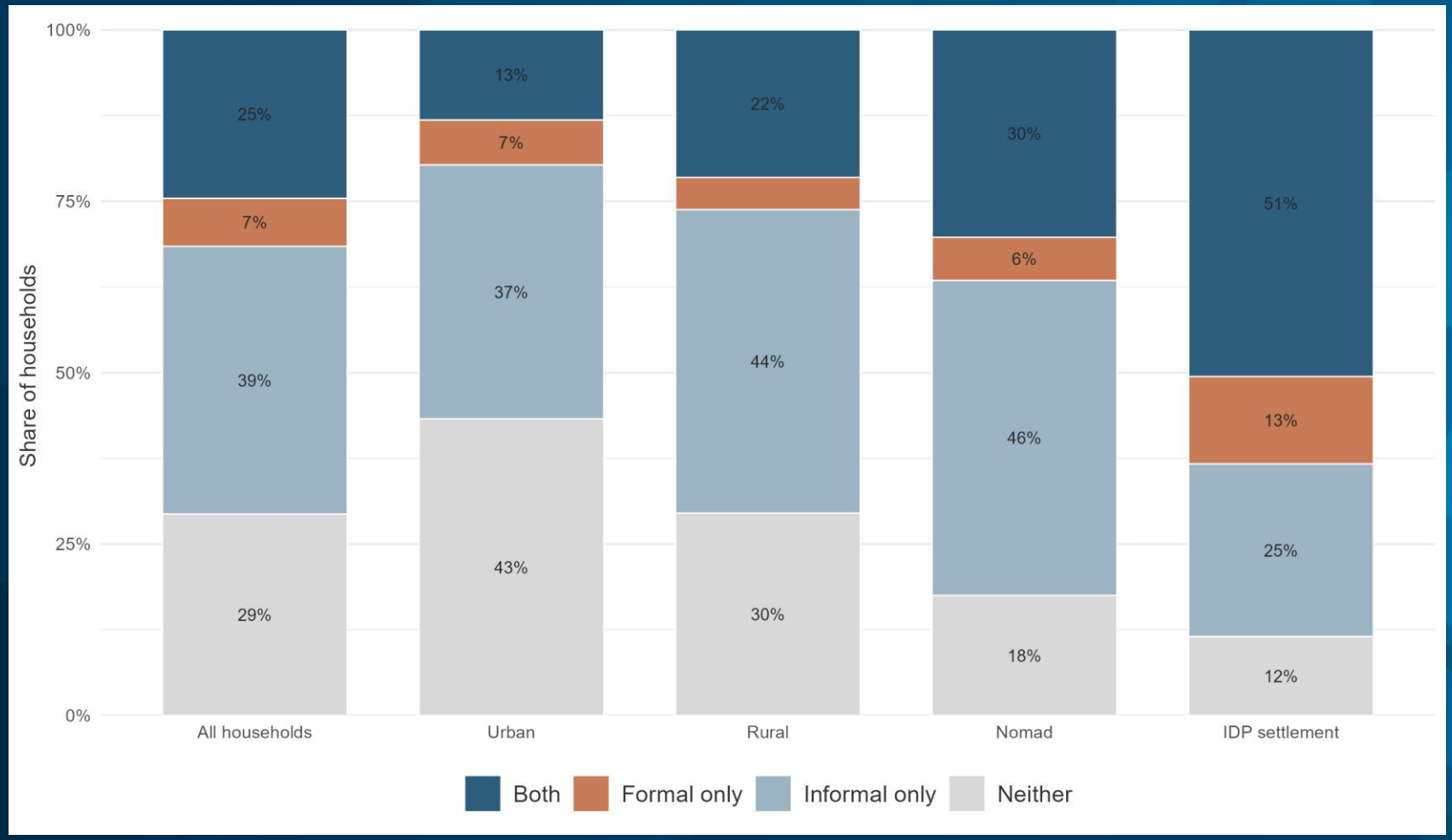
- Primary source: the 2017 Somali High Frequency Survey — 6,092 households across 17 regions.
- We define:
  - Formal support: assistance from the UN, an NGO or development partner, or government.
  - Informal support: remittances, zakat, or food and money borrowed from relatives, friends, and neighbors.
- We then link this data to external data: conflict (ACLED), rainfall and drought (CHIRPS), food prices (WFP), and IDP sites.
- Regional exposure to shocks is identified from 26 pooled region-year cells across the 2016 and 2017 waves.

Formal support and displacement across regions



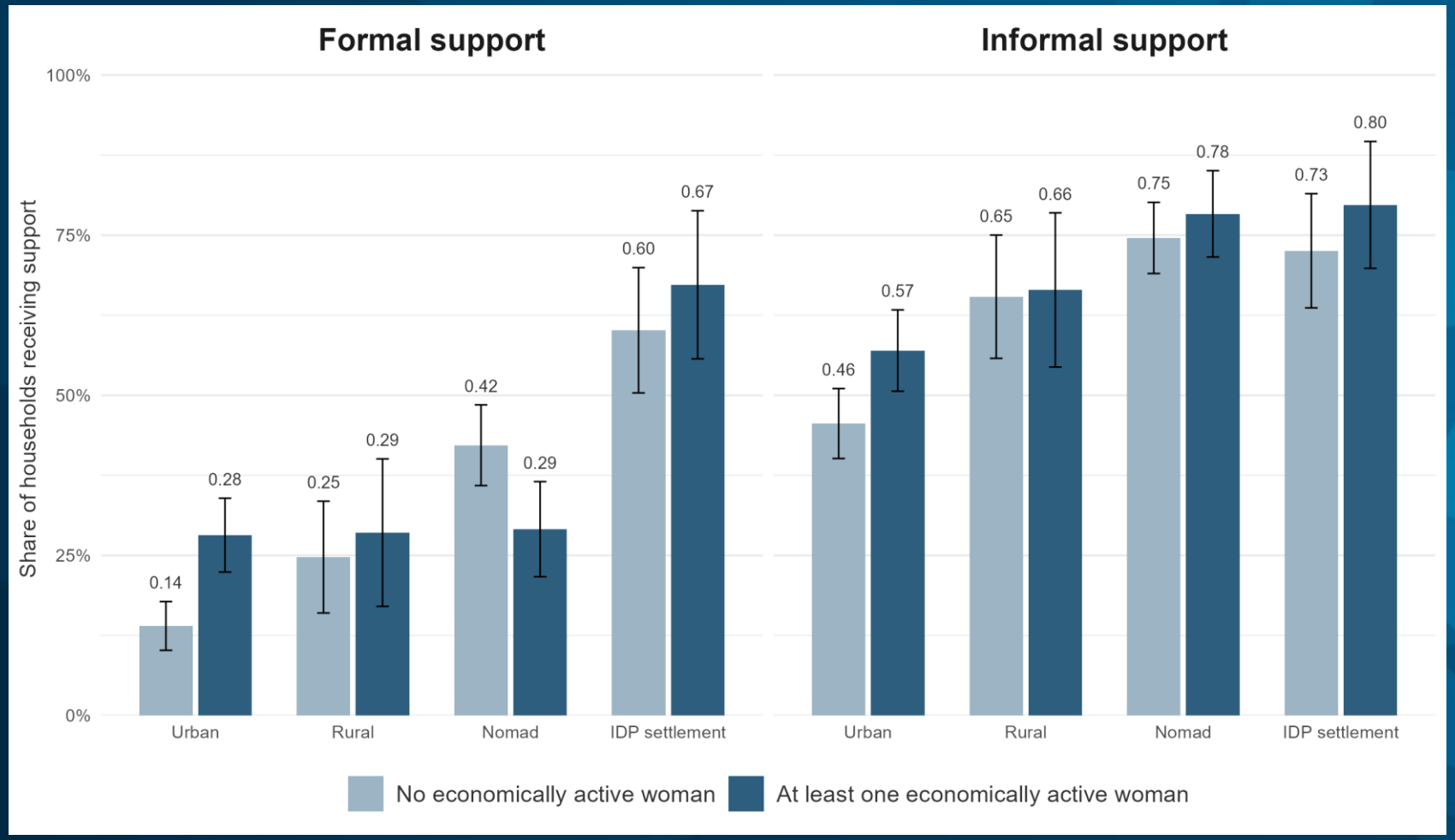
Note: Shading shows the share of households receiving formal support by region; yellow points mark IDP sites (2017).

Formal and informal support often overlap



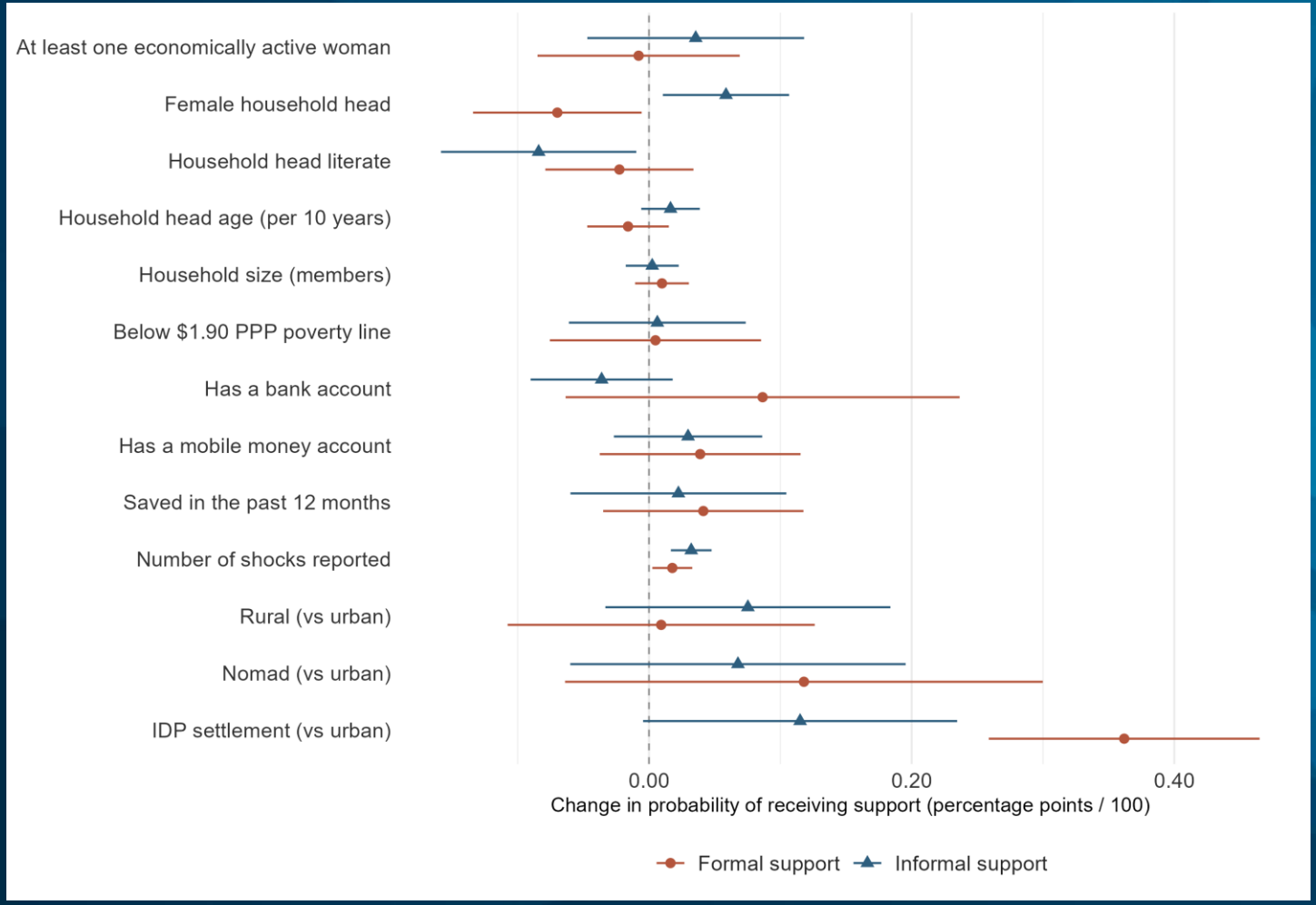
Note: Categories are mutually exclusive within each bar; shares of households by settlement type, 2017.

Heterogeneity with respect to women's economic role



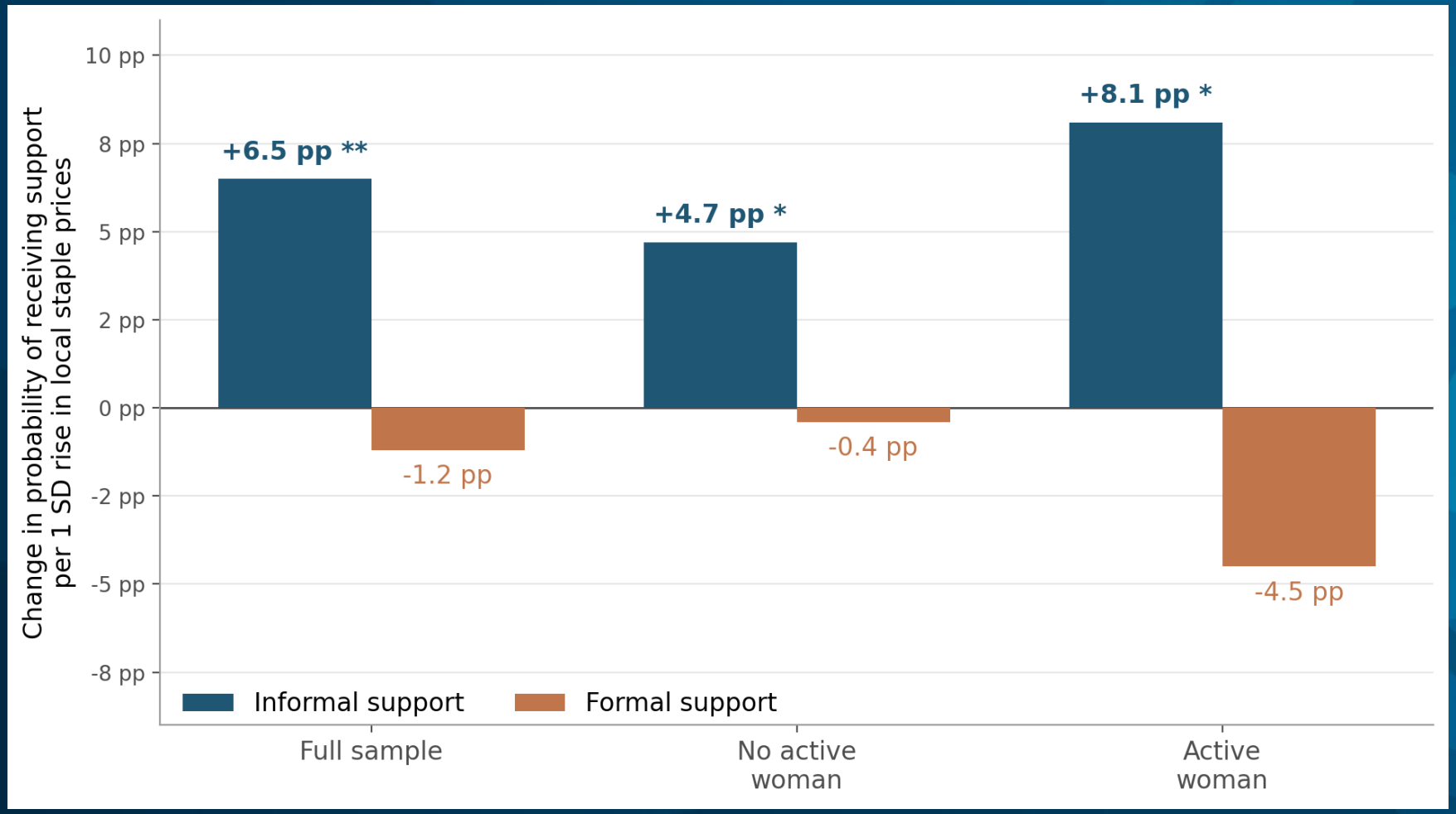
Note: Bars show share of households receiving each type of support; whiskers are 95% confidence intervals.

What predicts formal versus informal support?



Note: Coefficients from weighted linear probability models with region fixed effects; bars are 95% confidence intervals.

Food price shocks move informal — not formal — support



Note: Coefficients on the produced staple food price index; pooled 2016–2017 waves; ** p<0.05, * p<0.10 (wild-cluster bootstrap).

Summary: what we found

- Formal support alone is rare; it tends to add to informal support rather than substitute for it.
- About 29% of households receive neither form of support — a substantial vulnerable minority.
- Formal support tracks displacement and geography; informal support tracks literacy, headship, and reported need.
- Measured poverty predicts neither form of support.
- Informal support responds to local food price shocks; formal support responds to none of the region-level shocks examined.

Conclusions

- Poor Somali households face frequent, compounding shocks and large gaps in support.
- Many rely on informal networks — networks that themselves include many poor households.
- Formal assistance concentrates among households that already receive informal support.
- Households that receive neither form of support are left particularly exposed.

Policy implications

- Stakeholders may consider incorporating the absence of informal support — not only displacement status — into targeting protocols.
- Another useful direction could be building price and rainfall indicators into pre-agreed triggers for formal allocations, including Baxnaano and humanitarian responses.
- Linking formal support to observable shock triggers would relieve informal networks at the moments they are most strained.

Thank you

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