

Study on Public Attitudes Towards National Service

5 July 2023

Study Background

- National defence is the backbone of Singapore's survival, peace, and prosperity.
- National Service (NS) is key to Singapore's defence strategy, with our national servicemen forming the foundation of our defence force.
- To remain effective and relevant, it is essential that Singapore's NS system continually adapts to shifts in the global and regional environment, while addressing emerging domestic needs.

Research Objectives

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Social Lab conducted an independent study to understand public attitudes on *NS as an Institution* and *NS as Lived Experiences* between July – November 2022.

This research study aims to:

- Understand public attitudes towards NS arising from recent trends in the demography, education and work landscape of Singapore, the geopolitical landscape, as well as their aspirations
- Identify the emerging challenges that the NS system needs to address to ensure that it is relevant and effective, and to improve our national servicemen's NS experience

Methodology



General Population Survey

- Conducted July - October 2022
- A nationally-representative sample of Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents aged 17 and above, by gender, age, and ethnicity (n=1002)
- Quota-based sampling method, controlling for age, gender and ethnicity



Focus Group Discussions

- Conducted July - November 2022
- 13 focus group discussions with 81 participants, including (i) national servicemen*, (ii) females, (iii) family and spouses of national servicemen, and (iv) C-suite equivalent and HR managers in SMEs and MNCs
- Snowball sampling and market research support company sampling

Qualitative In-Depth Interviews

- 10 unemployed NSmen
- Focus on challenges faced while balancing NS with personal, family, and work commitments, and desired forms of support
- Snowball sampling

Research Highlights

NS as an institution

NS as lived experiences



Importance of NS

Public belief and conviction in the **continued necessity of NS** remain steady and strong



Support for NS

High levels of public support for NS as an institution, noting some mentions of **trade-offs to servicemen's studies and career**



Family and Employer Support

National servicemen's **family and employers are supportive** and take pride in them serving NS



Benefits of NS

NS viewed as **important for contributing to national defence, societal and individual growth**, but **less for civilian employment prospects**



Training Safety

High confidence that NS training is conducted safely is a positive reflection of the strong organisational safety emphasis



Perceived Organisational Support

National servicemen generally felt valued and supported during NS



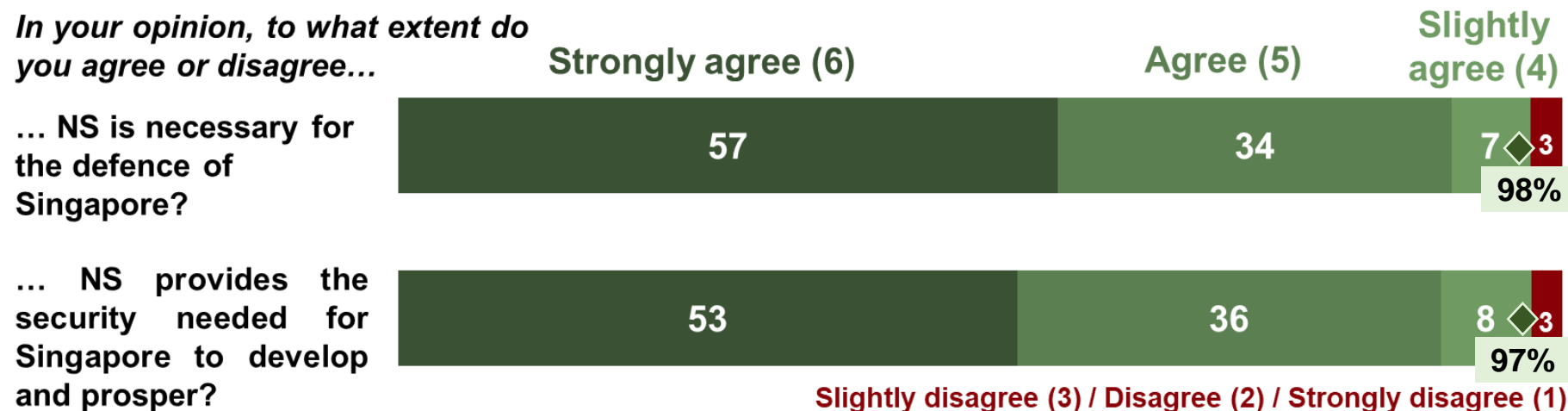
NS Recognition

Sufficient government and public recognition, noting growing preference for **recognition to support national servicemen's life stage needs**

Public Perceptions on the Importance of NS Remain Steady and Strong

- Almost all respondents agreed that NS is necessary for Singapore's defence, as well as to provide the security required for Singapore to develop and prosper.

In your opinion, to what extent do you agree or disagree...

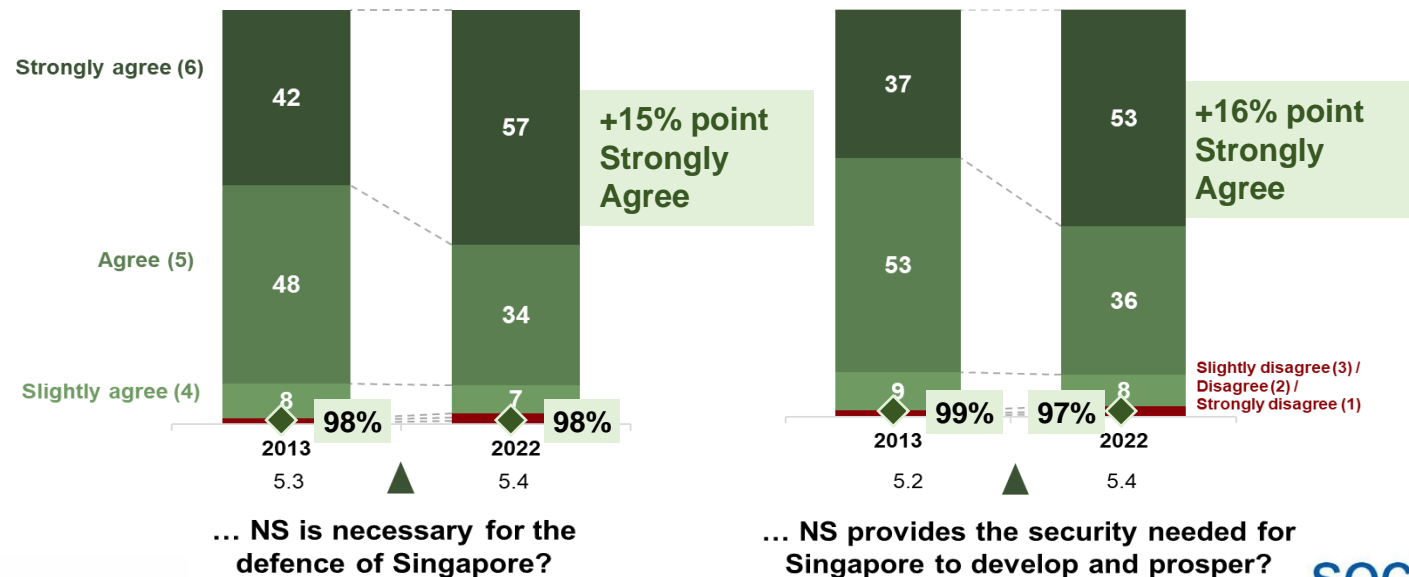


Note: Percentages are reported in the charts, which may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

As the 2013 study did not include a 'Don't Know' option; 'Don't Know' responses are excluded from all 2022 study findings to facilitate comparison.

Public Perceptions on the Importance of NS Remain Steady and Strong

- The proportion that strongly agreed that NS is necessary for the defence of Singapore increased from 42% in 2013 to 57% in 2022.
- Similarly, the proportion that strongly agreed that NS provides the security needed for Singapore to develop and prosper increased from 37% in 2013 to 53% in 2022.



Note: Mean ratings included for 2013 and 2022 comparisons.

Public Perceptions on the Importance of NS Remain Steady and Strong

- Similar sentiments were expressed by focus group participants, demonstrating the strong belief in the necessity of NS for national defence and economic development.

For me, [the meaning of NS] will be total defence and vigilance because these guys are actually serving the nation to actually prepare Singapore for anything like, like any threats.

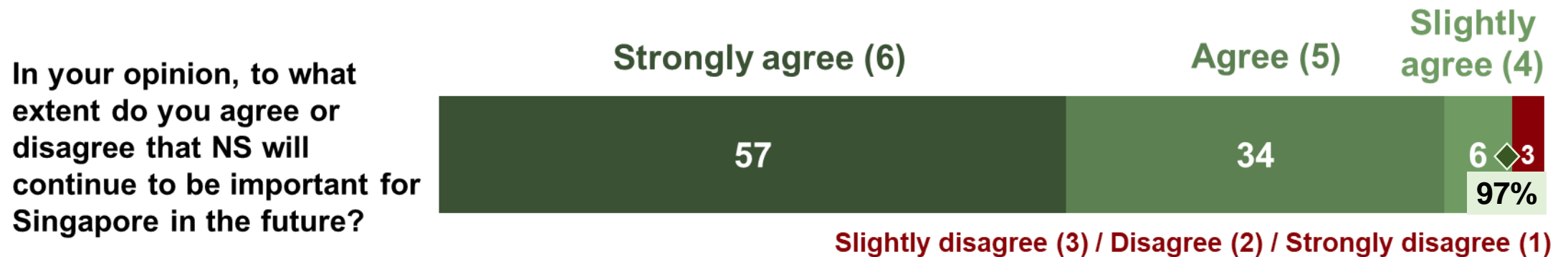
Female, 21

I mean, it's very important for us to maintain our sovereignty, right? We're surrounded by neighbours who may or may not be hostile. They are currently friendly but you never know when someone might come to power, which has an overly nationalistic agenda. And that is very scary. Because Singapore, what are we? We have no national resources. We are an island and the only thing that we have going for us is the rule of law. And being very open to trade and in flow of capital. So if we lose that ability to serve as a deterrent to our neighbours, we could lose everything that we have. Because we are nothing. I think that is the main thing lah.

Male, 30

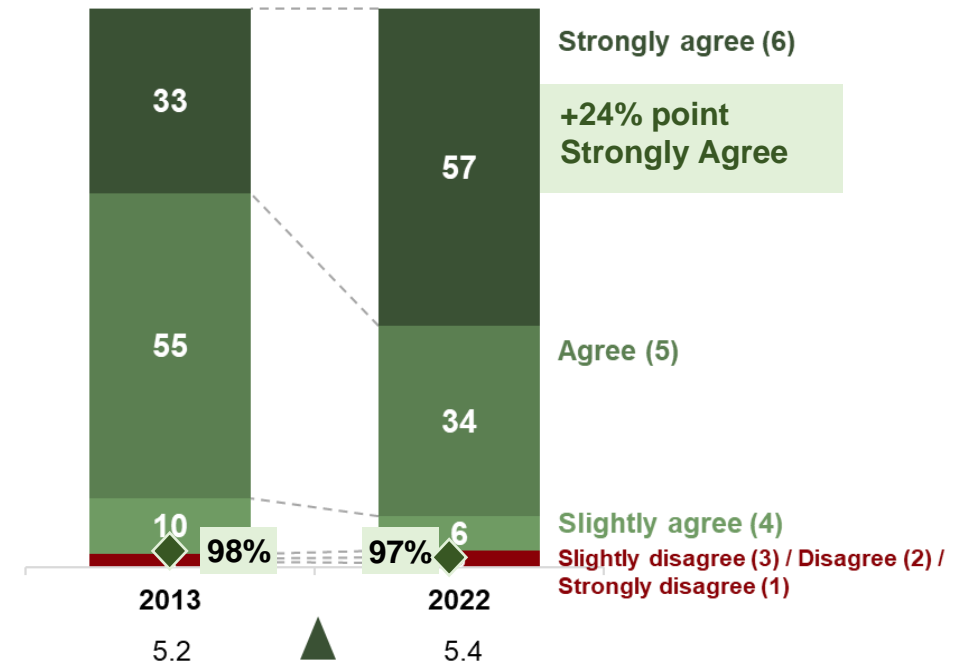
Public Perceptions on the Importance of NS Remain Steady and Strong

- Nearly all (97%) agreed that NS will continue to be important for Singapore in the future.



Public Perceptions on the Importance of NS Remain Steady and Strong

- In 2013, about one in three (33%) strongly agreed that NS will continue to be important for Singapore.
- This proportion has increased to 57% in 2022.



In your opinion, to what extent do you agree or disagree that NS will continue to be important for Singapore in the future?

Public Perceptions on the Importance of NS Remain Steady and Strong

- Recent heightened geopolitical tensions might have augmented perceptions that NS will continue to be important for Singapore in the future.
- Several focus group participants shared that these tensions serve as a reminder that defence remains important because the risk of being attacked is even more palpable now.

... Russia-Ukraine is a good example of why things can go wrong unexpectedly [...]. No one's going to come to your defence. No one's actually going to stand up for Singapore if you are not going to stand up for yourself. I think that's very important.

Male, 32

I think personally for me it's like, it's something that Singapore can't do without. Because if I recall, NS was set up in a time where Singapore was like in great conflict, which is why males are mandatorily required to go NS and I think especially with like recent global events like the Russian Ukraine crisis, along with just global trends as well, it kind of presents a kind of gloomy outlook. So I think this is why it is even more important for us to have some sort of national deterrence, which would be our armed forces.

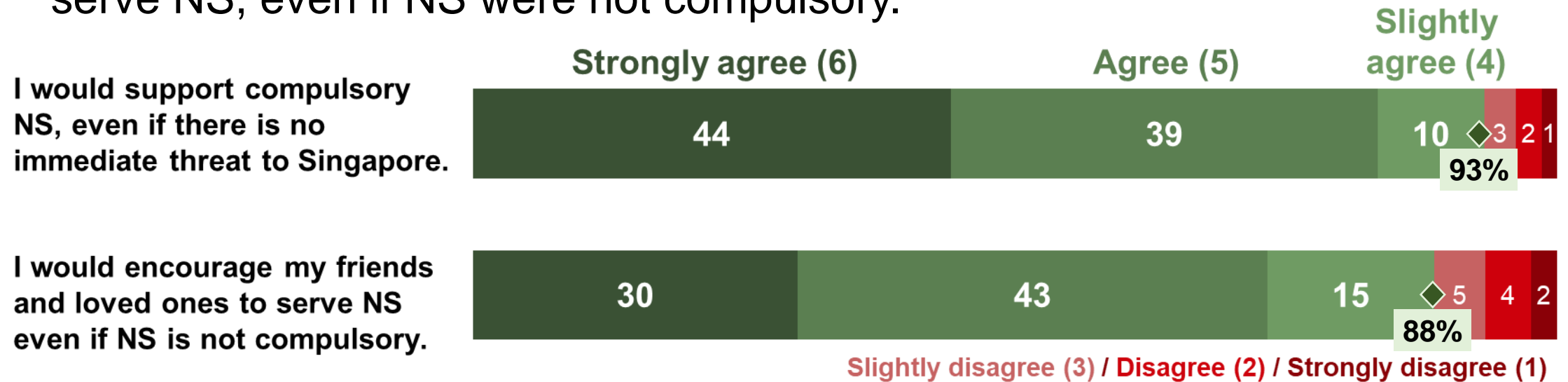
Female, 24

... But I still agree that National Service is still a form of like, very important because the people are the ones that will defend the country and if you look at the war in Ukraine and Russia, you know, they really, even though they are faced against a big army, they still fight. The kind of tenacity that you see in these people is quite amazing. So if anything were to happen to Singapore one day, I think we, not only just the boys, as women, as a whole nation, we should be equipped and do our best to defend our country.

Female, 41

Strong Public Support for NS as an Institution

- Most would support compulsory NS, even if there were no immediate threat to Singapore.
- The large majority would also encourage their friends and loved ones to serve NS, even if NS were not compulsory.



Public Perceptions on the Importance of NS Remain Steady and Strong

- When asked if males should still serve NS if it were not compulsory, parents in focus groups voiced their support as they thought that NS helped with their son's maturity and confidence. Many servicemen also felt that their experiences during NS were formative and memorable.
- Some servicemen, parents, and females in focus groups and interviews also noted that NS involved some trade-offs to education, career, and earning potential.

I wouldn't say it's really negative but I just think that the disruption to their studies, you know, the continuation period is a bit of a concern for me.

Female, 49

... some of us who are in a commission-based self-employed, then it will affect us lah cause two weeks, yes, we can, we can argue that during two weeks, we can still do our business over the phone but it's still disruptive lah.

Male, 39

Yes, because it builds their confidence, they grew up maturely I suppose, and I expect, they learn what National Service is, what things you can do and offer to your community, the country as a whole.

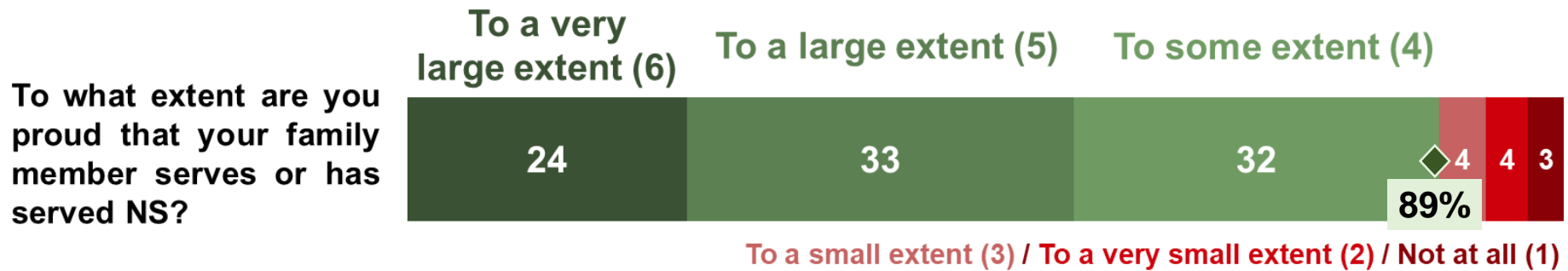
Female, 51

... I mean, discounting the fact that it's 'bobian' and all that stuff lah, it's that substantive life experience that really made me say that you know, if I had to do it all over again, I would.

Male, 36

National Servicemen's Family and Employers Support their NS Commitments

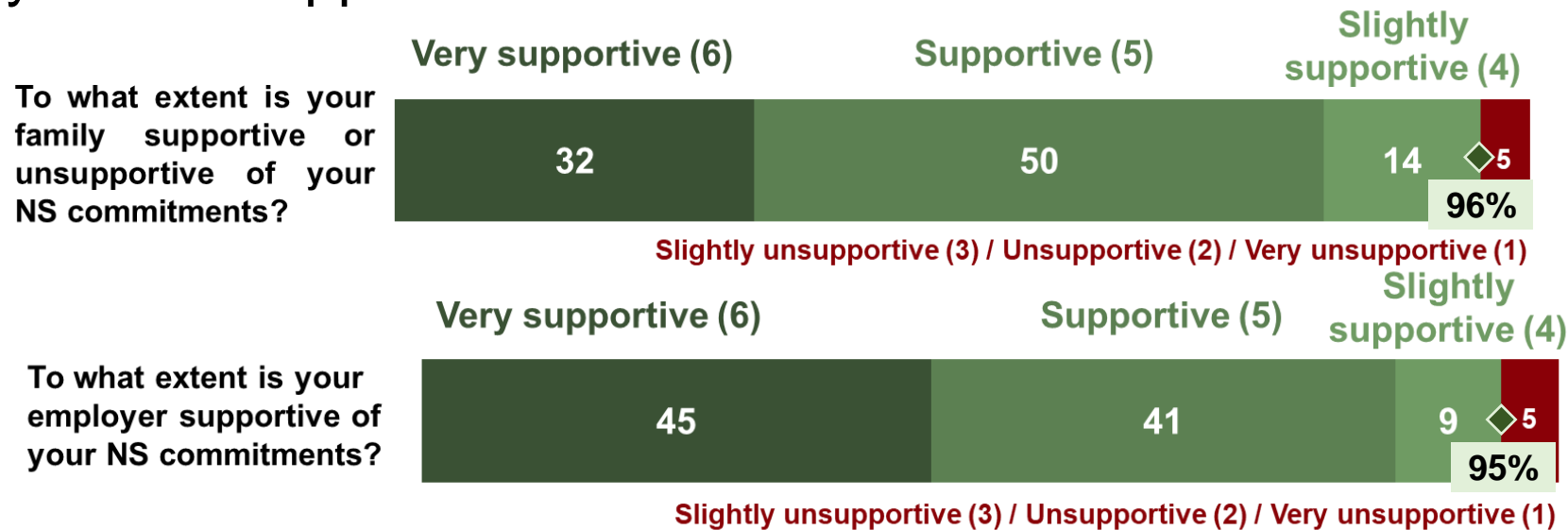
- The large majority (89%) are proud that their family member serves or has served NS.



Note: Previous 2013 benchmark not comparable due to significant response scale changes.

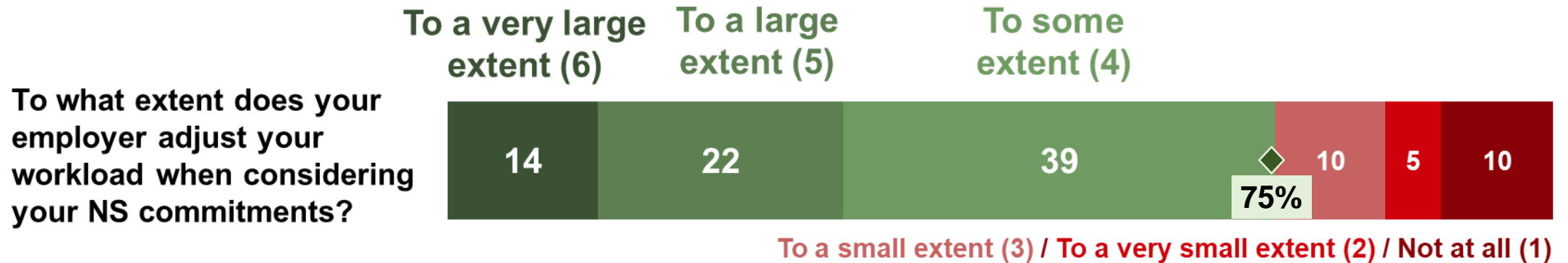
National Servicemen's Family and Employers Support their NS Commitments

- Nearly all national servicemen (96%) felt that their families are supportive of their NS commitments.
- Moreover, nearly all employed national servicemen (95%) agreed that their employers are supportive of their NS commitments.



National Servicemen's Family and Employers Support their NS Commitments

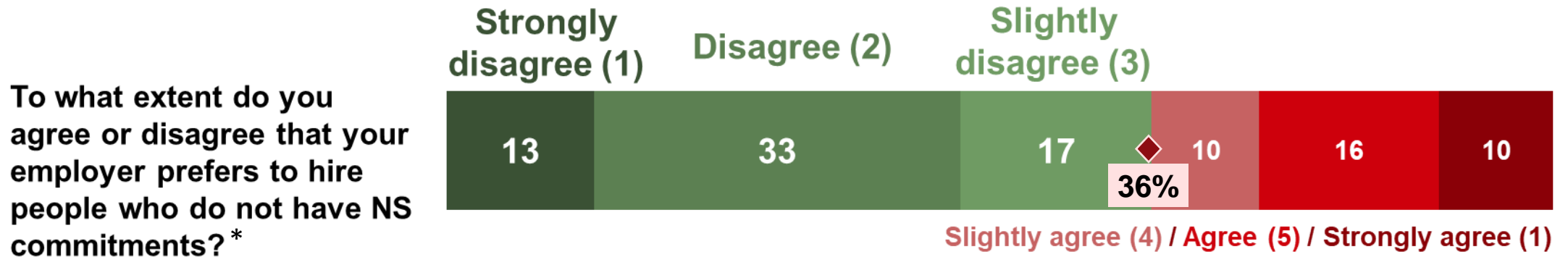
- Three in four (75%) employed national servicemen agreed that their employer adjusted their workload in consideration of their NS commitments, at least to some extent.



Note: Previous 2013 benchmark not comparable due to significant response scale changes.

National Servicemen's Family and Employers Support their NS Commitments

- About one-third (36%) of employed national servicemen felt that their employer prefers to hire individuals without NS commitments.

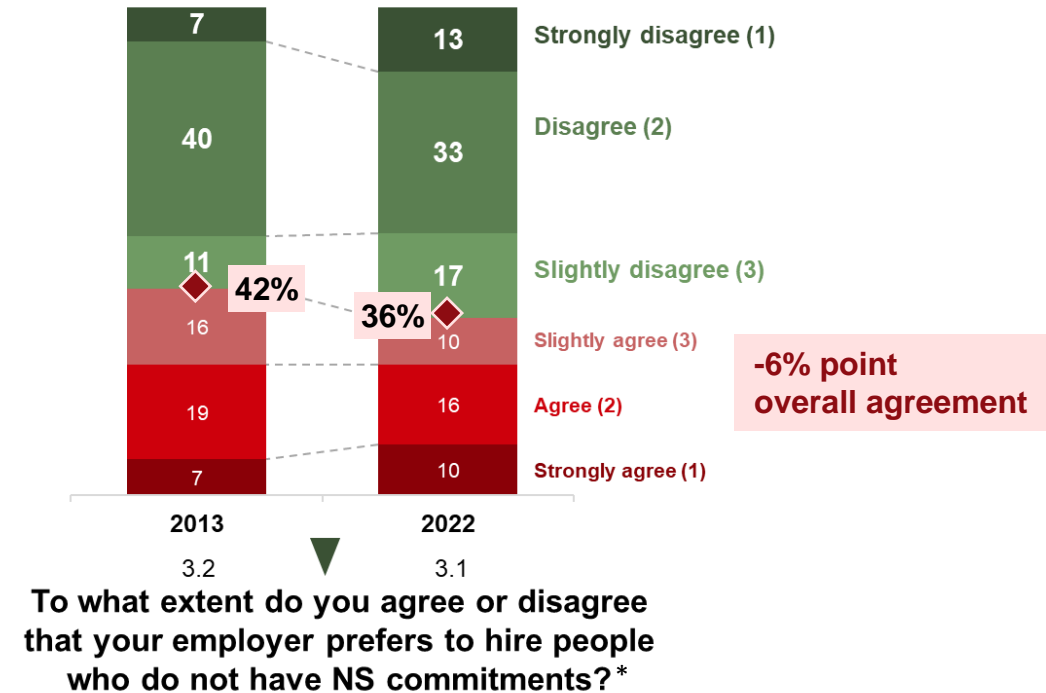


* Question was asked to employed national servicemen in 2013.

In 2022, question was asked to national servicemen who are employees, not HR decision makers or self-employed.

National Servicemen's Family and Employers Support their NS Commitments

- A smaller proportion felt that their employer prefers to hire those without NS commitments in 2022 (36%) compared to 2013 (42%), suggesting an improvement in employer support for NS.



* Question was asked to employed national servicemen in 2013.

In 2022, question was asked to national servicemen who are employees, not HR decision makers or self-employed.

Family and Employer Support Might Be Driven by the Mandatory Nature of NS Commitments

- In focus groups, national servicemen reasoned that employers will have to show support due to the mandatory nature of their reservist commitments, and that their work will be passed on to colleagues when they are away.
- In alignment with servicemen's perceptions, HR decision makers of SMEs and MNCs were accepting of their employees' mandatory NS commitments, though some were concerned about the resource costs to the company.

Personally, my department has been supportive. [...] I still have to arrange my own covering and do my work when I am gone. [...] My manager was actually very proud to share that his ex-staff was like certain position in. [...] He will say this person is actually doing something outside of his day job for these two weeks. It's actually very interesting. So that's just one example I can cite. But ya, very supportive, at least in my company.

Male, 32

Pretty supportive. We won't really like, stop them from going, ah. Because I mean, all guys need to complete their reservist right, so ya, we just let them go, unless like sometimes, my company really need people. And then, we will probably just ask to defer.

HR decision maker, Male, 30

I may add one more head count, you know, to cushion off. If not, the workload of the other colleagues right, will increase by 20, 20, 20, 20, 20 percent. Ya. So, I can just get a temp guy to come in, you know, to help to cushion the workload effect. It depends lah, on the scale of the project that we are going in, ya.

HR decision maker, Male, 42

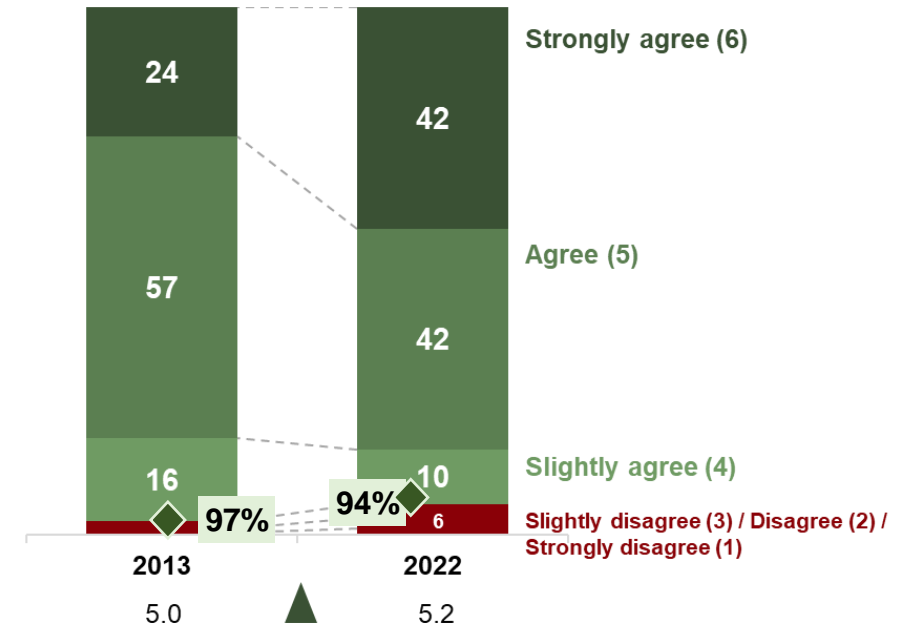
NS Viewed as a Rite of Passage

- Nearly all (94%) agreed that NS is a rite of passage for the Singapore man.



NS Viewed as a Rite of Passage

- The proportion that strongly agreed that NS is a rite of passage for Singaporean men increased from 24% in 2013 to 42% in 2022.

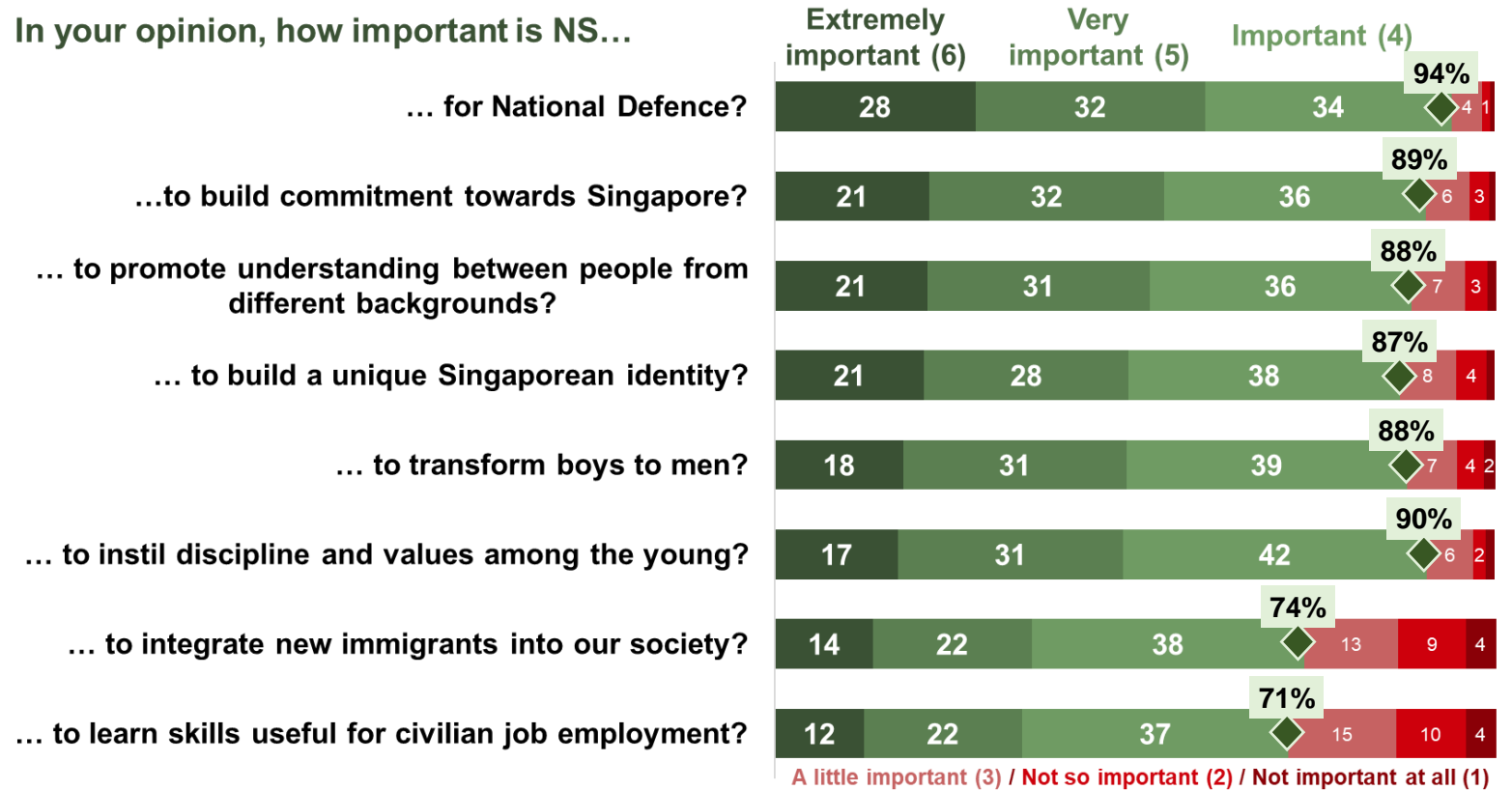


In your opinion, to what extent do you agree or disagree that NS is a rite of passage for the Singapore man?

NS Most Important for National Defence, but Less Important for Enhancing Civilian Employability

- NS was perceived as the most important for national defence and social cohesion.
- A lower proportion (71%) of respondents thought that NS is important for learning skills useful for civilian employment.

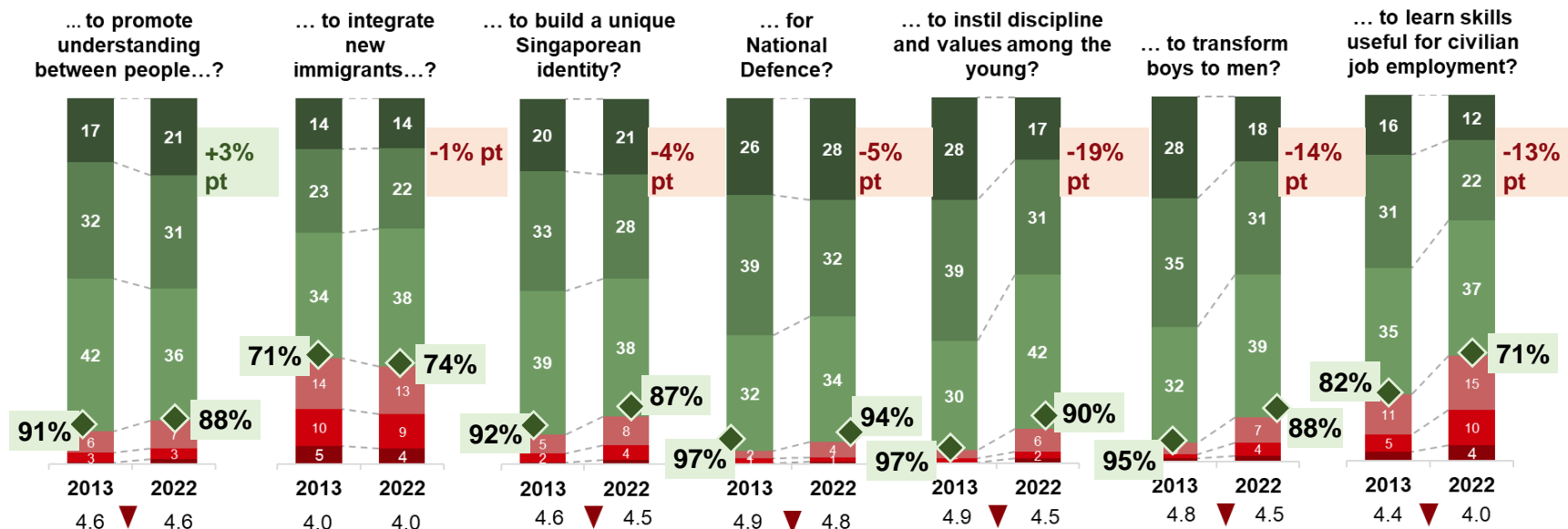
In your opinion, how important is NS...



Note: The question (... to build commitment towards Singapore?) is new in 2022.

Notable Declines in Perceived Importance of NS were for Skills for Civilian Employment and Maturation

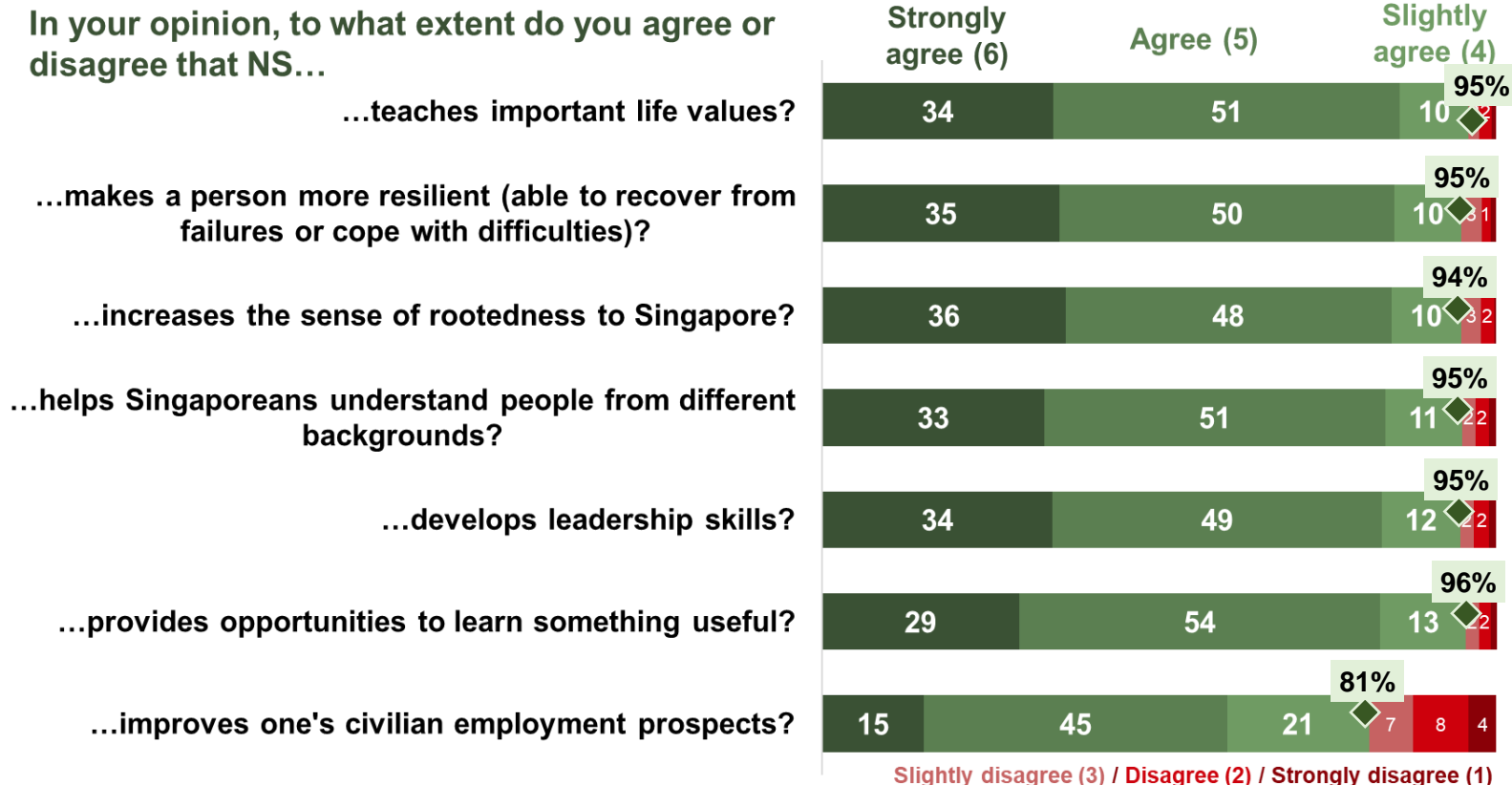
- Between 2013 and 2022, notable declines in the perceived importance of NS were in the domains of learning skills useful for civilian employment, instilling discipline and values, and transforming boys to men.



In your opinion, how important is National Service...

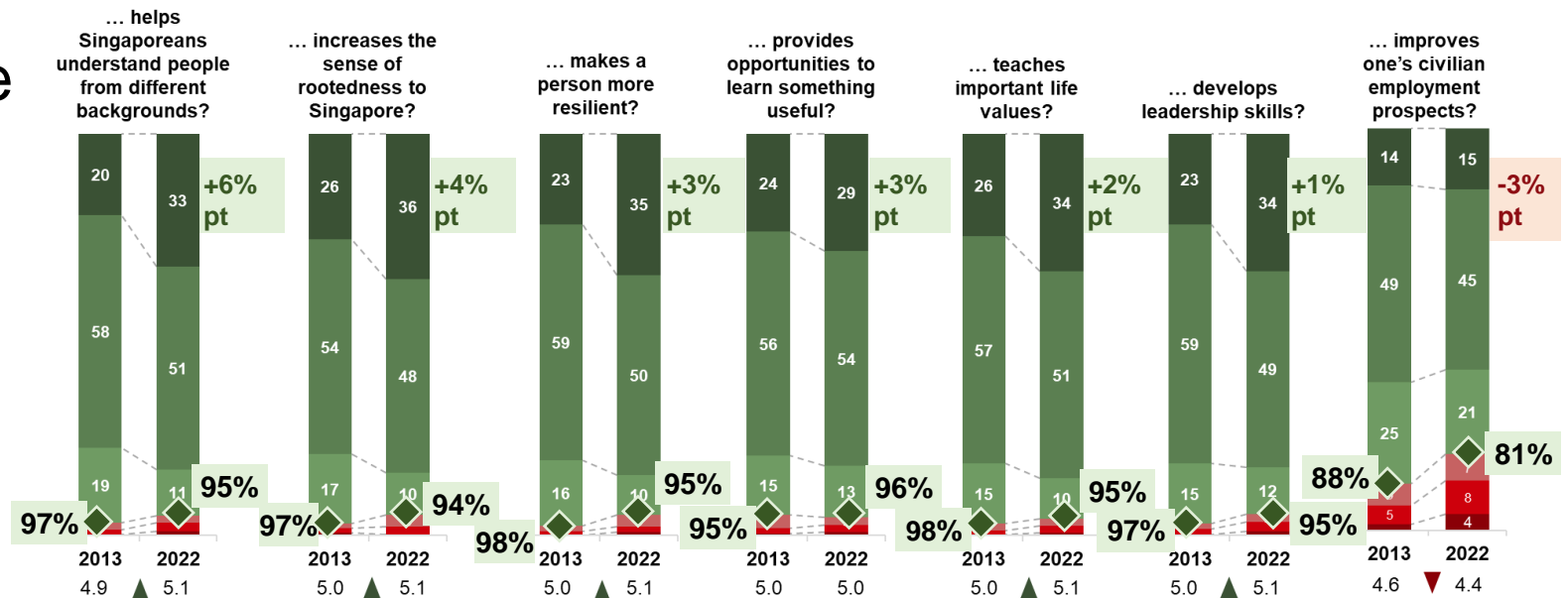
NS Contributes to Societal and Personal Growth, but Less Useful for Civilian Employment Prospects

- Over 90% of respondents agreed that NS contributes to varying aspects of societal and individual growth.
- A lower proportion (81%) agreed that NS improves one's civilian employment prospects.



Perceptions of the Value of NS for Societal and Individual Growth Generally Remains Positive and Stable

- Between 2013 and 2022, perceptions of the value of NS for different aspects of societal and individual growth have mostly improved or remained stable.
- There was a slight decline in agreement that NS improves civilian employment prospects.



In your opinion, to what extent do you agree or disagree that NS...

Overall Agreement on Importance and Value of NS, Though There Is a Need to Address Concerns about How NS Contributes to Civilian Employability

- Diverse views on the importance and value of NS emerged during focus groups, with nearly all voicing that NS is important for national defence.
- Many, especially parents and family members, felt that NS forges discipline and maturity.
- Many, particularly parents, felt that more non-military training could be included to broaden national servicemen's skill sets.

For me, I think it's important, lah. Because we are such a small country right, [...] if we rely too much on other country to support us, and we don't do our, so-called like our own defence and all these things, then we can be easily taken down quite fast, lah.

Female, 30

... They learn from the training from the NS. They learn these things that they cannot learn from the outside, from their friends. So it's a different kind of environment. And it's the right timing in their puberty. Right so, they grow more mature in the ways that they think, the way they move, the way they take care of themselves, their fitness. So I really agree with everyone, what they say, it's important.

Male, 46

...probably integrating other lessons apart from their usual military training.

Male, 46

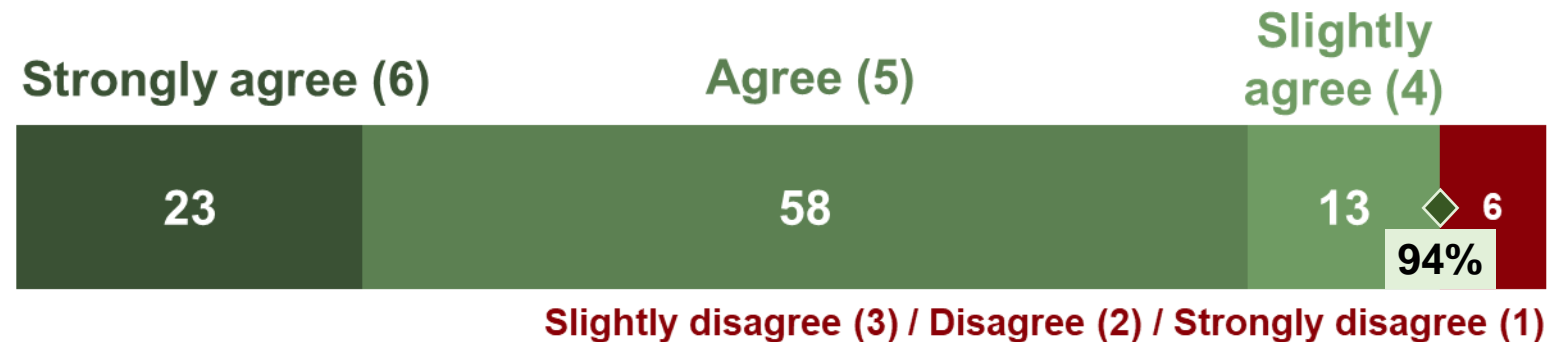
Pertaining to your question about how the employers and employees have behaved after their deployment, definitely the kind of responsibility, kind of mental strength that I can see after they have gone through the National Service is much higher because for guys who haven't gone through the National Service, I think that they are like, more complacent. They feel that life has no prospects. But after that, after they went through the NS and come back, I think that they take on more responsibility, apart from their job roles. So, I feel that they mature through the process of NS.

Male, 45

Overall Confidence in Training Safety Is High

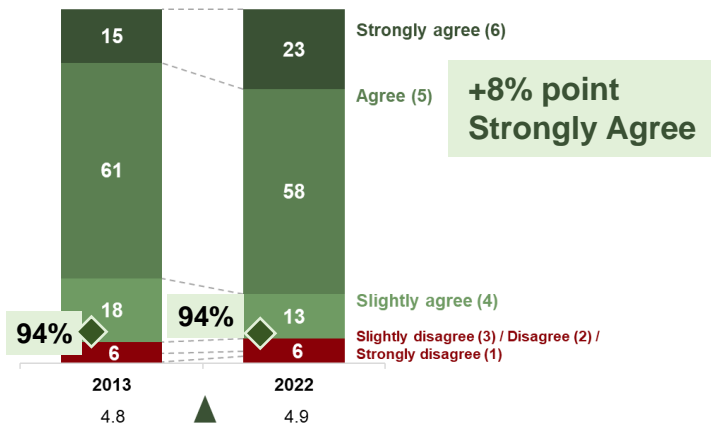
- Current sentiments reflect the strong emphasis on training safety in recent years, with 94% of national servicemen expressing confidence that NS training is conducted safely.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
NS training is conducted safely.



Overall Confidence in Training Safety Is High

- The proportion of national servicemen that strongly agreed that NS training is conducted safely has increased from 15% to 23%.
- Focus groups also alluded to a positive and increased safety and health focus.



+8% point Strongly Agree

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
NS training is conducted safely.

... the commanders are also, are more [...] concerned about safety so they tend to prioritise our safety over, and our health over everything else lah. Yeah. Which I think is good lah. I feel that they care for us in that sense, yeah.

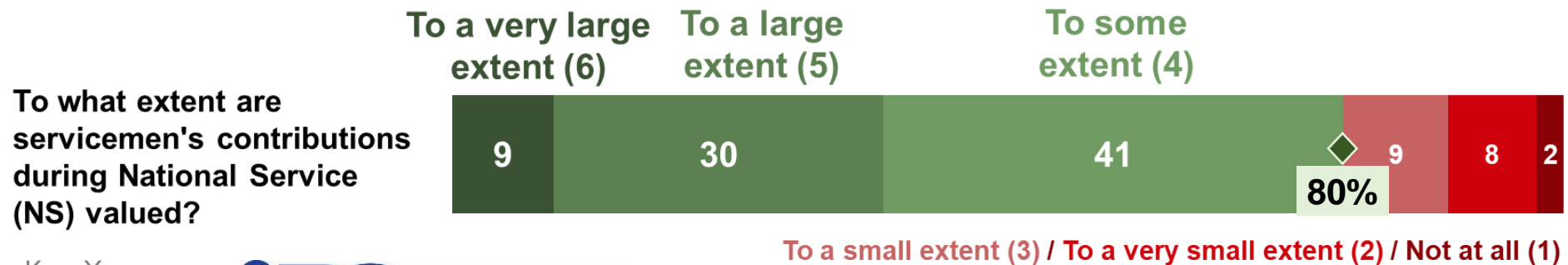
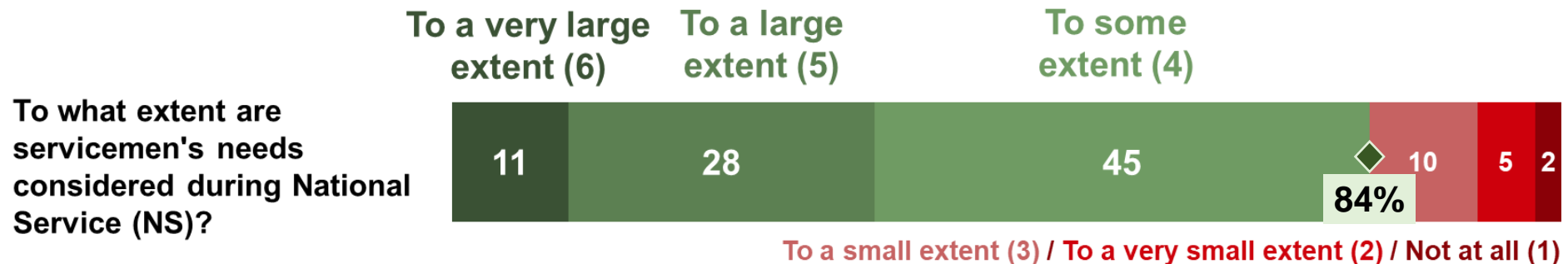
Male, 31

... initially you only hear from whatever news and all that and news is never all the positive ones, right. So there is a lot of fear and even for my parents like why you have to do it right, you are not a citizen [...] so for them there was a lot of fear. My parents thought that something will happen to my son but [...] now I realise how safe it is [...] And he says sometimes I feel like you know, I feel like such a sissy because every now and then what they do is, remind me to drink water. Make sure you are hydrated. You don't faint. So it's like super safe and he says, so [...] my impression has changed.

Female, 49

National Servicemen Felt Supported and Valued During NS

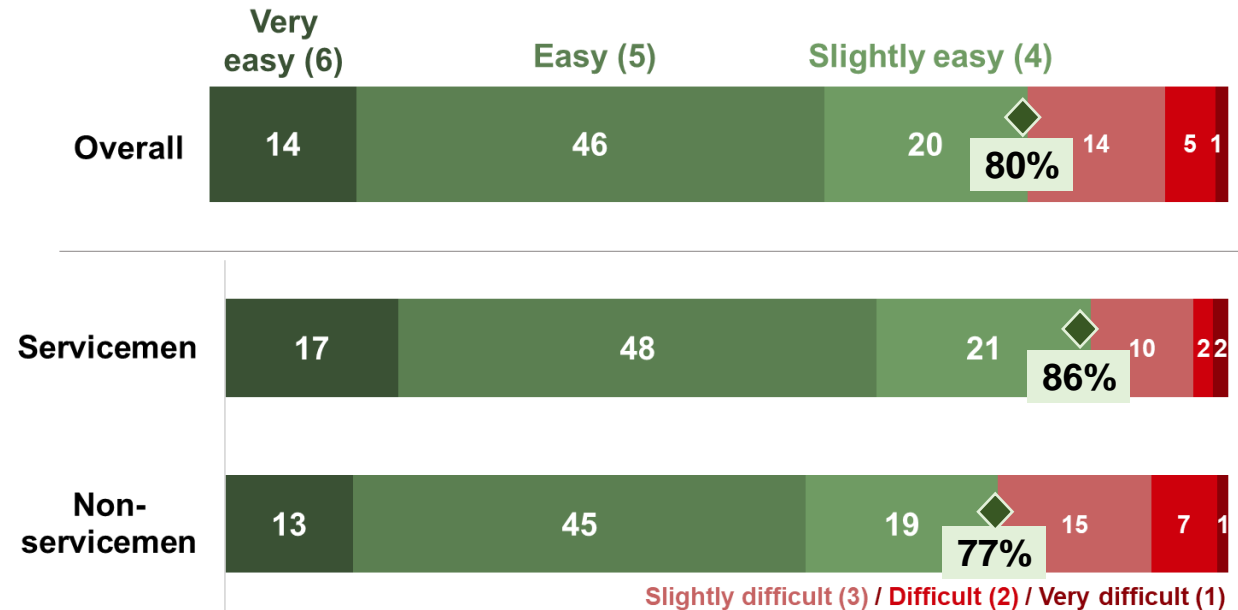
- About four in five national servicemen felt that their needs during NS are considered (84%) and that their contributions are valued (80%), at least to some extent.



NS-Related Information Is Easily Accessible

- Majority (80%) found it easy to obtain information on NS, with agreement being higher for servicemen (86%) than non-servicemen (77%).

How easy or difficult is it to obtain information on NS?



Note: Difference in perceptions of access to NS information between servicemen and non-servicemen is statistically significant. Previous 2013 benchmarks not comparable due to significant response scale changes.

NS-Related Information Is Easily Accessible

- While survey findings suggest that NS-related information is accessible, some focus group participants suggested that there could be information targeted at families of national servicemen.
- Some national servicemen suggested that they wanted to have more information on the actual NS experience, particularly post-BMT and reservist.

... I think like, what they give us right, pre-enlistment stuff during orientation, I think it's fine cause they give you information where to go and all that. But what they don't tell you, erm, is when you are already inside. The experience, the hierarchy, how you supposed to, ya.

Male, 24

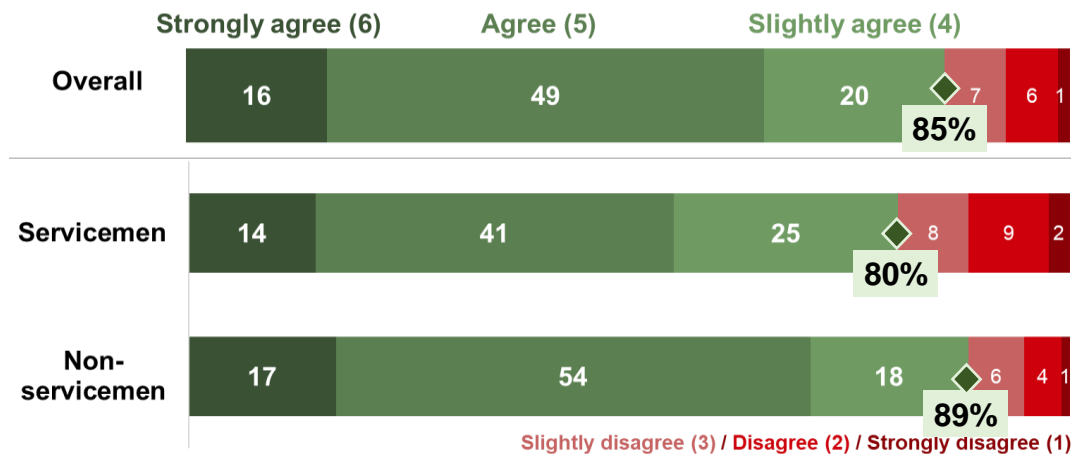
I think right there should be outreach efforts and communication directed at females like us up to middle age because we are kind of all associated to these men in a way. They can be our partner, our sibling, our family member and essentially what happens inside NS, unless we actually gone for it is like a black box to us. We only know the parts that like... like these people who know have coloured out for us. So I think there needs to be communication targeted to us to kind of, to get us to kind of understand more of the, not just understanding what are the experience they are going through but how can we support them. You know a lot of the avenues that we can do to kind of make them feel like their work matters, that it's not just them alone going through this module, this kind of thing.

Female, 24

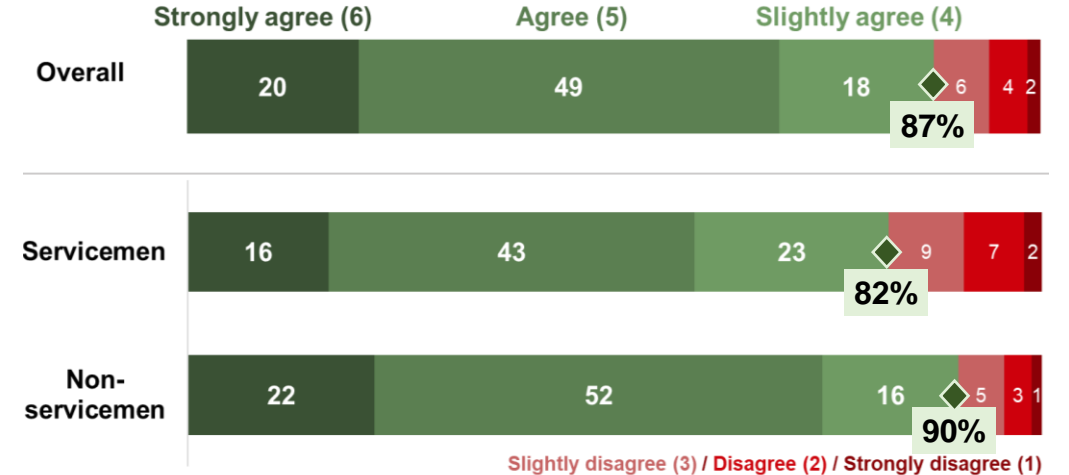
NS Feedback Channels are Generally Satisfactory

- The large majority (over 80%) agreed that there are feedback channels to suggest improvements to NS and that feedback on NS is taken seriously, with agreement being higher for non-servicemen than servicemen.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that there are feedback channels to suggest improvements to NS?

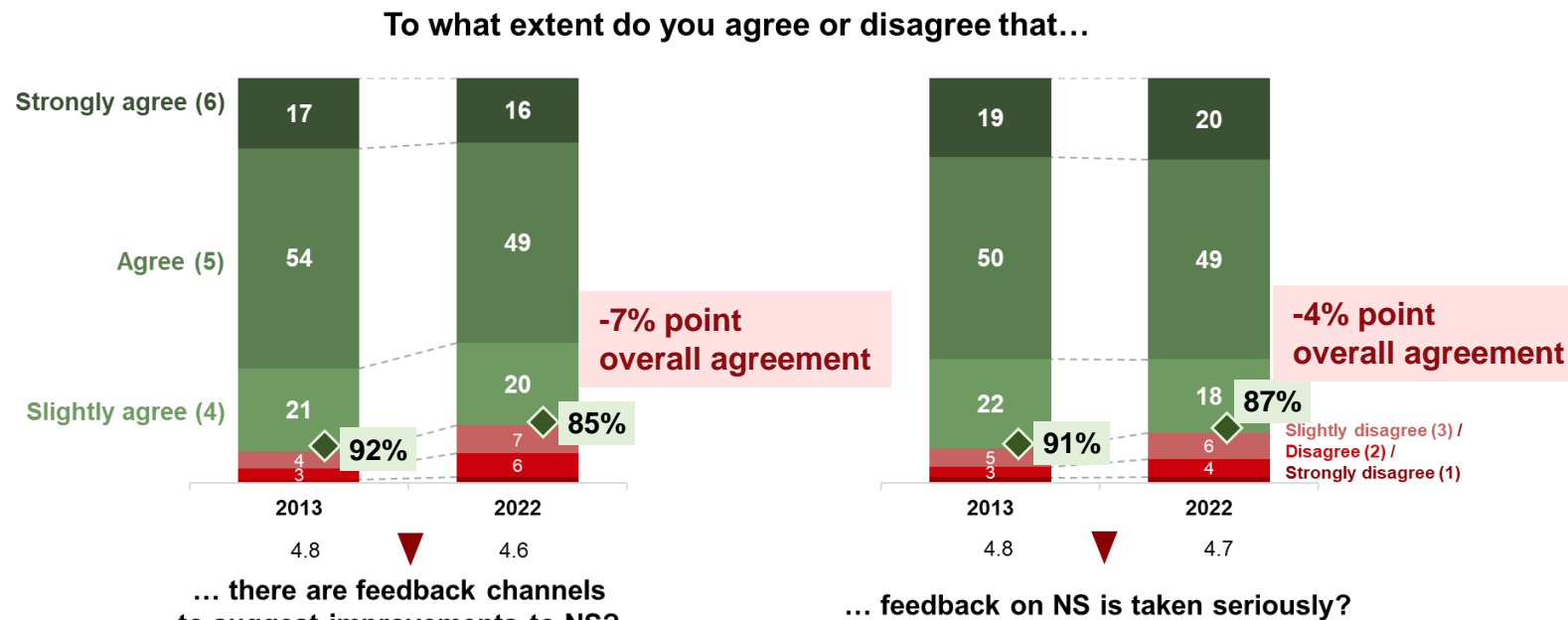


To what extent do you agree or disagree that feedback on NS is taken seriously?



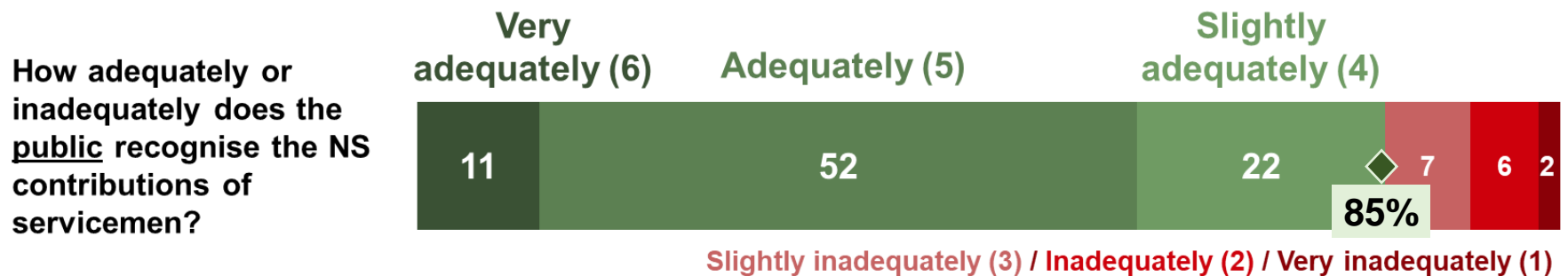
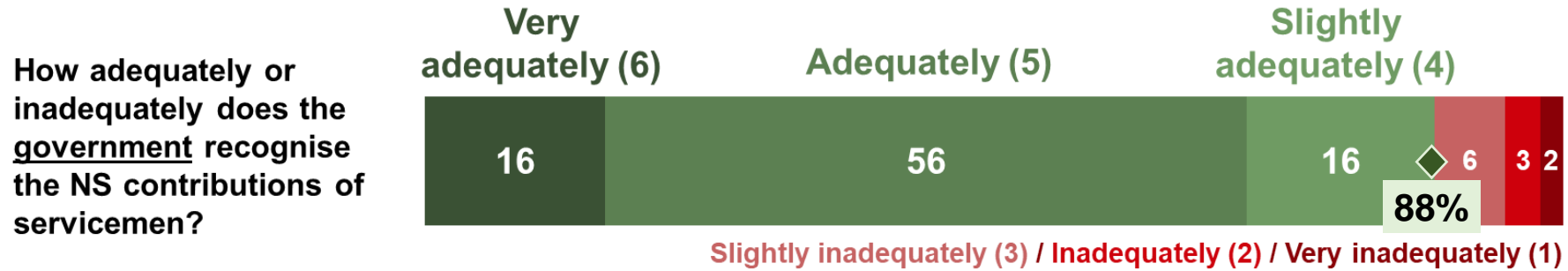
There Remains Room to Continually Strengthen NS Feedback Channels

- However, perceptions that NS feedback channels are available and that feedback is taken seriously have declined since 2013. This reflects rising public expectations, and the need to continually strengthen NS feedback channels.



Overall Recognition for NS Contributions Is Adequate

- Over 80% felt that the government and public adequately recognise the NS contributions of national servicemen.



Overall Recognition for NS Contributions Is Adequate

- Focus groups echoed awareness of government efforts to recognise the NS contributions of national servicemen.
- Some opined that the non-voluntary nature of NS might have minimised the perceived significance of national servicemen's contributions to national defence.

I think it's okay already. Like generally, it's enough for them. But I guess in a – I mean, the one thing that I do find different is that, for Singaporean men, it's already considered mandatory for them to go, so it's like, okay lah, you got to go. And I know that Singapore has not been to war, but it's quite different from people in other countries where, even though they have not technically participated in wars and stuff like that, there is kind of like a difference. Where, for them, it's like they actually usually say like “thank you for serving the nation” if they actually went out for certain things. When in Singapore, it's more of like no choice, I've got to do it lah.

Female, 26

I think okay ah. Every first July got SAF day and then every NDP, NS something. NS50 and NS51. So I feel like there's enough talks about NS at least lah, that we will not be able to forget about NS.

Female, 34

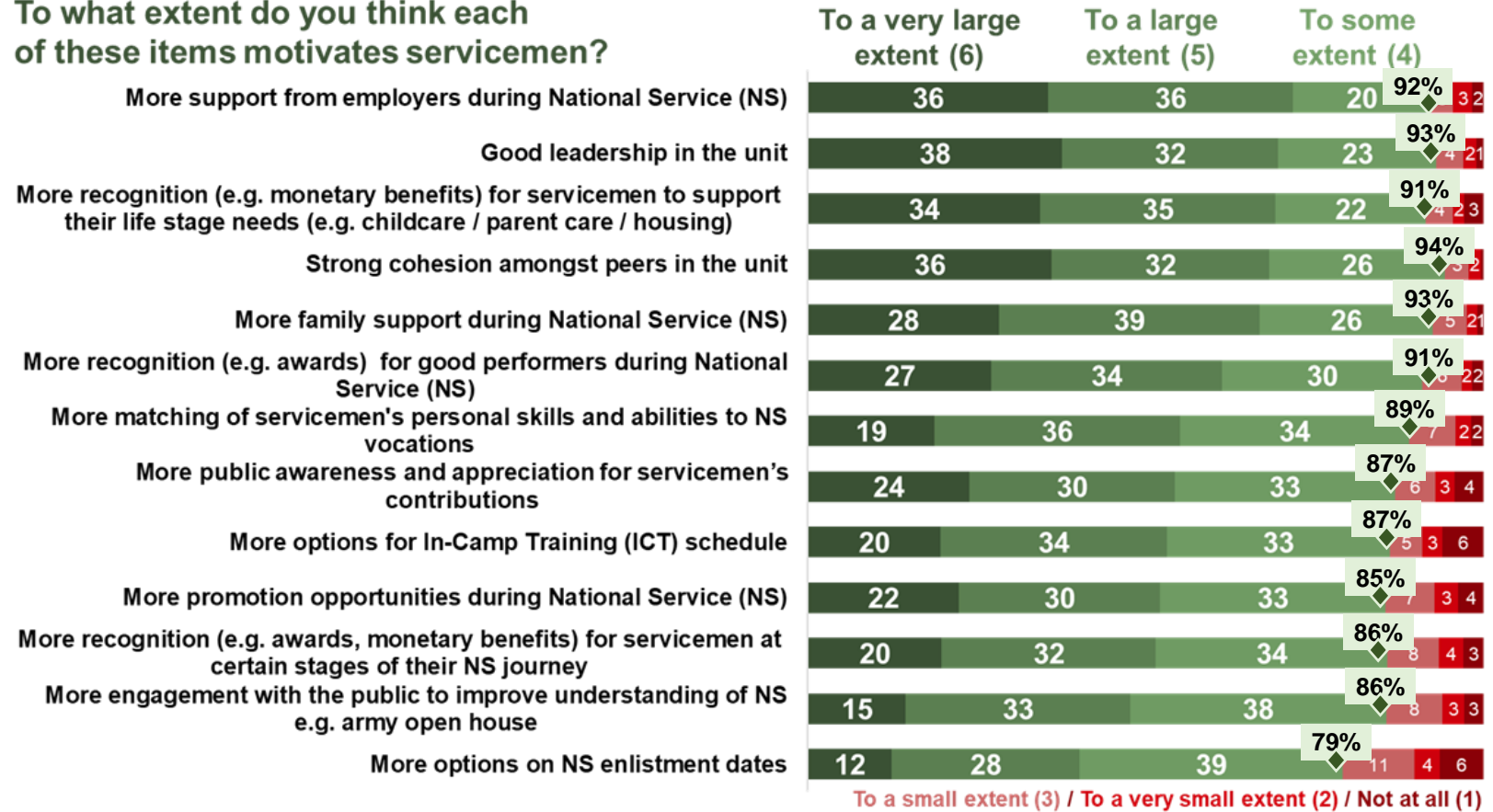
I think appreciation I think to me, no matter what you do definitely there will be people... [who] just want more, unfortunately. But I think as of now, what they are doing, I think it's enough from MINDEF or from the government but I think it's just the public perception has to be changed.

Female, 36

More Employer Support, Good Unit Leadership and Recognition to Support Life Stage Needs are Motivators

- National servicemen agreed that they would be motivated by more employer support during NS, good unit leadership, and more recognition to support life stage needs such as childcare and housing.

To what extent do you think each of these items motivates servicemen?



To a small extent (3) / To a very small extent (2) / Not at all (1)

More Employer Support, Good Unit Leadership and Recognition to Support Life Stage Needs are Motivators

- More attention could be paid to those from lower-income households, whose ability to contribute to household income may be diminished when fulfilling their NS duties.

And also like I have a lot of friends cause I come from a friend group that was kind of lower income. And then I saw how, like, firsthand how they struggled. Like, let's say they are supporting their parents by working, like, in a night life or whatever to support their home income. Then when NS hit, I saw firsthand how difficult it was for them to – they were stressing out all the time. They were like “oh I need apply leave, I need to go back and take care of my mum, my grandmother.”

Male, 30

The only toughest one to be managed was the financial [aspect that was] critical in my house, with my family. 'Cause I'm still in service that time, I can't help out in a lot of things. I only can help out for a bit, maybe it's just \$20, \$10. [...] That's why I choose to went to work that point of time, moonlight that point of time, just to work and get more money for my family.

Male, 20

Summary of Key Findings

- There is strong public conviction that NS contributes to national defence and economic development.
- Public support for NS, including family and employer support for NS, remains high.
- NS may increasingly be seen as a disruptor of work given the pace of change in the labour market; this is reflected in weakening perceptions that NS is important and valuable for imparting employable skills and for improving job prospects.
- NS is viewed as important for building a national identity and for fostering social cohesion amongst other maturation functions.