

VOICES RISING:

Rohingya Women's Priorities and Leadership
in Myanmar and Bangladesh

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Acknowledgement by the Authors:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Amidst the ongoing crisis on both sides of the Myanmar-Bangladesh border, Rohingya women are leading efforts to support their rights and wellbeing, along with those of their families and communities. Such roles are also contributing to small but important shifts in gendered norms in the camps, ultimately indicating their transformative possibilities. However, the active roles women are playing in their communities are not being properly recognized and supported by the range of stakeholders involved in delivering humanitarian assistance and developing political solutions to the crisis. This must change. Women's voices and their priorities, ideas and leadership must be further elevated. Such efforts will help ensure women not only have a seat at the table, but that they are able to actively shape the response and solutions to the crisis, while supporting the potential for broader, positive transformations in women's rights.

In this report, Oxfam draws on ongoing engagement and discussions with displaced Rohingya women living in camps in Myanmar and Bangladesh. The report shares the difficulties women face living in these camps, their priorities for the future, and opportunities and barriers to promoting women's rights and leadership, both in the existing civic space in Bangladesh and under the tighter conditions of the confined camps in Myanmar. It also shares recommendations for governments and the aid community to better support the active agency and leadership of displaced women on both sides of the border.

These recommendations include:

1. Tackle the root causes of the crisis and ensure equal rights for Rohingya women, men, girls and boys on both sides of the border.
2. Ensure the humanitarian response meets women's immediate needs and addresses the gendered barriers that prevent women from participating in public spaces and accessing services.
3. Address barriers to women's representation in community governance structures and enhance equitable participation and decision-making.
4. Invest in gender transformative programming that tackles social and cultural norms, creates opportunities for women's participation and leadership, and recognises women's roles in supporting their families and communities.
5. Ensure adequate, flexible and long-term resourcing for gender responsive programming and transformative women's leadership efforts.



1

INTRODUCTION



They [women leaders] can understand what our needs are. The things that men cannot see and do, she will do for women.

The Rohingya crisis is a human rights crisis with stark humanitarian impacts on both sides of the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. Over one million Rohingya are currently living in camps – both refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh and camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) in Rakhine state, Myanmar.

For Rohingya women, this crisis multiplies the challenges they face as displacement aggravates vulnerabilities and limits their coping strategies. Yet, amidst the devastating conditions in camps on both sides of the border, Rohingya women are displaying remarkable courage. Women are taking on active and critical roles as they seek to meet basic needs while improving the lives of their families and communities. Such roles are also contributing

to small but important shifts in gendered norms in the camps, ultimately indicating their transformative possibilities.

As the crisis becomes protracted, humanitarian actors, government agencies and political stakeholders must actively engage Rohingya women in meaningful and empowering ways to support immediate wellbeing as well as transformational possibilities for women's rights.

In Myanmar and Bangladesh, Rohingya women and girls living in camps face particular challenges to staying safe, to meeting their basic needs, and living with dignity. They also have clear priorities for the future, including their roles as active leaders and the pursuit of durable solutions.

Times of crisis can have positive transformational impacts on gender norms and women's lives - or can represent a further roll back of their rights; and actions taken by external stakeholders can make a huge difference.

One of the key challenges raised by women on both sides of the border is the lack of opportunities to shape decisions that so profoundly impact their lives.

This relates to both the delivery of humanitarian assistance as well as engagement in political dialogue aimed at supporting longer-term solutions to the crisis.

While women are taking on important roles in their communities, this is not being effectively recognised, harnessed and amplified by humanitarian, developmental and political stakeholders.

Important opportunities to support women's priorities, rights and leadership are being missed.

This report draws on ongoing engagement by Oxfam with diverse women in the camps, a core element of our ongoing humanitarian response on both sides of the border. Insights and quotes are taken from discussions with Rohingya refugee women in Bangladesh and

Rohingya and Kaman IDP women in Myanmar throughout 2019. This report aims to share their perspectives, amplify their priorities, and identify ways to further support their leadership. The report concludes by sharing key recommendations Rohingya women view as critical to a better future.

These missed opportunities and the need to collectively "do better" in ensuring Rohingya women have a seat at the table in all aspects of the response have become clear through Oxfam's ongoing engagement with diverse women and girls living through this crisis on both sides of the border.



If you're discussing our future, do it with us.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh



2 CONTEXT

in Myanmar and Bangladesh



Men are above women.
We have to listen, or
they will beat us and
break our bones.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh

DRIVERS

of the Crisis

Myanmar has been affected by decades of devastating and well-documented violence, including the ongoing national-level ethnic political conflicts in multiple states. Various ethnic groups have been targeted, including the Rohingya, who have faced particularly brutal forms of persecution.¹

The military dictatorship in Myanmar, in place from 1962 to 2011, brought with it a virulent ethnic nationalism that denied the Rohingya identity and framed them as 'outsiders' and 'immigrants'.² This rhetoric played out in various pogroms and episodes of violence, alongside the gradual denial of basic rights.

In one particularly devastating move, Rohingya in Myanmar were effectively stripped of citizenship under the 1982 Citizenship Law, cementing their status as one of the world's largest stateless groups.

Violence targeting Rohingya and other ethnic groups in Myanmar has been marked by severe forms of sexual and gender-based violence. The Independent International Fact-finding Mission on Myanmar (FFM) concluded that "rape and other sexual violence have been a particularly egregious and recurrent feature of the targeting of the civilian population in Rakhine, Kachin and Shan States since 2011."³ It also described sexual and gender-based violence as a hallmark of military operations in northern Myanmar and Rakhine. Indeed, the systematic sexual and gender-based violence perpetrated against the Rohingya forms a core part of the case that is currently under review by the International Court of Justice, with it being seen as a key indicator of the genocidal intent of the Myanmar military.⁴

Violence in Myanmar against the Rohingya community has been ongoing for decades, with thousands of people fleeing across the border into Bangladesh, in light of specific crackdowns in the 1970s and 1990s, and again in 2016.⁵ However, events in 2017 represented a new phase of brutality against the Rohingya. In response to attacks by the insurgent group the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, the military undertook so-called "clearance operations" that targeted the Rohingya population, resulting in grave human rights violations.⁶ These military operations, described as "ethnic cleansing" by senior UN officials,⁷ are now the subject of multiple international justice processes.⁸ These operations resulted in an estimated 745,000 people, largely Rohingya, crossing the border in a matter of months.⁹

Close to one million Rohingya refugees are now sheltering in camps located just outside Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh; while they are perhaps the most visible dimension of the crisis, it is the less visible, ongoing persecution that Rohingya face in Myanmar which is perpetuating the longer-term cycle of violence and displacement.

Today, an estimated 600,000 Rohingya remain in Rakhine State, Myanmar.¹⁰

They face various forms of persecution, including the continued denial of citizenship, an inability to vote or run for political office and local orders that restrict their ability to gather publicly in groups of five or more people, for instance.¹¹ Rohingya in Myanmar also face severe restrictions on movement, which limit their ability to leave their villages to access markets, schools or health clinics. For over 120,000 of these Rohingya, even more extreme movement restrictions confine them to camps for IDPs in central Rakhine. The majority of these camps are located a few kilometers outside the town of Sittwe and were established based on the rationale of providing security to affected communities following violence, which disproportionately targeted and displaced Rohingya, in 2012.¹²

However, while other communities have been resettled over the years, Rohingya and Kaman

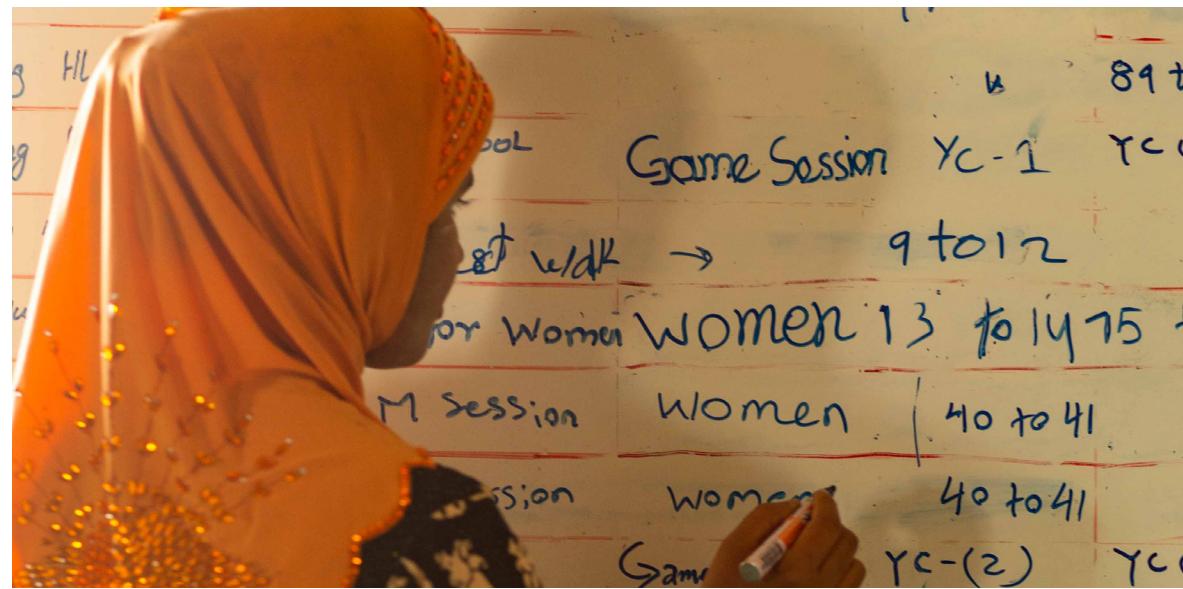
Muslims still remain in the camps, where they are largely reliant on humanitarian aid for survival. These camps and the movement restrictions faced by Rohingya across the state have created a society segregated along ethnic and religious lines. In a 2017 report, Amnesty International described this system, premised on discriminatory laws, policies and practices, as constituting the legal crime of apartheid.¹³

Barriers to WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Displaced Rohingya women living in camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, and central Rakhine, Myanmar have specific needs and priorities that must be taken into account to ensure their rights and dignity are strengthened. However, almost eight years into the displacement crisis in Rakhine and almost three years into the refugee crisis in Bangladesh, women are markedly absent from many formal and informal decision-making spaces on both sides of the border. Women consistently expressed to Oxfam that they wanted to engage but were being left out of community discussions and decision-making processes.

This includes in the formal camp management governance structures in both Cox's Bazar and central Rakhine, where women have been severely underrepresented. While some positive steps are being taken to increase women's representation in such committees and structures, women still brought up that their voices continue to be marginalised.

This difficult context reflects myriad barriers that women face in taking on active roles in



Those women who are taking on leadership roles in their communities are often targeted, facing harassment and abuse by fellow community members, as a response to this very brave leadership.

their communities. In communities across Myanmar, including Rakhine State, there are strong gendered norms and roles with respect to the division of labour. This heavily influences the behaviours, responsibilities, and activities that are considered appropriate for women, men, girls, and boys and is particularly pronounced throughout Rohingya communities.

In general terms, in Rakhine and Rohingya communities, men are often accorded decision-making roles at the household level, with the ability to pursue livelihoods activities outside of the home and determine how limited resources are used. Men also tend to be considered natural leaders, whereas women have limited opportunities to participate in any community leadership and public decision-making processes, with profound impacts on their ability to communicate with leaders and influence decisions.

For Rohingya communities located within camps in Cox's Bazar, and central Rakhine in particular, these dynamics are also mediated through differing religious and cultural dynamics tied to their communities of origin (with most refugees in Cox's Bazar coming

from northern Rakhine communities and IDPs in central Rakhine coming from nearby communities) and experiences of displacement. This, in turn, offers particular constraints and opportunities for coping mechanisms that enable greater flexibility for some women to pursue work for income.

In the camps on both sides of the border, the ability for women to move freely in public spaces is a critical element that links with their ability to access services, engage in dialogue and decision-making processes and pursue active leadership roles. Refugee and IDP women face a range of movement restrictions which include state-imposed restrictions through legal measures, formal policies and informal practices that target Rohingya, including through, most notably, the denial of citizenship, policies of encampment policed through barbed wire fences and military checkpoints.

Alongside such considerations are those

related to how services, consultations and decision-making processes play out in the camps on both sides, with a lack of tailored services and supports often aggravating the situation.

This includes the lack of sex and age separated community consultations for instance.

And the lack of support for women leaders to be able to effectively influence decisions and take on leadership roles, safely.

There are also informal mechanisms, which include perceptions of personal safety and vulnerability, cultural norms and religious beliefs that influence behaviours in women and men.

These factors all have a significant impact on the ability of women to access essential services, claim their rights and take on active roles in their communities, including through informal and formal leadership positions. These issues were frequently highlighted as key challenges by the diverse women that Oxfam spoke with and are shared in the following sections of the report. Importantly, alongside these challenges, Rohingya women also consistently highlighted the existing small spaces where they and others are managing to actively shape their roles and pursue leadership in different ways, and what further supports they need to do more of this. These suggested actions are integrated into the final section of this report which outlines recommendations for government and humanitarian stakeholders.



Here in the camps women can be leaders, we can go outside, women believe in other women, but men don't. Men don't believe women can be leaders.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh

A photograph of a woman from behind, wearing a dark blue dress with a intricate gold and white batik-like pattern. She is leaning her head against a window frame, looking out at a lush green garden. The scene is bright and sunny.

3

Rohingya Women's

CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES

in the Camps in Myanmar



It is very difficult for women to stay in one room with all family members because some families have married couples, teenagers and daughters. It is very shameful for everyone to stay in one room. I have 11 family members and we all stay in a single room.

Rohingya IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

Approximately 128,000 people, 98% of whom are stateless Rohingya, have been confined to IDP camps in central Rakhine since 2012.¹⁴ These camps were established by the government following waves of violence that disproportionately targeted and impacted Rohingya.

While these camps were initially established on the premise of providing security, other ethnic groups have long since been resettled to villages, while Rohingya and Kaman people (another predominantly Muslim ethnic group in Myanmar) remain confined in the camps. These camps are surrounded with barbed wire, with all movement between the camps, as well as into and out of the camps, tightly controlled by military and police checkpoints.¹⁵

Unable to fish, to farm, or to access markets, the Rohingya and Kaman IDPs inside are largely dependent on humanitarian aid for their daily needs and survival.

Rohingya and Kaman IDPs' conditions within the confined camps, their ability to access services and to engage in formal decision-making and leadership are considerably different for men and women, due to gendered inequalities and socially

held beliefs concerning acceptable behavior of men and women. These beliefs are in part tied to men and women's interpretation of Islamic teachings and practices, particularly the practice of purdah, which requires women to be screened or veiled from men outside their families and can limit women's activities outside of the home. The ability of IDPs to access essential services is largely determined by one's ability to move freely in public spaces, access to financial resources and their literacy levels, all of which women are disproportionately limited in. The result is that Rohingya and Kaman women are often excluded from accessing services, information and expressing their opinions, and, ultimately, influencing decisions that affect them.

CHALLENGES in the Camps

Rohingya and Kaman women spoke with Oxfam about how conditions in the confined IDP camps in central Rakhine have furthered their disempowerment and that obtaining equal rights is fundamental to resolving the human rights crisis. The context in the confined camps is one where extended families live together in cramped shelters, limiting privacy and dignity, and where movement restrictions regulate access to very basic services, including healthcare, education and livelihoods.

When asked about the specific challenges affecting women confined to these camps, Rohingya and Kaman women shared their frustration about how all aspects of life in the confined camps - using a latrine, sleeping and

staying in the shelter, cooking, earning money, having enough food, supporting their children—are challenges that profoundly impact their sense of dignity, safety and hope for the future.



Living here, the dignity of women is not protected. It is a very shameful life here. We have been put here and we have to keep staying here.

Rohingya IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

Rohingya and Kaman women shared their overwhelming distress concerning the overcrowding of shelters and its negative impact on their sense of dignity and safety. Women spend the most time in shelters due to unequal gender norms that discourage women from leaving their shelter. As a direct result, women spend most of their time in insufferably small and hot spaces. Rohingya and Kaman women went on to describe that they live with as many as six to twelve family members in a single shelter doing routine tasks such as cooking, sleeping, and bathing, while also trying to maintain any semblance of human connection and intimacy in the same eight by eight foot room.



Being in the camp, everything is a challenge for women. It is not one thing. Everything is a challenge.

Rohingya IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

Rohingya and Kaman women emphasised repeatedly how shameful it is for married couples and youth to be living in the same room often stating, "this is not how human beings should live."



This is not how human beings should live.

Rohingya IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

Unsurprisingly, Rohingya and Kaman women's insecurity was much worse outside of the confines of their shelter. Women felt particularly unsafe and at risk of experiencing physical and sexual abuse by men when leaving their shelter at night, particularly when walking to use the public latrines.



For healthcare in times of emergencies, if someone needs to see a doctor it is very difficult here. The doctor is not available 24 hours. The doctor is only available two hours per day in the clinic and it is difficult when people are in need.

Rohingya IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES

Confinement in the overcrowded shelters makes it easy for people to contract serious illnesses and diseases, and the ongoing management of chronic conditions is extremely difficult in the camps given the lack of medical services. Rohingya and Kaman women told Oxfam that doctors are seldom in the camps, with one main clinic in Thet Kae Pin camp and sporadic services primarily provided by mobile health clinics operated by international NGOs.

Women noted that medical treatment beyond paracetamol requires specialist services available only in Sittwe town, primarily at the Sittwe General Hospital. Yet, to access such services, official permission is needed for IDPs to pass through various military checkpoints



When women and girls go to the toilet at night, they have fears because at night there is no light in the camps. Women are fearful going to toilet because they have fears of being attacked and harassed by men. Harassment happens very frequently because there are no lights and only men are on the way to the toilet because women often do not leave their shelter. Because of the lights, we cannot see if anything happens.

Rohingya IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

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In my family, I have a teenage daughter, me and my husband, and my sons all living together in the same room. I don't know how this affects my daughter, but I know how she must feel being all together in one room.

Rohingya IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

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It is very difficult for people in the camps to receive proper treatment. Women face the most difficulties with delivery cases and go to Sittwe General Hospital, but they need to go with police security. This is not good for patients because here in the camps people are afraid of the police.

Rohingya IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

and leave the camps. IDPs must also be accompanied by a paid security escort during their transit from the camps to the hospital and then watched over by a police officer and Rakhine staff during their stay, all of which requires time and money to arrange and are simply out of reach for many, with fatal consequences.



Recently, one of the IDPs here in Mor Thinyar IDP camp died after an emergency involving breathing difficulties. We managed to bring him to the Thet Kae Pyin clinic from here, but there at the clinic there was no doctor and the doctor's assistant called an ambulance. It took two hours for the ambulance to arrive at Tae Ka Pyin clinic, and by the time the ambulance arrived the patient had died. It was no use. This is how people are dying here.

Rohingya IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

While access to health services for all communities in the confined IDP camps are extremely limited, this has particular impacts on women, who require specific sexual and reproductive health supports throughout their lives. This includes access to prenatal care and safe delivery in child birth, both of which require services that are currently located outside of the IDP camps.

Accessing services beyond the barbed wire and checkpoints requires money, language skills and the paid accompaniment of a male police escort and those requirements are more difficult for women to meet and pose dangers for them. As Rohingya and Kaman women are less likely than men to be enrolled in schools, less likely to have employment or access to an income, and less likely to speak Rakhine and Burmese language, this has spillover effects on their ability to access healthcare and other necessary services.¹⁶ For many, they simply don't feel safe accessing essential health care.



When we go to Sittwe General Hospital and the nurses are Rakhine they treat us very badly. This is not good for us or for them as we are all human. When someone is not able to speak Rakhine, the nurses beat the patients and carers because of the language! And we have to spend so much money to buy food and to eat and buy medicine there. When women go to deliver in the general hospital, they lose their lives and sometimes they lose their babies because they are treated this way by nurses.

Rohingya IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

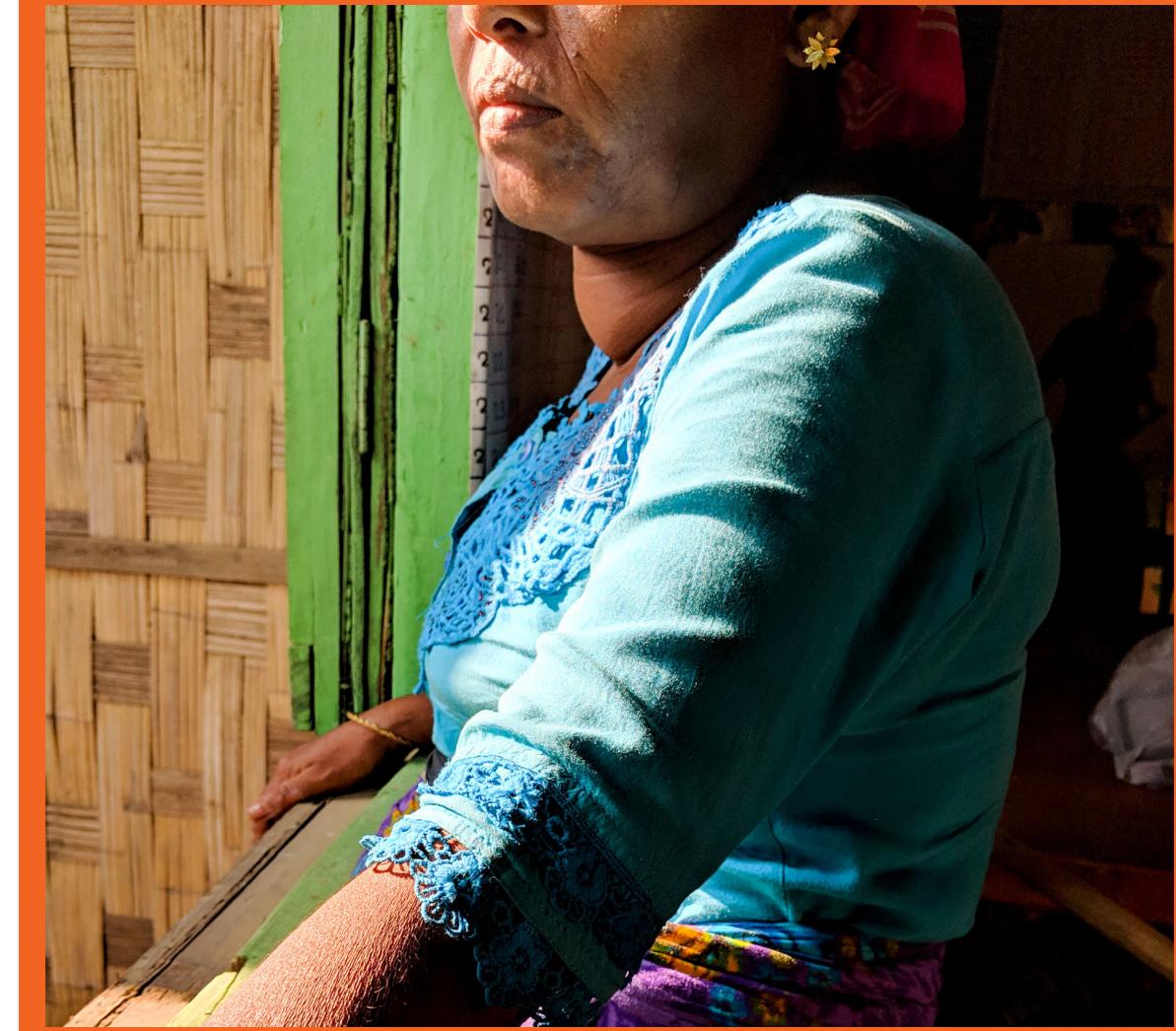
MA KHIN HLA'S STORY

Ma Khin Hla, an IDP woman living in the confined camps in central Rakhine, passed away in 2019 due to complications related to diabetes. Earlier that year, she had spoken to Oxfam about how limited health services were a key challenge she and others faced in the camp.

She shared that "For us, living here in the camps is very difficult. Camp conditions easily affect our health but it's very difficult to get medical treatment here. No doctors are available here. Mobile doctors come once a week but

sometimes no doctors come for months. If a pregnant woman faces difficulties delivering a baby and needs to look for a clinic, she can die or lose her baby. People have so many diseases here. This is what living in the camp is like. We want doctors but we don't have any."

A few months later, she passed away, leaving behind her husband and five children. "I tried my best to look after her, borrowed 700-800,000 kyat, but in the end I couldn't keep her alive," mourned her husband.



ACCESS TO EDUCATION

The opportunities for Rohingya and Kaman IDPs to receive good quality education in the confined camps are severely limited. Primary education is informal, run by international NGOs, and there is only one secondary school accessible to the entire population of more than 100,000 IDPs living in the 14 camps located in Sittwe Township.¹⁷ The government and education board of Sittwe University also barred all Rohingya from attending university following the 2012 violence, cutting people off from further educational and occupational advancement.

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The biggest challenge is that we are losing our future, most importantly within the education system. When I was in Sittwe [before the displacement in 2012], around there everyone was better educated, and I could become educated. I could go to higher education, high school and even university. Now the education system has a lot of restrictions even to get secondary education here. So that is my biggest concern about the future.

Rohingya IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

Rohingya and Kaman women told Oxfam that education is vital to access livelihood opportunities and to create a brighter future for themselves and their families. However, they are confronted with a range of barriers that prevent them from accessing educational opportunities. When speaking about their children, women said young girls have the greatest challenges accessing education. One woman shared:

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Here in the camps we cannot educate our children properly. We do not have jobs that provide income so that we can financially support our children's education. I have a daughter who goes to 7th standard, and due to financial problems, I took her out of school. These are the difficulties of being in the camps. The way we suffer is indescribable.

Rohingya IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

Rohingya and Kaman women worried about the safety of their daughters and told Oxfam that sending their daughters to school places a greater financial burden on the parents to ensure they can travel to school safely, taking into account transportation costs as well as bribes to pay at checkpoints in case of extortion or harassment. When families are struggling to earn enough just for food, girls are often likely the first to be taken out of school.

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When you have a boy child you are better able to give transportation fees, because they can go themselves directly, but for girls it is difficult. She requires someone to take her and accompany her to and from school, because there are a lot of people, and if she is alone something bad might happen to her. Thet Kae Pyin high school is very far from here.

Rohingya IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

RAINAS BIBI'S STORY

Rainas Bibi is a Rohingya girl who has a thirst for learning and wants the situation in the camps to change for children like her. She walks 45 minutes each morning to go to school and is in a class of over 70 students, most of whom are boys. She described how "there's always more boys than girls at school and this sometimes is the parents' decision because they don't have enough money or they're worried about the girls' safety."



While she loves school, she's aware that the future is grim: without citizenship rights she can't study at university or move out of the camps. "I want to spend all my life just educating myself or educating others, but I don't know, because I know the situation of my family. We have a lack of opportunities, a lack of property, a lack of money, so I'm not sure if this will happen, but my desire is to spend all my life learning."

PRIORITIES

for the Future

The Rohingya and Kaman women that Oxfam spoke with, consistently identified ways in which their situation could be improved. These priorities included immediate improvements to basic services as well as the removal of various restrictions and requirements, such as having to pay for a police escort to Sittwe General Hospital.

What was shared most clearly by displaced women in the central Rakhine camps, however, were the clear calls for the Myanmar authorities to dismantle the discriminatory systems that are keeping them confined to camps in the first place and perpetuating this human rights crisis.

Since 2017, the Myanmar government has reclassified three IDP camps in Rakhine and declared them as "closed" after upgrading housing.

These so-called camp "closures" lacked consultation with communities and did not offer the option to return to their place of origin or another place of their choosing.

Further these "closures" have not been accompanied by any change to the movement restrictions that Rohingya face, with IDPs thus largely confined to the same sites where they have been, without access to basic services and continued dependence on humanitarian aid.

In early December 2019, the Government of Myanmar released its "National Strategy on Resettlement of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Closure of IDP Camps". This strategy presents an opportunity for the government to change its approach to how it has implemented camp closures to date. However, much remains to be seen in terms of how the strategy is implemented. As outlined in the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State final report and recommendations, which the government has endorsed, consultations with affected communities are absolutely paramount to ensuring any camp closures are done in a voluntary, safe and dignified manner.¹⁸ The Advisory Commission recommendations are clear that returns to places of origin should be prioritised, and that IDPs need opportunities to actively participate in the planning and management of their return, relocation or local integration.

These recommendations are the very same as those that Rohingya and Kaman women prioritised when speaking with Oxfam, and

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I would like to say to the government that we need freedom of movement, identity cards to travel in times of need and we need equal rights. No one comes to ask us how we feel or our perspectives or concerns, No one has ever asked us.

Rohingya IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

which are documented in previous initiatives such as the Sittwe Camp Profiling Report, which found 94% of those surveyed said they wish to return to their place of origin.¹⁹ Throughout discussions in 2019, Rohingya and Kaman women in the confined camps clearly stated that for any camp closure, return, or resettlement process to result in real change, it must involve them in every step, while restoring and respecting their rights.

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I want to see single houses with land for one family. We are tired of living here in the IDP camps and we don't want to stay here any longer. If the government closes the camps, we don't want to be relocated from one camp to another camp... we want to be relocated to our original places.

Kaman IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

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When the camp closes people should not be trapped in this open-air prison. These people need to be free. These people require freedom of movement to create a better life for themselves. They can do it. They can better their own life. At the very least the government needs to free us and let people go to the city like before [the violence in 2012]. When we have freedom of movement it will create development for the city and for the people as well.

Rohingya IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

It is clear that Rohingya and Kaman women do not want to keep on living in overcrowded shelters in the confined IDP camps. Women told Oxfam they want freedom of movement and they want to return to their original lands and homes. Many women also explicitly noted the need for the authorities to communicate transparently with them about return and what rights and services they can expect in their places of origin and in any new potential area for resettlement. An important point that many Rohingya and Kaman women emphasised was that the simple removal of checkpoints or change to local orders that restrict movement were necessary, but not enough, in terms of improving their overall situation.

They called for the authorities to take positive steps in building peace, accompanied by clear communication to all communities in Rakhine that Rohingya people had the right to move freely and could rely on the protection of the state.

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The government should release a clear statement that we are allowed to have freedom of movement, that we can freely move to the city and anywhere we want. We need to make sure the government has informed everyone.

Rohingya IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

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In terms of camp closures, I would say women don't hear any information either inside or outside the camps. No one thinks to share information with us. For camp closures, we have never been invited to the meetings so we only hear about them afterwards.

Rohingya IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

LEADERSHIP

Rohingya and Kaman women IDPs have extremely limited avenues to participate meaningfully in community leadership and public decision-making structures. Community organising is highly restricted in Myanmar, especially among Rohingya and Muslim communities.

According to Myanmar law, Rohingya cannot form groups greater than four persons in public spaces, making community organizing acutely difficult, if not impossible, while carrying significant risks in terms of safety, including possible arrest and detainment.²⁰ In addition to structural barriers to public organising and leadership efforts, socially held beliefs further limit Rohingya and Kaman women's civic participation, including the belief that men are 'natural leaders' while women's role is largely reproductive and confined to the household.

The primary leadership and decision-making structure within the camp is through the Camp Management Committees (CMC), whose membership is "composed of persons living in the camp who are installed by the Government to represent their camp" (JIPS, 2017). The CMC representatives are the key focal point for people to communicate their needs and issues, and CMCs in turn are expected to communicate these concerns with service providers and government departments.

However, CMCs are both largely controlled by the authorities and predominantly male, and it is clear from discussions with women in the camps that there is an acute lack of trust in the ability of CMCs to represent their interests. In 2018, all CMC members were men, although small shifts have started to happen and as of February 2020 women occupy approximately 20% of CMC positions.

“

I believe when I help one person that I can help the entire community. I always want to help others because we are all created by god, the almighty to help others and to worship him. This is how we should be here we shouldn't be giving trouble to others. I want to stop those kinds of injustices that are happening in the camps. This is the priority I want to see happen here. If we are to stay one more year here in the camps, I would like to decrease the difficulties of being a woman here. There are many sufferings women experience, daily. We have been under attack here. I want to speak for equality and justice for women's rights.

Rohingya IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

“

The CMC problem—
CMC leadership makes
our lives worse. I want to
stop them and get rid of
those in leadership;
we don't need them
because they are taking
the power and taking
advantage and taking
money from other people.
The CMC have been the same
for many years hurting people.
They are not representing us.

Rohingya IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

However, women CMC members continue to face significant challenges in terms of their full participation in decision-making and, based on insights from camp management stakeholders, their authority often remains limited. As in Cox's Bazar, women leaders in the camps often face additional risks in terms of harassment, abuse and violence for any visible roles they take on in the community.

The social belief within Rohingya and Kaman communities that men are 'natural' leaders, perpetuates negative social norms and impacts who holds leadership positions in the confined camps. Men often hold positions such as teachers, medics and service providers working with INGOs and UN agencies, due to social norms and education levels. Without women in those positions, Rohingya and Kaman women lack people they can seek support from, or express concerns in ways that are deemed culturally appropriate, cutting women off from vital information, services and the ability to influence decision-making within their communities. Rohingya and Kaman women spoke positively about initiatives aimed at transforming gender relations and supporting awareness of women's rights in the camps, describing their participation in such programmes as empowering and ultimately often leading to informal and formal leadership roles in their community.

Having male-dominated service provision and authority structures in the camps mean that women's needs and priorities are not being heard. Not only is their health and wellbeing at stake, but it also means that opportunities for women to engage as income-earners, to participate in decision-making processes and further exercise informal and formal leadership are all being missed. Women need to be consulted not only in terms of issues that affect women, but also consulted as leaders who have opinions about how to address priority issues in their communities and work towards solutions for a better future.

“

Here in our community women are stuck in the home and are not able to come out of their homes. We encourage women to leave and that they have the right to work and make an income. We have seen a lot of changes in the camps. Even for us, we didn't understand women's rights. But, after the training from the session, we do. I enjoyed leading these activities and now my husband has much more sympathy for me and encourages me to keep doing this job because he has seen changes among IDPs. Before my husband did nothing, only sat and went where he wanted. I was doing everything. I had to cook. I had to clean. I had to work. Now when I am busy running sessions [for the gender training sessions] he understands that I am busy so he cooks. I want these types of activities to continue.

Rohingya IDP woman,
central Rakhine camps, Myanmar

NU NU HTAR'S STORY

Nu Nu grew up in downtown Sittwe and sold building supplies. She remembers a peaceful time, with Rakhine, Hindu, Rohingya and Kaman communities living together.

Reflecting on life in the camps, she said "we face a lot of challenges as women in the camps. Women are restricted by their husbands from going outside to do community work, and most don't know they can be leaders, too."

After learning more about gender norms and women's rights, Nu Nu realised that she too could bring about positive change. "I didn't know I had the power within me. Now my mission is to encourage other women to have the confidence to be leaders. And I will. I want to try and create space for women to be elected (as Camp Management Committee members)."



4

Rohingya Women's

CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES





Now we are living like chickens in a cage. You (humanitarian organizations) are giving, we are eating. You are giving so much but we cannot live as we wish.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh

Since the current phase of the crisis began in August 2017, an estimated 745,000 new Rohingya refugees have crossed the border from Myanmar into Bangladesh. This brings the total number of Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar to more than 914,000, including those who are in host communities or who crossed the border in previous crises.²¹

Lack of space has been an overwhelming constraint in the provision of water, food, sanitation, shelter and other community infrastructure; all of these challenges are more acutely felt by women and girls. Strict controls on movement outside of the camp areas, and restrictions on cash and livelihoods programmes for refugees, signify that the majority of refugees are almost fully dependent on distributions and aid. Compounded with socio-cultural norms, these controls further limit and pose gendered risks to vulnerable groups, such as women and girls, and their

access to basic facilities and services, literacy, livelihoods, mobility and community participation. Protecting the small gains that have been made by individual women in the camps has become even more pressing as, since the events of August 2019, there have been various restrictive measures put in place. These measures include cuts to internet service, restrictions on movement, even for critical services such as access to health, and parts of the camps are now being enclosed by fencing. They are having a direct impact on refugees' freedoms and space, including for women-led Rohingya organisations.

Sexual abuse and harassment targeted at women and girls who are taking on more visible roles in the economic and socio-political spheres in their communities has been a recurring gender and protection issue in camps.²²

CHALLENGES in the Camps

More than two years on from the staggeringly large flight of people from Myanmar to Bangladesh, Rohingya refugee women are struggling to negotiate their new realities while at the same time finding new spaces to exercise active roles in their communities.

While safe from the violence they were subjected to in Myanmar, Rohingya women now living as refugees in the sprawling camps in Cox's Bazar face huge protection risks and challenges. It's also very clear that even daily efforts to meet basic needs have come to represent major challenges for women.

Gender and protection analyses have found that women and girls still do not equitably benefit from humanitarian aid, reflecting both gaps in gender equality mainstreaming as well as a lack of stand-alone gender programming.²³ Although advancements have been made in gender approaches in the response, their inconsistent application has added to gaps in addressing the practical and strategic needs of women, men, girls and boys. For instance, women still

outcomes for girls – with only 1% of girls compared to 9% of boys aged 6-14 attending Temporary Learning Centers in 2019.²⁵

The Rohingya women Oxfam spoke with consistently reported feeling unsafe in camps and also perceived increases in the occurrence



Men can use the latrine anytime they wish. When a woman is using the latrine and men have stomach problems, they knock on the door and demand use. When a man is waiting outside, this is difficult for women, especially when they have their period.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh

face insecurity in using latrines given the lack of lighting or clear gender segregation. Women are less able to utilize current humanitarian accountability systems—the majority of which are complaint boxes—especially in light of low literacy, disabilities or limited awareness about their rights to aid and accountability. In addition, women frequently expressed the need and willingness to earn an income to fulfil basic needs, but noted they have fewer opportunities to pursue employment or receive cash assistance as compared to men.²⁴ Despite education being a high priority, gender norms, adequate facilities and the lack of safe environments contributed to lesser



"[In Myanmar] we could live in comfortable houses but here it's so small and hot and crowded, we are living like boiled chickens here. Last year during Ramadan we hoped that we could go back to our country as soon as possible and we wouldn't have to live here for another Ramadan, but this year we are still here.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh



If I speak in my house [in Myanmar], I speak of a secret, my feelings, my heart's feelings, other people can't hear it. Now here, if we discuss something in our house, if we discuss secrets, everybody hears it. This is undignified.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh

Unlike in camps, the women shared with Oxfam that the boundary around their homes in Myanmar made resources accessible for women's daily household work such as water collection, food from the garden, latrines and bathing spaces. This granted women a sense of individual safety, as they were not seen by others outside the family while performing household duties. When women had to go out of the home, they said they wore a burka, abaya, and niqāb in order to uphold purdah. Yet, in the context of camps, purdah is felt to be almost constantly violated because of the need to have to do household work, such as fetching water, using latrines or collecting rations in the public domain.

of sexual harassment, intimate partner violence (IPV) and marital rape. As leaders are primarily men, they also dominate and define community mediation verdicts, which are likely to exclude women's interests, consent, and disregard their rights. As a result, women reported tending not to seek help when experiencing GBV for fear that mediation will result in unjust verdicts, such as being married off to the perpetrator.²⁶

Community discussions also highlighted a gendered sense of safety and dignity, meaning that women must perform household work and maintain purdah, which in turn allows men to maintain their dignity. Men, on the other hand, must perform their role as a provider for the family, and therefore have access to livelihoods and income. For Rohingyas living in camps, privacy concerns are paramount as they continue to live in cramped, temporary and hot shelters more than two years into their exile.

Finally, the overall context of exile, extreme poverty and reliance on humanitarian assistance has further compromised refugees' sense of dignity and self-efficacy. Limited resources have meant refugees are too often faced with impossible choices and/or trade-offs. For instance, one woman shared that the most accessible way she is able to pay for rent is to sell almost half of their monthly food ration. For many Rohingya women, they expressed the inability to feel a sense of equality and dignity while living as refugees in another country and being dependent on assistance, while at the same time expressing a deep sense of gratitude to the people and government of Bangladesh.

“

We have many problems here. We don't have enough working opportunities, or opportunities for education. Our children can't go to school for proper education. Some security problems are also here. Days are passing and our children are getting older.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh

“

If people come from one country to live in another country, will they have dignity? We have come here from another country. Are we getting the same dignity that we had living in our own country? They have given us shelter and have let us stay here – these, we have.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh

PRIORITIES

for the Future

For the Rohingya women refugees Oxfam spoke with, to be alive and safe from violence remains their primary concern, and the reason they sought refuge in Bangladesh. Women consistently expressed a deep sense of gratitude to the government and people of Bangladesh for allowing them to cross the border and seek safety.

There was however, an acknowledgement of the incredibly precarious situation refugees now find themselves in, uncertain how long they will be welcome in Bangladesh and unsure of when a return to Myanmar might be possible. Key themes from discussions with women in the Cox's Bazar camps consistently centered around the importance of being able to lead a safe and dignified life while in Bangladesh and providing opportunities for their children. Many women acknowledged they had missed out on educational opportunities growing up in Myanmar and they want a different situation for their children.



I dream of giving my children good food and clothing, and a good education.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh

When women refugees spoke of the future, they tended to focus on the ultimate desire to return to Myanmar once assurances had been given that violence and persecution against their community would cease.

Many spoke of their longing to return to their homes and their land, and ultimately, returning



We used to be farmers.
We grew rice and chillies,
and our sons fished.
My husband had a snack stall.
We want that life back.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh

to their previous lives. One clear barrier to return for many of the women Oxfam spoke with was linked with the fear of being placed in a camp in Rakhine should they return now, something they see continuing for many of the Rohingya who have remained in Myanmar.

Another barrier to return that women consistently cited was the need for justice and accountability for the crimes committed against them. This included a desire to have a

and to have rights and justice was connected with being recognised as ethnic Rohingya. This included having their ethnic identity stated on their national ID cards.²⁷



If we have to go back to Myanmar and live in the camps, we cannot agree with that - we will not go to Myanmar and live in camps.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh

Women Oxfam spoke with considered national identification as closely connected with their ability to be safe and live peacefully, to have freedom of movement and obtain equal status with other citizens. Also, this translates into having access to productive assets such as land, houses and livelihoods, and to have equal opportunities for education, all of which will enable them to be self-reliant.



There have to be rights for Rohingya in Myanmar first before we go back. People in camps in Myanmar must go back to their homes first. If some people go back without their rights it would be like slaughtering the Rohingya who are waiting for us to come back with our rights.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh

“

Even if we cannot eat,
we want dignity.

Even if we cannot get it,
it is our right.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh

“

Because we [women] are uneducated, we cannot read anything. We did not have the opportunity of education when we were in Myanmar. If we are to put any signature on any paper, we cannot do it because we are illiterate, and we have to put our finger print instead of our signature. But although we couldn't study, we have to try to educate our children, and we should inspire them.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh

Women also raised their expectations and desire for dialogue with Myanmar authorities. With this, there was a hope their suffering could be recognized and some agreement on conditions needed for return reached. With two failed repatriation attempts since the majority of refugees arrived in the camps in 2017, it is clear that dialogue around what changes are needed in Myanmar to enable any



After suffering so much in Myanmar and on the way here, we cannot go back without assurances of our safety. If we can't get justice for ourselves, at least our children can have justice.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh

eventual safe and voluntary return is sorely needed. And it is clear that women refugees need not just a seat at the table to engage in such political processes but also opportunities to help shape and drive them.



We cannot stay forever in this camp. We have to return home to Burma. But we need justice for what was done there. Otherwise, they will treat us the way they did before.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh

women's **LEADERSHIP**

As the camps have stabilised in Cox's Bazar and services have become more available, Rohingya refugee communities have also transitioned from an initial focus on survival to engaging in a range of community actions.

Rohingya women have been playing critical roles in these emerging efforts, including as volunteers actively contributing to the work of aid agencies operating in the camps.²⁸ In 2018, some women began to organise via grassroots community groups and other associations, with one example being a small group of women who came together to teach basic literacy to women and girls, contributing to their right to education.²⁹

These women-led groups consisting of both fellow women and men aim to find both immediate and long-term solutions to their displacement, such as demanding accountability from the Government of Myanmar and more appropriate humanitarian aid.³⁰ Moreover, several donor and humanitarian agencies are now engaging with women's collectives and networks advocating for women's rights and providing leadership programmes for women and girls' empowerment. In a positive step, many of these groups have been recognised as needing to be included in the community representation model in the camps by a number of key humanitarian actors.

The formal male-dominated camp management system installed by the Government of Bangladesh to coordinate aid and maintain

order in the camps at the onset of the refugee influx in 2017 continues to prevail in the camps and is largely perceived to be overlooking women and girls by Rohingya and humanitarian actors alike. Efforts to improve representation and participation in the camps have been undertaken, and are welcome, including the piloting of a new camp representation model with elected representatives and a gender quote to replace the *majhi* system.³¹ However,

only 12% of camps include women in the representation system.³² The emergence of Rohingya women-led initiatives on organising and leadership to respond to this gap in representation in this given context, is therefore noteworthy. It demonstrates communities' agency to respond to their evolving needs and interests amid the uncertainty of their situation and something that needs to be better recognised and supported.

AMINA'S STORY

21-year-old Amina is one of the many Rohingya refugee women living in the camps in Cox's Bazar. She has been living here with her husband and their two-year-old since their flight to Bangladesh in 2017.

Before coming to Bangladesh as a refugee, Amina shared that she had lived a happy family life in Myanmar, with her husband working as a farmer.

After arriving in Bangladesh, her family situation has completely changed as they are now entirely dependent on aid to survive. Unemployment has also contributed to her husband becoming more and more frustrated and abusive.

One day, Amina heard from her neighbours about a women's group in her community. For her, the women's group became a 'knowledge centre' where she could obtain valuable information, insights and perspectives. Through

her experience in the group, she learnt about Gender Based Violence (GBV), especially intimate partner violence, and human rights. Alongside these concepts, her group has also discussed power and power abuse. These discussions resonated well with her, and she realised how these issues affect her and her family and what solutions can be found to change the situation.

Slowly, Amina started to share her learnings and insights with her husband at home. At first, her husband refused to engage, ignoring and shouting at her. But Amina did not give up and instead she continued to engage with him through conversations. After a while, Amina saw some changes in her husband's behaviour and he now tries to listen to Amina and has also started doing household work.

Amina thinks that joining the women's group was a good decision, which brought changes in her, her husband and her family.

“

The aim of our group is to return to Myanmar as soon as possible. This is why the network is trying to empower women in camps so that they can talk, raise their voices, and fight for justice.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh

Rohingya refugee women are displaying remarkable courage as they become leaders and organise themselves into collectives to improve their lives and advocate for their rights. However, despite these changes on women's representation in informal and formal spheres, social norms on gender and leadership still persist.

Albeit nominal, these changes have not been taken positively, especially among those with more conservative views on women. Reports of targeted harassment, physical assault and even sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against women volunteers and staff, and women and girls visiting Women and Girls' Safe Spaces (WGSS) have been recurrent.³³ This backlash has prompted women and girls to negotiate their safety in a range of different ways, including restricting their own mobility and ending volunteer positions.³⁴

“

They [male community members] tell us, 'you are a Muslim woman, why are you doing these things? It is written in the Koran that women shouldn't [work]'. So, I sit with them and ask 'OK, show me, where is it written?', and they cannot respond. Because I think they are interpreting it differently and I believe that women work even in Saudi Arabia, so why can we women not work here? We keep trying. We go there again and again.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh

Despite the contested nature of women's leadership in the camps in Cox's Bazar, many of the women Oxfam spoke with pointed to the clear benefits of having women in leadership and decision-making positions. Many shared that they considered women leaders as beneficial to Rohingya communities because they are more accessible to women and other vulnerable people, and more able to understand their needs and rights. This in turn could facilitate collective processes among them in a way that maintains purdah, which then can address women-specific issues.

“

We need women leaders; we need women. We need women to talk about women's issues.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh

Furthermore, many women leaders informed Oxfam of the value of women leaders in educating and building the capacity of other women and girls. For others, women leaders could challenge inequitable and harmful practices against them, including various forms of GBV, such as intimate partner violence (IPV) and early/child marriage.

However, alongside support for understanding the value of women's leadership, hindering factors must also be challenged, including exclusionary gender norms and unequal power relations between men and women.

Further norms around age and disabilities often prevent other groups of people from practicing leadership. Humanitarian actors and aid agencies must also leverage and enable women leadership practices and participation rather than hinder or disengage from it. Affirmative action measures for women and

girls' participation and leadership, reforms in camp representation and participatory community-engagement models must be further implemented and enhanced to foster an enabling environment for women and girls leadership and participation and promote women's political, economic and social empowerment.

As the displacement continues and the humanitarian community focuses on the longer

term, it is critical to engage women leaders and collectives in such meaningful and empowering ways. The Rohingya response programming must not only adapt but leverage the context wherein Rohingya women organise to take part in the decisions that affect their lives. In this context, more effective strategies to support women's leadership, empowerment and participation are essential, alongside effective engagement of men and boys.

A STORY OF WOMEN LEADERS

"People can only be made strong and empowered by organising. If we do not stand on our own two feet, how will the world see and understand our problem? We have to stand up," said the woman leader of a peer-to-peer network of 400 Rohingya women. This self-organised and community-based group train and teach literacy, raise awareness on prevalent gender issues in their community and enable women's voices to be heard in repatriation advocacy.

The group recognises the right to education as both a cause and effect of the oppression of Rohingya in Myanmar. However, Rohingya women and girls have even lesser access to educational opportunities than men. Even after the flight to Bangladesh and despite an increase in overall attendance to learning

centres from 2018 and community-led education initiatives, Rohingya girls still are left behind. A leader of this network said in an interview that she leveraged her college education and training from aid agencies to organise and build the literacy, capacity and confidence of Rohingya women and girls. She operates on the assumption that everyone has the inherent capacity to learn. She said, "Can you only work and do other things if you have an education? Everyone is born with inherent capabilities."

Learning about the most important issues facing women from their experience, the network has expanded their work to include awareness-raising on family planning and GBV, the provision of health referrals, accompaniment and transportation support and livelihood activities.



To me a leader is a person who can do a task and who can talk about a demand. A leader is a person who can talk about and tries to understand women's rights and works on it.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh



5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that Rohingya women on both sides of the border face enormous challenges. Deprived of the very basics, women are struggling to access essential services and maintain a sense of dignity while living in cramped shelters and being reliant on humanitarian aid for survival.

Beyond meeting their immediate needs, women in both Myanmar and Bangladesh are consistently articulating the critical nature of participation, equal rights and legal protections if their situation is to improve in any kind of meaningful way. Without this, women were very clear that the cycle of persecution, violence and displacement will continue.

Rohingya women in the camps in Myanmar and Bangladesh are also demonstrating enormous courage in pursuing active roles in their communities, negotiating constrained spaces and taking on leadership roles in a wide range of informal and formal ways.

While there have been some positive shifts in gender norms among Rohingya communities, this is often happening primarily at the individual level. In positive steps forward, women leaders, including women with disabilities, now represent almost half of formal or elected positions in four out of 34 camps in Cox's Bazar, and an estimated 20% in the confined IDP camps in central Rakhine.³⁵ Despite the significant personal risks and dangers, countless more women have taken on informal leadership roles within their communities.

Some of these women have started to come together, forming a growing number of Rohingya-led civil society organisations in Cox's Bazar, where the basic freedoms of association are more readily enjoyed, albeit still severely constrained. Some of these groups have taken their increased sense of self-confidence and empowerment further to carry and drive the agenda for Rohingya women's rights. Their work reflects the urgent need to address protection vulnerabilities and practical gender needs and represents the growing strategic gender interests of women. Some of these strategic interests include:

- access to education, training and income
- voice and participation;
- accountability from aid providers; and
- inclusion in advocacy discussions around repatriation, justice and human rights.

Factors that hinder the practice of women's leadership include the restricted space to participate and organise in the camps on both sides of the border as well as underlying exclusionary gender norms and unequal power relations between men and women. Intersecting aspects of identity, including age and disability, are further preventing diverse people to engage in leadership positions. Along with risks of discrimination, violence and harassment, the lack of affirmative action measures to enable and

promote women's political, economic and social empowerment also put the sustainability of the emerging women's leadership at risk.

This report, focused on amplifying Rohingya women's voices and highlighting their leadership, reaffirms that women, regardless of their age and educational levels, are active agents in their own lives, the lives of their families and their broader

community. Women's groups and leaders have the ability to transform not only the conditions but the status of women and girls by building collective power, and challenging gender power relations and norms in their communities. It is now urgent that all stakeholders in the crisis work to further enable and advance women's transformative leadership as a key element to supporting the rights and wellbeing of Rohingya.



RECOMMENDATIONS

To create, recognise and boost opportunities for women leaders to transform the landscape for Rohingya women's rights in Myanmar and Bangladesh, there are a number of actions that humanitarian stakeholders, including NGOs, UN agencies and donors, should take together with governments on both sides of the border:

1. TACKLE THE ROOT CAUSES OF THE CRISIS AND ENSURE EQUAL RIGHTS FOR ROHINGYA WOMEN, MEN, GIRLS AND BOYS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE BORDER.

In both countries:

Recognise the rights and freedoms of Rohingya and ensure they have access to needed legal protections (including protective status in Bangladesh and access to citizenship in Myanmar);

Support the meaningful participation of women and girls in consultations and decision-making processes that affect their lives, including with respect to shaping any eventual return or resettlement processes;

Pursue durable solutions to the crisis that are premised on meaningful consultations with affected communities and the recognition of human rights, including the importance of freedom of movement, access to services, livelihoods and housing, land and property (HLP) and the implementation of peacebuilding measures between host and displaced communities.

In Myanmar:

Comprehensively implement the recommendations laid out in by the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, with a clear implementation plan that includes milestones and timelines and a related independent monitoring mechanism;

In the immediate, pursue concrete actions that enable IDPs to move freely and enjoy basic protections as part of longer-term efforts to realise durable solutions to displacement;

Lift ongoing restrictions on humanitarian organisations operating in central and northern Rakhine state so that life-saving assistance can reach all those in need in camp and non-camp settings;

2. ENSURE THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE MEETS WOMEN'S IMMEDIATE NEEDS AND ADDRESSES THE GENDERED BARRIERS THAT PREVENT WOMEN FROM PARTICIPATING IN PUBLIC SPACES AND ACCESSING SERVICES.

In both countries:

Ensure women's priorities, including safety and privacy concerns, are taken into account in the design and delivery of all services, particularly in terms of latrines and bathing facilities, water

collection and other daily activities. This includes through the use of women-led design and management practices;

Include gender and protection analysis and monitoring as a central component to all humanitarian programming, with such tools enabling the mapping of different groups in the community that have diverse needs, supporting understanding of the effectiveness of different activities for women, men, girls and boys and informing needed adaptations and risk mitigation measures;

Increase the understanding of informal women's leadership amongst the humanitarian community and how they can constructively support such leadership, including through improved engagement of women and women's groups in humanitarian programming, including as camp-based staff and volunteers;

Remove barriers and further support women and girls' access to education, including by addressing financial and transportation barriers and increasing the number of formal primary and secondary schools Rohingya can access while supporting Rohingya teachers, especially female teachers, to deliver community-based education efforts;

Improve access to gender-responsive health services, including access to sexual and reproductive health services, in the camps by addressing financial, transportation and language barriers, increasing access to available clinics and hospitals and ensuring immediate access to emergency medical services;

Ensure equal access to cash-for-work programmes, employment and income generating opportunities and other economic empowerment initiatives, which should include a recognition of care work.

In Myanmar:

Allow Rohingya and Kaman communities in Myanmar access to government recognised, accredited and non-segregated schooling from primary to university education;

Allow Rohingya and Kaman IDPs to access needed health services outside of the camps in a timely and safe way, including through an end to required movement permissions and male security escorts, the provision of translation supports and the implementation of confidence-building measures, such as enabling communication by patients with their families, including through mobile phones and in-person visits.

3. ADDRESS BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES AND ENHANCE EQUITABLE PARTICIPATION AND DECISION-MAKING.

In both countries:

Continue to improve the gender balance and representation of women and other underrepresented groups in visible leadership positions, including through affirmative action measures, with respect to camp governance processes and structures, police and security services and site management staff and volunteers;

Improve the recognition of elected women leaders in the community through consistent official endorsements, and engagement with CMC/CiC, site management and humanitarian agencies.

Build the capacity of camp leaders to meaningfully engage with diverse groups, including those with particular vulnerabilities, to ensure different needs, concerns and interests are considered in camp governance;

Continue to increase aid agencies' capacities to adhere to best practices with respect to women's participation and right to self-organise, including with respect to Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group guidelines.³⁶

4. INVEST IN GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE PROGRAMMING THAT TACKLES SOCIAL AND CULTURAL NORMS, CREATES OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP, AND RECOGNISES WOMEN'S ROLES IN SUPPORTING THEIR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES.

For both countries:

Meaningfully engage with and resource Rohingya women's collectives, groups and networks through targeted and stand-alone programmes on women's empowerment, participation and leadership, and work towards their greater recognition;

Directly engage formal and informal male and female leaders and apply approaches that promote equitable and inclusive community participation and include affirmative action measures for better representation, inclusion and participation in community-based processes;

Support emerging male allies in Rohingya communities to influence other men in the communities and prioritize programming on positive constructions of masculinities;

Work with women's groups in Rohingya and host/other ethnic communities to strengthen networks

and collective power among women's groups and develop shared actions and advocacy agendas for women's rights and other issues that matter to them.

5. ENSURE ADEQUATE, FLEXIBLE AND LONG-TERM RESOURCING FOR GENDER RESPONSIVE PROGRAMMING AND TRANSFORMATIVE WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP EFFORTS

Ensure that, in line with recommendations in the 2015 global report on UN Security Council resolution 1325, all future funding for the Rohingya response allocates at least 15% to gender in emergencies programming;

Comply with the IASC Accountability Framework on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action to strengthen the accountability of humanitarian actors;

Allocate an increased share of funding for gender targeted and stand-alone programming, increase resourcing and support for Women's Rights Organisations (WROs), including for Rohingya as well host/other ethnic communities, and pursue longer-term funding support for the leadership capacities of women in the camps.

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We need women leaders;
we need women.
We need women to talk
about women's issues.

Rohingya refugee woman,
Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh

VOICES RISING:
Women's Priorities and Leadership
in Myanmar and Bangladesh

