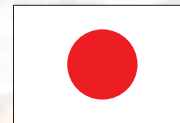


A woman wearing a vibrant pink headscarf and a matching shawl stands in the foreground, looking towards the camera with a somber expression. In the background, a sprawling refugee camp is visible, with numerous small, makeshift dwellings built on a hillside under a clear blue sky with some light clouds.

“I’M BETTER THAN BEFORE
BUT INSIDE MY HEART LIES
SO MUCH PAIN”

STORIES OF ROHINGYA WOMEN
SEEKING REFUGE IN COX’S BAZAR



From
the People of Japan



UN Women is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide.

UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to implement these standards. We stand behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on five priority areas: increasing women's leadership and participation; ending violence against women; engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes; enhancing women's economic empowerment; and making gender equality central to national development planning and budgeting.



UN Women's work is in line with the Convention for the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action and the UN Security Council resolutions 1325, 1820 and related resolutions. We work globally to make the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals a reality for women and girls. Within the humanitarian sector and in humanitarian settings specifically, we promote accountability towards the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Policy for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women and Girls, as well as the World Humanitarian Summit and Grand Bargain Commitments, and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 among others. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.

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FOREWORD



On 25 August 2017, a coordinated attack on the Rohingya community in Northern Rakhine State, resulted in the forced displacement of nearly 750,000 Rohingya into Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh – the majority of whom were women and girls. Many Rohingya arrived with mental and physical wounds, from the trauma of having lost their loved ones, their homes and their land. They were in dire need of health services, food, shelter and protection. Under the leadership of the Government of Bangladesh, the Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission (RRRC), in partnership with humanitarian partners, responded to this emergency with resolve. And with the strong support of the host community who opened their hearts and homes– we got through those hard autumn months in which on average 10,000 people were arriving every day. We, the Government of Bangladesh, the UN agencies and other humanitarian actors- have since established a robust joint response which ensures that the Rohingya community in Bangladesh has reliable and consistent access to life-saving and life-essential services. Just as important, the Rohingya community are themselves engaged in the betterment and strengthening of their own community.



They do this as teachers, health and community outreach workers, community representatives, volunteers, first responders, radio reporters, and as neighbors looking out for each other. As we approach the two-year mark since the commencement of the crisis, we can look back and be proud of what we have achieved through collaborative and coordinated efforts, working with and for the Rohingya. But we should also look forward and find ways to improving our support and further strengthen the resilience of the Rohingya community while they are here.

Within these pages you will find stories of the hardship of forced displacement, the power of resilience, and hope for the future – all from the perspective of Rohingya women and girls. You will read about their difficulties and challenges as a result of gender barriers, discrimination and gender-based violence. But you will also read of their resilience and of their contributions as change agents, first responders, and leaders helping themselves, their families and community cope in the context of the one of the world's largest humanitarian crises.

The needs and challenges of Rohingya women and girls are distinct, and the promotion of women and girls' empowerment, rights and equality must be included in all aspects of the response. UN Women has been at the forefront of this since the early days of the response. Their compassion and commitment to improving the lives of the Rohingya women is evident through their work, and through the pages of this book.

The stories of the Rohingya speak of the grief and sorrow which come with the loss of one's home, one's loved ones, and one's sense of safety. But they are also inspiring stories of hope and resilience – of people rebuilding their community with firm resolve despite a dark past and an uncertain future. In depicting these stories, I believe this book will touch hearts, as the ordeal of the Rohingya has touched mine.

Mohammad Abul Kalam, ndc

Additional Secretary
Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner
Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief

FOREWORD



August 2019 marks two years since the influx of Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, following escalated armed conflict and violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar. Currently over 909,000 stateless Rohingya refugees are living in camps and facing an uncertain future. More than half of them are women and girls who are disproportionately impacted due to barriers in access to information and services that they face because of their gender. They are also frequently exposed to sexual and gender-based violence and remain in a high-risk environment. Nonetheless, Rohingya women are not only victims. In the past two years, we have witnessed their resilience, contributions as change agents – helping themselves, their families and their community cope and rebuild their lives. They are also organizing themselves through women's networks at camp level for joint action and advocacy for change. Similarly, women in host communities and women humanitarian workers have been playing a significant role, shaping the course of the response from day one.

This photobook provides a glimpse into the lives of Rohingya women and girls living in the camps in Cox's Bazar. It attempts to share their stories of how they are leading the fight for survival and for a better future. You will discover how Rohingya refugee women, as educators, entrepreneurs, leaders, advocates, economic actors and inspirers, are slowly bringing about some change in their families and communities.

We also pay tribute in this photobook to the people of Bangladesh who acted as first responders and opened their doors to Rohingya's seeking refuge. We appreciate the efforts of the Government of Bangladesh, Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission (RRRC) in Cox's Bazar, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and others. We also remain grateful to our Donors - the Governments of Canada, Germany, Japan, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the National Committees for UN Women in Australia, Japan, Iceland, Singapore, Sweden and USA, as well as the Tingari Silverton Foundation, the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and some private individuals.

UN Women remains committed to making a positive contribution for Rohingya and host community women and girls in Cox's Bazar. We are striving to contribute to social cohesion and harmony between host community and Rohingya women by bringing them together for joint activities. We also work with the Bangladesh Police and the Camp-in-Charges to help them deliver better services for women and girls.

The future of Rohingya people in Cox's Bazar remains uncertain. But despite the adversities, we are seeing a hopeful sign of Rohingya women's networks forming and women also filling elected community leadership positions. Women police are starting to be deployed to camps, and we also have the first female assistant Camp-in-Charge. The coming year will be a crucial one to maintain this positive trend, and UN Women is fully behind these efforts.

Shoko Ishikawa

Country Representative, UN Women Bangladesh

A view of Balukhali Rohingya Refugee Camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.



The widows camp in Balukhali



Salema Khatum cooks for relatives in the widows camp.



Women are seen in the widows camp.

In the refugee settlement of Balukhali, over 116 widows, orphans, and women who have been separated from their husbands have found shelter within a dense settlement of 50 red tents where no men or boys over the age of 10 years old are allowed.

About a long journey to the widows camp and a great divide

20-year-old Swahila is the leader of the widows camp. She says that one day the military attacked her village, burned all the houses, killed young boys, threw young children and babies onto fires and took away the beautiful girls. When the brothers of the girls protested, they were murdered. It took her 10 days to walk to Bangladesh.

She says that she feels happy she has the opportunity to take care of and be responsible for the other women. "Here, we all share together, we're all friends." She was married at the age of 14, and 4 years ago her husband got on a boat and made the journey to Malaysia seeking a better life. Two weeks later, she arranged for a broker to take her to Malaysia. When she was gathered with the broker and 10 other women, and was about to get on the boat, the Bangladesh Navy suddenly swooped in. The broker took the opportunity to rob her off 30,000 takas and her cell phone.

Her husband has been waiting for her and she is desperate to start a new life with him. She encourages him to re-marry but he says he loves her and wants to wait for her.

The survivor's tale of grief

"This is a little village here, we call it Shanti. We feel safe here. We're all women living here together, we help each other. But still I can't forget my country, my sweet home, my life. I still get nightmares, I still wake up crying." Nosima says.

Nosima Khatom, 70, lives in the widows camp. "I'm so grateful for the support that we have gotten here, but I have no hope for the future. If we go back, we fear we will be killed. I wish the international community would help us to go back. I want justice." She left Myanmar after her nephew was killed. The father of her grandchild, 1.5-year-old Nur Fatema, was also killed in Myanmar. "I really don't have hope for her future. She doesn't have her father or grandfather. Women aren't strong like men. In our culture men can go out and make money, women can't. My daughter already has three children, who will marry her?"





Women wait for donations in Balukhali camp.



Women and children are seen in the widows camp.





International Women's Day being observed in one of the camps.



Minara Begum, 22, is seen with her child in Balukhali camp.



Continuous rain means scores of children are at risk from waterborne diseases.



Rainy days in Balukhali Rohingya Refugee Camp.

"Our women are confident and can do anything"



27-year-old Shamima Bibi is currently running three schools for women and is in the process of opening a fourth. She opened the first school seven months ago and currently has around 50 students, the youngest of whom is 13 years of age, and the oldest being 60 years old. Many Rohingya women and girls don't attend educational classes because the classes are mixed gender. The students say that in Myanmar there was no need for an education, but here in the camps, they realize they need to acquire an education.



In the camps, she works for a Rohingya women's rights organization. After coming to Bangladesh, she worked to convince the Rohingya men and women that Islam does not dictate that women cannot get an education. Her family told her, "If you are not educated, you are blind. You cannot understand the world".

"I want to show the Myanmar Government that we can do anything. If I can teach the women something, then when we go back they will be shocked. I want to show them that our women are confident and can do anything" Shamima says.



When women first started to attend Shamima Bibi's classes, the men as well as women gave them a hard time, asking why education was important. She started with only 5 students and now when she is out and about in the camps, so many women request to join that she has started having to turn people away. When there is trouble at home, she will go to the student's house to convince the husband why it's important that his wife is educated. Right now, these schools are funded directly from Shamima's pocket. She will buy one notebook and tear out the pages and distribute the individual pages to each student to use.

Shamima dreams of all Rohingya women to be educated, saying "This isn't life - getting food, cooking, eating, and sleeping. I want everyone to raise their voices and talk about problems. I want to do something for my community, because this isn't life. If a mother is not educated, she can't raise her children"



Developing confidence through education

Lucky, 19, poses for a photo in front of a collection of blankets made by Rohingya women at the multi-purpose women's centre. She is a volunteer at BRAC working with communities on matters relevant to peace and justice.

"There are lots of groups working here. If we work together we will be successful. If we are strong and raise our voices together we will be united all the time. The biggest problem we face is domestic violence. They just think women are only good for cooking and raising families. If we are educated the situation will change" she says.



Kite-flying in Balukhali camp.

A mother-daughter team running a business for survival

Dildar Begum, 25, and her daughter Nur Kalima, 12 run a shop in Hakimpara camp. Her husband and other children were brutally killed in Myanmar. The money to open the shop was donated by a journalist who visited her. "I'm better than before but inside my heart there lies so much pain. The extra money helps buy them vegetables and fish." says Dildar. Her daughter goes to the madrasa in the morning and runs the shop in the afternoons.

"I feel shy being in front of other people. People will say I'm doing bad things. Women in our community can't be outside and in front of people. My daughter runs this shop." She says she won't let Nur run the shop once she is old enough and gets married. Her plan is to focus only on sewing for a livelihood thereafter. "I have lost my children and my husband. In my mind there is no peace. This is Bangladesh, not my own country. We are provided with the things we need but it feels like nothing because this is not our own country. If we are given our rights we will go back, we can have a peaceful life."



12-year-old Nur Kalima runs her mother's shop.



People walk past Dildar Begum's shop.



12 year-old Nur Kalima runs her mother's shop.



Dildar Begum peeks through a hole from her shelter into her shop that her 12-year-old daughter is running.

"Before the influx, it was just the elephants and me"



Zahrina Khatum and her husband Abul Kalam Azad pose for a photo in Balukhali camp outside their home.



Abul Kalam Azad spends time with his family in his home.



Zahrina Khatum cooks in her home.

Abul Kalam Azad is a Bangladeshi who lives in Balukhali camp with his 7 other family members. He has lived here for 9 years, and recalls, "Before the influx, it was just the elephants and me". He used to farm at his field before, growing rice and vegetables. Since the influx however, he says it's been very difficult – for instance when recently he broke up a fight, which ended in him getting beaten up by a mob. Nevertheless, he tries his best to support the refugees despite the hardship.

When the influx happened, he gave them shelter and food - 16 families in his house over the course of 3 months. They told him and his family stories of what happened to them. He thought someday perhaps it could happen to him and so he felt empathy for them. But he says if he knew the situation would turn like this he would not have given them shelter. Abul reasons with despair, "They're Muslim like me, and they're my people. I feel sad for them. But I don't get any support. I gave them land when they had none. Everyone says I'm a nice person but people from the other blocks beat me. This is the only land we have. Even if we wanted to take it back or leave we can't go anywhere. We don't have any hope." His wife works at a local NGO, earning 6,000 takas per month, while he works as a night guard for an NGO too, earning, 10,000 takas per month. His sister works at Action Aid earning 10,000 takas per month.



Girls study at a mosque in Balukhali Rohingya Refugee Camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

The beauty of human reform

Ambia Khatum works as a community block leader. _____
“In Myanmar, we weren't even allowed to go outside. Women only cooked and prayed, our family was very religious, and we couldn't even talk to men. Our life has changed in so many ways since. First, we left our country, now we are here. I'm happy that this has changed that I can help my people and raise my voice for women.”

Her husband, Kabir Ahmed says “I think she is doing a great job, I'm proud of her.”



Women attend a cyclone safety session that Ambia Khatum helped organize in Nayapara camp.



For a better life

Yasmin Akhter is a 14-year-old wife and mother, who came to Bangladesh when she was 8 years old. She never had the chance to go to school. Her father left the family including her mother, 40 old Nurnahar Begum, and two years after she fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh, she was sent to Chittagong to work as a housekeeper for a family of five. She worked there for two years, never receiving a formal salary, receiving only 200 or 300 takas occasionally. She says her employer beat her frequently, and she wasn't allowed to go outside. Yasmin stayed on with the job however, thinking that it was the only way she could help her family. Not being able to hold back her frustration any longer, she called her mother and told her about the abuse, saying if she stayed there one more day she would die. Her mother brought her back to the refugee camp and arranged for her to get married.

Yasmin was 12 years old when she married her 30-year-old husband. She says she was happy thereafter, thinking that her husband would provide a better life for her. Unfortunately, her husband has carried a long-term illness and is unable to work, and their food rations from the NGOs are proving to be inadequate. Nine months ago, Yasmin gave birth to a baby girl. She dreams of a better life for her daughter, one where she is independent, educated, and has a respected job. "It will be up to her when she gets married", she says.

Nurnahar Begum regrets the direction her daughter's life has taken, saying, "I didn't have any choice, and had to make this decision. I took two wrong decisions for her life. The first one was sending her to Chittagong to work as a maid and the second one in getting her married. I didn't know it would turn out like this. I always tried to give my kids a good life, but I failed. We never had enough food, poor shelter, and they were never able to get an education. I failed."

Contrary to all expectations

Shamima Akter Jahan works as an assistant Camp-in-Charge (CiC), for the Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission (RRRC), Government of Bangladesh.

She grew up in Rajshahi with two sisters and studied physics in Dhaka. In the camp, she says, the Rohingya accepted her well but "it was a big change and shock for them." In the history of RRRC's 27 years of existence, she is the first female CiC. "I don't know why, maybe no one thought a lady could do this job." She considered doing the job as soon as she saw it advertised. Her boss at the time told her "You should go, you'll be a pioneer. Maybe you can be an example for other women." Her role is to support the CiCs in areas of law and order, and mediate disputes. She is also responsible for coordinating between the police, local Government, community leaders and Mahjis, as well between all the NGOs and beneficiaries.

Shamima deals with issues of gender-based violence (GBV) everyday - almost 6-7 cases daily, about which she says, "This is the toughest job I do here. Psychologically, it was difficult." She recalls a particularly difficult incident, where a woman's husband was beating her every day and divorced her because she gave birth to a girl instead of a boy.

"I couldn't believe it. You see this baby girls face, and you're shattered. The baby was only 2 months old, and I couldn't resolve the issue. Every time I see the babies face, it tortures me, and I take it personally. As men, the other CiCs can relate in the same way. The women in the camp are very open with me, and this is a privilege. Everyone thinks this job is very male dominated, but it's just the opposite. The camp is 60% women and we need more female CiCs."



Regarding gender issues facing the Rohingya population she says "We can work easily here as Bangladeshis because we passed this patriarchal phase in our country too. We are replicating and using the same techniques as what we did here some 40 years ago in Bangladesh."



Community leadership demonstrating change and progress

Roshida, 40, works as a Mahji (community leader) in Nayapara camp, and shares -

"Camp life has been very different. I'm happy that everyone respects me. They come to me when they have problems and if I can't solve them, I go to the Camp-in-Charge (CiC). People treat me as an authority figure and come to me first, and I'm happy that I'm breaking barriers, but there are people who still don't allow women to step outside. There were no female volunteers before me, and people gave me a hard time. After I was elected, I convinced a lot of people that women can work and have power. I always try to protect women. We now have 50 women volunteers, out of about 200 men. Women go door to door fixing problems and providing information."

She works on practical problems such as broken houses, and issues to do with water. It's been about nine months since she's been a Mahji and she looks after 100 houses. "The biggest problem I run into again and again is men saying that women working outside the house is against the culture."

Families are relocated because of flooding and landslides in Balukhali Rohingya Refugee Camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.





Scenes from Balukhali Rohingya Refugee Camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.



Empowering women through information, skills and knowledge

The five women's centres that UN Women has set up in the camps have provided services to over 25,000 Rohingya women and adolescent girls since January 2018 and will continue to do so. Through the women's centres, women are accessing livelihoods skills training, health services, psychosocial support, Gender Based Violence (GBV) case management, and gaining essential knowledge about preparing for monsoons and cyclones, how to manage their sexual and reproductive health and protect themselves from risks of gender-based violence, trafficking, child marriage.



Vocational training provided to Rohingya women and adolescent girls at women friendly spaces such as the UN Women supported multi-purpose women's centers help create a pathway towards sustainable livelihoods.

A devotion to human rights and justice for Rohingyas

Razia Sultana was born in Myanmar but is a citizen of Bangladesh. She grew up in Chittagong in the tight knit Rohingya community there. Her dream was always to be a barrister.

"My life is full of struggle", Razia says. "The influx broke me totally. I was sick and traumatized. I couldn't control myself. My friends and family asked me what I wanted, to which I responded that I had to do something for women. That was the start. I gave up everything to work for my nation, to get them their rights. What's been going on is wrong."

She has since trained hundreds of women in livelihood and literacy training. "There is no life in the camps, they have become a burden for the world. If there is no skills training, no education, they will become subhuman! They're deprived of all opportunities and denied a normal life and will become desperate. You can't blame them or anybody - it's like you're creating a bomb! They're frustrated and can't think wrong or right. We have to prevent this - we have to solve the issue of going back, because you can't keep them in Bangladesh, and this isn't their land."



Razia Sultana was the first Rohingya to address the UN Security Council in April 2018 and represent civil society at the UN Security Council Open Debate on Sexual Violence in Conflict. As a lawyer, educator, human rights activist, and founder of the Rohingya Women Welfare Society (RWWS), she has made speaking up for the most vulnerable Rohingya women and girls her life's mission.

Women walking around in Balukhali camp.



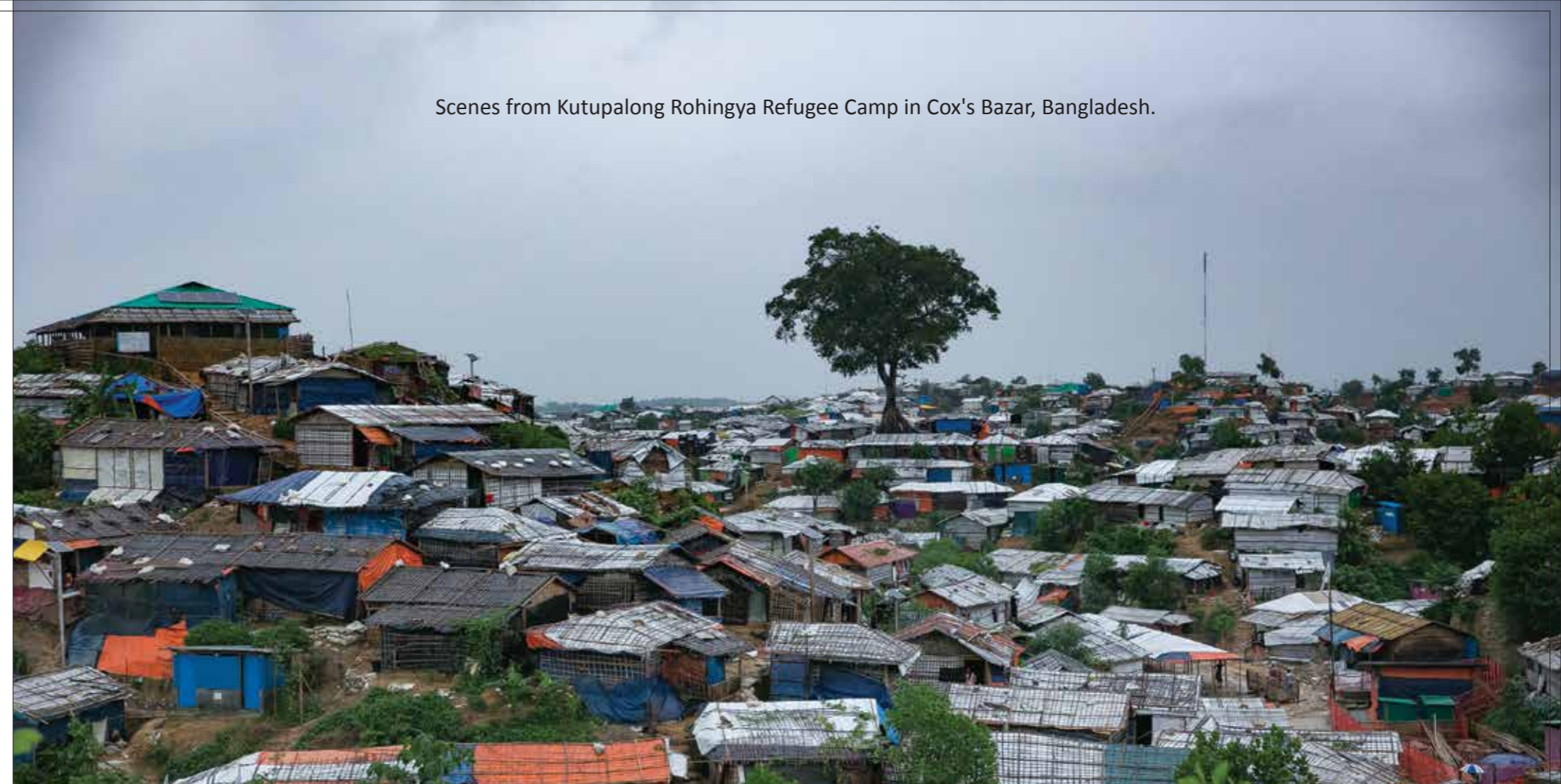
A helpdesk for women and children righting wrongs



Bangladeshi police women Shati Akhter, Rupali Akhter, Mojina Begum, Mojina Akhter and Ruby Barua pose for a photo at the women and children's helpdesk. Bangladesh Police, Cox's Bazar and UN Women took the initiative to launch the help desk in 2019, the first of its kind in Rohingya camps, at Madhuchara Police Camp-1. It has dedicated and trained female police officers to assist Rohingya women and children, and facilities for female police officers to be able to stay overnight, to provide 24-hour services.

The help desk addresses most prominently, issues to do with domestic violence, polygamy, rape and trafficking. Dealing with the high levels of domestic violence reported in the camps has been a rude awakening for the police women, and the frequent occurrence of such crimes has caught their attention. "Rohingya women have suffered so much and survived. We just want to make sure they get their justice - that is our goal" says one of the police women.

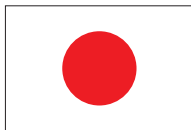
Scenes from Kutupalong Rohingya Refugee Camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.





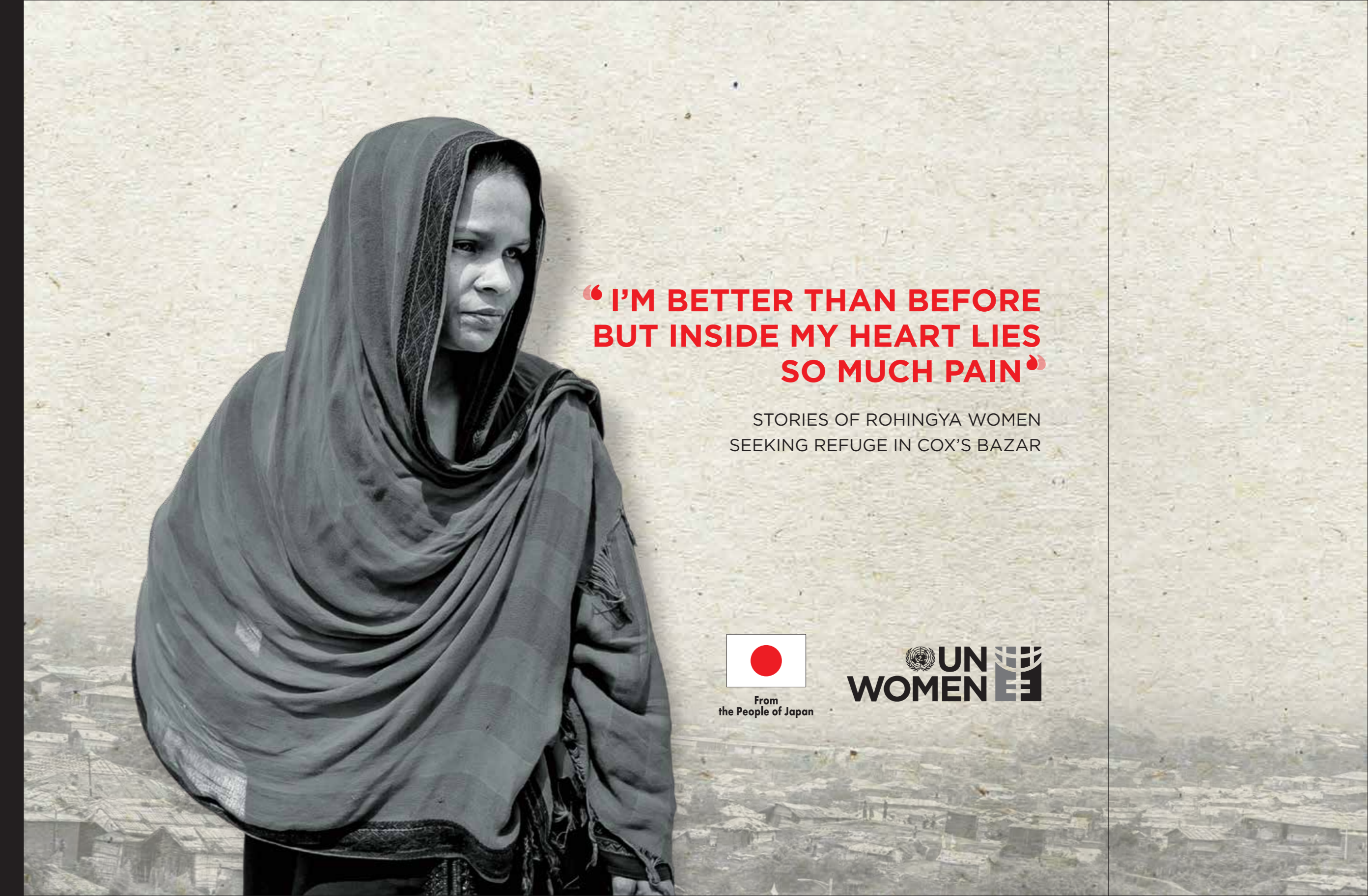
*"The ache for home lives in all of us,
the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned"
-Maya Angelou*





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