UPDATES FROM UN WOMEN COX’S BAZAR

Spotlight: UN Women and Rohingya women at the frontline of COVID-19 response

The world in lockdown due to COVID-19 crisis has created a profound shock to our societies and economies, and women are at the heart of care and response efforts underway. Primarily as caregivers, women are not just sustaining families, but also serving as front-line responders, mainly in the health and service sector.

In Cox’s Bazar, where the world’s largest refugee camp lies, Rohingya women face further increased gender-based violence due to the heightened tension within households and within the camp. This heightened tension is often caused from restrictions on income generating activities needed to sustain families. Despite these odds, Rohingya women are serving as front-line workers to protect their families and communities.

One unique way they are doing this is by producing masks to fill a significant gap of personal protective equipment (PPE) in the market. Over 50,000 masks are being produced and the manufacturing is being managed by partners in UN Women’s five multi-purpose Women’s centers in the camps, engaging 163 Rohingya women and girls with 46 families run as single female headed households.

One of them, Shetara, a 25-year-old Rohingya woman was trained by one of UN Women’s partner organisations. A mother of 3 children, she fled to Bangladesh during the 2017 outbreak of armed conflict in Rakhine State, Myanmar, when her husband was killed. Back in Rakhine State, her family was self-sufficient owning land and livestock.
But now in the refugee camp, like more than 859,000 refugees, she is fully reliant on humanitarian aid, just to survive. With the mask production, she is now able to earn 2,720 BDT, that equals to 32 USD per week. This is her first ever income and the highest her family has ever earned. Shetara is happy, “I have money to celebrate Eid and I hope to earn more for my children’s education and for my family”

Nur Ankich is also part of the mask production. She is still a teenager, but already the breadwinner for her family of ten. In a week, she has earned around 40USD and this helps tend to her sick father. Despite her newfound economic freedom Nur Ankich mobility is limited to the UN Women’s center. Conservative gender norms are very prevalent in the Rohingya community, with restrictions and scrutiny on behavior, conduct and mobility.

“I have money to celebrate Eid and I hope to earn more for my children’s education and for my family”- Says Shetara, beneficiary of UN Women, engaged in mask production.

UN Women is trying to address these conservative gender norms through engaging with men and leaders in the community through gender-transformative social norms change programs, as well as by offering women opportunities for income-generation, education, and leadership. Nur says, “I hope I can study and also learn more handicraft skills so I can earn more”.

The mask production project in the camps has quickly taken the interest of other humanitarian actors as well. “There have been days when I was giving information on managing mask production, back-to-back for hours and the calls kept pouring in”, says Nadira Islam, UN Women Gender Programme Analyst. To this date, various NGOs are reaching out to Nadira to visit UN Women’s multi-purpose women’s centers to observe how production is being managed.

UN Women with its partners BRAC and Action Aid Bangladesh started masks production in the camps by mobilizing women previously trained in tailoring. Various self-mobilised Rohingya women’s groups, including the Rohingya Women Empowerment and Advocacy Network and the Rohingya Women for Justice and Peace Network have also mobilized to respond to the Corona virus outbreak including mask production in their homes, thereby demonstrating leadership and empowerment they have developed.

These women’s networks form part of the Rohingya Women’s Leaders Umbrella network which was established a year ago with UN Women’s technical and financial support. UN Women provided these grassroots women’s networks with sewing machines, material support and training to further scale-up their mask production.

While other income-generating activities in the camps are put on-hold during the lockdown to prevent spread of COVID-19, this mask production project has kept the women engaged, giving them an opportunity to contribute to emergency response efforts, support and protect their community and generate income to sustain their family’s basic needs. Being able to come to the Multi-Purpose Women Centres to work on mask production together with other Rohingya women, they also say is important for them to get a chance to leave their homes and get their minds off the tension and anxiety among their family members right now.

Managing rapid life-saving mask production, amidst the lockdown, has not been an easy task. It has required end-to-end management, procurement of materials, mobilizing women, packaging, disinfection of masks, ensuring production meets approved samples and ensuring effective coordination overall. This has been achieved through astounding combined efforts of the teams from UN Women, AAB, BRAC and most importantly the Rohingya women and their networks.
This project has also required close coordination with the Government. Prior to starting production, Nadira sprang into action by meeting government representatives amidst the lockdown. The Office of the Refugee Relief Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) understood the gravity of the situation and provided expedited approval for UN Women to start mask production.

“Despite restrictions, the Government of Bangladesh has shown genuine commitment to supporting the Rohingya community and especially enabling women’s contribution as first responders to this emergency by allowing this special exception for Rohingya women to be engaged in mask production” said Flora Macula, Head of Cox’s Bazar Sub-office. Beyond the camps, UN Women is also engaging Bangladeshi women from the local community in Cox’s Bazar in the production of masks at a smaller scale, together with a local women’s rights organisation Jago-Nari Unnayan Sangstha (JNUS) and Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) to further support filling in the gaps in the market for masks.

UN Women is also preparing samples for various other items like bedsheets, curtains and other items that could be required if the COVID-19 situation escalates in Cox’s Bazar. Apart from mask production, supply and distribution, UN Women is also conducting awareness raising and outreach sessions through 75 community volunteers to ensure the community, particularly women, are informed on infection prevention and control to stop the spread of COVID-19.

Regular consultations are ongoing with the community to identify solutions to COVID-19 response and preparedness efforts in the camps and host communities in Cox’s Bazar. Through UN Women’s Multi-Purpose Women Centres and the UN Women supported Women and Children Police Help desks in camps, UN Women is also providing critical life-saving services to women and girls including paramedic services, psychosocial counselling, sexual and reproductive health care through midwives, case management and referrals for gender based violence survivors (including domestic violence, trafficking, rape and harassment).

Honour in Transition: Changing gender norms among the Rohingya

IOM Bangladesh and UN Women partnered to jointly produce the consultation paper “Honour in Transition: Changing gender norms among the Rohingya.”

In the context of COVID-19, it is especially important to look at how gender norms are impacted, including potential social-norms related backlashes related to the epidemic with long-term consequences for women and girls, including through increased social stigma, gendered barriers and gender-based violence.

This paper is part of a series of publications based on consultations conducted by the International Organization for IOM’s Communicating with Communities (CwC) team in the Site Management and Site Development Unit at IOM Cox’s Bazar.
The objective of these consultations is to provide and build a better understanding of the thoughts, practices, traditions, culture, values and perspectives of the Rohingya community as a group of people with different ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. These works are supported by relevant insights and research on the Rohingya population in Myanmar, Bangladesh, and other contexts. The key findings from the study highlighted that:

- Social norms are heavily influenced by individual attitudes, institutional practices, including religious rules and governing institutions, material incentives, and humanitarian programmes.
- The Rohingya’s understanding of izzot, or “honour” has specific implications for women and operates as a normative system of control that shape their status and roles within their families and communities.
- Registration practices are influencing the practice of marriage, divorce and family formations in unclear ways that need to be explored further. These dynamics exacerbate fathers’ and husbands’ feeling that their daughters and wives are “outside of their control” and may be ineffective at substantively transforming norms related to honour.
- Financial challenges are increasingly leading women to engage in “unacceptable” work that threatens their honour. Women are engaged in humanitarian activities in ways that often require them to compromise their honour and potentially result in further policing, harassment and shaming by men and women.

UN Women and UNHCR sign an MOU on strengthening gender-responsive site management in Rohingya Refugee Camps in Cox’s Bazar

UN Women and UNHCR finalised and signed an MOU on strengthening gender-responsive site management in Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. This will strengthen UNHCR and UN Women’s collaboration to reinforce gender mainstreaming and promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in all Site Management and capacity building activities. This includes integrating UN Women Gender Officers and the Rohingya gender volunteers into the site management team across 13 camps to support strengthening of gender-responsive site management services, activities, monitoring and community engagement; ensuring Community Representation programme has streamlined gender equity & women’s participation in camp committees & UN Women’s Empowerment Programme ensures leadership skills for elected women members and supports the work of Rohingya women’s CSOs. An Operational Plan for the implementation of this MoU was also drafted. This is the first such UNHCR-UN Women MoU of its kind globally.

UN Women has received invaluable support from the Governments of Canada, Germany, Japan, Sweden, Australia, the National Committees for UN Women in Australia, Japan, Iceland, Singapore, Sweden, USA, as well as the Tingari Silverton Foundation towards delivering a humanitarian response in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh for Rohingya refugee and host community women and girls.
World Refugee Day, 20th June 2020

World Refugee day is celebrated on 20th June which has been designated by the United Nations to honour refugees around the world. This year’s theme was “Every Action Counts”. This year COVID-19 poses an additional threat to refugees and displaced people. Considering the pandemic, this year it was celebrated in minimal manner by few development organisations with the Rohingya Community people through arranging simple activities such as - mask distribution, recreational activities (Introductory speech, storytelling by beneficiaries), Art Competition, awareness sessions etc.

On World Refugee Day, the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working continued to stress the importance of meaningful engagement and enabling women and adolescent girls to directly participate in planning, implementation, monitoring and review of COVID-19 response activities. On this note an advocacy brief “Everyone can make a difference, every action counts” by GIHA Working Group highlighting the experiences of women as first responders to COVID-19 in Cox’s Bazar.

On World Refugee Day under GiHA Working group a video was produced. The link of the video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctNO_QMgVM0&feature=youtu.be
COVID-19 Outbreak: Cox’s Bazar Rapid Gender Analysis

A Rapid Gender Analysis of the impact of COVID-19 in Rohingya and host communities was conducted by the Rohingya Response ISCG Cox’s Bazar Gender Hub, UN Women, CARE Bangladesh and Oxfam in Bangladesh. The analysis looks at the different consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak on women, girls, men, boys and other vulnerable populations, and identified how gender norms and roles will affect their ability to prevent and recover from COVID-19. This analysis was done based on a secondary data review of country-level and response-level resources from humanitarian organizations, sectors, and government. Apart from this, preparations were also ongoing this quarter for the roll-out of another rapid gender assessment based on primary data collection. The survey data for this analysis will be collected by Rohingya Women Volunteers across 13 camps of Ukhiya.

Rohingya Women Speak Up on COVID-19: Concerns, Demands and Solutions

UN Women spoke with 49 Rohingya women and adolescent girls, women leaders and women volunteers living across 13 camps in Ukhiya, Cox’s Bazar to better understand their perceptions, key concerns, demands and proposed solutions on the overall COVID-19 crisis. Here is what they said:

“"We try to maintain peace in the home now by agreeing with what our husbands say, because if we argue he will go outside and put himself at risk of Coronavirus” – Rohingya woman volunteer, aged 35

Almost all the information received by women came from humanitarian staff and volunteers, rather than TV, radio or newspaper. Access to information for women and girls is highly dependent on women volunteers that have been providing information through door-to-door sessions and through women friendly space. Any sectors and agencies working on awareness raising must ensure an adequate number of female volunteers with information and materials to ensure women-friendly information dissemination.

Women reported appreciating opportunities to support their communities to prevent COVID19, such as being involved in door-to-door awareness raising as outreach volunteers and being involved in mask production. This was important for them to get a chance to leave their homes and get their minds off the tension and anxiety, but also to get status and recognition in their communities and earn an income for their family.

“I feel that I can support my people to protect them from Coronavirus by listening to their worries and giving them information. Because my community recognizes me as a mentor, and I am earning an income, my husband is supporting me and takes care of our children and the home while I am outside” – Rohingya woman outreach volunteer
Rohingya Women’s Welfare Society (RWWS) works on supporting self-mobilised Rohingya Women’s CSO. Photo: RWWS

Light House Bangladesh works on supporting female sex workers and transgender populations by providing GBV, SRHR services and cash voucher support. Photo: Light House Bangladesh

Rohingya Women’s Welfare Society and Light House Bangladesh are the first recipients of the Women Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) in Bangladesh. WPHF is a global pooled funding mechanism managed by UN Women which aims to stimulate action and a significant shift in the financing of the women’s participation, leadership and empowerment in humanitarian response, and peace and security settings. Both organizations will support the most vulnerable and marginalized Rohingya refugees and host community women and girls including female sex workers and transgender people through Gender-based violence and Sexual and reproductive health services, cash voucher support and awareness raising, as well as supporting and strengthening the response efforts of self-mobilised Rohingya women’s CSOs.

Activities of frontline workers

Rohingya women leaders and volunteers, supported by UN Women Gender Officers seconded to Camps in Charge (CiC), assessing MSF isolation and treatment facility in refugee camps to ensure it is safe, appropriate and accessible for women in case of potential COVID-19 outbreak in camps. Photo: Mani Elizabeth Chakma/ UN Women

In this quarter, as part of PSEA network activities, UN Women Gender Field Officers provided training on PSEA to 40 Rohingya Volunteers to increase awareness (Left photo). Additionally, to conduct Rapid Gender Analysis, all these volunteers were also oriented on using conducting smart phone-based survey using Kobo Toolbox software which helped to conduct the survey later this quarter (Right photo). Photo: UN Women.
Mr. ABM Masud Hossain, Superintendent of Police, Cox’s Bazar and Mr. Md. Iqbal Hossain Additional Superintendent of Police (Administration), Cox’s Bazar is receiving face masks and hand sanitizers for COVID-19 preparation from UN Women. Photo: Pappu Mia/ UN Women

UN Women providing face masks produced by project beneficiaries along with hand sanitizers to Bangladesh Police in Cox’s Bazar for COVID-19 Preparation. Photo: Pappu Mia/ UN Women

Beneficiaries are receiving masks from UN Women Funded project of BRAC. Photo: UN Women

Rohingya Women Volunteers are consulted on what they think are the key concerns and needs for Rohingya women in their community in the current situation, at UN WOMEN- ActionAid Bangladesh Multi-Purpose Women’s Center. Photo: Nadira Islam/ UN Women

Consultation with UN Women Rohingya Women Volunteers and Rohingya women CSO leaders on key concerns, needs, demands and solutions for Rohingya women in the context of Covid-19 at Camp-in-Charge Office. Photo: Nadira Islam/ UN Women

Rohingya Women Leader Chekufa Ra receiving sewing machine from UN Women funded project of BRAC to enhance mask production activities. Photo: BRAC
Gender Hub Developed communication document “Taking stock”

Gender Hub developed a communication document “Taking Stock”, consolidating The Gender Hub’s Achievements” since its inception in March 2019. This document highlights Gender Hub’s frontline role in COVID-19 response, on strategic technical role in developing a gender responsive COVID-19 Response Addendum, Capacity Development of humanitarian actors, awareness raising on gender implications on COVID-19, knowledge management and development of several guidance and tools and conduction of various research works over this period.

![Taking Stock](image-url)