Empower women to lead, inspire and thrive in Host Communities

Hasina Begum in front of her grocery shop in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. Photo: Courtesy of Oxfam Bangladesh

Living in Teknaf, where women have limited access to basic services, information, education, and formal work and continue to have limited influence over decision-making, Hasina Begum has carved out a space for herself by establishing a small business.

I started a small grocery shop in our village. While the profits are still modest, the business has started to flourish, with many villagers starting to buy their groceries from my shop.

Begum inside her shop and selling grocery to communities peoples in Teknaf at Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. Photo: Courtesy of Oxfam Bangladesh

Hasina Begum, a businesswoman, received financial assistance and business planning support from the Multi-Purpose Women’s Centre (MPWC) in Teknaf, Cox’s Bazar, to develop her own business.

Read her story: http://unwo.men/fkU150RE3o1
Rohingya refugee women making in jute baskets, mats, vases, and trays at MPWC- Camp 4Ext. Photo: Courtesy of ActionAid Bangladesh

With support of UN Women, livelihood activities take place in the MPWCs located in Camp 4, 4 Extension and 18 operated by ActionAid Bangladesh. In accordance with national and international standards, the MPWCs provide holistic, multi-sectoral services and support for women and girls in the camps, many of whom are survivors of gender-based violence (GBV). These include psychosocial counseling, GBV case management, and livelihoods and learning activities, among other, to address both the protection and empowerment needs of women and girls.

Eco-friendly jute baskets, mats, vases, trays, and others made by Rohingya women and girls in MPWC- Camp 4. Photo: Courtesy of ActionAid Bangladesh.

Approximately 200 skilled Rohingya women and 20 transgender craftsmen are involved in these income generation activities, all of whom received training through the MPWC in Camp 4 Extension and have been since delivering quality products and meeting orders from diverse locations. In December 2023 alone, their combined earnings were estimated at approximately BDT 600,000 (USD 5,460), enhancing their economic resilience and contributing to addressing their needs in a sustainable and dignified manner.

Multi-stakeholder Consultation

UN Women’s Responsible Partner, ActionAid Bangladesh (AAB), sources products for their outlet, Aaurhi-AAB, located in Gulshan-Dhaka from the products made by Rohingya women in the three camps where they operate MPWCs with UN Women support. In 2023, Rohingya women earned some income by filling orders from Aaurhi-AAB for various items such as laundry boxes (100), flower tubs (100), Kantha stitched pieces (100), winter jackets (100), table runners (100), placemats (100), scarves (100), winter shawls (100), bamboo baskets (100), jute trays (100), jute mats (100), and tote bags (400), among others. An order for 500 Kantha stitched pieces is was in progress at year end 2023 for the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce, destined for shipment to India.

Partnerships play a key role in ensuring gender equality in the world of business. Dialogues and consultations, such as the one convened by Oxfam and BNPS, UN Women’s partners in Cox’s Bazar, on 19 July 2023, play an important role in levelling the playing field for women entrepreneurs. Key issues of social acceptance and limited finance and guidance for women entrepreneurs in Cox’s Bazar were raised by women leaders at the event. “After participating in the event, I feel more confident,” shared Monwara Pervin, Senior Vice President of the Women’s Chamber in Cox’s Bazar. As agreed by the participants, it is critical to engage more women engage in decision-making processes of private and public sector in Cox’s Bazar.
Men engagement in Camp highlights championing positive masculinity

“Before, I thought gender issues were only about women, but now I see how vital our role as men is in this fight,” reflects Karim (pseudonym), one of the male Gender Volunteers at Cox’s Bazar, under the mentorship of Muhammed Aziz Ullah, UN Women's first male Gender Field Officer (GFO). UN Women male Gender Volunteers play a vital role within their communities in raising awareness of and increasing male engagement in addressing gender issues. Aziz emphasizes, “Our society is far from fair. Men are often the perpetrators of GBV, with women and girls as the primary targets. In my capacity as a GFO, my goal is to engage men in preventing this violence, to encourage the ideals of ‘good men,’ and to challenge harmful gender norms.”

The introduction of a male GFO is a deliberate move on UN Women side to foster greater male involvement in the promotion of gender equal norms and behaviors, and to ensure that gender equality work is not seen as the responsibility of only women. Aziz's role entails mentoring around 40 male volunteers like Karim (pseudonym), supporting them to enhance their understanding of, and their role in promoting gender equitable gender roles and behaviors in their community through workshops, trainings and outreach activities.

Aziz emphasizes, “Our society's imbalance stems from a narrow view of gender roles. Engaging men in this dialogue is not just about awareness, it is about action. We are here to redefine what it means to be allies in the fight against GBV and to promote equality.”

This shift, guided by Aziz’s mentorship, is creating a ripple effect of change, challenging long-held stereotypes, and fostering a more gender inclusive environment. Involving men as active participants in the promotion of gender equality is central to building more equitable communities, transforming gender norms that are harmful for both men and women.

Rohingya girls challenge gender norms with chess in Cox’s Bazar camps

UN Women organized chess competitions during the 16 Days of Activism in Camp 1E between male gender volunteers. Photo: Courtesy of UN Women/Magfuzur Rahman Shana

UN Women introduced chess as a tool to empower Rohingya girls and challenge gender stereotypes in Cox’s Bazar refugee camps. Traditionally seen as a male-dominated game, chess is now providing a platform for girls apply their critical thinking skills and participate in such recreational activities on an equal foot with boys. During the chess tournament held as part of the 16 Days of Activism campaign, Rohingya girls, wearing scarves with the message, “Empowered women empower generations,” competed alongside boys. Their moves on the chessboard echoed a powerful message, “Gender equality is the new endgame.”

The chess tournament was not just about checkmates and castling. It was a strategic move against GBV, shifting energy from harmful activities to a positive, collaborative sport. The chessboard became a safe space for open dialogue, where boys became allies and girls discovered their own strength and strategic thinking.

"Chess helps us think beyond boundaries," said Jarina (pseudonym), a player from Block D2. Through a series of orientation workshops leading to the tournament, UN Women engaged participants in thinking through the need for intentional actions to advance gender equality, like moving chess pieces on the chessboard.

"Playing chess taught me that every move counts, just like every action in our community can make a difference in preventing violence against women and girls," said Hossain Ahammed from Camp-1 W.

Inequality needs to be checkmated, one strategic move at a time, GFOs overseeing the competition emphasized. By challenging gender stereotypes, promoting strategic thinking, and fostering open conversations about GBV prevention, is the young participants are moving piece by piece towards a future where equality is the new endgame.
Media action for gender equality

(Left to right clockwise) Head of UN Women Sub-office in Cox's Bazar, Silja Rajander (seated right), President of Cox’s Bazar Press Club, Mohammed Abu Taher (seated middle) and Mainul Khan from the DW Akademie (seated left) with the first batch of participants at the Gender-responsive Journalism Training; additional second batch of training participants; ongoing training sessions. Photo: Courtesy of UN Women/Magfuzur Rahman Shana

“Through the Gender-responsive Journalism Workshop, I learned how to avoid creating divisions between men and women, and I feel better equipped to be influential in my future work as a journalist,” stated Bandan Sarkar, a young reporter with Probal News in Cox’s Bazar.

UN Women, in collaboration with the Deutsche Welle (DW) Akademie, organized two batches of Gender-Responsive Journalism Workshops. These were attended by 32 participants (16 women, 16 men), representing various media platforms in Cox’s Bazar, including newspapers, radios, television stations and online news outlets. Through the training, the participants learned skills in non-gender-biased language, how to draft positive narratives on gender equality issues, interactive discussions on the importance of gender representation in media, how to address sensitivity when interviewing survivors of GBV, and ethical standards in reporting.

Training on Women’s Leadership in collaboration with UNFPA in Cox’s Bazar

“Attending the Women’s Leadership Training in Cox’s Bazar was pivotal for me. It sparked a transformation in my professional journey, nurturing self-awareness and the value of community support. I learned skills in power sharing, how to amplify my voice, and embrace change without fearing failure.

The training equipped me with skills and perspectives for effecting positive change in my organization. A crucial lesson was how to reject discrimination and the misuse of power at work. I am now resolute in standing against such behaviour and maintaining a harassment-free environment. This was shared by Shampa Goswami, Executive Director, PRERONA (Women Development Organization) Foundation, Kaligonj, Satkhira.

Reem Elmeleegy, GBV Specialist from UN Women, delivered a session on the Inter-agency Standing Committee for Humanitarian Coordination Gender with Age Marker and how this tool ensures gender equality as part at the planning stage. Photo: Courtesy of UNWomen/Magfuzur Rahman Shana

The training on women empowerment and leadership for GBV Sub-Sector actors was held from 20-22 June 2023, as a collaborative effort of UN Women and UNFPA. The training contents focused on feminism, linking feminism and leadership, stereotypes and misconceptions about women’s leadership capacity and women’s rights.

Topics covered included conflict management, emotional intelligence management, power, active communication as a leader, advocacy, localization, identifying locally relevant supportive practices, and the contributions of women-led organizations in Joint Response Plan (JRP) Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis 2023.

A female local journalist in Cox’s Bazar presenting during gender-responsive journalism training. Photo: Courtesy of UN Women/Magfuzur Rahman Shana.
Engaging the Department of Women Affairs (DWA) on gender in humanitarian action discussions in Cox’s Bazar

On 14 September 2023, Ms. Farida Pervin, Director General of DWA, met with members of the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Groups and with local women-led organizations. She discussed the importance of ensuring gender-responsive humanitarian actions which are field-driven. The discussions also focused on recognizing the important role of women-led and women’s rights organizations; undertaking formative analysis to drive interventions that respond to gender dynamics in the field; and the need to move beyond sensitivity to gender transformation.

The national Working Group of GiHA stands ready to support the Cox’s Bazar initiatives, Ms. Pervin emphasized. During her stay, she visited the MPWC in Ukhiya which is being supported by UN Women. Services offered in the Centre include women’s empowerment through literacy and numeracy skills; livelihood skills development; business skills; basic health services, including sexual and reproductive health services; psychosocial counselling; and consciousness raising about women’s rights, to strengthen their sense of self-worth and make their own choices.

“The activities of the MPWC in Ukhiya address vulnerable women’s situations and are greatly appreciated,” said Ms. Pervin.

Gender-responsive policing within the Rohingya refugee camps

In 2023, UN Women’s partnership with the APBn in Cox’s Bazar advanced discussions on the need for gender-responsive policing within the Rohingya refugee camps. At a meeting held on 16 October 2023 at APBn 8’s office and attended by APBn Additional Director-General S. M. Fazlur Rahman and UN Women Program Specialist Mehtap Tatar, UN Women agreed to continue to support the APBn through trainings on gender-responsive policing, coaching and mentoring of female APBn to enhance APBn’s skills to ensure a gender lens in its work.

APBn officials expressed their commitment to strengthen gender-responsiveness within their operations, addressing challenges faced by female police officers in the camps. As a result, concrete plans were made for specialized training on GBV case management and reporting, and to support APBn to strengthen progress achieved by its Women and Children Police Help Desks.

UN Women GFOs play an important role in coaching Women and Children’s Police Help Desks within the camps. Through monthly visits initiated in the second half of 2023, GFOs have identified crucial training needs of female APBn in areas such as GBV case management and referral pathways and have provided related coaching on skills necessary to effectively support GBV survivors.

To bridge identified gaps, UN Women organized an intensive four-day training in December on gender-responsive policing for 51 APBn members, including 20 female police officers. Participants enhanced their skills in adopting survivor-centred, trauma-informed, and perpetrator-focused approaches through the training, gaining a deeper understanding of GBV dynamics while learning to provide effective and compassionate support to survivors. Feedback collected from the participants on the training was positive, highlighting the value of the stress management elements incorporated into the training, also.
The Business Transformation Unit from UN Women Headquarters visited the Cox’s Bazar Sub-Office and Country Office in Dhaka to conduct a functional review of the Sub-Office on 9-18 July 2023. The review assessed the role of UN Women in Cox’s Bazar and in country and how it can be best placed to deliver quality, sustainable and value-added services to the Rohingya refugees and the host community members in the protracted refugee crisis setting.

The interactive workshop during the mission included exercises such as analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, value-added analysis, capacity and demand mapping, responsibility assignment matrix analysis, business process engineering and financial resource review. The Business Transformation team recommended, through the functional review report, that the office should ensure positioning itself as the humanitarian-development-peace “nexus player” in Cox’s Bazar, building on UN Women’s triple mandate across programming, coordination and normative spheres.

On the operations side, the report recommended clarifications to the roles and responsibilities of staff, enhancing linkages between the two offices, articulating more clearly how workloads are shared between the Dhaka office and the Cox’s Bazar sub-office. As recommended, the Cox’s Bazar sub-office is working to develop the Sustainability Strategy to guide the office’s transition to the nexus programming, strengthening the office structure together with the Country Office in Dhaka.

In 2017, an estimated 745,000 stateless Rohingya refugees fled persecution in Myanmar’s Rakhine state and arrived in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. As of May 2023, more than 961,175 Rohingya refugees, 52 per cent of whom are women and girls, remain in Cox’s Bazar in a protracted crisis. The protracted humanitarian context in Cox’s Bazar led to changing and exacerbated needs and vulnerabilities (including GBV), and experiences of gender inequalities among the Rohingya refugees and host communities.

The Thematic Evaluation conducted in 2023 examines UN Women’s programmatic contributions to the Rohingya refugee response, with a focus on the Sida funded “Means to Lead: Empowering Rohingya refugee and host community women through leadership, learning and livelihoods.” The evaluation put forward altogether 14 recommendations, which UN Women is carrying forward in 2024.

🔗 Join the journey and download the evaluation free of charge.

Link: https://gate.unwomen.org/Evaluation/Details?evaluationId=1627
Cox’s Bazar marks 16 days of Activism against Gender-based Violence

The campaign kicked off with a colourful launch event at the Cox’s Bazar Cultural Center and continued at the Rohingya Refugee Response Camps. The largest gathering of gender equality actors and women-led organizations in 2023, the Open Dialogue event "Advancing Gender-responsive Camp Governance," organized under the overall banner of the 16 Days of Activism against GBV campaign, brought all together more than 500 Peoples including government, UN, and civil society actors.

Read and watch for more details 📚🎥:

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JAN08UqWo
- https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/stories/feature-story/2024/05/coxs-bazar-marks-16-days

Campaign events in the camps began on 26 November 2023, with the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women at Camp 1 West. Here, survivor stories made the call for community-driven approaches to GBV prevention, emphasizing the need for greater outreach and dedicated resources.

On 29 November, Camp 9 celebrated the International Women Human Rights Defenders Day through art and storytelling. The activities resulted in highlighting the pivotal role of women’s rights defenders, particularly advocating for the active involvement of adolescent girls.

The International Day for Persons with Disabilities on 3 December at Camp 18 shed the light on the intersections of disability and gender. Through thematic discussions and cultural performances, the event promoted inclusivity and celebrated diverse abilities.

World Volunteer Day on 5 December at Camp 5 Darbar Hall recognized the contributions and commitment of volunteers from both Rohingya and host communities. This fostered unity and a strong volunteer culture through traditional games and exhibitions.

World AIDS Day on 6 December at Camp 1 East employed an interactive chess tournament to bring community members together, with facilitated discussions on HIV/AIDS and related linkages with GBV, highlighting youth empowerment and the importance of male engagement.

The campaign concluded on 10 December with an International Human Rights Observation event at Camp 4. Discussions and artistic performances community members were encouraged to advocate for human rights, with a focus on gender-responsive solutions.

Collectively, these events, organized by UN Women Cox’s Bazar and bringing diverse stakeholders and actors together at the camp level, contributed to strengthened community and sectoral engagement inefforts to create safer, more equitable environments for women and girls. These further showcased the resilience and collaborative spirit of the community.