

Gender in Humanitarian Action

Brief 3 – Marking International Women’s Day

Rohingya Refugee Crisis Response

Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh

(as of 8 April 2018)



Developed by the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group co-chaired by UN Women and UNHCR with technical support from inter-agency GENCAP.

The celebration of **International Women’s Day (IWD)** in refugee camps and host community in Cox’s Bazar on Thursday 8 March 2018 was a joint event and acknowledgement by the humanitarian community of women and girls’ needs, vulnerabilities, barriers, capacities and voices. The event underscored the need to integrate gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in interventions across all sectors of humanitarian response for Rohingya refugees and host communities in Bangladesh.



Rohingya woman discussing the draft Charter of Demands at the IWD event at the UN Women-Action Aid-YPSA Multipurpose Women Center (MPWC)
(Photo by Allison Joyce/UN Women)

IWD events led by **GiHA Working Group members and their humanitarian partners**, showcased women and girls’ capacity to exercise agency and contribute to making choices to transform their lives.

BRAC and ADRA led events in Camps 3, 4 (PP, OO, II DD zones) and Charkmarkul spontaneous site, calling for meaningful inclusion of women and girls in all aspects of camp life.



Rohingya women celebrate IWD in Zone PP, Kutapalong Camp and discuss their demands (Photos by Eva Buzo/BRAC)

Calling attention to their current refugee status, Rohingya women appealed for family members to be kept together, which they said, “would enhance their safety and demand for justice”.

The women also made calls for justice over torture and atrocities they suffered in Myanmar. While appealing for the Rohingya people to be officially recognized as citizens of Myanmar, they called for birth registration of their children and their population census. They also demanded higher education opportunities and equal rights to higher education. The women’s demand for the right to practice Islam as their own religion came along with calls for freedom to receive formal religious education and to practice associated religious festivals, e.g. Ramadan, Eid, and removal of taxes levied on religious and other festivals, such as marriage.

In anticipation of the possibility of going back to their homeland in Rakhine in Myanmar, the women called for their relatives who were “unfairly arrested and are currently in Myanmar prisons to be freed”. Demanding compensation and reparations, they said, Myanmar government must return their properties, land and ornaments, which were forcefully taken away from them. They said that, as citizens, “we want freedom of movement through all Myanmar’s cities and towns” and called for “access to employment opportunities for our own people, the young and the next generation.”



Rohingya woman with her IWD message “Today, I feel happy to come to the MPWC, I have forgotten my pain and can smile again. We want to live in peace. (Photo by Dilruba Haider, UN Women)

UN Women, Action Aid, YPSA held an event in their Multipurpose Women Centre in Camp 18. Making strong calls related to the international women’s day theme for 2018, “*Time is now: Rural and urban activists transforming women’s lives*” and “*#PressforProgress*”, women and girls demanded their human rights (citizenship in Myanmar, protection, equality, religious freedom, access to justice); skills development (embroidery, sewing, cap-making) and empowerment

opportunities; improvement in the quality of shelters, WASH facilities (toilets and bathing points), information on disaster preparedness; and installation of solar lighting in dark corners in the camps and educational opportunities for girls.

UNHCR and Technical Assistance Inc. (TAI) led IWD events in the BB, CC, and EE zones, Kutupalong Makeshift, Kutupalong Registered Camp and Nayapara.



UNHCR and partners supported drama by youth groups on their volunteer services for elderly women

TAI marked the event by engaging the refugee community in Camps, 1E, 1W, 2E, 2W, 5, Kutupalong and Nayapara Registered Camps as well as Nayapara Extensions focusing on raising awareness on the role and potential of women in the community.

Other IWD events were held by **UNFPA** in Makeshift Camps in Ukchia and Teknaf, while **Solidarites, Save the Children, and DCA** led events in Chakmarkul. **BDRCS and IFRC** in Burmapara, **TMI and IRC** in WSS Camp 1W, WSS Camp 3 and 4, **OXFAM** in Balukhali, and **CARE** in Camp 16 and **HelpAge International** in Camps 11 and 18.

DanChurch Aid chose to use IWD as an opportunity to promote awareness of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) issues. There is currently generally a low standard of WASH in the refugee camps. Poor hygiene directly affects women.



WASH Campaign organized by DanChurch Aid at Chakmarkul
(Photo by Md. Sakib Imtiaz, CCCMO, ADRA)

According to the WASH sector, about 10,000 toilets are presently due to be de-sludged, another 10,000 need to be de-commissioned; and 3,000 could be flooded in the event of a cyclone or monsoon rains. A lot of work is thus needed to construct and upgrade latrines and bathing facilities. Towards this, the WASH sector is currently working with the gender-based violence sub-sector in revising toilet and bathing shelters. Dignity kits distributions are being aligned to WASH sector activities.

These IWD celebrations amplified the calls of women and girls, both Rohingya and within host communities for gender equality. Men and boys too should be active partners in this change process.

Women's Agency Matters

Women's agency, understood here as an individual woman's (or group of women) ability to make effective choices and to transform those choices into desired outcomes, has instrumental relevance for humanitarian response in Cox's Bazar to improve the well-being of Rohingya refugee women and their families. It is required if women and girls are to play an active role in the delivery of services and products across sectors, and thereby benefit.

A call by the **Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG)** for a transformative shift in discriminatory gender norms and practices so that Rohingya women and girls are increasingly facilitated in addressing their past traumas and helped in accessing their potential is a welcome development. Rohingya women are resilient and are asking for a role to play. Humanitarian actors should therefore co-opt women and marginalized groups, into leadership and positions of influence in refugee camps leadership. Considering that refugee women and girls (as well as host community women and girls) are still experiencing gender barriers including restricted movement and access to humanitarian services and markets, these expressions of agency will result in key outcomes such as:

- Access and control over resources – measured by women's ability to earn and control income and to own, use, and dispose of material assets.
- Ability to move freely – measured by women's freedom to decide their movements and their ability to move outside their homes.
- Decision making over family formation – measured by women's and girls' ability to decide when and whom to marry.



Theater performance by community volunteers organized by Solidarites International on IWD at Chakmarkul



UNFPA street play with young men on dowry prevention



Help Age International programme with elderly women

Photo Gallery of IWD Celebrations in Rohingya Refugee Camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh



IWD was an opportunity for WFP staff to reflect on ways to strengthen the gender equality and protection lens applied to the emergency response as well as the host community development programmes in Cox's Bazar".



The OXFAM IWD event in the camp was a two-hour sensitization session for community based volunteers. It included participatory tools, games and discussions focused on gender equality and women's rights issues.



CARE events in the camps included an art competition for girls and writing of messages on balloons on their journey



Rohingya adolescent girls flying kites with messages of their dreams and stall showcasing products made by Rohingya women (Photo by Allison Joyce/UN Women)