



## Promoting the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh



**ACTION BRIEF: WOMEN | PEACE | POWER**

Commemorating 20 years of UN Security Council Resolution 1325

On 25 August 2017, the military offensive in Rakhine state, Myanmar, targeting the Rohingya escalated and the violence unleashed upon them forced them to flee across the border to Bangladesh. To date 861,545 Rohingya refugees live in camps in Cox's Bazar, over half of which are women and girls and an estimated 80% of whom are women and children. The refugees reported massive atrocities of extrajudicial executions, killings, rape and other forms of sexual violence, and destruction of property based on which they face deep trauma and haunting memories. The speed and scale of the influx of refugees resulted in a critical humanitarian emergency, and now three years on we honour the resilience of the Rohingya refugees and the generosity of the Government and people of Bangladesh for hosting them. Yet, today, amid the COVID-19 pandemic and related increase in tension and reduced access to meeting basic needs, women's security risks in the camps and host community are unfortunately reaching new heights.

### Women, Peace and Security Context in Cox's Bazar<sup>1</sup>

The Rohingya community is highly conservative in their gender norms and practices. Practices such as purdah and perceptions around women's honour (izzot) are restricting the mobility of women and their access to life-saving assistance, services, information and decision-making. Adolescent girls, young women, and women heads of households are some of the most at-risk in this context. Conservative groups of male youth and men that are policing women in the settlements, enforcing the wearing of burqas at all times and questioning women's presence in public spaces, thus further restricting the mobility of women and girls.

On top of the atrocities of sexual and gender based violence Rohingya women and girls faced during armed conflict and displacement in Rakhine State, Myanmar, they now in Bangladesh face new risks. Due to limited viable livelihood

opportunities for refugees, women and girls are at risk of being forced to engage in survival sex, begging, illegal drug trade and the selling of their remaining assets and relief items as a means to mitigate economic and food insecurity. Women and children are also at heightened risk of becoming victims of human trafficking, sexual abuse and exploitation or child and forced marriage, as well as polygamy for the same reasons. Human trafficking for marriage, sex work and labour is reported to be on the increase. Domestic violence is also the most reported form of GBV in the camps according to the most recent GBV Information Management Systems report. In addition, GBV risks are high in the congested camps.

**"I am a widow so I am all alone. Every night I cannot sleep thinking someone will come to murder me. I just lie there in the dark remembering the bad things that happened in Myanmar."** (Elderly woman in FGD discussion, Kutapalong, March 2020)

<sup>1</sup> IOM and UN Women (2020), "Honour in transition: Gender Norms Among the Rohingya"; UNDP and UN Women (2020); Gender Hub, UN Women,

OXFAM and CARE (2020) "Rapid Gender Analysis on the Impact of COVID-19". And UNHCR, AAB and CARE (2020), "Intersectional Analysis of Gender"; GBVIMS monthly reports;

Women continue to report feeling unsafe to use WASH facilities that are not adequately separated by gender and not well lit at night. To avoid being seen bathing and defecating, women reportedly wash and defecate inside their shelters, restrict food and water intake and restrict movement during their menstrual period. Women face barriers in fulfilling their sexual and reproductive rights, due to restrictive social norms around family planning, as well as attitudinal and physical barriers to accessing maternal health and reproductive health services.

GBV service provision has improved over the years. The proportion of survivors receiving services has increased in many sectors including Health care, mental health, care for child survivors, and basic needs support. However, access to police and security services has been low. Rohingya women have little confidence in the ability of police and camp authorities to respond to their needs, and many women fear they will be arrested or deported to Myanmar if they report a crime in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the stigma for GBV survivors is high. When perpetrators are known, other factors prevent women from seeking access to justice.

Rohingya refugee women and girls who are survivors of SGBV, including conflict related sexual violence, have limited access to formal legal justice and rule of law for the crimes perpetrated against them - whether committed while they were still in Rakhine State Myanmar, during the journey to Bangladesh or upon arrival in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Various reports and studies have confirmed that although the existing legal framework should apply to Rohingya women and children survivors of GBV and trafficking, in practice the current legal mechanisms which should generally act to provide protection from violence, appear to be inaccessible or unutilized by the Rohingya refugees. Reports have also confirmed denial to Rohingya refugees from accessing the Police and courts to file or proceed with a complaint against rights violations. Yet, there are positive developments in international justice processes led by the International Criminal Court, International Court of Justice, and the Independent Investigative Mechanism on Myanmar, in recognising injustices perpetrated against the Rohingya, including conflict related sexual violence, with investigations and evidence collection ongoing including through testimony collection and victim representation by Rohingya women in Cox's Bazar, including SGBV survivors.

Local Bangladeshi host communities have been on the frontline of the response. The host communities were very active in collecting food, household items and money for refugees at the beginning of the influx. However, tension between the refugees and host community continue to rise as the host community is now severely overburdened by the refugee influx. Basic services that were available to host community and the old refugees prior to this influx have been

**“Some believe if you go to the hospital and your COVID-19 test results are positive then you’ll be killed... There is also a new rumour that Rohingya people who get COVID-19 will be sent to Bashan Char.”**

(Rohingya Head Mahji, March 2020)

severely strained, wages for day labourers have gone down, and natural resources such as water and forests have been severely depleted. Despite the increase in tensions, Bangladeshi women from the host communities declared their willingness to be more involved in the response, especially if it could also result in benefits for the host communities.

### Impact of COVID-19 on Women, Peace and Security context

In March 2020, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic hit Bangladesh, including Cox's Bazar and the first confirmed COVID-19 case was confirmed in the refugee camps on 15th May 2020. The congested conditions of the camps, restrictions of movement, limited mobile network and lack of income sources all compound to create a dire situation for Rohingya refugee women and girls in the camps.

As highlighted in the Rapid Gender Analysis on the Impact of COVID-19 in Cox's Bazar (conducted by the Gender Hub, UN Women, OXFAM and Care in August 2020), there has been a clear gendered impact of this pandemic. Activities by women perceived as “dishonourable” are being cited by women and men in Rohingya camps as a reason for the COVID-19. These gendered perceptions and the increased social stigma against women has led to increased policing of and violence and discrimination against women.

There has been limited access to GBV services following a reduction introduced by the Government in the types of activities allowed in the camps, hence reducing number of GBV service facilities to only individual case management. A significant number of GBV case workers are transitioning into providing remote support through teleworking. There has been a reported increase in the number of GBV cases particularly intimate partner violence, child marriage as well as polygamy and transphobic violence. Due to cumulative factors including mobile network restrictions, limited presence of essential humanitarian staff in the camps, “stay at home policy” and limited access to mobile phones by women and girls, there are reasons to believe that GBV incidents are underreported. Prolonged restrictive measures aimed at preventing and/or curbing the spread of COVID-19, are likely to result in negative coping mechanisms, increased

vulnerability to, and heightened risks of GBV including sexual exploitation and abuse and trafficking.

The economic consequences of the pandemic and its associated preventive measures have been one of the biggest impacts on women, girls, men and boys in both communities, which in turn limits their ability to seek services, meet their basic needs and has increased protection risks. Women, who are mostly engaged in the informal economy, and vulnerable populations dependent on daily work, such as transgender persons and female sex workers, are hit the hardest.

### Intensified security risks in 2020

There has been a reported steady growth in violent confrontation in the camps since January 2020 (UNDP CARU), with particular escalations in violence between armed gangs and conservative forces since July 2020, especially in the northern camps (1east, 1west, 2, 3 around Kutupalong and Nayapara registered camps), as well as in Teknaf camps. This correlates with the transfer of some Camps-in-Charge and the handover of security management for the camps to the Armed Police Battalions, amid reduced presence of humanitarian protection and overall actors in the camps due to COVID-19 prevention measures, and hence creates an urgent need to ensure there is no security vacuum in addressing these severe forms of violence, which include kidnapping, smuggling, trafficking, killings, abductions, sexual assaults, rape, as well as sexual harassment and threats, particularly targeting women and girls, including women leaders and volunteers who are being blamed and scrutinized for not being “good Muslim women”.

“The bad group [dacoits/ bandits] comes almost every night to take whichever women they want. What can we do about it? Our shelters are only made of tarpaulins so there is no way to keep them out. In the last six weeks (February/March 2020) they have taken around 40 women. **Because they are women they can’t avoid being raped. We are too scared to tell the authorities what is happening or even take the girls for medical treatment in case it leads to retribution [by the dacoits]’.** We just want to move to somewhere safe.”

(Community leader from southern camp Cox’s Bazar, March 2020)

**“We are afraid to live in the camp due to current conditions.** Conflict makers are around inside the camp in front of our shelters on pathways at nights. We can't leave our shelter to use washroom, toilets and there are no lights in the camp. They can harm us easily because the whole camp is in darkness at night. Sometimes they come near our home and call women to go out of the shelter. They are doing such evil activities harassment, rape, forced marriage of young girls. If anyone has a beautiful girl they demand to marry her from her parents, and if anyone disagrees to give away their daughter to them, they kill them. These kinds of activities are increasing day by day. If anyone raises their voice against them, they kill them. Many women volunteers have changed their contact number and stopped working because they are afraid. Where has our peaceful life gone? Are we not human beings? Where is justice for us? Why can't we feel safe in the camp? Government of Bangladesh, UN, international and national NGOs, please provide access to security to save women and vulnerable community members from such violence. **We need women police in the camp to protect us.**”

(30 Anonymous Rohingya Women from Cox’s Bazar refugee camps, October 2020.)



UN Women trained women police officers deployed at Women and children Help Desk at Police Station in Camp 4. Photo Credit: UN Women/Alison Joyce.

## Leveraging women’s participation and leadership capacities

Rohingya women and girls are not merely vulnerable victims. They play a key role in increasing the resilience of families and communities. Family structures have changed, and all persons in the household now face new duties and must engage in new activities and this is giving space for new gender roles to emerge. Rohingya women are playing an important role in the relief and recovery as volunteers, elected and self-mobilised community leaders and formed their own groups to advocate for their rights and call for justice, and they are engaging in income-generating activities to support the economic resilience of their families. There are Rohingya women leaders, including survivors of conflict related sexual and gender-based violence, that are self-organizing and forming their own groups in the camps to advocate for their rights and call for justice. Examples include the Shanti Mohila network that submitted a request for investigation to the International Criminal Court in 2018 and the Rohingya Women’s Welfare Society that spoke to the Security Council last year which provides counseling and helps women on issues of domestic violence, child marriage and health. In line with Security Council Resolution 2467 (2019), the capacity building of these women-led and survivor-led organizations need to be further supported to enhance community-level protection mechanisms against sexual violence, and to increase women’s active and meaningful engagement in processes to strengthen gender equality, women’s socio-economic empowerment and protection.

There is also an increased representation of women and gender expertise among humanitarian actors, police and camps-in-charge. However, gaps still remain in terms of addressing specific needs of women and girls and overcoming gender inequality, including the need to promote women’s

leadership and empowerment and designing and implementing gender-transformative programs.

Humanitarian responses often miss opportunities to transform socio-cultural gender norms and relations through the leadership and empowerment of women and girls, as well as by promoting positive forms of masculinities — notwithstanding the fact that these are key to a right-based and effective response and to communities’ longer-term resilience and social cohesion. Leveraging women’s participation and leadership capacities is not only a way to ensure humanitarian efforts respond to the specific needs and vulnerabilities of affected communities – whether women, men, girls or boys- but also a strategic investment in whole community resilience.

“Women should be engaged in all levels of decision making processes from the family to the state. Women should be recognized as an important representative of their families, communities and society as a whole and should be in decision-making positions in all sectors. Women should be income earners and have full control of their personal finances, and be free to make their own financial decisions at the same level as men. Women should be prioritized for skill training and targeted opportunities and support. **Women should be ensured full safety and security from all forms of gender based violence everywhere.**”

(120 host community women leaders, Ukhiya, Cox’s Bazar, October 2020)

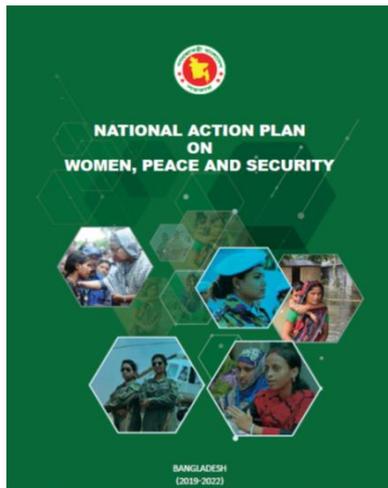


Assistant Commissioner, Former assistant Camp-in-Charge, Ms. Shamima Akter Jahan, RRRC Office

## Imperative for Action – National Action Plan for Women, Peace and Security

In 2000, the Government of Bangladesh played a pioneering role in bringing the issue of women, peace and security to the attention of the UN Security Council during its Presidency of the Council. This subsequently led to the adoption of the landmark Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security by the UN Security Council on 31 October 2000. The resolution was the first to recognize the disproportionate and unique impact of armed conflict on women and girls, acknowledged the contributions women and girls make to conflict prevention, peacekeeping, conflict resolution and

peacebuilding and highlighted the importance of their equal and full participation, as active agents in peace and security. Over the years, Bangladesh has remained committed to this important agenda in all its international and multilateral efforts. The country remains one of the top contributors of troops and police to UN Peacekeeping Operations worldwide – currently it has 255 female peacekeepers (troops and police) deployed in Peacekeeping Operations in different capacities, a figure that has consistently increased over the years.



Furthermore, Bangladesh launched its first National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security last year under the leadership of Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the support of UN Women. The NAP WPS was formulated through a series of consultations within the government and with civil society organizations and women’s organizations at

grassroot and national levels to identify and reflect women’s experiences and needs related to the WPS agenda, and it focuses on the following objectives:

- **Prevention:** Strengthen social cohesion and raise awareness to prevent all forms of conflict, violent extremism, and gender discrimination that disproportionately impacts women.
- **Participation:** Increase women’s meaningful participation in decision making on peace and security, including peace building, peacekeeping missions, and preventing violent extremism.
- **Protection, relief and recovery:** Protect women’s safety and well-being as well as their rights, and engage women in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief policies and programmes with an aim to address their specific needs and utilize their unique expertise.

Notably, the plan includes reference to address the gender aspects of the Rohingya crisis through the refugee crisis response in Cox’s Bazar.

On 11 December 2019, UN Women and the Government of Sweden organized a workshop on “The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the context of the Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Cox’s Bazar” with participation from the RRRC, the

Ambassador of Sweden to Bangladesh, as well as 60 representatives the Deputy Commissioner’s Office, District Magistrate, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, Bangladesh Police, women’s networks/CSOs, NGOs, and the United Nations agencies. Drawing from the recommendations from this workshop, as well as statements collected through more recent consultations in October 2020 with over 200 host and Rohingya community women and adolescent girls, the following Call for Action was prepared.



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I want to say to every woman and girl like me who want to work for women’s rights that there will be challenges. Accept the challenge and explore every possible way to overcome them.

**RIMA SULTANA RIMU**  
an eighteen-year-old girl living in Cox’s Bazar. She educates young women especially Rohingya Refugees through theater, radio broadcasts and runs workshops on the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325.



**“**

In the future, I want to be a political leader and work for Rohingya women rights and access to education. As women we have to raise our voices, share about our problems and seek support.

**LUCKY**  
an eighteen years old Rohingya refugee girl, studying Politics, Philosophy and Economics at Asian Women University remotely from the camp. She is a community youth leader engaged in women’s and youth CSO networks for peace, ending gender-based violence and promoting girls’ education in her community.

## Call for Action – Recommendations by Humanitarian, Development and Peace Actors and Statements by Rohingya and Host Community Women

### A. Prevention of conflict and violence, including sexual and gender based violence

- Hold the Government of Myanmar accountable for creating conditions conducive to safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable repatriation for Rohingya refugees including women and girls, and those who are survivors of conflict related sexual and gender based violence, while ensuring women survivor’s participation in the justice and accountability process and decision-making on how the repatriation takes place.
- Prevent threats and violence against diverse women leaders, human rights defenders, and peacebuilders in Cox’s Bazar, including by elevating their work and their role in promoting human rights and peace;
- Create accessible platforms for sustained interaction and dialogue between Rohingya refugee and host community women and girls to build mutual trust and understanding;
- Improve accessibility of services and resources, including legal aid and psychosocial counselling, available for host community and Rohingya refugee young women and girls facing early, forced, and child marriage and survivors of sexual violence in Cox’s Bazar;
- Expand use of gender-responsive community risk assessment. Strengthen efforts to promote access to justice and community-based protection mechanisms, including community policing and gender-sensitivity and GBV response training for law enforcement actors (police, judges, etc);
- Continue and further expand ongoing capacity development efforts on gender, GBV, PSEA, anti-trafficking and protection for the Bangladesh police, armed forces and Camps-in-Charge. Develop and roll-out women, peace and security module for training of civil servants.

- Engage with media to advocate for women’s rights and promote gender-responsive journalism through gender-sensitisation efforts and supporting female journalists.
- Increase collaboration with the armed police battalions to promote good gender practices, including protocols around victims/survivors of SGBV. Increase presence of female police and women and children police help desks across all camps, night patrolling at block-level and securing shelters at night-time, as well as ensure all armed police battalions are trained on gender-responsive policing, including through engagement in the civil-military coordination platforms;

### B. Participation of women and inclusion of women’s perspectives in decision-making processes related to prevention, management, and resolution of conflict

- Hold all actors, including especially the Government of Myanmar, but also the Government of Bangladesh, United Nations and other relevant non-governmental organizations, accountable for ensuring the full and meaningful participation of diverse women from host communities and Rohingya refugee camps, including young women, in political decision-making at all levels on, security conflict prevention and resolution and the achievement of gender equality;
- Promote women’s increased participation in all levels of decision making and representation structures in both camps and host communities, and provide training and peer-mentoring for women leaders.
- Create enabling conditions in which young women in Cox’s Bazar can meaningfully participate in peace and security processes, by addressing barriers to participation and enhancing their capacities and understanding of leadership, peacebuilding, women’s rights, and advocacy;
- Engage and build support amongst men, as allies, in Cox’s Bazar for the achievement gender equality, protection of women’s rights, and the meaningful participation of women and young women in peace and security processes.

- Develop holistic and formalized approach for consulting women’s rights organisations and CBOs, including creating formal platform, for systematic engagement as an accountability mechanism. Advocate for and support registration of women’s CSOs and strengthen their capacities.

### C. Protection, relief, and recovery

- Ensure the meaningful participation and leadership of Rohingya refugee and host community women and young women in decision-making at all levels on the design and implementation of humanitarian interventions, including them in coordination platforms and mechanisms to monitor the effectiveness of interventions;
- Recognize, coordinate with, and invest in local women’s groups in Cox’s Bazar, including those led by Rohingya refugee women, as key actors on the frontlines of humanitarian emergency response, by providing them with accessible, direct, sustainable, reliable, and flexible funding;
- Protect, preserve, and increase host community and Rohingya refugee women, young women, and girls’ access to gender-sensitive, age-appropriate, education, which incorporates modules on peace, gender equality, and women’s rights, as a form of empowerment, including in the Madrasa education system and also through awareness raising campaign at community level;
- Create sustainable, large scale income-generating and self-reliance opportunities for women and men from host and Rohingya communities in Cox’s Bazar. Strengthen joint activities and initiatives through increased involvement of Refugee and host communities, e.g. joint skill training, market linkages, dialogues between women’s networks/CSOs etc
- Guarantee that humanitarian interventions implemented by UN and INGO actors in Cox’s Bazar are equitable and meet the urgent, intersecting needs of host community and Rohingya refugee women and girls. Prioritize the development of sustainable, gender-responsive, inclusive, and transformative humanitarian interventions, which build community resilience, foster social cohesion, and prevent outbreaks of conflict in Cox’s Bazar

- Increase collaboration with district level judges, lawyers and public prosecutors to promote acknowledging the legal rights of the Rohingya victims of gender based violence and trafficking, to access courts under the applicable general and special laws.
- Enhance efforts to provide legal justice training to women’s rights organisations, CSOs and networks – both linked to camp level justice mechanisms, national justice systems, as well as global justice processes (International Criminal Court/International Court of Justice).

### D. Feminist COVID-19 response and recovery

- Women’s full, equal and meaningful participation must be promoted in leadership and decision-making roles related to COVID-19 response and recovery.
- Responses to COVID-19 driven by the security sector must be proportionate, gender-sensitive and protect women’s human rights, including through women’s leadership in law enforcement and the security sector;
- Preserve and protect women’s rights, including access to sexual health, reproductive services, livelihoods and education, in all COVID-19 response and recovery efforts for host communities and Rohingya refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar;
- Address the digital divide and the gender gap within this divide, which prevents local women and youth peacebuilders from accessing critical online/phone-based services, consultations and meetings, and information dissemination on humanitarian action and peacebuilding, by guaranteeing reliable and affordable access to internet and telecommunications; and
- Women must lead in social cohesion initiatives including countering discrimination and hate speech, to help ensure prevention of COVID-19 becoming a driver of gender-based violence and conflict;

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Cover photo: Rohingya Women's Leaders Network meeting in UN Women Multi-Purpose Women Centre in Camp 4, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Marie Sophie Pettersson/UN Women

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**This advocacy Brief was prepared with invaluable contributions and endorsement from:**



**GIHA WG**