



IN BRIEF



COX'S BAZAR UPDATE

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Photo: ActionAid Bangladesh

Women leaders making change

“Child marriage and gender-based violence are taking place every day in our community,” says Sultana, a woman leader in Cox’s Bazar. “These are important issues. I didn’t miss a single day of the training.”

The women’s leadership training run by Oxfam supports women in the host community to feel empowered to raise their voice, to challenge social norms and to demand change.

“I was very shy and timid before this training, I just did what I was told,” Sultana says. “I gradually improved my confidence, especially in speaking out against violence, discrimination and early marriage. Now I have become a women leader and can speak fluently about these issues.”

Speaking up has profound effects for the status of these women both at home and in the community.

“I share my knowledge with my husband and he is changing slowly,” says Sultana. “In our culture we are traditionally more supportive of our sons, but my husband is starting to understand that we need to give our daughter and our son equal opportunities. Now he is taking an interest in our daughter’s education, and they have improved their relationship. My husband and I have many conversations about these issues and our relationship is better too.”

People in the community have come to respect Sultana for her activism and seek out her advice. “My niece was only 16 when her parents tried to force her to marry. She came to me for help so I asked her mother to let her finish her studies. Her mother said she could not afford her school fees so I sold some of my gold jewellery to pay for it. Last year my niece earned an A-minus in her final high school exams. I was very proud of her.”



Photo: UN Women/Liz Pric

Host community women leaders, Sultana (left) and Anowara

Anowara, another graduate of the women’s leadership training, was also inspired to take action and lead change.

“I learned a lot about unity from the training,” she says. “When people work together, we can achieve more. As women we can increase our power to influence decision-making when we support each other.”

Recently, Anowara helped lead a grassroots campaign to make a dangerously narrow road safer for the community. The local administration agreed to widen the road, but two shop owners refused to relocate their shops.

“We held many meetings with community leaders and the shop owners but nothing convinced them. So a big group of women leaders got together to protest. We formed a human chain with a banner. I was at the front and we marched together down the road.”

Ultimately, the shopkeepers agreed to move, the road was widened, and there are now fewer traffic accidents. “To be united is to be powerful,” Anowara says.



Empowered women empower generations

Celebrating International Women’s Day in Cox’s Bazar

International Women’s Day (IWD) on 8 March celebrates the strength, courage and leadership of women around the world. A joint communications campaign for Cox’s Bazar was developed under the leadership of the Gender in Humanitarian Action working group (GIHA WG), chaired by UN Women and UNHCR, to be inclusive of women in both the Rohingya and Bangladeshi communities.

The **Empowered women empower generations** campaign aimed to draw attention to women’s contributions to society as caretakers, educators, volunteers, producers, earners, decision-makers and leaders as well as the key role that women in the Rohingya and host communities are playing in supporting the refugee response.

Mindful of persistent gender inequalities, UN agencies and NGOs were encouraged to evaluate their activities and procurement for IWD, and beyond, to ensure that women directly benefit from response resources. Partners were also encouraged to “give back” to women with distribution of a



Photo: UN Women/Pappu Mia

“Most women are at high risk of experiencing GBV. So we asked the CiC to prioritise GBV response. Without this, women empowerment will not be possible.” Minara. UN Women volunteer, Camp 1W

token of appreciation specifically for women such as an umbrella, torch or scarf.

UN Women Gender Field Officers coordinated with Camp-in-Charges (CiCs), sector focal points, UN agencies and NGOs to organise cross-sectoral events in five camps. The events were hosted by CiCs and included dialogue sessions between women leaders, community leaders and camp management; distribution of tokens of recognition to women leaders; and music and drama performances with GBV awareness messages. GiHA partners led similar events in other camps.

UN Women’s implementing partners ActionAid, BRAC, Oxfam, BNPS, DCA and RTMI also organized various celebrations and community activities for women, girls, men, boys and gender-diverse people across the eight MPWCs in the camps and host community.



Photo: UN Women/Pappu Mia

“Now I have the knowledge and confidence to advocate to my parents and other adolescent girls, boys and their parents stop child marriage.” Halima (18), YPSA-IRC Girl Shine group, Camp 18



Photo: UN Women/Rezaul Islam

Camp 9 CiC, Sarwar Kamal, hosted women leaders and a female mahji for a dialogue session.



Empowered women empower generations

Celebrating International Women's Day in Cox's Bazar

Photo: UN Women/Pappu Mia



Camp 1E & 1W CIC, Kyathowai Prue Marma, and UN Women and partner representatives release a dove to symbolise peace at the celebrations in Camp 1E



Photo: BNPS/Shaheda Parvin

Staff from Oxfam, BNPS and DCA organized a display of handicrafts and a food stall at the MPWC in the Cox's Bazar host community

Photo: UN Women/Pappu Mia



Rozina, an adolescent learning centre student, said it was her first opportunity to express her opinion in front of an audience, Camp 4



Photo: UN Women/Pappu Mia

Monowara, women leader and UN Women Volunteer and speaks at the Camp 4 dialogue session and celebrations

Photo: ActionAid Bangladesh/Khatun Dalim



Camp 18 CiC, Md Manoar Hossain joined a rally organized by ActionAid at the Camp 18 MPWC



Photo: UN Women/Pappu Mia

A drama performance raising awareness about the negative impacts of child marriage, Camp 5



Empowered women empower generations

Celebrating International Women's Day in Cox's Bazar

Photo: UN Women/Pappu Mia



"Gender norms hold women back. This Women's Day aims to empower women and bring them to the front." Marina Tasnim, BRAC, GBV focal point, Camp 5.



Photo: UN Women/Pappu Mia

Camp 4 CiC, Dawood Hossain Chowdury, addresses the audience gathered to recognize and celebrate the contribution of women to the camp and society

Photo: UN Women/Pappu Mia



Community and religious leaders hold up a postcard with IWD messaging on it, Camp 18



Photo: UN Women/Pappu Mia

Camp 5 CiC, Pritam Saha, recognises the contribution of women leaders with an umbrella as a token of appreciation

Photo: BRAC/Tahmida Mostafa



Women inspect handicrafts at a stall at the IWD Fair organized by BRAC at the Women's Market, Camp 5



Photo: UN Women/Pappu Mia

Rahima, a UN Women women's group member, shared her experience of learning group problem-solving skills as Camp 1 CiC Kyathowai Prue Marma looks on

Small business owners grow their income and community status

In a corner of the Women's Market in Camp 5, Rehana runs a canteen serving tea, breakfast and lunch to other refugees, humanitarian workers, police and CiC staff. Even the Queen of Belgium ate there in February.

Widowed just three months after her wedding, Rehana had no work experience when she applied to be a stallholder three years ago. These days she says she makes up to 6000 taka (65 USD) in profit each month, which she can track herself thanks to literacy and entrepreneurship training by UN Women's partner BRAC.

This enables Rehana to support her sister, also a widow. "I grew up without any parents, so my sister and I always struggled to take care of ourselves. Now I can buy things at the market, like a dress or fabric, that I never could before."

"The community respects me now that they see me making money. I am proud that I am an independent, empowered woman."

Defying social norms in this way hasn't been without its challenges. "People used to say, 'women shouldn't earn money, they should stay at home'. But now we are seeing women can earn money and work in equal positions to men."

Rehana has improved her status in the community thanks to her success as a businesswoman.

"The community respects me now that they see me making money. I am proud that I am an independent, empowered woman. If I can go back to Myanmar, I would like to start another restaurant there and save up to buy a house."



Rehana serves fuchka, a local snack, at the women's market canteen



Omar Khatun at the sewing machine in her women's market stall

Omar Khatun has a shop nearby selling ready-made clothes, fabric, and hand-embroidery.

"I have three daughters at home. Before getting a stall at the market we had no income because my husband was injured and cannot work. I used to have to ask my neighbour for food or money. Now I can support my family with the profits that I am earning. I can buy a dress for daughter or buy medicines when they are sick."

"I tell my daughters they must earn an income so they can be independent and self-empowered like me."

Khatun also learned basic literacy and numeracy from a BRAC host community volunteer at the market.

"Before the training, I had no education; I couldn't even write my name. Now I know how to use a calculator to keep a record of my sales and track my income."

One of Khatun's daughters is training to be a beautician at the beauty parlour in the market. "I tell my daughters they must earn an income so they can be independent and self-empowered like me."

"When I feel sad, I come to the market to take a breather from out there," she says gesturing to the rest of the camp. "I can share my feelings with the staff and the other shopkeepers here. We are like a family."

The Women's Market is supported by the Government of Sweden and the United Nation's Central Emergency Fund.

Gardening for personal growth

“I used to cultivate my own garden back in Myanmar but here in the camps there is no space, we all live so close together. So when I came to the women’s centre and saw that there was some free land I asked if we could use it,” says Rahima, a Rohingya refugee.

A women’s gardening group was established at the multipurpose women’s centre (MPWC) in Camp 4 in 2019 with support from UN Women and ActionAid. Together, the women say they are building their self-reliance and developing resilience to the challenges of life in the camps.

“I used to do gardening work in Myanmar,” says Shamima, a new recruit. “Living in the camps I became very depressed, but recently I saw the work the group is doing here and decided to join. I never imagined it was possible, but I feel at peace here in the garden.”

Shamima is not the only one who says they feel happiest with their hands in the soil. Jorina, a transgender woman, says she regularly experiences transphobic abuse and discrimination in the camps. Despite completing six-months of training in tailoring at the MPWC, she found the community was still reluctant to give her any work. She recently joined the gardening group instead.

“I am so happy to be treated like a normal person here,” Jorina says. “I don’t experience any kind of discrimination at



Photo: UN Women/ Liz Pick

“I feel accepted here; this is my sanctuary.” Jorina, in the garden of the Camp 4 MPWC



Photo: UN Women/ Liz Pick

“I feel at peace here in the garden.” - Shamima

the MPWC. I feel miserable when I just stay at home alone, so now I come here whether I am working in the garden or not. I feel accepted here; this is my sanctuary.”

Group members share the rewards of their efforts, choosing whether to keep the food they harvest for themselves or sell it and split the profits.

“The food rations are decreasing day by day, but we can supplement our rations with fruits and vegetables that we grow here. We can also sell them and use the money to buy things that we need,” Rahima says.

“We do not get fish or fresh fruits in the WFP rations,” adds Nurbanu, one of the founding group members. “Now I can use the money I earn to buy nutritious foods and choose what to feed my children. Working here allows me to take better care of my family and knowing that I am doing it with my own hands is very satisfying.”

The group have recently branched out into vermicomposting – using worms to turn organic waste into rich soil – following a training session run in collaboration with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). A worm composter has been set up and is already producing more compost than the group needs.

“I used to buy soil in the local market, but it wasn’t very good quality. Vermicompost is a natural, organic fertiliser which is better for our bodies. Since learning how to make it, we don’t need to buy soil anymore,” Rahima says proudly. “We plan to start selling it to the community soon.”

Rahima, who had the most gardening experience before fleeing Myanmar, says she has learned many valuable new skills as part of the group.

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Policing for women and children

“In Rohingya culture, women are traditionally not allowed to speak to men outside their family. These helpdesks are important so that women and children can feel comfortable to come to the police station,” says Fatima, a female police officer in camp 20 Extension.

With support from the Australian Government, UN Women has established five women and children helpdesks in police stations across the Rohingya refugee camps. The helpdesks are staffed exclusively by female officers to reduce cultural barriers for Rohingya women seeking justice.

“Most of the complaints are related to gender-based violence (GBV),” Fatima says. “For example, an adolescent girl might come to report a rape or a family to report an abduction of a child. If a woman comes here after experiencing intimate partner violence, we go with them to the hospital for treatment and support them through the legal process.”



Photo: UN Women/ Liz Pick

Fatima (far left) with fellow police officers in Camp 20E

survivors are going through because we can link it with our own experiences as women. The training improved my ability to speak with women and deal with their emotions sensitively, especially survivors of GBV.”

Sahajia, aged 23, has three years of police service under her belt. She has completed two UN Women training sessions for five days in total but feels she still has more to learn.

“Learning is continuous. I would like more training on different topics related to gender. This training is important for all police officers posted here, both men and women.

“The training changed the way I think about Rohingya women,” Sahajia says. “It taught us how to respond to specific issues like child marriage, dowry and polygamy in a calm and compassionate way.

“Before the training some of us felt negatively about the Rohingya people. I used to keep my distance from them but now I understand their culture better I try to support them with my best efforts and always treat them sensitively.”

women are worried about how they will meet the needs of their families. Homestead gardening is a practical way women can improve their situation.”

UN Women recently collaborated with FAO to provide training for ActionAid and BRAC staff to increase their knowledge of homestead gardening and water harvesting techniques. This training will soon be rolled out through UN Women’s MPWCs to offer more women the opportunity to increase their self-reliance.

This project is supported by the Government of Sweden and the United Nations’ Central Emergency Fund (CERF).

“We learned how we can provide better service to Rohingya women and children by considering their culture and emotional sensitivity.”

Fatima, aged 20, has worked here for nine months; this is her first posting. In 2022, she took part in a two-day training on gender-responsive policing run by UN Women and supported by the Government of Switzerland.

“We learned how we can provide better service to Rohingya women and children by considering their culture and their emotional sensitivity when disclosing information. Also the importance of ensuring confidentiality as they do not feel comfortable to speak in front of male officers.

“Female police officers can more easily relate to what GBV

Gardening... continued from page 6

“In Myanmar, I had a lot of land for planting but here it is very crowded. I learned techniques through the training to make the best use of the limited space available. I am also more confident in myself now. I know how to deal with other people. Previously I was afraid to speak to others but here I have learned to be a leader.”

ActionAid provides the group with seeds, tools, fertiliser and financial support, and a staff member, Sadek, is on hand to offer technical advice.

“Homestead gardening training is in high demand from the community,” Sadek says. “Food support is decreasing, and

Driving ambition breaks social norms

“It was my childhood aim to become a driver,” says Jannatul. “If men can drive a car, why not women?”

After 10 theory classes and 30 practical lessons, Jannatul (21) and Nusrat (19) say they now feel confident behind the wheel. They are among seven women who have completed driving training supported by UN Women and provided through the Oxfam-managed MPWC in Cox’s Bazar.

When Jannatul and her mother heard about the livelihoods training options available at the MPWC, Jannatul knew straight away she would enrol in the driving program.

“My mother chose sewing for me, but my friend encouraged me to follow my dream instead. She said, ‘when you start earning money your parents will realise that driving is a respectable career’. My family has remained against it but I persevered and I completed the training without their help.

Both women dream of finding a job with an NGO or the UN. “Before the Rohingya people came here, I never saw a female driver,” says Nusrat. “But then I began seeing women driving cars for the UN and NGOs and I was inspired to learn to drive and earn money so I too can become self-reliant.”

They have also attended training in leadership through UN Women’s partner BNPS. “After I learned about gender discrimination from a leadership session, I realised that my



Photo: UN Women/Liz Pick

Nusrat (left) and Jannatul dream of becoming professional drivers

family gave my brother more opportunities than me. So I talked to my parents to support me more and they agreed,” says Nusrat.

“My parents have encouraged me in my driving but there are people in the community who laugh and say this is a man’s job. But day by day, women in our society are becoming more empowered. They have important jobs in different sectors - they can be in government, they can be pilots, engineers. So why not a simple job like a driver?”

“My friends are inspired by me, they want to learn to drive too. Sometimes they joke, ‘can you drive a car right now?’ I tell them, if you bring a car, I will show you.”

Women want non-traditional skills

“In Myanmar we used a clay stove for cooking that we could easily fix. But here [in the refugee camp] every family was given a gas burner instead,” says 28-year-old Mosuda. “It is expensive to call a mechanic every time it breaks so when I heard about this training, I was excited to learn.”

Mosuda and Rajuma (30) are proudly demonstrating how to disassemble the standard single gas burner issued to each household in the Rohingya camps.

“The burners frequently get blocked by dust or debris but it is a simple to fix if you know how,” adds Mosuda. “We learned to take it apart and clean it and put it back together. I used to have to pay a mechanic 250 taka (2.30 USD) each time to fix the gas burner but since the training I can fix it myself.”

Women can learn this simple but useful skill at the MPWC in Camp 18 run by UN Women’s partner ActionAid.

“Yesterday my neighbour asked me to fix her burner,” Mosuda says. “I didn’t take any money from her. I always share any information that I get from the awareness sessions with my family and neighbours. When other women ask how



Photo: UN Women/Liz Pick

Rajuma (left) and Mosuda reassemble a gas stove after cleaning it

I learned to do this, I tell them: I can teach you or you can go to the MPWC.”

Rajuma says it has inspired her to learn other practical skills that could generate income to help support her six children. “My husband is happy, he is very supportive of my learning. Next I would like to learn to make fishing nets so I could sell them. There is a lot of demand for nets in the camps.”

Reproductive health rights supported by UNFPA collaboration

The walls are covered by brightly coloured posters in the small room of the multipurpose women's centre (MPWC) where midwife Rachana is counselling women on sexual and reproductive health. The service is provided by RTMI, and supported by UNFPA, as part of UN Women's efforts to provide multisectoral services to women visiting the MPWC.

Rachana says around 100 women visit each month for family planning services, STI checks, psychological first aid and referrals for GBV survivors, and general health check-ups.

The clinic and MPWC recently began running awareness sessions in the MPWC and in the community about the benefits of the contraceptive implant.

"Women are afraid of the implant because they think it will permanently stop them from having children," Rachana says. "In the awareness sessions I explain how it works and that it is reversible. Now it is becoming more popular, and demand is increasing."

Amina, aged 23, comes to the MPWC regularly for family planning. She is at the clinic today for a routine check-up as she had the implant inserted a month ago.

"They recommended the implant to me a few months ago but I feared what it would do to my body. It took me a few months to decide," Amina says.

Amina has a one-year-old and a newborn and is her husband's second wife, which she says was a factor in deciding to get the implant. "I have already given him two children. I want to focus on giving them a better life before I have any more babies," she says.



Amina (left) has come to the Camp 4 MPWC for a family planning consultation with Rachana, an RTMI midwife funded by UNFPA



Midwife Rachana (right) explains contraceptive methods to Jamilla (left) at the UNFPA family planning clinic in the Camp 4 MPWC

Jamilla, aged 35, is also here for family planning. It is her third visit.

"I first heard about family planning at an outreach session in my block. They told me that when you have too many births it can affect your health, your family and your financial wellbeing. I already have five children and my last baby was born with a disability. I am getting older day by day and I don't want to have any more children," she says.

"I feel more comfortable here. I'm so glad I found out about this centre."

Jamilla heard about the clinic from a neighbour who comes to the MPWC for livelihood training.

"If I didn't come here, I would have to go to the hospital where there is always a long queue. This centre is much closer, and I feel more comfortable here."

While visiting the clinic, Jamilla got to know more about the livelihood skills training programs implemented by ActionAid at the MPWC.

"I have just enrolled to learn *nakshi kantha* [embroidery] in the session starting this month. My daughter's husband recently left her, so I encouraged her to also enrol. I'm so glad I found out about this centre."

UN Women's Programme in Cox's Bazar is supported by: