

# Gender Operational Review Report Summary

## Background

The Rohingya people, a stateless minority group in Myanmar, have suffered persecution, discrimination, and denial of basic rights for decades. In August 2017, Myanmar security forces launched brutal attacks on Rohingya civilians. This resulted in a massive influx of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh, with an estimated 745,000 people arriving over an 18-month period. Most of the refugees are living in camps in Cox’s Bazar, a district in Bangladesh that has become the world’s largest refugee settlement.

In May 2019, the Women’s Refugee Commission (WRC) conducted a review of how gender has been integrated into the Rohingya humanitarian response in Bangladesh, documenting positive practices, lessons learned, and recommendations for the humanitarian response in Cox’s Bazar and globally.

Many women and girls were exposed to sexual violence in Myanmar and, following displacement, they continue to be at risk of domestic violence, forced/child marriage, and exploitation and trafficking.

Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls are considered central to an effective, inclusive, and rights-based response in situations of crisis, conflict, and natural disasters. Humanitarian actors must understand and address the different needs of women, men, girls, boys, and other groups in the affected population.

## Key findings

- Several working groups and networks have played a part in the **coordination and monitoring of gender equality and women’s empowerment** across the Rohingya humanitarian response. A recently established **Gender Hub** will draw together the technical guidance and data from the different coordination bodies, support partners to translate policies into actions, develop standardized training, and facilitate knowledge management and exchange. The Gender Hub is also expected to play a role in the **analysis of aggregated data** to monitor progress and identify gaps for future attention in response planning.
- The gender equality programming being implemented includes both **gender mainstreaming and targeted strategies**. Gender mainstreaming ensures that the needs and vulnerabilities of all people affected by a crisis are taken into account, and that women and men benefit equally. Some humanitarian actors raised concerns that the gender mainstreaming process is a “check the box” exercise, with limited opportunity for the community to meaningfully influence programming. Targeted strategies address the specific needs identified in gender analyses and assessments. The vast majority of targeted actions focus on women and girls, with systems being set up to ensure quality support for gender-based violence (GBV) survivors, largely through safe spaces for women and girls that also provide service delivery, skills development, and psychosocial support.
- All humanitarian actors consulted reported having an **organizational commitment to gender equality**, with policies in place to promote gender parity across the organization and for prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA). All national organizations consulted had large numbers of women working for them. However, they were mostly in field-level positions; all the directors and senior managers of these organizations were men. In contrast, most people consulted from international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) and UN agencies were women, highlighting that perhaps men remain largely underrepresented in gender equality programming at global levels.
- Humanitarian actors and field staff demonstrated a good **understanding of the consequences and seriousness of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA)** for refugees and on affected communities. The PSEA Network is finalizing a unified training on PSEA and creating a pool of trainers. Proposed mechanisms for reporting SEA will be based on community input to ensure maximum accessibility, acceptability, and confidentiality when a report is made.
- Two gender analyses by INGOs have highlighted the **high rates of GBV and reduced mobility** faced by Rohingya women and girls in Bangladesh, as well as the concentration of power in the hands of men for decision-making at household levels.
- Analysis of **how gender intersects with other factors** is largely confined to age (with a focus on children and adolescents) and marriage (with a focus on child marriage and widows). The specific needs of men and boys and people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or sex characteristics (SOGIESC) are largely overlooked in such analyses.
- There are more than 55 **safe spaces for women and girls (SSWG)** across the Rohingya camps that provide a range of services and activities, including safe and confidential case management for GBV survivors and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, such as

family planning. Some SSWG provide separate and tailored activities for adolescent girls, as well as skills development, such as literacy, tailoring, and handicrafts. Some SSWG have activities to mobilize women into groups and committees to encourage greater participation in decision-making in the community.

- **Engaging men and boys** to increase the acceptance of activities that target women and girls has started recently in response to initial backlash against these activities. Activities have been developed to raise awareness and address misconceptions about SSWG, and to address GBV prevention and SRH. Consultations suggest that these activities have influenced the attitudes, and even behaviors, of men and boys.
- UN Women has developed training modules and a set of tools to **strengthen Rohingya women's leadership and decision-making skills** at the individual, household, and community levels.
- At least two **women's civil society groups** have been established. One group raises awareness on topics such as trafficking, sexual violence, women's rights, and civic engagement. Another seeks justice for the women and the community through the International Criminal Court and the Human Rights Council, and provides literacy training for women and girls.
- Very little is known about **how the crisis is affecting more marginalized groups** in the Rohingya community, such as people from the SOGIESC community and individuals with different types of disabilities, and how the intersection between gender and older age affects the opportunities and access to resources for older women.
  - » There is a lack of insight among women and girls into the different groups that may or may not be able to access the SSWG. **Women with disabilities** often have problems reaching SSWG, and therefore may not be able to access GBV and other services.
  - » Many **older women** (and men) experience difficulties with continence, mobility, and hearing. There are anecdotal reports that when a man marries a second wife, usually a younger woman, the older wife may face added risks of physical abuse.
  - » **Divorced women** are likely excluded by other women from social networks and opportunities, and as such face extreme marginalization in their community.
  - » A national Bangladeshi organization is launching a project to learn more about Rohingya from the **SOGIESC community** and provide mental health and psychosocial support.
  - » Many **Rohingya men and boys** are also survivors of sexual violence experienced in Myanmar, and some are subjected to SEA in Bangladesh.
  - » While **sex work** is hidden in the Rohingya community, majhis (unelected refugee focal points) and "madams" (usually older women) are working together to organize and control the sex work trade around the camps, which often involves women and girls ages 15-22.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are provided to build on and strengthen the positive efforts already undertaken in the Rohingya humanitarian response, and to catalyze longer-term support for transformative approaches.

- **Foster innovation and collective learning on emerging issues and approaches**, such as how to safely reach and support marginalized women and girls and people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or sex characteristics.
- **Establish a more structured approach to gender analysis**, which maps the different groups in the community for consultation. Ongoing and regular gender analysis can help to track the small but important incremental changes in gender equality and women's empowerment in the community, identify risks, and evaluate the effectiveness of mitigation strategies.
- **Increase space for women to self-organize**. More flexible programming in women's and girls' safe spaces could create additional opportunities for women to self-organize and define their own goals and activities.
- **Advocate for longer-term programming**. Donors and funders must meet global commitments to gender equality, which will give humanitarian partners the time and space to test different methodologies and approaches.
- **Support fledgling women's civil society organizations**. These groups can act as advisors to humanitarian actors on culturally sensitive programming relating to women's leadership and participation, reducing risk of backlash in the community.

The full report is available at <https://wrc.ms/gender-equality-rohingya>.

For more information, contact Dale Buscher, Vice President, Programs, [DaleB@wrcommission.org](mailto:DaleB@wrcommission.org)

## Women's Refugee Commission

The Women's Refugee Commission improves the lives and protects the rights of women, children, and youth who have been displaced by conflict and crisis. We research their needs, identify solutions, and advocate for programs and policies to strengthen their resilience and drive change in humanitarian practice.

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