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## Rapid Gender Analysis Brief: Bhasan Char, Bangladesh

### OVERVIEW

Bangladesh hosts approximately one million Rohingya people in Ukhiya and Teknaf upazilas of Cox's Bazar district and Bhasan Char Island of Noakhali district<sup>1</sup>. The majority come from Maungdaw township (68%), followed by Bauthidaung (26%) and Rathedaung (5%), all in Myanmar.<sup>2</sup> Among the 32,574 people in Bhasan Char, 51% are female and 49% are male, comprising 56% children, 42% adults, and 2% older people.<sup>3</sup>

After a resettlement order was given on 26 January 2017 by the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) to address issues of overcrowding and insecurity in Cox's Bazar<sup>4</sup>, the government has been developing Bhasan Char as a relocation site since October 2017 for displaced Rohingya communities.<sup>5</sup> The Bangladesh Navy built much of the infrastructure on the island such as flood protection embankments, houses, hospitals, and mosques.<sup>6</sup> Despite these efforts, concerns have been raised by humanitarian actors regarding the impact of the relocation on the Rohingya community's safety, freedom of movement, legal rights, and livelihood opportunities.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the 2022 Refugee Emergency Vulnerability Assessment (REVA) revealed that the Rohingya community in Bhasan Char is more vulnerable than those in Cox's Bazar with 99% of the Rohingya population on the island being identified as "moderately" or "highly vulnerable".<sup>8</sup>

The relocation to Bhasan Char forces the displaced Rohingya community to reconstruct their lives and community yet again in a new island setting, making such transitions particularly difficult for vulnerable groups such as widows, persons with disability, elderly people, and pregnant or lactating women. Gender roles and dynamics within families and communities are also disrupted due to repeated displacements, impacting power relations and decision-making. Not only is inadequate infrastructure not conducive to meeting the basic needs of people, such as having electricity at night, but it also increases protection risks, particularly for women and girls. As infrastructures continue to be developed and people adjust to their new lives on the island, unforeseen impacts may arise and put pressure on already limited resources.

To understand such impacts, Japan International Corporation Agency (JICA) and CARE partnered to conduct the first-ever Rapid Gender Analysis (RGA) on Bhasan Char. This RGA focuses on understanding how the relocation to the island impacted the different needs, capacities, and coping strategies of women, men, boys, and girls. It primarily focuses on understanding the changing patterns of gender and governance, livelihood and mobility opportunities, and gender-based violence (GBV) and protection concerns. Practical recommendations are also provided for humanitarian programming and operations to ensure the principle of "do no harm" is adhered to.

### METHODOLOGY

This RGA includes secondary data from a literature review of 30 key documents and previous RGA reports to understand the overall socio-cultural and socio-political context of gender equality, equity, gender norms, gender-based violence, and women empowerment in Bangladesh. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used for primary data collection, which comprised of survey questions, key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs). There were 335 survey respondents (59% female, 41% male, all adults). For qualitative data,

9 FGDs were conducted (3 women's groups, 2 men's groups, 1 religious leaders' group, 1 adolescent girls' group, 1 adolescent boys' group, and 1 gender-diverse people's group); 3 in-depth interviews were conducted to collect case stories of adult women and men as well as adolescent girls; 8 KIIs were conducted with relevant government agencies responsible for camp management and administration (ie Camp-in-Charge (CiC)), UN agencies, national and international NGOs, and community leaders such as *majhis* and *imams* in Bhasan Char. Data collection occurred from April 8-13 and May 20-25, 2023.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Gender and Governance

**Domestic labor in the private sphere within the Rohingya community are women's responsibility.** Childcare and domestic work such as housework and cooking are viewed as women's responsibilities, while tasks that require travel outside the home such as collecting firewood and humanitarian cash assistance are viewed as men's responsibilities. Tasks that are seen as shared responsibilities include farming and household gardening. As the protracted crisis continues to unfold, many humanitarian actors in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char have primarily been targeting women and girls for empowerment and economic development programs in efforts to promote gender equality. However, there have been reports of backlash from men and increased tension and violence within households and communities, especially in contexts where men have been unable to fulfill their traditional role as breadwinners.<sup>9</sup>

**Women and men have different decision-making power at the household and community levels.** Due to pre-existing social and cultural norms, more women than men feel obligated to ask permission from family members (such as a spouse or the head of the household) to make household-level decisions, especially for tasks that require travel outside of the house. For example, 51% of female respondents shared that they need to obtain permission to visit a nearby shop compared to 2% of male respondents. However, both female and male respondents reported that they need to obtain permission from family members for major decisions such as having a child, relocating to Bhasan Char, or migrating back to Cox's Bazar. At the community level, male community leaders, known as *majhis*, are considered the most influential in decision-making spheres as they link the Rohingya community to government authorities.<sup>10</sup> However, the *majhi* system has been criticized for abuse of power and the lack of representation, impartiality, transparency, accountability, and gender equality.<sup>11</sup> There is no representation of women in community decision-making bodies with only a small number of female respondents mentioning that female religious leaders, teachers, elderly women, and educated women are influential leaders in their communities.

**Women's leadership is severely constrained in Bhasan Char.** The majority of respondents (70% women and 77% men) believe that Rohingya women cannot become leaders in their community in Bhasan Char. This could be due to existing perceptions of gender roles and responsibilities as well as the limited level of influence women have in their communities. Also, resistance from *majhis* and security concerns from the National Security Intelligence (NSI) and the Camp in Charge (CiC) due to the lack of acceptance of female leaders in Rohingya communities are additional barriers to women's leadership. However, some religious leaders in FGDs expressed the importance of women's leadership as long as they only focus on addressing issues related to women

### Livelihood and Mobility

**Bhasan Char has fewer income-generating opportunities compared to Cox's Bazar.** Although finding income-generating opportunities in Cox's Bazar was challenging, access to livelihood opportunities in Bhasan Char is even more limited. For example, 42% of respondents stated they earned cash through daily labor and 23% from NGO work in Cox's Bazar. However, after they arrived in Bhasan Char, only 10% of respondents earned money through daily labor and 9% from NGO work. The Rohingya community continually expresses their need for a stable income in Bhasan Char to meet their basic family needs, with some, especially men, taking desperate measures to migrate to other countries secretly despite safety and security issues as they seek ways to provide for their families financially. If available in Bhasan Char, women would choose to tailor, work with NGOs, farm, and raise livestock, while men would choose daily labor, small trading, farming, and working with NGOs.

**Women and men have different views on women earning income outside the home.** Due to cultural norms, Rohingya women often are not allowed to work outside the home. However, perceptions and practices around women's economic participation, leadership, and empowerment shifted upon arrival in Bangladesh as the Rohingya community underwent lifestyle changes for survival.<sup>12</sup> More women expressed a desire to work (52% of female respondents fully agreed, and 29% somewhat agreed) and more women reported feeling responsible for supporting their families financially (49% of female respondents fully agreed, and 27% somewhat agree). However, women

also expressed a need for more livelihood training and opportunities due to a lack of education and work experience. This view was also shared among adolescent girls that reported prioritizing income generations in their future to support their families. On the other hand, Rohingya men still hold on to traditional views with 58% of male respondents disagreeing to the idea that women should support the family financially.

**Women's mobility and sense of security are tied to their clothing.** When it comes to leaving the house alone, most Rohingya women feel more secure wearing a burka and both women and men consider it important for women to wear a burka when they go outside. However, some women might not have burkas or choose not to wear them, which impacts their mobility and participation in livelihood activities due to societal pressure and expectations for women to wear burkas. Also, family rules and religious practices are additional factors that limit their freedom of movement. Despite these restrictions, women have greater mobility in Bhasan Char compared to Cox's Bazar due to improved general security, better road conditions, and increased acknowledgment that women may need to work outside the home to support their families. The cost of transportation is the main barrier to movement for men and receiving approval from the Government of Bangladesh to travel outside of their communities is the main barrier to freedom of movement for both women and men.

### Gender-based violence (GBV) and Protection

**The infrastructural setting of Bhasan Char does not promote a safe environment.** Although many people left Cox's Bazar to escape from intra-community conflicts and seek a safer life in Bhasan Char, the island's infrastructure is not currently set up to help people, especially women, feel safe. For example, Bhasan Char is not part of the national power grid, leaving residential areas completely dark after sunset. This increases safety and security concerns, especially for women and girls, as people do not feel safe moving around in their residential areas due to reports of assaults happening at night. Also, unoccupied shelters on the island are found to be used for anti-social activities by gang groups. Some women and girls are encouraged not to travel far from their community, remain home after dark and avoid areas where family and social networks are not near-by.

**Women/girls and men/boys have different perceptions of security and safety concerns.** When asked if security concerns increased for women and girls in Bhasan Char, 63% of female respondents answered women and girls face increased security concerns while 58% of male respondents mentioned they do not see an increase. Although the island has improved general security due to decreased levels of intra-community conflicts compared to Cox's Bazar, security concerns are mainly related to pre-existing social norms around GBV and/or crime based activities (i.e drugs or gangs). In Bhasan Char, women and girls consider moving outside alone at night, sexual violence or harassment, domestic or intimate partner violence, and early marriage as main security concerns. For men and boys, their main security concerns include pressures to conform to traditional norms, drug abuse, human trafficking, gang group activity, and abduction.

**There is a lack of gender-based violence services available.** According to UNHCR in March 2023, Bhasan Char does not have the appropriate infrastructure to provide comprehensive GBV services and lacks a quality case management system.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, services that do exist such as legal aid services are not easily available and women and girls' safe spaces (WGSS) are often far away from shelters. However, 63% of female respondents mentioned that GBV survivors receive enough assistance, while 51% of male respondents mentioned that GBV survivors do not. The discrepancy between available services and people's understanding of what GBV services could be attributed to sensitivity around talking openly about such topics and a lack of understanding about GBV and protection risks and services in general.

**GBV and protection risks are increasing as people adopt negative coping mechanisms to survive.** The lack of food and livelihood opportunities increases protection risks as some may turn to child labor, survival sex, child marriage, or dangerous migration to other countries to provide support for their families. Although respondents expressed awareness that such coping strategies are not preferred, practices such as child marriage are viewed as unavoidable by parents to survive in Bhasan Char. Also, it is a culturally accepted belief that marriage and polygamy provide protection to Rohingya women, forcing many women to enter marriages and putting them in vulnerable positions with potential exposure to domestic violence, especially if their families cannot provide enough money for dowry.

**People turn to community leaders to address protection concerns.** When it comes to seeking support for protection concerns, most women and men (64% female respondents, 73% male respondents) approach male community leaders such as *majhis* or *imams*. It is important to note that since more community leaders are men, women might not feel comfortable speaking openly about sensitive issues with them, highlighting the need for more



female leaders. People also seek support from family, friends, and a system that collects feedback and complaints from Rohingya community members known as Info Hub/FIC. The lack of trust in law enforcement makes Rohingya people reluctant to seek their support due to fear of harassment or demand for bribes.

### Perception of humanitarian support and priority needs

**Rohingya communities trust NGOs to provide information about aid.** Most respondents (86% female, 92% male) mentioned that NGOs should provide aid information to Rohingya communities in Bhasan Char. If not from NGOs, more women prefer to receive information directly from community leaders compared to men (61% female, 34% male) and more men prefer to receive information from the government compared to women (46% female, 56% male).

**Fewer women are consulted by aid organizations than men.** Although the majority of respondents (63% female, 66% male) mentioned that they were well-informed about the assistance available in Bhasan Char, 57% of female respondents mentioned they were not consulted by aid organizations compared to 40% of male respondents who were not consulted. This could indicate that the services available are more geared towards the needs of men or are not culturally sensitive to the needs of women. Women mentioned that food is their top need, followed by healthcare and then livelihoods. For men, their top need is livelihood, followed by food and then healthcare.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

### Protection

- The RGA has made it clear that the Rohingya community on Bhasan Char is composed of various individuals and households that have different cultural backgrounds, capabilities, and susceptibility to vulnerability. The Protection Sector should continue mainstreaming protection concerns with other sectors, so a comprehensive approach is strengthened across the community to address varied protection risks that have different impacts on different groups in the diverse Rohingya community.
- Protection Sector has already identified the gaps in GBV-related services. Humanitarian partners should consider providing additional support to this sector so all Rohingya people in Bhasan Char from diverse backgrounds will have just access to necessary support when they face GBV-related challenges. This includes ensuring access to justice for GBV survivors. Men and boys also need to engage with GBV-related activities for various purposes.
- Community governance structures and participatory mechanisms should ensure that women, girls, men, boys, and gender diverse individuals of all ages and diverse backgrounds contribute to their own protection. This can include the formation of representative committees to enable Rohingya communities to exercise their right to participate and influence the design and delivery of humanitarian programmes.
- In facing serious livelihood challenges, an increasing number of people are expected to engage with harmful practices as negative coping mechanism. Risk mitigation programs need to be implemented in cooperating with the Protection sector. Community leaders as well as law enforcement agencies need to be trained on addressing harmful practices in a more inclusive and effective way.

### Education

- There is a pressing need of education support for Rohingya girls and women in Bhasan Char in consideration of the fact that the majority of them have never received education before arriving in Bangladesh. Not only does education help girls and women reduce protection risks such as child marriage, human trafficking, or child labour, it also paves the way for women to take up leadership roles.
- Rohingya girls continue facing mobility challenges in Bhasan Char. To increase girls' attendance to educational services, creating an enabling environment is essential, by engaging with the entire community including men and boys as well as securing caregivers' full buy-in.

### Food Security

- The RGA shows that Rohingya women and girls have not attained an equal social position with Rohingya men and boys. Because of such structural inequality, Rohingya women and girls have more risks of having less access to food than their male counterparts. Similarly, the food insecurity could lead to the increased tension and conflict within households. Detailed studies need to be conducted to better understand how the food security deteriorates gender equality in the Rohingya context.

- More than 20% of the Rohingya people consider they do not receive enough information about humanitarian assistance in Bhasan Char and more women than men report that they are not consulted enough for humanitarian assistance they are entitled to. In case food assistance is reduced in Bhasan Char following the same path of Cox's Bazar in future, the careful consultation with Rohingya people, particularly girls and women, is necessary to ensure everyone understands potential consequences of the reduction of food assistance.

## Health and Nutrition

- The Rohingya community in Bhasan Char has been grappling with food insecurity since the day they arrived in the island. A strong health monitoring system needs to be strengthened to keep track of adverse impacts of food insufficiency, incorporating intersectional perspectives. Equitable access to quality health services must be ensured to all Rohingya residents from different backgrounds
- In view of declining humanitarian assistance and existing livelihood challenges, those who engage with harmful martial practices are expected to rise. It is important to strengthen a health system so it addresses the unique needs of Rohingya girls and women from all backgrounds and diversities, including mental health support. Raising awareness on Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights is critical as well.

## Livelihoods and Skill Development Sector

- Giving women access to more livelihood opportunities will lead to the empowerment of Rohingya women. However, the sudden structural change in the Rohingya community can induce a backlash from individuals who do not appreciate such change. The entire community needs to be sensitized about the importance of women engaging with livelihood activities for the future of the Rohingya community. Diverse voices of women of different backgrounds also need to be made visible within the community.
- Particular groups within the Rohingya community such as persons with disabilities, elderly people, gender-diverse people, and young women tend to be left behind from participating in livelihood activities because of their accessibility barriers. A clear guideline needs to be developed for the selection of program participants in a way that takes into consideration of access barriers of different groups in the community. The livelihood sector should pay particular attention so particular groups in the community do not dominate the control of community assets

<sup>1</sup> Islam, R., Islam, T., Alam, M., Hussain, M., and Haque, M. (22 November 2021). "Is Bhasan Char Island, Noakhali district in Bangladesh a sustainable place for the relocated Rohingya displaced people? An empirical study." Spring Link. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s43545-021-00281-9>

<sup>2</sup> Government of Bangladesh and UNHCR. (7 June 2023). "Rohingya Refugee Response/Bangladesh: Joint Government of Bangladesh - UNHCR Population factsheet (as of 31 May 2023)". ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/rohingya-refugee-responsebangladesh-joint-government-bangladesh-unhcr-population-factsheet-31-may-2023>

<sup>3</sup> Government of Bangladesh and UNHCR. (11 February 2024). "Rohingya Refugee Response/Bangladesh: Bhasan Char Population Factsheet (as of 31 January 2024)". ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/rohingya-refugee-responsebangladesh-bhasan-char-population-factsheet-31-january-2024>

<sup>4</sup> Rahman, S. (February 2, 2017). "Plan to move Rohingya to remote island prompts fears of human catastrophe." The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/feb/02/bangladesh-government-plan-move-rohingya-remote-island-human-catastrophe>

<sup>5</sup> Cowper-Smith, Y. (17 June 2020). "The Bhasan Char Relocation Project – Implications for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh". ReliefWeb. Link: <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/bhasan-char-relocation-project-implications-rohingya-refugees-bangladesh>

<sup>6</sup> Al Jazeera. (29 January 2021). "Bangladesh sends third group of Rohingya refugees to island." Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/29/bangladesh-sends-third-group-of-rohingya-refugees-to-island#:~:text=Nearly%201%20C800%20refugees%20sent%20to,groups%20to%20halt%20the%20process.&text=Authorities%20in%20Bangladesh%20have%20sent,a%20halt%20to%20the%20process.>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> WFP. (June 2023). "Refugee Influx Emergency Vulnerability Assessment Reva - 6) Report". World Food Programme. [https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000150690/download/?\\_ga=2.238209414.784528505.1690173732-497685824.1684129786](https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000150690/download/?_ga=2.238209414.784528505.1690173732-497685824.1684129786)

<sup>9</sup> Ahsan, Dr M. (15 Sep 2020). "An intersectional analysis of gender amongst Rohingya refugees and host communities in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh" UNHCR, CARE and ActionAid. [https://reliefweb.int/attachments/6b69cc90-e03e-3419-8199-a82b4a40691f/Coxs-Bazar-Gender-and-Intersectionality-Analysis-report\\_2020.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/attachments/6b69cc90-e03e-3419-8199-a82b4a40691f/Coxs-Bazar-Gender-and-Intersectionality-Analysis-report_2020.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Translators Without Borders. (1 October 2020). "The Language of Leadership: The words that define how majhis are seen and understood in the Rohingya refugee response." TWB. [https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/TWB\\_Bangladesh\\_Majhi\\_Report\\_FinalEN.pdf](https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/TWB_Bangladesh_Majhi_Report_FinalEN.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group. (March 2022). "Four Years On" Shifting Gendered Perceptions and Experiences – Comprehensive Gender Analysis within Rohingya and Host Communities in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh." GiHA. [https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/ap-Comprehensive-Gender-Analysis\\_web\\_FINAL.pdf](https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/ap-Comprehensive-Gender-Analysis_web_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> UNHCR. (March 2023). "Bhasan Char Inter-Agency Operational Update, March 2023." UNHCR. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/100553>