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Gendered aspects of distress migration: Taking note of Rohingya voices

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Abstract

A qualitative study conducted among Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh provides empirical confirmation of two types of adverse consequence that frequently occur following distress migration: harsh and exclusionary host state policies, and exacerbation of power inequities (and related abuse) within the refugee community. This article describes research that explored the circumstances of female Rohingya refugees living in the Cox's Bazar refugee camps in Bangladesh after fleeing genocidal violence in Myanmar. The refugees describe harsh gendered aspects of their forced displacement, including limited access to needed protection and services as well as intra-community hardships exacerbated by the impact of displacement and segregation. Both sets of outcomes constitute preventable human rights violations that require redress.

Keywords

Rohingya, Gender-based Violence, Cox's Bazar, Distress Migration

Introduction

Human migration, within and across state borders, comprises about 13.3% of the world population (UN DESA, 2020 and IOM Slovak Republic, 2021). Many factors determine its impact – positive or negative – on migrants’ subsequent quality of life. This general observation also applies to the subset of human migration that is forced upon people because of circumstances beyond their control. We have defined this common type of migration as “distress migration”, a phenomenon that includes but is broader than refugee flight, and is driven by conflict, persecution, oppression, insecurity, climate change or other intolerable situations (Bhabha, 2018). According to UNHCR (2020a), the number of forcibly displaced people globally reached 79.5 million by the end of 2019, 26 million of whom were refugees. Many flee unbearable hardship at home only to encounter severe obstacles to their search for protection, peace and a sense of well-being during and after their migrations. The circumstances of Myanmar’s Rohingya minority, refugees from genocidal violence in their home region of Rakhine State on Myanmar’s western coast, provide a vivid example of this negative pattern. Before addressing Rohingya circumstances in detail, some general research findings on the living circumstances of distress migrants are presented by way of contextual framing.

Many of the challenges facing distress migrants are a direct product of state policies designed to deter unauthorized migration (Hansen, 2014). Such policies include confinement in unsatisfactory, even perilous, spaces where access to fundamental human rights is elusive. Additional challenges arise as by-products of these official policies, when members of distress migrant communities adapt to their new circumstances by engaging in conduct designed to protect, contain or restrict the activities of subordinated family members. Increases in child marriage, in prohibitions on social mobility and withdrawal of young girls from school are examples of such conduct (Bartels et al., 2018).

Large, segregated camps where refugees have minimal access to self-sustaining opportunity or social integration are harsh environments for living, a situation only exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Vonen et al., 2020). Limited access to basic health care and education opportunity, inadequate lighting, poor hygiene, unsafe drinking water, and accommodation ill-suited to local weather conditions have been extensively documented for decades, a situation captured by Giorgio Agamben’s (2005) powerful description of refugee camps as “zones of exception”, that set refugees apart and compromise their daily life. These service failures are compounded by rights violations perpetrated within the camps. Numerous reports have documented the violence, abuse and exploitation rampant in these settings (Hossain et al., 2021; Digidiki & Bhabha, 2017; UNICEF, 2016)

These overcrowded and under-resourced sites magnify gender inequalities, with women and girls most susceptible to experiencing violence and exploitation and denial of their rights to education and income generating opportunities (WHS, 2016). Since 1990, a series of UN declarations and resolutions have focused on the urgent need to protect women in emergency settings. They include, most recently, the 2018 G7 Whistler Declaration on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action (G7 Development Meeting) and the 2019 UN Security Council resolution on ending sexual violence in conflict (United Nations Security Council, 2019). These normative initiatives have been complemented by practical frameworks to encourage greater focus on the safety of women and girls (Real Time Accountability Partnership, 2018) and minimum standards for ensuring the protection of women in humanitarian settings.

Thus far, these initiatives have been underfunded and born little fruit (Marsh & Blake, 2020). In 2014, only 12% of UN funding earmarked for crises response was allocated to gender focused programs (WHS, 2016); in 2016, 2017 and 2018, only one third of the funding requested for prevention of gender-based violence in humanitarian settings was granted (Marsh & Blake, 2020). Funding constraints impede the roll out of essential services such as sexual and reproductive health care, safe sanitation facilities, specialist medical attention for GBV survivors, obstetric and maternal and child health needs. The failure to involve women in affected communities in decision-making processes is another problem that impacts both the function and design of relevant facilities (Freedman, 2010), an enduring legacy of colonial and paternalistic attitudes. These assumptions generate homogenizing attitudes to “the needs of refugee women” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2017) and ignore the particular intersecting forms of oppression that circumscribe refugee women’s access to power and control over resources (Crenshaw, 2016). Prevailing assumptions have continued to privilege certain types of knowledge and expertise. It is these flaws that perpetuate the “victimicity” that informs attitudes to refugee women, rather than any inherent gendered vulnerability embedded within them. Examples include ill-informed decisions about privacy, daily schedule, appropriate training materials and format, and who within the household to award humanitarian benefits to (UNHCR, CARE & ActionAid, 2020).

Drawing on qualitative research in Cox’s Bazar in 2018, this article analyzes the multiple challenges facing female Rohingya refugees, including their exposure to violence and their lack of control over relevant resources. It concludes with programmatic suggestions to advance their rights and agency.

Background: The Rohingya Crisis, an example of local non-integration

Four years after the August 2017 genocidal atrocities against the Rohingya minority in Myanmar (Human Rights Council, 2018, UNHCR, 2019a) 884,041 Rohingya refugees (UNHCR, 2021) are still living well below basic international humanitarian standards, in makeshift camps in the littoral region of Bangladesh known as Cox’s Bazar. The COVID-19 pandemic has further compounded an already massive humanitarian challenge (Guglielmi et al., 2020a). Though the Rohingya situation can only be solved through concerted international efforts, these have not been forthcoming (Gaffar, 2018), and as a result the primary responsibility rests with Bangladesh. Though the country has laudably allowed Rohingya survivors onto its territories, it has insisted on strictly constrained rights to signal a limited commitment.

As Bangladesh is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol (UNHCR, 2015), it registers Rohingyas as ‘forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals’ denying them official refugee status and any of the rights attached to such a status. Rohingyas’ precarious legal status under domestic law (HRW, 2018), is exacerbated by the fact that they are stateless (having been deprived of Myanmar nationality in 1982) (Burma Citizenship Law, 1982). A series of anti-integration measures constrain their daily lives, including restrictions on freedom of movement outside the camps (recently secured by external fencing), exclusion from the state school system and from the domestic labor market (HRW, 2019). The authorities have also been considering radical relocation scenarios, including repatriation to Myanmar and relocation of Rohingya to a remote island in the Bay of Bengal (Fortify Rights 2020a). A brutal military coup in Myanmar on February 1, 2021 (Goldman, 2021) further complicates the political situation and any prospect of repatriation. As a matter of international law and policy, the refugee regime offers three durable solutions for refugees: voluntary repatriation, local integration, and refugee resettlement (UNHCR, 2003). However, Rohingya refugees have no meaningful access to any of these solutions. Given the recurrence of genocidal action and continuing denial of Burmese citizenship, voluntary repatriation is not an option (HRW, 2020). Local integration is also unavailable as continuing segregated encampment demonstrates. Finally, resettlement to a third country has only benefitted a minuscule proportion of the relevant population. Between 2006- 2010, only

920 Rohingyas were resettled to Australia, Canada and the US before the program was suspended (Ruma & Krishna, 2020), less than 50% of the refugees whose cases were submitted to resettlement countries and less than 0.5% of the Rohingya hosted in Bangladesh within the same period who were categorized as “of concern” to the UNHCR (Kiragu, Li Rosi & Morris, 2011). In short the Rohingya situation demonstrates the bleak failure of global responsibility sharing (GCR, 2018).

Methodology

The qualitative data presented in this article were collected as part of a larger *mixed methods* study of educational services and protection challenges affecting Rohingya children and young people. The article draws on thick data¹ gathered through Key Informant Interviews (KIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Data collection was preceded by a literature review and Institutional Review Board approval. One of the authors visited Cox’s Bazar twice (in October 2018 and August 2019) to conduct preliminary and follow-up interviews with key informants. The office of Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) of the Government of Bangladesh granted permission for the study².

15 focus group discussions were conducted with children aged 7-14 attending learning centers, parents of children aged 7-14, young Rohingya aged 15-24, and Rohingya teachers (all female), generating data from 136 participants (see table 1 in the Appendix for a breakdown of the focus groups). Additionally, 10 interviews were conducted with key informants including Rohingya community leaders, members of the International Humanitarian Education Sector in Cox’s Bazar and non-governmental actors.

FGD participants were recruited by employing a stratified purposeful sampling methodology. Students, parents, and teachers were approached randomly during the administration of the surveys³ and asked whether they wished to participate in a group discussion. All the necessary permissions were secured. Key informants were recruited by employing the expert sampling methodology that allowed the research team to approach those who would “yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge” (Patton, 2015 p.276).

Data collection and analysis

Data collection took place between May 6 and 16, 2019. FGDs with children and parents were carried out at a dedicated space in Learning Centers close to participants' dwellings. FGDs with young people were conducted in spaces where young male Rohingya gather as well as in Women Friendly Spaces, settlements located within the camps, specifically designed to cater to the needs of Rohingya women.⁴ Interviews took place at a location chosen by participants. The students and parents FGDs were gender-mixed, in contrast to the teachers’ and young people’s FGDs. The teacher FGDs included only women as only women are hired as teachers, while separate focus groups were held for young male and female Rohingya. The main reason for holding separate FGDs for female and male Rohingya was to avoid compromising women’s ability to voice opinions on gender issues that may affect them

¹ For more information about the notion of “thin” and “thick” data see also Geertz, 1973.

² The RRRC is the governing body that is responsible for the provision of humanitarian assistance for and support to Rohingyas in Bangladesh. The body has the support of the United Nations and the international community.

³ For the needs of the survey, a multi-cluster sampling methodology was employed to allow for a practically and logistically viable sampling process. 10 camps from Ukhia and 5 Camps from Teknaf were chosen based on the number of students per camp. From each camp 2 PSU (block/subblock) were then randomly selected. A more detailed presentation of the methodology employed for the surveys is beyond the scope of this article.

⁴ Women Friendly Spaces (WFS) are formal or informal places where women and girls can feel safe, both physically and emotionally, express themselves and engage with culturally appropriate activities (HealthNet TPO & Unicef South Sudan, 2016).

directly. FGDs with Rohingya participants were conducted in the Chittagong dialect of Bangla, spoken by the data collection team, a dialect similar to the Rohingya language and easily understood by Rohingya native speakers. Expert interviews with non-Rohingya participants were conducted in English. FGDs were led by a local data collection team specializing in working with the Rohingya population and fully aware of their cultural and social norms. Expert interviews were conducted by both the local data collection team, as well as one of the authors in August 2019. Prior to data collection, participants received all necessary information about the study to allow for verbal informed consent. In the case of children, permission was also requested from their parents. To ensure the anonymity of participants, no identifiable information was requested. FGDs were then translated into English by members of the local data collection team fluent in both the Chittagong dialect of Bangla and English. To ensure quality control, a representative sample of the discussions was back translated to the Chittagong dialect of Bangla by an expert fluent in both languages. The local data collection team also provided notes about concepts and community structures mentioned by the interviewees to assist the research team's analysis.

During preliminary analysis, a tentative thematic coding scheme was developed based on dominant concepts stemming from the interviews. Data were further analyzed to identify secondary topics. The final coding scheme reached saturation after the analysis of 10 FGDs and 6 key informant interviews, at which point no additional concepts or themes were revealed. In the discussion of findings, verbatim quotes are presented to support results, asserting the 'conformability' and dependability of the data collected (Maiter & Stalker, 2011).

Findings

Rohingya women as gendered targets of ethnic cleansing: The Past in the Present

In the genocidal campaign against Rohingya, gendered aspects of persecution were central and included physical violence, systematic rape, gang rape, forced impregnation and death (HRW, 2017). The rape of Rohingya women constituted an integral tool of war, wielded to drive the exodus of the entire Rohingya population. The choice of atrocity also reflected a gender-based motivation familiar from other conflict settings: to assert male domination over women (Thomas & Regan, 1994), enhance the perpetrators' masculinity and build unit cohesion, and thereby a stronger fighting force (Cohen, 2013). The gendered experience of the atrocities perpetrated by the Myanmar authorities was repeatedly referenced in this study. Study participants mentioned the significant psychological sequelae of the gender-based violence they experienced and its ongoing impact on traditional familial norms and networks of care. A key informant commented: 'Rohingya women not only experienced the violence themselves but they also lost their support system. They lost their husbands and parents, they are left alone to fend for themselves post-conflict.'

Gender-Based Violence within the Refugee Camps in Cox's Bazar

In addition to the daily material hardships arising from food insecurity and deficient health care access, Rohingya women reported various forms of sexual and gender-based violence perpetrated or caused by humanitarian actors, by military personnel, organized crime syndicates, male members of the host society, and finally males in their own refugee community.

Violence perpetrated by humanitarian failures to protect Rohingya women

Overcrowded living conditions

Refugee camps are rarely safe places for refugee women (UNHCR, 2006). In the case of Rohingya, though scattered across 34 camps within the Cox's Bazar area, more than 630,000 are housed in Kutupalong-Balukhali Expansion Site, the largest settlement of its kind

(UNHCR, 2019a). Whereas international best practice sets 45 sqm per person (IRC, 2019) as a minimum standard, the population density in this camp is less than 3.5 square meters per person (Strategic Executive Group and Partners, 2019). Congested living arrangements increase gendered insecurity (United Nations Environment Programme, UN Women, UNDP & UNDP/PA/PSO, 2020). As a female adolescent participant explained:

There are at least 8 members in each of the families. In the family there are elder brother, sister-in-law and parents. But there is only one small room for such a big family. We have to sleep there together along with our parents. That is very uncomfortable for the young girls and also shameful for the brother and sister-in-law. But we have to accept all of that and have to live in that uncomfortable environment.

Overcrowding is known, not only to jeopardize people's privacy, but also to generate psychological effects: people are more likely to socially withdraw and develop anxiety, hostility (Zeedyk, & Smith, 1983) and aggressive behaviors (Baum & Koman, 1976). Cox's Bazar is no different.

Poorly designed facilities

Almost all participants, regardless of age or gender, commented on the shortage of resources and the poor camp design as factors aggravating gendered violence. Some drew attention to the outer camp boundaries and the latrines and water pipes, as sites of particular vulnerability for women. A key informant explained:

There is usually one tube well in a bloc where Rohingya can collect drinkable water – There are approximately 600 families in a bloc- Women and girls have to wait alone for hours in the line, among hundreds of people, to access water or have to go to another tube in another bloc. It is very dangerous for them as they move around alone. Anything can happen to them, particularly when they have to take alternative routes.

Failure to include refugee women's advice in the design of sanitation facilities has, predictably, resulted in an absence of privacy, no gender-segregation, poor lighting and other features which render these spaces deeply unsafe for women (UNHCR et al., 2020). Female participants reported their fears when using the facilities, particularly at night, and parents noted their concern for their daughters' safety. In the words of one of them:

Women and girls do not feel safe to go to the latrines because latrines are not segregated. They feel unsafe when they have to use the same latrine as men or have to wait in the same line. [...]Men harass women on the way to the latrines and outside the latrines and can even abuse them there.

Breaking the cycle of violence against women in the camp settings requires meaningfully including the gendered concerns voiced by the women and girls themselves at every stage of camp planning and organization (UNHCR 2015). Instead, even in those refugee settings where women refugees are formally allocated a role in the decision-making and planning process within the camp, their actual impact is minimal because meeting agendas are pre-determined and dominated by humanitarian actors whose views of what refugee women need drive policy (UNHCR et al., 2020). Communication between community members and aid agencies is largely one-way initiated by the aid agency to provide information, rather than to generate a role in decision making. This "info as aid" approach does not really encourage women to share their concerns or participate directly in key decision affecting them.

Lack of Gendered Provision in Livelihood Programs

The lack of gender inclusiveness extends to learning centers within the camps. The existence of gender-mixed rather than gender-separated classrooms, although based on adherence to inclusive educational principles, has fueled parent concerns about their daughters' safety, and led to the withdrawal from educational engagement of many young girls. The balance between advancement of universal non-discrimination pedagogical norms and promotion of gender equity in practice in a specific context requires careful calibration and consultation. A recent study of educational access for Rohingya refugee children in Cox's Bazar showed how the feeling of insecurity, and a lack of gender-separated learning facilities led to reduced educational outcomes for girls: only 1% of girls as compared to 9% of boys aged 6 to 14 years currently were attending Learning Centres (OXFAM International, 2020). As a young female participant explained:

If separate education for the girls could have been arranged, they would have the opportunity to study. Rohingya parents do not want girls and boys to study together. [They are afraid], so they do not allow girls to participate in education. Now if education is arranged separately for girls then the girls can go to school and get opportunities.

Though economic empowerment is a critical component of a multi-sectoral refugee response, sustainable livelihood opportunities for refugee women remain limited, while existing opportunities do not leverage their transformative potential fully (UNHCR, 2016). In Cox's Bazar, livelihood programs are generally designed by the humanitarian actors and reflect their assumptions about cultural gender norms (UNHCR et al., 2020). The opportunities on offer seem targeted at keeping women and girls engaged in some activity rather than in promoting skill development, earning potential self-reliance, or independence. Traditional female occupations such as embroidery and tailoring, while familiar, are rarely unucrative in contexts where mechanization and mass production dominate markets. Poorly informed assumptions about women's work thus consign women to unregulated, informal labor markets to generate income (Gordon, 2019). A key informant explained:

A significant number of households, almost 16%-17%, is female-headed. These women have to rely on the limited aid distribution to survive. There are not many sustainable livelihood opportunities for these women. They may end up engaged in dangerous activities to generate an income.

Effectively integrating gender equality into livelihood programs requires both a gender analysis of how Rohingya women's role has shifted as a result of the displacement and real-time consultation with the women themselves to ensure priorities reflect their needs. Such initiatives have to be integrated into effective training and income generating opportunities for the community as a whole.

Lack of Gendered Mental Health Care

The legacy of Rohingya exposure to pervasive violence, coupled with the impact of hardships inside camps, increase the likelihood of depression, serious mental health issues and social withdrawal (UNHCR, 2019b). According to a UNHCR study (2019b), 15% to 20% of Rohingya could be suffering from mild to moderate mental disorders and as many as 3% to 4% from severe mental disorders. These numbers do not accurately reflect the breadth and scope of mental health problems among the Rohingya community. The cultural opacity of western mental health concepts for this community, and the stifling social stigma surrounding mental illness have impeded effective documentation and relevant service provision (Tay et al. 2019). The majority of female participants in this study, across the age range interviewed, described how displacement and camp conditions had affected their psychological and

emotional state, while key informants explained how the lack of gendered mental health care services perpetuated their suffering.

Constant fear as a result of previous persecution and failed international intervention was among the most common psychological issues mentioned. One of the participants explained:

We feel scared all the time. No one could prevent the government of Myanmar from oppressing the Rohingya people [...]. The government of Myanmar could kill 20 families by attacking one locality. But now they can kill hundreds of families if they attack only one bloc. We feel afraid of bomb attacks every day.

A small number of women and girls explained their ongoing experience of trauma and stress by reference to spirit possession. To quote one young female participant:

Jinns⁵ enter into people's body if they go outside their home late at night. People go mad if Jinns enter their bodies. There is a girl in our bloc. Everyone says that she is affected by the influence of Jinns. She became mad after Jinns entered her body. She used to go outside the home in the evening and night. She didn't tie her hair well and didn't cover her hair well. That's why she became mad.

This terminology is usually applied to people who suffer from emotional or dissociative disorders, epilepsy, or psychosis and present symptoms such as paranoid delusions, visual hallucinations, anti-social behavior, or seizures (Tay et. al., 2018). Almost all participants, regardless of age and gender, described how the trauma they endured and continues to generate nightmares, somatic symptoms, feelings of sadness, and instances of uncontrollable crying. As a young female participant noted: 'I get very emotional because I remember. I start crying. I feel so sad remembering my household in Myanmar. I want to go back. I have stomach aches all the time (remembering my home).'

Ineffective Efforts to Combat Child Marriage

The perennial sense of physical and sexual danger that Rohingya women and girls experience has accelerated rates of child marriage within the camps. Perceived as a protective strategy against sexual violence and family dishonor, child marriage is chosen by parents for its assumed benefits despite the detrimental impact of child marriage on young girls' overall health and well-being. Male parents spoke of choosing the lesser evil to protect their daughters. As one noted:

We do not allow girls over the age of 12 to go outside their homes. We arrange marriage [...] as a solution to eve-teasing so they will not become victims when they go outside. We believe that the problem will be solved if the girl gets married.

Though the practice of child marriage has long existed among the Rohingya, it was restricted in Myanmar by state law and effectively banned by military forces (Melnikas, et al, 2020). In Cox's Bazar, however, living circumstances have lowered community barriers to the practice. Quantitative data are not yet available to confirm an increase but qualitative data from other studies indicate that child marriage is much more common than it was among Rohingya in Myanmar (Melnikas et al, 2020).

⁵ In the traditional Islamic folklore, Jinn is a supernatural creature, usually mad of fire, capable of taking different forms such of a human, a ghost, or animal.

Violence perpetrated by external forces

Despite the early acceptance and hospitality shown by most local Bangladeshis to Rohingya refugees, competition and conflict between the host and the refugee community have increased over time and are now widespread. Soon after the mass exodus, the demographics in the area changed as Rohingya began outnumbering locals by two to one (Mahmud, 2017). Locals responded to this dramatic change by evidencing increasing hostility towards Rohingya, casting them as competitors for jobs, security threats and drivers of environmental destruction (Alam, 2018). Nativist hostility and resentment have led to cases of violence and harassment, including assaults on Rohingya women. Both young female participants as well as parents and community leaders commented on these occurrences. A young female participant explained how being a Rohingya and a woman in Cox's Bazar is both a driver of and a justification for harassment:

When I go to school, local young men threaten me. They say that they will “tabij” (hypnotize) me. They wouldn't do this if I was a Bengali girl. They do this because I'm a Rohingya woman. I can not get help from anyone in this regard. Because, if I complain to the Majhi they will say to me [...] that it is not possible to take any kind of steps against the locals.

The feeling of insecurity is increased by rampant crime within the camps where criminal networks, and rival gangs operate freely (Amnesty International, 2020). All participants explained how the sense of security even in their own “home” has changed since they were forced out of Myanmar, and how the risk of abduction, robbery and physical violence looms large. A young female participant explained:

We are mostly scared of robberies [...] 2 months ago, an 11 years old girl's earrings were stolen. The girl was sleeping with her mother at night. Around 1:00 am the thieves cut the room fence and took her earrings tearing apart her ears. The girl shouted and cried. Then everyone woke up and saw that her ear was bleeding [...]

A fear of robbery and abduction was mentioned by the most interviewed children as well as many young people and parents. As mentioned, crimes could have been opportunistically perpetrated by members of the Rohingya community, taking advantage of the absence of effective security; but they could also have been the result of organized crime linked to outside criminal networks. A male participant explained:

A month ago a child was kidnapped from the camp. The father was working [...] abroad and had just returned to the camp. They asked a ransom of 3 lakh Taka (300,000 Bangladeshi Taka)⁶. The kidnappers released the child after they received the money.[...] I believe that this was done by Rohingya people, because only Rohingya could know that the father had money to pay. Bengali people could not know that.

Accurate numbers for people abducted are not available, but the task force of the Ukhiya Upzila, an administrative region in the Cox's Bazar District, reported 400 documented abduction cases between September 2017 and May 2018. Given the fear attached to reporting cases to the Bangladeshi police and the slow response from authorities and the UN (Fortify Rights, 2020b), these numbers are likely significant underestimates.

⁶ Approximately \$3,5

Violence perpetrated by the Bangladeshi authorities

Violence against Rohingya women is also perpetrated by those responsible for keeping law and order inside the camps. No quantitative data documenting this exist, but there have been recurring allegations of sporadic beatings, looting and intimidation of Rohingya women by Bangladeshi soldiers in the camps (VOA News, 2018). As a young female participant explained:

12 Bangladeshi army people came to our house at midnight.[...] They were checking the house for two hours. They also checked my body and my younger sister's body by hand. But they did not check my mother by hand. (While they did this), they told the rest of the family to go outside. My mother did not want to go outside so they kicked her out of the house. They forbade my mother to cry because as she was crying a lot.

The absence of legal remedies together with the lack of intervention by family and community members generates a sense of impunity for perpetrators and abandonment for the women. The same participant explained: 'We went to the Mahji⁷ to complain but he could not do anything because of fear. [...] Nothing can be said against them. The army comes and goes according to their will. We have to endure many tortures. It hurts us so much'.

Violence perpetrated by the Rohingya community

Inadequate security exacerbates the risk posed by intra-community abuse, a risk that is heightened by the pressures to which all camp residents are subjected. A recent International Rescue Committee (IRC) report (2020) indicates that rates of reported GBV in camps are in line with global rates, a worrying finding given the significant barriers that Rohingya women face in reporting gender-based violence. Prior their forced exodus, the Rohingya lived in a highly conservative society governed by patriarchic social norms, with women strictly confined to the private sphere (Bentil & Adu, 2020). Displacement, unemployment, the breakdown of traditional family structures and new, highly restrictive living conditions inside the camps have challenged traditional roles and destabilized power dynamics within Rohingya family units. Challenges to male authority and identity may have led to an increase of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) with consequences for Rohingya women's physical and psychological wellbeing (UNHCR et al., 2020; Guglielmi et al, 2020b).

Besides IPV, other forms of gender-based violence and discrimination were also reported in the Cox's Bazaar camps. More than half of the participants mentioned that verbal harassment and intimidation, also referred to as "eve teasing" were common, particularly when women leave their homes for educational or training activities. As a young female participant described:

When the young girls go out (to the learning centers or the Women Friendly Spaces), young men harass them and speak badly about them. They keep making bad remarks to the girls like "why are you roaming around when you should be married, why do you need to go to school when you should get married and start a family.[...] These men are either from the local or the Rohingya community.

⁷ Mahji are Rohingya camp leaders who report to the Bangladeshi civil servants who operate in the camp alongside the Bangladeshi military. The "Mahji system" is an informal justice mechanism that aims to resolve conflict and injustice with the assistance of local leaders. If the conflict cannot be resolved by the local leaders then the senior official administrating governance within the camp will become involved (IRC, 2019).

Another young female participant explained how the educational and training opportunities available to them in the camps have in practice generated new hardships and restrictions, that end up preventing them from seeking greater relative autonomy:

People will curse us if we go out to learning centers after the age of 12. They will talk bad about the girl who attends learning centers.. They will [...] say that she is getting arrogant. They will also say that she is a bad girl and moves outside the house unnecessarily. People will talk badly about our character. This is why we don't go to learning centers.

Conclusions

Whether by design (as a deterrent) or because of failings in humanitarian provision and competence, refugee settlements continue to foster environments that pose grave threats to their inhabitants, exacerbating gender inequalities and power imbalances. The situation of Rohingya refugee women in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar, illustrates the harsh gendered consequences of distress displacement and post displacement life.

This study highlights the different forms that gender inequalities take inside Cox's Bazar and underscores the many risk factors that exacerbate gender-based violence for female Rohingya. From denial of access to basic services to persistent verbal harassment, from physical violence to sexual abuse, intimate partner violence and child marriage, gender-based violence in Cox's Bazar is driven by an intersection of multiple factors – legal, economic, social, cultural and psychological – that are inadequately addressed by international state actors, local state authorities and humanitarian organizations. The urgency of investing in reforms that afford female refugees a decision-making role, and, safe and rights respecting living conditions and transformative educational and employment opportunities is evident.

Existing interventions and measures that treat Rohingya women as a homogenous group, while ignoring how traditional social norms and power dynamics change and evolve in refugee settings, do not adequately address the intersecting inequalities that feed gender-based violence. If the Rohingya community has no experience of “Women Friendly Spaces”, and if such spaces are viewed with suspicion by a community that had no hand in designing them, then alternatives need to be carefully developed instead. If traditional craft-based activities are ineffective in generating the financial rewards or skill sets that women heads of household aspire to and that have economic potential in a mechanized and highly competitive working context, then more creative strategies could be jointly explored. If gender segregated educational opportunities are considered more generative of female opportunity and autonomy by girls and women than their co-educational equivalents, these alternatives should be discussed within the community with a view to innovation. Ultimately the diverse components of the “gender element” (Thomas & Regan, 1994) can only be adequately deconstructed and acted upon with leadership from the affected women and girls themselves. Moving beyond an emergency response to a sustainable, just and long-term, gender-based response requires a holistic approach that incorporates the strengths and resilience of Rohingya women as a key resource. Ultimately the Rohingya refugee community as a whole needs access to fundamental rights such as a secure legal status, nationality, and inclusion within the broader society, in order to regain a sense of security and the ability to thrive. Given the increased risk of gender-based violence within the segregated camp setting, special attention could usefully be paid to the cultural barriers that impede discussion of gender-based violence, to traditional idioms of distress, to pathways for seeking help, and to traditional healing methods that might ensure a culturally appropriate response. In this context, collaborative strategies that enable humanitarian actors and local community members to cooperate with and learn from Rohingya women and other Rohingya community leaders on the development of healing tools and services would be of considerable benefit. Finally, gender-based interventions require substantial investments to ensure the scale, quality and objectives of the needed response. The paltry funding for the GBV sub-sector

described above cannot provide a basis for the initiatives required to address the grave violations and discriminatory conduct currently in evidence. An urgent and transformative rights based agenda is called for.

Limitations

The findings of this study should be considered in light of its limitations. The study was conducted over a limited time period, with fieldwork preceding the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, this study does not include an exhaustive documentation of the challenges that female Rohingya face across all the camps. However, because of the diversity of the groups interviewed and the similarities across camps, the findings have strong relevance to the improvement of gender-based consultation, community engagement, programming and policy implementation in all the Rohingya refugee camps.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix

Table 1. Number of FGDs and participants per different target group			
Target population	Number of Participants Per FGD	Focus Groups	Total Participants
Children aged 7-14	15	1	15
	8	1	8
Total			23 (19 female and 4 male students)
Young people aged 15-24			
a) Young women	8	3	24
b) Young men	8	4	32
Total			56
Parents			
Total	10	3	30 (21 female & 9 male parents)

Female Learning Instructors	9	3	
Total			27
Total		15	136