

# Doing right by women and girls in Cox's Bazar

## **Gendering perspectives on social cohesion**

June 2021

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## Acknowledgements

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**Cover photo: A Rohingya refugee looks at the full moon with a child in tow at Balukhali refugee camp near Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, 3 December 2017.**

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Rashida Begum, a Rohingya refugee woman sits with her son in front of her makeshift tent in the Kutupalong camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, 24 August 2018.  
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## 1

# Introduction

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**Analysis and interventions to strengthen social cohesion in Cox's Bazar have primarily focused on how the influx of Rohingya refugees into the area has impacted on host communities living directly adjacent to the camps, and the grievances between them. Attention has been given to the most visible forms of conflict and tensions, such as competition over resources, public violence and crime. Responses have included mitigating tension drivers, with differentiated access to resources such as humanitarian aid, employment and shelter. Research has also highlighted the specific forms of insecurity that women and girls face in Cox's Bazar, including increased levels of gender-based violence (GBV) and poor access to justice. Most of this analysis has highlighted the plight of Rohingya women and girls.**

However, current analysis of and responses to tensions, violence and insecurity in Cox's Bazar suffer from two gaps: first, the ways in which humanitarian programming itself has exacerbated tensions and, in particular, insecurity for women and girls; and second, how current framings of social cohesion miss or at least mask some forms of gendered insecurity and gendered drivers of conflict and violence. Current gendered analysis also focuses on the divisions or grievances between women in both communities, missing the many common experiences and vulnerabilities they share.

Social cohesion is an important programming area in contexts with high levels of displacement, where often-traumatised communities enter spaces where host communities are already suffering insecurities and impoverishment. Yet social cohesion is commonly used to maintain the status quo within and between communities, creating 'in and out' groups and reinforcing or creating new forms of exclusion.<sup>1</sup>

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The humanitarian response has made efforts to integrate social cohesion into interventions in Cox's Bazar. There has also been increasing awareness of the risks women and girls face, as well as increased interventions on GBV prevention and women's empowerment schemes. However, little attention has been paid to how social cohesion and GBV intersect, and how gendered dynamics of social cohesion have been impacted by COVID-19-related measures. Intersections include: common root causes and drivers of gendered violence and discrimination and of intra- and inter-community tensions; the ways in which social cohesion practices, and the interventions of authorities, can exacerbate exclusion and insecurity for women and girls; the fact that some interventions might be working at cross purposes; and the gender gap or problem that many social cohesion interventions have – which excludes the safety, security and justice needs of more than half the refugee population from policy and practice.

This gap not only means humanitarian responders miss vital opportunities to increase the safety and security of host and Rohingya communities in an inclusive, sustainable and effective way – it also means that by missing these links, social cohesion systems, interventions and governance actors are actually undermining women and girls' rights, safety and security.

From 2018 to 2019, Saferworld and BRAC<sup>2</sup> worked together on a UK Aid-funded project on enhancing social cohesion within and between refugee camps and Cox's Bazar host communities, with a strong emphasis on GBV and women's empowerment. This report is based on evidence gathered during and after that project. It includes two in-depth evidence reviews of relevant literature, including analyses, situation reports and briefings from local and international aid responders; GBV service and response mapping and related needs assessments; and field research conducted over 18 months from July 2019 to January 2021. The research included interviews and focus group discussions conducted in July 2019 with residents of Camps 16 and 23 and adjacent host communities, including different age groups of women and men, Camp-in-Charges (CiCs),<sup>3</sup> *majhis*,<sup>4</sup> local women's organisations, and local and international humanitarian organisations; and two participatory gender-sensitive conflict analysis workshops for Camps 16 and 23, conducted in September 2019 by Saferworld and BRAC. These were supplemented with further interviews with local women's organisations, and local and international humanitarian organisations between December 2020 to March 2021.

During our research, both before and after COVID-19 emerged, it was evident that for both Rohingya and Bangladeshi women and girls – particularly in camps such as 16 and 23 and their adjoining sub-districts, where the two communities live in close proximity – the tensions that have emerged between the two communities have had detrimental and life-threatening effects, as have some of the measures put in place to foster social cohesion. Women and girls in both communities have small and diminishing spaces where they feel and are safe, or where they are able to shape any decisions that affect their lives. They have little to no access to security and justice, while governance structures and processes that are in place to protect them are, in reality, increasing their vulnerability in exponential ways.

This report looks first at gender norms and dynamics in Cox's Bazar. It then provides a gender-sensitive conflict analysis of the main drivers of tensions and conflict in Cox's Bazar, within and between Rohingya refugee and host communities, including how humanitarian responses are aggravating these – particularly to the detriment of women and girls. It also further considers the ways in which social cohesion efforts, structures and processes are working against women and girls. In doing so, the report highlights how gendered dimensions of social cohesion are being overlooked, with women and girls not just 'falling through the cracks' of interventions to strengthen social cohesion but, in many cases, being harmed as a result of interventions that prioritise a male-centric community harmony model and which are grounded in patriarchal norms, rules, laws and authorities over women and girls' lives, safety and basic human rights. This is now more important than ever – at a time when COVID-19 has severely affected women and girls in these communities, and when there is no certainty as to when Rohingya people will be able to return safely to Myanmar.

## 1.2 Background

### 1.2.1 Displacement, rupture, competition and confinement

Since 2017, more than 745,000 Rohingya people have fled Myanmar and made their way to the Cox's Bazar region of Bangladesh, fleeing persecution and human rights violations by the Myanmar military.<sup>5</sup> In the Ukhiya and Teknaf sub-districts of Cox's Bazar, which are the focus of this report, the Rohingya live in a densely populated area with makeshift refugee shelters, which is side by side with the mostly informal housing of Bangladeshi families. Host and Rohingya communities in Cox's Bazar have historical ties based on solidarity and collaboration; there has been a community of Rohingya in Cox's Bazar for several decades, which has integrated into the Bangladeshi community.<sup>6</sup> Family, marriage and kinship bonds have existed for many decades between the two communities, namely between the Rohingya across the border in Rakhine and Bangladeshi Muslims in Cox's Bazar.

The histories of both populations – under British colonisation and independence struggles – are full of experiences of displacement, exclusion, discrimination (for the Rohingya under the British and then the Myanmar state) and acute violence, particularly against women and girls. Cox's Bazar also borders the Chittagong Hill Tracts, a group of districts in south-eastern Bangladesh that border India and Myanmar. The arrival of government-sponsored Bengali settlers to the Chittagong Hill Tracts has also impacted demographics in Cox's Bazar, while exposing it to intercommunal conflicts between Buddhist and Muslim communities in 2012. The legacies of such traumas and their root causes have been left unaddressed and unaccounted for, while colonial, militarised and patriarchal structures and systems continue to undervalue women's roles in society and seek – through cultural norms and practices, policy and legislation – to control their bodies, rights and behaviour.

Over 1 million Rohingya people now live in Cox's Bazar; 55 per cent are children.<sup>7</sup> Women and girls make up more than 52 per cent of the Rohingya population living in camps, with about one-sixth of families headed by a single mother. Almost every woman and girl in the Rohingya community in Cox's Bazar has either experienced or witnessed incidents of gender-based violence (GBV).<sup>8</sup>

At the beginning of the refugee influx in 2017, the host community was deeply sympathetic to the refugees and in many cases provided the first response to the emergency, giving shelter and food to the newly arriving Rohingya.

However, the influx of the Rohingya into a historically poor and under-resourced region has increased pressure on food and land availability, local economies, public services and employment.

This has in turn increased tensions and insecurity.<sup>9</sup> With the most recent arrivals, Rohingya and Bangladeshi host communities have experienced rupture and loss – of material resources, of homes, and of control over their future. For the Rohingya arriving in Cox's Bazar after 2017, the recent past has been one of extreme violence, loss of lives and loved ones, destruction of homes and villages, and forced displacement. Their situation is precarious and extremely fragile: they lack legal status in Bangladesh, and their daily lives and futures are decided by the Bangladeshi government, international organisations and the government of Myanmar. While the Bangladeshi government is already implementing repatriation programmes, the recent political situation in Myanmar further decreases the limited opportunities Rohingya have for a safe return in line with international protection standards.

For Bangladeshi host communities, their everyday lives have been disrupted by the arrival of 'outsiders'. The newcomers have shaped their access to services, such as education; their access to resources, such as food and land; their social practices, such as marriage – including polygamy; and they have experienced a loss of livelihoods. There is a palpable sense of injustice in these losses, along with resentment about what appears to be, and is experienced as, bias towards 'the others'. This is worsened by humanitarian practices when it comes to distribution of and access to resources. The continuing presence of the camps and the Rohingya are beyond the host communities' control and this too shapes their sense of being unable to take control of their own future.

Fuelled by these tensions, and by the economic and political pressures the increased population is putting on Bangladeshi authorities at the local and national levels, the government's responses have been increasingly geared towards redressing some of the grievances related to unequal access to resources between the communities. They have included a crackdown on Rohingya people's movement and livelihoods, and an effort to move some 100,000 Rohingya from the current camps to

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Bhashan Char in Hatiya upazila of Noakhali District, where the government has built shelters with basic facilities. Around 10,000 Rohingya had already been shifted to Bhashan Char at the time of writing.<sup>10</sup> The Rohingya have also been subject to a public smear campaign that portrays them as a 'burden' and a threat to 'national security'.<sup>11</sup> In September 2019, the authorities ordered mobile phone companies to shut down network frequencies inside the refugee camps, while the security forces recommended erecting barbed wire fencing around the camps.<sup>12</sup> But on the third anniversary of the influx in August 2020, the government decided to lift the ban, following repeated requests from UN agencies, as well as from local, national and international NGOs.<sup>13</sup>

Tensions within and between refugees and host communities and the vulnerabilities of both populations have only increased with the COVID-19 pandemic and pandemic-control measures. The World Health Organization (WHO) recently reported 5,407 cases of COVID-19 in the host community and 367 cases among the Rohingya, with the

disproportionate number of confirmed cases between the communities reflecting more testing among the host community than the Rohingya.<sup>14</sup> On 25 March 2020, in an attempt to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in the camps, the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner issued guidelines to significantly reduce humanitarian activity in the camps.<sup>15</sup>

The COVID-19 crisis has had a specifically detrimental impact on the safety, dignity and needs of women and girls, who were already bearing the

brunt of the humanitarian crisis and the tensions within and between communities. In 2019, data from 19 centres operated by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) across 19 camps where GBV screening was carried out demonstrated that at least one in every four women or girls screened between July and December 2019 were GBV survivors.<sup>16</sup> UN Women has called GBV in camps a 'shadow pandemic', and has published reports on the impact and scale of it during COVID-19. Pandemic-related restrictions have increased GBV and other vulnerabilities faced by women and girls.<sup>17</sup> Despite this, women and girls' voices are not being meaningfully consulted or included to inform a gender-targeted response.<sup>18</sup>

## 1.2.2 Gender norms and power dynamics in Cox's Bazar

Both Bangladeshi host communities and Rohingya people are affected by the highly patriarchal structures and systems of the societies they live in. These are based on gender norms that view men and boys as more valuable and powerful than women and girls. In both communities, these norms are connected to conservative cultural and religious practices.

### Gender norms and societal expectations for Rohingya and Bangladeshi men and women, boys and girls

Both Rohingya and Bangladeshi men are socialised to be 'protectors, providers, decision-makers, and breadwinners' if they are to be considered to be 'real' men. Women, on the other hand, are supposed to be 'caregivers for family, kind and polite, obedient and submissive, good mothers, religious, and beautiful' if they are to be considered 'good' women.<sup>19</sup> Because of these norms, women and girls are expected to stay in the home and be close to their family from an early age, whereas men and boys are able and expected to be more present in the public sphere. This segregation starts early: girls get separated from boys before puberty, are given domestic chores, and are not allowed out for educational or recreational activities unless they are segregated. Most girls don't attend school beyond Grade 5 and those who do are usually from higher-income families. Girls are kept inside the home and boys are more able to play and engage outside.<sup>20</sup>

Marriage is very important for both communities; however, it is particularly so for Rohingya women in the camps, as it is the only way they can achieve social and economic security. In the case of Rohingya women, the only way they can get legal status is by marrying a Bangladeshi man. Upon marriage, a woman is responsible for unpaid domestic work (and paid work, depending on the family's economic circumstances) and caring for the husband's family. Women, particularly in the early stages of marriage, are under the rule of elder women in the household, usually the mother-in-law, who dictates norms around behaviour, childcare and other gendered tasks.<sup>21</sup>

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## The impacts of COVID-19 on women and girls in Cox's Bazar<sup>22</sup>

- Women, girls and other marginalised groups (for example, people with disabilities, the elderly and children) face overwhelming difficulties accessing sufficient food. This is even harder for women and girls within these disadvantaged groups, single women, mothers, and pregnant and nursing women and girls.
- Women and other marginalised groups are mostly engaged in the informal economy and depend on daily waged work, leaving them more vulnerable to economic hardship. People with disabilities, transgender women and women sex workers have been hit the hardest.
- COVID-19 containment measures have also impacted sex workers and reduced their ability to negotiate safe sex. Women sex workers reported an increase in exploitative behaviour by clients (such as refusal to pay the agreed rate after using their services, and refusing to use protective equipment like masks and contraceptives).<sup>23</sup>
- GBV and, in particular, intimate partner violence (IPV), polygamy, and violence by men against women sex workers (including transwomen sex workers) have increased, while access to support is more restricted. Community-wide transphobia has also worsened, alongside increased men-perpetrated violence against transgender men and women. Safety and security risks have increased with the decreasing presence of the authorities in the camps.
- Child, early and forced marriages have increased and girls are most affected by disruptions in education and livelihood services.
- Programmes to protect and empower women and girls have been disrupted, including services for sexual reproductive health, protection, and women- and girl-friendly spaces. Services for women sex workers have also been put on hold. Several months on, programming and access restrictions remain in place. GBV services have been reduced to individual case management.<sup>24</sup> The IRC reported a 50 per cent decrease in the number of women accessing women's protection and empowerment services since the onset of COVID-19, due to isolation and fear.<sup>25</sup>
- Women's already unequal access to health, protection, and water and sanitation services has become even more unequal, and children, transgender men and women, and people with disabilities also face low levels of access to services. Menstrual health management is harder, due to delays in the distribution of materials and difficulties for women and girls in washing and drying their menstrual cloths, resulting from taboos around menstruation – particularly while men and boys are in the house. This is increasing infections.
- Gender-transformative programming – including leadership and skills building for women and strategies to end harmful practices and abuse such as early, forced and child marriage and GBV – rely heavily on activities that can no longer take place. These include livelihoods and education opportunities for women and girls, broader community engagement, behaviour change, awareness raising, advocacy, and engaging men and boys in accountable practices.<sup>26</sup>
- Women and girls now have increased workloads, as all the family is at home and care and domestic work falls on them.



**Social spaces in and around the camps – markets, mosques, latrines and madrasas (places of education) – are all dominated by men and boys.**



what is not acceptable for a woman or girl to do. Honour-related norms and systems lead to the seclusion of women in private spaces during various stages of a woman's life, including through practices such as the imposition of 'purdah' (the physical separation of women and men, including by using objects such as screens and curtains and/or by covering women's faces and/or bodies, and the exclusion of women from public spaces). Activities carried out by women that are perceived as being dishonourable, or breaking *purdah* or gender norms – including taking part in any public or political role – were cited by women and men in the camps as a reason for the spread of COVID-19.<sup>27</sup>

GBV has historically been highly prevalent in both communities. It is both socially acceptable and a common tool that men use at home and at the community level to reassert their authority when threatened by changes in gender roles and external factors.<sup>28</sup>

*'Most of the [Rohingya] women are illiterate. All of them believe that once married, their husbands have absolute right to dictate their way of living. They also believe that they have to be obedient and try their utmost not to displease their husbands; and if the husbands are not satisfied with their "services", then they accept to be punished – shouting, beating, sexual violence, humiliation, and in some cases starvation. It is common for them not to complain of domestic violence. In fact, they do not consider husband disciplining them as "domestic violence" – it is just a matter of marital rights of their "husbands" – claimed many of the women interviewed.'*<sup>29</sup>

Our research showed that in response to raised community tensions, increases in crime and insecurity, frustrated masculinities and now COVID-19, men were tightening control over women's behaviour and fulfilment of expected gender norms.

Despite this, the activities and roles of men and women have changed significantly according to both communities' experiences of Rohingya displacement. In the private sphere, women are 'stepping' into productive roles that are traditionally taken on by men. At the same time, men from both the refugee and host communities are less able to fulfil these traditional 'masculine' roles, which leads

to them feeling frustrated and needing to reassert some level of control – in both violent and coercive ways towards the women in their lives.

COVID-19 has further affected these dynamics. While some Rohingya women suggested that Rohingya men and boys had started helping more with household chores since the onset of COVID-19, the majority said that the responsibility for most unpaid care work still fell on them and on girls. They also spoke of increased stresses and tensions in the home, the impact lockdown was having on mental health, and increasing IPV.<sup>30</sup>

### 1.2.3 Shrinking space: women and girls' movement in Cox's Bazar

Women and girls have been pushed into increasingly limited spaces – more so since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rohingya women's mobility outside camps is highly restricted. Before COVID-19, they could only leave the camps if they had court appearances or to go to the nearest hospitals when health issues were too complicated to be treated at health facilities inside the camps provided by organisations like Médecins Sans Frontières or the International Organization for Migration (IOM). This latter instance was extremely rare, as there is little clarity around which channels they have access to in terms of formal legal redress due to their lack of legal status.

The limitations on their movement and almost total exclusion from any kind of social engagement are stark. They spend most of their time at home: typically a 4 metre x 6 metre shelter made out of bamboo and tarpaulin, shared with five to seven people and providing little privacy or space. *Purdah* is also practised in these spaces. Women do not identify home as a safe place either. When asked to draw a visual landscape to safely move around the camps, Rohingya women and girls showed how constrained and limited they were. Social spaces in and around the camps – markets, mosques, latrines and madrasas (places of education) – are all dominated by men and boys. Women go out to fetch water from water points in the camp (usually in groups as a safety measure) and to collect rations from designated collection points on fixed days, usually accompanied by husbands, fathers or brothers.

Adolescent girls (aged 12–17 years) move very little beyond home, latrines and school, but do not identify any of these as being 'safe' (especially latrines). They are not allowed to step outside their homes, unless accompanied by their mothers, and are always covered from head to toe. Mothers fear that their daughters will be preyed upon; to prevent





Women participate in a therapy session at the RW Welfare Society healing centre in the Rohingya refugee camp on 27 October 2019 in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.  
© Allison Joyce/Getty Images

this, girls are often married off as soon as they reach puberty and start menstruating. Girls stop attending madrasas after they start menstruation. They can go to health facilities inside the camp accompanied by their mothers.

A Rohingya adolescent girl described how there were lots of people, mostly men and boys, hanging around the latrines, causing anxiety when using the washrooms – especially at night – for fear of being attacked and/or raped. She explained how there was a real sense that “We can’t go anywhere, boys are everywhere”:

*“Young girls have the smallest of worlds and the most violence; they don’t have the resources or the power to establish themselves.”*

A participant in a Rohingya women’s focus group discussion

Young girls aged 9–11 years and adolescents aged 12–16 years love to dress up and usually wear make-up, even inside their sheds. The young girls are only allowed to go to the madrasas inside the camps, where they learn in either Burmese or Arabic. Adolescent

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**Young girls have the smallest of worlds and the most violence; they don’t have the resources or the power to establish themselves.**

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girls do most of the chores and look after the other family members (a majority of families have more than ten members). Young adults aged 17–18 years, if not married, are usually engaged in romantic relationships. A group of young girls (11–13 years) described their future plan as “getting married”.

Bangladeshi women in the host communities do not face the same restrictions on movement – although they are always cautioned to cover themselves and not to venture out after dark. The women cited

incidents of severe sexual violence, which were not reported or addressed, making them concerned for their safety. Women from the host communities shared the view that while men could go to the market, the mosque, playground, or even places far from their house and at night, women had few places to go: “We have to stay home” (host community women).

Young girls go out to play near their houses, but many host community girls and young adults (16–24 years) have stopped going to school or college as they are employed by various organisations to work temporarily at camps as interpreters with lucrative wages. Education institutes are empty.

While young women employed by aid organisations go in and out of their houses and to and from the camps regularly (leaving campsites after 4pm, like all other organisation staff), there is a general fear of ‘men’ and the disruption they can create.

COVID-19 restrictions have impacted the ability of women and girls to negotiate the gender norms that govern their lives. Prior to the pandemic, women could move more freely while their husbands were not at home; but with men at home all the time, women’s movement and agency have been being increasingly policed. Some of those interviewed, including men police officers, disclosed that this situation impacted women’s ability to seek support, including from the police, NGOs or other assisting agencies.

Because of shrinking space, women and girls also have very limited access to information technology (IT), and their access is far more limited compared to men’s access. Women’s access to IT is also highly dependent on men. Restrictions on phone and internet access in the camps already leave Rohingya people without a clear understanding of the COVID-19 outbreak and how to limit exposure. This is worse for women and girls, as their ownership of mobile phones is lower. While roving *tuk-tuks* (or auto rickshaws) and loudspeakers are used to deliver lifesaving messages, some areas of the camp are inaccessible for vehicles, so members of households who do not have access to public spaces – namely women, girls and people with disabilities – do not receive these messages, potentially increasing their vulnerability.<sup>31</sup> The analysis also highlighted Rohingya women’s preference to receive information from women Rohingya door-to-door volunteers.<sup>32</sup>

Access to information was also hampered by information being disseminated in a language that the refugees were not familiar with, or through inaccessible formats such as written flyers. As women, girls and older people have lower literacy levels in the camps, this is yet another barrier they face.<sup>33</sup> Rohingya women have also reported reduced access to service provider hotlines and feedback and reporting mechanisms, as there was a shift to remote, phone-based communication and reduced presence of women workers in the camps.

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## Notes

- 1 SwissPeace and Koff Foundation, 'Case study: Social cohesion and peacebuilding in the Rohingya refugee crisis in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh' ([https://koff.swisspeace.ch/fileadmin/user\\_upload/JLPM\\_CaseStudyBangladesh.pdf](https://koff.swisspeace.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/JLPM_CaseStudyBangladesh.pdf))
- 2 BRAC is a Bangladesh-based development and humanitarian organisation. See: <http://www.brac.net/>
- 3 Camp-in-Charges (CICs) oversee humanitarian actors and coordinate and liaise with government and security in the camps.
- 4 The 'majhi system' was established by the Bangladesh authorities as an emergency response arrangement upon the sudden influx of many refugees in August 2017, primarily for: estimating the population; identifying immediate survival needs; and linking Rohingya refugees with emergency assistance from various providers. The *majhi* system was not established with the participation of the Rohingya communities and consequently lacks any representation of and accountability to the refugees. In most cases, in fact, *majhis* were appointed by the Bangladesh army. *Majhis* are not traditional leaders or elders, nor are they necessarily respected members of the community. Source: Protection Sector Working Group Cox's Bazar (2018), 'Protection Considerations on the "Majhi System"', June ([https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/protection\\_considerations\\_on\\_the\\_majhi\\_system\\_pswg\\_fv\\_june\\_2018.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/protection_considerations_on_the_majhi_system_pswg_fv_june_2018.pdf))
- 5 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), 'Rohingya Refugee Crisis' (<https://www.unocha.org/rohingya-refugee-crisis>)
- 6 Since the 1970s, Rohingya refugees have been arriving in Bangladesh from Myanmar. In the 1990s, more than 250,000 resided in refugee camps in Bangladesh. In the early 2000s, all but 20,000 of them were repatriated to Myanmar, some against their will. This respite ended in 2015 and by 2017, an estimated 300,000 to 500,000 Rohingya refugees were in Bangladesh.
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- 8 Nelson E, Reyes Saade D, Greenough P (2020), 'Gender-based vulnerability: combining Pareto ranking and spatial statistics to model gender-based vulnerability in Rohingya refugee settlements in Bangladesh', *International Journal of Health Geographics* **19** (1).
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- 10 *Dhaka Tribune* (2021), '2,200 more Rohingyas on their way to Bhashan Char', 2 March 2021 (<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/rohingya-crisis/2021/03/02/2-200-more-rohingyas-on-their-way-to-bhashan-char>)
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Mohib Ullah, a leader of Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights, speaks to other Rohingya people who are having trouble collecting relief supplies in Kutupalong camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, 7 April 2019.  
© REUTERS/Mohammad Ponir Hossain



# 2

## Gendered dynamics of social cohesion in Cox's Bazar

### 2.2 Competition over services, livelihoods and resources

As the situation of the Rohingya has become more protracted, there have been ruptures in host communities' sympathetic attitudes – due to a combination of overstretched services, struggles over limited resources, and host communities' negative perceptions of the humanitarian assistance provided to refugees, while their own impoverished communities are not benefitting from such support.

Pressures and disruptions in Cox's Bazar have been heightened by the material impacts of a significantly increased population, leading to tensions between the host and Rohingya communities. While the Rohingya population have also experienced important material losses, these took place elsewhere prior to their arrival at the camps (and are therefore not seen by the host communities). For host communities, there have been more immediate and visible losses since the Rohingya arrived. Both materially and socially, the apparent disparities in losses and access to resources are a deep source of tension.<sup>34</sup> Host communities have lost land, livelihoods, and access to facilities and services.<sup>35</sup> Competition over resources (land, firewood and aid) and livelihood opportunities are therefore a major source of tension and conflict.

Restrictions on the Rohingya population's right to work have led them to work informally in the local economy. While the Rohingya pointed to the insecurity of informal work, host communities felt that this threatened their own

livelihood opportunities. Host communities also felt that the Rohingya population had better access to new employment opportunities – overall leading to increased unemployment for them. While Rohingyas are prohibited by law from taking up employment, they were reported to be often informally employed by businesses that profited from their lack of status and offered them lower wages. Small businesses, traders, fishermen and landlords were seen as the key actors driving this issue, as they were said to abuse the opportunity to maximise profit by hiring cheap Rohingya labour, leaving local men in a precarious position. This oversupply in the labour force has created unhealthy competition – with host community men either facing unemployment or feeling compelled to take lower wages. It has become a significant barrier to social cohesion within and between communities. An example cited widely was that of Rohingya men driving *tuk-tuks* without driving permits and with no consequences, taking a main source of income from host community men.

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Encroachments on land by NGOs (see 'The impact of the humanitarian response' below) have directly impacted agricultural productivity and undermined the host communities' capacity to undertake subsistence farming, affecting their food security. Men's inability to provide has contributed to a rise in crime and an increase in GBV, especially domestic violence and IPV. Such land encroachments have also affected women's livelihoods, as they grow food for domestic purposes to fulfil their social caregiving role. This was one of the few economic activities that women engaged in outside of the home. Its decline has limited their mobility outside of the household even further. Women also complained that land and kitchen gardens used by them for domestic food production were frequently contaminated by inappropriate wastewater disposal. This has led to increased domestic violence and IPV, as women are seen as not fulfilling their roles. It has also

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The way in which aid is distributed and its impact on local economies – undermining prices in the markets, undercutting the cost of labour, and disrupting host community markets and livelihoods – also increases tensions, crimes and specific forms of violence, including GBV.

contributed to narratives of the Rohingya population contaminating and polluting land.<sup>36</sup>

Reports from refugees highlighted the rapidly deteriorating security dynamics between them and host communities, stemming from fears around COVID-19. The pandemic's economic impact also fuelled conflict dynamics around resources. Rohingya people were blamed for the spread of the virus, due to the unhygienic and overcrowded conditions in the camps. Meanwhile, food prices either increased or food availability was severely hampered, the few income-generating opportunities there had been were reduced – with a particular impact on local small

businesses – and day labourer options completely dried up due to lockdown measures.<sup>37, 38</sup> This has fuelled high levels of economic insecurity and host communities' antagonism towards the Rohingya population.<sup>39, 40</sup>

## a) The impact of the humanitarian response

Various examples were provided of humanitarian policies and practices that contribute to, or are perceived as contributing to, competition over resources and livelihoods:

- Host communities point to the Rohingya having better access to new employment opportunities, and that international and national humanitarian providers favoured them for low-level job opportunities.

- NGOs were accused of appropriating host community land to provide services for the Rohingya population, with the army and CiC officials complicit in forcing them to give up their land for services they would not benefit from. Such mechanisms contributed to a sense of insecurity (both physical and financial), with little or no recourse to justice.

*“[An] NGO was trying to build a toilet on my land – I didn't let them do it because I know if I let them build a toilet, they'll gradually capture my whole land for giving shelter to the Rohingya. The army tried to threaten me. Think about it. I am the Chairman of the area; this is my area. And the army was forcing me to do this. So how can general host community people save their lands?”*

Host community chairman

- One of the most enduring sources of tension was the feeling that NGOs provided resources for the Rohingya population, but not for host communities – deepening feelings of loss and 'injustice'.<sup>41</sup>

*“We give our land to them and they get support from the NGOs and the army . . . Rohingya children go to NGO schools and get biscuits. Our children are going to school in front of the Rohingya school, they are getting upset and telling parents ‘why aren't we getting biscuits?’”*

Host community representative

- The way in which aid is distributed and its impact on local economies – undermining prices in the markets, undercutting the cost of labour, and disrupting host community markets and livelihoods – also increases tensions, crimes and specific forms of violence, including GBV. Host communities felt that the influx of goods provided to the Rohingya population had skewed market prices, and were suspicious that the Rohingya had more than they needed and were profiting by selling goods – including those provided as part of aid packages and goods coming across the border from Myanmar, both legally and illegally – at lower prices.<sup>42</sup>

Some policies have sought to remedy this – for example, the government requirement that 25 per cent of aid is directed at host communities, which also gives *upazila* (sub-district) authorities space to decide how resources should be invested in the host communities. However, there was a sense that this was not enough. This may be linked to the scale of the problem, or the fact that feelings of injustice are intrinsically linked to how authorities deal with tensions and disputes.

This resentment has remained throughout the COVID-19 response, with host communities believing that the Rohingyas have benefited from 'international quality' COVID-19 support which they have not. In particular, many felt that while host

communities had lost their jobs or livelihoods due to COVID-19, Rohingyas were getting all the support they needed from different NGOs.<sup>43</sup> For example, a hospital run by an international NGO (INGO) was cited as providing care to Rohingya people during COVID-19, and various NGOs provided masks and hand sanitising facilities – which were not available to host communities through either external or domestic authorities.<sup>44</sup>

## b) Women and girls' access to resources, polygamy, and women and girls as resources

Competition over resources has multiple gendered dynamics. Pressures on men and boys to fulfil perceived norms of masculinity, such as providing for the family and controlling resources, have made them (and women) vulnerable to exploitation in terms of working conditions and pay, as well as encouraging them to engage in illegal activities, including drugs and human trafficking. A relatively unexplored dimension is that of women and girls' access to resources in the local economy. Unable to secure food, income and safety consistently, women have been exposed to behaviours that have detrimental consequences for their own rights and safety, as well as aggravating community security and tensions.

As men's access to livelihoods decreases, women and girls have become a means for men to access additional resources, including resources that refugee women receive from humanitarian actors. Men in host communities increasingly resort to the sexual exploitation of, and polygamous or extra-marital relationships with, Rohingya women in order to have access to additional resources, including food and other items and women's domestic labour or unpaid work. The increase in men's polygamous and extra-marital relationships with Rohingya women has reduced host community women and children's access to resources, since men control these as heads of households, leading to tensions between both communities.

Host community men have established relationships with Rohingya women, using their position to coerce transactional sex in 'exchange' for resources; for Rohingya women, there is also the hope of a partner who is willing and able to provide protection from other men – for example, protection from assaults outside the camps – and the possibility of obtaining legal status through marriage with a Bangladeshi national. For most women who 'accept' men from host communities in exchange for some degree of protection or legal status, these relationships are mired in inequality and a 'double' hierarchy (of gender and legal-refugee 'status'), given the

disparity in status and inequalities in power. Rohingya women in this situation reported incidents of assault, of feeling afraid and being unprotected.

While polygamy was identified by both communities as a source of tension and conflict, it is rarely explicitly linked to competition over resources – it is, in reality, a dynamic in which women and girls are 'resources' themselves, and in which they also seek to obtain other resources they need. In other words, polygamy does not only have cultural dimensions, but has become an adaptation strategy for women in response to lack of funds and safety.

For men from both communities, polygamy is an issue of cultural values, requiring increased enforcement of social norms around women's sexuality to "protect and preserve their community's cultural identity from another group".<sup>45</sup> This cultural identity is intimately linked to women's 'honour' and 'morality', and is intimately attached to women's reproductive role. For men, the solution therefore is to regulate women's sexual behaviour and movements. Our research points to an often under-analysed dynamic: issues that men perceive as social cohesion challenges are viewed by women and girls as security and justice issues.

*"Many Rohingya women are now involved in sex work which is disrupting our social environment . . . Host community women feel worried, they think access to Rohingya women needs to be controlled as male members, especially their husbands, are going to Rohingya women to establish extra-marital relationships or doing polygamy."*

**Participant in a host community men's focus group discussion**

Controlling measures over women and girls included encouraging or imposing the use of veils and restricting their mobility. Despite decades of research suggesting aid assistance is better managed in the hands of women in humanitarian and development settings, host communities and community and religious leaders suggested altering nominated humanitarian recipients from women to men to reduce women's exposure to the violence – and the temptation – of men.<sup>46</sup>

*"The organisations involving women as relief receivers in the family . . . is the main problem for VAWG [violence against women and girls]. We have already requested relief providers not to pay relief to women. They should give it to men members of the family. Even door-to-door relief isn't possible, as women might be seen by men."*

**Imam**

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**While polygamy was identified by both communities as a source of tension and conflict, it is rarely explicitly linked to competition over resources.**

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Religious leaders such as imams also play a role by reinforcing and encouraging stronger adherence to religious teachings and norms. Women in particular did not welcome religious conservatism, nor was it seen as a solution to the issues they faced; it was instead seen as a driving factor for some forms of GBV. Women in both Rohingya and host communities were very clear that they did not support tighter constraints for themselves or for adolescent girls.

Despite the exploitative nature of many of these relationships, women and girls in both communities were blamed for the rise in extra-marital relations, polygamy and prostitution. They were blamed for bringing dishonour to their families and communities, and perceived as 'corrupting' men and destroying society's 'morality'. They were also blamed for bringing harassment and abuse upon

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**In both communities, there was a reluctance to see men as accountable for their behaviour, with little recognition of the harm and insecurity women faced as a result of men's actions.**

themselves, leading to norms that condoned violence against women and girls because “they deserved it” and “they only have themselves to blame”. In both communities, there was a reluctance to see men as accountable for their behaviour, with little recognition of the harm and insecurity women faced as a result of men's actions.

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The narrative of women as resources was not just linked to the private sphere, as they were also seen (and exploited) as 'public' resources by men from both communities, who collaborated for mutual economic profit through increased prostitution and sex and labour trafficking.

*“Rohingya women don't like our [Bangladeshi] dress; they wear tight-fitting dresses in their houses; male people are attracted by their body and fall in extra-marital relations.”*

**Host community chairman**

*“Our adolescent boys and girls are spending time in hotels by the school, colleges and offices doing immoral incidents.”*

**A Bangladeshi man market trader**

When incidents of GBV or exploitation occurred, women were blamed both for the initial event and then faced a second layer of abuse from the men within their families and households. Meanwhile, the impunity of the men and boys perpetrating the abuse was reinforced. Adolescent girls said that when they were harassed, nobody blamed the boys – yet “the girls are blamed for their situation”. For this reason, they were much more likely to stay silent and to try to protect themselves.

COVID-19 has also impacted this dynamic. Interviews conducted in February 2021 reported increased divorce rates and polygamy, with women and girls in

polygamous families facing increasing difficulties as their husbands and fathers could no longer move easily between households and could not offer financial support and protection in any consistent manner.<sup>47</sup>

## 2.3 Rise in crime and insecurity, including GBV

Increased levels of crime, insecurity and GBV have affected men, boys, women and girls in different ways, and overall safety and security for both communities continues to decrease. However, women and girls have faced the most direct experiences of violence.

While 'security has long been a concern in Bangladesh's overcrowded camps', the 'rapid expansion of the refugee settlements after August 2017 has made the issue more pressing'.<sup>48</sup> Reports have pointed to a struggle for control among many different sides, including criminal gangs, informal leaders and non-state armed actors, with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) – blamed for attacking Myanmar border areas in 2017 – stated by the military as being the cause of attacks on civilians.<sup>49</sup> Rights groups have also accused ARSA of abducting and threatening camp residents, including Rohingya women who worked with aid agencies or people who were seen as being 'informants' for authorities in Bangladesh or Myanmar.<sup>50</sup>

The lack of the Rohingya's legal status was highlighted by host communities as aggravating crime and insecurity. They view the Rohingya as 'unaccountable' for their actions: because they lack legal identity, Rohingyas are not subject to the same formal legal processes and do not face the same potential legal repercussions as host communities for any misconduct. Host communities argued that the non-applicability of the laws or jurisdiction of Bangladeshi law to the Rohingya contributes to the lack of regulation or sanction of illegal activities. Drug dealers, traffickers and other criminal gangs were perceived to be taking advantage of this 'lawlessness' to commit crimes in Cox's Bazar.<sup>51</sup> Violent crime, including drugs and human trafficking, has increased, while a phenomenon of kidnapping the Rohingya has emerged.<sup>52</sup> The illicit drugs economy, including for a drug locally named

Yaba, seems to have grown and has gained prominence in national media.<sup>53</sup> Concerns over crime also seem to have prompted a more securitised and regulated approach by Bangladeshi authorities towards the camps, impairing the ability of humanitarian responders to operate and exacerbating already low levels of access to services.<sup>54</sup>

For women and girls, a major source of insecurity is GBV. International humanitarian protection organisations reported an increase in domestic violence and IPV as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, as people had been inside their homes for long periods of time and because of the impact of the virus on livelihoods. In women-headed households, economic hardship has forced women to increasingly engage in prostitution and/or exploitative relationships with men from both communities as one of the few options available to try to meet their basic needs. The protective value of some control over their own resources has been further diminished in the pandemic, leaving them more exposed to exploitation and abuse, within their households and outside it. There were also reports of Rohingya women who had ventured out in the evening being attacked by organised groups, as there were fewer people out and a reduced presence by authorities. As discussed in subsequent sections, while access to GBV and security and justice services have seen some improvements, there are still gaps in outreach to communities about these services, in strengthening referral mechanisms, and in ensuring adequate coverage of safe and quality GBV services for host communities.<sup>55</sup>

While GBV and IPV were common prior to the pandemic, they have significantly increased. The negative economic impacts resulting from COVID-19 are likely to continue for some time. Women's support networks have been disrupted due to movement restrictions, which have prevented them from visiting family and friends in other shelters, while support facilities have closed, reducing their access to services. The UN Refugee Agency reported that referrals relating to GBV cases have risen in some camps.<sup>56</sup>

The pandemic is also having negative impacts on child protection issues in host communities, with reports indicating an increase in both violence in the home and child labour.<sup>57</sup> For example, child marriage has increased in both communities during the COVID-19 pandemic; this is due to education being stopped and community tensions increasing as a result of unemployment and rising prices for food and other goods.<sup>58</sup> With greater time spent at home and sharpened focus on household resources, parents have also looked to arrange their daughters' marriage at younger ages.<sup>59</sup>

## a) The impact of the humanitarian response

The humanitarian response has not been sufficiently gender or conflict sensitive, especially regarding GBV risk reduction and protecting women and girls from violence and exploitation. For example:

- Latrines and washrooms in the camps are often not segregated by sex and are shared between several families. Women and girls describe them as very unsafe places – they are reluctant to go there at all after dark, which has had severe health and hygiene consequences for women, particularly when they are menstruating or unwell. IOM also recognised the levels of risk to women and girls at night in the camps and the lack of security, with an IOM man staff member reporting that “Sexual abuse is common in the camps. No-one is here after 5pm so anything can happen.”
- Humanitarian practices to ensure women's access to food and resources have not been accompanied by engagement with men and GBV prevention efforts. A significant amount of humanitarian aid has been targeted at women as they make up the majority of adults in the camps (especially at the beginning of the influx, when registration occurred). Food cards were also issued to the women in the family. In Cox's Bazar, this has led to tensions, increased GBV and exploitation – not only in the household but, as previously discussed, also in the public sphere, including rape and human trafficking as well as refugee men seeking exploitative relationships with refugee women to gain access to their resources.
- Women and girls who participated in the research were not aware of GBV services in their camps or areas, nor did they identify safe spaces or supportive services as part of their everyday lived experience. This means that: firstly, women and girls do not have access to supportive services, because they do not know about them and do not know how to find them; and secondly, outreach for these services has not been a priority. This is confirmed by the 2020 Joint Response Plan,<sup>60</sup> which notes that 57 per cent of women interviewed were unable to identify any GBV service points in the camps.

“Humanitarian practices to ensure women's access to food and resources have not been accompanied by engagement with men and GBV prevention efforts.”

## b) Tensions and social cohesion: from public to private and domestic spheres

While social cohesion interventions are commonly framed around tensions, conflict and violence occurring in public spaces, this lens is exclusionary

and gender blind. Evidence is clear on the importance of challenging conventional boundaries between public and private spaces when addressing conflict within and between communities, and strengthening the important intersections between violence against women and girls and peacebuilding.<sup>61</sup> These issues need to be taken into account by the protection/GBV sectors, peacebuilding actors and humanitarian organisations working on social cohesion in Cox's Bazar.

For men and boys, 'home' is a private domain and space. Men participants expressed resentment about 'interference' from outside, especially in terms of how they treated and were expected to treat women. When asked about their most pressing concerns related to insecurity and violence, their answers focused mainly on tensions between men in both communities and with authorities, as well as tensions related to a perceived and/or real threat to the women under their control by other men.

For women and girls, 'home' is the most dangerous place; it is clearly the one place where most incidents of violence against women are reported. When asked about tensions, conflict and security, women's answers mostly focused on violence and discrimination by men, and mainly concerned the home, where they had spent most of their time from an early age.

In both communities, men's responses to threats, tensions and violence were to limit even further the

participation of women and girls in public life, drawing in the lines of 'private' spaces more tightly. Yet women and girls' views on insecurity, tensions and violence showed that they saw the lines between public and private life as blurred, as their presence, safety and participation in both were constrained and controlled by others.

Despite this evident intersection, donors, INGOs and national organisations working on social cohesion continue to see GBV and women's safety in the home as an issue to be addressed by the protection/GBV and gender sectors, and not a social cohesion issue at all. Until social cohesion is reframed to include the tensions and violence faced by women and girls – who are a majority in the camps – humanitarian actors in Cox's

Bazar working on social cohesion will be solely responding to a male-centric view. At the same time, experiences of safety, security and violence, as well as the GBV sector, will not benefit from

peacebuilding approaches to challenge harmful gender norms at the home, community and public levels.

## 2.4 Lack of inclusive, transparent and efficient legal status and governance systems

As discussed, many of the issues linked to competition over resources and to the rise in crime, insecurity and violence are compounded by ambiguities over the Rohingya's lack of legal status. Bangladesh has not legally recognised any Rohingya who arrived as refugees since 1991–92. A law enacted in 2014 prohibits marriage between Rohingya and Bangladeshi nationals; this is an additional barrier for Rohingya populations to access basic rights and integrate, especially for women and girls who depend on marriage on many levels. The Rohingya are unable to access formal education and the government has also limited their freedom of movement within the camps.<sup>62</sup>

Formal authorities do not therefore have jurisdiction over Rohingya people, and have appeared reluctant to address disputes between them or between them and host communities, or to deal with illegal activities and crimes such as theft, rape and sexual harassment committed by them. This means traditional legal channels cannot always be followed, and there is no clarity on which rules apply and which security and justice actors and mechanisms have jurisdiction over these cases.

*"The governance of the Rohingya camps is a hierarchical intersection of [government authorities], humanitarian actors . . . and local community leaders (majhis, camp/block committees, ARSA, respected elders). The various actors have direct implications for the administration of justice, as they are a "patchwork of power-holders all engaged in policing or dispute resolution activities in various ways".<sup>63</sup>*

Rohingya communities (especially women, girls and marginalised groups) are therefore immensely vulnerable, with little access to formal justice mechanisms. Host communities are subject to a complex, exclusionary and ineffective justice system, which has continued to fail women and girls

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Rohingya communities (especially women, girls and marginalised groups) are . . . immensely vulnerable, with little access to formal justice mechanisms. Host communities are subject to a complex, exclusionary and ineffective justice system, which has continued to fail women and girls and rural communities more broadly.

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Policemen seen patrolling at a closed market during the silent protest against Rohingya genocide in Myanmar, at Kutupalong refugee camp in Ukhia, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh on 25 August 2020.

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and rural communities more broadly.<sup>64</sup> They therefore feel that formal mechanisms are unresponsive to their complaints and that the Rohingya are 'unaccountable' for their actions. Both Rohingya and host communities feel there is minimal recourse and, by extension, no effective solution available for intercommunity conflicts. As a result, disputes over resources and crime and related tensions are more likely to escalate into violence.

The main mechanism for resolving disputes between host and Rohingya communities rests with the CiCs and the army – the only structures that intersect with both communities and which have the support of NGOs.<sup>65</sup> The use of the CiCs and the army to enforce host community support of the Rohingya population intensifies host community perceptions that these agencies cannot be impartial or fair, nor that they can expect justice from them. The involvement of the army, in particular, was identified as exacerbating

issues of insecurity, rather than mitigating them, since resolution is militarily enforced and seen as a threat, rather than as generating security.

For the Rohingya, the traditional *majhi* system represents the main entry point to aid distribution, conflict resolution, security and justice response, and related decision-making at the camp level. The system is recognised and legitimised by camp authorities and humanitarian actors. Other traditional figures include imams, local leaders, government representatives and military authorities. There is no codified system nor specific rules for the selection of most *majhis*, who were appointed by the army at the time of the influx of refugees into the camps.<sup>66</sup> A local *majhi* functions as an interlocutor, who may work to resolve conflicts or escalate them to higher authorities.<sup>67</sup> If the *majhi* cannot resolve a dispute, the CiCs will be called upon for support. These security and justice systems are highly authoritarian and patriarchal, and there were

multiple reports of corruption and abuse by *majhis* (such as *majhis* expecting payment, with a widespread belief that whoever paid the most would be the one 'supported' in a dispute). *Majhis* are mostly men in their 40s and 50s; in 2017, just one in more than 1,200 *majhis* was a woman.<sup>68</sup>

Frontline workers and women leaders stated that men and boys were given priority for accessing humanitarian services, with one specifically stating that *majhis* discriminated against women and girls while giving priority to men. There were also reports of harassment of women and girls at aid distribution points.<sup>69</sup> Transgender men and women said that they were often served last and were left out of humanitarian services when resources were limited. Prior to the pandemic, they had to resort to paying 'tips' to receive services, but since the pandemic began they lost their main sources of income – begging from singing and dancing and sex work – and this option was no longer available to them. They also pointed out that they found it difficult to negotiate gender-segregated lines at aid distribution points and facilities.<sup>70</sup>

### a) Governance and security and justice actors favour social cohesion over women's rights and redress against GBV

For women and girls, the alignment between the patriarchal values of both men in host and refugee communities and men in security and justice systems (*majhis*, CiCs, the army and religious leaders) means that formal and informal justice systems are not generally seen as responsive, sensitive or inclusive of their needs and rights.<sup>71</sup>

*"Majhis are biased towards money and to the men ... most of the time they side with the men"*

A man counsellor from CARE humanitarian agency

The *majhi* informal justice mechanism follows a conciliation model to conflict resolution, with close alignment to patriarchal and religious value systems that fail to challenge the kinds of violence and control that women and girls experience. As such, *majhis* intrinsically believe that men are protectors of women, which includes having the right to discipline their wives and take any measures to ensure family harmony is never disrupted.<sup>72</sup>

The 'standard' response to domestic violence is mediation through formal referral pathways. This often results in (men) security and justice actors who are involved in mediation (the police, the CiCs and the *majhis*) putting pressure on women to accept

their husbands' behaviour and return home. Mediation processes and 'responsibility meetings' tend to reinforce the patriarchal dominance of men over women. International and national NGOs working on GBV also go through the CiCs and the *majhis*, as part of established and supported referral pathways.

*"When the husband and wife disputes [IPV] come to the police, they hear the opinions of the husband, the wife, and the parents, and make them understand the disadvantage of divorce as a way to keep them together and solve their problems. When the CiCs cannot solve this, they refer to the police and the army."*

Police officer

Women and girls also rely on men to access all security and justice services. CiC volunteers are primarily men and none of the agencies involved – the CiCs, the *majhis*, the police or the army – have specialist skills in GBV response or in prioritising survivor safety. The channelling of resources through these same structures reinforces their power and their lack of accountability to both communities; there is little oversight and little influence over these agencies' methods.

There have been indications of some positive shifts in government-run services, police desks targeting women, and legal aid services, as well as GBV service entry points established by NGOs. UN Women has been working with the police on community safety, including working with CiCs and the police to include women police engagement officers in the CiC office, set up four women police desks in police stations, and establish a safe house. This has resulted in more women coming forward with cases to women police officers. However, pushback from within the police and CiCs and from other men authorities has required organisations to dedicate a lot of time to advocacy, negotiation and sensitisation with men officers and the men in charge – including through recruitment of men volunteers.<sup>73</sup> This has led to police and CiCs taking more 'ownership' of initiatives,<sup>74</sup> which could be a 'double-edged sword' given the continued exploitation and corruption such authorities still exhibit. An important point noted by a humanitarian actor in Cox's Bazar was the continued high level of mistrust that the Rohingya community had towards international aid providers, with gaps in community consultation.<sup>75</sup>

The general lack of women police and army officers in the camps was identified by volunteers as making it harder for women and girls to report security issues. Concerns were also expressed about the perceived loss of confidentiality when accessing GBV support services due to movement restrictions, which made those accessing support more visible.

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The *majhi* informal justice mechanism follows a conciliation model to conflict resolution ... that fail to challenge the kinds of violence and control that women and girls experience.

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For women who had experienced GBV, this was a significant barrier to them finding any kind of support or appropriate response. In most instances, the priority of sustaining men's authority in the household overrode the security of women and girls.

*"A man lives at Kutupalong Camp, his wife lives in Shamlapur Camp no 23. The husband built extra-marital relationships with another woman and beat his wife. The wife complained to the majhi. The majhi involved the imams and recommended what can be done, such as create opportunity for husband and wife to live together. Then with help of majhi and CiC, now both of them are living together in Kutupalong Camp."*

Imam

For GBV service providers this nuance is critical, as they refer women and girls to services and authorities that ultimately do not make women's safety, well-being and rights a priority. Despite this, many providers recorded a referral to these conflict resolution or justice mechanisms as a resolution of a GBV case if an agreement was reached. Given the exclusionary nature of current governance and security and justice structures in Cox's Bazar, gaps in training and awareness raising for authorities such as *majhis*, the CiCs and the army impact on women's rights, inclusion and community mobilisation.<sup>76</sup>

Research participants stated that some government employees – even CiC representatives – did not want to understand gender sensitivity; some did not even agree that women needed to go out or participate in the community. One said, "GBV is increasing due to women coming out, which is not liked by their male family member". Nor did they feel the need to maintain confidentiality in cases of GBV.

## b) Tensions and backlash linked to women's participation in community- and camp-level structures

Changes in gender roles in public arenas have also increased tensions and led to backlash from men authority figures, including an increase in violence against women working for the humanitarian response and/or wanting to be part of governance structures. For example, women are perceived to receive privileged attention from 'outsiders', such as response workers. As women have not previously closely interacted with people outside the community, powerholders – men heads of the family, *majhis* and religious leaders – have felt threatened. Their response is often to restrict women through coercive means, including violence, in order to enforce traditional restrictions on women's access

to public, decision-making or political spaces and reassert their authority.

In particular, women working with INGO and NGOs, including as volunteers, have sometimes been threatened by leaders in the community for taking up such roles and have not felt safe going to work. Women involved in a UN Women-supported initiative to increase women's leadership in the camps spoke about the backlash they faced, the risks this represented to their safety and security (including threats from men *majhis* and CiCs), and how empty their leadership roles felt.<sup>77</sup> This was compounded by increased risks from armed actors to volunteers' safety: women's leadership and empowerment initiatives, women's self-organised groups and women-led civil society organisations have all received backlash from armed actors and formal and informal authorities, requiring considerable navigation.<sup>78</sup>

Elected women leaders were still in these positions at the time of writing this report, and their roles in supporting women and reaching out to them had become even more important during the COVID-19 pandemic. Initial plans to roll out elections across all camps have been scaled back however, with recognition of the risks for women and of how social norms may lead some communities to not readily accept elected women. Where women have been elected, and where other forms of women's leadership were promoted, women had successfully developed their own strategies – liaising with *majhis*, forming women's groups in their camps, going straight to CiCs (instead of communicating through *majhis*), and convening meetings across different camps.<sup>79</sup> Where this had been possible, there was visible community recognition of the need for women in leadership roles – albeit in a gender-segregated way – to work to support women. However, this was by no means widespread, and had involved significant negotiation by working with men in the community, including, more recently, imams.<sup>80</sup>

While this initiative has had mixed results, it seems to have failed to bring about any greater accountability. Nor has it attempted to disrupt the masculinised and militarised systems of security, resources and gender in the camps:

“Women are perceived to receive privileged attention from 'outsiders', such as response workers. As women have not previously closely interacted with people outside the community, powerholders – men heads of the family, *majhis* and religious leaders – have felt threatened. Their response is often to restrict women through coercive means, including violence, in order to enforce traditional restrictions on women's access to public, decision-making or political spaces and reassert their authority.”

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*“Communities are not accepting the women majhis because they are not [yet] talking and raising their voices against violations, and also because [of the fact that they] are women. People say we women are always trying to make some problems in a society.”*

A woman from a women's rights group partnering with UN Women

Different organisations, including UN Women, are working to build the capacity of women *majhis*.

“

**The historic reliance of UN agencies and INGOs, and by extension their donors, on the *majhis* as the system of governance and distribution has helped to consolidate their power and embed them within the social structures of the camps.**

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undertaking paid work. The unfortunate result was that she stated that she would not run for elections in the future.<sup>81</sup>

Yet, as Romida Begum (a woman *majhi*) shared with the *New Humanitarian*, she wasn't sure if her voice mattered. When she was elected, she was nervous about whether she had enough knowledge to be able to do the job, but trainings on camp management and conflict resolution helped her gain confidence. Yet while Romida grew in her role, she received resistance, criticism and even threats from men who refused to have a woman represent them. As well as these obstructions, she struggled to carry on working without any pay – and her work as a *majhi* made her ineligible for

### c) Impact of the humanitarian response

Participants mentioned various examples when reflecting on the humanitarian sector's role in this dynamic:

- The historic reliance of UN agencies and INGOs, and by extension their donors, on the *majhis* as the system of governance and distribution has helped to consolidate their power and embed them within the social structures of the camps.<sup>82, 83</sup> Because the *majhis* benefit from their roles, they are highly

resistant to change and are tightly connected to the CiCs. They have consolidated their power formally and informally, to the detriment of any sense of security for marginalised groups and, in particular, for women and girls. It would be naive to expect that isolated initiatives to empower some women within camp structures could disrupt such embedded power structures, unless these are addressed in a holistic and structural manner.

- For host community women, the hiring practices of INGOs and their national partners with regards to employing people to run their services and distributions were discriminatory – as they particularly benefitted Bangladeshi men who then had greater access to employment opportunities and training while women did not. Women's reduced exposure to education and their domestic responsibilities meant they were not able to benefit from these opportunities.

*“We want to work in camps, but we don't have education and so we are excluded.”*

Host community woman

- For the Rohingya women in the camps, the few benefits they had in terms of directly receiving food and other aid distributions were superficial. These not only increased GBV, but failed to challenge social norms and practices that would have given the women more significant independence. There were very limited opportunities for them to be involved in work or activities that generated a stipend or increased their social assets. They depended on the men around them and had limited control over resources. At the same time, their isolation excluded them from opportunities and contributed to their vulnerability to violence.

*“Rohingya women are locked in houses, and men won't let the women do any kind of work; the mentality of men is domineering and there is no security for women.”*

CARE camp management

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Women are seen outside a shelter on 21 August 2019 in a Rohingya refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.  
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## 3

## Conclusions and recommendations

**The analysis presented here confirms the need to increase attention, funding and programming to respond to women's safety and needs, and specifically to prevent and respond to GBV – issues that other organisations have highlighted in other reports, particularly in light of the impact of COVID-19.<sup>83</sup> It also confirms gaps identified by other research on governance and security and justice structures and mechanisms in Cox's Bazar, including their patriarchal and exclusionary nature, policies and practices, and what this means for women and girls' safety and security.<sup>84</sup>**

There are two new aspects that a gender lens on social cohesion brings to light. Firstly, **the need to improve conflict and gender sensitivity in the humanitarian response.** The continued (and expedient) reliance of aid distribution on patriarchal authority structures that show exclusionary, unaccountable and corrupt tendencies, inevitably has negative consequences for those communities the aid is intended to benefit – especially women and girls who are often excluded from decision-making. There was also some cautious discussion of the negative effects of government restrictions on NGO activities in the camps and movement in and out of Cox's Bazar, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the actions of armed actors that have made it increasingly unsafe for women, including humanitarian volunteers, to move around the camps safely. Apprehension around discussing these issues limited the information provided, but it was suggested that these were significant concerns for a number of respondents. Further discrete, sensitive analysis and spaces for aid providers to share concerns are necessary.

It is evident that humanitarian efforts are themselves driving or exacerbating many tensions between communities around resource allocation and distribution and access to services. The ways in which aid intersects with community dynamics and its negative and violent impacts on women and communities are also fluid, and require regular monitoring through gender and conflict sensitivity analysis.

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In particular, GBV risks faced by women and girls inside and outside the home are linked to poor gender-sensitive humanitarian design and implementation. The initial practices of targeting women, based on humanitarian standards and policies, unintentionally exposed them to GBV. The reversal of this during the COVID-19 outbreak has seen priority access to humanitarian services accorded to men and boys, with *majhis* complicit in discriminating against women and girls. Transgender people, who are often overlooked in monitoring assessments, are particularly vulnerable to being left out of humanitarian services when resources are limited.

Humanitarian responses often miss opportunities to transform socio-cultural gender norms and relations through the leadership and empowerment of women and girls, as well as by promoting positive forms of masculinities – notwithstanding the fact that these are key to a rights-based and effective response and to communities' longer-term resilience and social cohesion. Leveraging women's participation and leadership capacities (for instance, by encouraging more meaningful and effective women candidacies for *majhis*) is a start to ensuring that humanitarian efforts respond to the specific needs and vulnerabilities of affected communities – women, men, girls or boys – and it is a strategic investment in community resilience. These approaches need to be accompanied by structural transformation to address the exclusionary nature of current governance and security and justice systems and policies. It is also important to engage and build support among men in Cox's Bazar in order to achieve gender equality and the protection of women's rights.<sup>85</sup>

The second aspect our research highlighted is that **social cohesion and governance structures and**

**programming are exacerbating tensions and insecurity, in particular for women and girls.**

The need to understand and address the gendered impacts of social cohesion and the rights, safety and well-being of women and girls is now more important than ever. Small movements made towards gender equality and in the empowerment of women and girls in host and Rohingya communities have

been reversed by COVID-19 and its related restrictions, specifically in terms of meeting their basic needs, ensuring their safety, and empowering them to participate and lead in the response.<sup>86</sup>

Recent political developments in Myanmar will neither facilitate nor speed up the planned return of Rohingya nationals by the Bangladeshi

government – at least in terms of a safe return in line with international refugee and human rights law. Inclusive peacebuilding and social cohesion efforts are therefore now a priority.

There is a need for a gender-sensitive understanding of tensions and violence that is inclusive of women and girls' views and experiences of that particular conflict and violence. This means understanding that notions and experiences of security and justice are very different for men, women, boys, girls, and sexual and gender minorities.

An example of this is how humanitarian actors are addressing the issue of 'competition over resources' as a key source of conflict within and between communities. Current analysis and interventions to address this issue are led by men and are male-centric, focusing on men's views of how these tensions are arising and prioritising their solutions to address them. A critical gap within this analysis is that women and girls do not just have less access to all resources (and less control over them once they have been given them), but also that women and girls themselves are seen as resources by men in both communities. The rise in polygamy, sex work and exploitative relationships is an example of how women and girls have little option but to exchange their bodies and the few resources they have in order to gain different types of protection. The response to these coping mechanisms by men, men authorities and leaders is to blame women and further restrict their freedom of movement and rights, despite their vulnerability.

Women and girls' safety and protection from violence does not seem to be an objective of the formal and informal authorities when dealing with tensions within the home and the community and as a result of GBV. Instead, a gender-blind notion of harmony within the home and community prevails. GBV service providers refer survivors to *majhis* and CiCs to 'solve' tensions within the home, recording an agreement as a solution. The reality is that these authorities believe that GBV is acceptable and that it is the norm, and that their duty is to reassert social and gender norms and prevent divorce and further disputes. These responses continue to drive the conflict and violence that they were trying to address in the first place.

Exclusionary governance structures that are dominated by men at the host community and camp levels are significant drivers of conflict, violence and exclusion. While some initiatives have tried to increase women's participation, evidence suggests that these have not just been tokenistic, but have put some women at further risk of violence at home and at the community level. They have also been far from sufficient. Establishing women *majhis* will not disrupt the masculinised and militarised systems of

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The need to understand and address the gendered impacts of social cohesion and the rights, safety and well-being of women and girls is now more important than ever.

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security, resources and gender; these women are locked out, by virtue of being women, of the systems between men.

Any efforts to increase the inclusivity and effectiveness of governance and security and justice systems, and efforts to ensure that the particular security issues affecting women and girls are taken seriously, must aim to tackle the root causes of these problems. They must be grounded in a recognition of gender norms and gender inequality as guiding a system dominated by men, and the likelihood of resistance to change from the men who benefit from that system.

In light of these findings, **we recommend the following:**

### 1. Donors should:

- Require all partners to integrate gender and conflict sensitivity into their work. This should, at least, include a requirement to undertake gender-sensitive conflict analyses to inform strategy and programme design, implementation, and monitoring, evaluation, and learning at the camp and host community levels.
  - Encourage and fund humanitarian actors, including local and women-led organisations, to raise awareness of, build capacities on and design programmes to address tensions, conflict and violence within and between communities in gender-transformative ways. These actions should move away from the false dichotomy of tensions and violence in public spaces being a social cohesion issue, and tensions and violence in private spaces being a protection issue – as this is a male-centric and exclusionary understanding of social cohesion issues.
  - Work with the government to resume and increase funding to GBV prevention and response programming, including community-based approaches to mitigate and respond to GBV. Build sensitive processes over time to bring groups together and work on common issues that concern women refugees and women from the host communities.
  - Fund and support local women’s organisations that have been piloting initiatives to empower women and transform the gendered root causes of conflict, violence and exclusion in Bangladesh.
- Invest in further research and innovative programmes to explore and address the interactions between gender, GBV and social cohesion, in line with triple nexus<sup>87</sup> commitments to address the needs of conflict and emergency-affected populations. Require social cohesion and conflict prevention interventions to conduct a gender-sensitive conflict analysis to inform design, implementation, and monitoring, evaluation and learning of these interventions.

### 2. The Government of Bangladesh should:

- At a minimum, consider recognising the temporary legal status of the Rohingya in Bangladesh and apply a rights-based approach to their situation, including allowing their access to security and justice mechanisms.
- Conduct gender-sensitive conflict analyses to inform social cohesion policies and practices at the camp and host community levels to address tensions between host communities and Rohingya people. These should include and respond to the needs of women and girls, including in the private sphere.
- Complement security and justice efforts in Cox’s Bazar with gender-sensitive social cohesion programmes that address individual intercommunity issues and concerns in the long term.
- Pair current policies to provide assistance to Bangladeshi communities with inclusive mechanisms to resolve conflict. Strengthen or establish local mechanisms for dispute resolution within and between both communities, such as joint mediation and counselling by CiCs and NGOs. This includes increasing the gender sensitivity and accountability of formal and informal authorities, by engaging local and women’s organisations and NGOs to train and act as a watch group, and by creating coordination committees that include women in a meaningful and sustained way.
- Strengthen the capacities of authorities at the host community and camp levels, including *Union Parishads* and *Upazila Parishads*,<sup>88</sup> *upazila* officials, *majhis* and CiCs, village courts, arbitration councils, and the *Salish*<sup>89</sup> on gender sensitivity and women’s and girls’ rights.
- Hire specialised GBV staff to deal with all domestic disputes in the camps and host communities. Raise awareness of the importance of referrals to specialised GBV services among the communities.

### 3. Coordination bodies, UN agencies, INGOs and NGOs operating in Cox's Bazar should:

- Conduct periodic gender-sensitive conflict analyses to inform strategy and programme design, implementation, and monitoring, evaluation and learning at the camp and host community levels. Initiatives to address tensions within and between host communities and Rohingya people should include and respond to the needs of women and girls, including in less visible spaces such as households and hygiene facilities.
- Ensure that the security and justice issues affecting women and girls are not lumped together with men's social cohesion issues, while ensuring that differences in perspectives and experiences are both recognised and given proportionate weight.
- Work with men from community groups, men leaders in the camps and host communities to raise awareness of and address the impacts of exclusion, discrimination and violence against women, girls and other marginalised groups, as well as the impacts on communities' well-being. In order to do this, use champion models – those who have successfully supported change – and other best practices around changing social norms.
- Work with the government and local formal and informal authorities to develop alternative management structures (or build on existing alternative initiatives). Increase inclusivity and accountability, and develop shadow mechanisms to coordinate and collate complaints and reports of current malpractice and corruption, including demanding payments or changing outcomes in relation to payments. Ensure that shadow mechanisms have women-only groups, which give specific attention to issues affecting women.
- Strengthen coordination between social cohesion actors, the protection, GBV and child protection sectors, and the gender sector. Ensure that social protection strategies and action are gender sensitive and aim to address gendered root causes of conflict and violence, including harmful gender norms.
- Invest in innovative programmes and research to explore and address the interactions between gender, GBV and social cohesion. Support peacebuilding and women's organisations to pilot holistic approaches to GBV prevention and response, women's empowerment and social cohesion. These should frame ideas of 'safety' for women and girls as being 'safe to' (participate, disagree, dissent and lead), and not just 'safe from' (violence or threats for example).
- Build women-only community safety groups that improve security and build solidarity between women, based on their shared experiences and shared fears. Work with *majhis*, CiCs and community leaders to protect these groups. Give particular attention to safe learning spaces for adolescent girls and build relationships between women's groups and adolescent girls' groups. This work should open up spaces, relationships and opportunities for adolescent girls that are not based around a formal curriculum.
- Explore the possibility of joint economic programming between women in host communities and the camps, to help build a shared commitment and establish practical relationships. This should be done in coordination with organisations conducting women's economic empowerment work, and especially with those who carry out such work while engaging men to participate in and reflect on this shift.
- Work with men and boys in a way that is accountable to women and girls, and ensure that women do not become the mechanism through which men build peace. This happens when men and men leaders build social cohesion by appealing to 'traditional' gender roles, further reducing the spaces and opportunities of women. It can also involve men developing agreements over how they treat women and which men have access to which women, reinforcing the dynamic of women as resources. These bodies and agencies should work to challenge men's entitlements to polygamy, multiple sexual relationships, and to paying women for sex in exploitative relationships. They should interrogate men and men leaders' agency and decision-making, their responsibility for their own behaviours, and the consequences of their actions.

## Notes

- 83 CARE (2020), 'Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and COVID-19: The Complexities Of Responding To "The Shadow Pandemic"', May ([https://www.care-international.org/files/files/GBV\\_and\\_COVID\\_19\\_Policy\\_Brief\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.care-international.org/files/files/GBV_and_COVID_19_Policy_Brief_FINAL.pdf)); International Rescue Committee (2019), 'Access to justice for Rohingya and Host Community in Cox's Bazar', February, (<https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/3929/accessingjusticeassessmentexternalfinalsmall.pdf>); UN Women (2020), 'Promoting the women, peace and security agenda in the Rohingya refugee crisis in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh', October, ([https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/un\\_women\\_advocacy\\_brief\\_on\\_unscr\\_1325\\_wps\\_in\\_cxb\\_final\\_21\\_october\\_2020\\_.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/un_women_advocacy_brief_on_unscr_1325_wps_in_cxb_final_21_october_2020_.pdf)); Inter-Sector Coordination Group (2020), 'In the shadows of the pandemic: The gendered impact of COVID-19 on Rohingya and Host Communities', October, ([https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/in\\_the\\_shadows\\_of\\_the\\_pandemic\\_gendered\\_impact\\_of\\_covid19\\_on\\_rohingya\\_and\\_host\\_communities\\_october2020.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/in_the_shadows_of_the_pandemic_gendered_impact_of_covid19_on_rohingya_and_host_communities_october2020.pdf))
- 84 International Rescue Committee (2019), 'Access to justice for Rohingya and Host Community in Cox's Bazar', February, (<https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/3929/accessingjusticeassessmentexternalfinalsmall.pdf>)
- 85 Ibid.
- 86 CARE (2020), 'Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and COVID-19: The Complexities of Responding to "The Shadow Pandemic"', May ([https://www.care-international.org/files/files/GBV\\_and\\_COVID\\_19\\_Policy\\_Brief\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.care-international.org/files/files/GBV_and_COVID_19_Policy_Brief_FINAL.pdf))
- 87 The 'triple nexus' is an approach that aspires to transform the way that humanitarian, development and peace activities are planned, implemented and financed in fragile situations to more effectively and coherently meet human needs, mitigate vulnerability, and promote peace – also called building resilience. See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/triple-nexus-building-resilience-introduction-and-discussions>
- 88 *Union Parishads* are the smallest rural administrative and local government units in Bangladesh, while *upazilas* are the second-lowest tier of regional administration as sub-units of districts.
- 89 The Salish is an informal mediation system and is the most common form of justice available in Bangladesh. International Rescue Committee (2019), 'Access to justice for Rohingya and Host Community in Cox's Bazar', February, (<https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/3929/accessingjusticeassessmentexternalfinalsmall.pdf>)



## About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

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