Policy Brief

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Young adolescent girl from the Rohingya refugee community in Bangladesh ©Anna Dubuis/DFID

Age- and gender-based violence risks facing Rohingya and Bangladeshi adolescents in Cox's Bazar

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Overview

Many of the 860,000 Rohingya refuges living in Cox's Bazar have been – and continue to be – affected by human rights abuses, domestic violence, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) (ISCG, et al. 2020) and are also at risk of trafficking. Host community residents also have complex unaddressed protection needs, including a high risk of child marriage for adolescent girls in the Ukhia and Teknaf upazilas (ISCG, et al., 2019b), coupled with a perceived deterioration in community security, exacerbating women and girls' freedom of movement in particular (ISCG et al., 2020). To address these risks, humanitarian organisations have mobilised to provide a range of services including referrals, case management and gender-based violence (GBV) services across all 34 camps and in 6 host communities (ISCG, et. al, 2019a).

Critical service gaps remain, in terms of funding and coverage. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)'s Financial Tracking Service (FTS) reported that only 75% of the Rohingya and host community response plan appeal funding was met in 2019 and that the GBV sub-cluster received just 46% of appeal requirements (OCHA FTS, 2020). In terms of coverage, adolescents are among those most at risk of being left behind: the Inter-Sector Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group reported that 'adolescents are increasingly marginalized and at risk of significant protection threats' (ISCG, 2019) and concluded that programming does not accurately address the specific risks faced by adolescent girls and boys.

Drawing on data from the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) study nested within the larger Cox's Bazar Panel Study,[2] this policy brief discusses the age- and gender-based violence risks facing adolescents from Rohingya

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refugee and Bangladeshi host communities. It concludes with recommendations to accelerate progress towards addressing critical protection gaps for adolescents as the Rohingya crisis becomes more protracted.

Methodology and conceptual framing

This brief draws on mixed-methods data collected in 2019 as part of the GAGE longitudinal research programme, which explores what works to support the development of adolescents' (10–19 years) capabilities (GAGE consortium, 2019). In Bangladesh, GAGE partnered with researchers from Yale University and the World Bank to implement the Cox's Bazar Panel Survey (CBPS) (CBPS, 2019; World Bank, 2019) with 2,280 adolescent girls and boys and their caregivers. The quantitative survey was complemented by in-depth qualitative research across 3 camps[3] and 2 host communities in the Ukhia and Teknaf upazilas (sub-districts) with a sub-sample of 149 Rohingya and Bangladeshi adolescents, their families, community leaders and service providers, using interactive tools with individuals and groups. Our sample included two cohorts – younger adolescents (10–12 years) and older adolescents (15–19 years). In line with the 2030 Agenda's commitment to 'leave no one behind', we also included adolescents with disabilities, and adolescent girls and boys who married as children (see Table 1).

Our analysis followed the GAGE conceptual framework, see Figure 1, (GAGE consortium, 2019), which focuses on adolescents' multidimensional capabilities. This brief focuses on one of the six GAGE capability domains: bodily integrity, encompassing the prevention of and response to age- and gender-based violence in the home and community. The framework recognises that adolescents' capability outcomes are highly dependent on contextual realities at household, community and state levels, which also determine the change strategies (such as promoting community norm change; empowering girls; and engaging with boys and men) that can be employed to improve adolescents' outcomes.

Scope and scale of the challenge: key findings

Gender-based violence (GBV)

While adolescents in camps and host communities are vulnerable to multiple forms of GBV, including sexual harassment, child marriage and domestic violence, the normalisation of certain forms of GBV likely contributes to the underreporting of incidences. A recent evidence review (Ripoll, 2017) found that in Rohingya society, 'domestic violence is perceived as a "family affair" to be solved by the family alone' (p. 4); and a 2019 vulnerability assessment (ACAPS, 2019), found that 'Across all camp locations participants discussed fears of their adolescent girls being harassed. This fear is less related to the psychological impact on the victim of harassment, and much more strongly related to the consequence of ... social stigma for the family of the girl, and difficulty getting the girl married in the future, leading to economic consequences of additional family members' (p. 9).

These findings are in line with GAGE baseline data: our survey found that only 4% of older adolescents (15–17 year olds) reported experiencing any kind of GBV in the past 12 months and only 1% reported ever having experienced rape or sexual abuse. When asked about other members of the community, 12% of older adolescents report having witnessed rape or sexual abuse and 64% report hearing about it. Our survey data shows that across locations, married girls are at greater risk: 17% of older married girls have experienced GBV in the past 12 months compared to 4% of their unmarried counterparts (see Box 1). This was crystalised during a focus group discussion (FGD) in one camp with older adolescent girls, when one participant explained: '*I don't get beaten, as I don't have a husband.*'
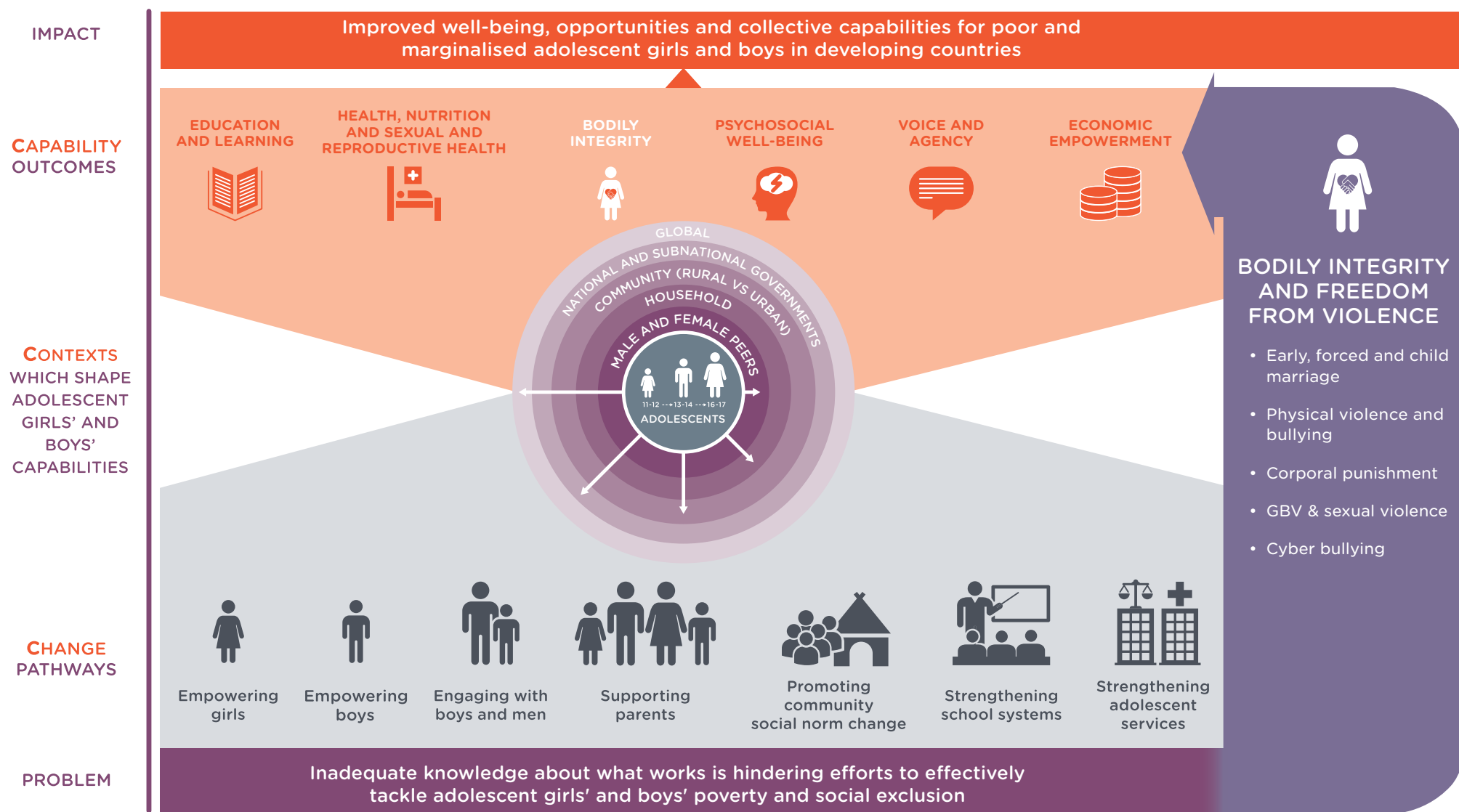
Unmarried adolescents in both settings also face physical violence by parents, when failing to fulfil cultural expectations and norms. Across locations, 47% of adolescents report being pushed, slapped, hit, beaten or otherwise physically hurt by a parent or adult in their household in the past 12 months with young adolescents reporting parental violence more commonly than older cohorts (59% and 28% respectively).

Table 1: Mixed-methods research sample

	Quantitative fieldwork		Qualitative fieldwork	
	Fieldwork sites	No. of respondents	Fieldwork sites	No. of respondents
Refugee camps	32	1,209	3	112
Host communities in Teknaf and Ukhia	57	1,071	2	37
Total	**89**	**2,280**	**5**	**149**

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3 We have anonymised the camp names to protect the privacy of study participants, and refer to them here as Camps A, B and C.

Figure 1: GAGE '3 Cs' conceptual framework

IMPACT
Improved well-being, opportunities and collective capabilities for poor and marginalised adolescent girls and boys in developing countries

CAPABILITY OUTCOMES
- EDUCATION AND LEARNING
- HEALTH, NUTRITION AND SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH
- BODILY INTEGRITY
- PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL-BEING
- VOICE AND AGENCY
- ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

CONTEXTS WHICH SHAPE ADOLESCENT GIRLS' AND BOYS' CAPABILITIES

GLOBAL
NATIONAL AND SUBNATIONAL GOVERNMENTS
COMMUNITY (RURAL VS URBAN)
HOUSEHOLD
MALE AND FEMALE PEERS
11-12 ---> 13-14 ---> 16-17
ADOLESCENTS

BODILY INTEGRITY AND FREEDOM FROM VIOLENCE
- Early, forced and child marriage
- Physical violence and bullying
- Corporal punishment
- GBV & sexual violence
- Cyber bullying

CHANGE PATHWAYS
- Empowering girls
- Empowering boys
- Engaging with boys and men
- Supporting parents
- Promoting community social norm change
- Strengthening school systems
- Strengthening adolescent services

PROBLEM
Inadequate knowledge about what works is hindering efforts to effectively tackle adolescent girls' and boys' poverty and social exclusion

Source: GAGE consortium, 2019.

Box 1: Child marriage in Cox's Bazar

Evidence suggests that more than one-fifth of Rohingya girls aged 15–19 years are already married (Plan and GPS, 2018). Our baseline survey found a lower rate (12%), which likely reflects the younger age of our sample (15–17 year olds). Critically, the rate of early marriage among older girls in camps was approximately four times the rate found among host communities (3%). While the exact prevalence of child marriage among Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh is not known, parents having to resort to negative coping mechanisms (and the fact that there are more lenient penalties for child marriage in the camps compared to Myanmar) have reportedly led to an increase in the practice since displacement (ACAPS, 2019). Marriage in camps and host communities alike occurs early; among our older sample, the average age of marriage for girls was 15.5 years (the youngest married girl was a Rohingya girl aged 11). Spousal age is markedly higher; the average age of marriage for spouses in our sample was 23.7 years. Irrespective of age and location, girls are a little over twice as likely to be married before 18 than boys.

Married girls face many risks to their bodily integrity and psychosocial well-being. Our qualitative data finds that married girls face abuse from their husbands and in-laws if they neglect 'wives' duties'. Wives are meant to stay indoors, take care of their children, do household chores and show the utmost respect and diligence towards husbands' and in-laws' wishes. A 16-year-old girl from Camp A recounted being tortured by her husband and his family upon refusing to eat food brought by her sister-in-law during Eid celebrations. She recounted: '*My husband beat me with a stick for not eating the foods she brought. Then I wasn't given food and water for three days.*'

In the camps, intimate partner violence (IPV) – especially physical violence – is common, though married girls did not know whether or how to report it. This partly stems from cultural notions silencing girls' voices. As an 18-year-old married girl from Camp B explained, '*What will we say? Can we bad mouth men or beat them up? They beat us. Why will I say anything? When I say anything to my husband he beats me. So I keep quiet … When I ask him why he beats me, he says they have the right to beat up women.*' Other girls expressed the desire to seek justice from community structures, though when they tried this avenue, they felt disregarded. This is partly due to the role of informally appointed Rohingya leaders, *Majhis*, who have gained increasing power during the crisis, acting as gatekeepers of aid thanks to their role as de facto representatives for displaced Rohingya vis-à-vis the government of Bangladesh. However, their discretionary power has been used arbitrarily. The Protection Sector Working Group reported that the *Majhi* system hinders gender equality in the camps, with '… serious allegations of corruption, extortion and charging fees for access to humanitarian aid, including with instances of violence and GBV' (ISCG, 2018).

However, our qualitative data suggests this is not universal. As a 16-year-old girl in Camp C mentioned, '… *whenever I go out, I am beaten up. Also I have to hide my Ludo board when father is here or he beats me.*' Others described more leniency from parents; an 11-year-old girl from the same camp noted, '*If I do something wrong, no one at home beats me. They just scold me.*'

In camps, there are minimal gender differences for adolescents suffering parental beatings (32% of girls report compared to 37% of boys), while in host communities there is a larger gender gap with 57% of boys reporting beatings compared to 49% of girls. Being physically beaten by parents is more common in host communities where 53% of our sample reports such occurrences compared to 35% in camps. Among host communities, a key informant in Teknaf explained that entrenched household poverty coupled with new stressors, such as commodity price increases, have recently increased domestic violence both experienced and witnessed by adolescents. In the camps, Rohingya parents beat their daughters if they go outside their homes, as this risks gossip and having their purity questioned. This is seen as particularly distressing for parents trying to organise suitable marriages for their daughters. Older Rohingya boys face beatings at home if they ignore their parents' wishes, such as using their mobile phones secretly, or engaging in conversations with girls. Boys can also face parental violence for not contributing to household finances, as expressed by an 18-year-old boy in Camp A: '*sometimes unrest happens with money. When I can't provide any financial help in home … When parents tell me to go to shop [and] bring something and if I don't bring that, then disputes happen.*' Our data also found that parents beat younger adolescents if they do not study or if they play truant from the learning centres in the camps.

Community safety

Despite installation of 7,200 solar streetlights across the camps in early 2019 (ISCG et al., 2019a), adolescents in camps reported feeling unsafe, as many parts of the camps remain dark. Our survey revealed that only 14% of adolescent Rohingya girls felt safe walking in their camp at night compared to 37% of boys, with sexual harassment still a major problem. A 15-year-old boy from Camp B explained, '*Older girls can't go out from their home in the evening because people harass her … they abuse her [and] they face problems if they go out … they are kidnapped,*

▶▶ When I can't provide any financial help in home … then disputes happen.

(An 18-year-old boy in Camp A)

Young adolescent girl from the Rohingya refugee community in Bangladesh © Anna Dubuis/DFID

or adults who want to act scandalous with younger girls … some want to rape them.'

Adolescents in host communities also feel unsafe at night, with only 24% of girls feeling safe compared to 43% of boys. An 18-year-old girl in Teknaf explained, '*We don't go anywhere because of boys*'. Adolescent girls mentioned being 'eve-teased' [sexually harassed] on the streets, and parents claimed that harassment has increased due to a relaxing of gender norms around girls' mobility. As one man in a focus group in Teknaf commented, '*Now girls are being harassed more than [before]. Girls can move freely. In our time girls couldn't go out from home*.'

Many parents forbid their daughters from wandering around the camps (day or night) due to safety concerns, severely limiting girls' mobility. Even in the daytime girls can be harassed, which harms family honour and jeopardises marriage prospects, with girls bearing the brunt of the consequences. A 12-year-old girl from Camp B explained: '*If girls went out to fetch water, boys used to do a lot of things … Parents used to beat up the girls as a result … Society sees girls as to blame, of course*.' Our findings also reveal a perceived threat of kidnapping in camps, among adolescents and parents alike, backed by stories of children going missing (see Box 2).

Box 2: Escalating fear of kidnapping

According to UNHCR and REACH (2019), Rohingya male and female household heads reported 'fear of kidnapping' as the most commonly perceived risk facing both boys and girls in the camps. The perceived threat of kidnapping emerged strongly from our qualitative data in both host communities and camps and many adolescents spoke fearfully of the risks both themselves and younger children face in being abducted. This perceived risk is felt by girls and boys alike and instills fear, particularly at night. A 12-year-old boy from Camp A mentioned, '*[I can go wherever I want, but] I don't go out at night. I feel afraid. There are many kidnappers here*'; and an 11-year-old girl from Camp C echoed this, '*If any child is found alone outside, he/she is kidnapped and sometimes children are kidnapped from home too at night*.'

Most stories of kidnapping result in the payment of ransom money, children escaping from their captors or security forces intervening. One FGD respondent in Camp C, however, mentioned, '*If we aren't able to give ransom then they kill children by beating or something else*.' Our qualitative findings underscore a perceived risk of kidnapping in host communities as well, where both adolescents and FGD participants spoke fearfully of 'neck-cutters' and kidnappers. One female FGD participant in Ukhia explained, '*A school girl was kidnapped and the fear is increasing. We are now afraid to send our children to school after hearing this*.'

▶▶ Local gangsters beat us up ... Here in [a village adjacent to the camp], they kill our people ... by shooting ... When they need money, they come here and cause a nuisance.

(A 10-year-old boy from Camp C)

Peer violence

The rate of peer violence across locations is high – 53% of adolescents (particularly the younger cohort of 10–12 year olds) report experiencing peer violence regularly and 32% report experiencing physical violence in particular. Among girls, competition at water points is often a trigger, while boys reported fights with peers, often when moving outside their immediate neighbourhood. As an 11-year-old boy from Camp B explained, 'When we fight, we throw stones at the other boys ... they beat us in their area.' Another 10-year-old boy from Camp C highlighted the problems of gangs and gun violence: '*Local gangsters beat us up ... Here in [a village adjacent to the camp], they kill our people ... by shooting ... When they need money, they come here and cause a nuisance. Sometimes they kidnap boys and girls ... and ask for a ransom from their parents.*' Adolescents with disabilities appeared to be at greater risk of bullying, but reported relying on adults to intervene. As a 12-year-old boy from Camp B noted: '*If someone laughs at me then my grandmother helps me ... she brings me home. Young people [girls and boys] beside my home laugh at me, they call me broken arm, disabled. So, I have to complain to our religious teacher so that they can batter them.*'

Boys and girls alike commented on the risks of peer violence facing older adolescent boys. As an 18-year-old girl from Teknaf explained: '*It's not good to stay so long at night ... it's not secure. [Boys] can quarrel with their friends. Then they come back home late for this reason.*' Similarly, a 17-year-old boy from Camp C reported: '*[Yes, there is someone I am afraid of.] He called me and took me into the jungle and bound my mouth.*' Others reported limiting their movement and recreational activity out of fears around peer violence. A 17-year-old boy from Camp B explained: 'There is a place in the other block where they play football. *We don't go there. That is their area so we don't play there ... [If we try to play] they will try to make a quarrel.*'

Rohingya refugee community in Bangladesh © European Union

Policy and programming implications

Our baseline research findings highlight the need for policy and programming that enhance the bodily integrity of Rohingya adolescents in camps and Bangladeshis in host communities. Key priorities include the following:

1 Extend mobile GBV case management and outreach for adolescents in camps and host communities.

The GBV sub-cluster has increased integrated case management, psychosocial support and referrals (ISCG et al., 2019b), but outreach to individuals at heightened risk – including adolescent girls – has been limited. We recommend prioritising GBV support services in mobile, multi-purpose, adolescent-friendly centres, to target hard-to-reach girls whose mobility is severely restricted. Scaling up adolescent chaperones to address safety concerns for girls wishing to access services will also be important, as will providing culturally sensitive clothing (burkas and umbrellas) for all girls wishing to attend the centres, to facilitate their access. Outreach will also be critical in host communities, where GBV survivors lack access to services provided by humanitarian organisations but do not necessarily have access to governmental services.

2 Invest in a multi-pronged approach to eradicating child marriage, through advocacy and social protection.

It is important to work through community and religious leaders, including *Majhis*, in camps and host communities, to disseminate messaging about the negative consequences of early marriage for adolescent girls' well-being and development trajectories. Indeed, the role of *Majhis* needs

◗◗ If girls went out to fetch water, boys used to do a lot of things ... Parents used to beat up the girls as a result ... Society sees girls as to blame, of course.

(A 12-year-old girl from Camp B)

further exploration as they are often gatekeepers of aid and information; programming should be designed accordingly. Given poverty levels, social protection programming is also urgently needed so that families do not have to resort to early marriage as a negative coping mechanism, and can instead invest in education for their adolescent children. Finally, as a focus country of the UNICEF-UNFPA Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage, it will be important for the programme to draw on promising practices from other humanitarian contexts to inform responses aimed at tackling the drivers and consequnces of child marriage among camp and host communities alike.

3 Integrate adolescent voices into multi-sectoral needs assessments and welfare monitoring surveys

to capture the perspectives of young people with regard to specific age- and gender-based violence vulnerabilities they face. In both camp and host settings, power and gender analyses capturing adolescent voices to best understand domestic and community violence will be critical in designing age- and gender-responsive interventions.

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