



An 18-year-old volunteer in a camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2023



'Safe is in the grave': adolescent girls' risk of gender-based violence in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh

Authors: Silvia Guglielmi, Jennifer Seager, Khadija Mitu and Nicola Jones

Context

More than six years into the largest influx of Rohingya into Bangladesh, 970,000 Rohingya refugees currently live in 33 congested camps across Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, constituting the largest refugee settlement in the world. Another 30,000 Rohingya have been relocated to the Bhasan Char Island camp in the Bay of Bengal, reachable only through approved military transit (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2023). The Rohingya humanitarian response is guided by a Protection Framework, recognising that the protection needs of affected populations must be understood and met, and guiding all humanitarian sector priorities (Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) et al., 2023).

Protection of Rohingya refugees remains a priority partly because the Rohingya continue to be affected by grave human rights abuses, gender-based violence (including high prevalence of intimate partner violence and sexual violence), and are also at risk of trafficking (International Rescue Committee (IRC), 2020; ISCG et al., 2020; Gerhardt, 2021). Recent factsheets compiling data on gender-based violence show that in the second quarter of 2023, intimate partner violence constituted 80% of all reported incidents of gender-based violence in Cox's Bazar (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 2023). Gender-based violence remains a disproportionate threat to women and girls across Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, with the Gender-Based Violence Information Management System (GBVIMS) illuminating that 98% of survivors are female (UNFPA, 2023). Trends notwithstanding, under-reporting of gender-based violence means that the documented cases likely represent only a small fraction of actual cases (Guglielmi et al., 2022). Accounts of a deteriorating security environment in Cox's Bazar also raise concerns for a worsening of protection needs at the community level.

Against this backdrop, the humanitarian Joint Response Plans (JRPs) for the Rohingya crisis acknowledge that adolescents and youth face distinct risks that have not been adequately addressed in the response thus far. Comprising approximately 38% of the Rohingya population, adolescents and youth (aged 10–24) are a vulnerable group that remains on the margins of programming (Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), 2022). Evidence suggests that Rohingya adolescent girls experience high rates of child marriage, sexual and gender-based violence and unintended pregnancy, and face difficult emotional and social transitions into adulthood (Plan International, 2018; Guglielmi et al., 2020; O'Connor and Seager, 2021; GAGE consortium, 2022). This policy brief focuses on midline findings from the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) longitudinal study in Cox's Bazar regarding adolescent girls' risks of intimate partner violence, gender-based violence and child marriage.

Methodology

This brief draws on GAGE preliminary midline data collected in 2023. Since baseline data collection in 2019 in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, GAGE has continued to partner with researchers from Yale University and the World Bank to implement the Cox's Bazar Panel Survey (CBPS¹).

This brief is based on a sample of 811 adolescents and young people living in camps (Table 1). GAGE undertook quantitative fieldwork across 24 Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar as well as in the Bhasan Char Island camp (Table 2). The quantitative sample is split relatively evenly by gender (54% female, 46% male); 62% of the sample is in the younger cohort (aged 15 or below at baseline in 2019) and 38% in the older cohort (15–19 years at baseline²). In terms of vulnerabilities of interest, 6% of the sample comprises adolescents with disabilities, and 28% are currently married, with 52% of those marriages happening before the adolescent reached 18 years. The quantitative survey was complemented by in-depth qualitative research across seven camps³ in the Ukhia and Teknaf *upazilas* (sub-districts) of Cox's Bazar with a sub-sample of 73 Rohingya and Bangladeshi adolescents, their families and community members, using interactive tools with individuals and

Table 1: Mixed-methods research sample

	Quantitative fieldwork	Qualitative fieldwork
Fieldwork sites (CXB camps + Bhasan Char)	25	8
Number of respondents	825	97

Table 2: Quantitative fieldwork

	Cox's Bazar			Bhasan Char		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
Adolescent interviews young cohort (10-15)	243	258	501	8	2	10
Adolescent interviews old cohort (16-21)	195	115	310	3	1	4
Total	438	373	811	11	3	14

¹ The Cox's Bazar Panel Survey (OBPS) is a partnership between the Yale MacMillan Center Program on Refugees, Forced Displacement, and Humanitarian Responses (Yale MacMillan PRFDHR), the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) programme, and the Poverty and Equity Global Practice (GPVDR) of the World Bank. Within the partnership, the Yale MacMillan team has a special interest in migration and employment history; the World Bank team has a special interest in consumption patterns and food security; and the GAGE team has a special interest in issues affecting adolescents.

² Some qualitative quotes presented in this paper are from young people aged over 25. Following the Government of Bangladesh and UNHCR's joint registration exercise (a process begun in 2019) via the Biometric Identity Management System (BIMS), Rohingya refugees' personal identities were accurately captured via biometric data, including fingerprints and iris scans, securing each refugee's unique identity, family links and identifying information. Previous to this exercise, and during the time of the GAGE baseline data collection, many Rohingya were not able to confirm their exact age, which they were more accurately able to report on during midline data collection, hence some outlier ages.

³ We have anonymised the camp names to protect the privacy of study participants. We refer to them as camps A–G.

Table 3: Qualitative fieldwork

	Cox's Bazar			Bhasan Char		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
Adolescent interviews young cohort (10-15)	15	13	28	7	3	10
Adolescent interviews old cohort (16-21)	16	6	22	3	3	6
Parent focus group discussions	3	3	6	1	1	2
Adolescent focus group discussions	3	3	6	1	1	2
Key informant interviews	3	8	11	2	2	4
Total	40	33	73	14	10	24

groups (Table 3). We also engaged qualitatively with 24 adolescents, caregivers and key informants in Bhasan Char. Researchers conducted key informant interviews with service providers and programme and policy actors to better contextualise young people's lives.

Findings

Intimate partner violence and violence from in-laws

Intimate partner violence in the Rohingya context is pervasive. In our data, 45% of married Rohingya girls reported experiencing any type of intimate partner violence (physical, sexual or emotional) in their lifetime, and 40% report this occurring in the past 12 months. Physical violence is most common, with 38% of married girls reporting experiencing this type of violence in the past 12 months. The most common form of physical violence is slapping (reported by 38% of married girls), pushing (30%), and punching and kicking (each 23%). A small percentage of girls reported more extreme forms of violence: 4% reported having been strangled, 2% threatened with a weapon, and 1% attacked with a weapon.

In the qualitative data, adolescent boys and girls in our sample both commented that hitting, beating, and denying resources and opportunities to women is commonplace, and it is evident that this type of violence is also normalised. Qualitative data underscores the endemic nature of intimate partner violence perpetrated by husbands. Examples of such reports include: 'Yes [husbands beat their wife all the time], I see this in my camp... For example, he is telling his wife not to go to work but she is going. Because of that he beats her with chains' (21-year-old young man, camp C); and 'Yes, [husbands beat their wives]. Everyone does. Even my brother beats his wife' (29-year-old young woman, camp D).

As reflected in the quantitative data, intimate partner violence – primarily in the form of physical beatings, and what the Rohingya call 'various forms of torture' – happens due to divergences of opinion between husband and wife, and when women and girls are seen (or presumed to be seen) talking to any other male in the community. The vast majority of incidences of intimate partner violence, therefore, occur when married women fail to conform to expectations about their behaviour and duties, and because violence seems to be a part of marriage. One 20-year-old young woman from camp C recounted: '*He beats me because I talk [and because I make mistakes] like not keeping everything clean.*'

Accounts of husbands' drug-taking habits appear to exacerbate intimate partner arguments, and this problem seems to be an escalating factor for extreme forms of physical violence (see Box 1). Intimate partner violence due to economic strains in the household and lack of livelihood opportunities was less prominently discussed in the GAGE midline data compared with baseline data collected in 2019. We hypothesise that the increased opportunities to engage in paid employment – mostly through the humanitarian volunteering schemes – has led to a decrease in economic tensions that were spurring domestic abuse. One 22-year-old young woman from camp B noted that, '*In recent times, the husbands go outside to work, they stay home less. That's why the wives don't get tortured.*'

Among the Rohingya, resolving domestic disputes is typically dealt with within the domestic sphere. Partner violence is regarded as a private matter for the couple involved. A 21-year-old young woman from camp A said, '*[My husband] hit me hard once... We resolved it ourselves. We don't tell outsiders about our problems.*'

Box 1: Rohingya women and girls at risk of severe IPV

Our qualitative data reveals extreme cases of intimate partner violence occurring in the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar. We present two examples from girls living in different camps to emphasise the need for additional measures to combat the deeply entrenched norms surrounding intimate partner violence.

A 17-year-old adolescent girl in camp B recounted that in her sister's case, a lack of intervention on the part of camp authorities to protect her sister from her abusive husband resulted in her murder:

My own sister was tortured after marriage... Now, she died... Her husband murdered her. It's been one year. She [was living with him] for 4 years after their marriage, when we came to know that he had a second wife. So, we brought my sister back [home] and kept her with us and complained to the CIC. The CIC [said that he had] solved it and sent her back with her husband. After 2 days, [the husband] murdered my sister. Now he is in jail. [We found out [about the sister's death] because the CIC office called us. The majhi of that block told the CIC. My sister had one child, the baby died also... It was born dead because her husband beat her while she was pregnant. We brought her back home [you understand,] but the CIC sent her back. They didn't want to divorce them. Their neighbours told us [that it was her husband who had murdered her].

A 26-year-old girl in camp A also reported that she is routinely subjected to violence from her husband, and that while the majhi speaks to him in an effort to reduce the violence, his input is ineffective and no follow-up measures are taken:

Yes, [my husband] beats me a lot. From the beginning [of our marriage] till the end... I couldn't go anywhere, [not even] to bring water... He would beat me. He would beat us if we went outside our house. He would beat me when my mother was here... After I got separated from my mother, the 500 taka (US\$4.50) he gave me monthly wasn't enough for me to get by. So I used to sneak out of his house, when he went to work and come to my mother's house to eat. But people would tell him about it and when he came back home he just beat me up. He beats me too much. If I go to my mother's house, he beats me. If I go to fetch water, he beats me. If I ask for clothes, he beats me. Just like that. If I asked for food, he would beat me. He can eat food from outside, but I can't. And he doesn't let me go and eat anywhere.

He would beat me if I went to get water too... If I go without permission. My son was small. But he wasn't having breast milk. If I wanted to bring water for my son, he would say rude things to me and beat me... There was not a drop of water at home. But as I went to bring water and came back home, he was very angry and screamed at me and started beating me like a maniac.

I told majhi-molla (community and religious leader). They would tell him to calm down. "Why are you doing this? Why are you being like this? Don't do it." But he listened to no one. If I asked for medicine or treatment, he would beat me then too. [Only my] mother used to take care of me [when I was pregnant]. She looked after everything. My treatment cost, my clothes, my mother gave everything. He wasn't even here on my child's birth. He beat me before delivery and went away. I had surgery for the delivery. But he wasn't here. I didn't give the news of delivery to him. [He came back a] few months after the child was born. Majhi-molla asked him why he fights with me. He didn't say anything. I didn't want to have a baby... [but in the end I had it]. I thought if I get a baby it would be good, probably. If I had a child, he [husband] might turn good. He might stop having drugs. I thought that. Maybe he will be understanding. But, no, sister. He was still the same.

It remains unclear as to why, in some cases, Rohingya girls and women do report intimate partner violence to the authorities; we hypothesise that only in cases when girls and women choose to enact justice mechanisms, seek safe shelter or file for divorce do they refer cases of abuse externally. Echoing previous data (Guglielmi et al., 2022), Rohingya girls prefer reporting to *majhis* (elected Rohingya community leaders) and the Camp in Charge (CIC) officer (government of Bangladesh-approved civil servants operating the Rohingya response), rather than to humanitarian partners, including implementing partners involved in the GBV Sub-Sector. Authors' previous analysis (Guglielmi et al., 2022) highlights that the Rohingya view CIC officers and *majhis* as the ultimate authorities in camp settings, preferring to seek redress from these entities rather than humanitarian partners who are viewed as providing support services rather than justice.

The quantitative data echoes these findings and highlights that lack of reporting is not due to lack of knowledge about how and where to report. The vast majority (80%) of married girls reported that they knew where girls and women could go for support if someone hits them, and among those who knew of a place, 80% said they could access those services if they needed them. The most commonly cited places for support were the police (56%) and community leaders and/or CIC (72%). A 19-year-old boy in camp C explained:

Fights between couples happen [and the husband beats the wife]. It is normal. They settle it among themselves. [If it gets too severe] we have a majhi in our block for such matters. If the majhi can't handle it... then the matter is taken to the CIC officer.

However, the preference for (and reliance on) reporting to *majhis* has been seen as problematic, particularly in some camps and camp blocks.

Box 2: Intimate partner violence in Bhasan Char

Our qualitative and quantitative data reveals similar patterns of extreme intimate partner violence occurring in the Bhasan Char camp. Quantitative analysis in Bhasan Char finds that, out of the 5 married girls who were surveyed on Bhasan Char, 3 reported experiencing physical intimate partner violence and one reported experiencing sexual violence (being forced to engage in sexual acts against her will).

One 19-year-old girl told us her husband beat her so badly that she tried to escape. She told us, *"I didn't want to be with him, that's why I ran away. When I returned, I didn't even [get the chance to] sit in the room and he started to beat me again with 3 broom sticks. He stopped after breaking all three...my back turned black, black... I couldn't see, I couldn't move."* Similarly to qualitative data from camps in Cox's Bazar, young people in Bhasan Char seldom report instances of intimate partner violence to authorities and, when they do, there are fewer opportunities for redress due to lack of infrastructure and systems in place to support survivors. One multi-purpose centre coordinator explained,

The challenge we face here is that the people who come from Cox's Bazar don't come together. They come scattered – the full extended family doesn't come. Everyone is from different camps, and no one knows each other. As a result, the neighbourly relationships among them aren't always good and they always fight. When survivors of intimate partner violence come to us, we have many difficulties to make safety plans because here, there is no safe shelter. We can't send them back to their home because if they go back, they will face violence again. And she doesn't have any close relatives here, there's no distant relatives either. We face challenges like that...A severe case of intimate partner violence comes to us, and she does not have anyone. At that time, where will I keep her?

In Bhasan Char men emphasised that the drivers of intimate partner violence are related to a lack of employment and lack of education. In a focus group discussion with men, one participant noted: *'I have been here for almost seven months, but I haven't earned a single penny yet. In such a situation, how will I support my family? The government should definitely consider this matter...we do not have access to these opportunities, and as a result, frustration is increasing'*. For women and girls, drivers of intimate partner violence also had to do with lack of educational and employment opportunities but they were also seen as a reflection of personality traits: *'he is a bad man'* (19-year-old girl). Some girls also normalise gender-based violence and see intimate partner violence as a reflection on their own behaviour, and a failure to comply with expectations on their tasks as wives. One girl recalled, *'it was also my fault...He came home from the field and asked for cold water, but I hadn't gotten water from the pipe, that's why he beat me.'* (16-year-old girl).

UNFPA factsheets report that majhis have been known to prevent survivors reporting incidences of intimate partner violence and gender-based violence to humanitarian service providers (UNFPA, 2023) and have even threatened to reduce aid and opportunities to girls and women who report such incidences to humanitarian partners (ACAPS, 2022; Guglielmi et al., 2022).

Rohingya married adolescent girls also reported experiencing physical and verbal abuse from their husband's family (their in-laws), for a multitude of reasons, including not doing what is considered a wife's duties – primarily taking care of the in-laws, their son and the children. One 20-year-old young woman from camp C explained that:

If their son, my husband, doesn't give money to them, they fight with me. They say I am the reason. 'You are eating and having a good time and not giving us anything.' They say things like that. And they fight with me. They just like to fight with me a lot. If I talk about anything, they will make something big out of it.

Girls also reported that fights with their in-laws also led to further beatings by their husband.

There were some outlier voices in the research. Although intimate partner violence appears endemic, some girls mentioned that they do not get regularly beaten by their husband. One 20-year-old young woman from camp A said:

My husband is studying in private [tutoring]. He knows Bangla... he works for WFP [World Food Programme]... and he is now also learning English and is in class 10. My parents liked him because his habits and behaviours were good... My parents never looked for a rich man. They wanted to see me happy... When I was pregnant, I quarrelled with my husband. I was doing household chores and missed my prayer. He became angry about this and slapped my face. Now everything is fine. Now our habits and behaviour are matching... We have two children but now I have had the contraceptive injection. I went with my children to the hospital to get it. My husband would never let me go there alone. Because if I go to the hospital alone, other boys will follow me or try to talk to me. [But] there is no turmoil between us. We are happy. My husband and I both make decisions. He values my opinion.

In individual interviews and focus group discussions, girls also mentioned that a boy's level of education is correlated with the extent of intimate partner violence perpetrated. Girls noted that uneducated boys and men beat their wives hard enough to send them to hospital, whereas educated boys do not. Box 2 highlights experiences of intimate partner violence in Bhasan Char.

Sexual violence

Sexual violence in the Rohingya context is shrouded in secrecy and not readily disclosed nor reported. The most recent GBVIMS factsheet reports that 3.7% of all reported cases in the third quarter of 2023 were cases of rape, and 3.9% were cases of sexual assault (UNFPA, 2023). GAGE baseline data from 2019 found that while just 3% of Rohingya adolescent girls reported experiencing rape or sexual abuse, 72% reported hearing about someone being raped or sexually abused in their community (Presler-Marshall et al., 2022). Similarly, at midline in 2023, we find that 3% of married girls reported being touched against their will, or being made by their husband to do something sexual that they did not want to do. However, when we asked a question that allows respondents to privately report via placing a piece of paper in an envelope whether anyone has 'ever touched you sexually against your will, or made you do something sexual that you didn't want to', reports of sexual violence among married girls increased to 35%. The rate among unmarried girls was 28%, and 20% among boys.

Girls are fearful of rape and sexual assault occurring in the camps, on the streets, in and around latrines and at night-time, although they were reluctant to disclose any personal or community stories of specific incidences. In the quantitative data, only 11% of married girls reported that they feel safe walking in the community at night, compared with 20% of unmarried girls and 28% of boys.

The data highlights the reluctance of Rohingya adolescents to discuss or disclose occurrences of rape or sexual abuse. When asked if rape and sexual abuse happens, responses included the following: 'Yes, I have heard that rape happens, but in other places, not here' (14-year-old boy, camp C); and 'Yes... but not in our camp. It happens in other camps' (17-year-old boy, camp A). In fact, while there is a widespread fear of sexual violence, qualitative data points to hearsay rather than grounded community experiences. For example, one 15-year-old girl explained that:

If a girl goes outside... There are incidents like [sexual violence]... They get tied up and men do something bad to them. Then they are just left behind. That's why girls don't go outside... They get it videotaped and spread it on the internet. And soon it's on everyone's phone... They get killed and I saw in my mobile once that a girl got raped and killed instantly. The girl was screaming but no one listened.

To resolve cases of sexual violence, Rohingya adolescents and young people mentioned majhis as the first port of call. If they are unable to resolve the situation, sexual abuse is reported to the CIC office, which typically leads to police involvement. It is unclear what the legal solutions are for cases of rape. We heard accounts of

mediation being preferred to other forms of resolution. In fact, we heard widespread accounts of majhis resolving cases of rape by requesting that the boy or young man concerned marries the girl, which is considered by the community to be an acceptable form of resolution. One 21-year-old young woman from camp C explained:

Well you can seek justice [for cases of rape and pregnancy as a result of assault] from the majhi. You can go to the majhi and say, 'A man like this and that did this to me', but you have to know the person, [otherwise] how will you seek justice if you don't even know the man? However, if you can recognise him, you can tell the majhi and the majhi will arrange the marriage. [If you don't want to marry him] you can ask for compensation. The majhi will ask her father and everyone else and [tell] the man 'either you marry the girl or give compensation'.

In terms of reporting, there were some outlier voices, namely Rohingya camp volunteers who were trained by the GBV Sub-Sector and mentioned that they encountered many cases of sexual abuse and referred cases to hospitals and medical centres for clinical treatment of rape.



Camp scenes, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh
© Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE

Programmes to prevent and respond to gender-based violence

As part of the GAGE survey, we asked respondents about awareness-raising by humanitarian partners on the harms of intimate partner violence, including through specific programmes being implemented in the camps, namely: SASA! Together, Girl Shine, Champions of Change, Engaging Men through Accountable Practice, and MaBoinor Rosom (translated as Mother's and Sister's Way). Table 4 provides a description of each programme.

Overall, adolescent participation in these programmes is relatively low, at 13%. Females are more likely to have participated in a gender-based violence programme than males (15% vs 11%). Among programme participants, involvement in SASA! Together and Girl Shine was the most common (8% each), followed by Champions of Change (5%). Engaging Men through Accountable Practice, and MaBoinor Rosom, were less popular, with only 2% of adolescents reporting having participated in each programme. One 20-year-old young woman from camp O recounted her participation:

[I know] SASA! Together... They handle torture... such as marrying off before 18 or suffering from violence. If anything like that happens, they tell you to go to police. There's torture for dignity and also there's physical torture [Interviewer's note: 'torture for dignity' is interchangeable with 'rape']. There's also torture for money. Girls get

tortured if their family doesn't give money to their husband. There are many kinds of violence... If anything like that happens, you can tell the sisters who come or tell them at the office. Then they will stop it, they will do whatever is needed to be done. And if they can't do it, they will show the other ways that could be done.

While some adolescent girls mentioned knowing about programmes to prevent or respond to violence and others mentioned attending programme sessions, others believed these services were targeted to women – not to girls. Others mentioned hearing about such interventions taking place in different camps and believed programming to be patchy.

Adolescents mentioned that survivors of abuse, or married girls who seek divorce, can find support at the shanti khana ('peace house', signifying a women- and girl-friendly space) – a safe space that offers a diverse range of programmes and support to girls. Girls also mentioned receiving knowledge on maternal and neonatal health, as well as skills-building classes on tailoring and crafting. Adolescents also mentioned community-based awareness-raising campaigns, informing community members about what constitutes gender-based violence and the harms it can cause. Community-based meetings are also held on violence mitigation measures, power dynamics, and protection referral mechanisms offered by humanitarian partners.

Table 4: Brief description of programming addressing gender-based violence in Cox's Bazar

Programme	Description
SASA! Together	SASA! Together is a step-by-step social mobilisation approach, used with both Rohingya and host communities, to prevent gender-based violence and end all forms of violence against women and girls through community activism campaigns, trainings, group-work and knowledge-sharing sessions to increase awareness on the different forms of gender-based violence and the safety of women and girls.
Girl Shine	Girl Shine is a programme dedicated to adolescent girls, to reduce their risk of gender-based violence and child marriage. Through 20 sessions, the programme helps girls build social networks and self-confidence, and includes a shorter curriculum for girls' caregivers.
Champions of Change	Champions of Change targets adolescent boys aged 10–19 years and promotes positive gender norms and attitudes via a staged curriculum encompassing topics on gender, life skills, sexuality, positive conflict resolution and interpersonal skills.
Engaging Men through Accountable Practice	Engaging Men through Accountable Practice seeks to address internalised male behaviours that result in gender-based violence. A weekly meeting guides dialogues between men and women around gender norms, the causes and consequences of gender-based violence, and masculinity.
MaBoinor Rosom	MaBoinor Rosom was created specifically for the Rohingya context by Rohingya people. The programme aims to share knowledge about sensitive topics while increasing confidence among women, girls and female facilitators. Interactive group activities are run with Rohingya women and girls over 8 weeks.

Child marriage

Nearly all qualitative interviews demonstrated Rohingya adolescent and young people's knowledge that marriage should occur after 18 years of age. That said, many also agreed that marriage occurs earlier than the legally binding age. In the quantitative data at midline, 41% of girls reported having ever been married, and more than half (60%) of those marriages occurred before the adolescent was 18. The average age at marriage was 16, with reported ages ranging from 12 to 22. Some adolescents commented on the high prevalence of child marriage in the community: *'There are many cases where they get married at 12 or 14/15 years old'* (22-year-old young man, camp D); *'Girls become adults at the age of 12. Marriage should be as soon as possible according to religion. Even though the legal age for marriage is 18, girls are married here before that'* (21-year-old young woman, camp A). However, other respondents disagreed. Some believe that child marriage has become less prevalent in recent years and girls are marrying closer to the legal age of 18:

[Girls are married off] at 14, 15 and 16 years old... but such cases are rare... [and] risky. There is no permission from the government to do marriages like these. (14-year-old boy, camp B)

Qualitative data highlights that Rohingya families can avoid policy formalities when conducting child marriages, by bypassing the CIC office and approving marriage ceremonies within the community itself. One girl noted, *'Girls who are 12 or 13 years old got married here... People don't listen to the CIC. My brother also married a girl who was 12 or 13 years old then. Now she is 18 years old and has two children... [Basically] if their family wants [to get a girl married] then she has to get married'* (17-year-old girl, camp A).

When discussing the appropriate age of marriage, adolescents – girls especially – mentioned that marrying before 18 is not formally allowed, particularly because girls are not physically mature by that age. Marriage is thus associated with childbearing, and the knowledge they received from humanitarian interventions that raise awareness about the risks of child marriage is aligned with medical problems associated with early childbearing. Girls also spoke about immaturity related to not knowing how to cope within a marriage and in the household. One girl said, *'I went to a session where they told us to not get married before 18. If a girl gets married before 18 they will not understand anything regarding their household life and how to handle a husband and everything else. They wouldn't know how to take care of themselves and their children'* (16-year-old girl, camp B). During a focus group discussion, one participant said that, *'[girls under 18] would not know*

how to manage a family, they wouldn't know how to handle the baby and how to raise her. Girls wouldn't know in what manner she should speak with her husband [and in-laws].'

Drivers of child marriage

Our data points to socio-religious norms and the perception of increased security as the main drivers of child marriage. Qualitative data underscores that abiding with socio-religious norms is the most significant and relevant driver, by far. Adolescent girls and boys discussed the fact that there is little value placed on females in Rohingya society, and although it is a family's duty to take care of their children, once a girl enters puberty she 'becomes a burden to the family, therefore, they arrange the marriage. Girls don't carry any value in the camp' (20-year-old young woman, camp A). Socio-religious norms effectively truncate educational opportunities for Rohingya adolescent girls: *'I want to be educated and become something big. My mother says that girls shouldn't be too educated. They say it's an order from the Prophet to get girls married as soon as possible'* (15-year-old girl, camp C).

During the research, we heard accounts of parents and community members telling girls they will be reprimanded and ridiculed if they delay marriage. Girls and boys alike spoke of dignity, honour and security of social standing if girls marry young – as soon as possible. One 18-year-old girl from camp D summed up a common sentiment: *'People think girls should get married as soon as possible. It will give them security. Their honour will be saved.'* Majhis are also seen as promoters of child marriage in many instances – something that came out strongly in the qualitative data:

Majhi [decided I should marry at 16]. Majhi said, 'The girl has reached the age for marriage. It's now "Faraj" [mandatory in religious sense]. Marry her off. She is now grown up and eligible.' And everyone said that and then they married me off. (20-year-old young woman, camp C)

Marriage is believed to increase girls' safety and security. Security, however, is intertwined with maintaining socio-religious norms, and abiding by community perceptions of girls' behaviour. As a result, 'security' is often used interchangeably with social standing and safety from potential danger. One 20-year-old young woman in camp A noted that, *'...the situation in the camp is not good, it is not safe [so] everyone thought if young girls are not married they couldn't be safe. People got scared for their honour.'* Upon marriage, girls are viewed as having a seal of community approval, and boys in the community will understand that they cannot look or speak to married girls on the streets; the absence of this risk secures a girl's standing in the community,

A 19-year-old young man in camp C explained:

Boys bother girls when they grow up. Then the girl's image gets tarnished. So, parents marry off the girl to protect her from defamation.'

Relieving a family of the economic burden of taking care of a girl child was also cited as a driver of child marriage, though this was less pronounced as a factor in the qualitative data.

In terms of decision-making around marriage, the quantitative data showed that 83% of married girls said their parents decided their marriage, and 16% reported feeling pressure from their parents to marry. Qualitative data underscores the limited value placed on girls' opinions – and their very limited say in decisions that affect their lives. None of the girls interviewed expressed feelings of excitement about their marriage; many expressed a sense of desperation and worry, yet felt voiceless and powerless to express their feelings. One 20-year-old young woman in camp C said, 'My opinion has no weight. I would get married regardless of what I say... So I wouldn't say it, even if I didn't agree to my marriage.' Others appeared void of any feeling related to their marriage, and abide by the norm that decision on their marriage befalls on others: 'My parents fixed my marriage... they don't have to take my permission because they are my parents. They know what is good for me. Whatever they decide for me, I have no problem with it. In our community, all of the girls gets married at this age' (21-year-old young woman, camp C).

Parents and in-laws are the main decision-makers about marriage for Rohingya girls, and cultural codes do not permit 'talking over' or 'refusing' parental wishes. This is seen to carry risks, particularly of disinheritance, not paying the groom's family, and would ultimately result in less protection for the girl. We highlight an outlier story in Box 3, where one girl's family members opposed her early marriage and attempted to, unsuccessfully, interrupt it.

Rohingya girls expressed grave worry when thinking about their wedding and when imagining their married life. As noted earlier, none expressed excitement or joy at the prospect. Rather, girls often lamented the loss of their life as daughters and their fear about leaving their family home. Girls' comments included the following: '*I was worried about how I was going to cook and clean... I was worried about how I was going to leave my parents behind. I didn't know how I was going to maintain a house, where I had never been... I felt afraid of all things*' (20-year-old young woman, camp C); '*I wasn't ready. I cried so bad*' (20-year-old young woman, camp A); and '*[the day of the wedding] I felt restless in my heart*' (22-year-old young woman, camp B).

Box 3: Marriage under 18: an account of family members who disagree

We report an account of an adolescent girls' family members who disagreed about her parents marrying her off before 18. Now 20-years-old (camp A), she reflects on her aunts' opinions against her child marriage.

I got married at 14.. Only my aunts said 'If you marry at a young age there will be bad consequences. Either mother will be harmed or child. She will get hurt while giving birth' and they also said that if I was married off, a young majhi would come and stop it. At that time the CIC [Camp in Charge officer] wasn't there. CIC came here later. But the majhi himself married me off... My aunt didn't even come to my wedding. I was married too young... that's why she didn't even come to the wedding. Out of anger. She believed that if I married young, my life would be destroyed... Some girls my age are still unmarried. And here I am at the age of 19, I have [already had] two husbands. What a tragedy... My aunts said I was still a child. They said to my parents that I was being married off way too young. That they wouldn't come, they wouldn't agree to the marriage.

Adolescent girls expressed intense feelings of hopelessness and disorientation at the prospect of their married life. While we do not report fear of intimate partner violence as linked to negative ideas of marriage, there were strong sentiments that they did not want to leave the safety of their family and the home they knew. One 21-year-old young woman from camp C said, succinctly, '*I felt like the world was breaking*'.



Rohingya girl, 15 in a camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh
© Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE

Policy and programming implications

Our mixed-methods midline research findings across Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char highlight the urgent need for policy and programming that enhance the safety and security of Rohingya adolescents and young people. Key priorities include the following:

- Invest in intimate partner violence reduction programmes, that help families tackle gender and power inequality in the home. Co-create interventions with the Rohingya community, to promote supportive behaviors and positive communication between girls and boys and women and men that are designed by the community, in order to increase buy-in and social appropriateness. Consider specific ways to target male involvement in intimate partner violence prevention.
- Scale up gender-transformative activities, including programming by SASA! Together, Engaging Men through Accountable Practice (EMAP), Girl Shine and MaBoinor Rosom, and couple these with skills- building components for female and male participants. Our data confirms that although participation in programming remains low, it is beneficial to those who do attend – particularly for girls, for whom programming is sometimes the only opportunity to venture beyond their homes. To further increase uptake, programmes should provide diverse skills building opportunities for adolescents and youth who can use the skill set for employment within the camp setting.
- Increase coordination between humanitarian partners working to prevent and respond to intimate partner and other forms of gender-based violence. The roles and responsibilities of Camp in Charge (CIC) officers, majhis and other stakeholders should be better harmonized to

increase complementarity and understanding of their work and their collective role in combating violence. Explore the feasibility of recruiting female community and government leaders in the Rohingya camps, which could make the response more impartial, while at the same time showcasing female leadership.

- Further explore Rohingya reporting patterns and mechanisms through research, particularly the preference of Rohingya survivors to report abuse to majhis and CIC officers. Linked to this, evaluate the feasibility of humanitarian partners offering a one-stop-shop system to survivors where they are able to access multisectoral case management as well and justice services, as this would make their response package more appealing to survivors and increase their judicial authority.
- Continue to invest in innovative and best practice child marriage prevention programmes while supporting already-married girls. It is critical to continue to keep child marriage prevention high on the agenda due to the numerous and multi-faceted negative outcomes for girls who are married early. At the same time, it is important to direct attention to already married girls and promote safe space programming (including skills building components, child care, psychosocial support) so they are not left behind.

References

- ACAPS (2022) Bangladesh: needs and priorities of Rohingya refugees and host communities in Cox's Bazar since 2017: what has changed? ACAPS Thematic Report, 30 August 2022 (www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20220830_acaps_thematic_report_cxb_needs_and_priorities_of_rohingya_refugees_and_host_communities.pdf)
- ACAPS (2023) Bangladesh: rising violence, insecurity, and protection concerns in Cox's Bazar refugee
- GAGE consortium (2019) Gender and adolescence. Why understanding adolescent capabilities, change strategies and contexts matters. Second edition. London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (www.gage.odi.org/publication/gage-conceptual-framework-second-edition/)
- GAGE consortium (2022) 'Adolescent lives in Cox's Bazar: what are we learning from longitudinal evidence? Lessons from longitudinal research with adolescents.' Policy brief. London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence
- Gerhardt, L. (2021) 'GBV trends among Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar: COVID-19 update'. International Rescue Committee (www.rescue.org/report/gbv-trends-among-rohingya-refugees-coxs-bazar-covid-19-update)
- Guglielmi, S., Jones, N., Muz, J., Baird, S., Mitu, K. and Ala Uddin, M. (2020) 'Age- and gender-based violence risks facing Rohingya and Bangladeshi adolescents in Cox's Bazar.' Policy brief. London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence
- Guglielmi, S., Mitu, K., Jones, N., Ala Uddin, M. and Seager, J. (2022) Gender-based violence. What is working in prevention, response and mitigation across Rohingya refugee camps, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence
- Hölzl, V. (2021) 'As violence soars in refugee camps, Rohingya women speak up'. The New Humanitarian, 2 August (www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2021/8/2/as-violence-soars-in-refugee-camps-rohingya-women-speak-up)
- International Rescue Committee (IRC) (2020) The shadow pandemic: gender-based violence among Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar. Washington DC: International Rescue Committee (www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/2247/theshadowpandemicbangladesh.pdf)
- Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG), International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and UN Resident Coordinator for Bangladesh (2019) 2019 Joint Response Plan: Rohingya humanitarian crisis, January – December 2019
- ISCG, IOM, UNHCR, and UN Resident Coordinator for Bangladesh (2020) 2020 Joint Response Plan: Rohingya humanitarian crisis, January – December 2020
- ISCG, IOM, UNHCR, and UN Resident Coordinator for Bangladesh (2021) 2021 Joint Response Plan: Rohingya humanitarian crisis, January – December 2021
- ISCG, IOM, UNHCR, and UN Resident Coordinator for Bangladesh (2022) 2022 Joint Response Plan: Rohingya humanitarian crisis, January – December 2022
- ISCG, IOM, UNHCR, and UN Resident Coordinator for Bangladesh (2023) 2023 Joint Response Plan: Rohingya humanitarian crisis, January – December 2023
- Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) (2022). What about us? Youth inclusion in the Rohingya refugee response. NRC/2022 (<https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/what-about-us/what-about-us-youth-inclusion-in-the-rohingya-response.pdf>)
- O'Connor, K. and Seager, J. (2021) 'Displacement, violence, and mental health: evidence from Rohingya adolescents in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh' International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health 18(10): 5318 (DOI: 10.3390/ijerph18105318)
- Plan International (2018) Adolescent girls in crisis: experiences of risk and resilience across three humanitarian settings. Woking, UK: Plan International (https://plan-international.org/uploads/2021/12/adolescent_girls_in_crisis_-_global_report.pdf)
- Presler-Marshall, E., Oakley, E., Abu Hamad, Sh., Diab, R., Jones, N., Abu Hammad, B., Alheiwidi, S., Yadete, W., Seager, J. and Baird, S. (2022) 'Adolescent girls' and boys' experiences of violence: evidence from Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE). Policy brief. London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2023) 'Refugee response in Bangladesh', Operations data portal (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/bgd>)
- United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (2023) Cox's Bazar: Gender-Based Violence Information Management System (GBVIMS) quarter 2 GBVIMS 2023 factsheet. Cox's Bazar April–June 2023 (https://rohingyaresponse.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Q22023_GBVIMS_Factsheet_final.pdf)