

Education, skills development, and employment for Rohingya young people living in Bangladesh

Midline evidence from GAGE

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Introduction

More than six years on from the mass Rohingya influx into Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, the multisectoral needs of Rohingya refugees remain acute. An estimated 930,000 Rohingya live in 33 congested camps across Cox's Bazar, constituting the largest refugee settlement in the world (ISCG et al., 2024). More than 75,000 Rohingya have been relocated to Bhasan Char Island, which is in the Bay of Bengal and is reachable only through approved military transit (ibid.). The protracted nature of the crisis, the categorisation of the Rohingya by the Government of Bangladesh as 'forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals' (FDMNs) rather than refugees (thereby preventing them accessing social and economic rights), and the recent cuts to aid for the Rohingya emergency¹ all add complexities to the humanitarian response (Pirovolakis, 2023; United Nations (UN), 2023). The educational response has been especially limited by government policy, and Rohingya children and youth continue to be prohibited from accessing the Bangladeshi national curriculum or learning Bengali. Indeed, until late 2021 – when 10,000

children were allowed access to a pilot curriculum – formal education was prohibited for all children over the age of 14. While the Myanmar curriculum has since been rolled out for all students up to tenth grade, challenges remain. Young people's access to skills training and employment is similarly limited. While the Rohingya are allowed by the government to volunteer for stipends inside camps, they are strictly prohibited from working in host communities, due to concerns that they will affect the employment prospects and wages of Bangladeshi nationals.

In this report, we draw on mixed-methods midline data collected in 2023 as part of the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) longitudinal research programme to explore changes in the education and learning opportunities – including for employment related skills – and work opportunities available to Rohingya young people living in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char. We also explore how the provision of educational and skills-building services to displaced Rohingya young people intersects with their gender, age, disability and marital status to shape their uptake of and experiences with those services.



A Rohingya young man at a NRC learning center who wants to become a teacher, Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2024

¹ Commitments by United Nations (UN) member states to the Rohingya humanitarian appeals have been falling from approximately 70% in 2021, to 60% in 2022 and around 30% by October 2023. There have been significant cuts in food aid: in mid-2023, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) cut per person food rations from US\$12 to US\$8 (Howes, 2023), and although still inadequate they were increased to US\$10 in January 2024 (WFP, 2023).

Bangladesh context

Education sector challenges and priorities

Although the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) mandates the basic human right to education (UN General Assembly, 1989), and the Global Compact on Refugees calls for the inclusion of displaced populations in host country schools as well as education systems and employment sectors (UNHCR, 2018), the Rohingya population has been denied these rights because the Government of Bangladesh does not recognize them as refugees and instead prioritises their repatriation to Myanmar.

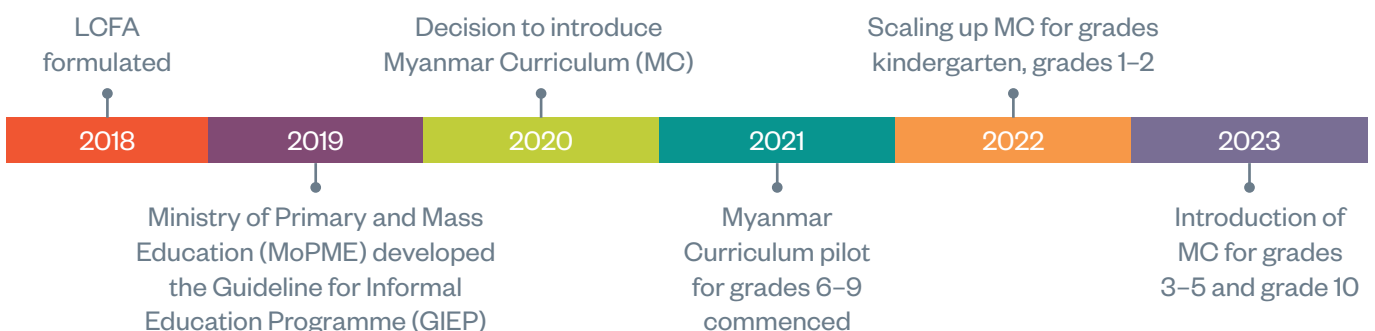
During the initial years of the Rohingya response, the Cox’s Bazar Education Sector, led by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and Save the Children International (SCI), took leadership in developing the Government of Bangladesh-approved Learning Competency Framework Approach (LCFA). The LCFA was a condensed and tailored curriculum covering four levels of learning, corresponding to content for children and adolescents aged 4–14 years. It was developed as an emergency measure for non-formal learning and was delivered in dedicated learning centres run by the UN, and national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). By 2020, it became increasingly clear that the unaccredited LCFA was not meeting the needs of Rohingya families; they perceived the child-centred pedagogies and curriculum to be too interactive when compared with the teacher-centred, lecture-based lessons they had been accustomed to in Myanmar (at least prior to the escalation of tensions between the Rohingya population and the government in Rakhine state in August 2017) (Guglielmi et al., 2020). Additionally, although the LCFA levels 3 and 4 were more rigorous than levels 1 and 2, the curriculum was

not designed to provide education analogous to secondary education (ibid.). The Cox’s Bazar Education Sector, alongside the Government of Bangladesh, therefore agreed to pilot a formal educational programme (the Myanmar curriculum) in the Rohingya camps. Although the pilot was delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic (when all schools in the country were closed), official roll-out commenced in December 2021 to learners in grades 6–9 (equating to ages 11–15 as per the breakdown). Since July 2023, the Myanmar curriculum has fully replaced the LCFA, delivering instruction to children and adolescents from kindergarten up to grade 10 (see Figure 1).

The language of instruction of the Myanmar curriculum is Burmese, though the curriculum does include a class on English. A systemic teacher training programme is currently underway to build the capacity of both Rohingya and Bangladeshi teachers to deliver the curriculum content. It includes coursework aimed at strengthening teachers’ subject knowledge and language and pedagogical and assessment skills. It is important to note that although learners currently progressing through the Myanmar curriculum will not obtain formal accreditation, their progress is being captured through formative and summative report cards as proof of learning to be used upon their eventual repatriation to Myanmar (Cox’s Bazar Education Sector, 2022).

The most recent Education Sector dashboard indicates that young people’s access to learning opportunities is highly uneven. Most learners are young and among adolescents, most are male (Rohingya Refugee Response Bangladesh, 2024). As of September 2023, of 334,000 Rohingya learners enrolled in any type of education in the camps, approximately 14% were aged 3–5, 53% were aged 6–10, 29% were aged 11–18, and 3% were aged 19–24. Although enrolment data shows that there is a close to 50% gender ratio up to age 10, girls are less likely to be

Figure 1: Myanmar curriculum roll-out



Source: UNICEF, 2023a

enrolled after age 10, with significantly more boys enrolled, especially in the 11–14 age bracket (Cox’s Bazar Education Sector, 2023).

Learning opportunities are provided in multiple venues. NGO-run learning centers in the camps are utilised to provide education under the Education Sector guidelines, including the Myanmar Curriculum delivery for learners up to age 18, and vocational education programmes for learners aged 15–18 (ESCG et al., 2024). Multi-purpose centres (MPCs) also contribute to the learning environment. While they primarily provide social protection services and social change initiatives to enhance the protective environment for children and adolescents against violence, abuse and exploitation, they also offer life skills-based education to adolescents and youth – including on violence, social awareness, protection, communication skills – as well as skills-based training initiatives, including sewing, tailoring, engineering and computer trainings (UNICEF, 2023b). Community-based learning facilities (CBLFs, which are Rohingya community-led education programmes occurring in the homes of Rohingya families, also provide opportunities for education. These include the direct delivery of the Myanmar Curriculum, are approved and overseen by the Education Sector, are more flexible (and proximate) learning arrangements, and also include female-only secondary level classes.

Community-led Islamic religious schools and private tutors are also functional in the Rohingya camps. Religious education is offered through maktabas, which provide an hour or two of instruction per day, and through madrasas, which provide full-day instruction (Olney et al., 2019; Folven, 2022). Private tutoring is also available (provided by people who were teachers in Myanmar and by Rohingya tertiary students), though this is prohibited by the government.

Livelihoods and skills development sector challenges and priorities

Due to their precarious legal status, the Rohingya do not have freedom of movement in Bangladesh; they are not formally allowed to take up employment and are not integrated into the Government of Bangladesh’s development agenda (Talukder et al., 2022). As a result, the Rohingya continue to significantly rely on humanitarian assistance for survival. Since the onset of the Covid-19

pandemic and the associated global food price hikes, the Rohingya have become much more vulnerable (World Food Programme (WFP), 2023). To combat this, the newly established Livelihoods and Skills Development Sector seeks to operationalise the 2022 government-approved Framework on Skills Development for Rohingya refugees/FDMNs and Host Communities (Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) et al., 2023), which aims to build livelihood skills useful for the eventual repatriation of the Rohingya to Myanmar (Government of Bangladesh and UN, 2022). This Framework on Skills Development also allows for and structures the capacity-building, training and paid engagement of Rohingya ‘volunteers’ into the humanitarian response. Through a stipend framework, Rohingya volunteers can be recruited and engaged by humanitarian partners and are able to contribute to humanitarian activities and service delivery in the camps. The Framework on Skills Development, in tandem with the Education Sector’s Skill Development Framework for Adolescent and Youths (Cox’s Bazar Education Sector, 2019),² is meant to open pathways for Rohingya adolescents and youth to develop the livelihood skills they need to become self-sufficient in the future.

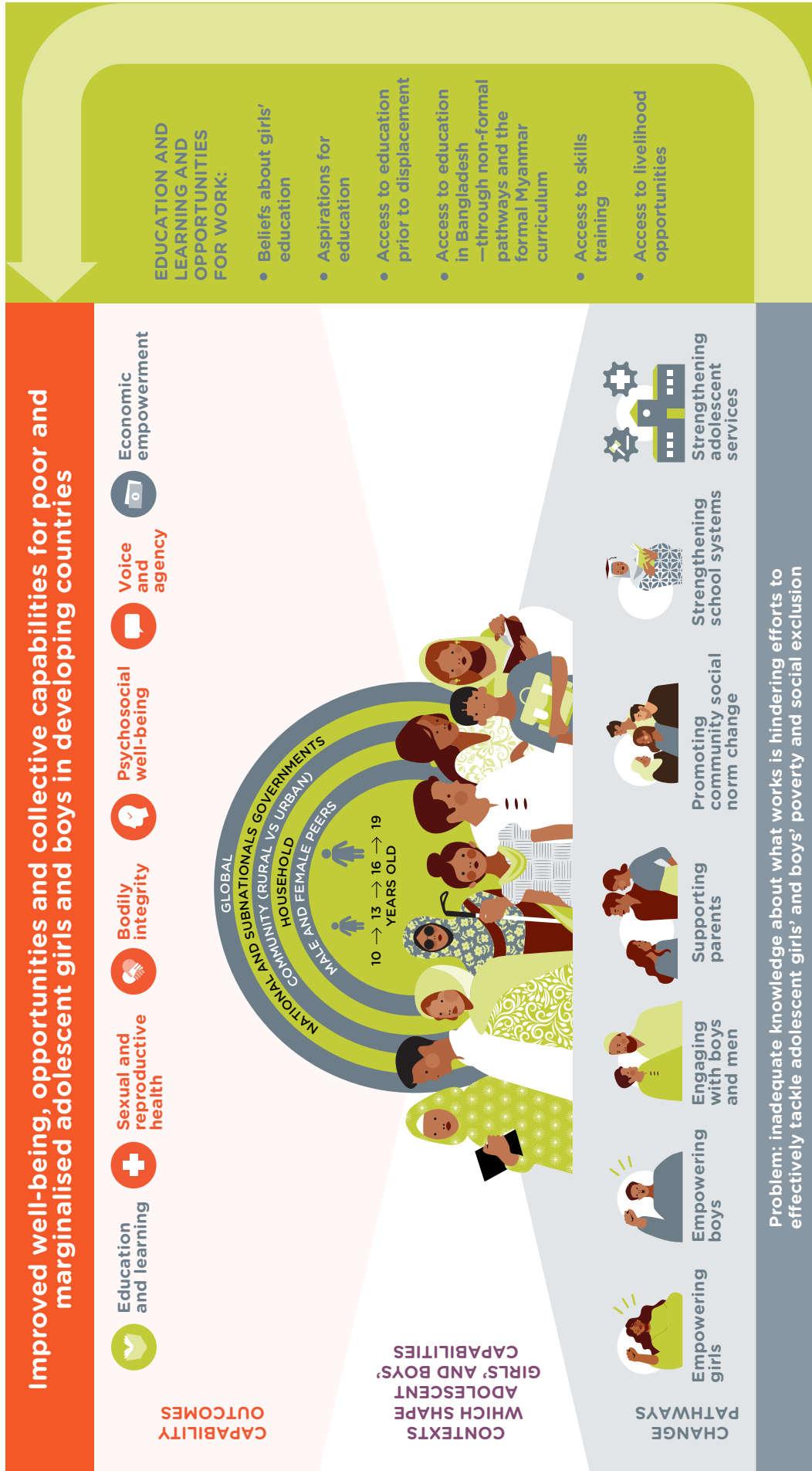
Conceptual framing

Informed by the emerging evidence base on adolescent well-being and development, GAGE’s conceptual framework takes a holistic approach that pays careful attention to the interconnectedness of what we call the ‘3 Cs’ – capabilities, change strategies and contexts – in order to understand what works to support adolescents’ development and empowerment, both now and in the future (see Figure 2). This framing draws on the three components of Pawson and Tilley’s (1997) approach to evaluation, which highlights the importance of outcomes, causal mechanisms and contexts, though we tailor it to the specific challenges of understanding what works in improving adolescents’ capabilities.

The first building block of our conceptual framework is capability outcomes. Championed originally by Amartya Sen (1985, 2004) and nuanced by Martha Nussbaum (2011) and Naila Kabeer (2003) to better capture complex gender dynamics at intra-household and societal

² A framework seeking to build adolescent educational opportunities through the provision of literacy and numeracy skills as well as building life skills and social entrepreneurship skills, to develop adolescent and youth competencies so that they can live more fulfilled day-to-day lives.

Figure 2: GAGE conceptual framework



levels, the capabilities approach has evolved as a broad normative framework exploring the kinds of assets (economic, human, political, emotional and social) that expand the capacity of individuals to achieve valued ways of 'doing and being'. At its core is a sense of competence and purposive agency: it goes beyond a focus on a fixed bundle of external assets, instead emphasising investment in an individual's skills, knowledge and voice. Importantly, the approach can encompass relevant investments in children and young people with diverse trajectories, including the most marginalised and 'hardest to reach' such as those with disabilities or those who were married as children. Although the GAGE framework covers six core capabilities, this report focuses on education and learning – including learning employment related skills – and paid work.

The second building block of our conceptual framework is context dependency. Our '3 Cs' framework situates young people socio-ecologically. It recognises that not only do girls and boys at different stages in the life course have different needs and constraints, but also that these are highly dependent on their context at the family/household, community, state and global levels.

The third and final building block of our conceptual framework – change strategies – acknowledges that young people's contextual realities will not only shape the pathways through which they develop their capabilities but also determine the change strategies open to them to improve their outcomes. Our socio-ecological approach emphasises that to nurture transformative change in girls' and boys' capabilities and broader well-being, change strategies must simultaneously invest in integrated intervention approaches at different levels, weaving together policies and programming that support young people, their families and their communities while also working to effect change at the systems level. The report concludes with our reflections on what type of package of interventions could better support Rohingya young people's access to quality learning opportunities and employment.

Sample and methods

This report draws on midline data collected in 2023 as part of the GAGE longitudinal research programme, which explores what works to support the development of adolescents' capabilities as they transition through adolescence and into young adulthood (GAGE consortium, 2019). Quantitative data collection took place from July to October 2023, with additional tracking in December 2023 and January 2024. Qualitative data was collected in March and April 2023. Research was conducted in 24 camps in Cox's Bazar, as well as in Bhasan Char island (Table 1). The quantitative sample included 834 young people living in Cox's Bazar. It included slightly more females than males (54% versus 46%) and is split into two age cohorts, the younger larger than the older (62% versus 38%) (see Table 2). Of the young people in the quantitative sample, 66 (8%) have a functional disability even with assistive device. Of the 449 females in the sample, 194 (43%) have been married. A smaller number (131) were married prior to the age of 18. This report refers to the younger cohort (who were mostly aged 10–12 years at baseline and were a mean of 16 years old at midline) as 'adolescents'. It refers to the older cohort (mostly aged 15–17 at baseline and a mean of 20.5 years old at midline) as 'young adults'.

Findings from the quantitative survey were complemented by in-depth qualitative research across 7 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 communities (see Table 3), using interactive tools with individuals and groups.⁴ Researchers also undertook qualitative interviews with 21 adolescents, caregivers and key informants in Bhasan Char island.

Prior to commencing research, GAGE secured approval from ethics committees at ODI and George Washington University, as well as from the Institute of Health Economics from the University of Dhaka. We also secured informed assent from adolescents aged 17 and under, and informed consent from their caregivers, and from adolescents aged 18 or above. There was also a robust protocol for referral to services, tailored to the different realities of the diverse research sites (Baird et al., 2020).

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

⁴ 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.

Table 1: Mixed-methods research sites

	Quantitative fieldwork sites		Qualitative fieldwork sites	
	Fieldwork sites (Cox's Bazar camps + Bhasan Char)	No. of respondents	Fieldwork sites (Cox's Bazar camps + Bhasan Char)	No. of respondents
Total	25	834	8	73

Table 2: Quantitative sample

Quantitative sample – Cox's Bazar			
	Female	Male	Total
Adolescents	249	266	515
Young adults	200	119	319
Total	449	385	834

Table 3: Qualitative sample

Cox's Bazar			
	Female	Male	Total
Adolescents	15	13	28
Young adults	16	6	22
Parent focus group discussions	3	3	6
Young people focus group discussions	3	3	6
Key informant interviews	3	8	11
Total	40	33	73
Bhasan Char			
	Female	Male	Total
Adolescents	7	2	9
Young adults	3	1	4
Parent focus group discussions	1	1	2
Young people focus group discussions	1	1	2
Key informant interviews	2	2	4
Total	14	7	21



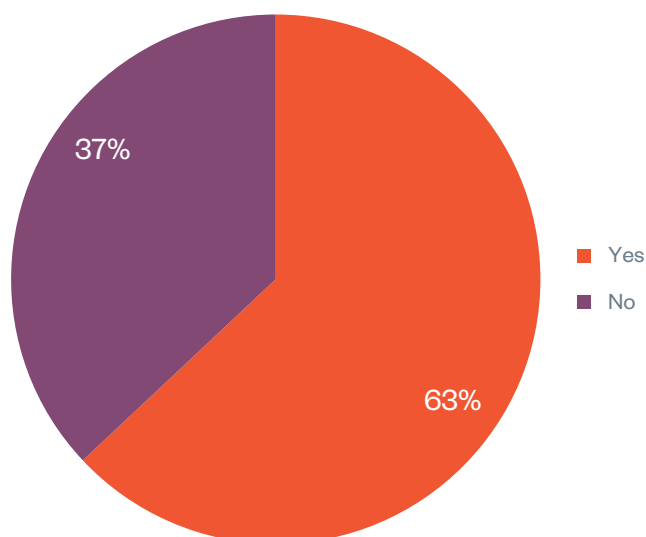
Findings

GAGE midline findings underscore that Rohingya young people have – and have had – only the most limited access to any form of education. This is due to a combination of factors: their legal status in Myanmar prior to displacement; displacement itself; and their legal status in Bangladesh since displacement. For girls and young women, these broader barriers are amplified by social norms that de-prioritise girls’ education because of their role in the home, even when girls are young – and then strictly require girls to retreat into the home at puberty, under the custom of purdah. Because these gender norms are so central to understanding the broader picture of how Rohingya young people engage with learning, our findings begin with a section that addresses these social norms, before turning to educational aspirations and access to education.

Beliefs about girls’ education

The midline survey asked young people a variety of questions to explore the social norms that shape access to education. Responses did not vary by cohort or gender. Two-thirds (63%) of adolescent girls and boys and young women and young men agreed – at least in part – that girls should only be sent to school if they are not needed at home (see Figure 3). A similar proportion (64%) agreed that if a family can only afford to send one child to secondary school, it should be a boy (see Figure 4). These beliefs are reflected in the enrollment data presented below.

Figure 3: Proportion of young people who agree with the statement ‘Girls should only be sent to school if they are not needed at home’



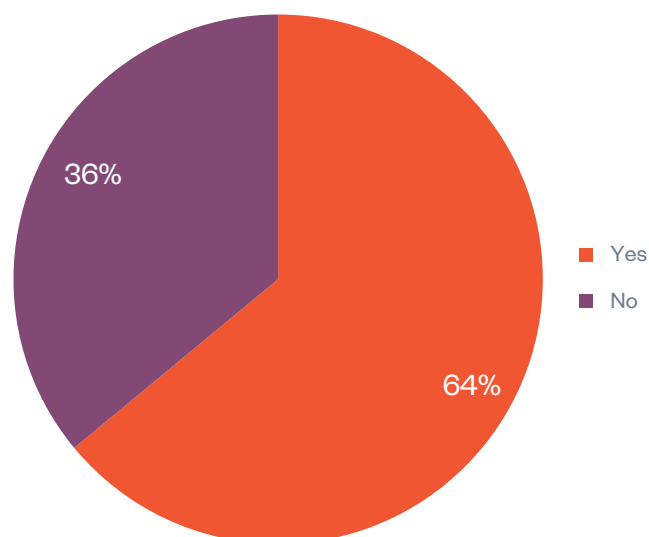
Critically, even girls who are allowed to attend school during early childhood are rarely allowed to continue attending once they reach puberty. In line with existent evidence, GAGE qualitative findings underscore that this is due to restrictions on girls’ mobility – specifically the custom of purdah, which requires them to strictly stay at home once their bodies begin maturing (see Ripoll, 2017). Nearly all adolescent and adult respondents spoke of menarche (the onset of menstruation) as marking the end of girls’ access to school. A 15-year-old girl from camp C explained:

I stopped going to school the day I started my period. I felt bad about it, I couldn’t go out anymore. I couldn’t go to play with my friends ... but the worst part is that I can’t go to school anymore. It makes me feel very sad. Even now. I still want to study.

A Rohingya father added, ‘In our society, girls are not allowed to leave the house from the time of menarche, so after the age of 12... girls cannot go out or study... It is the law of our society.’

Although the qualitative data suggests that Rohingya adolescent girls had limited mobility in Myanmar prior to their displacement, most respondents blamed the insecure camp environment for the very strict restrictions on girls’ mobility. Although the average distance for adolescents to travel to learning centres is 12 minutes (maximum 35 minutes) by foot, this distance is considered ‘far away’ for girls, whose purity must be protected if family honour is to

Figure 4: Proportion of young people who agree with the statement ‘If a family can only afford to send one child to secondary school, it should be a boy’



be upheld and girls are to remain marriageable. An 18-year-old young man from camp C reported that adolescent girls must never leave home, lest 'boys give them a bad stare'. A 21-year-old father added, 'Boys will disturb them, that's why parents don't allow girls to go to school.' A father explained, 'Here, the houses are attached to each other, the boys will see if the girl comes out ... They [girls] can go out to go to hospital ... and to use the bathroom [but] they can't gossip with boys or go roaming outside.'

With the caveat that some girls internalise that they do not need a 'worldly' education (see Box 1), it was not uncommon for respondents in the qualitative sample to report that what ends at menarche is not girls' access to education and learning, but their access to school. Several adolescent girls and young women reported being taught at home, by their fathers or older brothers, or attending private tutorials. A 15-year-old girl from camp C explained, 'When I turned 14 my family told me to start studying again and admitted me into private study.' Indeed, respondents broadly agreed that in order to improve adolescent girls' access to education, it is important to either bring tutors to girls' homes, or to reduce girls' exposure to unwanted stares by making learning centres more proximate and more private. They added that in both scenarios, it is critical that girls are taught only by women – which is challenging given the dearth of educated Rohingya women

and the mobility restrictions that Rohingya women face. A 17-year-old girl from camp B stated:

If they arrange learning in our house, I could do it. If a female teacher comes, I don't have any problem, but I will not learn from a male teacher ... There are many girls of my age. They all want to study. If school is arranged in someone's house, then all girls can go there.

A 15-year-old boy from camp C added:

Female teachers should be appointed for the girls' education, and a separate room is needed so that it cannot be seen from the outside. If done in this way, the girls will be able to learn.

Aspirations for education

The reality of young people's access to education notwithstanding (see below), the midline survey found that aspirations for secondary education are high: nearly all boys and young men (95%) aspire to attend secondary school, as do most girls (81%) and young women (69%) (see Figure 5). Young people's aspirations for university are far lower and vary only by gender: only 22% of boys and young men and 7% of girls and young women would like to attend university (see Figure 6).

Qualitative research underscores that most Rohingya young people primarily value education for the livelihood

Box 1: 'I am not a child'

Interviews with many girls in the qualitative sample underscored that, as a result of prevailing social norms, girls tend to internalise that they do not need education once they reach puberty. A 14-year-old girl from camp B explained that while she had been devastated to leave school upon menarche, now she is 'no longer a child' and no longer needs 'worldly' education as it is not needed for her socially expected role in the home:

[The girl stopped school] since I got older, when I was no longer a young girl. I studied till class 4 [and stopped going] when I had my first period. I haven't gone to school since, I stopped going outside. [This happened] almost a year ago, a few days before Qurbani Eid [Eid al-Adha, Islamic holiday]. I had my first period then. Qurbani Eid is a big day for me, because on that day I dress up and go out to visit other houses and relatives with other kids in the block. I loved going outside and celebrating with children my age. But now I can't do that anymore. I felt very sad [when she got her period]. I was only thinking and asking God, 'Why? Why did you give me this? What did I do?'... It was very sad for me, I cried secretly ... I don't [cry anymore about it]. I am more mature now. I feel like I have grown up a lot. I have a lot of things to do and I don't want to go outside like a child anymore ... I am not a child.

[Interviewer: What do you do all day long?] I help my mother with chores at home. And I still study at home. When I used to go to school my only duty was to study. I used to be in school all day and play, and when I came back home, I only completed my study for school and after that if I had time I helped my mother with her work. But now I spend all my day at home. I study by revising what I studied at school, I still have some old books. But that's not the only thing I study ... My brother has a lot of books and I study them. He teaches me ... about religion and how to lead your life. He only tells me to study things about the afterlife. Actually, my knowledge that I need for the world is over. I already have gathered all the knowledge that I need for the world. Now I only need education for the next world, for the afterlife. I don't need to study English or Burmese anymore. So I only read religious books and I only gather knowledge for the next world.

Figure 5: Aspirations for secondary school

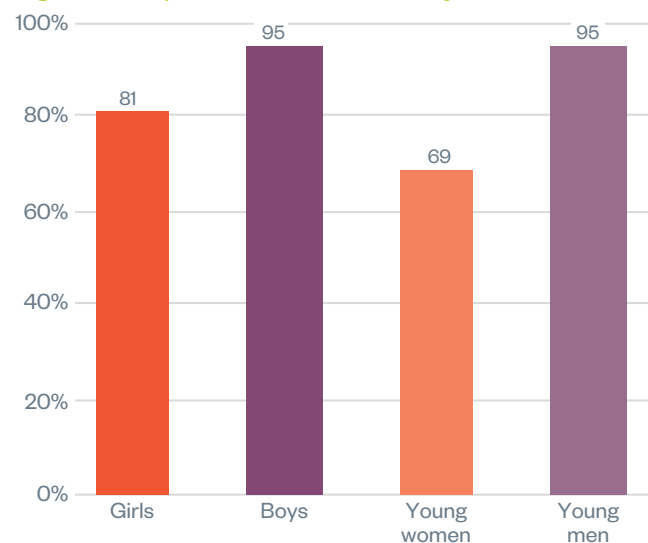
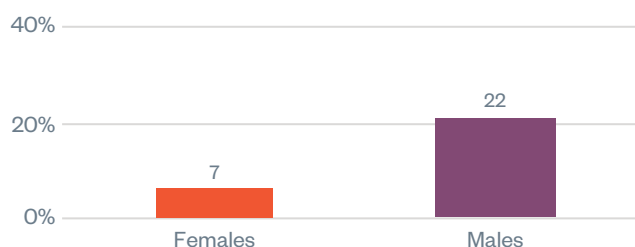


Figure 6: Aspirations for university



opportunities that it affords them. A 15-year-old girl from camp C stated:

You are like blind without studying. If you study, you can do something for yourself... Those who study have jobs and they can talk very proudly. They can go to good places. It's not hard for them to earn money. But those who didn't study at all – earning money is harder for them, they go from one house to another and earn very little.

That said, during individual and group interviews, most young people reported aspiring to access private tutoring provided by Rohingya instructors, not the Myanmar curriculum or forms of non-formal education offered by NGOs. This is due to several factors. First, the Myanmar curriculum had only recently been rolled out for adolescents at the time of midline data collection, was not yet being delivered at scale, and was unknown to many respondents. Second, Rohingya young people and their families have a strong preference for highly structured educational programmes, preferably those that result in certification, which the Myanmar curriculum and non-formal pathways provided in Bangladesh do not. Most of the respondents that aspired to private tutoring admitted that this option – which is legally prohibited by the Government

of Bangladesh in any event – is not affordable, as monthly costs start at 200 taka and can reach 1,500 taka. A 15-year-old boy from camp C noted that he has been unable to access education because it is unaffordable: *'I did not study only because of my financial crisis.'*

Access to education prior to displacement

The midline survey found that Rohingya young people had limited access to education even prior to their displacement from Myanmar. Building on the discussion above, this was particularly true of girls. Of boys and young men, just under three-quarters (71%) had ever been enrolled in formal education in Myanmar (see Figure 7); of girls and young women, only 44% had ever been enrolled.

Young adults who attended school in Myanmar prior to displacement dropped out of school in early adolescence. The midline survey found that young men dropped out at a mean age of 13.2 years; young women left school at a mean age of 11.5 years, nearly two years before their male

Figure 7: Ever enrolled in formal education in Myanmar

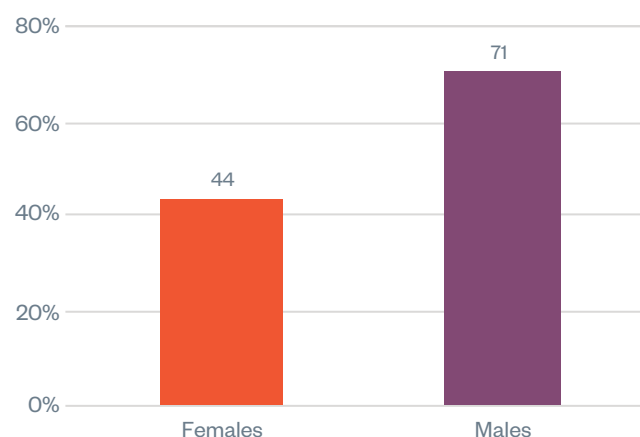
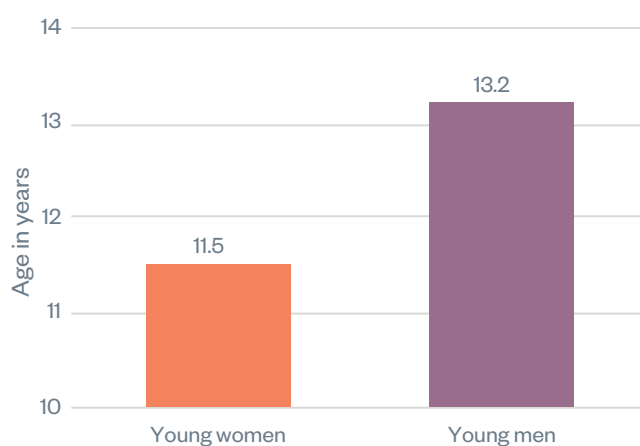


Figure 8: Age at dropout in Myanmar (of those ever enrolled)



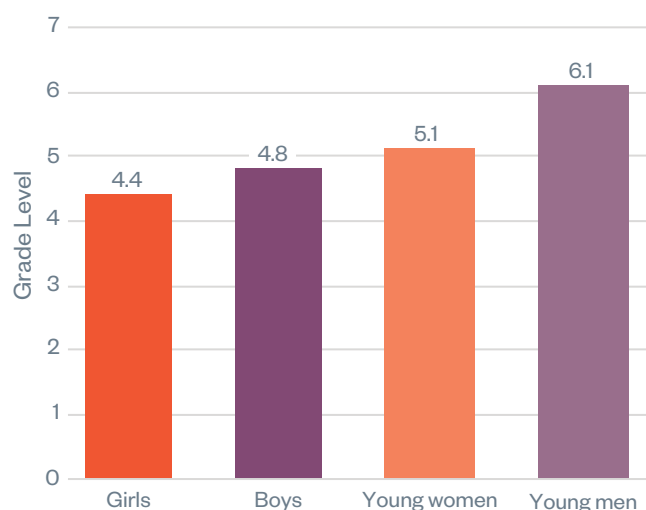
peers. Young adults' age at dropout – and especially young women's age at dropout – suggests that factors other than displacement were central. Adolescents do not appear to know how old they were when they left school; while they report leaving school just before turning 11, most arrived in Bangladesh before turning 10.

Unsurprisingly, given when they left school, Rohingya young people had completed few grades of education prior to dropping out. The midline survey found that of adolescent boys who were ever enrolled in school, mean grade attainment was 4.8 (see Figure 9). The analogous figure for adolescent girls was 4.4. Young men and young women, who are on average 4.5 years older than adolescents, had attended only a little more schooling than those in the younger cohort. Young men in the GAGE sample had completed only one extra grade of education (6.1 grade) before leaving school. Speaking again to their disadvantage, young women in the sample had barely completed more schooling than adolescent girls (5.1 grade).

Access to education and learning in Bangladesh

As already noted, Rohingya young people have had limited access to formal education since their arrival in Bangladesh. Although the Myanmar curriculum completed roll-out in July 2023, at the time of data collection our findings show that learning opportunities were still predominantly informal or non-formal and provided by the UN, a variety of NGOs, and private tutors, often through or at multi-purpose centres. In general, these opportunities were aimed at younger children rather than adolescents.

Figure 9: Highest grade attended in Myanmar (of those even enrolled)



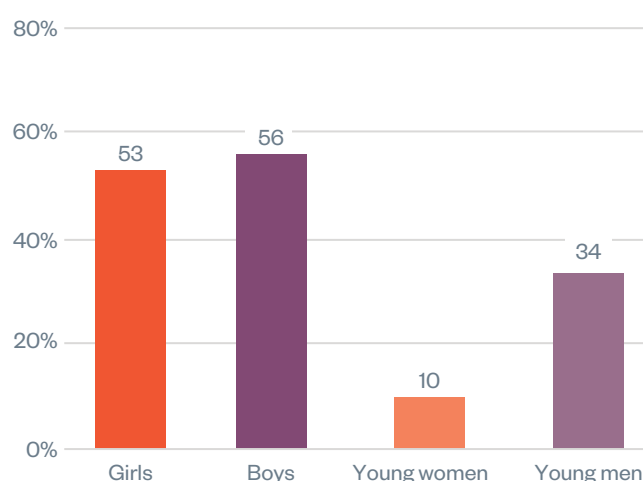
Informal and non-formal education

Evidencing both how non-formal education was scaled over time, and adolescent girls' disadvantage, the midline survey found that young people's participation in non-formal education varies by cohort and gender. Over half of adolescent girls (53%) and boys (56%) reported that they had ever participated in non-formal education (see Figure 10). Young adults, and especially young women, were far less likely to have ever participated. Only 34% of young men and 10% of young women reported that they had ever participated in non-formal education. Disability also shapes young people's access to education and learning (see Box 2).

Among the Rohingya in our sample, participation in non-formal education is and has been limited, especially for girls and young women – and especially after marriage (see Box 3). The midline survey found that only 35% of adolescent boys and 14% of young men were currently participating in any form of non-formal education (see Figure 12). Only 5% of adolescent girls – and no young women – reported on the survey that they were taking part in any form of non-formal education. In addition, and presumably due to their engagement with paid work (see below), it is common for adolescent boys who are attending non-formal education to miss days of class. The midline survey found that boys⁵ had attended only 77% of days over the past two weeks.

The midline survey also found that few young people had ever attended a multi-purpose centre. Adolescent boys (14%) were again the most likely to have done so (see Figure 13).

Figure 10: Ever attended non-formal education in Bangladesh

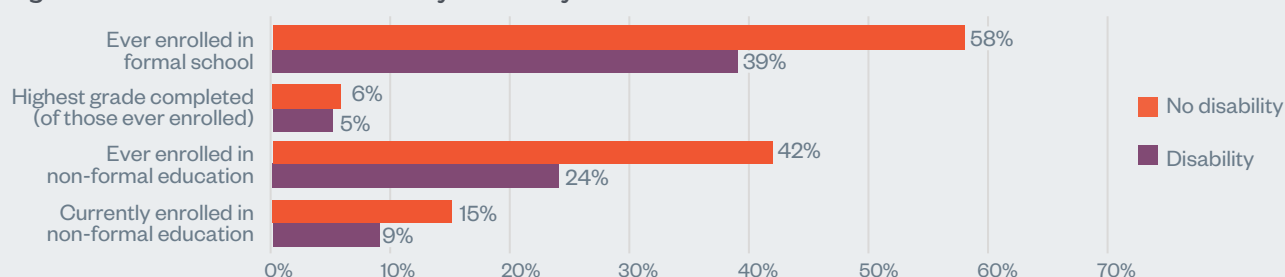


⁵ There were too few young men attending non-formal education to report on attendance patterns.

Box 2: Disability limits access to learning

Existing but limited evidence showcases that young people with disabilities face high structural barriers to accessing camp services, including education, and that the proportion of children completely excluded from education is higher among those with disabilities (ACAPS, 2021; REACH and Protection Sector, 2021). With the caveat that the GAGE Cox's Bazar sample includes only 66 young people who meet the strictest definition of disability (that is, they have a functional disability even with an assistive device), midline survey findings are in line with this evidence. For example, compared with their peers without disabilities, young people with disabilities are less likely to have ever attended formal school in Myanmar (39% versus 58%), have completed fewer grades of schooling even if enrolled (5 versus 6), are less likely to have ever attended non-formal education (24% versus 42%), and are less likely to be currently enrolled in non-formal education (9% versus 15%) (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: Educational indicators by disability status



Qualitative evidence also speaks to the difficulty that young people with disabilities face in terms of accessing education and training. It finds that limits are due to the stigma that surrounds disability, the inaccessibility of communities and learning centres, and the fact that disability-focused NGOs tend to be medically oriented – providing assistive devices rather than linking young people with, and facilitating their access to, broader services.

A 14-year-old girl with a physical disability from camp F reported that she has never been allowed to attend school, and that disability-focused NGOs are no help at all:

If I had education I could have a good life, I could have earned respect ... I want education most of all. If [only] I could learn. But the NGOs that work with disabled people, I went there and I got humiliated today ... They told me there is a meeting for us ... So I went there, it took a lot of time for me to go there ... By the time I reached the place they told me, 'The meeting is over. You go back.' ... I was surprised ... I will never go there again.

A 19-year-old young woman with a physical disability from camp D explained that while she was selected into a training programme, it lasted for only 15 days, rather than the promised 6 months:

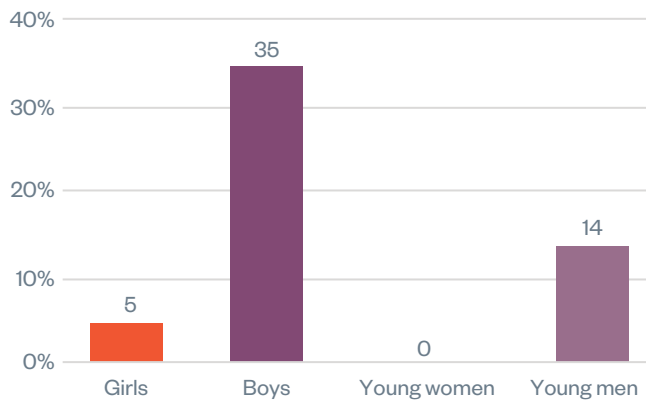
An NGO approached me because they went block-to-block for people like us who cannot walk well to earn some money. Some people like that came to me, like you, and asked me if I could do mask sewing. So I saw someone next to me doing it and learnt a bit. So I said I could do it. Then they accepted me for work. I worked for 15 days though I was supposed to do it for 6 months. They said I won't have to go anywhere, they would bring everything to me. After we finished the sewing work, they took some new people. We were 20 people. Then they took another 20 people after us. They did not take us again.

Box 3: Child marriage closes educational doors

GAGE qualitative research underscores that even adolescent girls who are allowed to study after menarche see those opportunities eliminated by child marriage. A 20-year-old young woman from camp A, who married at age 14, explained that she was forced by her husband (who is himself uneducated) to abandon the language [English and Bangla] and sewing courses that her mother had allowed her to attend:

I was learning to sew ... After marriage, my husband didn't let me go [to any learning]. Before marriage ... I was going to private study. They taught Bangla, English ... My mother [was paying] ... She was struggling to afford it ... but I really wanted to study ... I couldn't study because I got a husband ... Majhi-molla [community leader] fixed the marriage forcefully, sister, so I couldn't study. I told my mother. 'Why are you marrying me off this young? I will not be able to study.' Here ... after you start your married life, you can't study. If I had had a choice, I would have chosen a husband who has studied. If he studied, he would understand. People who don't study, don't understand ... how to take care of your wife, how to behave. If he doesn't have an education, he behaves badly with his wife.

Figure 12: Currently attending non-formal education



Only 6% of adolescent girls, 3% of young men and 1% of young women had ever attended a multi-purpose centre.

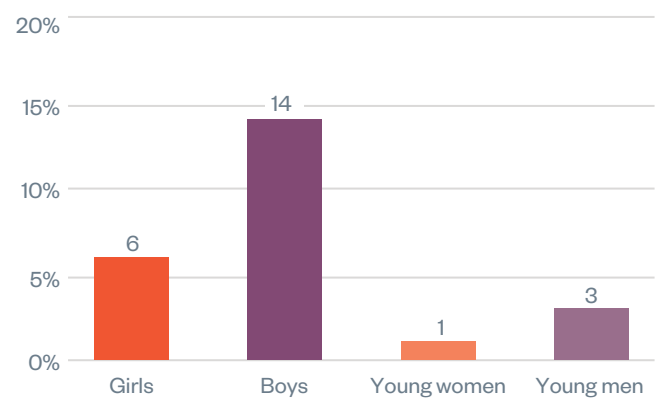
As noted earlier, adolescent girls’ (and young women’s) limited engagement with educational opportunities is primarily due to social norms that require them to cloister at home after menarche. A 15-year-old girl from camp B explained that her only access to learning is through her father:

[The girl stopped going to school] since I got big two years ago [referencing menarche, the onset of menstruation]. [Now] my father teaches me ... but he won't let me go to school. Because I am a big girl now. It will be bad for my reputation. People will see me, that's not good ... If I don't go [to school], that is better for everyone.

For boys and young men, explanations of limited uptake revolve around economics and the real costs (for private tutors and religious education) and opportunity costs (for UN and NGO education) of education over paid work. A 21-year-old young man explained, ‘Those who have money and don’t have to earn money go to school and those who don’t have money and have to earn money, they don’t go to school.’ A 17-year-old boy, from camp C, agreed and added that if money were no object, he would happily return to education:

When my father died there was no one to earn money in my family. So, we were in shortage of monthly groceries and did not have enough food. Also, I have a younger sister to look after. Now, if I study there will be no one to earn money in the family. If I study while leaving my family hungry, will my family survive? No, my family will starve to death. Because of this I quit my studies and started working ... I am a mason worker but beside that

Figure 13: Ever attended a multi-purpose centre



I also do roofing. The engineer used to instruct us how much cement and sand a mixture would contain ... They pay 400 taka daily ... The salary was paid in hand ... Inshallah, I would definitely [study again, if he could].

Qualitative research found that young people’s participation at multi-purpose centres is limited by social norms (females), poverty (males), and distance (males) – but also by widespread beliefs that the centres do not provide education or training likely to bolster future employment prospects. Many adolescent and adult respondents reported that the centres are a place for recreation and respite, rather than where useful training takes place. A 15-year-old girl from camp C recalled her experience at a multi-purpose centre: ‘They gave us food and let us play different things ... They even let us draw.’

In line with existing evidence, GAGE midline research found that Rohingya families often have a strong preference for religious education and that this limits uptake of non-formal programming. Respondents reported that they valued the strict discipline imposed by religious teachers and also believed that when they die, what will be necessary is religious teachings, ‘not the school stuff’ (17-year-old boy, camp A). A 15-year-old girl from camp C added, ‘My mother told me to pay attention to madrasa education and not to mind the playful education at the schools.’

Formal education through the Myanmar curriculum

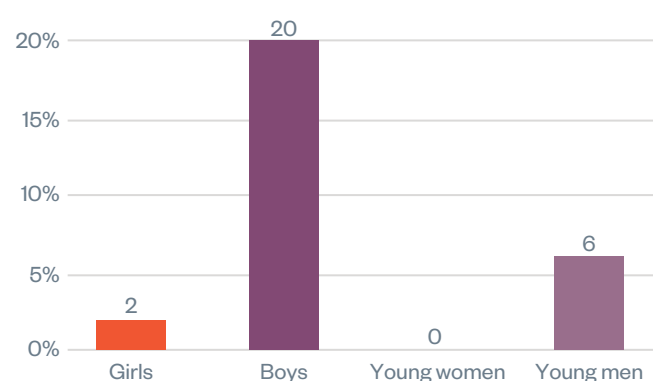
Midline survey data on the Myanmar curriculum is coloured by the fact that curriculum roll-out was completed only months before surveys were fielded.⁶ While over 250,000

⁶ We will be able to shed more light on perceptions of the efficacy of the implementation of the Myanmar curriculum following endline data collection in late 2024/early 2025 now that the rollout (transferring 250,000 children) from NFE curriculums to MC has been achieved.

students had been enrolled in the Myanmar curriculum by the end of the first quarter of 2024, a large minority of them female, enrolment was far lower at the time of midline data collection. The GAGE survey found that enrolment was unusual for adolescent boys (20%), rare for young men (6%) and adolescent girls (2%), and non-existent for young women (0%) (see Figure 14).

Qualitative data also reflects the timing of curriculum roll out and data collection. Relatively few respondents were aware of the Myanmar curriculum and many confused it with the previous non-formal curriculum provided through Learning Centres. With that in mind, GAGE qualitative data

Figure 14: Enrolled in Myanmar curriculum course



suggests that not only is enrolment low, though perhaps higher on Bhasan Char (see Box 4), but that the Myanmar curriculum roll-out is experiencing a range of challenges. Some of these challenges are expected and unavoidable given the small number of Rohingya refugees with formal education – and the even smaller number willing to work for NGO stipends (versus the fees they can charge as private tutors) and with the ability to negotiate mobility restrictions imposed by the Government of Bangladesh. For example, many respondents noted that there are teacher shortages, primarily at the secondary level and in maths and science courses. They also reported that some teachers, most of whom are volunteers with only primary or secondary education, are not yet ready to be leading their own classes. A 15-year-old boy from camp C stated, ‘Good teachers are needed. Teachers who can explain everything well. If the students can understand, it will be easier for them to study.’ A 14-year-old boy from camp B, who was in primary school – where a single teacher handles all subjects – agreed, ‘The teachers’ quality is not satisfying. They can’t teach properly. There is one teacher for 6 subjects. How many subjects can a teacher teach all alone by himself?’

Box 4: Education on Bhasan Char island

The Government of Bangladesh hoped to entice 100,000 Rohingya to voluntarily relocate to Bhasan Char island by the end of 2023, by loosening restrictions on mobility and work and improving the quality of daily life. As part of planning for this, and in line with the Education Sector Plan and the Skill Development Framework, steps were taken to ensure: that children and adolescents have access to the Myanmar curriculum, to be delivered in cyclone shelters fitted out as schools; that young people have access to skills development and livelihood opportunities; that girls and young women are provided with tailored opportunities for education and skills development; and that teachers and staff are well trained. However, by the end of summer 2023, only 30,000 Rohingya had accepted resettlement.

GAGE qualitative research suggests that although there are still concerns about educational quality, including insufficient teachers and teachers with limited qualifications, young people’s access to education and learning on Bhasan Char is somewhat better than in Cox’s Bazar. Cyclone shelters are permanent structures (rather than the temporary structures being used in Cox’s Bazar) and have dedicated learning spaces that are well provisioned, given the population. In addition, enrolled boys note that the Myanmar curriculum is much better than the older curriculum. A 17-year-old boy stated, ‘The curriculum now is better.’ Also, because the island is reachable only through approved military transport, parents no longer have to worry that their sons will be recruited by terrorist insurgency groups (Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, formerly known as Harakah al-Yaqin, tries to recruit adolescent boys in Cox’s Bazar). A 17-year-old boy summed up how his learning opportunities have improved since coming to the island:

After coming to Bhasan Char, we can live here well. We have benefited by coming... I used to not go to school before [in the Cox’s Bazar camps] because of al-Yaqin. That’s why we came here... [Now] we study in private centres and in NGOs... There is more opportunity in Bhasan Char. We could not study in camp because of al-Yaqin.

Because Bhasan Char is peaceful and under-populated, especially compared with Cox’s Bazar, opportunities for adolescent girls and young women to acquire education and skills training have improved. When asked if she sends her daughter to school, a mother replied yes and then added that NGOs are pushing for girls’ education: ‘They encourage us to send girls.’ A 14-year-old girl noted that schools are helping girls develop basic literacy skills, ‘They give girls education and teach them how to read, write.’

Several young adults added that because the Myanmar curriculum is only available to those under age 19, they are shut out of formal education. A 22-year-old young woman explained: *'I am already more than 18 years old...Because of my age, I cannot get admitted to the school.'*⁷

Some young people also commented that their limited knowledge of Burmese poses challenges for their uptake of the Myanmar curriculum. Although Burmese is the official language of Myanmar, and their mastery of that language would allow for their integration into Myanmar classrooms if they are repatriated in the future, many young Rohingya (who speak dialects of an Indo-Aryan language that has no written form) (see Translators without Borders, 2022) have only rudimentary skills with it. This leads some students to drop out of education, rather than spend the time required for mastery. An 18-year-old young man from camp A reported: *'I was reading but I failed. I don't know Burmese ... I work in a hotel ... They pay me [but] I want to study more.'* A community key informant added that this is not uncommon, because students who are not fluent in Burmese feel frustrated with their learning speed – despite teachers' regular deployment of mixed-languages to explain concepts: *'Even though they've started the Myanmar curriculum, everything is in Burmese ... A person like me who doesn't even know ABC in Burmese, if they admit me in, say, class 8, will there be any education?'* Several respondents added that young people's reluctance to study the Myanmar curriculum extends beyond their concerns with their fluency. Although studying Bangla, or the Bangladeshi curricula, is not permitted for Rohingya, many young people believe they are unlikely to ever be repatriated to Myanmar and prefer to learn in English (rather than take a single class in English) or Bengali because of the livelihood opportunities that doing so would open. A 15-year-old boy explained, *'English is now used worldwide.'*

Critically, however, in terms of the longer-term success of the Myanmar curriculum, there is a mismatch between what students and their families expect and what the programme is designed to deliver. Rohingya young people and their parents are used to teacher-centred lectures and strict discipline, which they see as evidencing care for children – whereas the Myanmar curriculum uses child-centred pedagogies and forbids the use of corporal punishment. This has fostered a general perception that

learning centre teachers are not 'masters' able to command students' respect. It was not uncommon for parents to report that learning centre teachers need to stop being friends with students and instead control their classrooms more like teachers at madrasas. In a focus group discussion in camp B, the father of an adolescent summed this up:

Children have to be taught right from wrong. But they are not getting proper guidelines because this teacher doesn't know how to teach them and how to control them. Even if children are fighting each other and using slangs, teachers don't say anything to them. Instead of that, the teacher is giving them biscuits⁸. Madrasas are far better... Yes [students may like easy, friendly teachers], but if they don't teach anything, then why should we send our children to school? Teachers [just] wait for the time to end. When the time is over, they send the children home with a biscuit. We don't want their biscuits – we want better education.

A community key informant agreed that hands-on, child-centred pedagogies are far less important to children's learning than discipline:

The children curse the teachers and run away because the teachers can't scare them, scold them or beat them ... When the authorities visit, if they see any stick in the hand of a teacher, they will be fired ... The teachers are not allowed to beat the students, they'll have to teach them by playing. If the students get to play, will they study?

The relatively few young people who were familiar with the Myanmar curriculum were generally positive about it. Students commented that it will be beneficial to learn languages and that *'life will be better if one is educated'* (15-year-old boy, camp O). Adolescents view the value of education in terms of whether it is connected with livelihood opportunities. When asked whether the Myanmar curriculum can be a means of success, a 17-year-old girl said, *'Yes, if anyone studies the Myanmar curriculum, he or she will be able to do a job.'* Some young adolescent boys also reported being interested in the subjects and happy with the free school materials – which include higher level books – provided as part of the Myanmar curriculum.

Qualitative research suggests that one way to get parents and young people more interested in the Myanmar

⁷ According to a key informant the new skills development and livelihoods sector which was established in 2023 was meant to continue to provide literacy and numeracy classes to adolescents/youth aged 19-24 years but this seems not to be happening. With the opening of this new sector, the education sector's responsibility changed to providing learning for children aged 3-18 whereas before it was for children and youth aged 3-24.

⁸ The respondent is referring to the biscuits provided by the World Food Programme to children attending Learning Centres in camps.

curriculum is by continued and stepped-up engagement with Rohingya educators. These teachers – some of whom have worked covertly in their own homes for years but are now receiving NGO stipends to deliver the Myanmar curriculum – are not only respected by the community but are also deeply committed to providing education to the next generation. One such teacher explained:

We Rohingya teachers thought we Rohingyas are lacking and deprived of education, so we need to do something about education. If we stay here without education, our community will be lost in the future. That's why we started as active volunteers to get the education for our community and we agreed and ordered books online.

Skills training and paid work

At midline, few young people took part in skills training. The survey did, however, find that some adolescent boys (13%) and many young men (33%) were currently engaged in paid work (see Figure 15). Only 2% of adolescent girls and young women reported that they were working for pay.

Qualitative research deviates from survey findings, suggestion that skills training and work opportunities have been increasing over time - particularly for boys and young men, but for some girls and young women too. A 17-year-old girl from camp A noted that, *'There was less training before. Now there's more training and more work.'* Boys echoed this view. A 21-year-old young man from camp C commented that, *'Various job opportunities are increasing.'* An 18-year-old young man from camp B agreed, *'There are many types of jobs...Some build houses, some work as mechanics.'* Many boys and young men, some of whom admitted to overstating their age in order to access skills training and work, reported learning skills on-the-job (as opposed to attending centre-based trainings). A 17-year-old boy explained that his contractor boss had taught him many things:

I have learnt about accounting [calculation] of income sources from my boss and also how to buy and sell

things. Before, I did not know about how to measure and sell the goods. Now, since going there, I understand how to measure [cement] in the metre, I understand how to calculate. I understand how much money will be gained by bringing any goods from where.

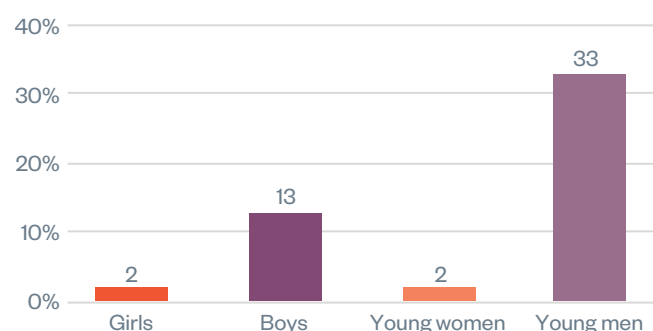
With the caveat that it is a rights violation for boys under the age of 18 to engage in hazardous labour, a 14-year-old boy from camp B stated that even young adolescent boys are engaged in training activities for potentially dangerous work:

[Yes there are trainings for] boys of 12-18 years. [They learn] how to fix a broken toilet, how to fix a broken street slab ... They clean the dirt in the latrines, clean drains, provide garbage baskets [to families] and come in the morning to take [garbage away], they [go around and] provide soap every month.

Respondents also reported that NGOs are providing skills training. An 18-year-old young man from camp B stated, *'Many services are provided by NGOs...An NGO called Christian Aid provided us training. They taught us mechanical work.'* A key informant clarified that NGOs are running two types of training courses – pre-vocational, which teach literacy, numeracy and language and communication skills, and vocational, which teach employment skills. He explained:

'If I want to give skill training they have to have a minimum literacy, numeracy... And there's a huge gap at that part...For example this child came here from Myanmar at the age of 13, their age is now 18/19. So what does that mean? That means he/she neither received education nor received skill... So from there our decision was that we have to maintain two programmes at the same time one is pre-vocational another is vocational. Because if you don't have pre-vocational training you can't enrol in vocational.'

Figure 15: Current engagement in paid work



For pre-vocational skills, young people are not remunerated for participation. However, once young people have acquired these basic skills, they may be able to access opportunities to take part in livelihoods training, for which they would be compensated with stipends as 'volunteers'. A 19-year-old young man explained, *'We have home based learning center here. Those who pass the interviews, get hired by different NGOs.'*

Girls and young women living in Cox's Bazar tend to have more limited access to skills training and work than

Box 5: Skills training and work on Bhasan Char island

Young people reported that access to livelihoods training and paid work is generally better on Bhasan Char than in Cox's Bazar. While the population is smaller, and there are (as yet) fewer markets and home industries (and no access to paid work in the host community), NGOs are providing stipends for those who participate in skills training and volunteer activities, as well as productive assets that support income generation. A 19-year-old young man explained:

[Employment] has increased [for girls and boys]. [Girls get taught] handicrafts in the learning centre and multi-purpose centres. They have also provided sewing machines so that [women and girls] can earn from home. [Boys] who are educated and still studying, work in the camp ... Those who pass the interviews, get hired by different NGOs.

Girls and young women living on Bhasan Char island reported that their access to life skills and livelihood training is especially improved compared to Cox's Bazar. With the improved security situation on the island, families are allowing girls more freedom to engage in learning, to access the stipends allocated to students and to improve girls' earning potential. A 15-year-old girl explained that while she was made to leave school when she got her period, her mother has sent her for skills training in the hope that she will be able to earn an income:

They teach ABCs and sewing... They teach us tailoring and also give us money... per month 3 thousand taka...The quality is good ... I don't go to school as I started menstruating [but her mother sends her to learn tailoring because] if I go out here and learn tailoring then I can earn money...

their peers living on Bhasan Char island (see Box 5), due to tight restrictions on their mobility. In a focus group discussion with young women, one participant explained that, 'Our parents don't let us go to learn skills if it's not near our house ... Some parents will let us go if it is in our block, others will let us go only if it's right near our house.' That said, it was not uncommon for girls and young women participating in qualitative research to report taking part in tailoring, sewing and embroidery courses and work – primarily through volunteer schemes provided by the UN and NGOs and through small, informal businesses. A 20-year-old young woman from camp A mentioned that

she was able to attend such a course thanks to female volunteer chaperones:

Volunteers come to take girls to sewing classes ... I get 150 taka for a set of clothes. I take orders from my neighbours ... We have a women-friendly space [shantikhana] in our block. Volunteers come from there and tell us to go there. They also give sessions on violence. They give mental peace to the girl or woman who is in trouble.

A few girls and young women also stated that they had been given sewing machines by NGOs, so that they could work at home.



A 12-year-old girl in the CODEC learning center, uses thanaka, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2024

Policy and programming implications

GAGE midline research findings highlight that Rohingya young people have limited access to education, skills training, and employment. Although the educational landscape has improved in recent years, the adolescents and young adults in the GAGE sample missed out of years of learning – due to government policy and despite the efforts of donors and NGOs – and few are able find a pathway back into formal education. This is especially true for girls and young women, for whom restrictive gender norms form an impermeable barrier to education. Although skills training programming is reaching some young people, even – due to the stipends provided for participation – females, it is not yet being delivered at scale and is not yet tightly enough linked with opportunities for remunerated work. To enhance learning opportunities for Rohingya young people in camps in Cox’s Bazar and on Bhasan Char island, GAGE midline research suggests the following priority actions:

- **Increase gender-transformative interventions targeting a broad range of stakeholders, including adolescent girls and boys, parents, and political, community and religious leaders, on the value of learning for all adolescents – including girls.** Because young people have limited input into whether they continue to study, and because broader gender norms about marriageability (girls) and employment (boys) continue to limit access to education, it will be critical to work with whole communities to increase buy-in.
- **Step up the use of female chaperones within camp blocks to support adolescent girls’ and young women’s participation in education and training opportunities.** This is important to off-set gender norms regarding girls’ safety and marriageability.
- **Organise mobile classrooms and community-based learning facilities that are closer to adolescent girls’ and young women’s homes,** so that travel times are reduced and females’ time in ‘public’ is minimised.
- **Invest in professional development of teachers implementing the Myanmar Curriculum** given that many are volunteer teachers who will need capacity building support on subject knowledge, pedagogies, language, lesson planning, assessment, and engagement with parents and caregivers.
- **Prioritise the expansion of a cadre of female Rohingya teachers** so that parents are more comfortable with their daughters attending learning and skills training centres and so that girls, their families and their communities have role models of what girls can become.
- **Expand skills-building programmes, scale up camp volunteer opportunities, and pair these with stipends so that more young people are incentivised to take part.** Given that older adolescents and young adults feel themselves shut out of formal education, use this programming to simultaneously support literacy, numeracy and work skills – and link these to camp-based opportunities for decent work. An analysis of skills-to-work transitions for adolescent girls and boys needs to be conducted in the design phase of skills-based interventions to make sure that effects are longer-lasting, and that skills training programmes include a pathway to paid labour.
- **Ensure that learning opportunities are accessible for young people with disabilities.** This will require community outreach, because many young people with disabilities (especially girls) are confined to home. It will also require partnering with disability-focused service providers to develop their capacity to deliver age-disaggregated services that support young people’s broader well-being, including education, not only their medical needs.
- **Prioritise robust longitudinal impact assessments of the implementation of the Myanmar Curriculum in order to provide ongoing evidence-informed recommendations for adjustments and adaptations** so as to ensure that all Rohingya children are supported in their right to an education and in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Quality Education.

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