

WHAT ABOUT US?

Youth Inclusion in the Rohingya Response



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NORWEGIAN
REFUGEE COUNCIL



Photo: Imrul Islam/ NRC

Acknowledgement

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Executive Summary

While youth are routinely lauded as “changemakers” in society, they are often unsupported in refugee responses. As the Rohingya mark five years of exodus in Bangladesh, what is the state of youth inclusion across sectors? Do youth and adolescents feel supported, or are they being ignored and left behind?

To assess, information from three data streams was used:

- desk research of available literature on youth participation and inclusion in humanitarian programming;
- key informant interviews with practitioners from national and international non-government organizations and UN agencies, specifically individuals leading or coordinating sectors and working groups engaged with youth programming; and
- focus group discussions and key informant interviews with refugee individuals and groups across 11 camps.

Findings

- Refugee youth and adolescents remain firmly on the margins of humanitarian programming, and are largely excluded from decision making processes, with lack of inclusion contributing to child marriage, informal labour and negative coping practices
- Stress and anxiety are omnipresent among the community, with an overwhelming majority of respondents reporting experiencing intrusive thoughts and resorting to negative coping mechanisms
- Approximately **96 per cent** of surveyed youth aged 18 to 24 are currently unemployed
- **9 out of 10** respondents aged 18 to 24 are in debt, having borrowed money within the last six months
- For women aged 18 to 24, unemployment rates border at **99 per cent**

Recommendations

Partner agencies, the Strategic Executive Group and the Inter Sector Coordination Group

- Scale-up quality and inclusive education following the Myanmar Curriculum for children, adolescents and youth with an agreed and monitored timeline for implementation
- Generate evidence on the link between self-reliance and sustainable return. Approaches can borrow from policies in Uganda, Jordan and others
- Mainstream monitoring and reporting of youth disaggregated data across sectors, to be led by the SEG and ISCG

Recommendations

Donors and the international community

- Ensure sustained financial support for both refugee and host community education systems, including Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services funding, and the scale up of the Myanmar Curriculum
- Lobby to open up skills building and vocational opportunities and programming for youth aged 18 to 24
- Accelerate multilateral efforts for sustainable return of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar

The Government of Bangladesh

- Support youth refugees to facilitate early, sustainable return. Youth can be the strongest voices of a community that wants to find a way to go back home, and are eager to acquire transferrable skills to take back to Myanmar. However, for that to happen, the community needs to be supported by humanitarian programming through a steady scale up of facilities

Introduction

We are sitting in a circle in Ali's shelter, which he has generously offered to be used a community learning centre. A bamboo lattice divides the outer area from living arrangements inside, where Ali's family of six has lived for the last five years. Above us, tarpaulin is emblazoned with the logo of an aid agency; below us, a concrete floor. On our right, a makeshift wall of bamboo and blankets separates us from the world outside, slivers of sunlight labouring in through the gaps. Despite it being a bright morning, it is awfully dark inside. There are no windows, and the door is the only opening for the wind and the sun.

Here, during the two plus years of the Covid-19 pandemic, small groups came together twice a week for self-guided learning following modules created by aid agencies and the Education sector. Those who have gathered at Ali's are learners in the programme. Over the course of the conversation, it becomes clear that during the pandemic, these small-scale innovations ensured education continuity for some, and further modifications allowed humanitarian programming to reach groups who often face additional barriers to learning: women and girls, single mothers, refugees with disabilities.

However, in the Rohingya refugee response, the alternative to this "Covid modality" is the same patchwork model at scale, not "formal learning" by any means. Neither is this patchwork model an anomaly. While the Global Compact for Refugees (GCR) calls on host governments to include refugees in national educational plans, and while some progress has been made, refugee education remains largely constrained to parallel, temporary systems (Murthi, 2021). This often includes temporary learning centres or schools within refugee camps, parallel systems with the home country curriculum and language of instruction, parallel afternoon classes, and accelerated or remedial learning programmes primarily set up through United Nations (UN) agencies, local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and donors. Across a number of refugee responses, education-despite being a fundamental right, and despite receiving almost consistent donor support-remains largely out of reach of most refugees.

In Bangladesh, the same holds true. For five years, the response has failed to institute one curriculum for the community, instead relying on sector-approved manuals. Pushes for adopting the Myanmar curriculum, which the Bangladesh government insists is the only acceptable option, have been hamstrung by bureaucratic barriers, and by the political crisis across the border since February 2021. Coupled with a steady deterioration of camp conditions, increasing uncertainty and insecurity, and deepening deprivation of refugees, the lack of opportunities for youth and adolescents has had a chilling effect.

The consequences of prolonged deprivation have been multifaceted and dire. As displacement stagnates, loss of income and limited opportunities have led to rising frustration and adoption of negative coping mechanisms-precipitating an alarming increase in smuggling and trafficking, gendered violence, child labour, early forced marriage and child marriages. Covid-19 and climate have amplified these trends; over the last two years, rolling lockdowns have ripped through the community, and in terrain acutely vulnerable to climate shocks, cyclical floods have left a trail of devastation and dread. Most recently, a spate of fires has led to loss of life and property, and pushed the community close to breaking point.

This August will mark five full years of the Rohingya refugee response. For half a decade, almost

900,000 survivors of grievous atrocities have lived from one emergency to the next in the hills of Teknaf and Ukhiya, fenced in and condemned to complete aid dependence in bamboo and tarpaulin shelters collectively branded the “largest refugee camp in the world”. In a crisis increasingly characterized by chronic underfunding and regional political indifference, refugees remain firmly on the sidelines of decision-making, forced to conform rather than inform.

Led by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and supported by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), Humanity and Inclusion (HI), and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), this report looks at one key aspect of that exclusion: refugee youth and adolescents. Constituting almost half of the population, Rohingya youth and adolescents remain almost entirely overlooked by current programming—with no formal education, and limited vocational training and livelihood opportunities.

Access to self-reliance opportunities, particularly for refugee children, adolescents and youth, in situations of conflict and displacement are essential in promoting recovery, stability, reducing protection risks distinct across demographics, and building individual, household and community resilience. The relationship between self-reliance, human capital, and durable solutions is further recognized as the capacity of conflict and displacement affected communities to successfully and sustainably find solutions. The protracted absence of self-reliance opportunities for refugee children and youth can propose significant challenges for durable solutions and drive major protraction risks with far reaching, often intergenerational consequences.

The purpose of this report is twofold: to show how the preconditions for this abject dispossession have been normalized in Cox’s Bazar; and to identify how inclusion of youth in advocacy and programming can help contribute to aid accountability, and to efforts toward durable solutions. This is done in three parts.

In Part One, in conversation with humanitarians in the response and a review of IASC youth inclusion guidelines and internal agency reports, the current landscape of youth programming in Cox’s Bazar is overviewed, framing the side-lining of youth and adolescents not just as a failure of inclusion, but as a failure of principled humanitarian action.

In Part Two, having established where things stand, perspectives of refugee youth and adolescents are highlighted to set a marker for where the response needs to be. Here, insights are offered from a 317-person survey by NRC on youth needs and interests, with trends triangulated through key informant interviews of refugee youth leaders. Specifically, we focus on youth perspectives across five thematic areas: education, skills and vocational activities, community engagement, mental health, and protection.

In Part Three, the report spotlights intertwined themes of pain and power that dominate much of the Rohingya experience of displacement; spotlighting initiatives led by refugees that are providing hope to the community, but remain woefully under supported. The report ends with recommendations for the government, donors, and aid agencies engaged in the response.

Methods

This study uses mixed methodology to assess the state of youth inclusion in humanitarian programming in Cox’s Bazar. Specifically, information from three data streams was used:

- desk research of available literature on youth participation and inclusion in humanitarian programming;
- key informant interviews with practitioners from national and international non-government organizations and UN agencies, specifically individuals leading or coordinating sectors and working groups engaged with youth programming; and
- focus group discussions and key informant interviews with refugee individuals and groups across 11 camps.

Over a period of 3 months, a total of 317 refugees participated in this study, along with 10 aid workers from eight agencies. Sixty-five per cent of respondents identified as male, with 35 per cent identifying as female. A review was conducted of internal monitoring reports and data related to youth programming, to triangulate specific data points and settle certain data inconsistencies.

Three things to note:

- In this report we collectively refer to the population aged 10 to 24 as “adolescents and youth,” making a distinction in the age group 18 to 24 when engaging issues such as formal employment.
- To protect confidentiality, all names of participants have been changed.
- The analysis concentrates on Rohingya refugees living in Cox’s Bazar, not the approximately 21,000 refugees living in Bhasan Char. While education access and livelihoods opportunities are issues of concern in Bhasan Char as well, analysis of the secondary site is outside the scope of this project.



Photo: Sadia Rahman/ NRC

Background

Five years since fleeing Myanmar, 1 million Rohingya refugees remain completely aid dependent in Bangladesh, neither legally recognized as citizens of Myanmar, the country that drove them out, nor legally considered as refugees by Bangladesh, the country that currently hosts them.

The refugee response in Cox's Bazar is shaped by an annual Joint Response Plan (JRP)-a product of bilateral negotiations between the United Nations and the Bangladesh government-that outlines strategic objectives and funding needs for the year.

Operational decisions are coordinated via a hybrid model by the Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) and the Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC). Strategic decisions are made by the Strategic Executive Group (SEG), based in Dhaka and chaired jointly by the UN Resident Coordinator, and the Mission Chiefs of IOM and UNHCR.

In Cox's Bazar, decision-making power lies, to a degree, with Sectors, by and large led by UN agencies with a handful of NGO co-representatives. In the camps, Camp-in-charges (Bangladeshi government officials) are tasked with facilitating humanitarian programming, often in ad-hoc coordination with block-level refugee community leaders called *majhis*.

Since 2018, the JRP has consistently emphasized protection and support to both refugees and host communities, and analysis of the plan's objectives from 2018 to today shows a gradual shift from purely humanitarian programming to a more development-focused approach. In practice, however, preparedness and protection have taken a backseat to a response that has stumbled from one emergency to the next. The challenges driving limited progress in response trajectory are multifarious and often intertwined, including but not limited to, recurring bureaucratic and access issues, an ineffectual coordination structure, and dwindling donor influence and support.

Meanwhile, prolonged deprivation amplified by two years of Covid-19 has produced a noxious mix of desperation and dread. Child marriages are increasing, abuse and assault have skyrocketed, and women and girls consistently report feeling unsafe and unsupported. At a time when protection programming should be expanded, funding cuts mean that many agencies have been forced to curtail their protection programmes. On the ground, that means fewer women-friendly spaces, fewer learning facilities for girls, and fewer support systems for survivors.

At the centre of this ecosystem of hurt, coping, and suffering are youth, forced to grow up too early and provide for families, respond to cyclical emergencies and support a struggling community, all without any support systems of their own. **In many ways, this report is an attempt at understanding the world from where they stand.**

Part One: Youth Inclusion

Globally, according to UNICEF estimates, half of all refugees are aged under 18, with young adults aged 18 to 24 constituting another 13 per cent of the total (UNICEF, 2021). In Bangladesh, an internal mapping conducted by the UNFPA in April 2022 places the youth population at 306,413—almost 68 per cent of the total population of children, youth and adolescents.

In Part I, two issues are engaged: a) global policies and commitments that seek to meaningfully include refugee youth in humanitarian programming; and b) how these commitments translate, if at all, across the Rohingya response in Bangladesh. We find predictably large gaps between policy and practice and argue participation and inclusion constitutes the heart of the discrepancy.

At the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, the Inter Agency Standing Committee launched global guidelines on youth inclusion in humanitarian action, outlining five key actions: equitable access to services; participation in decision making; increased youth capacity and empowerment; increased access to youth specific resources; and better reporting and data vis-à-vis youth in aid interventions. For the purpose of this project, participation is of particular concern.

Participation in the context of humanitarian response is generally understood to mean involving people in the decisions that affect their lives, specifically including marginalised groups within communities. Inclusion, perhaps, can be understood as an objective—as the process to ensure impartial, equitable access to assistance. In practice, participation requires a shift in focus beyond whether or not needs are being met, to a wider analysis of patterns of marginalisation influencing how they arise in the first place (Lough et al, 2021). When seen as a foundational component of inclusion, participation acquires broader significance, offering a means for marginalised communities to organise, build solidarity, demand their rights and engage as equal partners in crisis response.

When it comes to participation, two key themes are important to engage: time, and tokenism.

First, the assumption that protracted displacement creates space to deepen participation over time does not hold water in Bangladesh. Despite the Rohingya crisis coinciding with critical policy developments in how we deliver aid—specifically the Global Compact on Refugees and the Grand Bargain—no “participation revolution” has materialized in Cox’s Bazar. On the contrary, over the past five years, refugee groups, activists, artists and advocates have felt the blunt force of restrictions on community and civic life. As the crisis becomes more protracted, refugee voices that should be amplified in pursuit of international attention and action have been largely silenced.



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Second, participation where it has occurred remains surface level and often tokenistic. Over the past few years, for example, aid agencies have worked to establish committee structures as a means to engage with different segments of the population. While these bodies are often designed to fulfil a programme support role such as managing facilities or running information campaigns, they also provide a platform to communicate directly with agencies and provide input into decision making processes. However, by and large, participation remains largely limited to the bare minimum of “voicing concerns” and “suggesting improvements”. While Rohingya youth groups are forcefully disbanded, handing over maintenance of community water points is lauded as success. As a new ODI report on inclusion in the Rohingya response puts it, “Asking people whether they have been engaged effectively on WASH projects borders on the meaningless when their identity, language, culture and rights are being eroded” (Lough, Barbelet, and Njeri, 2022).

Who is included, to what degree, is also up for debate, and a consistent source of friction. Including *majhis* in community consultations, for example, is important because it recognizes existing power dynamics, but at the same time, it might alienate and/or stymie groups, especially women, refugees with disabilities, and youth collectives from speaking with authority about their needs and demands. In a conservative, male-dominated society, it remains hard to reach women and girls and systematically include them in community-level consultations, further compounded by the protracted absence of education, vocational training, and other services and facilities that would support active and regular participation. The detriments of no “pathway to participation” is highlighted in recent IOM research, which suggests including women in leadership structures without proper support is unlikely to be effective and might actually precipitate protection risks (Lough et al, 2021). Worse, pushing for their presence in mixed groups risks sparking active backlash from a conservative community.

While criticism rightly piles up, aid agencies face an uphill battle with little support from those deciding response strategy. The process to facilitate inclusion is fraught with difficulty, especially five years of attrition later, and while policy prescriptions often resort to binary prescriptions of “community trust” and “time” as key ingredients, translating policy into practice is often hamstrung by structural barriers. There are fundamental questions that remain unanswered, for example: if everyone is responsible for inclusion, who is ultimately accountable for the process? Additionally, it is hard for agencies to put money where their mouth is when cash aid is not allowed, and severe restrictions remain on employing refugees as paid volunteers.

In theory, the answer to foster inclusion is simple: the Strategic Executive Group (SEG) is tasked with decisions about response strategy and is responsible for high-level negotiations that make principled delivery of humanitarian aid possible. However, while there have been some efforts made to create bureaucratic space to systematically include refugees, these efforts have remained regrettably ad-hoc and ultimately futile.

As Part Two shows, in Cox’s Bazar, this amalgamation of disjuncture and failure has deepened vulnerability and contributed to the reduction of refugees as helpless victims and passive aid recipients, deepening desperation, frustration, and dispossession.



In the aftermath of severe floods and landslides in July, 2021, Rubel and Jamshed dig their shelters out of rubble. Refugee youth remain first responders in every emergency in the camps. Photo: Yassin Abdumonab for NRC

Interactions indicate high levels of unemployment, frustration and deprivation. Concerningly, almost 96 per cent of all respondents aged 18 to 24 reported being unemployed. For women specifically, unemployment rates among youth aged 18 to 24 was even higher, bordering at 99 per cent.

We focus here on five issues are of particular significance: education, skills and vocational opportunities, community engagement, safety and security, and mental health. Across issues, we present insights on two cross cutting themes: gendered vulnerabilities, and disability inclusion.

Education

As of July 2022, a Myanmar Curriculum Pilot engages 10,000 students, with plans to expand to include up to 300,000 learners, but across the camps, a UNICEF-coordinated “Learning Competency Framework and Approach” (LCFA) is still very much the dominant “modality” of education. Almost 90 per cent of all students under the LCFA are at Level 1 and 2, equivalent to the second grade. The LCFA was not designed, and neither has it been expanded, to include youth and adolescents, the overwhelming majority of whom remain disengaged from current humanitarian programming.

Access to education, and in particular, access to *quality* education was raised as a priority concern by a majority of respondents. Time and again, respondents pointed out that education was a priority need, but facilities remained insufficient, and that “learning centres are not schools”.

“The education provided here can only make us a cleaner or volunteer in the NGOs working in the camp. **Why should I settle for being a cleaner when I want to become a doctor or a lawyer?**”

Concerns were raised with methods of teaching as well as subject matter. Across learning centres in the camps, teachers (or learning facilitators) are recruited from both the refugee and the host community. While responses were largely positive about “refugees teaching refugees”, individual concerns were raised about Bangladeshi teachers being “harsh,” “unfair” and “disrespectful” of refugee communities. Follow-up questions attempted to understand how complaints were channelled and dealt with by agencies. By and large, despite complaints and feedback mechanisms existing in theory, respondents indicated that they did not feel comfortable raising concerns, and that when concerns were raised by individuals, they felt trivialized.

Impacts are beginning to be felt on the ground. Agencies engaged in education programming reported irregular attendance, drop-outs and low retention rates. Women and girls remain hard to reach, and women teachers harder to recruit. Structurally, the lack of opportunities for higher education is having a crippling effect on engagement and participation. As one interviewee put it, **“We are seeing in real time the impact of there being no plan, no pathway. Students ask us what the point of coming to school is, and we have no answers.”**

Refugees with disabilities face added challenges. In camps constructed almost entirely out of bamboo and tarpaulin, accessibility remains an ever-present and seemingly unsurmountable challenge. Ramps are uncommon; programming to reach students with visual or hearing impairments even more so.

Women and girls continue to face additional barriers to accessing already minimal services, facing the dual challenges of stigma and soaring child marriage. As one male respondent pointed out, "At least we get some opportunities, and at least we get to go outside. Most of the time, girls are just stuck at home."



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Skills and Vocational Opportunities

Since this phase of the Rohingya displacement crisis began in 2017, humanitarians have warned of the real risk of a "lost generation". Despite legal obligations of states outlined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights, five years on, for a sizeable portion of Rohingya youth and adolescents, that risk is now a reality.

Livelihoods looms large in the landscape of need for youth aged 18 to 24. Respondents repeatedly pointed out that they were expected to provide for their families, and under pressure to generate income. "I have a sister who is old enough to get married," Aman shared, "but I do not have the money to buy her jewellery, or for the wedding ceremony. My mother has already sold all the jewellery she carried from Rakhine, and my father has already borrowed money from the neighbours. We are out of options."

According to Asia Foundation research from 2020, nearly three in four Rohingya households are currently in debt from loans they have taken since arriving in Bangladesh. Almost twenty-one per cent of all families rely on remittance, and for almost 54 per cent of households who receive them, remittances constitute half or more of their annual income (Asia Foundation, 2020).

Our study indicates these levels are much higher among youth aged 18 to 24, with 9 out of every 10 respondents currently in debt, having borrowed money within the past six months. Overwhelmingly, respondents borrowed money to support families, buy food, cover medical expenses and/or contribute toward ceremonies such as marriage.



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Debt remains one of the strongest indicators of vulnerability among communities and **in Cox's Bazar, debt can be understood not just at the level of the individual, but at the level of the block, the camp, and ultimately the community.** Gender modulates much of the interaction around livelihood and debt. Especially in the first few years of exodus, women pawned jewellery they had brought from Myanmar, often to pay for their families or for dowry for their daughters. Debt is also related, as one respondent explained, closely to intimate partner violence, with money, or lack thereof, becoming a trigger for abuse and violent behaviour within the home.

As respondents shared, the only way out is to find the means of earning, which remains almost impossible without access to the formal economy. The absence of a formal economy does not mean there is no economic activity within the camps. On the contrary, a burgeoning informal market serves as a locus of interaction between Rohingya refugees, host Bangladeshis and the local market. A recent study finds inside the camp, 34 per cent of those employed in informal economic activities are Bangladeshi, suggesting that the response is providing additional economic activities for the host community inside the camps (Filipsi 2021).

However, because nothing is formal, the propensity for abuse is baked into the system, meaning exploitation, particularly wage theft and child labour, is common. Moreover, since “businesses” are not registered, they are not legal per se, leading to regular demolitions by camp authorities. In line with previous reports, we found no links between income-generating activities and reluctance to return. On the contrary, respondents urged skills building as a way of increasing community self-reliance in order to make future return to Myanmar sustainable. As 67-year-old Rabeya put it,



Photo: Imrul Islam/ NRC

“My life is over. I cannot work anymore. But I see my son, and I see my grandchildren and I do not know what will happen to them. I do not know if they will ever be able to support their families. **How much longer must we live at the mercy of others?**”

Community Engagement

Across the world, youth are seen as drivers of change, as agents of empowerment and action. In the Rohingya camps, too, refugee youth are often first responders to sudden onset disasters, including fires and floods. However, youth voices-within their own communities and in the world outside of the camps remains largely stymied.

A majority of respondents reported that they do not feel included and involved in humanitarian decision-making processes regarding the assistance and services they receive. Even within their own communities, on social issues, individuals said they were not taken seriously when voicing concerns: “No one takes us seriously, and why should they? We have no jobs and we have no qualifications. When an issue like child marriage comes up, we say what we feel, but our opinion does not matter.”



Photo: Ayesha Nawshin/ NRC



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For women and girls, having a say in the decisions that shape their lives is even harder. In the camps in Cox's Bazar, almost all *majhis* are male, and decision-making, by and large, lies with male elders, imams and heads of households. "We are powerless," Fatema shared, **"Apa, you ask us about our dream. We tell you we want to become doctors and engineers, but we both know this will not happen. This world will not let it happen."**

As part of the report, enumerators also spoke to one of the four female *majhis* in the camps, Halima Begum.



Photo: Sadia Rahman/ NRC

“ They include me when they need me to settle disputes, or when they need a woman there. Thankfully, I am old so I get a bit of respect. Men tend to take me less seriously during decision making but I don't mind their behaviour. I rather keep doing what I feel is the best for my community.”

Safety and Security

For most of 2020 and 2021, Covid-19 lockdown measures resulted in a reduced presence of protection and other humanitarian staff in the camps, and disrupted the delivery of key services. As a result of the reduced humanitarian footprint, various groups and factions consolidated influence, effectively taking over many of the functions normally covered by aid organisations including dispute mediation, ensuring safety of camp residents, distribution of assistance. In response to escalating risks, intense securitization measures were employed by authorities, often deepening insecurity.

Over the past year or so, camp safety has deteriorated sharply. Abuse and assault have skyrocketed, crime has increased, and reports of smuggling and trafficking of drugs and humans have piled up in the media. By and large, these acts have been publicly attributed to individuals and/or organizations belonging to the refugee community. Internal protection monitoring reports by aid agencies corroborate these public reports, but also find instances of abuse of power by camp and security authorities. Harassment at checkpoints-an increasingly permanent feature of highly securitized camps-have become troublingly common, and often include bribery, arbitrary arrest, and/or physical assault of refugees.

In this context, younger population groups, adolescents, youth and even children, have been particularly affected. Trend analysis by agencies indicate adolescent boys and/or male youth are more at risk of being arbitrarily arrested on suspicion of drug abuse/drug dealing or of being associated with criminal groups. Additionally, the sharp deterioration of security has resulted in recruitment of young adults to patrol camps at night. While a sensitive topic, it is important to note that this activity runs parallel to similar night patrolling activities organized by criminal gangs, meaning sometimes youth or adolescents are caught, quite literally, between two conflicting parties vying for control.

In particular, physical violence against women and girls continues to be a major concern. **Internal protection monitoring data by agencies indicate upwards of 50 per cent of women and girls reported physical abuse in the first quarter of 2022 alone, with almost 30 per cent of cases of violence against girls aged 13 to 24.** This trend runs parallel to the sharp rise in child marriages within the community that has been exacerbated by almost two years of Covid-19. Adolescent/young girls who are married early are often subject to violence (physical assault) by intimate partners. In extreme cases this has resulted in some young girls committing suicide. As one female respondent put it, **“there is no peace for girls anywhere in the world”**.

The deteriorating safety and security situation in the camps is also pushing many families to engage in harmful practices such as early marriage. Adolescent girls of 13–16 years are often entrusted to smugglers and sent to Malaysia or Thailand to marry. Often, they face additional threats during the smuggling journey including detention by immigration authorities or rape/sexual assault. Deteriorating safety and security and lack of education/livelihood prospects in the camps is also driving many adolescent or young boys to flee the camps through smugglers. Data from protection monitoring shows they often end up detained by border authorities. **Youth and adolescents are caught in the centre of all that is going wrong in the camps in Cox’s Bazar. Often, they are both suspects and sufferers, all while being left with little to no support to institute change.**

Mental Health

Forced migration exerts short- and long-term effects on mental health, including anxiety disorders, depression, posttraumatic stress disorders (PTSD), and associated emotional distress. A 2018 rapid mental health assessment by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported a substantial mental health crisis within the community, with almost 74 per cent of respondents reporting “always sad”. Recent research conducted post Covid-19-induced lockdowns indicates these levels have gone up even more (Palit et. al, 2022).

Several factors are associated with the mental distress in displaced communities. Trauma, violence, and restrictions in education and freedom of movement can be seen as primary causes, exacerbated by the lack of appropriate health care facilities, inadequate social facilities such as accommodation, along with loneliness and boredom after arrival in Bangladesh.

To extend insights from existing research, we looked specifically at mental health across youth and adolescents. Importantly, we use “stress and anxiety” to capture mental health related symptoms and disorders, noting here that our data fails to capture the cascading severity of psychosocial ailments.

Despite prioritization of mental health in the most recent JRP, facilities also remain inadequate and below minimum acceptable quality. As one participant put it, **“I used to try and seek help when I would feel very sad, but every time I went, I would come back with even more sadness and disappointment. Forget sadness. Even for physical issues, there is always a medicine shortage, and no access to proper pharmacies. Every prescription is for paracetamol.”**

The data collected indicates a community experiencing staggering levels of anxiety and stress. While the psychosocial impact of prolonged displacement is well established in the literature, our data suggests stress and anxiety is contributing to rising negative coping mechanisms in Cox’s Bazar. Almost every single respondent reported being disillusioned, with frustration and anger a common feature of every conversation. According to one respondent, “Agencies come to teach us how to control our anger. How to breathe. How to lie down and count numbers. But how can I control my anger when I cannot control anything in my life?”

This stark disillusionment was shared by many facilitators involved in the study. Scrawled by an enumerator on the back of a field note is the following reflection:



We are in Hamida’s shelter to talk about camp security. The world outside poses a lot of dangers, but the inside is not safe either. There are no mosquito nets, and not enough pillows for the family. There are insects everywhere. If it rains ... *when* it rains, the water rushes inside. There is a mud wall that can collapse at any moment. There are children in this home. The kitchen is a stove in a corner bordered by bamboo. There is not enough water to cook, and no adult men in this household to fetch the water. The women’s bathroom is a block away, but the lock is broken, so the makeshift bath is a bucket in the bedroom.”



Kulsum and Noor are friends. Where Noor (on the right) wants to become a makeup artist, Kulsum finds the dream too ambitious. Photo: Sadia Rahman/ NRC

Part Three: Power and Pain

Quite often, youth are described as “agents of change,” as “forces for good”, and as “leaders of their communities”. These terms have found themselves, uncritically and perhaps unsurprisingly, into the vernacular of the refugee response, with little engagement of the preconditions necessary for youth empowerment. Over the course of this project, time and again, respondents told us that they wanted to be stronger voices within and for their communities, but faced unsurmountable challenges.

As multiple respondents from humanitarian agencies reiterated, the exclusion of youth from humanitarian programming has significantly deteriorated trust and programme quality. This exclusion has been hardwired by the reluctance and/or inability of the ISCG to advocate beyond the bureaucrat, with two key issues standing out: advocacy, and data.

For the ISCG, which coordinates the response and advocates for humanitarian access, advocacy engagement with the Bangladesh government has remained at the level of the individual, not at the level of the system. Five years on, key decisions regulating aid remains tied to “personal relationships” with officials who are on a rotational basis and are “switched out” every few months. The result has been a deepening of uncertainty in humanitarian programming and response strategy. As one key informant put it, “We don’t have clarity on what is allowed, which becomes a huge issue when trying to design, for example, skills or vocational programming.” Making advocacy success unlikely is the lack of data the ISCG collects and/or has access to. Five years on, there is no uniform information management that indicates programme reach as it relates to youth, meaning, in many instances policy engagement continues to rely on anecdotes, not evidence.

And yet, despite there being little to no support for youth and adolescents, refugee groups and individuals have organized and collaborated. In the past, Rohingya youth have banded together to respond to emergencies, to produce art shows, and most recently, to organize relief for Bangladeshi communities in Sylhet. However, all this has happened independent of any institutional support.

Zia is part of a collective of storytellers who started off taking photos of the camp life. As he puts it, “we wanted to show the world how life is here”. Since then, the collective has published two widely appraised magazines, and collaborated with aid agencies on art shows, one of which was held at the Bangladesh Liberation War Museum. The exhibition, titled “We Are Rohingya” does not just feature photos from the camps, but also 11 archived images of 1971-Bangladesh’s own refugee crisis. In effect, refugee youth have done what five years of agency “expert-led advocacy” has failed to do: situate the Rohingya refugee crisis within a much broader narrative of national memory and commitment to protect people forced to flee.

But Rohingya youth, and the broader Rohingya refugee community, need more than the odd opportunity. They need to be part of a broader, intentional plan that does not simply identify inclusion as important, but is willing and committed to the work that must be done to foster meaningful participation.

“ You do not know how we live,” Rahim tells us. “You can come and go as you like. We are here, even when we do not want to be here. We cannot leave like you can. **When we speak, when we take photos, when we write poetry or even talk to people like you, we are trying to make the world understand what a great injustice this is ... to trap so many people in this endless nightmare.**”

Conclusion

This report has attempted to explore three things: a) the landscape of youth inclusion in Cox’s Bazar; b) the impacts of exclusion of a large demographic from humanitarian programming; and c) vignettes of youth art and agency despite lack of support. We conclude with the following recommendations:

Partner agencies, the SEG and the ISCG

- Scale-up quality and inclusive education following the Myanmar Curriculum for children, adolescents and youth with an agreed and monitored timeline for implementation
- Generate evidence on the link between self-reliance and sustainable return. Approaches can borrow from policies in Uganda, Jordan and others
- Mainstream monitoring and reporting of youth disaggregated data across sectors, to be led by the SEG and ISCG

Donors and the international community

- Ensure sustained financial support for both refugee and host community education systems, including Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services funding, and the scale up of the Myanmar Curriculum
- Lobby to open up skills building and vocational opportunities and programming for youth aged 18 to 24
- Accelerate multilateral efforts for sustainable return of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar

The Government of Bangladesh

- Support youth refugees to facilitate early, sustainable return. Youth can be the strongest voices of a community that wants to find a way to go back home, and are eager to acquire transferrable skills to take back to Myanmar. However, for that to happen, the community needs to be supported by humanitarian programming through a steady scale up of facilities.

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