

Overview

The Gender-Diverse Population Working Group (GDPWG)¹ is focused on addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by gender-diverse individuals in the Rohingya refugee camps and host communities. As part of the Protection Sector, the GDPWG plays a critical role in ensuring that all humanitarian efforts are inclusive, sensitive, and responsive to the needs of people with diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Expressions, and Sex Characteristics' (SOGIESC).

Context

Lack of data on kothis² and hijras³ inside the refugee camps has resulted in a significant information gap and further discrimination due to the lack of understanding from communities and local authorities. According to the Women's Refugee Commission, 45,000 refugees have identified as hijras or gender-diverse⁴. The GDPWG, through its partners, is closely working with 1,664 clients.

Bangladesh's Penal Code criminalizes same-sex acts⁵. A legal exception is the recognition of hijras as a culturally recognized 'third gender' group, however this hasn't led to a significant change in social discrimination and the stigma gender-diverse population face. In the past, there was a new bill under consideration to recognize the rights of the gender-diverse community, however following a pushback, further consideration had been given to reviewing the wording of the legal framework to enhance its purpose.

Identified Needs:

In the camps, gender-diverse individuals face exclusion, discrimination and violence deeply rooted in social norm, law and societal practices. Cases of gender-based violence (GBV) against the gender-diverse population are frequent; physical violence, sexual violence, psychosocial violence, as well as economic violence continue to be experienced by kothis and hijras. Stigma and discrimination coupled with emotional and physical abuse from some of the community members, impact the participation of gender-diverse individuals in the daily activities. Challenges in accessing healthcare and psychosocial support systems increase the likelihood of this population experiencing mental health concerns. These, if not addressed in a timely manner, can develop into illnesses, including severe forms of anxiety and depression, substance abuse, and other mental health illnesses.

Further, the new and increased protection risks arising from the current security context in the camps, with organized groups openly expanding their power domination over the refugee populations/ camps including by recruiting members, have further impacted gender-diverse persons, in particular female sex workers. Heightened risks of protection incidents linked to these organized groups' criminal activities, including extortion, rape and physical abuse, are being reported.

In this context, there is an urgent need for safe shelters for at-risk gender-diverse individuals, males and male survivors including gender-specific services, especially for urgent cases that require immediate response mechanism. Safe shelters are designed for females at-risk and female survivors, and while some interim arrangements were possible during the height of the forced recruitment phase to accommodate families including men. A specific solution is required to provide safe shelters for gender-diverse persons. Targeted services to address the specific needs of gender-diverse populations are also needed as only three organizations are currently responding. The attitudes of service providers continue to limit access to existing services; these in turn further feed into protection risks associated to

exposure to other community members. As a result, services for gender-diverse populations are being provided outside the camps with follow-ups carried through household visits.

Gender-diverse communities do not feel fully engaged in the development of GBV prevention, risk mitigation and response programming as there is a perceived belief amongst them that this is intended for women and girls that do not identify as hijras or kothis. Gender diverse individuals have requested that counselling and GBV service provision be done outside the camps where they are not seen and identified by the community. This poses challenges in integrating gender-diverse survivors of GBV and exploitation to the services inside the camps for those who wish to access these services while adapting the response for those that feel safer receiving assistance outside.

Communication channels are available for all refugees in the camps. However, given that some gender-diverse individuals prefer not to engage in regular programs inside the camps and rather join activities in spaces where they feel comfortable, they may miss out on messages received through service providers and humanitarian workers. Further, communication channels, reach out means and staff supporting communities are not always sensitized and do not have the tools to properly assist with the needs of this population and refer their cases.

In community consultations with gender-diverse communities, the lack of livelihoods remains their top priority. The lack of resources has pushed refugees into sex work, and they are very vulnerable to exploitative practices. Case managers need enhanced technical skills to approach survivors appropriately and in a sensitive manner so that gender-diverse persons can access services.

Messages and Advocacy

Enhanced Protection Measures:

Strengthen protection protocols for gender-diverse populations, including by establishing dedicated services and safe shelters, increasing patrolling of law enforcement agencies in high-risk areas, and ensuring access to emergency support services. A safe shelter exclusively dedicated to gender-diverse refugees, as the available facilities do not accept them.

Strengthen Communication with communities:

Ensure that communication channels, including complaint and feedback mechanisms, are accessible to and inclusive of the specific needs of gender-diverse individuals. Further, provide information in protection-oriented formats and use trusted community leaders to disseminate critical information to avoid further discrimination or stigmatization.

Rapid Response Mechanisms:

Implement rapid response mechanisms to address immediate threats to gender-diverse populations during heightened security situations. This should include emergency relocation plans, immediate access to medical care, and psychosocial support.

Capacity Building for Local Actors:

Enhance the capacity of local protection actors, including community leaders and volunteers, to respond effectively to the needs of gender-

diverse populations during crises. Training should focus on risk identification, crisis communication, and referral pathways.

Risk Mitigation and Contingency Planning:

Risk Mitigation and Contingency Planning:

Develop and regularly update risk mitigation strategies conducted by protection partners and contingency plans specifically tailored to the protection needs of gender-diverse populations. These plans should be integrated into broader humanitarian contingency planning efforts and drafted together with the community (e.g. Emergency Preparedness Responses).

Increased Monitoring and Reporting:

Intensify monitoring and reporting efforts to track incidents of violence, discrimination, and other protection concerns affecting gender-diverse populations. Ensure that this data is used to inform response efforts and protection strategies.

Engagement with Authorities and Service Providers:

Increase the training of authorities and service providers on the specific needs and vulnerabilities of gender-diverse populations to prevent abuse and ensure they are protected.

From raising awareness to responding:

A total of 3,076 individuals were reached through capacity-building initiatives with the host community and local government administrators in 2024 to enhance understanding of and response to the specific needs of gender-diverse individuals. These initiatives included local administrations, Camp in Charge (CiC) offices, site management offices, frontline volunteers, Rohingya leaders, Mahjis, and service providers.

Specific awareness sessions are being delivered to the managers and staff of all the hotels located in Cox's Bazar to prevent the sexual exploitation of both Rohingya and Bangladeshi Gender Diverse Populations. There are currently six dedicated facilities funded by UNHCR to assist and protect the gender-diverse population in Ukhiya and Kutupalong, including one facility located outside of Kutupalong Refugee Camp. A seventh facility will open in Teknaf in October to ensure that populations at risk and survivors can access services in a

timely manner, including a safe shelter exclusively dedicated to gender-diverse refugees, as the available facilities do not accept them.

The mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) response, including psychosocial counseling and psychological first aid, focusing on the specific mental health issues faced by gender-diverse populations.

Since January 2024, partners have established integrated services in five service centers, where GBV case management is an important activity in supporting GDP.

The GDPWG is working closely with partners to include gender-diverse populations as volunteers in their programs to enhance gender-sensitive responses, mitigate the risk of negative coping mechanisms, and support the socio-economic empowerment of gender-diverse individuals.

¹ The GDPWG is chaired by Bandhu and co-chaired by UNHCR and the current members are ActionAid Bangladesh, BRAC, Care Bangladesh, Centre for Disability in Development (CDD), DRC, HI, IFRC, IOM, IRC, Legal Action Worldwide (LAW), MSF, Mukti Cox's Bazar, NRC, Save The Children, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women, WFP, WHO and World Vision.

² kothi is a generic label for non-masculine males used by hijras. The term originated in Hyderabad, India. An Epistemology of Collusion: Hijras, Kothis and the Historical (Dis)continuity of Gender/Sexual Identities in Eastern India Aniruddha Dutta

³ People assigned male at birth who live as women or identify as women -often under a specific cultural code. Hijras in Bangladesh are part of a broader group of culturally recognized 'third gender' groups across South Asia. THE ONLY WAY IS UP: Monitoring and Encouraging Diverse SOGIESC Inclusion in the Humanitarian and DRR Sectors.

⁴ The International Journal of Transitional Justice, Vol. 17, 2023, 252-267. Male and Gender-Diverse Victims of Sexual Violence in the Rohingya Genocide: The Selective Narrative of International Courts Victoria Hospodar