

TWO SETTLEMENTS, TWO DIVERGING PATHS:

Jobs and Labor Market Outcomes for the Displaced Rohingya Population

ANALYSIS BASED ON THE COX'S BAZAR AND
BHASAN CHAR PANEL SURVEYS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents a comparative analysis of labor market outcomes for the Displaced Rohingya Population (DRP)¹ in two distinct settlement contexts in Bangladesh: the long-established camps of Cox's Bazar and the more recently developed, geographically isolated site of Bhasan Char. Drawing on harmonized data from the 2022 Bhasan Char survey and the 2023 Cox's Bazar Panel Survey (CBPS), the analysis highlights how location, legal constraints, and program design shape employment opportunities and economic self-reliance for displaced populations.



¹ The Government of Bangladesh refers to the Rohingya temporarily sheltered in Bangladesh as Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMN). The World Bank refers to them as the Displaced Rohingya Population (DRP) and UNHCR refers to them as Rohingya refugees. FDMN, DRP, and Rohingya refugees refer to the same population and this note uses the term DRP throughout.

Despite legal prohibitions on formal employment, both settlements have seen the growth of informal economic activity, with humanitarian programs providing limited livelihood opportunities that support community resilience. However, employment rates² remain low overall—only about one-third of working-age DRP were employed in the year preceding the surveys. Cox’s Bazar offers relatively better outcomes, with more diverse livelihood options and lower unemployment, while Bhasan Char’s isolation and limited economic infrastructure constrain opportunities and increase reliance on aid-supported work.

Gender disparities are pronounced. While approximately 70 percent of working-age men were employed in both locations, only 10–15 percent of women had jobs. In Cox’s Bazar, women who sought work were generally able to find it, whereas in Bhasan Char, many women remained unemployed despite actively seeking employment. Youth faced particularly acute challenges: over two-thirds of DRP aged 15–24 were not in employment, education, or training (NEET), with young women disproportionately affected.

Humanitarian employment programs—such as volunteer and cash-for-work schemes—play a critical role, especially in Bhasan Char, where half of employed DRP rely on them. However, these programs are limited in scale, offer below-market wages, and are vulnerable to declining donor support. The DRP in Cox’s Bazar are more likely to engage in informal wage work or self-employment, which, while precarious, offers greater autonomy and resilience to funding fluctuations.

The report also finds that education is a key determinant of access to skilled humanitarian roles in Bhasan Char, while in Cox’s Bazar, even educated DRP are often confined to low-skilled informal work. Earnings are generally higher in Cox’s Bazar, particularly in non-humanitarian roles, and employment tends to be more sustained throughout the year. Yet, the lower earnings for the self-employed, relative to those in wage-employment also highlight the need for augmented interventions to support the productivity of household enterprises within the camp-economy.

The findings underscore the urgent need for policy shifts toward market-based employment solutions and gradual economic integration. Expanding access to diverse livelihood opportunities, especially for women and youth, is essential to reduce aid dependency and foster self-reliance. As donor funding declines, sustainable employment pathways must become a central pillar of refugee policy in Bangladesh.

² We use the term “employment” and “wage” or “earnings” in this brief to describe the income generating activities of the DRP. These activities can be formal through humanitarian employment programs or informal. These terms do not indicate any formal employment, and the volunteer incentives they may receive do not provide any labor entitlements, such as insurance, social benefits, etc.

CONTEXT





Bangladesh currently hosts over one million Displaced Rohingya Population (DRP), the majority of whom reside in Cox's Bazar. Most DRP live in 33 camps located in the Ukhia and Teknaf subdistricts, including the Kutupalong camp—one of the largest refugee settlements in the world (UNHCR, 2024). This mainland location has supported the development of a large and long-established DRP community.

To manage population pressures and improve living conditions, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) initiated the voluntary relocation of DRP to Bhasan Char in December 2020. Bhasan Char is a remote island in the Bay of Bengal, situated in the Hatiya subdistrict of Noakhali district. As of December 2024, approximately 37,000 DRP reside on the island (ISCG, 2025).

To enable comparative analysis of DRP well-being across locations, the Cox's Bazar Panel Survey (CBPS) was extended to Bhasan Char in November 2022. This brief draws on harmonized labor market data from the 2022 Bhasan Char survey and the 2023 CBPS to examine employment outcomes across the two sites.³ The labor market module was administered to 959 adult DRP in Bhasan Char and 3,217 adult DRP in Cox's Bazar, with results representative of the DRP population aged 15 and older.⁴

This report aims to provide a rigorous diagnostic of labor market outcomes for the DRP in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char by leveraging harmonized, high-quality survey data. Its primary objective is to present the current state of employment, participation, and livelihood dynamics across the two settlements, offering a detailed evidence base to inform policy and programmatic decisions. By highlighting key disparities—across geography, gender, and age—and unpacking the role of humanitarian employment and informal work, the report equips stakeholders with the analytical foundation needed to shape future interventions. While this analysis focuses on the “what” of labor market realities, it is intended as a precursor to follow-up work that will explore the “how” and “what next” for advancing sustainable livelihoods and economic inclusion for the DRP in Bangladesh.

³ This brief will focus exclusively on comparing labor market outcomes between DRP in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char and will not examine differences in livelihoods between hosts and DRP in Cox's Bazar since comparisons to hosts are undertaken in other analyses. Box 1 provides a brief summary of DRP and host comparisons in Cox's Bazar.

⁴ Refer to World Bank (2019) and UNHCR (2022) for details on the survey methodology.

NAVIGATING CONSTRAINTS:

HUMANITARIAN EMPLOYMENT
AND INFORMAL JOBS IN
DRP SETTLEMENTS



Despite legal and geographic constraints, DRP settlements in Bangladesh are gradually developing into hubs of economic activity. The DRP face significant restrictions on their ability to work, including prohibitions on leaving the camps or the island of Bhasan Char without permission, and a lack of formal access to income-generating employment. Nevertheless, in both Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char, DRP communities are becoming vibrant hubs of informal economic activity, even amid high levels of poverty and deprivation (Filipski et al., 2021).

Humanitarian employment programs serve as the primary formal work avenue for DRP, operating within strict regulatory and geographic constraints. DRP primarily access jobs through humanitarian-run "volunteer programs" and cash-for-work schemes. These programs enable DRP to contribute to essential services within the camps in Cox's Bazar and on Bhasan Char, including construction, community health work, and teaching. Cash-for-work schemes typically involve short-term, unskilled labor—limited to 16 consecutive days or 32 days spread over three months—while volunteer programs engage individuals across skill levels for longer durations, capped at 22 days per month (ISCG, 2018). Eligibility is restricted to those aged 18–59. Beyond these structured opportunities, DRP also engage in informal income-generating activities within camp markets and their own dwellings, with such activities being more prevalent in Cox's Bazar due to its proximity to host communities and a more dynamic local economy.

The structure and composition of volunteer programs differ notably between Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char, particularly in terms of host community inclusion and gender representation. In Cox's Bazar, both DRP and Bangladeshi nationals participate in volunteer programs, with Bangladeshi nationals accounting for approximately 25 percent of all volunteers (ISCG, 2022). In contrast, only DRP are engaged as volunteers in Bhasan Char, as there is no host population on the island. Bangladeshi volunteers in Cox's Bazar tend to occupy more skilled roles than DRP volunteers in either location (Figure 1). Over half of Bangladeshi women in the program hold skilled positions—more than twice the share of female DRP volunteers in similar roles. Additionally, the gender composition of the volunteer workforce differs: women make up 59 percent of Bangladeshi volunteers, while DRP volunteers in both Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char are predominantly male, comprising 70 percent of participants (Table 1).

Volunteer participation among DRP varies significantly between Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char, both in scale and the nature of roles held. In Bhasan Char, the proportion of DRP volunteers relative to the working-age population is approximately four times higher than in Cox's Bazar (Table 1). Notably, one in four working-age DRP men in Bhasan Char is engaged in the volunteer program. However, DRP volunteers in Cox's Bazar are more likely to hold skilled or semi-skilled roles. For example, DRP men in Cox's Bazar are nearly 20 percent more likely to be employed in such roles compared to their counterparts in Bhasan Char.

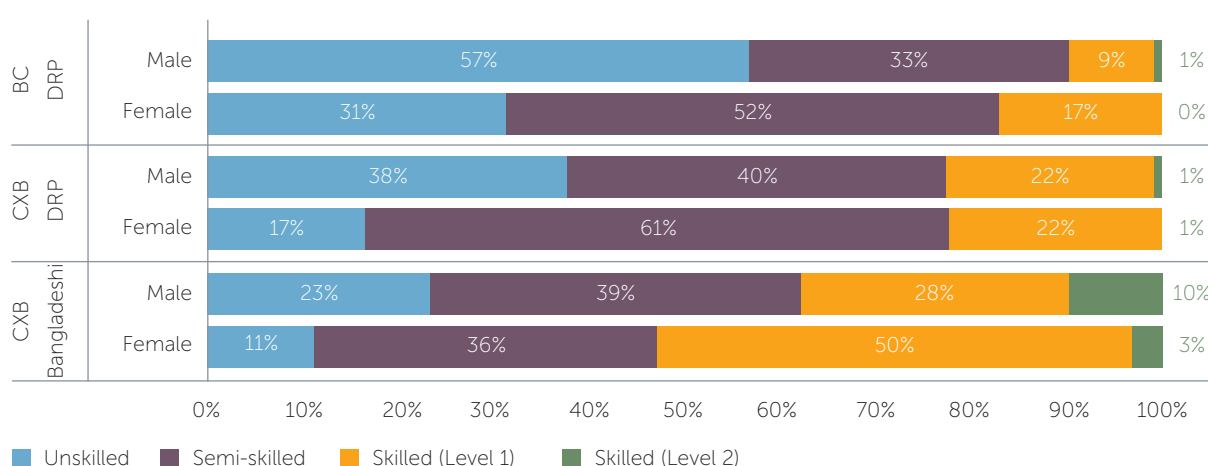
Differences in local context and program design shape the livelihood opportunities available to DRP in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char. In both locations, the regulatory environment limits formal employment, making humanitarian employment programs the primary official avenue for DRP to engage in work. As a result, access to these programs plays a central role in shaping livelihood activities. Key structural differences between the volunteer programs—such as the number of available positions and the types of roles offered—contribute to disparities in labor market outcomes across the two sites. These differences are further influenced by factors like proximity to host communities, the vibrancy of the local economy, and broader refugee management strategies.

Table 1: Share of volunteers by gender in 2024

Sub-group	Female	Male	Total
% among volunteers			
CXB Bangladeshi Nationals	59%	41%	100%
CXB DRP	31%	69%	100%
BC DRP	30%	70%	100%
% among working-age population (18-59 years)			
CXB DRP	2%	6%	4%
BC DRP	9%	25%	16%

Source: Authors' calculation based on UNHCR volunteer database and Joint GoB – UNHCR Population factsheet, March 2024.

Figure 1: Skill distribution of volunteers by gender in 2024



Source: Authors' calculation based on 2024 UNHCR volunteer database.

Table 2: Volunteer earnings by skill level

Category	Examples	Monthly stipend	Daily stipend
Unskilled	Cleaners, Security/ Night Guards, Roles related to waste management services (cleaning, desludging, wastewater treatment)	BDT 8,000	BDT 363.64
Semi-skilled	Community Support Assistants/Mobilizer, Health Assistants, Facility Support Assistants, Junior Assistant Teachers, Early Childhood Development (ECD) facilitators	BDT 10,000	BDT 454.55
Skilled Level 1	Field Assistants, Community Health Care Providers, Assistant Teachers	BDT 13,000	BDT 590.91
Skilled Level 2	Field Supervisors, Headteachers, Master Trainers	BDT 15,000	BDT 681.82

Source: Official volunteer incentive rate (ISCG, 2022).

KEY LABOR MARKET OUTCOMES FOR DRP IN COX'S BAZAR AND BHASAN CHAR



Labor market outcomes⁵ for DRP in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char reveal both similarities in employment levels and stark differences in unemployment and gender disparities. In both locations, roughly one-third of working-age individuals (aged 15 and older) were employed (Table 3). While labor force participation was higher in Bhasan Char than in Cox's Bazar, the unemployment rate was also significantly greater. In Bhasan Char, 34 percent of DRP in the labor force were unemployed—three times the rate observed in Cox's Bazar. However, these aggregate figures mask substantial gender-based differences.

While employment rates for DRP men are similar across Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char, underlying labor market dynamics differ. In both locations, approximately seven in ten working-age DRP men are employed. However, the higher labor force participation observed in Bhasan Char is largely driven by a greater share of unemployed men. Specifically, one in five DRP men in the labor force in Bhasan Char is unemployed, compared to just one in ten in Cox's Bazar.

DRP women face substantial barriers to employment, with particularly acute challenges in Bhasan Char compared to Cox's Bazar. In both locations, female labor force participation remains extremely low—only about 10 percent of working-age DRP women were employed in the past year. However, employment outcomes differ: DRP women who seek work in Cox's Bazar generally find jobs, while many in Bhasan Char remain unemployed. Regression analysis confirms these results with a wider gender gap in labor force participation in Cox's Bazar, whereas the employment gap among active job seekers is larger in Bhasan Char (Table A2). In fact, two-thirds of DRP women in the Bhasan Char labor force are unemployed—three times the rate in Cox's Bazar. As detailed in the next section, this disparity reflects differing motivations: in Bhasan Char, low participation appears to be largely involuntary, while in Cox's Bazar, 93 percent of non-working women reported not actively seeking employment—potentially reflecting a combination of social constraints, discouragement, or limited perceived opportunities—compared to 54 percent in Bhasan Char.

Labor force participation among DRP is influenced by age, education, and household structure, with some variation across locations. In both Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char, older DRP are more likely to participate in the labor force, although participation rates decline slightly at more advanced ages (Table A2). Regression analysis also shows that higher levels of education are associated with greater labor force participation in both sites. In Cox's Bazar, individuals from households with higher dependency ratios are more likely to be economically active, possibly due to increased pressure on working-age adults to support their families.

⁵ The DRP is not officially allowed to work outside humanitarian employment programs. However, the DRP engages in informal activities. This study refers to "employment" as having worked for remuneration for at least one hour in the past 7 days. "Work for remuneration" is defined as any activity the individual undertook for remuneration, including daily labor, working for earnings or in-kind, or working on your own account or running a business, including an agricultural business. This can be through humanitarian employment programs but also informal work.

Table 3: Labor market indicators for DRP in BC and CXB, past 12 months

Gender	Survey	Employment to working-age population	Inactive to working-age population	Labor Force Participation	Unemployment rate
All	CXB	35.2%	60.3%	39.7%	11.4%
	BC	38.7%	41.7%	58.3%	33.6%
Male	CXB	70.4%	22.6%	77.4%	9.0%
	BC	66.7%	15.6%	84.4%	21.0%
Female	CXB	9.7%	87.5%	12.5%	22.2%
	BC	14.8%	64.0%	36.0%	58.8%

Source: Authors' calculation based on adult module of Bhasan Char 2022 and CBPS 2023 survey.

Employment patterns among DRP differ sharply between Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char, reflecting the influence of geography, humanitarian employment design, and economic context. In Bhasan Char, DRP are more likely to be employed through humanitarian employment programs—such as cash-for-work schemes and volunteer initiatives—with about half of all employed DRP engaged in these activities (Figure 2). This reliance is especially pronounced among women: over 60 percent of employed DRP women in Bhasan Char work in humanitarian programs, compared to 49 percent of men. In contrast, DRP women in Cox's Bazar are more likely to pursue self-employment, with more than half running their own small businesses and only one in five participating in humanitarian employment. This disparity highlights the limited availability of alternative livelihood options in Bhasan Char, due to its geographic isolation and weaker local economy. Looking ahead, the growing demand for jobs is unlikely to be met solely through humanitarian programs, especially in the face of declining donor funding—raising concerns about the long-term prospects for self-reliance among DRP in Bhasan Char.

Compared to Bhasan Char, DRP in Cox's Bazar engage in a wider range of livelihood activities, reducing their dependence on humanitarian employment programs. Fewer than one-quarter of employed DRP in Cox's Bazar participate in cash-for-work or volunteer initiatives. Instead, nearly half are engaged in informal wage employment, and about one-quarter are self-employed. While these jobs are informal, they play a critical role in supporting household income and enhancing self-reliance. Importantly, they are also less vulnerable to fluctuations in donor funding cycles, offering a more sustainable—albeit limited—pathway to economic resilience.

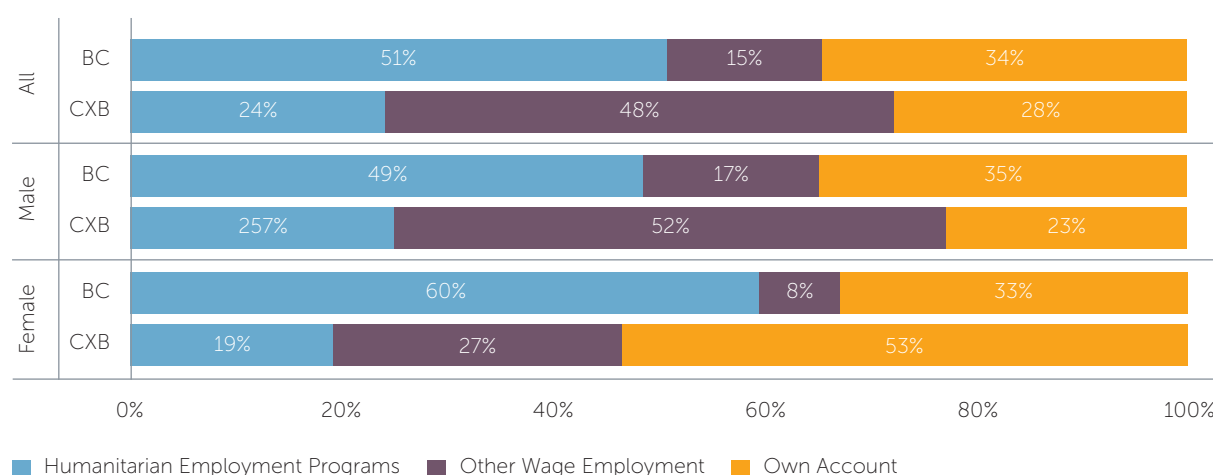
The type and quality of humanitarian employment available to DRP varies by location, with volunteer programs playing a more prominent role in Bhasan Char. Among DRP employed in humanitarian programs, only one-quarter serve as volunteers in Cox's Bazar, compared to 56 percent in Bhasan Char (Table 4). Volunteer programs typically offer longer durations and accommodate a wider range of skill levels, making them a higher-quality employment option compared to short-term, unskilled cash-for-work schemes. However, these programs are also more resource-intensive and costly to operate, raising concerns about their long-term sustainability as a large-scale employment solution for the DRP.

Education plays a more decisive role than demographic characteristics in determining DRP participation in humanitarian employment programs. Regression analysis indicates that in both Bhasan Char and Cox's Bazar, employment in these programs is not significantly associated with age, sex, or household dependency ratios (Table A3). However, in Bhasan Char, more educated DRP are

more likely to be employed in humanitarian roles—likely due to the presence of more skilled positions such as teachers, healthcare providers, and NGO staff.

Employment outcomes for DRP remain constrained in both Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char, but the underlying drivers and severity of unemployment differ. While restrictive legal conditions continue to suppress overall employment rates, Cox's Bazar shows relatively better outcomes, largely due to a more vibrant informal labor market and stronger economic ties to the host community. In contrast, employment in Bhasan Char is primarily limited to humanitarian programs, with few opportunities for informal wage work or self-employment due to the island's geographic isolation and limited economic activity. Although the number of humanitarian employment positions in Bhasan Char is higher relative to the working-age population, it remains insufficient to meet demand. This is reflected in the high unemployment rates—21 percent of DRP men and nearly 60 percent of DRP women in the labor force remain unemployed.

Figure 2: Composition of work type (% of DRP employed in past year)



Source: Authors' calculation based on adult module of Bhasan Char 2022 and CBPS 2023 survey.

Table 4: Composition of humanitarian employment (% of DRP employed in humanitarian employment program in past year)

Gender	Survey	Cash for work	Volunteer Program
All	CXB	74.6%	25.4%
	BC	43.5%	56.5%
Male	CXB	77.7%	22.3%
	BC	46.3%	53.7%
Female	CXB	53.2%	46.8%
	BC	35.0%	65.0%

Source: Authors' calculation based on adult module of Bhasan Char 2022 and CBPS 2023 survey.

Despite the importance of humanitarian employment programs for income generation, access to these opportunities is not easy. Information about job openings is primarily disseminated through humanitarian agencies in coordination with community leaders (Majhis), Camp-in-Charge offices, and Community Outreach Volunteers. Recruitment notices are posted in public spaces such as Camp-

in-Charge offices, community centers, and Complaint and Feedback Mechanism desks, and are also accessible via hotlines. While this system is designed to be inclusive, access to opportunities often hinges on how quickly individuals receive and act on this information—those with earlier access are more likely to secure positions.

Barriers to equitable access persist, particularly for women, even in the absence of formal exclusion.

Cultural norms often restrict women's mobility, requiring permission from male guardians to leave their homes, which limits their ability to engage with recruitment processes. Moreover, many humanitarian roles are not designed with women's participation in mind, and limited educational attainment further narrows their eligibility. Prior work experience is valued, especially for skilled volunteer roles, creating additional hurdles for newcomers. With demand far exceeding the number of available positions—especially amid declining humanitarian funding—many sectors have developed internal pools of experienced volunteers. While newer programs emphasize training and skills development, matching people to work still relies heavily on informal networks and social capital, underscoring the importance of both formal systems and community-based mechanisms in shaping access to livelihoods.



EMPLOYMENT ASPIRATIONS AND BARRIERS AMONG UNEMPLOYED AND INACTIVE DRP



Among those who have not worked in the past year,⁶ DRP in Bhasan Char demonstrate a significantly higher interest in economic participation compared to those in Cox's Bazar, particularly among women. Among DRP who have not worked in the past year, a notably larger share in Bhasan Char expressed a desire to find a job or start a business than their counterparts in Cox's Bazar. This contrast is especially stark among women: while 93 percent of women in Cox's Bazar who were unemployed in the past year were also not interested in seeking work, only 54 percent of women in Bhasan Char shared that sentiment. Furthermore, both men and women in Bhasan Char were more likely to actively pursue employment opportunities than those in Cox's Bazar.

Table 5: Interest in finding a job or starting a business (% of not employed in past year)

Gender	Survey	Not interested	Interested but not attempted	Interested and attempted
All	CXB	88.4%	4.6%	7.1%
	BC	45.7%	22.3%	32.1%
Male	CXB	71.0%	5.1%	24.0%
	BC	21.2%	25.5%	53.2%
Female	CXB	92.5%	4.4%	3.1%
	BC	53.8%	21.2%	25.0%

Source: Authors' calculation based on adult module of Bhasan Char 2022 and CBPS 2023 survey.

The reasons male and female DRP cite for not seeking employment differ notably between Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char, reflecting a contrast between personal and structural barriers. Among men not interested in finding work, those in Cox's Bazar were more likely to cite personal constraints—such as being too young or too old (due to age limits in humanitarian employment programs), retirement, or health-related issues like disability or illness. In contrast, men in Bhasan Char more frequently pointed to structural barriers, including limited job opportunities and restricted access to employment. Additionally, about 25 percent of men in Bhasan Char who were not seeking work reported being full-time students. For women in both locations, domestic responsibilities or being a homemaker were the primary reasons for not pursuing employment, cited by approximately 70 percent. The second most common reason among women in both sites was social restrictions, such as family disapproval.

Table 6: Reason for not finding work (% of not interested in finding work)

Reason	Male CXB	Male BC	Female CXB	Female BC
Too Young/Old	15.7%	10.6%	4.8%	8.4%
Fulltime Student	10.1%	23.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Social Reasons	0.3%	0.0%	7.2%	12.0%
Disability Or Chronic Illness	20.4%	2.5%	3.5%	3.2%
Retired	25.9%	6.2%	6.4%	2.5%
Homemaker/ Domestic Work	6.9%	14.2%	69.1%	69.2%
Doesn't Want to Work	5.7%	3.4%	5.9%	4.1%
No Jobs Available	13.4%	18.4%	2.0%	0.5%
Not Allowed Due to Refugee Status	1.2%	13.2%	0.1%	0.0%
Other	0.4%	7.7%	1.0%	0.0%

Source: Authors' calculation based on adult module of Bhasan Char 2022 and CBPS 2023 survey.

⁶ This encompasses both the unemployed and inactive in Table 3.

DIVERSE LIVELIHOODS, UNEQUAL RETURNS:

JOBS AND EARNINGS AMONG DRP



DRP employed in Cox's Bazar engaged in a more diverse set of livelihood activities over the past year compared to those in Bhasan Char. While male DRP in both locations commonly worked in construction and operated businesses in retail and wholesale trade, those in Cox's Bazar also found employment in sectors such as food and beverage services, administrative support, and building maintenance (Table 7). Women in Cox's Bazar primarily worked in agriculture and manufacturing, with common activities including livestock rearing and tailoring.

Employment opportunities for DRP in Bhasan Char remain limited and more narrowly concentrated compared to Cox's Bazar, largely due to geographic isolation and dependence on humanitarian-run activities. Both men and women in Bhasan Char were less likely to work in agriculture than their counterparts in Cox's Bazar, a trend likely driven by challenges such as limited land availability, high soil salinity, and weak connectivity to mainland markets (Islam et al., 2022). Instead, fishing emerged as a more common livelihood in Bhasan Char, given its proximity to water bodies. Male DRP in Bhasan Char were also more likely to work in transport services—such as driving rickshaws—which are more prevalent on the island than in Cox's Bazar. Women in Bhasan Char were more frequently employed in personal services, primarily as domestic help. Additionally, both men and women in Bhasan Char reported higher participation in social services compared to those in Cox's Bazar, possibly because the survey classified volunteer or cash-for-work roles under humanitarian programs.

Table 7: Occupation categories (% of employed DRP in past year)

Reason	Male CXB	Male BC	Female CXB	Female BC
Crop and Animal Production	16.2%	8.9%	26.9%	10.6%
Fishing and Aquaculture	1.5%	13.1%	0.0%	4.9%
Manufacturing	0.5%	0.2%	22.6%	12.9%
Construction	20.0%	20.7%	4.0%	8.4%
Retail or Wholesale Trade	13.3%	15.1%	0.7%	6.7%
Repair/Installation Activities	2.7%	2.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Transport	0.8%	11.6%	0.0%	0.7%
Waste Collection	0.0%	2.5%	0.0%	1.0%
Education	2.9%	2.1%	7.9%	1.8%
Human Health Activities	0.9%	0.2%	2.6%	1.8%
Food and Beverage Service Activities	5.1%	0.0%	5.1%	0.0%
Office Administrative and Support Activities	4.8%	0.0%	5.6%	0.0%
Social Service Activities	2.9%	12.6%	6.8%	29.1%
Religious Activities	4.5%	0.6%	0.0%	0.0%
Personal Service Activities	5.2%	2.4%	3.5%	13.9%
Services to Buildings	9.1%	1.1%	4.8%	2.7%
Miscellaneous	2.0%	2.3%	0.0%	5.4%
Non-Agricultural Day Laborer	7.5%	4.5%	9.5%	0.0%

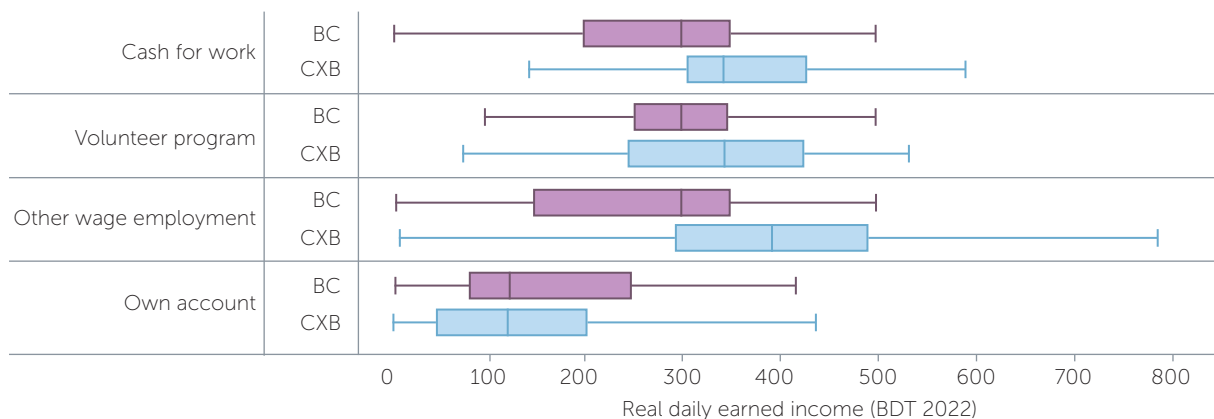
Source: Authors' calculation based on adult module of Bhasan Char 2022 and CBPS 2023 survey.

While gender disparities in earnings persist among DRP in both Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char, the gap is considerably narrower in Bhasan Char. In Cox's Bazar, employed DRP women earn 87 percent less than men, whereas in Bhasan Char, the gender earnings gap is reduced to 32 percent (Table A4). This gender disparity likely reflects variations in occupational roles, as women are more frequently self-employed in lower-paying activities such as tailoring or livestock rearing.

Earnings among DRP vary significantly by employment type and location, with self-employment yielding lower returns and Cox's Bazar offering higher wage opportunities overall. Across both sites, self-employed DRP earned less on average than those in wage employment, with median daily earnings of BDT 125 (Figure 3). Among wage earners, DRP in Cox's Bazar consistently reported higher median earnings than their counterparts in Bhasan Char across all work types. This disparity is especially pronounced in non-humanitarian wage employment, where the median worker in Cox's Bazar earned around BDT 400 per day—surpassing the earnings of 75 percent of their peers in Bhasan Char. This gap reflects the more vibrant economic environment in and around the Cox's Bazar camps. Within Cox's Bazar, DRP engaged in non-humanitarian wage employment also earned more on average than those in humanitarian programs, underscoring challenges in maintaining competitive wages in aid-supported roles. In contrast, DRP in Bhasan Char reported similar median earnings across humanitarian and non-humanitarian employment, though earnings in the latter category showed greater variability.

The economic returns to education among DRP vary sharply between Bhasan Char and Cox's Bazar, reflecting differences in the availability of skilled employment opportunities. In Bhasan Char, each additional year of education is associated with a 2 percent increase in earnings among employed individuals, likely due to better access to higher-skilled roles within humanitarian employment programs that tend to reward educational attainment. In contrast, Cox's Bazar shows minimal earnings returns to education, suggesting that even educated DRP are often confined to low-skilled positions with limited upward mobility (Table A4).

Figure 3: Distribution of daily earnings by work type⁷

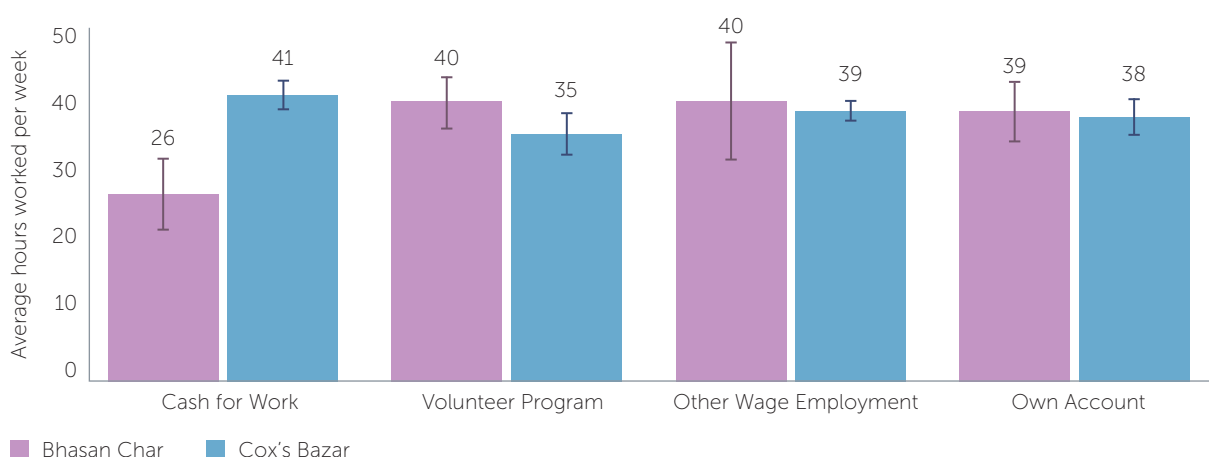


Source: Authors' calculation based on adult module of Bhasan Char 2022 and CBPS 2023 survey.

Despite similar average earnings across volunteer and cash-for-work programs in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char, the duration and intensity of work differ significantly between the two sites. DRP engaged in cash-for-work in Cox's Bazar worked substantially more hours per week—averaging 41 hours—compared to just 26 hours in Bhasan Char (Figure 4). They also worked more months per year, with a median of 5 months, while those in Bhasan Char reported a median of only 1 month (Figure 5). In contrast, DRP participating in volunteer programs in Bhasan Char worked more hours per week than their counterparts in Cox's Bazar. Although the median volunteer in both locations worked for 3 months annually, Cox's Bazar showed greater variation in duration, with over 25 percent of DRP working year-round in both volunteer and cash-for-work roles.

⁷ Daily earnings for wage-employed individuals are standardized to a daily rate based on the reported payment amount and frequency. For self-employed individuals, daily earnings are calculated by dividing monthly profits by the number of days worked in a month.

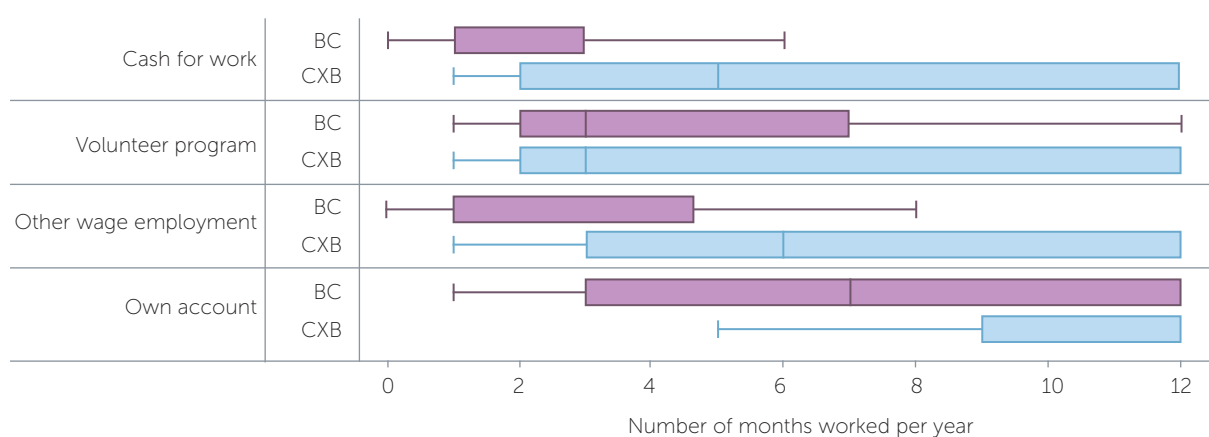
Figure 4: Average number of hours worked per week



Source: Authors' calculation based on adult module of Bhasan Char 2022 and CBPS 2023 survey.

In general, the DRP in Cox's Bazar maintained longer work durations throughout the year compared to those in Bhasan Char. In both locations, DRP engaged in non-humanitarian wage employment and self-employment reported comparable weekly working hours, but those in Cox's Bazar worked more months annually. In Bhasan Char, self-employed DRP worked longer than their wage-employed peers, yet still fell short of the average months worked by the DRP in Cox's Bazar.

Figure 5: Number of months worked



Source: Authors' calculation based on adult module of Bhasan Char 2022 and CBPS 2023 survey.

YOUNG AND DISCONNECTED:

LABOR MARKET CHALLENGES
FACING DRP YOUTH



Youth labor market outcomes among DRP aged 15–24⁸ reveal both gender and location-based disparities, highlighting critical challenges during their transition into productive adulthood.⁹ Among young men, labor force participation was nearly 15 percentage points higher in Bhasan Char than in Cox’s Bazar. However, this higher participation was accompanied by a greater unemployment rate in Bhasan Char. For young women, the unemployment rate in Bhasan Char was approximately double that of Cox’s Bazar. Consistent with trends in the broader adult population, young women exhibited very low labor force participation—just 6 percent in Cox’s Bazar and 20 percent in Bhasan Char.¹⁰

High rates of youth disengagement from employment, education, and training persist across both Cox’s Bazar and Bhasan Char, with young women disproportionately affected. In both sites, over two-thirds of young DRP were not in employment, education, or training (NEET), indicating that a substantial share of youth are neither gaining work experience nor building skills through education. This challenge is especially acute among young women, with more than 90 percent falling into the NEET category. The situation for young men is also concerning: nearly half of those aged 15–24 in Bhasan Char were NEET. Among NEET men, those in Cox’s Bazar were more likely to be inactive and out of school, whereas in Bhasan Char, most were unemployed and out of school.

For displaced youth, prolonged disengagement from employment, education, or training can have lasting consequences, particularly for young women. Being NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) is associated with long-term scarring effects, including reduced future employment and earnings prospects, poorer mental health, and increased social exclusion (ILO, 2024). These risks are especially acute for conflict-affected and displaced populations. Moreover, NEET status is rarely temporary, as the structural and social barriers that drive it—such as early marriage, motherhood, and restrictive gender norms—are unlikely to change over time (O’Higgins et al., 2023). As a result, young women who are NEET are often not actively seeking work and are more likely to remain disengaged in the long term.

Table 8: Labor market indicators for DRP in BC and CXB (past 7 days) for 15–24-year-olds

Gender	Survey	LFP rate	Unemployment rate	NEET rate
All	CXB	28.1%	34.2%	68.0%
	BC	41.0%	52.3%	72.2%
Male	CXB	52.1%	35.0%	41.4%
	BC	66.7%	47.3%	50.3%
Female	CXB	6.1%	28.0%	92.4%
	BC	20.0%	66.3%	90.3%

Source: Authors’ calculation based on household roster of Bhasan Char 2022 and CBPS 2023 survey.

⁸ This is the United Nations’ statistical definition for ‘youth’.

⁹ In this section, we use the data from the household roster section of the survey.

¹⁰ Refer to Table A1 in Annex for comparable labor market indicators for the full adult sample with a 7-day reference period.

Table 9: Breakdown of NEET categories in BC and CXB (past 7 days) for 15–24-year-olds

Gender	Survey	Employed	In School	Unemployed Out of school	Inactive Out of School
All	CXB	18.5%	13.5%	9.2%	58.8%
	BC	19.6%	8.2%	20.2%	52.0%
Male	CXB	33.9%	24.7%	17.4%	24.0%
	BC	35.2%	14.5%	29.1%	21.2%
Female	CXB	4.4%	3.2%	1.6%	90.8%
	BC	6.7%	3.0%	13.0%	77.3%

Source: Authors' calculation based on household roster of Bhasan Char 2022 and CBPS 2023.

Box 1: Evolving labor market outcomes: DRP and hosts in Cox's Bazar

This box explores labor market outcomes in Cox's Bazar in greater detail, comparing trends between the host community and the DRP over time.

Labor market participation among the DRP in Cox's Bazar has declined over time, diverging from modest gains observed among the host community. DRP consistently show lower labor force participation rates than hosts (Table 10). Between 2019 and 2023, participation among hosts increased slightly from 49 percent to 53 percent, while it declined for the DRP from 44 percent to 40 percent. Although the unemployment rate among DRP dropped significantly—from 17 percent to 11 percent—this decline primarily reflects individuals exiting the labor force rather than securing employment, indicating rising discouragement rather than improved job prospects.

Most DRP men who were employed in 2019 remained employed in 2023 (Figure A1), although they also exhibited considerable movement across employment, unemployment, and inactivity. In contrast, most women remained inactive in 2019 and 2023 (Figure A2). The number of unemployed DRP women also fell, largely because they exited the labor force, and only a small proportion of DRP women transitioned from inactivity into the labor force.

High rates of inactivity persist among both DRP and host populations, with young women—particularly among the DRP—facing the most severe barriers to labor market and educational engagement. A large proportion of both DRP and host populations remain outside the labor market and education system. In 2023, 68 percent of DRP were not in employment, education, or training (NEET), a modest improvement from 76 percent in 2019. NEET rates among DRP women remain alarmingly high, exceeding 90 percent in both years. While the NEET rate for young female hosts is considerably lower than that of young DRP women, it remains concerning—nearly half of host women aged 15–24 are classified as NEET.

Proximity to host communities plays a critical role in shaping livelihood opportunities for DRP, without negatively affecting host labor market outcomes. In Bhasan Char, DRP are geographically isolated from host communities, partly to minimize potential negative spillovers. However, when DRP reside closer to host populations in Cox's Bazar, they gain access to better livelihood opportunities without negatively impacting host employment outcomes. Hosts in

Cox's Bazar continue to earn nearly one-third more than DRP, with no significant change in their earnings over time (Figure 6). More broadly, evidence from various contexts suggests that inflows of displaced populations generally have neutral effects on host employment and earnings (Rozo & Grossman, 2025; Verme & Schuettler, 2021). Thus, proximity to host communities can enhance livelihood prospects for DRP without compromising labor outcomes for hosts.

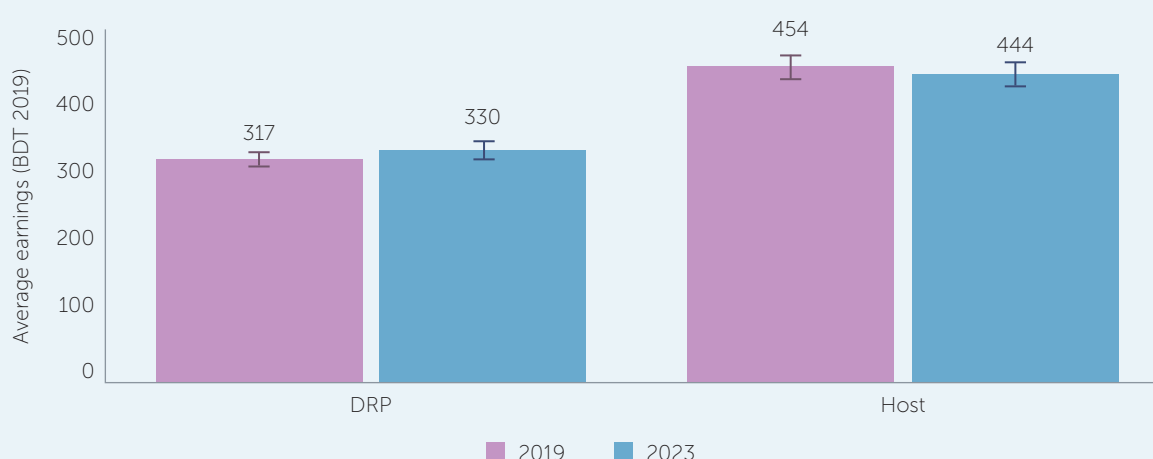
Table 10: Labor market outcomes for DRP and hosts in Cox's Bazar

	Camp		Hosts	
	2019	2013	2019	2013
Labor force participation rate				
Total	44%	40%	49%	53%
Male	83%	77%	79%	85%
Female	15%	13%	25%	31%
Unemployment rate				
Total	17%	11%	5%	4%
Male	13%	9%	3%	2%
Female	34%	22%	10%	6%
Youth NEET rate				
Total	76%	68%	36%	33%
Male	51%	41%	15%	11%
Female	95%	92%	55%	53%

Source: Authors' calculation based on CBPS 2019 and 2023.

Note: Labor force participation and Unemployment rates are for a 12-month reference period. NEET rates are for a 7-day reference period. See the Annex for more details.

Figure 6: Average earnings for DRP and hosts in Cox's Bazar



Source: Authors' calculation based on CBPS 2019 and 2023.

CONCLUSION:

TOWARD SUSTAINABLE JOBS FOR DRP IN COX'S BAZAR AND BHASAN CHAR



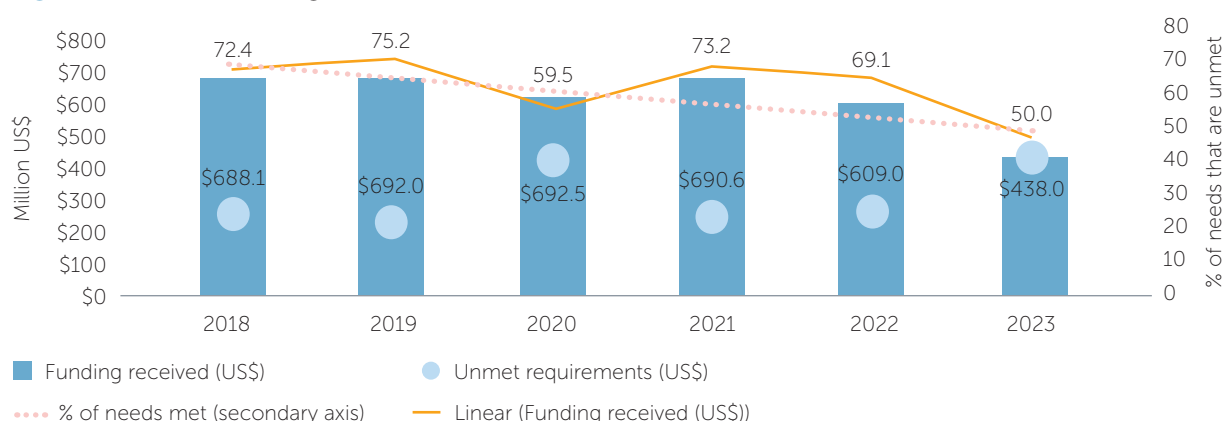
Jobs and labor market outcomes for the Displaced Rohingya Populations (DRP) in Cox’s Bazar and Bhasan Char reflect stark differences shaped by the nature and accessibility of work opportunities in each location. Cox’s Bazar offers a broader range of employment options, driven by its larger population, dynamic informal economy, and greater integration with surrounding communities. While these jobs are often informal and insecure, they tend to offer higher earnings. In contrast, Bhasan Char’s geographic isolation, limited infrastructure, and controlled environment restrict economic activity and external engagement, resulting in fewer and more constrained employment opportunities.

Gender disparities persist across both sites. Women’s labor force participation remains low, largely due to domestic responsibilities and social norms. However, women in Bhasan Char face higher unemployment, as more express a willingness to work. Among men, those in Cox’s Bazar experience lower unemployment despite slightly lower participation rates. Youth disengagement is a critical concern in both locations, with over two-thirds of young DRP not in employment, education, or training (NEET). This is especially severe among young women—nearly 90 percent of whom are NEET—raising concerns about long-term scarring effects such as diminished future earnings, poor mental health, and social exclusion. For displaced youth, prolonged disengagement from employment, education, or training can have lasting consequences, particularly for young women.

Employment patterns also differ by program type. DRP in Bhasan Char are more reliant on humanitarian employment programs, while those in Cox’s Bazar are more likely to engage in informal wage or self-employment due to the more vibrant local economy. Workers in Cox’s Bazar tend to work longer and earn more, particularly in non-humanitarian roles. However, across both sites, employment remains constrained by legal limitations, restricted mobility, and the structural challenges of camp or island life.

Humanitarian employment programs—supported by the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) and international donors—play a vital role in sustaining livelihoods. Yet, these programs are inherently limited: they offer below-market wages, are often part-time or temporary, and cannot meet the scale of need. Competition for limited placements is intense, especially in Bhasan Char, where underemployment and frustration are widespread. The sustainability of these programs is further threatened by declining donor funding, which fell by one-third in 2023 compared to the 2018–2022 average and is projected to continue decreasing (Figure 7). This trend raises serious concerns about the long-term viability of the current livelihood model, particularly in isolated settings like Bhasan Char.

Figure 7: Trend in funding (in million US\$) and share of needs met



Source: Financial Tracking Service of the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis Joint Response Plan 2023.

While this report offers a comprehensive diagnostic of labor market outcomes for the DRP, translating these insights into actionable strategies will require further work. Global experience shows that enabling policies alone do not guarantee equitable access to employment for all displaced populations. Regulatory shifts may occur in practice without formal legal reform—a dynamic reflected in the employment patterns observed in both Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char. As such, this analysis should be viewed as a foundation for designing a transition pathway toward greater economic inclusion until conditions allow for voluntary, safe, and dignified return to Myanmar. Future efforts must build on existing systems to expand access to financial services, strengthen income-generating capacity, and invest in skills and human capital—particularly for women, who face the most significant barriers to participation.

To support durable solutions, labor market integration must become a central pillar of refugee policy.

The current humanitarian model provides essential protection but limits economic opportunity and self-reliance. Expanding access to market-based employment—both within and beyond humanitarian programs—can help DRP secure better-paying, more stable jobs and contribute to local economic development. A gradual approach to economic integration, allowing for increased mobility and access to local labor markets, could balance the needs of DRP and host communities. Enhancing job access and mobility together will be key to fostering sustainable livelihoods and reducing long-term dependency on aid.

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ANNEXES



Differences in reference periods and survey modules influence the interpretation of labor market indicators for DRP, particularly when comparing adult and youth outcomes across Cox’s Bazar and Bhasan Char. The key labor market indicators presented in Table 3 were derived from the adult module of the survey using a 12-month reference period, as detailed labor market questions were asked for this timeframe. In contrast, youth labor market indicators in Tables 8 and 9 were calculated using the household roster module, which applies a 7-day reference period and is more representative of the 15–24-year-old population. To enable comparability, Table A1 presents labor market indicators for all working-age adults using the 7-day reference period, drawing from both the adult module and household roster data. This makes Table A1 more directly comparable to the youth statistics in Table 8.

Using the 7-day reference period, male labor force participation in Cox’s Bazar was over 10 percentage points higher than in Bhasan Char. While employment rates were similar, men in Cox’s Bazar were twice as likely to be unemployed. However, when comparing the 7-day and 12-month data (Table A1 vs. Table 3), the male unemployment rate in Cox’s Bazar was about half over the past year compared to the past week. This suggests that many men were employed at some point during the year but not in the recent week, highlighting the instability of informal employment and greater labor market vulnerability in Cox’s Bazar.

For women, unemployment was significantly higher in Bhasan Char—more than four times the rate in Cox’s Bazar. Still, both sites showed high female inactivity, with fewer than 10 percent employed in the past week. Comparing the two reference periods reveals that in Bhasan Char, more DRP—both men and women—were unemployed over the past year than in the past week. This shift likely reflects discouraged workers who stopped seeking employment. In Cox’s Bazar, most women remained inactive across both periods, with only a small share transitioning from unemployment to inactivity.

Table A1: Labor market indicators for DRP in BC and CXB, past 7 days

Gender	Location	Employment to working-age population	Inactive to working-age population	Labor Force Participation	Unemployment rate
All	CXB	24.0%	69.3%	30.7%	21.9%
	BC	24.3%	69.2%	30.8%	21.0%
Male	CXB	46.0%	39.1%	60.9%	24.5%
	BC	42.6%	50.4%	49.6%	14.1%
Female	CXB	8.1%	91.1%	8.9%	9.3%
	BC	8.7%	85.3%	14.7%	40.7%

Source: Authors’ calculation based on adult module of Bhasan Char 2022 and CBPS 2023 survey.

Table A2: Determinants of labor force participation and employment

Gender	(1) LFP CXB	(2) LFP BC	(3) Emp CXB	(4) Emp BC
Female	-0.654*** (0.015)	-0.491*** (0.033)	-0.139*** (0.034)	-0.410*** (0.046)
Age	0.025*** (0.003)	0.033*** (0.009)	0.005 (0.006)	-0.004 (0.010)
Age squared	-0.000*** (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Years of education	0.012*** (0.003)	0.014* (0.008)	-0.006* (0.003)	0.012 (0.008)
Dependency ratio	0.013* (0.008)	0.021 (0.022)	0.013 (0.014)	0.045 (0.028)
Constant	0.386*** (0.063)	0.303** (0.151)	0.859*** (0.114)	0.814*** (0.172)
Obs	3153	886	1324	488

Source: Authors' calculation based on adult module of Bhasan Char 2022 and CBPS 2023 survey.

Note: Dependent variable in (1) and (3) is an indicator of labor force participation in past 12 months; (2) and (4) is an indicator of employed in past 12 months given in the labor force.

Table A3: Determinants of humanitarian work

	(1) Humanitarian work CXB	(2) Humanitarian work BC
Female	-0.056 (0.041)	0.103 (0.069)
Age	-0.005 (0.008)	-0.010 (0.014)
Age squared	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Years of education	0.001 (0.004)	0.047*** (0.009)
Dependency ratio	0.026 (0.019)	-0.037 (0.039)
Constant	0.314** (0.149)	0.709*** (0.259)
Obs	1174	302

Source: Authors' calculation based on adult module of Bhasan Char 2022 and CBPS 2023 survey.

Note: Dependent variable is an indicator of humanitarian work in past 12 months given employed in the past 12 months.

Table A4: Determinants of earnings

	(1) Earnings CXB	(2) Earnings BC
Female	-0.869*** (0.092)	-0.319** (0.123)
Age	0.009 (0.012)	0.021 (0.026)
Age squared	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Years of education	0.001 (0.006)	0.022* (0.012)
Dependency ratio	-0.003 (0.034)	-0.012 (0.062)
<i>Work type</i>		
Other wage employment	-0.037 (0.042)	-0.325* (0.188)
Own account	-1.108*** (0.070)	-0.724*** (0.109)
Constant	5.906*** (0.217)	5.320*** (0.432)
Obs	1088	249

Source: Authors' calculation based on adult module of Bhasan Char 2022 and CBPS 2023 survey.

Note: Dependent variable is the log of real daily earnings (BDT 2022). Base category is humanitarian work.

Figure A1: Employment transitions for Male DRP from 2019 to 2023



Figure A2: Employment transitions for Female DRP from 2019 to 2023

