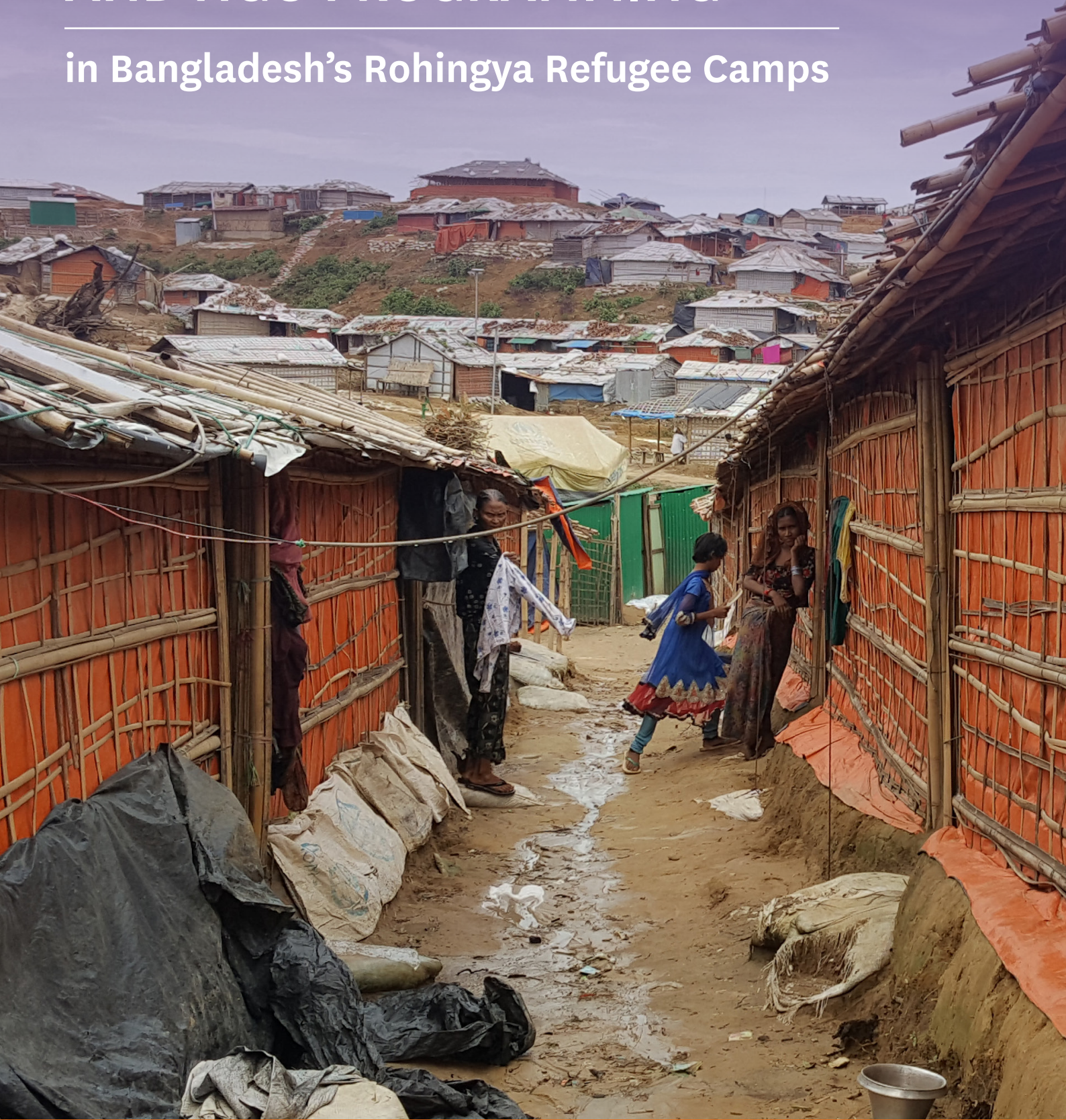


ASSESSING GENDER, POWER, AND NGO PROGRAMMING

in Bangladesh's Rohingya Refugee Camps



Author Profile

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1. Introduction

As an ethno-religious minority living in Myanmar's Rakhine State located on the western coastal region of the country, the Rohingya were stripped of their citizenship in Myanmar in 1982 and have lived without legal residency status in the country since.

The Rohingya have been making the perilous trek across the border from Myanmar into Bangladesh since the 1970's, with the most recent mass exodus of over 700,000 people in 2017. Often dubbed the "most persecuted minority in the world", not only are they denied citizenship, legal rights, economic opportunities necessary to support their families in Myanmar, they have been subjected to unspeakable horrors at the hands of Burmese soldiers with reports of murder and kidnapping of Rohingya men, and forced public nudity and humiliation, sexual slavery, and gang rape of Rohingya women and girls. Forced out of their native land as they flee ongoing persecution, over 1 million Rohingya refugees have settled in the makeshift and overpopulated refugee camps outside of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, making this the largest refugee crisis in the world. The mass exodus in 2017 resulted in a drastic increase of women and girls crossing the border into Bangladesh. This influx of Rohingya women and girls in the camps has brought with it a unique set of multidimensional challenges, that many international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) based in the camps are attempting to address, with varying levels of success.

As the number of Rohingya women and girls increased in the refugee camps, many NGOs began to implement interventions designed to promote gender – and many programs specifically target women. Significant resources have been invested into embedding gender considerations into programs through the strategy of gender mainstreaming and the promotion of gender equality as it is understood from a western feminist perspective, with little to no consideration of the cultural and power hierarchies

that exist within Rohingya society, Bangladesh's political structure, and the NGO sphere itself. Organizations operating in the Rohingya refugee camps by-and-large implement programmes based on a pre-existing set of "best practices" that are meant to be applied to diverse refugee contexts. The functioning of these organizations is closely related to, and influenced by, the prevailing scholarship on forced migration which categorizes refugees merely as victims and thus in need of particular services and provisions, while overlooking their subjective ability to transform their own lives and settings. This disregard is further pronounced amongst doubly marginalized groups such as refugee women. The gender-based strategies employed by the hundreds of NGO working to assist the refugee crisis have shifted the way many Rohingya women understand their ability to effect changes in their own lives, in ways that were previously not possible. The impact of this gender micro-politics of NGO assistance and its influence on Rohingya gender dynamics in the camps requires careful evaluation to change the ways in which development efforts affect Rohingya women's social positions.

As such, the goal of this report, is to evaluate women's exposure to, and contact with, the NGO industry and gender programming and how this directly impacts and transforms gender asymmetries. This report will specifically target humanitarian aid agencies and NGOs that implement gender equality and women's empowerment projects amongst Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, with the goal of addressing the inadequacy of these agencies' gender programming. Based on first-hand research of Rohingya refugee women as well as aid agencies and NGOs working in the camps, this report seeks to engage with camp organizations and reorient their efforts by taking into account the voice of their intended end-users, namely, refugee women. The report aims to uncover both the reasons underlying misguided international efforts that overlook the subjective experience of refugee women and their

capacity to bring about changes in their own lives, even in dire circumstances. At the policy level, the report explores how camp organizations can adopt new approaches to their work that consider the voice and subjective capabilities of refugee women in the running of these organizations and in the design and implementation of projects. The report thus asserts the need for a grounded, multi-disciplinary approach in policy implementation so that project designers and implementers are in conversation with the very individuals targeted by these development initiatives. Such an approach will allow for the research to have maximum impact on the way development and humanitarian organizations operate.

This report is divided into four parts. Firstly, the background provides brief overview contextualizing life in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, particularly the lives of women in the camps. Secondly, an overview of the research conducted will be discussed, including the concepts and theories used to frame and understand this research as well as the analytical and research methods employed, focusing on gender theory, feminist ethnography, and narrative approaches. Thirdly, the main findings that emerged from the interviews and other primary data sources will be highlighted. This includes an analysis of why women are considered the “ideal” NGO client, the importance of language and how it is perceived, an overview of the *majhee* system in the refugee camps, and the role of *taleems* in the lives of Rohingya women. Finally, the report will conclude with several key policy and programming recommendations that should be employed by aid agencies and NGOs on the ground when implementing gender-based programming within the Rohingya refugee camps.

Overall, this report aims to be an accessible source of information for NGOs to draw from when developing programs and services geared towards Rohingya women in the refugee camps. This report outlines the benefits of incorporating a feminist

approach and gendered lens to their activities, and the need to be cognisant of Rohingya cultural and gender norms and practices, and the inherent power hierarchies that exist within this context.



2. Analytical Approach and Methods

In order to understand the impact of the NGO industry and gender-based programming on the lives of women in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, it is necessary to understand gender theory in situations of forced migration, and the frameworks and methods used for the analysis of this research. The frameworks outlined below have been used to analyse the collected data to gain a nuanced understanding of the multi-layered experiences of Rohingya refugee women in the camps. By better understanding women's experiences in the camp, we are able to analyse the role and impact of NGOs in the camps and the potential limitations that may exist in the development of such programming.

2.1. Feminist Ethnography

This research is based on feminist ethnography, which allows for the interpretation of gendered subjectivities and the lived experiences of refugee women. Feminist ethnography can play an important role in “revealing major transformations in gender relations, generational positions, [and]...identities” (Abusharaf, 2009: 8). According to Henrietta Moore (1988: 6), the feminist ethnographic framework is:

“...the study of gender, of the interrelations between women and men, and of the role of gender in structuring human societies, their histories, ideologies, economic systems and political structures. Gender can no more be marginalized in the study of human societies than can the concept of ‘human action’, or the concept of ‘society’. It would not be possible to pursue any sort of social science without a concept of gender.”

By adopting a feminist ethnographic approach, this research captures the nuances of human experience, in this case, the creative capacity of Rohingya refugee women in employing frameworks created by themselves, which existing scholarship on gender and forced migration rarely accounts for. The research reveals how displacement and forced migration both shape – and are shaped by – these social processes, thereby transforming gender relations that allow for varying gendered experiences amongst Rohingya refugee women.

In utilizing a feminist ethnographic lens, this research critically questioned common-sense assumptions about men and women, masculinity and femininity, and the existing power dynamics at play. The power differentials and gendered nuances between Rohingya men and women were interrogated, as well as the power differentials that exist within the social structure of the camps including between government officials, NGO and humanitarian agencies, and the Rohingya refugees. Through this framework, this research critically analyses the lives of Rohingya women beyond the restricted categories of “victimhood” and “agency”, and instead recognized the everyday choices and negotiations Rohingya women make within the constraints of their physical and social environment – particularly as it relates to their relationship and interactions within their community, with NGOs, and with the structures of authority in the camps.

2.2. Construction of Gender Identities

Hand-in-hand with a feminist ethnographic framework, understanding gender is necessary to comprehending the ways constructions of masculinity and femininity affect the lives of Rohingya refugee women within the context of forced migrations, their ability to exercise their own agency, existing power hierarchies, and the

ways they navigate their gender identities in their everyday lives. By examining gender identities and how they are constructed in everyday life within Rohingya culture and the refugee context, we gain insight into how NGOs may use these constructions to develop their gender-based programming and the gaps that may exist.

Gender is considered to be a social construct. Men and women carry out their daily activities and perform behaviours that are strongly influenced by the culture of society and established social order (Kandiyoti, 1988; Lorber, 1994; Butler, 1998; Ferree et al., 1999). According to Butler (1998), gender identities are not a result of intrinsic biological or natural characteristics, but rather are the “effects of signifying practices rooted in regimes of power-knowledge characterized as compulsory heterosexuality and phallocentrism” that places male dominance at the core of gender construction (Jagger, 2008). Gender norms and behaviours are therefore constructed based on power structures and hierarchies, and normative frameworks that are deeply rooted in people’s lives (Butler, 1998). This construction influences the way gender relations are understood in society. Gender is a way by which societies and cultures construct ideas and knowledge about men and women, placing each in the context of differentiated gender relations. The subtle, and often invisible, dynamics of power and status within a relation exists in a particular context which people are socialized to see as natural and inevitable. This is particularly the case for the Rohingya community where the male-female binary is socially constructed and maintained based on culture and religion. These constructions explain unequal power relations between the sexes. These constructions also form the basis for how many NGOs and humanitarian agencies choose to design and conduct specific gender-based activities. It is through this study of gender relations that feminist scholars have theorized gender relations as ones of domination, and that take place within hierarchies

of power and privilege (Kandiyoti, 1988; Flax, 1990; Ferree and others, 1999).

Gender can only be understood by studying social and cultural norms and the practices that shape society’s perceptions of what it means to be masculine and feminine, male and female, and how these perceptions structure human societies (Indra, 1998). Societal and cultural norms and expectations play a disciplinary role by holding individuals accountable to the “appropriate” behaviour expected of men and women. This is particularly evident in the Rohingya community due to strict notions of “manhood” and “womanhood”. Thus, as Freedman (2007: 17) asserts, “gendered meanings and roles are constructed and maintained, but also [negotiated,] contested” and redefined by men and women. These gender theories serve as the backdrop for the qualitative analysis and provide the framework for understanding the way gender identities and roles have meaning within Rohingya culture, and how this understanding can be employed in the development of NGO programming.

2.3. Research Design

The research involved multiple methods, and implemented feminist, grounded research methodologies that account for existing power hierarchies within the refugee camps. Research that takes a feminist approach can be empowering for all participants and each step of the research process should be participatory.

The research involved a series of qualitative in-depth one-on-one conversations, group interviews, narrative collections, and participant observation or “hanging out” with Rohingya women in the Kutupalong-Balukhali refugee mega-camp in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. Visual methods including photography and videography were also employed. Throughout the data collection process, feminist ethnographic and narrative approaches were used

to understand and bring meaning to the nuances and complexities of the experiences of Rohingya refugee women in their everyday lives. Feminist research methods allowed for the interpretation of the various gendered subjectivities and lived experiences of refugee women, and brought meaning to the multi-layered analysis of the impact of forced migration on gender relations.



3. Life in the Refugee Camps

The concentration of refugees in the overpopulated refugee camps outside of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh is amongst the densest in the world. It is estimated that over 1 million Rohingya refugees are living in the overcrowded and squalid camps, the majority of whom are women and girls (Ellis-Petersen, 2019).

The arrival of refugees into Bangladesh is not a new phenomenon. Rohingya people have sought refuge in Bangladesh since the beginning of Rohingya persecution in Myanmar during the 1970s, when the Rohingya were first stripped of their citizenship (Zarni and Cowley 2014). Since the first wave of refugees into Bangladesh in 1977, the Rohingya have largely been settled in two main camps set up by the UNHCR located outside of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. During the next wave of arrivals in the early 1990's, at which time the Bangladeshi government stopped recognizing the Rohingya as refugees, they settled in unregistered camps adjacent to the camps run by the UNHCR and self-settled in nearby host communities (Bhatia et. al., 2018). Since the latest crisis in August 2017, an estimated 900,000 Rohingya have entered Bangladesh, with a majority of them now settled in Kutupalong-Balukhali Expansion Camp in the Cox's Bazaar District, which has become the primary area for newly arrived unregistered Rohingya refugees to settle. In total Bangladesh now hosts over 1 million Rohingya refugees (Ellis-Petersen, 2019).

The research discussed in this report was predominantly conducted in Kutupalong-Balukhali Expansion Camp, often referred to as the "mega-camp". It is the world's largest and most densely populated refugee camp. This "temporary city" continues to spread across five square miles – a warren of mud paths cut across the vast Kutupalong-Balukhali mega-camp, revealing its unplanned structure, as settlements of fragile, improvised

tarpaulin shelters organically grew with the arrival of more refugees (Gaynor, 2018). In an already densely populated country, the fifth densest in the world (Bhatia et. al., 2018), the high influx of Rohingya has meant that resources are scarce and as a result the standard of living for refugees is low.

The living conditions within the densely populated camps can be described as dire. The camps are a harsh environment, located in an area not suitable for safely accommodating the large population. Homes consist of makeshift tents and fragile shelters made of bamboo, tarpaulin, and plastic built precariously on hilly, steep land. Since the beginning of the crisis, more than 50,000 shelters have been erected. Due to heavy congestion, 75% of families have to share their shelters and 93% of the population in the camps lives below the UNHCR emergency standard of 45 square metres per person. Space can be as low as 8 square metres per person in some areas of the mega-camp (Gaynor, 2018; Oxfam 2019).

The poor conditions can also be seen in the overflowing latrines and contaminated waters (Oxfam, 2019). Overcrowding, indoor cooking, and suboptimal shelters made of plastic have also increased the risk of fire and injury, and respiratory infections (Chan et. al., 2018). Within the camps, there is also a severe lack of essential non-food items including footwear and feminine hygiene products, increasing the risk of disease, infection, and injury (Chan et. al, 2018).

These unsuitable living conditions are further degraded by bad weather, as Bangladesh is the second most natural disaster-prone country in Asia and the Pacific. During monsoon season, heavy rains cause significant amounts of damage and injuries, as well as making large areas inaccessible and increasing the risk of disease. During monsoon season approximately 2.5 meters of rain falls in a three-month period, "*turning camps built of dusty soil in unhealthy swamps*" (Oxfam, 2019). Efforts

have been made to fortify the land and secure homes with sandbags to prevent landslides and flooding, however conditions remain the same with each passing monsoon season as many flimsy shelters are washed away during storms (Gaynor, 2018). Additionally, rain and flooding, poor water drainage, and plastic shelters, can increase the accumulation of stagnant water creating breeding sites for disease carrying flies and mosquitoes (Chan et. al., 2018). Poor weather also makes access to water, food, toilets, aid and services nearly inaccessible and is especially risky for women in the camps.

Of the nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees in the Cox's Bazaar region, the majority of them are women and girls (Ellis-Petersen, 2019). Many of these women have endured and survived horrible crimes of sexual and gender violence in Myanmar including numerous brutal cases of rape, gang rape, and sexual slavery (UNFPA, 2018). These women continue to face risks within the refugee camps. Many women fear for their safety and dignity when trying to access water and sanitation facilities, particularly at night, which has led some women to go hungry and thirsty as they fear leaving their shelters. Female headed-households feel especially vulnerable to the threat of physical and sexual abuse and harassment. There have also been troubling reports of human trafficking as well as cases of girls going missing from the camps (Oxfam, 2018). This has further led to concerns about women's access to washing facilities due to fear, leading to sanitation and infection concerns. Additionally, women face a severe lack of access to feminine hygiene materials including menstrual materials (Oxfam, 2018). As this is a significant point of concern, many organizations have implemented programs to specifically address these issues and concerns faced by women. For example, UN Women has set up Women's Centres to serve as hubs for information and services for women, as well as a safe space with private rooms for breastfeeding and women's only secure bathing spaces and toilet facilities. Beyond fears about safety, women also

face increased risks with regards to female health and the access to and availability of female health services. This is especially of concern to those who suffered physical and sexual violence.

Despite the harsh reality of life in the camps and the ever-present reminder of the lives they left behind, the resilience of the Rohingya people cannot be underestimated. As one woman said:

“It is not Burma but we are making a life here. We don't know what the future will be like so we try our best to survive. What else can we do? We don't have our cows and poultry here like we had in our villages – or my vegetable garden – so things are more difficult here. But we are still living our life based on the values and traditions we had back home. Every day we are cooking and cleaning and being with our children – in many ways it is so different than life in Burma but sometimes I also feel that it's not very different. We don't know how long we will be here, but for now we are still trying our best to live.”

Since the 2017 influx of 900,000 refugees into the Cox's Bazaar region, large-scale and ongoing humanitarian effort has been required to address this issue. As a result, the Cox's Bazaar region has seen a significant spike in the number of organizations, both local and international, that have arrived to work with the Bangladesh government and the Rohingya people. These organizations vary in cause and impact, with some focusing on particular elements of the crisis, while others have offered wholesale support. Many of these organizations have implemented gender-based programming to address the challenges faced particularly by women and girls in the camp with various degree of success, and significant room for improvement. The remainder of this report will focus on the work of these NGOs and humanitarian agencies, and their position within the camps.

4. Key Findings

4.1. Women as the “Ideal” Client

While the UNHCR, in cooperation with the Bangladeshi government, have been leading the coordination of the humanitarian response within the refugee camps, there are hundreds of organizations all working to assist this urgent refugee crisis. These organizations run a wide range of development initiatives, activities, and programs addressing various issues pertaining to the refugee crisis. Upon embarking on this research, one of the first observations made was not only the sheer number of NGOs, both large and small, that were actively working in the camps, but also the number of organizations that had programming specifically focused on the implementation of gender equality strategies, through awareness-raising, empowerment, and assistance. The number of workshops and trainings on human rights and gender-based issues have also increased.

Many organizations have established “gender equality” as the priority of their operations. However, a closer look at the messaging of NGOs and their initiatives indicate that much of the gender-based programming is geared towards women and the safety of women, with very few programs geared specifically towards men. Throughout the camps, various initiatives in the form of training centres and women-friendly spaces have been established. These include preventing gender-based violence workshops, hygiene and sanitary workshops, training courses for sewing and handicrafts, women’s mental health programming, and women’s safety in the camps. These initiatives typically aim to provide women with knowledge on topics such as self-empowerment, confidence-building, and gender equality.

Rohingya women regularly interact with these aid agencies and NGOs, something that did not take place in Myanmar. Many women expressed the fact that the presence of these numerous organizations provided opportunities that they did not have

access to previously, such as special assistance and trainings on domestic abuse and other forms of gender-based violence, for example. The presence of all these initiatives have had a clear impact on Rohingya women’s understanding of the ways in which they can effect changes in their own lives, in ways that were previously not possible. As one woman stated:

“In Myanmar we were shut out from everything and lived in despair. Even though life is not easy here [in Bangladesh] we have more access to the world and different types of ideas and people. We are learning many new things.”



The overwhelming presence of NGOs and humanitarian agencies focusing on women's issues leads to, what is referred to as, the "feminisation of the refugee clientele" (Szcepaniková, 2008), where women are often viewed as the "ideal" refugee "client" by NGOs. Women are regarded as being more "ready to comply" with new gendered ideals, as they are often more susceptible to various forms of abuses or exploitation within the camp. Through this lens, NGOs provide trainings through workshops and information dissemination campaigns, primarily targeting women as a means of disrupting prevailing gender dynamics in order to address the gender-based challenges arising in the camps. While women are seen as the ideal refugee clientele for addressing gender-based challenges, it is sometimes assumed that men would be disinterested in participating in workshops, and therefore they are rarely included in programming that is meant to promote concepts of gender equality. As a result, NGOs are less inclined to make programming specifically targeting men.

The limited inclusion of men is a disadvantage to the end goal of many gender-based programs. For example, advocacy efforts by NGOs focusing on "empowerment" sought to provide Rohingya women with concepts that could help them negotiate new gender roles and potentially forge a new gender identity within the camps. However, these same NGOs did significantly little to incorporate men into their efforts. By excluding men from discussions of women's empowerment, NGOs are not promoting male buy-in into these concepts, thus highlighting the one-sidedness of their efforts and calling into question their ability to be fully effective tools in their own goal for transformation.

4.2. The Importance of Language

The previous section briefly mentions that men are often not included in gender-based programming due to a perceived notion that they are disinterested in such workshops. Part of this perceived disinterest may be due to the type of language used by NGOs to promote gender concepts, and how that language contradicts with certain cultural and customary norms. This research found that the language of NGOs surrounding women's "rights" were often frowned upon by many Rohingya men and women in the camps. This includes NGOs active promotion of a new type of "womanhood" – that is, being outspoken, participating in workshops, and being active in public spaces – which is different from prevailing and intrinsically understood Rohingya cultural norms regarding the roles of women. Some men felt that the way NGOs were pushing for women's "rights" and "freedoms" was promoting newfound behaviours that went against the "honour" of women in Rohingya culture. This language around "rights" is viewed as a "Western" concept that directly challenges culturally established gender norms, gender identities, and the distinctions of masculinity and femininity, and is often met with great criticism. As one Rohingya father stated:

“ I have allowed my daughter to go out and participate in the NGO activities, but there has been a lot of comments from my neighbours about my daughter because she is unmarried and they say she is getting influenced by these Western ideas. They say that she is spreading ideas about women's rights and many other things our culture is not familiar with. They say that I have already lost two children and now I am slowly losing my last one to the West. People in our society say many terrible things. I worry about her safety, but I also want her to do something with her life. We did not have any opportunities in Burma – here she can do something. ”

The concept of traditional notions of “honour” cannot be overstated, in a discussion of NGOs language around women’s “rights” and the impact it has on the ability for women to partake in NGO programming. A women’s ability to engage in certain aspects of camp life is often influenced, and in many cases restricted, by the perceived threat of public shaming which could damage a women’s reputation and her family’s honour. This is clearly illustrated is the father’s quote above. Despite his neighbour’s comments about the perceived negative influence of Western concepts of women’s rights, he has allowed his daughter to participate in NGO programming. Many other men may not be as willing to allow their female family members to participate in similar activities due to social stigma.

It should be made clear, that Rohingya men are not the only ones that have expressed hesitation towards NGOs programming for women. Similarly, while some women embraced the concepts of “human rights” and “equality” advocated by NGOs, other women contended that men and women have different – that is, unequal yet complementary – roles and therefore should be given different rights and responsibilities according to their sex. One 20 year-old woman, who is a frequent participant in NGO workshops, shared that she often has to “walk a fine line” due to the traditional mindset of not just Rohingya men but also Rohingya women. She said:

“When the NGOs tell me to encourage other women to join the workshops, I am happy to do it. In fact, I am proud of the changes I am seeing in myself. It is important to learn about these things. But we have to be careful how we talk to men. Perhaps others are more confident than me and are comfortable to take a leading position – like K. (her friend) – she is able to talk in front of the men and express her opinion. I am the same age as K. but I am more comfortable to be quiet and allow the men to speak because

it is more respectful in our culture to do so. I am making small changes in my family with the knowledge the workshop is giving me. But it is more honourable to do what is appropriate in our culture and religion. I don’t want to do something that will be different from Rohingya customs.”

This comment reveals the feelings of many Rohingya women, and the constant struggle they face in balancing these new ideas with their traditional cultural practices. NGOs have a tendency to introduce concepts and ideologies that do not necessarily coincide with Rohingya culture and Islamic norms. And so, while many agreed that there is a need for more awareness of women’s rights, they do not necessarily believe in abandoning more traditional gendered roles that were given to men and women in Rohingya society. This research finds that many women seek to reconcile the knowledge they have gained through NGOs activities, with the Rohingya cultural norms that they ascribe to. These constant negotiations between new concepts and traditional norms surrounding acceptable cultural practices requires subtle daily and consistent efforts that allow women to find a “middle ground” between traditional gender roles and shifting societal norms within the camps. In order to find this “middle ground”, the discussion around concepts related to women’s “rights” as they are presented by the NGOs, sometimes need to be limited in certain settings, particularly when it could lead to a potential conflict. Rather, these concepts should be asserted and reframed in a way that could sway or incrementally adjust existing traditions without undermining them.

4.3. Humanitarian Aid Supporting Gender Specific Labour

Unlike NGO programming that focuses on women's rights and empowerment through initiatives on domestic violence for example, programming that supports paid work is viewed more positively, though not without its fair share of criticism. This research found that gender divisions of labour within the camps are shifting, with an increased reliance on humanitarian aid and NGOs.

Upon arriving in the camps, Rohingya refugees lost their rural ways of life including cattle grazing and harvest-ready rice fields, and had to come to terms with the loss of their pre-displacement livelihoods. As a result, refugees have become highly dependent on humanitarian agencies for survival. In the initial months of Rohingya arrival in the camps, it was common to see large UNHCR trucks stop by the camps a few times a week providing meager rations of rice, lentils, and cooking oil. And with limited access to income for additional necessities such as clothes and cooking supplies, many refugees had to sell or barter their limited rations for cash or other items. There was a clear need for addressing livelihoods and economic challenges within the camps.

And as mentioned previously, the presence of NGOs and humanitarian agencies also meant increased access to economic opportunity, particularly for women. Many aid organizations began and continue to facilitate programming that aims to support and teach women vocational pathways to sustainable livelihoods, through specific skills trainings and workshops. These programs allowed women to help support their families in ways that they were not able to do so before. However, this also meant a shift in the roles of men and women both within the home and beyond, and change in men's traditional role as breadwinner.

On the one hand, Rohingya women's engagement in paid employment is generally somewhat

acceptable. On the other hand, considering the changing gender divisions of labour in the camps and growing unemployment among men, there is increasing concern among men that the prevalence of women's rights discourse within NGO activities will result in women having more authority and employment preference above men. Many men feel these initiatives are negatively impacting the role of men within the community and within families. One man states:

“We were happy with UN support for food rations, but now with all these workshops they are running...especially the ones for women, those are not necessary. They are involving themselves in our family affairs. Before local elders were in charge of helping to fix any issues that arise in the community – especially family problems and things like that. Now when there is a problem, women do not call us to help them. They only go to the workshop.”

This shift in community and family dynamics and its impact on the role of men and their distrust of NGO programming for women is only exacerbated by the fact that there are limited similar economic activities run by NGOs for men. As women become increasingly more employable over men, men will continue to feel greater resistance towards this programming.

4.4. The Majhee System: A Hinderance to NGO Programming

While NGOs provide many workshops, trainings, and designated spaces for women in the refugee camps with the goal of “empowerment”, the success of these programs are highly varied, with women's spaces in particular often being avoided by many women. This research found that many women felt that the programs did not improve the social

position of women within their communities or provide them with avenues to utilize and implement the skills they had learned. As one woman put it:

“How can we implement these things when our society is still run by men with little input from women?”

This is especially highlighted in the fact that the entire administrative system of the camp is run through *majhees*, and NGOs rely heavily on *majhees* to do the main legwork for their programming.

The *majhee* system was established by the Bangladeshi authorities as an emergency response to the sudden influx on Rohingyas in the country. A *majhee*'s main tasks involve identifying the immediate survival needs of the particular zone they administer, linking refugees with emergency assistance from various providers, and acting as an intermediary authority between NGOs and the Rohingya refugees. The *majhee* system was not established with the participation of the Rohingya community and consequently lacks representation and accountability to the refugees. They are not traditional leaders, elders, or even necessarily respected members of the community. And they certainly do not reflect the age and gender composition of the Rohingya refugee population, as they are almost exclusively middle-aged Bangladeshi men. Within this system, Rohingya refugees must receive permission from their respective zone *majhee* for activities such as getting married, accessing relief items distributed by various NGOs, and especially, access to resources for social and mental health support. Aid organizations rely heavily on *majhees* to distribute humanitarian aid, including food packages and other relief items.

Due to aid agencies' heavy reliance on the *majhee* system, programming and messaging related to “empowerment” and “women's equality and rights” are often met with great skepticism. Rohingya women feel that the *majhee* system works in direct

opposition of the stated goals of these programs and the ideals of empowerment that they are taught in these programs. As one woman stated:

“Majhees are all frauds. We have to inform them of everything and they are always checking up on us. I went to one of those NGO workshops where they tell us about those types of things (referring to “empowerment” and “rights”) but how can we even use these things when they themselves are abusing a system by setting up these majhees. All the majhees are here only for money. If we have any problems, first we need to give them money and then they think if they want to help us – that thinking phase will take another few months. As you know in our culture women do not share things – only with other women we do – but why will go to these majhees and share our problems when we know they will not do anything? One time I heard a woman who was getting beaten by her husband a lot so she told the majhee to fix the matter and involve the authorities. The majhee said he will do it, but it is now already three months and nobody has done anything. The man is still beating his wife.”

This comment clearly articulates why “women-friendly” spaces set up by aid agencies in the camps are rarely used by Rohingya women, despite an established need and importance of these types of spaces. The power structure embedded in the *majhee* system and the requirement to discuss sensitive issues with *majhees* in order to access services, makes it difficult for both men and women to access these resources. This is especially challenging for women when trying to access programming related to sexual and gender-based violence and other extremely sensitive matters.

Despite these challenges, NGOs continue to rely on the *majhee* system as they feel that the culture of the camps would be “too difficult to navigate if not for the *majhees*”, as noted by an NGO staff member. According to another aid worker:

“This is the way things are. It’s an excellent system. It works very well because we can outsource the difficult work of having to choose who to properly distribute the items to. Majhees also report to us if there are any specific issues in their zone such as gender-based violence or any other such troubles. They’re trustworthy people for the most part and make our job more efficient. I couldn’t imagine having to this work without their cooperation.”

If NGOs continue to rely solely on the *majhee* system for the distribution of resources and implementation of programming, then they will continue to see limited participation in women-focused programming, particularly for sensitive issues related to gender-based violence and mental health.

4.5. Importance of *Taleems*: Self-created Women’s Spaces

As discussed, NGOs and other humanitarian development organizations have set up a number of “women-friendly spaces” and “multi-purpose women’s centres” with the aim of providing a safe environment where women and girls can access a variety of resources and services, such as sessions and workshops on gender-based violence and mental health support. While these spaces have all proven to be important for advancing Rohingya women’s access to resources, a significant portion of Rohingya women in the camps are not making use of these NGO-run initiatives, preferring instead to attend the *taleem*.

Taleem is an Arabic work that literally translates to “education”. It is commonly used by groups in South Asia and refers to gatherings for prayer and supplication. These gatherings are supplementary and not part of the obligatory prayers in Islam. In the camps, women usually attend *Taleems* on Fridays after *Jumu’ah* (Friday-afternoon congregational prayer, which in the camps are attended only by men), and generally gather in one of the women’s shelters. However, it can take place on other days as well, depending on the availability of space in one of the women’s shelters.

Most Rohingya refugee women in the camps live with tremendous trauma and each has their own horrific experiences of the gender-based violence they faced in Myanmar. The *taleem* offers a space that evokes memories of positive experiences, providing a sense of belonging, community, safety, and hope that is familiar to them and their culture. Speaking of the importance of the *taleem*, one woman said:

“I lost many of my family members in Myanmar so I don’t know many people here in the camp except those who live in the shelter next to mine. I am always worried about what will happen with our lives and our future. That’s why I like coming here (the *taleem*). I am okay to just be quiet and listen to others recite the Qur’an, and I want to always learn more from the *alima* (learned person or teacher). That is most important to me. I don’t like to share my sadness – nobody here likes to. Everyone...all of us Rohingyas have bad memories; it is not our way to talk about these memories with each other. For me, just sitting with the other women and hearing Allah’s words makes me feel safe and I feel that I am part of a community. That’s why I keep coming back every time.”

This quote highlights the fact that, while unsaid, all the women present at the *taleem* are aware that each person there has experienced tremendous suffering. Through the *taleem*, women create a safe space to deal with the individual trauma they have faced while drawing support simply from the presence of others. These spaces help to establish a sense of community, and build bonds of friendship and the creation of a social support network amongst the women.

Taleems are religious gatherings where women come together for prayer and supplication. During the *taleem* the *alima* begins with the recitation of short prayers followed by the recitation of the Quran – first in Arabic and then translated into the Rohingya language. During these lessons the women gather together in a semi-circle to reflect on the meanings of the passages the *alima* has read. After at least an hour (sometimes more) of lessons, and of the women listening, learning, and reflecting on the teachings, the session turns to collective prayer where the group will raise their hands in supplication. Within this space of religious observation and reflection, the women are able to find a momentary sense of therapeutic relief in their collective prayers and tears. One attendee said:

“ I could not live. I had no will to survive. Sometimes I stay up all night crying and asking Allah to take me away. I wake up in the middle in the night and sit for hours staring into the darkness. I was praying and praying but I was suffering inside. I kept thinking of what happened and felt angry, sad, frustrated – I wanted to kill myself. I wanted my children to come back. I didn’t know who to turn to or where to go. And then I heard about the *taleems* and went to it. By the grace of God, it helped me a lot. When I cry by myself so many bad thoughts come to my mind. But then in the *taleem* everyone is

crying together – like all of our worries are coming out together. It makes me feel a thousand times better, as though a big weight is lifted from my heart. ”

The *taleem* also evokes a sense of home and reminder of a time when things were better. In a densely populated refugee camps made up of bamboo and tarp shelters, the feeling of home can be impossible to achieve.

“ You know, we used to have *taleem* in Burma? It reminds me of better times in Burma. When I sit here (in the shelter) I feel depressed – this is not a home, it is only a box made out of bamboo and tarp. ”

Research on the *taleem* at the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh reveals the significance of such spaces for Rohingya women as a semblance of home, hope, and well-being. Although the harrowing experiences of forced migration and displacement can lead to a loss of identity and social belonging for Rohingya women, the *taleem* creates a spiritual, psychological, and emotional haven that allows for bonds and friendships to emerge.

It also serves as an important lesson for NGO initiatives that seek to create women-friendly spaces. The *taleem* shows that self-created spaces that reflect the culture and the experiences of the women themselves and where women have the autonomy to conduct their own activities, can sometimes have the greatest and most profound impact.

The success of the *taleem* highlights one of the key failures of NGOs and aid agency activities, as one woman who organizes the *taleem* clearly articulates:

“ I started this *taleem* because of these NGOs. They are always involving themselves in our business and now women are going off to these programs where they do sewing and other things. Why? When we were in Myanmar we didn't need all these things. We always used to do *taleems* – we were happy like that. Sometimes I see these women and I ask them if the workshops they attend are helpful, and most of the time they have nothing to say. They say that the NGOs are paying them some small amount to participate in the workshop and then they go back to their shelters. How many of these organizations are sitting with us? How many have come to our *taleem* and see how we do things according to our culture and religion? It is important to discuss things according to our Islamic way. Did these NGOs come anytime to ask us how it is done in our religion? Barely any of them. They come, think we are all living terrible lives – yes, we have many problems – but we are also able to do many things. *Taleems* are run by Rohingya women. How is that not empowerment? These groups say that only the NGOs' work is empowering for us Rohingya women. But if you ask any woman that goes to the *taleem*, she will tell you that our religion is giving us more empowerment than what they can offer. This is why more women are joining our *taleems* than they are joining those workshops. ”





5. Policy and Programming Recommendations

Overall, the findings of this research confirm that while NGOs and humanitarian agencies in the Rohingya refugee camps of Bangladesh are providing necessary and beneficial services and resources to Rohingya refugees, particularly through programming geared towards the advocacy of women and girls, there are still a number of areas within the program implementation process that can be re-evaluated and improved. The following section will outline a number of policy and programming recommendations that should be considered in the implementation of NGO activity in the Rohingya refugee camps moving forward.

5.1. Make grounded research more accessible to NGOs

With their strong insistence on implementing “best practices”, alongside the need to quickly respond to various disasters, NGOs are poorly equipped to engage in grounded research that seeks to understand the subjective experiences of doubly marginalized groups like refugee women. Nonetheless, grounded research, such as the research and subsequent findings discussed in this report, can provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of people affected by any crisis that an organization is working to address. These insights, and the methodologies employed to gather information, can be used to improve programming in ways that allow for better program outcomes. In order for this to be possible, grounded research should be made more accessible to organizations so that the vital information gathered in research may be employed in the daily activities of NGOs and humanitarian aid agencies. This can be done in a variety of formats including reports, briefs, white papers, audio/video content, etc. Regardless of the

format, concerted effort should be made to link academic research with discussions at the policy level amongst humanitarian agencies and NGOs, to aid in the development of programming that results in the best outcomes for program recipients. While the following recommendations are specific to the Rohingya refugee context in Bangladesh, this first recommendation is more widely applicable to NGO work in any sector, addressing any crisis or issue area.

5.2. Recognize personal/ institutional biases, and consider principles of gender theory when determining population needs, and program goals and outcomes

When conducting direct-to-user programming – especially those focusing on gendered issues – NGOs and their staff should be aware of their own personal/institutional biases and assumptions, and how this may impact the way they develop and implement programming. The methodology used in this research can be taken as an example. This research utilized theories based in feminist ethnography and gender identities to analyse and understand the many findings discussed. By basing the research in these theories, the researcher was required to question their own biases, allowing them to bring increased objectivity to their analysis. These types of gender-based theories are typically viewed as academic concept, but an understanding of gender-based principles can be extremely valuable and necessary to the development of on-the-ground gender-based programming. For instance, through a feminist ethnographic lens and a greater understanding of gender identities, NGOs and humanitarian agencies would be equipped to question their own implicit biases and perceived “common-sense” assumptions about men and

women, masculinity and femininity, and any power dynamics that exist. As discussed in this report, personal and institutional biases can result in programming that views women as the “ideal” refugee clients and men as “trouble-makers”, effectively excluding a key segment of the population and limiting the potential for success of programs. By addressing these types of assumptions and biases, NGO will be able to increase the inclusivity and subsequent success of gender-based programs.

5.3. Increase cultural understanding prior to program development

In addressing crisis situations as large and complex as the Rohingya refugee crisis, NGOs and humanitarian aid agencies often only have the capacity to implement ready-made solutions that have been successful in other similar crisis settings. However, there is no such thing as one-size-fits-all solution. Programs must be adjusted and created in response to the specific needs and cultural contexts of the given population. One of the primary criticisms of NGO activities found in this research is that limited effort has been made to understand the cultural and religious practices of the Rohingya people and how these practices may impact their response to certain types of programming, particularly those related to gender. This limited cultural understanding is a key factor in why many Rohingya women choose to attend *taleems* rather than similar NGO-created women’s spaces, and why many Rohingya men and women are uncomfortable with NGO language in their promotion of women’s rights. Programs and messages must be culturally sensitive.

5.4. Increase participation of Rohingya refugee women in the design and implementation of project programming

Rohingya refugee women should be increasingly included in the day-to-day design and implementation of NGO programming where they are the intended end-users. The presence of *taleems* is a clear example of why this is important. As discussed in this report, across the camps, *taleems* are a preferred option to the “women’s-only spaces” that are implemented and widely promoted by NGOs. Tellingly, none of the NGO workers who were spoken to during this research were even aware of *taleems*, despite their presence in the camps. This finding shines a light on the gaps between NGOs’ projects and the desires and actual needs of Rohingya refugee women.

Research on the *taleem* at the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh reveals the significance of such spaces for Rohingya women in creating a sense of home, hope, and well-being. They are an example of self-created women-friendly spaces that reflect the culture and the experiences of the women themselves, where women have the autonomy to conduct their own activities without the intervention of external actors.

As such, by including Rohingya refugee women in the design and implementation of NGO programming, especially in the creation of women-friendly spaces, NGOs can ensure the programs reflect the actual needs of their end-users, while remaining culturally sensitive. This will also ensure that the voices of women are integrated into the activities of the camps, and will provide women with a sense of ownership and responsibility towards these programs. If they are part of the program development process, they will be more likely to use the program and promote it amongst their peers, increasing the chances of program success.



5.5. Recognize the power hierarchies that exist within the camp

While NGOs seek to provide services in the form of empowerment trainings and resources for women, their efforts may affect and be affected by existing power hierarchies in the camps in unexpected ways. The research revealed how NGO activities are often conducted under the auspices of the patriarchal system of power in the camp.

For example, the research found that NGOs must contend with the power hierarchies that exist in the camps administrative system. As discussed, NGOs rely heavily on the government established *majhee* system for the implementation of programs. The *majhee* system represents a system of authority that in many ways acts as a barrier and gatekeeper between the Rohingya refugees and NGOs. While conducting activities within this system, NGOs must recognize the challenges this poses, especially for Rohingya refugee women when seeking NGO services, and should actively seek solutions that reduce the impact of this barrier.

This is one example of the many power hierarchies that exist within the camp. For NGOs to be successful in their programming, which often impliedly or directly seeks to eliminate such hierarchies, all these dynamics and their potential impacts must at the very least be recognized, even if they cannot be immediately addressed.

5.6. Consider power differentials in programmes that address gender inequality

Similar to the recommendation 5.5, while NGOs seek to provide services in the form of empowerment trainings and resources for women, their efforts may affect and be affected by existing power hierarchies in the camps, including power hierarchies that are embedded in the gender dynamics of the Rohingya people.

NGOs with programs that promote gender equality, whether through workshops, trainings, or otherwise, must be mindful of the way power hierarchies operate in the community. Rohingya cultural norms are structured to perpetuate patriarchal hierarchies. Programs that counter these hierarchies run the risk of creating problems in the community as men may feel that their way

of life is under threat. An example of this, as discussed in this report, is the language of NGOs regarding women's rights is often perceived as a challenge to masculinity and the culturally established gender roles. Services that address empowerment and the rights of women have a direct impact on those established power dynamics. NGOs should be cognisant of that impact when designing and implementing their programming as it could have potential negative consequences for the Rohingya refugee women for which the programs have been developed.

5.7. Include men in gender-based programming

Men must be included in some gender-based programming, particularly those related to the promotion of gender equality. As discussed in this report, men's participation in gender-based programming is often limited. By not including men in discussions of gender equality, efforts to promote gender-equality become one-sided, with women advocating for their rights with no buy-in and support from their male counterparts. This can cause gender-equality programming to be virtually ineffective. As such, the limited inclusion of men is a disadvantage to the end goal of many gender-based programs.

As men play an influential role in the decision-making of their family's lives, programs should leverage this role for the promotion of gender equality by integrating men into the process. It is vital to design community-level human rights-based programming that raises awareness of how gender norms hinder women's empowerment, and this should be done by including men as key partners in women's empowerment.

5.8. Develop alternate methods for program delivery that does not rely solely on the *majhee* system

As discussed in this report and in recommendation 5.5, NGOs rely heavily on the government established *majhee* system for the implementation of programs, which often acts as a barrier to Rohingya women's ability to access resources and services. NGOs seeking to develop gender-based programming in the camps should actively develop methods for program delivery that does not predominantly depend on the *majhee* system – particularly for programs focused on issues of gender-based violence and women's mental and physical health. This can include: a) developing relationships with Rohingya leaders and elders in the community, both men and women; b) fostering leadership roles among Rohingya women so that they may act as a liaison between the NGO and the community; c) conducting direct outreach among the areas of the camps that they serve, etc. The alternate methods will depend on the capacity of the NGO.

5.9. Employment opportunities for women must take place alongside the creation of similar opportunities for men

Some of the programs run by NGOs for women provide vocational and skills training for potential employment. If women are provided employment opportunities in a context where men do not have the same opportunities, this can potentially create resentment and hostilities towards women. To avoid potential backlash from men in such circumstances, NGOs must focus on awareness initiatives that stress the importance of employment for both men and women.

6. Conclusion

As Rohingya women and girls make up the majority of the refugee camp's population, and as they continue to face multi-dimensional gender-specific needs and challenges as a result of their displacement and within their everyday lived experiences in the camps, it is vital that NGOs and humanitarian aid agencies continue to support them.

The various programs, workshops, skills trainings, and designated women's only spaces that seek to promote gender equality and women's empowerment are necessary for addressing the many challenges faced by women in the camps. However, in providing these valuable resources and services, the NGO industry must be willing to evaluate the inadequacies of their gender-based programming and reorient their efforts from the implementation of "one-size-fits-all" solutions by taking into account the voices of their intended end-users – the refugee women themselves – as well as the cultural and religious practices and norms that influence their decisions. Refugees, particularly women, cannot merely be seen as victims in need of aid and services, but must be recognized as having the ability to transform their own lives. And refugee men cannot be viewed outside the lens of gender programming, as their participation is also vital in achieving the goals of gender equality.

This report has aimed to understand the impact and underlying limitations of humanitarian efforts in providing gender-based programming and has outlined a number of recommendations for how camp organizations can adopt new approaches to their work. These recommendations are based on first-hand research and target on-the-ground practices, as well as policy-level considerations. These recommendations have been designed to prioritize the immediate and long-term needs of

Rohingya refugees. By working alongside refugee women in the camps, NGOs and humanitarian actors may be better positioned to provide gender programming that is in line with the aspirations of these women, thereby bringing about positive changes even in the direst of circumstances.





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The University of Auckland's Centre for Asia Pacific Refugee Studies (CAPRS) focuses on generating evidence-based and high-impact research to support persons forcibly displaced by climate or conflict-based situations.

It is driven by a transformative agenda that places social justice and human rights as core aspects of its work that will empower refugee voices and build local capacities. Through a commitment to multidisciplinary scholarship, the Centre is committed to bringing together people from academia, refugee communities, government, civil society and the private sector to collaboratively work on meaningful and tangible projects on current and future forced displacement situations.

