

‘Safe in the grave’

Young people’s risk of sexual and gender-based violence in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh

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Introduction

The 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants was an historic agreement whereby all 193 Member States of the United Nations (UN) recognised that protecting persons who are forced to flee and supporting the countries that shelter them are shared international responsibilities. Key principles enshrined in the Declaration include to 'Protect the human rights of all refugees and migrants, regardless of status' and to 'Prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence' (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2024). In this vein, the Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Sub-Sector in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, which is led by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and comprises more than 71 standing member organisations (including UN agencies, national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and government agencies), seeks to prevent, respond to and mitigate gender-based violence through community-based programming and awareness efforts. The work of the GBV sub-sector is complemented in turn by the efforts of the Child Protection Sub-Sector (led by the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF) and the Protection Sector (led by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR) (Rohingya Refugee Response Bangladesh, 2024). Acknowledging the risks faced by the Rohingya population in Bangladesh, humanitarian actors and the Government of Bangladesh have worked to strengthen the protection of displaced Rohingya, including addressing the risk of gender-based violence, which remains a top strategic priority as per the 2024 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya response (Inter-Sector Coordination Group 2024).

These efforts notwithstanding, there are significant barriers to realising the commitments of the New York Declaration, as well as the promise in the Sustainable Development Agenda to leave no one behind, including in relation to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 (which calls for eliminating all forms of violence against all women and girls, including child marriage), and SDG 16 (which calls for reducing all forms of violence and ending all forms of violence against children under the age of 18) in the context of the Rohingya community in Bangladesh (Hözl, 2021; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2022). Indeed, research in Cox's Bazar has found that myriad forms of sexual violence, age-based and gender-based violence against adolescents and youth remain endemic (Presler-Marshall et al., 2020; Guglielmi et

al., 2021; O'Connor and Seager 2021; GAGE consortium, 2022; Guglielmi et al., 2022).

This report draws on midline data collected by the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) longitudinal study in Cox's Bazar to explore Rohingya young people's experiences of and beliefs about sexual and gender-based violence and access to prevention and response services. Building on baseline research undertaken in 2019 (Guglielmi et al., 2020), it focuses on sexual and gender-based violence, child marriage and marital violence. The report concludes with implications for policy and programming.

Context

More than six years into the largest influx of Rohingya into Bangladesh, 970,000 Rohingya refugees currently live in 33 congested camps across Cox's Bazar, constituting the largest refugee settlement in the world. Another 75,000 Rohingya have been relocated to the Bhasan Char island camp in the Bay of Bengal, reachable only through approved military transit (UNHCR, 2023). The Rohingya humanitarian response is guided by a Protection Framework, recognising that the protection needs of affected populations must be understood and met (Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) et al., 2023). This ostensibly guides all humanitarian sector priorities.

Despite the Protection Framework, the Rohingya continue to be affected by grave human rights abuses, including gender-based violence (International Rescue Committee (IRC), 2020; ISCG et al., 2020; Gerhardt, 2021). The World Food Programme's (WFP) Refugee Influx Emergency Vulnerability Assessment (REVA-6) report showed that 22% of its Rohingya participants faced harassment and that for those living in host communities, rates rose from 18% in 2021 to 25% in 2022 (WFP, 2023). While the GAGE baseline survey found that only 4% of older adolescents (aged 15–17) reported experiencing gender-based violence in the past 12 months, and only 1% reported having ever experienced rape or sexual abuse (Guglielmi et al., 2020), there is evidence that gender-based violence (and particularly sexual violence) is significantly under-reported because adolescent girls and young women who admit to experiencing gender-based violence are stigmatised by their families and the community, and crucially, see their marriageability reduced (Green et al., 2022; Guglielmi et al., 2022).

A major challenge that has been identified is the gatekeeping role played by community leaders (*majhis*) in the camps (UNFPA, 2023a). Indeed, there are reports that *majhis* have even threatened to reduce aid and opportunities to girls and women who report such incidences to humanitarian partners (ACAPS, 2022; ACAPS 2023; Guglielmi et al., 2022).

In Rohingya culture, menarche (the onset of menstruation) heralds that girls are old enough for marriage. In Myanmar, state laws (strictly enforced by the military) prevented young people from marrying before the age of 18 (Melnikas et al., 2020). In the refugee camps of Bangladesh, however, and particularly in the earlier years of the 2017 mass influx of the Rohingya, there was less regulation of family law, and so child marriage often occurred undetected (Leigh et al., 2020). For Rohingya girls, the average age at first marriage in Cox's Bazar is estimated to be 15.7 years (Islam et al., 2021b).

Recent factsheets compiling data on gender-based violence show that it is common, and is primarily (80%) comprised of intimate partner violence (IPV) (UNFPA, 2023a and b). A survey conducted among married Rohingya women in Cox's Bazar confirmed these high levels of intimate partner violence. Most women regarded intimate partner violence (beating/hitting) as a normal part of marriage, and 72% had experienced such abuse. In addition, 56.5% reported having been forced by their husband into unwanted sexual intercourse (Islam et al., 2022). Another questionnaire showed that women who were married before the age of 18 were more vulnerable to intimate partner violence, especially child brides who had married between the ages of 12 and 14. Having had some form of education (either the husband or wife) was a protective factor against husbands perpetrating intimate partner violence (Islam et al., 2021a).

It can be difficult for adolescent girls to access infrastructure for reporting gender-based violence (such as GBV entry points, women-friendly spaces, women-led community centres, health centres), primarily due to gender norms that limit their mobility (NRC, 2022). Challenges in reporting experiences of gender-based violence were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, as GBV services were deemed non-essential by the Bangladeshi government and – despite growing reports of an increase in gender-based violence due to the stay-at-home order – centres were either closed or had limited opening hours due to reduced availability of staff (Chowdhury et al., 2022).

Conceptual framing

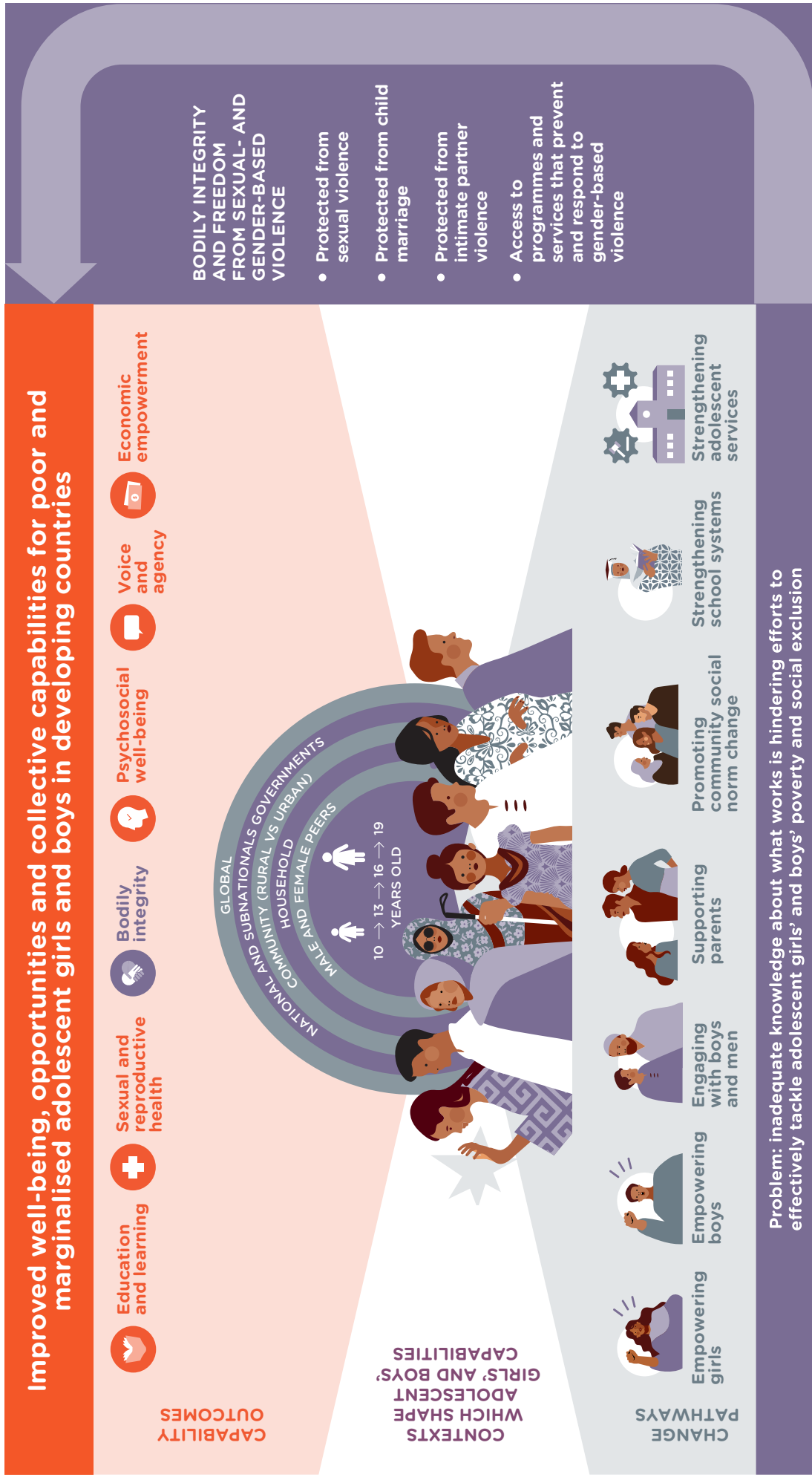
Informed by the emerging evidence-base on adolescent well-being and development, GAGE's conceptual framework takes a holistic approach that pays careful attention to the interconnectedness of what we call the '3 Cs' – capabilities, change strategies and contexts – in order to understand what works to support adolescents' development and empowerment, both now and in the future (see Figure 1). This framing draws on the three components of Pawson and Tilley's (1997) approach to evaluation, which highlights the importance of outcomes, causal mechanisms and contexts, though we tailor it to the specific challenges of understanding what works in improving adolescents' capabilities.

The first building block of our conceptual framework is capability outcomes. Championed originally by Amartya Sen (1985, 2004) and nuanced by Martha Nussbaum (2011) and Naila Kabeer (2003) to better capture complex gender dynamics at intra-household and societal levels, the capabilities approach has evolved as a broad normative framework exploring the kinds of assets (economic, human, political, emotional and social) that expand the capacity of individuals to achieve valued ways of '*doing and being*'. At its core is a sense of competence and purposive agency: it goes beyond a focus on a fixed bundle of external assets, instead emphasising investment in an individual's skills, knowledge and voice. Importantly, the approach can encompass relevant investments in children and young people with diverse trajectories, including the most marginalised and 'hardest to reach' such as those who were married as children. Although the GAGE framework covers six core capabilities, this report is on bodily integrity and freedom from sexual and gender-based violence. It focuses on sexual violence, child marriage, and marital violence.

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

The third and final building block of our conceptual framework – change strategies – acknowledges that young people's contextual realities will not only shape the pathways through which they develop their capabilities but also determine the change strategies available to

Figure 1: GAGE conceptual framework



them to improve their outcomes. Our socio-ecological approach emphasises that to nurture transformative change in girls' and boys' capabilities and broader well-being, potential change strategies must simultaneously invest in integrated intervention approaches at different levels, weaving together policies and programming that support young people, their families and their communities while also working to effect change at the systems level. The report concludes with our reflections on what type of package of interventions could better support the bodily integrity of Rohingya girls and young women in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char.

Sample and methods

This report draws on midline data collected in 2023 as part of the GAGE longitudinal research programme, which explores what works to support the development of adolescents' capabilities as they transition through adolescence and into young adulthood (GAGE consortium, 2019). Quantitative data collection took place from July to October 2023, with additional tracking in December 2023 and January 2024. Qualitative data was collected in March and April 2023. Research was conducted in 24 camps in Cox's Bazar, as well as in Bhasan Char island (Table 1). The quantitative sample included 834 young people living in Cox's Bazar. It included slightly more females than males (54% versus 46%) and is split into two age cohorts, the

younger larger than the older (62% versus 38%) (see Table 2). Of the young people in the quantitative sample, 66 (8%) have a functional disability even with assistive device. Of the 449 females in the sample, 194 (43%) have been married. A smaller number (131) were married prior to the age of 18. This report refers to the younger cohort (who were mostly aged 10–12 years at baseline and were a mean of 16 years old at midline) as 'adolescents'. It refers to the older cohort (mostly aged 15–17 at baseline and a mean of 20.5 years old at midline) as 'young adults'.

Findings from the quantitative survey were complemented by in-depth qualitative research across 7 camps¹ in the Ukhia and Teknaf upazilas (sub-districts) of Cox's Bazar, with a sub-sample of 73 Rohingya and Bangladeshi adolescents, their families and communities (see Table 3), using interactive tools with individuals and groups.² Researchers also undertook qualitative interviews with 21 adolescents, caregivers and key informants in Bhasan Char island.

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

Table 1: Mixed-methods research sites

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

Table 2: Quantitative sample

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

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

2 Some qualitative quotes presented in this paper are from young people aged over 25. Following the government of Bangladesh and UNHCR's joint registration exercise (a process begun in 2019) via the Biometric Identity Management System (BIMS), Rohingya refugees' personal identities were accurately captured via biometric data, including fingerprints and iris scans, securing each refugee's unique identity, family links and identifying information. Previous to this exercise, and during the time of the GAGE baseline data collection, many Rohingya were not able to confirm their exact age, which they were more accurately able to report on during midline data collection, hence some outlier ages.

Table 3: Qualitative sample

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

Findings

Sexual violence

The midline survey, like the baseline survey, found that few adolescent girls and young women (2%) – when asked directly if they have experienced sexual harassment in the past 12 months – reported in the affirmative. This is because, as one father explained, reporting sexual harassment ‘means that the reputation of the girl will be finished.’ However, during qualitative interviews, most girls and young women admitted that they had experienced sexual harassment. Some girls reported that boys and young men made lewd comments and looked at them lasciviously. An 18-year-old young woman recalled, ‘They [boys and young men] used to follow the girls and ask their number.’ Other girls and young women reported being stalked by groups of young males intent on policing their behaviour. A 17-year-old girl reported that males’ efforts are aimed at making girls leave school and stay at home:

I was going to the school in another block. Some people were following me and harassing me, saying, ‘We don’t let girls learn in school in this block.’ They were saying rude things and were telling me to stop going there. They said they will make me pay if I don’t stop. I went inside the school and cried a lot.

A key informant added that when words fail to suffice, some groups of young males throw acid on girls and young women to make them return home: ‘When the girls go out

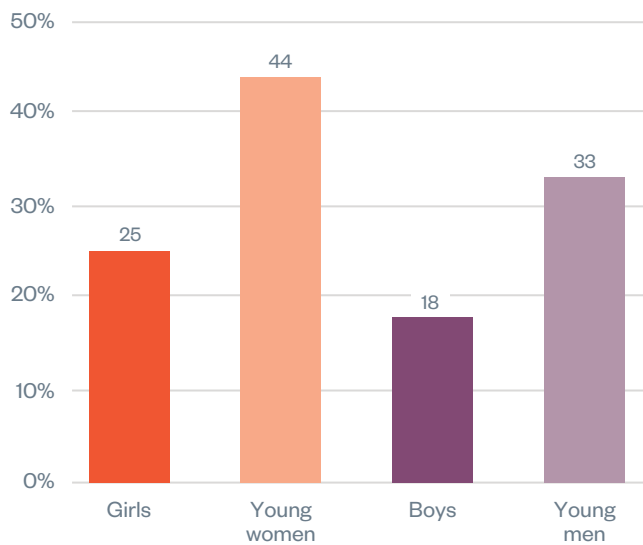
to study, they disturb girls, throw acid, and drive them away... The more they are scolded, the more they continue to do it, which then bothers the girls again.’

The midline survey included a question that allowed respondents to silently report experiences of sexual violence. It asked, ‘has anyone ever touched you sexually against your will, or made you do something sexual that you didn’t want to?’ and then requested young people to choose either a happy face or a sad face and place it in an envelope that was not to be opened until later that evening. Using this technique, the survey found that sexual violence is very common among Rohingya communities in the camps of Cox’s Bazar. One-quarter (25%) of adolescent girls, 44% of young women, 18% of adolescent boys and 33% of young men admitted to unwanted sexual contact (see Figure 2).

Qualitative data highlights that girls and young women are fearful of sexual assault, especially in and around latrines and at night. A 21-year-old young woman reported that, ‘When we go to the latrine we feel afraid that someone is inside there or going to shower.’ However, girls and young women were reluctant to disclose any personal or community stories of specific incidences when they could not do so silently. Instead, they primarily reported stories that were already in the public domain. For example, one 15-year-old girl explained that:

If a girl goes outside ... There are incidents like [sexual violence]... They get tied up and men do something bad to them. Then they are just left behind. That’s why girls

Figure 2: Ever experienced unwanted sexual contact



don't go outside ... They get it videotaped and spread it on the internet. And soon it's on everyone's phone ... They get killed and I saw in my mobile once that a girl got raped and killed instantly. The girl was screaming but no one listened.

Adolescent boys and young men were also hesitant to verbally disclose sexual violence against girls and women in their communities. When asked if rape and sexual abuse happens, responses included the following: 'Yes, I have heard that rape happens, but in other places, not here' (14-year-old boy, camp C); and 'Yes ... but not in our camp. It happens in other camps' (17-year-old boy, camp A). That said, when asked more generally about protection risks faced by girls in this context, responses were strikingly candid, as crystallised by a group of adolescent boys and young men in a focus group discussion in camp B: '[Interviewer] Which place is safe? Where girls do feel no one will disturb them? Is there any safe place [for girls] in your society? [All respondents] Safe? They are safe in the grave...or at home. They are not safe outside their doors.'

Notably, during qualitative interviews, no respondents spoke of sexual violence against boys – despite the silent survey question finding that it is quite common. We assume this is due to the extreme stigma that attaches to male survivors.

Research participants reported that community leaders – rather than the Camp-in-Charge (CIC) office (Government of Bangladesh-approved civil servants operating the Rohingya response) or the police – are the first port of call in the event of sexual violence. A 21-year-

old young man reported that, 'First they go to the majhi of the block.' This means that few survivors of sexual violence have access to formal justice, and that most cases of intimate partner violence are mediated by the *majhi*. Whenever it is reported that an unmarried girl has been raped, the girl is typically made to marry the perpetrator, instead of being taken to pursue justice through the formal legal system. A 20-year-old young woman explained that, 'You can take the problem to the majhi and ask for help. Majhi will talk to the rapist's parents and try to marry them off.' A 21-year-old young woman from camp C added that marriage is seen by the community as an acceptable resolution in such instances, and prevents the perpetrator from having to compensate the girl's family:

Well you can seek justice [for cases of rape and pregnancy as a result of assault] from the majhi. You can go to the majhi and say, 'A man like this and that did this to me', but you have to know the person, [otherwise] how will you seek justice if you don't even know the man? However, if you can recognise him, you can tell the majhi and the majhi will arrange the marriage. [If you don't want to marry him] you can ask for compensation. The majhi will ask her father and everyone else and [tell] the man 'either you marry the girl or give compensation'.

Several young men added that *majhis'* responses are often shaped by class dynamics, with only girls and women from better-off households likely to receive support in the event of sexual violence. An 18-year-old participant in a focus group discussion explained that:

Those who are powerful, rich and do complain to the majhi, get the help. But the people who are poor do not get any help, or if they get help it is not like the powerful or rich persons. Because it's all about money, this era is all about money.

Another young man from that same focus group discussion added that justice is only available to those with power who can afford to pay bribes:

They do not give justice here, even if the girl is victimised by oppression, the parents keep her at home because her honour will be lost. They test her secretly at the hospital. Then she gets married to the other side...There are many such obstacles. Suppose my sister had a similar incident with his brother. But because they are influential, even if we want justice, we will not get justice. Such incidents would be covered up... if someone is powerful then the less powerful [person] doesn't get



A Rohingya camp, Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2024

justice... Those who have money can use it to bribe others...

In terms of reporting, there were some outlier voices, namely Rohingya camp volunteers who were trained by the GBV Sub-Sector. They reported that they encountered many cases of sexual abuse against girls and women and referred cases to hospitals and medical centres for clinical treatment of rape.

Child marriage

With the caveat that some Rohingya adolescents and young people do not know their exact age, and others deliberately mis-state their age because they are aware that child marriage is illegal, of the females in the midline sample, the survey found that 15% of adolescent girls (who were, on average, only 16 years old) and 47% of young women (20.5 years old on average) had married prior to age 18. Child brides had married at a mean age of 15.9 years. The survey also found that parents largely control decision-making about marriage. Of the child brides in the sample, 82% reported that their parents had made the decision for them to marry. That said, 85% of child brides reported that they felt ready to marry when they did.

Qualitative research found that not only is child marriage common, but that it can take place in very early

adolescence. A 17-year-old girl from camp A noted that while families are aware that marriage is illegal prior to age 18, they simply bypass the CIC office and unofficially arrange marriages when they choose to do so:

Girls who are 12 or 13 years old got married here... People don't listen to the CIC. My brother also married a girl who was 12 or 13 years old then. Now she is 18 years old and has two children ... [Basically] if their family wants [to get a girl married] then she has to get married.

A 21-year-old young woman from camp A added that very early marriages are driven by religious convictions: *'Girls become adults at the age of 12. Marriage should be as soon as possible according to religion. Even though the legal age for marriage is 18, girls are married here before that.'*

Young people taking part in qualitative research reported that there have been improvements in recent years, with the youngest girls less at risk of marriage than they were in the immediate aftermath of displacement. A 14-year-old boy stated that, *'[Girls are married off] at 14, 15 and 16 years old ... but such cases are rare ... [and] risky.'* A 16-year-old girl from camp B added that it has become more common for girls to marry in later adolescence, albeit often still while children, so technically illegal: *'In earlier times, girls used to get married when they were young. Now they get married at 17 or 18.'* Respondents attributed

recent improvements to efforts of humanitarian actors to raise awareness about the social and health risks of child marriage and adolescent motherhood. A 16-year-old girl from camp B explained that:

I went to a session where they told us to not get married before 18. If a girl gets married before 18 they will not understand anything regarding their household life and how to handle a husband and everything else. They wouldn't know how to take care of themselves and their children.

An older girl in a focus group discussion added:

[Girls under 18] would not know how to manage a family, they wouldn't know how to handle the baby and how to raise her. Girls wouldn't know in what manner she should speak with her husband [and in-laws].

Recent improvements notwithstanding, respondents agreed that child marriage is primarily driven by social norms and Rohingya girls' place in the family and community. A minority of respondents reported that child marriage is related to girls being seen as an economic burden once they enter puberty. A 20-year-old young woman from camp A stated, '*she becomes a burden to the family, therefore, they arrange the marriage. Girls don't carry any value in the camp.*'

Child marriage was more commonly attributed to the dire security situation in camps and the need to protect girls, and their honour. A 20-year-old young woman in camp A noted that, '*... the situation in the camp is not good, it is not safe [so] everyone thought if young girls are not married they couldn't be safe. People got scared for their honour.*' An 18-year-old young woman from camp D concurred: '*People think girls should get married as soon as possible. It will give them security. Their honour will be saved.*' It was common for boys and young men to admit that their own actions serve to drive child marriage. A 19-year-old young man from camp C explained that, '*Boys bother girls when they grow up. Then the girl's image gets tarnished. So, parents marry off the girl to protect her from defamation.*'

Qualitative research found that (child) marriages are arranged by parents and that while child brides are often opposed to marriage, they have extremely limited input into marriage decision-making. A 20-year-old young woman from camp A recalled of her wedding day, '*I wasn't ready. I cried so bad.*' A young woman the same age, from camp C, explained that everything about marriage had worried her:

I was worried about how I was going to cook and clean ... I was worried about how I was going to leave my parents behind. I didn't know how I was going to maintain a house, where I had never been ... I felt afraid of all things.

Young wives added that regardless of how they felt about marriage, refusal – or even delay – was not an option. A 21-year-old young woman from camp C recalled that she did not try to have a say in the decision because she understood that her parents had her best interests at heart:

My parents fixed my marriage ... they don't have to take my permission because they are my parents. They know what is good for me. Whatever they decide for me, I have no problem with it.

A 20-year-old young woman, also from camp C, added that in her case, she did not try to have a say in the decision because she understood that there was no point:

My opinion has no weight. I would get married regardless of what I say ... So I wouldn't say it, even if I didn't agree to my marriage.

During qualitative interviews, respondents often reported that *majhis* were behind some parents' insistence on child marriage. A 20-year-old young woman from camp C explained:

Majhi [decided I should marry at 16]. Majhi said, 'The girl has reached the age for marriage. It's now "Faraj" [mandatory in religious sense]. Marry her off. She is now grown up and eligible.' And everyone said that and then they married me off.

Another 20-year-old young woman, from camp A, added that in her case, the *majhi* himself conducted the marriage, over the strong objections of her aunt:

I got married at 14. Only my aunts said 'If you marry at a young age there will be bad consequences. Either mother will be harmed or child. She will get hurt while giving birth ...' But the majhi himself married me off ... My aunt didn't even come to my wedding. I was married too young ... that's why she didn't even come to the wedding. Out of anger. She believed that if I married young, my life would be destroyed ... And here I am at the age of 19, I have [already had] two husbands. What a tragedy.

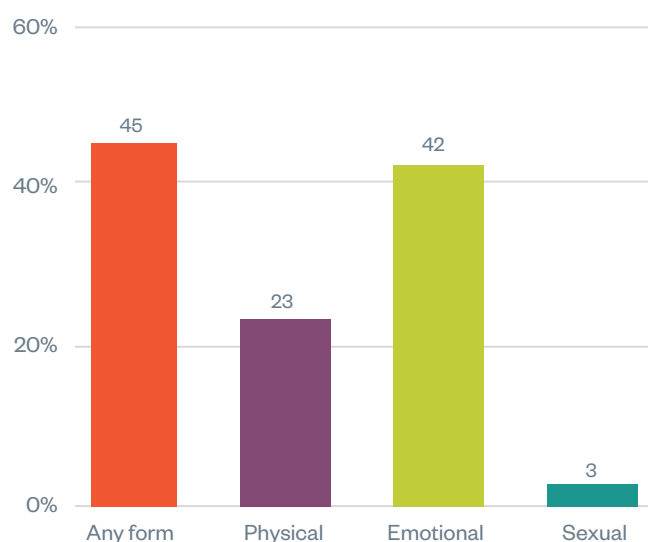


A 20-year-old pregnant young woman, married to a man twice her age, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2024

Marital violence

The midline survey found that intimate partner violence is common. Of all married girls and young women in the sample, 45% had ever experienced any form of gender-based violence (see Figure 3). Physical violence (42%) was the most common form. With the caveats that sexual violence is under-reported and marital rape is rarely conceptualised as rape, sexual violence was reported as rare (3%).

Figure 3: Ever experienced intimate partner violence

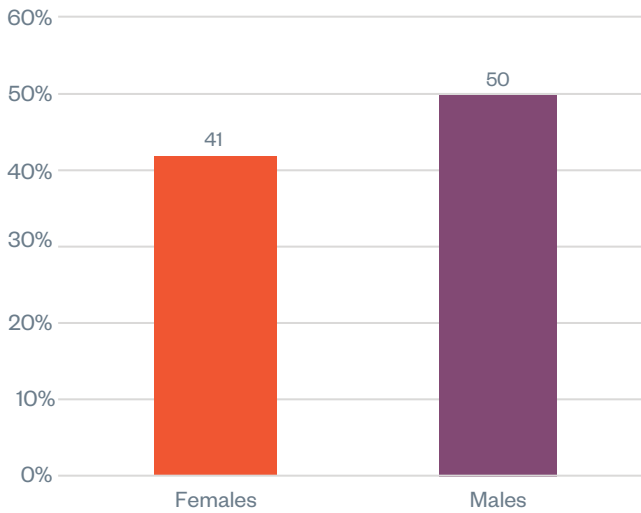


The midline survey also found that most married girls and young women (79%) knew where a girl or woman could seek support if they were experiencing violence. Most commonly, young brides reported that violence could be reported to the police (54%), to *majhis* (49%), or the CIC (44%).

Young wives' knowledge of reporting is offset by widespread beliefs about intimate partner violence. For example, nearly all young survey respondents (89%) agreed (at least in part) with the statement, 'A woman should tolerate violence in order to keep her family together'. Most (70%) also agreed (at least in part) with the statement, 'Intimate partner violence is private and should not be discussed outside the home'. There were no differences in response between females and males or adolescents and young adults, and females' beliefs did not vary by marital status. When asked whether 'It is acceptable for a man to beat his wife to mould her behaviour', boys and young men were more likely to agree with this statement than girls and young women (50% versus 41%) (see Figure 4).

Qualitative research suggests that intimate partner violence is even more common than survey findings would suggest. Indeed, most respondents, including those living on Bhasan Char island (see Box 1), report that nearly all marriages involve violence. A 21-year-old young man from camp C explained:

Figure 4: Agrees, at least in part, with the statement 'It is acceptable for a man to beat his wife to mould her behaviour'



Yes [husbands beat their wife all the time], I see this in my camp ... For example, he is telling his wife not to go to work but she is going. Because of that he beats her with chains.

A 29-year-old woman from camp D added, 'Yes, [husbands beat their wives]. Everyone does. Even my brother beats

his wife.' The minority of young wives who reported that they do not experience violence attributed this to their husband's level of education. A 20-year-old young woman from camp A reported of her marriage that although it had not been free from violence, she is generally supported by her husband – a man who has had access to various educational opportunities – and that he listens to her views:

My husband is studying in private [tutoring]. He knows Bangla... he works for WFP [World Food Programme]... and he is now also learning English and is in class 10. My parents liked him because his habits and behaviours were good... My parents never looked for a rich man. They wanted to see me happy... When I was pregnant, I quarrelled with my husband. I was doing household chores and missed my prayer. He became angry about this and slapped my face. Now everything is fine. Now our habits and behaviour are matching... We have two children but now I have had the contraceptive injection. I went with my children to the hospital to get it. My husband would never let me go there alone. Because if I go to the hospital alone, other boys will follow me or try to talk to me. [But] there is no turmoil between us. We are happy. My husband and I both make decisions. He values my opinion.



An 18-year-old Rohingya girl whose parents beat her when she was sexually harassed, WGSS, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2024

Box 1: Intimate partner violence among the Rohingya in Bhasan Char

Intimate partner violence (which can be severe) is also common among the Rohingya living on Bhasan Char island. A 19-year-old young woman recalled being beaten severely by her husband, after she tried to flee to her parents' house to keep herself safe: *'He started to beat me again with 3 broomsticks. He stopped after breaking all three ... My back turned black, black ... I couldn't see, I couldn't move.'* A male community key informant explained that rates of intimate partner violence reflect men's lack of access to employment, and their growing frustration at being unable to fulfil their role as breadwinner. He explained:

I have been here for almost seven months, but I haven't earned a single penny yet. In such a situation, how will I support my family? The government should definitely consider this matter ... We do not have access to these opportunities, and as a result, frustration is increasing.

Respondents added that reporting of intimate partner violence is rare, partly because while some survivors of such violence recognise that their husband is a 'bad man' (19-year-old young woman), for many other girls and women, intimate partner violence is so normalised that they believe they are at fault for it. A 16-year-old girl recalled, *'It was also my fault ... He came home from the field and asked for cold water, but I hadn't gotten water from the pipe, that's why he beat me.'* Key informants added that because the island lacks infrastructure and systems in place to support survivors, even if violence is reported, support and redress is rarely possible. A multi-purpose centre coordinator explained:

The challenge we face here is that the people who come from Cox's Bazar don't come together. They come scattered – the full extended family doesn't come. Everyone is from different camps, and no one knows each other. As a result, the neighbourly relationships among them aren't always good and they always fight. When survivors of intimate partner violence come to us, we have many difficulties to make safety plans because here, there is no safe shelter. We can't send them back to their home because if they go back, they will face violence again. And she doesn't have any close relatives here, there's no distant relatives either. We face challenges like that ... A severe case of intimate partner violence comes to us, and she does not have anyone. At that time, where will I keep her?

Intimate partner violence – primarily in the form of physical beatings, and what the Rohingya call 'various forms of torture' – is seen by respondents to be the result of married girls' or women's failure to conform to social expectations. Wives are beaten for leaving home without permission, for speaking without permission, for asking for food for themselves and their children (see Box 2), and for failing to meet standards of home cleanliness. A 20-year-old young woman from camp C recounted: *'He beats me because I talk [and because I make mistakes] like not keeping everything clean.'* Although at baseline respondents regularly reported that intimate partner violence was the result of men's lack of work (and men's frustration with this), at midline this reason was less commonly cited, due to increased opportunities for men to earn an income through humanitarian volunteering schemes. A 22-year-old young woman from camp B explained that, *'In recent times, the husbands go outside to work, they stay home less. That's why the wives don't get tortured.'* However, at midline, there were reports that intimate partner violence is increasingly related to men's use of drugs.

In line with survey findings, several survivors of intimate partner violence admitted during qualitative interviews that they had not sought support, because they believed it to be

a private matter that should not be discussed outside the home. A 21-year-old young woman from camp A said, *'[Her husband] hit me hard once ... We resolved it ourselves. We don't tell outsiders about our problems.'* Echoing previous data (Guglielmi et al., 2022), which found that the Rohingya view *majhis* and CICs as the ultimate authorities in camp settings (and view humanitarian partners as providers of support services rather than justice), respondents added that whenever violence is disclosed, it is most common for survivors to approach *majhis* or CICs. A 19-year-old young man from camp C reported that:

Fights between couples happen [and the husband beats the wife]. It is normal. They settle it among themselves. [If it gets too severe] we have a majhi in our block for such matters. If the majhi can't handle it ... then the matter is taken to the CIC officer.

As noted earlier, this preference for turning to *majhis* in the case of violence often reinforces discriminatory gender norms and exacerbates the challenges faced by young survivors because of *majhis'* beliefs about men's 'right' to behave violently towards their wife. A 21-year-old mother explained, *'The majhi says nothing. If a husband beats his wife, what can the majhi do?'*

Box 2: Rohingya women and girls at risk of severe forms of intimate partner violence

Qualitative evidence underscores that intimate partner violence can be extreme. Here, we present two examples, to highlight the need for additional protection measures for Rohingya women and girls in the camps of Cox's Bazar.

A 17-year-old girl in camp B reported that due to inaction by camp authorities, her sister had been murdered:

My own sister was tortured after marriage ... Now, she died ... Her husband murdered her. It's been one year. She [was living with him] for four years after their marriage, when we came to know that he had a second wife. So, we brought my sister back [home] and kept her with us and complained to the CIC [Camp-in-Charge]. The CIC [said that he had] solved it and sent her back with her husband. After two days, [the husband] murdered my sister. Now he is in jail. We found out [about the sister's death] because the CIC office called us. The majhi of that block told the CIC. My sister had one child, the baby died also ... It was born dead because her husband beat her while she was pregnant. We brought her back home ... but the CIC sent her back. They didn't want to divorce them. Their neighbours told us [that it was her husband who had murdered her].

A 26-year-old woman reported that while the majhi lectures her husband about his use of violence, it has been ineffectual, and she is both starved and beaten for trying to feed herself and her son:

Yes, [my husband] beats me a lot. From the beginning [of our marriage] till the end ... I couldn't go anywhere, [not even] to bring water ... He would beat me. He would beat us if we went outside our house. He would beat me when my mother was here ... After I got separated from my mother, the 500 taka [US\$4.50] he gave me monthly wasn't enough for me to get by. So I used to sneak out of his house, when he went to work and come to my mother's house to eat. But people would tell him about it and when he came back home he just beat me up. He beats me too much. If I go to my mother's house, he beats me. If I go to fetch water, he beats me. If I asked for food, he would beat me. He can eat food from outside, but I can't. And he doesn't let me go and eat anywhere.

He would beat me if I went to get water too ... If I go without permission. My son was small. But he wasn't having breast milk. If I wanted to bring water for my son, he would say rude things to me and beat me ... There was not a drop of water at home. But as I went to bring water and came back home, he was very angry and screamed at me and started beating me like a maniac.

I told majhi ... They would tell him to calm down. 'Why are you doing this? Why are you being like this? Don't do it.' But he listened to no one.

Although the survey did not ask young wives about violence at the hands of their in-laws, during qualitative interviews it was common for female respondents to report verbal and physical abuse perpetrated for myriad reasons. Most often, this revolved around young wives' insufficiency as wives and mothers. A 20-year-old young woman from camp C explained that:

If their son, my husband, doesn't give money to them, they fight with me. They say I am the reason. 'You are eating and having a good time and not giving us anything.' They say things like that. And they fight with me. They just like to fight with me a lot. If I talk about anything, they will make something big out of it.

Respondents also emphasised that when young wives have conflicts with their in-laws, this regularly led to further beatings by their husband. A 13-year-old adolescent girl noted (for example) that:

There are always people like this [complaining about the husband because he beats her] at the head majhi's office. For the cases where the husband beats the wife,

When the mother complains to her son against the wife, then the husband beats her [the wife] up. Such cases are reported to the head majhi.

Similarly, a 21-year-old divorced woman, who attributed part of the collapse of her marriage due to ongoing conflicts with her in-laws, noted that:

My father-in-law used to scold him [the woman's husband] when he was violent ... but my mother-in-law used to tell him to beat me more ... My mother-in-law was bad. She used to scold me and told my husband many things about me. Then my husband used to beat me.

Programmes to prevent and respond to gender-based violence

As part of the GAGE survey, we asked respondents about awareness-raising by humanitarian partners on gender-based violence, including through specific programmes being implemented in the camps, namely: SASA! Together, Girl Shine, Champions of Change, Engaging Men through Accountable Practice (EMAP), and MaBoinor Rosom

(translated as Mother's and Sister's Way) (see Table 4). The midline survey found that young people's participation in such programmes was relatively low. Overall, 13% of adolescents and young adults had taken part in programming, with no significant differences between females and males. Girls and young women were most likely to have taken part in Girl Shine (11%) and SASA! (10%). Boys and young men were most likely to have taken part in Champions of Change (7%) and Engaging Men through Accountable Practice (4%). Among young women (as opposed to adolescent girls), marital status shaped uptake: 17% of those who had ever been married had taken part in at least one programme, compared with 4% of those who had never been married.

The qualitative research found that many young people believed that GBV programming is only for adult women, not for adolescent girls and boys, and that programming

is patchy, operating in different ways in different camps. That said, participants spoke highly of what they had learnt in classes. A 20-year-old young woman from camp C recounted her participation in SASA! Together:

[I know] SASA! Together ... They handle torture ... such as marrying off before 18 or suffering from violence. If anything like that happens, they tell you to go to police. There's torture for dignity and also there's physical torture [Interviewer's note: 'torture for dignity' is interchangeable with 'rape']. There's also torture for money. Girls get tortured if their family doesn't give money to their husband. There are many kinds of violence ... If anything like that happens, you can tell the sisters who come or tell them at the office. Then they will stop it, they will do whatever is needed to be done. And if they can't do it, they will show the other ways that could be done.



A GBV-awareness poster in a Rohingya camp, Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2024

Table 4: Brief description of programming addressing gender-based violence in Cox's Bazar

Programme	Description
SASA! Together	SASA! Together is a step-by-step social mobilisation approach, used with both Rohingya and host communities, to prevent gender-based violence and end all forms of violence against women and girls through community activism campaigns, trainings, group work and knowledge-sharing sessions, to increase awareness on the different forms of gender-based violence and the safety of women and girls.
Girl Shine	Girl Shine is a programme dedicated to adolescent girls, to reduce their risk of gender-based violence and child marriage. Through 20 sessions, the programme helps girls build social networks and self-confidence, and includes a shorter curriculum for girls' caregivers.
Champions of Change	Champions of Change targets adolescent boys aged 10–19 years and promotes positive gender norms and attitudes via a staged curriculum encompassing topics on gender, life skills, sexuality, positive conflict resolution and interpersonal skills.
Engaging Men through Accountable Practice (EMAP)	This programme addresses internalised male behaviours that result in gender-based violence. A weekly meeting guides dialogues between men and women around gender norms, the causes and consequences of gender-based violence, and masculinity.
MaBoinor Rosom	MaBoinor Rosom was created specifically for the Rohingya context by Rohingya people. The programme aims to share knowledge about sensitive topics while increasing confidence among women, girls, and female facilitators. Interactive group activities are run with Rohingya women and girls over 8 weeks.

A few boys participating in awareness-raising programmes around gender-based violence and gender equality highlighted that their participation had motivated them to become champions for girls' rights. One 17-year-old boy explained that he now speaks out against young men who are harassing girls in his community:

[Some boys from other camps] *harass the girls ... They disturb the girls ... They throw rocks at the girls ... I have seen those boys a lot of times. A lot of boys sit beside the tap near the toilet. I had prohibited them several times but they just don't listen and I had stopped prohibiting them. Now, however, I guard the bathroom if any female enters into the bathroom.*

Young people and key informants mentioned community-based awareness-raising campaigns, informing community members about what constitutes gender-based violence and the harms it can cause. Community-based meetings are also held to discuss violence mitigation measures, power dynamics, and protection referral mechanisms offered by humanitarian partners. A *majhi* in camp B explained,

There are NGO people who come and have meetings with community people. They say 'you and your boys should not harass girls on the street. Don't do eve-teasing [sexual harassment]. There is a law and several years of punishment.' They give trainings like that. Those who have the mentality to harass girls, they become afraid and stop doing it. It's a densely populated place, so if something happens in one house they will hear in other houses. That's why they are afraid.

Young people also reported that survivors of abuse, or married girls and women who seek divorce, can find support at the *shanti khana* ('peace house', signifying a women- and girl-friendly space) – a safe space that offers a diverse range of programmes and support to girls and women; or from *shanti khana* staff, as a 22-year-old young woman from camp B described:

There are people who came from the shanti khana and told us to not get married before 18. They came to our house and my friend also came to our house [for these sessions].

Conclusions and implications for policy and programming

GAGE midline research finds that Rohingya young people are at high risk of sexual and gender-based violence. Girls and young women risk sexual harassment every time they leave home – harassment perpetrated by young males to ensure that young females adhere to strict gender norms that deny them access to community spaces. While most of this violence is verbal and makes young females ‘choose’ to stay home, some young males couple taunts and leers with acid attacks, reinforcing concerns about females’ safety. Although none of the respondents taking part in GAGE qualitative research were willing to disclose having personally experienced sexual violence, the survey found that when young people were afforded the opportunity to silently report, lifetime prevalence rates were high – especially for females but also surprisingly for males.

GAGE midline research also found that girls are at significant risk of child marriage, starting in early

adolescence, due to social norms that emphasise the importance of girls’ sexual purity to family honour. Girls have no input into decision-making about marriage, and traditional community leaders often force reluctant parents to conform to social norms. Although marriage is believed to safeguard girls’ honour, it exacerbates their risk of violence. Midline research found that despite widespread programming aimed at raising awareness about intimate partner violence and other forms of gender-based violence, the former is considered acceptable—so as to ‘mould’ a wife’s behaviour—and as a private matter, and is extremely common (and sometimes severe). Because families primarily rely on traditional justice, and turn first to community leaders rather than the police and humanitarian actors, survivors of sexual and gender-based violence have only the most limited access to redress and support.



A 34-year-old GBV case manager in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2024

In order to protect Rohingya young people from sexual and gender-based violence, GAGE mixed-methods midline research findings suggest the following key priorities for policy and programming:

- **Scale up gender-transformative programming for young people, complemented by skills-building components aimed at incentivising participation.** Our data suggests that programming such as SASA! Together, Engaging Men through Accountable Practice (EMAP), Girl Shine and MaBoinor Rosom can support the mobility of girls and young women, improve adolescent girls' and young women's knowledge of their rights and encourage reporting of violence, and encourage boys and young men to champion females' safety. As noted in the companion report on education and skills (Guglielmi et al, 2024), young people and their families are highly interested in skills-building programmes that result in paid work, making these an ideal incentive, particularly when females are provided with chaperones.
- **Continue to invest in innovative and best practice child marriage prevention programmes.** Preventing child marriage must be kept high on the agenda due to the numerous and multi-faceted negative outcomes for girls who marry early. It is also important to direct attention to married girls and to promote safe space programming (including skills-building components, childcare and psychosocial support) so that they are not left behind.
- **Step up security on the streets.** This should include prohibiting all forms of harassment against girls and women, by jailing perpetrators, and providing chaperones for girls and women to attend education, skills-building programmes and other services.
- **Target parents and broader communities with awareness-raising messages aimed at shifting the gender norms that leave girls and young women confined to the home and unaware of their rights, afraid to report sexual violence, and at risk of child marriage and intimate partner violence.** GAGE findings suggest that stigma and concerns about family reputation and honour are core to reducing the

risks that girls and young women face. Given that girls and young women have extremely limited voice in the family and community, it is critical to target familial and community decision-makers.

- **Work with Rohingya communities to develop and scale programmes targeting young couples that are designed to reduce intimate partner violence.** Courses should support marital communication, address gender norms, and encourage help-seeking. They may be best delivered by religious leaders who have participated in awareness raising and gender norms change training.
- **Provide, throughout the Rohingya camps, one-stop centres that offer medical, legal and psychosocial support to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, using a case management system,** and continue to raise awareness about the availability and value of such services to encourage uptake.
- **Increase coordination between humanitarian partners working to prevent and respond to all forms of gender-based violence.** The roles and responsibilities of Camp in Charge (CIC) officers, majhis and other stakeholders should be better harmonised to increase complementarity and improve joint efforts to combat violence.
- **Undertake more research to explore Rohingya preferences for reporting violence to majhis and CICs, rather than officials, and entry-points for improving gender-responsive options for reporting and response.** This is necessary in order to appropriately tailor formal responses to improve uptake. Awareness-raising initiatives with majhis are also essential to ensure that their influence in the community is leveraged to support gender norms that empower adolescent girls and young women, rather than reinforce patterns of violence and gender-based power.
- **Explore the feasibility of recruiting female community and government leaders in Rohingya camps,** which could contribute to greater reporting and improve girls' and women's access to justice – and also showcase female leadership.

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Front cover: An 18-year-old volunteer in a camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh
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