



POLICY PAPER

We Live Our Lives in Uncertainty:

Rohingya Women's Voices of Survival and Hope as Refugees

— On August 25, 2017, due to conflict, we were forced to flee to Bangladesh to save our lives. My father couldn't come with us, though, as he was on duty in Maungdaw Township. It took us twelve days hiking over mountains and through rivers on foot to reach safety in Bangladesh. We had no food. I am so grateful to the government and people of Bangladesh—they have helped us with many things and have saved our lives. I do not have adequate words to thank them.

Although I am grateful to be in the Cox's Bazar camp, we live our lives in uncertainty. The shelter is only temporary, built with tarpaulin and bamboo...I am a peace lover, but I see the current conditions bring out the worst in some people, and women are increasingly vulnerable. I feel like a whole generation is being lost. I wouldn't wish living as a refugee on my worst enemy. We live in miserable conditions, but I won't give up. (Dania, Distance-Learning Video Exchange, 1 August 2020)



| The Rohingya Refugee camp in Kutupalong, Bangladesh

Background

On 25 August 2017, more than 700,000 Rohingya fled from Rakhine state, Myanmar, crossing the Naf River into Bangladesh. Described as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing” by then UN Human Rights High Commissioner, Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein, the horrific circumstances the Rohingya were fleeing prompted Bangladesh—a nation that itself endured genocide in 1971—to keep its borders open to allow the flow of refugees seeking safety. Since then, Cox’s Bazaar, the town that has hosted refugees for decades in Kutupalong Camp, has become the largest refugee settlement in the world.

In September 2018, the Government of Bangladesh signed a Framework of Cooperation between Bangladesh and the United Nations to address together conflict-related sexual violence committed against the Rohingya

population. The agreement aimed at improving key areas, including improving access of Rohingya survivors of sexual violence to medical and psychosocial support services; preventing trafficking in persons, including the return and reintegration of trafficked women and children; and raising awareness about the rights of victims and access to services. Sadly, women survivors continue to face multiple obstacles when seeking to access these services or any other remedies to the violations they have experienced. A multitude of dire challenges, from COVID-19 to floods and fires, have hindered progress toward the fulfilment of these commitments.

Since early 2019, Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR), together with the Liberation War Museum (LWM), has been working with Rohingya women in the refugee camps, engaging them in a dialog on human rights and justice, and developing distance-learning participatory action research tools that have withstood the challenges of the pandemic.

This series of briefing papers outlines the key lessons learned and themes that have been articulated by more than 100 women who have been actively engaged in our program. AJAR and LWM have conducted more than 100 workshops from 2019 to the present, adapting participatory action research tools, such as [Stone & Flower: A Guide to Understanding and Action for Women Survivors](#), to the conditions in the camps. Since COVID-19 restrictions were introduced in March 2020, we have integrated video-based distance learning with these women's groups, allowing for dialog within family and close community circles in accordance with lockdown rules. During this process, we have transcribed some of the key messages or responses from the women, as part of identifying issues raised by the groups. In this policy brief, we focus on women survivors' hardships and also their vision of the most important elements that can help them to survive, not only in the camps but also to maintain hope and connection to a better future. Again and again, the women speak out about how long-term empowerment programs for women survivors can lay the foundation for their survival and resilience. All names have been changed for this report, and all quotes come from participatory workshops and discussions conducted with women survivors.

Floods, fires, and COVID -19 exacerbate the struggle to survive in the camps

The last 18 months in the camps have proven to be very difficult for the Rohingya refugees, in general, and even more so for women survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). The camps have been in lockdown since March 2020. They have continued to experience seasonal flooding, a harsh reality that now accompanies every monsoon season, with the most recent July floods being the worst to date. Since 2017, the Cox's Bazar fire department has reported 73 fires, noting that April 2021 was the largest fire to have an impact on the camps. At the same time, COVID-19 and all its variants have prolonged the lockdown of the camps. Under such circumstances, many civil society groups working on human rights, justice, and trauma support have suspended their programming.

— *This time I was lucky because my house didn't get carried away by the flood. But I can't be happy while I look around; my neighbours are dying. My heart was broken into pieces when I saw the children who died by drowning. But there is no guarantee that my family will be safe tomorrow.*
(Halima, Distance-Learning Video Exchange, 28 July 2021)

I will never forget the day of the fire. I was sleeping in my house and heard screaming from outside. I saw there was fire outside; I started to run to save my life. I realised I couldn't go out unless I saved my

documents. If I leave without them, maybe I will survive, but what about tomorrow? I need the documents to get back to my country, and to survive every day until then. That day of the fire, I lost everything: my house, clothes, goods - everything except the documents. After the fire, I thought about how uncertain my life is. I had to think about my documents to be able to have a future, rather than run to save my life, I could have died in that moment.

(Lana, Distance-Learning Video Exchange, 22 March 2021)

Lockdown, isolation, and rising violence make it difficult for women to protect themselves and their families

Learning about COVID-19 has been frustrating for the women as they have few choices for protecting themselves and their family members. At the time of publication (August 12, 2021), none of the women have had access to vaccines, although the camp authorities have just announced the availability of 48,000 dosages. Learning about social distancing and how to strengthen immunity through nutrition has been of no help as they are unable to practice these measures.

- *The problem in the camp is that we live in small places. If someone is sick, there is no way to keep them in a separate room. I can't go to the hospital as usual, and I can't get the right medicine when ill. Another problem is that men are no longer able to work due to the lockdown. Family quarrels are increasing day by day. If you say to save human rights, we must first save ourselves. To survive this time, we need nutritious food like fruits, fish, and meat which we do not get in the camp. Life is going on in such a difficult way.*
(Maya, Distance-Learning Video Exchange, 9 November 2020)

Under lockdown, and isolated from non-essential services and activities that usually are offered in the camps, many women feel vulnerable and anxious.

- *There are various types of...organizations and gangs who are working with different purposes in the area and they are pretending to assist and help the victims and inhabitants in the camp. But in reality, they are leading the victims to suffer from several things like kidnapping and ravishing...children, including young ladies. Some muggers break into the camp pretending...[to be] beggars and request [help from] only housewives in order to stay at their shanties at night and then they ravage, and what's more ravish both women and children. Due to this crisis, several students here are afraid to go to school because on their way there are so many students who are kidnapped and detained.*
(Loulia, Distance-Learning Video Exchange, 24 June 2021)

Child marriage and trafficking are on the rise

The uncertain future for the young generation is most clearly demonstrated by the continuing rise in reported incidents of child marriage and trafficking.

- *I have tried to stop at least three child marriages. Their parents were trying to marry off their daughters with the men who live in Malaysia. A person would take them to their husbands. I counselled the families and made them understand that this could be a trafficking case, moreover the girls were under 18. Luckily, the families agreed and stopped the marriage. But I don't know how long they will agree upon my points as they are poor, and bad people can easily can take advantage of their situation.*
(Halima, Human Rights Workshop, Camp 13, 8 March 2020)

Nearly five months ago, a girl under 18 years old was enticed and pressured into accepting a proposal of marriage...She was completely persuaded, and he got her to believe that she would be married in the future, but eventually she was...tortured by the man. Her life was completely ruined.

(Nada, Distance-Learning Video Exchange, 24 June 2021)

In a more recent exchange with male Rohingya youth facilitators, we heard of a growing trend of young girls being trafficked to other countries.

— *There are situations that make the family push the girl to marry [young]. They think that if a girl gets married early she will find a better groom and the amount of dowry would be less.*

(Saleem, Distance-Learning Video Exchange, 5 July 2021)

Traffickers tease and push the Rohingya people by telling them it's time to establish your bright future abroad. Young girls, ages 14 to 17, are going to other countries to marry men who live [there]...This is taking place often because the girls don't have more education.

(Hasan, Distance-Learning Video Exchange, 24 June 2021)

[We see] unbearably difficult conditions in the camp where parents have no jobs, no future, and think that by marrying their children the burden in their lives is less. Some parents also think that marriage can protect their daughters from harm, protect their virginity, and provide them with a level of financial stability.

(Yasir, Distance-Learning Video Exchange, 5 July 2021)

Safe spaces for women to express trauma become spaces of empowerment

Throughout our meetings, many women recounted the atrocities perpetrated against them and their loved ones, and the violence they witnessed. They refer to the relief they feel at being able to share experiences, and explore the sadness and trauma that they live with. Women survivors engaged in activities designed to support each other speak about the benefits to their peace of mind.



| Rohingya women participating in sharing sessions.

— *It was really hard to get a [safe] room in the camp. Every day thousands of bad thoughts come to our mind. But when we all sit together for the workshops we forget all the sorrows and tension. It gives us comfort and relief.*

(Lana, Distance-Learning Video Exchange, 9 November 2020)

Sometimes it's difficult for people to share their feelings, to open up about their experiences with their family. At that time, they need a friend, a safe space where they can share everything. If I can be that friend, I will do my utmost to understand their feelings, to help them voice their expectations and demands. It is also important to share knowledge, to promote mutual respect, and listen carefully to what people want to say.

(Malak, Human Rights Workshop, Camp 1, 7 September 2019)

My memories of Myanmar break my heart. When I came to Bangladesh, my heart was full of sadness. But by joining the workshops, I had the chance to express my feelings and learn many new things. Now I engage with my community. So, in the dark and with a broken heart, I was able to find a ray of light and sweet happiness. I symbolize myself as a broken heart with sweet fruit.

(Marya, Hand-Mapping Workshop, Camp 1, 24 December 2019)

Providing these safe spaces allows for personal and psychological empowerment. The women are able to build resilience and self-confidence as well as the capacity to reflect on and begin to manage the trauma they have experienced. The opportunity to share, reflect, and learn about human rights has helped many of the survivors to become stronger.

— *When the moonlight falls on a flower, it starts to bloom. My life is like this. After the dark memories of my life, I'm blooming like a flower. The moonlight is my knowledge which makes me stronger and more confident day by day.*

(Lara, Hand-Mapping Workshop, Camp 1, 24 December 2019)

I feel good, happy when I think about the days we spend sewing together. I don't want to remember the bad days.

(Aya, Human Rights Workshop, Camp 13, 26 September 2019)

Sadly, these opportunities have become even less accessible to many women survivors.

— *Our life ends in a hut. I can't work, I can't go out, I can't eat. Since I got the coronavirus I can't eat properly. Having to eat rice only with salt, I'm in a lot of trouble.*

(Sadiya, Distance-Learning Video Exchange, 9 November 2020)

Disrupted education points to a bleak future

For many Rohingya women, access to education for themselves and their children is of paramount concern. Since their arrival at the camps the women have expressed concern for their children's education. Obstacles to education have now been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

— *After coming to Bangladesh, I used to go to school. I was able to play with my friends and get the chance to read my books. Suddenly, from nowhere, the COVID-19 virus came and waved away all my rights to education.*

(Maha, Distance-Learning Video Exchange, 20 December 2020)

I hope that despite COVID-19 the activities will continue and I can keep learning. I do worry about my children's education, though. Because of COVID all the schools are closed. We are very concerned about our children's future.

(Hyat, Distance-Learning Video Exchange, 9 November 2020)

Due to the lockdown because of COVID-19, the schools are closed. That's why Rohingya children are deprived of an education. We are concerned about our Rohingya children's futures. They no longer have access to any formal studies.

(Hala, Distance-Learning Video Exchange, 9 November 2020)

While many women place high value on education, they themselves have faced significant obstacles in claiming this right both in Myanmar and Bangladesh.

— *[Not being able to go to school] makes me feel sad and small, but I like learning and studying. I hope one day that I can learn to write.*

(Naila, Human Rights Workshop, Camp 1, 27 March 2019)

Finally, I passed class (10) in 2015, but I was unable to continue my studies because we are Rohingya and the Myanmar government prevents us from studying at university...We have very few opportunities here, not only as refugees but as inmates in a prison without walls.

(Dania, Distance-Learning Video Exchange, 1 August 2020)

Women's diminishing livelihoods do not extinguish their hopes for obtaining new skills

Many women who had jobs with NGOs, such as being teachers, have now lost them because of the pandemic. They express concern that their husbands and other family members are also unemployed, leaving them to survive on rations. They are motivated to learn new and/or upgrade existing skills, including their English and Bengali, their computer literacy, and their dressmaking in order to earn an income and support their families.

— *These are the sources of livelihood. I want to learn about computers and sewing for my future so that I can be independent.*

(Neziha, Human Rights Workshop, Camp 2, 31 March 2019)

[My niece] is now in fourth grade. We have to pay tuition fees for her which is very difficult for us...because my husband is a mosque imam; he gets a small salary. He is the only earning member of our family. It's really challenging to manage everything depending on his salary. It's become more challenging for us to run the family during the pandemic where everything is shut down.

(Loulia, Distance-Learning Video Exchange, 9 November 2020)

Women access the Internet for communication and learning

The importance of communication is expressed and alluded to in different ways. Mobile phones are explicitly and implicitly mentioned as very important to the women and their communities. Women highlighted the ability to communicate and keep in touch with friends and relatives. They also spoke of the communication skills they have developed through the workshops and how that has improved their lives.

— *Mobile phones allow us to reach people easily. It means we can stay connected. Being connected is important. The mobile phone is a powerful symbol of communication for me. Whenever anyone needs me, I am here for them. Because of the AJAR workshops, I engage more with my people. The communication gap is decreasing day by day.*

(Latifa, Hand-Mapping Workshop, Camp 1, 24 December 2019)

Getting mobile networks and internet connectivity in the camps is challenging for me. My communication relies on the phone when I go out to different camps. I am a volunteer...so I need to go to many camps for my work...and [must] search for where the mobile and internet networks have a good connection. I used to send feedback at midnight because that's the only time the Internet connection is stable for me.

(Halima, Distance-Learning Video Exchange, 9 November 2020)

Access to the Internet is a prerequisite for women survivors to continue learning about human rights and justice, particularly so they can inform and share with others. Being able to access AJAR's long-distance learning videos and exchanges has been an important opportunity for reflection, discussion, leadership, and self-sufficiency.

— *Before the workshops, I didn't know anything about justice mechanisms, rights, and other related issues. Now I can share my knowledge with my neighbours and engage with the survivors. I want to keep learning new things.*

(Heba, Distance-Learning Video Exchange, 19 November 2020)

I have learnt many things. It's a great opportunity to engage with the survivors, our community. It feels like I am in school and learning new things like a child, and I'm looking forward to learning more. Working together is the most important activity; it makes it easier to promote human rights. But responsibility is also important, it's the key feature. We should prepare ourselves for the good and bad results of our actions. If we are unable to be responsible, then we can't uphold human rights.

(Amal, Human Rights Workshop, Camp 13, 21 December 2019)

Lastly, access to the internet allows them to stay informed about the well-being of family members who remain in Myanmar or who became separated during the escape to Bangladesh. One young woman has been separated from some of her siblings, and she misses her brother. This is a letter she wrote to him during a postcard-writing activity.

As-salamu alaykum,

I am writing to you, my big brother, from very far away.

Dear big brother, are you well? Your younger sister is well. It's been a long time since you last phoned us. Please, call this number 0183xxxxx as soon as you receive this letter. I miss you day and night. I am always doing Duwa [saying a pray] for you. Please, do Duwa and pray for me. Looking forward to receiving a reply from you,

Your sister,

(Basma, Postcard Writing Workshop, Camp 13, 27 March 2019)

AJAR's recommendations to the Bangladesh government draw on the experiences of Rohingya women refugees

Drawing on the experiences of Rohingya women refugees highlighted in this paper, AJAR recommends that the Bangladesh government (including the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner) and relevant civil society organizations take the following actions:

- **Continue with a humanitarian approach toward the Rohingya that looks for a peaceful and long-term solution through participatory processes.** Rather than a security approach that utilizes top-down mandates and programming that could easily lead to violence or strengthen illicit activity in the camps (such as human trafficking, illicit economies, etc.), it is critical that authorities and those providing services to the Rohingya uphold principles of inclusion and cooperative engagement.
- **Work with the international community and United Nations agencies to secure access to COVID-19 vaccines for all adults and, when approved by world health authorities, for all children in the camps.** The camps pose a significant public health risk as the crowded living conditions could lead to the rapid and devastating spread of COVID-19. The efforts to secure and distribute vaccines also need to be accompanied by an increased public education campaign related to the vaccines to prevent the spread of misinformation.
- **Ensure, with the assistance of the international community, that Rohingya refugees have access to education from early childhood through secondary school, with special attention to girls and women.** This includes the provision of long-distance or remote learning to ensure education is COVID-19 safe. This also includes Rohingya, English, Bangla, and Burmese language curricula, as women consistently request multi-lingual education to facilitate their ability to engage with international service providers in the camps (English), fully participate in the life of the country that has given them temporary refuge (Bangla), and allow them to fully participate in life when they return to their homeland (Burmese).
- **Uphold women's right to work and attain a livelihood.** While the Rohingya are determined to return to Myanmar as soon as a safe and dignified return can be assured, the current circumstances in Myanmar have cast greater uncertainty on their ability to return in the near future. It is now more critical than ever that they be allowed to pursue work and livelihood opportunities so they do not become ever-more dependent on assistance from the Bangladesh government and humanitarian aid providers. Providing training, such as sewing and computer skills, as well as ensuring adequate access to communication technologies and networks, is also needed.
- **Provide comprehensive information, and a transparent and participatory process with regard to Bhasan Char resettlement.** An effort must be made to combat the confusion circulating in relation to the placement of Rohingya on Bhasan Char Island. This includes ensuring international agencies have full access to the facilities and people currently housed on Bhasan Char.