

Guidance Note on Rohingya Women's Right to Self-Organise in Refugee Camps in Cox's Bazar

By the Women's Empowerment and Leadership Task Force under the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group
Rohingya Refugee Crisis Response
Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh
(as of 23 June 2019)

Background

The Women's Empowerment and Leadership Task Force under the ISCG Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group (GiHA WG)¹ are working to promote the safety and protection, as well as providing the skills and opportunities, to empower women in camp governance through engagement in formal and informal decision making and leadership positions and bodies, in line with internationally-recognized standards and frameworks. Notably, the involvement of the Rohingya refugee community, particularly women, in the organization and administration of refugee camps and settlements is important for security, effectiveness of services and infrastructure provided, as well as for their overall well-being, dignity and resilience. The overall goal of the taskforce is to ensure that the ability of Rohingya women to effect positive changes in their communities is recognized and encouraged.

There are Rohingya women leaders, including survivors of conflict related sexual and gender based violence, that are self-organizing and forming their own groups in the camps to advocate for their rights and call for justice. Examples include the Shanti Mohila network that submitted a request for investigation to the International Criminal Court in 2018 and the Rohingya Women's Welfare Society that spoke to the Security Council last year which provides counseling and helps women on issues of domestic violence, child marriage and health. In line with the **United Nations Security Council Resolution 2467² just recently adopted, the capacity building of these women-led and survivor-led organizations need to be further supported to enhance community-level protection mechanisms against sexual violence, and to increase women's active and meaningful engagement in processes to strengthen gender equality, women's empowerment and protection.**

There are reports that some independent women groups have been requested by certain humanitarian actors to seek government permission to organize activities in some of the camps in which these women live. There have also been reports of activities disrupted on grounds that Rohingya refugees are not allowed to conduct any activities independent of any humanitarian agency/organization. However, we are meant to understand that this issue has not been reported for activities conducted by Rohingya men's groups operating in the camps, e.g. Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights and Voice of Rohingya, as well as the Centre for Social Integrity. This restriction on women-led or survivor-led groups is a concern.

¹ <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/bangladesh/gender-humanitarian-action-working-group>

² *Resolution 2467 Paragraph 20* "Encourages concerned Member States and relevant United Nations entities to support capacity building for women-led and survivor-led organizations and build the capacity of civil society groups to enhance informal community-level protection mechanisms against sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations, to increase their support of women's active and meaningful engagement in peace processes to strengthen gender equality, women's empowerment and protection as a means of conflict prevention"

Reinforcing the community-based approach is a key strategic priority in the 2019 Joint Response Plan (JRP) for the Rohingya Humanitarian crisis³ - it puts refugees at the centre of the response, ensure their voices are heard and enhance humanitarian actors' accountability to both refugees and host communities. The protection programming model builds on pre-existing partnerships with communities and community groups including those groups led by women. Humanitarian responses across the world have supported advocacy led by community groups which have often played a major role in highlighting the refugee community's plight and in some cases led to solutions to their issues.⁴ In line with the protection framework of the 2019 JRP, humanitarian actors including the Site Management Sector and Camp-in Charge (CiC) officials are committed to strengthening the exercise of agency by refugee individuals and groups, contributing to the restoration of dignity, well-being and enjoyment of all human rights by the Rohingya refugee community. . Furthermore, in line with the IASC Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Humanitarian Action and its Accountability Framework⁵, the Senior Executive Group (SEG)⁶ have formally committed to ensuring the inclusion in leadership and meaningful equal representation of women and marginalised groups, as well as civil society groups representing these population groups, in the overall response.

Key Recommendations

- Based on consultation with Rohingya women leaders, Site Management Sector to promote and support **the allocation of safe, accessible and suitable spaces in the camps for Rohingya women leaders and their networks** where feasible to allow them to assemble, network, and convene joint activities including for political advocacy.
- Humanitarian actors are encouraged make their meeting rooms or other safe, accessible and suitable spaces and facilities available for shared use by self-organised Rohingya refugee networks, especially women networks, to encourage civic participation as part of vibrant camp life.
- All Humanitarian actors **to implement zero tolerance for any form of abuse, harassment, intimidation, threats and forceful disruption of the activities of Rohingya women leaders, networks, and volunteers operating in the camps.**
- Site Management including its Governance Task Force to continue to coordinate closely with the Protection Working, GiHA WG and the Communicating with Communities WG, to **ensure Rohingya refugees of all gender, ages and diversities are informed of their rights to participate in camp elections as well as their overall right to freedom of expression, association and assembly** including for political purposes, as long it has a peaceful agenda and that it does not include any violent action.

³ <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/bangladesh/document/2019-joint-response-plan-rohingya-humanitarian-crisis-january>

⁴ Community-based protection, Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, Standing Committee EC/64/SC/CRP.14

⁵ <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/gender-and-humanitarian-action/documents-public/iasc-policy-gender-equality-and-empowerment-women>

⁶ Gender Equality Commitments Rohingya Refugee Crisis Response Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh (5 April 2018): <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/bangladesh/document/message-seg-gender-equality-commitment-brief>