

International Women's Day 2021: Empowering women and girls is essential for an equal and sustainable COVID-19 recovery in the Rohingya response in Cox's Bazar

Cox's Bazar, Monday 8 March 2021 – Today, on International Women's Day (IWD), the humanitarian community recognizes the leadership and contribution of women and girls to help curb the spread of COVID-19 in Bangladesh. We also recognize the important role they play in keeping their families and communities safe during the pandemic.

The global theme for IWD this year “Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world” is particularly relevant in Cox's Bazar, where female staff and volunteers from the Bangladeshi and Rohingya refugee communities play a critical role in the prevention and response to COVID-19. They worked as community mobilizers, community health workers, conducted outreach and sensitization, produced masks and implemented additional hygiene measures to prevent the spread of the virus. In fact, more than 70% of volunteer community health workers from both the refugee and host community are women.

“In Cox's Bazar and across the world, over the past year women have been standing tall at the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic as health care workers, community mobilizers, scientists, etc. Thus far our science is winning, now imagine how much can be achieved if we harness science's full potential through dismantling gender stereotypes and upholding women's rights globally”, notes WHO Microbiologist and Laboratory Supervisor, Dr Adneen Moureen, who is leading a hardworking team of 26 staff at the IEDCR Field Laboratory in Cox's Bazar, supporting the response to COVID-19 in the world's largest refugee camp.

Yet, despite these contributions, the COVID-19 pandemic has in many ways negatively impacted Bangladeshi and Rohingya women and girls of all diversities: restricting their mobility, decision-making power, self-reliance and economic opportunities and further exacerbated pre-existing gendered risks. In addition today, female humanitarian workers and volunteers are facing incidents of harassment and threats because of this vital role they play in their communities. These recurring threats have impacted service delivery in the camps, with refugee volunteers refraining from pursuing volunteer activities due to safety concerns.

“Every day, we see the incredible contribution that women and girls make, to their families, to their communities and to their country but studies also show that they are facing increasing risks to their safety and security,” says Mia Seppo, the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Bangladesh. “It is our collective responsibility to take all measures possible to ensure the safety of women and girls so that they are able to take on those decision making and leadership roles in a meaningful way. This is critical for Bangladesh's road to recovery from the impact of COVID-19.”

A rapid analysis on gender roles and responsibilities from October 2020 shows¹ that the impact of COVID-19 on the Rohingya refugees and local people in surrounding communities has exacerbated existing

¹ In the Shadows of the Pandemic: The Gendered Impact of COVID-19 On Rohingya and Host Communities
<https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/bangladesh/document/shadows-pandemic-gendered-impact-covid-19-rohingya-and-host>

discrimination and inequalities. This is particularly apparent for the most vulnerable, including women with disabilities and transwomen. Women and girls face a reduction in economic and livelihood opportunities, and an increase in unpaid care work. They are also at a greater risk of gender-based violence in and out of their homes, as well as increasing mental health issues, while simultaneously being less able to access lifesaving services and support.

More than half of the Rohingya women interviewed said they needed permission to purchase soaps, masks and other items needed to protect themselves against COVID-19. Almost two thirds of the Rohingya women interviewed reported that they need permission to access health services, including isolation and treatment centres, if they have COVID-like symptoms. In general, the findings of the rapid analysis show that strides made towards gender equality risk being undone as access to services and entitlements have been greatly reduced.

The humanitarian community is appealing for the safety of women and girls in Bangladesh including those in the Rohingya refugee community. The humanitarian community calls on all actors to take active measures to involve women and girls in a meaningful way in decision-making mechanisms and processes and promote their empowerment in leadership roles in different ways.

The creation of women and girls' safe spaces can create additional opportunities for women to come together, build capacity and define their own goals and activities. These safe spaces are places where women and girls can go to any time to feel safer and empowered and have access to information, education, recreational activities, support and services. A strong presence of female Camp in Charge (CiCs) and police officers in the camps is also important for strengthening both the safety and influence of women and girls.

It is imperative that women and girls of all diversities' leadership and meaningful equal representation is ensured within all aspects of the humanitarian response in Cox's Bazar. Only in that way can we work towards an equal future for all in a COVID-19 world and beyond.

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Please see [\[HERE\]](#) the link to a calendar of all events celebrating International Women's Day in Cox's Bazar.

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The Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group (GiHA WG) *for the Rohingya Refugee crisis response in Cox's Bazar provides cross-sectoral and inter-organisational support to ensure the integration of gender aspects in humanitarian action.*

The Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) *is a sector-based coordination structure for the Rohingya refugee response in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The ISCG provides a platform to ensure timely, coordinated, needs-based and evidence-driven humanitarian assistance to affected populations. The ISCG currently convenes ten active sectors; Education, Emergency telecommunications, Food Security, Health, Logistics, Nutrition, Protection, Shelter/NFIs, Site Management and Site Development, and WASH.*