On 27 November, Bangladesh Police, Cox’s Bazar and UN Women launched a Women and Children Help Desk, in camp 9 police station, Ukhiya. Over 130 people representing various stakeholders, Rohingya women leaders, Majhis, government high officials, UN agencies, international and local organizations, Camps-in-Charge and different forum members attended the opening ceremony. The help desk service, the second of its kind in addition to the existing one established in camp 4, has been established upon the request of the Superintendent of Police in Cox’s Bazar with support from the Government of Germany. The facility will bolster the presence of female police officers in the camps towards addressing safety and security issues of Rohingya women and children due to prevalence of sexual and GBV such as trafficking and domestic violence.

ABM Masud Hossain, Superintendent of Police, Cox’s Bazar and Flora Macula, Head of Sub Office, UN Women Bangladesh, Cox’s Bazar inaugurated the facility. Photo: UN Women / Khaled Arafat Ahmed

Flora Macula, Head of Sub Office, UN Women Cox’s Bazar expressed that, UN Women is looking forward to working closely with the Government of Bangladesh to support them in opening similar help desks across more camps to facilitate and strengthen services for ensuring safety and security of Rohingya women and children.

Second Women and Children Help Desk inaugurated in camp 9, Ukhiya, Cox’s Bazar

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First responders and investigators were encouraged to consider the impact of GBV, locally, nationally and internationally, and understand different perspectives within the refugee and host communities, and the challenges they face in delivering a service to GBV survivors.

Officers of the Bangladesh Armed Police Battalion, who work in the Rohingya refugee camps and host communities, participated in the training on 12 and 13 Oct. Photo: UN Women / Khaled Arafat Ahmed

Bangladesh Police officials trained on Gender Based Violence (GBV) response and prevention

UN Women, in collaboration with the Bangladesh Police, conducted a second round of training on Gender Based Violence response and prevention between 6 – 13th October for over 100 participants from the Bangladesh Police and the Bangladesh Armed Police Battalion in Cox’s Bazar, and organized a workshop with the Bangladesh Police Women’s Network (BPWN) in the Dhaka headquarters which led to the development of a draft strategy on gender-responsive policing.

The trainings were facilitated by international police expert Jane Townsley, Executive Director of the International Women Police Association and Force International. Photo: UN Women / Julian D’Silva

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In Brief

October-December 2019

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Yasmin Ara, a Rohingya refugee from Camp 18 shares:

“I received training on mobile phone repairing for 6 months, and I can now fix issues with a loudspeaker, LED light, battery, sim connector, and display, etc. I felt I could do this work which is why I got the courage and took this training. Now even I touch one mobile – I get 250 Taka. When I came from Myanmar, I didn’t have much knowledge on anything vocational. After coming here, I have gained basic literacy and knowledge and technical skills.

Today, during my commute to the MPWC, two people teased me and so I protested the matter on my own. Previously, I wouldn’t have been able to go two steps ahead in a similar situation. Now I can solve my problems on my own, can take them to a Majhi and if they don’t support me, I go to the CiC.” Yasmin is one of the many beneficiaries of UN Women’s Multi-Purpose Women’s Centre (MPWC), camp 18, who are growing in confidence.

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16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence marked in Cox’s Bazar

The 2019 theme for the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women was ‘Orange the World: Generation Equality Stands Against Rape’. Like previous years, this year’s International Day marked the launch of 16 days of activism, concluding on 10 December 2019, which was International Human Rights Day. The GIHA WG and the GBV SS jointly conducted advocacy initiatives to mark the 16 days of activism against GBV from 25 November to 10 December, in partnership also with the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA).

In Cox’s Bazar, women and men, and youth groups of all ages, and representatives of Government offices, authorities, institutes, humanitarian organizations and the public sphere, participated in rallies, learning events and discussions throughout the campaign. Organizations held awareness raising sessions in Host and Rohingya Community areas. They wore orange t-shirts, caps, and held placards and banners using the hashtag #generationequalitystandsagainstrape. In addition to the global theme, in Cox’s Bazar a local theme was adopted: “We can stop GBV at home, work, and community.” MoWCA kicked off the 1st day of the campaign with a rally starting from the trauma health centre, camp 1.

Their campaign strategy included daily awareness raising sessions across 11 camps for all of the 16 days.

A high-level panel discussion to mark “16 Days of Activism Against GBV” was held on 8 December, where more than 100 key actors including local authorities, law enforcement, host community leaders, camp elected Rohingya refugee leaders, civil society, NGOs, and UN agencies took part. The event discussed “inclusive and equitable access to services for a multi-sectoral response to GBV in the Rohingya and affected host communities, and was co-led by the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group and the GBV Sub-Sector, and organized by the ISCG Gender Hub, UN Women, UNFPA, IOM, UNICEF, World Vision International and Action Aid Bangladesh as part of the 2019 “16 Days of Activism Against GBV” campaign. The event resulted in the drafting of a joint Call for Action to respond to and prevent GBV in Cox’s Bazar which will be submitted to all key actors for collective endorsement. The panel discussion provided an opportunity for key stakeholders – the Government of Bangladesh, humanitarian agencies, including UN Women and representatives from the affected populations - to come together and discuss the challenges and barriers for effective prevention and response to GBV.

On 5 December, UN Women and WFP organized a solidarity event for female frontline development actors working in the Rohingya refugee crisis response in Cox’s Bazar. It provided an opportunity for women humanitarian responders to network, share ideas, collaborate, and continue the campaign of 16 days of Activism against GBV. Over 400 women of different nationalities participated at the event.
Reflection Workshop held on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, along with launch of Government of Sweden funded UN Women project

UN Women Bangladesh and the Embassy of Sweden, on 11 December 2019, held a ‘Reflection Workshop on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the context of the Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh’ in light of the Government’s launch of its first ever National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security on 24th November 2019. The Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner, and the Ambassador of Sweden to Bangladesh graced the event, as well as distinguished representatives from the Ministry of Women and Children’s Affairs, Deputy Commissioner and District Magistrate, Bangladesh Police, women’s networks/CSOs, NGOs, and the UN.

The event also marked the formal launch of the Government of Sweden funded UN Women project in Cox’s Bazar: “Means to Lead: Empowering Rohingya refugee and host community women through leadership, learning and livelihoods in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh” and the recommendations from the workshop discussions will feed into the key priorities and focus areas for this 3-year project. H.E. Ms. Charlotta Schlyter, Ambassador of Sweden to Bangladesh (left), and Ms. Shoko Ishikawa, Country Representative, UN Women Bangladesh (right). The commissioner stressed the need to address the gap in safety measures between women and men in the Rohingya crisis, as well as focus on the betterment of human rights among female persons with disabilities and Bangladesh’s transgender community.

The workshop brought together over 60 key stakeholders from women’s rights organizations and women leaders’ networks, CSOs, Government, law enforcement, the UN, INGOs and donors to facilitate a shared approach to identifying good practices, lessons learned, priority issues and recommendations to inform efforts by UN Women and other actors in Cox’s Bazar. Ms. Chekufara, a Rohingya community leader and founder of the Rohingya Women’s Empowerment and Advocacy Network, in her keynote, appreciated the support of the Government of Bangladesh and humanitarian actors, emphasizing the need for Rohingya women’s empowerment and a focus on children’s education, human rights, health and Gender Based Violence (GBV) services in Cox’s Bazar based camps.

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Further updates...

On behalf of the GiHA WG, UN Women organized Gender in Humanitarian Action themed training sessions for approx. 45 Camps in Charge (CiCs) support staff on 2-3 December across all camps, as part of a joint capacity sharing Initiative of site management sector, Cox’s Bazar. One of the participants Sayeed Abdullah Al Mamun said, “Before the training, it was not clear to me why we need to give more attention to women and girls. Now I understand that whatever I am doing to support them is their right.”

CIC support staff were imparted with knowledge on considering gender aspects in humanitarian action. Photo: UN Women

UN Women receives invaluable support from the Governments of Canada, Germany, Japan, Sweden, the National Committees for UN Women in Australia, Japan, Iceland, Singapore, Sweden and USA, as well as the Tingari Silverton Foundation towards delivering a humanitarian response in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh for Rohingya refugee and host community women and girls.
Spotlight: Sheuly Sharma shares on the trials and triumphs of a local organization in Cox’s Bazar

Sheuly Sharma, a woman of the Hindu minority and a Cox’s Bazar local, is a women’s rights activist based out of Ramu, Cox’s Bazar District, and also the founder of Jago Nari Unnayon Sangstha (JNUS), (translated in English: organization for developing awareness in women), a community-based organization advocating for women’s rights and empowering women at the local level. Established in 2010, JNUS carries a mandate to promote gender equality, through small scale projects focusing on peace building, leadership, and livelihoods skills development. “Local people and women’s rights organizations were among the first responders in 2017 when the Rohingya influx happened, and we continue to care,” she says in retrospect, adding “it hasn’t been easy and we can’t help feel perhaps a little unknown, as many humanitarian and development organizations are now established at a larger scale here.”

Sheuly lost her father when she was a child and was brought up in a female-headed household along with two siblings. She witnessed struggles faced by her mother as single woman raising a young family with a limited income in a conservative society. On her own difficulties in establishing JNUS which has grown to become a team of 132 staff members, she says, “there was a time when we faced blatant sexism from misogynists - people accused us of being a vehicle responsible for trafficking women. A few despisers once went as far as hurling cow dung at me. But such hindrances and perceptions never curbed my motivation to advocating for the wellbeing of women and girls suffering in my locality and voicing their concerns of deprivation.”

She recalls over 450 Hindu Rohingyas, a minority group, crossed over the Gundum border from Myanmar during the influx in 2017: “many from this group arrived at night and took temporary refuge in a chicken farm belonging to my sister. On getting there I found most were in torn clothes and appeared traumatized and weary, and I gathered they had gone through an extremely stressful journey. They were helpless. The horror - it was unlike anything I had ever seen.” And so, she coordinated with the Ramu based community to help, collect and distribute clothing and food to the affected families. Since then, through JNUS, she has led a gradual and structured approach through projects supporting the Rohingya crisis response. This has involved developing a team and partnerships to function and meaningfully contribute as a local humanitarian actor. Currently, the organization implements projects serving Rohingya refugees in matters of violence against women, access to justice, community mobilization etc. in camps 3, 15, 22, and 9 and is in partnership with 18 other local organizations. Host community women and girls are engaged through community dialogue towards building trust and social cohesion with refugees, and minority groups. Some revenue is generated by selling handicraft goods such as jute bags produced by approx. 250 local women artisans who also earn an income in return. Buyers of these goods include well known Dhaka based entities – Joyeeta Foundation, Aarong, and Sadakalo, a popular clothing outlet. Sheuly points out that limited resources and short-term project durations pose a barrier to achieving a sustained impact, and further remarks that local grassroots organizations are constrained by resources, funding shortfalls, and a lack of sound operational processes. Among challenges faced by JNUS team members, the inability to fully understand the English language is a major one – and Sheuly acknowledges this is an area if they can overcome, will open doors for stronger collaboration with the broader development community, as well as help understand and apply best practice. She informs a high turnover rate has affected team synergy, as once some work experience is gained by employees, most move onto higher paying jobs in the development sector - “We cannot afford high management costs and remunerate employees with additional perks, who we know receive a modest salary.”

JNUS is registered with the Ministry of Women and Children’s Affairs, along with 86 other active women’s rights organizations in Cox’s Bazar, who have secured the same accreditation, however this is not the same as being recognized as an NGO. Sheuly hopes that JNUS can one day be granted the status of an NGO by the NGO Affairs Bureau, Bangladesh. Her advice to other women’s rights organizations in and around Ramu Upazilla is to cultivate a practice of good governance and drive societal change by improving delivery mechanisms. “There is a need for us to remain collectively active, in aspects of political, economic and social life, and to be together as a local network,” she says. With the UN, she would like to see further collaboration to unlock the potential of local humanitarian responses in Cox’s Bazar, especially, given that the local people of Bangladesh were among the first responders when the Rohingya influx occurred in 2017. In contemplation, she adds “if the big International organizations and NGO’s leave Cox’s Bazar, and aid dries up, it would certainly be regressive, however local organizations will likely remain and be one of the few left as responders in this humanitarian crisis!”

UN Women, recognizing the Grand Bargain localization commitments and the importance of supporting local women’s rights organizations, in December 2019 signed a partnership agreement to work with JNUS through Ain-O-Shalish Kendra to promote social cohesion by empowering Rohingya refugee and host community women peacebuilders in Cox’s Bazar, with funding from the Government of Canada. UN Women further continues to strengthen capacities of local women’s rights organizations through training, tools, practical guidance and other resources.