Rohingya women engaged in the production of masks in MPWCs to protect their community from COVID-19 and earn an income to support their families. Photo: Nadira Islam/UN Women

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UPDATES FROM UN WOMEN COX’S BAZAR

Spotlight: Women Frontline Workers mobilize to prevent COVID-19 in crowded Rohingya refugee camps

Mobina Khatun (45-year-old) is one of the 40 Rohingya Women Volunteers working with UN Women to mobilize their communities on crucial issues within different camps in Ukhiya. “To prevent this disease, we need to provide more awareness on personal cleanliness, hand washing and the do’s and don’ts when one has a cough or a cold. If we can raise more awareness, everyone will be safe”. Mobina worries that COVID-19 will have a very bad impact on female-headed households in the camps due to prevailing social norms and women’s traditional role as primary caregiver. She said, “We are afraid because we have nothing and there is additional restriction here from the authority. As we live in a very congested area, if there is limited access to medical treatment and the virus comes here, we all will die. So, we need sufficient hygiene materials like soap and mask along with doctors and nurses”. Despite the gendered risks and barriers that women and girls face in camps in Cox’s Bazar, Rohingya women leaders have self-mobilised and formed their own networks through which they are conducting awareness raising sessions on covid-19 for women across the camps. As of now 2,863 community members have been reached.

Nurussafa, another Rohingya Women Volunteer, says her community has shown appreciation for her work: “What you are doing is very good, we now have the information on covid-19 and how to prevent it. By following your advice, we can protect ourselves”.

UN Women is supporting these women leaders and our Gender Officer seconded to Camps-in-Charge in 12 refugee camps. They are our field gender champions who are advocating to ensure the voices of Rohingya women and girls are heard, their demands are met, needs addressed, and rights protected.

“As a volunteer, I get the chance to attend meetings and trainings where I can enrich my knowledge and skill and help protect my community from COVID-19. As I am working with UN Women, I have an official identity and dignity. My family and community respect me.”

- Nurussafa, Rohingya Women Volunteer,
Camp 5.
When I finally reach my specific camps, my field volunteers come to me, looking happy to see me. I have been discussing with them what covid-19 is, its symptoms and ways to prevent it. I trained them on how to disseminate the emergency messages amongst both Rohingya men and women in the camps and how to promote proper hygiene and social distancing. At the end of the day, I feel proud that my volunteers have successfully reached almost 400 Rohingya refugees with these messages.”

- Mani Elizabeth Chakma, Gender Field Officer, UN Women

Mani Elizabeth Chakma is one of UN Women’s Gender Officer working in camps 3, 4 and 4 extension. This has been her experience working in the camps during the covid-19 pandemic: “It has been very hard to do regular field visits since the beginning of the pandemic. Because covid-19 is a dangerous and life-threatening disease, measures have been put in place by the government to limit movements to the camps. Every day we go to the camps where my role is to support awareness raising amongst women and girls, so they can protect themselves from covid-19.

Gendered Impact of COVID-19 in Cox’s Bazar

Women and girls are disproportionately affected by epidemics and public health crises, including COVID-19 globally, and a similar threat is there for women and girls in the Rohingya and host communities as well. Social norms and gender roles in Rohingya and host communities place women and girls in even more of a vulnerable position. The congested conditions of the camps, restrictions of movement, limited mobile network, and lack of income sources all compound to create a dire situation for Rohingya refugee women and girls in the camps.

Women’s and girls’ role in the household, as primary caregivers of children, elderly and sick household members, puts them at higher risk of contracting the virus. Their time burden is likely going to increase significantly as their care work for family members, as well as their cleaning, washing, and water collecting responsibilities, become greater – which has already been reported by Rohingya women networks and Rohingya volunteers. Despite being at higher risk, they possess a greater potential to limit the spread of the virus, and their access to information and materials to protect themselves and their family is crucial.

Women and girls have less access to information in the camps, due to the restrictive nature of social norms. With some women multipurpose centres/friendly spaces now closed or staff being reduced, women have even less sources of information. Women with other vulnerabilities are even more excluded from information, including older women reporting male members of their household being their only sourceⁱ.

ⁱ BBC Media’s What Matters Bulletin #34
Due to the restrictive norms and roles placed on women in the Rohingya communities, women lack access to leadership and decision-making structures and mechanisms. With the lack of proper consultation targeting women, their needs, preferences and concerns are likely to be overlooked in future in the response.

This will also lead to the missed potential of engaging them, as their role in communicating information and promoting hygiene can have a critical impact on slowing the spread of the virus. Women’s networks, women volunteers and local women community leaders are self-mobilising to raise awareness amidst and consult with women across camps and host communities, yet they need to be engaged and supported considerably in their efforts.

Consultations with men have already shown that they would not let their female household members be isolated in mixed isolation and treatment facilities with unknown men\(^2\). Women and girls are likely going to feel unsafe in mixed facilities and will be at higher risk of GBV and abuse. Families are also unlikely going to want to separate, and women are reporting not wanting to isolate without their children\(^3\).

This is expected to lead towards a lack of disclosure of cases avoid going to these centres and crucially can lead to women’s lack of access to isolation and treatment. All of these can result in women being left behind with a higher risk of infection and mortality, as well as becoming key vectors for spreading the virus further within families given their role of primary caregivers.

There is limited access to GBV services following a reduction of the minimum standard package of services in a reduced number of facilities only to individual case Management, Individual PSS, and Clinical Management of Rape. A significant number of GBV case workers are transitioning into providing remote support through teleworking. The overall impact on services is not yet known and a service gap analysis will be completed with GBV service providers once all information on services becomes available. Preliminary indications suggest an increase in the number of GBV cases particularly intimate partner violence and child marriage.

Yet, women have reduced access to GBV services following a reduction of the number of women safe spaces that remain open and service providers in the camps moving more to remote GBV case management through teleworking. Due to cumulative factors including mobile network restrictions, limited presence of essential humanitarian staff in the camps, and limited access to mobile phones by women and girls, there are reasons to believe that GBV incidents are underreported. Movement restrictions in the camps and “stay at home” policy is strongly enforced by Camps-in-Charge and Majhi’s particularly for women and girls limiting their ability to access services. Prolonged restrictive measures aimed at preventing and/or curbing the spread of COVID-19, are likely to result in negative coping mechanisms, increased vulnerability to, and heightened risks of GBV including sexual exploitation and abuse and marriage-related trafficking of women and girls.

**UN Women Actions:**

- Providing gender technical advice, advocacy, analysis and capacity development through the inter-sector Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group, co-led by UN Women and UNHCR with support from the ISCG Gender Hub, managed by UN Women to ensure gender equality commitments are central in the COVID-19 preparedness and response at all stages, this includes the following:

1. A [Call for Urgent Gender Actions in COVID-19 response](#) was prepared and circulated widely.
2. A gendered protection guidance and checklist, as well as a [behavioural protocol](#) for staff and an information leaflet for patients, for COVID-19 quarantine, isolation and shielding facilities was prepared and shared with Sectors/WG for finalization and endorsement.
3. Gender inputs are being provided to Health, WASH, SMSD and ShelterCOVID-19 sector plans and facility lists/assessments to ensure gender-responsive including by on-going joining site visits.
4. [Gender and COVID-19 IEC material](#) (on prevention of GBV and intimate partner violence, gendered impact of COVID-19 and to promote gender equal roles in the household) was developed and is being finalized in coordination with the CwC WG.

\(^2\) IOM & ACAPS, 2020. Covid Explain #3

\(^3\) IOM & ACAPS, 2020. Covid Explain #3
5) Orientations on emerging gender impacts from COVID-19 is being provided to sectors. Gender Hub is further developing a contextualised Awareness Raising on Inclusion of Gender and 4 leading sectors (Health, WASH, Food Security and CWC) priorities.

6) A joint rapid gender analysis on COVID-19 in Cox’s Bazar is being developed from secondary data, another comprehensive rapid gender analysis based on primary data is planned.

7) We are updating our existing mapping of women’s leaders/committee/women’s CSOs and women’s rights organisations present and active in camps and host communities to circulate with sectors to ensure they engage them.

8) Gender Hub is co-leading with WHO the capacity development for training all humanitarian actors on COVID related technical sessions and cross-cutting themes: gender, GBV, protection, child protection and PSEA.

- UN Women CIC Gender Officers and their volunteers as well as women’s leaders and their networks in camps and host communities are conducting COVID-19 awareness sessions and consultations across 13 camps especially targeting women and girls in communities. Gender Officers and their 40 volunteers have been coordinating closely with site management, protection/GBV, health and relevant actors in those 13 camps including providing orientation on gender at camp level. The Gender Officers have been working with their volunteers to conduct consultations across camps on sex and age disaggregated perspectives on isolation and shielding through talking to men and women across age groups, as well identifying community solutions and ideas on how to ensure women’s access and use of facilities, and isolation and shielding overall, given the gendered constraint identified. We are planning to engage Rohingya women volunteers and women leaders in assessment visits of COVID-19 shielding, isolation and treatment facilities to ensure these are acceptable to women in the community.

- UN Women is engaging our partner Jago Nari Unnayan Sangsta, local CxB women’s rights organization, and other local women’s CSOs in host communities for awareness raising on COVID-19.

- UN Women’s Multi-Purpose Women Centres (5 in camps and 3 in host communities) are remaining open and continuing to operate to provide critical services for women and girls during this time including: paramedic services, sexual and reproductive health services, GBV case management and referral services, psychosocial counselling, as well as awareness raising on COVID-19. UN Women is also coordinating with the Health Sector, SMSD and GBVSS to explore repurposing some of the MPWCs into women-only isolation facilities in response to demands from the community for this need. Overall UN Women and partners are focusing on training women leaders and volunteers to manage/run/operate MPWC services in preparedness for case of further limitations to partners staff being able to move to camps.

- UN Women and our partners are engaging Rohingya and host community women and adolescent girls, including local women’s networks and CSOs, in the production of cloth dust masks for distribution to the camp and host community and Rohingya volunteers, including through our Multi-Purpose Women Centres.

- UN Women and our partners are procuring and distributing hygiene items and hygiene kits to Rohingya and host community women and their families.
The UN Women supported Women and Children Police Help Desks in camps 4 and 9 are remaining open at this time managed by the 10 UN Women-trained women police officers providing 24/7 GBV response services across 14 camps.

In relation to supporting the work of the GBVSS on GBV case management and referrals to ensure sustainability of these despite COVID-19, UN Women is in regular consultation with the women police, including the 10 women police deployed in camps 4 and 9 police stations, as well as with Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (who are managing one-stop crisis centres and trauma centres in camps and host community and providing case management and counselling through a hotline), and the women’s networks and leaders in camps and host community, who will continue to remain in camps and host communities even if GBV services become further restricted.

International Women’s Day celebrated in Cox’s Bazar through art and fair exhibitions

In Cox’s Bazar, to mark International Women’s Day on 8th March 2020, UN Women in coordination with Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) Working Group organized various events across camps and host communities including games, competitions, arts and crafts, theatre and dialogue sessions. The local theme chosen in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, for International Women’s Day 2020 is Realizing All Women’s Rights / সকল নারীর অধিকার বাস্তবায়ন করি/ Beg Maifuandor Hoq Khiyal Goron.

Rallies and dialogue sessions, “Refugee Women Speak Up” took place between Rohingya women leaders and Camp-in-Charges (CiCs) in 16 camps. The session gave the opportunity for Rohingya women leaders and CiCs to discuss challenges and actions needed in the camps to support Rohingya women and girls.

Over 1,000 Rohingya women and girls actively participated in all these dialogue sessions, together also with 10 female police officials, local Imams and Majhis. The dialogue sessions were supported by UN Women in partnership with other members of the Gender in Humanitarian Action Group (GiHA), including TAI, IRC, Caritas, Mukti, CODEC, ACTED, BRAC, Plan International, ACF, OXFAM, DCA, CARE, IOM, World Vision and Action Aid Bangladesh.

UN Women received invaluable support from the Governments of Canada, Germany, Japan, Sweden, Australia, 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.
Bangladesh Police officials trained on Gender Based Violence (GBV) response and prevention

On 3rd February 2020, UN Women, in collaboration with the Bangladesh Police, conducted a training on Gender Based Violence (GBV) response and prevention for first responders and investigators of Bangladesh Police, in Cox's Bazar. Approximately 25 participants of Bangladesh Armed Police Battalion, a specialized force of the Bangladesh Police participated in this 2-day long training.

First responders and investigators enhanced their understanding of the impact of GBV with a focus on the context in the refugee and host communities in Cox's Bazar, and the challenges, gaps and needs in delivering effective, right-based and survivor-centred GBV services.

Additionally, as part of capacity development process, the training facilitator also visited one of the UN Women supported Women and Children Police Help Desks in the camps and provided on the job training to the deployed female police officials who deliver critical services at camp level responding to safety and security issues for Rohingya women and children, including the recent increase in marriage-related human trafficking.

Introducing Gender Field Officers of UN Women Cox's Bazar

As of January 2020, UN Women has deployed six Gender Officers seconded to Camps-in-Charge covering 13 camps (1E,1W, 3,5,4,4Ext, 9,10,12,17 18, 20, 20Ext). As the camp level gender champions, they will be leading efforts to ensure that site management and site development efforts, as well as overall service provision, community representation and accountability systems in the camps, are gender responsive.

They have dual reporting to CiCs and UN Women and are supported by 40 Rohingya women and men Volunteers. They conduct regular monitoring at the camp level to identify key gender issues. They contribute to referral systems, information hubs as well as promote and facilitate accountability towards women and girls in the camps through consultations, community engagement and strengthening complaints, feedback and referral mechanisms.

They coordinate regularly with Camp Managers, Protection/GBV and PSEA actors, and Sector focal points at camp level, participate in CiC meetings with police, community leaders and various stakeholders to highlight gender issues and coordinate required actions.
Sabikun Nahar, a Rohingya Refugee from Camp 18 shares her journey as a Psychosocial Support (PSS) Volunteer

“When I see boys are harassing other girls on the way to MPWC, I tell them come to the MPWC. See even your mother, sister or wife come here. So, do not do this to your own people. Come and see” - Sabikun Nahar, Rohingya Refugee and Psychosocial Support (PSS) Volunteer, Camp 18

Sabikun Nahar (28 Years) mother of 9 children lives in Camp 18, Block F30. Her husband used to beat her almost every day, but she felt she could not take any action against him because she wanted to protect her children. From the MPWC, she received psychosocial support and individual counselling. Through this support, as well as attending indoor sessions on basic literacy she found mental peace. Now she works as a PSS volunteer at camp 18 and goes to every block to spread awareness messages on child marriage, polygamy, GBV related issues, and domestic violence. She reports the cases to the community leaders and supports them resolving the issues through mediation by her own initiative. Her husband has now stopped beating her, as she has gained more confidence in expressing her opinion and standing up for herself. Now she says they mutually make decisions within her household.

MPWC Receives Visitors

Visit from Ms. Gillian Frost, Executive Director, Global Affairs Canada participating in Rohingya women’s leaders’ network meeting at MPWC. Photo: UN Women.

Canadian Deputy Minister of International Development, Ms. Leslie MacLean, buying handicrafts produced by project beneficiaries exhibited at MPWC. Photo: UN Women

International Women’s Day snap shots from various camps on 8th March 2020, Cox’s Bazar

Dialogue session in Camp 5 between Mr. Abu Saleh Mohammad Obaidullah (CIC) and Rohingya women leaders. The dialogue session was followed by an exhibition showcasing handicrafts, food items, embroidery products made by Rohingya women. Photo: Khaled Arafat Ahmed/UN Women

In Camp 18, Mr. Md. Rashadul Islam (CIC) and other representatives inaugurating an exhibition, which showcased handicrafts, food items, embroidery products all made by Rohingya women and girls. Photo: Egeh Bahia/ ISCG
Rohingya women including their women leaders participating in the dialogue session “Refugee Women Speak Up” at Camp 1E, discussing with CIC on crucial challenges and actions needed. Photo: Egeh Bahia/ISCG

Afrooz, a Rohingya woman leader of Rohingya Women for Peace and Justice network at Camp 5 CIC office, shares her efforts of organizing women by bringing them into a women’s network, one of the significant needs at the camp level that UN Women is supporting for women’s empowerment. Photo: Khaled Arfat Ahmed/ UN Women

Women showing products made by Rohingya women and girls at Camp 18 exhibition. Photo: Egeh Bahia/ISCG

Women police contributing to the dialogue session at Camp 1E. Photo: Egeh Bahia/ISCG

International Women’s Day snap shots from various camps on 8th March 2020, Cox’s Bazar