

ADOLESCENT GIRLS **IN CRISIS:** **VOICES OF THE ROHINGYA**

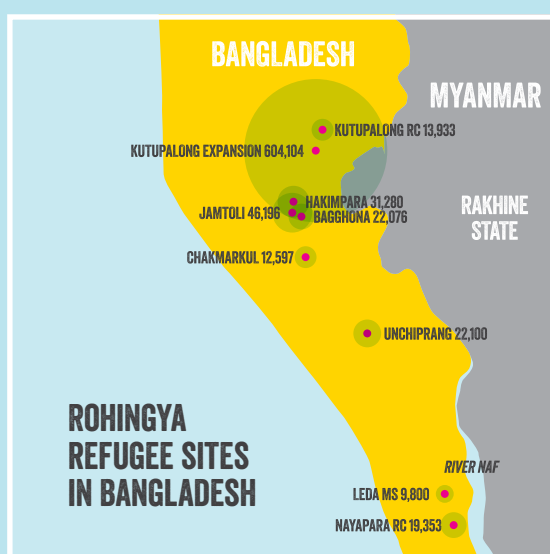
Summary Report



In August 2017 the long running crisis involving the persecution of the Rohingya community in Myanmar escalated after an outbreak of violence in Rakhine State. Almost a million Rohingya were forced to flee Myanmar and now live in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar in neighbouring Bangladesh.¹ Lives have been shattered and this report, the first to do so, focuses particularly on the lives and experiences of adolescent girls.

Commissioned by Plan International the report draws on data from research conducted in Bangladesh in April 2018. It explores how adolescent girls within two age brackets (10-14 and 15-19) understand the unique impact the crisis has upon them, and how they have responded to the challenges they face.

Despite the numbers of adolescent girls affected so profoundly by the ongoing Rohingya crisis, and of course by many crises around the world, it is rare that either their own communities or the humanitarian sector at large pay much attention to them. This research is an attempt to rectify that: to acknowledge that girls and young women do have rights, and that their ideas are worth listening to and acting upon.



Ismatara, 15, takes part in a menstrual health management session run by Plan International.

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WHAT DID THE GIRLS TELL US?

GIRLS ARE ISOLATED: in the camps, families live among strangers and parents say they worry more about their girls' safety. It is clear too that pre-existing ideas about gender roles play a part in the decision to keep their daughters at home, especially the older girls.

"I cannot go outside. I have always to stay in the house and in this heat."

GIRL, 18

This lack of freedom has far-reaching consequences: girls cannot learn, access health services, make new friends, or learn the skills which might help them rebuild their lives. Lack of access to information and peer support means they are more prone to depression, disease and early pregnancy.

"My parents will force me to get married. I have nothing to do. They could not do it in Burma but can do it here."

GIRL, 18

OVER 75%

OF GIRLS INTERVIEWED REPORT HAVING NO ABILITY TO MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT THEIR LIVES

THEIR PHYSICAL LIVING CONDITIONS ARE ALMOST UNBEARABLE:

overwhelmingly girls describe their experience as "stifling". The camp is overcrowded and shelters are "sweltering", which is particularly difficult for adolescent girls who are often not allowed to leave them. Girls also struggle with collecting clean water and with their many household duties.

1. Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG). 10 May 2018. "Situation Report: Rohingya Refugee Crisis." p. 2. https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/20180510_-_iscg_-_sitrep_final.pdf

"We have to bring water from all the way down the hill, scarcity of water is high and there is no shower room so it is difficult to get a shower."

GIRL, 14.

THEY WANT TO GO TO SCHOOL: girls of all ages express a passion for study and a disappointment that their current situation prevents them from attending school. For many of them education of all sorts is a way to improve both their present lives and their future opportunities.

"I want to be educated but cannot. This is the biggest interruption/barrier in my life. I have a desire to establish myself by studying."

GIRL, 14

ONLY 28%

OF THOSE SURVEYED REPORTED ATTENDING SCHOOL OF ANY KIND

STAYING HEALTHY IS HARD: lack of good quality food is an issue particularly for pregnant or unaccompanied girls and all girls need better access to health services, including mental health care. They also want more information, particularly about sexual and reproductive health.

"No one told this. We have learned when people whispered on the topic."

GIRL, 18

Despite everything the research also bears witness to hope and an impressive resilience. Adolescent girls identified several factors that are key to their happiness:

FAMILY AND FRIENDS: adolescent girls emphasised the importance of family and friends to provide support and comfort as well as protection from violence. Girls whose families had been separated or whose parents or siblings had been killed felt more vulnerable in their new homes. Girls felt supported by having people to talk to, safe spaces to go to and things to do.

POSITIVE OUTLOOK AND FAITH: an impressive number of girls remained positive and expressed hopes for the future. Many also had faith, or a belief in fate, which helped them.

EDUCATION AND LEARNING NEW SKILLS: girls clearly understand that going to school or to vocational classes will not only make them happier now, but it will also improve their prospects, and that of their families, for years to come.

INCREASED SAFETY: although violence and a fear of violence remains part of their lives, adolescent girls feel safer in Bangladesh than they did in Rakhine state - the main reason being the absence of military and police forces.

"I feel good in camp. In Burma the army used to throw people into rivers, cutting them into pieces."

GIRL, 12

CONCLUSION

The lack of freedom of movement, the result of long-established gender discrimination, as well as current camp conditions, is the predominant challenge faced by adolescent girls in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. They feel safer than they did in Myanmar but they also feel restricted: they have little access to education and are denied the chance to develop their abilities and help support their communities. Girls have faith in a better future and often the energy to make this a reality. They need to be supported in their efforts by their families, communities and the myriad officials and agencies who control their lives.

VOICES OF THE ROHINGYA: THE GIRLS' RECOMMENDATIONS

- Programme planners and camp managers must listen to girls: they need to be involved in the issues that affect them, not to be hidden at home. This means creating safe spaces and providing forums and processes that involve adolescent girls: acknowledging and tackling the endemic gender discrimination which exists within families and communities and deprives girls of their rights.
- Ensure that girls' education does not suffer: education systems need to be flexible and respond to girls' needs and circumstances, and should include life-skills and vocational education.
- Funding for girl-friendly information and services must be a priority: particularly around mental health issues and sexual and reproductive health and rights.



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Cover photograph: Rejuna, 12, and her little sister ©Plan International

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No photographs were taken during the course of this research. Girls featured in images in the report are not the same as those that participated in the research.

About Plan International

We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected. As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 80 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 75 countries.

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