



Research Title:

**Understanding the Role of Women in Preventing GBV and Promoting
Social Cohesion in the Host Community in Cox's Bazar**

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Executive Summary

Women and girls in the host community in Cox's Bazar have been enduring two catastrophic events since last four years, the first event - the large influx of the displaced Rohingya people in 2017- had triggered social tensions, increased the feeling of insecurity and rate of violence across communities and institutions, contributed to price hike, aggravated economic vulnerability and disrupted communication. All these have a bearing impact on the safety, security and vulnerability of women. The second one is the outbreak of COVID-19. This pandemic has further pushed the women and girls in a marginal situation partially restricting their access to information, mobility, disconnecting them from their social networks, and forcing them to live with a conflicting environment. It is undeniable that both events have contributed to increase the fragility of women and girls contributing to the rise of gender-based violence (GBV) and social disturbance in various forms among the host community in Cox's Bazar.

It has been found that many research and studies have already been undertaken to understand the overall situation of women and girls both in the refugee camps and in the host community. Though many joint studies have already been undertaken in this field, most of the studies are largely focused on understanding the situation of Rohingya women and girls. The vulnerabilities, risks, and fragilities of the women and girls in the host community have not been received due attention that it should be or might be. This research therefore has made a modest effort to fill up this gap by making the women and girls of the host community as a referent object of this study. This intervention has categorically focused on understanding the risks, vulnerabilities, challenges and social tensions being faced by the women and girls in the host community in Cox's Bazar in the context of the outbreak of Rohingya refugee crisis and the spread of global pandemic. It may be mentioned that that this study is no longer intended to provide a comparison in respect to the conditions of Rohingya women in Cox's Bazar. Rather, this particular study has solely focused on getting an in-depth understanding on the dynamics of Gender Based Violence (GBV) and the role of women as an agent of change and promoter of peace and social cohesion in the host community in Cox's Bazar.

Methodology:

This report follows a mix of various qualitative analysis methodologies including Literature Review, Focus Group Discussion (FGD), Key Informants' Interviews (KII). These tools were used to amass information from the field. Triangulation was used to verify authenticity of data/information gathered. Review of various documents, relevant literature and online reports/newspaper articles was carried out to collect recent information on the situation of women in the host community. All this information has been used throughout the report. A total of 12 FGDs and 15 KIIs were accomplished with a range of target groups and stakeholders in the Haladiapalong Union of Ukhiya.

Findings from the Filed:

Gender Based Violence (GBV), in fact, is one of the most prevalent forms of human rights violation against women and girls in Bangladesh of all.¹ According to a joint study of UNFPA and BBS (2011), 87% of married women reported to have experienced some form of violence in their life time.² GBV disproportionately impacts women in the traditional patriarchal society of Bangladesh. Like similar experience in other parts of this country, this research found that GBVs, in the forms of abuse, early and forced marriage, restrictions on freedom of movement and association, had largely been prevalent among the women and girls in the host community in Cox's Bazar. It is widely found that the forms of GBVs - early marriage, forced marriage, dowry, sexual harassment, eve teasing, etc.- are deeply rooted in the socialization process, which is predominantly driven by the patriarchal norms. In fact, violence against women are driven by gender inequality and social norms which are entrenched in structural inequities and social injustice.

This research reveals that social and cultural change is also resulting from decisions made by individuals and households in response to shifts in economic conditions, market opportunities and understanding in social risks and vulnerabilities. As the inflation soars for the refugee influx and the supply chain has broken down due to COVID-19, these drivers have contributed to changing family dynamics, gender norms and values. It is also observed that these changing dynamics have also been influencing public perceptions, social attitudes, norms and values in terms of the mobility, interactions and behavior of women and girls. This changing pattern towards women and girls had also provided another example of how decisions taken by male had been influenced by the larger patterns of social change. Women were being forced to follow a standard set of behavior and which has been crippling their ability to participate in the workplace, in public life and to make or influence decisions in the household and at the community levels.

Findings of the FGDs reveal that trust gaps exist due to the differences between perception and reality on various issues and therefore stereotyping is one of the major sources of concern and tensions even among the women in the host community in Cox's Bazar. It is evident from the discussion of the FGDs and many KIIs that many including women in host community possess a very hostile attitude towards Rohingyas as they are facing challenges in daily lives due to the large presence of Rohingya refugees in their locality. Rohingyas are likely to be blamed or stereotyped for all these problems existing in Cox's Bazar. Both men and women still consider Rohingyas both as the source of crime and violence. This mindset is responsible for simmering tensions between these two communities. A local women leader stated, "My husband used to do the job with an INGO, he was attacked by the Rohingya people. Rohingya's are very aggressive." Moreover, women in the host community have a

¹<https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/unfpa-collaborates-government-prevent-gender-based-violence-rohingya-camps>

perception that Rohingya women have a tendency to attract the local male and boys which causes increase in polygamy in host community area.

Despite the presence of negative perceptions, angers, and tensions towards Rohingyas, the majority of the women participants including women leaders were found sympathetic towards the legitimate causes of the Rohingya population. It was seen that most of the women present in the FGDs have expressed their interest to know about the Rohingya women and children and their situation and dire conditions in the refugee camps. One of the women leaders in the host community said, “Challenges facing by the women of both communities are largely similar in the form of GBV, dowry, forced marriage and lack of participation in decision making in their own communities. Since the Rohingya people live in a restricted area and officially they are not allowed to move outside the camp, the women in the host community have limited scope to contact with the Rohingya women.”

The findings of the FGDs and KIIs revealed key issues responsible for limiting women’s empowerment that included: (i) women’s economic opportunities continue to be limited by factors, such as discrimination in the labor market, limited access to market-relevant training, high illiteracy levels, and particularly heavy household work burdens due to deficiencies in basic services; (ii) women’s work tends to be in the low-wage side of formal employment and informal sector activity, and the gender gap in earnings is significant; (iii) learning outcomes in education continue to be poor, particularly for girls, and the gender gap is significant by the end of secondary schooling; (iv) the high levels of violence, and fear of violence, against women in families and communities impose critical constraints on mobility and quality of life; and last but not the least, (v) it remains a challenge for women politics to influence public decision making due to both lack of experience and continuing resistance from male colleagues³.

Another major source of concern responsible for exacerbating social tension is the use of technology and social media. The impact of technology and social media has been widening gender gaps as very few women and young girls are getting access to smartphone compared to young boys in the host community. The young girls are mostly being prevented using mobile phone in many families as policing attitude infused by patriarchy has been preventing them to take access. In most cases, tensions between young male members of the family and their parents are also simmering due to excessive addiction of the young boys to social media. It was also found that the user of smartphone and social media do not have any understanding on digital literacy and on rules and guidelines about the peaceful use of social media. There is high possibility that the youth bulge in the host community may subscribe fake news and disseminate disinformation without knowing the consequences. One of the female participants said, “She is very concerned seeing the overuse of the smartphone by her son. She is in fear pondering without knowing what he is doing in the social media.” In line with her comment, many women in the FGDs shared stories how social media acts as a triggering factor to maximize the possibilities of violence at the local level. The social, political, and

³ There is considerable reluctance on the part of political parties to nominate women as candidates despite the RPO provision for 33 percent of women nomination. According to the Women in Politics Index 2017 by UN Women, as of January 2017 Bangladesh had only two (6.3 percent) women ministers out of a total of 32 ministers and 71 (20.3 percent) women members of parliament in a House of 350 – with only 21 elected members and the remaining 50 from reserved seats (UN Women, & Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2017, February). Women in Politics 2017. Retrieved October 31, 2017, from <https://www.ipu.org/file/2687/download?token=oc2hik70>)

religious conflicts are sometimes turning towards violence due to the twisting of information and news in the social media platforms.

Recommendations:

- 1. Engagement:** It is important to promote, support, and enable women's networks and women's rights organizations to support their efforts. The women-led organizations and women networks should be brought under capacity development programme by the humanitarian organizations and offer opportunities to collaborate on joint action.
- 2. Representation:** Women's leadership and empowerment need to be strengthened supporting their representation at various forums and local government tiers and providing opportunities to raise their voice along with their male counterparts. The standing committees related to women and children affairs formed in the Union Parishad are still not performing at the desired level. Women must be offered equal opportunities to be engaged in all preparedness and response activities at the local level.
- 3. Mobilization:** It is essential to organize awareness sessions, consultations and messaging through women leaders/networks. The awareness sessions and messaging should need to include topics on gender equality and women's rights. It is also important to engage other influential stakeholders in awareness raising efforts for broader community engagement/mobilization and awareness raising to promote gender norms transformation.
- 4. Empowerment:** It is necessary to advocate for women's economic empowerment initiatives in the host communities including skill training, cash for work, and promoting women's engagement as paid volunteers and paid community representatives/elected leaders. For this, education and learning opportunities for women and adolescent girls in host communities need to be introduced with an aim to making them enable to get access to information and to make them proactive for exercising their rights.
- 5. Leadership:** It is crucial to promote women leadership, through which they could claim and ensure their effective participation in decision making process at various levels of governance at the community level on issues of conflict, peace and security. Women, exercising their leadership skills, should look for solution through peaceful means, generating discussion to look for alternatives. This is predominantly pertinent that women could be better interlocutors in promoting peace in a society which has been plagued by multi layered and multi-dimensional tension, conflict and violence.
- 6. Network Building:** Build up a network of women organizations to collectively raise their voice, from grassroots to national level, so as to leverage them into policy process and ensure their timely and effective implementation;
- 7. Sensitization on Global Demand:** Sensitize the policymakers about the local and global demand to empower and ensure participation of women in an inclusive and substantive manner.

8. **Inclusiveness:** Include women and girls from the minority and disadvantaged communities to give them a voice and create a space for their participation on issues of their vital interest.

Understanding the Role of Women in Preventing GBV and Promoting Social Cohesion in the Host Community in Cox's Bazar

Introduction:

Background of the Study

It is globally acclaimed that Bangladesh has made remarkable progress on many issues related to gender equality and women empowerment. The World Economic Forum in its recent report, titled 'Global Gender Gap Report 2020,' reveals that Bangladesh has been ranked the top country among its South Asian neighbours by performing the best in narrowing the gender gap. Bangladesh has also closed 72.6% of its overall gender gap and ranked 50th position out of 153 countries globally.⁴ Yet, at the same time the general climate of conflict and insecurity, often fed by patriarchy and prejudices, ends up in translating into violence against women at a variety of levels. Several recent studies have eloquently borne this out. Ain o Shalish Kendro, a local rights group, evaluated the situation in these words, 'Despite women's advancement in education, administration, sports and economic, social and cultural spheres as well as initiatives of different GO-NGO to curb violence against women, they continue to be victims of various forms of violence including rape, sexual harassment, etc.'⁵ It is also to be mentioned that the gender-related development Index (GDI) is lower than the human development index (HDI), which is clearly indicating that an aggregated index masks gender inequalities. Of the 155 countries for which both indexes can be calculated, 100 countries showed less disparity than Bangladesh. On the gender empowerment measure (GEM), which considers whether women are active in public and economic life, Bangladesh ranks 108th out of 109 countries.⁶

It is undeniable that any humanitarian crises exacerbate pre-existing gender inequalities and discriminations aggravating the risks, vulnerabilities and impacts on women and girls.⁷ This is equally true for the women and girls living in host communities along with the Rohingya women in Cox's Bazar. If media reports and the statements of the women and girls in the FGDs are to be believed, the presence of millions of Rohingyas has been contributing to prevailing gender inequalities by transforming power relations in terms of social norms, values and practices. This transformative change processes of gender and social norms has somewhat contributed to the rise of violence against women and GBVs and marginalized their position at the local level.

Women and girls in the host community in Cox's Bazar have been continuously facing serious challenges, and discrimination and are being frequently excluded from taking part fully in the economic, political and social life of their communities. Today, women as a

⁴ See Global Gender Gap Report of World Economic Forum
Forum, http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf

⁵ Ain O Salish Kendra, *Human Rights Situation of Bangladesh in 2018*, Dhaka, Bangladesh

⁶ See Amena Mohosin, "Evaluation Report for a Project titled Girls Ambassador for Peace in Cox's Bazar" page 5 (An internal report only shared with GNWP and JNUS)

⁷ See, Daniel Coyle, Mohammad Abdullah Jainul, Marie Sophie Sandberg Pettersson "Honour in Transition: Changing gender norms among the Rohingya" <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/-/media/>, April 2020

community have been experiencing new challenges – the pressure of one million Rohingya refugees and the outbreak of global pandemic - that are unjustly impeding or even violating their rights. The feelings, perceptions, risks, challenges and vulnerabilities of the women in host community are still remain unnoticed or unrecognized as very few attempts have been made to understand their real conditions and sufferings. There is a wide perception found in the host community among the women in particular that the humanitarian response in Cox’s Bazar has not been paying due attention to address the discriminatory practices and inequalities responsible for disempowering women in the host communities. This research is particularly focused on addressing or understanding some of the underlying causes of insecurity and GBV linked to the fragility of women and girls in Cox’s Bazar

Women and girls in the host community in Cox’s Bazar are devoid of networks, resources and platforms to play a proactive role to secure and consolidate sustainable peace in the society. Women and girls do have immense potentiality to prevent violence and promote social cohesion, which has been highlighted in the National Plan of Action on Women in Peace and Security (WPS) adopted by the government of Bangladesh in 2018 as part of global commitment UNSCR 1325. This study is also focused on exploring opportunities where the women and girls in the host community can play a productive role as an agent of change for advancing a culture of peace, against a culture of violence. While doing so, it will also assess the role of duty bearers and right holders in promoting the human rights of women.

Objective

The objective of the research is to understand the trends in vulnerability in women and the drivers in Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in the host community in Cox’s Bazar and to identify the ways where they can get the opportunity to bring about a positive social change.

The specific objectives of the research are as follows:

- To understand the issues related to insecurity and GBV among women and girls within the host community in Cox’s Bazar;
- To assess the opportunities for women to act as an agent of social change to prevent GBV and promote peace and social cohesion in society;
- To find out some actionable recommendations for the local and national level actors to take actions for improving the meaningful participation of women by widening opportunities for them;

Methodology

This research has been undertaken at the Haladiapalong Union of Ukhiya Uapzilla over a period of fifteen days. Information and analysis here is based on data gathered through dedicated inquiries and consultations with men and women, as well as discussions with other stakeholders in the project area. A total of twelve dedicated focus group discussions and fifteen key informant interviews were conducted at the Haladiapalong Union. The participants of FGDs were chosen based on a range of factors in terms of age, profession and social status to ensure a diversity of respondents. Discussions were carried out among female

household heads, adult women, women volunteers, adolescent girls and boys, elected women community representatives and committee members, male leaders, widows, older men and women, women leaders, and women with disabilities. The findings were first recorded and then transcribed as much as possible. The principle of voluntary participation has been followed to abide by the research ethics and the identities of the information providers and participants in the FGDs have remained anonymous.

A mix of various qualitative analysis methodologies, such as, Literature Review, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and Key Informant Interviews (KII) used to accumulate information as part of collecting primary and secondary data from the project area. Moreover, observation note was collected from the field researchers. Review of various documents from secondary sources like relevant literature and online reports/newspaper articles were carried out to collect recent information on the conditions of women in the host community. The triangulation – FGDs, KIIs, and Review of Secondary Materials - used to verify the authenticity of data/information gathered. It provided an accurate portrayal and account of the characteristics, for example behaviors, opinions, abilities, beliefs and knowledge of a particular individual, situation, or group etc.

- i. **Literature Review:** Various relevant study reports particularly related to GBV were reviewed. All relevant documents from the ISCG resources have been collected, as well as other relevant online reports including media reports. Tools and questionnaires available in online were also analysed. These were reviewed for developing the current modus-operandi of this project.
- ii. **Focus Group Discussion (FGD):** A total of 12 FGDs were accomplished with 95 people of Haladiapalong Unio through 12 FGDs. Among the participants 62 were female and 33 were male. Community women had been the first target as they were the prime beneficiary of this study and they were selected in view of a diverse set of background in terms of age, social position, profession, social status, race, religion and culture. The FGDs included the male participants against each category of age group, ranged for this study, in order to perceive their opinion on various issues related to GBV and women rights.
- iii. **Key Informants Interview (KII):** As per research design, 15 KIIs had been conducted with the service providers who were primarily responsible for preventing GBV and protecting the security of women in their locality. The service providers included the members of local administration, representatives from the law enforcement agencies, officials of the One-stop Crisis Centres and the Victim Support Centres, and the members of the various committees at the Union level that include the Legal Aid Committees, Law and Order Committees and VAW Committees, and Union level Arbitration Councils with an aim to improving their combined efforts to prevent the drivers of insecurity and the GBV in the targeted area.

Qualitative Analysis Methods

The findings from the FGDs, KIIs and literature review were noted in detail (mostly from hand-written notes). They were also re-checked with the questionnaires. In case of anomalies,

particularly in the case of KIIs, the key informant was re-contacted over the phone, if necessary. The main analytical process of qualitative data was triangulation of methods, i.e. findings obtained from FGDs, KIIs, and document review. The findings from FGDs were verified and ‘corroborated’ with the findings of literature review; these were finally verified during interviews with key informants. All of the validated outputs were utilized for deriving key recommendations.

Profile of the Respondents and the Study Area

FGD Respondents

Age group	Gender	Other Specification	FGD No
14 to 25 Years	Male	N/A	01
	Female	Adolescence girls	02
		Jobholders/Earning women	03
26 to 35 Years	Male	N/A	04
	Female	Housewife/Homemaker	05
		Representative from women committee of Union Parishad (UP and influential women	06
36 to 45 Years	Male	N/A	07
	Female	Female Teachers + women leaders	08
		Representative from women committee of Upazilla Parishad (UP) and influential women	09
45 to above Years	Male	N/A	10
	Female	Widows/Single Mothers	11
		GBV victims/Survivors	12

The study had been administered at Haldiapalong Union of Ukhiya Upazila in Cox’s Bazar. However, Most of the Key Informants Interviews (KIIs) were conducted from Upazilla level (Ukhiya). The basic information of this union is given below:

Name of the Union	Area (Acre)	Male Population	Female Population	Literacy rate (%)
Haldiapalong	8716	19061	17839	24.67

Understanding the Conditions of Women and Girls:

The research findings have been recorded and analyzed in four sections – 1) Violence against women and trends in GBV, 2) Women’s participation and empowerment 3) Women’s role in preventing violence and building social cohesion 4) recommendations for exploring opportunities for women and girls to play the role of change agent as identified in the ToR of the study.

Violence against Women and trends in GBV

It has been found out that men, women and other stakeholders in the project area have confused perception on issues related to ‘GBV’ and ‘violence against women’. They equated both the terms. Almost all of them have never heard of the word GBV. The participants in FGDs, both male and female, have interchangeably used the term "gender-based violence" (GBV) and "violence against women" (VAW). In view of the participants, *gender-based violence means the physical and mental torture upon women because of the incongruity with the male members of her family*. Same views also found from other stakeholders in the study area, i.e. women vice-chairman of Upazilla Parishad, women members of Haladiapalong Union Parishad, female teachers, and women businessmen except the government officials and members of law enforcement agencies.

All participants, irrespective of male and female, including duty bearers and right holders, have recognized that several forms of GBVs have been occurring in their locality and most of them are remaining unnoticed or unaddressed. Majority of the male participants (75%) in FGDs have mentioned that GBV and gender inequality exist in their localities. Child Marriage, Polygamy and Dowry and conservative mentality of various actors in society responsible for GBVs. Few male participants, however, were found resistant towards the idea of gender equality and women empowerment. They cited these ideas not compatible to their socialization process and harmful for the society. It has been observed that female participants become emotionally attached regarding the GBV issues, especially with several forms of it. They have added some more reasons behind the GBV and gender inequality that include prejudice, lack of educational opportunity, early marriage, lack of employment opportunities, and lack of confidence in women. Likewise, one of the participants stated, *“We are facing g the inequality from the beginning of our lives both in our parental house and in laws which push us towards the suffering and oppression”*. *The female participants also revealed* that restrictions, which have been imposed on men and boys to join their daily work and to go out as freely as before, are now resulting in increases in tensions in their home. There is a growing tendency now developing among the male to control and monitor the movement of women members of their family when they are visiting outside the home. They are falsely associating family honor with the women and trying to protect this policing their

movements and forcing to wear cloths as their choice. In many cases, such type of behavior is turning into tensions leading to domestic violence.

Research findings reveals that the social norms have been playing a very important role in determining the role of women in host community. The issues and incidents related to VAW or GBV are largely analyzed against the frames of existing social norms which is patriarchal in nature. In fact, there is recognition that the circumstances leading to creation of a conflict or violence, where women could be a victim, are essentially fed by the existing gender norms, generally biased against the equal rights, roles and participation of women within the family and outside. The findings further reveal that violence against women also grows from the existing social, cultural, political and economic practices, which are also generally loaded against the equal rights of women. Continued rise in violence against women, child marriage and trafficking of girls and women and recent trend of women involvement in drug trafficking are some of the sordid manifestations of such an anomaly. Indeed, the process of vulnerability of women has deepened, unfortunately against the complex process of violence, conflict and marginalization due to the restrictions imposed by the government and local authorities from time to time due to COVID 19. Unfortunately, both physical and psychological violence have been found to be rampant in areas under this survey. In this kind of oppressive condition, sometimes women could try to take revenge in three ways- either they seek divine justice and wait for it; they take their own life or retaliate against such oppression through other means.

The study finds that over politicization and partisan outlook, drastic fall in quality of governance, impunity and unavailability of timely justice, along with lax or practically little implementation of the existing laws and regulations are largely responsible for the current rise in GBVs in the host community in Cox's Bazar. The survey result revealed that involvement in conflict in project locations is very high (41%) among young men compared to adolescent and adult person. What is worrying is the readiness of society to accept some degree of violence as a means to resolve differences and conflicts, which unfortunately offers some degree of legitimacy to use of violence as a social norm. In this kind of environment, it is very much possible that extremist elements could capitalize on such a social flexibility to justify their ideas and actions.

Interestingly, this study finds that policy could also sometimes induce insecurity for women in a loaded environment if they are not matched by adequate and effective execution. This may somehow explain the paradox of existence of a large body of laws to promote the interests of women in public life and the growing trend of violence and discrimination perpetrated against women in the host community. In reality, over the last three decades, particularly since the Beijing Women Conference in 1995, Bangladesh has enacted many laws and legal frameworks to ensure participation of women in various sectors of life and uplift the role of women in society by offering various forms of incentives. Nonetheless, it is difficult to say how safe and secure the women feel and what notable role they could do to reframe the social discourse and participation in favor of enlarging their space in preventing GBV in the violent context of Cox's Bazar.

Women's participation and empowerment

It has been found out from the in-depth discussions with male participants that they support women's work outside the family, but strongly believe that after marriage, looking after children, husband and other family members should be women's first priority. Women should act according to their husband's instructions and they have the right to work outside the home only if the husband approves. This relative seclusion of women has direct and obvious consequences in terms of access to services outside the domestic sphere. It may also have a more profound influence on mentality and outlook by circumscribing interactions with the outside world, limiting exposure to new ideas and models of behavior and making her vulnerable to the exploitation and domestic violence. In terms of women's participation in the decision making, it has been found from the discussions that women are still far behind of decision-making process in the study area. The women's participation in the local government tiers is very limited. Almost 80% among the participants agreed that our cultural or traditional practice, norms and values and lack of education are the key contributors to such situation. The scenario on decision making can be expressed by the following quotes have come among one of the female participants, *"Our voice finds no values and our opinion is not considered in any family matters not even in family planning issues."*

Most of the respondents (male and female) think it is really difficult and complex to get access to GBV services. Many women victims even do not have proper information on services access point and process. A significant finding from KII is that number of litigations has been increased, analysis shows that very few complains (GBV case) were reported at police station in every week during the last eight Months. In order to find a solution to this problem, many KII respondents suggested to empower local administration and local law enforcement agencies. Alternatively, women Affairs Officer of Ukhiya stated that "Many of GBV Cases can be mitigated at Union Parishad."

Women's participation in education and in economic opportunities is also very limited in the host community. It has come out from the social mapping that the dropout rate is quite high among the female students, particularly after the secondary level. Child marriage, widespread poverty, strong patriarchal culture, lack of literacy among women, lack of security, which manifests mostly in the form of eve teasing and threats of violence have been cited as the major reasons for the high dropout rate among the girls in those localities. The scope of generating income for both men and women is limited in the project locations as the common employment opportunities include jobs at NGOs in the refugee camps, manual work and agriculture. The job crisis is one of the reasons that push the young females toward frustration, and a kind of social alienation which may also lead them to adopt illegal means to survive.

Findings explore that women empowerment, Economic opportunities, Access to information, raising voice for own rights are not the easiest and common terms for the female respondents. Most of them said that women need to know about their rights and only then they can claim those. All of the respondents were in favor of continuing the reserve membership for women in local Governments. Women in host community had identified local government leaders (Union Parishad members), Religious leaders, location of women support centers, local

women leaders, UP sanding committees on ‘women and children welfares, and culture’ and police stations (as the key law enforcement agency) as the key influential stakeholders. Most importantly, all the participants were of the view that religious leaders (Imam of the Mosque) have informal but effective role in determining the gender role in their respective communities.

Women as Builder of Peace and Social Cohesion

Women is always considered to be a better mediator in a conflict prone environment. In order to better understand the potential role of women to prevent, resolve and mitigate conflicts at the local level in Cox’s Bazar, a holistic and wider approach, which is multi-layered and multidimensional in nature, would perhaps be more useful and effective as a tool to empower them against the lurking threat of violence, including gender-based violence. Equally important yet less discussed issue is linked to the role of men in the entire process. There is a strong evidence to suggest that unless men could be made part of such a process, the effort to mainstream the women in preventing, resolving and mitigating conflicts in the society will produce modest results. Indeed, a society, which is suffering from simmering/subaltern violence and conflicts, a nuanced and inclusive approach, would produce better and perhaps sustainable results to advance the interests of women.

One of the most interesting findings of this study is that most of the participants even from the influential actors are unknown about the concepts of WPS. “in many cases, such laws related to women are made in paper, no sufficient effort is invested towards the achievements” response comes while discussing the issue of National Plan on WPS (Bangladesh, 2019 – 2022)⁸. Majority among the participants are aware of the risks faced by women in outside and inside of their homes.

One of the most remarkable findings is the insecurity felt by the host community because of the presence of large number of Rohingya refugees. The male and female participants in the FGDs from the host community identified that they had been enduring many disastrous consequences due to the Rohingya influx. The female participants identified price hiking, bad traffic and roads, cheap labor rate, negative impact on educational systems, deterioration of security situation and so on. On the other hand, the male participants in the FGDs expressed that situation like almost no income, insufficient food, paying for getting basic necessity like shelter, lack of access to justice, demand for better and fair treatment and so on are the root causes for mental anxiety and depression. Both male and female see Rohingyas as a source of concern, crime and an existential threat. Despite these prevalent prejudices and stereotypes regarding Rohingyas, many risks and challenges facing by the women and girls in the Rohingya and host community are found similar in case of gender inequality, dowry, early marriage and violence against women. The women in the host community moreover are found to be sympathetic towards the sufferings and legitimate causes of the Rohingya women. This may be the entry point where both parties might develop consensus and common understanding on issues related to gender equality and women empowerment.

⁸ Due to sensitivity of the issue, Respondent requested not to mention his name while quoting this statement.

The rise of various armed groups/criminal gangs and the failure of the law enforcement agencies to tackle them had been contributing to the insecure and unsafe conditions in the refugee camps because abduction, extortion, rape, and murder had been sporadically happening. The presence of such kind of groups in the refugee camps sometimes is affecting the safety, security and movement of the women and girls in the host community along with Rohingya women. These situations need to be dealt by the members of law informant agencies.

It is surprising that having no personal ID in social media, many of the women are aware of possibility of spreading fake news, rumor and abuse of social media against women. However, their level of knowledges on social media- how it operates, what is the process, etc- is found very poor. Many of them don't have even a basic understanding of social media operation. Hence, their knowledge on mis-use of social media is also based on the information form neighbors, family members and friends. While discussing about social media issue, one government official suggested to design and conduct training on Social Media for youth so that they can understand the proper use of it. Use of personal mobile and Facebook is somewhat limited to only boys in both areas. Girls hardly use their own mobile phone and do not have regular access to facebook. Thus, it can be said that internet is not an equal playing field. It has been found from the survey that girls are still about 50% less likely to be connected to the Internet than men. Children seldom share with the parents what they see in mobile or internet alongside what they discuss with their friends. Technology and social media are the cutting-edge instruments having the potential to breeze or break the society. Young women and men can be utilized for promoting the ideas for peaceful use of social media in the project locations.

A Way Forward: Recommendations:

- Impart training to empower the women both at professional and adolescent level with appropriate knowledge and skills;
- Inspire women groups at all levels to take the leadership to engage and mobilize community and other stakeholders with a view to transforming the attitudes, norms, practices of society on gender related issues;
- Arrange interaction of the women and girls with relevant professional bodies, peer groups and government support infrastructures;
- Engage them into a series of activities to develop and pass on alternative messages/narratives to sensitize the social actors/stakeholders about the need to review the gender norms and become more gender sensitive and facilitate creating a space for women to contribute to fight all forms of violence against them;
- Link grassroots women with larger networks, including the government policy makers at national level, and if possible global level with a view to multiplying the impact of the project and to creating a sustainability pathway for the future.
- A multi stakeholder approach needs to be developed comprising all relevant actors of those localities to produce the maximum and lasting impact against GBV. It is also important to provide a platform to the women leaders for preventing GBVs.

- Partnership need to be developed between key government institutions, NGOs and CSOs at the local level to increase awareness and knowledge of the root causes of conflict and how to address them, including an understanding of the role of women in promoting peace and social cohesion.
- Gender-sensitive policies and model initiatives that are effective in promoting social cohesion, tolerance and diversity including gender equality can be scaled up.
- Dialogue platforms and networks of women leaders and civil society actors need to be established to strengthen social cohesion, social harmony preventing conflict and GBV.
- The orientation of the security officials, law enforcement agencies and officials of local government need to be aligned with the gender sensitive policies so that these actors might become more gender-responsive during disasters, emergencies and humanitarian crises.
- The knowledge of government and civil society stakeholders, including first responders in disaster and emergency situations, need to be enhanced and shared to protect women's safety and well-being in peace and security settings.
- There is a need to develop a full value chain approach to effectively integrate the women organizations and networks into the national policy making and implementation process. Keeping this in mind, it is imperative to empower the local women organizations and link them with relevant Ministries and Agencies in Dhaka, so that they could forcefully push their agenda for equal and effective participation in decision making process at all levels on issues as vital as peace and security. The value of developing a comprehensive value chain approach can hardly be ignored, particularly in the context of addressing the multi layered and multi-dimensional violence and conflicts against women.
- Orientations need to be organized on the peaceful use of social media and the use of information in a conflict sensitive manner for the young men and women to promote social cohesion in the community.

Gaps and Challenges:

Most the government initiatives to empower women are the product of top down approach, and hence do not give the ownership at the bottom of society, which is reflected in their less practical value to women, who suffer from growing trend of violence against women and women falling victim to conflicts of various nature, including GBVs. Another gap is that most of the policy initiatives by the government and NGOs are only focused on women; men are largely excluded. It is also found that regardless of the adoption of NAP, no visible initiatives have been taken at the local level to implement it to empower the women with particular focus on participation and engagement on efforts to prevent violence, conflict and promote conflict resolution and peace building initiatives. The major challenge is that the new generation, which are being socialized in violence afflicted socio-cultural environment, largely fed by dysfunctional political process and radical ideas articulated and circulated by the various forces in society, will frame the social discourse, behavior and decision-making process in the future. But very little effort has been made to engage them on a constructive, inclusive, peaceful and sustained interactions in either community building framework or equal participation of women and other disadvantaged groups in managing the social process,

or fighting extremist narratives, which has afflicted many developing societies, including Bangladesh. The project location is also economically less advanced than other areas of Bangladesh, and poverty seems to have largely defined the outlook and behavior with obvious impact on the participation of women in economic and other activities, although the situation is slowly improving. Some experts fear that in the post Covid-19 era, the space for women could be further diminished as priorities may shift to other areas. Already, incidences of violence against women have gone up amid lockdown and potential economic down turn may hasten the negative process.

Final Remarks:

Our recent survey found out that violence against women is rampant and progress on women rights is limited. Geographic distance could be one of the reasons for slow progress on the women issues in that area. Pressure from the extremist politics and agenda may have also diminished the possibility of women's role in setting the social agenda, including fight against the process of GBVs. Innovative plans need to be explored and designed in the project location to build, energize and empower women network in those difficult to reach areas to address these delicate yet challenging issues. It is therefore imperative to invest in young women's empowerment, participation, education, and leadership through gendered, inclusive, pluralistic, multilateral peacebuilding efforts.