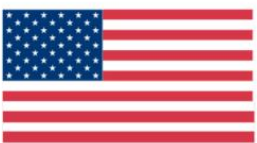# Enhancing Safety and Security of Female Staff and Volunteers in Humanitarian Response in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

Jago Nari Unnayon Sangstha and Global Women's Institute

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The Global Women's Institute
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4. CHAPTER THREE: RECOMMENDATIONS

Acronyms

GWI	Global Women's Institute
JNUS	Jago Nari Unnayon Sangstha
BPRM	Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration
UN	United Nations
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organizations
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
PSEA	Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
FDMN	Forcefully Displaced Myanmar Nationals
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
ISCG	Inter-Sectoral Coordination Group
GiHA	Gender in Humanitarian Action
RRRC	Refugee, Relief and Repatriation Commission
CFRM	Community Feedback and Response Mechanism
GBVSS	Gender-based Violence Sub-Sector
CiC	Camp in Charge

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Facing atrocities, including ethnic cleansing and genocide perpetrated by the Myanmar Army and their affiliates, over a million Rohingya refugees have been living in Ukhiya and Teknaf Upazilas, two sub-districts in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh since 2017. Since then, the Government of Bangladesh, in collaboration with the UN, INGOs, NGOs, and other relevant actors, has been managing an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in the southeastern part of the country bordering Myanmar. A notable feature of the crisis management in Cox's Bazar is the significant role played by female humanitarian workers in promoting gender-responsive humanitarian interventions. Despite facing various risks, vulnerabilities, and threats, these women have made crucial contributions alongside other actors in addressing the needs of the affected populations.

Female humanitarian workers have faced various risks, challenges, and threats, including verbal harassment, gender-based stereotypes, and opposition to their roles outside the home in the Rohingya camps and surrounding areas. Such incidents have frequently been reported by humanitarian partners and networks involved in the response. In fact, protection partners reported several incidents where female staff and volunteers faced threats for participating in volunteer work, as their activities were perceived as "dishonorable." There have been instances in which these women were blamed and scrutinized for not conforming to established patriarchal gender norms and values.[1]The likelihood of these occurrences had noticeably increased since January 2019, particularly during the pandemic, due to restricted movement for humanitarian partners and the rise of criminal gangs and violent groups within the Rohingya camps. Additionally, stereotypical perspectives on gender and threats against women working outside the home in the camps and host areas have heightened risks and vulnerabilities, impeding the movement of female staff and volunteers. Even after the Covid pandemic, this trend continued to some extent, with reports of messages against the use of female volunteers and attempts to restrict their movement. This situation has raised concerns among humanitarian partners about the potential impact on service delivery in the camps, as a significant number of female staff and volunteers are engaged in teaching, providing healthcare, and serving as community outreach volunteers.[2]

The female humanitarian workers can be categorized into three major groups: female staff from other parts of Bangladesh than Cox's Bazar, female humanitarian staff and volunteers from the host community in Cox's Bazar, and female volunteers of the Rohingya community. The degree of risk encountered by these groups depends on their local affiliations, positions within local power structures, and familiarity with the dynamics of the area. Female staff from outside Cox's Bazar is sometimes confronted with obstacles for not adhering to perceived local patriarchal norms right from the beginning, while female staff and volunteers from the host community in Cox's Bazar are somewhat able to leverage their local connections yet face opposition from their own communities. Female volunteers from the Rohingya community mostly endure significant hardships, including various forms of

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[1]   Eileen Pittaway., Linda Bartolomei., and Geraldine Doney. (2021). Addressing SGBV And Empowering Refugee Women in Cox's Bazar. Refugee Women and Girls: Key to The Global Compact on Refugees. UNSW Sydney. https://agd-matrix-tool.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/UNSW-GCR-Project_Bangladesh-Consolidated-Report_Final.pdf. Accessed 22 June 2022.

[2]   Gender Hub, UN Women, OXFAM and CARE (2020). Rapid Gender Analysis on the Impact of COVID- 19. Accessed 1 March 2022.

intimidation such as verbal abuse and physical aggression. Instances occur where individuals with conservative or hostile dispositions try to intimidate the aforementioned female humanitarian workers through the utilization of derogatory language or persistent surveillance. Perennial obstacles stem from entrenched patriarchal norms and values, as well as the cultural construct of "Izzat."[3] Additionally, the presence of criminal gangs within the camps poses a significant threat to the safety and well-being of female humanitarian workers, as they face a high risk of becoming victims of gunfights, illicit operations such as drug trafficking, extortion, and human trafficking. Moreover, female humanitarian staff and volunteers traveling to the Rohingya camps from Cox's Bazar town often use public transport and frequently experience harassment and verbal abuse, particularly during non-standard working hours. This complex scenario underscores the urgent need for comprehensive strategies that incorporate gender inclusivity in humanitarian responses.

Over the past seven years, a robust administrative and security framework, supported by overlapping institutional mechanisms, has developed to manage the complex and protracted humanitarian crisis in Cox's Bazar. Female humanitarian workers, primarily recruited on a contractual and temporary basis, often lack sufficient time to familiarize themselves with these administrative and security pathways, leave them vulnerable to various risks and challenges. This situation often hinders their ability to take appropriate measures in times of crisis. Additionally, a limited understanding of the protection sector's mechanisms, including the Gender-Based Violence Sub-Sector (GBVSS) and the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) network restricts their capacity to report sensitive issues - such as security incidents - to their own organizations or protection focal points while ensuring confidentiality. These factors exacerbate their fears of retaliation, and breaches of confidentiality in an uncertain and conflict-prone environment. As a result, addressing the safety and security issues of female humanitarian workers always remains a significant challenge. The lack of understanding and appreciation for gender sensitivity among key actors, coupled with the absence of whistleblower protections in many cases, often discourages them from reporting any sensitive security concerns which they face in the Rohingya camps and surrounding areas. Furthermore, building the capacity of female humanitarian workers is both critical and challenging due to limited resources and insufficient attention. If these systemic disparities are not properly addressed through appropriate measures, female humanitarian workers will continue to be marginalized, limiting their opportunities for equal participation in decision-making processes and undermining their rights, ultimately making them more vulnerable to exploitation and violence.

To enhance trust and confidence among female humanitarian workers, it is essential to establish a coordinated and responsive mechanism that involves security providers, local authorities, civil society, media, and representatives from both the Rohingya and host communities, as well as protection focal points. This approach might facilitate the reporting of security incidents by ensuring the involvement of relevant stakeholders and fostering a supportive environment. To achieve this, it is essential to strengthen community-based conflict resolution mechanisms, enhance the responsiveness of local authorities, reinforce early warning systems, build the capacity of humanitarian organizations, and increase the roles of the protection sector, civil society, and media.

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[3]   "Izzat" means honour prevalent in Rohingya culture. Unfortunately, the Rohingyas mostly associate this with women resulting into curtailing their freedom.

Effective and meaningful endorsement of all actors is pre-requisite to ensure safety and security of female humanitarian workers in the humanitarian response in Cox's Bazar. Therefore, a whole of society approach would be required to address the safety and security issues affecting the working environment of female humanitarian workers. Only then, it would be possible to engage and empower all relevant actors including security providers and local authorities. Addressing the safety and security issues of female humanitarian workers would not be possible without meaningful collaboration of local authorities, representatives of Rohingya and host community, United Nations agencies, humanitarian partners, non-governmental organizations, civil society, and media. Establishing a collaborative, functional, and responsive framework is crucial for generating trust and confidence among female humanitarian workers in reporting security incidents while maintaining anonymity and whistleblower protection.

This research was commissioned to JNUS by GWI as part of its global initiatives for building GBV Evidence. JNUS conducted this research project to get a deeper understanding of the nature and trends in threats, negative messaging, and violence against female humanitarian workers in the humanitarian response in Cox's Bazar. The findings of this research are expected to contribute to developing an informed understanding of the current situation and providing specific recommendations for relevant stakeholders to undertake effective measures addressing the safety and security concerns of female staff and volunteers in the Rohingya camps and surrounding host areas. Following a systematic approach, the research identified potential risks and challenges, as well as assessed the quality of formal and informal protection mechanisms available to enhance the protection of female staff and volunteers.

The findings of this research reveal that verbal abuse and threats towards female staff and volunteers primarily stem from inequitable gender norms and values embedded in the socialization process of both Rohingya and host communities. Current efforts by various actors in the Rohingya camps and surrounding areas to address harmful gender attitudes across local communities and institutions towards female humanitarian workers are inadequate. Additionally, the research highlights that the ability of female staff and volunteers to address the growing challenges and risks varies depending on their ranks and profiles. Factors such as familiarity with local conditions, access to resources, ability to participate in the decision-making process, and position in local power dynamics play a significant role in defining their capacity to deal with safety and security threats.

> **The findings of this research reveal that verbal abuse and threats towards female staffs and volunteers primarily stem from inequitable gender norms and values embedded in the socialization process of both Rohingya and host communities.**

This research was conducted in two interlinked phases. In the first phase, formative research was carried out to identify the needs, concerns, and fear factors of female staff and volunteers, as well as to understand the roles of various actors in addressing their safety and security issues. The findings from this formative research also informed the development of sampling procedures and data collection methods. Building on the insights gained from the first phase, the second phase focused on exploring the risks, challenges, and threats faced by female staff and volunteers. During this phase, the study

generated actionable recommendations for stakeholders and relevant actors, aimed at providing sustainable support to enhance the protection of female staff and volunteers.

As this project had been carried out in a conflict-prone environment and humanitarian context characterized by polarization and trust deficits, the identities of the sources of information presented in this report have been deliberately kept anonymous. An ethical standard, therefore, had been adhered to ensure security of the gathered information, privacy and confidentiality of female humanitarian workers. The research team underwent online training and attended regular monthly meetings with GWI to enhance their competence in administering gender-related projects in humanitarian settings, with a particular focus on safeguarding and data protection. The research had also followed purposive sampling techniques to identify female humanitarian workers and other potential humanitarian actors and representatives of local authorities, community actors and others given they qualify to provide relevant and necessary data and information for fulfilling the purpose of this research. In total, sixteen FGDs and thirty KIIs along with a number of roundtable discussions were conducted to collect data, information, reconcile and cross-check the validity of these. Data analysis, including independent coding by multiple coders, was undertaken using online based software called Dedoose[4] to improve the reliability of the coding process. It is assumed that the findings of this research report would contribute to strengthening the ongoing efforts to enhance the safety and security conditions of female humanitarian workers in Cox's Bazar.

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4   An online based software to preserve and analyse data and information.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Rationale

In 2017, Bangladesh experienced a massive influx of Rohingya refugees from the neighboring Rakhine state of Myanmar, forced to flee their country due to ethnic cleansing and genocide. According to the Office of the UNHCR, over 1 million Rohingya individuals are currently sheltering in temporary makeshift camps in the Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh.[5] Managing such a large number of Rohingya refugees is indeed an arduous task for a country like Bangladesh, even with the humanitarian assistance provided by various local and international organizations. However, a complementarity, incorporating government and non-government actors, has already emerged where the female humanitarian workers have been playing a significant role in managing this humanitarian crisis.

Advocacy for a gender-responsive humanitarian operation has consistently been recognized as a pivotal concern since the onset of the current humanitarian response. Consequently, the gender-friendly approaches adopted by many humanitarian actors have enabled female humanitarian workers to play a key role in various aspects of the response mechanism. Collaborating with humanitarian actors, multiple sectors, sub-sectors, working groups, and networks - such as the Protection Sector, GBVSS, GiHA, Gender Hub, and PSEA working group - have facilitated the substantive, dignified, and respectful engagement of female humanitarian workers. Despite the dedicated efforts of these actors, female staff and volunteers continue to face various forms of insecurity, abuse, violence, and deprivation. Reports from local media, humanitarian organizations, and testimonies from female humanitarian workers indicate a surge in campaigns characterized by verbal abuse, threats, intimidation, extortion, and enforced absenteeism in various locations

> The spectrum of safety and security challenges faced by female staff and volunteers emanates from a multifaceted social milieu. The drivers responsible for underlying threats directed towards female staff and volunteers are deeply embedded within detrimental gender norms and values, and intricately interwoven with local contextual realities and circumstances as well. Their susceptibility to risks and vulnerabilities has therefore been exacerbated by a pronounced erosion of trust across communities and institutions, alongside horizontal and vertical polarization among humanitarian actors, coupled with a surge in violence within refugee camps and surrounding host areas and, and attributed to illicit activities perpetrated by organized criminal groups.

within the Rohingya and host communities. These pressing issues therefore demand concerted attention from all stakeholders responsible for ensuring safety and security measures.

The spectrum of safety and security challenges faced by female staff and volunteers emanates from a multifaceted social milieu. The drivers responsible for underlying threats directed towards female staff and volunteers are deeply embedded within detrimental gender norms and values, and intricately interwoven with local contextual realities and circumstances as well. Their susceptibility to risks and vulnerabilities has therefore been exacerbated by a pronounced erosion of trust across communities and

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[5]   UNHCR (2023). Rohingya Refugee Crisis Explained. https://www.unrefugees.org/news/rohingya-refugee-crisis-explained. Accessed 1 August, 2023.

institutions, alongside horizontal and vertical polarization among humanitarian actors, coupled with a surge in violence within refugee camps and surrounding host areas and, and attributed to illicit activities perpetrated by organized criminal groups. These contextual realities engender a climate of fear among female humanitarian workers, furthering their marginalization and potentially discouraging the reporting of sensitive or security-related issues.

The Rohingya female volunteers are usually not interested filing complaints or speaking out against security threats as they are fearful of losing their jobs or retaliation from criminal gangs. There is a perception prevalent among the female Rohingya volunteers that the humanitarian organizations would not be able to protect them in times of crisis as they have to stay in the camps even after sunset when outside organizations leave. Moreover, regular incidents of human rights violations by the criminal gangs, and difficulty to bring them to justice have further aggravated the sense of insecurity among them. As a result, the trust deficit in the protection mechanisms has widened, creating a platform for extra-legal forces to exploit it. To address this, humanitarian organizations should work closely with local authorities, security providers and the protection sector to ensure that perpetrators are held accountable for their actions, which will, of course, help rebuild trust and confidence among the female staff and volunteers, ultimately creating a safer and more supportive work environment for all involved.

This research had been undertaken to understand the safety and security issues faced by female staff and volunteers working in humanitarian response in Cox's Bazar. It has offered information and actionable recommendations for a range of actors- security providers, community actors, protection sector, relevant networks, and working groups in different sectors- who are engaged and responsible for the protection of female staff and volunteers in humanitarian response.

Discussion with the Female Leaders in the host community, Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar. *Photo Credit: Robiul Hasan*

1.2 Target Group and Stakeholders

Target Group:

The primary target group of this research is the female staff and volunteers who served or have been serving in the humanitarian response in Cox's Bazar. This includes the female staff that are from Cox's Bazar as well as from other parts of Bangladesh and the female volunteers from the host and Rohingya communities at the local level.

Stakeholders:

1. **Humanitarian Organizations: Organizations that employ or collaborate with female staff and volunteers, with the primary objective of safeguarding the well-being and security of their personnel and volunteers.**

2. **Security Providers: The representatives of local authority, various law enforcement agencies, representatives of district administration who are entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining law and order, as well as ensuring the security of all, including humanitarian workers, host population, registered refugees and FDMN.**

3. **Community Leaders from the Host Community: Influential social and community actors within the host community who possess significant influence and can effectively facilitate communication between the local population and humanitarian actors, thereby fostering a cooperative and productive working dynamic.**

4. **Rohingya Community Leaders: Community leaders in the Rohingya camps, male and female, who have the ability to address the unique problems that the female staff and volunteers face and work together with other actors to promote a safe and secure environment for all.**

5. **Funding and Donor Agencies: Organizations that offer financial assistance for humanitarian endeavors in the Rohingya camps and possess an interest in ensuring the security of the initiatives they sponsor.**

1.3 Methodology

This section offers a comprehensive overview of the research methods and processes followed during this research.

i. **Research Objectives**
   a. To develop a better understanding of the trends in vulnerability, risks and threats towards female humanitarian workers.
   b. To generate actionable recommendations for the stakeholders with an aim to contributing to building an effective support mechanism for ensuring safety and security of female staff and volunteers.

ii. **Research Questions**
   a. What are the current vulnerabilities, threats, and risks towards female staff and volunteers? What measures need to be taken to mitigate these?
   b. Which stakeholders need to be engaged in the prevention efforts? How? Which actions are to be taken?
   c. What are the gaps available in the existing mechanisms to provide security for female staff and volunteers? How should these gaps be addressed?
   d. In what ways can stakeholders play an effective role to ensure security of female humanitarian workers?

iii. **Research Design**

Preparation	Formation of Research Team	Brainstorming and Idea Generation	Finalization of an Ethical Guideline	Orientation on Safeguarding and Ethical Standard
Capacity Building	Training on Various aspects of GBV Research	Regular Monitoring and Guidance from GWI	Preparation of Research Tools	Orientation on Research Tools
Planning	Preparation for Formative Research	Testing of Research Tools	Improvisation of Research Techniques	Finalization of Target Groups and Relevant Stakeholders
Implementation	Data Collection using Qualitative Method	Preparation of Codebook	Data Analysis through Dedoose	Validation of Findings through Roundtable and other Discussion Sessions
Report Preparation	Finalization of Research Report			

a. **Preparation for Research:** To commence, an ethical framework had been established to oversee and direct the research process. This framework prioritized the safety and rights of female humanitarian workers, confidentiality protocols, and ethical standards governing the study. Emphasis was placed on maintaining strict confidentiality, with measures implemented to ensure the anonymity of participants. Additionally, a robust safeguarding policy, with a focus on data protection, was instituted to secure the information collected, restricting access solely to authorized personnel. The research team conducted regular brainstorming sessions to identify key indicators and data sources, devising a systematic approach for data collection, cleaning, and analysis. This meticulous process ensured both the integrity of the research and the protection of sensitive information.

b. **Capacity Building:** To equip the research team with the necessary skills for investigating gender-related issues in humanitarian contexts, GWI conducted a comprehensive online training session aimed to familiarize team members with the intricacies of conducting research in humanitarian context. Furthermore, GWI facilitated monthly meetings to oversee the progress of the research, fostering an environment for knowledge-sharing and experience exchange among team members. These discussions were instrumental in identifying the need for robust safeguarding and data protection policies, prompting the development of these. To ensure adherence to these policies, regular orientation sessions were organized to sensitize the research team on safeguarding and data protection principles, thereby enhancing their ability to conduct research safely and ethically.

c. **Planning:** At the beginning, formative research had been conducted for developing an understanding of the various aspects of safety and security of female humanitarian workers. The findings from the formative research helped the finalization of the research questions, sampling and data collection methods, development of the research tools and categorization of target groups and stakeholders.

   ☞ **Sampling Method:** This research adopted a purposive sampling method to identify the target groups and stakeholders, including female staff and volunteers. It is of course a non-probability sampling method in which female staff and volunteers are chosen because they possess traits that this research requires. In other words, they are chosen "on purpose".[6] The use of this non-random technique was deliberate, as it facilitated the identification of individuals with direct experience or expertise regarding the vulnerability of female humanitarian workers in the humanitarian response. This approach ensured that the data gathered was pertinent and provided valuable insights.

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[6]   Kassiani Nikolopoulou.,.(2022). What Is Purposive Sampling? Definition & Examples. Scribbr. https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/purposive-sampling. Accessed 2 August 2023.

☞ **Data Collection Method**

Method	Category of Respondents	Tools
FGD	Rohingya Female Volunteers, Female Volunteers from the Host Community, Female Staff and Volunteers of Various Humanitarian Organizations, Rohingya Majhis, Men from the Host Community and Men from the Rohingya Community, Rohingya Women Leaders, Rohingya Religious Leaders, Religious Leaders from Host Community	FGD Guidelines and Guided Questionnaire
KII	Camp Authority, Female and Male Police Officers in Ukhiya and Teknaf, GBV/Safeguarding/Protection focal of UN Bodies, INGOs, Local NGOs, Officer in Charge of Ukhiya Thana, Women-led Organizations, Elected Female Representatives of the Local Government, Upazila Women Affairs officer, Local Journalists, and Members of Civil Society.	KII Guidelines and Semi-Structured Questionnaire

d. **Implementation:** This study employed qualitative research methods to gain a deep understanding of the issues outlined in the research objectives and questions. Sixteen Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and thirty Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), supplemented by a literature review, were conducted. FGDs served as a platform for participants to collectively share their experiences and perceptions, offering a diverse range of views and insights. Additionally, KIIs provided a detailed exploration of individual experiences and expert perspectives on the issue. Qualitative data obtained from FGDs and KIIs were transcribed and analyzed using the software Dedoose. This software facilitated systematic organization, coding, and evaluation of the data, enabling the identification of patterns, themes, and insights related to the challenges faced by female humanitarian workers. By employing this approach, the study aimed to minimize potential biases and achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the dataset. Any discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussions among researchers, enhancing the reliability of the results. Finally, a data validation workshop involving all relevant stakeholders was conducted to ensure the accuracy and relevance of the findings.

✴ **Reviewing Secondary Materials:** Available relevant secondary materials, both from online and offline sources, were reviewed. Ongoing and completed relevant interventions were also examined. The aim was to develop a general understanding of the research questions. The findings of this review of secondary materials contributed to the development of research tools.

✴ **Focus Group Discussions:** Sixteen focus group discussions were organized with a range of actors that included Rohingya female volunteers, female volunteers from the host community, female staff of various humanitarian organizations, Rohingya Majhis, men from the host community and men from the Rohingya community, Rohingya women leaders, Rohingya religious leaders, and religious

leaders from the host community. The purpose of these discussions was to understand the perspectives of each group and identify their readiness to support efforts to increase the safety and security of female staff and volunteers while undertaking their roles and duties for humanitarian purpose.

✦ **Key Informant Interviews:** In order to validate and develop a deeper understanding of the findings of the FGDs, thirty interviews were conducted with the representatives of Camp Authority, female and male police officers in Ukhiya and Teknaf, GBV/safeguarding/protection focal points of UN bodies, INGOs, local NGOs, Officer in Charge of Ukhiya Thana, women-led organizations, Upazila Women Affairs Officer, local journalists, and members of civil society. The findings of these interviews helped to develop an in depth understanding of the critical aspects of safety and security issues of female staff and volunteers.

✦ **Roundtable Discussions and Data Validation Workshop:** Representatives from government, non-government, members of law enforcement agencies, humanitarian partners, female staff and volunteers and civil society stakeholders attended these roundtable discussions. Overall, eight roundtable discussions were organized at various levels with a range of stakeholders to solicit their views and opinions on priority areas as identified during KIIs and FGDs. The findings of these roundtable discussions, FGDs and KIIs were validated holding a data validation workshop which greatly contributed to the development of this research report.

1.4 Risks and Challenges

The complex nature of socio-economic and security settings of the Rohingya refugee camps presents a myriad of concerns, which affect not only the humanitarian workers but also the researchers who study these complexities. Mitigating the layers of risks that come with this kind of study was really challenging. In this study, some of the risks and mitigation strategies were as follows:

✦ **Safeguarding Respondent's Privacy and Confidentiality:** Maintaining privacy was one of the crucial aspects of this research considering the tense and polarized environment in the refugee camps and host areas. Any disclosure of respondent's identities or their views, opinions and statements could be used for malevolent purposes. Recognizing the potential risk, the research team implemented precautionary measures at the project's outset to protect, encrypt, and securely store data, utilizing offline storage methods to mitigate cyber threats. Careful assessment was a recurring procedure to ensure that the risks associated with collecting sensitive information did not outweigh the benefits derived from the study's findings. Prior informed consent presented in understandable language and emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation, was obtained from all participants before any data or information was collected from them.

✦ **Communication and Privacy Hurdles:** The research team encountered various communication hurdles at different levels during the study, including challenges in obtaining permissions from local authorities. The process was complicated and time-consuming due to unique requirements, review processes, and standards. Additionally, polarization among communities and institutions, including humanitarian partners, had the potential to create misunderstanding and sensitivity for this research, as each organization had its own approaches to addressing sensitive issues such as

the safety and security of female staff and volunteers. Given the sensitive nature of the topics, the research took particular care to preserve the privacy of all humanitarian actors. As a precautionary measure, the research primarily focused on external aspects of safety and security experienced by female staff and volunteers in the Rohingya camps and surrounding areas. It did not delve into how individual organizations address these issues within their own workplaces.

✦ **Trust Deficit at the Community Level:** Undertaking research in a humanitarian context presented significant challenges in earning the trust of female staff and volunteers. When outside researchers engaged with Rohingya volunteers, there was a noticeable degree of reluctance and fear, potentially limiting participation in the study. To address this crucial issue, the research team introduced Rohingya female volunteers to conduct interviews and discussions with the target groups in the refugee camps, thereby increasing participation and fostering trust in the process among respondents. Furthermore, the presence of criminal gangs, networks, and radical elements in the research sites posed evident threats. To mitigate risks, interviews and discussions were conducted in private locations to avoid attracting unwanted attention. Extra precautionary measures were implemented for female staff and volunteers when discussing experiences of violence, recognizing that breaches of confidentiality could present challenges for respondents or endanger existing social relations.

1.5 Scope and Reach of the Study

This study has taken a cautious approach to avoid breaching the privacy of any humanitarian organization or female staff and volunteers. Consequently, it does not delve into internal issues within organizations regarding their approaches to addressing safety and security concerns of their female staff and volunteers. Instead, the study narrows its focus to external aspects of risks, threats, and vulnerabilities faced by female staff and volunteers while fulfilling their roles and responsibilities in the Rohingya camps and adjacent host areas in Cox's Bazar.

Disagreements arose regarding this approach among various stakeholders, highlighting the challenge of distinguishing between internal and external threats and the respective organizations' primary duty in providing a safe and secure environment for their female staff and volunteers. Despite this, the research consciously acknowledges this limitation and respects the sovereign jurisdiction of each organization, restricting its analysis to external processes, drivers, values, and norms contributing to heightened safety and security threats towards female staff and volunteers. Additionally, the research recognizes that addressing threats towards female staff and volunteers requires the participation of various actors beyond humanitarian partners, including local authorities, community actors, humanitarian agencies, law enforcement agencies, and the media. Therefore, the study adopts a comprehensive approach to understanding safety and security issues faced by female staff and volunteers, considering the entire institutional mechanisms and processes, in addition to the mechanism introduced by the protection sector. It acknowledges that the sources of these risks, vulnerabilities, and threats are multidimensional in nature, thus advocating for a whole-of-society approach to effectively address these issues. Finally, the study takes a forward-looking approach to support sustainable efforts aimed at strengthening gender-responsive humanitarian interventions in Cox's Bazar.

1.6 Structure of the Findings

The next three chapters present the initial findings of the study along with subsequent recommendations. The first chapter details the prevailing trends in safety and security threats faced by female staff and volunteers, including an analysis of relevant terminology and concepts, as well as an exploration of the factors driving these threats. The second chapter examines the gaps and challenges in current protection mechanisms and their impact on the rights of female staff and volunteers. Finally, the third chapter offers recommendations for improving the safety and security conditions for female staff and volunteers, aimed at strengthening sustainable efforts to promote a safe and secure environment for them.
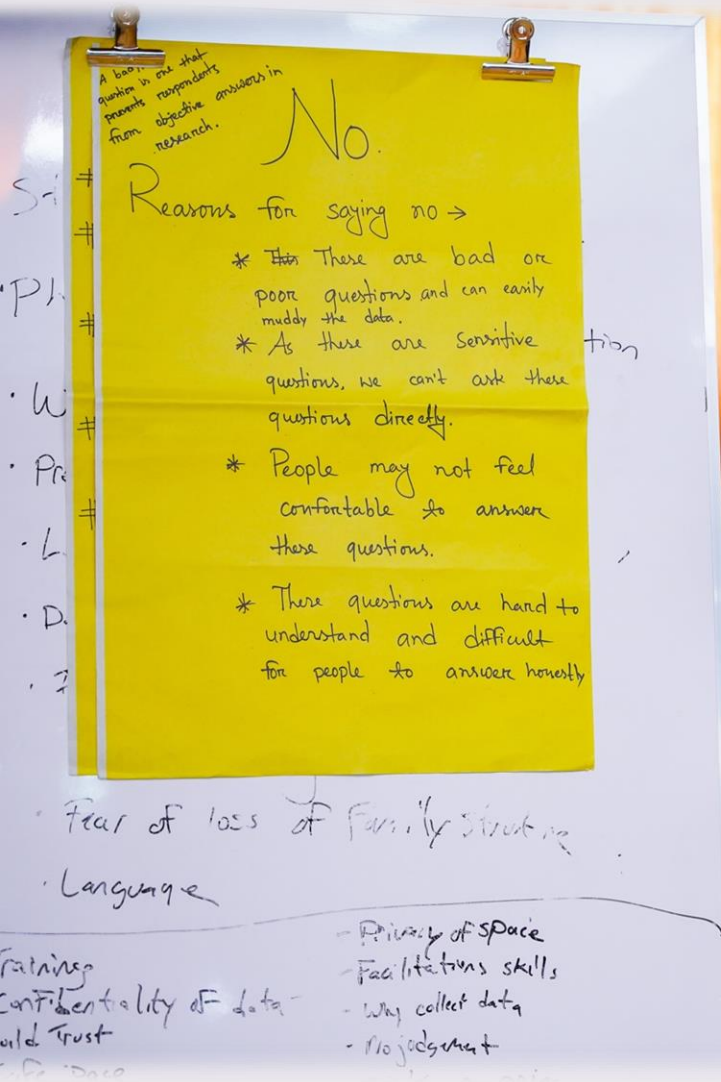
CHAPTER ONE: DRIVERS OF INSECURITY TOWARDS FEMALE STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

2.1 Interpretation of terms and concepts

Interpretation of terms and concepts

Female Humanitarian Workers: Female humanitarian workers, comprising both staff and volunteers, are pivotal contributors to humanitarian response efforts. Engaged in providing aid, support, and services to individuals affected by natural disasters, conflicts, forced displacement, and other emergencies, these females play a critical role. Their presence in the field is instrumental in ensuring that the needs of women and girls are addressed effectively. Their dedication and expertise contribute significantly to creating more equitable and impactful responses to humanitarian crises.

Safety and Security: Safety and security refer to the state of being protected from potential harm, danger, or threats. Safety encompasses physical well-being, preventing accidents or injuries, and promoting a secure environment. On the other hand, security involves safeguarding individuals and assets from any form of harm. Both safety and security are essential for maintaining peace of mind and ensuring the overall well-being of individuals and communities. Whilst safety is the unintentional protection against hazards, security is the conscious defense against threats. Safety is the protection from things that might accidentally damage an individual, whereas security is the protection from things that are intended to do harm.

Social Norms and Values: Social norms and values are generally unwritten, unspoken rules that determine what actions and behaviors are acceptable and are not acceptable within a certain community. They passively regulate human behavior in a certain community. A social norm or value in a community is made up of the things we do, the things we think other people do, and the things we think other people approve of and expect of us. Social norms and values are thus located at the point where behavior, beliefs, and expectations interact.

Violence against Women: Violence against women refers to any gender-based act, whether committed in public or private, that causes or is likely to cause bodily, sexual, or psychological injury or suffering to women. This includes threats of such acts, coercion, or the arbitrary denial of liberty.

Gender-Based Violence: Any violence against men and women that is motivated by their gender is considered gender-based violence.

Vulnerability: A weakness or deficiency in our decisions, actions, behaviors, procedures, or systems that is not addressed. Due to vulnerability, we are susceptible to damage or exploitation which renders us at risk of a variety of threats, including attacks of any kind, physical harm, and financial losses.

Threats: Anything that has a negative effect on our wellbeing. Physical injuries, caused by incidents of violence or accidents, chronic stress, or traumatic experiences, can all have a bad impact on our general state of wellness.

Risks: Risks refer to the potential consequences of combining threats and vulnerabilities, which can vary significantly depending on the situation. Some risks may cause minor inconveniences, while others can have severe consequences on individuals, or societies. Recognizing and evaluating these risks is crucial for developing mitigation plans and taking proactive measures to minimize the harmful effects of threats and vulnerabilities.

Conflict and Violence: Conflict and violence involve the use of physical force or aggression to cause harm or damage, often arising from differences in beliefs, values, or interests. These actions can lead to tension, aggression, and the outbreak of violence and conflict, causing devastating consequences such as loss of lives, infrastructure destruction, displacement, and long-lasting social and psychological trauma.

2.2 Gender stereotyped roles, patriarchy and harmful gender norms: Female humanitarian workers in the Rohingya camps and host areas navigate a deeply entrenched social landscape marked by rigid gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms. In both Rohingya and host communities, traditional beliefs dictate that women should prioritize family roles over professional pursuits, leading to stigma when women step outside these prescribed boundaries. As a result, female workers often face negative judgments for their presence in the camps, which can undermine their authority and effectiveness. These societal expectations not only limit their roles within the humanitarian response but also hinder the overall impact of gender-responsive interventions. The challenges are compounded by scrutiny regarding their attire and behavior, which can further marginalize these women and deter their participation. Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach that promotes gender equality within the humanitarian sector, encourages community dialogue to challenge prevailing stereotypes, and fosters an environment where women's contributions are recognized and valued. Empowering female workers through training, support networks, and advocacy can enhance their visibility and effectiveness, ultimately contributing to more equitable and impactful humanitarian efforts.

In the Rohingya community, the concept of "Izzat," or honor, is intricately tied to the behavior and roles of women, influencing their societal standing both within families and the broader community. Women seeking to work outside the home often face the necessity of obtaining permission from male relatives, which can create significant internal conflict. These patriarchal norms lead to skepticism about the appropriateness of women pursuing employment, reinforcing traditional gender roles that can restrict their autonomy. Female staff and volunteers in both the Rohingya and host communities frequently navigate complex dynamics where their choices are scrutinized and may require approval from husbands, brothers, or parents. Refusal of permission can escalate to severe consequences, including resistance from male family members and, in some cases, domestic violence. Moreover, these women often confront additional challenges from community actors such as religious leaders, Rohingya Majhis (community leaders), and organized criminal gangs. These groups can exert substantial pressure to conform to strict gender norms, further marginalizing women and complicating their efforts to engage in humanitarian work. The cumulative impact of familial and community opposition not only heightens the vulnerability of female workers but also hampers the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions. In the Rohingya community, deeply rooted beliefs among older generations often stigmatize women who work outside the home, viewing their actions as inappropriate and anticipating negative repercussions. This cultural backdrop can manifest in various forms of resistance and intimidation toward female humanitarian workers. For example, when a woman attempts to lead a group meeting, she may encounter derogatory comments or questions about her age, which aim to undermine her authority and credibility. Additionally, individuals with conservative or hostile attitudes may resort to intimidation tactics, such as verbal aggression or persistent surveillance, to deter women from pursuing their professional goals. Such behavior not only creates a hostile environment but also exacerbates the challenges female workers face in their roles. Moreover, male colleagues, even those who work alongside female staff, can perpetuate harmful gender norms. Instances of ridicule for minor mistakes or condescending attitudes toward female workers serve to undermine their confidence and capabilities, reinforcing a culture of inequality. This dynamic not only affects individual morale but can also hinder collaboration and the overall effectiveness of humanitarian efforts.

To address these challenges, it is essential to foster community dialogues that challenge harmful stereotypes, engage male allies in advocating for women's rights, and create safe spaces for women to voice their concerns and aspirations. Empowerment programs that provide support and resources to female workers can also help mitigate the risks they face, ultimately enhancing their ability to contribute meaningfully to humanitarian efforts.

2.3 Vulnerabilities of female staffs and volunteers working on GBV: The risk of harassment significantly increases for female volunteers from the Rohingya and host communities when they work with GBV survivors and perpetrators, who often reside in the same communities as the volunteers. When staff and volunteers engage in door-to-door outreach to raise awareness about gender-based violence (GBV) or women's rights, they often encounter verbal abuse from men or face obstacles hindering their work. Security threats to female staff and volunteers are particularly heightened when addressing issues related to GBV or reproductive health, such as early marriage, family planning, and sex education, as their efforts challenge existing gender norms and values. Consequently, female staff and volunteers involved in addressing GBV cases in both Rohingya and host areas may be exposed to various security threats, including verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and other forms of mental and physical violence.

2.4 Threats from organized criminal gangs: The nefarious activities of the unlawful outfits including drug traffickers, human traffickers and criminal gangs have been deteriorating the safety and security of the FDMN camps in Cox's Bazar. In fact, various criminal gangs are prevalent inside the camps that are likely to render the humanitarian workers vulnerable to their activities.[7] For this, the female staff and volunteers are likely to experience a myriad of challenges from these groups including intimidation, aggression or extortion. Taking advantage of the densely populated area and limited security arrangements, criminal gangs can sometimes operate with relative impunity. They are engaged in illegal activities such as theft, extortion and violence.[8] In fact, the Rohingya camps are becoming centers for the drug trade, particularly the addictive methamphetamine pill "yaba" and there are instances that women often participate in this trade, either as peddlers or part of the trafficking network.[9] While some women find empowerment, many are victims. Female humanitarian workers may be coerced into turning a blind eye or face threats or violence if their work is perceived as a hindrance.[10] The high-risk factors associated with these issues sometimes make it extremely challenging for the female humanitarian workers working in humanitarian context. It is not unusual for a female humanitarian worker to discover herself in a situation while she might be extorted for money or supplies when she is engaged in distributing aid or providing services. Female volunteers have revealed that the Majhis (the traditional leaders of the Rohingyas) and the members of criminal gangs sometimes put undue pressure to select their preferred candidates while preparing the list of beneficiaries or distribution of humanitarian assistance.[11] As such, the freedom of Rohingya female volunteers to work

[7]   Ali Asif Shawon. (2023, August 2). How Rohingya camps are turning into crime zones. *Dhaka Tribune*.
        https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/rohingya-crisis/306260/how-rohingya-camps-are-turning-into-crime-zones.
[8]   ibid
[9]   Sreeparna Banerjee. (2019, March 15). Drug trafficking and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/drug-trafficking-and-rohingya-refugees-in-bangladesh-49005. Accessed 2 August 2023
[10]   ibid
[11]   Maria Ferrante. (2018, June 30). .Protection Considerations on the 'Mahji System' in the Rohingya Refugee Camps in Bangladesh. UNHCR. file:///C:/Users/green/Downloads/Protection_Considerations_on_the_Mahji_S.pdf. Accessed 3 August 2023

independently and fairly is somewhat compromised. Discussions with them further indicate, there is ongoing anxiety about the possibility of physical violence, as criminal gangs often use intimidation tactics to establish dominance in a few locations of the camps. The existence of these criminal organizations adds complexity to the provision of vital services and assistance, as female humanitarian workers must remain vigilant at all times due to potential security risks.

2.5 Harassment in local transport: The female humanitarian workers, excluding Rohingya volunteers, who have been regularly commuting local transport, frequently experience verbal abuse and acts of mocking regarding their attire on roadways from Cox's Bazar town to Ukhiya and Teknaf. There is a sense of fear prevailing among them that they might become the victim of sexual harassment on roadways if they are obliged to return after dusk because of severe traffic or natural disaster. During nature calamities, the roads usually remain empty which further accentuate their worries, anxiety and vulnerability of any kind. It is important for organizations and authorities to take appropriate steps to ensure the safety and security of these female humanitarian workers when they commute local transport so that they can continue their vital work without fear or hindrance.

2.6 Safety and security threats towards female staff and volunteers:

The prevalence of threats, vulnerabilities, and risks in Rohingya camps increases the likelihood of infringing on the roles and movement of female staff and volunteers. They are frequently subjected to blame and scrutiny for deviating from 'traditional' gender roles. Initial analysis of available information suggests that there is a complex combination of factors that have contributed to the present trend of increased threats and restrictions on female staff and volunteers in Rohingya camps and in host areas.[12] They often encounter a diverse range of internal and external vulnerabilities and threats while carrying out their duties and these are being further intensified by instances of GBV, harmful gender norms and increasing pressure exerted by organized criminal groups. However, the nature of threats is not identical across refugee camps and host areas and the ability of tackling these threats varies across ranks and profiles of the female humanitarian workers. Table on the next page summarizes the growing safety and security threats towards female staff and volunteers.

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[12]   Protection Sector and GiHA WG. (2021). Strategy to Enhance the Protection of Volunteers in the Camps.
        https://fscluster.org/sites/default/files/documents/strategy_for_protection_of_volunteers_2021.pdf. Accessed 3 November 2021.

Illustration 1: Safety and security threats towards female staffs and volunteers			
Physical threats	**Harmful gender norms and values**	**Feeling of insecurity**	**Harrasment and bullying**
- Verbal abuse and physical assault and torture from their counterpart - Pressure and intimidation from organized criminal groups/gangs - Victims of drug and human trafficking - Victims of extortion - Victims of armed conflict	- IPV, force for adopting gender-steoriotyped roles - Control and domination (restrictions on the freedom of movement) - Negative attitudes towards working women	- Harrasment while using washroom facilities during night - Feeling of fear while leaving refugee camps after work - Travelling on local transports after sunset - Anxiety while travelling alone	- Incidences of harassment and bullying in the local transports - Gender insensitive behaviour from responsible and importamt actors - Conservative attitudes towards dress-up - Character assassination and bullying - Pressure and intimidation from powerful elites and personalities

2.7 Degree of exposure to security risks and challenges: In the humanitarian response within Cox's Bazar, three distinct groups of female staff and volunteers face a range of challenges shaped by their backgrounds: those recruited from outside the region, local host community members, and Rohingya female volunteers.

I. Female staffs from outside Cox's Bazar:

Newcomers face significant hurdles, starting with securing appropriate accommodations. Landlords often express concerns based on rigid gender norms, particularly regarding dress codes and lifestyle choices. Actions that might seem ordinary to outsiders—like smoking publicly with male colleagues or openly discussing issues during meetings—are frequently viewed as unacceptable by the conservative majority. This scrutiny fosters an atmosphere of non-cooperation among local populations, making it difficult for these women to establish rapport and effectively engage in their work.
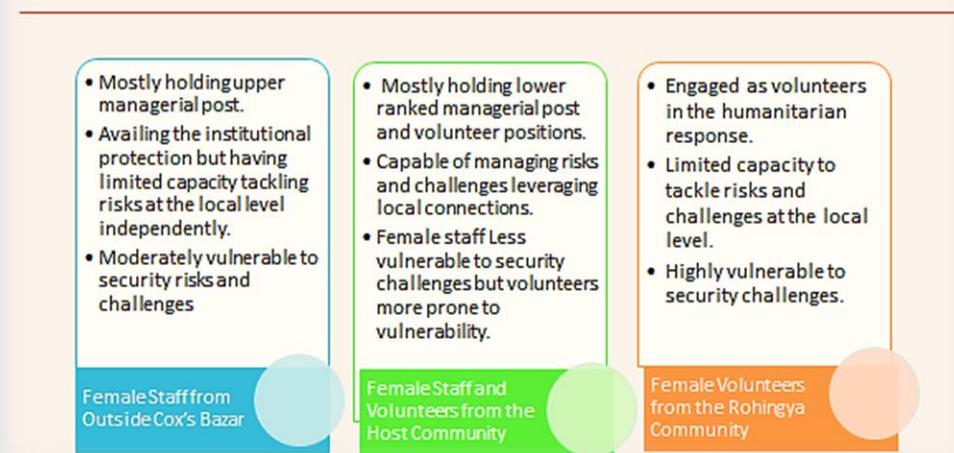
II. Female staffs from the host community:

Women from the local host community have the advantage of established connections and networks, which can facilitate their work. However, they also contend with familial and community pressures. Resistance and intimidation from male family members or community members reflect societal norms that often condemn women's employment outside the home. While their circumstances may be less perilous than those faced by Rohingya volunteers, they still navigate significant challenges in asserting their roles.

III. Rohingya Female Volunteers:

Rohingya female volunteers represent the most vulnerable group, enduring severe challenges, including verbal harassment, threats, extortion, and even physical assault. The compounded pressures from various criminal gangs add another layer of risk, significantly heightening their vulnerability. These women often lack the support systems that might help mitigate such threats, making their participation in humanitarian efforts exceptionally fraught.

Illustration 2: Female Humanitarian Workers Exposure to Security Risks and Challenges

- Mostly holding upper managerial post.
- Availing the institutional protection but having limited capacity tackling risks at the local level independently.
- Moderately vulnerable to security risks and challenges

Female Staff from Outside Cox's Bazar

- Mostly holding lower ranked managerial post and volunteer positions.
- Capable of managing risks and challenges leveraging local connections.
- Female staff Less vulnerable to security challenges but volunteers more prone to vulnerability.

Female Staff and Volunteers from the Host Community

- Engaged as volunteers in the humanitarian response.
- Limited capacity to tackle risks and challenges at the local level.
- Highly vulnerable to security challenges.

Female Volunteers from the Rohingya Community

2.8 Differences and Disparities in Managing Security Risks and Challenges: The capacity of female staff and volunteers to manage security risks and challenges varies significantly, influenced by factors such as their familiarity with the local environment and their ability to establish connections and communicate with local power structures and networks. Female humanitarian workers recruited from outside Cox's Bazar often lack knowledge of local dynamics and cultural nuances, which hinders their preparedness to address unforeseen risks and challenges. However, as they mostly hold upper managerial positions in the organizations they work for, they can enjoy the privilege of having institutional protection despite their limited ability to act independently in managing unanticipated risks and challenges. Female

> The capacity of female staff and volunteers to manage security risks and challenges varies significantly, influenced by factors such as their familiarity with the local environment and their ability to establish connections and communicate with local power structures and networks.

humanitarian workers from the host community benefit from their established positions within the community, yet they encounter unique challenges in balancing their responsibilities to both their own community and the Rohingyas they aim to assist. Despite often holding lower managerial roles or serving as volunteers, their strong social networks enable them to respond swiftly to risks and challenges. However, this advantage can place them in tense situations, navigating the complexities of relationships between local residents and the Rohingya population they support. Conversely, Rohingya female volunteers are highly exposed to risks and challenges in the volatile environment of Rohingya camps, often facing pressure from organized criminal gangs. As a result, they are considered the most vulnerable group, with limited ability to address and mitigate risks effectively at the local level. The categorization of female humanitarian staff and volunteers engaged in the response highlights the distinct challenges faced by women in this context.

CHAPTER TWO: UNDERSTANDING THE GAPS AND CHALLENGES IN THE PROTECTION REGIME CONSEQUENCES ON SAFETY AND SECURITY OF FEMALE STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

3.1 Multilayered Administrative and Legal System & Overlapping Institutional Mechanism: Over the past seven years, a multilayered administrative and legal system has developed in response to the need for effective governance and law enforcement in the Rohingya camps and host areas, contributing to the complexity of the humanitarian response in Cox's Bazar. The administrative operations of the Rohingya camps fall under the responsibility of the RRRC, while the Office of the Deputy Commissioner in Cox's Bazar oversees law and order. Addressing evolving security threats requires the engagement of various departments and actors, each with specific mandates and jurisdictions. To enhance accountability to affected communities, efforts are needed to establish a more efficient mechanism, as community actors in the host community have recommended a collaborative framework that involves relevant stakeholders, humanitarian partners, and community members. Such collaboration aims to hold perpetrators accountable and ultimately ensure the safety and security of all humanitarian workers, including female staff and volunteers.

Most female staff and volunteers in Cox's Bazar lack familiarity with the complex administrative and security structure of the humanitarian response, leading to significant difficulties and confusion for victims trying to navigate entry points or access mechanisms to address security issues. This gap in knowledge leaves them vulnerable to various risks and challenges, particularly in the current security context of the Rohingya camps. When directions are unclear and capacities are insufficient, their susceptibility to vulnerabilities is heightened. In response, humanitarian actors, supported by the protection sector, advocate for increased awareness of existing administrative and legal mechanisms during the induction process for female staff and volunteers. This initiative aims to enhance their ability to effectively navigate the intricate administrative and security apparatus, ultimately improving their safety and efficacy in their roles.

3.2 State of Reporting on Sensitive Incidents including GBV: The protection sector is primarily focused on ensuring the safety and security of all humanitarian staff and volunteers involved in the response in Cox's Bazar. To support this objective, the sector has introduced a reporting mechanism to document security incidents and has been actively coordinating responses with relevant actors, including security providers and local authorities. This collaborative approach aims to address security challenges effectively and enhance the overall safety of those working in the humanitarian context. The GBVSS, a sub-sector under protection sector, focuses on preventing and responding to GBV incidents through community-based programming comprising the sector members and the PSEA network focuses on preventing and responding to any incidents relating to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA). An SOP was also introduced by the PSEA network in 2017 for humanitarian actors describing the mechanism of reporting sensitive incidents including GBV in humanitarian response in Cox's Bazar.[13] This SOP has clearly delineated the reporting mechanisms, report handling and case management procedure, method of undertaking investigations and finally explains means and ways for redress. All humanitarian actors are obliged to follow these reporting mechanisms.

Despite the presence of functional reporting mechanisms introduced by various sectors and sub-sectors, sensitive occurrences including security incidents always remain under reported to concerned actors. A

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[13]   Rohingya Refugee Response Bangladesh. (2022, April) Standard Operating Procedure for SEA Complaint Referral in the Rohingya Refugee Response in Bangladesh. https://rohingyaresponse.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/SOP-for-SEA-Complaint-Referral-in-Rohingya-Refugee-Response_English_13092023.pdf, Accessed 10 January 2023

recent survey conducted by the IOM-NPM in coordination with the PSEA Network in the refugee camps found that only 16% of respondents received awareness-raising sessions or training specifically focused on reporting sensitive issues.[14] Discussions with the female staff and volunteers and other relevant stakeholders have clearly revealed limited knowledge, awareness and understanding on how to address the security incidents. This highlights a significant gap in knowledge and engagement regarding reporting mechanisms among the refugee population.

3.3 Challenges in Reporting Safety and Security Issues including GBV Incidents: The fear of confidentiality breaches, stigmatization, and retaliation significantly discourages victims, including female staff and volunteers, from coming forward to report complaints against perpetrators. Many fear that filing a complaint could further jeopardize their safety and push them into more vulnerable situations. This pervasive lack of trust and fear contributes to underreporting of security incidents, particularly among those most affected. Additionally, the absence of a comprehensive whistleblower protection system undermines the effectiveness of reporting sensitive issues, highlighting the urgent need for improved and accountable procedures to address the growing security challenges in the humanitarian context.

Rohingya female volunteers in the camps encounter significant barriers to understanding current reporting mechanisms due to a lack of opportunities, platforms, and the challenges posed by language and cultural differences. In cases of gender-based violence (GBV), victims often face societal accusations or blame from perpetrators, which discourages female volunteers from reporting threats, intimidation, sexual harassment, or assault out of fear of retaliation. The complex power dynamics within the camps, coupled with the influence of various criminal gangs, further intensify this fear. Additionally, concerns arise regarding the capacity of their employing organization to provide adequate support in times of danger, crisis, or retaliation, leaving these volunteers feeling vulnerable and unsupported.

Most female volunteers are hired on an ad hoc basis for temporary periods, leading to a piecemeal approach toward reporting mechanisms, with local demand for addressing sensitive issues remaining low. This temporary nature of employment further diminishes their motivation to proactively address security incidents. Without proper motivation, training, and support from responsible actors, including humanitarian partners, effectively addressing their issues becomes increasingly challenging. The lack of capacity, limited resources, and absence of a supportive framework significantly hinder female volunteers' efforts to tackle sensitive issues, including security incidents. Additionally, perceived doubts and uncertainties regarding ethical standards and procedures for maintaining confidentiality when addressing security issues contribute to their apprehension, making it even more difficult for them to come forward.

3.4 Inclusive Platform for Addressing Safety and Security Challenges: Singular efforts from development and humanitarian actors alone will not suffice to protect vulnerable staff and volunteers in the Rohingya camps and host areas. It is imperative to enhance collaboration with government functionaries and actively engage both the Rohingya and host communities to effectively address

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[14] NPM – IOM. (2023, August 2023). Assessment Report: Awareness of Reporting Mechanisms for Reporting General and Sensitive Issues in the Rohingya Camps. https://rohingyaresponse.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/NPM-PSEA-CFM-Round-3-Assessment-Report-August-2023_Final-Version.pdf. Accessed 30 September 2023.

security challenges. The active support and cooperation of security providers, local government bodies, humanitarian partners, and human rights organizations are crucial for responding to security incidents. An inclusive platform that brings together government, non-governmental organizations, humanitarian actors, UN bodies, INGOs, and other key stakeholders is urgently needed to strengthen the existing security mechanisms within the humanitarian response. Collaborative efforts among these actors will significantly improve the safety and security of female staff and volunteers, addressing the growing challenges they face.

3.5 Growing Insecurity and their Consequences on Female Humanitarian Workers: In many respects, the growing risks, threats and vulnerabilities are resulting into undermining the safety and security of female staff and volunteers. The following illustration depicts a picture of the risks, threats and vulnerabilities which will help understanding the cycle of disempowerment and marginalization experienced by female staff and volunteers in the humanitarian response in Cox's Bazar. The following chart provides a scenario of drivers of insecurity of female staff and volunteers.
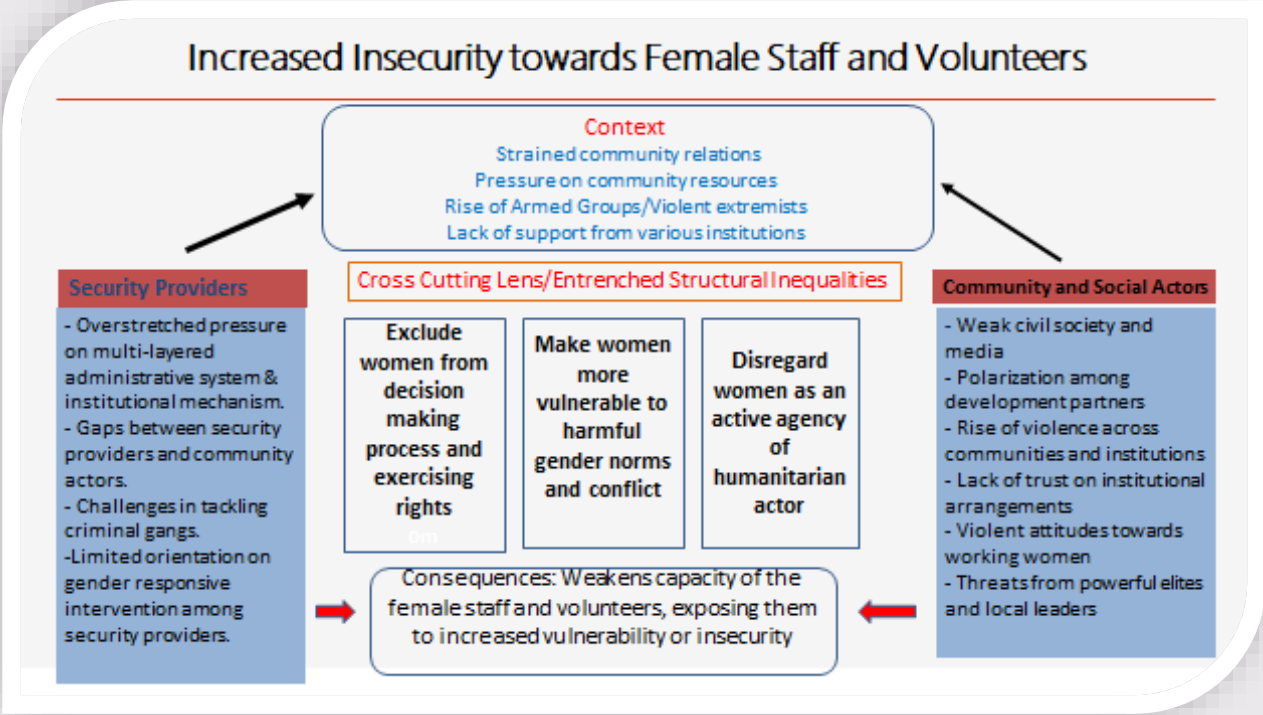
If statements from female humanitarian workers and other relevant stakeholders are to be believed, several critical gaps exist in the current protection mechanisms. If left unaddressed, these gaps could exacerbate the risks, vulnerabilities, and challenges faced by female humanitarian workers in Cox's Bazar. Key issues highlighted include limited knowledge and understanding among female staff and volunteers regarding the administrative, legal, and institutional frameworks, along with pressure on community resources and rising polarization across communities and institutions. The threatening actions of organized criminal gangs and terrorist groups, coupled with a lack of accountability, contribute to the increasing disempowerment of female humanitarian workers. The complex ground

realities often lead to delays in addressing security concerns, despite the commendable role security providers have played in tackling current threats. The intricate nature of the humanitarian response calls for improved coordination among major stakeholders, especially given the evolving circumstances in the Rohingya camps and adjacent areas. However, the lack of collaboration among various actors has hindered the effectiveness of the existing mechanisms for addressing safety and security concerns. Many female staff and volunteers have expressed critical views on the effectiveness of the current approach in addressing the growing security challenges. Increasing tension across communities and institutions for various reasons has slightly diminished their trust in the current arrangement, allowing perpetrators to exert additional strain on the community. Critics recommend a coordinated effort involving community actors, civil society, human rights bodies, and humanitarian partners to efficiently address the security challenges faced in the Refugee camps and adjacent host areas.

3.6 Experience of Fearful Environment and Insecurity: Female humanitarian workers operate in a fearful environment where they frequently face verbal abuse, threats, intimidation, extortion, and communal tensions. This volatile atmosphere not only jeopardizes their safety but also exacerbates distrust among them, creating fertile ground for rogue entities to pursue their agendas. Deteriorating security conditions, marked by systemic inefficiencies, widespread human rights violations, and increasing hostility towards women in the Rohingya camps and surrounding areas, further aggravate these vulnerabilities. As a result, incidents of verbal abuse, harassment, and threats in the Refugee camps and host areas are significantly higher than the number of formal complaints, which remain disproportionately low. This disparity reflects a lack of confidence in the conflict resolution mechanisms and doubts about the responsiveness of stakeholders in addressing grievances. Despite awareness of existing conflict resolution mechanisms and obligations to support victims in reporting sensitive issues like security incidents, many female workers refrain from filing complaints, enduring insecurity, abuse, and violence as a consequence. Additionally, polarization among humanitarian organizations contributes to divergent perceptions and conflicting priorities, hindering unified efforts to tackle escalating security threats against female humanitarian workers. This fragmentation weakens the capacity of female staff and volunteers, exposing them to heightened vulnerability and insecurity, with potentially far-reaching impacts on the humanitarian response. Paradoxically, even well-intentioned rules and regulations can increase risks if not implemented effectively, underscoring the gap between robust protection measures and the rising incidence of violence.

3.7 Feeling of Exclusion and Disempowerment: The inability of female staff and volunteers to navigate the multi-layered administrative and institutional mechanisms within the humanitarian response significantly hinders their access to various services provided by local authorities and security providers. Their difficulties in understanding these systems, combined with their hesitation to report sensitive incidents to protection or GBV focal points through their institutions, often limit their opportunities to seek timely assistance from relevant actors. Many female workers perceive a very limited scope for fair and transparent investigations in such a violence-prone and polarized environment, which erodes the credibility of existing protection mechanisms. Furthermore, it is unlikely that these workers will receive support or appreciation for their efforts, as many men in both the host community and Rohingya camps do not admire women who work outside the home. This contributes to a sense of dissatisfaction among

some community members, increasing the risk that female humanitarian workers may become targets of polarization within their own communities due to entrenched stereotypes and biases, potentially leading to violent attitudes. Additionally, female workers sometimes face bullying and stalking on social media platforms for their involvement in humanitarian efforts. As a result, their exclusion from decision-making processes and the exercise of their rights renders them more vulnerable to harmful gender norms and conflict, undermining their role as active agents in humanitarian responses.

CHAPTER THREE: RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

4.1 Need for a Complementarity and Whole of Society Approach: The safety and security issues of female humanitarian workers are conventionally treated as a law-and-order matter where the roles of local authorities and security providers are prioritized over other actors. Addressing safety and security issues through coercive measures is therefore often seen as the preferred option. However, given the nature of safety and security threats towards female humanitarian workers, this traditional approach may produce short-term results but is unlikely to be very effective in the long run. Since the safety and security threats and vulnerabilities faced by female staff and volunteers originate from entrenched harmful gender norms and values within the Rohingya and host communities, a complementary approach that integrates law and order with gender and human rights issues is essential to address these sensitive concerns of female humanitarian workers. Though security providers and local authorities bear primary responsibility for ensuring safety and security in the camps for both the Rohingya population and humanitarian workers, the roles of other actors including the UN, humanitarian partners, civil society, media, and community leaders cannot be underestimated. The role of the Camp in Charge (CiC) as the lead civilian authority in resolving cases of imminent physical threats or harassment towards female humanitarian workers should be strengthened by enhancing complementary efforts through regular dialogues and discussions among all stakeholders.

In this context, the evolving trends in security threats towards female staff and volunteers necessitate a more nuanced and sophisticated approach that goes beyond traditional methods of addressing safety and security issues. Creating an inclusive space for all actors is urgently needed to promote local ownership and a sense of responsibility across communities and institutions in order to address the underlying causes of risks, vulnerabilities, and threats faced by female staff and volunteers.

4.2 Strengthening Collaboration among Relevant Stakeholders in Addressing Security Issues: The protection sector in association with other sub-sectors and networks has established policies and institutional mechanisms to safeguard all humanitarian workers. To further strengthen these processes and procedures, humanitarian partners have recommended customizing the data collection and reporting processes on sensitive issues, such as security incidents, considering the diversity of camps and host communities. They also emphasized the need to establish safe reporting mechanisms, enhance inter-agency information sharing, and improve cooperation and coordination among various sectors, networks, partners, the CiC office, and security providers.

Strengthening cooperation and collaboration among these networks, platforms, and stakeholders, including humanitarian actors, is crucial to ensure the well-being of the humanitarian workers, including female staff and volunteers. Humanitarian practitioners believe that this collective effort involving all stakeholders will send a strong message on the ground, making it clear to perpetrators that any violence against female humanitarian workers will not be tolerated, which will eventually increase the confidence and decrease the likelihood of intimidation.

4.3 Promotion of a Gender Responsive Decision-Making Process: The participation of female humanitarian workers in the decision-making process is still marginal, and they are not actively involved

in managing networks, platforms, and resources to amplify their voices across all levels of decision-making. Female humanitarian workers have expressed grievances, citing instances where their concerns were sometimes disregarded in major administrative and security decisions. One such example is the embargo on the entrance of three-wheelers into the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar, which significantly restricted their access to public transport, increasing their vulnerability to risks and threats. Female workers typically do not use two-stroke wheelers due to social stigma prevalent in the Cox's Bazar social environment. Another story shared by a Rohingya female volunteer highlights that gender dimensions were often overlooked in the development of WASH facilities across the refugee camps. This sentiment was echoed by other Rohingya women and girls, revealing that many WASH facilities in the camps are not gender-responsive. Various surveys conducted in the camps have raised serious concerns from women, girls, and persons with disabilities regarding their safety, security, and dignity. These reports indicate instances of harassment and the risk of gender and sexual-based violence when using WASH facilities.[15]

The meaningful participation of female humanitarian workers is urgently needed to promote gender-responsive, inclusive decision-making platforms. By ensuring equal representation and participation, these platforms can empower female humanitarian workers to actively raise their voices and shape policies and programs that directly impact the lives of women and girls. This approach will not only promote gender equality but also foster a more effective response to any form of violence towards them. By including their voices in decision-making processes, it can be ensured that policies and programs are responsive to their needs and experiences. Ultimately, efforts to promote gender-responsive decision-making processes will create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all females, including humanitarian workers, where their voices are valued and their experiences validated, thereby creating a safer and more just community for all.

4.4 Familiarization with Multi-layer Administrative and Legal Procedure: Female humanitarian workers raised concerns about their lack of familiarity with the multi-layered legal and administrative procedures, which made them vulnerable to growing risks and threats in the humanitarian settings in Cox's Bazar. They suggested that their respective organizations should provide necessary orientation and organize training to ensure they stay updated on the current legal and administrative landscape. They emphasized the importance of understanding these procedures to enhance their ability to avoid legal complications and seek help from the appropriate departments and agencies if they face threats while performing their duties. The female humanitarian workers believed that with proper orientation and support, they would be able to navigate this complex process more efficiently and contribute effectively to the humanitarian response. They also emphasized the need for clear communication channels within various government departments and agencies, enabling them to seek guidance whenever they encountered any security threats.

4.5 Gender Training for Security Providers: Sensitizing security providers with a gender sensitive approach might enhance their ability to better understanding the gender dynamics of the conflict. While steps like recruiting female staff at security checkpoints and establishing women support centers at police stations are commendable. However, there is a pressing need for gender-sensitive training for law

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[15]   ISCG. (2021, April) Hygiene Promotion Strategy: Guiding Framework. https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/cox-s-bazar-wash-sector-hygiene-promotion-strategy-guiding-framework. Accessed 25 February 2023.

enforcement and local authorities to orient them about issues relating to gender sensitivity and gender dimensions of conflict. Such initiatives can enhance their perspective and enable them to better address the safety and security concerns of female staff and volunteers. This may include establishing a reporting mechanism that ensure anonymity and protection for victims, as well as providing comprehensive support services such as counseling and legal aid following a survivor centric approach.

4.6 Strengthening Early Warning and Response Mechanism: Security experts emphasized the importance of recognizing the diverse dynamics within and between Rohingya camps and the host community. They stressed the need to identify and map areas with heightened security risks, particularly for female staff and volunteers in Rohingya camps. Risk assessment and mitigation measures should be integral to the intervention plans of all humanitarian organizations to ensure the safety and security of all staff and volunteers, including female humanitarian workers. Only then, the humanitarian partners can undertake comprehensive precautionary measures before deploying them in the Rohingya camps for providing services. Female staff and volunteers can benefit from working in pairs or groups or seeking support from oversight bodies. Female humanitarian workers recommended conducting regular trainings and orientations on personal safety and conflict resolution techniques to enable them to effectively manage potential security threats in a conflict-sensitive manner. They also suggested establishing regular information sharing mechanisms and communication protocols to receive updates on security conditions and potential risks, allowing them to take proactive mitigation measures. The female humanitarian workers prefer prioritizing assignments in camps with better security track records and proximity to main roads to enhance safety and ease of access.

4.7 Increasing Capacity of Humanitarian Organizations in Addressing Security Issues: All humanitarian organizations are obliged to protect their humanitarian workers including female staff and volunteers. In Cox's Bazar, amid a protracted humanitarian emergency marked by conflict, violence, and polarization, the initiatives undertaken by national, local, and CBOs vary in their knowledge, understanding, and capability to address safety and security threats faced by their female staff and volunteers. There is significant potential to enhance the capacity of various humanitarian organizations at the national and local levels so that they can conduct their humanitarian operations in a conflict-sensitive manner. They can leverage local resources, provide support to strengthen protection measures, and prioritize the safety and security of female staff and volunteers, which may include establishing clear protocols and reporting mechanisms. Female staff or volunteers reporting security incidents should be protected against any form of retaliation through safeguarding measures such as confidentiality, anonymous reporting, whistle-blower protection, and, as a last resort, relocation. Humanitarian organizations need to ensure protection not only from external threats but also from internal misuse, discrimination, and negligence. Some female staff and volunteers feel that their organizations are not sufficiently sensitive to understand their concerns, which they perceive as burdens. They would require assurance from the organization that their jobs will not be jeopardized if they lodge complaints against perpetrators. By implementing these measures, organizations can establish a safe and empowering environment for female humanitarian workers, enabling them to effectively fulfill their crucial roles in humanitarian operations.

4.8 Ensuring Safeguarding Measures for Promoting Safe Work Environment: Promoting a safe work environment in Rohingya camps necessitates an inclusive approach involving local, national, and international humanitarian organizations, local authorities, and security providers. Current designs

primarily involve humanitarian partners and sector networks, but there is still a need for effective engagement of key stakeholders such as community leaders, local political figures, and security providers. Essential components include do-no-harm measures, clear operational guidelines, and inclusive platforms, alongside awareness campaigns, strengthening of community-based mechanisms, and training on anonymous reporting and whistle-blower protection. Consultations can help identify gaps in reporting processes and ensure safe incident recording while preserving victim privacy. Implementing these measures through camp-specific strategies will not only foster immediate threat mitigation but also strengthen trust in protection mechanisms for female staff and volunteers.

4.9 Empowering Civil Society[16] and Media: Civil society and media can take the initiative to bring together humanitarian actors, security providers, community representatives, and local authorities, and raise awareness about the challenges faced by female staff and volunteers who encounter various forms of violence. Unfortunately, civil society and media are often polarized and influenced by popular and biased narratives, which significantly undermine their independence and legitimacy. Despite these challenges, these actors can still contribute significantly to fostering civic engagement through organizing regular dialogues, community involvement, and awareness campaigns. Many humanitarian actors emphasize that there is ample scope and opportunity for civil society and media to enhance accountability by advocating for safeguarding and protection measures to improve overall safety and security conditions in the humanitarian response in Cox's Bazar.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Addressing the safety and security issues of female staff and volunteers in the Rohingya refugee camps is a complex challenge given the prolonged emergency and deteriorating security conditions. Therefore, meaningful participation of all stakeholders, including humanitarian partners, CSOs, NGOs, and local authorities, following a whole-of-society approach, may be necessary to tackle these challenges. Additionally, there is a need to adopt a gender-responsive and human rights-based approach to law and order to effectively address the safety and security concerns and threats faced by female humanitarian workers, as these issues largely stem from the structural dynamics of the Rohingya and host community contexts.

The current climate of fear and intimidation, due to presence of organized criminal gangs, has led to perceived restrictions which somewhat prevents movement of media personnel, civil society groups, women groups and women-led organizations. This situation is potentially discouraging those advocating for the rights and well-being of female humanitarian workers. To address these challenges and prioritize their safety and security, a comprehensive and inclusive platform is needed which should take the lead responsibility to facilitate collaboration among relevant actors and stakeholders, promoting a collective understanding of the risks and challenges faced by female staff and volunteers. Evidence-based approaches should be used, grounded in data and research, free from bias or predisposition. A robust

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16   This research considers civil society a diverse body of civil actors, formal or informal associations with a wide range of roles, who engage in public life seeking to advance shared values and objectives except NGOs.

whistleblower system should also be established to ensure confidentiality and encourage reporting of incidents.

Finally, no one can ignore this point that the Rohingya camps present a complex web of challenges for female humanitarian workers. However, a concerted, inclusive, and evidence-based approach endorsed by all relevant stakeholders can create an enabling environment where these dedicated professionals can work safely and effectively. All stakeholders must come together, prioritize the safety of female staff and volunteers, and upheld their rights and dignities at all times.

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