

CHILD MARRIAGE

IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS

THE ROHINGYA COMMUNITY IN BANGLADESH

Liza, a teenage Rohingya girl is conducting a session at Safe Place for Women and Girls, Rohingya camp, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

The Rohingya people are one of the few Muslim ethnic minorities in Myanmar, living mainly in northern Rakhine State, near the Bangladeshi border. **The crisis affecting this community is chronic and their displacement protracted.** While the violence precipitating their initial flight was acute – with state forces attacking villages in October 2016, and then again in August 2017 – there is a long history of structural oppression and build-up of threats to these acute events, including prior waves of attacks.

Fleeing villagers took days to weeks to arrive in Bangladesh, where they still remain in camps. Although many efforts are being made regionally and internationally to enable their return, as of yet, **conditions do not allow**

the Rohingya to return safely and with dignity, and there is no clear date for when that will be possible.

This policy brief summarizes **key findings from this displaced community**, based on the report, *Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in South Asia: Study Results from Bangladesh and Nepal*. It compares 400 registered refugee households, those who arrived in Bangladesh prior to 1995, and 800 Forcibly Displaced Myanmar National (FDMN) households, who arrived after October 2016, and were not granted refugee status by the Bangladesh government. While the report covers a wider range of aspects of child marriage within these communities, this brief will focus on prevalence, influencing factors, and recommendations.

As of the last survey in Rakhine State, **6.5 per cent** of females aged 15-19 were married.

After the violence in August 2017, approximately **700,000 Rohingya** fled to Bangladesh, joining **300,000 refugees** already living there, many without official refugee status.

PREVALENCE OF CHILD MARRIAGE

FIGURE 1
Prevalence of child marriage in the Rohingya community in Bangladesh, 2019 (%)

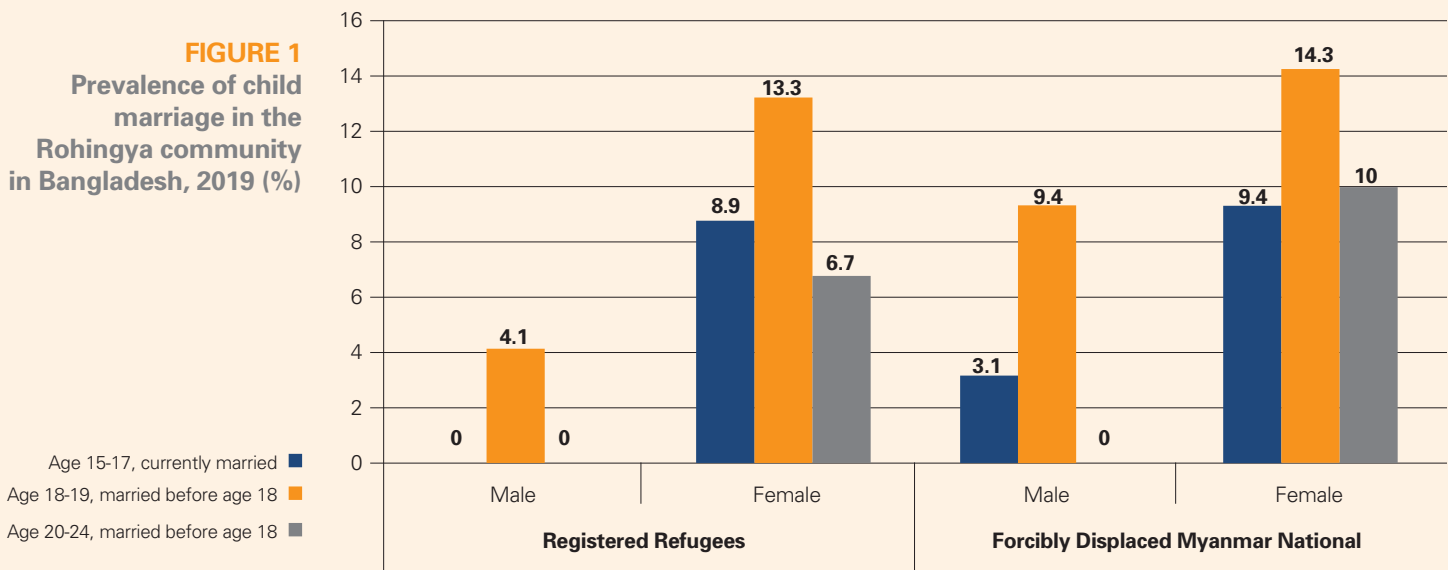


Figure 1 shows the prevalence of marriage prior to age 18 among progressively older age groups in each community: respondents who were aged 15-17 at the time of the late 2019 survey, those aged 18-19, and those aged 20-24. It is important to note that **since more adolescents aged 15-17 may have married after the survey took place, the prevalence rate for this age group should be considered an underestimation**, and is not directly comparable to the rates of the other two age groups. However, the drop-off in child marriage for boys in this age group, compared to 18-19-year-olds, is dramatic enough that **it may be an indication that child marriage for boys is now declining**.

Patterns shown by the data include:

- Across all age groups and both communities, **more girls than boys** are married before age 18.
- **FDMN girls have been the most likely to experience child marriage** in any age group, although rates among female registered refugees are comparable among those under 20 years.
- **Child marriage for boys is much less common in the registered refugee community** than in the FDMN community. No cases were found in either community among those surveyed in the 20-24 age group, suggesting that it had been extremely rare in 2012-2016.
- Rates of child marriage **increased after the 2017 wave** of Rohingya fleeing into Bangladesh.

"In Myanmar, we can not move freely and had to live in fear and anxiety. It took a long time to get marriage permission. After fleeing here, we do not need to fear anyone. Before the announcement from the CIC, many child marriages had taken place."

– ROHINGYA FATHER

"It has been nearly two years since we arrived in Bangladesh. We have seen many marriages among boys and girls younger than 18 years."

– FEMALE SERVICE PROVIDER

"[In Myanmar] when girls reached 18 years or even were in their twenties, we did not have to marry them. It was because our houses were big with fence and protection. People would not criticize them. After arriving here, we cannot live our lives as we wish. Everything is affected by displacement as is our marriage."

– UNMARRIED ROHINGYA BOY

FACTORS AFFECTING CHILD MARRIAGE RATES

As Figure 2 illustrates, similar factors may either drive or moderate child marriage, depending on the situation. For example:

- Economic concerns drive some families to marry their sons to gain dowry income, or to marry their daughters off younger so as to pay less dowry. However, families that cannot pay dowry at all are less likely to marry off their daughters.
- The lack of schooling and jobs available in the camps drives some families toward child marriage, while others prefer to wait for better conditions first.
- The Rohingya community generally views child marriage as inadvisable, and associated with low social status. On the other hand, if a family perceives a son or daughter's behaviour as signalling that greater family dishonour could be imminent, that could drive them to arrange the child's marriage as a pre-emptive measure.
- After a girl is sexually assaulted, she is generally forced to marry her assailant if possible; if this does not happen, then she is often considered undesirable for marriage.

FIGURE 2
Key factors in child marriage in the displaced Rohingya community in Bangladesh

Text in green indicates factors tied more closely to the humanitarian crisis itself, as opposed to factors pre-existing in the culture.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations of the report primarily encompass efforts to address child marriage in humanitarian settings in South Asia more generally, focusing on common themes across both Nepal and Bangladesh. These include further research on what works to effectively programme to end child marriage; programming that focuses on bolstering economic and physical security, shifting social norms, and including the needs of adolescent boys; and policy that addresses the impact of legislation, the varying types of child marriage in play, and the importance of continuity of access to civil registration.

Specific recommendations concerning the displaced Rohingya community in Bangladesh include the following:

RESEARCH

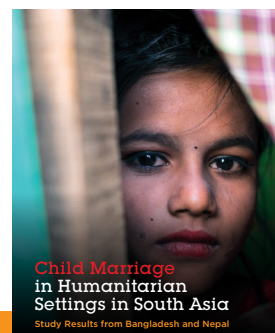
- Investigate the impact on **other populations that have been affected by this crisis**, but which are not included in this report. The Rohingya girls married to members of the host community, and the refugees who dispersed to other places, are all populations whose stories we do not know and whose voices were not included in the present study.
- Further research is merited on the **effects of migration and displacement** on patterns of child marriage, including the real and perceived threats to family and community security and honour that are associated with forced displacement.
- The effects of **COVID-19** on child marriage warrant additional study.

PROGRAMMING

- **Adolescent boys** must be included in programming, for their own sakes as well as for the sakes of gender equality and empowerment of women and girls. This need was clearly expressed by respondents in the case of the displaced Rohingya community in Bangladesh. As this study showed, ignoring adolescent boys affects them – they feel undervalued and left out, and lack resources to cope – as well as adolescent girls. Without their own dedicated interventions that address gender and social norms that support child marriage, boys are less likely to support programming that targets girls.

POLICY

- **Civil registration access** is indispensable for meeting needs and realizing rights, especially in humanitarian settings, and it must be expanded. It is needed for enforcing child marriage laws, accurately monitoring rates, and obtaining birth registration. Birth registration is not carried out in the Rohingya camps, which impacts access to education, health services, and social protection benefits. Continuity of access must be ensured in refugee camps.



Read the full report, *Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in South Asia: Study Results from Bangladesh and Nepal*, at <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/reports/child-marriage-humanitarian-settings-south-asia> or <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/publications/child-marriage-humanitarian-settings-south-asia>

This report was commissioned through the UNFPA and UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage, generously funded by the Governments of Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom and the European Union and Zonta International.

FOR MORE
INFORMATION

Amanda Bissex abissex@unicef.org, **Upala Devi** devi@unfpa.org and **Sujata Tuladhar** stuladhar@unfpa.org.