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Abstract

The Cox's Bazar Panel Survey (CBPS) tracks representative samples of Rohingya refugees and host communities in Cox's Bazar district in southern Bangladesh. A phone-based follow-up survey from April 2020 reveals that, despite widespread knowledge of COVID-19, attendance at religious gatherings is high, representing a potentially important pathway for disease spread in refugee camps and host communities in Cox's Bazar. Even after the imposition of lockdown restrictions in early April, attendance to religious events was still common in refugee camps and host communities alike. Over 75% of men in refugee camps and over 50% of men in host communities reported attending religious services at least once in the week prior to the survey (April 19–16, 2020).¹ Most male respondents who attended religious gatherings did so regularly, for an average of 4.0 days and 2.2 days in the last week for refugees and hosts, respectively. These behaviors are prevalent despite widespread awareness of the sounds of COVID-19 transmission. When asked about trusted sources of advice on COVID-19, both hosts and refugees identified friends, acquaintances, and community leaders – including religious leaders – as important. In fact, 46% of refugees place their trust in community leaders such as block wardens, putting them in front of other trusted sources of information including family, relatives, and informational campaigns.

In a separate survey of inmates from around Bangladesh, we find considerable willingness to make changes: almost every respondent had adjusted their practices in some way. Still, some important measures remain uncommon, including discouraging attendance of the elderly, removal of the communal prayer mat, and postponing congregational prayer. This may be due to respondents' subjective assessment of the risk posed by COVID-19. About two thirds of inmates felt that COVID-19 posed no or low risk to their communities. Given the ongoing attendance of religious gatherings and the trust placed in religious leaders, policies should be targeted towards decreasing prayer gathering sizes, reducing frequency of prayer attendance, and ensuring public health and social distancing advice through a key trusted source of information: inmates and religious leaders themselves.

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¹ In Bangladesh it is not uncommon for men to attend mosque and for women to pray at home.

Policy Insight: Changes in Religious Gatherings & Practices to Curb COVID-19

The Cox's Bazar Panel Survey (CBPS) tracks representative samples of Rohingya refugees and host communities in Cox's Bazar district in southern Bangladesh. A phone-based follow-up survey from April 2020 reveals that, despite widespread knowledge of COVID-19, attendance at religious gatherings is high, representing a potentially important pathway for disease spread in refugee camps and host communities in Cox's Bazar. Even after the imposition of lockdown restrictions in early April, attendance to religious events was still common in refugee camps and host communities alike. Over 75% of men in refugee camps

and over 50% of men in host communities reported attending religious services at least once in the week prior to the survey (April 9-16, 2020). Most male respondents who attended religious gatherings did so regularly, for an average of 4.0 days and 2.2 days in the last week for refugees and hosts, respectively. These behaviors are prevalent despite widespread awareness of the sources of COVID-19 transmission. When asked about trusted sources of advice on COVID-19, both hosts and refugees identified friends, acquaintances, and community leaders—including religious leaders—as important. In fact, 44% of refugees place their trust in community leaders such as block majhees; putting them in front of other trusted sources of information including family, relatives, and informational campaigns.

In a separate survey of Imams from around Bangladesh, we find considerable willingness to make changes: almost every respondent had adjusted their practices in some way. Still, some important measures remain uncommon, including discouraging attendance of the elderly, removal of the communal prayer mat, and postponing congregational prayer. This may be due to respondents' subjective assessment of the risk posed by COVID-19. About two-thirds of Imams felt that COVID-19 posed no or low risk to their communities. Given the ongoing attendance of religious gatherings and the trust placed in religious leaders, policies should be targeted towards decreasing prayer gathering sizes, reducing frequency of prayer attendance, and disseminating public health and social distancing advice through a key trusted source of information: Imams and religious leaders themselves.

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