FACT SHEET

Socioeconomic Characteristics of Rohingya Refugees from Myanmar Living in Bangladesh

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Background

Cox's Bazar district in Bangladesh has received multiple waves of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar since the 1970s, but late 2017 saw the largest and fastest refugee influx in Bangladesh's history. Between August 2017 and December 2018, 745,000 Rohingya refugees fled Myanmar into Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, following an outbreak of violence in Rakhine State.[1] As of December 31, 2019, Teknaf and Ukhia sub-districts host an estimated 854,704 stateless Rohingya refugees, almost all of whom live in densely populated camps (UNHCR 2019).

Researchers from Yale University[2], the World Bank, and the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) initiative started the Cox's Bazar Panel Survey (CBPS) in order to provide accurate data to humanitarian and government stakeholders involved in the response to the influx of refugees. The survey is an in-depth household survey covering 5,020 households[3] living in both refugee camps and host communities. This quantitative data collection is complemented with qualitative interviews with adolescents and their caregivers.

In line with the 2018 Global Compact for Refugees commitment to promote economic opportunities, decent work, and skills training for both host community members and refugees, this brief presents a set of stylized facts on the socioeconomic status of Rohingya refugees in 2019 and in the year preceding the latest outbreak of violence.

The aim is to better understand the ways in which the challenges faced by Rohingya refugees while they were living in Myanmar are likely to affect their ability—and the ability of future generations of Rohingya—to attain a better living standard in their host communities, with a view to informing policy and programming.

Drawing from a survey on retrospective employment and labor income from the first round of panel data in 2019, we compare three groups: the population of Myanmar, Rohingya people who crossed the border into Bangladesh in 2017, and those who left Myanmar prior to 2017 and are currently living in Cox's Bazar.[4]

Key Facts

- Refugees, especially women, have low educational attainment both in absolute terms, and relative to the average in Myanmar.
- Still, pre-displacement labor force participation rates were high among refugee men and comparable to those of men across Myanmar, as reported in the 2017 Myanmar Labor Force Survey.
- Among refugee women, however, pre-displacement employment rates were low, both in absolute terms and relative to average female employment rate in Myanmar.
- Refugee men were predominantly self-employed, and the self-employed earned about twice as much as wage workers.
- Those who were employed in Myanmar prior to forcible displacement are much more likely to be employed in Bangladesh currently. Their current employment consists primarily in volunteering.
- Despite the credible reports that assets were commonly confiscated or destroyed in Myanmar, Rohingya refugees displaced from Myanmar after July 2017 owned more assets than Rohingya who left Myanmar prior to 2017.
- Rohingya refugees in camps had on average an age dependency[5] ratio of 1.26 compared to 0.89 in host-community households, reflecting the greater pressure on working age refugees to find jobs and provide for the basic necessities for their household.

[1] Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, especially those who left Myanmar before 2017, have low educational attainment in absolute and relative terms. Only 12 percent of male Rohingya and less than 2 percent of female Rohingya refugees currently living in Cox's Bazar left Myanmar having completed secondary school, compared to the national average of 15 and 14 percent for men and women respectively (Figure 1). Among those who were not living in Myanmar in 2017, only 36 percent of men and 33 percent of women completed primary school, compared to the national averages of 50-41 percent (Testimonial 1).

[2] Despite facing severe restrictions in mobility and access to markets and public services (UNHCR 2018), the labor force participation rate of Rohingya men living in Myanmar in 2017 during the year 2016-2017 was approximately 78 percent. This is similar to the average rate of labor force participation for men in Myanmar. Reflecting a different set of labor market opportunities for Rohingya people inside and outside of Myanmar (Testimonial 2), those living in Myanmar 2017 were much more likely to be self-employed than Rohingya who were already in Bangladesh or living in third countries at the time (Figure 2). Our definition of employment includes in-camp cash for work and volunteer jobs (for example, bricklaying). This is the most common source of employment for refugees. Among the Rohingya who left Myanmar prior to the 2017 outbreak of violence, some are registered refugees and are therefore allowed to work outside of camps.[6]

[3] Strikingly, Rohingya women were much less likely to work than either Rohingya men or the average woman in Myanmar. Rohingya women displaced in 2017 were slightly more likely to work than other Rohingya women (Figure 2).[7] More evidence is needed to understand whether this is due to conservative social norms, security fears, or a dearth of appropriate employment opportunities.

[4] Earnings were low across the board, but there are significant differences by residence and employment type. Among those living in Myanmar in July 2017, wage workers earned less than half than as much as the self-employed (Figure 3). Wage workers living outside of Myanmar in July 2017 also earned less than their counterpart self-employed workers, but the gap was smaller. The lower labor earnings among self-employed workers living in Myanmar in 2017 suggests that the high rate of self-employment reflects a lack of wage employment options.

[5] Employment prior to the 2017 displacement was a strong predictor of working status in 2018-2019 in Bangladesh. This was true both for those living in Myanmar in July 2017 and those living elsewhere—and even more so for those who left Myanmar before 2017 (Figure 4).

Those who were employed as wage workers prior to displacement in 2017 were more likely to have worked in Bangladesh during 2018-2019 than those who were self-employed. Our data show that previously self-employed people primarily engaged in own agriculture; this activity is not feasible for refugees, and the associated skills may be less transferrable to the Bangladeshi labor market than the skills possessed by people who worked in wage employment prior to displacement (Testimonials 3 and 4).

[6] A high percentage—44 percent of those who were in Myanmar in 2017 and 38 percent of all other Rohingya refugees—report having had a family member or a friend murdered in their lifetime. Responses to open-ended questions in the quantitative surveys show that many respondents experienced or witnessed the death many family members (Testimonial 5). A quarter of all Rohingya households living in camps were female-headed, compared to 18% of host communities and 12.5% of Bangladeshi households overall, thus suggesting a relatively high rate of loss of male family members—or that they were unable to leave (Figure 5).

[7] Although household size is similar (5.2 in both communities), Rohingya refugees in camps had on average 1.2 dependents relative to working-age household members, compared to 0.8 in host-community households, reflecting the greater economic vulnerability of recent refugees (Figure 6). Our qualitative findings suggest that this is leading to a change in gender norms around the acceptability of work in some households, with adolescent girls and women going outside the home for income-generating purposes (Testimonials 6 and 7).

[8] Despite reports that their assets were often confiscated, stolen, or destroyed (Testimonial 9), Rohingya living in Myanmar in July 2017 owned more assets than Rohingya living elsewhere at that time, suggesting that it is difficult for households to accumulate wealth after they are displaced. The vast majority of Rohingya who migrated to Bangladesh after July 2017 owned their own home in Myanmar (94 percent), and most owned poultry (90 percent) and other forms of livestock, such as cows, goats, or sheep (65 percent) (Figure 7). Many owned residential land (64 percent) and unpowered agricultural equipment (60 percent). The loss of assets could explain the relatively low levels of self-employment among Rohingya living in Cox's Bazar in 2017, relative to those living in Myanmar (who were predominantly working on their own account).

Qualitative interviews with adolescents revealed that all family members were impacted, and women and girls were often forced to sell jewelry in order to cover immediate economic needs (Testimonial 8).

TESTIMONIAL 1

"Myanmar government denied us our basic rights—education, health and shelter—and tortured us for many years. They would take away all our cattle and leave us with nothing to eat." Female, 16

মায়ানমার কর্তৃক দীর্ঘ বছর ধরে আমাদের শিক্ষা, চিকিৎসা, আশ্রয়ের বাধা দেয়া, আমাদের ঘরের হাঁস, মুর্গী, গরু, ছাগল ধরে নিয়ে যেত নিজেরা খাওয়ার জন্য কিন্তু কোন টাকা দিত না।

TESTIMONIAL 2

"Myanmar Army never allowed free movement. They used to charge fine for no reason. They used to take away our ducks, chickens, cows and goats from our house." Female, 31.

মায়ানমার আর্মি আমাদের ঠিকমত চলাফেরা করতে দিত না বিনা কারণে জরিমানা করত, ঘরের হাঁস, মুর্গী, ছাগল ধরে নিয়ে যেত।

TESTIMONIAL 3

"Rohingyas are more skilled and they can work very hard. They can dig soil, do farming, they can tolerate the humidity, they can work with lower wage." Female, 45, host community.

আমার মতে রোহিঙ্গারা বেশি কাজ পারে। ওরা কাজে দক্ষ বেশি… অনেক সময় ধরে মাটি কাটতে পারে, ক্ষেতে কাজ করতে পারে, গরম সহ্য করতে পারে। কম টাকায় কাজ করে দেয়।

TESTIMONIAL 4

"Immigrants are not skilled as like Bangladeshi worker but they are active, they can hard work. Bangladeshi workers are more lazy. They are not familiar with the language. They don't know how to behave with people." Male, 20, host community.

অভিবাসীরা বাংলাদেশীদের মত দক্ষ নয়, কিন্তু ওরা কর্মঠ, কষ্ট করে কাজ করে, আমরা বাঙ্গালীরা তো অনেক অলস। তাদের মধ্যের ভাষাগত দক্ষতার অভাব, একজন মানুষের সাথে কীভাবে কথা বলতে হবে তা তারা ভালমত জানে না, তাদের আচার ব্যবহারও ঠিক নাই।

TESTIMONIAL 5

"My nephew, grandson, and neighbor were killed." Male, 66.

ভাতিজা, নাতি, প্রতিবেশীকে গুলি মেরে মেরেছে।

TESTIMONIAL 6

"After coming here women started going outside to do jobs. In our Burma women can't go to work if you even give fifty thousand taka as salary they aren't allowed to show their face to anyone. Women couldn't even go out of the door of their house in Burma. But now those women are going outside to do jobs." Mother of 17 year old girl.

এখানে আসার পরে মহিলারা বাইরে চাকরী করতে যাওয়া শুরু করেছে। আমাদের বার্মায় মহিলারা কাজে যেতে পারে না যদি আপনি তাকে পঞ্চাশ হাজার টাকা বেতনও দেন, তাদের মুখ কাউকে দেখানোর অনুমতি নেই। বার্মায় মহিলারা তাদের নিজেদের ঘরের দরজার বাইরেও যেতে পারতো না। কিন্তু এখন ঐ মহিলারা বাইরে যাচ্ছে চাকরী করার জন্য।

TESTIMONIAL 7

"[Girls] can go out from home after coming here. They can also do job after coming here. They are working for UNHCR. If they did job in Myanmar, she would have [been] excommunicated from society. [Her] father would have got loss from mosque. His father couldn't say prayer in the mosque." 18 year old married boy.

(মেয়েরা) এখানে আসার পরে ঘর থেকে বাইরে যেতে পারে। তারা এখানে আসার পরে চাকরীও করতে পারে। তারা UNHCR- এ জব করছে। তারা যদি মায়ানমারে চাকরী করত তাহলে তাদেরকে সমাজ থেকে বের করে দেয়া হত। মেয়ের বাবাকে মসজিদ থেকে আলাদা করে দেয়া হত। তার বাবা মসজিদে নামাজ পড়তে পারতো না।

TESTIMONIAL 8

"I had [gold] earrings, hand rings, chain, I had in Burma. I sold it for coming here." 18 year old married girl.

আমার সোনার কানের দুল ছিল, গলার চেইন ছিল, বার্মায় আমার কাছে ছিল। এখানে আসার জন্য সেগুলো বিক্রি করে দিয়েছি।

TESTIMONIAL 9

"The Myanmar army would come to our house and break things, vandalize domestic animals and crops." Female, 20.

মায়ানমার আর্মি আমাদের ঘর বাড়িতে ঢুকে ভাংচুর করত। আমাদের হাঁস, মুর্গী মেরে খেয়ে ফেলত। গোলার ধান নষ্ট করে দিত।)

Figure 1. Highest educational level completed in Myanmar compared with national average (2014 Myanmar Census)

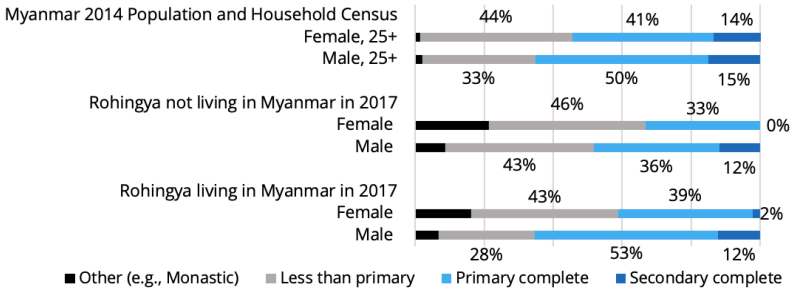


Figure 2. Employment in 2017 (percent)

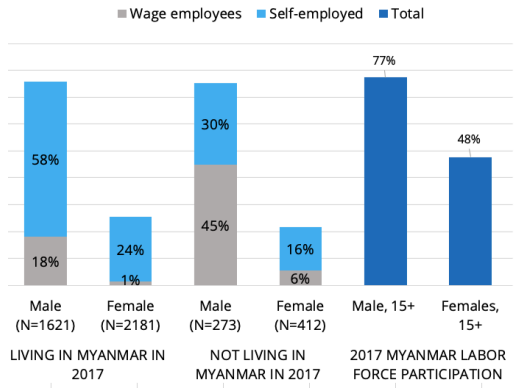


Figure 3. Labor income prior to 2017, by type of income (daily in USD 2017)

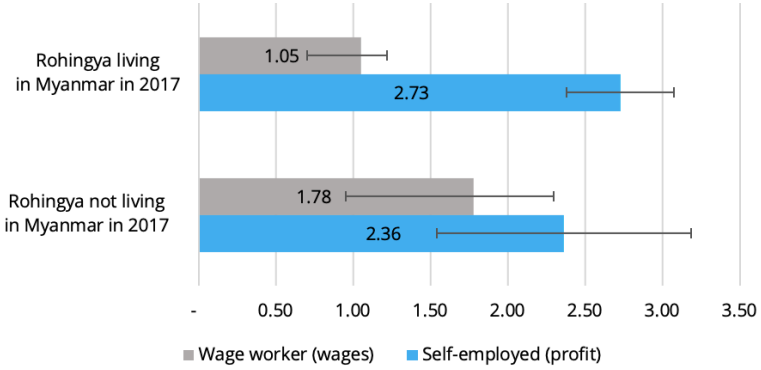


Figure 4. Employment in 2018-2019, percent who worked last year, by 2017 employment status

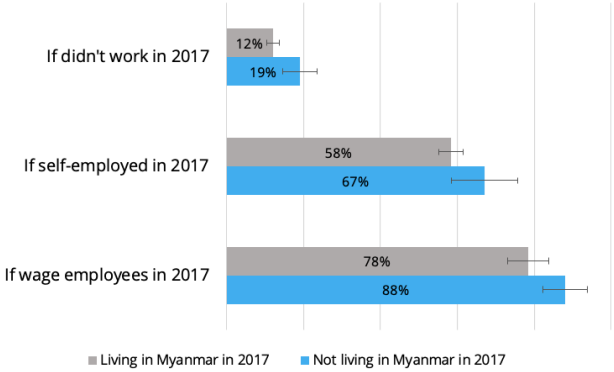


Figure 5. Human Loss Reported: Percentage who report having lost a relative (experienced or witnessed)

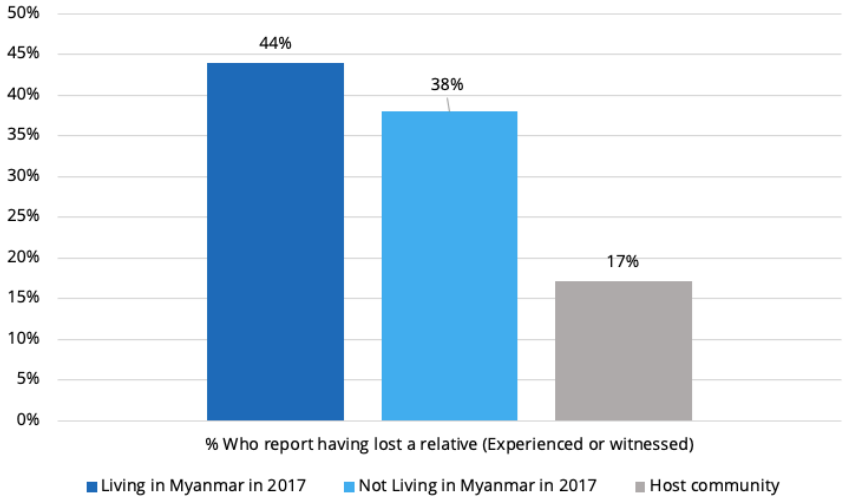


Figure 6. Household Composition

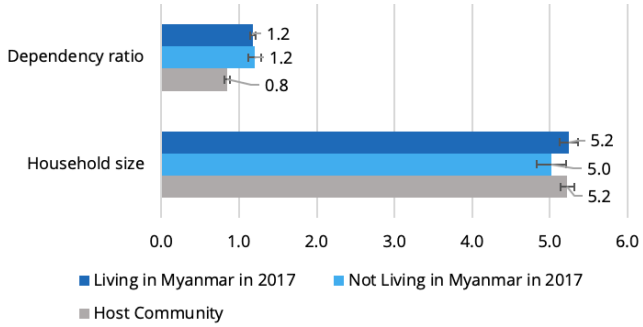
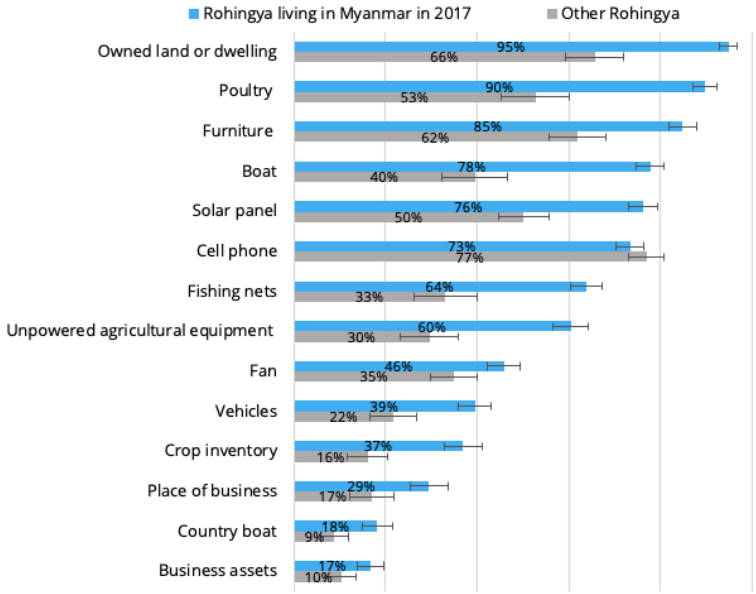


Figure 7. Asset Ownership in July 2017



Cox's Bazar Panel Survey—Methodological Note

The Cox's Bazar Panel Survey (CBPS) is a partnership between the Yale MacMillan Center Program on Refugees, Forced Displacement, and Humanitarian Responses (Yale MacMillan PRFDHR), the Gender & Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) program, and the Poverty and Equity Global Practice (GPVDR) of the World Bank. The survey was executed jointly by Innovations for Poverty Action Bangladesh and Pulse Bangladesh (Cox's Bazar).

The study had a sample size of 5,044 households, divided equally between refugees and hosts. Figure 1 is a map of the region with host upazilas and camps identified. The host sample covers six upazilas in Cox's Bazar District (Chakaria, Cox's Bazar Sadar, Pekua, Ramu, Teknaf, and Ukhia upazilas) and one upazila in Bandarban District (Naikhongchhori upazila). Within these seven upazilas, mauzas (the lowest administrative unit in Bangladesh), are split into two categories: (A) high spillover host mauzas and (B) low spillover host mauzas. High spillover host mauzas are mauzas within 15km (3-hour walking distance) from camps. Low spillover host mauzas are mauzas more than 15km away from camps. A random sample of 66 mauzas was drawn from a frame of 286 mauzas using probability proportional to size. Each mauza was divided into segments of roughly 100-150 households based on the reported census populations, and 3 segments were randomly selected from each sample. From each of the listed segments, 13 households were randomly selected for surveying, totaling 2,535 host households. Five additional households were randomly selected as replacements.

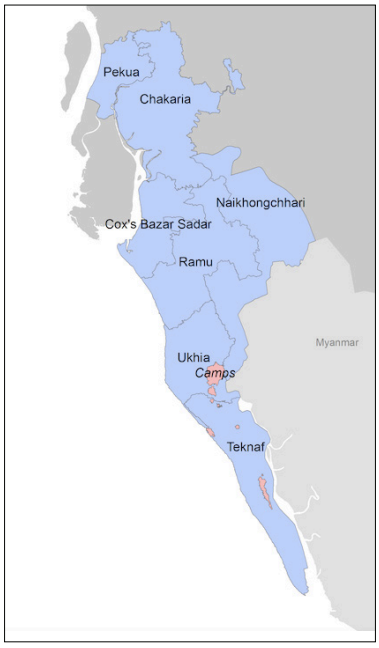
The camp sample uses the Needs and Population Monitoring Round 12 (NPM12) data from the International Organization for Migration as the sampling frame. NPM12 divided all camps into 1,954 majhee blocks. 1,200 blocks were randomly selected using a probability proportional to the size of the camp. 13 households were randomly selected from each of the listed camp blocks, totaling 2,509 camp households. Five additional households were randomly selected as replacements.

Ethical Considerations

All the questions included in the survey are standard self-reported measures that have been extensively used by researchers across the world. Nonetheless, questions about traumatic experiences might be sensitive and some participants may feel upset or distressed while being interviewed.

To minimize the risk of unduly upsetting respondents, we followed the recommendations made by the Trauma Psychology Division of the American Psychological Association. We provided appropriate consent on the nature of the questions that would be asked, as well as the costs and benefits from taking part in the study. We measured perceived costs, risks and benefits during the pilot phase, using Newman et al.'s (2001) Reaction to Research Participation Questionnaire. We established a referral and follow-up protocol for participants who felt distressed. Enumerators were required to attend a three-week training workshop covering a manual of procedures and ethical considerations. We protected client confidentiality by instructing enumerators to politely ask respondents and household members to find a quiet place to talk, and by assigning to each participant a number to identify the data collected during the survey. No questions about abuse, violence and trauma were asked if privacy could not be guaranteed. We provided continuous consent by reminding participants that questions about traumatic events would be asked, immediately before administering any violence-specific questions. We obtained permission again before proceeding with the interview.

Figure A1. Region Map and Areas Sampled



Directions for Future Research and Policy

- Rohingya refugees are twice as likely to report having had a family member murdered in their lifetime than natives of Bangladesh. In addition, refugee households have a higher dependency ratio —and a larger portion of female-headed households —than host households, thus suggesting a relatively high male mortality. Our qualitative findings indicate that this has led to a disruption of gender norms in some Rohingya households. Further research is necessary to understand how changes around the acceptability of work and women's mobility might affect the relative effectiveness of different livelihood support programs—and, in particular, the risk of a backlash against women who engage in work outside of the homestead.
- Rohingya refugees have very low levels of formal education. Because low parental education is strongly correlated with poor developmental outcomes among children,[8,9] early childhood development interventions, alone or in combination with parenting programs[10] might be necessary to improve the living standards of future generations of Rohingya. Future research on the mechanisms though which low parental education might affect the children's health and the acquisition of cognitive ability (such as language or numeracy skills) and socio-emotional development and functioning (for example, self-regulation) in a refugee setting is essential to inform the design of such interventions.
- Women refugees are much less likely to be employed in Bangladesh. Because they also had low rates of labour market participation in Myanmar this could be due to either conservative social norms, security fears, or a dearth of appropriate employment opportunities due to their lower educational attainment. Research on the determinants of the low female labor market participation among female refugees is necessary to identify the type of interventions that are more likely to increase their chances of earning an income—for example, safety interventions versus skills training.
- It is difficult for refugee households to build wealth after they are displaced, and opportunities to earn a livelihood are limited. A promising avenue for research and policy could involve piloting the effect of providing productive assets to hosts and refugees, alone or in combination with training.[11] The specific choice of assets—that is, ensuring that they match the current skill set of refugees, and of women in particular—is likely to be an important determinant of their effectiveness in raising living standards in camps and host communities.

Endnotes

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3. In addition to administering a household questionnaire containing detailed questions on household composition and living conditions, we randomly selected two adults in each household and administered to them a survey module containing questions on labor market outcomes, both contemporaneous and retrospective, migration history and prospects, health status and use of health services, crime and conflict, mental health, and trauma. In total, we administered these modules to 9,386 adults. In GAGE households, additional surveys were administered to either one adolescent aged 15-17 or an adolescent aged 10-12 and his or her female primary caregiver for a total of 2,086 adolescents and 1,273 female primary caregivers. The adolescent surveys asked questions on education, health, nutrition, and sexual and reproductive health, psychosocial and mental health, social inclusion, economic participation, and voice and agency, as well as on gender norms and attitudes that cut across all topics. The female primary caregiver surveys asked a similar set of questions, including questions on parental involvement and support in various aspects of the adolescent's lives and their expectations and aspirations for the adolescent's futures.

4. The latter group includes is predominantly earlier arrivals into Bangladesh. It also includes a small number of economic migrants who were working in third countries (including Saudi Arabia, India, and Malaysia) in July 2017 but are now living in Cox's Bazar.

5. The number of dependents aged zero to 14 and over the age of 65 relative to those aged 15 to 64.

6. ILOSTAT defines labor force participation rate as the proportion of the population aged 15 and older that is economically active. We calculate labor force participation in our sample by aggregating respondents aged 15 and older who report having being employed at any time during the period 2016-2017, or that report not being able to find a job due to either not planning on staying in the area for very long, a lack of employment opportunities, not being allowed to work due to refugee status, or a lack of capital, resources, or space.

7. Rohingya not living in Myanmar in 2017 include those who were already living in Bangladesh at the time, and those who were living in third countries.

8. See Carneiro et al. 2013 for causal evidence on the intergenerational effects of maternal education in the United States and transmission channels.

9. See Mensch et al. 2019 for a recent systematic review of studies investigating the causal links between schooling attained—particularly by women—and reduced maternal, infant, and child mortality.

10. Parenting programs are a wide class of interventions training, support, or education to parents, with a view to improving parental performance and increasing child well-being. This could involve coaching parents using videos or role models, learning by doing (e.g., supervised practice exercises), or providing feedback following direct observation of parent–child interaction, among other techniques. Parenting programs have been proven to be effective in reducing the risk of emotional and behavioral difficulties among children in high-income countries but there is a dearth of evidence from low- and middle-income countries. A recent survey of studies on the effects of parenting programs in developing countries (Mejia et al. 2012) documents large heterogeneity in intervention design and mixed results across programs and settings.

11. Similar to BRAC's Targeting the Ultra-Poor program (TUP) in Bangladesh, which has been proven to help poor women increase their aggregate labor supply and earnings, thus leading to asset accumulation (livestock, land, and business assets) and poverty reduction, with effects growing in time (Bandiera et al. 2017).

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