



The empowerment paradox: how humanitarian governance produces the gender inequality it seeks to fix

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Introduction

The Rohingya refugee camps of Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh are home to more than 1.2 million people who have fled persecution in Myanmar. Bangladesh does not give them formal refugee status – they cannot legally work, move freely, or access education. The camps are among the most crowded in the world, run by a complex mix of the Bangladeshi state, the Bangladesh Army, UNHCR, and hundreds of NGOs. Research supported by XCEPT has described this governance system as fragmented and uneven in its effects on refugees.¹

At the centre of camp governance sits the *majhi* – a male community administrator appointed by the Bangladeshi government to oversee zones of Rohingya families. Humanitarian agencies rely on *majhis* to deliver services, access communities, and identify programme participants. Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Cox's Bazar,² this policy brief explains why that reliance is counterproductive

to gender programmes' intentions of supporting and empowering women (naming this incompatibility the 'empowerment paradox'), and describes what actors at every level can do about it.

Key findings

- **The *majhi* system centres authority in roles overwhelmingly held by men:** The *majhi* camp administrator roles, held almost exclusively by men, were created by the Bangladesh Army and are kept in place by humanitarian agencies. There are significant reports of *majhi* administrators not adequately fulfilling their roles or even abusing their position. Their continued access to gatekeeping power is an institutional choice, not a given cultural norm, and humanitarian agencies can play a key role in addressing and improving this governance system.

1 Samira Manzur and Tasnia Khandaker Prova (2023), 'Governing at the Margins : A patchwork of policies and practices in the Rohingya refugee response in Bangladesh', XCEPT Research Report, The Asia Foundation and Centre for Peace and Justice, BRAC University

2 This brief draws on long-term feminist ethnographic fieldwork in the Rohingya refugee camps of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh from 2017 to 2025. The research included interviews with Rohingya women across four camps in the Kutupalong-Balukhali expansion site, conducted in Rohingya and Bangla. The full academic paper is titled "The Empowerment Paradox: Masculinity, Authority, and Feminist Agency in the Myanmar-Bangladesh Rohingya Borderlands".

- **Women have built parallel governance infrastructure which needs to be supported:** Women-led religious circles and mutual aid networks are running in camps right now. Humanitarian agencies walk past them every day without recognising what they see. However, cuts to humanitarian funding and the increasing pressure of long-term displacement means that this infrastructure is under threat and requires support.
- **Current gender programming approaches result in the empowerment paradox, which further excludes women:** Gender programmes delivered through male gatekeepers deepen the inequality they are meant to fix as women's association with these programmes and the *majhi* system risks destabilising women's existing authority. Better workshops will not solve this. Asking whose authority programmes flow through will.

The *majhi* system creates male authority, and humanitarian agencies sustain it

The *majhi* is not a traditional community leader. *Majhis* were appointed by the Bangladesh Army during the chaotic first weeks of the 2017 mass influx as a quick administrative fix. The system built around *majhis* has persisted because humanitarian agencies made them indispensable by routing aid distribution, protection referrals, and programme access through them. Their authority is not rooted in culture or community trust – it was built by the institutions that now depend on them.

Across this research, Rohingya women described *majhis* who:

- Demanded informal payments before acting on complaints or requests.
- Blocked or delayed domestic violence protection referrals, sometimes for months with no consequences.
- Monitored women's movements and used that knowledge as leverage: *"He knows who visits whom, who goes out, who goes to which NGO... You cannot do anything without him knowing."*

The empowerment paradox here is the NGOs' continued reliance and emphasis on *majhis*'

permission to operate in their respective zones. NGOs also rely on *majhis* to find participants and facilitate discussions with women. In this way, gender programming designed to challenge male authority is delivered through male authority. The structure that traps women is the same structure their empowerment is routed through.

Women have already built governance, but it is invisible to humanitarian actors

While the *majhi* runs the visible face of camp administration, women have built something parallel and far less visible. Spaces like the *taleem* – a women-led religious study circle that meets weekly in women's shelters – are led by women whose authority comes not from any official appointment but from years of sustained care and trust. It is not in any camp management database and no NGO funds or monitors it. And yet it governs in various ways where neighbour disputes are talked through and calmed, women in crisis are quietly supported, food is shared, and information circulates. As one interlocutor put it: *"[I]f I don't go to check on someone, who will? The majhi will not go. The NGOs cannot go to every house. We are the ones who know what is happening."* Related XCEPT research on gendered violence in the Bangladesh–Myanmar borderlands similarly documents how women's informal networks function as critical protection mechanisms that remain outside the view of formal humanitarian programming.³

Women make calculated choices about whether to engage with NGO programmes, and those choices often mean staying away from them. Being seen at an NGO session marks a woman as someone stepping outside her community's expectations. It costs her the informal authority – the reputation for discretion, care, and commitment – that makes her effective in the *taleem* and the visiting network. Women who stay away from workshops are not passive or resistant; rather, they are protecting the form of governance that actually works.

This infrastructure is now under threat. As humanitarian funding has been cut back and the pressures of long-term displacement have grown, many *taleems* meet less often and a large majority of them have stopped altogether. This matters because it removes one of the few reliable sources of support and dispute resolution for women in the camps. For

³ [Gendered violence and conflict in the Bangladesh–Myanmar borderlands: \(trans\)local experiences and responses.](#)

the overall camp system, it means that the informal buffer that has absorbed the gaps left by shrinking programmes is disappearing, at exactly the moment those gaps are growing.

The empowerment paradox on the ground

The empowerment paradox is not a coincidence or a programme design flaw. It is produced by three specific institutional mechanisms:

- 1. Aid flows through male gatekeepers:** Every aid distribution, protection referral, and empowerment workshop routed through the *majhi* adds to his authority. Over time, these choices compound, concentrating power in male hands regardless of what the programme content says.
- 2. Women's governance is invisible:** Because *taleems* are classified as religious or cultural activity (not governance), they are excluded from protection analyses, community assessments, and programme designs. Some NGO interventions have inadvertently undermined them by drawing women into visible public roles that cost them the community standing their informal authority depends on.
- 3. Programme design sends a signal:** When women need a *majhi* to access an empowerment workshop, the message is clear – power runs through men. That signal reaches women before any programme content does, and shapes whether they engage at all.

Recommendations

These findings suggest concrete actions for different actors, some specific to the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar and others with a wider application. Addressing the empowerment paradox requires changes in programme design, governance structures, and what the sector treats as evidence.

For programme implementers:

- Incorporate a feminist lens in the mapping of the governance landscape before designing programmes:** Before any gender programme is designed or scaled, we must ask who controls access to women in this community? How was that person's authority established? What happens to women who are seen engaging with external

programmes? These questions should shape the programme from the start.

- Create access routes that do not go through the *majhi*:** Direct outreach through women's networks, women-to-women referral pathways, and women's committees with real decision-making power are concrete alternatives. In practice, this means identifying and consulting women community leaders before a programme launches, not after.
- Measure whether women's authority is growing or shrinking:** Participation numbers are not enough. Track whether women's existing community authority is being supported or undermined as a result of the intervention. An empowerment programme that raises attendance figures while eroding women's informal leadership has made things worse, not better.

For humanitarian agencies and cluster leads:

- Treat women's informal governance as governance:** Women-only spaces like *taleems* and mutual aid networks belong in protection analyses and community assessments, and as active governance infrastructure that is sustaining stability in the camps right now. It is important to map them, consult them, and design around them.
- Hold *majhis* accountable:** Create direct complaint channels for women that bypass the *majhi*; introduce community satisfaction assessments disaggregated by gender; and consider tying *majhi* compensation to protection outcomes.

For donors and policymakers:

- Fund research that makes women's informal governance visible:** As formal programmes cut back, the informal networks absorbing the gap are themselves disappearing. Investment in qualitative research that tracks what is actually sustaining stability in the camps matters more than ever, and should sit alongside, not below, outcome-based monitoring in funding priorities.
- Engage the Bangladeshi government on the *majhi* system:** The *majhi* system was created by the state. Better NGO practice alone will not change the underlying governance architecture. Lasting reform requires political engagement – including advocacy with the Bangladeshi government – on how camp administrative structures are designed and who they are accountable to.

About the author

Farhana Afrin Rahman is an interdisciplinary scholar working at the intersections of international politics, gender, and development. Her research examines authority, knowledge production, and women's political agency in contexts of displacement and marginalisation across the global South. She is an incoming Assistant Professor in Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick, and previously held a Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship at the University of Cambridge where she completed her PhD. Her first book, *After the Exodus: Gender and Belonging in Bangladesh's Rohingya Refugee Camps* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), won major book prizes from the British International Studies Association and the Society for the Study of Social Problems. With over 15 years of experience spanning academia, international development, and policy, Farhana has conducted research across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, and consulted for various organisations including UNDP and UN Women. In 2021, she received the Paula Kantor Award from ICRW for her contributions to gender research.

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