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Rohingya women, girls being trafficked to Malaysia for marriage

Al Jazeera reveals how refugees in Bangladesh camps are vulnerable to proposals from single Rohingya men in Malaysia.

By Kaamil Ahmed

Al Jazeera (08.05.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2vJ8Qsp> - Senwara Begum travelled for two weeks by road and boat, over mountains and along rivers, guided only by a trafficker she feared, before she reached Malaysia to marry a man she had never met.

The journey was a blur of borders and landscapes unknown to her and it started in Bangladesh's Rohingya refugee camps, where she was born 23 years earlier and where there is increasing concern about the number of young women and girls being smuggled across borders to marry Rohingya men abroad.

The Kutupalong settlement in Cox's Bazar, from where the women are plucked, grew into the world's largest refugee site in 2017, after a Myanmar military operation described as "genocidal" by the UN targeted the majority-Muslim minority.

The overcrowded camp lacks security for women, who live in shelters composed of simple plastic sheeting on bamboo frames; there is little privacy.

According to Rohingya activists and rights groups, dozens of women are now regularly arriving in Malaysia to marry Rohingya men, reviving a form of transnational human trafficking that once moved thousands of Rohingya a year.

"We travelled by land, occasionally changing cars. We started in the camp and went up to the Indian border, then we headed to Malaysia. There were three of us: another woman and a man - the trafficker," Begum told Al Jazeera. "I didn't know the trafficker, so I was scared of being harassed by them. I've heard stories before about traffickers raping women, sexually harassing them and beating people, so I was scared."

The marriages and travel are often arranged by Rohingya men, previously smuggled into Malaysia themselves but usually unable to marry local women.

Without documentation, they are unable to travel back to Myanmar or the refugee camps in Bangladesh to get married, so send proposals through friends and relatives and make arrangements for marriages that do not involve much consent from the girls.

Several Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh described similar journeys taken by relatives and in-laws in the past year that involved road trips that could take months and passed through Myanmar's mountainous north.

Some of the trafficked women were among the remaining Rohingya families in Myanmar and had to enter Bangladesh, from where the traffickers operate, only to re-enter Myanmar at another point, one less militarised than their native Rakhine State.

Fortify Rights recently urged Malaysia to address child marriage, drawing on evidence from 11 interviews with child brides or their relatives in Bangladesh and Malaysia.

"One recent route documented by Fortify Rights is a complicated land route from Myanmar to Bangladesh, India, and then into Chin State in Myanmar and through the cities of Mandalay and Yangon, eventually crossing the Myanmar-Thailand border and later into Malaysia," said John Quinley, a researcher with Fortify Rights.

"Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar have few options. They cannot work and have no formal access to education. Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh fear forced repatriation or relocation to the island. All these push factors could lead to a real uptick in Rohingya families - including girls - moving to Malaysia, some for child marriage," said Quinley.

Until 2015, a network of human traffickers transported Rohingya to the jungles of southern Thailand, where the refugees were held for ransom before they could be smuggled into Malaysia, where many believed they could find more freedom to work and live than in Bangladesh or Myanmar.

That vast network has been dormant since Thailand uncovered 139 mass graves at some of the trafficking camps along the border with Malaysia.

Since the 2017 influx into Bangladesh, attempts by traffickers there to smuggle Rohingya by boat have been stopped by the Bangladeshi coastguard.

In the past year, however, there has been increased movement of Rohingya, mostly through long land routes from Bangladesh.

A Rohingya activist in Thailand, who requested anonymity, told Al Jazeera it is impossible to know exactly how many Rohingya are entering Malaysia, but that there is now a constant flow of people.

The activist showed this reporter photos of young women and girls who were arrested by Thai authorities in February, saying that they were caught in a safe house after neighbours reported them.

Al Jazeera will not publish these images, in order to protect the refugees' identities.

Hamida, 30, lives in the Bangladeshi refugee camps near Myanmar.

She said her Malaysia-based son arranged a marriage that brought a 15-year-old girl from Myanmar to Bangladesh, where the girl stayed with the family before travelling.

"She was scared about the journey but what could we do about it? It had all already been arranged," said Hamida.

"From Bangladesh, they went to the Indian border and had to walk for many days. Then, they got to Thailand and took buses and cars until they got to Malaysia," she said. "It took nearly three months and the girl became so skinny from the journey."

Hamida's son had been in Malaysia for several years when he organised the marriage through friends.

Begum's marriage was arranged through her brother Zakir Hossain, 29. He was already living in Malaysia and now shares a home with his 17-year-old wife - who he also brought to the Southeast Asian country from a refugee camp in Bangladesh, as well as Begum and her husband, in a Kuala Lumpur suburb.

He said Rohingya men take these measures to get married because they have no other options in Malaysia, where most work undocumented as labourers or in factories.

"We're scared about the traffickers but we can only leave it with God. We don't want to hire traffickers but we have no options," he said.

Chekufa, who has organised hundreds of Rohingya women across the camps into a network of volunteers, blamed economic challenges for the rise in trafficking and child brides.

"Many child marriages are happening because the monthly rations are not enough and there is no source of income," she said.

Concern over food rations was also reflected in a monthly report on the challenges faced by refugees produced in March by the NGOs Translators without Borders, Internews and BBC Media Action.

Refugees complained about smaller rations, saying they were often contaminated with rocks and other materials.

Chekufa said these worries have seen some families marry their female relatives off because it meant one less mouth to feed.

"We have to talk more to the parents to stop these early marriages. Sometimes, we have to promise them: 'We will try to support you with our own contribution, but please don't marry her before her time'."

Meanwhile, a combined lack of opportunity and security keeps many teenage girls locked inside their homes, with families saying they fear the attention women attract in the crowded camps.

Khaleda, 40, said her family received a proposal from a Rohingya man in Malaysia in 2018 to marry her 14-year-old daughter, but have not gone ahead with it because they cannot raise enough money.

Though these arranged marriages forgo the traditional dowry paid by the families of brides to men, in many cases they still pay half of the trafficking costs.

Khaleda says she would prefer to have her daughter married locally but would have to pay an expensive dowry.

The camps offer almost no education, so her daughter sits inside all day, where Khaleda believes it is safest for her.

In their dark shelter, the girl says little about the matter. Eventually, shyly, she admits she would prefer to stay with her parents.

"When the person came to us, my only thought was that I would follow what my parents tell me to do," she said.

Begum said she was aware of the risks but also feared a marriage in Bangladesh.

"In the camp, lives are difficult. Women don't have peaceful marriages. Men get married a few times and the women are not protected," she said, adding that several women have been abandoned by husbands who re-marry while others suffer domestic abuse.

She said the idea of living in Malaysia at least offered her the chance to escape the crowded camp she was born into, but she was still concerned.

"I was worried because I didn't what kind of man my husband would be. I was born in Bangladesh and he was born in Burma, so there could've been cultural differences. I didn't know whether he would be good or bad," she said.

Fortify Rights have documented cases of girls who have been abused by their husbands in Malaysia. Their research, conducted with the Rohingya Women's Development Network run by Rohingya refugee Sharifah Hossain, said many women were denied freedom to move, work or attend school.

"Some of the Rohingya child brides my colleagues and I at Fortify Rights have spoken with are in slavery-like conditions and in situations of domestic servitude," said Quinley. "A Rohingya girl told me she did not want to marry young but had no other choice."

Begum, who is six months pregnant, said accessing medical treatment can be difficult because they are not registered by the UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, and Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 refugee convention.

She has spent much of the past few months sat inside her home, scared to leave after being detained by immigration police who she says later released her after her husband raised money to pay them off.

"Here, you are not safe," she said. "I miss my mother a lot."

From sports to work, Rohingya women face new roles in world's largest refugee camp

VOANews (11.02.2019) - <https://goo.gl/E1BLrR> - On a blue mat in their mud and bamboo home in the middle of the world's largest refugee settlement, Mohammad Selim is pacing his 9-year-old daughter Nasima Akter on her taekwondo drill.

As a local taekwondo champion in his Rohingya district in Myanmar before fleeing to Bangladesh 18 months ago, Selim dreamed of making a career of his sport but now he is hoping that his daughter can instead follow that path.

He said in Myanmar it was impossible to teach her, as taekwondo was considered improper for girls and he didn't have time, but their flight to camps near Cox's Bazar in southeast Bangladesh has started to change his society's rules for women.

For women and girls make up about 55 percent of the 900,000 plus mainly Muslim Rohingya living in about 34 sprawling, crowded camps in the settlement and they are needed to work or to run households as many have lost their husbands.

"I want my daughter to learn taekwondo and one day represent us as a champion," Selim, 35, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation via an interpreter watched by his wife and three other younger children in their tidy, two-room shelter.

"Our society is conservative and we prefer covering our women but in taekwondo you are covered so people can't question a girl participating. We practice inside to not get criticized but many people regret they cannot teach their daughters."

With most Rohingya now in Bangladesh for 18 months and life starting to become more routine in the camps, Selim is not the only one breaking away from the Rohingya's previous lifestyle, where women rarely left the house and were segregated from men.

He is hoping to get approval to teach taekwondo to other girls in the camps where children do not have access to a formal education but can attend learning centers until about age 14.

More than 730,000 Rohingya have fled Buddhist-dominated Myanmar since August 2017 to escape a military offensive the United Nations called "ethnic cleansing" of one of the world's most oppressed people, joining others already in Bangladesh.

The chance of returning soon to Myanmar looks remote, with Bangladesh vowing to only repatriate volunteers.

The U.N. special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, said in late January it was clear they cannot return "in the near future" with the situation in Myanmar unchanged.

Myanmar has denied most allegations of persecution.

Women-only areas

Aid agencies and non-government organizations (NGOs) working alongside Bangladesh's government in the camps were aware from the outset that women and girls were vulnerable to sexual and other violence, both on their journey and in the camps.

To address this, they have set up women-only projects and committees to encourage women to get involved in the community as well as counseling services for those who faced abuse.

But not all Rohingya men used to a conservative Islamic lifestyle are happy to see women taking on new roles and making decisions, adding to the risk of domestic violence which aid groups said is on the rise in the camps as time goes by.

"Some men say it is a sin for women to work because in Myanmar we never worked," said Nuran Kis, 40, a Rohingya mother of eight, who is teaching others to sew in a women-only center.

"My husband supports me though because we need money and want to survive," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation, sitting cross-legged in her two-room home on a hill overlooking Balukhali camp, a maze of dirt roads and makeshift shelters.

Shameema Akhter, who co-ordinates eight women-friendly spaces in Balukhali camp for BRAC, Bangladesh's largest NGO, said some men were initially reluctant to allow women and girls to come to these centers but gradually that was changing.

She said they ran craft sessions for the women and girls, taught them to sew, talked to them about the risk of rape, human trafficking, and child marriage, how to manage hygiene, and provided one-on-one counseling for anyone abused.

Akhter said when they arrived many girls were given sanitary pads, but had no idea how to use them and cut them up as face tissues while handouts of cereal, a food item not known to the Rohingya, were sold at markets for a fraction of the real value.

Most of the Rohingya are illiterate, having had limited access to education — and healthcare — in Myanmar's Rakhine state where they were refused citizenship and free movement.

"Many of the girls were depressed and traumatized about being raped or being forced by their families to get married and very shy," Akhter told the Thomson Reuters Foundation in the group's center decorated with brightly colored paper cutouts.

"But now they want to come here and learn skills that might help them and their families in the future."

Limited work

Under Bangladesh government rules, Rohingya cannot take formal employment, but they can join cash-for-work schemes run by NGOs in the camps to earn about 400 Bangladeshi taka (US\$5) a day — and some women have taken roles previously only for men.

Dola Banu, 35, is one of the women building roads and other infrastructure under a Site Maintenance Engineering Project (SMEP) run by United Nations agencies International Organization for Migration (IOM), World Food Program (WFP) and UNHCR.

"This is the first time I have ever done any kind of work like this," Banu told the Thomson Reuters Foundation via an interpreter during a break from carrying bricks for a new road.

"I like this work and want to keep doing it as long as I can to support my family," said Banu, who is raising her four children as a single mother after her husband died.

Aid workers said these new roles were giving women more confidence and more were willing to take leadership roles in the community so they could raise issues such as the need for more lighting by latrines, where women fear being attacked at night.

"This is a group going through forced societal change and women are finding new forms of confidence," said Gemma Snowdon, a WFP spokeswoman based in the beachside town of Cox's Bazar about 40 km (25 miles) from the nearest of the camps.

She said a key barrier for female-led households was childcare so they planned to launch mobile child care and boost self-reliance by teaching women skills such as growing vegetables, sewing, and even repairing mobile phones.

Some help has come from outside the settlement as well.

Launched late last year, the Testimony Tailors website lets users fund and pick garments to be made by about 40 female Rohingya, with finished items donated to refugees in the camps.

Jamila Hanan, a British-based manager at #Hands4Rohingya, which supports the project, said all the women and girls involved in the project were aged between 15 and 40 and survivors of rape or massacres.

Many had witnessed family members being killed "This cooperative is them helping themselves... It has been incredible to see them supporting each other," said Hanan.

While some Rohingya are struggling to accept women's new roles and projects such as encouraging girls to play football, for others like Nasima Akter, the changes are part of adjusting to life in the camps for the foreseeable future.

Bangladeshi law proposing child marriage in "special cases" is a step backwards – charities

The proposed law would permit child marriage in "special cases"

By Nita Bhalla

Thomson Reuters Foundation (13.01.2017) - <http://tmsnrt.rs/2jxMRzO> - Bangladesh will be taking a step backwards in efforts to end child marriage if parliament approves changes to a law which would permit girls below 18 to be married in "special cases", a global alliance of charities said on Thursday.

The poor South Asian nation has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, despite a three-decade-old law which bans marriage for girls under 18 and men under 21.

Girls Not Brides, a coalition of more than 650 charities, said Bangladesh's parliament was expected to consider the proposed change to the Child Marriage Restraint Act. This is expected to take place in the next session beginning Jan. 22.

Girls Not Brides in Bangladesh said the proposed change was "alarming" and a step backwards for the country which has reduced child marriage in recent years.

"We have worked with thousands of girls who have been pulled out of education, married off early, bear the scars of early pregnancy, and forced to marry their abusers. This is simply unacceptable," said a spokesperson from the alliance's Bangladesh chapter in a statement.

The proposed law was open to abuse since it gave no definition of the term "special cases", Girls Not Brides said.

Statements made by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina suggest exceptions would apply in instances of accidental pregnancy, or where a marriage would help to protect a girl's "honour" and the family's reputation in this largely conservative society.

Bangladeshi officials were not immediately available for comment.

Along with Niger, Guinea, South Sudan, Chad and Burkina Faso, Bangladesh is among the 10 worst countries for child marriage despite moves to strengthen law enforcement and toughen penalties against the crime.

In 2011, 32.5 percent of girls aged between 15 and 19 were married compared with 37.5 percent a decade before, said Girls Not Brides, citing data from Bangladesh's Bureau of Statistics.

Campaigners say girls face a greater risk of rape, domestic violence and forced pregnancies - which may put their lives in danger - as a result of being married as children.

Child brides are often denied the chance to go to school, are isolated from society and forced into a lifetime of economic dependence as a wife and mother.

Yet the practice continues largely due to a combination of social acceptance and government inaction, activists say.

"Marriage before 18 does not ensure a pregnant girl's safety," said Lakshmi Sundaram, executive director for Girls Not Brides, said in the statement. "In reality it exposes her to the risk of sexual, physical and psychological violence."

"The progress Bangladesh has made to address child marriage is impressive, and reflects a real commitment from the highest levels of the government. Now is not the time to regress."
