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Policy Brief

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Gendered violence and insecurity in Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh – new insights and ways forward

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Executive summary

Gender-based violence (GBV) and insecurity have increased in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh. There is a clear link between this distressing development and violent dynamics in the wider Bangladesh-Myanmar border region. This policy brief presents findings of an empirical study conducted between April and June 2024 in the refugee camps and adjacent areas along the border. The policy brief underscores the need for holistic interventions that extend far beyond conventional measures against GBV within the Rohingya camps by addressing the roots of insecurity and violence, including their cross-border dimensions.

Key findings

- **The escalating civil war in Rakhine state in Myanmar and resurgence of Rohingya armed groups in the refugee camps in Bangladesh have increased GBV against and among Rohingya refugees.** Both women and men - in particular, the younger generation - are severely affected and largely unprotected.

- **Physical assaults and sexual violence against Rohingya women have become distressingly**

normal in the refugee camps. While female survivors are supported by humanitarian organisations, the root causes of GBV are hardly addressed. Community-based interventions are project driven, with minimal scope for Rohingya women to assume leadership roles. Powerful community members resist donor-driven models of women's 'empowerment' as they challenge existing social structures.

- **Forced conscription of Rohingya men in the refugee camps has emerged as a new form of gendered violence as the conflict in Myanmar escalates.** Young men are tortured, abducted, and forcibly conscripted into armed groups to join the war in Myanmar. Humanitarian organisations typically adopt women-focused approaches to GBV prevention and reduction, neglecting a large segment of male survivors and potential victims.

- **Security actors lack awareness of the multi-faceted nature of GBV and are ill-equipped to counter violence by armed groups within and beyond camp boundaries.** Security actors' insensitivity and inaction are exacerbating the situation, as they fail to provide comprehensive security for refugees in the camps and do not control the border with Myanmar effectively.

- **The Rohingya displacement crisis is deepening as a new refugee exodus occurs.** The past seven years have not seen a substantial improvement in the lives of the one million Rohingya people living in Bangladesh. Decreasing humanitarian budgets, widespread insecurity, and constrained livelihoods all contribute to worsening conditions in the camps. Worse still, escalating violence in Rakhine state has prompted a new wave of more than 80,000 Rohingya refugees seeking protection in Bangladesh since August 2024.

Policy implications

The Government of Bangladesh and the international community have so far regarded GBV against Rohingya refugees as a humanitarian problem that is taking place within camps. While it is true that most GBV incidents occur in the refugee camps, this focus on the conditions and actors in the camps is too narrow. Given the rising violence against Rohingya women committed by members of armed groups and the growing number of forced conscriptions of Rohingya men, all stakeholders need to urgently address the deteriorating security situation in the camps and the wider Bangladesh-Myanmar border region and consider how insecurity and GBV are linked to the ongoing war in Myanmar.

Reducing GBV implies resolving the Rohingya's protracted refugee situation. The interim government of Bangladesh and international actors thus need to reconsider their humanitarian encampment approach, and to develop alternative, comprehensive and more feasible solutions for and with Rohingya people that factor in local and regional cultural, social, economic and political contexts. Our study findings speak to policy changes and actions at three distinct levels: the Rohingya community, the refugee camps and the wider borderlands.

The community: Psychosocial, medical, legal and economic support for survivors of GBV – both women and men – must be enhanced, while existing efforts to prevent GBV at household and intra-community levels must be scaled up and sustainably funded. In response to newly emerging forms of violence, cases of GBV committed by members of armed groups, and of forced conscription and abduction of Rohingya men should be included through the GBV Information Management System (GBVIMS). As have already been implemented through various programmes, awareness raising about and preventive measures against all forms of GBV need to be further pursued and reach all gender and age groups, to improve gender relations and foster intra-community support. Raising awareness of women's equal rights and showcasing best practices and role models - for instance, in community meetings and through theatre and art - would promote social cohesion and could restore trust within the community.

The refugee camps: The governance approach to humanitarian encampment must be reconsidered as it severely restricts the freedoms, livelihood options and future prospects of Rohingya refugees. Such containment thereby contributes to cementing the precarious living conditions under which GBV has become rampant. While mobility controls are legitimate for security reasons, refugees' movements cannot and should not be totally curtailed. Enhancing livelihood opportunities implies lifting restrictions on working outside the camps. In addition, vocational training, microfinance initiatives, access to small-scale business grants, skills development and educational programmes should be scaled-up. Rohingya involvement in camp management should also be enhanced. Camp authorities and law enforcement agencies must also be educated on the causes, effects, and new dimensions of GBV to effectively address and mitigate them.

The borderlands: To sever the link between escalating armed conflict, camp insecurity, and gendered violence, it is imperative that Bangladeshi security agencies do not turn a blind eye to practices of armed groups, but establish robust security within the refugee camps and throughout the entire border region. The eradication of armed groups' power bases is essential. For example, United Nations (UN) agencies and the interim government of Bangladesh could establish regional disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programmes that target members of armed groups operating in the camps. Enhancing regional security necessitates coordinated bilateral and multilateral diplomatic efforts by the interim government and international stakeholders. The idea of creating a UN-monitored safe zone in the border region of Rakhine state should be pursued. Moreover, Bangladesh should open formal communications with the Arakan Army. Such measures would help restore regional stability and protect the vulnerable population, including Rohingya people in Myanmar and Bangladesh, from further violence and exploitation, paving the way for long-term solutions for displaced Rohingya people.
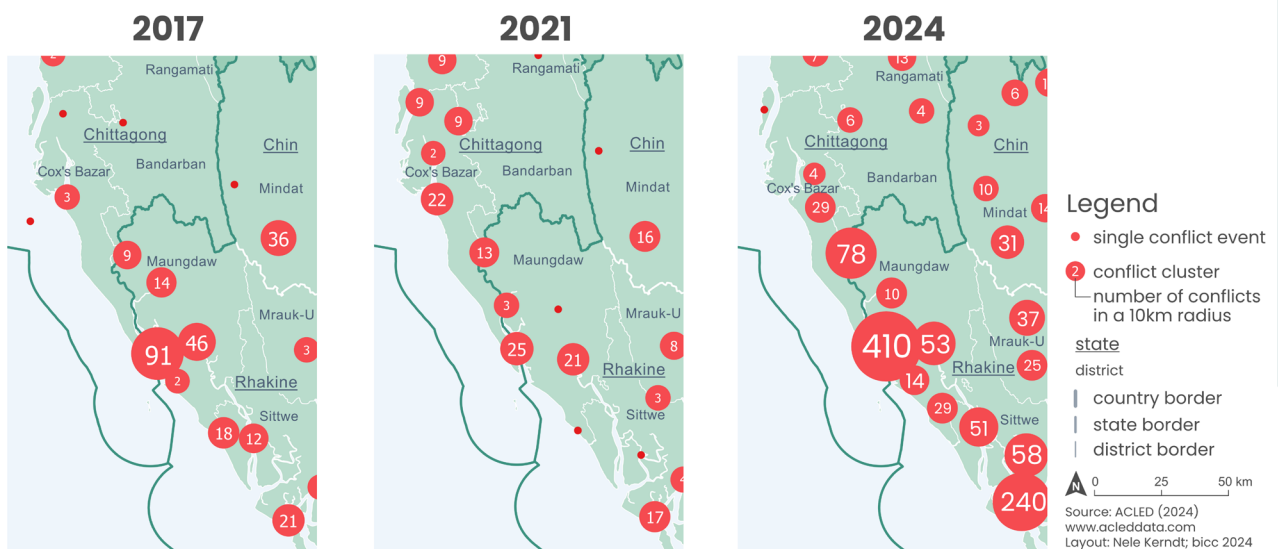
Figure 1: Conflict events in the Bangladesh-Myanmar borderlands (2017-2024)
Source: Based on ACLED data; © Nele Kerndt, bicc.

Violent conflict in the Bangladesh-Myanmar border region

War in Myanmar and a porous border pose security challenges for Bangladesh

The Bangladesh-Myanmar borderlands constitute a key site of refuge, hosting over 1 million Rohingya people in 34 refugee camps in Bangladesh (Ansar, 2020; Manzur & Prova, 2023). In recent years, however, this border region has become highly insecure as violent conflict, transnational crime and critical humanitarian conditions have converged.

Since 2010, violent conflicts have increased significantly in the borderlands (Figures 1 and 2), corresponding directly with the forced displacement of Rohingya people to Bangladesh. A gradual escalation of violence in Rakhine state started in 2015, culminating in genocide and mass displacement of the Rohingya population in 2017. This violence was followed by further spikes in 2019–2020 and another escalation since the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021. The ensuing civil war in Rakhine state has profoundly destabilised the region.

The continuation of conflict and instability have prolonged the refugee crisis and present numerous political and security challenges:

- Hard-to-reach areas on both sides of the border have become sanctuaries for armed groups, from where they launch military actions and facilitate cross-border trafficking.

- Myanmar army forces have sought refuge in Bangladesh, evidencing an unprecedented crisis.

- Over 80,000 Rohingya refugees fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh since August 2024.

- The Arakan Army seized large areas of Rakhine state from the control of Myanmar's military. In December 2024, Arakan Army achieved full control of Myanmar's border with Bangladesh.

- The withdrawal of Myanmar's forces has in effect turned parts of Rakhine into autonomous territory, leaving Bangladesh without a formal counterpart in bilateral talks.

- Informal cross-border trade has become a lifeline for people in Rakhine, leading to conflicts and new alliances among armed groups vying for control of and to profit from it.

In this landscape of conflict and contestation along a porous border, Rohingya armed groups have proliferated and everyday violence, particularly GBV, has intensified in the Rohingya refugee camps.
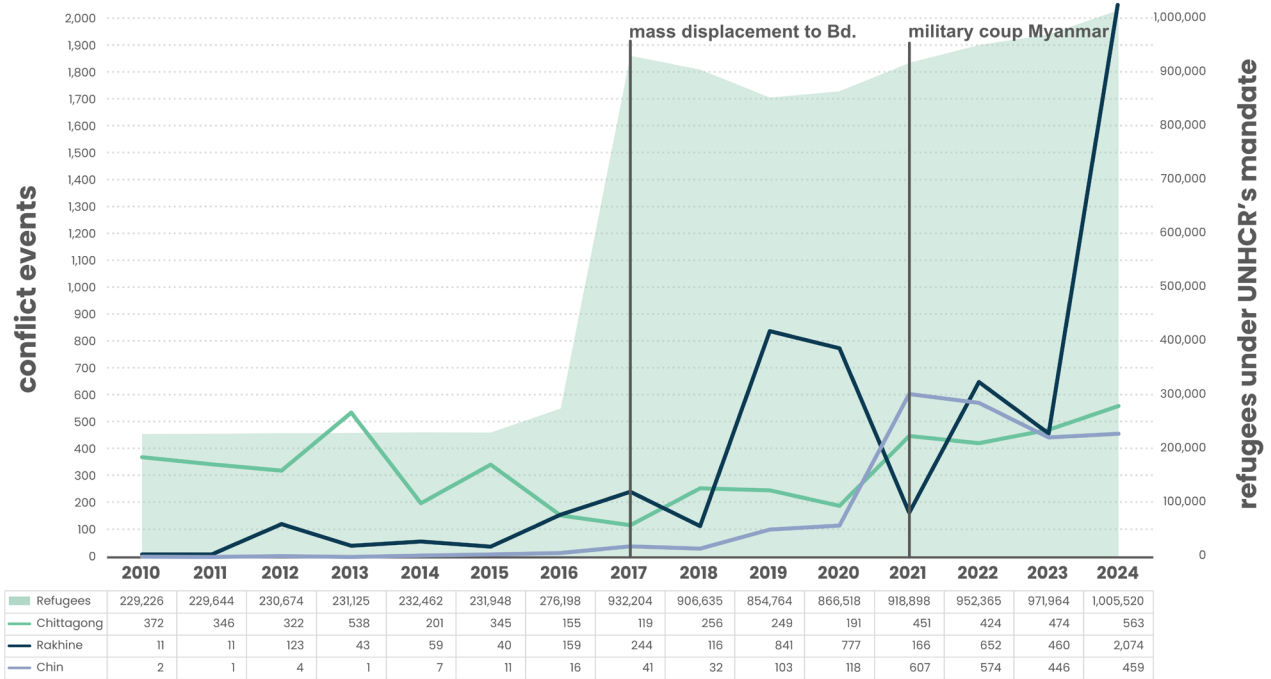
Figure 2: Conflict events in the border region and number of refugees hosted in Bangladesh (2010-2024)
Source: Based on ACLED and UNHCR data; © Nele Kerndt, bicc.

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Refugees	229,226	229,644	230,674	231,125	232,462	231,948	276,198	932,204	906,635	854,764	866,518	918,898	952,365	971,964	1,005,520
Chittagong	372	346	322	538	201	345	155	119	256	249	191	451	424	474	563
Rakhine	11	11	123	43	59	40	159	244	116	841	777	166	652	460	2,074
Chin	2	1	4	1	7	11	16	41	32	103	118	607	574	446	459

Violence against Rohingya women in the refugee camps

Refugee women and girls are experiencing a continuum of violence

Many Rohingya women endured genocide and rape in Myanmar. After fleeing to Bangladesh, such violence persisted. According to the UNFPA, reporting of GBV cases in the Rohingya camps has increased. Rohingya women and girls face physical assault, sexual violence, emotional abuse and denial of resources (Figure 3). Young women and girls are also coerced into early marriages, with some being forced into sex work. This continuum of violence severely limits their daily lives and future prospects, leaving deep psychological scars.

The perpetrators are most often husbands or intimate partners; but neighbours, community leaders and men from host communities also commit violence against women and girls. Since 2024, reports of GBV committed by members of armed groups has increased substantially. Powerful members of these groups can assault and force women into marriages without facing retaliation. The groups also use abduction and rape as weapons in internal power struggles (see Box 1).

Affected women find it extremely challenging to cope with GBV, although humanitarian organisations provide immediate care through health clinics, important advice and psychosocial support, and can initiate legal action. But many incidents of sexual violence go unreported due to distrust of authorities, legal costs, fear of retaliation from perpetrators and social stigma.

There are multiple projects, programmes and trainings by organisations in the GBV sub-sector, in which humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) collaborate to address the risks and consequences of GBV, and by women's committees that contribute significantly to GBV awareness raising. Activists, however, argue that awareness raising and education alone are not enough in a context where patriarchal norms and a culture of violence prevail. First, it is important to demonstrate the benefits of more equal treatment and women's participation in decision-making. In addition, more significant power shifts and structural transformations are required to improve the security and social position of Rohingya women and to effectively reduce the risks of GBV.
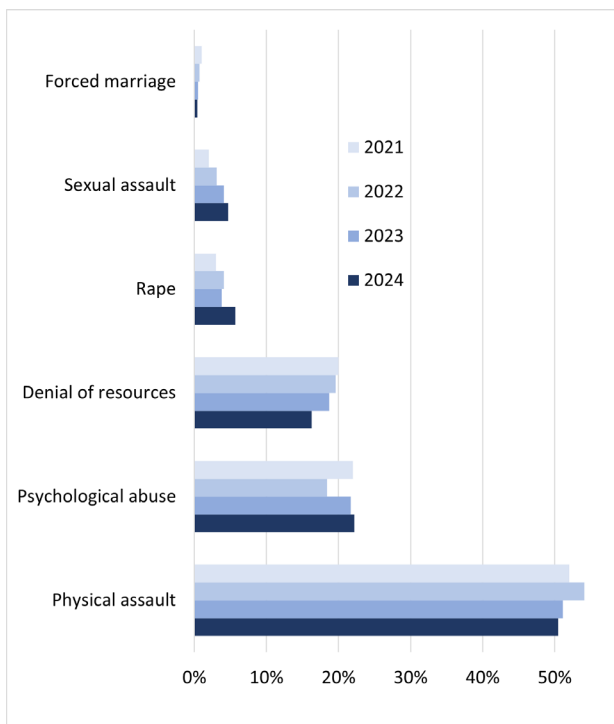
Figure 3: Reported types of GBV incidents in Rohingya camps (2021-2024)
Source: Authors' own, based on UNFPA (2023, 2024a/b), for 2024 data up to Q3 2024.

Community-based interventions in the field of GBV, most notably those focusing on Western models of 'women's empowerment' and 'justice', are often resisted and can inadvertently lead to further violence. Community leaders and other influential actors (e.g. from armed groups) might see such progressive approaches to gender equality as a threat to 'traditional' values and male-dominated structures within the Rohingya community.

Forced conscription of Rohingya men

Persistent insecurity and armed groups' violence affect both men and women

Young Rohingya men are also victims of gendered violence, although very few GBV cases against men are reported. Since 2024, armed groups in the refugee camps have used threats, abduction, and violence to forcibly recruit men aged between 18 and 45 years to fight in Myanmar's civil war (see Box 2). A report by human rights organisation Fortify Rights (2024) suggests a total of 1,700 cases of conscription, but our interviews indicate that between 3,000 and 5,000 young Rohingya were conscripted by various armed groups in the first half of 2024 alone. These men are trafficked across the border and forced to fight for either the Myanmar military or the Arakan Army, depending on which group conscripted them. Women face threats and sexual abuse as leverage against their male relatives.

Given the impunity and brutality of armed groups, and lack of protection in camps, male refugees hardly have any means of resisting other than to go into hiding. By paying a ransom, men can temporarily avoid being conscripted, or they are released and can return to Bangladesh from the battlefields in Myanmar. However, threats, psychological torture and moral pressure continue. Violence and insecurity drive many Rohingya men to flee the camps, seeking refuge in other regions of Bangladesh or in India, or embarking on perilous journeys to Indonesia and Malaysia. This exodus further disrupts the community's social fabric, leaving many women behind without male guardians and increasing their vulnerability to GBV.

Resurgence of Rohingya armed groups in the borderlands

The growing power of armed groups is based on their cross-border networks and mobilities

Since 2019, refugee camps in Bangladesh have become sites of violent power struggles among armed groups, most notably the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, Rohingya Solidarity Organisation, Arakan Rohingya Army and Islami Mahas. Recently, the situation was exacerbated further as the war in Myanmar intensified, and due to political upheaval and regime change in Bangladesh in 2024.

These groups use the camps to assert economic and political influence through extortion, drug trafficking and targeted killings of opponents. Their operational strategies also include forced recruitment of young men and systemic disruption of community-led governance structures.

These groups are referred to as 'night-time governments', operating with near impunity after regular working hours when the staff of international agencies and NGOs have left the camps, and the Armed Police Battalion (APBn) special police force has only a weak presence. Their emergence has created a climate of fear among refugees. Many camp dwellers consider the suffering under their 'own people' to be more painful than what they endured in Myanmar (see Box 3).

The armed groups' influence is sustained by coercive tactics, enhanced by the complicity of camp authorities and local leaders. The role of the APBn and majhis (camp leaders) in facilitating or turning a blind eye to forced recruitment and illicit activities has been widely reported.

The power of the armed groups also rests on their flexibility, mobility, and cross-border networks. They have footholds in different parts of the refugee camps and in multiple places on both sides of the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. They benefit from the escalation of violence in Myanmar and the war economies that have emerged as a consequence. A large part of their profits is generated through the cross-border trafficking of licit and illicit goods, including drugs; forced recruitment; human smuggling; and kidnapping for ransom. Such criminal activities require not only mobility, but also hard-to-control and remote border regions into which these groups can retreat. Given the density of border and security infrastructures – on both sides of the border (see Figure 4) – it is hard to imagine that their respective military and security apparatuses are not aware of these cross-border operations. Their negative consequences, however, are largely borne
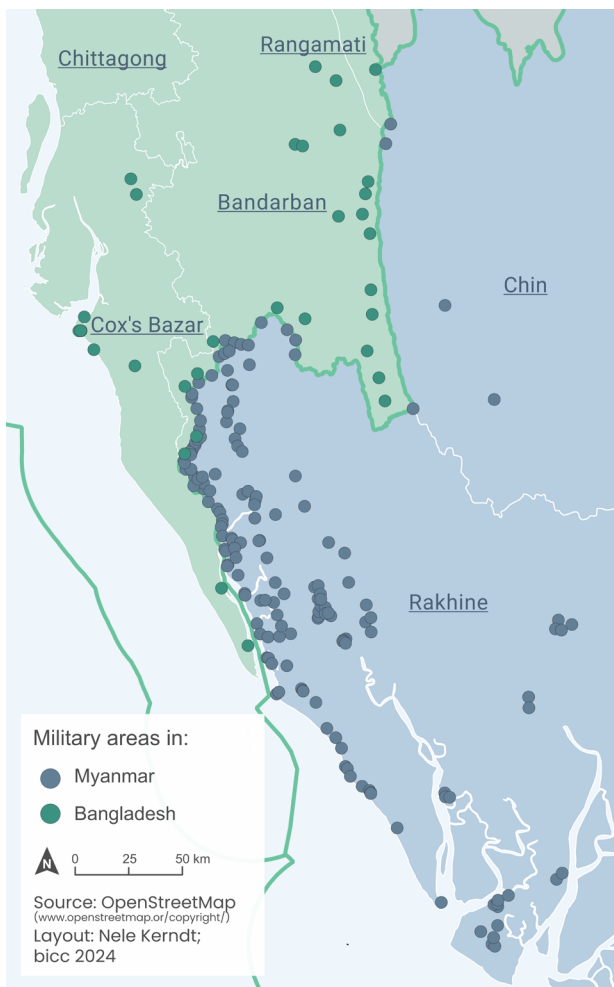
Figure 4: Military areas in the border region)
Source: Based on OpenStreetMap; © Nele Kerndt, bicc.

by civilians – both Rohingya refugees and local host communities.

Rethinking governance of the Rohingya crisis

The deteriorating security situation and deepening protracted refugee situation require bold new steps beyond encampment and humanitarian governance

The interim government of Bangladesh's response to the refugee crisis that has unfolded since 2017 has been generous and has been supported by the international community. Despite dwindling resources, hundreds of organisations collaboratively provide shelter, food, and basic services through

the camps to displaced Rohingya people (Manzur & Prova, 2023). The comprehensive repatriation of refugees to Myanmar was defined as the overarching goal from the outset; but by now it has become clear that the majority of refugees will not be able to return to Myanmar in the near future. However, neither integration in Bangladesh, with access to work and comprehensive rights, nor large-scale resettlement to third countries are currently envisaged or seem politically viable as durable solutions for Rohingya refugees (Rashid, 2019).

As a result, a complex protracted displacement situation has emerged in Bangladesh, which is marked by refugees' containment in camps, continued legal insecurity, limited livelihood opportunities and lack of means to rebuild their lives. This continuation of displacement without a durable solution in sight must be seen as one of the root causes of why Rohingya people are socially and economically excluded from host communities, and still live in a situation of precarity, remaining dependent on humanitarian aid and increasingly subject to GBV.

In light of unfavourable decisions taken in Bangladesh in recent years and similar approaches pursued by governments in other contexts, a sustainable solution to the combined protracted displacement and security crisis needs to put people at the heart of solutions and cannot rely on a single pillar (Wagner, Katsiaficas and Fogli, 2022).

A people-centred approach also implies that both Rohingya women and men would be effectively protected from GBV; that their generic condition of vulnerability and dependency on aid would be gradually reduced; and that their future prospects would be substantially enhanced. To achieve this, all state and non-state actors engaged in the Rohingya response must develop a deeper comprehension of how gendered violence:

a. manifests itself within the Rohingya community;

b. is embedded in continuous experiences of deprivation and lack of rights in the context of the refugee camps; and

c. is perpetuated by networks and mobilities that extend far beyond the camps into the Bangladesh-Myanmar border region.

With the support of national, regional and international partners, Bangladesh's interim government is now in a position to develop a bold and humane strategy to deal with this crisis. Such a strategy must pursue a long-term solution and needs to

strike a balance between enhancing security in the camps and throughout the wider border region, and expanding freedoms for Rohingya refugees.

Research methods: Mixing field and remote data collection

A variety of methods were employed in data collection for this research. The analysis incorporates 57 semi-structured interviews, 27 biographical interviews, 19 key informant interviews, nine focus group discussions, participant observation, and 12 case studies gathered during a workshop with GBV case workers. Fieldwork took place from April to June 2024 in the Rohingya refugee camps and border areas in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Key informant interviews and the inception workshop with GBV case workers were conducted in Cox's Bazar town. These efforts were complemented by analysis of conflict and satellite data.

Despite the research team's extensive efforts to engage in the data collection process, two significant factors limited the scope of the study:

1. **Geographical constraints:** The fieldwork was conducted on the Bangladesh side of the border. Information about the situation on the Myanmar side was derived from secondary data, and interviews with local residents and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. The analysis of the conditions and dynamics evolving within Rakhine state is thus restricted.

2. **Security concerns:** The high risk of forced conscription significantly impacted the willingness of many Rohingya refugees to participate openly in conversations. The pervasive fear of repercussions from armed groups active in the camps created an environment of apprehension, thereby limiting the depth and breadth of firsthand accounts.

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