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Displaced Rohingya Children and the Risk of Human Trafficking

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ABSTRACT

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On the thirtieth anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, more than half a million Rohingya children sit in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, at serious risk of falling victim to human trafficking and related forms of exploitation. Without access to education, these children are faced with limited options for their future. Child labour and child, early and forced marriage are serious concerns. As we approach the second anniversary of the violence which led to a mass exodus of Rohingya from their homes in Rakhine State, Myanmar, Rohingya children face an uncertain future, denied the rights ostensibly guaranteed to them in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Drawing on findings of a rapid assessment conducted in 2018, and supplemented by additional desk research, this article outlines risk factors that makes Rohingya children particularly vulnerable to exploitation, and offers recommendations for addressing these vulnerabilities.

1. Introduction

The particular vulnerabilities of children in the context of forced migration have received increasing attention over the past two decades. This is significant as around the world children comprise more than half of all refugees and displaced persons (United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), 2019b). In 2016 the United Nations Children's Fund

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(UNICEF) estimated 50 million children had been forced to move – approximately half due to conflict in their home country.

Globally, children are forced to move for a variety of reasons, and involving varying degrees of exploitation, which can make categorisation challenging (Van Doore, 2018). In South and Southeast Asia, some children are forced to flee conflict or persecution, others move when their families are forced by development projects to seek livelihood or education opportunities elsewhere. Others still are caught in cycles of debt bondage, or are trafficked for forced labour or sexual exploitation purposes. Children are forced to move both within national borders and across them. Sometimes they are aware of where they're going, often they are not. Sometimes they travel with their families, other times they travel unaccompanied. Movement of unaccompanied children is on the rise globally (UNHCR, 2019a; Van Doore, 2018).

When children who have been forcibly displaced, they are rendered further at risk of exploitation of all forms, including forced labour, human trafficking and migrant smuggling (Van Doore, 2018; Wilson, 2012). This paper explores some of the factors that have rendered displaced Rohingya² children living in and around the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, particularly vulnerable to these forms of exploitation. Drawing on findings of a rapid assessment conducted in 2018, and supplemented by desk research, the paper outlines key risk factors that increase the vulnerability of the group, then presents some recommended courses of action to address this "crisis within a crisis".

This paper begins with a background to the current displacement crisis affecting the Rohingya population, which has resulted in the majority of the group now living in makeshift camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The paper then expands on three risk factors that amplify the vulnerability of Rohingya children to trafficking while they are displaced: their lack of access to education, prevalence of child labour, and prevalence of child, early and forced marriage. Section four of this paper then presents recommends a number of courses of action including regional support to counter-trafficking efforts and inclusive educational development, and explores how these could improve the lives of Rohingya children.

This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which enshrines the right to be protection from trafficking in Article 35, and from forms

² This paper uses the word Rohingya throughout to refer to those who self-identify as part of this ethnic group, the majority of whom are from the northern part of Rakhine State.

of forced labour in Article 32 (CRC, 1989). This paper argues that despite these protections, the international community is continuing to fail Rohingya children. However, some hope exists. The recently signed Global Compacts on Refugees (GCR) and for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) – explored in more detail in Section 4 – offer a solid basis upon which to build child-sensitive policies and practices around forced migration. Although non-binding, the fact that the two Global Compacts have received support from most states in the Asia Pacific, creates renewed momentum for the region to tackle transnational issues collaboratively. Likewise, regional bodies such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and Bali Process on People Smuggling and Human Trafficking (Bali Process) each has a mandate to cover migration in some form, and each could be more ambitious in this regard. Although the current mass displacement of the Rohingya is one of the most fraught crises facing the region, there necessary tools, institutions and frameworks are at our disposal to address it, given sufficient political will.

This paper is partly based on the findings of an assessment carried out by a team from the Secretariat of the Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration (ADFM) in 2018. The assessment examined the risk of human trafficking, migrant smuggling and other forms of exploitation arising from the displacement of Rohingya in Cox’s Bazar, including both Rohingya and Bangladeshi communities, and took place between March and November of 2018.³ The full report outlines the risks to both adults and children, however the scope of this paper looks specifically at the risks facing displaced Rohingya children.

2. Background

2.1 *The Rohingya and a History of Forced Migration*

The Rohingya are a stateless Muslim minority from Rakhine State, Myanmar. Although a minority in Myanmar as a whole, the Rohingya comprise a majority in the northern part of Rakhine State, and are the second largest ethnic group in the state overall, after ethnic Rakhine

³ The author of this paper was part of the research team conducting the assessment and was an author of the ensuing assessment report *Avoiding a Crisis Within a Crisis*, released in March 2019. The ADFM is a Track II dialogue process, established in 2015, bringing together experts from government, national and international civil society and academia from nine countries and is chaired by a Secretariat comprised of leading policy institutes in Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. For more information on the ADFM, its membership and agendas of previous meetings, see Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration (ADFM) (2015)

Buddhists (Uddin, 2015). The Rohingya have faced escalating discrimination and persecution over the past two decades, particularly since 2012. Their access to education, employment and medical care in Myanmar remains severely restricted, as is their freedom of movement. (Amnesty International, 2017; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2018). Amnesty International (2017) and UNHCR (2016) reports indicate that Rohingya children in Rakhine State have experienced increasing difficulty accessing government-provided education since 2012. Rohingya students are also forbidden from attending Rakhine State's only university, located in the capital Sittwe. As movement restrictions prevent the Rohingya from leaving the state to pursue other opportunities, this effectively bars them from any higher education available in Myanmar in direct violation of their rights (Lewa, 2009). As non-citizens in Myanmar, the Rohingya must request travel permits to move around in Rakhine State (Uddin, 2015). Many are confined to internally displaced person (IDP) camps, and as they need permits to leave, these become *de facto* detention centres. It is estimated around 120,000 remain living in these IDP camps in Rakhine State, although it is difficult to establish exact numbers (United Nations General Assembly (U.N.G.A.), 2016).

Over the last half century, large numbers of Rohingya have periodically crossed the border into Bangladesh fleeing violence, particularly in 1978, 1991-1992, 2012 and 2015-2016. After each exodus, most Rohingya returned to Rakhine State once conditions there became safe to do so, but in each case some decided to remain in Bangladesh (Lewa, 2009). Some remained living in semi-permanent refugee camps while others integrated into the local community. Some have now been living there for decades, and some Rohingya children have only ever known this life in limbo in Cox's Bazar; a part of Bangladesh facing its own significant development challenges and prone to natural disasters (ISCG, 2018b). Although Bangladesh has traditionally been the most common destination for Rohingya seeking safety due to its close proximity and similar language, religious and cultural norms, there has also been significant movement to other countries in the region, including Malaysia, India, Thailand, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia.

The Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea has traditionally seen high levels of human trafficking and migrant smuggling, as has Southeast Asia as a whole (Van Doore, 2018). In 2015, human trafficking camps containing mass graves of Rohingyas have been uncovered along the Thai-Malaysia border, and are currently the subject of a royal commission in Malaysia (Fortify

Rights, 2019a; Sharma, 2015). A crackdown on irregular maritime movements in 2015 resulted in traffickers abandoning their boats, leaving round 8,000 Rohingya and Bangladeshis stranded at sea, including many children (STC, 2016). Children are often caught up in these irregular movements, either travelling with family or unaccompanied: the international NGO Save the Children (2016) estimate that one in three people who arrive in Thailand or Malaysia by boat from the Andaman Sea are under the age of 18.

2.2. The Latest Crisis

25 August 2017 marked a turning point in the treatment of the Rohingya in Rakhine State, and has since been labelled “the realisation of a disaster long in the making” by the Independent International Fact Finding Mission (U.N.G.A., 2018). On this day, attacks on police posts allegedly carried out by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) drew a disproportionate and violent response from the Myanmar military that has been described as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing” by former UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein (United States Department of State (US DoS), 2018; ICG, 2018; ICG, 2017; Nebhay & Lewis, 2017). An August 2018 report from the United States Department of State described the military as having “targeted civilians indiscriminately and often with extreme brutality,” and stated that security services explicitly targeted Rohingya children. (US DoS, 2018).

The UN body coordinating the crisis response with the Government of Bangladesh in Cox’s Bazar– the Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) – estimates 706,000 Rohingya refugees crossed the border from Myanmar into Cox’s Bazar (ISCG, 2018a). This group joined the estimated 200,000-300,000 Rohingya were already living in Cox’s Bazar prior to the influx, some of whom had lived there for decades. Save the Children (2018) estimated that around 6,000 unaccompanied or separated children were living in the camps by August 2018; half of whom had been orphaned as a result of “brutal violence”.

The Governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh have signed a memorandum of understanding on the return of Rohingya refugees, however as of writing, repatriation plans have stalled and the Rohingya – adults and children alike - are waiting in limbo in Cox’s Bazar (ADFM, 2019; ICG, 2018c). The situation is already described as ‘protracted’ by UNHCR (2019a), and World Bank (2017) data indicates that the average amount of time it takes to secure a durable solution to displacement is ten years. For now, displaced Rohingya children are forced to rely on humanitarian aid and, as this paper will demonstrate, are vulnerable to human

trafficking and related exploitation.

3. Rohingya children in Cox's Bazar and vulnerabilities to human trafficking

Child trafficking is defined by the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children as “recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of children for the purpose of exploitation” (U.N.G.A., 2001; Gallagher, 2017; Butterly, 2014). Conflict-induced displacement is known to create ideal conditions for criminal networks seeking to exploit vulnerable people (Nagle, 2013; Smith & La Cuesta, 2010). Organised criminal networks were already well-established in the Asia Pacific region, and the influx of recently arrived refugees to Cox's Bazar significantly adds to the pool of candidates for exploitation already living in the Bay of Bengal. The protracted nature of the displacement in Cox's Bazar makes the refugee population more prone to taking risks to seek a better life (Nagle, 2013)

Studies have found that large numbers of people are concerned about the trafficking risks, or worried to leave their children alone at night (ADFM, 2019; XChange, 2019). A number of NGOs active in the camp are conducting awareness-raising or information sessions to warn residents of the dangers of trafficking (IOM, 2018). However, awareness-raising programs alone will not suffice when in many cases trafficking or other exploitative options are the only avenues available.

The following section presents risk factors that contribute to the vulnerability of children to trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Lack of access to education is a significant risk factor for two major reasons: first, it leads to idleness in the camps and a resultant sense of hopelessness for the future, making young people easy prey for smugglers claiming to offer education or employment opportunities abroad. Second, the denial of a child's right to education dramatically limits their capacity for earning a livelihood in the future, limiting their horizons in a way that is both cruel and short-sighted. Other significant risk factors making Rohingya children more vulnerable to exploitation in the camps are prevalence of forms of child labour among the Rohingya population, and also of forms of child, early and forced marriage.

a. *Lack of access to education*

The right to education is enshrined in Article 28 of the CRC. However, Rohingya children have been denied access to education both in their home state of Rakhine and in their country of refuge. In the refugee camps in Bangladesh, children under the age of 14 are able to attend ‘learning centres’ managed by humanitarian agencies, which hold three shifts of two-hours each per day, for children of mixed ages. The learning centres are intended to prepare the Rohingya children for repatriation to Myanmar, and so teach basic English, Burmese and mathematics, however they do not follow any accredited curriculum (ADFM, 2019).

A UNICEF survey of 180,000 Rohingya children aged 4-14 in December 2018 reveals dismal results: over 90 percent of the group were found to have a school competency of just year 1-2 level, and only three percent were at the level of year 6-8 (UNICEF, 2019). The same survey found only three percent of the Rohingya surveyed who were aged between 15-25 were receiving any education or training at all. This tallies with the findings of the ADFM assessment, which found significant levels of frustration among parents and youth about the ongoing and indefinite denial of meaningful education to Rohingya children.

As in many other parts of the world, access to education is felt by boys and girls differently. A report by Plan International on girls’ access to education in Cox’s Bazar is illuminating as it demonstrates some of the societal and cultural norms which further restrict girl’s access to the learning centres, such as having male teachers or conflicting familial obligations (Goulds, 2018). Traditional attitudes towards gender roles can thus restrict the opportunity for girls in the camps to access the limited education available, making girls especially vulnerable to trafficking and other exploitation (IOM Bangladesh, 2018). Religious education, available to boys through imams at mosques, is also not open to girls. To address this gap, some organisations are offering ‘safe spaces’ for girls to provide support in a non-learning environment, but again, these are not accredited education centres (MacGregor, 2018; Pedrosa, 2017).

With no real education opportunities available within the camps, the lure of overseas opportunities can be very strong. Reports of recent expulsions of Rohingya students who had managed to enrol in the Bangladeshi national school system demonstrate a hardening of Bangladesh’s position that it will not support Rohingya children within its national school system (Stewart & Van Esveld, 2019; McPherson & Paul, 2019). In her latest report, the UN

Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, recognised the connection between access to education and human trafficking:

With no indications that the refugees will be returning to Myanmar in the immediate future, [I] urge[s] the Bangladesh Government to start longer term planning, and to ensure access to formal education and livelihoods. Failure to do so further increases their vulnerability to human trafficking and the drug trade. (Human Rights Council (HRC), 2019, 9)

The links between access to education and vulnerabilities of trafficking have also been highlighted in the latest *Trafficking in Persons* report issued by the United States Department of State (2019). In its list of recommendations to the Government of Bangladesh, providing educational opportunities to Rohingya children was specifically mentioned as a means of stemming vulnerabilities to trafficking (DoS, 2019).

Indeed, a lack of education appeals to brokers and smugglers. Intelligence services working in Cox's Bazar reportedly believe brokers and agents are targeting illiterate refugees for trafficking and smuggling" (Mahmud, 2017). Around the world, the promise of education opportunities has been found to be a significant lure used by human trafficking syndicates looking for children to exploit (Larsen, 2011; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2008; IOM, 2017).

b. Prevalence of child labour

The CRC (1989) protects children from labour that is "likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development." Nevertheless, the practice continues in the Asia Pacific, including among Bangladeshi and Rohingya communities. Norms around familial roles mean that some children see it as their duty to support their parents, leaving them with little option but to search for a means of earning an income. Indeed, as an example of how risk factors intertwine: "With no education and limited skills, children who begin working at a young age are easy prey for traffickers" (Seltzer, 2013). Boys and girls are vulnerable to different forms of forced labour: boys to manual labour in the construction and fishing industries, girls in domestic work and sexual exploitation (UNHCR, 2018a). IOM has reported that girls trafficked

for purposes of forced labour were the largest group of victims of trafficking they assisted in the refugee response in Cox's Bazar to date (IOM, 2018).

As legitimate livelihood opportunities are restricted in the camps in Cox's Bazar, the option to travel either within Bangladesh or abroad becomes more appealing. This, coupled with low literacy and education levels, makes the Rohingya children particularly vulnerable to potential trafficking and smuggling for purposes of forced labour. The ADFM assessment identified lack of access to livelihood opportunities as a significant risk factor for Rohingya adults, and the same is also true of children.

c. Prevalence of forms of child, early and forced marriage

Child, early and forced marriage has a range of negative impacts on girls, from interrupting education and development, increasing risk of domestic violence, social isolation and health impacts of early pregnancy (Save the Children, 2016). It is known that humanitarian crises lead to increased rates of child, early and forced marriage (IOM, 2015; UNHRC, 2013). As with child labour, within Rohingya and Bangladeshi communities there remains a traditional acceptance of child and early marriage for girls (PC, 2018; Goulds, 2018; Taylor, 2017). Some estimates indicate that up to 60 percent of Rohingya girls are married before they turn 18 (D'Costa, 2017). Some perceive the practice as a way to "protect" a girl from exploitation; many also believe that it can be a way to secure a better economic future for a daughter, or to lessen the burden of caring for an extra child on an over-stretched family (STC, 2016).

While the practice is difficult to measure due to the sensitive nature of the topic, there have been media reports and anecdotal evidence to indicate that it is both prevalent within and around the camps in Bangladesh, and also that Rohingya women and girls are attempting to travel outside the country to marry diaspora Rohingya men (PC, 2018; Fortify Rights, 2019b). Although the Government of Bangladesh has officially prohibited marriages between Rohingya and Bangladeshi couples, anecdotal evidence makes it clear that the practice continues, if informally. For some Rohingya families, the possibility of their daughter marrying a Bangladeshi citizen may also be appealing for their belief that it will confer citizenship upon her (XChange, 2018). Media reporting around cases of trafficked Rohingya women and girls frequently cite marriage to Rohingya living in the diaspora as a reason for movement, particularly to Malaysia which has a high proportion of unmarried Rohingya men (Ahmed, 2019; Fortify Rights, 2019b). UNHCR identified 120 Rohingya child brides in Malaysia in 2015 (UNHCR, 2015). IOM has noted

that traffickers have been known to use overseas marriage as a lure for young girls, who they can then exploit (IOM, 2018).

4. What can be done?

The world seems at a loss with how to resolve the current displacement crisis, however it is not as if these events were unforeseeable, or even unforeseen. Not only have the Rohingya been the target of state violence and have fled across the border on multiple occasions in the past, there were also several warning signs in the lead up to August 2017. On 10 August, two weeks before the violence, Yanghee Lee warned about increased army presence in Rakhine State and the increased likelihood of rights violations occurring (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2017). Despite international norms such as the Responsibility to Protect having been broadly accepted for several decades, and the digital age meaning refugees themselves could document their flight from Rakhine State in horrifying detail, the world once again failed to prevent the crimes that led to this mass displacement (Nishikawa, 2019; Quinley, 2019).

It is important to continue to pursue conditions in Rakhine State that are conducive to the safe, dignified, voluntary and sustainable repatriation of the Rohingya to their former homes, as this is the only long-term, viable solution. However, repatriation plans should not be pursued to the exclusion of intermediary steps which could significantly improve the quality of life for the refugees living in Cox's Bazar. If this does not occur, it is inevitable that refugees will begin to seek opportunities elsewhere. Indeed, although not at the levels seen in 2015, the movement of fishing boats carrying groups of refugees is regularly reported in local media (Thep gumpanat & Wongcha-um, 2019). There is also evidence that movements by land within Bangladesh and across its borders are increasingly common (US DoS, 2019).

This section outlines some opportunities for addressing the vulnerabilities of Rohingya children living in Cox's Bazar to human trafficking, migrant smuggling and related exploitation. Fortunately, the region already has institutions and frameworks upon which it can build a more effective response.

4.1 Regionalism and implementing the Global Compacts

To be sure, the regional response to forced migration challenges in general, and the treatment of the Rohingya in particular, has been weak. As Petcheramesree (2016) noted, ASEAN has had

trouble dealing with issues of forced migration, as its ten member states continue to prioritise national sovereignty and norms of non-interference over human rights. Some progress has been made in regards to labour migration within ASEAN, but ‘forced migration’ still remains a difficult topic to address within the bloc (Petcheramesree, 2016). However, some individual ASEAN member states have been more outspoken than others on fellow member Myanmar’s treatment of the Rohingya, particularly Malaysia (Heijmans, 2019). It will be a real test of ASEAN’s effectiveness to see whether the body can take any action or whether it is again rendered incapable of responding.

At the 33rd ASEAN Summit in November 2018, Myanmar extended an invitation to the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre) to conduct a needs assessment in Rakhine State to identify “possible areas of cooperation... to facilitate the repatriation process” (ASEAN, 2018). This is the most actively an ASEAN mechanism has been involved in the situation of the Rohingya, having failed to get Myanmar to come to the table at past endeavours addressing the minority group (Petcheramesree, 2016).

Another regional institution with an interest in supporting a resolution of the displacement crisis is the Bali Process, particularly as – unlike ASEAN – both Bangladesh and Myanmar are members. The Bali Process is Co-Chaired by Australia and Indonesia and comprises 45 member states and four regional institutions (UNHCR, IOM, ILO and UNODC). The Bali Process mandate on human trafficking renders it an important body in this crisis, and previous ‘good offices’ visits to Cox’s Bazar and Rakhine State in May 2018 were a promising sign of their engagement in resolving this crisis. A second visit is scheduled to take place in mid-2019 and could form an important assessment to compare with that conducted by the AHA Centre (Septiari, 2019).

The benefits of a regional response – either through ASEAN or the Bali Process or a hybrid of the two – are highlighted by the recently adopted Global Compact on Refugees. The Compact, supported by most world states and all of those in Asia Pacific, recognises the benefit of regional approaches to “allow neighbouring countries facing similar challenges to work together to protect and find solutions for refugees, and to address the root causes of displacement” (Global Refugee Forum (GRF), 2019). The upcoming Global Refugee Forum in December 2019 provides states with the opportunity to make pledges either as individual states or regional groupings. These pledges can take the form of offering settlement places, financial support to host countries, exchanges of expertise development projects, or any other

creative alternatives states can come up with. By the time the Forum is held, more than two years will have passed since the initial crisis began. Innovative, cooperative pledges have never been more required.

Both the GCR and GCM emphasise the importance of child rights. Child sensitivity is one of the ‘cross cutting and interdependent guiding principles’ of the GCM (2018) stating that it “promotes existing international legal obligations in relation to the rights of the child, and upholds the principle of the best interests of the child at all times, as a primary consideration in all situations concerning children in the context of international migration, including unaccompanied and separated children.” Likewise, the GCR (2018) enshrines the “best interests of the child” and recommends child sensitive approaches in many of its provisions. These two Compacts were widely supported in the Asia Pacific – particularly the GCR - and can now form a framework from which states can build improved domestic and regional policy around forced migration, including for children.

4.2 Inclusive educational development

One important avenue worth exploring is inclusive educational development projects on both sides of the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. Both Cox’s Bazar and Rakhine States experience high levels of poverty. The influx of refugees into Cox’s Bazar strained existing infrastructure and resources, while ongoing conflict in Rakhine State is damaging developments on that side of the border. There is a significant need for development of both infrastructure and educational institutions, bearing in mind that it is critical that any development project be designed in such a way that it does not further marginalise the Rohingya, or exacerbate tensions between communities.

2010 estimates indicated that 900 schools in Bangladesh are damaged by storms and floods every year (Rahman, Hussain, & Jacob, 2010, 35). Cox’s Bazar district has the lowest net education enrolment rate in Bangladesh, indicating that the area could benefit from a dedicated investment in education targeted at both refugees and locals (Newsroom, 2018). Educational investments in terms of both teacher training, constructing facilities and developing curriculum could also yield significant peace dividends. More creative solutions should also be sought. One under-utilised avenue is through the private sector. As Bina D’Costa (2018) argues, there is “significant potential to expand and innovate on the proactive

role of business actors in positively contributing to children's rights through corporate social responsibility initiatives" such as scholarships, training and work placements.

As argued above, denial of education is a key risk factor in child vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation, and thus improved education would not only support children's social and mental development and resilience, it would also better prepare them for their future repatriation to Myanmar. Further, provision of real, accredited educational opportunities would also address some of the drivers of child, early and forced marriage, and labour exploitation among children, by giving them a safe space to learn during the day and opening up more financially sustainable future livelihood opportunities.

4.3 Targeted child-sensitive counter-trafficking support

Both Bangladesh and Myanmar face significant challenges related to human trafficking, including child trafficking and related exploitation (US DoS, 2019). It is vital that child-sensitive approaches to trafficking be mainstreamed at both the policy and implementation level in both countries. In line with the CRC, it is crucial that when dealing with child victims of trafficking, the principle of the best interests of the child are to be respected at all times (Gallagher & Holmes, 2008). It is also recommended by Gallagher and Holmes (2008) that there should always be a presumption of a child being a victim of trafficking where there is a possibility of such. They continue that children also should be provided with "Special and enhanced measures... to protect their privacy during their stay in the country of destination or throughout any repatriation." Regional capacity building and technical support to child trafficking policy and practice could be managed through mechanisms with ASEAN or the Bali Process. The ADFM assessment identified a desire among members of Bangladeshi law enforcement, government and local non-government organisations working on trafficking issues for greater training, resources and staff to support their counter trafficking and prevention efforts (ADFM, 2019).

Bangladesh has recently updated its National Plan of Action for Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking 2018-2022, which is an important step (Hasan, 2018; US DoS, 2019). Bilateral or regional support towards the effective implementation of the Plan of Action, including its applicability to the displaced Rohingya population and particularly its relevance to child victims, would significantly strengthen institutional knowledge in this area.

Further, increased funding to the humanitarian response through the Joint Response Plan would make a significant difference (ISCG, 2019a). The JRP is a noteworthy document for many reasons, but partly because it disaggregates data between children and adults. The JRP includes a focus on child protection, recognising that “children face serious protection risks like psychosocial distress, neglect, abuse, separation from caregivers, child marriage, child labour and trafficking” (ISCG, 2018a) If fully funded, the JRP would go a long way to addressing some of the concerns outlined in this paper, yet as of writing, funding for the JRP is only at 18 percent, and the protection sub-sector only 14 percent funded (ISCG, 2019b). There is a real need to reinvigorate the international commitment to the humanitarian response and support to Bangladesh as the host country. Holding an international conference or similar event on the issue would be one way to regain momentum on the issue in the minds of policy-makers, particularly those with an eye to regional stability.

4.4. More research, and listening to the children themselves

Despite children making up half of the total number of refugees and displaced persons, there has not been a sustained focus on their experience of forced migration until recently (Van Doore, 2018). While this is a welcome improvement, there is still a need for further research on the numerous and interrelated protection issues facing children on the move in all regions, including in Asia Pacific. The latest UNHCR (2019b) statistics show that only 125 countries reported “at least some” age-disaggregated data, covering 43 per cent of the population of concern for UNHCR. This is lower than the data that is disaggregated by sex. To properly understand how to strengthen the protection of children in the context of forced migration this needs to improve. Among this research, there is also a greater need to listen to the voices and views of children themselves, to better understand their needs (D’Costa, 2018). This is enshrined in Article 12 of the CRC, but is too often overlooked in policy-making and practice.

Conclusion

For over half a million Rohingya children surviving in refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar, their daily lives leave them vulnerable not only to disease and natural disasters, but also – as this paper shows - to human trafficking, and related exploitation. Thirty years since the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted and hailed as a landmark international achievement, this group of children has seen none of the protections it was created to guarantee. Pursuing the

goal of safe, dignified, voluntary and sustainable repatriation of the displaced population to Rakhine State is critical. In the meantime, more can be done in the immediate-term to protect the rights of children. It is in no one's interests for a population of children to live their lives in limbo. Providing real education opportunities will bolster children's resilience and hope for the future and would reduce the lure of those seeking to exploit this hunger for education. Targeted, child-sensitive support to counter-trafficking efforts on both side of the border would also make a significant difference to the capacity of law enforcement agents, as would further research into Rohingya children's views of their own needs. The crisis is a regional one, and there already exist the necessary regional institutions and frameworks to help address it, given the necessary political will. A failure to act now will leave a generation of Rohingya children without hope for their future.

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