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Self-protection outside community protection structures Sensitisation Social cohesion

 Bangladesh

Women for Women

Strengthening women's capacity to identify and fight human trafficking

By Sanjida Naima, Protection Officer at Oxfam

Human trafficking is a multi-billion-dollar industry that attracts vulnerable individuals with offers of illegal travel and employment. Seeking to escape their harsh living conditions and economic situation, Rohingya people seeking to escape Myanmar and those living in refugee camps often become victims to traffickers.

People of all ages are in danger of human trafficking in the camp. Due to cultural norms, women are not able to come out of their houses and make their concerns known, which compounds their vulnerability. Women with no men at home are even more vulnerable. More than 70% of human trafficking victims are female. Displaced women and girls' specific vulnerabilities stem from long-standing gender inequalities, and ineffective social and legal protection systems.

In early 2020, Rohingya communities in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, raised human trafficking as a threat of concern in a group discussion. Oxfam decided to conduct trainings aimed at strengthening women's capacity to raise awareness of human trafficking. These women would then conduct awareness-raising activities in their wider communities. The activities took place from January until March, when group gatherings had to cease due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 123 women were trained across four areas of Teknaf and Ukhiya, and many more community members were reached through their awareness-raising sessions. The training targeted women heads of household, who were not part of existing community protection structures.

During one awareness-raising session, Fatema,¹ a Rohingya refugee, learned about a family in her block who had fallen victim to a human trafficker. The family's two adolescent girls decided to go to Malaysia after being deceived by a trafficker, who had promised them jobs. However, on the journey to Malaysia, their boat got stuck in a river and the two girls were forced to return to Bangladesh, but they were sent by the government somewhere other than Cox's Bazar. The family, concerned about the girls, asked for Fatema's help; she referred the case to Oxfam and then to UNHCR. The family now know the location of their daughters thanks to Fatema's initiative.

'I want to thank Oxfam for empowering our community and conducting awareness training on human trafficking', said Fatema. 'People in the camp are made victims of human trafficking because they don't know about the issue, so it is a great initiative to sensitize our community and tackle trafficking.'

¹ Name has been changed to protect the person's identity.



Awareness-raising session conducted by one of the women trained, 1 March 2020. Photo by Sanjida Naima, Oxfam protection officer.

After receiving training from Oxfam, each of the participants reached 30 women and girls from their community. Thus, over 3,600 women and girls were sensitized on how to identify human trafficking and not be victims of it. The Oxfam initiative created space and momentum for women and girls to talk about such an important issue in their own community. Finally, all the girls and women who attended the session realised that human trafficking is their own protection issue and they should come forward to report it.