



From the world's largest refugee camp in Bangladesh:

Meet **Riya Moni**, **Rojina Begum** and **Toyoba Begum** from Cox's Bazar

In August 2017, an outbreak of hostilities in Myanmar triggered the displacement of more than 600,000 Rohingya people, who fled across the border into Bangladesh to seek refuge. Their plight not only affected the lives of Rohingya men, women and children, but also the communities in Bangladesh who became their hosts.

Population density was already high in Bangladesh and resources stretched, when thousands of Rohingya arrived at their doorstep in the flood and disaster-prone district of Cox's Bazar that overnight turned into the world's largest refugee camp complex.

As of 2022, an estimated 541,000 Bangladeshi host community members in Cox's Bazar are known to be in dire need of humanitarian assistance. The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is assisting both Rohingya and their host communities to enhance their protection, build new livelihoods, improve shelter conditions, and offer critical camp management support. Meet three aspiring and resilient Bangladeshis who are among the 1.4 million people living in and around the 34 camps established for the Rohingya.

Transgender woman unravels the struggle of being herself

Riya Moni is putting her make-up on. She is not afraid of being caught, humiliated, or punished for her sins anymore – her make-up is her transgression. She is a Bangladeshi transgender woman living in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. A boy at birth, Riya, as she is now known, was named Zia by her parents. Cultural stigma and conservative doctrine towards the transgender communities in Bangladesh forces people like Riya to lead a dual and often undignified life. Being raised in a boy's guise, her childhood went by being constantly bullied for acting feminine.

'They made my life miserable by cat calling, bullying and sometimes even assaulting me. At times they would push, hit me or pull down my trousers,' says Riya. She had no one to trust, no one to confide in. Riya's only wish was to find a place where she could be her true self and not be afraid. But deep down she knew there was no such place.

After losing her parents at the age of 12, she started doing physical construction work for survival, where she was noticed by other transgender women – known as *hijra* - in the community who invited her into their community. She started to identify and feel at home among the *hijra* community - and eventually transformed herself from Zia to Riya.



'I brought nothing but shame to my father and sorrow to my mother. I was nothing but a disgrace to them.'



The *hijra* identity

Hijra is a term for intersex and transgender people, particularly common in the Indian sub-continent. In 2014, the government of Bangladesh recognised *hijra* as the ‘third gender’. Today, and contrary to many other countries globally, it even appears on various forms for government registration. Despite the progressive policy change, many *hijras* continue to struggle – including Riya. Now, at 28, she runs a clothes business, but that doesn’t mean her fight against the stigma is over. In 2021, there was an arson attack against her store. She strongly believes her store was attacked because of her identity – not least, as it is not the first time she has been targeted.

‘Some of the other store owners in the market don’t always like me because I am a *hijra*. Sometimes customers enter my store, see me and immediately walk out.’

Riya came across DRC’s Gender-Based Violence protection programme in Cox’s Bazar for both host community members and Rohingya inhabitants of the camps. She became a member of the group of vulnerable people, got access to a safe space and started to receive psycho-social support. Twice a week, also Bangladeshi *hijras* gather in the safe space to take part in the recreational activities conducted by DRC.

‘The goal is to make these very vulnerable people feel welcome and comfortable with who they are. This is where they can freely use make-up, costumes, wigs and jewellery and be who they really want to be, at least for a few hours a week,’ says DRC’s GBV Officer Mong Marma.

DRC’s Protection Programme provides sexual and reproductive health related information and services to the *hijra* community. The group also enjoys recreational activities such as painting, dancing and singing. Riya and her friends feel liberated and not judged by society when they are at DRC’s Safe Space, experiencing how this can have a positive impact on mental wellbeing.

‘This project has improved our lives in many ways - for example, now I have access to healthcare facilities in the hospitals. When we visit the clinics with DRC’s referrals, no one stops us from entering the hospital and we are treated respectfully. I met many other *hijras* in DRC’s Safe Space and our common identity help us to bond and forget about our differences.’

The Protection Programme is funded by the European Union and supports approximately 20,000 Rohingya and Bangladeshi host community members in Cox’s Bazar.

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