

August 2023

Livelihoods on Bhasan Char

 Briefs from Cox's Bazar Panel Survey¹ on Bhasan Char Baseline – 2022

Major livelihoods indicators on Bhasan Char

Bhasan Char extension to the Cox's Bazar Panel Survey (CBPS) was conducted in November 2022, and collected data on several socioeconomic modules, including a section on the livelihood opportunities and engagements on the island².

Table 1: Key labour force indicators for the Rohingya refugees living on Bhasan Char. Source: CBPS.

		All	Gender		Age groups		
			Female	Male	15 - 29	30 - 64	64+
Bhasan Char (2022)	Labour Force Participation (LFP) ³	44%	30%	60%	41%	50%	1%
	Employment (as a % of LFP)	23%	9%	41%	21%	29%	4%
	Unemployment (as a % of LFP)	77%	92%	59%	79%	72%	96%
Cox's Bazar (2019) ⁴	Labour Force Participation	33%	9%	64%	33%	35%	9%
	Employment (as a % of LFP)	64%	78%	62%	64%	64%	78%
	Unemployment (as a % of LFP)	36%	22%	38%	36%	36%	23%

The labour force participation rate on Bhasan Char is 44%, meaning that nearly half of the population aged 15 years or older is either employed or actively seeking employment. The gender breakdown shows that 30% of females and 60% of males are participating in the labour force. In comparison, Cox's Bazar in 2019 had a lower overall labour force participation rate at 33%, with a breakdown of 9% for females and 64% for males.

The employment rate on Bhasan Char, or the percentage of the labour force participants that is currently employed, is 23%. Across gender, 9% of females and 41% of males who are in the labor force are currently employed. The employment rate in Cox's Bazar in 2019 was 64%, with a breakdown of 78% for females and 62% for males.

¹ The Cox's Bazar Panel Survey (CBPS) is a partnership between the Yale Research Initiative on Innovation and Scale (Y-RISE), the Gender & Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) program, and the Poverty and Equity Global Practice (GPVDR) of the World Bank. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) funded and implemented the Bhasan Char stratum of the CBPS which is an extension to the original design. UNHCR gratefully acknowledges the support from the CBPS research partners for access to their survey instruments, technical support, and valued partnership.

² Rohingya refugees do not enjoy access to work as defined under Bangladesh Labour Act 2006. Work and employment associated activities under this brief refers to refugee participation through humanitarian run volunteer and cash-for-work activities where refugees participate in service delivery within their camps/ settlements, and small informal refugee-run businesses permitted by the local authority or within their dwellings.

³ Labour force participation is defined as the percentage of population within working age who are either currently working, or actively searching for jobs over a fixed period. In this brief, labour force participation is defined as percentage of population aged 15 years and above who have worked at least 1 hour in the last 7 days, or actively looked for work in the last 7 days. Employment is defined as someone of the same age group who has worked for at least 1 hour in the last 7 days, and unemployment is defined as someone who did not work but actively looked for work in the last 7 days.

⁴ World Bank, 2019. *Insights from the Labour Module on Work and Wages in Cox's Bazar*.

On Bhasan Char in 2022, the unemployment rate is 77%, which indicates the percentage of the labour force that is currently unemployed but actively seeking work. The gender breakdown shows that 92% of females and 59% of males who are in the labour force are currently unemployed. The unemployment rate in Cox's Bazar in 2019 was 36%, with a breakdown of 22% for females and 38% for males. It is important to note here that the Cox's Bazar data was collected in 2019 when 32 of the 34 camps⁵ in Cox's Bazar were less than two years old. While the Government's position on livelihood activities, skills and vocational trainings on Bhasan Char has been relatively more open than Cox's Bazar, this has not so far translated to livelihood opportunities on the island.

Types of livelihood activities

Table 2: Share of wage and non-wage worker by Gender. Source: CBPS.

	All		Wage		Non-wage	
	Wage	Non-wage	Female	Male	Female	Male
Bhasan Char (2022)	65%	35%	67%	65%	34%	35%
Cox's Bazar (2019)	-	-	40%	79%	60%	21%

65% of employed refugees on Bhasan Char have some form of employment and earned wages, while the remaining 35% were engaged in non-wage activities⁶, in other words, entrepreneurs who run their own small businesses. When the data is further broken down by gender, 67% of female refugees in Bhasan Char earned wages, and so did 65% of male refugees. The remaining 34% of females and 35% of males were non-wage workers.

On the other hand, 40% of female refugees and 79% of male refugees who were employed in Cox's Bazar in 2019 were wage workers, while the remaining 60% of females and 21% of males were non-wage workers.

Overall, there is a higher percentage of refugees living on Bhasan Char with some form of wage activity compared to those in Cox's Bazar.

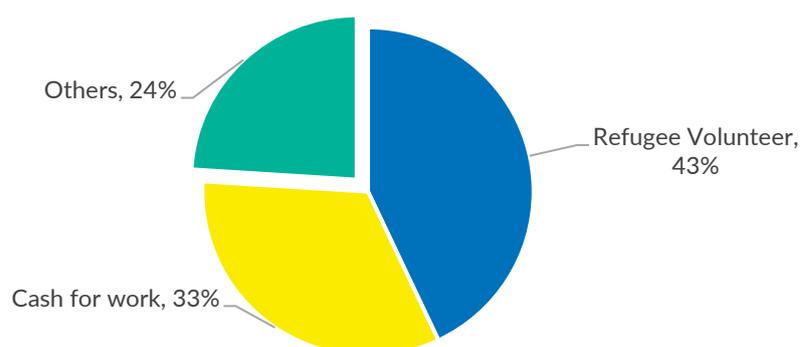


Figure 1: Type of livelihood activities among wage-earning Rohingya refugees on Bhasan Char. Source: CBPS.

Livelihood activities managed by actors in the Rohingya response account for 76% of all wage-earning livelihood opportunities on the island. Such activities mostly refer to refugee volunteer and cash for work

⁵ One of the 34 camps was closed in 2022, bringing the total down to 33 camps.

⁶ Non-wage workers are individuals who are considered employed, but are not working for a wage incentive, instead running their own small businesses, or providing services to other refugees as a barber, tailor etc. where they receive compensation for services rendered or goods sold.

beneficiaries⁷. Through these two programmes, Rohingyas are engaged in service delivery activities in the camps in exchange of a stipend.

Of the employed Rohingya refugees living on Bhasan Char, 43% worked as refugee volunteers, 33% participated in cash-for-work programs, and the remaining 24% worked in other types of work.

Challenges in finding livelihood opportunities

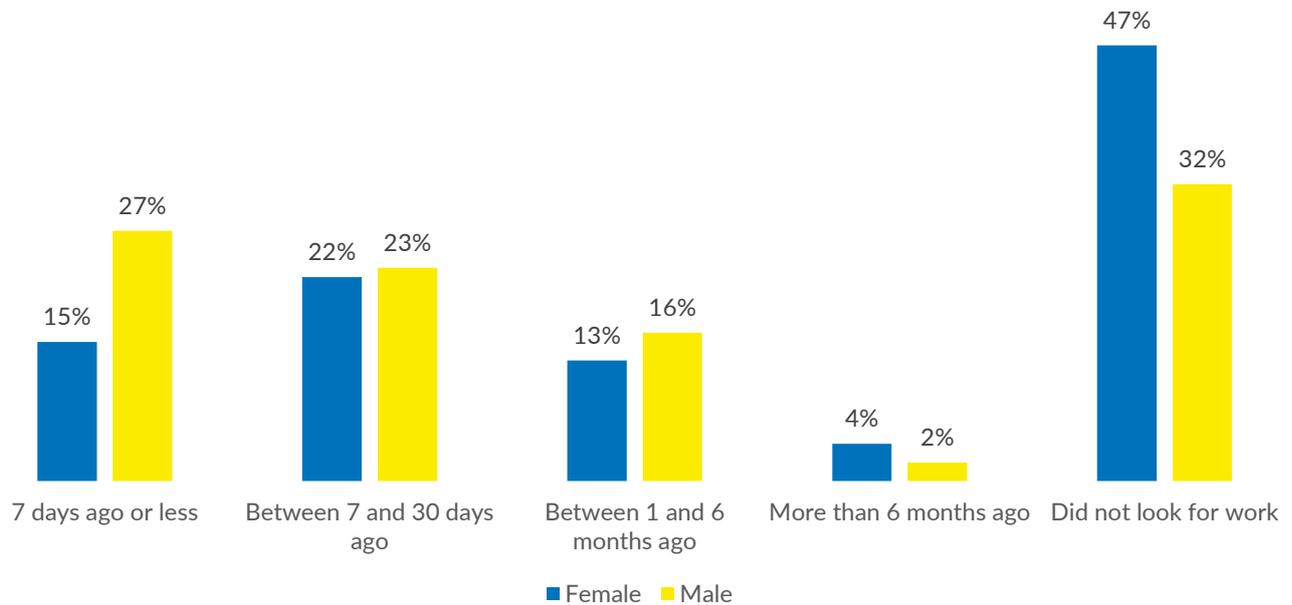


Figure 2: Share of time when Rohingya refugees on Bhasan Char who are unemployed but showed interest in livelihood opportunities looked for opportunities. Source: CBPS.

Among female refugees who are not part of the labour force, but were interested in livelihood opportunities, the largest share did not look for work in recent time. Among male refugees who are unemployed and showed interested in livelihood opportunities, 32% also did not look for work. For those who did look for work, more males (27%) than females (15%) last looked for within the last 7 days. On the other hand, females (22%) were more likely than males (23%) to have looked for work between 7 and 30 days ago. A smaller percentage of both females and males reported looking for work between 1 and 6 months ago, with 13% of females and 16% of males falling into this category. The smallest percentage of both females (4%) and males (2%) reported looking for work more than 6 months ago.

The two most common ways Rohingya refugees living on Bhasan Char searched for work were by asking their camp block cluster focal which is equivalent to Majhi in Cox's Bazar (a community liaison for authorities) or contacting an NGO, which accounted for 56% and 42% of the respondents, respectively. Other ways included asking friends, relatives, or other personal connections (20%), contacting an employer (16%), and trying to start their own business (13%). These findings suggest that the Rohingya refugees on Bhasan Char rely heavily on their social networks and local community leaders to find work opportunities, as well as on the support provided by humanitarians/NGOs operating on the island.

⁷ Volunteers from the Rohingya refugee community are involved by the actors in the Rohingya response in collaboration with the Government of Bangladesh to assist in providing essential services, ensuring their readiness for sustainable reintegration once they voluntarily and safely return to Myanmar. The government employs a cautious approach regarding financial aid for refugees, and presently, participation in cash-for-work and refugee volunteer programs offers some income opportunities for them.

The majority of Rohingya refugees on Bhasan Char who did not search for work were occupied with household chores and other domestic work, while 10% cited social reasons such as family not allowing them to work, and 9% mentioned their age as a barrier to finding employment. Other reasons cited included retirement, disability, lack of interest in working, and not being allowed to work due to refugee status (14%).

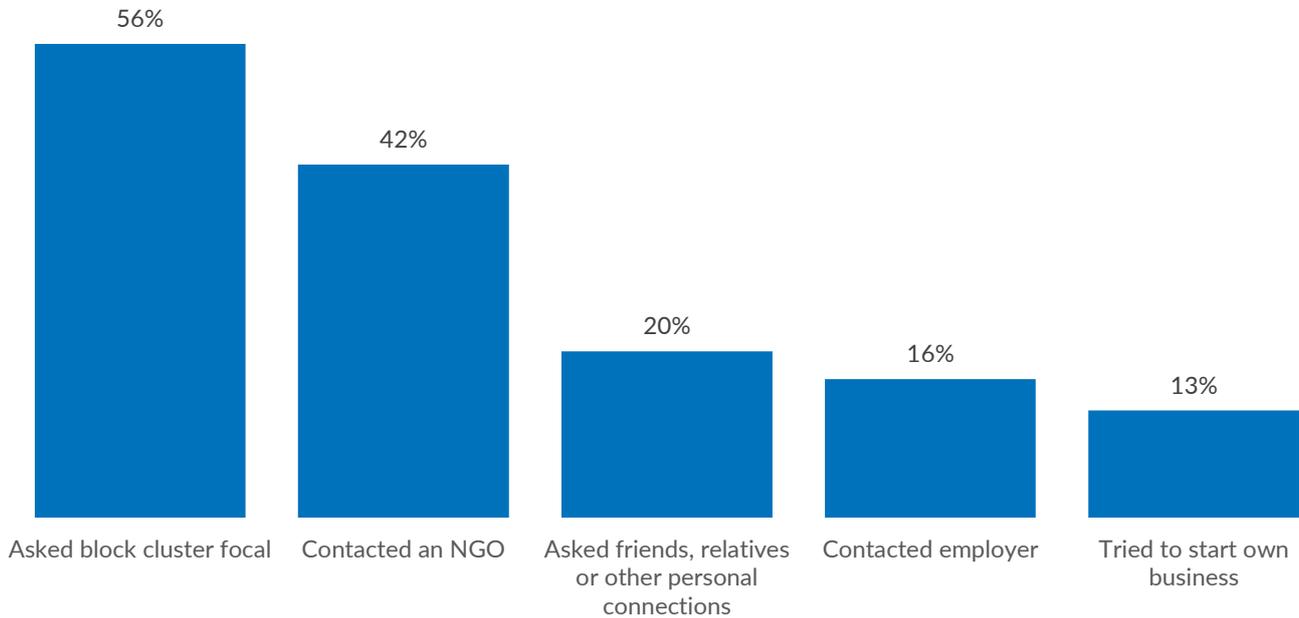


Figure 3: Top 5 ways Rohingya refugees interested in work looked for an opportunity. Source: CBPS.

Using cash assistance as seed money

At the time of data collection, Rohingya refugee households received BDT 5,000 per person from Government of Bangladesh as a relocation support grant when they relocated from Cox’s Bazar refugee camps to Bhasan Char. Nearly all survey respondents confirmed receiving this grant.

Despite this being the only source of new cash in hand on the island when they arrive, a rather small percentage of households (13%) reported spending their assistance as seed money on starting a business (opening small shops), vehicle (van/rickshaw), or equipment investment, indicating a desire to generate income and establish financial stability.

The majority of Rohingya refugee households on Bhasan Char primarily used their relocation assistance for food items, prioritizing meeting their basic sustenance needs. Clothing was the second most common expenditure category, followed by healthcare services. A significant number of households also purchased footwear, while a smaller percentage spent their assistance on furniture or household/ cooking items, indicating a need to establish basic infrastructure in their new location. Few households also spent their assistance on mobile phones or internet, education expenses were low, as learning facilities on the island are provided free of cost, and other expenditure categories included saving money, lending money to others, marriage events, or servicing debt.

Overall, the data indicates that households on Bhasan Char used their relocation assistance primarily to meet basic needs for food, clothing, and health services. This suggests that support for these fundamental needs should continue to be a priority as Rohingya refugees settle into their new home. ■