creatingChange

Series No. 8

Adapting *SASA! Together* for Refugee Settings: A case of Rohingya Community in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

Cox's Bazar Refugee camp in Bangladesh is the world's largest and most densely populated refugee camp. It is home to over one million Rohingya refugees who fled ethnic and religious violence in Myanmar. Just like in many humanitarian settings, Rohingya refugees face multiple challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, insecurity, natural disasters and violence against women including intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and the risk of human trafficking. Evidence suggests (Raising Voices, 2018) that that conflict exacerbates violence against women, and forcibly displaced women are at an increased risk of intimate partner violence. Despite numerous hardships, the Rohingya refugees have consistently demonstrated resilience and the strength of their culture, and this has spurred activism efforts that not only address immediate needs but also aim to build a more empowered and self-sustaining community.

One of the ways they have demonstrated this resilience is through the implementation of *SASA! Together*—an evidenced-based (Abramsky et al., 2014) community mobilization approach to prevent violence against women. Although initially created for development settings, a case study of Dadaab refugee settlement in Kenya showed that *SASA!* can be adapted for preventing VAW in humanitarian settings. To date, *SASA!* and its iterations — *SASA! Faith* and *SASA! Together* have been used in several humanitarian contexts globally[4].

From 2020-2025, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) have partnered with **Raising Voices** for technical assistance to support their partners **Gana Unnayan Kendra** (GUK), **Mukti Cox's Bazar, Relief International Bangladesh, Bangladesh Rural, and Advancement Committee** (BRAC Bangladesh) and later **International Rescue Committee** (IRC Bangladesh), **ActionAid Bangladesh** (AAB) to implement *SASA! Together* in Cox's Bazar refugee camps. The *SASA! Together* program in Cox's Bazar refugee camp is in the Support[5] phase of implementation.

All partners in the Bangladesh cohort have participated in joint training sessions, site visits and distance mentorship and coaching with Raising Voices. The cohort model has provided opportunities for cross learning and experience sharing that fostered innovations. Below, we highlight four exciting areas of innovation that have emerged from the Bangladesh cohort implementing *SASA! Together* as they responded to unique challenges they faced in their context!

4 The programming for prevention brief **Implementing *SASA!* in Humanitarian Settings** provides useful tools and tips for the humanitarian communities, many of which are being used in Cox's Bazar.

5 *SASA! Together* is a phased approach that uses four distinct phases—Start, Awareness, Support and Action—to mobilize community members to prevent violence against women. The support phase encourages community members to join their *power with* others to support women experiencing violence and hold men who use violence accountable for their actions.

1. Elevating Coordination and Collaboration for stronger programming

As in many humanitarian settings, Cox's Bazar actions are coordinated through the UN cluster system. Realizing that the mandate of the GBV sub-cluster was too broad to provide the space needed to address *SASA! Together* specific needs, the partners formed a mini coordination group within the GBV sub-cluster to oversee and coordinate *SASA! Together* implementation.

The coordination group is composed of UNHCR and UNFPA focal people, *SASA! Together* team leads and key staff from each of the partners. The coordination team holds monthly meetings to share updates of their work, exchange learning and explore ways to strengthen collaboration, ensuring that everyone has access to resources, communication materials, and reports. For example, when adapting *SASA! Together* communication materials, they split roles amongst themselves with UNHCR taking on the visual and UNFPA focusing on the audio adaptation of *SASA! Together* materials and messages. All the members of the cohort have shared access to the materials regardless of who oversees what aspect of the adaptation. The coordination group ensures that timeframes for implementing key activities are aligned and organizes exchange visits for partners to observe, learn from and support one another.

The partners have created a safe and intentional environment for supporting and holding each other accountable whenever there are challenges in programming. Additionally, when a new organization joins the cohort—as was the case of ActionAid, IRC and the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM), the existing members facilitate training sessions for their staff and activists and share existing materials to ensure quick and high-quality implementation in the camps.

2. Adapting for low literacy setting

Although *SASA! Together* materials are designed with lower literacy levels in mind, some were challenging for activists and leaders in Cox's Bazar to use because they were text-heavy yet the majority of Rohingya refugees have limited literacy. This was further complicated by challenges with orthography of the Rohingya language. As a result, the community activists and leaders struggled to effectively influence members of their camps.

To creatively respond to this challenge, the cohort has recorded mock *SASA! Together* activities in audio with pre-recorded discussion guides and take-home ideas for activists and leaders to use as they facilitate *SASA! Together* activities. During activities, activists and leaders play these pre-recorded audio messages, pausing at intervals to facilitate dialogue around power and violence. The activists have formed listener groups that meet regularly to reflect on these messages together while encouraging personal reflections.

Because activists and leaders use written guiding questions and take-home messages to facilitate *SASA! Together* activities, activists and leaders record the discussion guides and take-home messages on their mobile phones. They listen to and memorize these questions and take-home ideas ahead of activities.

Additionally, BRAC and AAB with the blessing of the cohort, organized a special six-weeks functional literacy and numeracy program for activists and leaders to boost their confidence and provide basic skills for reading and interpreting *SASA! Together* messages.

3. Tailoring the *SASA! Together* program for single-sex groups to enhance participation

Research and practice highlight the importance of engaging men and women simultaneously in violence prevention programs. This includes our practice-based learning from implementing *SASA! Together*, which recommends joint activities engaging men and women. However, among the Rohingya community, there are strict gender norms prohibiting mixed sex community activities and restricting women's movement and participation in community discussions. Because of these norms, at the start of *SASA! Together*, women were reluctant to participate in community activities and trainings which were conducted in mixed sex settings.

Before realizing the implications of these norms to their *SASA! Together* programs, the partners mobilized both women and men for the same activity but only men turned up. After understanding the sensitivities around mixed-sex activities, the cohort agreed to have same-sex group activities. They mapped out places women could easily access without restrictions, such as health facilities and the Women and Girls Friendly Spaces[6] (WGFS). They conducted *SASA! Together* activities in these places and women's attendance and participation improved. In addition to community activities, trainings, bi-monthly check-ins, public events were also same-sex. Contextualizing to a context which has different social norms is very important for effective programming.

Another challenge preventing women's involvement was the norm that restricts women from taking leadership roles within the community. Because of this, the partners struggled to find female activists and leaders since these roles required a significant level of leadership. Initially only a handful of women offered to join the teams of activists and leaders, and those who did were not confident expressing themselves and in turn struggled to facilitate *SASA! Together* activities. To build their confidence, the partners organized special leadership coaching programs often inviting distinguished women leaders to speak to the activists. This was very inspiring, and women activists started to show more confidence in conducting activities. Over time, the women activists have become very vocal and stepped up to take on other leadership roles beyond *SASA! Together.* This has, in turn, encouraged more women to participate in *SASA! Together* activities.

6 Women and Girls Friendly Spaces are places within refugee camps/settlement where women can go to feel safer, access information and support, build their networks and strengthen relationships with peers. The Inter Agency Minimum Standards for Gender Based Violence in Emergency Programming highlights WGFS as a minimum standard for VAW programming.

4. Navigating Security Challenges and Movement Restrictions in the Camps

The security situation in the camps is fraught with the heavy presence of militia groups, high levels of violence and forced conscription into armed groups. To mitigate these safety risks, the Bangladesh government imposes temporary curfews and restrictions on group meetings to limit movement within the camps (these restrictions are lifted when the situation is deemed safe). Cox's Bazar camps are also prone to natural calamities including flooding, fires, and cyclones, all compounded by difficult terrain. These challenges make it hard for activists and leaders to move freely within the camps, often causing *SASA! Together* activities to be halted temporarily.

The cohort has undertaken several strategies to sustain activism amidst the restricted movement and to ensure the safety of activists. Activists intentionally avoid mixing *SASA! Together* activism with political activism to maintain focus and reduce risks. For clear identification, the activists wear branded *SASA! Together* t-shirts during activities to easily distinguish themselves from other types of activists. During curfew times, when activists are unable to move outside their homes and immediate communities, they share audio recordings with community members via social media platforms. With support from partners, activists are able to prioritize their self-care and have been advised to pause activities, resuming only when it is safe to do so. Partners have also created emergency hotlines through which activists can contact them if they are attacked during *SASA! Together* activities or if their lives are in danger and responders are usually swift.

Despite these efforts, the complexity and scale of the settlement mean that security and mobility will continue to be critical areas requiring ongoing attention and support.

SASA! TOGETHER in Action!

Majuma's[4] Journey from Silence to Leadership

Majuma, a mother of three sons, is a 48-year-old community leader from Cox's Bazar refugee camp. She frequently experienced physical and emotional violence from her husband and considered this to be normal given the custom of husband's power over their wives. Majuma shared that she had unconsciously passed along this acceptance of violence to her three daughters-in-law. Her beliefs started to change when she was invited by a female community activist for *SASA! Together* activities that were happening in her community and when she also found out about another woman in the community who tried to commit suicide due to the violence she experienced. Majuma shared, "*This incident shook me to the core. 'How can we allow this to continue?' I asked myself. I realized that I was not alone—many women around me were trapped in similar situations, suffering in silence. That moment ignited a deep desire in me to find a way to help.*"

That's when she determined to rise up against the stigma against women's leadership in her community and joined the team of SASA! activists where she continued to use her voice and role to prevent violence.



A female community activist facilitating a *SASA! Together* activity with women at a Women and Girls Friendly Space.

The Creating Change Series are simple case studies of quality programming happening around the world to prevent violence against women and children.

4 While this is a story of a real activist, pseudonyms have been used to maintain confidentiality.

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