

Amplifying Rohingya Women's Shelter Priorities

Using qualitative and quantitative research in Cox's Bazar to inform evidence-based, gender-sensitive and climate-smart shelter interventions.



All photos by [Ishrat Bibi, from Rohingya Photographers' collective](#)

The Amplifying Rohingya Women's Shelter Priorities (ARWSP) project was co-designed by CARE Bangladesh and CARE's Global Shelter Team at CARE International UK (CIUK). ARWSP was an action research project centering women and girl's experiences and recommendations, implemented in the world's largest refugee camps at Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The project was prompted by an ambition to develop knowledge and capacity in adaptation to climate change and recognition of the importance of mainstreaming gender into good shelter programming. With climate change having an increasing impact on hazard-prone communities, the need for housing solutions that are adapted to dangerous weather events and extreme temperatures is paramount. Inadequate and unsafe housing has the greatest impact on women and girls, but in the decisions taken on shelter upgrades, reconstruction, preparedness and risk reduction, their voices are often not heard.

The ARWSP project ran from September 2024 to April 2025. ARWSP's methodology is summarized below. Analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data revealed that women's priorities centered on their lack of space and privacy, extreme heat inside their shelters, insecurity outside their shelters, and vulnerability to floods. CARE Bangladesh, with technical support from the CIUK Shelter Team, subsequently used the research findings as a starting point for the design of a shelter prototype. Every element of the existing shelter design was reviewed, and a set of low-cost adaptations responding to women's recommendations was then included in the design, iterated following further feedback from women. The prototype is being built in Cox's Bazar, with the intention of this being rolled out, as funds for shelter upgrades are available. A poster for advocacy was produced, illustrating women's priority recommendations.

Research methodology

The ARWSP research used mixed methods to uncover Rohingya women’s perspectives on their shelters and settlement living conditions. Quantitative and qualitative methods enabled the collection of broad and deep insights into women’s lived experiences and preferences regarding shelter.

Household interviews were carried enable in-depth conversations with women and witness living conditions faced by families residing in standard 10 x 15-foot shelters. Interviews explored women’s coping mechanisms, and households’ adaptive strategies in the face of weather-related and environmental challenges.



Household interviews gave an insight into how women use and adapt their limited spaces

Community workshops in three camps aimed to understand how women conceptualize a functional and safe shelter—one that accommodates their daily needs, ensures privacy and safety, and supports household and caregiving activities. The participatory, creative nature of these workshops allowed women to express their challenges and aspirations related to existing shelter conditions and desired improvements. The women’s groups were drawn from various community committees and groups in the camps including: the WASH committee, Disaster Risk Reduction, Disaster Management Unit, a GBV intervention program and a Livelihoods group, some groups initiated by CARE and some by other NGOs. The adolescent girls' groups were recruited from CARE’s Girl Shine group, a GBV prevention initiative.



Creative workshop activities in safe spaces enabled women and girls to share their priorities regarding their shelters

Men's focus group discussions, made up of community leaders (Majhi's) and Imams in the camps sought men's perspectives on shelter, and allowed the research to be fully explained to the wider communities.

Key informant interviews (KIIs) with CARE's Shelter partners captured the current strategies, challenges, and interventions adopted by various partners in the construction, repair, and ongoing maintenance of shelters.

A **survey** across three camps, with over 400 respondents, aimed to quantify challenges such as lack of adequate space, ventilation, lighting, protection from weather, and privacy, and to map variations in needs across different camps. The survey design was informed by the workshops and interviews, and a **pilot survey** preceded the final version, allowing iterations to be influenced by the respondents' and enumerators' feedback.

Research findings

Women's lived experiences of their existing shelter and settlements centered on the following issues:

- Fear of flooding and landslides triggered by floods. Risks triggered by strong winds and fires were also highlighted.
- Insecurity when moving around the camps to visit communal WASH facilities, especially at night.
- Desire for more green spaces and shade from trees within the camps, and for household planting to increase shade and food security.
- Heat and a lack of ventilation inside shelters, particularly hard for women and adolescent girls can rarely be in external spaces within the camps, due to social norms, and fear of violence.
- Lack of space, especially private space in their shelters, impacting women's safety, dignity and mental well-being. Women can rarely host others inside their homes.
- Inadequate security features of shelters, such as secure doors or fences.
- Deterioration of shelter materials (tarpaulins and bamboo) over time, and lack of concrete flooring.
- Desire for more opportunities to spend time and participate in creative activities in women and girls' safe spaces¹.

The KIIs revealed a clearer picture of the coordination landscape, resource allocations, and the extent of women-centered approaches in ongoing shelter initiatives.

¹ For more on the importance of women and girls' safe spaces and their positive impacts on health and well-being, see [blog post](#) from December 2024.

Prototype development

Directly informed by the research findings, CARE Bangladesh, in collaboration with CARE's Global Shelter Team, undertook a shelter design review to develop a new transitional shelter design that incorporates women's perspectives and priorities. Based on the research findings, women's recommendations focused on themes of climate adaptation, enhancing protection and security, and the accommodation of cultural practices. These were then integrated into the new design.

The shelter design included several additional low-cost features, including the provision of solar systems, charging points and lighting, improved ventilation to mitigate extreme heat, a built-in dedicated and ventilated cooking area, shelving and privacy partitions, enhanced security and homestead gardens.

Iterations of the design were informed by further consultations with the women's groups involved in the original research, facilitated by CARE Bangladesh staff. Once agreed by all parties, the design was built into a physical prototype for evaluation and to support advocacy efforts. In addition, an advocacy poster was produced to communicate the research and illustrate the design recommendations developed. CARE Bangladesh continues to champion and promote this research-driven approach to shelter design, which centers and elevates women's shelter priorities.

WOMEN'S SHELTER PRIORITIES

Action Research for Bangladesh

A research project centering women and girl's experiences and recommendations through creative research practices:

- Workshops using arts-based methods
- Informal group discussions
- Community based photographers
- A community survey carried out over 400 households

Distribution of experienced hazards

% of hazard exposure reported by respondents relative to total reported (N=272)

Most frequently reported shelter interior concerns

% of respondents (N=402) who reported each item as a concern

'The lack of private space in our shelter is not dignified and makes me feel mentally unstable'

'We would love to decorate and make our shelters beautiful, so they feel like home'

Any necessary Footnotes

SHELTER RECOMMENDATIONS

1 SOLAR AND LIGHTING

'The smaller things like the lights and fan will make the biggest difference right now.'

Recommendation: increase solar panels and adding in more lights and fans to improve comfort inside the shelter

Photo Description

2 STOVE AND KITCHEN AREA

Women fed back that they lacked dedicated kitchen space to cook.

Recommendation: place kitchens near ventilation points and design a dedicated kitchen area for women to use.

3 IMPROVED VENTILATION

72% fed back that the shelter had poor ventilation: *'It is so hot inside that it is hard to breath, the men can roam around the camp but we are stuck inside'*

Recommendation: improve ventilation by increasing ventilation points under the roof.

Photo Description

4 HOMESTEAD GARDEN

Adolescent girls fed back: *'We would love more plants and flowers to make the shelters feel beautiful, it would make us happy'*

Women also fed back that they wanted more green space to grow vegetables.

Recommendation: integrate a small garden into the shelter design to improve wellbeing and food security of women and girls

Photo Description

5 ENHANCED SECURITY

Women and girls do not feel safe outside their shelters due to violence in the camp, and often are worried their shelters are not secure enough.

Recommendation: replace current doors with sturdier material and strengthen the locks

Photo Description

6 SHELVING AND PARTITIONS

Three quarters of women surveyed said they lacked privacy in their shelter. Women also felt they had nowhere to store their belonging contributing to a lack of space.

Recommendation: integrate soundproof partitions in the shelters for privacy and add in storage solutions like shelves

Photo Description

Labels B&B from Rubinge Photography Collective took all the photographs for this project

Shokutara's story

Shokutara lives in Camp 13 with her husband and five children. They have been in Cox's Bazar since 2018, when they were displaced by conflict from their home in Myanmar. Camp 13 experienced two significant fires in June 2024 and Shokutara and her family lost their shelter in one. The shelter she lives in now was rebuilt; however, the family is still worried about the risk of future fires as the shelters are still made of highly flammable bamboo and tarpaulin. Shokutara is particularly distressed about how small her shelter is and the impact this is having on her children, particularly her eldest daughter.



"The lack of space is awful and makes me feel mentally unstable. There is no privacy for women and girls in this shelter. My daughter is reaching the age where she will start menstruation, and we do not have a private space for her. I have so little space I cannot pray properly, store my things or host my family and friends here"
