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The favourable impact of livelihood opportunities for vulnerable Rohingya refugees

Gregory Lane and Erin Kelley

- This study examines the impact of different livelihood interventions – paid work, cash transfers, and volunteer activity – on psychosocial well-being and intimate partner violence among Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.
- Findings from a randomised controlled trial, engaging 2,513 married couples for six weeks in the refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar, reveal that paid work improves psychological well-being for both women and men more effectively than cash transfers or uncompensated volunteer activity.
- In addition, reductions in intimate partner violence were more significant when men participated in the interventions.
- Integrating paid livelihood opportunities into social programmes could provide a more holistic approach to improving the lives of refugees and other vulnerable populations.

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Introduction

The Rohingya refugee influx created a major humanitarian emergency. Fleeing violence and persecution in Myanmar, approximately one million refugees sought safety in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char, Bangladesh. Now, seven years after the initial refugee influx, the crisis has become protracted, highlighting the significant need to shift from emergency assistance to sustainable solutions as humanitarian budgets are cut. The deteriorating security conditions in Myanmar put into question any immediate plans for a safe, voluntary, dignified, and sustainable repatriation. Therefore, more effort is required to promote livelihood activities and self-reliance for the Rohingya refugee population despite the restrictive policy on movement and employment. However, the benefits of livelihood activities extend beyond simply providing an income and fostering self-reliance. There are also potential positive consequences related to the psychosocial well-being of an individual and wider household, as well as other positive externalities, including a reduction in violence or wider social disorder.

With the above in mind, this study examines the impact of different livelihood interventions—paid work, cash transfers, and volunteer activity—on psychosocial well-being and intimate partner violence. These interventions were randomly assigned to a husband or wife, with both partners engaged in the study. The analysis reveals that paid work significantly improves psychological well-being for both women and men more effectively than cash transfers or uncompensated volunteer activity. In addition, the positive effects on intimate partner violence were more significant when men participated in the interventions.

Methodology

This study involved a randomised controlled trial (RCT), engaging 2,513 married couples for six weeks in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar to explore how different livelihood interventions impacted their psychosocial well-being. Each couple was randomly assigned to one of three interventions or a comparison group, with either the husband or wife participating in the intervention and both members of the couple being interviewed. The interventions included 1) paid work, where participants performed surveying tasks four days a week for six weeks in total; 2) cash transfers, where participants received the equivalent sum of money without working; and 3) uncompensated volunteer activity, where participants did the same surveying tasks without pay, but received a nominal fee for weekly survey participation. The comparison group only received a nominal fee for survey participation. The study aimed to determine how these interventions impacted the participants' lives and whether these effects differed based on the gender of the spouse involved in the intervention.

Findings

1. The interventions worked as intended: paid work and cash interventions increased savings and decreased debts, while paid work and unpaid volunteer interventions effectively reduced idle time. This indicates that earnings from livelihood activities improve the self-reliance of the refugee population.
2. Both women and men with paid work experienced substantial improvements in psychosocial well-being. Both genders reported significant reductions in depression; women noted greater feelings of stability, while men experienced enhanced purposefulness, self-worth, and control.
3. Employment provided significant psychosocial benefits beyond those of cash for men. While women benefitted four times more from work than cash, the difference was not as significant as it was for men. Volunteering did not produce any psychosocial benefits. This highlights the significant psychological benefits of employment compared to cash transfers or unpaid volunteer work.
4. Employment interventions also affected spouses. While husbands experienced no detectable change in their psychological well-being when their wives were employed, the study shows that wives experienced psychosocial gains when their husbands received employment or cash.
5. Women who worked experienced no detectable changes in intimate partner violence (IPV). In other words, we find no evidence of backlash. Wives of husbands engaged in the work, cash, and volunteer interventions experienced significant reductions in IPV. In particular, they experienced a 31% decrease in the likelihood of being physically threatened by their husbands. This highlights that in addition to interventions on household safety and well-being, men participating in paid work has significant positive effects.
6. Women who were employed did not exhibit greater agency and empowerment. This suggests that without direct norms engagement, programmes may not always be able to redistribute power within households over short time horizons.

Discussion and policy recommendations

1. **Psychosocial well-being through employment programmes:** Our findings demonstrate that livelihood programmes are powerful tools for vulnerable Rohingya refugees. The interventions significantly enhance the psychological well-being of both women and men. This finding is particularly interesting for women, of whom 95% in our sample had never

been gainfully employed in their previous lives in Myanmar. This indicates that livelihood programmes are important. Policymakers should advocate for and promote these programmes, especially in vulnerable households, to maximise impact and ensure self-reliance as well as psychological and social empowerment.

2. **Designing comprehensive social protection programmes:** Our results underscore the importance of designing social protection programmes that address multiple dimensions of well-being beyond material consumption. Programmes should aim to improve psychosocial well-being and reduce intimate partner violence. While cash transfers provide financial relief, they do not offer the same psychological benefits as paid work. Therefore, integrating paid livelihood opportunities into social programmes could provide a more holistic approach to improving the lives of refugees and other vulnerable populations.
3. **The importance of social protection programmes' selection of beneficiaries:** Social protection programmes can affect the targeted participant and others in their household differently. While we find that employment provides meaningful and comparable psychosocial benefits to both women and men, there are additional factors to consider. We find that women are happier and safer when their husbands are employed. We also find that programmes like the ones we studied may not be able to redistribute power within households over short time horizons without direct norms engagement. It is important to acknowledge that encouraging men to participate in paid work could lead to substantial improvements in relational health and household safety, thereby contributing to overall community well-being.