

Cloistered within their own homes

Balukhali camp: For adolescent Rohingya girls, the onset of their first period brings radical change to their lives. They are no longer allowed to move freely, and are expected to remain largely cloistered within their homes until they are married.

Such traditions are not unique to the Rohingya. But whereas in Myanmar or Afghanistan, a girl's home compound may offer some space, that is not the case in the crowded refugee camps of south-eastern Bangladesh, where, from their early teens, girls are confined to one small, stifling shelter, with nothing except cooking and cleaning to occupy her. Twelve-year-old Samira describes her experience:

"When we first arrived in Bangladesh, we felt afraid. We feared the elephants. We also feared kidnappers. The shelters were flimsier back then and people could easily break in and steal things, even steal children. It took at least two or three months before we could feel relaxed, safe.

"Here (in Balukhali camp) we are a group of about 15 girls. We all met at the Child Friendly Space. If we can get together,

we feel happy.

"When I get older, I won't be able to go out like I do now. When (a girl) gets her first period, she won't be able to go out and move around.

"Bangladeshi girls are allowed to go to school and move around, by wearing a (hijab). But we will be kept inside the house and then we get married. We can't go around anymore. Even now, they told me if I come to the CFS I'll be beaten.

"If my sister ever asked to go out, my parents would severely punish her. It is considered a sin for a young woman to speak with a man alone. And the fear is that if an adolescent girl is seen on her own, she will be accosted by men."

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A young Rohingya girl peers from behind a curtain in her family shelter in Balukhali refugee camp.