

# From Burma to Bangladesh: Continuous Challenges and Refugee-Empowering Resolutions for Rohingya Children's Access to Education

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## Abstract

The Rohingya, an ethnic minority from Burma (Myanmar), fled in large numbers to Bangladesh in the twenty-first century after facing increasing persecution in their homeland. However, due to government policies, inadequate living conditions, and pervasive cultural gender norms, Rohingya children's education has suffered in both Burma and Bangladesh. While scholarship on problems the Rohingya face in Bangladeshi refugee camps exists, journal-length articles that concomitantly explore their impacts on children's access to education, address curricular and campwide infrastructural shortcomings, and spotlight refugee-led campaigns are scarce. In detailing the intersectional challenges Rohingya children face in the world's largest refugee camp and highlighting grassroots campaigns to promote children's education, this article aims to both provide humanitarian practitioners and the general populace with an informed view of children's experiences in Kutupalong Refugee Camp, and shed light on rarely heard stories of refugees as agents of change rather than simply recipients of humanitarian aid.

## Introduction

Hafsa (an alias), a fourteen-year-old Rohingya Muslim girl residing in Kutupalong Refugee Camp in Bangladesh, has faced turmoil since birth. Originally, she was forced to flee her home in Rakhine state in Burma (often written "Myanmar" in Western literature), having faced severe discrimination from the governing Buddhist minority in her home state, a part of the Buddhist majority in the country overall. As with

countless other Rohingya refugees, she and her family likely witnessed the extrajudicial murders of Rohingya men in their community, sexual violence towards women and girls, and encountered severe restrictions on movement, employment, and education throughout their lives in their home state.<sup>1</sup> Not only did the Burmese military round up and execute many Rohingya in their villages, but soldiers have also been credibly accused of confiscating land,<sup>2</sup> destroying crops,<sup>3</sup> slaughtering animals, looting Rohingya homes, and burning entire villages, making it impossible to rebuild life after such incursions. Children like Hafsa had to flee the only homes they had known, many on Eid,<sup>4</sup> the chief day of celebration for Muslim day communities. Many families opted to bring just one or two photographs and the clothes on their backs, knowing the flimsy boats they needed to ride to Bangladesh's coast could not bear much more than the weight of their bodies. This research paper explicates the circumstances Rohingya children like Hafsa have faced since birth—with an emphasis on education accessibility—both before fleeing ethnic cleansing in Burma and after seeking refuge in Bangladesh, proposing pragmatic solutions throughout. I draw primarily upon qualitative observations gleaned from interviews conducted within refugee camps in Bangladesh, reports from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and governmental offices. I also cite academic literature, texts, and quantitative data sets on a range of topics, from the infrastructural challenges Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh may face, to broader fields such as psychology, healthcare, and migration

1 Amnesty International, "Caged Without a Roof": Apartheid in Myanmar's Rakhine State (London: Amnesty International Ltd, 2017), 42–58, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/CagedwithoutaRoof-ApartheidMyanmar-AIreport.pdf>.

2 Amnesty International, "Caged Without a Roof," 76–77.

3 Jeffrey Gettleman and AKM Moinuddin and Nick Cumming-Bruce, "Rohingya Recount Atrocities: 'They Threw My Baby Into a Fire,'" *New York Times*, October 11, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/11/world/asia/rohingya-myanmar-atrocities.html>.

4 "Rohingya crisis: The Children suffering in refugee camps" YouTube video, timestamp 2:16–2:21, from televised British news program [2017], posted by Channel 4 News, November 1, 2017. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_kF0mHrjzWA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_kF0mHrjzWA).

studies. The remarkable range of my primary and secondary sources capacitate among the most concise and comprehensive English-language analyses of Rohingya children's access to education to date. I hope this research paper can aid not only academic researchers and humanitarian practitioners, but also non-specialist readers unable to parse through lengthy and technical NGO, IGO, government, or secondary reports, in understanding and improving the circumstances of the world's largest group of refugee children today.

I begin this paper with a historical analysis of the Buddhist majority's protracted discrimination against the Rohingya minority in Burma, discovering resentment from British colonialism as a primary cause. Next, I outline many of the challenges the Rohingya people have faced in Burma since the country's independence in 1948, including legal restrictions on education, the wide economic disparity between the Rohingya and other Burmese ethnic groups, and inflammatory rhetoric depicting Rohingya in Burma as recent immigrants, contradictory to their enduring presence in the country.<sup>5</sup>

For the majority of this research paper, I engage in a three-pronged analysis of themes germane to the majority of Rohingya youth's education outside of Burma. Firstly, I review some of the major problems Rohingya children face in the world's largest refugee camp, threading inadequate sanitation, nutrition, building materials, and physical safety to explicit and plausible impacts on education access. Secondly, I unearth the noteworthy stories of a Rohingya woman and child in Kutupalong Refugee Camp who, despite severe danger, have resisted cultural and legal customs to educate and be educated. Finally, I propound practical solutions humanitarian and government agencies may use to ameliorate these issues, including disbursing food aid in learning centers to incentivize attendance, working within rather than working counter to cultural norms to increase girls' access to education, and addressing widespread mental health concerns by implementing art therapy in learning center curricula. By weaving these components together, I aim to not only illuminate prime impediments and solutions for children's learning in Kutupalong Refugee Camp, but also foreground the agency and ingenuity of Rohingya refugee women in forging pathways to education for children living in the camp.

### ***History of Rohingya Persecution***

Long having faced discrimination, such as extreme restrictions on movement outside of a single state in Burma,<sup>6</sup> Rohingya

people in Burma were pushed out of their home country after several waves of violence perpetrated by the Burmese military on the government's behalf. While tensions have long simmered between the Rohingya Muslim minority and Buddhist majority, they were heightened by the 2012 rape and murder of a Buddhist woman by three Rohingya men, and the subsequent Buddhist mob lynching of ten unrelated Rohingya passengers riding a bus.<sup>7</sup> Since then, the Burmese military and Buddhist majority's persecution of Rohingya communities has intensified, culminating in regrettably common stories like Hafsa's—that is, of children fleeing for safety as the military razed their fields, homes, and entire villages to discourage return.<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to pin the troubled relationship between these two native ethnic groups on any singular cause. However, historians might trace the root of their conflict to the British colonization of Burma, during which the British elite reportedly granted preferential treatment to the Muslim minority at the expense of the Buddhist majority. In the following century, after Japan invaded British Burma during World War II, Japanese forces recruited from the Buddhist majority while the British recruited Rohingyas, which many Buddhists viewed as the continuation of the social hierarchy from colonial rule. Burma gained independence from British colonial rule shortly afterward in 1948, and the relationship between these two populations worsened. Since independence, the Buddhist government has orchestrated several waves of displacement against the Rohingya population.

These policies rest on the government's counterfactual claim that all Rohingya in Burma today descended from migrants during the British colonial era, despite census records proving Rohingya existed in Burma for generations before colonial rule. This argument conflates the limited Bengali and Indian immigrants with the native Burmese Rohingya population and was the foundation for the internationally condemned 1982 Citizenship Law, which recognized over 100 ethnic groups in Burma as citizens but notably excluded the Rohingya,<sup>9</sup> effectively rendering them stateless. The argument that Rohingya are "migrants" has since been used by the Burmese political elite and military to restrict Rohingya people's access to politics, education at every level, and the professional workforce, leading this demographic to the country's highest unemployment rates and a correlated dependence on farming for survival.<sup>10</sup>

That being said, because the Rohingya were largely

<sup>5</sup> Rohingya Cultural Center, "History of the Rohingya."

<sup>6</sup> Amnesty International, "Caged Without a Roof," 42.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Ismail, "Crisis in Arakan State and New Threats to Freedom of News and Information," Reporters Without Borders, January 20, 2016. <https://rsf.org/en/crisis-ara-kan-state-and-new-threats-freedom-news-and-information>.

<sup>8</sup> Amnesty International, "Myanmar/Bangladesh: Rohingya community facing gravest threats since 2017," Amnesty International, October 24, 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/10/myanmar-bangladesh-rohingya-community-facing-gravest-threats-since-2017/>.

<sup>9</sup> Rohingya Cultural Center, "History of the Rohingya," RCC Chicago, accessed November 10, 2024. <https://rccchicago.org/history-of-the-rohingya/>.

<sup>10</sup> Amnesty International, "Caged Without a Roof," 73.

forced to live in isolation from other ethnic groups in one state—Rakhine State—since the founding of the country, it can be inferred that the sense of community inculcated among Rohingya Muslims in Burma before each swell of displacement was likely exceptionally high compared to other ethnic groups, who had no restrictions on movement and therefore could live throughout the country. Accordingly, many Rohingya refugees recount openly celebrating religious and cultural traditions together in Rakhine State, and many of them long to spend time gathering with friends and neighbors throughout the day again. While other ethnic groups also live in Rakhine State, the relatively homogenous demographics of the Rohingya villages may have also benefited the ethnic group linguistically. More specifically, it is plausible that their isolation contributed to the preservation of the Rohingya language, which is verbal with no written form.<sup>11</sup> However, the insidious and far-reaching impacts of being restricted from equal citizenship far outweigh these purported benefits, particularly where education is concerned. For example, no Rohingya have been granted permission to attend the singular university in Rakhine State in over a decade, there is an extraordinary 50 percent greater illiteracy rate among the Rohingya population compared to legal Burmese citizens, and the government still enforces strict ethnic segregation policies that bar Rohingya children from attending all but three of the seventeen government schools in Rakhine State.<sup>12</sup>

### *Experiences of Rohingya Children in Kutupalong Refugee Camp*

After arriving at Kutupalong Refugee Camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, fourteen-year-old Hafsa began attending one of the—at the time—1,900 “learning centers” established and run by UNICEF in the settlement.<sup>13</sup> Echoing the troubles faced in Burma, the Bangladesh government prohibits children like Hafsa from attending government-run schools,<sup>14</sup> contending that all Rohingya living in their territory are “Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals” soon bound back for Burma, not refugees entitled to long-term care in their new territory.<sup>15</sup> Somewhat paradoxically,

Bangladesh produces camp identity cards for Rohingya refugees with this label, despite the Burmese government's repudiation of the Rohingya.<sup>16</sup> In a speech to the UN General Assembly, Former Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina underscored her country's inability to care for the Rohingya long-term, highlighting not only budget constraints—the United Nations classifies Bangladesh as a “Least Developed Country”<sup>17</sup>—but also the environmental destruction borne from the increasing population and demand for shelter in Cox's Bazar.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to Bangladesh's demonstrated financial and ecological concerns in housing more Rohingya refugees, Amnesty International has reported alarming news about the Bangladeshi Coast Guard's behavior along the Bay of Bengal, where Kutupalong Refugee Camp is located. More specifically, members of Bangladesh's Coast Guard are estimated to have engaged in over five thousand cases of refoulement, sending Rohingya desperately fleeing from state-inflicted violence back across the river to Burma, even when refugees raise the chance of death.<sup>19</sup> While this is a clear violation of the international humanitarian law principle of non-refoulement, Bangladesh—alongside all South Asian countries—is not a signatory to the United Nations' “1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees,” nor the corresponding “1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees.”<sup>20</sup> Crucially, this does not mean Bangladesh has never engaged in humanitarian relief, a notion the very existence of Kutupalong Refugee Camp refutes. On the contrary, many non-signatory countries—mainly countries in the Global South with economies less advanced than Western states—outpace signatories in bestowing aid to those crossing borders in search of safety, most prominently in the cases of Jordan and Lebanon.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, because Bangladesh is not bound to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol, there are many questions raised about who is responsible for the Rohingya. Mohamad Rezaul Karim, a Bangladeshi official who supervises Kutupalong Refugee Camp, maintains that the Rohingya are short-term guests and Bangladesh “is waiting ... as soon as possible to repatriate them peacefully in their country.”<sup>22</sup>

11 [bangladesh@translatorswithoutborders.org](mailto:bangladesh@translatorswithoutborders.org), “Rohingya Language Factsheet,” Translators Without Borders, June 2022, <https://clearglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Rohingya-language-factsheet.pdf>.

12 Amnesty International, “Caged Without a Roof,” 66–68.

13 “In World's Largest Refugee Camp, Rohingya Children Face a Desperate Choice” YouTube video, timestamp 5:34–5:38, from televised American news program [2019], posted by PBS NewsHour, May 30, 2019, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vX9tQ9knjfo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vX9tQ9knjfo).

14 PBS NewsHour, “Rohingya Children Face a Desperate Choice,” timestamp 1:04–1:13.

15 Sheikh Hasina, “High-Level Side Event on “Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (Rohingya) crisis: Imperatives for a Sustainable Solution” (speech, Dhaka, Bangladesh, September 23, 2021), Bangladesh Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <https://mofa.gov.bd/site/page/a3d64c7a-3cf9-4780-9f27-80421cfcbe92>.

16 “Rohingya crisis: The Children suffering,” timestamp 4:45–4:57.

17 United Nations Trade & Development, UN list of least developed countries (Geneva, Switzerland: UNCTAD, 2021), <https://unctad.org/topic/least-developed-countries/list>.

18 Sheikh Hasina, “High-Level Side Event.”

19 Amnesty International, “Myanmar/Bangladesh.”

20 United Nations Treaty Collection, 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Convention) and its 1967 Protocol (Geneva, Switzerland: UNHCR, January 31, 2024), <https://rimap.unhcr.org/refugee-treaty-legislation-dashboard>.

21 Rebecca Hamlin, *Crossing* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021), 109.

22 PBS NewsHour, “Rohingya Children Face a Desperate Choice,” timestamp 6:26–6:32.

In contrast with the Bangladeshi government's hopes, many of the non-governmental organizations supporting Rohingya refugees agree that a return to Burma will not be feasible under the current government.

Further, concerned humanitarian actors point out that multiple generations of Rohingya children are at risk of growing up uneducated, restricted from accessing schooling in both Burma and Bangladesh unless their host country allows them to attend local schools. For the majority of Rohingya children today, more than three thousand UNICEF learning centers<sup>23</sup> and partner NGO-run learning centers in Kutupalong Refugee Camp, designed as a temporary and informal academic aid, are their only route to schooling of any sort. However, given the over 400,000 children in need of an education in Cox's Bazar today,<sup>24</sup> classroom sizes are staggeringly large, with 80–105 pupils per class.<sup>25</sup> Given recent decreases in international funding for nutrition,<sup>26</sup> it is plausible humanitarian workers simply do not have the capacity to prioritize education over the population's most basic survival needs.

Among the over 400,000 school-aged children in Cox's Bazar, about 100,000 are not engaged in any form of learning.<sup>27</sup> There are a host of possible reasons, ranging from sexual harassment of girls in the camp discouraging them from leaving their shelter, to hygiene problems arising from a lack of clean water, and, critically, cultural beliefs prominent among conservative Rohingya Muslims that girls cannot interact with boys after menstruation begins—with no exceptions for mixed-gender classrooms. This latter cultural norm, referred to as *purdah* (lit. “veil”), requires the “seclusion of women from public [and unknown male] observation by wearing concealing clothing from head to toe.”<sup>28</sup> In practice, *purdah* often results in social isolation for pubescent girls and all women, given the certainty of men in the crowded conditions outside their shelter. One cogent method to promote female participation in camp life includes the development of female-only community spaces where women and girls of all ages can gather to speak with each other without the need for *purdah*.

Thirty-year-old Romida Begum of Kutupalong

Refugee Camp remembers such spaces back home in Burma, recounting that, “[W]e had a space near our house that was secluded. We women used to go and sit and chat there together. I was happy. We don't have anything like this here in the camp.”<sup>29</sup> This concept may be extended to education. For instance, UNICEF may run a learning center specifically for menstruating girls, managed by female teachers to encourage equal access to education. As educated Kutupalong Refugee Camp resident Shahida Win asserts, “[I]t's possible to still get an education and ‘live’ while practising *purdah*.”<sup>30</sup> The creation of female-only learning centers can serve the dual purposes of educating girls while adhering to their cultural norms, simultaneously providing much-needed employment in education to Rohingya women in the camps who may not otherwise feel comfortable leaving their shelter.

In terms of curriculum, from 2017 to 2022, UNICEF learning centers were authorized to teach only basic math, science, English, “life skills” such as physical education, and the Burmese language.<sup>31</sup> The curriculum, designed by UNICEF and approved by the Bangladeshi government, was strictly enforced, with government officials regularly scrutinizing school materials and lesson plans for compliance. Notably, this curriculum was not aligned with either Burmese or Bangladeshi national standards, and restricted Rohingya children from learning their native Rohingya language as well as their host country's national language, Bangla, in the classroom. Consequently, even children who regularly attended learning centers risked falling behind grade level. Discussion with NGO workers on Rohingya youths' future aspirations has at times been marred by the latter's frustration over the lack of formal documentation for learning center-provided education, curricular differences between Burma and Bangladesh, and their effective inability to have a professional career in both Burma and Bangladesh due to circumstances out of their control.<sup>32</sup> Despite these significant obstacles, many Rohingya children maintain hope for their future and remain dedicated to their education. For example, girls in the camps speak about wanting to become teachers and doctors,<sup>33</sup> and

23 Sayed Ezatullah Majeed, “Inside Look: How UNICEF Supports Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh” (interview, Dhaka, Bangladesh, September 9, 2024), UNICEF USA, <https://www.unicefusa.org/stories/inside-look-how-unicef-supports-rohingya-refugees-bangladesh>.

24 United Nations Children's Fund, “UNICEF: Education milestone for Rohingya refugee children as Myanmar curriculum pilot reaches first 10,000 children,” UNICEF, May 1, 2022, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-education-milestone-rohingya-refugee-children-myanmar-curriculum-pilot>.

25 Education Cannot Wait, “Hope in a World Gone Mad,” Education Cannot Wait, January 29, 2019, <https://www.educationcannotwait.org/news-stories/human-stories/hope-in-world-gone-mad>.

26 Daniel F. Runde, “The Rohingya's Plight in Bangladesh Is Not Sustainable,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, May 1, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/rohingya-plight-bangladesh-not-sustainable>.

27 United Nations Children's Fund, “UNICEF: Education milestone for Rohingya children.”

28 Susan P. Arnett, “Purdah,” Prof. Pavlac's Women's History Site, December 18, 2001, [https://departments.kings.edu/womens\\_history/purdah.html](https://departments.kings.edu/womens_history/purdah.html).

29 “Rohingya women fight to be heard | DW Documentary” YouTube video, timestamp 2:24–2:35, posted by DW Documentary, June 26, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnxvTlS16F8>.

30 DW Documentary, “Rohingya women fight,” timestamp 10:21–10:29.

31 M. Mahruf C. Shohel and Rasel Babu and Md. Ashrafuzzaman and Farhan Azim and Asif Bayezid, “Learning Competency Framework and Approach for the Displaced Rohingya Children Living in Bangladesh: A Critical Review,” *Continuity of Education* 4, no. 1 (2023): 53, <https://doi.org/10.5334/cie.57>.

32 “Education Barriers for Rohingya Children” YouTube video, timestamp 3:50–4:31, posted by Peace Research Institute Oslo, December 8, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WsBc2sBL8bM>.

33 DW Documentary, “Rohingya women fight,” timestamp 6:41–6:46.

Hafsa herself strives to become a human rights activist for the Rohingya people.<sup>34</sup>

Fortunately for fourteen-year-old Hafsa, her mother is a staunch advocate for her education, and has argued with Hafsa's father that their daughter is too young to be married,<sup>35</sup> despite Rohingya cultural norms and her aging out of the UNICEF learning centers. The global education non-profit Malala Fund appears to support Hafsa and her mother's positions, positing that a baseline of twelve years for girls' education not only "promotes gender equality," but also "strengthens economies, supports climate action, and builds healthier communities."<sup>36</sup> While Hafsa's mother eventually persuades her husband to permit their daughter's education, her work has just started: she must now begin the arduous—and dangerous—task of illegally enrolling her daughter in a government school. First, she must locate and pay local criminals, using money raised from reselling the family's food rations, to forge Bangladeshi birth documents for her daughter.<sup>37</sup> Even at this early stage, Hafsa's mother faces the horrific risks of the felons revealing Hafsa's identity to the Bangladeshi authorities, or physical and sexual exploitation to preserve her daughter's documents—hence, her reliance on an alias. Fortunately, the process goes relatively smoothly, and Hafsa starts attending a formal school for the first time in years—if not her life.

However, Hafsa's mental turmoil most likely only increases when she starts attending the local school. Every weekday, at school, Hafsa must completely conceal her identity, adopting a fake name and ethnicity with administrators, teachers, and her peers, as with the townspeople she encounters en route to classes. If they knew her identity, they would torment her mentally and physically. As literature on the psychological impact of stigmatization states, children like Hafsa face inner turmoil from concealing their immutable identities,<sup>38</sup> which often impacts their socio-economic outcomes in adulthood, and has even been linked to premature death.<sup>39</sup> In other words, Hafsa must jeopardize aspects of her present and future well-being to continue her education in the present.

Hafsa is fortunate to have learned Bangla, the national language of Bangladesh, on her own, as the Bangladeshi government bars instruction of Bangla in the UNICEF learning centers,<sup>40</sup> so she would otherwise not understand the lessons in her local school. This policy reflects the Bangladeshi government's belief that the Rohingya are temporary residents who should not be integrated into Bangladeshi society. As Mizanur Rahman of Bangladesh's Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner states regarding Rohingya children, "Why should we pay our taxpayers' money to educate the other country's people? It's not our mandate."<sup>41</sup> In response to a German journalist incredulously confirming "[T]o be clear, state policy is not to integrate these people?" Mizanur emphatically agrees, saying, "Definitely not."<sup>42</sup>

The Bangladeshi government's anti-integration sentiment is further mirrored in their ruling that Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals cannot legally exit Kutupalong Refugee Camp,<sup>43</sup> a law that hearkens to the Burmese government's confinement of the Rohingya population in Rakhine State. Due to the Bangladeshi government's intentional withholding of linguistic, academic, and professional support for the Rohingya population, these refugees do not have the chance to develop the skills necessary for survival in their new country outside of Cox's Bazar. The host government's lack of support is certain to increase the likelihood of generations of prospectless Rohingya children and a cycle of forced dependence on humanitarian aid for survival, diminishing the Rohingya refugee population's dignity, sense of community, and capability over time.

Furthermore, because Rohingya are prohibited from leaving Kutupalong Refugee Camp, teenagers and adults—whose ages have restricted them from attending the UNICEF learning centers—have had little option but to work under the table for below-market wages,<sup>44</sup> or even resort to criminal activity, such as the rampant methamphetamine trade,<sup>45</sup> to supplement their meager rations or support their loved ones. In the absence of alternatives, these actions have caused friction between Rohingya refugees and their neighboring

34 PBS NewsHour, "Rohingya Children Face a Desperate Choice," timestamp 0:38–1:03.

35 PBS NewsHour, "Rohingya Children Face a Desperate Choice," timestamp 2:01–2:30.

36 Malala Fund, "Why Girls' Education," Malala Fund, 2024, <https://malala.org/girls-education#m4su3plt>.

37 PBS NewsHour, "Rohingya Children Face a Desperate Choice," timestamp 2:15–3:22.

38 Diane M Quinn and Stephanie R Chaudoir, "Living With a Concealable Stigmatized Identity: The Impact of Anticipated Stigma, Centrality, Salience, and Cultural Stigma on Psychological Distress and Health," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 97, no. 4 (2009): 5, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4511710/pdf/nihms706276.pdf>.

39 David G. Blanchflower and Alex Bryson, "The adult consequences of being bullied in childhood," *Social Science & Medicine* 345 (2024): 8, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277953624001345>.

40 DW Documentary, "Rohingya women fight," timestamp 7:14–7:39.

41 PBS NewsHour, "Rohingya Children Face a Desperate Choice," timestamp 8:03–8:11.

42 PBS NewsHour, "Rohingya Children Face a Desperate Choice," timestamp 8:12–8:20.

43 DW Documentary, "Rohingya women fight," timestamp 1:40–1:52.

44 Geoffrey Macdonald and Isabella Mekker and Lauren Mooney, *Conflict Dynamics between Bangladeshi Host Communities and Rohingya Refugees* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2023), 6, [https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/sr-519\\_conflict-dynamics-bangladeshi-host-communities-rohingya-refugees.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/sr-519_conflict-dynamics-bangladeshi-host-communities-rohingya-refugees.pdf).

45 Krishna N. Das, "Stateless Rohingya refugees sucked into booming Bangladesh drug trade," *Reuters*, February 27, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/stateless-rohingya-refugees-sucked-into-booming-bangladesh-drug-trade-idUSKBN1662M7/>.

Bangladeshi communities around Cox's Bazar, with Bangladeshi citizens expressing resentment toward, and even thoughts of violence against, Rohingya refugees for what they perceive as a surplus of domestic and international support—and an increase in criminal activity in their communities—at the expense of locals.<sup>46</sup>

### ***Campwide Infrastructural Deficits and Impacts on Rohingya Children's Learning***

Compounding stressors impacting children's access to education, and the broader experience of Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, also include endemic infrastructural failures. For example, upon registration in Kutupalong Refugee Camp, Rohingya families are given sheets of plastic and sticks of bamboo with which to construct their shelters.<sup>47</sup> Since these materials are not weather-resistant, and Bangladesh has a tropical monsoon climate, shelters are commonly destroyed in floods.<sup>48</sup> Worse, because Kutupalong Refugee Camp is located near the coast, flooding damage is exacerbated.<sup>49</sup> In an ironic twist of fate, the camp's location near the coastline makes it simultaneously easier for Rohingya to reach it by boat, yet increases the intensity of water damage as well as the incidence of water-borne diseases among the Rohingya population.

For instance, due to poor construction of water wells and sanitation facilities, diseases such as cholera and diarrhea run rampant in Kutupalong Refugee Camp.<sup>50</sup> An academic study on water security in Cox's Bazar blames poor water infrastructure on UNICEF's water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) teams' practices. According to the study, WASH rushed the installation of latrines due to the rapidly expanding Rohingya refugee population, accidentally placing latrines close to sources of drinking water.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, with one toilet per approximately one hundred people,<sup>52</sup> the vast majority of camp residents are unable to access restrooms when needed. This lack of restrooms may encourage children to hold their bladder, resulting in urinary tract infections. Without prompt medical treatment—which, given resource constraints, may

be difficult to find in the camp—these infections can lead to kidney complications and even death.<sup>53</sup> However, relieving oneself outside of crowded restrooms and latrines may also harm health, as water contamination from unhygienic waste disposal is an ongoing issue in Cox's Bazar.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, humanitarian and government stakeholders must invest significantly in water and sanitation facilities to avoid children from developing health problems that encumber them attending learning centers.

Lastly, there is a more sinister and gendered aspect to the avoidance of restrooms in Kutupalong Refugee Camp. As a German journalist reports, after humanitarian workers leave the camp after dusk, "Toilets ... are places where sexual harassment and even rape are commonplace" for women and girls in the camp.<sup>55</sup> If a restroom is available, females are discouraged from using it due to the risk of gender-based violence. However, as with Rohingya men in the camp, they also face health and contamination problems from holding their bladder or using an undesignated area for waste disposal. In total, Kutupalong Refugee Camp's extant hygiene landscape inhibits the ability of all Rohingya children, particularly girls, from safe relief practices. In light of these hazards, camp administrators may seek inspiration from Kutupalong Refugee Camp resident Kemal, who established a family reunification center after losing his brother in a crowd and has united over seven hundred children with their families to date.<sup>56</sup> More specifically, camp operators should assess the feasibility of child safety programs in a sanitation context, such as a small hourly stipend for supervising a restroom line or a child-only bathroom associated with each learning center. Whether they face long lines, bacterial contamination, or gender-based violence, many children have no option but to endanger their health and bodily autonomy to fulfill their basic biological needs, in turn endangering their ability to access schooling.

In addition to substandard conditions for sanitation, drinking water, and shelter, the poor quantity and quality of food provided to the residents of Kutupalong Refugee Camp

46 Macdonald, Mekker, and Mooney, *Conflict Dynamics*, 5-6 and 10-11.

47 Malteser International, *Inside the Kutupalong refugee camp, Cox's Bazar* (Colonge, Germany: Sovereign Military Order of Malta, n.d.), <https://www.malteser-international.org/en/our-work/asia/bangladesh/life-in-a-refugee-camp.html>.

48 Kaamil Ahmed, "A sample of hell: Rohingya forced to rebuild camps again after deadly floods," *Guardian*, August 7, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/aug/07/rohingya-rebuild-camps-again-21000-displaced-floods-bangladesh-coxs-bazar>.

49 Majeed, "How UNICEF Supports Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh."

50 World Health Organization, "Battling Cholera: WHO's lifesaving efforts in Rohingya Camps amid global resurgence!" *World Health Organization*, July 23, 2024, <https://www.who.int/bangladesh/news/detail/23-07-2024-battling-cholera-who-s-lifesaving-efforts-in-rohingya-camps-amid-global-resurgence>; Doctors Without Borders South Asia, "Bangladesh: Poor water and sanitation services expose Rohingya community to disease," *Doctors Without Borders*, October 19, 2022, <https://msfsouthasia.org/bangladesh-poor-water-and-sanitation-services-expose-rohingya-community-to-disease/>.

51 Mehreen Akhter and Sayed Mohammad Nazim Udin and Nazifa Rafa and Sanjia Marium Hridi and Chad Staddon and Wayne Powell, "Drinking Water Security Challenges in Rohingya Refugee Camps of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh," *Sustainability* 12, no. 18 (2020): 5-6, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12187325>.

52 "Rohingya refugee crisis: Life in Bangladesh's largest refugee camp" YouTube video, timestamp 1:57-2:04, from televised British news program [2017], posted by Channel 4 News, October 24, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7LtEhoH6Xo>.

53 Heidi Tyline King, "Is It Dangerous To Hold in Your Urine?" *Keck Medicine of USC*, April 23, 2024, <https://www.keckmedicine.org/blog/is-it-dangerous-to-hold-in-your-pee/>.

54 Doctors Without Borders South Asia, "Bangladesh: Poor water and sanitation services."

55 DW Documentary, "Rohingya women fight," timestamp 4:50-5:03.

56 "Rohingya refugee crisis: Life in Bangladesh," timestamp 0:45-1:43.

also poses severe problems for the educational outcomes of Rohingya children. According to 2024 data from the International Rescue Committee, about half of Rohingya children in Cox's Bazar show symptoms of malnutrition, and the vast majority of children eat fewer than three meals per day.<sup>57</sup> Despite this, due to a reduction in international funding, food rations have been reduced further in the past year.<sup>58</sup> Since malnutrition has been shown to impede a child's ability to learn,<sup>59</sup> the acute hunger within Kutupalong Refugee Camp paints a troubling portrait for Rohingya children's capability to pursue and retain knowledge, whether in the UNICEF learning centers or government-run schools. Overall, the Rohingya population, particularly children, are vulnerable to layered infrastructural and nutritional challenges, including inadequate toilets, water contamination, weather-susceptible shelter, and malnutrition, which obstruct Rohingya youth's—especially girls'—ability to learn and succeed in school.

### **Pragmatic Considerations and Interventions for Rohingya Children's Learning**

#### ***Mental Health for Rohingya Children in Kutupalong Refugee Camp***

On par with the variety of existential challenges the Rohingya people have faced in Burma, on their journey to Bangladesh, and in Cox's Bazar, the incidence of mental health conditions among Rohingya people is staggeringly high—in fact, over 60 percent of Rohingya adults surveyed for a Conflict and Health study indicated symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder<sup>60</sup>, and 84 percent endorsed symptoms of clinical anxiety or depression.<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately, witnessing Bangladeshi police officers in Kutupalong Refugee Camp can easily resurface their traumatic memories, as the local police and an infantry of the Burmese military wear eerily similar uniforms.<sup>62</sup>

As an academic field, developmental psychology has long postulated that “[c]hildren thrive in stable and nurturing environments where they have a routine and know what to expect. ... [L]ack [of] choice or control over

change ... escalates to extreme levels [of stress and] can be detrimental to children's mental health and cognitive functioning.”<sup>63</sup> Given the instability Rohingya children have faced since birth, they likely face mental disorders at similarly high rates as Rohingya adults, compounded by temporal trauma from their physical vulnerability in the dense, unsafe camp environment and the need to conceal their identities if they attend a local school. To address ubiquitous youth trauma while contending with budget constraints that hinder agencies from bringing licensed clinicians to Kutupalong Refugee Camp, UNICEF and other actors in the camp's education sector should consider incorporating low-cost art therapy into the routine curriculum in all learning centers. Not only is art therapy a proven intervention in adolescent mental healthcare,<sup>64</sup> but activities such as drawing, acting, and singing can offer Rohingya children age-appropriate outlets for self-expression, creativity, and control in their unstable environment. Even more, communal forms of art therapy such as murals or choirs can foster bonds among Rohingya children, helping rekindle a sense of community among the fragmented Rohingya population after they were forcibly uprooted from their homes and scattered across an unfamiliar environment.

#### ***Curriculum Design and Education Interventions in Kutupalong Refugee Camp***

Regarding learning center curricula, the difficulty of planning lessons that help children feel prepared for their future—when neither they, their teachers, nor their host country can predict their socio-political status in the following year—cannot be understated. School curricula often vary between country, state, and town, and curricula from one institution may contradict lesson plans from another, depending on their purposes. For instance, if Rohingya children are granted permission to stay in Bangladesh, then learning center staff may decide to teach them Bangla so they can pursue further education or employment in Bangladesh. However, since the Bangladeshi government staunchly opposes permanent Rohingya residency, UNICEF's learning centers currently teach Rohingya children Burmese using the Rohingya

57 IRC Global Communications, “New IRC data shows that hunger has increased for Rohingya refugees by nearly 60% in one year,” International Rescue Committee, August 23, 2024, <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/new-irc-data-shows-hunger-has-increased-rohingya-refugees-nearly-60-one-year>.

58 DW Documentary, “Rohingya women fight,” timestamp 8:43-8:50.

59 World Food Program USA, “The Effects of Child Nutrition on Academic Performance: How School Meals Can Break the Cycle of Poverty,” World Food Program USA, September 21, 2023, <https://www.wfpusa.org/articles/effects-child-nutrition-academic-performance-how-school-meals-can-break-cycle-poverty/>.

60 Andrew Riley and Yasmin Akther and Mohammed Noor and Rahmat Ali and Courtney Welton-Mitchell, “Systematic human rights violations, traumatic events, daily stressors and mental health of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh,” *Conflict and Health* 14, no. 60 (2020): 7, <https://conflictandhealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13031-020-00306-9>.

61 Andrew Riley et al., “Systematic human rights violations,” 9.

62 “Rohingya crisis: The Children suffering,” timestamp 5:28-5:42.

63 Heather Sandstrom and Sandra Huerta, *The Negative Effects of Instability on Child Development: A Research Synthesis* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2013), 5, <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/32706/412899-The-Negative-Effects-of-Instability-on-Child-Development-A-Research-Synthesis.PDF>.

64 Liesbeth Bosgraaf and Marinus Spreen and Kim Pattiselanno and Susan van Hooren, “Art Therapy for Psychosocial Problems in Children and Adolescents: A Systematic Narrative Review on Art Therapeutic Means and Forms of Expression, Therapist Behavior, and Supposed Mechanisms of Change,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 11, no. 584685 (2020): 3, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7578380/>.

language to uphold their prospects in Burma. Use of a particular language in learning centers is further complicated by fluctuating factors, such as a host government unexpectedly permitting or restricting their national language after a learning center's curriculum has already been approved, generational language loss in an instructional language as the adults who fluently speak an endangered indigenous language—such as Rohingya—perish, and a refugee child's resolve to learn another language and improve their future prospects even if officially prohibited from doing so—just like Hafsa. In such ways, refugee education, such as inside Kutupalong Refugee Camp, must evaluate children's hopes for their futures with pragmatism as well as the legal regulations of their host country—a nigh impossible task.

After persistent negotiations with the Bangladeshi government, UNICEF was recently granted permission to launch a “Myanmar Curriculum Pilot” inside their learning centers in Kutupalong Refugee Camp. As the name suggests, for the first time, Rohingya children are allowed to learn based on their home country's national standards. While less than 1 percent of forcibly displaced people worldwide have been resettled,<sup>65</sup> allowing Rohingya children to study under their home country's national curriculum can still provide numerous benefits. Not only does learning under the Burmese curriculum help maintain their sense of national identity and preserve a connection to their homeland while they live abroad, but it may also inculcate academic success if they plan to pursue university education in a third country outside of Burma and Bangladesh—the standards of a certified national curriculum are likely much more rigorous than a curriculum designed for temporary use in humanitarian contexts. As a result of the Myanmar Curriculum Pilot, teenagers like Hafsa no longer need to resort to criminal activity to continue their education because the new curriculum considerably enlarges the age groups UNICEF is permitted to teach in their learning centers, with grade-by-grade standards set for children from grades one through nine.<sup>66</sup> To these ends, while ascertaining definitive success rates for learning centers in Kutupalong Refugee Camp is difficult, the Myanmar Curriculum Pilot has certainly succeeded in substantially expanding Rohingya children's access to formal education—and, thus, prospects outside of a refugee camp context.

In spite of the significant obstacles in their path, many Rohingya children have displayed remarkable resilience and passion for learning. For example, after aging out of the UNICEF learning center, one teenage boy in Kutupalong Refugee Camp has started tutoring younger Rohingya

children in his camp neighborhood using his experience with the Burmese national curriculum. As he explains, “Teaching is [my] way of remembering what [I] learned [at home].” Moreover, he ties teaching to his sense of national identity, saying, “I am teaching [other children] so that they can do something for our nation [Burma]... and prosper in life.”<sup>67</sup> While teenagers like him and Hafsa were out of luck for years, having aged out of UNICEF's learning centers and barred from work, UNICEF recently introduced vocational skills workshops for teenagers and young adults in Cox's Bazar. Skills taught include computer-based research, phone repair, and sewing skills.<sup>68</sup> While these offerings are limited, they provide a crucial avenue for Rohingya youth and adults alike to participate in and contribute to their community, develop practical skills, and gain access to legal streams of revenue.

Given the nutritional and hygiene challenges in Kutupalong Refugee Camp, learning center administrators may also consider providing needed items such as meals, clothing, or toiletries to students to encourage parents to send their children to learning centers. Similar interventions were successful in Madagascar, where school attendance increased 10 percent within two years after schoolchildren were handed food rations to bring home. In Bangladesh itself, the World Food Program USA discovered distributing nutrient-fortified biscuits “improved school enrollment by 14.2 percent and reduced the probability of drop-outs by 7.5 percent.”<sup>69</sup> Moreover, such interventions can simultaneously reduce the culture-based gender disparity in learning centers in Kutupalong Refugee Camp. According to the United Nations World Food Programme's school feeding director Carmen Burbano de Lara, “Everywhere we implement school feeding, we see that disproportionately girls stay in school for longer... The longer a girl stays in school, the less likely she is to marry or have children very early in life.”<sup>70</sup> Because current literature from NGOs operating in Cox's Bazar does not highlight the existence of similar programs in Kutupalong Refugee Camp's learning centers, in conjunction with establishing culture-sensitive learning centers, apportioning the limited aid available to incentivize learning center attendance may enable international actors to substantially increase education rates among Rohingya children—particularly Rohingya girls, who may not otherwise receive any form of schooling.

Grassroots movements by the Rohingya refugees themselves must also be lent greater credence and support by international actors, as they address the Rohingya people's pressing concerns from an informed perspective. For example, take Kutupalong Refugee Camp resident Shahida's objective

65 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Refugee Data Finder (Geneva, Switzerland: UNHCR, 2024), <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics>.

66 United Nations Children's Fund, “UNICEF: Education milestone for Rohingya children.”

67 PBS NewsHour, “Rohingya Children Face a Desperate Choice,” timestamp 4:42–4:58.

68 PBS NewsHour, “Rohingya Children Face a Desperate Choice,” timestamp 5:56–6:03.

69 World Food Program USA, “The Effects of Child Nutrition.”

70 World Food Program USA, “The Effects of Child Nutrition.”

to start a school for girls in her shelter. While she was making progress toward enrolling her first students, a Rohingya militant group attacked her for promoting girls' education,<sup>71</sup> so she was forced to close her school before it ever opened. Here, humanitarian assistance in the form of temporarily enhanced protection, the establishment of a crime hotline, or even placing a faux agency-branded camera outside her tent may have deterred her attackers as she prepared to start teaching. Fortunately, with her literacy skills, she was able to pivot to penning a memoir about living as a Rohingya woman in Kutupalong Refugee Camp,<sup>72</sup> which, when completed, will be one of the few autobiographical accounts of an experience nearly one million people share. Her story, inspiring and maddening, further underscores the need to address the widespread gender-based violence in the camp as both an end in itself and instrument for girls' education.

### *Interventions for Infrastructural Deficits in Kutupalong Refugee Camp*

The prevalence of gender and child-centered violence also cannot be ignored in NGOs' mission to provide equal access to education. As Australian educator and aid worker Dayna Pérez hears, gender-based violence including domestic assault, rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and even child marriage is "prevalent" in the camps after she leaves at 5 PM daily.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, kidnapping by militant groups operating in the camps is a grave concern for parents and children. In fact, one woman's son was kidnapped for ransom and threatened with death if the mother could not scrounge up thousands of Euros to release him.<sup>74</sup> Camp administrators must set security measures in place to protect highly vulnerable populations, such as women and children, in Kutupalong Refugee Camp after dark. Whether that means NGOs raising funds to install security cameras or lighting at hotspots of gender-based and child-centered violence—for example, near latrines, toilets, and water wells—as well as along the path to learning centers, incentivizing other residents to chaperone bathroom visits, or introducing discreet reporting mechanisms for people who are sexually harassed or assaulted in the camp, humanitarian and government actors must dedicate more resources to rectifying the unsafe camp environment. With such interventions in place, parents will likely have more confidence in sending children outside of their shelter, whether to attend a learning center, drink water, or even simply relieve themselves.

### *Conclusion*

As delineated throughout this research paper,

Rohingya children face a variety of obstacles to not only their education, but their development overall. However, promising interventions exist, such as recruiting and training Rohingya women to become teachers for girls who cannot learn alongside boys after puberty, promoting public health by redirecting resources to build higher-quality water, sanitation, and shelter facilities, incorporating art therapy into learning center curricula to address trauma-induced mental disorders among Rohingya children, and allocating a portion of food aid to learning centers to incentivize attendance.

While the Rohingya people continue to face ethnic cleansing in Burma and multifaceted difficulties in Bangladesh, one would be incorrect to label them hapless victims. On the contrary, this research paper foregrounds several remarkable refugee-led and child-centered efforts originating from residents of Kutupalong Refugee Camp, including teaching girls in accordance with purdah, pursuing an education outside the camp illegally, and forming a family reunification center for lost children.

However, as Shahida's attempts to open a school for girls illustrates, although inspiring, there are limitations to the power of refugee-led movements. This is why it is imperative for all humanitarian stakeholders in Kutupalong Refugee Camp—including NGOs, IGOs and government bureaus—to partner with, not simply for, Rohingya refugees, and empower them to ameliorate pressing issues in their community, including education access. Rohingya people have already demonstrated exceptional resourcefulness, intelligence, and resilience by surviving unspeakable horrors in Burma and difficult conditions in Bangladesh. It is now up to all parties involved in Kutupalong Refugee Camp to provide the next generation of Rohingya children the most enduring tool of all—education—so they are equipped for a brighter, not even bleaker future.

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73 DW Documentary, "Rohingya women fight," timestamp 4:58–5:19.

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