

## Desperate Time Calls for Desperate Measures: Exploring the Coping Mechanisms of the Rohingyas in Camps

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**Abstract:** The Rohingyas have escaped one unbearable situation only to end up in other where they barely ‘staying alive’, and caged up in limited space, with minimal access to social and financial capitals. This prevents them from enjoying a desired ‘livelihood’ mode since they have hardly any control over any of their livelihood elements. Although ‘entitlement’ and ‘enfranchisement’ are preconditions for a livelihood and several International Human Rights covenants, refugee conventions and protocols confirm certain rights and entitlements of the Rohingyas; however, they are unable to exercise those rights. This study explores some of the prevalent challenges of economic activities of the Rohingyas and share several coping strategies regarding their livelihood mechanisms in the camps. The study also recommends certain strategies which can serve them better and simultaneously discourage them to partake in any illegal activities. The findings might be helpful for the Rohingya communities, governments, humanitarian, and development agencies and those in the international community, actively working to alleviate the Rohingya refugee crisis. The outcome of the article is result of a small-scale study carried out in Kutupalong camp only in Teknaf Upazila.

### Introduction

Since August 2017, approximately 742,613 Rohingyas have arrived and currently. At present, nearly 1.3 million of them are living in 34 camps in Ukhia and Teknaf Upazilas of Cox’s Bazar district (UNHCR 2020). Among the new arrivals, an estimated 6.7% are females, aged between 12-17 years. Several studies depict that this group is highly immobile and are more involved in household chores compared to the males in the camps. Although various educational and skill training programs have been offered by national and international NGOs in the camps, this group is deprived of education that could have made them earn some skills that again could be used for gainful employment inside the camp. Additionally, womenfolk are often subjected to trafficking and forced marriage not only in Bangladesh but also abroad. Several media sources reported on these matters in the past. Education for the Rohingya females is of paramount importance because ‘useful’ education should prepare them to ‘take responsibility of their own stuffs’. Whatever types of education (formal and informal) they receive in the camps, these do not contain any skill training therefore womenfolk have to depend on the community to cope up with external stressors coming from traffickers and often from their own family members. This study finds that among many tracks in the prevailing education system in the camp, the UNICEF approved Nonformal Primary Education (NFPE) model has been widely applied in grassroots educational development in

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Bangladesh in the past, which could be of some value for the females in the camps. It is a popular and economically sustainable model which is led by BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), Grameen Bank and their partner NGOs. The NFPE model is also customizable, meaning it can include skill training, low-resource-intensive, and locally grounded.

### **Aims and Objective**

This study would highlight economic hardship and related coping strategies of Rohingya females, considering their cost of living in camps, income sources and indebtedness, livelihood challenges of single mothers, and dowry payments for marriage.

Research objectives are:

- i. To explore the major economic crisis of Rohingya females in the camps.
- ii. To share the strategies they adopt to meet the existing economic challenges (i.e. coping mechanisms).

### **Methodology**

This study was based on a representative survey of 150 camp households and 25 in-depth interviews with selected camp residents in Kutupalong camp. Respondents were asked to share information about their livelihood strategies within the camps. Field research was conducted in two phases: phase one (January 1-15, 2021) and phase two (March 1-15, 2021). Collected data was analyzed through qualitative software (nVivo12).

The research team was composed of two researchers (one from JU, one from Conflict and Resilience Research Institute Canada-CRRIC) and 5 students from JU. Survey forms were first developed, followed by semi-structured questions for the qualitative part of the research. The quantitative data (numbers) was stored in MS Excel while qualitative data recorded and transcribed into English. Two interpreters helped in transcription. Mixed methodology was used to collect and analyze the data. A detailed coordination was done through Camp in Charge (CIC) prior to field work.

### **Study area**

Rohingya camps are located in Teknaf of Cox's Bazar district, Bangladesh. The study was conducted at the Kutupalong camp.

### **Result and discussion**

Livelihood is defined as “a composition of capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A sustainable livelihood refers to the one that can cope with and recover from stress and shocks. Additionally, livelihoods should also maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both current times and the future, while not undermining the natural resource base” (Chambers & Conway, 1992). Even after 3 years of the massive exodus in 2017, there is still no visible effort on the repatriation of the Rohingyas to Myanmar. With the bi-lateral initiatives nearly failed and the multilateral actions almost having not results, the Rohingyas continue to live and adapt to the lives in the camps. Despite having to come to

Bangladesh for a seemingly short time, they are getting more entrenched into the camp environment. Since their arrival, they have been supported by the government and local NGOs to meet their basic needs. However, with the passage of time, the Rohingyas are gradually seeking various unconventional methods to earn their livelihood. It is now common to witness sprawling grocery shops selling a wide range of products within the camps. According to the initial fieldwork, there is a growing demand for such goods from within the camps as the small businesses are becoming more popular amongst the Rohingyas. Although this is a single and simple aspect of formal business through which livelihood is earned, there are numerous not-so-transparent and illegal businesses (including drug and human trafficking) which are becoming lucrative options for earning money. Partaking in such activities is a coping mechanism of the Rohingyas given they see no immediate end to their situation.

### **Economic Hardship**

The living conditions of the Rohingyas are characterized by two main features, an absence of the 'freedom of movement' and 'absence of the right to work' as they deem fit. Given these two prevalent characteristics, it is deduced that the Rohingyas are pretty much a 'ghettoized' community with no entitlement to land of their own from which livelihood can be earned. The internationally approved principles of human rights include freedom of movement, right to work, and citizenship and identity. Although there is an abundance of information on the camp life of the Rohingyas, however, this particular section, specifically focuses on micro social organization - the households - and families therein who seek for a household-based solution to livelihood crisis of the Rohingyas.

Back in 1993, the Government of Bangladesh signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with UNHCR. One of the most important conditions in this MoU was that 1) refugees should be restricted to the area of the camps, and 2) should refrain from engaging in economic activities [HRC, 1999] (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1999, p. 9). On the basis of this agreement, Rohingyas are bound to live under restricted movement and space, which indicates the absence of freedom of movement. Even though several international instruments including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) that Bangladesh is a signatory to, do not suggest curtailing the right to earn livelihood as Rohingyas seem practical. According to the Human Rights Committee, once the foreign citizens' and aliens' status is regularized, they have the right to move freely. If 'registration' is considered as a regularization process, in that case, the registered Rohingyas are being deprived of this right to a large extent.

The *Freedom of Movement* of the Rohingyas is prohibited by a special government order. However, this restriction has detrimental consequences ranging from lack of self-worth, self-esteem and confidence leading to stress and trauma, mental health issues and the subsequent loss of human capital that could be used to engage in meaningful livelihood earning scheme. Although refugees are entitled to seek a one-day pass to go outside camps for movement or medical care or for visiting other refugees in other camps, passes for more than one day are rarely issued. By policy, the passes should be provided free of cost, however, in practice, refugees are often charged for the passes. The unregistered stateless Rohingyas may enjoy better freedom of movement since they do not require

official permission for movement. However, this freedom involves the high risk of being arrested and jailed under the Foreigners Act, which implies their complete confinement as neither can they apply for passes, nor do they have any legal means to go out.

*Desperation for a better life* often forces the Rohingyas to adopt high-risk measures. From 2012 to 2015, more than 170,000 people travelled (unsafe route) by boat to Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia from the coasts of Myanmar and Bangladesh (UNHCR, 2015). Given their 'stateless' status, they are unable to apply for visas and end up risking their lives by bribing human traffickers and corrupt officials with their hard-earned money to move to Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Philippines by sea. In 2015, a 10-member family with children desperate to row across to Thailand became stranded in the Andaman Sea with no food and water (BBC, 2015). The Human Rights Watch (HRW) recorded that many of them, upon arrival at the coast of Thailand, were pushed back into the sea by the patrols and Thai Coast Guards. The HRW advocated the Thai authority to display humane values by sheltering the stateless Rohingyas (Phasuk 2017). By 2015, "around 2000 people died because of hunger, dehydration, drowning and beating by smugglers or traffickers" (ERT 2017:83). Except only a fortunate few who enter the mainland, most others become arrested and thrown in different prisons and detention cells. Many fall victims to extortionists and goons asking for ransom money from the captive's relatives. Evidence of this was reported back in 2015, when police discovered 30 mass graves of the Rohingyas killed by their traffickers and buried in deep jungles around the Thailand-Malaysia border (Hutcherson & Olarn, 2015). Active transnational criminal networks pry upon the vulnerable Rohingyas, since they are easy to manipulate and are sources of making large profit by trafficking. According to UNHCR estimations, this illegal trade garnered around US \$100 million in revenues at its peak (UNHCR, 2015). It is also reported that around 50, 000 Rohingyas possess illegal travel documents and now live outside Bangladesh (Bdnews24.com, 2015).

Desperation might lead to violence in and outside camps. As mentioned before, as per the 1993 MoU between UNHCR and the Bangladesh government, income generating activities are strictly prohibited within or outside the camps. This condition contradicts with the natural human desire to strive for livelihood and innovation. Since 2018, there has been a proliferation of shops in both Kutupalong and Balikhali camps including the establishment of several markets inside the camps. UNHCR is to establish new markets in 2019. As 'livelihood' is a contested term in policy making circle in Bangladesh about Rohingyas, the UNHCR chief Filippo Grandi expressed his concerns of ignoring 'livelihood' as he said, "Rohingyas should have [at least] the minimum access to livelihood. Otherwise, it is very risky to create a dependent population". In April 2019, the government issued a notice to close the jewelry stores in an effort to halt income-generating activities. UNHCR and NGOs including BRAC, administer a variety of skill-development projects, specifically focusing on homestead agriculture inside the camps.

### **Livelihood challenges**

*Livelihood assets* encompass all cash and non-cash properties, savings, investments, and capacities and opportunities that make livelihood secured. Assets comprise five capitals: 1) *human capital* meaning skills, knowledge, health and ability to work; 2) *social capital* i.e., social resources, including informal networks, membership of formalized groups and

relationships of trust that facilitate cooperation and economic opportunities; 3) *natural capital* signifying natural resources such as land, soil, water, forests and fisheries; 4) *physical capital* delineating basic infrastructure, such as roads, water & sanitation, schools, ICT; and producer goods, including tools, livestock and equipment; and 5) *financial capital* meaning financial resources including savings, credit, and income from employment, trade and remittances (IRP-UNDP, 2015, pp. 1-12). In recent years, development activists also add a new attribute—*political capital*—access to, control over, decision-making capacity and participation at the micro-level such as household level, and transparency, accountability, good governance at macro development contexts which usually involves many partners and stakeholder such as public-private partnership *per se*.

It must be noted that assessing the livelihood of the stranded and marginalized groups like the Rohingyas are much more complex since they do not have any social organization and are continuously forced to live under pressure of further displacement and uncertainty. For them, livelihood is more of a constant struggle for mere survival rather than making efforts to uplift their current living conditions. As a survival instinct, the first priority for a Rohingya is to live, followed by making efforts to secure the lives of the immediate family, which may include children, spouse and parents. Therefore, a 'household' serves as the most effective and efficient micro social organization to their survival strategy.

People's access to favorable conditions, as well as their confidence and strength to adjust, adapt, and cope with new surroundings, especially in unpleasant, abrupt, and unplanned changes, are all part of the livelihood context. In particular, livelihood contexts refer to: 1) Social relations: how gender, ethnicity, culture, history, religion, and kinship influence the livelihoods of different groups within a society. 2) Decision-making processes, civic bodies, social standards and norms, democracy, leadership, power and authority, and rent-seeking behavior are all examples of social and political structure. 3) Governance: The structure, power, efficiency, and effectiveness of government systems, as well as rights and representation. 4) Service delivery: The efficiency and responsiveness of government and private-sector entities providing services such as education, health, water, and sanitation. 5) Resource access institutions: the social conventions, customs, and behaviours (or "game rules") that govern people's access to resources; and 6) Political policy and processes: the procedures for determining and enacting policy and law, as well as their implications for people's livelihoods (IRP-UNDP, 2015).

### **Surviving strategies**

*As Livelihood strategies* refer to how people organize and plan their actions and strategies to access and utilize their assets. Devising a strategy in this case entails combining social, economic, political and environmental contexts. In order to strategize, one must take into consideration the diversity, analyze the variety of livelihood choices and attempt to reap the maximum benefits through an action plan. The planning integrates individual needs, and best ways to meet them. On a micro-level, the basics of livelihood strategies begin with the family or household through financial budgeting and division of labor.

*Livelihood vulnerability* represents inability of the Rohingyas to cope with calamity, disaster, and adversities using their own means. The livelihood strength refers to being able to come up with productive outcomes by successfully overcoming adversities, not by

avoiding shocks and stresses. Humans are vulnerable to natural calamities like seasonal floods, landslides, drought, famine or other disasters like accidents, fire, unprecedented violence or even introduction of a new technology and many other unforeseen and untoward adversities. Livelihood vulnerability, therefore, needs to be analyzed and considered in any livelihood development planning. Appropriate livelihood planning and strategies make a population more resilient to shocks and seasonal changes since they are predictable and prepared. This calls for attention to many forms of accommodation, adaptation and adjustment in line with available resources and capabilities.

*Livelihood Interdependencies* is an essential ingredient of any livelihood system. 'Livelihoods is interdependence' (IRP-UNDP, 2015, p. 12). Inclusivity lies at the heart of livelihood interdependencies since it is almost impossible for livelihoods to exist in isolation and exclusion. The principle of social inclusion is to encompass a wide array of prospects, which may be commonly overlooked or remain unexplored. The interdependencies include broadening the horizons of communication, outreach and stakeholders of diverse nature as a means to cope with shock and adversities in livelihood planning.

Rohingya refugees present a gross denial of the above conditions. Our focus group discussions revealed a Rohingya perception of the presence of 'lies' in every aspect of social organization. This overarching use of the word "lie" represents both a deepest frustration and an acute hopelessness, implying that all the promises of the governments and the NGOs are made to be broken. Many Rohingyas describe their entire life and life-cycle as a farce, and consequently, the course of refugee life they are forced to embrace is 'a lie' as well. This acute negative perception of the worldviews may lead to intense mental health problems and debilitating life-long trauma. Their self-evaluation of the life-cycle makes an impression that they do not have 'livelihood' but 'livelihood', a state of living in a constant circle of lies.

### **Rohingya's resilience, problems, and problem-solving suggestions: An anecdote**

Since the 'livelihood' approach is widely considered an effective tool for policy analysis, this discussion of social organization utilizes it on policy-focused grounds. When the Rohingyas arrived on the camps, their life took shape of a disentitled and disenfranchised social organization as compared to their historical-cultural Rakhine livelihood of peasantry-fishing, which was their usual life despite systematic political exclusion and being stripped off citizenship rights in Myanmar.

The complex survival experience of the Rohingyas in the recent past decades in Myanmar and post-exodus prison-like confinement in refuge has significantly shaped their responses to their host country. The denial of their economic right, freedom of movement and citizenship and identity spark their responses to five refugee social organization dynamics which, in brief, are: 1) crisis response dynamics, 2) camp dynamics, 3) camp administration dynamics, 4) livelihood dynamics, and 5) livelihood problem dynamics.

*Rohingya livelihood dynamics:* As described by a Rohingya woman, their livelihood is "as fragile as living in a cracked glass window". In absence of the three important aspects of livelihood that set motion to six capitals, and assets and capability mobilization it is

evident that the Rohingyas do not meet 'livelihood' conditions. Rather, they are forced to live within a compromised social organization. This social organization is far from ideal and is often characterized by larger problems and no immediate solutions. A comprehensive social impact assessment was conducted by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and UN Women in order to capture aspects of Rohingya social organization for generating policy-friendly direction (UNDP-UN Women, 2017). This UNDP-UN Women study provides the most significant and all-encompassing Rohingya livelihood scenario. The living conditions of the Rohingyas, highlighted in the report, are as follows:

1) Atomization, traumatization, anger, lack of political leadership, lack of education, extreme deprivation. As most Rohingyas are determined about not going back to Myanmar "without citizenship and guaranteed security" the recommendations made were: a) Civil Society Organizations' (CSOs) role enhancement in mediation and cohesion, b) community-based response system; and strengthening of support to stakeholders for women and children's trauma recovery.

2) Hostility between the local people and the Rohingyas are emerging fast due to the prevalent conflict of interest. The report recommended a) environmental and host community assessments, and creation of "an evidence-based framework and system for measuring satisfaction, perceptions, track trends, etc." on an urgent basis.

3) Trafficking and gender-based violence (GBV) are identified as a significant human security threat, especially victimizing women and children. Consequent recommendations are a) support "NGOs working on legal protection for victims for trafficking and domestic violence", and b) expand women's development forums "as an early warning mechanism for conflict". Interestingly, the report placed "extremism" as a "limited risk in the near term" and emergence of anti-Rohingya narratives as a burning issue. Consequently, development of an "inter-communal approach" is recommended.

Other problems identified are: a) tensions flowing from insufficient or inaccurate information, b) confusion and life-style mismatch caused by transition from a military-enhanced emergency operation to a civilian-led recovery system, c) erosion in host community's sense of security and community integration, d) rapid loss of quality road communication, and e) extinction of local natural resources, vegetation, flora and fauna due to over-extraction for everyday use.[i]

*Income and debt* Imbalance is prevalent at every aspect of the regular Rohingya life. Although employment entitlement and right to employment are two principal preconditions of 'livelihood', the restrictions and prohibitions in Bangladesh put Rohingyas into a vicious circle of financial constraint and eventual destitution. Due to employment restrictions, 93.5% Rohingya households reported a decrease in income and increase of indebtedness in a year after arriving in Bangladesh. 80% of the household lost any means of income., 36% became newly indebted to money-lending NGOs and informal moneylenders, 40% of the informants became indebted in their bids to purchase food and about 50% households suffered a decrease in income compared to the level of earning in Myanmar. Their mean household income also dropped from 14,015 to 12,955 Taka [Harvard XG-BRAC 2019]. Additionally, about 70% of the households accumulated more than 20000 Taka (Bangladesh currency) debt in a year. In reality, the

debt burden may be much higher due to the prevalence of informal money lending businesses spreading undercover, both inside and outside the Rohingya community. Their presence is often beyond sight and surveillance of the law enforcement agencies. As per a UNHCR representative, UNHCR led small scale cash-for-food programs ended by mid-2018 and no NGOs are allowed to run microcredit programs of any sort. The Rohingyas who were interviewed, showed extreme caution in disclosing information about borrowing criteria and operators or lenders of the moneylending chains. If this development goes unchecked and uncontrolled, the informal moneylending chains may turn into crime syndicates for human trafficking, organ black-marketing and drug rackets.

*Drug trafficking and trade* related activities are feared to be plummeting. Many Rohingyas become involved in drug trafficking just to maintain their basic livelihood. Al Jazeera's Alsaafin (2018a) provided a glimpse of drug trading and trafficking as a livelihood strategy of the Rohingyas. The report mentions that members of the Rohingya population are used as the drug-peddlers by the traffickers, to cater to the booming yaba usage in Bangladesh, comprising about 4.6 million yaba users. In late 2018, Bangladesh government launched an armed anti-drug offensive against the trafficker in the yaba-infested coastal areas which killed about 90 drug dealers (Bengali, 2018).

Another report mentions the murder of 300 drug-peddlers and also highlights the fact that women and children are often used as safe carriers, (Banerjee, 2019) since they are soft targets and often are not perceived to be involved in this trade. A member of parliament popularly known as the 'yaba godfather' is of Rohingya descent who settled in Bangladesh decades ago. According to a number of local people in the host community, the Yaba trade may form the crux of organized crime, and help generate required funds for Harakh-Al-Yakin's activity. They report that the camps often become mobilization ground for the Al-Yakin—a radical Rohingya Islamist group—an offshoot of the ARSA. However, most Rohingyas deny the local view, and assert that most traffickers are from the host community and that the Rohingyas are blamed unduly.

## Conclusion

The response to the Rohingya crisis is a top priority for all the stakeholders in the Cox's Bazar district. Since October 2017, the crisis has drawn significant attention of the international community with generous participation and contribution of the international actors. However, majority of the response initiatives focused on 'crisis response', 'relief and rehabilitation', 'basic needs response', and 'emergency preparedness'. International funding priority areas comprise of 'food security', 'disaster response' 'shelter', 'basic health and hygiene', and 'water and sanitation' programs. This study team recorded 56 National and international NGOs (See Annex) and international donor organizations using the term 'joint response' in lieu of 'livelihood' support, since the use of the word livelihood is prohibited in the camps. The immediate help they provided and continue to provide focus on 'life-saving supports' than 'livelihood supports'. This implies that the support enables the Rohingyas to 'live for today', but does not necessarily help in providing any long run solution for survival. Given 'livelihood' comprises assets, resources and capabilities of the humans toward a sustained, desired and deserved living condition- all of the criteria are largely absent for the protracted Rohingyas. The Rohingyas reiterated the fact that, their survival in the camps is barely a "breathing



management” needed for physical survival, but without piece of land to call a country, a space to call home, an identity to be treated as ‘citizen’, and a life to call ‘self’—everyday life survival is neither a ‘livelihood’ nor a ‘crisis response.

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