

Trapped in Protected Refugee Camps: 'Please Help Me to Survive'

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Abstract

The resettlement of refugees who have experienced displacement, trauma and torture is of major global concern. This article reports on a Bangladeshi researcher's perceptions of the resettlement of Rohingya refugees in a protected camp in Bangladesh. The first author visited and interviewed a group of Rohingya refugees to learn about their experiences and perceptions about resettlement in Bangladesh. Notes were taken from interviews and observations conducted to gain insights into the physical and emotional state of the refugees. Significant problems were documented that were associated with poor living conditions, apparent resentment from the local community towards the refugees and a building-up of atrocious circumstances that these peoples face on a daily basis. This article offers a partial lens into these conditions that appear to be worsening. Implications for schooling of children and young women are discussed. Questions are raised about global responsibility for refugees who are part of the social and cultural fabric of communities abroad and in Australia.

Background

Rohingya refugee's resettlement has been an international issue for more than three decades. The Rohingya refugee position is precarious as re-settlement options into destination countries is unclear and tentative (Fangen, 2006). These refugees experience insecurity and uncertainty as they are resettled inside the crowded camps of Bangladesh. Not only are the living conditions poor but of considerable concern is that communication with the outside world is restricted and controlled.

The Bangladeshi government is noticeably apprehensive about settling Rohingya refugees into local communities and the wider Bangladeshi society. This sense of statelessness by the Rohingya refugees inter-generationally has led to vulnerability for this group of refugees (Inter Sector Coordination Group, 2018). Hyndman and Giles (2011) contend that the refugee camps have become an extra-legal space where the human rights of the refugees are of little concern. Psychological and emotional states deteriorate for these peoples as human rights conditions are violated in these poorly resourced camps (Milton et al., 2013). Physical and psychological care

is minimal (Haider, 2014). Post forced migration traumatic stressors also play into this dismal situation as refugees experience anxiety about physical harassment and threats of deportation (Milner and Loesche, 2011). The psychological effects of trauma that these refugees experience include feelings of fear, sadness, guilt, anger, discrimination, depression and anxiety. Substance abuse is prevalent (Eleftheriadou, 2018, Murray et al., 2008). Trauma associated syndromes are a consequence and are characterised by impaired functioning related to intrusive feelings and sentiments about the traumatic events, avoidance, numbing of emotions, and hyper-arousal (Murray et al., 2008).



Image: Rohingya Refugee Camp, Bangladesh. Photo taken 2 November 2017

Research Context

This article reports on the Kutupalong refugee camp of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh which was constructed in 1992 (Ullah, 2011). This camp is managed by the state authority of Bangladesh and is now the largest and most overcrowded Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh (Judah, 2017). In April 2019, the camp was the base for 14,277 registered refugees from 2,617 families (UNHCR, 2019). The mass inflow of refugees in the later part of 2017 altered the geographic landscape of this camp (Field note, 02 November 2017). Makeshift camps were established nearby and around the main camp (Field note, 02 November 2017). This led to an expansion of Kutupalong camp and it is now located on approximately 2000 acres (Beech 2017). Network migration is another aspect of this resettlement scenario as an uncountable number of Rohingya refugees live alongside local communities (Field note, 02 November 2017).

A case study approach was adopted to this research. The case study explores the everyday life of Rohingya refugees in the Kutupalong camp with a focus being on young women's and children's daily practices and concerns. This approach provides an in-depth and multifaceted

perspective of the experiences of the Rohingya refugees. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews; focus group discussions and direct observation of life in the refugee camp with the camp being visited seven times from the November 2017 to March 2019 by the first author who lives in Bangladesh.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect narrative descriptions from the Rohingya refugees. The first author conducted the interviews. The interviews focused on sharing stories of the various aspects of the refugee experience and provide rich insights into how Rohingya refugees view the local community and their experiences of being a refugee. A focus group was also conducted and observational notes of the case camp were maintained.

A narrative approach supports the capturing of small stories about the human experience. This approach does not pretend to tell grand narratives that are generalisable, but in contrast problematises such narratives about social and cultural contexts. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain that a narrative approach is both method and phenomenon when experience takes on a story-telling mode. We draw on Bamberg's (2007) notion of 'small stories' as it is located in time and according to personal, social and institutional contexts. These small stories explore the circumstances of Rohingya refugee's resettlement in Bangladesh and construct and unsettle the narrative of the refugee both in Bangladesh and more globally.

Ethical Considerations

Permission was obtained from the 'Camp in-charge', an Assistant Commissioner and Executive Magistrate of the People's Republic of Bangladesh to undertake this study. The purpose of the study was shared with participants in simple and meaningful language so that the participants could make informed choices about being involved in the study. A graduate male student of the University of Rajshahi who is of Chittagong background assisted with translation when required. He was selected as the local language of Chittagong and the Rohingya's language are similar and pronunciation is the same. Full consideration was given to establishing meaningful rapport, good and faithful communication so that a two-way exchange took place throughout the data collection phase of this study. Pseudonyms are used for reporting this research.

Rohingya Refugees: Kutupalong Refugee Camp

The Rohingya people are the most persecuted refugee group globally. They are living as stateless people in protected refugee camps in Bangladesh (Ullah, 2011). A female Rohingya

refugee parent (w2) talked about how her family were victimised after arriving in Bangladesh. The parent shared how at first, they lived with a local family but relationships between the two families deteriorated. At the suggestion of her younger brother, who was living in a refugee camp, they resettled in the Kutupalong camp. The parent told of the situation:

I have arrived in Bangladesh along with my three children (on September 2017) and firstly took shelter in the house of a local family nearest to the camp where my sister and her family were living from August 2017. However, immediately after our arrival the local hosting family have received us warmly.

After passing two weeks with them (locals) we have faced sudden inhuman attitudes from the hosting family. They said they will not share their food and house with us anymore. Furthermore, they inhumanly said us to leave their home.

Therefore, facing that difficulty we and the family members of our sister communicate with our younger brother (23 years old) who was living inside the case camp since August 2017 to give shelter and accordingly, in line with his suggestion we settled in the Kutupalong camp (Interview with w2, 02 November 2017).

Living with the local family was initially a warm experience. However, the situation took a turn for the worse with the Rohingya refugee parent reporting that her family was subjected to 'inhuman attitudes' and were asked to leave the local's house under 'inhumane' circumstances. The Rohingya parent's younger brother who lived in a camp was able to advise the parent what to do next.

Relationships with local communities were fraught with tension for the Rohingya refugees. The locals at times trespassed into the protected camps and looted the camps for relief goods supplied to the refugees by aid agencies such as UNHCR, Save the Children, Islamic Relief of USA, and GlobalGiving (Field note, 02 November 2017). Food shortages were a consequence (Field note, 12 November 2017). The Rohingya parents, who participated in the study, related stories of discrimination, harsh behaviour and harassment by the locals when they illegally left the camps after these looting episodes (FGD, 01 November 2018).

Imbalanced power relations between the locals and the Rohingya refugees existed. During the study, the Rohingya refugees reported their dissatisfaction with their treatment by the locals (Field note, 12 January 2018). One research participant explained how this power imbalance had travelled with the Rohingya people throughout their journey as refugees: "We leave Myanmar facing the cruelty of the armed forces. However, after coming to Bangladesh we are facing same types of inhuman behaviour by the local people. The police forces are also not bothering our voice rather they are supporting the locals and always accused us as responsible

for the ill-treatment of the locals towards us” (FGD, 01 November 2018).



Image 2: Rohingya girl selling flapjack to earn for her family. Photo taken 12 January 2018

The situation for the Rohingya young girls was risky and precarious. One interviewee noted that they were under the threat of physical violence (Interview, 12 January 2018). Islam and Nuzbath (2018) contend that physical violence among the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh has increased as there is lack of a duty of care. The issue of violence is cumulative psychologically as it escalates and intensifies the post-traumatic stress experienced by young refugee girls and women. The risk of post-traumatic disorder is acute among Rohingya children who experience increased social distress (Field note, 12 January 2018) as a consequence of the long-term re-settlement in Bangladesh. Many of these Rohingya children are born stateless in this hosting nation. This statelessness is further exacerbated by laws such as those prohibiting them from socially mixing with the local children (Field note, 03 November 2017).

One interviewee summed up the situation as:

We do not get our food and medical facilities at sufficient level due to the interference of the local people. Further, the local people always dominate us. Our children are not allowed to attend to local school for education. Therefore, we are concerned about the future of our children. We are unable to meet their demands since we do not have any employment scope (Interview with Rohingya refugee parents, 02 November 2017).

Rohingya refugee children are deprived of their rights to basic physical needs such as food and medical supplies as well as educational and social needs associated with schooling and for young adult’s employment (Field note 02 November 2017).

The first author revisited the camp again on the 3rd November 2017. He reported that the Rohingya refugee children (male and female) were experiencing challenges adjusting to the case camp setting. The children were attending non-formal school in the case camp conducted by a non-government organisation (NGO). A major issue was that the refugee children were not permitted to learn the Bangla language (Field note, 03 November 2017). Learning the Bangla language would give access to better communication with local communities and provide improved social conditions for the refugee children. Instead the lack of knowledge of the local language acted as a barrier for the process of social integration. One of the young female refugee students spoke of these conditions in the case camp:

However, in Myanmar we have studies up to class two. Since our arrival in this camp we have found no scope to continue our study. There are few non-formal schools for us but there is no opportunity to receive formal education from there. Besides, the non-formal schools are using English, Burmese and Rohingya language. As for that we are now confused about which one language should we learn. Despite such confusion, we want to learn Bangla language because we do not want to go back to Myanmar (Interviews, 3rd November 2017).

A sense of injustice and frustration can be heard in this young female student's voice. Another young refugee girl explained the hazardous nature of living in refugee camps and discussed the notion of 'deprivation' from a refugee's perspective:

We are deprived for being a refugee. The locals are always showing their conflicting attitude towards us. They are always treating us as their competitors for food and other factors of livelihood. Further, there is constant fear of being arrested, many local people intimidate and exert power over us and even they are not hesitating to rob as well as physically attack us (Interview with young refugee girls, 12 January 2018).

The interviews disclosed the precariousness of young Rohingya girl's situation in the case camp. These young women were supporting their families by working as sex workers at the local bazar. A young Rohingya woman described the situation: "I do not have any scope to work for my survival. My parents are very old. Therefore, to feed my parents often I go to Cox's Bazar with a local man to serve as a sex worker. She further told that I do not want to live this life any more. Please help me to survive" (Interviews with m2, 12 January 2018).

It can be seen from this study of one case refugee camp in Bangladesh that the psychological impact of post-forced migration is at a critical point among the Rohingya refugees (Field note, 10 May 2018). Of grave concern is that the young and the children have flashbacks of the persecution they have suffered (Field observation, 09 March 2019). The first author noted that the Rohingya refugees were suffering from psychological stress disorder, acute stress and

speech impairments (Field observation, 10 March 2019). The discrimination and ill-treatment that they experienced in Bangladesh further aggravated their psychological stressors (Field observation, 10 March 2019). The Rohingya refugees' post-traumatic stress was being further exacerbated by the living conditions inside and outside the case camp,

Implications for Education

The Rohingya refugees, especially girls and women, are living inside the Bangladeshi camps without any danger of persecution. Yet, opportunities for quality education for Rohingya girls and women remain challenging under camp conditions. There are a number of informal schools inside the camps which the refugee children can attend (Field observation, 02 November 2017).

Opportunities for formal schooling for young female Rohingya refugees is shaped by religious and cultural belief systems. Many of the Rohingya parents' (male) are indifferent to educating their girl-children (Field note 02 November 2017). Few parents (male) have expressed their objection to allowing their girl-children to attend school along with the boys (Focus group discussion, 01 November 2018). Yet, these parents would prefer to send their girl-children to the Islamic classrooms, known as *maktabs*, for religious education. These classes provide opportunities for young women to memorise the Quran (Focus group discussion, 01 November 2018). This desire for religious education leads to continuous withdrawal of girls from the informal schools.

In addition, the Rohingya parents are in favour of early marriage for young women which also leads to early withdrawal of females from the informal schools (Field note 02 November 2017). It is suggested that schooling opportunities in the camps are required that are sensitive to the religious and cultural beliefs of refugee communities. Education then could potentially be a means of empowerment and further prosperity for young Rohingya women.

Conclusion



Image 3: Participation of Rohingya women in drawing Paintings. Photo taken 9 March 2019



Image 4: Witnessing inner dormant creativity of Rohingya men and Women. Photo taken 9 March 2019

The Rohingya community is a small ethnic minority group from Myanmar who has resettled in Bangladesh due to the atrocities of the Myanmar government. Their human rights have been taken away including the right to schooling and education in Myanmar with limited schooling being available to children through NGOs in Bangladesh. Despite this the paintings above that were drawn by the joint efforts of Rohingya men and women represent a sense of expectation and are an expression of creativity. These paintings provide these displaced people with a form of collective cultural expression although one that has a restricted viewing.

In the end the question begs what role the global community has in acknowledging and taking responsibility for the human rights and needs of refugees. The research lens of this article is on Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Yet, the lens could be shifted to an Australian context. Are the human rights and psychological needs of refugees in Australian off-shore detention centres, such as Manus Island, being met any better than those of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh? This is an awkward and uncomfortable shift in focus as we as a nation continue the conversation about our own political positioning on such matters.

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