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Abstract

Education security exists when every child has equal access to quality education. Rohingya refugee children suffer widespread rates of education insecurity both in their home country, Myanmar and in their host country, Bangladesh. While the right to education is recognized in several human rights instruments, access to education is not ubiquitous, making the ability to achieve this right challenging for many Rohingya. Government restrictions on accredited education, COVID-19 related school closures, failures in launching a pilot of the Myanmar curriculum, and recent government plans to relocate refugees to Bhasan Char Island have created a ‘lost generation’ of Rohingya youth. This study traces the development of education insecurity among the Rohingya, a stateless ethnic minority group who fled to Bangladesh in 2017 in response to ethnic violence in Myanmar. Drawing upon available literature and primary fieldwork, this study examines the social, cultural, and political determinants of learning opportunities for Rohingya children.

Keywords: Rohingya, refugees, education insecurity, inequality, intersectionality, COVID-19, Bangladesh

Introduction

Over the last several decades, the Rohingya have been deprived of many civil, political, social, economic, and cultural rights by the Myanmar government, including the right to an education. In response to a violent campaign of ethnic cleansing by Myanmar’s military (*Tatmadaw*) in August 2017, nearly 1 million Rohingya fled to neighboring Bangladesh, with more than half being school-age children (UNHCR 2020). While Bangladesh initially welcomed the Rohingya, the government has restricted Rohingya children from enrolling in the mainstream national school system to prevent local integration. In response, development and humanitarian agencies operate 6,251 Temporary Learning Centres (TLCs) and Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) throughout the refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar, which primarily provide psycho-social support and informal education in makeshift classrooms for children ages 4 to 14 (Hart 2019). These TLCs and CFSs have allowed Rohingya children to access supplemental education in a safe learning environment, bringing much-needed normalcy to children whose lives were brutally uprooted by war. Despite being cramped into temporary bamboo structures and absent of any desks, chairs, or even electricity – Rohingya children eagerly attend classes in the hopes of getting an education. However, in March 2020, Rohingya children’s education was abruptly halted after COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) was declared a worldwide pandemic. Since then, both state and non-state actors have significantly reduced their development activities within the camps – leaving nearly 400,000 school-age children cut off from education services (ISCG 2020b). Additionally, the Cox’s Bazar Child Protection Sub-Sector reports that COVID-19 lockdowns have increased several protection risk factors for Rohingya children, including gender-based violence, forced labor, child marriage, sex trafficking, recreational drug usage and trade, and recruitment into religious extremist groups (Cox’s Bazar Child Protection Sub-Sector 2020).

While there is a great deal of literature around educational inequalities for the Rohingya, there is a need to better understand the intersectional identities¹ among the Rohingya and their impacts on educational disparities. This article fills the gap by tracing the development of education insecurity among the Rohingya and examining the social, cultural, and political determinants which have shaped Rohingya children’s learning opportunities both before and

during the COVID-19 pandemic. We begin by exploring the Rohingya's educational experience in Myanmar and then in Bangladesh before COVID-19. Next, we discuss how COVID-19 reflects the educational inadequacies that refugee children face and how social, cultural, religious, legal, age, and gender identity among the Rohingya exacerbate these shortcomings.

Although this paper has a specific geographical focus, the critical policy insights that emerge provides a broader understanding of how exclusionary education policies have adverse effects for both refugees and their host countries more broadly. This study also contributes to contemporary debates around international migration and public policy issues by examining the ongoing social, cultural, and political challenges of basic universal education of Rohingya children in southeast Bangladesh. Additionally, our discussion draws attention to the contemporary normative discourse of the global COVID-19 outbreak response and how standard infection control protocols can exacerbate existing social and cultural inequalities, impacting children's learning outcomes.

Education Security

Goal 4 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) aims to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (United Nations General Assembly 2015). We use the term 'Education Security' to refer to the principle of equal access to free, equitable, quality, and certifiable primary education. Education and knowledge are like food for the mind. Borrowing from the concept of food security,² similarly education security is determined by four components: 1) *Availability*: 'Is there education available near me?', 2) *Accessibility*: 'Can I access education easily?', 3) *Utilization*: 'Will this education be utilizable towards future livelihoods?', and 4) *Stability*: 'Will this education be available tomorrow, next week, next month?' When any one of these four components is unmet, it is considered education *insecurity*. Additionally, according to Article 13 of the CESCR³ the essential features of education should include its a) Availability, b) Accessibility, c) Acceptability, and d) Adaptability. The OHCHR Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) defines *Availability* as having functioning educational institutions and programs available in sufficient quantity. *Accessibility* of educational institutions and programs is defined by being accessible to everyone, without discrimination, being physical accessible, and economically accessible. Education must also be *Acceptable*, (i.e. culturally relevant, appropriate, and of good quality), to both students and parents. Finally, education should be flexible and *Adaptable* to the changing needs of society and communities and responding to the needs of diverse students (OHCHR Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1999). Simply put, education security is a measure of the availability of quality education and one's ability to access it. Here we offer the case study of the Rohingya to illustrate an instance of perpetual education insecurity and its impacts on human capital deficits.

Research and Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods and participatory approach combining secondary literature review and qualitative data acquired through fieldwork in early 2020. Fieldwork took place months before the pandemic began, in January 2020 in two of the world's largest refugee camps: Kutupalong and Balukhali. Qualitative data was collected through informational interviews, observation, and participatory action research with Rohingya children, teachers, and staff in camp learning centers and CFSs. The target population was Rohingya children and adolescents between the ages of 7 to 14 years attending UNICEF-sponsored Child Friendly Spaces (CFSs). The research team used visual ethnography and participatory drawing methods to collect data from 26 Rohingya youth in four camp sites (Camp 1E, Camp 4, Camp 4-Ext, and Camp 9) about their migration experiences. In addition, peer-to-peer messaging through participatory videos with Rohingya youth and Bangladeshi youth were conducted. Permission to carry out the research was granted by the Office of the Refugee Relief & Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) in Bangladesh. Meetings to introduce the study to parents of children were scheduled and all parents signed consent forms for children to participate. Thus, the study purposefully selected all children who were present on the day the research team visited the CFSs and whose parents granted permission to participate, and participation was entirely voluntary. Our analysis is also informed by ethnographic insights gained during earlier field visits to Kutupalong and Balukhali during October 2017, and again in July/August 2018. Finally, a literature review was conducted to triangulate findings. The literature review included both peer-reviewed scholarly research and grey literature produced outside of the academic setting including news media, United Nations situation reports and policy briefs, humanitarian agency reports, and human rights instruments and legal frameworks.

Based on findings from this study, we developed a conceptual framework to assess impacts of state-level exclusionary education policies on both individuals and host countries (see Figure 1 below). The conceptual framework shows that standard operational procedures and exclusionary policies at the state level can produce inequitable conditions that result in educational disparities. At the individual-level, exclusionary policies in Bangladesh have negative impacts particularly to an individuals’ social capital, human capital, livelihoods, economic development, critical thinking, problem-solving, peace building, and coping skills. At the national-level, exclusionary policies threaten a host country’s national security and undermine good governance (Haddad, Aliaga, and Attree 2018; Kerwin 2018). We use this conceptual framework to guide our discussion on the impacts of exclusionary education policies on both individuals and states.

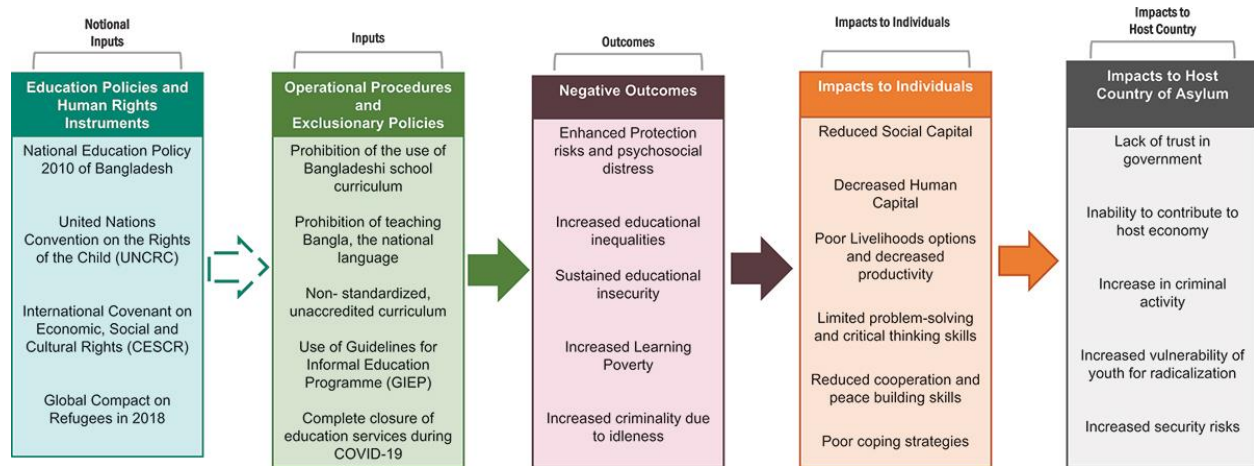


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for understanding the relationship of exclusionary education policies and their impacts to individuals and host countries.

Rohingya’s Educational Experience in Myanmar

Many human rights instruments such as Article 26 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Articles 28, 29, and 32 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the Global Compact on Refugees in 2018 all recognize the right to education as a fundamental human right. Despite the existing legal frameworks, compacts, and universal commitments to education, Rohingya refugees persistently lack access to adequate and equitable learning opportunities. Barriers to education began for the Rohingya in their home country of Myanmar, where a large portion of Rohingya children were not schooled or experienced severe disruptions in their education due to periodic outbreaks of ethnic and religious violence between Buddhists and Muslim communities.

Education System in the Rakhine State

The vast majority (66%) of Rohingya refugees originate from Maungdaw township in the northern Rakhine state (UNHCR 2020) (see Figure 2), which reportedly has one of the lowest literacy rates in the country. According to the most recent 2014 Myanmar Census, only 67.6% of adults living in Maungdaw township were literate. Since 2012, the Rohingya have encountered severe state-sponsored ethnic and religious discrimination and endured incitements of violence by extremist and ultra-nationalist Buddhist groups. Throughout northern Rakhine state, schools and mosques were commonly occupied by military forces and used as barracks, weapons storage facilities, command centers, training centers, detention, and interrogation sites (Mahmood et al. 2017). The UN documented several cases of military use of schools by the *Tatmadaw* forces in 2016 (UNGA 2017), and again in 2017, when reportedly military forces slept in schools as they moved through villages in northern Rakhine state (Amnesty International 2017). The majority of Myanmar’s formal education system was government-run basic education schools, with less than half of the Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships having had basic education schools (REACH 2015). Following inter-communal violence in 2012, an estimated 60,000 Rohingya were forcibly relocated into 36 internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Sittwe township, where they could not access formal accredited education. Schools that were available in IDP camps were set up in Temporary Learning Spaces (TLS) with minimal infrastructure and had an average student-to-teacher ratio of over 100:1 (REACH 2015). Though schools had designated government teachers,

most reportedly had such infrequent teacher attendance due to security concerns that schools were often staffed by parents, volunteers, or community-paid teachers in the absence of formal teachers. Other gaps included the lack of adequate learning materials, outdated textbooks, and the use of Burmese as the sole language of instruction.

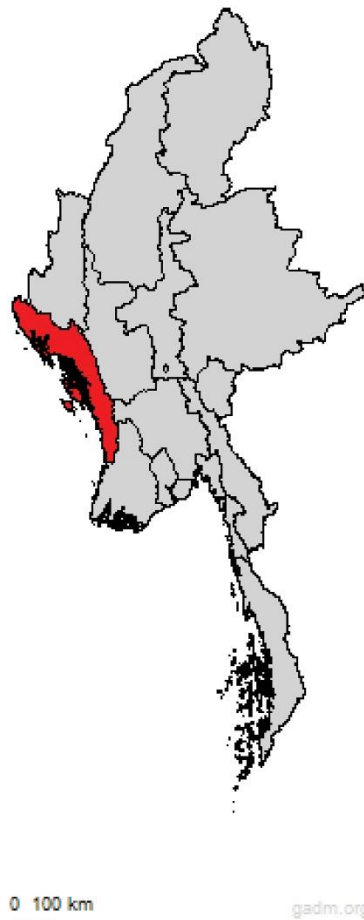


Figure 2. Map Rakhine state, Myanmar (Burma).

Map Source: © 2018 GADM <https://gadm.org/license.html>

Rohingya's Educational Experience in Bangladesh

Over the last four decades, Rohingya refugees have fled into Bangladesh from Myanmar in successive waves. The latest influx of Rohingya refugees arriving in Cox's Bazar occurred in August of 2017, with more than half (54%) of those reaching Bangladesh being children under 18 years (UNHCR 2020). While the Government of Bangladesh was initially sympathetic towards the Rohingya, the influx of refugees has placed enormous pressure on the host country's already fragile economic and environmental systems (Hammer and Ahmed 2020). Despite Bangladesh endorsing the Global Compact on Refugees in 2018, the country restricts refugees' access to many fundamental rights and considers repatriation the only viable solution. Thus, formal provisions for education within the camps have been low priority, effectively barring the Rohingya from continuing their education while in émigré. The humanitarian Education Sector in Cox's Bazar serves about 325,000 children who attend more than 3,200 camp learning centers, the majority of which (over 70%) are enrolled in UNICEF-supported centers (Reidy 2020). Building Resources Across Communities (BRAC) is the largest implementing partner of education programs in the camps. UNICEF's other implementing partners include local NGOs such as Community Development Centre (CODEC), Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM), MUKTI Cox's Bazar, and Plan International Bangladesh. None of these informal education programs currently have an approved, accredited, or certifiable school curriculum, with Rohingya children being taught using a variety of available learning materials and pedagogical methods. Learning centers generally teach a mixture of both cognitive

and soft skills, including mathematics and language (both English and Burmese), art, games, singing, and some life skills. Science is rarely taught, if at all. Additionally, there is no framework for ensuring quality teaching or an agreed method for teacher training. The Rohingya language is mainly an oral language with no written script. Assessments indicate that 73% of the Rohingya have self-identified as being illiterate (Translators Without Borders 2017), suggesting a high level of learning poverty.⁴ Few trained teachers speak the Rohingya language or Chittagonian (the closest Bangladeshi dialect to the Rohingya language). Following the 2017 influx, the Ministry of Education prohibited the use of Bangla – the national language – as a medium of instruction for the Rohingya and barred the use of the Bangladeshi school curriculum (Cox’s Bazar Education Sector 2018; Dhaka Tribune 2021).

Then in 2019, Bangladesh issued the Guidelines for Informal Education Programme (GIEP) as a blueprint for NGO partners to provide informal education. While GIEP provides the Rohingya with some basic education, the curriculum does not go beyond a second-year primary school level, it is limited in scope, unaccredited, and provides no formal matriculation – making it only an interim solution. While 42.7 million children (UNICEF 2021) need educational support, only about 145,000 Rohingya children (UNICEF 2019) living in camps attended UNICEF-supported learning centers in 2019. A recent qualitative study found that 65% of Rohingya participants expressed grave concerns about the lack of quality education and the need for improvements to existing education opportunities in the camps. Participants most requested improving the quality of education provided and access to formally recognized classes (ACAPS-NPM and IOM 2021). Finally, in January 2020, months before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the Government of Bangladesh approved a standardized education system for the Rohingya using the Myanmar National Curriculum for grades 6 to 9. This new curriculum was intended to be phased-in starting at the beginning of April 2020, initially to be piloted to about 10,000 refugee students (Alam 2020). It would cover Burmese, English, mathematics, science, and social studies, with additional subjects gradually being introduced over time. However, by March 2020, all camp learning centers were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, cutting off nearly 400,000 school-age children from education services.

Rohingya Intersectionality

Intersectionality is an analytical framework that recognizes how interlocking systems of power affect marginalized communities. We employ an intra-categorical approach to help us understand and interpret the diversity within individual and combined effects of sociocultural categories in the Rohingya context. We use the Rohingya ethnicity as our anchor point and then overlay various categories of social inequality to understand their impacts on educational disparities. Traditionally, broad categories of race, class, and gender are applied in conventional studies. However, based on our findings of diversity within the group, we expand our categories to include age, legal status, and religion for the Rohingya context. By applying an intersectionality lens, we can see how Rohingyas’ ethnic identity interplay with other sociocultural identities to create different modes of discrimination and privilege in education.

Inequalities Based on Legal Status

Marginalization exists between newly arrived Rohingya refugees and those that arrived before the 1990s. Earlier arrivals have a distinct legal status – having been officially registered by the Bangladesh government. In contrast, recent arrivals who came during the influx of 2017 have been given no official legal status, rather are designated as Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs) by the government of Bangladesh. Between December 1991 to March 1992, an estimated 250,000 Rohingya fled into Bangladesh (UNHCR 1999). Soon after their arrival, the Government of Bangladesh granted them temporary residence, labelling them as ‘registered.’ Registered Rohingya primarily live in the Ukhiya and Teknaf refugee camps, which are sub-districts of Cox’s Bazar district, while unregistered FDMNs primarily live in Kutupalong and Balukhali makeshift camps.

Because of their combined identities of being both ethnically Rohingya and their legal status as FDMNs, learning opportunities among newer arrivals are not equitable. While the Government of Bangladesh limits registered Rohingya from acquiring education beyond Grade 7, they do provide certificates upon completion, and registered Rohingya children are permitted to study a government-sanctioned informal version of the Bangladeshi curriculum (Cox’s Bazar Education Sector 2018). In contrast, unregistered FDMNs attend schools with no formal curriculum, no completion certification, and class instruction is given in Burmese or English rather than in Bangla – the national language (Cox’s Bazar Education Sector 2018). This gives the registered Rohingya an advantage, albeit a minimal advantage, over unregistered Rohingya. While technically it is illegal, registered Rohingya who obtain a certificate can utilize it to their advantage by seeking admission to mainstream education institutions. Additionally, the use of the Bangladeshi curriculum allows registered Rohingya to assimilate into Bangladeshi schools more easily. Dr. Sultana observes, by

delegitimizing one's legal status, States can exercise power to monitor, regulate, and control people's behavior in pursuit of their own agenda. While, on one hand, Bangladesh recognizes equal rights of all children through various legal instruments and its national laws, the State uses its power to delegitimize the Rohingya and their right to pursue education in favor of its own agenda of repatriation (Sultana 2017).

Religious Inequalities

While the Rohingya people are primarily Muslim, there are small sub-minority groups of Hindus and Christians. Previously, an estimated 21,000 Hindus were living in the Rakhine State (Tay et al. 2018). In 2017, Rohingya Hindus suffered devastating attacks by Muslim militants who burnt down Hindu villages in Kha Maung Seik, Myanmar and massacred nearly 100 villagers (Amnesty International 2018). Rohingya Hindus (particularly women) have also reportedly suffered kidnappings and forced conversions by Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. Additionally, in September 2017, weeks after the initial influx of refugees into Cox's Bazar, two Hindus were killed and nine others were injured after violence broke out between refugee groups (Krishnan 2019). A qualitative study with refugees found that Rohingya Hindus repeatedly raised concerns about threats from surrounding Rohingya Muslim groups and felt there was no escape from ARSA militant groups who still have a powerful influence throughout the camps (Mithun and Arefin 2020). Because of the tensions between Rohingya Hindu and Muslim groups, an estimated 500 Rohingya Hindus (ACAPS 2017) are kept in a separate police-guarded camp (Kutupalong, Camp 1-E), isolated from Rohingya Muslims (see Figures 3 and 4 below). Compared to their Muslim counterparts, Rohingya Hindus in Bangladesh are particularly disadvantaged in obtaining quality education due to their intersectional experiences of being both Rohingya and Hindu, as the Hindu camp has fewer services compared to other camps and education is particularly lacking. Until recently, the Hindu camp did not even have a CFS to hold classes until BRAC recently built the multi-purpose Hindupara Integrated Community Centre at the end of 2019. Part of the tensions between Rohingya Muslims and Hindu groups also stems from jealousy over privileges that Rohingya Hindus had in Myanmar that their Muslim counterparts did not. While the Citizenship Law of 1982 did not recognize the Rohingyas as citizens, in 2018 Rohingya Hindus were issued a 'blue card' (or Associate Citizenship cards) by the Myanmar government which afforded them the right to study in colleges and universities, freedom of movement, and other basic rights (Human Rights Council 2019). Additionally, Rohingya Muslims perceive the Hindus in Rakhine as traitors and accuse them of having loyalties to the Myanmar government due to the Hindus' neutral stance against the government and their opposition to the militant protests demanding full citizenship rights for all Rohingyas (Mithun and Arefin 2020).



Figure 3. Hindu temple (Camp 1-E). Approximately 500 Rohingya Hindus live in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar.



Figure 4. Krishna and Radha altar statues in the Rohingya Hindu Temple.

Ethnic and religious minorities in Myanmar have had a complex and contested history. Thus, it is vital, when speaking of education for the Rohingya, to take account of such circumstances to prevent violating the ‘Do No Harm’ principle by further inciting conflict between groups. The more that young people are equipped with knowledge, skills, and inspiration of interfaith cooperation, the more likely that interfaith cooperation will become normalized, and religious intolerance, bigotry, and extremism will be marginalized (Omer, Appleby, and Little 2015). Education increases interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Through subjects like social sciences, we can expand our worldview, particularly around recognizing shared values of all cultures and religions.

Age Disparities

Significant educational gaps remain for adolescents, aged 15 to 18, in refugee camps. When it comes to education, there is a unique and compounded disadvantage experienced by Rohingya youth. While being Rohingya may limit their general education opportunities in Bangladesh, their age effectively denies them any learning opportunities as learning centers prioritize children under the age of 14. Given the restrictions on space and funding, there are also limited opportunities for secondary or tertiary education. Only about 17% of the estimated 71,000 adolescents (15–18 years) and 110,000 Rohingya youth (ages 19–24 years) currently have access to education and/or skills training (Cox’s Bazar Education Sector 2020a). The remaining 83% are not engaged in any education or economic activities, increasing their exposure to protection risks including trafficking, drug abuse, early marriage, recruitment into gangs or religious extremist groups, and hazardous work opportunities. Additionally, there are limited opportunities for adolescents and youth to gain skills development through Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) (Cox’s Bazar Education Sector 2020b). When TVET skills trainings programs are available, they are generally offered on an ad-hoc basis, with no certification, and are limited in scale.

With no educational opportunities available, out-of-school youth adopt harmful coping mechanisms. Without opportunities to learn and develop skills, youth are susceptible to human trafficking, exploitation, neglect, abuse and remain vulnerable to criminal gangs or religious extremists (World Bank Group 2020). Notably, children who are separated from their families are of serious concern. The InterSector Coordination Group (ISCG) has identified at least 14,665 at-risk youth, including separated and unaccompanied minors living in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar (ISCG 2018). These children are dealing with the emotional distress of being separated from their parents, putting them at higher risk for child protection concerns. Forced displacement creates an ideal condition for organized criminal syndicates to exploit vulnerable youth. As McCaffrie explains, the lack of access to education is a significant risk factor for two major reasons: First, it leads to idleness, resulting in a sense of hopelessness for the future, making young people easy prey for smugglers under the false pretense of potential employment opportunities abroad; and Second it limits a child's capacity for obtaining a decent livelihood in the future (McCaffrie 2019). Additionally, the prevalence of child labor among Rohingya communities is high (See Figure 7 below). A Joint Rapid Education and Child Protection Need Assessment (JRNA) in 2017 showed that 74% of respondents acknowledged that their children engage in both paid and unpaid work (Cox's Bazar Education Sector and Child Protection Sub-Sector 2017).

Gender Inequalities

While the impact of lack of access to education is similar for both girls and boys, Rohingya girls are more likely to be affected by social-cultural impacts. The weight of the pandemic is not always equally shared, and the longer that marginalized groups are out of school, particularly for girls, then the less likely they will return. According to the Joint Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (J-MSNA) conducted in 2020, 14% of households with children previously attending any form of education reported planning not to send all their children back to learning centers post-COVID (ISCG 2020a). Rohingya girls are particularly in jeopardy as lack of educational services often leads families to adopt negative coping mechanisms. Due to traditional cultural and social norms, Rohingya girls are often forced into early marriage when they are not in school or at an increased risk of experiencing gender-based violence and sexual exploitation (Leigh et al. 2020; Guglielmi et al. 2020). Essentially, Rohingya girls' distinct experiences result in their lives being fundamentally altered – particularly due to early marriage, the impact of which will play out over the next generation. On the other hand, Rohingya boys experience unique protection concerns. Out-of-school boys are exposed to the dangers of using and selling illegal drugs such as *Yaba* (a mixture of methamphetamine and caffeine) (Rabbi 2018), are at heightened risk for child labor (Cox's Bazar Child Protection Sub-Sector 2020), or are recruited into religious extremist groups such as ARSA that promote radical ideologies (Corraya 2019). UN Secretary-General, António Guterres described the devastating camp conditions as 'a breeding ground for radicalization, and also puts vulnerable people – including young children at risk of criminal elements.' He further stated, 'We should not be surprised if decades of discrimination and double standards in treatment of the Rohingya create openings for radicalization.' (Guterres 2017). One example of this was painfully obvious when our research team worked with Rohingya children in January 2020. During a field visit to the Kutupalong camp, one team member was approached by a 15-year-old boy who, in his best broken English, explained that he was eager to take up arms and return to Myanmar to fight the militias. His confession indicated that he had likely been exposed to ARSA members looking to recruit him. When a development vacuum exists, it is easy for extremist groups to step in and fill the void.

Rohingya's Educational Experience Amongst the COVID-19 Pandemic

Bangladesh experienced one of the more stringent lockdowns globally, ranging on average between 80 to 90 on the Oxford COVID-19 Government Stringency Index scale (with 100 being strictest) (University of Oxford, Blavatnik School of Government 2021). With an average population density of 40,000 people per square km, the Rohingya live in 34 overcrowded makeshift refugee camps in Cox's Bazar (see Figures 5–8), increasing the potential for the rapid spread of COVID-19 (ACAPS 2020). The combination of a high population density, overcrowding, poor hygiene, use of public hygiene facilities, inadequate health facilities, and the inability to self-quarantine means that there are potential higher-than-average mortality and morbidity rates inside refugee camps compared to other impacted populations. With the average household size at 5.1 persons (ISCG 2020a) and the vast majority of households living in one-room shelters, social distancing is nearly impossible. As of October 2021, there has been total of 3,084 confirmed COVID-19 cases among Rohingya refugees (WHO 2021). As a result, public health officials continually stress the need to slow the spread of the virus through social distancing measures, which is often impossible to do in congested refugee camps. In March 2020, the Government of Bangladesh categorized education services as non-

essential, and COVID-19 lockdown measures were put in place by camp authorities, severely restricting access to much-needed services. These COVID-19 restrictions put in place to control infection rates, continue to have unintended impacts, which will have severe long-term effects on Rohingya refugees.

Photo Source: Fieldwork 2018, Kutupalong camp.



Figure 5. Four toilets built on a steep slope serving those living in surrounding temporary shelters.

Photo Source: Fieldwork 2018, Kutupalong camp.



Figure 6. Camp residents are crowded into hilly areas with little infrastructure and prone to landslides.

Photo Source: Fieldwork 2018, Kutupalong Bazar.



Figure 7. Girl, age between 10–12 years old, cleaning Betel leaves (popular in many South Asian cultures) that will be sold from this roadside shop. Child labour is high among the Rohingya.



Source: Fieldwork in Camp-4 Extension, 2020.

Figure 8. Rohingya children eagerly attend classes in CFS despite being cramped into temporary bamboo structures – absent of any desks, chairs, or even electricity.

Restricted Access to Education

Before learning centers were closed in March 2020, 76% of Rohingya boys and 70% of Rohingya girls ages 6 to 14 years were accessing informal education through GIEP (ISCG 2019). Today, the ISCG reports that nearly a third (27%) of households reported loss or diminished access to education as an impact of the COVID-19 outbreak. While many children continue learning from home, however, of those households with children who have been studying remotely, 43% report lacking basic learning materials, while 15% report lack of guidance from teachers (ISCG 2020a). Nearly half (48%) of Rohingya children expressed distress over the closure of child protection facilities and learning centers (Child Protection Sub-Sector 2020).

In September 2019, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission shut down all 3 G and 4 G services in the camps and directed mobile phone companies to deny SIM cards to Rohingya under the guise of security, claiming that refugees were using internet-based communications for criminal activities (Human Rights Watch 2019; The Daily Star 2019). As a result, the restricted telecommunications within the camps have made it challenging to deliver adequate and quality remote education. Globally, in the era of COVID-19, more than two-thirds of countries have introduced remote learning platforms, which require internet access. In refugee camps around Cox's Bazar, owning a SIM card is illegal for the Rohingya, and mobile and internet use are banned. Few implementing partner NGOs have successfully provided offline remote learning platforms such as *Pop-Up* learning, an offline tablet-based platform recently piloted by the International Rescue Committee (Airbel Impact Lab n.d.; Katende, Gerhardt, and Skinner 2020). However, even when students have access to remote platforms for learning at home, domestic chores can often prevent children, especially girls, from having sufficient time to learn or they may not have adequate parental support for homework. In a consultation with Rohingya refugee children, 66% of girls compared to 36% of boys reported spending their time doing household chores during the lockdown (Child Protection Sub-Sector 2020).

In circumstances like the Rohingya in Bangladesh, where the population has suffered decades of perpetual education inequality and insecurity, where there is an increase in children's exposure to protection risks, and where little educational support is offered during school closures, then traditional infection control protocols can exacerbate existing social and cultural inequalities making educational attainment nearly impossible. Learning losses also threaten

to extend beyond generational boundaries and erase decades of progress, becoming a generational catastrophe (United Nations 2020). Recognizing that stay-at-home orders and social distancing are not possible in many humanitarian contexts and thus it is important that governments, humanitarian and development actors, and other decision-makers consider the implications of school closures before enacting reactive virus control measures such as complete school closures. COVID-19 responses need to be more adaptive and less prescriptive when considering refugee populations. Rather they should strengthen educational systems and enable them to mitigate the risks of transmission through the use of various effective mitigation measures such as universal masking requirements, holding classes in open air outdoors to increase ventilation or using hybrid methods of in-person and remote learning. Studies have shown that in-person school is not the key driver in virus resurgence and that opening schools to in-person instruction is possible with stringent nonpharmaceutical interventions in place which mitigate the risk of transmission (Yuan et al. 2021). Making learning environments safe is key to mitigating child protection risks and combating learning losses. Good practices include prioritizing teachers for vaccinations; training teachers and support staff to reduce the risk of transmission; and equipping schools with adequate health and hygiene infrastructure (Carvalho et al. 2020; Chuang et al. 2020).

Probable Outcomes in the Post COVID-19 Era

On 1 February 2021 began the newest Myanmar coup. Amid unsubstantiated allegations of voter fraud, President Win Myint and State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi were imprisoned by the *Tatmadaw* forces along with ministers, deputies, and members of parliament (Reuters Staff 2021). While the door to Myanmar might have once been slightly opened to the Rohingya, providing a glimmer of hope, it appears that, after the recent Myanmar coup d'état, it has now been sealed shut for the Rohingya. With this recent military seize of power over the country, it is clear that Rohingya repatriation is no longer a viable option, further prolonging the unsustainable nature of the protracted refugee crisis in Bangladesh.

Furthermore, in 2018, the Bangladesh Navy and Chinese and British construction crews began constructing a camp on the island of Bhasan Char in the Bay of Bengal for the sole purpose of housing 100,000 Rohingya refugees (Paul, Baldwin, and Marshall 2018). Bhasan Char or 'floating island' spans about 40 square kilometers and is located 30 kilometers (21 miles) away from the mainland refugee camps. The Government of Bangladesh has recently begun relocating Rohingya refugees to the island (Al Jazeera 2020) despite harsh criticism from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the international community (Paul 2021). Several key concerns have been raised regarding the island's safety. Experts warn that the island is not sustainable for human habitation; it is prone to natural disasters and is seriously affected by rising sea levels and storm surges. Due to the island's remoteness, it has minimal facilities for education and health services and provides minimal opportunities for livelihoods or self-sufficiency. Additionally, communication and information systems are constrained and refugees living on Bhasan Char have limited freedom of movement between the island and the mainland camps (Cowper-Smith 2020). Thus, it is clear that the situation on Bhasan Char island will likely contribute to poor educational outcomes for the Rohingya and continue to exacerbate the existing education disparities.

Most recently, on 22 March 2021 a devastating fire broke out in the Rohingya camps displacing approximately 45,000 people and causing massive destruction of basic infrastructure and essential facilities including hospitals, learning centers, and women and child friendly spaces (Chirac, Mahmud, and Perera 2021). The Cox's Bazar Education Sector reports a total of 163 learning facilities were damaged or destroyed by the fire, affecting the approximately 13,226 children who attend these learning centers and learning facilities (Save the Children 2021). Additionally, the Education Sector has activated an Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan (EPRP 2020–21) allowing learning centers in nearby camps to be used as temporary shelters for affected communities (Cox's Bazar Education Sector 2021), further displacing children from attending neighboring learning centers. It will take months, if not years, for camp authorities to rebuild lost education facilities. The damage caused by the fires and the prolonged use of learning centers as temporary shelters significantly exacerbates the existing educational needs of the Rohingya. Thus, based on past results, the outlooks on education security in the post-COVID-19 era remain grim for the Rohingya.

Discussion

Social Relationships and Social Capital

When youth are excluded from education, their opportunities for building social capital are also reduced. Social spaces, such as educational institutions, grant access to social capital through a network of relationships among people, enabling individuals to have group membership and reciprocal relationships which they can draw upon in times of need. For the vulnerable, social capital is multi-dimensional and defined by political, societal, and institutional capacities (Duran, Al-Haddad, and Ahmed 2021). Scholars have found that increases in average education levels significantly improve social trust and social engagement, two key variables used to measure social capital (Helliwell and Putnam 1999). Major and Wilkinson, et al. conducted cases studies with Sudanese refugees and found that participants identified schools, church, and sports as being the most important institutions where friendships develop, playing a key role in their development of bonding and bridging social capital by providing access to social networks and opportunities to make friends across a variety of ethnic and socio-economic groups (Major et al. 2013). Schools also facilitate a sense of belonging and inclusion, help form new associations, build trust with others, and cooperation in collective decision-making. Participation in school also provides access to wider social networks which can be leveraged during times of need. The impact of exclusionary education policies reduces students' ability to access, develop, and utilize social networks which can be leveraged to enhance their resiliency.

Livelihoods, Human Capital, and Economic Development

It is well accepted that quality education directly impacts a person's livelihood opportunities and provides a pathway to economic independence. People with more education tend to have higher earnings, thereby increasing one's economic growth. Education not only serves as a catalyst for economic growth but also accumulation of human capital. According to the World Bank, the global average rate of return on schooling equates to a 9% increase in hourly earnings for each extra year of schooling (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2018). Education can drive long-term economic growth, spurs innovation, strengthens institutions, and fosters social cohesion. Many economists argue that education plays a key role in economic development not only due to its role in income generation, but also due to its strong correlations with improved health outcomes and declines in fertility rates (Case 2006). Lochner argues that education as a human capital investment increases future legitimate work opportunities and discourages participation in crime (Lochner 2004). Furthermore, refugees who are more educated and have greater access to knowledge may also be more receptive to new ideas and are more likely to experiment with technology and innovation. Displaced populations have been known to develop a range of creative and entrepreneurial responses to complex situations. For example, during the COVID-19 lockdown in Yemen, when PPE wasn't available locally, displaced Yemeni engineers prototyped PPE locally, with the support of technical experts. The prototypes are now being manufactured by local small-medium enterprises to serve the market (Kumar 2020). Thus, exclusionary education policies stifle ingenuity and decreases one's overall productivity.

Peacebuilding and Cooperation

Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child requires '*that the education of the child shall be directed to ... the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples*' (OHCHR 1989). Peacebuilding is meant to be integrated into education and yet it is often overlooked. For refugees who have been forced to flee conflict, the peacebuilding component is an essential element of education. Education, or lack of it, can also be a fundamental source of conflict and marginalization, but it can likewise be a catalyst for peacebuilding when education is conflict sensitive. It can play an important role in reconciliation as it helps shape attitudes, behaviors, values, and improves social relations. While the international community has committed to peacebuilding, it rarely considers how education contributes to avoiding conflict. In this way, inclusive education can reduce inequalities, overcome prejudices, and build new social values and institutions. It seems unlikely that the situation in Myanmar will change as recent developments in the political landscape with the latest coup by the *Tatmadaw* forces in February 2021, leaving little hope for Rohingya repatriation. Global evidence also suggests that refugees stay in their host countries on average 15–17 years. Thus, how host communities perceive refugees and vice versa is critical to combating intolerance, discrimination, and racism.

Miho Taka examines the role of education in post-conflict recovery in Rwanda and highlights the benefits of education through the lens of peacebuilding. Taka's research found that there are three main outcomes that education produces including improved livelihoods skills; cognitive rewards; and personal transformations, particularly in healing and humanization. He argues that in addition to enhancing livelihoods and human capital, education contributes to healing and (re)humanizing individuals in a post-conflict society and that conflict sensitive education helps address inequalities and grievances, promotes mediation and conflict resolution, provides a sense of normalcy to children, restores social cohesion, and encourages critical thinking skills that are more inclusive and democratic (Taka 2019). de Coning further maintains that we need to reframe peacebuilding approaches to focus on longer-term preventative measures aimed at supporting resilient social institutions that can better absorb and adapt to future shocks. By strengthening local social institutions, such as educational institutions, we invest in social cohesion and the institutions' ability to promote lasting change. As peacebuilding agents, social institutions, such as schools, facilitate awareness of the drivers of conflict and can help manage tensions without resorting to violence (de Coning 2018).

Lack of education for young people can leave them highly susceptible to persuasion and fails to equip them with the means of resisting extremist propaganda and dispelling false rumors. Left unaddressed, educational needs will be filled by dangerous alternatives. Research suggests that policy mechanisms that are designed to increase educational attainment and improve the quality of education significantly reduce crime rates committed by youth (Hjalmarsson and Lochner 2012; Lochner 2004). Researchers who studied the common characteristics of radicalized individuals from 27 developing countries found that typical extremists are often more likely to be young, unemployed and relatively uneducated (Kiendrebeogo and Ianchovichina 2016). Unaccompanied and orphaned youth are particularly at increased risk of recruited into armed groups. Better cognitive and problem-solving skills increase our ability to look at a problem comprehensively, break the problem down into manageable pieces, and generate possible solutions, which are key components to peacebuilding. Education imparts critical thinking skills and offers opportunities for hope, provides one a sense of value in society, and it can alter social constructs. Educational opportunities also help to reduce youth's social deviancy through encouraging school attendance. It can help protect youth from exploitation and recruitment into violent extremist groups and encourages critical thinking skills necessary to evade the lure of charismatic leaders. Thus, improving education is an imperative first step towards countering this type of radical indoctrination and reducing inter-community hostility by providing a means to improve socio-economic development.

Threats to Host Country National Security

Exclusionary policies also have security implications for countries of asylum. Proponents of anti-immigrant sentiment often promote false narratives in order to make it easier to demonize people – seeing them as the 'other'. In the words of Noam Chomsky, *'The more you can increase fear of drugs, crime, welfare mothers, immigrants and aliens, the more you control all of the people.'* Xenophobic rhetoric is often used by government officials worldwide to reinforce the belief among the general public that immigrants, especially migrants and refugees, are illegal and dangerous. However, studies have shown that denying refugees legal status and enacting exclusionary policies are counterproductive to a country's national security (Haddad, Aliaga, and Attree 2018). As Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lloyd Axworthy once stated in a speech to the 51st General Assembly of the United Nations *'human rights and fundamental freedoms, the rule of law, good governance, sustainable development and social equity – are as important to global peace as arms control and disarmament.'* (UN General Assembly 1996). Additionally, some scholars have argued that there are positive impacts of education on state stability and peace including state provision of education increasing trust in the government, strengthening individuals capacity for effective governance, and contributing to a shared identity and social cohesion through curriculum and an integrated system (Burde et al. 2011). Scholars have also argued that providing education in the refugee context yields benefits beyond personal gain accrued by refugees themselves, but it can also benefit host communities by strengthening the quantity and quality of the local teaching force (Wright and Plasterer 2012). For example, the UNHCR reported that when Sudanese refugees in Chad were transitioning into the Chadian national education system, Sudanese refugee teachers were being trained to deliver the Chadian curricula in Arabic. This benefitted both Sudanese refugees and Chadian children due to the increased number of qualified Arabic language teachers and from increased investments in the national educational system (UNHCR 2017).

However, it's simply not enough to provide education alone, particularly if the education is poor-quality. Poor-quality education that doesn't support future livelihood opportunities or provide hope for a better future has been shown to push older students into joining violent extremist movements (Burde et al. 2011; Sas et al. 2020). While the education sector in developing countries has been a prominent factor in preventing and combating the radicalization of youth,

however, three major bottlenecks have been found that can reduce the effects of education. Unequal access to education, the poor quality of education, and the relationship between education and employment were found to be potential causes contributing to the increased vulnerability of youth for radicalization (Sas et al. 2020). Thus, in order to prevent such radicalization of youth, education should ensure sustainability through equal access for all, its quality, and its certifiability.

Lost Generation

After years of living in IDP camps in Myanmar, and just after their arrival into Bangladesh, some of the initial concerns expressed by Rohingya parents were fear that the lack of formal education is creating a ‘lost generation’ of youth who will be illiterate, jobless, and lack the life skills necessary for their future. The importance of access to education to refugees should not be easily overlooked. According to a 2019 survey done by the PRIO, many respondents felt that the uneducated lost generation of their children is tantamount to genocide (Olney, Haque, and Mubarak 2019). The compounding issues of government restrictions on formal accredited education, school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, failures in launching a pilot program of the Myanmar curriculum in refugee schools, destruction from recent camp fires, and most recently the Bangladesh government’s plans to relocate refugees to Bhasan Char island have all contributed to a regression in education security outcomes for the Rohingya, creating a ‘lost generation’ of Rohingya youth.

Access to education is only meaningful if the education offered is pragmatic and operable. Education that mimics certifiable education can be both discouraging and dangerous when it has no practical output and offers no opportunities for the future (Sas et al. 2020). Educational programming currently offered in refugee camps is a box-ticking exercise meant to satisfy administrative and donor-driven requirements rather than addressing refugees’ actual educational needs. Education, in the context of humanitarian aid should not be an exercise in schooling for the sake of instruction. Education should be value-added and skills-building or induce innovation, otherwise it provides no durable solutions for refugees. By failing to recognize the protracted nature of refugee situations, we foster a ‘lost generation’ of youth dependent on humanitarian aid. For migrant and refugee children who are unable to enroll in public education systems, the provision of educational alternatives is critical including investing more in vocational training and business development opportunities that provide tangible skills and promote self-sufficiency, especially for out-of-school youth. Or providing opportunities for general education diplomas which can fill the education gap for older children.

Conclusion

Rohingya youth’s ability to attain an adequate education is shaped by patterns of political and economic discrimination. Expanding access to quality education benefits not only the Rohingya but also Bangladeshi society. Educated refugees are less likely to be dependent on humanitarian aid and more likely to positively contribute to their host country’s economies both as consumers and employers. Improvements in access to education and skills development have been shown to reduce reliance on negative coping mechanisms such as criminal activity and child marriage and promote social cohesion and tolerance between refugees and local host communities.

While both the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Global Compact on Refugees (2018) recognize the right to primary education, most refugees worldwide are denied such basic human rights. Education security is not only a fundamental human right itself, but it directly impacts a person’s ability to attain other rights. More than four years later after the initial influx into Bangladesh, the Rohingya are still fighting for their fundamental right to quality education. It is also important to be cognizant of the intersectionalities that impact educational disparities. Our findings show that social, cultural, and political determinants have shaped Rohingya children’s learning opportunities both before and during COVID-19 and that access to quality education contributes to improved human capacity, strengthens people’s agency, improves wellbeing, and resilience capacities. Additionally, our findings show that exclusionary policies which foster education insecurity have adverse effects for both refugees and the surrounding host community.

We argue that development and humanitarian agencies and government partners should focus more on educational investments to enhance people’s adaptive capacities and reduce dependency. Refugees must be integrated into national education systems and educational programming must go beyond just informal education that are largely reproduced as part of a standard humanitarian response which contributes little to self-sufficiency. Thus, educational programs must provide a pathway to self-reliance to avoid the unintentional consequences of fostering a lost generation of youth.

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Notes

1. Intersectionality is a framework for understanding that people's intersecting experiences of oppression, discrimination, and marginalization are based on their coetaneous identities. [See Crenshaw, Kimberle, 1989. *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. University of Chicago Legal Forum 1989(8).].
2. *An Introduction to the Basic Concepts of Food Security: Food Security Information for Action, Practical Guides* (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2008). <http://www.fao.org/3/al936e/al936e.pdf>
3. Bangladesh ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) in 1998.
4. Learning poverty means being unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10. [See, World Bank Learning Poverty Brief (October 2019). <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/brief/learning-poverty>.].