

The Time of Becoming Resilient? Rohingya Women of Bangladesh Camps in Between Hopes and Waiting

By

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"Life is about change, sometimes it's painful, sometimes it's beautiful, but most of the time it's both"

-Ro Mohammad Faruque, Balukhali Refugee Camp, Bangladesh

This article probes an ethnographic account into the lives of Rohingya women in Bangladesh camps. The dispossession of the Rohingyas from Myanmar and their subsequent marginalisation and deracination is widely known across the globe in contemporary times. Their forced migration resulting from their lack of citizenship status or statelessness has led them to live in Cox's Bazar of Bangladesh in huge numbers, which I shall describe later. Any discussion on dispossession, refugeehood or statelessness necessitates us to study the borders and migration from a feminist perspective because women are most often the worst sufferers of any displacement, ethnic persecution, violence, conflict or war. Refugee women are also subjected to myriad gender-based violence like trafficking, rape and sexual abuses.¹ The usage of the term 'gender' loosely refers to the social construct surrounding roles of men and women in society.²

It is understood that any humanitarian crisis of a great magnitude is deeply gendered, and a refugee crisis like that of the Rohingya displacement is worse in terms of its impact on women. During armed conflicts, women, especially, become the targets of planned gender-specific violence. A gendered analysis of studying forced displacement entails a few key important objectives according to Paula Banerjee. A feminist lens considers gender as the central category of analysis and questions the 'normal'. It also accepts women's own interpretations, voices of identities and experiences.³ Most often, a gendered

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lens of analysis in case of a conflict has been narrowed down to imply sexual violence. They are said to be doubly marginalised and oppressed because of their socio-political categories, race, ethnicity, religion and nationality.

However, this kind of a reductive lens tends to ignore how crimes occur with respect to different segments of society like transmen. The problem with the reductive lens is also that it refuses to understand gender as encompassing marginalisation of the less powerful, by which I mean, anything that challenges the dominant power disposition is considered a threat. The reductionist lens also confines to a simplified understanding of gender especially in the context of a war that only focuses on the need to 'protect' and render care. In the post-recovery processes, more attention by care givers is rightfully given on trying to help 'victims' return to a normal life. In this kind of an analysis however, physical violence becomes the core determinant to address issues plaguing women in a post-conflict situation, an analysis that often ignores the power of silence, bearing abilities and resilience. It also fails to address the general status of women within a patriarchal societal system. In cases where women do assume leadership roles and there is a chance of role reversals or of a change in the power equation, it gets least attention or encouragement.⁴ One could see this happening for Rohingya women activists although that discussion is not the focus of this article.

This article attempts to closely look at some of the concerns flagged above and introspect on how waiting in a camp space is gendered and whether Rohingya women, within the space, can deal with the trauma faced in Myanmar and evolve into autonomous beings. Are they able to become self-reliant individuals through employment opportunities in the camps and carve out their belongingness? How does waiting for a change in such contexts feel like? Gendered experiences in this essay, therefore, are looked through the prism of waiting and hope that transcend the boundaries of victimhood. This is no way to state that a binary between agency and victimhood exists. Researchers for long have critiqued victim-centric narratives arguing that they silence voices of survivors. By not problematising victimhood, refugees, especially women, for long were denied a centre stage to narrate their own narratives. Refugee experiences also get lost by limiting their identities as solely victims, for even during the worst of times, refugees constantly negotiate with the ruling power against their marginalisation.⁵ On the other hand, in response to such critiques, scholars have also urged to go beyond simplistic narratives as writing of "women as agentic in efforts to empower them runs the risk of generating overly voluntarist conceptions of agency".⁶ Thinking beyond such binary constructions thus enables one to take into consideration the agency of survivors without ignoring structurally unequal power dynamics.⁷ In common parlance, the defiance against victimisation and to be resilient is often understood as agency. However, Saba Mahmood puts forth an interesting argument in this regard. She contends that equating agency with resistance runs the risk of not understanding the capacity of actions that "historically specific relations of subordination enable and create".⁸ This decoupling between agency and resistance thus, according to her, is necessary so that we understand the lives of women whose identity and

aspirations are not shaped by liberal traditions like that of Islamist women participating in the Mosque movement in Egypt.⁹

The Rohingya women in Bangladesh camps form a diverse group in terms of their choices, accessibility to resources and networks both in Myanmar and then Bangladesh. This article describes the different groups of women that I met in the camps, all of them bound by the single common thread of hope for a change of their present situation. While hope guides most of them, for women who have faced unspeakable violence in Myanmar before their forced eviction, waiting for a normalcy becomes a distant mirage with occasional breakdowns.

The Phase of Waiting and the Process of ‘Becoming’

In this section, I will refer to three snippets of narratives in order to epitomise how the phase of waiting for women in the camps is not passive but prolifically active. It is also a phase of ‘becoming’ empowering individuals and decision-making voices. These narratives are powerful stories of survival marked by the temporality of belonging. This process of becoming comes with its own challenges as well, which I shall point out later in the chapter.

“I Wait to Hear from My Husband”

I met Shaufika in Camp 14, known as Hakimpara, in Cox’s Bazar (Fig. 1). The speciality of this camp is that it is the only widow block among the 34 Rohingya camps built in 2017, after the biggest Rohingya exodus from Myanmar. At the time of this research in 2019, there were 20 women in Camp 14. There is absolutely no male figure living in this widow block as these women have lost all their male family members at the 2017 massacre. Most of them have been killed and some like Shaufika’s husband are incarcerated in Buthidaung, Rakhine state of Myanmar, for being a rebel against the then government of Myanmar.

The Rohingyas have been forced to cross over from Myanmar’s Rakhine state (erstwhile Arakan) to Chittagong and Cox’s Bazar region in Bangladesh since the 1970s. The root cause of the Rohingya crisis or persecution stems from their lack of citizenship in Myanmar and the colonial history of partition in the subcontinent, dividing territories and loyalties. Burma, the earlier name of Myanmar under British rule, is the largest of the Southeast Asian states. Arakan is the westernmost state of Myanmar, now officially known as the Rakhine state. Apparently, the word ‘Rohingya’ is derived from Rohang, the ancient



Fig 1: Widow Block, Hakimpara, Camp 14

name for the Arakan or Rakhine state.¹⁰ In 1942, when Japan attacked Burma, the first communal clash between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims took place.¹¹ In 1978, a military crackdown called '*Ye Tha Ha*' had triggered the first major Rohingya displacement from Myanmar.¹² Twenty thousand Rohingyas were forced to flee to Bangladesh as a result.¹³ This was followed by continuous drives across the borders, especially after 1982, when the Burmese government framed a new citizenship law. This law in reality excluded the Rohingya from the 13 recognised national ethnic groups affecting their statelessness and subsequent refugeehood.¹⁴ The narrative of otherisation of the Rohingyas had already begun since long but got institutionalised with the implementation of the new Burmese¹⁵ constitution in 1948.¹⁶

New waves of forced eviction thus continued even after the Partition



Fig 2: A picture of one of the camps, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

in 1947 with landmark years like 1992, 2012 and 2017 registering the pinnacles of the waves. The military crackdown of the Rohingyas in 2017 has triggered by far the biggest exodus, affecting a million Rohingyas to force flee Myanmar for Cox's Bazar. Thus, the world's largest refugee settlement of 34 camps came into existence in Cox's Bazar from 2017, including the two previously formed registered camps in 1992—

Nayapara Camp near Teknaf and Kutupalong Camp in Ukhiya (Fig.2).¹⁷ Both these camps are registered with the UNHCR in collaboration with the government of Bangladesh.¹⁸ Shaufika has also started living in Camp 14 since 2017 August.

I came to know about Shaufika (aged 24),¹⁹ a woman leader of the widow block through the course of my several rounds of conversations in the camps in 2019. It took me a few days to find her, and finally, I was able to meet her. At times, during our long conversations, I felt embarrassed at my 'intrusion' into her life and positions of privilege. My efforts to take her down the memory lane opened her wounds which were still fresh, violent, and ripped with trauma; this triggered my guilt that I have faced multiple times during my stay in Cox's Bazar.

As mentioned earlier, Shaufika is not a widow, although she stays in the widow block. Her husband Ebrahim was a protestor against the current disposition in Myanmar, hence, he was arrested in July 2017. Fearing an impending military crackdown soon, he wanted Shaufika and rest of the family members to escape to Bangladesh. However, within days of his arrest, her in-laws and other family members were witch-hunted and killed. Shaufika somehow managed to escape with her two infant sons as they were already living in hiding after her husband was arrested. She wanted to stay back and

help Ebrahim but had to flee to ensure the safety of her children.²⁰ It took her 10 days to cross over through forests and hills amidst extreme adversaries. In her own words, they walked and walked, hungry and thirsty, losing the sense of time and count of days. All she knew was that the only chance of her survival and that of her children depended on their reaching Bangladesh, along with several others taking the same journey. It was a harrowing experience for them to recount the traumatic journey, even in the summer of 2019, two years since the massacre. It was only after reaching Ukhiya District of Cox's Bazar that she got back her sense of time and distance. The initial days of settling down were marked by immense hardship especially for women like Shaufika, who were mostly used to staying indoors in Myanmar. She never even went out to the markets in Myanmar. This was the first time that she was forced to step out and, most importantly, take decisions like asking the local administration of Bangladesh for help to build her a place in the camps and so on and so forth.²¹

Soon Shaufika became the voice of all single women and widows from her village in Myanmar that needed help to rebuild their lives in the camps. They were given a separate block to live in Hakimpara. Once settled, she took the help of the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society to contact her husband in the prison of Buthidaung and ensure him of their safety (Fig. 3). Her joy knew no bounds when she received a response from him (Fig. 4). With a smile in her lips and tears in her eyes she said, "I keep on waiting to hear from him and write to him. It is not easy. Most times we are denied contact by the jail authorities, but I still try and hope that one day we will be reunited as a family again. I am fortunate that he was spared his life and we know about each other. He and my children are the only family that I have ... but the others here are not that fortunate and I feel so sad for the young women here who have lost everything in 2017. Some of them don't even want to live anymore. This is why I try to help them through local NGOs by providing them psychological support to deal with the trauma and keep them engaged in economic activities. I never went out in Myanmar but here I am going to the tube wells to bring our own water, bring food through the ration received from the camps and buy other essentials all by myself. I could have never imagined doing everything by myself in Myanmar." She added with a smile, "I have also learned to make tea. We are safe here. I hope my husband can also come here to the camps. Here we can atleast sleep safely in the nights unlike Myanmar. For us, the thought of returning under the prevailing conditions is like a nightmare. We can only go back if there is safety but the painful memories will never leave us"²².

BANGLADESH RED CRESCENT SOCIETY
TRACING DEPARTMENT
084-686 BAKA MAGHEBAZAR, DHAKA-1217

MESSAGE FORM 10/05/2017

A. SENDER (ROH) **BRCS Ref. No.**

Full name (ROH): **EBRAHIM**
Father's name (ROH): **ELIYAS**
Mother's name (ROH): **ALIKUMA KATRU**
Date of birth (DD/MM/YY): **21/05/78** Sex: **M**
Relationship with the addressee (ROH/ROH/ROH):
Full postal address (ROH/ROH/ROH): **Maung Gyi, Dham**
Postal code: **000000/000000/000000** **CHECKED**

B. ADDRESSEE (ROH) **BRCS Ref. No.**

Full name (ROH): **KALD MIA**
Father's name (ROH): **KALD MIA**
Mother's name (ROH): **SARA BANU**
Date of birth (DD/MM/YY): **01/01/83** Sex: **M**
Place of birth (DD/MM/YY):
Full address (ROH/ROH/ROH): **MAKEM PARA CAMP, GLOKATSE, HOUSE NO. 10, UKHTYA, COX BAZAR**
Postal code: **000000/000000/000000**

Fig 3: Document facilitating the exchange of letters between Myanmar and the camps in Bangladesh by the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society

RCM/COX/021/17
Dear my wife,
My son and I are staying properly at Buthidaung Prison. I hope you are the same too. We pray for you all. Please take care of son's baby well. Please send me a photo of you and son's baby. I hope you can take care of son's baby by the grace of Allah. That's all for today. Looking forward to the next letter.
Your husband,
Ebrahim

Fig 4: A letter from Shaufika's husband from Myanmar

6. REPLY TO THE MESSAGE (Family news of strictly personal character)
বর্তমান অবস্থা (সর্বজনীন ব্যক্তিগত পরিবারিক খবর)
শ্রীঃ শাউফিকা/কমিউনিটি ক্যাম্পে আছেন।
আমি ও আমার সন্তান বুথিডাউং কারাগারে আছি।
আমি আশা করছি আপনিও সুস্থ থাকবেন।
আমি আপনাকে আমার সন্তানের একটি ছবি
ও আমার সন্তানের একটি ছবি পাঠাবো।
আমি আশা করছি আপনিও সুস্থ থাকবেন।
আমি আপনাকে আমার সন্তানের একটি ছবি
ও আমার সন্তানের একটি ছবি পাঠাবো।
আমি আশা করছি আপনিও সুস্থ থাকবেন।

Fig 5: Shaufika too sends her replies back through the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society.

Shaufika had no access to education in Myanmar or any professional course but is now trying to acquire skills training in the camps. She was a housewife in Myanmar and never had to bother about feeding her family or about earnings. The changed situation has led her to take an active role in raising her children and start a new chapter of her life. She has become the selected representative of her block, trains other women of her camping her sewing machine, the only machine that her block has received, and earns money by selling hand-knitted garments like dresses and shawls, to make lives better for her children. She also helps the other women in her camp. Many like Shaufika dream of getting their children out of the camps to get educated and live a different life.

Shaufika was a pillar of grit and strength. Sipping tea made by Shaufika and chatting with her and other widows from Hakimpura over biscuits and warm hospitality, I was immensely impressed by the courage and zest of Shaufika and others to live against every odd. They have taken a journey that is very difficult to imagine. Perhaps imagination, hence, many times it is more intriguing than the reality. Most of the young widows in the block have lost their husbands in the military crackdown in Myanmar in 2017 but have still not lost hopes or surrendered to their fate by living only off the rationing provided by the government. Rather, many of them are striving to earn so that they can keep capital for their children and make their future secured outside the camps.

Shaufika added, “We never got any opportunity in Myanmar to educate ourselves, but now that we are getting the chance here and NGO

leaders and activists trying to help us, we are extremely happy as this is the first time, we are feeling important. We now feel we have a role too in making choices or take decisions and bring our children up in absence of our husbands or any male figure in the family. This is a boon in disguise for us. Many men inside the camps are unable to accept this but since the NGOs are helping and providing protection to us, we have got the courage to come out and be leaders' ourselves".²³ The women

in Hakimpara embody resilience. Their period of waiting for a change is marked by becoming self-dependent individuals, eager to get educated, learn new skills and start from the scratch. They live in the moment, and for the moment.

“Waiting To Go Back”—The Story of Pormin

I have spent a substantial amount of time with Pormin, an adolescent youth living in the camps since 2017, throughout my stay in Bangladesh. She has been one of my key interlocutors as well, helping me to navigate my presence in the camps. Pormin, whose eyes lit up each time at the mention of Myanmar, was of immense help in taking me to places inside the camps. I could never understand her longing for Myanmar as during her stay there the Rohingyas had suffered the worst manifestations of violence. “*Deshe jaito mon chaye, tar i apekhya korchi*” (“I am waiting to return to my country as a free person and study there just like girls of other countries do. I hope we get justice. I am waiting for justice”).²⁴ Pormin along with her family fled Myanmar in August 2017 while she was studying in the ninth standard; so, she had just one year left to complete the first stage of formal education, which she has not been able to complete yet. This is what she was most sad about.

“What do you want from life at this juncture Pormin?” I asked her. “What do you dream of?” She replied, “To have a life of freedom just like you. To have a normal life, just like most girls across continents have. I want to live a free life in a free country where I will be able to have options to choose from, to be educated, to have ambitions, to be independent, but most importantly to be a citizen. A free citizen!”²⁵ The idea of *normalcy* in camps comes with its own problems that get more prominent through the narrative I present in the next section. Normalising theories regarding semi-permanent camps with political exceptionality, often result into legitimising refugee restricting within the camp boundaries, limiting their mobility through narrow ideas and concepts (see Fig. 6).²⁶

Pormin’s family was never a direct victim in Myanmar, probably why she had no direct bitter memory of the homeland. In fact, her father Ayub Alam shared that he had a good working relationship with both the military and the then government of Myanmar. He had his own business in Myanmar, hence, their family had more resources and access than many others in the camps, for instance, Shaufika and the others



Fig 6: Rohingya children in one of the camps —longing, waiting and hoping



Fig 7: Kitchen of Pormin.

I met in the widow block. Hence, the refugee experiences of Pormin and her family were also different. Bourdieu explains this distinction among individuals through his concepts of ‘habitus’ and ‘capital’.²⁷ Differences in individuals stem from their cultural backgrounds that represent their hierarchy in society and determine their access to capital and resources. Pormin was working in a self-help centre, run by the UNICEF, at the time of this interaction. She has an elder brother, and they were treated equally at home so far as rights to education and employment were concerned. What is important here is to note that belonging is also shaped by access to social resources and capital.

For Pormin, the camps, albeit providing job opportunities to women were still not liveable in comparison to Myanmar where her family enjoyed better access to social and cultural institutions. Within the camps too, Pormin’s cottage was bigger and stacked with things like electric inverter or electricity, when most women that I interacted with in the camps were still waiting for their turns to get full ration, stove or a cooking gas to cook, water, sanitation and even a proper shelter (see Fig.7). Pormin’s family had to leave Myanmar only because there was a clampdown over their entire village and since then they have been hoping to go back at the earliest opportunity.

Pormin and a few others from her age group (15-18 years) would often tell me in the camps that they are “waiting to live a life of freedom like you, waiting to go back to Myanmar ...” This leads one to wonder how refugee women coming from deeply bordered and closeted existences make sense of mobility in an immobile space like that of the camp? Is it, as Shahram Khosravi describes as “existential” stuckedness, as “back to square one,”²⁸ or it is a perpetual state of trying to look for a home and let the home find them? While for Shaufika, the camps have offered an emancipatory space, for someone like Pormin, it is a setback because there are no opportunities in the camps. Their accessibility in Myanmar depended upon their networks, relations with the local administration, documents and resources. Pormin’s

family also have documents of their housing in the Rakhine state. The camp, on the other hand, is like a prison for Pormin.

It is thus intriguing to think about how the stage of waiting can be marked by both hope and hopelessness in a closeted, yet open space like that of the camp. Waiting and hope are intricately connected with each other as without hope can there be any waiting? Time flies—in mobility when one is active, but interestingly also in stagnancy, in apparent temporal immobility. Waiting can have an interesting connotation so far as, historically, women are concerned. Both have been traditionally conceived with temporal stagnation. To elaborate, what I mean here is if we consider women of the yesteryears in South Asia, who will not work outside, domestic labour was hardly even considered as ‘being active’ or as proper work. Non-working upper or upper middle-class women married to landlords (zamindars), workaholic industrialists or educationists and likes, despite having household chores would have stalemate days when each moment would seem like an hour.

Traditionally and historically, women have been relegated to the domestic space, the private. For instance, in the colonial period of the 1940s, in an undivided India (including both Bangladesh and Myanmar as one country), women had left homes to take the roads only for emergencies like a famine or war. Women’s participation in public spheres, political movements or the struggle for independence happened in most cases when the men were visibly absent. Even then it was the middle-class women mainly taking part in public affairs. In of her recent articles, Samita Sen shows the gendered layers of women participation into the political that in recent times have sparked debates on the political being the personal. Moving beyond either celebrating women’s political participation or in labour union movements or highlighting their marginalisation in a pre-independent India, she strives to address women’s’ negotiations with their own families and the limits of gendered behaviour.²⁹ Through moving tales of a few women activists of the colonial era, Sen depicts the stages of women activism and how the political is also personal through a parallel descriptive narrative of both the personal and political lives of these women, the confluence and converges of both lives. Most of these women labour activists were associated with the day’s left movements. Interestingly, each of their personal lives and kinship ties were unusually ahead of their times, often leading to a misplaced or stereotyped reading of how the politics of the women or public lives of them shaped their personal too. Hence, if any of the central characters from Sen’s article, for example, had moved out from a stable marriage or smoked cigarettes with their male colleagues it was naturally considered as normal because these women had independent public lives or opinions and, in most cases, were educated and well read. It can be concluded probably that in any movement the public life of women is often judged by their domestic navigations.

The different contexts that I have discussed in this paper are similar in several ways, but the complexities are deeper. It is fraught by moments of breakdown when everyday living is questioned. In this living, there is a break in the normative framework as to how gender has been construed in countries

of the subcontinent. I was curious regarding how life shapes women, who rarely have worked outside in the public and are suddenly put in a supposedly static, frigid place like a camp. Shahram Khosravi describes the feeling of stuckedness in a space like that of the camp as “going nowhere” or a life that is suspended in social mobility but active in spatial and temporal mobility.³⁰ In most times, the standard response to “what are you waiting for” draws responses like “for a normal life”. Is the idea of a ‘normal life’ same for men and women? Is waiting also gendered and mean different things in accordance with class, generation/age? Drawing from Faith Wilding’s poem *Waiting* (1972), Jenny Richards and Gunilla Lundahl write that women, regardless of class or culture, are conditioned to wait, particularly in relation to care work. Care work is gendered because, throughout history, it has been devalued; it is rarely considered as an economic activity.³¹ We can see that the gendered experiences and situations of Shaufiga and Pormin are very different. The following section adds one more dimension to this and also the problems that normalization brings in the precarious lives that protracted refugees live over a span of time.

“Waiting for Refugee Rights and Inclusion” Within the Current Set-up

We had an unforgettable Rohingya meal at Shabbir³² and Hameeda’s home (Fig. 8). Over this splendid meal, I chatted with Shabbir, his wife and a few women from their Block H of Camp 26, Noyapara in Teknaf. Shabbir is a registered Rohingya and has been living with his family in Noyapara since 1977, from the time of the earliest Rohingya exodus. He was just 10 years old when he came to Noyapara while his wife Hameeda is born in the registered camp of Bangladesh. Shabbir is a Rohingya activist in the camps and has been working for the community for a long time. Since the last few years, he has been actively involved in helping women with education and skill training. “*Meyera meyeder golpo nijerai boluk. Oder kotha amra chelera kano bolbo? Ei jonne ami oder lekha pora sikhe sabalambi bote shahajyo kori*” (“Women should narrate their own stories. Why should we men do that on their behalf? That is why I am helping them with educational opportunities so that they can be independent and be their own representatives”).³³ Shabbir introduced me to Anwara Bibi and her mother Lucky Akhter. Anwara was born in the camps to Lucky (Fig. 9).



Fig 8: Lunch in Camp 26, Noyapara, Teknaf



Fig 9: Entrance of Camp 26, Noyapara, Teknaf

Lucky is a female leader of her block in Camp 26. She had also migrated in 1978, during the first Rohingya exodus from Myanmar, when she was an infant and has been living in Noyapara since then. It is like her real home now as she does not remember anything of Burma, except it being her homeland. With the help of Shabbir, Lucky could enroll her daughter at a local school. Since they live in the registered camp, they have refugee cards issued by the UNHCR. Although they do not formally enjoy refugee rights because Bangladesh is a non-signatory of the 1951 refugee convention, they have managed to ensure education for their children in the camps. For 40 years they have been waiting for a proper refugee status so that their mobility is not restricted outside the camp area, and they can move freely, without fearing incarceration, besides getting employment opportunities in Bangladesh. Lucky works as an NGO volunteer within the camp to generate awareness among women on nutrition, hygiene and reproductive health. She wants her daughter to be educated and move out of the country for employment opportunities. She does not want her children to live like refugees. However, their situation drastically changed after the 2017 influx of the new Rohingya and formation of unregistered camps. Now, over a million plus refugees live across Cox's Bazar that has created animosity among the local Bangladeshi residents. This has significantly impacted the lives of Lucky and others in Noyapara and Kutupalong, the other registered camps. For instance, Lucky's daughter Anwara Akhter, who has studied till the ninth standard in a local Bangladeshi school just outside the camps in Teknaf, was suddenly asked to leave the school, because her identity as a Rohingya was revealed. All through these years she could get registered and study in the school through forged documents but now with strengthened security and vigilance from the government of Bangladesh, the mobility of the registered Rohingyas have begun to be curbed as well. Despite having UNHCR-approved refugee cards, they are treated equally like the unregistered Rohingya who are known as 'Undocumented Myanmar Nationals' in Bangladesh.

Anwara speaks fluent Bengali like her mother Lucky, and Shabbir and Hameeda. Their attires were also strikingly different from the majority of the Rohingyas in the camps. For them it is easily possible to pretend as

Bangladeshi nationals because of their attires and general conduct. Although given a chance, they would like to go back to Myanmar, yet for them it will mark a rupture in their settled camp lives for these many years. At this stage all they want is to be given refugee rights in Bangladesh which includes the right to education and economic opportunities, a life of dignity, freedom and inclusion within the society of Bangladesh. The existential experience of the registered Rohingyas have continuously shifted between hope and hopelessness in their quest to form new identities and yet not shelving their own as Rohingyas.

Waiting, thus, has remained a perpetual condition in their lives, as a way of life. They live in waiting, for a change, but again to not change what they have already built in the last few many years in Bangladesh. Waiting to get back and yet waiting to not let go. Scholars like Shahram Khosravi argue that waiting is also tied with the technique of delaying. Refugees are often kept in waiting, through a circular motion of delaying as they need to start from scratch again. “Dialectical relation between the now and the not-yet- generates hopeful visions and practices. Even in the form of daydreaming, these practices are agentive.”³⁴ Protracted periods of waiting are also an aging process as we see in the case of the registered Rohingyas in Bangladesh. In the next section, I write about the current challenges that women collectively face in the camps and their struggles to overcome them.

Becoming Independent, Yet the Challenges ...

Shaufika, Pormin and Lucky Akhter have been able to negotiate with a space like that of the camp—spatially active but temporally immobile—through their courage, valor and grit, occasionally with external help like humanitarian organisations. The humanitarian response platform to the Rohingya crisis, which is a collective of various international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), has given importance to gender rights and prevention of sexual violence on women and children to ensure a safe environment within the camps. Prospects of employment opportunities for women have also increased inside the camps, paving way for self-reliance.

Although there is no system of formal education in the camps, there are



Fig 10: Awareness session organised by local NGO

education awareness sessions organised by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (also known as UN Women) in collaboration with local NGOs based in Bangladesh. Many local NGOs too have separate ‘safe centres,’ focusing on skill training and a space to share personal

problems for young girls and women (Fig.10). According to a UN report on the humanitarian assistance platform created to respond to The Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh, and published in February 2019, women and girls make up 52 percent of the total refugee population with around 16 percent being female headed households (the absence of a male figure mostly owing to the clampdowns in Myanmar). Girls (57 percent) represent a larger and more vulnerable group as they are more prone to sexual abuse, child marriage, child trafficking, abuse and neglect. The report mentions that although initial aid from the government to resettle the refugees post-August 2017 was swift, there remain numerous gaps especially relating to the gender protection sector. One of the key recommendations in the report was to train men and adolescent boys “to promote positive masculinities and gender equality as a strategy to end gender-based violence”.³⁵ To promote leadership among women and equal representation within the camps, various women’s and men’s groups are being formed in the camps to make them audible on protection issues. There are active initiatives to involve Rohingya women as volunteers in:

- The Health Sector, as assistants in health facilities and as assistants to midwives and doctors.
- The Sector of WASH, as hygiene promoters to generate awareness regarding safe drinking water, to teach how to use tube wells and washrooms/latrines that are built in the camps.
- The Protection Sector, as team members in the Protection Emergency Response Units, to provide basic first aid, search and rescue in the camps.³⁶

On the one hand, while ample instances hint at the camp being an emancipatory space for the Rohingya women where they possibly can exercise their liberty without consulting the male members of the family, on the other hand, tales of gender-based violence, border trafficking and forced prostitution continue. Many women and girls that I have met in the camps like Pormin and Anwara are evolving through their education and employment. However, despite success stories, there are severe constrictions that impede many others. Turning skills into commercial purposes, even when they want, have not materialised in some cases. For instance, Rashida (aged 24), housed in Camp 9, Balukhali, said, “I know sewing and have a machine as well donated by a local NGO, but I mostly stitch our own clothes.”

Why doesn’t she sell the products which will help her financially? To my query, she said, “I want to, but I do not have resources to make something good enough to make it saleable. I have asked a few NGO workers to help me multiple times, but no one has helped so far. I send my daughter to the skill training sessions that the NGOs organise here, but she says that the sessions are not effective. Sometimes there are workshops but that will not help us. Even if we know what to do, the question is how to do it. We are not used to working outside or making things for sale”.³⁷ Similar narratives like this and others hint that child marriage and early pregnancy resulting into big families, without even basic education, mark the lives of most Rohingya

women, if not all. Low levels of literacy that restrict many women from public spaces pose the biggest challenge for women to work inside the camps, even if there are now more opportunities that they used to get in Myanmar. Many of them even face difficulty in accessing the latrines because they are built far from home.

Most women I have met confirmed that there were more opportunities in the camps for them to work as compared to Myanmar, but most times they were not allowed by the male members. Even now, when they are trying to earn to help the male members in the family, they do not get assistance or support. While some do manage by teaching in schools supported by INGOs like the UNHCR or IOM, there are internal restrictions from the families itself. For instance, Ali Aham (aged 52) has six daughters. They are a family of eight members, including his wife. He is extremely poor and not educated, which is why he has not managed to get any work in the camp, unlike some of his neighbours. They are dependent only on the ration provided by World Food Programme in the camps. I wanted to talk to his daughters about their lives inside the camps, but it was Ali who kept on answering on their behalf. They hail from Maungdaw in Myanmar, Rakhine state. His elder daughters are twins, aged 18 years and the youngest daughter is four. He had a business of dry fish in Myanmar, but after they left the country in a rush, penniless, following the major crackdown in 2017, he has not been able to start afresh in Bangladesh. Unlike many Rohingya living in the camps, Ali has not been to Bangladesh before; hence, he has no relatives or contacts there who could help him with the capital to resume work. Additionally, he is extremely worried as he doesn't have a son who could support him. In his words, "the daughters are grown up, and already passed the age of marriage but I am unable to get them married off without arranging for the dowry".³⁸

This bit of news was surprising and only proves why gender experiences are different in an apparent homogenising space like the refugee camp. Alam continued, "so many prospective grooms and their fathers have come to see my daughters but because I am poor and cannot arrange anything at the moment, apart from the marriage ceremony, they are not willing to take my daughters. How can I arrange for gold and cash when I am not even able to provide adequate food to the family? The ration is not enough as we get only rice, dal and sugar. Tell me, how can someone survive without vegetables or fish and meat that we are used to having. Is it possible to eat rice and dal (lentils) every day? Others here earn money somehow or the other or they sell off their extra packets of rice and dal to buy vegetable or fish and meat but the ration that I get is not even sufficient!"

Upon enquiring why doesn't he let his daughters work then, when there are multiple opportunities in the camps now for young girls and women, Ali replied, "My daughters are not educated and I will never allow them to study. Our religion does not allow that. I will not even let them go out, especially the eldest ones as they are quite grown up and should stay indoors, covering themselves well. Our women are not allowed to go outside or earn money."³⁹My attempts to speak to the girls were not much successful as although they kept staring at me with eager eyes, their father was vigilant to

make sure that they do not get the chance to communicate. One of the daughters, aged seven, was eager to speak, and I asked her whether she goes to the women-friendly spaces—one was built right next to their shelter—which prompted me to ask the question.

The daughter replied that she and her sisters enjoy going there. “The women teach us, allow us to play, and we can also sing there freely. The teachers are really good.”⁴⁰ At this point, Ali intervened by signalling her to stop. Then he told me, “I have till now allowed three of my daughters to go to this centre because they are not yet adults, but I cannot allow them to continue as I am already receiving threats for this. The camps are filled with many outsiders. There are so many male NGO workers. Often, they try to be friendly with our daughters, marriages are also taking place. But, I will never let my daughters go out and be friends with men. I am a god-fearing person and cannot allow something that our religion does not permit for women.”⁴¹

There are several similar families who would restrict women mobility sighting religious reasons, while others would talk of ‘threats from within the community’, not naming the groups or sources. For instance, Arifa (aged 16) was teaching Burmese in a school built by a local NGO, close to her home. My interaction with some of the NGO workers on their work in the education sector led me to Arifa who had studied till the ninth standard in Myanmar and was forced eviction from there in 2017. Her family was supportive when she got the job in school for 8000 Bangladeshi Taka (BDT). But after a few months, she said, “My father started getting threat calls to stop me from working. Then one night a group of four-five men came and told my father if I do not stop working, the consequences would not be good. I was still adamant of not leaving work as women security is much better in the camps in comparison to Myanmar, but then I got a call recently and the man told me if I still continue to work then they will kidnap and kill me. On hearing this, my parents and brother got very scared and that is when I left my job. I have told this to my school authority but reporting to the camp administration will be risky as they might harm me or my family. Although there is security in the camps, after 5 p.m. till the next morning there are no guards or protection. That is when all stray incidents take place in the camps”.⁴² In recent years, following my visit to the camps, especially due to the Covid lockdowns, the protection scenario of the camp has further weakened resulting in rise of petty crimes.

While young girls like Arifa and Pormin wait, not fully knowing for what, oscillating between hope and despair, for others like Jasmin (aged 10) the wait is for some kind of a “normal life”. I prodded Jasmin to reveal what does normal mean to her, to which the very reticent young girl responded “to get married in Australia and get settled there”. She does not like the camps which are restrictive with no big spaces to play or mingle with other kids like Myanmar. She has learnt from her parents that living normally like others mean a life like her own elder sister who has been married off to Australia from the camps in 2018. Jasmine is patiently waiting for her turn to freedom. For her, marriage spelt freedom, hope and the promise of a good, normal life.⁴³ Both for Arifa and Pormin the right to education for camp settlers is

extremely important as awareness regarding rights and justice for refugees and women specifically can stem from there. For them and women living in the widow block, justice is also very important for losing their families and gender based violence like rape. They believe that justice in the form of a legal redressal in their homeland Myanmar can provide them the security necessary for facilitating a return to Myanmar in near future.

Conclusion

It goes without saying that women and children continue to constitute the most vulnerable group among refugees and stateless people. Striking is how they can ride over the boundaries of being victims and find new ways of belonging through their work and activism. In “At Home but Not at Home,” Nicole Constable explores the shifting notions of home for diasporic women.⁴⁴ Through an exclusionary space as that of the camp which reeks of captivity, deprivation, and marginalisation, the Rohingya women can make a mark for themselves.

So, waiting within this paradigm is an ontological notion when belonging can be understood through time as well as space. Although traditionally, the idea of belonging is tied with home and homeland, it can also be relational to space.⁴⁵ It is through this lens that we can try and understand the different kinds of temporal belonging that is shaped by the Rohingya women across age and generations, old and new settlers. In this context, for women like Lucky who has barely any recollection of her homeland and Anwara who is born in Bangladesh, a return or deportation by the state of Bangladesh to Myanmar now can mean a ‘temporal un-belonging’, in addition to the spatial belonging that has marked the most part of their lives. They have spent their entire camp lives in believing they only belong to Myanmar and Bangladesh is their temporary space to be in, but in this process, Cox’s Bazar has become their home and thus for them there is a lot of doubt in waiting. This existential doubt comes from the danger at both sides of perpetually not belonging to their present time and not fully comprehending their belonging to their future, potentially their homeland, Myanmar.⁴⁶

Do they still have hope? The answer is yes. This phase of uncertainty is not bereft of hope which is often shaped by humanitarianism. As Ranabir Samaddar reminds us, humanitarianism that shapes the discourse of refugees, stateless people and migrants actually emerge out of these refugee situations.⁴⁷ Over the last couple of years, the Bangladesh government has decided to resettle registered Rohingyas in a different region since Cox’s Bazar is primarily a tourist area and the smuggling-trafficking nexus in the region has led to a lot of anti-social activities, including drug smuggling. While rising forced prostitution in and outside the camps and generally in Cox’s Bazar is of concern, it is also time to consider these options as labour of choice for women. There are times when the line between force and volition obliterates, and in both physical and spatial mobility, choice is triggered by a condition, just as in a displaced situation there are works and choices that women take to

be independent, and this autonomy needs to be recognised even within the ambit of coercive external forces.

The author has published on Rohingya refugee experiences in the camps in Bangladesh from her multiple visits to these campsites and interviews with the refugees. Few interviews in this article are borrowed from the author's previously published work "Towards Emancipation or Bondage? Rohingya Women's Narrative from Bangladesh Refugee Camps and Indian Jails," in Migration, Trafficking and Gender Construction: Women in Transition, ed. Roli Mishra, (New Delhi: Sage/Stree, 2020).

Notes

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¹⁴Basu Ray Chaudhury and Samaddar, *The Rohingya in South Asia*; Paula Banerjee, "Foreword," in *Migration, Trafficking and Gender Construction*; Nasreen Chowdhury and

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¹⁵The names Burma and Myanmar are at times used interchangeably in this paper without any political connotation. The Burmese government changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar in 1989, but the older generation of people living in India or Bangladesh often refer to the country as Burma and not Myanmar. It is in this spirit that I have used the two words to denote the same place.

¹⁶Chowdhury and Mohanty, *Citizenship, Nationalism and Refugeehood*.

¹⁷Sengupta, "Towards Emancipation or Bondage?"

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Shaufika, Camp 14, Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, interviewed by author, March 2019.

²⁰Shaufika and other women, Camp 14, Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, interviewed by author, July 2019.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Pormin, Camp 7, Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, interviewed by author, January–August 2019 and *Signal* messages, June 2, 2022.

²⁵Ibid January–August 2019.

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³²Both names have been changed for security.

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³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Sengupta, "Towards Emancipation or Bondage?"

³⁸Rashida, Camp 9, Balukhali, Bangladesh, interviewed by author, June 2019.

³⁹Ali Alam, Camp 9, Balukhali, Bangladesh, interviewed by author, March 2019.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Arifa, Camp 9, Balukhali, Bangladesh, interview by author, June 2019.

⁴³Jasmine and her family members, Camp 7, Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, interview by author, June 2019

⁴⁴Nicole Constable, "At Home but Not at Home: Filipina Narratives of Ambivalent Returns," *Cultural Anthropology* 14, no. 2 (May, 1999): 203-28.

⁴⁵Khosravi, *Waiting*; Nasreen Chowdhory, *Refugees, Citizenship and Belonging in South Asia* (Singapore: Springer, 2018).

⁴⁶Khosravi, *Waiting*.

⁴⁷Ranabir Samaddar, *The Postcolonial Age of Migration* (New York: Routledge, 2020).