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'Through teaching I found myself again': the role of self-efficacy in Rohingya refugee teachers' motivation to teach in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Teacher shortages and working conditions are linked to a global 'teacher motivation crisis', while teachers' pedagogical capacity often explains a 'global learning crisis'. These tensions are acute in conflict-affected contexts, where teachers' work conditions are associated with burnout and high attrition. Yet little evidence exists on refugee teachers who often teach without pre-service training, all the while navigating profound liminality in their lives. To examine how this reality shapes refugee teachers' commitment to the teaching profession, this study of Rohingya refugee teachers ($n = 301$) in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, investigates the relationship between teachers' experiences of self-efficacy and their motivation to teach. Findings show that self-efficacy ($B = 0.51$, $p < 0.001$) is positively and significantly associated with teacher motivation. However, Rohingya narratives reveal how a more complex repatriation agenda underpins their commitment. Moreover, gendered differences in how self-efficacy is experienced highlight the inherently political and humanistic foundations of teaching.

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Introduction

By mid-2025, the estimated global forcibly displaced population stood at 120 million people, of which 31 million are refugees seeking asylum in countries other than their own (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2025). Approximately 12.4 million of this population are school-aged, but only 54 percent of this number are able to attend school (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2025). Within these statistics, Bangladesh is currently experiencing one of the world's most protracted and intractable refugee crises. Since the Myanmar military's 2017 campaign of ethnic cleansing, nearly 1 million Rohingya from Rakhine State have resided in 36 barbed-wire fenced and surveilled refugee camps. Stateless, the Rohingya are stuck in limbo with resettlement or repatriation possibilities both undecided and far out of reach (Begum 2024).

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United Nations agencies and local implementing partners manage over 6000 refugee learning facilities in Cox's Bazar. These centres serve approximately 303,000 Rohingya children and adolescents, representing 75 percent of the 399,000 Rohingya children, adolescents and youth living in the camps (Cox's Bazar Education Sector 2025). Before the humanitarian funding crisis of 2025, close to 7000 Rohingya teachers and just over 3000 Bangladeshi host-community teachers with varying levels of training and experience taught this population. Teachers' work in Cox's Bazar contributes to the protection of children's rights and it creates a contrary sense of belonging via the Myanmar national curriculum and Burmese language, which are taught in anticipation of the Rohingyas' eventual repatriation to Myanmar (Prodip 2023). As a Rohingya teacher who participated in this study shared:

Because we hope that one day we will go back to our motherland, if we learn here continuously then we can join [schools in Myanmar]. If we learn grade five here, then we can go there and adjust at grade six . . . so it is very good that we are continuously supporting and learning [now] . . . it is for our children's [future]. (Mohammed Ullah¹)

Teachers are the strongest school-level predictor of children's learning and well-being (Hattie 2009; Schwille, Dembélé, and Schubert 2007). But due to myriad social, political and economic factors, the teaching profession is beset by low levels of motivation and high rates of attrition (UNESCO 2024). To understand whether the precarity of teaching in refugee-hosting settings further compounds this reality, my research focuses on the work and motivation of thousands of teachers like Muhammed Ullah who provide vital learning and protection for forcibly displaced children in Cox's Bazar and further afield. For this study, I employed the construct of *self-efficacy*, a widely cited factor contributing to teachers' positive *motivation to teach* (see Lauermann et al. 2017; Watt, Richardson, and Smith 2017). In doing so, I explore how the conditions in which Rohingya refugee teachers' work enable or hinder a sense of self-efficacy and their corresponding motivation to persist in the profession. In this regard, the two questions that my study addresses are:

- (1) To what extent do Rohingya refugee teachers experience *self-efficacy* in their work?
- (2) In what ways, if any, are Rohingya refugee teachers' experiences of *self-efficacy* associated with their *motivation to teach*?

In this article I first introduce the context of Cox's Bazar and the Rohingya refugee crisis, connecting the complexity of the Rohingyas' past and the present liminality of their displacement with education's perceived role in their hoped-for futures, including their repatriation to Myanmar. In the literature review that follows, I note the dearth of evidence on refugee teachers' *motivation to teach* and the implications of this gap on policy and practice in refugee-hosting settings like Cox's Bazar. Next, I describe the mixed-methods approach I employed with a sample of Rohingya refugee teachers ($n = 301$) to understand how the construct of *self-efficacy* might be associated with Rohingya refugee teachers' *motivation to teach*. Finally, I discuss the

implications of my findings on policy and practice in the refugee education sector more broadly.

Teaching in the context of the Rohingya refugee crisis

The Muslim Rohingyas' statelessness emerged after Myanmar's revocation of their citizenship in 1982. Following years of diminished rights and the proliferation of online hate speech from Buddhist nationalists in the early 2010s, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) coordinated an attack on Myanmar police posts in August 2017. This event reignited inter-communal violence between Arakan Buddhists and the Muslim Rohingya, stoking a new campaign of 'ethnic cleansing' carried out by the Myanmar Government's Tatmadaw military forces (Hossain 2023). As many as 25,000 Rohingya are thought to have perished, leading to 889,753 Rohingya seeking protection in Cox's Bazar (Habib et al. 2018).

An ad hoc arrangement between the UNHCR and the Bangladesh government permitted initial educational activities for Rohingya children, but created an under-resourced and unpredictable learning environment (Magee, Diwakar, and Nicolai 2020). Humanitarian agencies seeking to establish a cohesive programme of basic education were then slowed by inter-agency tensions, languid bureaucracy and government anxieties (Homonchuk, Sharp, and Nicolai 2024). By early 2018, UNICEF and a constellation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) implemented the Learning Competency Framework and Approach (LCFA) for over 300,000 children, which included psychosocial support, socio-emotional learning, and literacy and numeracy activities (Coombes, Ponta, and INEE 2019). Fledgling Rohingya organisations also built a network of community-led schools, employing Myanmar's national curriculum and Quranic teaching to create a semblance of 'formal' education in the camps (Olney, Haque, and Mubarak 2019; Nilsen et al. 2023; Prodip and Garnett 2019). Fearing the insurgent influence that Rohingya schools might foment, however, in 2021 the Bangladesh government closed Rohingya-led schools, much to the dismay of Rohingya teachers (Human Rights Watch 2021; Østby et al. 2023). Responding to Rohingya sentiments about the inadequacy of the LCFA and intensifying frustrations relating to the closure of Rohingya schools, in 2022 Bangladesh also retracted the ban on formal curricula (Magee, Diwakar, and Nicolai 2020; REACH 2021). From 2023 onwards, and in line with emergent urgency for the Rohingya's repatriation to Myanmar, the Myanmar Curriculum was then approved for fast-track implementation in UN-led learning centres – albeit with inadequate funding and no foreseeable possibility of accreditation in Bangladesh or Myanmar.

Rohingya teachers teach the Myanmar Curriculum in the Burmese language and script – a nascent vernacular to many and once weaponised as an instrument of the Rohingyas' 'unbelonging' to and dispossession in Myanmar (Galache 2020). And as Myanmar's broader civil war rages on, possibilities for repatriation are exceedingly grim and thus the curriculum and Burmese language have marginal utility if the Rohingya stay in Bangladesh or are resettled elsewhere. As markers of their liminality and hope, however, the curriculum and language of instruction acquire significant symbolic value as Rohingya work towards an 'imagined future' (Dryden-Peterson

2022): they embody a paradoxical truth at odds with *and* a response to the origins of the Rohingyas' forced displacement.

The situation in Cox's Bazar also mirrors knowledge–power asymmetries in emergency settings where 'deficit perspectives are reinscribed through program design [and] constrained by Northern knowledge systems' (Zakharia, 2024, 120). This effect was exacerbated via the centralisation of Rohingya learning centres, in which teachers now contend with expropriative work arrangements and limited agency due to the 'racialized' hierarchies of control within the international humanitarian system (Olney, Haque, and Mubarak 2019; Shah 2023). Notwithstanding threats to Rohingya teachers' job security and salary cuts since the humanitarian funding crisis of 2025–2026, refugee teachers' work as presented in this study is situated within the 2022–2024 period of my fieldwork and corresponding political economy.

Literature review

While teacher motivation studies in settings of conflict and forced-displacement are rare, refugee teachers teach in order to nurture a sense of protection, belonging and possibility (Falk 2023; Shah 2023; Zakharia 2024); to be community- or nation-builders (Dryden-Peterson 2022; Sesnan et al. 2013; Waters and LeBlanc 2005); and to prevent another 'lost generation' of learners (Nilsen et al. 2023; Olney, Haque, and Mubarak 2019).

West and Ring (2015) highlighted challenges pertaining to refugee teacher retention and multiple studies since have then focused on teacher well-being – for which motivation is a corollary factor (e.g. Brandt and Lopes Cardozo 2023; Falk 2023; Marchais et al. 2024; Mendenhall et al. 2024). Yet few studies define or directly investigate the experiences that contribute to refugee teacher motivation in settings like Cox's Bazar. In this way, our full understanding of refugee teacher well-being dynamics and refugee teachers' *motivation to teach* are constrained by the fact that a majority of studies on teacher motivation come from high-income and stable settings (e.g. Fernet et al. 2008; Lauermann et al. 2017; Watt, Richardson, and Smith 2017). Moreover, just a handful of studies focus on refugee teachers' lived experiences and the factors that influence their well-being, with only fragmented articulations of how well-being extends to teachers' *motivation to teach* (see Brandt and Lopes Cardozo 2023; Falk, Shephard, and Mendenhall 2022; Kirk and Winthrop 2007, 2008, 2013; Wolf et al. 2015). Further still, while a number of recent studies draw attention to the political economy of refugee education in Cox's Bazar, Rohingya teachers are largely overlooked (Akther 2024; Nilsen et al. 2023; Prodip and Garnett 2019; Østby et al. 2023; Rahman and Husain 2022; Shohel 2022). This gap limits our understanding of education interventions in Cox's Bazar with implications for future research and policymaking. It also signals Bangladesh's politicised and restrictive regulatory environment, which has hampered scholarly research such as my own.

Scholars recognise the concept of teacher motivation as 'amorphous' (Tao 2016), 'vague' (Han and Yin 2016) and 'poorly defined' (Watt, Richardson, and Smith 2017). Additionally, due to the contextually variable factors that determine an individual's motivation to act, there is little consensus on how universal concepts of motivation might apply to the work of teaching (Han and Yin 2016). There is some agreement, however, on the categories of factors that nurture an individual's initiation of an activity

and their engagement in it. As Han and Yin (2016) theorise, motivation comes from a nuanced constellation of social, political and economic conditions that shape an individual's beliefs, upon which they decide to act.

High-income setting studies conceptualise teacher motivation and the phenomena in teachers' personal and professional lives that influence their *motivation to teach*. For example, Watt, Richardson, and Smith (2017) Factors Influencing Teaching (FIT) scale includes the social utility value, personal utility value, task demand and task reward of teaching. Similarly, Lauermann et al. (2017) employ the intrinsic career value of teaching as a core motivation factor. Fernet et al. (2008) draw on Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory and the factors of autonomy, competence and relatedness as informing a teacher's *motivation to teach*. And Osman and Warner's (2020) Expectancy Value Theory (EVT) includes expectancy for success, attainment value or the alignment of a task with the individual's identity and beliefs as central determinants.

In all of these studies, teachers' perceived *self-efficacy* – or their beliefs in and experiences of task success – is positively and significantly correlated with teachers' motivation. For example, Watt and Richardson's initial FIT study (2006) found that perceptions of teaching ability (or projected self-efficacy), the intrinsic value of teaching, and the moral or political purpose of teaching, or desire to make a social contribution, were the most powerful predictors of teachers' motivation to join the profession. Lauermann et al. (2017) also identified how the social utility value of teaching and teachers' perceived *self-efficacy* were core predictors of their *motivation to teach*. Likewise, Osman and Warner (2020) found that teachers' perceived *self-efficacy* was the most powerful predictor of teachers' willingness to integrate new practices into their classrooms ($p < 0.05$). Fernet et al. (2008) also showed that *teacher self-efficacy* was the most significant predictor of teachers' motivation to fulfil core teaching tasks ($R^2 = 0.49$, $p < 0.01$). Building on these insights, my study investigates how experiences of *self-efficacy* are associated with Rohingya refugee teachers' *motivation to teach* in a context of forced displacement.

Methods

Over three distinct phases of mixed-methods research, I made six trips to Bangladesh between 2022 and 2024, accruing a total of seven months in the Cox's Bazar camps to carry out the larger socio-ecological study from which this article's findings are drawn. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Institutional Review Board at Teachers College, Columbia University, Protocol Number 22-329. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and my research was conducted in accordance with relevant ethical guidelines.

Research sites

The quantitative and qualitative components of my study took place in four camps within the 24-camp Kutupalong complex, which hosts 709,800 or 72 percent of the 975,350 Rohingya refugees living in Kutupalong at the time (Inter-Sector

Coordination Group 2024). The four camps comprised 156,032 people or 21 percent of the UNHCR registered population living in Cox's Bazar (Inter-Sector Coordination Group 2024). To maintain the anonymity of the camps and the teachers who participated in my study, these sites are referred to as Camp A, Camp B, Camp C and Camp D.

Research design

While my research was effectively exploratory due to a lack of pre-existing studies on Rohingya teachers' work, a three-phase explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was better aligned with my desire to include teachers' 'explanatory' analysis of larger quantitative patterns, meaning this design provided grounded and analytical depth (Creswell 2014).

Following concept and research instrument validation with key informants and a refugee teacher advisory group, I administered and analysed results from a survey on refugee teachers' experiences at the classroom, learning centre and community levels. I then facilitated focus group discussions (FGDs) to elicit teachers' interpretations of quantitative results. In using a closed-ended quantitative survey and open-ended qualitative methods, I minimised the limitations of my approach and achieved a more layered account of the relationship between teachers' lived experiences and their *motivation to teach* in Cox's Bazar (Creswell 2014; Schoonenboom and Johnson 2017).

Quantitative methods

Based on feasibility consultations with key informants and my advisory group, the 12 enumerators I employed for this study recruited an initial sample of 500 teacher participants via a non-random purposive sampling approach (Creswell 2014). Given my focus on variations in refugee teachers' *motivation to teach* across identity and contextual factors, participants were selected to reflect key dimensions of analytical relevance such as refugee and host-community status, sex, years of teaching experience, and alignment with the demographic composition of teacher identity groups across the four camps. My final sample of 494 teachers² represents 27 percent of all Rohingya refugee and Bangladeshi host-community teachers working in the selected camps ($n = 1816$) and 5 percent of the total teacher workforce in the Cox's Bazar camps ($N = 9732$).

Although this article focuses on Rohingya refugee teachers, the inclusion of Bangladeshi host-community teachers provided a comparative baseline in my larger study. This enabled my analysis of the different realities associated with teaching in Cox's Bazar as a shared context and the experiences unique to forcibly displaced Rohingya refugee teachers. It also allowed for a more precise identification of how Rohingya teachers' liminality and 'unknown futures' shaped their *motivation to teach* (Dryden-Peterson 2017, 2022).

Surveys were administered using Samsung tablets and the Kobo Toolbox platform's offline data collection function due to the Bangladesh government's prohibition on internet connections within the camps. Because of teachers' language and time limitations and to reduce cognitive load, teachers responded to survey items using a simple four-point Likert scale.³

Motivation to teach and self-efficacy scales

The dependent *motivation to teach* outcome variable, as shown in Table 1, comprised a combination of 12 extrinsic and intrinsic motivation items that key informants and the literature identify as core motivation factors for teaching in refugee-hosting settings. *Motivation to teach* is theorised via the work of teaching's contributions to self, to children, to teachers' communities and to the future.

Table 1. Motivation to teach survey items.

-
- (1) *I will continue to teach because I need the money*
 - (2) *I will continue teaching because there are no other job opportunities*
 - (3) *I will continue teaching because I love working with Rohingya children*
 - (4) *I will continue teaching because I see the positive difference I make*
 - (5) *I will continue to teach because I am helping create a better future*
 - (6) *I will continue teaching to help Rohingya rebuild their lives*
 - (7) *I will continue teaching because it supports my own development*
 - (8) *I will continue teaching because teaching skills will help me in the future*
 - (9) *I will continue teaching because I enjoy the respect I get*
 - (10) *I will continue teaching because I benefit from the status*
 - (11) *I am personally committed to teaching in Cox's Bazar*
 - (12) *I want a future career in teaching*
-

The independent *self-efficacy* predictor factor was then defined by six items (see Table 2) which included teachers' personal beliefs about their influence on children's sense of belonging, children's learning achievement and children's protection from harm. For the purpose of this study, and to correct for the opaqueness of teacher motivation definitions in the literature, *self-efficacy* is simply defined as a teacher's 'beliefs in and experiences of task success' (Watt, Richardson, and Smith 2017). In other words, and as an operational definition for this study, this is the extent to which teachers believe their work makes a difference for the children they teach.

Table 2. Self-efficacy survey items.

-
- (1) *I believe I have a positive relationship with my students*
 - (2) *I believe I can help my students to feel like they belong in my classroom*
 - (3) *As a teacher, I believe I am able to protect my students from harm*
 - (4) *As a teacher, I can help my students' feel a sense of safety*
 - (5) *As a teacher, I believe I have an influence on student learning success*
 - (6) *As a teacher, I CANNOT help students to have hope for the future (reverse scale)*
-

I uploaded survey results to Stata and constructed index variables for the *motivation to teach* outcome factor and the *self-efficacy* predictor factor by averaging item responses per observation. I next disaggregated the *sex* and *identity* variables to create four new teacher identity group 'dummy' variables.⁴ I then employed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to validate the structure of my predictor and outcome factors, assessing model fit using RMSEA, CFI, TLI and CD,⁵ as well as factor reliability using Cronbach's alpha (with an $\alpha > 0.70$ acceptance level). Next, I ran three OLS regressions – first with only the *sex*, *identity*, *age* and *experience* demographic control variables and the *motivation to teach* outcome factor, then with the demographic control variables and the *self-efficacy* predictor

factor, and finally with the disaggregated teacher identity variables of *age* and *experience* and the *self-efficacy* predictor factor. This allowed me to assess the direction, strength and statistical significance of the *self-efficacy* factor on teachers' *motivation to teach*. Finally, I compared each model's explanatory power using R^2 and unstandardised coefficients (B).

Qualitative methods

A sample of 24 teachers were selected to participate in subsequent FGDs. Five gender- and identity-segregated groups were formed, representing all four camps and loosely mirroring the demographic composition of the teacher workforce across the four selected camps. With translation support, two 90-minute-long FGDs for each group were facilitated, amounting to 10 sessions and 30 hours of FGD transcripts for analysis. In the first FGD I invited teachers to interpret visualisations of descriptive *motivation to teach* statistics and provide experiential insights on the relationship between these findings, their work and their own *motivation to teach*. In the second FGD we interpreted statistics relating to *self-efficacy* and teachers' own experiences. Next, I uploaded field notes and FGD transcripts to NVivo for open and closed coding and the identification of themes and patterns through deductive and inductive analytical approaches (Creswell 2014; Saldana 2015).

Limitation

Due to power differentials between implementing partners, enumerators, teachers and myself, a degree of social desirability bias in the survey results likely eventuated: teachers may have provided responses that they wanted end users to read rather than an accurate reflection of their situations (Plano-Clark and Creswell 2015). Due to profound job scarcity, where dignity is in short supply, teachers were unlikely to contribute in ways that exacerbated their already pronounced vulnerabilities. This influenced my decision to employ an explanatory mixed-methods approach in which qualitative critiques mediated possibly inflated survey results. In effect, my triangulation of the literature and qualitative insights helped control for any potential distortions in the quantitative results.

An additional limitation is the language in which surveys were administered and FGDs facilitated. I do not speak Rohingya and the language has no written script, meaning that Rohingya teachers participated via languages and modalities that were not their own. Survey items were therefore validated by an advisory group and written in grade-five level English to reduce the cognitive burden for enumerators and participants alike. Finally, because my sample was not representative, my findings are indicative of refugee teachers' *motivation to teach* but are not generalisable to the wider refugee teacher workforce.

Findings

Rohingya male teachers ($n = 260$) made up the largest proportion of the sample (53 percent), with their highest representation in Camp B ($n = 85$). Bangladeshi female teachers ($n = 163$) accounted for 32 percent of the sample and are evenly distributed across camps, while Rohingya female teachers ($n = 41$), making up 9 percent of the sample, are most

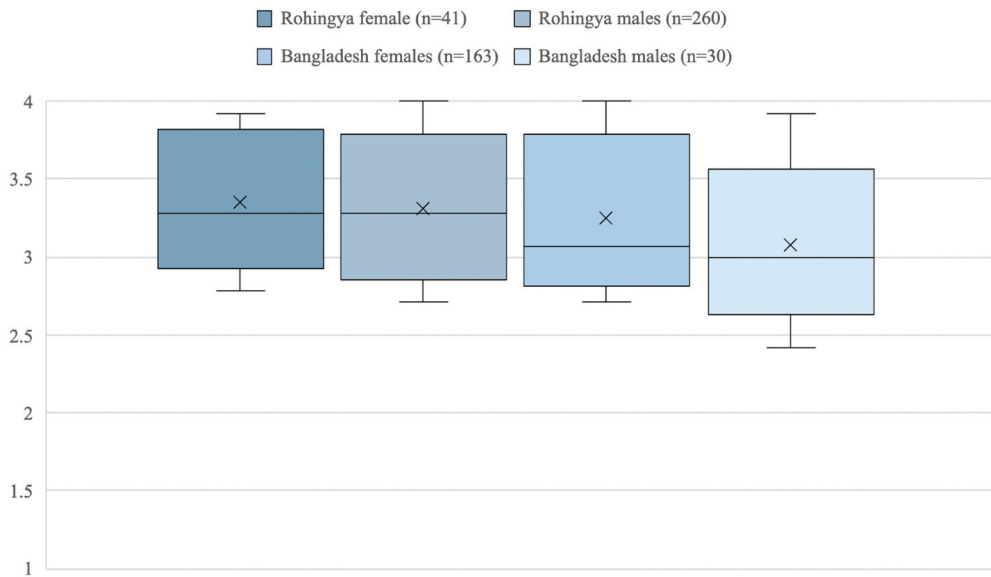


Figure 1. Box plot of teachers' motivation to teach disaggregated by teacher identity ($N = 494$).

represented in Camp D. Bangladeshi male teachers ($n = 30$) are the smallest group, representing just 6 percent of the overall sample ($N = 494$).

In terms of my sample's reported *motivation to teach*, Figure 1 illustrates the identity-disaggregated mean, median and range of participant responses to *motivation to teach* survey items.

Rohingya teachers – both female ($M = 3.34$) and male ($M = 3.31$) – reported slightly higher levels of *motivation to teach* than their Bangladeshi peers, with Bangladeshi females averaging 3.23 and Bangladeshi males reporting a statistically significant and lower *motivation to teach* with 3.09.⁶ Figure 1 also illustrates consistent interquartile ranges across groups, though Bangladeshi male teachers exhibited a wider spread and lower minimum values, suggesting that there are more teachers in this group with low motivation levels.

Table 3 below details the three OLS regression models that I ran. In Model 1, the Rohingya refugee identity is a statistically significant predictor of participants' *motivation to teach* ($B = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$) while *sex*, *age* and *experience* have a limited association, resulting in a very low overall R^2 of 0.04 for the model. When the factor of *self-efficacy* was introduced in Model 2, however, *identity* and *sex* become non-significant and the model's explanatory power increases substantially to an R^2 of 0.57. In this model, *self-efficacy* ($B = 0.51$, $p < 0.001$) emerges as a statistically significant and powerful predictor of teachers' *motivation to teach*. In Model 3, which includes disaggregated teacher identity groups, *self-efficacy* remains strong with an almost identical coefficient and explanatory power, while none of the identity groups reach statistical significance. Cumulatively, the three OLS regression models confirm that the factor of *self-efficacy* rather than teacher identity alone is a more meaningful driver of teachers' *motivation to teach* in the context of Cox's Bazar.

Table 3. Unstandardised coefficients from OLS regression of **motivation to teach** outcome factor on selected demographic variables ($n = 494$).

Outcome factor	Predictor variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Motivation to teach ^a	<i>Identity (Rohingya)</i>	0.18*** (0.04)	0.03 (0.03)	
	<i>Sex (female)</i>	0.07 (0.04)	0.05 (0.03)	
	<i>Rohingya female</i>			0.09 (0.05)
	<i>Rohingya male</i>			0.06 (0.04)
	<i>Bangladesh female</i>			0.08 (0.04)
	<i>Bangladesh male</i>		-	-
	<i>Self-efficacy^b</i>		0.51*** (0.03)	0.51*** (0.03)
	<i>Age</i>	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.03** (0.01)
	<i>Experience</i>	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
	<i>Constant</i>	3.17*** (0.06)	0.63*** (0.11)	0.60*** (0.08)
	R²	0.04	0.57	0.57

(Standard errors in parentheses).

Note: $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

^aGoodness-of-fit statistics from a confirmatory factor analysis on the *motivation to teach* factor (RMSEA = 0.000, CFI = 1.00, TLI = 1.00) indicate an excellent model fit, suggesting that selected survey items align well with the theorised construct of *motivation to teach* for the context of Cox's Bazar. This factor also presents positive internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.82$) and a promising coefficient of determination, in which 92 percent of the variation in the *motivation to teach* factor is explained by the items in this model.

^bConfirmatory factor analysis for the *self-efficacy* factor indicates that the model captures the relationship of the survey response items with the self-efficacy construct. An RMSEA score of 0.000 and CFI and TLI results of 1.00 confirm that each of the items are a good fit for the self-efficacy motivation factor. These results also represent a high ceiling effect (high mean scores, low variation) due to possible participant response bias and employment precarity, thereby limiting the sensitivity of the factor analysis. *Self-efficacy* also has acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.73$) and the coefficient of determination (CD) indicates 98 percent of the variation is explained by the model.

How Rohingya refugee teachers described their motivation to teach

Quantitative findings highlighted broad factors that positively influenced Rohingya refugee teachers' *motivation to teach*. Qualitative narratives, however, revealed deeper, gendered and more political reasons to teach that were not elicited in my survey. Multiple barriers to teacher motivation were also revealed in FGDs, especially when prompts specific to teachers' *self-efficacy* were provided. For example, teachers' lack of safety amidst increasing violence between Rohingya armed groups and low levels of teacher agency within the humanitarian system were expressed in relation to the dynamics of forced and protracted displacement. The unique influence of the Rohingyas' agenda for repatriation to Myanmar – and education's perceived role in its realisation – alongside a liberatory effect of teaching for Rohingya women seemed to mitigate many of the work stressors that teachers otherwise experienced (Bradley, Bahous, and Albasha 2022; Kirk and Winthrop 2008, 2013).

For Rohingya females ($n = 40$), of whom over 80 percent reported strong *motivation to teach* ($M = 3.34$), there was hesitance to identify teaching as 'work'. Following an internal discussion, the translator shared that 'they are not considering teaching so much as

a profession, but it is similar'. The translator then clarified that '[t]hey feel that by being teachers, they are not doing jobs. They are doing a community duty . . . like community welfare to improve the lives of their students.' The translator also highlighted Jusna Homaira's contribution, sharing that 'maybe it is because she enjoys teaching so much, she enjoys improving her community, so she thinks that [to teach], it is now her life, not a job.' When I suggested that teachers' salaries and training defines them as professionals, Somaya Akter responded:

I am not so concerned about the salary, or you know, to provide for my family . . . That is not the point. The point is our community is lagging, and they are not getting the rights they deserve; they are not getting everything they want from their life . . . It's not a job, because salary might come and go, but my commitment to my community is to make improvement, to make development.

As this comment highlights, and in contrast with other studies (e.g. Falk, Shephard, and Mendenhall 2022), Rohingya women promoted the moral and intertwined emancipatory significance of teaching over its economic reward, or lack thereof.

In terms of the transformative effect of teaching on many Rohingya women's lives, in Myanmar – and for a majority of adult women in the Cox's Bazar camps – *pardah*⁷ is still the norm and access to post-primary education is rare (Guglielmi et al. 2021; Hossain 2023). Thus, alongside the intrinsic personal utility value of teaching, the spatial mobility and sense of self-reliance that teaching affords is a key motivator for Rohingya women who teach. As the translator summarised:

Basically, women were not getting opportunities to be teachers or even be educated in Myanmar. When they get this opportunity [in Bangladesh] to be a teacher or be educated, that is why they are more motivated here.

Rohingya men ($n = 260$) reported the second highest mean score for the *motivation to teach* factor ($M = 3.31$), with nearly 80 percent reporting high levels. This is partly explained by political norms in Myanmar that hindered Rohingyas' schooling opportunities and led to their exclusion from higher education and employment, meaning their professional pathways in Cox's Bazar represent a unique opportunity.⁸ Rohingya men also attributed the violence they experienced in Myanmar – and the protractedness of their current displacement – to their community's lack of education. As Anowar Monsur explained: 'Currently our people are uneducated, that is why we cannot change our situation. But when our generations are educated, they may change our future, our conditions, our situations.' Moreover, for many Rohingya men, access to quality education is existentially framed. As Mannan Rahamot shared: 'If we are not educated, how do we survive a situation like this?'

In line with quantitative findings, Mohammed Alam explained how he is motivated by the formal Myanmar Curriculum and that '[a]s an educated person, I just wish for our community to get a formal education . . . our generation will regret it in the future if they do not get [the curriculum].' This also speaks to the sense of duty that Rohingya women and men professed. As Mohammed Alam continued: 'I know things . . . many [Rohingya] have information about the world missing in their lives, and I know I can do work to provide that information.'

Other reasons to continue teaching related to the Rohingya retaining their rights and the community respect and support associated with being a teacher. In line with low response values for survey items on teacher compensation ($M = 2.81$), multiple participants downplayed the importance of salary. When I reminded teachers that they receive just ₳130,000 or USD130 per month for their work, Ahmad Soliman commented that: ‘For us salary is not the main reason [to teach] ... we got just ₳60,000-taka salary before ... so we don’t have that much interest in the salary to do the job.’

How experiences of self-efficacy are associated with teachers’ motivation to teach

FGD discussions on *self-efficacy* ($B = 0.51, p < 0.001$) elicited Rohingya teachers’ history of marginalisation, with few opportunities to contribute to society, and clarified how they have benefitted from teaching in Bangladesh. As Anowar Monsur shared: ‘I lost myself through the genocide, [but] through teaching I found myself again.’ Similarly, Sahidul Barua reasserted his decision to teach by stating: ‘I have lost everything in my life ... my generation will not get an opportunity for a better future ... I even lost myself ... that is why I decided to teach for my children, for their generation.’

As a sense of task-success, a dichotomy also emerged between Rohingya teachers’ expressions of *self-efficacy* in the present and a projected sense of *self-efficacy* in the future, if they return to Myanmar. In this sense, Rohingya men ($M = 3.31$) believe they will create future ‘belonging’ for children; they feel duty-bound to invest in children now but believe the dividends will only eventuate upon their return. This is realised as teachers’ long hours and perseverance in work arrangements that extract their labour with little recognition or financial reward, not to mention teachers’ navigation of ‘quotidian acts of violence’ by armed groups and Bangladeshi security forces that reaffirm teaching’s purpose but can undermine their experiences of success (Marchais et al. 2024). In this sense, and discordant with survey findings, many Rohingya men presented subdued experiences of *self-efficacy* in the present tense.

By comparison, Rohingya women’s ($M = 3.30$) future-oriented sense of *self-efficacy* was muted. They spoke of the immediate sense of belonging and protection that their work imbues for the children they teach, offering this element as a point of pride and source of motivation. I asked Rohingya women why they were so assertive of their influence on children’s protection and sense of belonging. After a brief discussion, the translator shared that:

The way they are actually teaching in this community, they always feel [they provide] value of protection, the value of self, you know, the safety, security [for children], they know that very much ... So that’s why they have this confidence in their voices.

Rohingya teachers acknowledged how teaching helps them realise collective aspirations for quality education, their rights and possible repatriation. Through a lens of hope, their *self-efficacy* is derived from the protective and preparatory role of education on Rohingya children’s present lives. Yet through a lens of despair, their sense of *self-efficacy* extends as far as the provision of basic education while they wait for a solution that may never come. Mirroring this predicament and explaining the influence that protracted displacement

has on their more reserved associations between *self-efficacy* and the future, Jusna Homaira explained how teachers create:

... a positive environment, there is a positive mentality about education ... [we] don't feel like there is something [we] do not have here ... but when it comes to the point that [we] have to go back to Myanmar, [we] believe it, that [we] have to go back one day, but [we] don't want to right now.

Jusna's comments represent a further dilemma among Rohingya women in particular. As previous studies identify (see Bradley, Bahous, and Albasha 2022; Dryden-Peterson 2022; Kirk and Winthrop 2013), the sense of 'transformation' that women gain from teaching contributes newfound feelings of purpose. These aspirations become conflicted, however, as repatriation means they will abandon the comparative benefits available to them in the camps.

While Rohingya men and women were reluctant to describe acts of teaching and children's corresponding learning outcomes, they were forthright about their positive influence on children's sense of protection. This speaks of their connections to 'expanded' notions of teaching in Cox's Bazar (Falk 2023). Teachers influence a sense of protection inside the learning centre but disseminate knowledge and skills to protect children amidst the various and increasing forms of violence taking place outside of learning centres. Summarising a longer discussion about child safeguarding, the translator conveyed the Rohingya female group's sense of 'task success' in the following way:

... they're saying that [safeguarding is] part of their job that they do each day ... At the end of their shift, they have a short session on PSEA, child safeguarding, child trafficking. Every day they are doing that ... But she adds that it's not like learners are just safe in the classroom, they are teaching knowledge for outside the classroom too.

I also asked Rohingya women how they attribute specific child protection outcomes to their work, about which the translator shared:

... in their community, it is so common that adolescent learners are getting married before 18, and the [teachers] think they are able to, you know, protect them from early marriage because some of their learners are still connected to the [learning centres] even near the age of 18.

Rohingya women also interpreted 'belonging' as something achieved inside learning centre classrooms rather than in the camps, believing that teachers nurture this reality. As the translator conveyed: 'All of them agree that the children have a lot of belonging inside the learning centres.' When I asked what belonging feels like, teachers described a family-like environment where children feel protected and included. As Somaya Akter shared, teachers make children feel 'comfortable to come here, and that makes them feel safe here, like they have a sense of belongingness'.

Rohingya men were less focused on children's immediate belonging and again spoke of a future sense of *self-efficacy*. They related their own fractured sense of belonging to halted educations and uncertain trajectories, equating the purpose of their teaching to the continuity between children's education in Bangladesh and possible futures in Myanmar. Without further education or employment pathways, Rohingya men questioned how Rohingya could ever truly belong in Bangladesh. Where Rohingya women connected their influence on belonging to the classroom and camps, Rohingya men claimed future

‘task success’ or *self-efficacy* through the newly implemented Myanmar Curriculum, reinforcing ideas of Rohingya belonging to Myanmar more than in Bangladesh. As Mannan Rahamot shared:

[Even] after one hundred years, if you ask me, if you ask our children who learn the Myanmar Curriculum, he will easily say yes, [Myanmar] is my country, I belong to it, we will answer like that If you want to ask one of our students, they will easily give you an answer about it, this is the influence that we have on them [in Cox’s Bazar].

Discussion and conclusion

Due to a lack of studies focused on teacher motivation in refugee-hosting settings, my research employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach to investigate how Rohingya teachers experienced *self-efficacy* in their work. The extent to which experiences of ‘task success’ are associated with teachers’ *motivation to teach* was then measured. From my approach, two key takeaways emerged.

Quantitative findings showed that Rohingya teachers are positively and more significantly *motivated to teach* than their Bangladeshi host-community peers. This significance is erased, however, when the motivation factor of *self-efficacy* is added to the OLS regression model. Given the broadly positive results for female teachers from both communities and noting that 85 percent of the Bangladeshi sample were women, this result reveals stronger interactions among gender identity, experiences of *self-efficacy* and a *motivation to teach*. In other words, being a female teacher who experiences *self-efficacy* is a more significant predictor of *motivation to teach* than one’s refugee- or host-community status. In this way, the transformative individual effects of teaching on conflict-affected and forcibly displaced women comes through strongly.

This does not discount Rohingya men’s comparable *motivation to teach*, however. While teaching was rarely a career of first choice, teaching had a revelatory effect. By serving a political agenda and preparing Rohingya children for future repatriation, teaching creates purpose and assuages feelings of loss. In this regard, and in line with Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs, experiences of *self-efficacy* via teaching engenders experiences of self-actualisation for the Rohingya. As Anowar Monsur stated: ‘I lost myself through the genocide, [but] through teaching I found myself again.’

Rohingya teachers’ ability to discuss their *self-efficacy* in relation to children’s belonging and protection more than their learning is paradigmatic of comparable studies (e.g. Falk 2023). It connects with refugee teachers’ nascent pedagogical skills and professional identities, which make connecting acts of teaching with children’s learning especially difficult. In this way, teachers claim a higher level of ‘task success’ or *self-efficacy* for ‘expanded’ social duties than for their ‘expected’ academic roles (Falk 2023). To improve workforce motivation, teacher policies and practices should therefore encompass teachers’ pedagogical *efficacy* within the classroom, their social or relational *efficacy* in the community, and their sense of *self-efficacy* through improved agency at the system level. As this study illustrates, refugees’ *motivation to teach* and their retention are more likely realised when the conditions needed for these factors to flourish are in place.

Conclusion

With a sizeable Rohingya refugee teacher sample ($n = 301$) and robust mixed-methods approach, this study extended the scope of teacher motivation studies to include refugee teachers in contexts of forced displacement. Due to the unique dynamics that inform education system decision making in such settings, I have contributed valuable analysis towards the politics of refugee teachers' work. At a time of pronounced global teacher shortages (UNESCO 2024), I also contributed overdue and focused evidence on how teachers' lived experiences and political agendas correspond with their *motivation to teach*.

Tao (2016) observed that there is 'often incongruence between what teachers say and what broader discourse says about them' (1). Despite system-level narratives concerning Rohingya teachers' lack of preparedness for teaching, little was previously known about how Rohingya teachers defined the purpose or reward of their work. This study has uncovered how, for Rohingya teachers, the work of teaching is an inherently political and humanising act: rather than being passive system inputs, Rohingya teachers see themselves as agents of opportunity, albeit within a highly constrained system and while still facing extreme political rejection at home. Moreover, via statistical analysis and the integration of teachers' perspectives, findings illustrate why experiences of *self-efficacy* are a powerful predictor of teacher motivation in refugee-hosting contexts, especially as *self-efficacy* interacts with education's role in refugee inclusion, repatriation or third-country resettlement. In this regard, where teacher motivation literature has been decontextualised by a 'bounty of superficial empirical observations' (Tao 2016, 22), this study has centred the contextual dynamics in which refugee teachers' work and incorporated teachers' voices to more fully elicit how these dynamics are associated with their *motivation to teach* and retention in the profession.

Notes

1. To protect participants' identities, all names used in this study are pseudonyms.
2. Six teachers were removed from the dataset due to incomplete or missing data.
3. 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Agree; 4 = Strongly agree.
4. The identity groups were Rohingya female, Rohingya male, Bangladeshi female and Bangladeshi male.
5. Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) are model fit indices used on confirmatory factor analysis to assess how well a model fits the data. RMSEA values below 0.06 and CFI and TLI values above 0.95 indicate a good fit. The Coefficient of Determination (CD) reflects the proportion of variance explained by the model, with values closer to 1.0 indicating stronger explanatory power.
6. A one-way ANOVA showed significant differences in motivation across groups: $F(3, 490) = 4.71$, $p = 0.003$. Post-hoc Bonferroni tests indicated that Bangladeshi males had significantly lower motivation than Rohingya females ($p = 0.025$) and Rohingya males ($p = 0.010$). However the difference between Rohingya females and Rohingya males was not statistically significant. Neither was the difference between Bangladeshi females and all other groups.
7. *Purdah* is a cultural and religious practice within the Rohingya community that requires adolescent girls to remain largely confined to their homes after reaching

puberty, limiting their movement and opportunities for education (Guglielmi et al. 2021).

8. While the formal Myanmar national curriculum has now been permitted for use in the camps by Bangladesh and Myanmar governments, neither have agreed to recognise Rohingya children's completion of the curriculum or graduation from schooling (Hossain 2023).

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