

Research Article

# Human Trafficking and the Rohingya Migration: Understanding the experiences of Vulnerable Refugees

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**Abstract:** Research suggests connections exist between migration and criminal forms of exploitation such as human trafficking, forced labour and modern slavery. Certainly, constellations of risk are seen in certain migrant communities and migration corridors. The Rohingya community in Myanmar has endured prolonged persecution and marginalization, leading to displacement and vulnerability. Approximately more than 1.5 million Rohingya refugees have sought refuge in neighbouring Bangladesh, facing challenges such as livelihood struggles, insecurity, gang violence, and restrictive camp conditions. The research aims to explore the factors contributing to their vulnerability, the trafficking process, the challenges encountered during migration and the reasons behind their willingness to take significant risks to reach Malaysia. Furthermore, it examines the living conditions in Malaysia after enduring such hardships. The study was conducted in August 2023. Employing qualitative research methods and conducting interviews with victims and their families, the study sheds light on the atrocities faced by Rohingya refugees, emphasizing the urgent need for intervention and support and thematic analysis was performed in study. It was analyzed that article delves into the experiences of Rohingya refugees who have irregularly migrated to Malaysia, victimized in the hand of human traffickers, often facing perilous journeys through treacherous seas and jungles. In conclusion, some have attempted to find safety in nearbour countries like India, Indonesia, and Malaysia, undertaking irregular migration while falling prey to human trafficking due to fake influential promise.

**Keywords:** human trafficking, Rohingya migrants, Malaysia, civil society organizations, vulnerable refugees

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Rohingya community in Myanmar has endured decades of oppression and marginalization in the struggle of political right and ethnic identity and subjected to persecution by the government [1]. They also spread hate speech throughout the country and incited communal violence, accentuating the Buddhist-Muslim divide within the country of Myanmar [2-4]. As a result, the Muslim Rohingya population has faced extreme persecution, including acts of genocide. Many Rohingya have sought refuge in neighboring Bangladesh, where they have fallen prey to the manipulative tactics of human traffickers because of camp situation such as no access of livelihood, education, healthcare, gang violence and lack

of safety security [5]. However, author's pursuit of safety and a better life is often met with a horrific reality: human trafficking [6]. This article delves into the issue of human trafficking among Rohingya refugees who have irregularly migrated to Malaysia. This study aims to shed light on the reasons why the Rohingya community is susceptible to exploitation by traffickers and the syndicates that facilitate their dangerous journeys. By understanding the factors that contribute to their vulnerability, we can better address the issue and work towards protecting and advocate these marginalized and oppressed Rohingya communities. With journal this article, we are trying to showcase the vulnerable situation of Rohingya refugees and create safer place for them and act against human trafficking. Through qualitative research methods, including interviews with the first person of hman trafficking victims and as second person of their families, this study seeks to uncover the complex dynamics involved in the trafficking of Rohingya refugees. It aims to answer crucial questions such as who the traffickers are, why Rohingya refugees are particularly vulnerable to be a victim of traffickers, and how their journey to Malaysia unfolds. Additionally, the research examines the length and cost of the migration journey, the access to information and resources available to the migrants, and the zero role of NGOs and the government in providing support and combating human trafficking. By shining a light on the realities faced by Rohingya refugees, we hope to raise awareness about their plight and advocate for the protection of their rights. It is essential to understand the multifaceted nature of human trafficking and its devastating impact on the lives of vulnerable individuals. Through this research, we aim to contribute to the ongoing efforts to address the issue of human trafficking among Rohingya refugees and work towards creating a safer and more secure future for them.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The qualitative research methods were employed in study. It seeks to answer key questions regarding the traffickers, the reasons behind trapping and being vulnerable to be dominant to migrate illegally through informal pathway through Myanmar, Thailand jungle, sea and boat, the experiences of refugee migrants, the motivations for choosing Malaysia, the migration types within the Rohingya community, and the pathways used to reach Malaysia. The research also examines the length of the migrant journey, the costs involved, the challenges encountered, the support and punishment faced by migrants, the roles of NGOs and the Bangladesh government, and the living conditions in the destination country. The research participants consist of human trafficking victims and families whose member have are victims of human trafficking. They currently reside in refugee camps in Bangladesh and have arrived in Malaysia seeking safety and permanent settlement. The participants include individuals who have experienced trafficking first-hand, second person who is a family of victim as well as a focal person representing the Rohingya refugee community. The research was conducted by Rohingya community development campaign (RCDC) members in Kutupalong, Balukhali, and Thainkhali refugee camps in Bangladesh, as well as among Rohingya migrants in Malaysia. The team engaged with multiple stakeholders and conducted in-depth investigations into the human trafficking process, forming the basis of this journal article. Data was collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and mobile phone interviews with victims. Open-ended questions were used to gather detailed experiences. The interviews were conducted in the Rohingya language by a dedicated team of civil society youths and females. The transcribed data were analyzed using thematic analysis and through discussions within focus groups.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Understanding human trafficking and identifying the traffickers

Human trafficking is a grave issue faced by Rohingya refugees seeking refuge in third countries. Since 2012, the Rohingya population has experienced horrendous and ongoing systematic oppression in Myanmar and Bangladesh, resulting in atrocities such as murder, enslavement, torture, and rape as reported by the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia. Regrettably, there has been a lack of effective advocacy from international organizations and local governments, leaving Rohingya refugees vulnerable to the horrors of human trafficking. Despite some UN agencies, like the IOM, raising concerns on the World Day Against Trafficking, their efforts often serve as mere symbolic gestures. In 2015, there was 150 graves found in Thailand and Malaysia borders and the discovery alarmed to international community, but they are failed to act against it and prevent further action. Traffickers frequently subject Rohingya girls to sexual abuse in public spaces, often in front of other migrants. Women and girls are commonly victims of gang rape and various forms of abuse, yet they are reluctant to speak out about their experiences. One survivor shared her harrowing account of being repeatedly gang-raped by traffickers during her journey from Myanmar to Malaysia.

In the end of 2022, there was a gang rape video footage viral [2] The ordeals faced by Rohingya migrants include beatings, deprivation of food, water, and medical care, and the withholding of necessary medication. Traffickers deliberately keep them hungry and weak to assert control and inflict torture. The provision of inadequate meals further exacerbates their suffering. Furthermore, Rohingya migrants are prohibited from keeping their mobile phones, severely limiting their communication with family members. They are allowed only brief, monitored conversations once or twice a week, often used to request money for the traffickers. Failure to comply with payment results in inhumane beatings, regardless of gender. Many Rohingya refugees have tragically lost their lives, their financial resources, and have endured sexual abuse at the hands of traffickers. Those who manage to complete their perilous journey often carry lasting trauma, recounting tales of horror, including rape and sexual abuse by traffickers and boat captains.

The abominable practice of human trafficking is an unfortunate consequence of the Myanmar government's targeting of educated individuals, imposing exorbitant taxes, ransoms, fines, and engaging in various forms of extortion. Such actions have forced people of all ages to resort to desperate measures, resulting in the loss of lives, belongings, and population displacement. Boat migration represents a significant aspect of Rohingya migration. Many Rohingya people embark on treacherous journeys by sea, often on overcrowded and unseaworthy vessels. These voyages are fraught with peril, exposing them to the risk of drowning, starvation, and dehydration. However, despite these dangers, many Rohingya individuals are willing to undertake the risks in their quest to escape persecution and violence in their homeland.

Trafficking syndicates play a significant role in facilitating the perilous boat migration of Rohingya people. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) confirms the involvement of these syndicates in both human trafficking and the illicit transportation of drugs and weapons. With their extensive network of contacts across various countries, these syndicates operate across borders, evading law enforcement agencies. Unfortunately, the international community has failed to implement visible and effective measures to address this issue, leaving Rohingya migrants without viable alternatives or increased resettlement processes. The syndicates entice Rohingya people with false promises of a safe journey to

their intended destination country. They offer food, water, and a place on a boat for a fee. Tragically, these journeys often culminate in disaster due to overcrowded and poorly maintained vessels, where passengers are subjected to mistreatment and exploitation by the traffickers. Despite the awareness of the vulnerability of the Rohingya, the international community has not effectively addressed these issues; questioned by many people, resulting in continued suffering for the Rohingya people.

The trafficking networks involved in the exploitation of Rohingya refugees comprise individuals from various communities, including Rohingya, local Bangladeshi people, members of the Arakan Army (AA) within along the pathway of Myanmar, Rakhine people, and individuals from different regions in Yangon and the Thailand border. These groups collaborate to ensure the success of their trafficking operations, with some Rohingya individuals also participating. They sometimes pay to junta forces and make it easier. Their extensive networks and connections make it easier for them to locate potential victims, as they have contacts with relatives in Malaysia who facilitate their communication with traffickers in refugee camps, host communities, and even within Myanmar. "Each region has its own network of traffickers who work in coordination to ensure the safe passage of victims. We are handover to new group of traffickers in every region who treated horror with us," said Shohina. Different teams have specific responsibilities, such as identifying possible passageways and transporting individuals to their intended destinations.

For instance, Abul Hasim, a victim's father, shared his experience of how he encountered a trafficker: "My cousin sisters in Malaysia introduced me to a trafficker from Shamila. I communicated with him, and we finalized their travel plans for 450,000 BDT taka." The actual trafficking and transportation process of victims is carried out by the Arakan Army (AA), as confirmed by Khin Maung, a civil society leader of the Rohingya community in the Bangladesh refugee camp. It is noteworthy to mention that the involvement of the Arakan Army raises concerns regarding their complicity in the trafficking network. Instead of preventing such activities and protecting the Rohingya population, there are indications that they may be enabling the brokers to profit from this deadly business. This raises concerns about their true motives, potentially undermining efforts to combat the annihilation and genocide of the Rohingya population.

### **3.2 Factors making Rohingya refugees prone to human trafficking**

The decision of Rohingya refugees to embark on perilous boat journeys to Malaysia can be attributed to several significant factors. These factors shed light on the challenges they face and the reasons they are willing to risk their lives in search of safety and stability. Firstly, the harsh living conditions within the refugee camps play a crucial role. The camps are marked by the impacts of climate change, livelihood, insufficient medical support, issues related to marriage and dowry, and food shortages due the ration reduced. These circumstances have made survival extremely difficult and unbearable for the Rohingya population. Ration reduction one of the key reasons to send youth in Malaysia and generate for their families. Secondly, the discriminatory treatment they have endured adds to their motivation to seek alternative solutions. The Rohingya community faces exclusion from job opportunities, bans on economic activities, and limited access to education. These factors have left them feeling marginalized and hopeless, pushing them to search for a more permanent settlement. Education is free for all human being, but it is not for Rohingya. Bangladesh has false assumption. They say if we give them present high school education, they will not return to their motherland, but it is totally incorrect because there were many Rohingya studied in Bangladesh university and Madrasa. Later, some of them returned to Myanmar and aboard. Thirdly, restrictions on their movement and the lack of access to legal advocacy and complaint mechanisms contribute to their vulnerability. These limitations make Rohingya refugees feel

trapped and devoid of basic human rights, reinforcing their sense of being subjugated and confined. Furthermore, the Rohingya population has been subjected to mental and emotional torment from various sources, including insurgent groups and individuals. Such experiences deepen their insecurity and despair, adding to their vulnerability and fell in the trapped of traffickers. Lastly, gang violence, kidnappings, and ambushes further exacerbate the risks faced by the Rohingya. In a National News reported that gang wars have become a significant security threat within the camps, with gang members engaging in activities such as kidnapping, extortion, arson, drug trafficking, and murder. This internal violence has claimed the lives of over 116 individuals within the camps between 2017 and December 2022, highlighting the perilous environment in which the Rohingya find themselves. Given these circumstances, Rohingya refugees are willing to undertake significant risks to reach Malaysia, despite being aware of the dangers involved. The delays in repatriation efforts and the growing population within the camps have created a sense of instability and uncertainty, impacting the resilience of the Rohingya. The slow progress of international justice mechanisms further compounds their frustration and despair, pushing some individuals to contemplate as a form of suicide along their risky journey to Malaysia.

### 3.3 Refugee life experiences: The journey of a migrant

Mohammad Younus, a young Rohingya refugee, shares his poignant account of life in the Bangladesh refugee camp. His story reflects the challenges and uncertainties faced by many Rohingya<sup>7</sup> refugees. Younus expresses his deep dissatisfaction with life in the camp, describing it as an unbearable burden and a constant struggle. He shares his frustration at the lack of opportunities for higher education, both within the camp and abroad, due to overlapping government restrictions and the absence of global refugee education access mechanisms. The fear of crossing illegal borders in search of education weighs heavily on his mind, presenting a dilemma between his aspirations and the risks involved. The prospect of returning to his homeland is clouded by uncertainty, as the situation in Myanmar shows no signs of improvement. Repatriation seems distant and elusive, leaving the Rohingya refugees uncertain about their future and how long they will have to remain in Bangladesh. Living as a Rohingya refugee in the camp feels like a crime, as they are denied basic human rights, safety, and security.

Each refugee carries traumatic memories of the Myanmar genocide, further compounding their mental and emotional distress. The camp is plagued by attacks and violence from gang groups, turning it into a breeding ground for crime, murder, and kidnapping. The constant threat to their lives has created an atmosphere of fear and insecurity, where risk and death have become daily occurrences. With a heavy heart, Younus had to leave behind his relatives, friends, and family in the camp, driven by a desperate desire to seek safety and a better life elsewhere. The mental toll on the majority of Rohingya refugees is immense, as they struggle with instability, exhaustion, and the constant fear of violence. They feel lost, deprived of a sense of belonging and a hopeful future. Their existence has been reduced to seeking survival as human beings, rather than aspiring for a better life. Younus emphasizes that the refugee camp is not a prison, but it feels like a lifelong confinement. The refugees live under an unofficial curfew, constantly monitored and marginalized. The derogatory label of "Shalar Rohingya" (stupid Rohingya) is used to demean and belittle them, further exacerbating their sense of displacement and vulnerability. They yearn for the international community's attention and support, emphasizing the urgent need for action to address the plight of Rohingya refugees.

### 3.4 Reasons for choosing Malaysia as a destination

Many Rohingya people choose to migrate to Malaysia in search of better economic opportunities and protection from violence and persecution. They hope to find stability, resettlement opportunities, and access to education in a new country. The living conditions in the Bangladesh refugee camp become unbearable for many, pushing them to seek alternatives for a better life. Baher, a Rohingya mother quoted: "Life had never been easy, but it became unbearable in the camp." However, the journey from Bangladesh to Malaysia is fraught with challenges and dangers. The refugees face insecurities and a lack of family support, exacerbating their already difficult circumstances. Additionally, the reduction in rations by the World Food Programme (WFP) adds to their concerns about survival, as they struggle to find reliable sources of livelihood within the camp. Migration to Malaysia often involves high risks and hazards. Some Rohingya individuals undertake the arduous journey on foot for several days, while others opt for boat or vehicle transportation. Sadly, many lose their lives during the journey due to shipwrecks, lack of food or water, illnesses, and acts of violence and torture. Two individuals who have experienced the challenges of migration exemplify the stories of many Rohingya refugees. Mohammad Shohid, a 17-year-old student, fled to the Bangladesh refugee camp when he was 13. After the Bangladesh authority closed the Rohingya community school he was attending and unsatisfied with the limited educational opportunities in the camp, he ventured to study in Teknaf, where he faced abduction and ransom demands from jealous friends. His escape from captivity led to false accusations by the Bangladesh APBN, which left him with nowhere to stay in the camp. Ultimately, his father decided to take him to Malaysia for his safety.

Similarly, Muhammad Toasin, a 20-year-old student who studied in Myanmar and later in a private school in Bangladesh, made the decision to leave the camp and seek a better life in Malaysia. He felt that the camp was not a suitable place for long-term solutions to their crisis and decided to take matters into his own hands. Rajuma Begum, who arrived at the Bangladesh refugee camp in 2017, faced the inability to get married due to poverty and the financial constraints of managing dowry expenses. An opportunity for marriage arose in Malaysia when a family proposed their son as a suitable match for her. Rajuma agreed to go to Malaysia for marriage, as her own family could not afford to arrange marriages for her three elder sisters at the time. These personal accounts shed light on the individual circumstances and motivations that drive Rohingya refugees to choose Malaysia as a destination. The hope for a better future, economic opportunities, and the pursuit of marriage and family stability are among the key factors influencing their decisions. However, it is essential to recognize the risks and challenges they face along their journey and the need for international support and sustainable solutions to address the Rohingya crisis.

### 3.5 A father: Intentions behind migration

As I listened to my son and sister-in-law's plans to settle in Malaysia, my heart was filled with a mixture of pride and worry. I understood the reasons behind their decision, even though it wasn't an easy one. The uncertainty of their future as Rohingya refugees in the camp weighed heavily on their minds. They faced constant reminders of their stateless status and the limited access to basic necessities, including education and healthcare. It was evident that they were determined to break free from the confines of the camp and build a better life for themselves and our family. My son's dreams and ambitions were the driving force behind his decision to embark on the risky journey to Malaysia. He had witnessed too many young people in the camp losing hope and wasting away, and he refused to let that be his fate. He was

eager to pursue his aspirations, support our family, and create a brighter future. Although my heart ached with worry, I knew that his determination and resilience would guide him along the way. For my sister-in-law, the decision to settle in Malaysia had a different motivation. She faced the challenge of finding a suitable husband and the desire to create a peaceful life after marriage in a more developed country. In the camp, opportunities for work and education were limited, and she realized that waiting indefinitely for a suitable partner would hinder her own growth and the prospects of her future children. She believed that going to Malaysia and marrying there would provide her with stability, opportunities, and the ability to educate her children. While it was a difficult choice, I respected her determination to pursue a better life for herself and her future family, as expressed by Salim Ullah. As a mother and a family member, I did my best to support them in their decision, but I couldn't escape the fear and uncertainty that accompanied their departure. Thoughts of what if they didn't make it to Malaysia or faced new hardships plagued my mind. However, I also recognized that staying in the camp was not a viable long-term option. They deserved a chance to thrive, to build a future free from the constraints of the camp, and to support our family in a more stable environment.

Months passed before we received news from them. When I learned that they had successfully made it to Malaysia and were settling in well, a wave of joy washed over me. My son had found work in a factory and was sending money back home regularly, providing much-needed support for our family. My sister-in-law had married a kind and loving Rohingya man, and they were eagerly awaiting the arrival of their first child. Their journey had been filled with challenges and obstacles, but their resilience and determination had brought them to a place of stability and hope. Their story served as a reminder that, even in the darkest of circumstances, hope and courage can prevail. However, it is important to acknowledge that not all families are as fortunate, and many have lost loved ones on perilous journeys. The UN has reported that 2022 was one of the deadliest years for refugees at sea since 2014. As we celebrate my son and sister-in-law's success, we must also remember those who continue to face unimaginable hardships and work together to address the underlying issues that drive such risky migration.

### **3.6 Types of migrants within the Rohingya refugee community**

The Rohingya refugee community consists of diverse individuals, each with their unique circumstances and motivations for migration. Within this community, various types of migrants can be identified, including girls from impoverished families, young people from different socio-economic backgrounds, married women with children whose husbands reside in Malaysia, elderly individuals struggling to support their families in refugee camps, and students seeking education and improved prospects. Additionally, there are those who feel a lack of prospects and purpose, individuals facing instability and displacement, and those unable to sustain themselves due to inadequate provisions. Tragically, some adolescents become victims of kidnapping and trafficking. Girls from impoverished families often find themselves in vulnerable situations due to economic hardship and limited opportunities and face difficulties to get married. Traffickers exploit their desperation and vulnerability by offering false promises of a better life, job interests or marriage arranged (TPQ, 2020). Both affluent and low-income young people can become victims of human trafficking. Factors such as unemployment, societal pressures, and the desire for financial independence expose them to risks associated with trafficking. Their vulnerability is further heightened by limited access to support and guidance. Married women with children face unique challenges within the refugee camps, particularly when their husbands reside in Malaysia. They experience isolation, economic strain, and a longing for family reunification. Traffickers exploit their

desire to be with their husbands, deceiving them into perilous journeys that exploit their vulnerability. Elderly individuals in the refugee camps often struggle to support their families due to limited resources and opportunities. Seeking stability and the chance to provide for their loved ones, they become targets for traffickers who take advantage of their desperate circumstances. Students in the camps aspire for education, freedom of movement, and improved prospects. They yearn for opportunities to grow and access quality education. Traffickers manipulate these aspirations, offering false promises and exploiting their desire for a brighter future. Additionally, individuals who feel a lack of prospects and purpose become susceptible to the false promises of traffickers. The harsh living conditions, conflicts, and discrimination experienced in the camps leave them feeling trapped and hopeless. Migration represents a chance for escape and a new beginning. In the end of their journey, they have a huge confrontation and terrible occurrence such as they have eternally departed from family, relatives, and nation. After all, they do not have a peaceful life or permanent dwelling. Rather they used to face additional challenges and a great loss of lives. Insufficient provisions within the refugee camps force some individuals to seek alternatives for their survival. The lack of basic necessities compels them to migrate, risking involvement with traffickers in search of a more sustainable and secure life. Unfortunately, some vulnerable adolescents within the camps become victims of kidnapping and trafficking. The story shared by Sahat Zia about his brother Toha highlights this disturbing reality. The presence of traffickers and their manipulation of unsuspecting victims necessitates heightened vigilance and community support to prevent such incidents. To address human trafficking effectively, it is crucial to address the underlying factors that render individuals vulnerable. Poverty alleviation, access to education, improved living conditions, and comprehensive support systems are essential to empower and protect individuals at risk. By addressing these root causes, they can work towards eradicating human trafficking and ensuring the well-being and future opportunities of all individuals within the Rohingya refugee community. If international community indeed care about Rohingya's desperation and helpless situation, they would not be difficult to find an alternative or intervention to call the end of this traumatized people.

### **3.7 Migration routes: How Rohingyas reach Malaysia**

There are many ways to get to Malaysia. Initially, people used to travel there via planes from Bangladesh in previous time, but it required them to pay a huge amount and used to make duplicate Bangladesh passport. In a nutshell, traffickers started using another way which involved river and jungle journeys, and Rohingyas took risky journeys through the ocean to reach Malaysia or other countries for many years because persecution, arbitrary killing, discrimination, restriction on marriage, movement and worship etc. Many people risked their lives, and some even died in the seas, while others survived but had to go without food and water for days. Eventually, traffickers started using the way to Myanmar. At first, refugees were made to cross the NAF-river from the refugee camp and were taken directly to Shamila village in Sittaw. They were kept in safe houses for many days before taking a ride for many days through the ship to reach Yangon, where they stayed for a few days. From there, they drove to the Thailand border and finally reached Thailand. "My son went first from Taknaf to Northern Maungdaw Feranparo by boat with Rohingya brokers, and then he went to Maungdaw by car at once with AA members. Two days later, he went to Shamila by car with AA. Then he went to Yangon by boat with Muslim and Rakhine boat carriers. After that, they went to Miya wadi by car with AA. Then he went to Thailand by car with Muslim carriers," said Harjin.



*“While I was traveling from Yangon to Thailand, I had to walk for days without food and water. The smuggler I hired got arrested, so I had to find another smuggler to continue the journey. It took me six months to reach Malaysia.” [,” Mixed Migration Centre, March 2022]*

When they reach in Thailand and Malaysia border and keep in a forest detain center which is known as Received Calls as code of traffickers, and once the refugees reach there, traffickers ask them to give all the money, and their family members have to pay the amount completely once. Once the payment is cleared, they are shifted to Malaysia. There are many traffickers either in the camp or outside the camps, and even in every place where people pass from one area to another. For example, the traffickers in the camp manage the people and hand them over to local traffickers who help them cross the river to Myanmar or board a huge ship at Teknaf or Moheshkhali river. These traffickers are everywhere to help migrants to pass safely in all direction. Sometimes they need to walk, while at other times they need to ride vehicles throughout their journey. Rohingyas travel to Malaysia via boats, spending many days on the seas before finally reaching their destination. In this phase, majority of migrants abused, beat, get ill and even die.

### **3.8 The Journey: Duration and difficulties**

Allow sufficient time to complete the journey. Typically, it takes about two months to travel to Thailand, and once they get there, migrants must remain until they can find a safe way to cross the border to Malaysia without endangering themselves or violating border security. Waiting for one or two months in Thailand to cross into Malaysia is common for most migrants, as it is challenging to make the journey without getting arrested, either on the way from Yangon to Thailand or from Thailand to Malaysia. According to a parent, it takes almost one to two months for their child and most people to reach Malaysia, although a few may arrive sooner. The duration of the journey is determined by how quickly the full amount can be paid to the traffickers. When the full amount is paid promptly, the victims may be transported to Malaysia more quickly. However, if the full amount cannot be paid, it may take several days to arrive. The traffickers may inflict severe beatings and torture on the victims when their families cannot pay the full amount.

### **3.9 Access to information: The role of communication**

Victims’ families get the information access of their entire journeys through traffickers or their relatives who contract with traffickers from Malaysia. The brokers snatch all the phones from the victims once they start their journeys. They always keep in touch with them via phones. Even there are some of the victims who keep button phones with them secretly without letting the traffickers know. To get their full information of the journeys, we have to pay to the traffickers, and they make us contacts with the phone call of traffickers. The traffickers also snatch the phones from the victims and don’t allow anyone to use phones. If any victim is found with the phones, then he/she is beaten severely by the traffickers. "My son doesn't allow keeping mobile, but he was talked from traffickers mobile all the way. Actually, traffickers allow us to call with family once or twice per week," said Ruminah.

### **3.10 The Cost of migration: Financial implications**

Different people have dealt with the cost differently, managing it from various sources. Here are a few statements of victims’ families. I had to pay almost 5 lakh BDT. I sold all my ornaments and my daughter's gold to manage that amount, which was brought from Myanmar. However, I couldn't fulfill it entirely. I

borrowed 2 tickle golds from my relatives, and I will settle it when my son sends money from Malaysia, said Sara Khatun. I had to pay more than 4 lakhs to the traffickers, and I borrowed the amount from different relatives by increasing interests, said Md Toyoub. I need to pay almost 5 lakhs to the traffickers, and I get the amount from my relatives by borrowing and depositing my family's valuable things with them. A few amounts are supported by my aboard relatives and help me huge to collect all the required amounts. There are also a few people who sell their lands in Myanmar and collect the amount by selling their gold and lands, said Abdul Hakim. Likewise, many victims' family manage money for traffickers very differently from unexpected sources. In a daily star news mentioned in 2019 "between 2012 and 2015 human trafficking trade involving the Rohingya is estimated to have generated between USD 50 and 100 million a year. At that time, Rohingya were in Myanmar, and they had somehow belongings and properties to pay it but now mostly people going from refugee camps who have no savings or support of any aid groups. As far as we learned that many victims died in Thailand detention center due to delay payment. I went in Malaysia without informing my parents or managing any for traffickers. When I got Thailand and called my parents, but they did not any savings, they could not pay anything. In this case, I had stay almost six months and had to do their work such as cooking, washing, porting and so many ran errands. One day I went to drop some migrants in Malaysia border and then I got a chance to run away, said Kamal Huson.

### 3.11 Challenges encountered during the migration

The challenges faced along the journey are numerous, as they are often restricted by authorities.

*"We have to hide from place to place, move through uncomfortably, dirty places and bushes, and we can't eat proper meals or drink water along the way. As a result, many people become dehydrated and weak very quickly," said Foyazullah.*

They mostly have dry ration foods which are not enough to fill their stomachs. I took some "Sura and mera" [which is dry rice fried, jaggery] but I couldn't take water, he added. This harmed them very badly. The most terrible thing is that they can get arrested on the way by authorities and sentenced in jail 5-7 years. In such cases, people are not able to inform their families where they are jailed.

*"My daughter was arrested on the Yangon border, and we didn't get any information about her. When we tried to call the traffickers, they didn't answer. We understood it might be something wrong because they cut off communication when a person gets arrested. After two months later, shokutara sent a letter through a release prisoner and asked some money to use in jail for medicine and food," said Abul Hashim.*

They are tortured by the traffickers if they can't pay the amount on time, and they can't speak, eat, or sleep on time during their journeys. "Mostly my son had to stay hungry on the way, and he was beaten and sick because I couldn't manage all the money," said Rashid Ahmed. Neither are they fed any food properly, nor can they sleep well because they have to hide in the jungle at night or during resting time. When my son was going to Yangon from Shamila by boat, there was a windstorm with heavy rain in the sea. By the mercy of Allah, they arrived in Yangon without affecting. Similarly, they faced difficulties with food, sleep, medicine, and bathing in Thailand. Since my son is a boy, he didn't face many other difficulties, but girls faced a lot. My son said that all girls faced sexual abuse throughout the entire journey from the traffickers [13]. It was done in front of all people publicly. Some beautiful girls had to sleep with traffickers as their odalisque. Women had to wear uncommon clothes that were not suitable for them.

Also, they faced the tortures of traffickers if they couldn't pay the amounts, and mostly women and girls faced difficulties and challenges in their journeys. The reason for facing all these difficulties is due to illegal immigration from one place to another. Secondly, there are intelligent agencies that take action against traffickers.

### **3.12 The dual role of illicit support and punishment: non-governmental organizations and the Bangladesh government's response**

The legal support for Rohingya migrant prisoners in Myanmar is lacking. Many of these migrants have been arrested by the government and sentenced to jail time ranging from 2 to 5 years, along with additional fines. A concerning aspect of their detention is that their families are unable to communicate with them directly. Detainees can only send letters through intermediaries, such as Rakhine or Barma people who work at the jail or through released prisoners. Families can provide funds for medicine, personal expenses, and fines through these intermediaries. However, there is no legal support available from Myanmar advocates, the international community, or NGOs. Records from RFA indicate that between December 2021 and January 6, 2023, 1,816 Rohingya who fled refugee camps in Rakhine State and Bangladesh were arrested in Myanmar. Of these, 387 received prison sentences of two to five years (RFA, 2023) [14]. The total number of Rohingya migrants arrested in Myanmar or Thailand is unknown, and there is no information on how many have died or been killed. Shuna Mia said, "This world is not for us because there is no one talking or assisting Rohingya who are really in danger and oppressed." The international community is also aware that Rohingya arrested in Myanmar are being aggressively tortured in prison without access to food, water, or medicine.

In Bangladesh, punishment is not severe for Rohingya migrants who are arrested while traveling. They are kept in detention centers for a few days before being sent back to their shelters. There are no reports in Bangladesh of Rohingyas being jailed while traveling to Malaysia. However, two years ago, some Rohingyas were forced to go to Bachan Char Island while they were stranded in the sea of Bengal. But when they are arrested inside Myanmar or Thailand while traveling, they are directly sent to jail in each country. In Malaysia, they are jailed for a few years and released with the help of UN, but in Myanmar, they are jailed for two to five years for illegal border crossing and being undocumented people. The Bangladeshi government and NGOs are not playing any positive role or taking any initiative to fight against human trafficking. They say nothing regarding the process of human trafficking, and only identify those who have gone to Malaysia to remove their names from family data and cut off their ration. It is clear that trafficking is a grievous violation of human rights and a serious crime that affects millions of people worldwide. However, the international community, NGOs, and camp authorities are doing nothing to stop it or take action against it.

*"There is no awareness or activity from the authority and NGOs to enforce law and prosecute Traffickers," said a youth leader anonymously.*

We have not seen the role of NGOs raising concerns about human trafficking or conducting advocacy for stronger laws and policies to prevent trafficking and protect victims. They have not given any support to the victims' families or the victims themselves who are really in trouble. Md Zubair asked, "Why hasn't the camp authority implemented any effective policies and laws to prevent and combat trafficking in the camp?" The role of NGOs and the government is to make refugees aware not to fall into the trap of any traffickers, as they lure innocent people and make money. Many refugees are being misled by traffickers, who show them ways of making money. All NGOs should invite Majhi and community elders to attend

awareness sessions on trafficking and give them responsibilities to stop people from trafficking. Together, NGOs and the government can make a real difference in the fight against human trafficking, helping to put an end to this heinous crime and ensure that victims receive the support and assistance they need. "Our solution does not lie in the migration of Malaysia. Rather, our people are dying and getting away from our national goal," said Md Zubair. Refugee community leaders are raising concerns to have international community support to release their detainees and stop trafficking in the camp.

### 3.13 Life in Malaysia: The current state of Rohingya refugees

#### i. Education:

Formal education is not allowed for the Rohingya community in Malaysia, and as a result, 90% of children are unable to attend school because the government does not permit refugees to access education. Although a few education centers are run by NGOs, they are limited and not enough to accommodate all Rohingya students. Unfortunately, even though the UNHCR is mandated to assist refugees, it does not provide education to refugees in Malaysia because the country is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and has no domestic or administrative framework to govern refugees and their rights. There is no higher education system in Malaysia available for Rohingya refugees.

*"I have three children who are now under 15 years old, but there is no institution for them to enroll in. I fear for their future," said Md Arafat.*

There is no future for Rohingya upcoming generations in Malaysia, and their future is uncertain. Without education, the younger generation may become involved in illegal activities, which could lead to them being viewed as terrorists, gangsters, or bad influences on the community. Rohingya refugees in Malaysia live in an unstable environment with limited access to education, freedom of worship, medical facilities, legal government approval to work, and legal recognition. Even in 2020 April, Home Minister Hamzah Zainudin explained "the Rohingya "have no status, rights or basis to make any claims on the [Malaysian] government," [15].

#### ii. Medical facility:

Limited healthcare services are available in Malaysia for refugees, but they are required to pay exorbitant fees to gain access. UNHCR, apart from issuing UNHCR cards, does not play an active role in assisting refugees. However, it takes 4 to 6 years to issue UNHCR cards to refugees. At government health facilities, including public hospitals, UNHCR-registered refugees and asylum-seekers are charged 50% of the foreigners' fee, but they are not entitled to full healthcare coverage. Instead, they have access to limited healthcare services, such as lifesaving emergency operations. They are not allowed to receive chemotherapy, radiotherapy, or medications for infectious or non-communicable diseases. To register as a local Malaysian, one needs to pay a registration fee of 1 Ringgit, while foreigners pay Rm 120. The health ministry's idea is that foreigners should go to government hospitals, but this indirectly forces foreign patients to go to private hospitals, which are unaffordable for refugees.

*"Once, while working in building construction, I had an accident and was admitted to a government hospital. It cost me 6,000 Ringgit. I reported it on the UN website, and they provided me with half of the cost, and I paid the rest," said Md Faisal.*

However, two-thirds of migrants are not yet registered with the UN. If they fall sick, they must pay for their treatment themselves in private hospitals.

### iii. Careers:

"The refugees in Malaysia have no rights and are not allowed to work legally. They often work as daily laborers under Malaysian employers, where they are vulnerable to exploitation by locals. Since refugees cannot report such incidents to authorities, they have no career prospects in Malaysia. According to Md Akram, "No migrant can work legally there. In the past, they could create a bank, open their own small business, but now it is restricted by the government. I am afraid of being detained and have to work secretly in dangerous and rural areas to avoid government scrutiny." If the Malaysian government legally allows Rohingya workers, they will not have to resort to illegal work, and it would also help the Malaysian economy to progress. According to an article in Malay Mail News in April 2022, "Allow Rohingya refugees to work so they can contribute to the Malaysian economy, Putrajaya urged" [15]. The Rohingya community in Myanmar is considered the most oppressed and vulnerable in Southeast Asia. They face various challenges in their daily life, including lack of income, restrictions on marriage, sexual abuse, movement, and rooting. Due to these difficulties, many Rohingya people choose to migrate to other countries, often risking their lives. Khin Maung expressed that they prefer to go to a developed and democratic country, but unfortunately, they are facing the same difficult situations.

### iv. Laboring:

Bullying is happening widely as refugees are not allowed to work legally. In Malaysia, there are no Rohingya migrant workers who are not betrayed with wages by their company or boss. If a worker's salary is not paid, they can't complain to the police because they are not recognized as refugees and do not have the right to work there. If they forcibly ask for their wage, their boss beats them and sends them to the police. With UNHCR card, we can only breathe here in Malaysia, he added. In the past, the Malaysian government and people were optimistic and cohesive towards Rohingya refugees. However, last year some Rohingya demanded rights from the Malaysian government rudely by posting a video on social media in Malay language. This was created by some Malaysian citizens, but the Malay people took it negatively, thinking that the Rohingya were asking for national rights. After that incident, hate speech and discrimination have potentially increased. In some valleys of Malay, they hang postcards that say "No Rohingya enter or work or allow for an apartment". Recently, during Ramadan, 50 Rohingya migrants were driven out of the village by local Malay people. Nowadays, it seems there is no place for Rohingya. They spread prejudice, such as the belief that the Rohingya would seize Malaysia the way Israelis did in Palestine, said Muhib Arakani. Some UN cardholders are allowed to work as laborers in the Malaysian market or at homes, while a few others can engage in their own small businesses of selling vegetables or opening small betel or tea shops. However, Rohingya refugees are not permitted to operate their own businesses or open shops in Malaysia. They are forced to work for low wages because the Malaysian government and the UN do not legally allow them to work in the country, said Akram.

### v. Challenge in Malaysia:

Refugees are not protected under the law of Malaysia and facing a daily basis for their livelihood and career. "We have all in all challenges in Malaysia. For instance, I can't work with a perfect wage or open self-business. I don't have Bank account to transfer money for my family or as savings," said Akram. The locals' people are very much hostile towards refugees specifically to Rohingya communities and

xenophobia spreading widely countrywide because the refugees are burden to their country's economy and no law or policy for asylum seekers [15].

**vi. Positive point:**

I really don't have any clue to utter as a positive point for current situation here in Malaysia and very recently in Ramadhan the local Malay discussed about Rohingya and forced to leave from a small village in Malaysia and the Rohingya refugees have to move in Ramadhan with elderly refugees and children which is very worst facing my Rohingya community. We have only positive is that some of Rohingya refugees can resettle in third countries, but it is small rate of people. I'd rather like to request the international community and UN to increase settlement for Rohingya, said Nosur Ullah. Many Rohingya people suggested that the best way to solve the Rohingya issue in Malaysia is to find a third country for them to resettle in or give them some opportunities legally to do work or movement freely.

**vii. Prisoner and Jail:**

"It is a living hell here in Malaysia. I have personally experienced being in jail and an immigration camp, and the treatment of refugees by the authorities is far worse than anyone can imagine. There is not enough food, healthcare, and physical abuse is an almost daily occurrence, especially in immigration detention centers. In Malaysia, there are more than 2000 Rohingya refugees in immigration detention centers who are not allowed to be released. The detainees are hopeless and do not know their release date, suffering mentally on a daily basis," said Muhib Arakani. Kushida, who has four children under 8 years old, explained that her husband was jailed in 2022 and they have not received any information about him or any support from the UNHCR or government. Kamal Huson, who was jailed in Malaysia in 2016 and released three years later, described the inhumane conditions in the jail. He said, "I have never heard or seen anywhere the way we suffered in Malaysia jail. They provided us one-time food in a day. We could take a bath twice in a month. They did not provide us with any medicine or clothes to wear. We had to stay almost naked with torn and bare clothes."

**viii. Legal Advocacy:**

As the term "refugee" is not protected under Malaysian law, the authorities consider refugees as migrants. Although there are some NGOs providing advocacy at the field level, there is no advocacy at the regional level because Malaysia does not recognize refugees as refugees under its national law since they are not part of the UN Convention. The UNHCR in Malaysia operates under a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and does not have the power to push the government to uphold refugees' rights, as the Malaysian law does not recognize any rights for refugees under the country's constitution. Many migrants are arrested in Malaysia and are neither released nor allowed to communicate with their families. They are not jailed or investigated but are instead kept in custody for an extended period without any clear explanation or legal process. When I talked with different Rohingya migrants of Malaysia, they shared their lives experience and challenges. Some people terribly express about post trauma and current state of Malaysia. Some others said that they miss their motherland Arakan, neighborhoods, friends and family. My heart will not dissolve if I can't go back in my country and meet with my family, said Shohina. Muhib Arakani expressed "I am suffering mentally on a daily basis because of the way Malaysians treat refugees. I am waiting for my life to end according to Allah's will, as otherwise, I might have considered committing suicide. However, being a Muslim, suicide is Haram in Islam, and I cannot do that to myself. Another man namely Md Ayas who mentioned that he has been

unable to meet with his friends for three years since arriving in Malaysia due to travel barriers caused by lack of proper documentation."

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

It is concluded that some have attempted to find safety in neighbour countries like India, Indonesia, and Malaysia, undertaking irregular migration while falling prey to human trafficking due to fake influential promise. In conclusion, the world must not forget the Rohingya people or delay in resolving the Rohingya crisis. The refugee camp is a place where Rohingya refugees exist without the essential support and resources they need to live with dignity. It is crucial to work towards justice for the atrocities committed against them and create a safe and secure environment for their future. As Khin Maung aptly states, "The world should not forget the Rohingya and not delay in working till calling the end of the Rohingya crisis."

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