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PERSPECTIVES OF ROHINGYA ON THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF LIFE IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The Rohingya are a minority ethnic group who practice Islam in predominantly Buddhist Myanmar. Due to decades of persecution by the Myanmar government and military, the stateless Rohingya have fled to nearby countries. Many Rohingya have fled to Malaysia because it is a Muslim country with available work. Malaysia, not a signatory to the 1951 and 1967 Refugee Convention and Protocols, considers the Rohingya as illegals. The tenuous situation in Myanmar and low rates of resettlement to third countries mean the Rohingya will likely be in Malaysia long-term. As part of a qualitative study on child marriage, Rohingya participants discussed positive and negative aspects of their lives in Malaysia. Four focus group discussions (FGDs) with a total of 20 Rohingya men aged 35 and older were conducted. Additionally, four FGDs with community stakeholders, including refugee schoolteachers and community workers, involved a total of 18 Rohingya participants. Negative aspects of their lives in Malaysia included their status as illegal, leading to problems with employment, finances, access to education and healthcare, extortion and xenophobia. Positive aspects of their lives in Malaysia included being less fearful than in Myanmar, gratitude for being allowed to live here, freedom of movement, the opportunity to live in a Muslim country, and the ability to provide for their families through limited work and education. The Rohingya pointed out that, despite the challenges, their lives in Malaysia are better than their lives in Myanmar. Recommendations include urging

the Malaysian government to ratify the Refugee Convention and its Protocols, and grant rights to refugees. Due to their illegal status in Malaysia, the Rohingya continue to live in limbo, able to survive but not thrive.

Keywords: ecological theory, Malaysia, Rohingya, social exchange theory, social work

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has a history of hosting refugees dating back to the 1970s, when Malaysia took in Vietnamese boat people after the Vietnam War. Since then, Malaysia has received refugees from Bosnia, Aceh and Mindanao, Philippines, among other countries (Munir-Asen 2018). While Malaysia is home to 187,020 refugees registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the majority of them, 108,500, are Rohingya (UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency 2024). There are also many Rohingya in Malaysia who are unregistered (Md Mahbubul, Zarina and Bakri 2023; Wake and Cheung 2016). Despite the dangerous journey (Fortify Rights, and The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia 2019), the Rohingya have been coming to Malaysia for decades and continue to call Malaysia home (Yesmin 2016).

Research has discussed facets of life concerning refugees in Malaysia (Todd, Adli and Shin 2019; Kartini and Nur Atiqah 2022). Other research has focused on specific aspects of life in Malaysia for the Rohingya, such as education (Palik 2020), healthcare (Rajaratnam and Azlinda 2022), intimate partner violence (Welton-Mitchell et al. 2019), motherhood (Arshad and Islam 2018), and security (Bakri, Siti Darwinda and Ku Nurasyiqin 2023). There has been little research, however, on overall aspects of life in Malaysia from the point of view of the Rohingya, which this article addresses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background

The Rohingya people are a Muslim ethnic group from Rakhine state in Myanmar. Although Myanmar is predominantly Buddhist, the Rohingyas' Muslim identity is an important part of their daily lives (Tay et al. 2018). They have a unique language, similar to Chittagonian, and culture (Riley et al. 2017; Ripoll 2017; Tay et al. 2018). United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has called the Rohingya "one of, if not the, most discriminated people in the world" (*BBC News* 2020, 1).

While Rohingya people have a long history in Myanmar, the Myanmar government's 1982 Citizenship Law refused to recognise them as one of the 135 original ethnic groups, leaving them stateless. The Rohingyas' lack of citizenship and resulting statelessness have not only deprived them of political power but have also caused major problems in their daily lives (Advisory Comission on Rakhine State 2017; O'Brien and Hoffstaedter 2020). Their movement is restricted, they are forced to pay bribes to officials because corruption is prevalent, and they face discrimination in many areas, such as politics, work, and education (Advisory Comission on Rakhine State 2017; Kiragu, Rossi and Morris 2011).

The oppression of Rohingya has led to large exoduses of the Rohingya from Myanmar for several decades (Kiragu, Rossi and Morris 2011). Starting 25 August 2017, a new wave of violence against the Rohingya occurred in Rakhine State, Myanmar, causing over 600,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh (Inter-Sector Coordination Group 2017). This wave of violence was significant because vast numbers of people fled at once, giving the long-standing Rohingya crisis more worldwide attention (*BBC News* 2020). Authorities have referred to the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar as ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, and even genocide (Fortify Rights, and The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia 2019; Human Rights Council 2018; O'Brien and Hoffstaedter 2020).

There are several reasons why forcibly displaced Rohingya choose to flee to Malaysia. First, they escape to Malaysia because it is a Muslim country, and they feel they can practice their religion without fear of persecution (Cohen, Cohen and Li 2017; O'Brien and Hoffstaedter 2020). Next, there are job opportunities for low-skilled workers (Franck 2019). In addition, traffickers have regular routes to Malaysia, making it easier to access than some other countries (Cohen, Cohen and Li 2017).

Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention or the 1967 Protocol, leaving any refugees in the country to be considered illegal immigrants (Immigration Department of Malaysia 1959; UNHCR 2017) and making daily life for them challenging (Fortify Rights, and The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia 2019). The Rohingya can be arrested at any time for any reason (Equal Rights Trust 2014).

Right To Basic Needs for Living

While Malaysia is not signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, neither are most of the countries to where the Rohingya flee, such as Bangladesh, Indonesia and Thailand (Md Mahbubul, Zarina and Bakri 2023; UNHCR: The UN Refugee

Agency 2024). As a result, the Rohingya are not automatically granted the right to work that the 1951 Refugee Convention affords (Andika 2017; UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency 1951). This results in them finding underground work in the informal job sector (Cohen, Cohen and Li 2017; Equal Rights Trust 2014; Andika 2017). Forcibly displaced Rohingya in Malaysia find work that is "dirty, dangerous, and difficult" (Todd, Adli and Shin 2019, 8). Because they do not have the legal right to work, the Rohingya struggle financially. They face problems such as not being paid wages that were promised, working in hazardous conditions and inconsistent work (Nungsari, Flanders and Chuah 2020). Their financial problems related to their lack of right to work cause them to struggle in multiple areas of life (Bakri, Siti Darwinda and Ku Nurasyiqin 2023; Nungsari, Flanders and Chuah 2020).

The Rohingya in Malaysia do not live in camps but integrate into local communities (Hoffstaedter 2015; Munir-Asen 2018). Most Rohingya in Malaysia find housing through their social networks and choose to live near potential places of employment (Munir-Asen 2018). They usually live in low-cost housing that is split among multiple families, with each family living in a different bedroom (Wake and Cheung 2016).

Although Malaysia is a signatory to the 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child, the principles the convention upholds are not realised for forcibly displaced Rohingya children in Malaysia (Equal Rights Trust 2014; United Nations Human Rights 1989). Under Malaysian law, they are not allowed to attend local government schools (Hoffstaedter 2015; Munir-Asen 2018). Rohingya families usually send their children to a local community learning centre (Bakri, Siti Darwinda and Ku Nurasyiqin 2023). As of January 2023, 143 community learning centres are operating in Malaysia (UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency 2023). These schools are usually run by non-government organisations (NGOs) and operate on sparse budgets, often funded by some combination of community members, school fees, NGOs, and faith-based groups (Letchamanan 2013; Todd, Adli and Shin 2019; (UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency 2023).

The Rohingya in Malaysia have limited access to medical care, a common problem for refugees. In their study of healthcare access among refugees in Malaysia, Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand, Legido-Quigley, Chuah and Howard (2020) found that lack of finances was the main problem in refugees accessing healthcare. Research on the Rohingya in Malaysia has also shown the same (Todd, Adli and Shin 2019; Chuah et al. 2019). Rohingya who hold a UNHCR identification card receive 50% off the rate for foreigners at government hospitals (Equal Rights Trust 2014; Todd, Adli and Shin 2019), but many forcibly displaced Rohingya still find

the costs prohibitive (Chuah et al. 2019; Rajaratnam and Azlinda 2022; Todd, Adli and Shin 2019). Legido-Quigley, Chuah and Howard (2020) suggested that access to livelihoods would help make healthcare more accessible for refugees.

Giving refugees in Malaysia a legal right to work has been a point of debate for several decades. Temporary work permits, known as IMM13, have occasionally been used in the past to grant work to undocumented migrants. Under the Immigration Act of 1959/1963, the home affairs minister can allow some groups of people to work (Immigration Department of Malaysia 1959). Malaysia has used IMM13 in the past for groups from the Philippines, Aceh (Indonesia) and Syria (Md Mahbubul, Zarina and Bakri 2023; Putri and Gabiella 2022). In 2006, IMM13 was allowed for the Rohingya, with approximately 4,000 Rohingya paying the RM90 fee to register. The programme ended, however, after about two weeks amid allegations of corruption during registration (Puteri Nor Ariane, Daniel and Naufal 2019). More recently, the Malaysian government has also stated that it will allow refugees to work legally. In 2016, the government implemented a pilot programme for 300 Rohingya to work in the plantation sector, but the program failed (Md Mahbubul, Zarina and Bakri 2023; Puteri Nor Ariane, Daniel and Naufal 2019). In 2018, when the Pakatan Harapan government outlined its governing plan, it stated its intention to ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention and grant refugees the legal right to work (Pakatan Harapan 2018; Puteri Nor Ariane, Daniel and Naufal 2019). While the plans of the Pakatan Harapan coalition were never realised due to changing Malaysian politics (Putri and Gabiella 2022), it is significant that a major political coalition in Malaysia would openly push for refugee rights.

Malaysia's policies toward refugees are primarily guided by the National Security Directive No. 23. This 2009 policy refers to those who hold United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) documents as *pendatang asing tanpa izin* (PATI), or illegal immigrants (Bakri, Siti Darwinda and Ku Nurasyiqin 2023; Parlimen Malaysia 2023). The policy states that these persons will be tolerated on a humanitarian basis until they can be resettled to a third country (Parlimen Malaysia 2023). Malaysia's lack of clear policies towards refugees has caused their response to be dealt with ad hoc instead of in a consistent manner (Bakri, Siti Darwinda and Ku Nurasyiqin 2023).

Many have argued that refugees in Malaysia should be given a legal right to work (Todd, Adli and Shin 2019; Bakri, Siti Darwinda and Ku Nurasyiqin 2023; Nungsari, Flanders and Chuah 2020; Md Mahbubul, Zarina and Bakri 2023). Todd, Adli and Shin (2019) completed a comprehensive report about the economic impact of granting refugees in Malaysia the legal right to work and found that the refugees' tax contribution to Malaysia would be over RM50 million annually by

the year 2024. Malaysia continues to need foreign workers and has consistently brought foreign workers into Malaysia to fill gaps in employment that refugees could fill (Puteri Nor Ariane, Daniel and Naufal 2019; *The Star Online* 2023). Puteri Nor Ariane, Daniel and Naufal's (2019) paper was unique because it sought to address the impact that giving refugees the right to work would have on the best interests of Malaysia. When recommending that Malaysia give refugees the right to work, the authors pointed out that giving refugees documents helps with national security concerns in Malaysia (Puteri Nor Ariane, Daniel and Naufal 2019). Bakri, Siti Darwinda and Ku Nurasyiqin (2023) also noted that documenting refugees in Malaysia provides them with increased safety and security and helps make the general public safer.

Refugee Legal Status and Context in Malaysia

The Rohingya are at risk of bribery because of their illegal status in Malaysia (Equal Rights Trust 2014; Franck 2019; Hoffstaedter 2015; Md Mahbubul, Zarina and Bakri 2023). Refugees pay bribes to avoid arrest and detention (Franck 2019; Equal Rights Trust 2014). As O'Brien and Hoffstaedter (2020, 8) state, "police regularly demand bribes from refugees because they know where they live and when their paydays are". Refugees cannot open a bank account in Malaysia (Bakri, Siti Darwinda and Ku Nurasyiqin 2023), meaning they usually have cash, which increases their vulnerability to being bribed (Hoffstaedter 2017).

Because Rohingya are illegal in Malaysia (Immigration Department of Malaysia 1959), they can be arrested at any time (Equal Rights Trust 2014; Fortify Rights, and The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia 2019; Wake and Cheung 2016). Malaysian law does not limit their time in detention centres, so they can be held indefinitely (Fortify Rights, and The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia 2019; Human Rights Watch 2024). Conditions in detention centres in Malaysia are below international standards, with problems including overcrowding, poor sanitation facilities, inadequate food, and abuse (O'Brien and Hoffstaedter 2020; Human Rights Watch 2024; United Nations Human Rights Council 2019).

The importance of UNHCR to Rohingya in Malaysia cannot be overstated, as it is the primary agency assisting them (Kartini and Nur Atiqah 2022). The Malaysian government views refugees as being in Malaysia temporarily while they wait to be resettled to a third country (Bakri, Siti Darwinda and Ku Nurasyiqin 2023) and generally allows Rohingya to be in Malaysia as long as UNHCR takes responsibility for helping them (Equal Rights Trust 2014; Hoffstaedter 2015). As part of their vetting process, UNHCR interviews asylum seekers and validates that they are refugees. After they have been deemed a refugee, UNHCR registers their data and

gives them a UNHCR identity letter or card, which allows them identity, 50% off at government hospitals, and at times, some legal protection (Mohd Ramlan et al. 2021; Wake and Cheung 2016). Having a UNHCR card also makes it easier to obtain employment (Ripoll 2017).

Any policies towards the Rohingya in Malaysia should recognise that the Rohingya are likely to be in Malaysia long-term (Letchamanan 2013). Repatriation or resettlement are often suggested as solutions for the Rohingya, but they do not want to return to Myanmar without citizenship and freedom of movement (Barany 2019). At the time of writing, there is much uncertainty in Myanmar because opposition groups are fighting the Myanmar military, which seized control in a coup in February 2021 (Head and Luo 2023). The tenuous relationship between the Myanmar government and the Rohingya people indicates that any hope of repatriation is unlikely (Barany 2019). Resettlement, often mentioned as the preferred solution by the Rohingya, is an option for very few people (Munir-Asen 2018), as less than 1% of refugees worldwide are resettled (UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency 2021). Letchamanan (2013, 91) summarised the situation of the Rohingya in Malaysia: "they are not resettled to a third country. Nor are they repatriated because their country of origin has declared them stateless. For that, many have come to call Malaysia their home".

Theoretical Frameworks

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory provided a framework for this study because of its focus on the various layers of the environment and how those layers affect a person's life (Bronfenbrenner 1977; 1979). Ecological theory focuses on four systems in a person's life. First, the microsystem involves roles and relationships in the individual's life (Bronfenbrenner 1979). For a Rohingya man in Malaysia, that might include his roles as a father, husband, and informal sector employee. Next, ecological theory includes the meso-system, which are the relationships between different parts of the individual's microsystem (Bronfenbrenner 1979). In the example of a Rohingya man, it could include his relationship with his wife and his children, his wife's relationship with his children, and his wife's relationship with his boss. Next, the exo-system involves systems in the individual's life that may impact him indirectly (Bronfenbrenner 1979). This might include the laws of Malaysia and how his status as an illegal impacts his life. Finally, the macrosystem involves culture or beliefs that cause similarities between all other sub-systems (Bronfenbrenner 1979). In a Rohingya man's life, the fact that Rohingya culture is patriarchal would impact all other sub-systems. Ecological theory has been used in other qualitative studies to interpret findings (Low, Kok and Lee 2014; Kohno et al. 2019).

A second theory, social exchange theory, was also used because it supports the notion that social interactions include costs and rewards for those involved (Homans 1961). Blau (1964) emphasised power in relationships and how the person with power often withholds rewards or gives punishments. He noted that imbalance in the relationship often causes one person to have more power. It is important to note that the power imbalance in relationships can lead to exploitation (Ekeh 1974). Social exchange theory also extends beyond individuals and dyads to include groups and networks (Emerson 1976).

When studying the Rohingya in Malaysia through the lens of social exchange theory, the Rohingya flee to Malaysia because it is an Islamic country and they have some level of safety (rewards). The risks for the Rohingya in Malaysia are that their illegal status affords them few rights. For Malaysia, social exchange theory would hold that the reward of having the Rohingya is that they provide low-cost labour. Yet, a cost for Malaysia is that the Rohingya are considered illegal immigrants who live in poverty and have needs, such as education and healthcare.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design, Sampling, Recruitment and Setting

This study was part of a qualitative research project that included two types of focus group discussions (FGDs) about child marriage among the Rohingya in Malaysia. This qualitative method provided a holistic approach that was considered appropriate for extracting perspectives on emotional and personal subjective issues (Azlinda et al. 2020; Jamir Singh et al. 2023; Isahaque et al. 2020; Mohammed Mamun et al. 2020). Participants were asked about the positive and challenging aspects of life in Malaysia for the Rohingya. Both types of FGDs in this study used criterion sampling, a subset of purposive sampling. This method was used because there were limited numbers of Rohingya in Malaysia that matched the study criteria. This study also used snowball sampling, as participants referred others who might want to join the study. All FGDs with men included men who lived in Penang. FGDs with community stakeholders included participants from Penang and the Klang Valley/Kuala Lumpur area. The Human Research Ethics Committee at Universiti Sains Malaysia approved this study. Pilot studies were conducted to check recruitment methods, evaluate questions and responsiveness and examine methods of translation and data analysis.

The first set of FGDs included Rohingya men aged 35 and older (Table 1). Four FGDs were conducted between February and April 2022, with five participants

in each group. The participant's UNHCR card or letter was used to determine the participant's age and Rohingya ethnicity. Rohingya men for FGDs were found through contacts of community liaison workers for Penang Stop Human Trafficking Campaign, an NGO that has advocacy and education initiatives in the Rohingya community. FGDs with Rohingya men were held in community centres near the participants' housing, were held in the Rohingya language, and were audio recorded with the participants' consent. FGDs were transcribed into English by a research assistant who is fluent in Rohingya and English. Later, another Rohingya person fluent in both languages who uses English daily back-translated one-fourth of the transcriptions, and any discrepancies were addressed.

Table 1: Sociodemographic profile of older Rohingya men in FGD

Abbreviation	FGD number	Participant number	Age	Years in Malaysia
FGDM1-P1	FGDM1	P1	49	12
FGDM1-P2	FGDM1	P2	35	15
FGDM1-P3	FGDM1	P3	36	8
FGDM1-P4	FGDM1	P4	47	9
FGDM1-P5	FGDM1	P5	62	16
FGDM2-P1	FGDM2	P1	50	15
FGDM2-P2	FGDM2	P2	47	9
FGDM2-P3	FGDM2	P3	46	9
FGDM2-P4	FGDM2	P4	50	9
FGDM2-P5	FGDM2	P5	51	31
FGDM3-P1	FGDM3	P1	48	9
FGDM3-P2	FGDM3	P2	52	30
FGDM3-P3	FGDM3	P3	60	27
FGDM3-P4	FGDM3	P4	74	20
FGDM3-P5	FGDM3	P5	57	7
FGDM4-P1	FGDM4	P1	35	15
FGDM4-P2	FGDM4	P2	47	17
FGDM4-P3	FGDM4	P3	44	14
FGDM4-P4	FGDM4	P4	36	8
FGDM4-P5	FGDM4	P5	42	20

The lead researcher conducted the FGDs with community stakeholders, who worked directly with the Rohingya in Malaysia through NGOs, learning centres, or community-based organisations (CBOs). Participants in the FGDs with community stakeholders had at least one year of experience working (paid or volunteer) directly with the Rohingya (Table 2). Four groups were held between February and March 2022, and each group had 4 to 6 participants. For this article, any responses from non-Rohingya community stakeholders were excluded (n = 2). FGDs with community stakeholders were conducted online in English via Google Meet, as the community stakeholders had higher education and were fluent in the language. These FGDs were video recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed as part of the data analysis process. ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, was used to code and organise data and to discover common themes.

Table 2: Sociodemographic profile of community stakeholders in FGD

Abbreviation	FGD number	Participant number	Current role	Years in current role	Years working with Rohingya
FGDCS1-P2	FGD1	P2	Refugee school teacher	6	6
FGDCS1-P3	FGD1	P3	Community worker	7	7
FGDCS1-P4	FGD1	P4	Community worker	6	6
FGDCS2-P1	FGD2	P1	Community worker	1	1
FGDCS2-P2	FGD2	P2	Refugee school teacher	9	9
FGDCS2-P3	FGD2	P3	Community worker	4	4
FGDCS2-P4	FGD2	P4	Community worker	6	6
FGDCS3-P1	FGD3	P1	Community worker	6	6
FGDCS3-P2	FGD3	P2	Community worker	4	7
FGDCS3-P4	FGD3	P4	Refugee school teacher and community worker	5	7
FGDCS4-P1	FGD4	P1	Community worker	6	6
FGDCS4-P2	FGD4	P2	Community worker	5	5
FGDCS4-P3	FGD4	P3	Community worker	1	8
FGDCS4-P4	FGD4	P4	Community worker	5	5
FGDCS4-P5	FGD4	P5	Community worker	4	4
FGDCS4-P6	FGD4	P6	Community worker	2	10

FINDINGS

Negative Aspects of Life in Malaysia

Participants discussed numerous challenges that the Rohingya face in Malaysia. First, participants pointed out that they are considered illegal in Malaysia, resulting in many problems.

> When you are talking about the problem in Malaysia, A to Z is a problem. Refugee come itself is a problem in the country because this country is not a signatory country to the UN convention, so they do not want to give any right. (FGDCS4-P1)

The illegal status of refugees in Malaysia exacerbates their challenges, including that they are not permitted to work even with a UNHCR card.

> For us everything is a challenge because with UNHCR we are not allowed work, so how are we going to feed our family? I have children who are in school, how would I pay for their fees and living if I can't work? (FGDM3-P3)

Another aspect of challenges for the Rohingya in Malaysia is financial problems, which also relate to their illegal status.

> We know that this is not our country and so we are not allowed to do what we want. We have a lot of difficulties here and can't pay bills. (FGDM2-P5)

The financial problems that the Rohingya in Malaysia face also cause problems in educating their children. While families can send their children to refugee learning centres, expensive school fees often make school costs prohibitive.

> Sometimes, the parents say, I have 5 children. The refugee school: I have to pay one person is RM100. I have 5 children; how do I pay RM500 in this school? This is a problem also faced by a lot of family members. They want their children to learn, but finance is a big problem for the school fees. Only the name is refugee school, but the fees are too expensive. (FGDCS1-P4)

Many older men also mentioned the government schools were of higher quality than the refugee learning centres.

> We can do everything, we have food, we can live, but we can't educate our children. There are few UNHCR and NGO schools, but they don't have a proper system there. We hope to send our children to government school. (FGDM4-P5)

> Challenge is that we can't send our children to school. If we could, then at least our children would have a bright future. I have a question: Do you know things that government schools teach in a day? UNHCR and NGO's schools will take a year to teach the same amount. NGO's schools are just for beauty and name. (FGDM4-P4)

Participants also tied the success of their children's future to their children getting a good education.

> So, what I want to say is like, I just want to add education. It's the most important things for my community. If we were educated people today, we would do something for the world. But we don't have the opportunity to do anything, as we have lack of education, we are just following whatever people say, we are just saying yes, whatever people ask to do. (FGDCS3-P2)

Participants also shared that financial problems deter their access to medical care because it is too expensive.

> Some of the Rohingyas, they became families, they married and then they give birth, so the newly born babies, they get some kind of disease, they stay for a few weeks, and then the bill is so high, they cannot approach to anybody. They don't have saving that much money. (FGDCS2-P1)

Community stakeholders also pointed out that Rohingya in Malaysia face financial difficulties because of remittances to family members.

> Some of us, including me, they have been here as a refugee in Malaysia. It is very challenging. In the first place, the one who is here in Malaysia as a refugee, he or she himself are struggling; at the same time, so is the family left behind. Some are in Myanmar within country, some are in neighbouring country, like Bangladesh, also as a refugee in the open camp. Whether you are able to work here or not, you still need to support yourself, at the same time you need to support your family back in Myanmar. (FGDCS4-P6)

Yet another financial challenge mentioned was that refugees are sometimes bribed.

> Plus, the refugee are working in Malaysia illegally, so they become a chance for the authority to ask the bribe from them. Let's say a person is working in construction or anywhere, the police ask. There are two questions asked: "do you work?" If the person replies, "I do not work," then the police ask, "Then how you eat?" If he say, "Ok, I work," then you are not supposed to work. So, both sides, you are tied. So, at that time, they, the authority themselves, convinced the refugee to give bribe. So even though we do not want to give bribe to the authority, police, and anyone, they convince us, they question and ask us. I cannot go away. If I say I work, its illegal. You are not supposed to work. If I say I am not working, how you eat? So, both side is tied. (FGDCS4-P1)

Several community stakeholders pointed out that the Rohingya in Malaysia also face xenophobia, indicated by discrimination in housing and employment, negative comments about Rohingya in the media, and hate speech on social media.

> And I would also say that, it is sad of course, here in Malaysia, there are some discrimination we have to face. (FGDCS3-P1)

Community stakeholders also noted that they are more fearful due to the rise in xenophobia.

> Of course, xenophobic statement is given by the country, even though last time and two years ago, since the pandemic started, because of the Rohingya there is a lot of conflict, as you guys know. This is the political pressure to the refugee community. They feel they are – I as a refugee, I assume that the authority feel that we Rohingya are happily stay in this country, and we are going stay in this country for a long time. So, the agenda they make is to hate the refugees. If the public generally hate the refugees, these refugees are going to leave the country….they are making the Rohingya life more difficult for this people. In the name of to clear the country the refugee, they want to free the refugee, refugee-free country, they also should think we also human, we feel, we have a feeling. We are refugees, but we have a feeling. (FGDCS4-P1)

Overall, the Rohingya face many challenges related to their illegal status in Malaysia. They cannot legally work, causing them financial problems that affect their access to education and healthcare. They also mentioned their vulnerability to bribery and xenophobia, which their illegal status only magnifies.

Positive Aspects of Life in Malaysia

In contrast, participants also had positive things to say about life in Malaysia. First, participants mentioned that freedom and the overall feeling of safety are aspects that make life in Malaysia preferable to life in Myanmar, particularly in terms of movement, work and educating their children.

> In Myanmar, we don't have access to education at all, but here we can at least teach our children how to read and write. (FGDM4-P3)

> When we were in Myanmar, we never had the opportunity to visit one township to another township...But after coming to Malaysia, so we can go wherever we want to go around Malaysia, entire Malaysia. (FGDCS3-P2)

Another positive aspect of life in Malaysia compared to life in Myanmar is the greater feeling of safety in Malaysia.

> When I was in Myanmar, I had to suffer and get bullied by the monk. After coming here, sometimes we can work and live without so much fear. (FGD4-P4)

> They are safe here. I know accidents and other things happen, but compared to Bangladesh and Myanmar, they are here, safe. Their life is safe at least. (FGDCS4-P5)

> So, in general, in Malaysia, for a positive point, the first thing is I sleep without fear. This is the best positive in being in Malaysia. Because when I used to in Myanmar, I do not know what time the military will come, and what time they are going to kill me, and what time they are going to beat me, what time they are going to call me for forced labour…I want to give you an example. There is one cobra, and another one is a scorpion. Being in Myanmar is under the cobra. Being in Malaysia is under the scorpion. Both are biting, but the fear, the biting of the cobra is more. (FGDCS4-P1)

Next, as a positive aspect of life for the Rohingya in Malaysia, participants expressed gratitude for being able to live in Malaysia, a sentiment that was especially evident among the older Rohingya men.

> Since we are helpless and we don't have land under our feet, we thank Malaysia for letting us stay here. (FGDM1-P4)

> We must be grateful to Malaysians, that they allowed us to live here and somehow work. They have helped us in many ways. (FGDM3-P5)

> Things that we couldn't do in Myanmar, we can do here. We can't forget this favour of Malaysia for letting us stay here. (FGDM4-P5)

Next, many participants pointed out that they were able to work and survive in Malaysia, and this aspect was highlighted among the older Rohingya men.

> This a Muslim country, and thanks to the public for a bit of support, and we thank God that we can at least fill our stomach every day. (FGDM1-P1)

> Somehow, we can find work and we can move from one place to another, which we couldn't do in Myanmar. (FGDM4-P2)

Rohingya participants also mentioned that Malaysia being an Islamic country was a benefit for them.

> This is a Muslim country. First of all, it is good for us, but it is not our country. We are here just for temporary. (FGDM2-P5)

> Benefit is that this is an Islamic country, and society here does not harm us. Since we have nowhere, we can at least live here temporarily. (FGDM3-P2)

The Rohingya noted many benefits of life in Malaysia. These included increased freedoms and greater safety than in Myanmar, gratitude to be allowed to live in Malaysia, the opportunity to work, survive, and educate their children, and the ability to live in an Islamic country.

DISCUSSION

One unique element of this study was the focus on positive aspects of life for the Rohingya in Malaysia. While the Rohingya expressed that there are benefits to living in Malaysia, it is notable that many of the good things that they pointed out, such as work and education, were also mentioned as challenges. Their living situation in Myanmar, however, was so poor that the level of safety, security, and freedom of movement that they have in Malaysia is an improvement. The fact that the Rohingya in Malaysia have some level of safety and security and the ability to educate their children can be viewed as benefits or rewards for them, according to social exchange theory.

Rohingya participants were quick to point out the challenges they face in Malaysia, highlighting problems related to work and money, accessing healthcare and education, discrimination, and xenophobia. These findings were similar to other studies of the Rohingya in Malaysia (Bakri, Siti Darwinda and Ku Nurasyiqin 2023; Md Mahbubul, Zarina and Bakri 2023). According to ecological theory, the Rohingyas' lack of rights in Malaysia can be seen as part of their exo-system that has a great impact on their lives.

Though research has shown that giving refugees the legal right to work would greatly benefit the Malaysian economy (Todd, Adli and Shin 2019), Malaysia seems reluctant to do so. While Malaysia grapples with the lack of workers in certain sectors and the challenge of bringing in foreign workers (*The Star Online* 2023), giving refugees the legal right to work could help. It is likely, however, that Malaysia is concerned that giving refugees the right to work would become a pull factor, overwhelming the country (Equal Rights Trust 2014; Hoffstaedter 2017). The number of refugees in Malaysia increasing in the country can be viewed as a cost or risk for Malaysia as part of social exchange theory.

Cultural norms also play a part in the Rohingyas' financial problems in Malaysia. Patriarchal Rohingya culture leads to women not working outside the home (Rajaratnam and Azlinda 2022; Tay et al. 2018), making it difficult for Rohingya families to survive on only one income. In addition, Rohingya often send remittances to relatives in Myanmar or Bangladesh (Rajaratnam and Azlinda 2022), where cultural norms dictate that Rohingya who are working send money to family members who are struggling (Huennekes 2018). Nungsari, Flanders and Chuah (2020), in their study of Rohingya construction workers in Malaysia, found that they remit 25% of their salary to family members in other countries, contributing to their financial problems in Malaysia. The cultural norms of patriarchy and a familial obligation to send remittances to family members coincide with the macrosystem when viewed through ecological theory and impact all areas of their lives.

Researchers and community stakeholders have argued that Malaysia should ratify the 1951 and 1967 Refugee Protocols, especially because it would give refugees in Malaysia the right to work (Kartini and Nur Atiqah 2022). Others have suggested, however, that Malaysia could give refugees the right to work without signing the Refugee Conventions (Bakri, Siti Darwinda and Ku Nurasyiqin 2023). Zetter and Ruaudel's (2016) study of the right to work in 20 refugee-receiving countries found no notable differences between countries that ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and those that did not (Md Mahbubul, Zarina and Bakri 2023; Zetter and Ruaudel 2016). The implementation of policies was the primary factor in

whether refugees had the right to work and could do so (Zetter and Ruaudel 2016). While Malaysia signing the conventions would be an ideal solution, refugees could be afforded rights through solutions such as further implementing IMM13 (Bakri, Siti Darwinda and Ku Nurasyiqin 2023; Putri and Gabiella 2022). Multiple respondents in Bakri, Siti Darwinda and Ku Nurasyiqin's (2023) study suggested using IMM13 as an easier solution to help refugees with the right to work and documentation.

The positive and negative aspects of life in Malaysia, as discussed by the Rohingya are helpful to highlight how to assist them. Recurring themes point to how the Malaysian government, UNHCR, CBOs and NGOs might help. First, UNHCR could advocate for policy changes that would benefit refugees, such as signing the 1951 and 1967 Refugee Protocols or granting them the legal right to work through IMM13. They could also advocate for the Malaysian government to allow refugee children to attend government schools, improving their education and increasing understanding between refugees and locals, potentially decreasing xenophobia (Lee 2020).

NGOs and CBOs could also benefit refugees by providing programmes and services for the needs that were mentioned. They could also advocate for refugee rights, including the right to work and access government schools. In addition, they could provide education through learning centres, make these centres more affordable, and assist with providing medical services.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study align well with ecological theory and social exchange theory. The Rohingyas' illegal status and lack of rights in Malaysia, part of the exo-system in ecological theory, impact all other areas of their lives and increase the challenges that they face, which participants highlighted in this study. Viewed through social exchange theory, the rewards for both Malaysia as a country and the Rohingya in Malaysia are significant enough that the Rohingya will likely keep coming to Malaysia, and the Malaysian government will likely continue to tolerate them on a humanitarian basis. While Malaysia risks having large numbers of undocumented people in the country, it receives the reward of low-cost labour. The Rohingya risk arrest and detention to live in Malaysia, but the reward they receive-relative safety and security-is better than remaining in Myanmar or Bangladesh.

Without rights in Malaysia, the Rohingya will remain at the margins of society, awaiting repatriation or resettlement, neither of which is probable. It is doubtful their overall situation in Malaysia will improve unless Malaysia grants them the right to work and/or signs the 1951 and 1967 Refugee Protocols. In summary, Malaysia serves as a transient home for the Rohingya, allowing them to exist but not flourish.

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