

How Education Can Help Rohingya Women Avoid Human Trafficking

Maria Begum

Abstract

How a Rohingya woman receives education and healthcare services from the Myanmar state depends on where the woman is born. In this article, a Rohingya doctor from Yangon describes how she was treated differently to her female relatives in Rakhine State. Drawing on her time working at a non-governmental organization (NGO) in northern Rakhine State, the author also describes how some well-intentioned NGO projects that tried to promote women's rights in Rakhine State went wrong, and proposes an alternative for Rohingya women who are at risk of human trafficking.

Introduction

I am a Rohingya woman born in Yangon, so I am luckier than other Rohingya women, particularly those born in Rakhine State. One of the ways in which I am luckier is that I had the opportunity to study. The lives of Rohingya women differ greatly by where they are born. My cousins born in Rakhine were unable to have the same education as me. My father used to tell me about Rohingya women who died giving birth in their homes because Rakhine State's public hospitals are inaccessible to many Rohingyas. Such stories motivated me, and I was determined to study medicine and return to Rakhine State to serve my people. I had always dreamed of returning to my father's village in Buthidaung Township among the mountains, rice fields, and cold winter mornings. The serenity and beauty of my father's village lived inside me thanks to his many nostalgic stories.

After graduating from medical school, I joined the government service. My first posting was at Myawaddy Township

Hospital, on the Thailand-Myanmar border in southeast Myanmar. Working as a doctor in a conflict-affected area like Myawaddy exposed me to the suffering of ethnic Karen women as well as the predicaments of young Burmese immigrants working in garment factories in Mae Sot, the town opposite Myawaddy in Thailand. I witnessed huge suffering and how conflict and poverty put the lives of women in danger. This led me to become very interested in women's issues.

When my mother died in 2011, I quit my government job to look after my family. The government's regulations at the time banned me from practicing medicine, as I had technically quit before completing my term of mandatory service, until retirement at 60 years of age. The government revoked my medical license and I also had to pay the equivalent of US \$1,000 to compensate the government for my medical education. I started to see the power of the state that had extensive control over us. I gradually became an activist to fight this oppressive system instead of working within it.

My First Visit to Rakhine State

The first day I had the chance to set foot in my father's hometown in northern Rakhine State was the day before he passed away in 2020. I had secured a job at a non-governmental organization (NGO) in Rakhine State, and when I told my father, who was suffering from liver cancer at the time, that I had to visit there, he was very excited and happy. He had left his home in the 1970s to look for work in Yangon. For the whole time I had been alive, he had been unable to return to his mother's home in Rakhine State.

Rohingyas cannot travel easily in Myanmar without a National Registration Card (NRC). Rohingyas born and raised in Rakhine State have long been prevented from traveling outside of their immediate surroundings, let alone outside the state, by successive Myanmar regimes. They cannot travel from Buthidaung or Maungdaw towns in northern Rakhine State to Sittwe Town, the state capital, without receiving permission

from township and state immigration authorities. Even if they manage to secure permission to travel, they can only stay in their destination for a limited number of days. When they return home, they are subject to interrogation and extortion, and if they cannot pay bribes, government security forces arrest them.

As a result, many Rohingyas who flee Rakhine State cannot visit their relatives at home until they obtain NRCs. It is extremely difficult for Rohingyas to receive an NRC. Even with an NRC, immigration authorities still harass us. This is why my father did not have the courage to return to his home in all those years. All minorities in Myanmar face similar hardships, but discrimination against Rohingyas based on their NRC registration is systematic, widespread, and severe. We are denied the right to a birth certificate, family registration documents, NRCs, and even death certificates. Essentially, the state withholds all the documents we require from birth to death, creating the impression that we are stateless.

My own family members in Yangon have long been afraid to visit Rakhine State without NRCs. Even after receiving NRCs, they constantly worried that the government could intercept and arbitrarily detain them, as there are no laws protecting Rohingya people. I only dared to set foot in Rakhine State when I received the status of working for an NGO, long after I had an NRC.

My father was excited for me to meet my grandmother, so I went to her village the very same day that I set foot in the state. Riding a motorcycle on a muddy road in the rain had never been so difficult in my entire life. My uncle, the elder brother of my father, waited for me in front of the village. He can speak a little bit of Burmese, and he welcomed me by saying, “Our daughter has come!”

I saw my 89-year-old grandmother when I entered the courtyard of her house. She was dressed in traditional Burmese attire and wore a white scarf over her head. She welcomed me at the stairs, calling me *phutu*, or “baby” in our Rohingya language. My grandmother and I had never spoken directly before. Since I do not speak Rohingya, in the past I had to listen to her

words being translated by my father when he talked to her on the phone. But as soon as we saw each other in her home, my grandmother and I cried together. We were unable to talk in a mutual language. Living in the same country as my grandmother but being unable to meet her until my early thirties, I could not help but cry.

Why Many Generations of Rohingya Living Outside Rakhine State Do Not Speak the Rohingya Language

My uncle, the elder brother of my father, translated for my grandma and I as we sat in her home. She was upset that I could not speak Rohingya and blamed my father for not teaching me. Most Rohingyas who grow up outside of Rakhine State, like my siblings and I, do not speak the Rohingya language. When we were young, we often asked our father to teach us. My father himself was afraid to speak Rohingya, even in the home. The only exception was when he called his family in Rakhine State on the phone. He was worried that our primarily Burman neighbors might notice that he was Rohingya and find out where he was from. He was scared of being forced back to Rakhine State. Every Rohingya family like us who lives outside of Rakhine State feels insecure about their mother tongue. We can easily be arrested, tortured, and imprisoned just because we are Rohingya from Rakhine State. Fear flows through many generations and fear is the main factor ridding us of our heritage, including our language.

My father was so terrified when the census officials came to our house when we were kids. His legs and hands trembled, and he could not even speak. It was not until I moved to Rakhine State that I realized why my father was terrified of the police officers, soldiers, and ward administrators who patrolled our neighborhood. In Rakhine State, soldiers and police stop, curse at, and beat Rohingya people at any time and for any reason. I encountered soldiers at checkpoints in Maungdaw Township who asked whether I was a *kalar* (a derogatory term for people of South Asian appearance) or of Rakhine ethnicity.

Rakhine State is a very beautiful land. It is the origin of our Rohingya traditions, customs, and culture, but at the same time, it is also an open-air prison where our people are unjustly detained on a daily basis. My father knew this and refused to teach us the Rohingya language because he wanted to protect us and hide our identity.

Oppression Against Rohingya in Rakhine State

After I met my grandmother on the day of my arrival, I went into the back room of her house to meet my aunts and cousins, who were sobbing quietly in a room. They felt vulnerable. I could feel their anguish at seeing someone like me who can freely visit them while they cannot even travel easily inside their own township. They felt ashamed as they lived in poverty brought about by the oppression and violence against them. I was crying with them, but I did not dare look into their eyes. I could not face the eyes of my relatives living in fear and hopelessness.

We were crying because we were feeling sorry for ourselves. We felt the violations of our fundamental rights to live in dignity, survive, have free movement, be educated, and receive state-provided healthcare. My aunts and cousins wept because my presence showed a sharp contrast to their own lives. They were well-off farmers who owned land and lived with dignity before the period of military rule under General Ne Win, when oppression against the Rohingya and other minorities began in earnest.¹ They now depend on other relatives who live outside of Rakhine State. So they were sad for being dependent, poor, and still hopeless.

By looking into the eyes of my relatives, I came to understand the terror felt by Jewish people in Nazi concentration camps, the pain of Palestinian farmers whose lands are forcibly seized by Jewish settlers in Gaza, and the sadness of Uyghur Muslims who are forced to abandon Islam and are put in detention centers by the Chinese government. I felt resentment and

¹ Druce, 2020.

rage in my mind about us being predestined to precarity, injustice, and violence brought about by our identity. I kept thinking that my life would be the same with my aunts and my female cousins if I were born and raised in Rakhine State, and that thought terrified me. I also realized my privilege as an educated Rohingya woman.

The Differences Between Rohingyas Inside and Outside Rakhine State

When I walked around our village in Buthidaung Township with my uncles, I saw many young and old men in front of the mosque my grandfather had built. They were preparing to start their daily prayers. I looked around and noticed that there were no other women on the street. There were only a few elderly women standing in their yards looking at me. In Rohingya villages, when a female reaches puberty they are no longer allowed out of their house without permission from the guardians of the family and without wearing a *niqab*, an Arabic term for a black garment that covers the entire body except for the eyes.

It seems that using the *niqab* to restrict women's movements and appearance was introduced through the religious teachings of the Wahhabist sect of Saudi Arabia. Ghoshal highlights the *niqab* as an example of Arabization affecting Muslim women outside the Arab world.² Rohingya people once wore more Burmese-style dress. Women wore *yin bone* and *longyi* with a *hijab* on our heads (a piece of cloth that only covers the person's head, like a hood). When the Burmese authorities closed off the geographical and cultural spaces of the Rohingya community, it became evident that the Rohingyas started to embrace Arabic culture and Wahhabist teachings to a greater extent. This shift can be attributed to the fact that many Rohingya men and women acquired their knowledge of Arabic and religious teachings from scholars who were trained by expatriate scholars from Saudi Arabia, primarily in Pakistan and Bangladesh. The influence of

² Ghoshal, 2010.

these scholars on the lives and religious interpretations of Rohingya women is widely acknowledged within the community. However, it is important to note that there is a lack of comprehensive research on this subject. Rohingya women continue to be strongly controlled by their communities and families and instructed to strictly follow the *niqab* dress code in their daily lives.

Most Rohingya women I know do not like to wear the *niqab* out of the house. The scorching heat, coupled with mud or dust, inconvenience them as they try to walk down the street. But if they go out in a more convenient outfit, they are harassed and criticized by their neighbors, and their fathers and husbands are admonished by the religious leaders of their villages.

Rohingya men use religious teachings to assume the authority to discipline the women in their family. Women must ask for permission from their fathers, husbands, and brothers for the minor and major things in life. After puberty, female Rohingya are only allowed to leave the home when accompanied by a male guardian, such as a brother, a father, a husband, or a son; even in an emergency, such as to visit a hospital or clinic when they are sick. Due to these religious prohibitions on women's movements, it has become normal for Rohingya women to simply stay home.

As I did not wear a *niqab* or *hijab* when I visited my grandma's village, men stared at me strangely. They may have seen me as a loose woman or an outsider who does not follow religious rules strictly. Before I left the village, my grandma asked me why I was not wearing a *hijab*. I just kept smiling without answering her question. While I largely have the same heart as Rohingya women from Rakhine State, my ideas of women's values differ greatly from those of my grandmothers and aunts.

My privilege of being born in Yangon and my educational opportunities have given me perspective on these values. I did not want to ask myself whether my family in Rakhine State was ready to accept that they and I have fundamental differences in women's values. They were proud of me for the education I have achieved, but I could see that they were uncomfortable that I

was a single mom not following their dress code. They asked me where my spouse was and could not understand that I had a child out of wedlock. When they asked me more about my personal life, I just changed the topic.

Rohingya Women's Lives in General

After visiting my grandma's house, my aunts invited me to visit their house too. I had never met my female cousins, but we looked alike enough to know that we were related. My cousins rarely go out of the house. They are very young and beautiful. When I looked at them, their innocent faces reminded me of the 2017 violence against the Rohingya, when soldiers raped many young Rohingya girls. When I remember that the extremist Buddhist monk U Wirathu said, "Who would rape these ugly-looking Bengali women?", when I remember how National League for Democracy supporters shared hate messages on Facebook, and how the State Counsellor's official Facebook page posted that rapes of the Rohingya were "fake", I feel resentment. I can feel pain in my heart again.

In our ancestral village in Rakhine State, there are no more than three or four girls who have finished middle school. It is almost impossible for a girl to attend high school as once they hit puberty, they cannot leave the house unaccompanied. My cousins are aged between 13 and 16 years old. My aunt is a widow. She took her daughters out of school at the time they had their first period, but she lets them study the Quran and practice sewing at home. My aunt surprised me when she told me that because she is poor, she cannot find husbands for her daughters. I had never heard of the parents of a daughter needing money to be able to marry off their daughters and I thought my cousins were too young to marry, anyway. According to shariah Islamic law, it is the man that must give gold and other jewelry to a bride's family in order to propose a wedding.

Later, locals explained to me that after the 2017 crisis, many boys and men fled Rakhine State out of fear. The authorities often accused them of being members of the Arakan Rohingya

Salvation Army.³ There is now a shortage of Rohingya single men in the village area. Consequently, a would-be Rohingya daughter-in-law has to pay money, just like a dowry in Indian culture, to the groom's family to be able to get married. I discovered this happened in my own family: another female cousin paid gold to her husband-to-be's family in order to secure the marriage.

Rohingya parents who have daughters are trapped in a dilemma: cultural norms restrict girls from moving freely and working outside the house, but at the same time, they are expected to marry. When they cannot find a husband for their daughters at puberty, parents usually let their daughters remain single for a few more years. But the longer a girl remains single, the more shame her family receives from the community because of their inability to marry her off with a dowry. On the other hand, being able to pay a large sum of money to get a husband brings pride to the girl's family.

My Experience Working in Rakhine State

Unfortunately, the morning after I went to visit my grandmother, my father passed away, before I could return to Yangon. My family told me that my father was very happy to see me with my grandmother before he passed away. He was proud to see me return to his village. He was grateful that I visited his mother for him. After my father's funeral, I decided to further my work on women's education and gender equality in Rakhine State. I spent almost two years there away from my one-year-old son, who I left with difficulty with my family in Yangon. Working as a single mom is tough, but I was very excited to work for women in Rakhine State.

I worked as a program coordinator at a local NGO called the Center for Social Integrity. I led programs on women's education, women's empowerment, reproductive health, and gender equality in northern and central Rakhine State. We ran

³ Fortify Rights, 2017, p. 11.

education programs for young girls of all ethnic backgrounds who dropped out of school after puberty and provided non-formal education for adolescent girls.

Although the program was free, it was quite challenging for girls to join and fully participate in it, especially if they were Rohingya. It was not safe for them to travel from one village to another on foot to attend daily classes. The most difficult challenge however was parents' perceptions of girls' education, with parents asking, "Will our daughters get jobs if they attend your program? What if they cannot get a husband because they broke cultural rules by not staying home?"—I could not answer these questions, as the NGO's only aim was to educate girls to read, write, and do math, as well as teach other general knowledge useful in their daily lives. We were merely a raindrop in a desert of scarce job opportunities felt by all young people, let alone Rohingya girls. For the parents we worked with, the only purpose of education for their children was for them to find work, a pragmatic view. Women's empowerment through education without a pathway to a job seems like an empty promise to many.

The main problems regarding education for Rohingya people in Rakhine State are a shortage of schools and teachers, a lack of motivation for teachers, under-trained teachers with poor teaching skills, and teachers' inability to speak the Rohingya language. Rakhine-speaking teachers teach Rohingya-speaking students using Burman-language texts. Even when Rohingya students go to school regularly, they struggle to excel because of the language barrier. The education of entire generations has gone to waste.

There is also widespread discrimination against Rohingya people in formal education. Some public schools do not allow Rohingya children to enroll and some separate Rohingya students from other students in class. Such discrimination traumatizes Rohingya students, who suffer and do poorly.

Rohingya parents perceive formal education as incompetent and inaccessible—figuratively and literally, as schools are often very far from Rohingya villages, which further

traumatizes students. Many parents choose religious schools instead of state public schools. These schools, where students primarily learn to read and memorize the Quran, are often the only viable option they have for their children.

After decades of discrimination in the education system, it is very rare to find a Rohingya high school graduate, let alone a female one. Even when Rohingya students work hard to pass secondary education, going on to become a teacher in the public education system is almost impossible. Rohingyas are not allowed to work as civil servants in any sector since they lack citizenship status.⁴ The consequence is that Rohingya children do not understand what is being taught at school in the Rakhine language and it is likely there will be no Rohingya teachers for generations to come.

On top of the shortage of Rohingya female teachers, there is a cultural restriction that bars females from studying under male teachers' supervision. This restriction creates an additional barrier for girls to continue their education after puberty. Due to this, female illiteracy is prevalent in Rohingya society. Most women internalize oppression and discrimination by believing that, since their grandmothers and mothers are uneducated, it is acceptable that they, and their daughters, remain uneducated. Few try to fight for the rights of women in our community: Why single out Rohingya girls and women when the whole community is persecuted?

Overcoming Structural and Cultural Barriers in Education

When we did our women's education programs, I had to meet the public, talk about the value of education, convince parents to support their daughters' education, and show myself as an example of an educated woman who can support her family, her life, and her community. Some accepted my point of view but others argued that parents need their adolescent daughters to

⁴ Lewa, 2009, p. 12.

do housework, babysit, and earn money in order to support their parents' daily needs. Most adolescent girls must perform housework and caregiving at home and we had to adjust our teaching sessions for them to be able to balance between school time and household chores.

Shortage of Women Teachers

Because parents prefer female teachers for their daughters, we had to train local women to become teachers. It is easy to find ethnic Rakhine teachers, but as mentioned, it is difficult to find Rohingya women who have passed even seventh or eighth grade. In cases where we managed to do so, the trainees were soon married off by their families, and then their husbands prohibited them from continuing teaching. Often their in-laws disapproved of them earning money outside the home and they were pressured to become a mother at the expense of working. This chronic shortage of Rohingya teachers has affected Rohingya girls' education. The NGO I worked at could replace substitute Rohingya teachers with Rohingya-speaking ethnic Rakhine and Chakma teachers, but it was so disheartening to see Rohingya women submit to their families and lose the opportunity to work as teachers.

Non-formal Education

During my time in Rakhine State, when NGOs provided non-formal education for adolescent girls, they did not use the national curriculum and instead used curricula that could accommodate differently aged students who had dropped out of school. For example, our curriculum focused on Burmese language skills and math together with life skills. Since it was not recognized by the government nor accredited in any way, our programs could not guarantee jobs, as employers often ask for government credentials. As a result, communities thought our education program could not meet the same standard as public schooling. This was a huge problem in some areas. It was also ironic that

organizations providing these non-formal education programs required their own staff to have passed the matriculation exam of government schools. These NGOs internalized and sustained oppression by validating the importance of a public school education.

Regarding non-formal education curricula, the developers, who are most often Burman former government teachers, focus on lessons, stories, and histories that privilege Burman values. They rarely take into consideration different life experiences and stories from non-Burman populations. For example, when it comes to the topic of women leaders, non-formal curricula also highlight Burman women leaders and women leaders from foreign countries, which is not very inspiring for non-Burmans. The women in the textbooks, who are often from privileged backgrounds, do not represent rural ethnic women from Rakhine State. I asked my NGO why we did not use examples of female leaders from Rakhine State in our lessons, to help our students relate to them and be inspired.

Education and Gender

Disadvantaged girls and young women who have the chance to enter non-formal education after dropping out of public school face similar gender discrimination in their learning materials as they did in the public school system. Our civil society organizations and NGOs are failing to provide empowering alternative programs for women. NGOs, before they can change wider society, must reflect on their approaches to the communities they seek to serve and change themselves first.

During my time in Rakhine State, parents of adolescent female students requested we train them in vocations like sewing, as they did not see how our non-formal education curriculum could help their daughters earn a living. (Rohingya females have limited access to vocational education, unlike males who have opportunities to acquire skills from several organizations, such as computer literacy, repairing and maintaining electronic devices, and welding.) Most parents expect daughters to make

money at home by sewing only, and girls who can assist in this way are more attractive to suitors and preferred by would-be parents-in-law. When a girl has learned to sew, her parents consider her ready to marry. Students often married immediately after they graduated from our program. The Rohingya community expects women to stay at home and earn money, as well as doing care work for the in-laws' family, other household chores, and having babies. Their mobility and freedom continue to be restricted as they cannot work outside the house or make their own reproductive choices.

We Rohingya women should be able to work outside of the house and to travel freely, just like ethnic Rakhine and other women.

The Shortcomings of Women Development Programs

NGOs continue to encourage discriminatory gender norms in their work either intentionally or unintentionally. Most organizations view public cooperation as something to help them complete their projects rather than bringing about change. They do not try to change public perceptions of women's rights; instead, they leave many deep-rooted patriarchal issues untouched through cultural relativism: "this is their culture and this is their religion". They put the success of their projects first, and prefer not to challenge community attitudes towards women. Many organizations implement programs that are similar to government programs, as in the case of non-formal curriculum development.

Programs for women's education and development are often implemented with the assumption that income equals empowerment. Many programs include sewing. Helping young women make money at home is the heart of community development programs. Instead of effectively addressing structural and cultural oppression and violence against women, the development program I worked for assumed that when women are educated and can participate in productive work, they will then better achieve gender equality. The focus on education and

women's development was limited to helping women contribute to the community's economic outputs, i.e., increasing family incomes. Few projects and training programs focus on equipping women and communities with the knowledge they need to combat the patriarchy, structural violence and other oppressions against women.

Some development projects even foisted extra burdens onto already busy Rohingya women. For example, programs distributed seeds and compost for home gardens, but due to water scarcity, very few women could easily grow and nurture a new garden. They cultivated and maintained the provided plants for the NGO to document as a positive program outcome, but doing so significantly added to their daily responsibilities.

Also, when it comes to reproductive health and rights, some programs send the message that only the rich should have babies. NGOs rarely paint reproductive choices as a liberating tool; instead, their approach and messages sound eugenic. Programs must focus more on the reproductive rights of women and point out the traditional and cultural oppression of women when it comes to reproduction.

Community Participation and Gender Awareness

As a women's rights activist, I am aware of these shortcomings in programs and projects. During a discussion with my colleagues and partners, I proposed the idea of addressing the traditional, cultural, and structural oppression and discrimination faced by women in our target areas as a means to bring about change. However, my colleagues, being local members of the Rohingya community, expressed difficulty in openly discussing the oppression of women in their own community and challenging prevailing gender norms. This became particularly evident when I suggested implementing programs such as teaching digital literacy and providing computer training for women. My colleagues hesitated to advocate for these programs within their community. As a result, we initiated computer training and painting classes for adolescent girls. Unfortunately, Rohingya

girls did not participate in the training sessions, possibly due to the fact that the instructors were male. Many did want to attend, but their parents thought that they would be corrupted and would begin spending more time on social media. Later, when Rakhine women joined these classes, some of the female Rohingya teachers and young women followed suit. Therefore, although it is difficult to change the Rohingya community's views towards women and women rights, I believe NGOs can do it. When we put enough effort into communicating with community members, we can achieve our desired outcomes.

Sometimes, people need time to understand how change can benefit their community. Once they understand, they actively and fully participated in our projects. My experience working in Rakhine State showed me that people are far from ignorant. They are willing to tackle the root causes of their problems if the resources and knowledge are there. NGOs need to have the courage to tackle these problems alongside the people rather than thinking only about their own project outcomes. They should strive to work alongside the community in countries like Myanmar, rather than merely portraying themselves as benefactors from abroad.

Why Do So Many Rohingya Women Choose to be Trafficked?

The question is more than rhetorical. It intends to provoke and challenge the notion that women are merely innocent victims without agency when trafficked. In townships like Buthidaung and Maungdaw, being trafficked may be a better option for some who live in communities with multiple forms of oppression. While I was working in Rakhine State, girls from Rohingya villages were being arrested for trying to go abroad. I heard from my colleagues that some of the girls from their villages were trafficked to meet their groom in another country; sometimes brokers raped the girls on their way to another country, and sometimes local authorities arrested the girls outside Rakhine

State and sent them back. The authorities then jailed the trafficked girls and women and sent them to prison.

When I talked to parents in the community, I realized that human trafficking is a last resort for many. Sometimes, the wives and children of Rohingya men already in another country choose to be trafficked to meet with their husband or father. However, most of the time, single Rohingya girls and young women travel to meet a future husband, whom they have never seen in person before. For these girls and women, their hopes are to settle in a new country with a husband they can rely on for the rest of their lives. The main reason for this human trafficking phenomenon is that most of the Rohingya feel hopeless in Myanmar. Even ethnic Rakhine people who can travel freely outside Rakhine State often travel for better opportunities elsewhere; for Rohingya who cannot travel freely, being trafficked is the only way to leave.

Rakhine State is one of the least developed states in Myanmar according to the 2014 census data and there are many factors that contribute to the economic and social crises there. These include the lack of investment in people, irresponsible investments that exploit natural resources and contribute to environmental disasters, ethnic conflicts, corruption, illicit drug trafficking, human trafficking, and low productivity of agricultural and aquaculture farming. For most people in Rakhine State, it is very difficult to meet basic daily needs by just doing random jobs.

It is this situation that pushes many parents to support their children to migrate for better opportunities. Parents feel like they have to put their children into the hands of human traffickers and risk everything, even their children's lives. Sometimes, human traffickers also traffic illicit drugs, although there might be different routes they take for the people and drugs. Rakhine State residents claimed to me that trafficking brokers and traffickers are often themselves Rohingya. Often, these Rohingyas traveled from Rakhine State to other parts of Myanmar with a Form 4 from the immigration department, which allows Rohingyas to travel.

The Dirty Business Behind Rohingya Trafficking

Air travel is prohibitively expensive for many Rohingyas. In comparison, traveling by boat is more affordable, though it carries its own risks. The location of the Rakhine State coastline along the Bay of Bengal offers fairly direct boat routes to neighboring countries such as Bangladesh, Malaysia, or Thailand. So, most Rohingyas who leave risk their lives at sea.

Some allege that the military regime's police and immigration staff cooperate with human traffickers by providing legal documents and sometimes taking bribes to ignore boats carrying Rohingyas through checkpoints. Then, the same officials tip off other government forces and the latter arrest the trafficking victims. Police in other areas of Myanmar take information from Rakhine State officials and intercept the traffickers' boats in another part of the country, like Ayeyarwady Region. When this happens, the people being trafficked are brought back to Rakhine State and jailed. Sometimes, they can give a large sum of money to be released from prison: human trafficking is a lucrative business. The Rohingya men and boys who are already abroad only sustain the chain of human trafficking when they attempt to get the rest of their family members out of the state.

The majority of Rohingyas who choose to risk their lives at sea do so with the knowledge that they may not survive. They are encouraged by the few examples of the Rohingyas who successfully reach their destination and make a new life. Most of the time, they are arrested in Myanmar or get stuck in another country (that was not their destination).⁵ Some are jailed, some are trapped in camps, and some are deported back to Rakhine State.

Many Rohingya men and women are imprisoned in Rakhine State for trying to leave the state. According to legal aid lawyers, many young girl detainees are sexually abused in these prisons.⁶ Since sexual abuse is common in human trafficking, Rohingya girls who are trafficked, whether they succeed and reach their

⁵ Wahab, 2018.

⁶ Lawyer for Rohingya women, personal communication, September 2022.

destination or fail and are imprisoned, are treated either way as if they had been sexually abused or lost their virginity. This is a new stigma around human trafficking. Families try to marry such girls off as soon as possible because they believe she will bring shame to the family and endanger its reputation.

The Struggle of Returning from Bangladesh

Some Rohingya refugees from camps in Bangladesh also sneak back into Maungdaw Township where they have family, relatives and community support. The living conditions in the Bangladesh refugee camps are striking. Families are deprived of food, have no sustainable livelihoods, have their movement restricted and have little or no access to health and education services, together with health risks and insufficient clean water. The well-being of refugees is totally dependent on donations and humanitarian organizations.⁷ While the situations in Bangladesh and Rakhine State may bear some similarities for the Rohingya population, it is important to recognize that Rakhine State holds a deep sense of homeland and belonging for them. Despite the challenges and adversities they face there, the Rohingya's strong connection to Myanmar drives their desire to return to Rakhine State, as it is their ancestral land and the place they consider their home.

These Rohingya refugees have grown increasingly frustrated by the lack of progress in the repatriation process, despite five years having passed since the largest and most recent exodus, caused by state-sponsored violence in 2017-2018. Many Rohingya who return to Maungdaw are imprisoned there by the military regime. As the regime checks the family registration of every household in Rohingya villages three to five times a year, it is easy to find returnees from Bangladesh. The authorities aim to detain everyone who returns to Myanmar without their knowledge, including breastfeeding mothers and newborns. When I was in Maungdaw during the rainy season, locals found

⁷ Karin et al., 2020.

the dead bodies of a widow and her young kids in the Naf river. They had tried to swim from Bangladesh to Maungdaw during a night of heavy rain. Their funerals were arranged by local religious leaders. The struggles of each and every Rohingya are heartbreaking.⁸

Why Do Some Rohingya Girls Resist Being Trafficked?

Some girls and their parents do not choose the trafficking route for their daughters' future. They are the girls who were trained to be community teachers, to be women leaders in the Rohingya community, to resist patriarchal norms against women working outside the home, and to provide an income for their families. They are the ones who studied and passed high school in Rakhine State and who went on to graduate in Yangon or Sittwe with the support of organizations. They are very rare and precious for the community, as they inspire others.

The Rohingya community teachers in my organization's education program are becoming more confident in their lives and their work; they can communicate well and survive on their income. The community gradually accepted them as strong, confident, and educated women who support their own community by teaching, and they earned respect. They do not think that they must take the risk of traveling to get a husband overseas. Sadly, these people are in the minority, and high school and university education are still impossible dreams for most Rohingya girls.

From my experience working in the community, education is the best way to prevent Rohingya women from taking the

⁸ It is easier to cross between Bangladesh and Rakhine State than to go abroad to a third country. It does not cost too much to go back and forth between northern Rakhine State (Buthidaung, Maungdaw, and Rathedaung townships) and Bangladesh, but it costs around 500,000 Myanmar Kyat to try and leave for Malaysia or Indonesia from Rakhine State. It is even harder to try from Bangladesh, as the Bangladesh Navy controls the sea much more tightly than the Myanmar Navy. People making plans to travel to third countries from Bangladesh usually first sneak back into northern Rakhine State and leave from there.

dangerous path of human trafficking. We need to continue to work hard for women's education, both at the grassroots level and at the national level. In terms of education, it is important for both educational institutions and civil society organizations to recognize that not only public school education but also the knowledge they need to fight for their rights and other life skills are crucial for development. Only by teaching through public education a wider range of curricula, critical thinking, and how to practically apply knowledge, can we equip our people with the skills to free themselves from oppression. Together with education, it is important to give vocational training and to support locals' agricultural and aquacultural businesses. It is very important to provide technical assistance so that the people can have sustainable livelihoods.

What Women's Development Programs are Needed?

Currently, numerous organizations focus on teaching sewing and embroidery skills to Rohingya girls. However, the lack of a viable market for their handmade goods, coupled with the prevailing financial crisis and widespread poverty, creates a challenging situation. Consequently, the emphasis on sewing and embroidery skills may not effectively benefit Rohingya girls who are confined to their homes due to traditional norms and restrictions. If we really want women to be empowered, we need to give mentorship support to help them realize that they really do have skills and power. It is also necessary to help them gain the knowledge and education they require in order to recognize the oppression they face. On the other hand, we still need to create opportunities for people to earn an income in order to sustain their own lives.

Conclusion

Rakhine State has beautiful mountains, rivers, beaches, and is plentiful in natural resources. It has a diverse ethnic population and rich traditions, which makes the state unique. People living in Rakhine State have one common desire: to live peacefully. But people there have suffered from ethnic divisions caused by military regime policies and propaganda in the past and present. The military has committed mass killings, authorities are corrupt, there is illicit drug trafficking, dangers from human trafficking, and a lack of rule of law. Due to systematic discrimination and violations of their human rights, Rohingya people have endured enormous hardship. For Rohingya women, on top of all this sorrow, they face discrimination based on gender from their own traditions, culture, and religion, adding to their problems: being a female Rohingya simply means suffering. They are falling behind other women in Rakhine State when it comes to women's rights and social and economic representation.

From the time they are born, Rohingya women must obey their parents. Then they are forced into marriage and lose their right to freedom of movement, which is placed in their husband's hands. They are prevented from working and cannot control when they have children. Many of them suffer from social oppression and end up in the hands of human traffickers.

They are not fully benefiting from the projects that aim to support and liberate them due to organizations' inability to understand these problems from a feminist perspective. There is a distinct lack of solutions that effectively impart knowledge about or assist women's liberation. Rather than fully supporting a powerful social movement or women's movement, so-called women's empowerment projects only maintain the patriarchal status quo. I believe that viewing our problems through a feminist lens and finding solutions through such a lens is the approach needed to solve the problems facing Rohingya women.

After the 2021 coup d'état, the situation for women in Rakhine State has deteriorated significantly and huge challenges face the achievement of women's rights across Myanmar.

But on the other hand, the anti-coup revolution has in some ways progressed the feminist movement. The Gender Equality Network, an umbrella Myanmar NGO network, estimated that 70–80 per cent of revolutionary leaders are women,⁹ and on many occasions, women's *longyi* (*htamein*) have been used as a flag and a symbol of ideological revolution to resist patriarchy. With the *htamein* symbol, the young protesters challenged not just the military but patriarchy as a whole. Many are also criticizing religious leaders and the patriarchal military openly as the revolution continues. Many people now recognize different forms of oppression felt by men and women, by minorities such as those identifying as LGBTQI, those in the urban areas and the countryside, and different social classes. How different oppressions intersect across certain groups—such as Rohingya—have come to the fore.

Young people have become more interested in leftist ideologies and gender equality issues and are participating in seminars and discussion groups. Many Facebook pages, podcast and YouTube channels spread left-wing revolutionary ideologies, radical feminist ideologies and expose young people to intersectionality. The current moment is a good opportunity for us to evaluate our existing strategies and start transforming our society. The anti-coup revolution is a time when a women's movement that is truly for all the women in Myanmar, including the Rohingya, could really take off. Revolutionary ideas to liberate all women in conjunction with educational programs for marginalized women such as Rohingya could bring actual improvement in gender equality sooner or later.

References

- Druce, S. C. (2020). Myanmar's Unwanted Ethnic Minority: A History and Analysis of the Rohingya Crisis. In M. Oishi (Ed.), *Managing Conflicts in a Globalizing ASEAN: Incompatibility Management through Good Governance* (pp. 17–46). Springer.

⁹ Villadiego, 2021.

- Fortify Rights. (2017). 'They Tried to Kill Us All' Atrocity Crimes against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State, Myanmar. <https://www.fortifyrights.org/mya-inv-rep-2017-11-15/>
- Ghoshal, B. (2010). Arabization: The changing face of Islam in Asia. *India Quarterly*, 66(1), 69-89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097492841006600105>
- Karin, S., Chowdhury, M. A., Hasnat, M. A., & Tarin, N. J. (2020). Status of Rohingya in Refugee Camps of Bangladesh: a Review Study. *Open Access Library Journal*, 7(e6575).
- Lewa, C. (2009). North Arakan: An Open Prison for the Rohingya in Burma. *Forced Migration Review*, 32, 11-13. <https://www.fmreview.org/statelessness/lewa>
- Villadiego, L. (2021, May 7). The women's revolution: what the coup means for gender equality in Myanmar. *Equal Times*. <https://www.equaltimes.org/the-women-s-revolution-what-the>
- Wahab, A. (2018). The colors of exploitation: Smuggling of Rohingyas from Myanmar to Malaysia. *Akademika*, 88(1), 5-16. <http://ejournal.ukm.my/akademika/article/view/15433/8208>

