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**Forced Labour and Access to Education of
Rohingya Refugee Children in Bangladesh:
Beyond a Humanitarian Crisis**

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Forced Labour and Access to Education of Rohingya Refugee Children in Bangladesh: Beyond a Humanitarian Crisis

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Abstract

Rohingya refugee children in Bangladesh are forced into labour both inside and outside the camps for a wide range of reasons. This article examines this situation in relation to the access to education for those children living in the camps in Cox's Bazar. Being informed by several perspectives concerning child labour and access to schooling in developing country contexts, this research work has adopted a qualitative approach to study various factors working behind this pressing issue. After collecting data by means of qualitative methods, including non-participant observations and semi-structured interviews, the researcher has analyzed the findings with these informed perspectives. Results show that lack of formal identity, limited access to the formal labour market, absence of social sanctions against child employment, lack of aspirations, household composition, and substandard living conditions are some of the key factors that drive children to engage in various forms of labour, especially outside the camps. They often work in small workshops as labourers and in the host community households as domestic workers. Undocumented children are also reported to become victims of bonded labour, sex trade, and trafficking in the region. The author argues that a lack of formal education has compounded this issue into a severe humanitarian crisis which calls for immediate support and actions from local and international agencies.

1. Introduction

About a million stateless Rohingya people live in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. Referring to the Rohingyas as the world's most persecuted minority, the United Nations called on the international community to provide all sorts of assistance towards making a long-lasting solution of the ongoing humanitarian crisis (UNHCR 2017). The Rohingyas¹ are a Muslim ethnic community living in the Rakhine State in the western part of Myanmar. The community are officially stateless as the Myanmar government has disowned them, claiming that they came

¹ The Rohingyas themselves and the international communities use the term "Rohingya" to refer to the Muslim communities residing in the Rakhine State of Myanmar while the state and majority of people of Myanmar call the community (illegal) Bengali Migrants (Devi 2019).

originally from its neighbouring country – Bangladesh (Prodip 2017). Being subjected to severe oppression and violence, forced migration of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar to Bangladesh has taken place in multiple waves starting from the year of 1978 (Mohajan 2018). The largest and fastest influx of Rohingyas to Bangladesh occurred in August 2017, when Myanmar's armed forces and local Buddhist mobs launched a brutal crackdown (killings, rape, and torture) on the community (Alam and Kamruzzaman 2020; Al Jazeera 2019). This massive exodus commenced on the 25th of August 2017, after some Rohingya militants attacked police posts, killing 12 members of the Myanmar national security forces. Consequently, about 740,000 Rohingya people crossed the border into Bangladesh and arrived in Cox's Bazar joining the already-existing 200,000 refugees (Al Jazeera 2019). The incident generated a huge global outcry, and several international donors and humanitarian agencies responded immediately and extended their support to these one million stateless camp dwellers. Despite an uproar from local communities, the Bangladesh government welcomed and accommodated the vast number of displaced people and aided international organizations which were supporting the community. Despite having written agreements, the repatriation of the Rohingyas has still not happened due to a wide range of issues. Today, the Rohingya crisis remains a critical humanitarian emergency (The New Humanitarian 2020).

This article focuses on this humanitarian crisis and investigates the two very pressing issues related to the welfare of Rohingya children in the camps – forced labour and access to education. The term “child labour” is often defined as work that deprives children of their childhood (ILO 2018). Although the term “childhood” may entail different things in different cultures, (formal) education remains as a commonly desired socialization for children, and a key element of prevention of child labour (Guarcello, Scott Lyon, and Furio Camillo Rosati 2008). According to the data published on 31 May 2020 by the Bangladesh Government and United Nations High Commission for Refugee (UNHCR), 51% (about 500,000) of the population living in the camps are children below 18 years of age (GoB 2020). Many of these children are being subjected to the worst forms of child labour, forced labour, movement restrictions, trafficking, and irregular adoptions (Xchange 2019; TRT World 2020). Moreover, these children are being denied access to education and schooling (HRW 2019). On one hand, children living in the camps are in danger of being subjected to harmful and forced labour; and on the other hand, they are growing without one of the most valued basic human needs – education. It means that half a million children are deprived of a formative childhood. Humanitarian organizations fear that this could lead to a “lost generation” of Rohingyas (Hammadi 2020). Responding to this issue, the government of Bangladesh on 27 January 2020 decided to allow Rohingya children to receive a formal education. Sadly, the Covid-19 pandemic hit the country right after this much-awaited government decision. In this backdrop, this research work focuses on the prevailing child labour situation in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar and analyzes the concerns related to the existing educational opportunities for Rohingya children living in these camps.

The following section briefly presents the wider context, followed by the theoretical perspectives concerning labour and education. The next sections illustrate the focus and

methodology of the study. After presenting the findings and analysis in the subsequent sections, I contend why a more severe humanitarian crisis is in the making for this huge number of Rohingya stateless children and why this will require a concerted effort to arrive at an effective solution.

2. Child Labour in Bangladesh: The Wider Context

International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that at least 150 million children perform as labourers worldwide (ILO 2017). The World Counts² adds that about 120 million of those children work in hazardous conditions. An estimated 17 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 are trapped in harmful child labour across South Asian countries (Khan et al. 2015). In Bangladesh, the issue is rampant and widespread. UNICEF (2007) notes that social norms and economic realities mean that child labour is widely accepted and common in the country. The National Child Labour Survey 2013 estimated that there are 3.4 million child labourers (aged 5-17) in Bangladesh, of whom 1.28 million are trapped in hazardous works (BBS 2015). The actual number has grown in the last few years (Ovi 2020). Legal provisions under Child Labour Act (Amendment) 2018 prohibit the employment of a child below 14 years of age and put restrictive policies on employing children between the ages of 14 and 18 (Beaubien 2016; Hasan 2018). However, since most of the working children sell their labour in informal sectors³ as welders, assistants of vehicle drivers, in plastic and chemical factories, bidi factories, brick kilns, stone crushing, battery recharging, waste removal, tanneries, the matchbox and garment factories, formal institutions fail to tackle and monitor the issue (Ahad et al. 2021; New Age 2018). An enormous number of girls also work as domestic helps across the country (Jensen 2017). Amid this situation, the country hosted an additional 350,000 Rohingya children who have been exposed to risks of being exploited in the form of forced labour and trafficking (BILA 2019).

3. Methodology

This work was initially informed by a body of literature that I went through as part of my doctoral research work concerning child labour and protection. Being informed about various theories and perspectives of child labour in various contexts, I set out to explore the condition of child labour in the Rohingya (refugee) camps in Cox's Bazar. At first, I did a review of literature dealing with child labour in refugee camps and its implications for access to education and schooling. After developing an understanding and grasp of relevant concepts, I visited the camps to understand the prevailing situation. In the 4-day fieldwork in early September 2020, I visited concerned government offices, including the focal point secretariat Refugee Relief and

² The data used by The World Counts originate from many organizations, research institutions, news services and so forth. For more details, please visit <https://www.theworldcounts.com/stories/Child-Labor-Facts-and-Statistics> (Accessed on 20 September 2020)

³ Informal sectors are those in which formal regulations cannot be applied because of their informal operations and unregulated and undocumented employment practices.

Repatriation Commissioner's Office (RRRC) situated in Cox's Bazar city. With prior permission from the concerned authorities, I also visited a couple of camps spending one day in each of them and went to the local government offices and the offices of the Camp-In-Charge (CIC). As part of my qualitative approach, a few methods of data collection were utilized – observations, conversations, and semi-structured interviews. Non-participant observation is useful to explore and understand the behaviours of a group of people in natural work settings (Cooper, Lewis, and Urquhart 2004; Mulhall 2003). Conversations are informal but engaging ways to collect qualitative insights from individuals, especially in settings where formal parameters are unknown (Albert 2016). Semi-structured interviews are one of the most used data collection techniques, offering participants the chance to explore issues they feel are important (Longhurst 2003). I spent half of my fieldwork period walking through two camps (camp number 6 and Kutupalong), allowing myself to observe how children were engaged in various outdoor activities in the camps, and how they are seen in the marketplaces, small workshops, food distribution centres, and streets and open places. I also spent considerable time outside the camps where children could go and sell their labour, including in the city of Cox's Bazar. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 participants, which included four Rohingya parents living in the camp, two CICs, two officials from RRRC, the chief executive of a local government institution, and three employees serving in international humanitarian and voluntary service organizations. Though I had prepared some questions for these interviewees, eventually the interviews went on more like conversations which allowed me to explore the nuances and deep insights. Conversations with host community workshop owners, businesspersons, and Rohingya volunteers working at the offices for camp management were informative. The short but extensive fieldwork was helpful not only to collect information from key informants but also to get the essence of the lives and livelihoods in the area.

Reflecting on ethical issues is crucial, especially considering the current pandemic situation (IDRC 2020). First, I followed the public health guidelines set by the Bangladesh Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Before visiting the camps, consulting with officials of RRRC helped me to understand the norms and practices of visiting camps as an outsider. I followed the guidelines, which included wearing masks and hand gloves, maintaining social distancing, and checking body temperature before visiting. Second, I attained prior approval from the government authority, which in this case was RRRC. I explained my purpose and clarified my ethical standards for doing my fieldwork. Third, while talking with Rohingya parents I was careful to not make them reflect too much on what they had experienced in Myanmar to ensure “no harm” to the participants. In both camps, two Rohingya adults (who speak both languages – Rohingya's native tongue and Bangla) helped me in conducting these interviews by acting as translators. Since I am a native Bangla speaker, transcribing was not necessary in other cases. Finally, consents were obtained from all interviewees before I asked any questions or started recording any parts of the interview.

In the following section, I present my key findings relating to the child labour practices involving Rohingya children both inside and outside the camps, and its implications to the access to education of children living in the camps.

4. Findings and Analysis

A. Child Labour in Rohingya Camps

Rohingya community in Cox's Bazar resides in two types of camps – registered and unregistered (also called the “other”). Out of 34 camps, the two registered camps are Kutupalong and Nayapara in which about 40,000 Rohingya people reside (GoB 2020). These people arrived from Myanmar to Bangladesh before 2017 and 33,000 of them have officially received the status of “refugees”. The rest of the Rohingya (more than 1 million undocumented Myanmar nationals) community members reside in the *other* 32 camps (for details, see Figure 1 below). These Rohingya people have not been given the status of refugee; they are referred to as “Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals” (FDMNs) (Brac 2020). These camps are jointly run by the UNHCR and Bangladesh government. The child labour situations in these two types of camps differ in significant ways. The opportunity and exercise of child labour are predominant in registered camps as the Rohingya refugees have been living there for decades.

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ROHINGYA REFUGEE RESPONSE/BANGLADESH
Refugee Population by Location
(as of April 30, 2020)

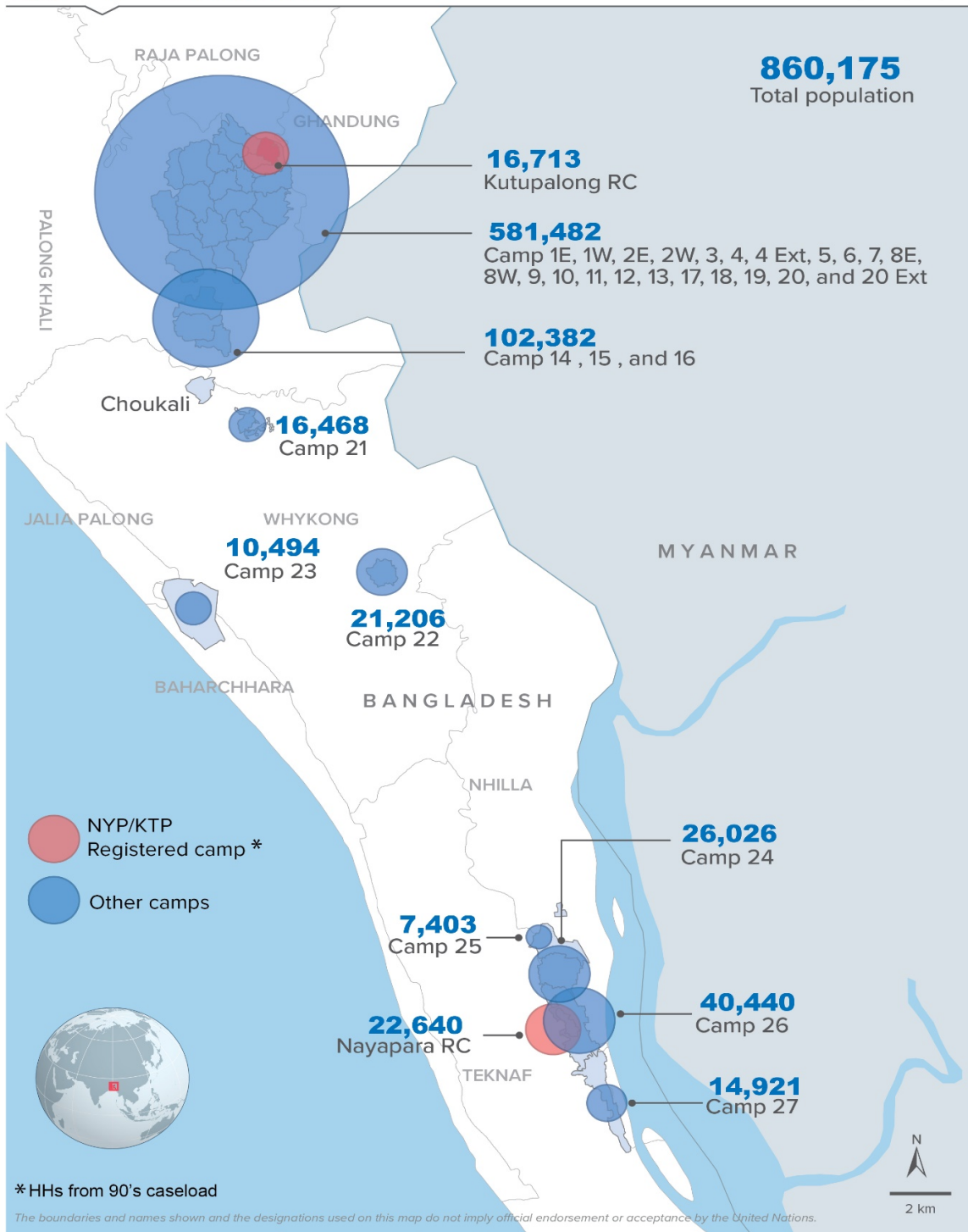


Figure 1: The locations of the camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh (GOB 2020)

Children are found to be working both in the camps and outside. In a photo story, we see children engaged in hard labour in fishing, transportation, and agricultural fields (TRT World 2020). Movement is not too restricted in these camps. As a result, the children living in registered camps usually travel to these places to sell their labour and come back to the camps by the end of the day.

The situation in other camps is different. Children are seen to be involved in various forms of exploitative works, mostly with parents, in the tiny factories and shops in the local marketplaces. A few interviewees shared that in several cases, young children fled the camps and later were found working in nearby cities including Chattogram – a big regional city. Xchange (2019) states that child labour and trafficking are among the most pressing issues in the camps, citing cases of adoption for labour. The study finds that the inability to cover daily living costs was the main reason that participants had considered giving away their children - either permanently through adoption or temporarily in child labour - to sustain their families. The conversations and interviews reveal that the pattern and composition of households is also a crucial force that drives children to go for hard labour outside the camps. Many of the households claim to have lost their members – both adults and children – because of the genocide conducted against Rohingyas by the Myanmar army and while crossing the border. A participant who is a mother of four children shares:

‘We were seven members in our family, we lost one of our sons during the conflicts. We looked out for him, but we had to leave our house without him. Now we six live together in this camp. Our one son and one daughter used to go to schools in Burma, but now there is no schools here. I send my son to a madrasa⁴ here. NGO learning centres are also closed now. My daughter helps me in household chores. My children do not work anywhere outside. My husband is also not young anymore. What can we do?’

The parental attitude towards work and education is reflected in this statement. They value both work and education for their children. Local madrasas offer religious education, but parents want formal mainstream schooling for their children, which they believe can ensure a better future for them. Many families do not have a male adult breadwinner and for religious beliefs, females do not tend to go outside their houses for income-generating or outdoor activities. As a result, adolescent boys are often seen working hard, such as carrying heavy-relief food sacks in the camps.

Several reports confirm that more than 100,000 Rohingya children have been born in the camps since 2017 (Sakib 2020). Interviewees also confirmed that every household has an average of six to seven members living together as a family and additional members mean additional household work and expenses. Moreover, the tiny size of the houses makes it impossible for these members to be inside all times of the day. The fact is that even the adult members of the family do not have much income-generating work in these camps, which are

⁴ Madrasas are educational institutions that offer both formal and informal Islamic education. Several madrasas run inside the camps for education Rohingya children.

situated in a small isolated hilly area. Young children also do not have much work to do and cannot enjoy much of outdoor games due to unavailability of open spaces. Nor can they go to schools. In these circumstances, many young children choose either to help their family business activities or to find ways to sell their labour outside the camps in nearby business outlets. Since the government agencies and UNHCR have provided all the families living in these camps with a document called “Family Attestation” containing the details of family members with a unique document number called “Family Counting Number (FCN)”, CICs believe that they can track the movement of the members of each family. However, representatives of international non-government organizations and local government agency say that Rohingya children travelling to workplaces, both far away and nearby, and to the sea-beaches to sell their labour, are common incidents.

B. Linkages between Missing Children and Forced Labour

The district of Cox’s Bazar is not only famed for hosting local and international tourists⁵ but also identified as a risky geographical channel of the banned drug (Yava) transportation, child and adult trafficking, and illegal sex trades (Pressly 2019; Ferguson 2020). Referring to several stories of missing children, Ferguson (2020) notes that many of the disappearances are thought to be linked to human trafficking for labour or sexual exploitation, but allegations remain difficult to prove. Although child employment is a punishable offence under Bangladeshi law, there is hardly any social sanctions against it (Tariquzzaman and Hossain 2009). It is socially normal practice for middle and upper (economic) class households to employ children as domestic helpers (Xchange 2019). Determining the age of a Rohingya person is somewhat arbitrary since they do not have any birth certificates. Moreover, national laws are hardly applicable to stateless FDMNs. These issues make Rohingya children easy targets and victims of child trafficking for forced labour, domestic slavery, and sex trade in the country. Newspaper reports claim that many Rohingya (100,000 to 200,000) people have disappeared from the camps (Roy and Jinnat 2020). Interviewees share that a large number of children, especially girls have fled the camps and are working as domestic helps outside the camps in the host community. They anticipate that many of these children have been subjected to bonded labour and sex trafficking. However, government agencies responsible for managing the camps officially deny the authenticity of these reports.

A local official and administrator shed light in this regard. His statement reflects several key issues:

‘Most child trafficking cases are found to have linkages with the Rohingya camps. Some Rohingya children, especially girls after going missing are often found to be forced in prostitution or domestic slavery. Recently, a senior citizen from Dhaka contacted me and asked if I knew any Rohingya family that may need support and wanted to send their any

⁵ Cox’s Bazar is internally known for its world’s longest sea-beach of the Bay of Bengal having uninterrupted 120 Kilometer sand beach.

of their girl children to work as maid in Dhaka. I was shocked and I simply informed him that such acts are illegal and considered punishable offences.’

This statement clearly indicates that there are strong linkages between the missing Rohingya children and forced labour for children. These camps are located near the sea and the supply of trafficked children is relatively easy, and notably the demand is incredibly high.

C. Labour and Access to Education for Rohingya Children

A study published in 2017 suggested that the health and educational status of Rohingya refugee children in Bangladesh was an improvement over their life in Myanmar (Prodip 2017). This research also found that Rohingya people had limited educational opportunities in Myanmar. However, in 2020, access to education and schooling is even more limited in the camps. A study analyzed the issues related to educational opportunities of Rohingya children in Bangladesh and noted that the right to education of school-age Rohingya children was being violated, which has profound implications (HRW 2019). Initially, the Government of Bangladesh did not even allow non-government organizations to provide children with formal educations, arguing that it might affect the prospects of repatriation of Rohingyas to Myanmar (Amnesty International 2020; HRW 2019; BRO 2018). Even though the government altered its policy in 2020 and allowed Rohingya children to enjoy their educational rights, the facilities remain limited or closed.

ILO notes that access to education is a crucial component of any effective effort to eliminate child labour in developing countries⁶. One of the primary reasons children work is not having access to education or a lack of support to continue their schooling. Nath and Hadi (2000) found a significant inverse relationship between child labour and years of schooling in rural areas in Bangladesh.

International donor organizations are providing support to run hundreds of Learning Centres in the camps (Reidy 2020). For instance, in camp number 6, there are 54 community-based and 226 home-based learning centres operating in three shifts every day. These centres provide learning facilities to children on Rohingya Language, Mathematics and English. The following photograph taken inside a learning centre shows a set of learning materials in two languages – English and Burmese.

⁶ For more details, please visit: <https://www.ilo.org/ipec/Action/Education/lang--en/index.htm> (Accessed on 20 September 2020)

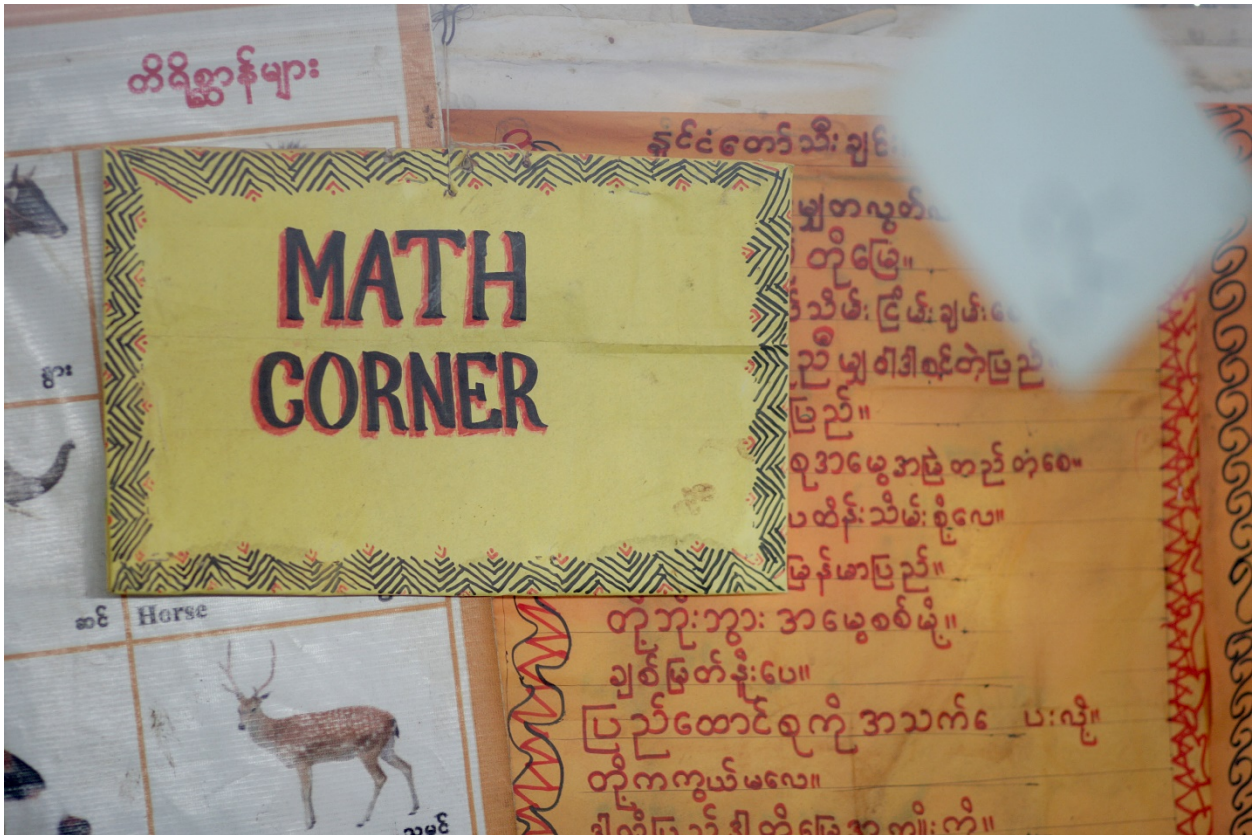


Figure 2: Inside an NGO-run learning centre that offers basic education for Rohingya children in one of the camps (Photo: Author)

Parents say that they like to send their children to these learning centres hoping that they would be skilled and resourceful. A Rohingya father's statement reflects this:

'I want to educate my children. We have lost everything we had – land and resources. My children want to go to school as well. But it seems like they will never be able to secure a bright and meaningful future. We used to send my children to schools run by NGOs, but they are also closed now. It is hard to look after all of them in a tiny house.'

In the camps, a relatively large number of children are found in the streets, either sitting idle or playing games that require limited physical movements. Some of these children participate in part-time labour inside the camps in the businesses run by their parents or neighbours. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) notes that these children are potential victims of forced labour and marriage since their access to education is limited (Bangkok Post 2017).

Local inhabitants say that the living conditions in the camps have improved in the last several months. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has made the situation worse since most of the learning centres had to cease their operations (UNB 2020). Notably, the pandemic has worsened the overall child labour situation in Bangladesh because of the growing demand of cheap labour

(Hoque 2020). Responding to this growing demand, the Rohingya children are becoming victims of forced labour. The issue is making this humanitarian crisis worse and leaving us with little hope.

5. Conclusions

The above account of the current child labour situation concerning Rohingya refugee children is a pressing issue. Rohingya children are engaged in harmful child labour and become victims of forced labour mostly outside the camps. National and international agencies struggle to tackle the issue due to several key factors. First, existing social norms and lack of social sanctions make it easy for employers to engage children in commercial and household works. Second, legal and formal institutions fail to tackle the issue as Rohingya children, like many other Bangladeshis, work in informal sectors. Third, parents are forced to give up their children due to a wide range of reasons including lack of access to the formal labour market, limited economic freedom, uncertain future, and poor living conditions in the camps. Fourth, undocumented Rohingya children have become easy targets for forced labour, sex trade, and trafficking through Cox's Bazar. Fifth, the Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to making matters worse since national and international agencies have considerably failed to sustain their regular support.

Lack of access to education remains a grave concern and the crisis is now more than a mere humanitarian one. More than half a million children are growing up without formal education. The consequences will of course be long-last. We can recognize that light work, especially domestic chores, are beneficial not only for the household but also for the social growth of children. So, support organizations may provide care and protection services, including cash and in-kind transfers for children participating in light work inside the camps to discourage these children from travelling outside the camps and to encourage them to continue engaging themselves in learning.

The government agencies must enforce formal mechanisms to ensure punitive actions against members of the host community who employ children, including Rohingyas. Otherwise, the illusion of independent lives and livelihoods will always attract children to leave the camp and become victim of exploitations including forced labour. This study has focused on the situation of child labour relating to Rohingya children in Bangladesh and its implications with a lack of educational facilities in the camps. The summary of findings indicates that the crisis is growing bigger, and the solutions are not merely in the hands of local and international humanitarian organizations. The global governance mechanism needs to acknowledge the crisis, provide support to the host country, and ask the Myanmar government to find sustainable solutions to the Rohingya refugee crisis.

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