

Claiming Space and Contesting Gendered Refugeehood in Exile

Issues and Factors of Rohingya Refugee Women's Civic Engagement in Diaspora

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Abstract

This article examines the emerging political and social mobilisation of Rohingya women activists in connection with the forced displacement of nearly a million Rohingya from the Rakhine state of Myanmar in August 2017. In exile, a promising number of Rohingya women have become actively engaged in social and political domains that have been historically male-dominated. The findings reveal how the internationalisation and the considerable global attention to the Rohingya refugee crisis have provided the space to navigate traditional gender roles and created an opportunity for Rohingya women to become important civic actors in this relatively nascent diaspora. Varying levels of education, age, technical and linguistic skills, along with diverse opportunities offered by the host countries, impact the (in)ability of Rohingya refugee women to play their part in diaspora activism.

Keywords: Rohingya, Myanmar, refugee women, gender, diaspora, activism, civil society

Introduction

The history of the Rohingya¹ in Myanmar has long been mired in military dictatorship, exclusion from citizenship, ethnic conflict and violence (Kyaw 2017). For decades, systematic marginalisation and protracted human rights violations have resulted in the large-scale forced displacement of the Rohingya population from Myanmar. Their recurring expulsion has progressively created a burgeoning Rohingya diaspora in different parts of Asia, which has expanded globally in recent years, particularly following the latest Rohingya exodus in August 2017 (Ansar 2020).

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The discourse around the “Rohingya diaspora” is a relatively new phenomenon compared to the longstanding discussion involving Kurdish, Jewish, Tamil, Armenian, Indian and Palestinian diasporas, to name just a few (Marat 2015). To date, nuanced research that has comprehensively evaluated the size of the exiled Burmese Rohingya population remains scarce. Existing data are limited and largely unreliable. At best, information can be collected from diverse sources (via media reports, NGO analyses, UNHCR documents on refugees and field-work) to make an educated guess about the number of Rohingya people living in exile. Combining sources, the best estimate this paper can propose is roughly two million Rohingya currently living outside Myanmar (Chickera 2021). The vast majority, approximately 1.5 million Rohingya (both registered and unregistered), live in sprawling refugee camps and informal settlements in Bangladesh. Another 101,530 Rohingya had registered with UNHCR in Malaysia as of August 2020 (UNHCR 2021). More recently, small but vibrant communities have also emerged in Australia, North America and several European countries, some of whom migrated there as part of the UNHCR resettlement programme or have claimed refugee status after arriving in these countries with mainly Bangladeshi passports. Two relatively recent developments in this transformation of the Rohingya diaspora motivated and guided our research direction, leading us to focus on Rohingya women.

First, there is a perceptible gendered dimension among the new refugee population. A distinctive pattern can be observed whereby a large number of women and children have been undertaking perilous journeys to escape intense violence – including mass sexual violence in Myanmar. For instance, nearly 80 per cent of the Rohingya who arrived in Bangladesh in August 2017 were women, girls and children (UNHCR 2019), including some 30,000 pregnant women (UNFPA 2018). Similarly, women made up 32 per cent of the Rohingya refugees in Malaysia and the country has also witnessed an increase in Rohingya women by 13 percent since June 2014 (UNHCR 2021).

Second, the global spotlight on the violent military crackdown on the Rohingya has invigorated the social and political activism of the Rohingya community in exile. These expanding community mobilisations have impelled many women to investigate the surrounding socio-political realities and actively engage in advancing their cause.

When examining the lives of Rohingya women in exile, it is imperative to reflect on the community’s restricted social life in Myanmar and how women are positioned within such a context. Under the draconian laws dictated by the military, Rohingya people are not allowed to form groups of more than four persons in public spaces in Myanmar (Oxfam 2020). This makes community

1 The authors are aware of the contrasting opinions about the name “Rohingya”. The purpose here is not to address the naming controversy, and we use this term as it is a commonly known name and also a term used by the community itself.

mobilisation practically impossible. Any type of comparatively larger social engagement carries significant safety risks, including the possibility of arrest or detention. These restrictions have profound implications, particularly on the lives of women and girls within Rohingya communities.² There are also perceptions of safety and security, cultural norms and religious beliefs that influence behavioural differences between women and men (Mohsin 2019). Amid the absence of basic rights, the political and social marginalisation and isolation from mainstream Burmese society, many Rohingya turn to religion and religious institutions for comfort. These arguably help to reduce psychological distress, provide spiritual shelter and improve self-actualisation (Mim 2020, Rahman 2019).

However, the conservative interpretation of religious influence in everyday life also limits women's civic participation in a society where men are considered "natural leaders", while the woman's role is mainly confined to the household. Some Rohingya women even view female leadership as a sin (Mohsin 2019: 11). Many gendered consequences of such structural barriers exacerbate women's position in society, where they are devoid of bargaining power compared to their male counterparts. In such a setting, this article examines the emerging civic engagements of Rohingya women activists in diaspora and offers a nuanced understanding of how their activism has been shaped and negotiated by multi-dimensional factors.

The study follows a qualitative approach with a threefold strategy. First, we reviewed the relevant secondary literature to provide essential contextual information. Second, a total of 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with Rohingya refugee women from six countries, spanning two years from April 2019 until April 2021 (see Appendix 1 for a comprehensive overview of the respondents). The respondents were identified through the snowball method and also from the authors' close collaboration with several Rohingya-led organisations in Bangladesh and Malaysia. All the respondents were between 21 to 30 years of age. They were informed in advance about the study's aims, the voluntary basis and the anonymity of their participation. While face-to-face interviews were conducted in Bangladesh, Malaysia and Germany, as the authors were residing in these countries during the data collection phase, digital media such as Skype and WhatsApp were used to accommodate distance and allow the inclusion of respondents from Australia, the United States and Canada. One of the authors has a near-native proficiency in the Rohingya language, and the conversation often took place in both the Rohingya language and English, frequently switching from one to the other.

Third, with prior permission, the respondents' social media engagements, which have become immensely popular among the Rohingya activists, were also

2 For an extensive overview of the Rohingya's apartheid-like situation and immobility in Myanmar, see <https://www.fmreview.org/sites/fmr/files/FMRdownloads/en/statelessness/lewa.pdf> (accessed 3 July 2022).

observed throughout the study period. There are two precise reasons for this: digital platforms possibly compensate for the Rohingya refugees' offline constraints and many young refugee activists are becoming digital "space invaders" of locations and issues for which "they are not, in short, the somatic norm" (Puwar 2004: 1). A deductive method was then employed to create preliminary themes and categories for subsequent data analysis purposes.

Refugee women in Diaspora Studies

In conceptualising refugee women's role in exile, a growing number of studies offer a nuanced understanding of how diaspora communities and camp settings provide the space and opportunity for resistance to dominant patriarchal social systems and cultural norms.³ Much has been written on how exile spaces and migration experiences provide opportunities for political consciousness-raising among women and act as a vehicle for women's empowerment.⁴ These studies show how women persistently challenge patriarchal notions, re-negotiate their assigned domestic roles and embrace new professional and educational successes in host countries. This perspective also opposes the one-dimensional image of refugee women as homogenous, victimised and passive followers of their men (Boyd 1989, Carling 2005, Palmary et al. 2010).

Focusing on the emergence and evolution of the exiled Burmese women's movement, seminal research has been conducted, particularly on the Thai-Burma border, that portrays refugee women as "insurgent citizens" (Olivius 2019); highlights their political agency (O'Kane 2007); shows their involvement in humanitarian operations (McConnachie 2012), forms of camp-based political activism (Olivius 2017) and civic engagement through informal education and political advocacy (Maber 2016); and examines the nexus between feminism, militarism and nationalism, and refugee women's place in armed conflicts and nationalist struggles (Olivia / Hedström 2019). These studies offer a nuanced understanding of Burmese women's socio-political engagement in exile.

Nevertheless, there remain some considerable gaps in the literature. The studies cited above mainly investigated the struggles and resistance of the recognised ethnic minorities in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands, namely the Karen and Kachin. Notably, the Women's League of Burma (WLB), which was frequently mentioned in several of these studies, does not represent any Rohingya women's organisation.⁵ Therefore, the multiple ways Rohingya women participate in civic activism remain largely excluded in these otherwise important studies.

3 See for example Holzer 2015, Vasta 2016, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014, Ghorashi 2005.

4 See for example Pande 2018, McConnachie 2018, Sánchez 2016, Pessar 2010.

5 The Women's League of Burma (<http://www.womenofburma.org/>) was founded in 1999, as an umbrella organisation consisting of 13 ethnic minority organisations. Rohingya are not part of this platform, and the only organisation representing this platform from the Rakhine state is the Rakhaing Women's Union (RWU).

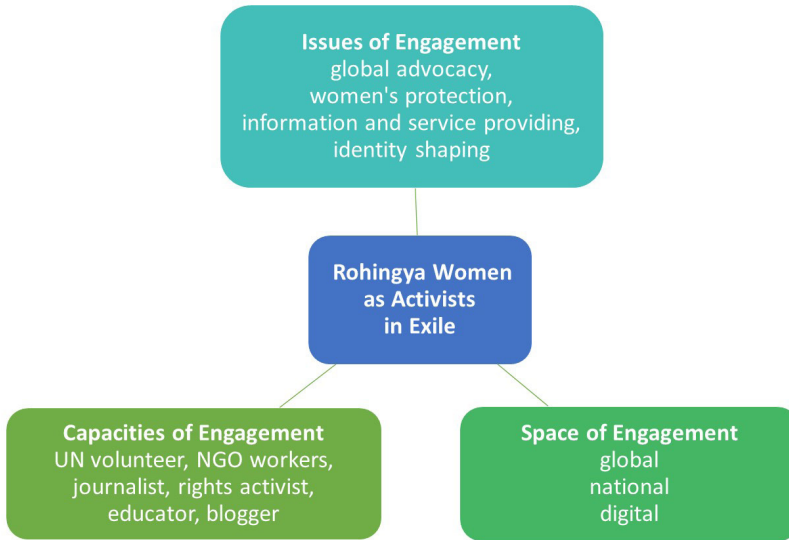
In recent years, a few studies have looked at the evolving gender dimensions within the exiled Rohingya community and how women create space and agencies while navigating their displacement (i.e., Mim 2020, Mohsin 2019, Rahman 2019). Placing a spotlight on different gender dynamics, these three studies mainly concentrated on Rohingya women living in different refugee camps in Bangladesh, however. Additionally, several recent reports have been published by UN agencies and human rights organisations (e.g., Oxfam 2020; UN Women 2017). These reports are likely to reinforce the image of Rohingya women as victims and vulnerable, presumably derived from a programme or project-oriented focus. Our study attempts to contribute to this perceived gap by taking the discussion beyond the largely homogenous camp settings in Bangladesh. Keeping women's civic activism at the core, we engage with a gendered diaspora narrative that is transnational in nature and multi-dimensional in its scope.

Our research broadly builds on the notion that diaspora provides the much-needed space for new social and political mobilisation of refugee women in exile, also sparking their capability to renegotiate perceived gender norms while navigating the various institutions and actors in this process. Accordingly, the conceptual underpinning of this study derives from the notion of "sites of refuge" (Nyers 2006: 122) that refugees inhabit in exile and that provide the required "safe space" to engage in building resilience, creating space for resistance and becoming part of a transformative politics (Olivius 2019: 765). This "exceptional space" functions as what Giorgio Agamben (1998: 187) defines as a "zone of indistinction" that moulds the ways and strategies for resistance and political mobilisation of Rohingya women activists. Borrowing from Nadjé Al-Ali (2007: 140), this study also conceptualises the Rohingya in exile as a "conflict-generated diaspora" which is partly "in the making". Therefore, to attain a comprehensive understanding of Rohingya women's diaspora activism, it proposes considering the fluidity within the group as well as the conditions in the host countries.

Rohingya refugee women's civic participation: Issues of engagement

The following section presents the various patterns of Rohingya refugee women's civic engagement in their host countries and addresses factors contributing to their growing interest in and capacities to perform these activities. During the interview phase, the research participants were involved in various professions and social commitments. Nevertheless, we prefer to address them as activists throughout the paper as, regardless of their professional priorities, they remain focused and committed to drawing global attention to their cause and aspiring for a better future for their community and beyond.

Figure 1: Overview of Rohingya women's civic engagement in diaspora (compiled by the authors)



Mapping the nature of engagement

The situation in Myanmar has not allowed me a space to contribute to my society. When the UNHCR asked me to be a part of their community volunteer team, I did not think even a minute. It was an immediate YES! (Rohingya activist, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, November 2020 via Skype)

This is the recurring experience of many women activists, particularly those who left Myanmar after 2017. Their mass exodus, the international visibility of the Rakhine crisis and the new space in exile has generated a quantitative increase in Rohingya women's civil society participation. Figure 1 presents the mapping of Rohingya women's civic engagement in exile. Broadly, the following key issues can be identified in their activism: global advocacy on refugee protection from a gender perspective, finding a just solution to the Rohingya crisis, attending to immediate community needs, providing services and shaping the Rohingya identity through various creative activities. Collaboration with national and international stakeholders, including camp management authorities, different UN bodies and non-governmental organisations and active social media campaigns, allows them to remain committed to the welfare of the community. Some of them run their own organisations, work as religious educators, journalists, online activists, human rights activists and social entrepreneurs.

The gendered and stratified nature of their refugeehood and experience of forced displacement have implications for women's emergence at the frontline

of community activism. As stakeholders, they have been actively involved in refugee protection issues, humanitarian agencies' governance and aid distribution mechanisms, as well as discussions on their safe and voluntary return to Myanmar. One young activist explains the purpose of such engagement:

We want the current humanitarian engagements to meet our specific needs and be shaped by our voices. (Rohingya activist, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, December 2019)

In Bangladesh, there is a formal inclusion of refugee women in the camp coordination committee that supports the relevant stakeholders in better management of the relief distribution programme. While their role and influence are subject to debate, it is an important step toward mainstreaming Rohingya women's active engagement. As Jennifer Hyndman and Wenona Giles observe, "[w]hile refugees are nominally covered by human rights covenants and refugee law, 'temporary' camps have become extra-legal spaces of liminality where rights are optional" (Hyndman / Giles 2011: 367). Due to the protracted nature of the displacement, many refugee camps and informal settlements in Southeast Asia become a living space that goes beyond the temporary aspect of such camps and the emergency nature of management in those campsites. In such protracted displacement, refugee women seek to build a new life to the best of their abilities in countries like Bangladesh, Thailand and Malaysia. This also echoes previous scholarship where refugee camps serve as political spaces where struggles continue over the right to influence life and governance structure in the camps (Olivius 2019, Agier 2011).

Outside of Southeastern Asia, Rohingya women's activities remain deeply rooted in their everyday struggles, yet they go beyond the essentialist community activism associated with their historical grievances, traumas of violence and livelihood challenges in the host countries. For instance, the activists in Germany, the United States, Canada and Australia engage with wider audiences and diverse issues, given their entitlement to certain rights as refugees:

The plight of our (Rohingya) community is not an isolated event. It is the consequence of sheer ignorance and avoidance of collective global responsibility where we live together, and we need to extend hands, build solidarity with other people, whenever possible. (Rohingya activist, Toronto, Canada, December 2020 via WhatsApp)

Here, their civic participation does not simply consist of taking part in community activities and addressing immediate needs. They equally aspire to shape the discourse that matters to them and influence how they are represented. Emphasising self-representation, another activist from Australia shares her frustration:

I am tired of seeing Rohingya women as nothing but a victim of war, as if their identity is synonymous to the rape victim, suppressed, sexually abused and struggling to make a living. It is much more than that. You have to open your eyes and have an honest intention to see the large picture. (Rohingya activist, Melbourne, Australia, December 2020 via Skype)

Going further, another activist who also works as a journalist in an amateur Rohingya online television channel in Malaysia clarifies why self-representation makes a significant difference:

In most Rohingya-related articles, the international media will write religious or communal violence as a cause of the unrest in Rakhine. The Rohingya media, however, would clearly communicate this as state-sponsored violence or genocide. (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, September 2020 via Skype)

Thus, while the nature of Rohingya women's engagement is primarily concentrated on shaping refugee-related governance and humanitarian aid delivery in refugee camps and informal settlements, a small yet notable diversity can be found in recent community engagements depending on where the women reside. These different pathways derive from their surrounding realities, available support systems and individual skills at navigating life in their host countries. This political switch from conventional community engagement of providing immediate support to becoming a rights activist also influences the international community and other stakeholders by reminding them of the rights of the Rohingya and the steps necessary to achieve their common goals.

Despite the spatial differences in activism, one notable similarity among the activists scattered across different continents is their uncompromising stance on the issues of acknowledging genocide, demanding Myanmar citizenship and asserting a distinct Rohingya identity. In addition, past trauma, the quest for justice and homeland grievances also remain interwoven. One respondent from the United States put it this way:

This is what binds us together as a larger family with a shared memory of the suffering and a single hope for the future. To be acknowledged that we belong to Myanmar. (Rohingya activist, New York, USA, December 2019 via Skype)

Protecting women's rights:

Bringing women's issues to the forefront

The discussion of refugee women's distinct vulnerabilities and gender-specific issues is one of the main themes of women's civic involvement in the diaspora. Their engagements generally revolve around the categorical needs of displaced Rohingya women, many of whom are in a perilous situation due to their experience of gender-specific violence. Moreover, women activists are vocal about issues such as inadequate gender-sensitive humanitarian support, lack of space for women to interact with humanitarian actors and, above all, a lack of self-representation, as compared to their male counterparts. An activist in Malaysia illustrates the need for a gender perspective:

There are certain experiences that are gender-specific. While we all [men and women] are victims of genocide, it would be sheer trivialising if we cannot differentiate the pain

of a woman who was raped, tortured, lost all the male members of her family and (in some cases) dragged into prostitution afterwards. (Rohingya activist, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, September 2020 via Skype)

Another activist from Bangladesh who works as a counsellor in the refugee camps elucidates:

It would be a travesty of justice if women are not allowed to tell their part of the stories. It is not about telling stories but offering a way out from what she endured and becoming resilient by engaging and connecting with new possibilities and hopes in life. (Rohingya activist, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, December 2020)

Many women activists are seeking to promote gender-sensitive humanitarian assistance in addition to advocating for policies that effectively fulfil the needs of displaced women and girls while also safeguarding broader refugee rights in their host nations. They also run non-profit organisations that promote women's empowerment and gender mainstreaming in refugee-related projects. An activist from Germany emphasises how refugee women are:

[...] victims in a double sense – as women and as refugees in the asylum system, [...] therefore] we need to walk an extra mile to assert rights not only in the host society but also within the Rohingya community. (Rohingya activist, Frankfurt, Germany, November 2019)

The activists have been carefully crafting an image within and beyond the community, where they are seen as occupying an intersection between the women's movement and refugee rights. Particularly in Bangladesh and Malaysia, they play a crucial mediating role between women, men, host governments and international organisations. A Rohingya UN volunteer in Bangladesh, who mainly works with single mothers and rape victims, explains:

Rohingya women are the most disadvantaged within a disadvantaged community. They live in fear every day – people are sympathetic, and then again, behind them, they talk about why she is carrying a *Jaraj* [father's name is unknown] baby of a Buddhist soldier. I sincerely believe that we do not talk about such things loudly within the community because of prejudice. The pain remains deep in your heart. You see how many layers of victimhood there are within one single woman? (Rohingya activist, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, December 2020)

Underlying such “feminist engagement”, as one respondent from Australia chose to frame it, there is a need to escape the “marginal space” marked by gendered violence, male dominance and a lack of voice, into which Rohingya women have been structurally confined. Many activists provide the necessary platform to escape from this marginal space by creating women's organisations and women-friendly spaces. This allows women to navigate gendered prejudice in a society where rape and violence are generally equated with a loss of honour and status for a girl in the community (Mohsin 2019: 9). With such actions, they also resist the orthodox understanding of *purdah* (a religious and social practice of female seclusion), often a male imposition that attempts to limit the scope of women's role in the society using a (mis)interpretation of religion as a pretext.

Internal advocacy:

Claiming space and overcoming community gatekeeping

Political participation and civic engagement of the Rohingya women has never been easy. In Myanmar, their social and political marginalisation can be attributed to several structural constraints within the community and the state. Remarkably, a Rohingya *majhi* (community representative for the camp management), until she arrived in Bangladesh, could not even imagine a Muslim woman could be a *Raja* (the colloquial reference to the head of the state):

When I saw Sheikh Hasina [the Prime Minister of Bangladesh] in the camp, I could not believe my eyes. She is a Muslim Woman and running the country for 15 years. (Rohingya camp representative, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, November 2019)

These barriers are likely to derive from the population's isolation from the rest of the world and marginalisation within Myanmar. This also influences their capability and willingness to engage in the community. Another social activist who is heading a Rohingya Women's Association in Malaysia states:

Even two years back, sitting next to a man in the front line of a community event was unthinkable for my community. To talk about the particular needs of women was a taboo topic, especially in front of the male presence. We no longer want to be invisible, because our pains are no longer veiled. (Rohingya activist, Georgetown, Malaysia, July, 2020 via WhatsApp)

Almost all the women in the study stated that they routinely encounter community gatekeepers and dogmatic views about what women can and cannot pursue. One Rohingya activist from Germany claims, "this comes from both our own people and the NGOs and humanitarian actors with whom we collaborate" (Rohingya activist, Cologne, Germany, July 2020). Critical of the international community's role, a Rohingya entrepreneur and social worker from Australia argues:

Despite the best of their intention, they [humanitarian actors] want us to be less opinionated. They appreciate it when we follow them without asking anything. We just cannot let a vicious cycle of dependency go on. We want to prove that we can take care of ourselves – we just need a space and some support. (Rohingya social worker, Sydney, Australia, January 2021)

Women's dual responsibility as homemakers and social activists sometimes puts them in a situation that can be referred to as "priority confusion". External factors, such as the lack of adequate knowledge of different national and international platforms, language barriers, inadequate economic opportunities and mobility restrictions limit the scope of their involvement.

Nevertheless, despite having made significant inroads in civic and political engagement, Rohingya women continue to be underrepresented in the community leadership compared to their male counterparts – be it as a camp representative

in Bangladesh or in leading newly founded diaspora organisations in the Western countries.

Global advocacy: Networking beyond the Rohingya community

Rohingya women activists have also broadened their civic participation by forming networks and expressing solidarity with other marginalised populations within and beyond their host countries. This is pervasive among all the respondents who are based in Europe, Australia and North America. This inclusion in the extended civic sphere creates a learning space for partnerships, community empowerment and the accumulation of experiences in the long run. An activist from Germany, who is an active member of Fridays for Future, a youth-led and organised global climate strike movement, explains:

Being a refugee is not a choice, rather a consequence. I try to help others to avoid enduring similar suffering. So, I must speak out and be part of that force who are there in the streets to claim a piece for everyone in this world. (Rohingya activist, Berlin, Germany, January 2021)

Several women interviewed are part of a larger civil rights movement, where their activism concerns matters related to the rights of other minorities, migrants and refugees. An activist from the United States who has been travelling across the country and taking part in activist movements, including Black Lives Matter and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, eagerly divulges:

What happened in Myanmar can happen tomorrow against another community somewhere else. No matter who the perpetrators are and which part of the world it is happening in, there needs to be a global consensus. For me, there is no better place than the US to make sure that our voices reach out to the right places. (Rohingya activist, Washington DC, USA, January 2021, via Skype)

Through active participation in diverse civil rights platform in the host countries, these women expand the scope of engagement, as another activist from Germany describes:

We are fighting for the same cause, which is to establish justice, peace and equality. Be it the Rohingyas in Myanmar, Uighurs in China, or the Kurds in Turkey – we need to support each other as in the end, we are the same persecuted people. (Rohingya activist, Cologne, Germany, January 2021)

Through such demonstrations and by widening their sphere of civic actions, Rohingya women strengthen their cause and boost their confidence by tapping into this learning process of the civil rights movement. As another activist from Australia clarifies, it helps in “expanding your horizon by observing what strategy other people employ, what to say on which occasion and how to frame your argument and draw attention” (Sydney, Australia, September 2019, via Skype).

However, such extended civic participation and networking is largely absent in the refugee camps of Bangladesh and informal urban settlements in Malaysia. This is partly due to the contextual socio-cultural constraints resulting from the encampment of the refugees in Bangladesh and the restrictive policies and constant surveillance by the law enforcement agencies in Malaysia.

Providing information: Becoming digital activists

Statelessness and the resulting mobility restrictions inevitably triggered the Rohingya diaspora's online presence to mobilise around various issues, including the right to self-determination. In this context, the internet and social media offer unprecedented access to connectedness and provide a platform for a "virtual togetherness" to raise the Rohingya women's voices. There has been an exponential increase in digital advocacies in recent years, with Rohingya community members demonstrating notable engagement on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. In another forthcoming paper on the "Rohingya Digital Diaspora", the authors examine how, through the creative constellation of socio-cultural and political issues in virtual space, exiled Rohingya practice a politics of resistance and recognition while confronting the policies of Myanmar's government.

In recent years, scholarly attention has been drawn to the rising exchanges and communications within and among diaspora communities in digital arenas.⁶ Such practices are also manifested by our research participants. Women activists interviewed reaffirmed the opportunities that derive from using social media to widen the scale and scope of engagement. Social media platforms have expanded the women's opportunities and motivations to invite wider audiences to engage in online or offline mobilisation. Several issues were frequently discussed by the respondents on their social media accounts, including genocide remembrance in the Rakhine state, Rohingya identity, human rights, political developments in Myanmar, the International Court of Justice hearing on the Rohingya persecution, the living conditions in the refugee camps in Bangladesh, extrajudicial killings of the Rohingya by Bangladeshi security forces in border areas, and global advocacy for their civil and political rights.

The protracted COVID-19 pandemic has also increased this "digital dependency". In this changing global reality with its offline constraints, including mobility restrictions, the digital space emerged as a platform to continue activities to preserve and reshape the dominant narratives on and around the Rohingya issue. In this context, Rohingya women in exile are using digital

6 Cf. Alencar 2018, Kaufmann 2018, Marat 2015, Levitt / Schiller 2006.

platforms to contest the mainstream narrative while claiming a significant position in the digital sphere, for example by offering webinar series.⁷

In their country of origin, the Rohingya are denied education in their native language and the ability to fully practice their cultural rites, including religious rites, thereby weakening their culture. An in-depth retention of the Rohingya language has never been a priority for the Myanmar government (O'Brien / Hoffstaedter 2020). This is where the role of digital platforms becomes crucial to fight the gradual disappearance of language and culture following the dispersal of Rohingya to many countries in the world. A Rohingya activist, who has been working as a UNHCR volunteer and educator in Malaysia, sees digital activism in this way:

We want to be a part of a generation of Rohingya youth embracing the Rohingya language, our identity and heritage with pride and there is not much of a scope in traditional media, which we try to compensate for through our online engagement in our language. (Rohingya activist, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, July 2020, via WhatsApp)

This growing civic engagement in the digital space also serves several purposes, including transnational political engagements, developing distinct forms of local and global consciousness and new forms of relations and constructions of place, and reimagining homeland through remembrance and digital representation.

Conditional solidarity with other Burmese ethnic groups

On February 2021, the *Tatmadaw*, Myanmar's military, toppled the democratically elected government of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and seized power, once again. Since then any opposition to the military coup has been ruthlessly suppressed by the ruling regime. Following the coup, Myanmar entered a violent new chapter. The opposition formed a shadow government in exile, known as the National Unity Government (NUG). Many ethnic minority groups who were part of the semi-democratic unity government under Aung Sun Suu Kyi between 2016 to 2020 relaunched their armed conflict to resist the military junta.

In this new political reality, the Rohingya seem to be reluctant to engage and join hands with other ethnic groups and civil society activists in diaspora who have been at the forefront in protesting the military takeover. There remains a deep resentment amongst the Rohingya as illustrated by the following quote of a Rohingya activist:

We are neither Burmese nor Bangladeshi [with anger]. When our people [Rohingya] were slaughtered, they [Burmese civilians] did not stand up for us, what shall we do for them now? (Rohingya activist, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, March 2021)

⁷ See for example <https://hervoicesherjourney.wordpress.com/> (accessed 1 July 2022) and <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCz7i6uQeOIAMYCUC-B0ApLA> (accessed 1 July 2022).

As the above statement indicates, this disinclination largely stems from the lack of support from Myanmar’s civil society, other ethnic groups and above all, from the semi-democratic transition government during 2016–2020, when the state-sponsored anti-Rohingya violence and persecution took place in Rakhine state.

Still, many Rohingya activists consider the coup as an opportunity for national reconciliation and to build a wider consensus on their struggle. As the coup represented an important political development during the course of the study, it seems pertinent to understand the perspective of the Rohingya activists, who have been divergent, critical yet loosely optimistic about the new political situation in Myanmar. A mix of reactions can be observed depending on respondents’ location and the scale of their suffering. There seems to be strong reluctance to collaborate with other ethnic groups and political actors in Myanmar among the activists in Bangladesh, as compared to among those living in Western countries. For many interviewed Rohingya women in the camps, with their raw memory of violence and current everyday struggles, the military coup and subsequent violence against the Burmese protesters are seen as “God’s punishment for them [the civilians who supported military atrocity against the Rohingya]” (Rohingya Activist, Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, March 2021).

Another respondent from Malaysia highlights the absence of Rohingya persecution narratives in the anti-coup protests:

I have been closely observing whether the coup was making my countrymen rethink their indifference during the Rakhine massacre. I wish to hear a few words about our predicament, about our future, as they speak about democracy and democratic rights. However, it is nowhere there in their placards and banners. (Rohingya activist, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, March 2021, via Skype)

On the other hand, given the exiled National Unity Government’s (NUG)⁸ promise to restore Rohingya citizenship, there is a cautious optimism among respondents in the United States, Germany and Canada. A Rohingya activist in Germany, who is already in collaboration with other exiled Burmese groups, sees the recent events as a positive momentum:

The term “Rohingya” was taboo, even Suu Kyi carefully avoided calling us Rohingya. Mentioning the term “Rohingya” and promising to restore our citizenship by the NUG is a small but a significant step of acknowledgement, finally. (Rohingya activist, Berlin, Germany, April 2021, via WhatsApp)

Another respondent from Australia sees the possibility of a new channel of communication and of reconnecting with Burmese youth in the frontline of anti-coup processions:

8 NUG is a group of ousted National League for Democracy (NLD) politicians who formed an exiled civilian government following the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021. In a policy statement released on 3 June 2021, this government says that the Rohingya are “entitled to citizenship by laws that will accord with fundamental human rights and democratic federal principles” (see <https://twitter.com/NUG-Myanmar/status/1400471485697781768>, accessed 3 July 2022).

They [the young Burmese] now see the worst of their Army whom they praised during the crackdown [on the Rohingya]. They can feel the pain [...] at least I believe so. (Rohingya activist, Melbourne, Australia, April 2021, via Skype)

As a result, a new form of solidarity is being formed where Rohingya activists regularly tweet and share political developments inside Myanmar using hashtags such as *#whatshappeninginMyanmar* and also take part in exchanges between Rohingya community leaders and NUG officials. It seem that they want to capitalise on this opportunity by connecting the Rohingya plight to this broader resistance within and outside Myanmar.

Contributing factors in diasporic civic activism

Different quantities and qualities of factors contribute to mobilisation and participation in civic activism by Rohingya refugee women. Since 2017, the growing international solidarity and humanitarian support, evolving Rohingya diaspora, host country situations and the concomitant socio-economic and political transformations have led to a meaningful increase in Rohingya women's civic engagement. Furthermore, a combination of age, education, language skills and technological know-how among young Rohingya in diaspora also shapes this growing civic activism. This confirms previous study findings on how various intersecting personal factors place refugee women in varying positions of privilege or disadvantage (Al Munajed 2020). Based on the study findings, Figure 2 shows the various factors that determine Rohingya refugee women's civic engagement in exile.

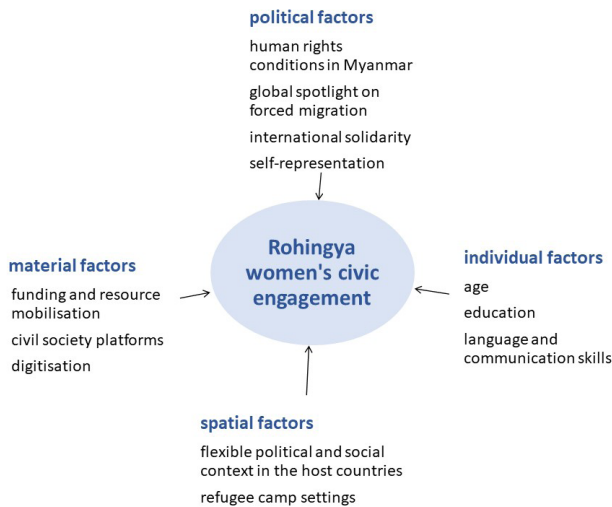


Figure 2: Contributing factors in Rohingya women's growing civic engagement (compiled by the authors)

Broadly, four factors have been identified that have contributed to Rohingya women's expanding civic engagement: individual, material, spatial and political features. It is important to note that the ability of Rohingya refugee women in diaspora to mobilise and actively engage in civic activism is highly context-specific. The following section offers a detailed illustration of these factors.

Individual factors:

Age, educational background and language skills

Our study showed that without a certain level of education, language skills and other relevant skills, Rohingya women find it challenging to take advantage of the opportunities in their host countries. An examination of the educational background of the women activists and their diverse commitment to social and community development abroad reveals that a process of selfhood and political identity is being created within them. This derives from their personalised skills based on various factors, including education, age, language, duration of living in the host countries and familiarity with communication technologies. Except for two participants from Bangladesh, all of the other Rohingya women interviewed have commendable linguistic skills. They are fluent in more than four languages, including English, which has become the most extensively used language across international platforms. This skill has indubitably helped them navigate the host countries' institutions and become a natural choice for representing and speaking on the community's behalf on national, regional and international stages. Furthermore, most of the respondents have a decent educational background, ranging from a higher secondary school certificate to a university degree. However, this may also trigger the question of how representative they are when looking at the varied conditions of the Rohingya refugee women. Another noteworthy fact is that all of the activists interviewed in this study are from 20 to 30 years of age. This young profile has doubtless helped them to better correlate and coordinate between online and offline domains of activism. They also bring a wide array of new strategies to make their voices heard, as we have seen in their diverse forms of engagement, especially among those in the Western countries.

Material factors:

Access to communication technology

Social media has a profound influence on Rohingya diaspora women's capacity to establish and become part of transnational diaspora networks. Their disappointment with the portrayal of Rohingya women in mainstream regional and global media, in which they are largely characterised as passive victims of the

conflict, has given rise to a new, independent and more grounded perspective on refugee activism through digital platforms, as participants in this study reiterate. Social media plays a decisive role in connecting, streamlining and shaping the community narratives of violence and discrimination while providing an alternative platform for making their voices heard. This facilitates material and imaginative connections, a phenomenon observed in previous scholarship (Blunt 2007, Marat 2015). Our interviewees also emphasised the importance of the internet and social media when aiming to link up with different social movements. Most of the interviewees were active on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Five of them have over a thousand followers on their Twitter accounts, which testifies to the scale and scope of their digital engagement. The rising presence of diaspora women in cyberspace and social media has thus opened new paths for mobilisation, leading to transnational forms of participation.

Nevertheless, the question remains as to how digitalisation complements the everyday struggle of refugees trapped in the camps and makeshift settlements in different parts of South and Southeast Asia. For instance, in both Malaysia and Bangladesh, in addition to the logistical constraints, refugees face an array of challenges to freedom of expression on digital platforms, which restricts many Rohingya activists to remaining less assertive, even as the host country's policies have detrimental consequences on the refugees living there.⁹ Despite such predicaments, digitisation has emerged as a salient feature in current Rohingya diaspora engagement and transnational connectedness, albeit the extent of such impacts remains a topic to be explored further. Digital platforms obscure many local features to accommodate a more globalist view on the Rohingya. This homogenisation often lacks contextual analysis and ignores the influence of other factors, such as class, education, age and the rural or urban origins of Rohingya refugee women. The online discussions also largely exclude non-Muslim Rohingya in their process of narrative making. To what extent this digital togetherness in /excludes multidimensional features of the Rohingya community and how a new transnational identity is being constructed and negotiated needs to be researched further.

Spatial factors:

Host countries' asylum policies

The host country's environment facilitates opportunities to build local and international networks while also supporting economic and political exchanges. For instance, in Bangladesh and Malaysia, the current refugee situation and camp-

⁹ For Malaysia, see <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1673766/world> (accessed 5 July 2022). For Bangladesh, see <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/rights/news/digital-security-act-threatens-press-freedom-needs-reformation-editors-council-3016776> (accessed 5 July 2022).

centric humanitarian assistance provide an opportunity for many women to be part of the ongoing humanitarian programmes that, besides other objectives, also aim to empower refugee women in different capacities. For example, in the sprawling refugee camps of Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, where the great majority of Rohingya are currently concentrated, so-called Camp Management Committees (CMC) provide the key leadership and decision-making bodies within the camp. The CMC representatives are the key focal point for people to communicate their needs and issues, and CMCs, in turn, are expected to communicate these concerns with service providers and government departments. While at the beginning of 2018 almost all CMC representatives were men, as of February 2020, women occupied approximately 20 per cent of CMC positions, as the camp management strategy ensures such compulsory participation for women in camp management leadership (Action Against Hunger et al. 2020). This is but one example of how host country refugee policies and other related factors are crucial in determining women's visible and meaningful engagement in community development initiatives. The women's newfound freedom, which was lacking in Myanmar, thereby reaffirms the interconnection between the situation of the host country and the refugee women's access to civil society participation.

In the Western host countries, freedom of movement, multiculturalism, acceptance of certain rights for refugees and asylum seekers, and relatively higher employment and social service opportunities have enabled more and more Rohingya women to participate in civil and political spaces. The importance of multiculturalism and flexible asylum policy can easily be identified when analysing significant differences among the countries they represent. For example, in countries like Canada, Germany and Australia, Rohingya women activists are engaged in various civil and political platforms. On the other hand, in Bangladesh or Malaysia, the civil and political space for refugees is limited, and the women activists interviewed primarily concentrate on representing issues that are predominantly gendered.

Political factors:

Internationalisation and global solidarity

The August 2017 mass exodus of the Rohingya from Myanmar led to profound international solidarity, large-scale humanitarian support and access to funding.¹⁰ This overwhelming global solidarity has provided a new opportunity for

10 Just to give a few examples of international initiatives: 1) In 2019, the United Nations General Assembly approved a resolution condemning rights abuses against Rohingya Muslims and other minority groups in Myanmar; <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/myanmar/> (accessed 4 July 2022). 2) UN and other international agencies launched a Joint Response Plan (JRP) for the Rohingya Refugee Humanitarian Crisis in 2018. See the latest JRP: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/2022-jrp-rohingya> (accessed 4 July 2022). 3) Myanmar is currently facing a genocide charge at the International Court of Justice; <https://www.icj-cij.org/en/case/178> (accessed 4 July 2022). 4) There is a global initiative for Rohingya Justice, Truth and Reconciliation; <https://gijtr.org/our-work/rohingya/> (accessed 4 July 2022).

many Rohingya activists to take an active part in social and political endeavours. The massive arrival of Rohingya in 2017 in Bangladesh and neighbouring Asian countries also triggered varied consequences that humanitarian actors needed to tackle carefully. Specifically, as many refugees were female victims of sexual and gender-based violence in Myanmar, there was a need for women to be in the frontline and confront such issues.

The issues of transnationality and multiculturalism also emerged as prominent factors in facilitating diaspora activism in the host countries. Multiculturalism provides diaspora groups with a much-needed community space to discuss their various needs, and such positionality activates diaspora civic engagement (Blunt 2007). In Malaysia, Germany, the United States, Canada and Australia, Rohingya people settle mainly in urban and multicultural settings that provide much needed socio-economic space and support mechanisms. This eventually allows community building in the host countries and transnational network development. Similar solidarity is also found in Bangladesh, as for instance in the Joint Response Plan (JRP) by the UN, which is designed to address the camp-based Rohingya in Bangladesh. Yet restrictive government policies and the official ban on any form of refugee-led political processions and events limit the scope of active engagement.

The effects of forced migration on selfhood and subjectivity are integral in understanding how women reimagine their space and renegotiate their gender identity (Rahman 2019). For the Rohingya, a community primarily defined by conflict-driven migration, the diaspora engagement is concentrated on campaigning for basic human rights in Myanmar and abroad, coupled with the claim for a distinct Rohingya identity and Myanmar citizenship. Nonetheless, it can be observed that a dominant narrative is emerging amid the activism, which broadly embraces a notion of Muslim victimhood while defining the Rohingya identity. This could well be the ramification of their alienation and exclusion from mainstream Burmese social, political and cultural narratives. Such a limited portrayal of the Rohingya community may become an obstacle to facilitating a more inclusive and pluralist conception of the Rohingya community and hinder future outreach and reconciliation towards wider and diverse Burmese society in Myanmar and beyond.

One cannot discard the marginalisation and vulnerability of most refugee women, who suffer severe uncertainty in the refugee camps in Bangladesh or informal settlements in Malaysia. Their historically disadvantaged position – as women, Muslims and refugees – and systemic discrimination hamper their social mobility. Nevertheless, the impressive engagement of Rohingya women activists fighting for better rights for themselves as women and for their community as a whole, reveals promising civic and political prospects for the foreseeable future. First, Rohingya refugee women are slowly but surely becoming key actors in the host countries' civic space, and their participation goes beyond the con-

ventional gendered dynamics of civic engagement. Second, their involvement shows characteristics that may resemble the experiences of other marginalised groups and resistance movements in the host countries, and there is growing solidarity and interconnectedness among them. Third, the formation of refugee-led civil society organisations and their relations with the host country and other state structures are overwhelmingly driven by the receiving country's migration, citizenship and civil society dynamics. Fourth, they use both formal and informal pathways to claim their rights and to fight for justice. They are active in cities, digital spaces, refugee camps in the borderland, and at the discussion table in international forums and sites of global visibility. Thus, they employ a diverse spectrum of spaces and strategies, as observed in this study.

Summary

After enduring decades of persecution, the Rohingya community effected a noticeable political and social mobilisation following their forced displacement from Myanmar in 2017. Within this new socio-political landscape, Rohingya women are carving out a space of influence through civic activism in the host countries under challenging conditions. Diverse motives, opportunities, limitations, social processes and interactions with the broader international community have created a space for the flourishing of their civic activism in exile. Highlighting their claiming of this space, the paper illustrates how geographically dispersed Rohingya refugee women have been working towards developing shared values and setting agendas for the community's future, both as future citizens in Myanmar and as refugees in exile. In this evolving process, growing transnationalism, multiculturalism, digital transformation and the crisis's internationalisation have paved the way for asserting rights and creating a sense of community across borders.

The study's findings also stress how Rohingya women embody and navigate between multiple marginalised subject positions, claiming rights as refugees, ethnic minorities and women while constituting themselves as important political and social actors. The context of exiled life provides a degree of freedom for many women and motivates them to be a part of the political, social and cultural struggle of the Rohingya community. This profound civic involvement is an important step forward and "long overdue", yet this diaspora activism is conditional and subject to access to resources, the policy of the host countries and support mechanisms offered by the international community. The paper thus shows how times of crisis can have positive transformational impacts on gender norms and women's lives. Actions taken by external stakeholders and unconditional global solidarity can make a tremendous difference in the lives of many Rohingya women, be it as a camp representative in Bangladesh, a free-

lance journalist in Malaysia, a climate activist in Germany or as a social worker in the United States. Therefore, the growing landscape where women are taking up a decisive social and political role deserves greater attention.

This study makes a novel contribution to migration and diaspora studies in several ways. Highlighting a rather unconventional community in diaspora studies, we bring perspectives of a nascent diaspora scattered across different continents, one that is still in the process of formation. We attempt to offer diaspora women's experiences from various spatial contexts, including the Global South and the Global North, and to show how this spatiality influences and shapes the women's civic role.

Through these observations, this paper sheds light on an emerging diaspora community that deserves greater and diversified attention in the years to come. There is still work to be done to incorporate a gendered history of the Rohingya diaspora, shifting demographics and spaces, and the diverse nature of Rohingya diaspora women's engagement. Given the limited scope of this research, this paper is an important step forward that hopes to encourage further research on Rohingya diasporic politics and their potential leverage as agents of change.

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**Appendix 1: Rohingya refugee women's activism in diaspora
(study respondents April 2019 – April 2021)**

Location	Number of respondents	Age (average)	Level of education (average)	Marital status	Languages spoken	Average years of living in exile	Professional engagement
Australia	3	22	highest: university graduate lowest: high school degree (grade 9)	all unmarried	all: Rohingya, Burmese, English	6	social and business entrepreneur, INGO worker, educator
Bangladesh	5	24	highest: primary school (grade 5) lowest: no formal education	married with children (3) widow (1) unmarried (1)	all: Rohingya, Bengali, English (1)	3	NGO worker, UN volunteer, religious school teacher, journalist, coordinator of a camp refugee women's network
Canada	3	25	highest: university graduate lowest: high school degree (grade 10)	unmarried (2) married (1)	all: Rohingya, English French (1)	8	moderator of a global Rohingya online platform, coordinator of a Rohingya women's association, editor of an online diaspora magazine, INGO worker
Germany	2	22	all: technical training	all unmarried	all: Rohingya, German, English	5	climate activist, women's NGO worker and member of a platform for refugee women in Germany
Malaysia	5	25	highest: high school degree lowest: no formal education	married (2) unmarried (2) divorced (1)	three: English, Rohingya, Malay one: English, Rohingya one: Rohingya only	5	online educator, journalist, teacher in a refugee school, coordinator of a Rohingya refugee women's network, NGO worker, UN volunteer
USA	2	27	highest: university graduate lowest: high school degree (grade 10)	married (2) with children (1)	all: Rohingya English	8	social entrepreneur, women rights activist, NGO worker and coordinator of a Rohingya rights platform in North America

Source: Compiled by the authors