Rohingya Refugee Education in Malaysia: An Analysis of Current Standards and Challenges

Abstract

The Rohingyas, the longest-standing stateless refugees in Malaysia, are continuously denied access to formal education. The UN Refugee Agency and local non-government organizations run learning centers that offer non-formal education to Rohingya children. Existing literature highlights that, in the absence of formal openings, alternative educational programmes remain the main provider of refugee education in Malaysia. This study, utilizing the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies' five-domain framework, scrutinizes the educational standards offered to Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. The findings suggest that most learning centers lack financial, human, and infrastructural resources. Lack of opportunity for secondary schooling makes primary education less worth it. Moreover, prevailing cultural and religious norms make it challenging for Rohingya children (especially girls) to access educational opportunities outside the community. National examinations and academic accreditation for learning are inaccessible to refugees, including Rohingyas. This paper deliberates on some immediate and long-term measures that can potentially address these issues. However, all actors, including UNHCR and the Malaysian government, must collaborate towards formulating a sustainable solution to this critical problem.

Key words: Rohingya Refugees, Education, Human Rights, Malaysia, Challenges

1. Introduction

Recent global reports estimate that at least 15 million people are stateless, having neither citizenship nor a nationality (Institute of Stateless and Inclusion, 2020). Although international agencies and donors provide stateless people with support and protection, they are often deprived of the basics, including access to education, healthcare, travel, employment, and marriage during their entire lifetime, meaning that they cannot lead a normal social life (Manly & Persaud, 2009; UNHCR, 2014).

Education is a fundamental right enshrined in the Universal Human Rights Declaration of 1948. However, the application of the right to education is not yet universal, and many of those who lack legal citizenship documents cannot exercise this right (Willems & Vernimmen, 2018). Article 22 of the United Nations' 1951 Refugee Convention recognizes the right to education for all refugees (UNHCR, 2010). Article 2 of the UN Convention for Child Rights (UNCRC) also demands states to respect and ensure the rights outlined in the 1951 Convention to each child within their jurisdiction. Yet, this right is placed under the "welfare" chapter of the treaty and has not yet been included in any of the humanitarian assistance (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2010). Under these circumstances, refugee children are caught between the international promise of human rights and the realization of these rights within the system of nation-states (Dryden-Peterson, 2016b). Many host countries have not created any legal framework for providing education for refugees, and instead bar access to public education. Whatever education refugee children receive are often provided with an externally-funded informal learning system with little merit in the form of official certification. [121]

The Rohingya are one of the largest stateless groups of people in the world and the longest-standing refugees across many countries, including Malaysia. Rohingya refugees in Malaysia are likely to continue in this limbo since they are unable to return to Myanmar. As illustrated in the literature review, several organizations and institutions are offering informal education to Rohingya children and youth. However, it is critical to provide them with quality education so that the next generation can go on living in Malaysia or in any other place with confidence and self-reliance, and to receive the opportunity they deserve to grow as positively-contributing members of society. Most importantly, Rohingyas regard education as a key to success (Hoque & Tama, 2020; ICMC, 2021). With regard to this backdrop, this study aimed to explore the challenges and impediments in ensuring quality education for Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, and unpack ways to improve the existing standards of education. The structure of this paper is as follows. After setting the context in the following section, this paper presents its literature review section. The subsequent sections elaborate on the methodology, findings, and analyses before concluding.

2. Context

2.1 Stateless Rohingya Refugees

The Rohingya, one of the world's largest stateless groups, are a Muslim-majority ethnic group living in Rakhine State in Myanmar, a predominantly Buddhist country (Kiragu et al., 2011). The group[1] was denied citizenship by Myanmar's Citizenship Law in 1982. This rendered the Rohingya population stateless and placed them as illegal migrants (Human Rights Watch, 2020; INEE, 2020; Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma, 1982). The Myanmar government argues that the community descended from Chittagong region (in the eastern part of Bangladesh) and migrated into Arakan after the British annexed it between 1824–1826[2] (Md. S. Islam, 2019). Therefore, Rohingya are treated as illegal Bangladeshi migrants in Myanmar, which limits their access to public services such as health care and education, and restricts their freedom of movement (Manly & Persaud, 2009; Wolf, 2015). Any member of the Rohingya community in Myanmar must obtain travel permits for their movements, and they are also not allowed re-entry to Myanmar once they leave the country (Equal Rights Trust, 2012). In addition to the systematic and institutionalized discrimination, Myanmar's Rohingya community have encountered targeted repression and violence under successive Myanmar governments over the decades (Ehmer & Kothari, 2021; UNOCHA, 2020). The UN has described this situation as "ethnic cleansing", "textbook case of genocide" and described Rohingya refugees as "the world's most persecuted population" (Ingram, 2018; Md. S. Islam, 2019). Yet, the situation was largely under-reported and ignored by the international community (Letchamanan, 2013). Decades of successive violent attacks on the Rohingya community since the 1970s have forcibly displaced them (UNOCHA, 2020).

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[1] The term Rohingya is only used by the members of Rohingya and international community. It does not exist in Myanmar (Devi, 2019).

2.2 Rohingya Refugees in Neighbouring Countries

Freedom remains a myth to many ethnic minorities in Myanmar, including the Rohingya (Ullah, 2011). Discriminatory policies, institutional discrimination, deprivation of fundamental human rights, social exclusion, and prolonged oppression have forced hundreds of thousands of marginalized Muslim Rohingyas to flee their homeland[3] by land into neighboring Bangladesh and India, and by boats across the Bay of Bengal to Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand (Albert & Maizland, 2020; Sholeh, 2019). Because of the cultural and religious resemblance, Rohingya have willingly traveled to Bangladesh since 1978 (Babu, 2020). Following the Myanmar government's brutal crackdown (killings, rape, torture, and persecution), the largest influx of 7,40,000 Rohingya to Bangladesh occurred in August 2017 (Hoque, 2021b). Currently, about a million stateless Rohingyas live in camps in Bangladesh, making the country the largest Rohingya-hosting country. Although basic facilities (health services, food supplies, sanitation, and so forth) for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh have improved since 2017, they are still deprived of their educational rights. Since the country is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 protocol, ensuring educational rights to Rohingyas remains unattainable (HRW, 2018). Although the country allowed non-formal education to huge numbers of Rohingya children in 2020 through NGO-run learning centers, the scope remains critically limited and ineffective (Hoque, 2021b, 2023). However, most of the Rohingyas have not received the status of 'registered refugee', which makes the case even more complicated and makes them even more vulnerable.

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[2] According to the 1982 Law, any individual (including Rohingya) is still eligible for Myanmar citizenship only if documents can prove that the individual's ancestors had lived in Burma before 1823 (Md. S. Islam, 2019).

[3] A synopsis of the Rohingya crisis with a chronology of historical events can be found on https://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/rohingya-refugees-bangladesh-facts (Accessed on 3 December 2021)

The situation in Thailand – a destination and a transit for Rohingyas – is not much different (Ostrand, 2020). The country currently hosts about 92,000 forced migrants from Myanmar, including Rohingyas (Auethavornpipat, 2021). Thailand is neither a party of the 1951 Refugee Convention or its Protocol, and does not recognize Rohingyas as refugees; instead, the authorities treats them as illegal migrants and hold many in squalid immigration detention centers indefinitely (Chaijaroenwatana & Haque, 2020; Yesmin, 2016). Children living in these detention centers and temporary shelters[4] have little or no access to educational services (Letchamanan, 2013; Women News Network, 2014). Since the outbreak of conflict in the Rakhine state in 2012, hundreds[5] of Rohingya (boat people[6]) have also found themselves stranded in the Malacca Strait and most of them have eventually taken shelter in Indonesia (Susetyo & Chambers, 2021). In 2015, the Indonesian government admitted 200 Rohingya children to boarding schools (Rohmah, 2015); and recently issued a circular note to include refugee children from selected areas in formal education (UNHCR Indonesia, 2021).

2.3 Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia

In the Asia-Pacific region, Malaysia over the decades has been an important transit and destination country for refugees (Palik, 2020). In recent years, the country has witnessed a gradual increase in its displaced and refugee populations. According to UNHCR Malaysia (2021), as of October 2021, some 179,830 registered refugees and asylum-seekers reside in Malaysia, of which 87 per cent (155,030) are from Myanmar. They are registered as Persons of Concern[7] (PoCs), and according to unofficial estimates, about 60,000 are below the age of 18 (Palik, 2020). Currently, 103,090 Rohingya refugees are registered with UNHCR in Malaysia. Besides this registered group, tens of thousands more unregistered Rohingyas live in Malaysia (Palik, 2020). Currently, Malaysia hosts the highest number of Rohingya refugees in the Southeast Asian region and the second highest in the world after Bangladesh (Sukhani, 2020).

Since the 1980s, Rohingya refugees have taken many dangerous routes[8] to reach Malaysia (S. M. B. Y. M. Nasir et al., 2021). However, Ehmer and Kothari (2021) critically note that many refugees

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[4] In Thailand, stateless Rohingya being denied of recognition and legal documents, tend to live in cities outside the designated camps as urban refugees and "unauthorized migrants" (Ostrand, 2020). This renders the community more vulnerability and less protection among all ethnic groups who fled Myanmar.

[5] The exact number of Rohingya refugee in Indonesia could not be known. The latest UN report conveys that about 707 people fled Myanmar to Indonesia (UNHCR Indonesia, 2021). According to Sholeh (2019, p. 5), 'Indonesia accommodated more than 10,000 Rohingya refugees in Aceh'.

[6] The phrase "boat people" is commonly used to refer the refugees who fled a country by boat. As many Rohingyas over the decades have fled Myanmar by boat to reach in several Southeast Asian countries, they are often referred as the "boat people" in the region.

[7] A PoC is any person whom UNHCR considers a refugee, internally displaced, asylum-seeker, or stateless, with some additional persons not fitting these criteria (Titus, 2017).

[8] For instance, in 2015, the discovery of 139 mass graves at the Thailand-Malaysia border were believed to be of Rohingyas who were fleeing sectarian violence in Myanmar and subsequently became victim of human trafficking (Mohd Noor et al., 2017; S. M. B. Y. M. Nasir et al., 2021).

who reached the country were often disappointed as Malaysia also did not ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocols. Malaysia also lack the legal and policy frameworks to administer documentation or any kind of status to refugees on its territory (Wake & Cheung, 2016). Under the Malaysian Immigration Act, Rohingyas remain 'illegal' migrants and risk arrests, detention, and deportation (Palik, 2020). Even those who are born in Malaysia were denied any status[9] and remain stateless[10] (Farzana et al., 2020; Letchamanan, 2013). As a result, the Equal Rights Trust (2010) points out that the Rohingya community in Myanmar lack social protection and are exposed to a wide variety of vulnerabilities including discrimination, debts, bonded labour, trafficking, hunger, and violence.

Nevertheless, the reasons Malaysia attracts so many refugees and asylum-seekers, especially Rohingyas, are quite clear. The first obvious pull factor is the religious one. Muslim asylum-seekers including Rohingyas who fled from religious persecution in Myanmar, and those who fled camps in Bangladesh commonly have a sense of safety in Malaysia – a Muslim majority country with a wide territory and a labour-importing middle-income economy (Equal Rights Trust, 2010). The country also offers a relatively straightforward tourist visas, particularly for people coming from Muslim majority countries like Bangladesh (Munir-Asen, 2018). Secondly, urban living spaces in Malaysia (not in camps) not only give them more freedom of movement (compared to the Rohingyas living in Thailand) and job opportunities in informal sectors, but also allow them to enjoy an environment of low discrimination and high socio-economic and bodily security (Munir-Asen, 2018). Almost all the Rohingya refugees in Malaysia live in urban areas around Kuala Lumpur (the capital city) and the surrounding Klang Valley (Wake & Cheung, 2016). Former governments have also piloted some policies to provide work permits to a small number of registered Rohingya refugees (Farzana et al., 2020). Thirdly, Malaysia is one of the top ten[11] countries that sends refugees for resettlement. In 2020, the country has lodged 1,143 submissions to UNHCR to transfer refugees to a third country with legal status (UNHCR, 2021). Resettlement is often considered the most desirable, durable, and viable solution for the vast majority of refugees since it offers crucial protection, a safer environment, and better economic livelihood opportunities (Amnesty International, 2010). Lastly, there are several strong and well-developed refugee communities from Myanmar who have strong solidarities with various non-government organizations in Kuala Lumpur (Crisp et al., 2012). These communities play critical roles for the Rohingyas, including advocating for their rights and needs, linking them with job opportunities, and communicating with UNHCR on behalf of them (Munir-Asen, 2018).

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[9] In 2006, the Government began to provide the Rohingyas with IMM13 (standard document for migrants) permits, which could give them some form of legitimacy. However, the process was later halted when the Government decided to relook at the issue. See Letchamanan (2013).

[10] Malaysia is neither a signatory of any of the stateless conventions, nor has any policy to define or deal with "statelessness" in its territory. See Equal Rights Trust (2010) and Koya (2006).

[11] In 2020, the top ten UNHCR resettlement submitting countries were Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, Kenya, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Uganda, Malaysia and Tanzania (UNHCR, 2021, p. 118).

However, the absence of a permanent legal framework puts refugees in Malaysia at risk of arrest, detention, and deportation; and limits their access to public health care and educational services (Hoffstaedter, 2014; UNHCR, 2018). UNHCR Malaysia (2021) officially reports that about 26 per cent (45,870) of the registered PoCs in Malaysia are children (below 18). Palik (2020) discovered that there are 14,000 more refugee children than the figures estimated by UNHCR. The government takes responsibility for the provision of education only of Malaysian citizens. Therefore, PoCs, including asylum-seekers, refugees, and stateless populations are not included (Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network, 2018). Hence, the stateless Rohingyas have been living in the country without educational services, meaning that a generation has lost out on a formal education.

3. Literature Review

In a global context, UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency) is mandated with the protection of refugees, with the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and with the provision of education (Dryden-Peterson, 2016a). The key protections that the organization provides to refugees are through durable solutions, including the repatriation to the origin country, integration to a host country, and resettlement to a third country (Dryden-Peterson, 2017). The inclusion of refugee and asylum-seeking children, adolescents, and adults into the national formal education system of the host country has become more important. Firstly, almost half of all refugees globally are children, and the average duration of exile since 1990s are between 10 to 15 years (Devictor, 2019; UNHCR, 2019c). Refugee children spend or are likely to spend their entire childhood and schooling cycle in the host country. Secondly, accredited school certification is the only pathway to progressing to higher education and onwards to economic activity and livelihood opportunities (UNHCR, 2019a). Providing them with formal schooling will increase educational opportunities, boost enrollment, and contribute to global education (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2018). Thirdly, several studies reveal that non-formal parallel education in many contexts remains a temporary response, with poor quality of delivery and content, underqualified teachers, and limited learning environment (Deane, 2016; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2018; Hoque, 2021b; UNESCO, 2018). Moreover, such interventions require consistent external funding which is often challenging. Finally, providing young and adult refugees with lifelong education is also critical to bridge schooling disruptions and to fulfil the refugees' aspirations of self-reliance and participation in society (Morrice, 2021).

3.1 The current stance of Malaysia government on Refugee Education

Malaysia has recognized the importance of education for economic development in several of its national development vision documents, including Vision 2020 and the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Lee, 1999; Wan, 2018). Equal access to education for every child in Malaysia remains central in these development plans (Educate A Child, 2012; Pang et al., 2019). The Education Act, 1996 states the value of rights, opportunities, and accessibility of education for all children but makes no reference to undocumented and refugee children (UNICEF, 2015).

Since Malaysia is not signatory to the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, refugee children, youth and adults in Malaysia are not guaranteed the right of access to the formal education system.

UNHCR (2019a) states that in 2018, globally, 63 per cent of refugee children were enrolled in primary school while the figure for non-refugee peers was 91 per cent. At the secondary level, the figure for refugee children was far lower (24 per cent) compared to a global average of 84 per cent in 2018. One obvious factor causing lower school enrollment of refugees is the host country's regulatory restrictions (Dupuy & Østby, 2019). More than 80 per cent of refugees stay in developing or least developed countries that struggle to provide education for their own citizens (UNHCR, 2019b). Dupuy and Østby (2019) reports that in 2019 more than 10,000 Rohingya refugees were hosted by 48 developing regions each[12]. Some countries created legal frameworks to provide refugees with access to public education, while other nations have not yet developed any such frameworks and limit the provision of education for refugees. Dupuy and Østby (2019) further specify that 27 out of the 48 countries including Uganda, Sudan, and Ethiopia provide refugee children full rights to formal schooling, and 16 countries including Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon include refugees in their public system with some restrictive documentations. Only five of those 48 countries, including Malaysia, refuse to grant refugees the right to any access to formal education.

3.2 Alternative Educational Programmes

Refugee-hosting countries that have no legal frameworks or policies often rely on alternative approaches. Provision of education in these countries is often made available to refugee children through non-formal mechanisms such as a community-based schooling system (Pang et al., 2019; UNHCR, 2019b). Alternative education refers to types of educational programmes offered mainly by agencies and non-government organizations outside of the state-run formalized system, where the certification and accreditation of learning is not assured (UNESCO, 2009). Two widely practiced forms of alternative educational programmes are – (i) *access programmes*, which use formal curriculum and pedagogy to "fill the gap" for those who are not currently enrolled in formal schools; and (ii) *curriculum provision programmes*, which provides a curriculum in line with formal systems for different groups of learners mainly to change behavior (UNESCO, 2009).

Farrell et al. (2008) notes that the aim of alternative education programmes (AEP) is to provide marginalized groups and refugees (especially targeting minors) with learning opportunities enabling them to develop expected levels of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and to ensure education for all. Such alternative education mechanisms have complementary roles in providing emotional and academic (including language) support, promoting an enabling environment for social inclusion, and giving opportunities for children to reintegrate to mainstream education (Lipnickienė & Siarova, 2018). However, the evidence regarding the effectiveness and outcomes of such informal and non-formal education programmes are mixed. Kaukko and Wilkinson (2020), after analyzing such informal learning practices, concluded that although many refugee students succeed in learning in such facilities, such achievements are not mere serendipity. In addition, as mentioned earlier, AEPs for refugees suffer a variety of expected and unexpected challenges. For instance, the AEPs run for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh have faced enormous challenges during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (REACH, 2021).

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[12] Definition of the developing countries in Dupuy and Østby's (2019) work is based on a list of countries provided by UNHCR (2017) – states outside of Australia, Japan, North America, and Western Europe.

In Malaysia, children and adults rely on AEPs run by NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) supported by UNHCR (Palik, 2020). UNHCR Malaysia (2021a) states that 30 per cent of refugee children of school-going ages are enrolled in 133 local community learning centers (LCs)[13] across the country. Some of these centers charge some fees while some are completely free of cost (UNICEF Malaysia, 2015). UNHCR further highlights that out of these 133, only 21 LCs offer secondary level education. Only 44 per cent of refugee children aged between 6 and 13 are currently enrolled in primary education while only 16 per cent of those aged between 14 and 17 receive secondary-level education (UNHCR Malaysia, 2021a). These numbers are low compared to the percentages of refugee children enrollment in primary and secondary schools globally (63 per cent and 24 per cent respectively) (Morrice, 2021).

Despite opportunities for higher studies[14] being generally more scarce for refugees, 48 refugees are pursuing higher education at five Malaysian universities (UNHCR Malaysia, 2021a). The case study of Ali, a Rohingya refugee in Myanmar illustrates the struggle of a stateless Rohingya to receive (higher) education and flourish as a full-fledged human being (Farzana et al., 2020). Notably, higher education to many Rohingyas previously carried little importance – not by choice but because of the discrimination they experienced in Myanmar (Alam & Kamruzzaman, 2020). Without citizenship, Rohingyas are still barred from applying for government jobs in Myanmar. However, some AEPs in Malaysia offer various life-long educational programmes for refugee adults (VoA, 2020).

Several studies have assessed the outcomes of AEPs and the need for children's integration in public education. Pang et al. (2019), after analyzing students' attainment at Murni Alternative Education Centre (Malaysia), found significant improvements in students in five critical components – literacy and numeracy, religious practices, civics and citizenship, self-management, and living skills. Hussain (2017) also found that most of the secondary level students in NGO-run schools in Klang Valley are well motivated to successfully complete their education. However, insights generated by Sulgina and Gopal's (2018) indicate that the AEPs are not adequate to be called a "parallel" system to mainstream formal education. Lipnickienė and Siarova (2018) similarly argue that although AEPs and non-formal education can be considered a flexible solution for newly arrived refugee children, it must not be used as a replacement for formal schooling. The

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[13] Participant interviewees of Palik (2020) estimated that as of 2020 the number of LCs was at least 148.

[14] For more insights and stories about refugees' access to higher education in Malaysia, see (Bailey & İnanç, 2018).

project-based AEPs currently offer neither the quality nor the accreditation for refugees for it to be considered a sustainable solution.

3.3 Actors, Roles and Responsibilities

The most oft-cited argument of the Malaysian government to not sign the 1951 Convention or provide adequate support and protection to the refugees is that such a move can lead to an increased number of refugees and boat people to its territory (Hoffstaedter, 2017). Although the government's treatment of refugees was previously reported to be improving, the authorities demonstrated little flexibility on providing refugee children with access to state-run schooling (Crisp et al., 2012). However, the government aided private sector entities, local and international NGOs, and the UNHCR, in operating AEPs and non-formal education for refugees and asylum-seekers. The Ministry of Education also provides registrations for the alternative education centers run by the CBOs (Palik, 2020). This equivocal position and irregular humanitarianism of the government in this regard allowed the other actors' roles and responsibilities to become more prominent (Kunapalan et al., 2020).

a) UNHCR

In countries (like Malaysia) that are not signatories of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the ambiguous legal status[15] of UNHCR forces it to find ways to elicit sympathy, charity, and recognition for refugees (Crisp et al., 2012; Floyd et al., 2015; Hoffstaedter, 2017). The limited responsibilities of state and other development actors in refugee protection in Malaysia has fallen large on UNHCR (Wake & Cheung, 2016). Consequently, the organization has taken up a range of responsibilities, including registration, determination of status, fundraising, engaging local actors, livelihoods, health, and educational assistance (Crisp et al., 2012; UNHCR, 2001). The funds collected and provided by UNHCR are mainly spent on the procurement of school materials, teacher compensation and incentives, teachers' training, etc. (UNHCR, 2001). Partnering with local NGOs, UNHCR operates educational programmes and offers school-going children with protection against a range of vulnerabilities. For instance, Crisp et al. (2012) describe how school uniforms and backpacks with UNHCR logos were helpful in protecting children against abuse on their way to and from schools. It also keeps a check on the LCs to ensure a safe environment and quality of teaching and infrastructure (Palik, 2020).

UNHCR Malaysia (2021a) states that it currently has six implementing partners to operate 10 LCs and coordinate activities related to teachers' training and benefits. Despite several challenges (e.g. lack of certification, inadequate data, and minimal compensation against high turnover of teachers), the organization carries out support activities for refugees, including – (i) improving children's learning attainment in primary schools, (ii) ensuring safe learning environments for all,

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[15] In absence of the regular mandates, UNHCR in Malaysia operates by virtue of the "goodwill agreement" which was an ad hoc response to the exodus of Vietnamese during the Vietnam War (Floyd et al., 2015).

(iii) improving access to secondary and higher educational opportunities for youth, and (iv) creating opportunities for life-long education for adults (UNHCR Malaysia, 2021a).

b) NGOs

The behavior of the Malaysian government has been notably strict and unfriendly with NGOs, especially with the ones intending to support refugees and asylum seekers (Hamidi, 2020). Regarding this, Wake and Cheung (2016) pointed out that, fearing a government backlash, some local and national NGOs in Malaysia were unwilling to work with "illegal" people, and some operate with limited capacity. Crisp et al. (2012) revealed that when international NGOs dealing with refugee matters were denied permission to operate, national NGOs with high dependency on UNHCR support engaged with refugees in a very restricted capacity. Despite these confinements, the refugee-focusing NGOs' role in the country has not only been proactive and valuable, but also expanded in recent years (Hamidi, 2020; Hussain, 2017; Kunapalan et al., 2020).

The six NGOs that partner with UNHCR to provide educational services to the refugees in Malaysia are - Dignity for Children Foundation, Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, Future Global Islamic Network, Soroptimist International Johor Bahru (SIJB), Malaysian Social Research Institute (MSRI), and Muslim Aid Malaysia (UNHCR Malaysia, 2021a).

c) CBOs

In urban settings where NGOs have limited functions, UNHCR advocates for Community Based Protection (CBP) through CBOs (Wachisukhonwana, 2015). Strong social ties and networks have spurred the formation of these unregistered community organizations that run on informal support, including membership subscriptions, individual donations from Malaysian citizens, and UNHCR's project-funds (Hamidi, 2020; Wake & Cheung, 2016). Among the 133 LCs, only 10 are run by the implementing six NGOs (abovementioned), while the rest are operated by CBOs (UNHCR Malaysia, 2021a). The centers run by CBOs are also known as community-based schools. About 70 per cent of refugee children attend CBO-run educational programmes (Palik, 2020). These community schools are mostly located in Selengor and Kuala Lumpur, where a large population of school-aged children reside. Despite having resource constraints, some of the CBOs under UNHCR supervision serve as illustrative standards of non-formal education (Palik, 2020). For Rohingyas, religion takes on an important role in their lives and mosques are important spaces for them. Mosques are often used for community meetings and as places of sanctuary, especially for newly-arrived asylum seekers (Wake & Cheung, 2016). Many Rohingya refugee children have also received religious education from programs run by mosques and faith-based community organizations (also known as "madrassa") (Letchamanan, 2013). Many Rohingya parents send their children to madrassas as it is often the only option available to them (Wake & Cheung, 2016).

3.4 Standard of Education in Emergencies

International aid workers promoted the idea of "education in emergencies" to promote educational humanitarian responses to people living in crisis situations (Burde et al., 2017; Hoque, 2021a).

According to Bromley and Andina (2010), standardization of emergency education that originated in the 1990s as a rational response to ensure the education right for everyone, later became a consolidated and rationalized approach to resolve social problems in an increasingly interconnected world. The authors argue that creating global standards of education in emergencies is critical not only to institutionalize the field but also to make sure that education becomes an inseparable part of any humanitarian response. With a view to creating international standards, Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE[16]) was formed and conceptualized during the 2000 World Economic Forum in Dakar. The platform is shared by concerned UN agencies (i.e. UNESCO, UNICEF, and UNHCR), international donors, and individual actors (Bromley & Andina, 2010). INEE developed its first set of standards in 2004, which were subsequently used for educational quality assessments across many emergency contexts (Hodgkin, 2007; Qahir & Kirk, 2007; Shohel, 2020). Presently, the network sustains its role not only to advance global minimum standards of emergency education but also to watch the activities of concerned actors (Burde, 2019). Recent studies and research also continue to use INEE's framework to examine educational services in emergencies. For instance, relevant to this study, Letchamanan (2013) used INEE's (2010) framework to find that the role of key actors in ensuring quality education for Rohingyas in Myanmar was not adequate. Building on this finding, this study used the latest INEE framework to examine the issue and explore ways to improve the situation.

4. Methodology

4.1 Conceptual Framework

To achieve the objectives of this study, researchers needed a conceptual framework that would enable them to analyze the present state and difficulties of Rohingya refugee schooling. As stated before, INEE's framework is a valuable tool for this objective. INEE's Minimum Standards (MS) provide a set of guidelines towards ensuring the quality of educational services. The MS framework guides the standardization, monitoring, and evaluation of educational programmes offered in acute emergencies (INEE, 2021). It has allowed this research study to examine both challenges and opportunities with regards to informal education provided in the LCs for Rohingya refugees. The framework is organized with five thematic domains (see figure 1) and 19 specific indicators. Each domain has between two and four measurement indictors. Five thematic domains are described below (source: INEE, 2010, 2021):

Domain one: *community participation and coordination*

These standards apply to all other domains to stimulate a comprehensive response. These standards mainly include community participation, and coordination and analysis, and motivate continuous diagnosis. In the context of this study, the primary concerned actors related to this domain are – (i) Rohingya refugees, (ii) host community, (iii) NGOs, and (iv) UNHCR in Malaysia.

Domain two: *Access and Learning Environment*

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[16] The website of INEE (https://inee.org/about-inee) offers more details about its mission, vision and history.

This domain demands ensuring access to safe learning prospects and conditions. The objective is to create linkages with other crucial sectors including health, security, and wellbeing. It has three categorical standards which are critical to this study. These are equal access, protection and wellbeing, and facilities and services.

Domain three: *Teaching and Learning*

This domain standardizes curricula, learning materials, development of human resources, supervision, support, and assessment of outcomes. The aim is to guide the educators creating quality education facilities for learners. This assessment focuses on three components – (i) curricula, (ii) learning process and assessment, and (iii) training for teachers.

Domain four: *Teachers and Other Education Personnel*

These standards cover the administration and management of education-related human resources. A review of evidence carried out by Richardson et al. (2018) indicate that qualified people from refugee communities are best placed to teach. Therefore, most AEP emphasizes on having experienced teachers from among the refugees. This study focuses on the challenges a refugee teacher faces and what measures can support improving their work conditions and performances.

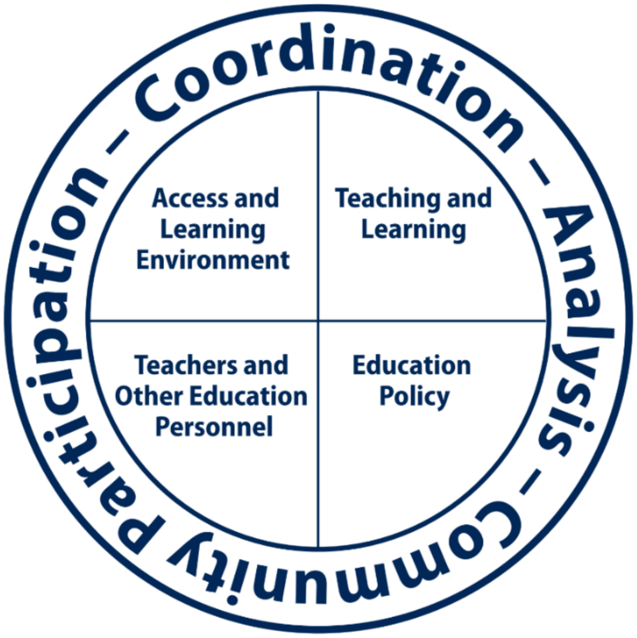
Coordination – Analysis – Community participation –
Access and Learning Environment
Teaching and Learning
Teachers and Other Education Personnel
Education Policy

Figure 1: INEE's Minimum Standards Framework (Source: INEE, 2010 p. 8)

Domain five: *Education Policy and Coordination*

Standards in this domain aim to formulate sound laws and policies, design comprehensive plans, and carry out implementation. This domain takes account of national and international educational rights, laws and policies, and aims to facilitate quality educational services in emergencies within existing legal frameworks.

4.2 Data Collection

This study is largely based on a purposive review of existing academic and grey literature. Primary data was collected through qualitative interviews. The majority of the data collection was carried out between March and August 2020. Both the researchers were based in the United Kingdom during this period. Due to covid-19 related restrictions, the interviews were conducted using online platforms, including email and video-calling. One interview with further literature review was conducted in November 2021.

4.2.1 Interviews

In social science research, interviews are widely used as tools for collecting qualitative data and navigating real-life experiences (Afza et al., 2015; Alshenqeeti, 2014; Hoque, 2021c; R. Islam & Hoque, 2022). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five key informants (Hoque & Tama, 2021; Tama et al., 2021, 2023). These purposefully chosen key informants were of three broad categories – (i) two UNHCR staff, (ii) two teachers of LCs (having Rohingya students) in Kuala Lumpur, and (iii) one member of the Rohingya community who currently serves as an interpreter for an international development agency. These interviews were conducted to collect opinions, views, observations, and experiences relevant to the research questions. Different sets of questionnaires and information sheet guidelines were developed for each category of informants and were sent to the participants in advance. Participant information sheet guidelines explained the purpose of the study, the interviewee's right to withdraw, confidentiality of participant identity and of the information collected. The questions were formulated based on the data needs, focus of this study, and conceptual framework. All interviewees were adult and their participation was voluntary. Although the questionnaires were semi-structured, the interviews were more like conversations. This approach allowed the researchers to dig deeper into the issues and understand their nuances. All interviews were conducted in English and the conversations were between 60 to 90 minutes long. Interview data was subsequently analyzed by looking through the thematic domains of the conceptual framework. Apart from these interviews, email communication with several staff of UNHCR and local NGOs informed this research.

4.2.2 Documents

As illustrated in section 3, the review of academic literature provided the theoretical and empirical foundation of this research. To complement this existing body of knowledge and to answer the research questions, this study reviewed numerous open source documents (i.e. reports, statements, blogs, datasets, and so forth). To collect relevant documents and information, the researchers consulted websites (including social media platforms) of UNHCR, community LCs and schools, relevant NGOs, CBOs and INGOs, government ministries and organizations, and news media.

Some documents and information were also collected through personal individual connections. These documents allowed the researchers to understand the entire system and relevant policies, the official curriculum used in LCs, and the functions of various actors in providing and improving educational services to Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. The analysis of secondary data was helpful to navigate the opinion gaps among the actors and the differences between expectations and reality. This review also critically informed this study regarding the challenges and impediments service providers face in a wide range of circumstances.

4.3 Limitations

This study has a few critical limitations that readers must be aware of. First, due to pandemic-related restrictions, primary data could not be collected through fieldwork. This barrier has somewhat decreased the sense of realism in this work. Visiting a few LCs and talking to refugee students and parents could have been more useful in generating crucial insights. Second, this research reviewed the pieces of literature and documents which were available in English. It means that this work may have missed many critical documents and discourses written in any local language. Finally, the findings of this study are based on a very limited number of virtually conducted interviews.

5. Findings and Analyses

This section comprises of two parts. The first part of the section outlines the existing systems of operation in place for providing Rohingya refugees with educational services in Malaysia and an exploration of the current situation against the standards focused in the conceptual framework. The second part illustrates the prevailing challenges and discusses potential solutions and ways forward.

5.1 Rohingya Refugee Education in Malaysia

Community participation and coordination

The dying prospects of Rohingya repatriation has made the refugee crisis in Malaysia protracted. In response to this long-standing emergency, different communities have been actively engaged in the provision of educational services. Interviews agree that it is still the local Rohingya refugee community that offers the most significant educational support to build solidarity among its members. Besides running community-based LCs and madrassas for children and youth, the community serves as the primary source of information for parents regarding children’s schooling and education. At an individual level, some qualified community members have opted to teach in LCs, while some others offer privately-run religious education for children.

The attitude of the host community towards Rohingyas is influenced by government policies. Notably, there is a lack of evidence in the existing literature about the role of local communities in hosting refugees in Malaysia. Currently, Rohingyas have no lawful way to earn a livelihood or to receive formal education. However, locals fear that if Rohingya integration happens, then they might face an increase in job competition and a drain on basic state services (Towle, 2017). Any such integration measures may also attract more refugees. Mixed views were obtained from interviewees. Most interviewees spoke of noticing a more antagonistic attitude from the local communities towards Rohingyas and UNHCR. During the Covid-19 lockdowns, any government favours to Rohingyas was seen as a loss to the local population by Malaysians, an interviewee informs. On the other hand, there were some contrasting views. A teacher said – 'I usually see that locals are very generous towards refugees, but most of them are unaware of why Rohingyas had to flee their homelands to Myanmar.'

UNHCR has been actively coordinating the functions of NGOs in providing basic services to Rohingya refugees. Sulgina and Gopal (2018) found that schools supported and sponsored by UNHCR's implementing NGOs are comparatively well-managed. Each implementing partner has different visions and target groups in the provision of education. As Table 1 shows, the six partner NGOs operate mostly in Kuala Lumpur and Selengor (a state close to Kuala Lumpur) to provide basic and pre-primary to secondary levels of educational services.

Table 1: Information about the six partner NGOs of UNHCR Malaysia implementing educational programme for refugees, including Rohingyas

Implementing Partner NGO	Area of Operation	Educational Services	Extra-curricular	Source of Information
Dignity for Children Foundation	Kuala Lumpur	Pre-schooling to secondary level	Vocational training, Sports Welfare, and mental health	Annual Report (Dignity for Children Foundation, 2020)
Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation	Klang Valley	Pre-schooling to tertiary level	Sports, Outdoor activities and field trips, Value development	Website (Tzu Chi Malaysia, 2021)
Future Global Islamic Network	Kuala Lumpur	Pre-primary to Secondary level	Study tours, Religious practices	Social Media Page[17]
Soroptimist International	Johor Bahru; Kuala Lumpur	Basic education, Diploma programmes	IT skills, Career Guidance, Cultural activities	Blog Post (Soroptimist International, 2016)

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[17] The organizational website of Future Global Network Foundation (http://www.futureglobalnetwork.com/) was found dysfunctional. The information placed in Table 1 was obtained from the organization's Facebook page - https://www.facebook.com/futureglobalnetwork/ (Accessed on 12 January 2022).

Malaysian Social Research Institute	Selangor	Pre-schooling to secondary level	Community service programme, Vocational skill development, Home learning support	Website (MSRI, 2022)
Muslim Aid Malaysia	Selangor	Basic education (reading, writing, counting, and reasoning)	Kids club, Living skills	Website (Muslim Aid Malaysia, 2022)

These organizations offer learning materials and exercises mostly in two languages – English and *Bahasa Melayu*. They also offer a wide range of extra-curricular activities, including vocational and skill development programmes, sports and physical exercise, life and value development, welfare and health, clubs, career guidance, and so forth.

UNHCR remains the main actor as the government frequently shifts responsibility of protection for refugees on to them. Besides supporting partner NGOs, UNHCR requests other NGOs to run educational programmes for refugees with their own-sourced funds. UNHCR not only provides various support to LCs, but also advocates with relevant government authorities for providing educational services to refugees including Rohingyas.

Access and Learning Environment

Interviews commonly highlight that education is mostly accessible to children living in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor state, where half of the PoCs live and partner NGOs also mostly operate (See Table 1). Rohingya families living in other Malaysian states (e.g., Terengganu, Pahang) find it hard to get access to education at all levels. Some LCs charge monthly tuition fees (up to RM 300) which many Rohingya parents find too expensive to bear (Farzana et al., 2020). Several sources and interviewees report that Rohingya girls (compared to boys) find it harder to get to schools. UNHCR Malaysia (2018) found that at secondary education levels, out of 612 are girls, only 5 percent were Rohingya girls. Many Rohingya parents are not willing to send their young girls to mixed-gender schools because of religious and cultural norms. Many girls also miss out on education since they have to help in domestic chores. This results in increasing numbers of child marriages and domestic violence in Malaysia (Palik, 2020). A Rohingya child bride's testimony says it all:

> 'I have never been to school . . . I am only allowed to leave the house with my husband. I can't leave often. He beats me. I want to leave my husband to move to a shelter. It's not safe with my husband. I am broken.' (Source: Fortify Rights, 2019)

LCs that provide lessons mostly to Rohingya children are located within the Rohingya community areas. Due to their proximity, both parents and students feel protected. Parents also find it easy to send off and pick up their children. Teachers informed that the centers take all required measures to keep children safe inside. However, some children in schools who are yet to be registered with UNHCR consider going outside unsafe (O’Neal et al., 2018). Therefore, students usually perform their physical activities inside school buildings.

Several studies note that many LCs run with very limited resources in *shoplots* (i.e. office or retail rental spaces), houses and apartments (Letchamanan, 2013; O’Neal et al., 2018; Sulgina & Gopal, 2018). In classrooms, many have to sit on the floor due to the low number of desks available for a relatively high number of students. Most of these schools lack facilities to ensure a sound learning environment. One school teacher from a school run in a three-story *shoplot* said that the building does not have enough space to accommodate all the needed functions. The space needs to be multifunctional in order for them to manage their classrooms properly. For example, the teachers’ room is often converted into a make-shift classroom. The school sometimes serves as a social gathering center for the wider Rohingya community living in Kampung Cheras Baru (i.e., an area in Kuala Lumpur). Because of the aforementioned issues, there is a lack of adequate support and oversight, and a lack of access and learning opportunities for refugees (including Rohingyas) in Malaysia become limited (Loganathan et al., 2021).

Teaching and Learning

Classes are conducted in *Bahasa Melayu* or/and English in most of the LCs. Some schools run by the partner NGOs use only English as a medium of instruction (e.g., Dignity for Children Foundation) or conduct classes in additional languages such as Mandarin (e.g., Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation). Each school uses a different system. The refugee children attending Rohingya community LCs mostly follow the Malaysian curriculum, because they are encouraged to adopt the national curriculum, conduct classes in the local language, and administer completion of primary school using the national school test as a test template, one UNHCR staff informed. One teacher noted that their students are following a mixture of the Malaysian and Myanmar curriculums so that they can prepare for potential local integration while also learning about their country of origin. Common subjects that Rohingya community schools teach are Malaysian language, English, mathematics, science, Rohingya language, and Islamic studies. The Myanmar language classes are usually taught by teachers who are from Myanmar. Rohingya language and Islamic studies are taught by a Rohingya *Ustad* (qualified Islamic scholar).

Most of the community LCs have teachers from Malaysia and Myanmar, and many of the non-Malaysian teachers are refugees (O’Neal et al., 2018). UNHCR has supported capacity-building training programmes which strive to improve teachers’ skills around academic content and curriculum. Moreover, UNHCR and its partner NGOs have been working to connect with professional groups in the education sector (e.g., National Retired Teachers’ Association) for various workshops and exchange programmes. One teacher felt that training programmes offered by UNHCR improve their applied knowledge and skills. However, it is doubtful that the training can be properly conducted and/or fully utilized by participants in the poorly equipped LCs.

Teachers and Other Education Personnel

Teachers are supported by UNHCR through its teachers' compensation programme. 128 out of around 700 teachers benefited from this programme in 2017 (UNHCR Malaysia, 2021a). The compensation ranges monthly from 70 to 200 United States Dollars (USD), and only refugee teachers who are registered with UNHCR that have a refugee status can be compensated through this programme (O'Neal et al., 2018). These refugee teachers often have additional jobs to financially support themselves and their families (Kaun, 2012). From the interviews, it was found that many teachers are themselves refugees who went through severe traumatic experiences. They often have multiple duties (i.e., teaching, classroom management, student counseling, etc.) and financial and emotional stresses due to the constant resource constraints. The ratio of students to teachers[18], students' unexpected behaviour, extra working hours, and lack of non-teaching human resources often cause additional stress to these refugee teachers. However, regular monitoring from UNHCR staff members help to ensure accountability of both teaching and non-teaching staff.

Education Policy and Coordination

The Malaysian government previously provided UNHCR with substantive cooperation towards helping Rohingya refugees (Nasir et al., 2019). However, recent studies show that the government's position and policies have become more strict and unchanged for refugees, which are making Rohingya refugees more marginalized (Farzana et al., 2020; Loganathan et al., 2021). Several actors, including refugee communities, NGOs, and international organizations, work to improve access to quality education for refugee children in the country. Nonetheless, all interviewees remind that such temporary measures are largely ineffective. The issue requires a more sustainable approach from different actors, and especially from the government. Enabling sustainable provisions for quality education requires a comprehensive legal protection framework that allow children to join the national education system. As long as this does not happen, UNHCR must bring in more actors, including community leaders, for better coordination.

5.2 Challenges and Ways Forward

Building awareness of host communities

An important finding from the interviews was that, during the time of the covid-19 pandemic, the local communities developed negative attitudes towards Rohingya refugees. Any government benefits declared for the refugees stimulated debate among the locals. One teacher argued that this was happening because of a lack of awareness among the locals about conflicts and crises experienced by Rohingyas in Myanmar. In light of this, UNHCR should conduct an educational campaign targeting the host communities with a view to changing their current attitudes and behaviours, the teacher stressed. This argument reinforces Phillimore's (2020) idea of putting emphasis on the mutual understanding between host and refugee communities to advance the possibility of successful integration. The actors must cooperate to disseminate relevant knowledge and information through various mass media.

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[18] In many LCs, average teacher-student ratios is 1:70 (Sulgina & Gopal, 2018).

Ensuring Access to Education for All Refugees

Resource constraints remain a big challenge when it comes to reaching refugees in states where LCs are not available. UNHCR must mobilize financial resources to cooperate with more partner NGOs that can offer educational services in these areas. It is critically important to ensure Rohingya girls' participation in education. For this purpose, schools can increase safety and protection measures and arrange girls-only classes. However, an interviewee argued that such gender-binary practices often provide unexpected results (e.g., such practices become normalized even outside classrooms). Instead, teaching boys and girls how to behave with each other can be more effective, the interviewee added. As religious and cultural norms make the situation harder, adopting participatory measures with Rohingya parents and community leaders can be an effective way to find acceptable and innovative solutions to ensure girls' participation.

Lack of access to secondary and higher education makes primary education less valuable. One teacher from a Rohingya community LC informed that they do not offer secondary level education, thus they fund their promising students and transfer them to other secondary schools. The interviewee further argued that the low participation problem had more to do about relevance and prospects for the future. With diminishing prospects for resettlement and the denial of access to local centralized exams, LCs struggle to convince refugees that education for their young children is an asset. Rohingya families generally encourage religious and primary education for their children. Instead of continuing education, young children engage in informal economic activities to support their families. One way to support these children to combine informal work with education is to include soft-skills-based sessions in LCs. UNHCR should also provide additional support to schools willing to start secondary schooling and offer school-feeding programmes (e.g. mid-day meal) for children.

Improving quality of facilities in LCs

Several interviews highlight the issue that most LCs are equipped with rudimentary levels of schooling amenities due to under-funding. In Rohingya community LCs, children neither have spaces for indoor/outdoor games, nor have libraries. Such an ineffective learning environment fails to nurture children's cognitive development. While some LCs charge a tuition fee, the amount is insufficient to secure basic facilities, learning materials, and adequate staffing. Classrooms are overcrowded since the schools accommodate a high number of students. Therefore, alternative educational programmes are not able to deliver positive outcomes for Rohingya refugees. There are potential solutions both in the long-term and short-term. As part of the long-term strategy, UNHCR must advocate for inclusion of refugees to mainstream education in Myanmar. In the short-term, LCs can consider double shifting (separate morning and day shifts) to accommodate students in grade-based separately run sessions. Stricter monitoring from UNHCR may also be effective in ensuring more optimum use of resources.

Regarding Evaluation, Accreditation and Certification

Community LCs in Malaysia are neither accredited, nor can they offer any recognized academic certifications. Therefore, the obtained certificates remain unusable both locally and internationally. Accreditation is a critical gateway to further education and a condition of employment. Kirk (2009) notes that formal recognition of educational attainment would not only create a positive change in the views of local communities, but also boost the quality and value of the programmes. Given the current political and policy context for refugees in Malaysia, it is not possible for community LCs to provide accredited certifications to refugees. Considering the potential of integration, UNHCR encourages LCs to follow the Malaysian curriculum. In reality, even though some LCs thoroughly follow national curriculum, the rest have adopted internationally recognized curriculum. For instance, Dignity for Children Foundation prepares its students for the Cambridge International General Certificate of Secondary Education examination, which as a qualification recognized by universities and employers all over the world (UNICEF Malaysia, 2015). Some refugee students register for this expensive program just because of its accreditation. However, an interviewee pointed out that adopting a foreign curriculum is costly and most of the funded community LCs cannot afford them.

Most of the Rohingya children in school were born in Malaysia. A few interviewees argue that these children should be identified as Malaysian without any discrimination. The school curriculum and teachers should educate these children about their rights and limitless possibilities in Malaysia. They should be not be made to feel as people who are not part of Malaysian society. Given the current context, the role of education in shaping the Rohingya children's perspective for their future is absolutely vital.

Reforming Policies for Teachers

Quality education is not possible without good, responsible, and disciplined teachers. Along with good compensation, regular training and adequate monitoring are key. However, due to budget constraints, neither UNHCR nor community LCs can ensure these criteria. Currently, teacher training includes only academic content. UNICEF Malaysia (2015) critically noted that it is common for many refugee teachers to have never previously worked with children. These teachers also face emotional challenges and constant fear of being considered "illegal" in a transit country. Teachers' emotional well-being positively influence the motivation of students (Shen et al., 2015). Hence, professional training to develop teachers' mental health can improve the educational environment for both children and educators. Due to the inadequate benefits from teaching at LCs, many teachers do multiple jobs, which often causes absenteeism and affects the quality of lessons (Kaun, 2012).

Some schools also heavily depend on volunteer teachers who have subject expertise. However, these teachers are often not aware of the culture, history, and the current situation of the Rohingya refugees. These teachers must be trained to be sensitive to Rohingya refugee students' diverse backgrounds and traumatic experiences. For sustainable empowerment and capacity building for teachers, mobilizing local resources and partners such as higher educational institutions could be valuable (O'Neal et al., 2018). Nonetheless, besides allocating more resources for training and development of teachers, UNHCR must adopt better recruitment, compensation, and monitoring policies and mechanisms for them.

6. Conclusion

The above examination of the standards of alternative educational programmes provided to the Rohingya refugees in Malaysia offers key findings and explores several key challenges. Since Rohingya refugees in Malaysia live largely in urban city settings, the context is uniquely different in Malaysia's case. Rohingya children attend informal schooling at the community LCs, as the Malaysian government has barred these children from accessing the formal public schooling system. The provision of refugee education is mainly implemented by various actors, including refugee communities, NGOs, and UNHCR. The Rohingya community feel a strong sense of abandonment for refugee education by the government. Rohingya refugees are likely to live in Malaysia for many more decades. The importance of providing standardized education to these refugees cannot be ignored or left to the responsibility of a third party.

Quality education enables refugees to integrate into the host communities, avail job opportunities, and live a minimum acceptable standard of life. In the case of Rohingya refugees, this study discovered four key issues – (i) most community LCs lack critical resources, (ii) the scarcity of educational opportunities after primary school makes primary level education worth less for Rohingya parents, (iii) prevailing cultural and religious norms make it difficult for Rohingya children (especially girls) to avail educational opportunities outside the community, and (iv) refugees, including Rohingyas, are denied access to national examinations and obtaining academic accreditation for their learning.

This research also explored the ways these challenges can be addressed. First, UNHCR must immediately organize resources to support LCs to provide refugees with secondary level education, and teachers with adequate compensation, training, and benefits. Second, the actors must work together to increase the awareness of local communities about the educational and livelihood needs of refugees. Third, there needs to be a long-term awareness programme which aims to influence the views of Rohingya parents regarding the need of education for their children. Further research should identify the underlying cultural and religious norms with harmful practices (e.g., child marriage, school drop-outs) in the Rohingya refugee communities. Participatory action research with community members can generate innovative interventions. Finally, the only sustainable and desirable solution lies in the hands of the Malaysian government. The host government must appreciate the positive impacts of providing education to all of its residents, and reform existing policies to allow all refugees to integrate into a unified system of national education.

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Ethics approval and Consent: The ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Sussex, UK in 2020. The application number is ER/HL459/1. All human participants were adults and Written consent were obtained before conducting their interviews.

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