



Barriers to Educational Access and Integration Among Rohingya Children in Bangladesh: A Qualitative Policy and Community Perspective

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Abstract

Bangladesh currently hosts over one million forcibly displaced Rohingya refugees in the Cox's Bazar camps, with children comprising nearly half of the refugee population. Despite extensive humanitarian interventions, access to equitable, continuous, and quality education remains severely constrained. This study examines the multidimensional barriers that impede educational access, participation, and learning outcomes among Rohingya children in Bangladesh. A qualitative multi-stakeholder research design was adopted, integrating Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) with policy and institutional document review. Data were collected between September and December 2023 through 42 semi-structured interviews and six focus group discussions involving Rohingya parents, Learning Center facilitators, NGO personnel, camp administrators, and community leaders across five refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. Thematic analysis was guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and a rights-based educational framework to capture interactions between policy, community, and individual-level determinants. Findings reveal five interrelated barriers shaping educational exclusion: (i) the persistence of a "temporariness doctrine," whereby the absence of formal legal recognition sustains educational uncertainty; (ii) curriculum dislocation resulting from exclusion from the national education system and limited recognition of the Myanmar curriculum; (iii) a gendered dropout cascade characterized by the progressive withdrawal of adolescent girls from schooling due to entrenched sociocultural norms; (iv) psychosocial learning obstruction linked to displacement-related trauma and chronic insecurity; and (v) donor-dependent fragility, reflecting the vulnerability of educational provision to fluctuations in international humanitarian funding. These barriers operate as a mutually reinforcing system of educational exclusion. Sustainable solutions require integrated policy responses encompassing legal recognition, gender-responsive interventions, trauma-informed educational practices, and long-term financing mechanisms. The study proposes an Integrated Educational Inclusion Roadmap (IEIR) and advocates for a rights-based, refugee-sensitive educational policy framework to advance inclusive and resilient learning opportunities for Rohingya children.

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Introduction

One such crisis is that of the Rohingya population. After the August 2017 mass exodus, wherein around 740,000 people fled Myanmar owing to military actions and sought refuge in Bangladesh, the total number of refugees has reached over one million people, thus making the Cox's Bazar camp the largest in the world [1]. About half of the total refugees consist of children below 18 years of age, while the number of school-going children (ages 3 to 17 years) has reached well above 500,000 [2]. Therefore, there has been placed a tremendous responsibility upon the shoulders of Bangladesh and other stakeholders to provide quality education.

Education is enshrined as a right in various international human rights laws, namely Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and SDG 4, aimed at achieving sustainable development by the year 2030. However, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya children in Bangladesh continue to be denied this right, which might be either non-enforceable or unattainable due to structural constraints. About 400,000 children reportedly have no access to education, while those attending Learning Centers (LCs) do so in an environment which is pedagogically deficient, legally dubious, and socially precarious [3].

Several studies have been carried out highlighting the problems associated with Rohingya educational programs in Bangladesh, including issues related to inadequacy of physical infrastructure [4], ambiguity in curriculum design [5], gender inequality [6], and psychosocial barriers [7]. Nevertheless, there remain three important research gaps. First, not many scholars incorporate a multi-actor qualitative approach that includes insights from the parents or caregivers of the children, educators, NGO workers, and community leaders. Second, the impact of policies developed by the host government at the structural level in maintaining exclusionary practices is mainly covered in advocacy papers but not peer-reviewed qualitative research. Third, very few researchers provide a comprehensive model to explain educational exclusion.

This study aims to fill in these gaps by conducting a qualitative analysis with multi-stakeholders among five refugee camps located in Cox's Bazar within the period September-December 2023. There are three major objectives for this study, which are: (a) identifying and categorizing the main impediments towards the education of the Rohingya children; (b) analyzing the effects of national policies in producing and sustaining such impediments; and (c) developing a theoretical yet feasible policy framework for education inclusion.

Background: The Rohingya Crisis and Educational Context in Bangladesh

The Rohingya are an ethnic minority of Muslims who hail mainly from the Rakhine State of Myanmar. The Citizenship Law of Myanmar enacted in 1982 denies them citizenship. Consequently, they have been the victims of long-standing discrimination, lack of citizenship, and episodes of large-scale massacres. The military operation that took place in 2017, characterized by the UN as having all characteristics of a genocide [1], has caused the biggest ever displacement in recent Asian history. Being already amongst the densest populations in the world, Bangladesh has received this population in Cox's Bazar district, which was amongst the least literate districts of the country before this migration started [8].

The official policy of the Bangladesh government regarding the Rohingya sees them only as a temporary problem, a situation requiring urgent attention rather than a resettlement process. This approach has major repercussions for education. Rohingya children are not allowed to enter the national school system, follow the Bangladesh curriculum, and learn the Bangla language in the camps [4]. For a long time, the government refused to set up any educational facilities in the camps arguing that it might have meant a permanent arrangement and hence hinder the prospects of future repatriation of the refugees [5]. Under such circumstances, humanitarian organizations like UNICEF, Save the Children, BRAC, and NRC set up Learning Centers (LCs) through funding from international donors [9].

Prior to 2021, the LCs provided the Learning Competency Framework Approach (LCFA), a curriculum that was both informal and competency-based, which was specifically designed for the refugee camps. The government of Bangladesh sanctioned the implementation of the Myanmar curriculum in January 2020 as a

trial period. By 2023–2024, the Myanmar curriculum was implemented from kindergarten up until grade ten in the camps with a total enrollment of approximately 303,064 learners [10]. Although the shift in curriculum is a great achievement, the numbers of enrollment are still far from the estimated 400,000+ out-of-school children. Additionally, the curriculum's quality and the accreditation issue have not yet been addressed [5]. Moreover, the sudden stoppage of the Rohingya self-established schools that offered the Myanmar curriculum in December 2021 caused great concern in the community due to the breach of trust in the administration of the Rohingya education [11].

In fact, the gendered facets of this crisis have become all too obvious. Although the enrollment rate is more or less equal for girls and boys at primary education level, a recent 2024 survey by UNICEF involving 21,975 out of school girls indicates that while enrollment levels remain at 75 percent for 5 to 14-year-old females, the figure plummets drastically to just 8 percent in the case of 15 to 18-year-old girls [6]. In secondary education, enrollment is just 24 percent in favour of females, with early marriage being an important factor in school dropouts by adolescent girls [12]. These figures underscore the need for analysis that goes beyond enrollment statistics to understand the lived social and cultural dynamics behind dropout.

Theoretical Framework

The research is underpinned by two theoretical perspectives: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) and the Rights-Based Approach to Education (RBA). Both allow for examining the challenges in education on different levels, including those on the micro level – in the child's immediate environment, and those on the macro level – at the national and international levels. See Figure 1 below for a framework integration example.

Ecological Systems Theory

The EST proposed by Bronfenbrenner is an excellent theoretical framework because it sees humans developing in multiple systems, including the microsystem (the immediate environment, family, LC, and peer group), mesosystem (interactions between microsystems), exosystem (influences from outside of microsystem, NGO work, camp leadership), and macrosystem (national policies, laws, cultural values, international humanitarian considerations) [13]. Indeed, the theory can be particularly applied to the refugee context because refugees develop their education not only due to personal factors but due to interaction between supportive families at micro level, problematic institutions at meso level, discriminatory policies at exo level and geopolitics at the macro level.

In light of the Rohingya situation, application of the model shows that interventions focusing on one level alone, such as the construction of LCs (exoteric level), will not suffice if other factors, such as parents' hesitancy to enroll their children due to cultural issues (micro level), poor teacher-parent relationships (meso level), and lack of law support (macro level), are not addressed.

Rights-Based Approach to Education

According to the Rights-Based Approach (RBA), the right to education is considered an entitlement rather than a discretionary gift. This means that states should guarantee the 4As – availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability – of education for all children irrespective of their status, where the term was coined by Tomasevski and further incorporated into United Nations human rights instruments [14]. The focus in the case of refugees is on 'accessibility' as well as 'adaptability' since both terms consider language, culture, and psychology of learners [8].

In relation to the case of children in the Rohingya population in Bangladesh, the application of the RBA reveals some serious flaws, where the state has failed to achieve accessibility (because of exclusion in terms of formal education), acceptability (because of lack of stability in the curricula and problems of language), and adaptability (as the response is not adequate for the problem of trauma and gender). By putting forward the RBA as the analytical tool, this research makes clear who is responsible.

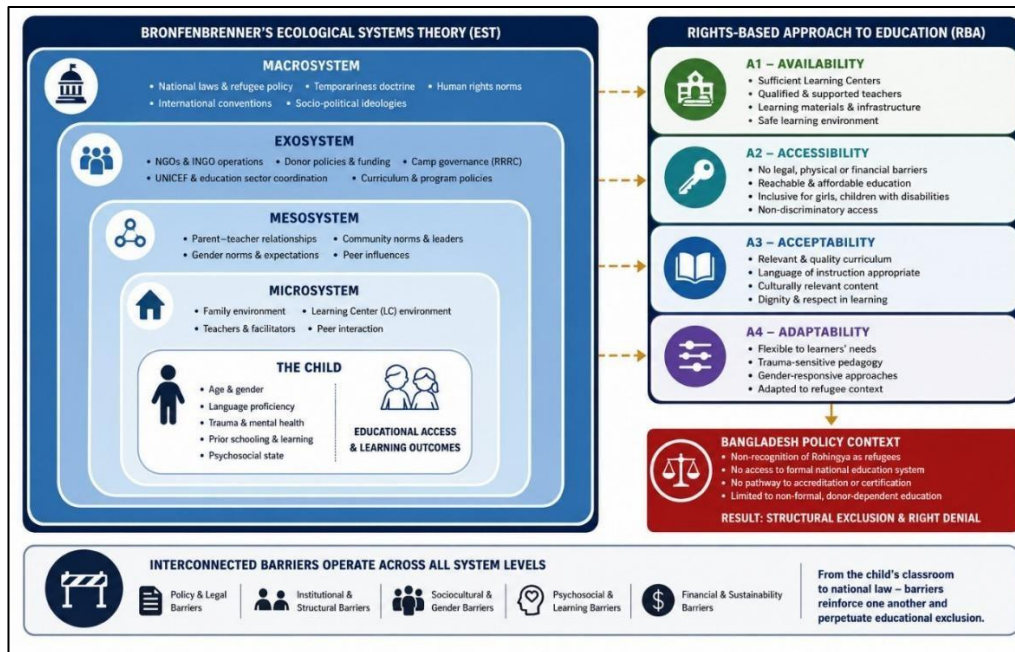


Figure 1. Integrated Theoretical Framework: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) with four nested system levels (Macrosystem → Child), aligned with the Rights-Based Approach to Education (RBA, 4As: Availability, Accessibility, Acceptability, Adaptability). Each system level maps to specific barriers identified in the study. Bangladesh currently fails all four RBA dimensions for Rohingya children

Methodology

Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative interpretive research methodology incorporating Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as well as policy document analysis. The use of IPA was based on the fact that this kind of study aimed to comprehend the meaning making of people who were either working in or had been impacted by the education system operating in the camps [15]. This methodology is focused more on rich contextual insights about people's experiences that influence their lives rather than attempting to generalize any statistical findings. In addition, policy document analysis was used in order to complement the research process [15].

Study Sites

This study was carried out in five different camps located in Cox's Bazar district, which includes Camp 4 (Kutupalong), Camp 13 (Balukhali), Camp 20 (Jamtoli), Camp 24 (Shamlapur) and Nayapara Registered Refugee Camp (Teknaf Upazila). Five different camps have been chosen by applying criterion sampling techniques to ensure variation in the size of the camps, their geographic locations (Ukhiya and Teknaf) and infrastructure facilities related to education.

Participants

Forty-two semi-structured individual interviews and six FGDs were undertaken from September to December 2023. Individual interviewees included: fifteen Rohingya parents/caregivers (eight mothers, seven fathers, of which five were parents of dropouts); twelve Learning Centre facilitators/teachers; eight NGOs' field education officers; four camp-administrative officers; and three Rohingya community leaders/mahjis. FGDs involved six to eight people per discussion group on the following three types of participants: adolescent girls (age 13–17) who were not attending school; presently enrolled boys (age 10–15); and LC facilitators. The total number of FGD participants was 43, totaling up to 85 individuals as participants. Table 1 shows the complete list of participants.

Table 1. Participant Profile Summary

| Participant Category | n (Interviews) | n (FGDs) | Gender (M/F) | Camp Sites |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|---------------|--------------|----------------------|
| Rohingya Parents/Caregivers | 15 | — | 7M / 8F | All 5 camps |
| LC Facilitators/Teachers | 12 | 8 (FGD-06) | 9M / 3F | Camps 4,13,20,24 |
| NGO Field Education Officers | 8 | — | 5M / 3F | Camps 4,13,20 |
| Camp Admin. Officers (incl. RRRC) | 4 | — | 4M / 0F | Camps 4,13,Nayapara |
| Community Leaders (Mahjis) | 3 | — | 3M / 0F | Camps 4,20,24 |
| Out-of-school Adolescent Girls | — | 18 (FGDs 1–3) | 0M / 18F | Camps 13,24,Nayapara |
| Currently Enrolled Boys | — | 9 (FGD-04) | 9M / 0F | Camp 20 |
| Mixed LC Facilitators (FGD) | — | 8 (FGD-05) | 5M / 3F | Camp 4 |
| TOTAL | 42 | 43 | 42M / 43F | All 5 camps |

Table 1. Participant Profile. M = Male; F = Female; LC = Learning Center; RRRC = Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner; FGD = Focus Group Discussion.

Data Collection Instruments

Semi-structured interview guides were devised and improved upon using two pilot interviews done in Bangla and Rohingya (with the help of bilingual researchers). These guides consisted of open-ended questions related to: motivation for lack of participation or dropout; experience with the learning center setting; perception about the curriculum and language; safety concerns within and outside of the LC; knowledge and opinions regarding girls' education; and evaluation of educational policy both from the government and NGOs. FGDs used a narrative vignette technique. Participants were given brief, anonymized cases (for example, a 13-year-old girl dropping out of school due to financial issues within her family) and asked to reflect upon the case as seen through their perspective. This helped in generating normative discourse without putting blame on any one particular family decision.

Data Analysis

All interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were recorded using an audio device following participants' permission. They were then transcribed verbatim in the language of origin and then translated to English using verified bilingual translators. The translations were further verified by another independent translator for accuracy. The data analysis process was done using Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis methodology, which includes the following six steps: (1) familiarization with data; (2) generation of initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) writing up. Two researchers independently did coding of the entire dataset while any disputes were sorted out through a meeting of consensus. We used Atlas.ti version 24.0 for data analysis and management.

Ethical Considerations

Approval for ethical conduct of the research was granted by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Chittagong (Ref: IRBC-SOC-2023-041) and camp administration. Participants gave their written consent to participate in the study, or in case of illiteracy, thumbprint consent. Confidentiality among participants was ensured using codes (P-01 to P-42 for interviews, and FGD-01 to FGD-06 for focus group discussions). When interviewing children (focus groups with enrolled boys and girls not attending school), parental/guardian permission was obtained and there were no authorities present to avoid power dynamics inhibition.

Results

Theme analysis of the interview and focus group discussion data generated five overall themes. Even though each theme is unique, it is interesting to note that there were recursive relationships between the themes, which in themselves become an outcome and are discussed in Chapter 6. The thematic map and exclusion cycle have been presented in Figure 2 below.

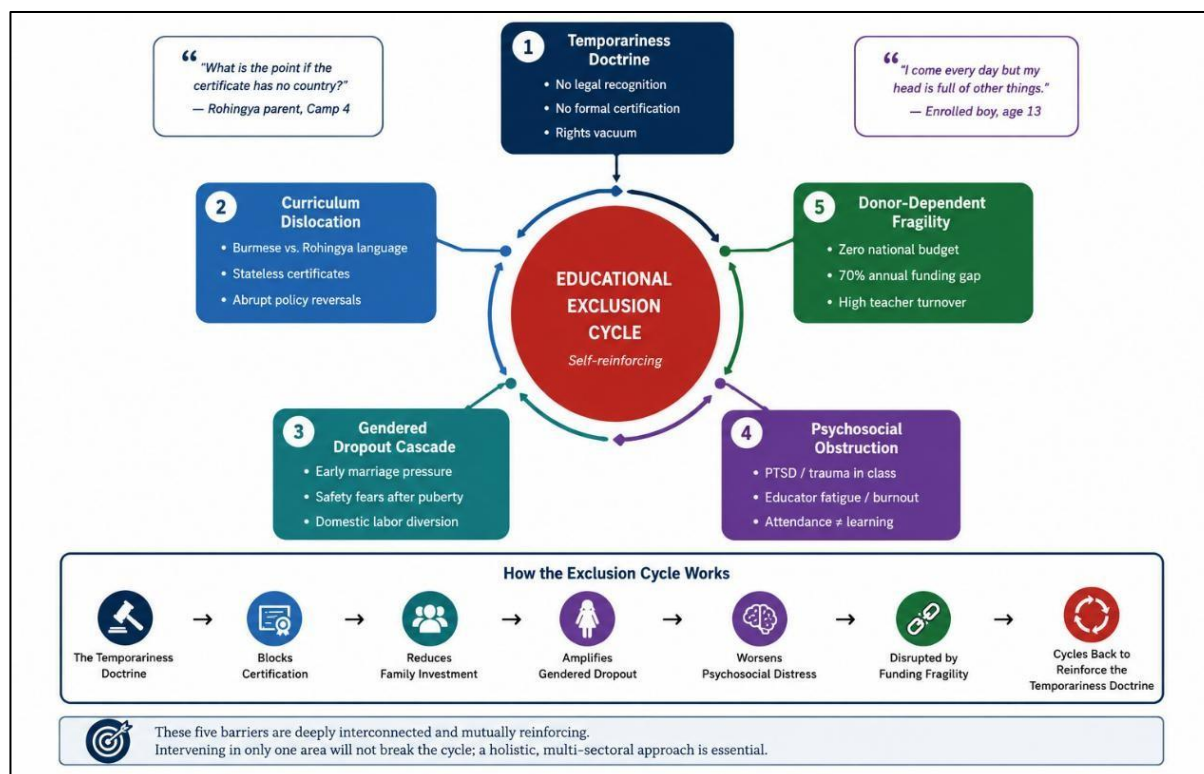


Figure 2. Thematic Map and Exclusion Cycle Diagram: Five interconnected barriers to Rohingya children's education in Bangladesh. Central arrows show how each theme feeds into the educational exclusion core; outer curved arrows show reinforcing connections between adjacent themes. Participant quotes are embedded from FGD and interview data (2023). Developed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) [15] thematic analysis protocol

Theme 1: The Temporariness Doctrine and Its Educational Consequences

By far the most fundamental barrier raised in this research is the inability of Rohingya children to envision any kind of formal education in their futures – something which can clearly be attributed to the Bangladeshi government's policy stance with regards to their being a temporary population. Indeed, one of the most serious implications of this policy has been the ability for it to justify the exclusion of Rohingya children from the national school system, the inability to create permanent school structures, and limitations on what can officially be taught.

The camp's administrative officers made no qualms about this attitude, noting that "these facilities are in place until further notice. It is not a permanent situation. We cannot make plans that will hinder our ability to repatriate" (Camp Admin Officer, Camp 4, P-38). On the other hand, NGO education officers were very clear that this policy stance had significant limitations: "we cannot give out any kind of certification. We cannot use the formal Bangladesh grading system. We cannot teach in Bengali. These constraints all arise from the same idea that these children are only passing through".

The Rohingyas demonstrated a contradictory attitude towards this principle. At first, they were hopeful about overcoming short-term difficulties and could demonstrate their patience because of the hope that poor education conditions would not last too long. However, in the sixth, seventh, and eighth years of living in the camps, a sense of fatalism started to prevail among the parents. 'I sent my son to the Learning Center for three years and he doesn't have anything on paper. He can study; he is clever, but why bother?' (Rohingya father, Camp 20, P-07). The change in caregivers' attitudes is a result of the temporariness doctrine and a phenomenon that needs to be mentioned as a secondary consequence of the doctrine that remains underexplored in academic literature.

Analysis of policy documents showed a clear contradiction between the national and international obligations of Bangladesh. Bangladesh is not a member state to the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of

Refugees and does not have domestic legislation addressing the rights of refugees, thus creating a 'rights vacuum,' which is filled by the temporariness doctrine fills with exclusion by default [4].

5.2 Theme 2: Curriculum Dislocation and the Certification Abyss

The second major obstacle is the inherent volatility and unsolved nature of the curriculum environment in the camps. While moving away from the LCFA to the Myanmar curriculum represents progress in theory, there have been significant practical and psychological disturbances associated with this transition. LC facilitators pointed out that each year brought a new development: 'At first it was LCFA, then Myanmar curriculum, now schools have closed and re-opened with different policies. Teachers don't know what they are teaching towards and the children don't know what they are studying for.' (LC Facilitator, Camp 24, P-28).

The issue of language of instruction arose as one of the most important sub-themes. Although the Myanmar curriculum is taught in Burmese, the vast majority of Rohingya children who reside in the camps in Bangladesh were born there, therefore having minimal to no experience with learning Burmese language. The Rohingya children are accustomed to speaking their mother tongue, the Chittagonian Rohingya dialect, which is an oral language, and many use their pidgin Bengali language to interact with humanitarian organizations [5]. 'They give us Burmese textbooks, but in Myanmar I learned a little Burmese. The children know spoken Rohingya and some Bangla words. I teach by drawing pictures. That is how we manage' (LC Teacher, Camp 13, P-22).

Certification became an issue of emotional importance for both the family and the children. Assessments at the end of the year were conducted for the first time in May 2023 for Grades 6-9 based on the Myanmar curriculum, with approximately 9,464 children taking part in the assessment [10]. Nonetheless, participants clearly noted that there was an understanding that these certificates have no official recognition within Bangladesh, nor do they even receive recognition in Myanmar due to the coup-led political climate. This issue was discussed by community leaders as a form of betrayal of trust: "We sent our children to school. They studied. They cleared their tests. But the certificate is a piece of paper without a country. What does a stateless certificate prove?" (Community Leader/Majhi, Camp 4, P-42).

Theme 3: The Gendered Dropout Cascade

The third theme and the one producing the richest emotional material relates to the gradual removal of girls from the education system. In contrast to the abrupt moment of decision making, this theme came out of the stories told by the participants as a cascade – a combination of pressures that build up intensity as girls enter and exit the pubertal stage of their development. Focus group discussions with adolescent girls out of school (FGD-01, FGD-02, FGD-03) shed light on this experience.

Four forces were identified as factors behind the cascade phenomenon. First is the normative shift towards girls being positioned as household contributors and potential wives rather than pupils: "School is for kids. My mother said I'm grown up and can help my family" (Out-of-school girl, age 14, FGD-01). Second is the threat perception due to insecurity: "I stopped sending my child to school after hearing about how some strange man was bothering her close friend who attends classes near Block C at night time." (Mother, Camp 24, P-11).

The third factor is economic; older girls may be engaged in domestic chores or earning from other informal occupations: "There are cases where there are six people and no means for earnings. The older girls shoulder the responsibility in the family so that parents can find something to do. Schools conflict with their survival" (NGO Education Officer, Camp 4, P-17). The fourth, but arguably the most insidious factor, is that of early marriage: "The locals feel that once she studies too much, she becomes hard to marry. Hence, they take the girls out of schools" (Majhi/Community Leader, Camp 20, P-40). Crucially, it should be noted that out-of-school girls showed a marked tendency to continue with their education as they realized that their exclusion was unfair [3].

Theme 4: Psychosocial Learning Obstruction

Fourthly, the issue of psychosocial trauma as a cross-cutting factor is a key factor impacting learning because the great majority of children from the Rohingya camps have been exposed to violence and displacement and have suffered or witnessed trauma during their life course. The rate of psychosocial distress in the camps'

population has been recorded as quite high (as high as 38.4%) in the Cox's Bazar region in the years of 2023–2024 [7].

The LC facilitators noted the symptoms of psychological distress which manifest themselves during classes: screaming outbursts, hypervigilance, inability to focus, fear of noise, social isolation. “I see my students being silent for long periods of time. Ask them a question, they will look at you but they will not see you. Some of them shake in fear when there is noise or vehicles passing by. You can see that they do not feel safe here” (LC teacher, Camp 24, P-30).

The novel contribution of the study compared to the documented evidence of psychosocial distress is that of educator fatigue, a condition of vicarious trauma experienced by teachers in the LC. These teachers, too, are refugees, like their pupils, carrying the same burden of trauma as the students. The following excerpt provides insight into how some of them felt when teaching while trying to cope with their own personal pain: 'I, too, am a refugee. I, too, am uncertain whether I will know my whereabouts next year. I, too, have lost members of my family. How can I teach a lesson about the future, when I have no idea what mine is going to be?' (LC Teacher, Camp 20, P-31). According to FGD data involving enrolled boys (FGD-04), children adopted pragmatic methods for dealing with such situations, such as using the LC as a social sanctuary despite poor learning outcomes, meaning that attendance figures may overstate actual learning engagement.

Theme 5: Donor-Dependent Fragility and Programmatic Precarity

Theme five is the vulnerability that arises due to the fact that the education system architecture relies solely on the international donor community's funds without any inputs from the national budget of the country for education. The humanitarian education community in Bangladesh was only able to get 22 million USD out of their annual target of 72 million USD for the year 2023–2024 – which is about 70% underfunding [9]. This gap has direct operational consequences: Learning Center hours are reduced, teacher salaries are delayed, learning materials are unavailable and staff face redundancies.

As expressed by the NGO education officers, "Every six months we don't know whether we'll be able to pay our teachers or not. We hire them, train them and then have to fire them because funding has run out. And then we begin all over again. Children change their teachers each year." (NGO Education Officer, Camp 13, P-18) Almost 60% of the teachers working in the five camps included in the study had been with the organization for less than two years; the high turnover rate among teachers was mainly due to discontinuity in funding.

Despite being grateful for NGO support, Rohingya parents and community members conveyed a sense of lack of confidence due to programming instability: "Last year the center near our home was closed for four months due to lack of funds. My daughter fell behind. We did not know when it would open again. How do you plan your child's education when it could vanish like that?" (Mother of Rohingya community member in the Nayapara camp, P-06). Review of policy documents revealed that there is currently no line in the Bangladeshi government budget for education of Rohingya refugees and the JRP is completely dependent upon international funding as its only source of finance [9]. Recent reporting further confirms that international aid cuts in 2025 have created additional disruptions to Rohingya children's education [11].

Table 2. Summary of Barrier Themes, Sub-themes and Evidence Sources

| Theme | Sub-theme | Primary Evidence | EST Level |
|--------------------------|--|--|------------------|
| Temporariness Doctrine | No formal legal status; no certification; exclusion from national system | Policy docs; Camp admin; Parent interviews | Macrosystem |
| Temporariness Doctrine | Attitudinal fatalism among families after prolonged displacement | Rohingya parent interviews | Microsystem |
| Curriculum Dislocation | Burmese instruction barrier for camp-born children | Teacher interviews; FGD-04 | Exosystem/Micro |
| Curriculum Dislocation | Stateless certificates, unrecognized in BD or Myanmar | Parent & community leader interviews | Macrosystem |
| Curriculum Dislocation | Closure of community-led schools (December 2021) | NGO officer interviews; Policy docs | Exosystem |
| Gendered Dropout Cascade | Post-pubertal domestic reallocation; early marriage pressure | FGD-01 to FGD-03; Parent interviews | Microsystem/Meso |

| | | | |
|---------------------------|--|--|-----------------|
| Gendered Dropout Cascade | Safety fears on routes/in mixed-gender LCs | Parent & girl FGD participants | Exosystem/Micro |
| Psychosocial Obstruction | PTSD/trauma symptoms in classroom setting | Teacher interviews; FGD-04 | Microsystem |
| Psychosocial Obstruction | Vicarious trauma and burnout among LC facilitators | Teacher interviews | Meso/Exosystem |
| Donor-Dependent Fragility | No national government budget for Rohingya education | Policy docs; NGO officer interviews | Macrosystem |
| Donor-Dependent Fragility | High teacher turnover linked to funding gaps | NGO officer interviews; Teacher interviews | Exosystem |

Table 2. Summary of Barrier Themes, Sub-themes and Evidence Sources. EST = Ecological Systems Theory; BD = Bangladesh; FGD = Focus Group Discussion; LC = Learning Center; MHPSS = Mental Health and Psychosocial Support.

Discussion

These five barrier categories in this research are not just additive in effect; instead, they combine to create a cycle of exclusion where each serves to bolster the other barriers in the process, thus becoming collectively more impervious to change than any single part. Figure 3 shows enrollment figures for different levels of education and gender, showing the quantitative aspect of the dropout process discussed qualitatively in Section 5.3.

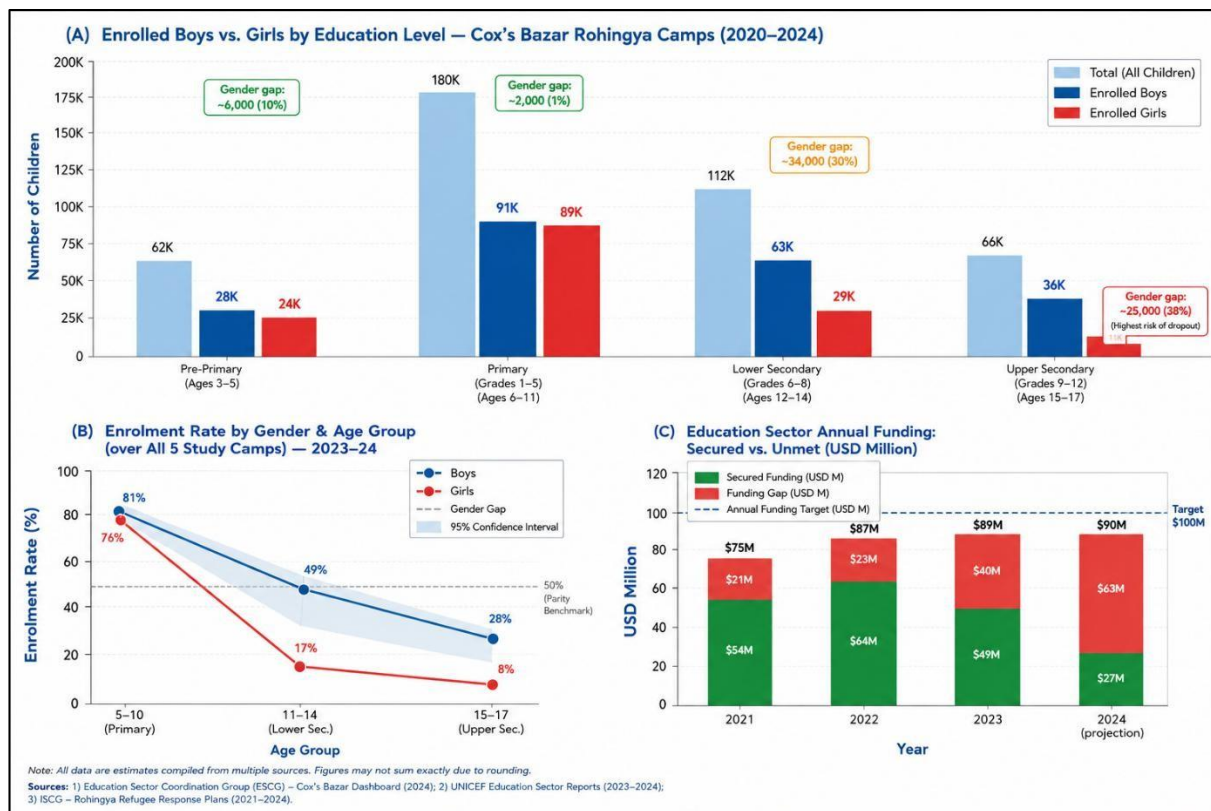


Figure 3. Educational enrollment by level and gender, Rohingya camps, Cox's Bazar (2023–2024). Panel A shows enrolled boys and girls against the target population. GPI values highlight near-parity at primary level but critical gender gaps at secondary level (GPI = 0.26). Panel B shows enrolment rate (%) by gender and age group, confirming the gendered dropout cascade. Panel C shows the annual education sector funding gap (2021–2024). Data sources: UNICEF Education Sector reports [2, 10]; UNHCR Fact Sheet 2024 [22]; ECW Progress Report 2024 [9].

The Interconnected Exclusion Cycle

The temporariness doctrine leads to curriculum dislocation, since the government is unwilling to adopt a national curriculum; curriculum dislocation results in attitudinal fatalism on the part of families due to lack of vocational or educational returns; attitudinal fatalism reinforces the gendered dropout cascade through low parental involvement in educating girls; psychosocial obstruction lowers the quality of learning that occurs; and donor dependence makes even the few resources provided inherently fragile. This finding is aligned with Dryden-Peterson's [8] concept of 'educational trajectory disruption' in refugee settings, which asserts that the worst effects of disruption result not from any one failure point but from accumulated trajectory disruptions.

Nevertheless, whereas Dryden-Peterson identifies only the concept of trajectory disruption in her definition of 'education in exile', this research further specifies the key policy variable at the core of the cycle – the temporariness doctrine. If this doctrine were abandoned or undermined, without any other changes to the system, its disruptive effects would be weakened considerably.

Comparison with the Regional and Global Literature

The barriers found in this study share similarities and have key differences when examined relative to literature pertaining to education among the Rohingya in other geographical locations. Loganathan et al. [16] highlight the existence of structural barriers for non-citizens, such as documentation problems, language barriers, and financial barriers in Malaysia, implying that the marginalization of stateless children is a result of similar factors in various countries. Lee and Hoque [17] establish that the Rohingya children in Malaysia are excluded because their country is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, directly paralleling Bangladesh's situation.

In fact, Palik and Østby's [18] global scoping review concludes that community participation and teacher training stand out as some of the most consistently effective interventions, backed up by this study's findings indicating that trust-based relations between family members and NGO employees and teacher qualifications are indeed the enabling factors, according to the parents' claims. Regarding the gender-related aspect of education, one can point at the fact that Hossain's [6] multilevel analysis confirms statistically the existence of the dropout cascade identified in this study through a qualitative approach, while the rest of the literature (e.g., Habib et al. [3]) agrees with the findings that post-pubertal girls face qualitatively different pressures than younger children or boys.

The Role of Community Agency

Another significant secondary finding was the effectiveness of the community's educational initiatives despite the structural exclusion. The Rohingya families, community leaders, and even the children who were born in the camps all showed awareness of the importance of education and how they could overcome challenges, such as arranging for private tutoring in their own homes, forming study groups for girls only within the homes of trustworthy neighbors, and requesting more LC classes from NGO officials. This is consistent with what Bakali and Wasty [19] have shown about post-conflict settings. This has major implications since many programs consider the Rohingya community passive beneficiaries of educational assistance.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

From the findings and discussion presented above, this research develops the concept of an Integrated Educational Inclusion Roadmap (IEIR) with interventions at four distinct levels, consistent with the Ecological Systems Theory. As shown in Figure 4 below, this includes a Policy Community Gap Analysis and the IEIR Priority Action Matrix, providing a visual decision-support tool for policymakers and programme designers.

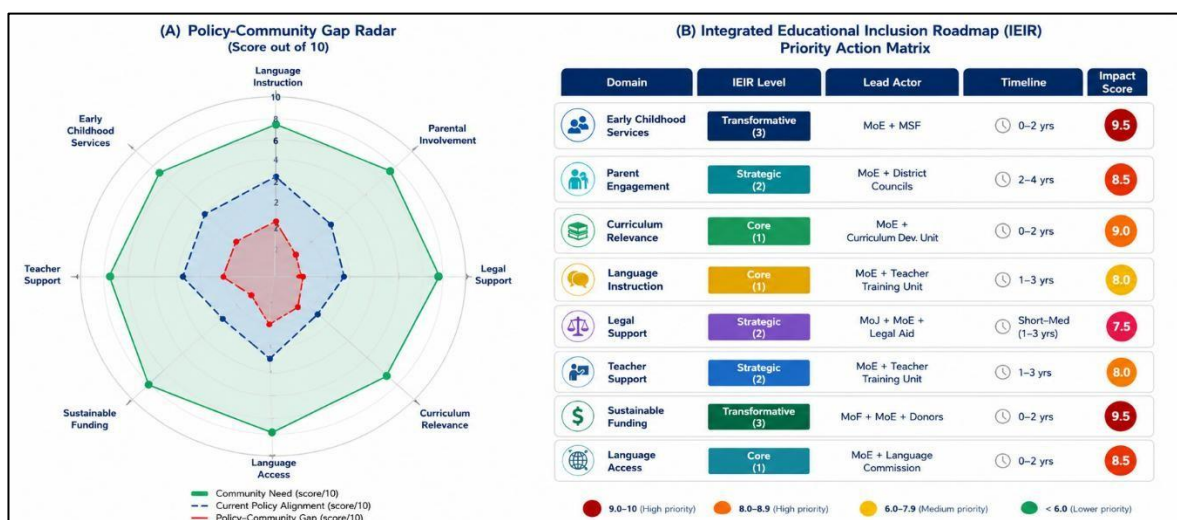


Figure 4. Policy–Community Gap Analysis and Integrated Educational Inclusion Roadmap (IEIR). Panel A (radar): scores reflect qualitative assessment from policy document analysis and stakeholder interviews (this study, 2023); community need consistently scores $\geq 8/10$ across all dimensions while government provision scores $\leq 4/10$. Panel B (matrix): IEIR priority action matrix with impact scores, lead actors and timelines. Impact scores are triangulated evidence-weight assessments from the thematic analysis. GoB = Government of Bangladesh; SC = Save the Children; NRC = Norwegian Refugee Council; MoF = Ministry of Finance; GPE = Global Partnership for Education

Table 3. Policy-Community Gap Analysis Matrix

| Policy Area | Current State (2023–24) | Community-Identified Gap | Mandate Breach |
|-------------------------------|---|---|---------------------------|
| Legal recognition of refugees | No domestic refugee law; non-signatory to 1951 Convention | Families demand stable legal status to justify educational investment | Art. 28 CRC; SDG 4 |
| Formal education access | Prohibited from national school system; informal LCs only | Children want recognized, certifiable qualifications | Art. 26 UDHR; Art. 28 CRC |
| Curriculum & language | Myanmar curriculum (Burmese) since 2023; no Bengali instruction | Camp-born children need Rohingya/Bengali transitional instruction | UNESCO linguistic rights |
| Girls' secondary education | 8% secondary enrollment (girls 15–18); no gender-segregated secondary LCs in many camps | Safe, girl-only secondary spaces; female teachers; community mobilization | CEDAW; Beijing Platform |
| Teacher welfare & MHPSS | Teacher training exists but MHPSS for teachers absent from most programs | Teachers need psychosocial support equivalent to that given to students | Sphere Standards |
| Financing | 100% donor-dependent; no national budget line | Sustainable multi-year financing with government co-contribution | SDG 4; JRP 2023–24 |

Table 3. Policy-Community Gap Analysis Matrix. CRC = Convention on the Rights of the Child; UDHR = Universal Declaration of Human Rights; CEDAW = Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; MHPSS = Mental Health and Psychosocial Support; JRP = Joint Response Plan.

Table 4. Integrated Educational Inclusion Roadmap (IEIR), Recommendation Matrix

| EST Level | Barrier Addressed | Recommended Action | Lead Actor | Timeframe |
|-------------|--|--|---------------------------|-----------|
| Macrosystem | Temporariness doctrine; no legal recognition | Develop a domestic Refugee Education Policy Framework granting Rohingya children the right to non-formal certified education, with a defined pathway upon voluntary repatriation | GoB + UNHCR | 0–2 years |
| Macrosystem | Donor-dependent fragility | Establish a 5-year National Emergency Education Fund with $\geq 20\%$ government contribution; integrate into national education budget cycle | MoF + Donors | 2–4 years |
| Exosystem | Curriculum dislocation; certification abyss | Fast-track bilateral agreement with Myanmar education authorities for mutual recognition of Myanmar curriculum certificates, facilitated by UNESCO | MOPME + UNESCO | 0–2 years |
| Exosystem | Curriculum dislocation; language barrier | Introduce transitional bilingual instruction (spoken Rohingya + Burmese literacy) for KG–Grade 3; recruit bilingual community teachers | UNICEF + Education Sector | 1–2 years |

| | | | | |
|------------------|--|---|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Mesosystem | Gendered dropout cascade; community norms | Scale female Rohingya peer-educator programme; establish all-female secondary LCs in each major camp block; engage Mahjis as co-designers | Save the Children + GPE | Short–medium term |
| Meso / Exosystem | Psychosocial obstruction; teacher burnout | Mandate trauma-informed teaching in all LC teacher training; establish Peer Support Groups for teachers; introduce teacher MHPSS allowances | UNICEF + NRC | 0–18 months |
| Microsystem | Psychosocial obstruction; family disengagement | Integrate structured Family School Partnership (FSP) model: weekly 30-minute parent briefings combining child progress feedback with parenting-under-stress support | UNICEF + Volunteers | 0–18 months |
| Microsystem | Gendered dropout; early marriage | Establish 'Stay in School' conditional support: monthly food/livelihood incentive for female-headed households with girls aged 12–17 linked to regular attendance | WFP + UNHCR + UNICEF | 2–3 years |

Table 4. Integrated Educational Inclusion Roadmap (IEIR). MOPME = Ministry of Primary and Mass Education; GPE = Global Partnership for Education; NRC = Norwegian Refugee Council; WFP = World Food Programme; FSP = Family School Partnership.

Limitations

However, there are several limitations of this study which need to be stated. First, the ability to gain access to some types of informants was limited by the governance system at the camp. Although CiC officials and official education liaison members of the government were approached, they refused participation in this study. Hence, only four administrative officers participated, forming a non-representative subsample. Second, although purposive sampling was employed in order to ensure variation among the sample units, extrapolation from these results to all camps in Cox's Bazar, or to Bhasan Char Island, is cautioned against. Bhasan Char is known for its own peculiarities regarding education which are beyond the scope of this study. Third, as a qualitative study, generalizability cannot be claimed in a statistical sense, while thick description and theoretical interpretation are considered. Finally, even though bilingual research assistants were involved and back-translation protocol was applied, there is a possibility of losing some nuance of the language used by Rohingya people.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive qualitative examination of the structural barriers constraining educational access for Rohingya children in Bangladesh's refugee camps. Drawing on multi-stakeholder perspectives across camps in Cox's Bazar, findings reveal that educational exclusion is shaped by an interconnected system of constraints encompassing legal temporariness, curriculum discontinuity, gendered dropout trajectories, psychosocial distress and prolonged dependence on humanitarian aid. Rather than operating independently, these barriers reinforce one another, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of educational marginalization. The study therefore argues that the educational challenges faced by Rohingya children are not merely operational or logistical shortcomings but manifestations of a broader governance framework that continues to treat refugee education as a temporary humanitarian intervention rather than a fundamental human right.

Findings suggest that meaningful educational inclusion cannot be achieved through incremental programmatic adjustments alone. Sustainable progress requires a coordinated transformation of policy and institutional frameworks, including recognized certification pathways, culturally responsive and multilingual curricula, strengthened protection mechanisms for girls, improved teacher support systems, and predictable long-term financing arrangements. In this context, the proposed Integrated Educational Inclusion Roadmap (IEIR) offers a practical and evidence-informed framework for advancing educational justice and social inclusion.

Most importantly, the voices of Rohingya children underscore a persistent aspiration for learning, dignity and future opportunity despite prolonged displacement. Their educational ambitions challenge dominant narratives of refugee dependency and highlight the transformative potential of inclusive education. Ensuring meaningful access to quality education is therefore not only a developmental necessity but also a moral, legal and humanitarian imperative. Future of Rohingya children will ultimately depend on whether national and international actors possess the political commitment to recognize stateless children not as temporary policy challenges, but as rights-bearing individuals entitled to education, opportunity and hope.

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