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Coping practices and gender relations: Rohingya refugee forced migrations from Myanmar to India

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ABSTRACT

Rohingya experiences of displacement and refuge are heavily gendered. Sexual and gender-based violence have been used as weapons against Rohingya women, men, girls and boys in Myanmar for decades. Trafficking and exploitation are rife on the flight out of the country, and host states such as India present their own gendered challenges to family survival and individual coping. In this paper, we examine how some of those violent and disruptive experiences have affected gender roles for individuals and families as they have fled Myanmar (often more than once) and sought refuge in India via Bangladesh. We present new insight into the dynamic subjectivity of Rohingya women as we show how, contrary to dominant depictions of passive victimhood, many have lead family migration across borders, taken up NGO/community leadership roles, or made the best ‘home’ possible within the limitations of the host context. This is because personal and family agency is sensitive to transitional opportunities and threats—i.e., gender norms of home and host contexts, interactions with host communities, and trust relations with NGOs, to name a few. Crucially, these social practices and experiences are not static or linear; they span generations and sprawling geographies.

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Rohingya; gender; refugee women; agency; India; transitionality

1. Introduction

Rohingyas have been violently displaced from Myanmar many times across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The most recent genocidal attacks on the community began in August 2017, causing over 740,000 to flee to Bangladesh. In neighbouring India, there are around 17,000 Rohingya

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refugees registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR India 2020; Brenner 2019)—most of whom arrived around 2012 via Bangladesh—and potentially tens of thousands more unregistered and living anonymously.

As with forced displacements elsewhere, Rohingya experiences of violence, forced migration and settlement in host camps and cities are heavily gendered. Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) have been used as weapons against women, men, girls and boys in Myanmar as part of the state-backed military's acts of genocide (UN Women Bangladesh 2018). Trafficking of men, women and children for labour and prostitution is rife on the flight path out of Myanmar, as well as in host camps and cities. In addition to these gendered experiences of violence, the dislocation of displacement has also resulted in gendered shifts in survival, coping practices and everyday life for Rohingyas in migration and refuge. For instance, in India, men (and many women) Rohingya refugees have to work daily wage jobs in a precarious informal market, which contrasts with their previous farming and fishing practices in Myanmar (Field, Tiwari, and Mookherjee 2020). Limited land, unpredictable and meagre incomes, frequent exploitation, and the necessity of women to work in piecemeal jobs feed feelings of frustration and shame for some Rohingya families.

Rohingya coping practices and gendered shifts in roles have been shaped by a range of transnational factors, including: i) the social and cultural construction of (gender) roles in Myanmar as well as in the refugee host states, ii) individual and family experiences of displacement and refuge, and iii) the life conditions of the host contexts. There is an expanding body of academic and advocacy literature that explores Rohingya experiences of surviving and coping in host countries (Farzana 2017; Rahman 2021; Wake, Barbelet, and Skinner 2019). While some of it focuses on the gendered aspects of these practices (Hutchinson 2018; Shair, Akhter, and Shama 2019; Chynoweth 2018; UN Women Bangladesh 2018), many of these publications are policy-focused texts aimed at recommending changes to current humanitarian practice. As such, they tend to perpetuate the oversimplified categories of 'disempowered' women-as-victims and 'womanandchildren' as a singular vulnerable category (Enloe cited in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014, 398), or newly 'empowered' women being defined as such because they have moved to the (ostensibly masculine) public sphere of community leadership or employment (Field, Tiwari, and Mookherjee 2017, 24–28; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014).

Moreover, in the limited academic research undertaken on Rohingya survival and coping practices in host contexts, much of the analysis focuses on Bangladesh, as the country with the largest Rohingya refugee population globally (Farzana 2017; Rahman 2021; Holloway and Fan 2018; Olivius 2014; Crabtree 2010; Pittaway 2008). While these are important studies, the dynamics of a refugee camp—and the survival and coping practices engendered

in such a controlled humanitarian space—are markedly different from the self-settled urban and rural lives of Rohingya refugees elsewhere in the world, such as India. Moreover, analyses of the Rohingya in Bangladesh often only tell a static (i.e. first-country-of-asylum) story of Rohingya refuge; many Rohingyas have travelled between Myanmar, Bangladesh and India as a result of repeated persecution and extended exile.

A key goal of this article, therefore, is to offer a more detailed examination of some of the negotiated practices of survival and coping for Rohingya refugees as they have emerged on their forced migration journeys from Myanmar, through Bangladesh and then to settlements in India. We selected rural Mewat and urbanised Hyderabad as fieldwork locations for reasons we explain shortly. Within these locations, we are interested in the gendered and relational nature of coping and survival practices. More specifically, we examine how Rohingya women negotiate roles, responsibilities and power in response to forced migration and refuge experiences.

To explore these ideas, this paper builds on discussions from peace and conflict literature and refugee studies on everyday agency (particularly women's) and negotiations with power in a disrupted social space (Yadav 2021; Tripp 2015; Berry 2018; Hyndman 2010, 1998). Specifically, this study seeks to examine these (re)negotiated roles in their *multiple* disrupted social spaces over a period of time: Myanmar, the flight path between Myanmar and Bangladesh/India, and in Mewat and Hyderabad in India. As such, this paper also builds on scholarship in refugee and migration studies that sees migration flows as 'turbulent' rather than linear (Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, and Pickles 2015), and gender relations as dynamically negotiated across national borders and over time (Hoffman, Tierney, and Robertson 2017; Hopkins 2010; Nolin 2006; Pessar and Mahler 2003). The next section overviews the Rohingya refugee situation in India and outlines the research methodology. Following this, the paper explores current literature around Rohingya coping and, in particular, how Rohingya women are framed in these discussions. The paper then shares and analyses Rohingya refugee experiences as they have navigated survival on their flights out of Myanmar to India, often via Bangladesh.

2. Location and methodology

Rohingya refugees have been categorised by the Indian government as 'illegal migrants' in India since August 2017, for a number of (geo)political reasons that include the governing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s rhetoric around security, increasing anti-Muslim communal politics, anti-Rohingya posturing, and their efforts to strengthen relations with Myanmar (Field, Tiwari, and Mookherjee 2020; Amin 2018; Basu 2015). Linked to that, the Indian government is currently attempting to deport this vulnerable refugee group back to Myanmar; an act that is being challenged in the Indian

Supreme Court (Tiwari 2020). While some Rohingya refugees have lived in India for decades, many thousands (though exact numbers do not exist) have sought refuge in the country after the Myanmar military launched brutal attacks on the community in Rakhine state in 2012 and the camps in Bangladesh did not offer much of an opportunity for dignified refuge (Crabtree 2010; Interview RF4, Hyderabad, 4 August 2019).

Several thousand Rohingyas currently live in Hyderabad and Jammu (exact numbers are disputed), around 1,500 live in Delhi, with similar numbers in Mewat, Haryana. A smaller number are scattered in other regions of India, such as West Bengal (Brenner, 2019). Jammu and West Bengal were experiencing (often violent) anti-Rohingya protests at the time of research, and so Hyderabad and Mewat were selected for participant and researcher safety. Rohingya refugees currently residing in Hyderabad and Mewat have largely settled in these host sites after fleeing from Myanmar via Bangladesh (and sometimes via other Indian cities). Depending on their monetary resources or wider network, some families spent years in Bangladesh; others passed through Bangladesh fairly quickly to get to India. Few came to India directly.

Research for this study included desk research and three visits to each field site, Hyderabad and Mewat, for focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews. Between June 2019 and January 2020, we interviewed 65 Rohingya refugees in 43 in-depth, semi-structured discussions (20 interviews in Hyderabad, and 23 in Mewat). In Hyderabad, the gender split among refugee participants was 15 women and 19 men; in Mewat, we interviewed 13 women and 18 men Rohingya. Interviewees in Hyderabad were contacted through snowball sampling based on initial contacts provided by a non-governmental organisation (NGO) leading relief operations, as well as the researchers' own contacts among the Rohingya refugee population in Delhi. Interviewees in Mewat were contacted through snowball sampling based on the researchers' Rohingya contacts in Delhi, Mewat and Hyderabad.

Prior to conducting in-depth interviews, we held four FGDs in Hyderabad with Rohingya adult women (six in total), adult men (nine), all-male youths (seven, aged 18-25) and all-male elders (six). These FGD groups were self-selected, with requests for participation initiated by an NGO supporting Rohingyas in Hyderabad. As such, only male youths and elders came forward for these rough age groupings, and so answers are not fully representative. Through these FGDs, we were concerned about ascertaining as best we could from a broad spectrum of Rohingyas: i) what questions would be relevant to ask participants around the themes of violence and resilience; ii) how to sensitively and respectfully draw out personal experiences on their journeys from Myanmar to India; and iii) how to make these questions gender-responsive. Responses to these early discussions indicated that personal experiences of violence will come up in questions that focus on Rohingya journeys from Myanmar to India, and that questions should be

asked (Male elders FGD, Hyderabad, 25 July 2019). The women explained that having someone to listen ‘helps them’ (Women FGD, Hyderabad, 24 July 2019), while a male community leader explained that a person will elaborate if they feel comfortable—ideally if they are interviewed individually (Men FGD, Hyderabad, 24 July 2019). We endeavoured to follow this direction and where interviews were not alone, this was at the request of participants. Where participant names are given in this paper, they are pseudonymised to protect anonymity.

‘Resilience’ is a heavily contested term and its appropriateness and relevance (or otherwise) to forced displacement contexts has been explored in-depth elsewhere (Krause and Schmidt 2020; Ilcan and Rygiel 2015). It is not the purpose of this paper to repeat these debates or expand on the meaning of the term. Rather, we use it as a springboard to talk about the range of actions associated with the idea of resilience: i.e. coping, capabilities, and survival. In our FGD discussions, participants indicated that Rohingya ‘resilience’—or strength and coping in the face of hardships, as we also explained it—was understood less individually, and more at the scale of the family and community. As a Rohingya woman in Hyderabad explained when discussing resilience: ‘Our families also make us strong and overall, our unity is indication of our strength’ (FGD Women, Hyderabad, 24 July 2019). These responses mirror a recent Overseas Development Institute (ODI) study on Rohingya understandings of ‘dignity’, which highlighted Rohingya understandings of dignity as ‘social and collective – communal or familial – and it is rooted in mutual respect’ (Holloway and Fan 2018, 7). Thus, in subsequent interviews, we asked participants about collective coping strategies and what makes a Rohingya family or community strong/resilient, as well as seeking to understand personal experiences.

3. Forced migration and gender relations

Conflict and state violence disrupt gender roles and relations. While SGBV can attempt to violently reinforce oppressive gender roles or implement new ones, the social dislocation of conflict can also ‘pav[e] the way for women to exercise their agency’ and for men to experience ruptures in power (Yadav 2021, 451). This latter recognition is not to idealise the devastating impacts of conflict but—in line with recent research in peace and conflict studies—to draw attention to the complex social dynamics that can emerge from a situation of mass violence (Yadav 2021; Berry 2018). For instance, conflict-induced injuries, death or the disappearance of men can force women to assume the role as head of the family and breadwinner where this was not previously the norm (Yadav 2021, 453; Farzana 2017, 104). When families are forcibly displaced as a result of violence, they often do not have the chance to flee together; men, women and children may be

forced to flee separately, or they may have little choice but to join or lead disparate groups fleeing at the same time (or many more configurations still). In short: throughout conflict violence and exile, refugees (re)negotiate gendered social roles and relationships in and around challenging conditions, often for extended periods.

These observations around changing social roles have long been noted in feminist literature on conflict, refugee displacement and protection (Yadav 2021; Berry 2018; Buckley-Zistel and Krause 2017; Edward 2007). For instance, much of the literature around gender in refugee host contexts focuses on refugee camps and how men and women renegotiate roles and the family in 'temporary' settlement (Hoffman, Tierney, and Robertson 2017; Gerard and Pickering 2014, 341)—whether in response to personal circumstances and experiences, or due to gendered interventions by humanitarian organisations (Grabska 2011). For instance, Grabska's (2011, 88) study examining the effects of gender mainstreaming programmes in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya, noted how the household division of labour was changing, with women taking on leadership roles and paid work, or with 'men taking on some of the domestic tasks in the absence of their wives, sisters and mothers'.

Central to other recent scholarship has been a call to recognise that the places in which these gendered negotiations occur—for example, 'homes' in the origin country and 'temporary settlements' in refuge—must be considered as open, dynamic and interrelated (Brun and Fabos 2015, 6). Social expressions and experiences traverse international borders and memories of these come together in the practice of homemaking and role-negotiation in places of refuge (Brun and Fabos 2015, 8). To quote Rahman (2021, 875): 'the nature of culture is that it is not static and unchangeable—in many ways, it is constantly on the move along with the refugee', and is shaped by experiences along the way.

Despite these rich debates highlighting the transitionality and spatiality of coping practices and relations, representations of Rohingya social roles and coping mechanisms continue to be largely reductive or static. Rohingya culture 'in' Myanmar is often generalised as deeply conservative and patriarchal, with men at the head of the family as breadwinners and women passively occupying the home space with limited mobility outside of it. When Rohingya women, therefore, lead households or take up leadership positions in refugee contexts as community leaders, translators, and heads-of-family, it is presented as a (typically progressive) break from the 'norm' of Rohingya culture in Myanmar (Singh 2020). These broad-brush characterisations might hold true if slicing time (Massey 2005) and examining some Rohingyas in one particular moment of history in Myanmar. However, a place can encompass multiple realities and 'social relations stretched out beyond one location' and one period of time (Brun and Faboc 2015, 4). It is thus crucial to take a longer (temporal) and wider (geographical) view of Rohingya survival and coping, and related familial role negotiations.

For several generations of Rohingyas, violence, rupture and mobility have been more of a norm than an exceptional experience. The Rohingyas have been marginalised and violently persecuted with frequency in Myanmar since the 1970s (Zarni and Cowley 2014; Ibrahim 2016). Major military operations were conducted in 1978, 1991–92, 2012, 2015 and 2017, displacing tens or hundreds of thousands of Rohingya each time. Moreover, beyond Rakhine state, Myanmar has been a site of political instability, conflict, poverty and pervasive gender violence for decades (Davies and True 2017). It is common for Rohingyas to have experienced displacement multiple times across their individual lifetimes. In short, the gendered renegotiation of roles and relationships within Rohingya families and Myanmar society did not begin in August 2017 with the most recent displacement. Nor will it end if/when the Rohingya are able to safely repatriate. Periods of (negative) peace, violence, genocide and protracted displacement in/between Myanmar and Bangladesh/India have shaped the Rohingya's social, economic, cultural and physical lives for many decades and across many places.

For instance, in a recent webinar organised and hosted by Rohingya women activists about Rohingya women's experiences (The Rohingya Human Rights Network 2020), Rohingya activist Zainab Arkani noted that some examples of SGBV now common in the Rohingya community, such as the child marriage of young Rohingya girls, have increased as a result of the familial insecurity created by sustained persecution—rather than it being an enduring feature of Rohingya culture itself. Another consequence of the violence, and one we will explore in detail shortly, is that Rohingya women have frequently had to take the lead in navigating and protecting family welfare on forced migration out of Myanmar.

Our aim in exploring these connections is not to extend the gaze of 'pity' and the reductive framing of Rohingyas-as-victims across a wider geography and longer timespan. Nor is it to characterise Rohingya life as one of violence. Rather, our goal is to argue for the need to consider the gender relations of Rohingyas as shaped by interrelated places and experiences (past and present) and examine how they come together in particular moments (Hyndman and Giles 2017). To do so, we need to move beyond two dimensional representations of Rohingyas, particularly women, as passively oppressed in Myanmar by both the Myanmar state and Rohingya culture. We also need to move beyond the image of 'empowerment' and agency only being possible in refugee host countries, with external intervention. Instead, we seek to show how gender relations and coping practices developed in the face of hardships are transitional, non-linear, and shaped by experiences across many locations. To develop this argument, the next section outlines some of the broader challenges and social changes that Rohingya refugees have faced on their flight from Myanmar, before moving on to the specifics of how these experiences figure in, and collide with, daily life in Mewat and Hyderabad in India.

4. Out of Myanmar

In Myanmar, military and paramilitary attacks on Rohingya civilians, summary executions and extreme violence have been extensively documented for many decades (Ibrahim 2016; Amnesty International 2017). SGBV have been used as weapons during the violence and ethnic cleansing, with extensively reported cases of rape, gang-rape, sexual humiliations and mutilations, often done to invoke terror through forced witnessing by family members and neighbours (Abdelkader 2014; UN Women Bangladesh 2018). While these accounts usually concern women and girls, men and boys have also suffered SGBV, as well as being forced to bear witness (Chynoweth 2018). Rohingya interviewees in Mewat and Hyderabad spoke of these acts of violence as necessitating their collective flight out of the country at various times in the last few decades. While none directly spoke of sexual and gender violence perpetrated against themselves in Myanmar (and we did not press on this issue), the majority recounted extreme violence against their community over a long time period. As a 19-year old Rohingya woman in Mewat explained, 'so many atrocities were inflicted upon us' (MRF1, Mewat, 01 December 2019). Moreover, these narratives of physical violence were interspersed with recollections of everyday violence; in other words, routinised forms of violence, domination and 'terror as usual' perpetrated by the state, (Taussig cited in Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2017, 21).

One man who fled Myanmar in 2002 recalled that as a young teenager, he and his fellow eighth grade classmates were elated after finishing their final examinations and, in their distraction, they forgot to dismount their bicycles when crossing a military area, as was mandated by the authorities. He recounted:

I was caught by the military. ... My uncle was there, and he is a member of their council, so these cops did not beat me, but they harassed me asking questions. After returning to my place, I told my parents that I am not going to live here if I need to get education (MRM6, Mewat, 9 December 2019).

These acts of confrontation have occurred against a backdrop of state-sanctioned everyday violence against the Rohingya, including: gradual citizenship-stripping, restrictions on mobility, restrictions on marriage, denial of basic health services including maternal health, the conscription of Rohingya men into unpaid labour, arbitrary taxation, coercion and (SGBV) violence (Zarni and Cowley 2014). Both individual and family well-being have been disrupted through gendered acts of domination and exploitation by the state. For instance, while Rohingyas in Myanmar are primarily fisher-people by trade, men and women have been subject to frequent forced labour over the decades—often to construct state infrastructure on land taken from the Rohingya in forced land grabs (Ibrahim 2016, 52). Many of our male interviewees spoke of gruelling labour and beatings during these periods. A 40-year-old Rohingya man in Hyderabad recalled:

Back in Myanmar, I was a fisherman. On the river, Myanmar military issued permissions to travel or do fishing. One day, they called me to their post. When I went there, they asked me to visit another post 3-4 hours away to do [unpaid] labour work – I went there and I hadn't eaten anything the whole day. They asked me to pick up and carry very heavy stuff, but I couldn't and they beat [me] a lot for that (RM3, Hyderabad, 5 August 2019).

This forced labour became a regular occurrence over extended periods. 'Sometimes', this man continued, 'I had to stay [at the labour site] for weeks. And of course, without pay and very little food. During those times my family back home would be without money or even food'. Punishment could extend to the whole family for failure to comply. A Rohingya woman explained the impact of such everyday violence on her family:

[M]y husband was put in jail in Burma. He went to fetch fishes for us, he was caught by the police and put in the jail. He was asked to come for free labour, but he did not go, so he was targeted by them ... I had three children with me, so I thought of escaping our locality... I got very scared that they may harm my children as well and already father was in the jail. I thought if my children would be put into the jail, how I am going to survive without them (MRF5, Mewat, 9 December 2019).

In addition to creating an ongoing state of individual fear of violence, these acts serve to disrupt familial safety nets, gender relations and routines that underpin Rohingya family life and well-being. Forced labour and incarceration prevent Rohingya men from fulfilling their socio-economic role as breadwinners and heads of their families. For many Rohingya women, an important manifestation of their sense of dignity is *purdah*, which involves modest body coverings and taking charge of care responsibilities for the family and home (Tay *et al.* 2018; Holloway and Fan 2018, 8; Women FGD, Hyderabad, 24 July 2019). However, state acts of domination in Myanmar include legal restrictions on women's bodies and intrusions into private contexts; laws restricting marriage and birth control (themselves gendered acts of violence) have empowered officials to intrude into Rohingya homes to check compliance, frequently exerting arbitrary physical violence in the process (Ibrahim 2016, 53). One Rohingya man in Mewat recounted how Rohingyas have been treated when trying to get married: 'When we go for our marriages ... they take away scarf of the Muslim women before entering their office. They don't bother about our respect or sense of respect. Men can't wear cap on their head' (MRM6, Mewat, 1 December 2019). In Hyderabad, a Rohingya woman explained how her sister was a teacher in Myanmar, but the school began demanding that she remove *purdah*. 'My mother then said that she shouldn't work somewhere where she is being asked to be without the *purdah*' and so she had to quit the role (R1 in Women FGD, Hyderabad, 24 July 2019).

Moreover, the frequent and lengthy conscriptions of men and boys into forced labour, and the deaths of male family members in these conditions,

have resulted in women having to lead households, temporarily or indefinitely (Farzana 2017, 104)—often without the ability or opportunity to work, and at high risk of SGBV from military actors (RM3 and RF7, Hyderabad 5 August 2019; RF4 and RM2, Hyderabad 4 August 2019). These gendered acts of everyday violence in Myanmar—as in other contexts of genocide and conflict (Sanford, Stefatos, and Salvi 2016, 2)—are weapons deployed by state forces for political ends: namely, to dominate and dehumanise the Rohingya in order to expedite ethnic cleansing. For our interviewees, in the face of this systematic violence, forced migration (or repeated cycles of forced migration to and from Bangladesh) has been the only option for survival—bringing with it a set of new ruptures that have catalysed different coping practices and shifted gender roles and responsibilities.

5. Negotiating forced migration and borders

In the experiences recounted above, journeys out of Myanmar were not undertaken as a family unit; the teenage boy forced to dismount his bicycle travelled to Bangladesh without his parents, the woman whose husband was caught by police travelled to India with her three children and without her incarcerated husband. In other accounts, some fled without any members of their family, or only their immediate family members (siblings and parents).

On their flight out of Myanmar, Rohingyas have had to rely on multiple smugglers, termed ‘dalals’ or agents (typically male Rohingyas, Bangladeshis or Indians), and travel across challenging terrain in order to reach neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and India. On the whole, these smugglers were described as an essential lifeline and continue to be used for migration support within the region. Journeys are costly and fearful—one 19-year-old woman recalled that, ‘I was badly scared; I feared police and thought if we would also end up in the jail’ (MRF1, Mewat, 01 December 2019). Risks of violence and trafficking while travelling are high. For those unable to find the additional money, Rohingyas—typically men—faced bonded labour in factories in India where the smuggling fee is ‘repaid’ from their wages. None of our interviewees reported experiencing direct physical violence themselves on the route, though one woman had heard of this happening with others, ‘such as women[’s] jewellery being taken away, or young women being abducted, but with us nothing of this sort happened’ (RF1, Hyderabad, 3 August 2019).

As a result of disrupted family networks and travelling without male heads of households, Rohingya women have taken on bargaining and negotiating roles *en route*. This was the experience of Rahima, a Rohingya woman in her early 40s, who we have pseudonymised as we share more of her personal

experiences later in the article. Rahima recounted that, while trying to cross from Myanmar to Bangladesh to get to India:

[W]e were caught again by one policeman who demanded money. I didn't have anything since our stuff was not with us, I only had my nose rings, but he wasn't happy with that. I told him that once we meet our dalal again we can pay him, but he demanded to talk to him on the phone. I only had the number of the Indian dalal, he called him and through him got the number of our dalal here [at the Myanmar/Bangladesh border] with whom we had gotten separated. Then our local dalal came and paid and that's how we were let off. (RF4 [Rahima], Hyderabad, 4 August 2019).

In another interview (RM3 and RF7, Hyderabad, 5 August 2019), a husband and wife explained:

RM3 [husband]: it took us a day to reach the [Indian] border, and then we reached Kolkata

RF7 [wife]: we had to stay in Kolkata for 3 days

RM3: our dalal fled leaving us at Kolkata railway station – he left the three, four families including ours. The police caught me there and took me away to jail.

RF7: we [RF7 and the children] were not with him that time, but then I found where he was taken to, and with my children I told the policeman who had arrested him that we were his family. The policeman said that he thought he was alone and didn't know he was with family, so he let him go.

As Mainwaring (2016, 290) highlights in her analysis of migrant agency at securitised borders in the Global North, refugees in borderlands are often depicted in scholarship and policy literature as having limited agency—i.e. as victims of traffickers or smugglers (see also: Sharma 2009, 468). This is particularly true of the female migrant/refugee, who must embody 'victimhood' in order to meet the ideal of the humanitarian subject (Mainwaring 2016, 290; Grabska 2011, 91). Refugee agency can pose a threat to, or undermine, 'those who wish to control' or 'save' them (Sharma 2009, 469). However, the encounters of these Rohingya women with border security forces challenge images of migrant women as 'eternal victims' (Pickering 2011, 111) and highlight their agency in high-risk situations. Moreover, these women-led negotiations with police actors are particularly significant given that they have just fled a country where security forces are active participants in the genocidal violence. While these adaptation strategies deployed during the migration out of Myanmar are necessary to survive, they can span long time periods and wide transnational geographies, as family members might only be re-united after some time (if at all). Indeed, many of our interviewees still had family members dispersed across the region that they hoped might join them (or they might join) someday soon.

6. Coping practices and gender relations in Hyderabad and Mewat

Almost all Rohingya refugees we interviewed in Hyderabad and Mewat had lived in several locations before arriving to these settlements. Typical routes included a stay in Bangladesh followed by one other city in India, often Kolkata or Jammu. Employment and security were drivers of migration out of these early asylum locations—with male family members typically moving first, followed by wives and other family members, or all at the same time. In Bangladesh, even before the 2017 refugee camp overcrowding, livelihood opportunities were scarce and accessing food was noted as a challenge across many interviews: ‘things are cheaper and wages are bit higher here in India. People can live better life here rather than in Bangladesh’, as one Rohingya man commented (MRM19, Mewat, 11 December 2019). The camps, too, have been documented as violent and insecure places – particularly for women, many of whom have suffered ‘horrendous domestic violence’ as well as abuse and terror outside of the camp homes (Pittaway 2008, 92).

Kolkata or Jammu in India were frequently the next choice because of language and faith commonalities combined with perceived job opportunities. However, since 2017, West Bengal and parts of Jammu have experienced communal clashes intertwined with local state politics, some of which has been built on the platform of expelling so-called ‘illegal’ Muslim immigrants from these States (Financial Express 2019). Anti-migrant and anti-Muslim communal rhetoric and violence has forced Rohingya refugees to disperse to other cities as they lack formal recognition as refugees from the government. In contrast, Hyderabad and Mewat are viewed by many Rohingya as more ‘welcoming’ cities, not least as they have sizeable Muslim populations and are viewed as peaceful locations where they can pursue work and education for their children. As one Rohingya man in Hyderabad shared: ‘We thought that Hyderabad is a Muslim region, so it would be more comfortable for us, that’s why we decided to come’ (RM1, Hyderabad, 3 August 2019).

Rohingya settlements in both of these areas are on insecure, rented land. Families live together in cramped conditions and no landholdings—the opposite of their memories of home, where land is remembered as spacious and rich in flora (Women FGD, Hyderabad, 24 July 2019). ‘In Burma’, one man in Mewat shared, ‘even a beggar would not have such house [as the one I live in now in India]. Even a beggar would have a piece of land. There is a huge difference between lives here and there’ (MRM18, Mewat, 29 January 2020). Cramped and precarious living conditions have placed a significant strain on family dignity and well-being, and exacerbate relational pressures that have come from displacement-affected family migration.

For instance, in our interviews, several of the women shared that family dynamics have shifted as a result of tension between patriarchal marriage

norms and Rohingya refugee dispersal across Asia. In Myanmar, women would marry and move in with the husband, near his family, but this was rarely very far from the wife's family. As one Rohingya woman explained, 'back home there was no question of moving to a separate far-off place' (R6 in FGD Women, Hyderabad, 24 July 2019). However, in India, family networks have been disrupted and when a Rohingya woman marries a Rohingya man (typically arranged using dispersed family networks), she will move to where he resides, often in cramped dwellings near to his family, if they are still together. This can be in a different city or country to where the woman's relatives are based. As a result, Rohingya women experience that 'the husband listens to his side of the family more and we have no one so it feels difficult' (R6 in FGD Women, Hyderabad, 24 July 2019). This has arguably shifted more familial power to the patrilineal side of the family, and can exacerbate feelings of alienation and risks of domestic abuse for women. Though, as has been highlighted elsewhere, the level of power Rohingya women can have inside and outside the home varies a lot depending on age and status (Tay *et al.* 2018, 17).

Nonetheless, these dispersals have also resulted in the horizontal expansion of safety nets across female friends. During our focus group discussion with women Rohingya in Hyderabad, 29-year-old Respondent 1 (R1) explained how R2, aged 28, who she met in Hyderabad, has become 'like a sister' to her. R1 stated that, if it wasn't for R2, she would not have survived in Hyderabad. All six women in the room agreed, asserting that they were more like sisters than friends: 'We also usually after our chores meet up and talk a lot. That releases our tensions when we share. Alone, we experience more tension' (R1, Women FGD, Hyderabad, 24 July 2019). In Mewat, a 25-year-old Rohingya woman shared that if they have free time in the day, 'some educated women read Burmese books or Hadis, and some sit in a group and talk about their past like in Burma. Like I sit with some [women] elders here and talk to them about our lives in Burma' (MRF4 [referred to later as 'Yasmin'], Mewat, 5 December 2019). Rahman (2021, 882) found similar bonds and relationships in her interviews with Rohingya women in Bangladesh. *Taleems* (women's prayer spaces), Rahman highlights, have become vital 'safe spaces' for women in Cox's Bazar refugee camp because they are meaningful social areas where women can meet up and process trauma through 'drawing support from the simple presence of others', and through observing traditions related to their familial roles.

Hoffman, Tierney, and Robertson (2017, 1361) describe these shifting social relationships as reconfigurations of identity in response to the social-political-cultural consequences of transnational displacement. These reconfigurations draw on the refugee's gendered historical experiences, as well as their anticipations of the future for themselves, their family and community. For instance, in their research with Karen refugees on the

Thai-Burma border, Hoffman, Tierney, and Robertson (2017, 1347) highlighted how Karen women were creating and maintaining relationships with each other that were resilience-building and confidence-affirming in the face of change — ‘a sense of ‘together we are stronger.’

A key part of Hoffman *et al*'s argument is that relationships are co-constructed between refugees and the systems around them, meaning that they are constantly in transition and affected by internal and external dynamics over a long period. This notion of transitionality in relationships is instructive, as it focuses attention on the stimuli of change in a displacement context. In Hoffman's study on the Thai-Burma border, humanitarian support was retracting, further encouraging refugee moves towards social interdependence. In contrast, Rohingya refugees in Mewat and Hyderabad have seen ongoing NGO interventions that have sought to reconfigure gender and power relations as a means to augment Rohingya (women's) ‘resilience’, coping and well-being over the longer term.

7. Refugee agency in disrupted spaces

UNHCR-funded programming in India, like elsewhere, has moved towards limiting aid dependency and enhancing refugee self-reliance (Field, Tiwari, and Mookherjee 2020). UNHCR partner organisations have sought to do this economically by, among other things, increasing market linkages and livelihood opportunities for all working-age refugees. The gender dynamics of this globalised ideology centre on the need to reconfigure ‘traditional social systems’ and support equality in labour and leadership opportunities (Fiddian-Qasimiyeh 2014, 403). As such, UNHCR India and NGO partners have sought to augment the new, supportive relationships among Rohingyas (particularly women) and their family networks through the creation of ‘self-help groups’ (SHG) and the empowerment of women leaders in various initiatives. For instance, UNHCR's Hyderabad-based NGO partner has supported the development of democratic elections of men and women community leaders. A Rohingya woman in Hyderabad, who we have pseudonymised as ‘Rahima’, explained the extensive responsibilities she has taken with the support of local NGOs:

I was elected the women leader... I am also the leader in SHG, child line group, child marriage group, change maker. ... [T]hey [the NGO] would tell us how a leader should be, how to mediate, how to help others. (RF4 [Rahima], Hyderabad, 04 August 2019).

In contrast, Mewat had, at the time of writing, a notable absence of structured female leadership in the community. UNHCR's partner organisation supporting this area was less successful in implementing gender-responsive leadership elections, resulting in a visible absence of women leader

participation in general decision-making—though this was not always the case. A 25-year-old woman in Mewat, who we have pseudonymised as ‘Yasmin’, shared her reasons for stepping down as a community leader after some time:

I was the leader but now I am not the leader... because sometimes outsiders come here and I also need to talk to other men sometimes, so that is not permissible. If I talk to other men and if they hear me talking then it would be a sin, so that’s why I left the position. (MRF4 [Yasmin], Mewat, 05 December 2019).

While these two anecdotes suggest contrasting levels of leadership and ‘empowerment’ possibilities of women in Hyderabad and Mewat, the transformative status of a ‘women’s leader’ can be misleading in its suggestion of social change because of the historic context and agency it obscures.

For instance, Yasmin, who stepped down from her leadership role as a result of perceived sin in conversing with other men, previously served as a UNHCR Burmese interpreter for four years, travelling monthly into Delhi for meetings at UNHCR’s offices. She was educated to ninth grade in Myanmar and can communicate in Rohingya, Burmese, Hindi, Urdu, Mewati, Bengali and a little English. When Yasmin moved to Mewat with her family, she had one child who stayed with her grandmother while she and her husband worked, but when Yasmin had more children, she ‘could not go out for work’ (MRF4 [Yasmin], Mewat, 05 December 2019)—which itself speaks of the gendered division of childcare responsibilities within a nuclear family. In recent years, her family attempted to travel to Kolkata for better living and working conditions, only to encounter harassment and threats of violence from locals, and the death of one of their children—forcing them to return to Mewat.

Similarly, Rahima had already negotiated power hierarchies in displacement and refuge long before becoming a community leader in Hyderabad. She was, as she explained to us, educated in Myanmar alongside her sisters:

There was an issue that since we had no brothers and a lot of land [in Myanmar] who would manage it? My mother used to say that in today’s world if a person, including girl, isn’t educated they are blind, but my father would say what’s the point of girls being educated, how will education help in burning the stove. With boys, ok, because they have to go out and talk and mingle but girls don’t have to go out. But my mother used to ignore my father. She would tell him that an uneducated person can be deceived very easily (RF4 [Rahima], Hyderabad, 4 August 2019).

Rahima’s education stopped when she was 12 years old as a result of increasing violence in Myanmar. At 13, she was married to an older ‘class friend’, and they were both sent to Bangladesh by his parents to settle and prepare for family migration. They were living in the UNHCR camps in Bangladesh

and Rahima's husband moved frequently between the two countries as she managed their home. However, around 18 months after arriving in Bangladesh they were forcibly pushed back into Myanmar by the Bangladesh authorities, where she and her husband stayed with their family, until they were once more violently displaced in 2012. Determining from previous experiences that Bangladesh was also unsafe, Rahima migrated to Hyderabad that year with her children and mother and was joined by her husband a few days later. As noted earlier in the paper, Rahima played a key role in negotiating with 'dalals' along the migration journey—trying to pay for onward passage with her nose ring jewellery. Then, after a few years living in Hyderabad, she began training with NGOs and taking up various leadership positions in the camp. Echoing (the memories of) her mother's advice, she explained:

[W]omen are the roots of the world. If I wasn't educated how would I educate my children? For example, yes, the boy goes out and can study and get educated without my help – but what about the girls? For them it's important that their mother is educated and can teach them things at home itself, if needed.

For both Yasmin and Rahima, refuge in Mewat and Hyderabad has encompassed responsibilities and 'social relations [that have] stretched out beyond one location' and one period of time (Brun and Fábos 2015, 4). Social ruptures on their journeys from Myanmar and to/between Bangladesh, Hyderabad and (for Yasmin) Kolkata, have prompted (sometimes violently forced) re-contextualisations of social practices as a form of coping in the present.

Moreover, Yasmin's experience in Mewat and Kolkata highlights that 'coping' in crisis cannot be considered as a linear trajectory towards NGO-ised ideas of 'empowerment' (defined here in the globalised gender ideology as a self-reliant/decision-making woman visible in the public sphere). While Yasmin's family survived for several years on her work as a UNHCR Burmese interpreter alongside her husband's work as a Maulavi (religious teacher), they experienced persecution, poverty, and child bereavement in Kolkata over nine months in 2017/2018, and so returned to Mewat—where Yasmin subsequently decreased her social interactions outside the home.

Coinciding with her family's return from Kolkata, there had been a general decline in trust and positive relations between UNHCR's NGO partner in Mewat and Rohingyas settled there. Multiple male Rohingyas separately communicated concerns that there may be corruption in that NGO, stating suspicions that supplies and funding from the NGO seem irregular (MRM7, MRM8 and MRM9, Mewat, 09 December 2019). Others shared that the NGO 'doesn't do anything', even when a medial case is pressing (MRM5, Mewat, 05 December 2019) or when there are wider social needs, like a safe space to play sports (MRM15, Mewat, 29 January 2020). Another male Rohingya who used to work for the NGO, but had since left, shared that he felt 'something is very fishy' about their way of working, suspecting a monetary or

political agenda (MRM6, Mewat, 9 December 2019). Establishing whether or not these accusations are true is beyond the remit of this study. Relevant here is the pervasiveness of the narrative. Even if untrue, its dominance suggests an environment of mistrust, which may have contributed to Yasmin (and others) not engaging with NGO-backed leadership programmes.

This navigation of differing forms of insecurity should be read as a form of agency; not inaction, but an alternative form of coping in the face of altered hardships. One that is sensitive to surrounding and transitional threats, such as gender hierarchies, violence from locals, trust relations with the NGO, poverty, and changing family dynamics in the face of bereavement. As Thompson (2013) has explored with refugee women in Kenya, agency can manifest as silence and ‘muted voice’ as much public visibility.

8. Conclusion

Social roles within a society are fluid and can change over time in response to external and internal catalysts, particularly in contexts of insecurity. Rohingya forced migrations from Myanmar and Bangladesh, and within a changing India, mean that transitionality is a constant and Rohingyas are dealing with ‘multiple hierarchies of power operative within and across many terrains’ (Pessar and Mahler 2003, 818). These forced migrations and disrupted social spaces manifest and demand multiple ways for women and men to renegotiate gendered roles within and outside the household—both for immediate survival and coping over the longer term.

This article has primarily focussed on Rohingya women’s journeys from Myanmar to India and, through sharing some of their experiences, we have presented new insights into the dynamic subjectivity of Rohingya women in the face of ever-evolving threats and opportunities. We have highlighted how many have had to organise and lead (broken) family migration across borders, take up NGO/community leadership roles, or just make the best ‘home’ possible within the limitations of the host context. Memories of home in Myanmar, as both a physical space and a set of social practices, continue to inform role negotiation for Rohingya refugees in India, resulting in the continued importance of cultural practices that have particular coping value for families and the community—such as *purdah* for women. These are then interwoven with new/adapted practices that have emerged through their forced migration journeys to/within India. For instance, dispersed practices of marriage have fostered the reconfigurations of (gendered) social networks: biologically unrelated women provide supportive, solidaristic company and a sense of community in challenging moments where blood relatives might have done so at ‘home’ in Myanmar.

Importantly, as was particularly clear in the more detailed personal accounts of Rahima and Yasmin, we have shown how Rohingya women (and

men) have exerted power over the forces displacing them and disrupting their lives, as well as being affected by them. The intention here is not to argue that, for example, Rahima and Yasmin's experiences should be taken as typical of Rohingya women or families. Rather, in sharing these lived experiences of Rohingya women (and men) as they have negotiated survival across borders, we have sought to move discussions about Rohingya coping practices and gender relations in host countries beyond reductive 'women-as-victims' and static geographical frames. Sprawling and transitional influences have affected Rohingya roles and coping practices over several generations and wide geographies—from, between, and within Myanmar, Bangladesh, and India.

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