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EDUCATION ACCESS AMONG ROHINGYA WOMEN IN MALAYSIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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MySDG Centre for Social Inclusion

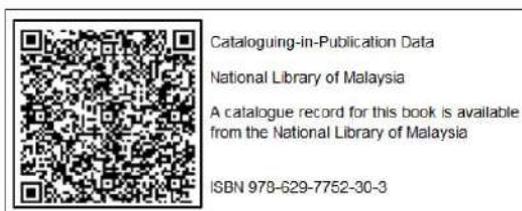
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The APPGM-SDG Case Study Small Grants for Young Researchers Programme empowers researchers under 35 to conduct qualitative research on pressing SDG-related issues in Malaysia. The resulting papers explore challenges affecting left-behind communities, directly supporting APPGM-SDG's grounded, evidence-based research agenda. The grant is offered and managed by APPGM-SDG's policy think tank, MySDG Centre for Social Inclusion.

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ABSTRACT

As of May 2025, there are 117,670 Rohingya refugees out of the 200,260 total refugees registered with UNHCR in Malaysia (UNHCR Malaysia, 2025). Due to the absence of a national refugee policy and Malaysia's non-signatory status to both the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Refugee Protocol, refugee access to basic healthcare, education, and economic opportunities remain severely limited. While many educational services in Malaysia are focused on refugee children, there is little discussion on adult education, including higher education and skills training programmes in the country. This paper examines educational access for Rohingya women in Malaysia, encompassing both skills training programmes and higher education. The paper reveals that some Rohingya women have received skills training programmes organised by civil society organisations (CSOs) in the past, although these were typically one-off sessions. While some Rohingya women express a desire to pursue higher education, they face challenges such as care responsibilities and financial constraints in obtaining the adult education they aspire to pursue. The paper argues that there is a need for an institution that provides Rohingya women with continuous adult education programmes, rather than one-off formats, to better empower them in their daily lives.

Keywords: Refugee, women, education, higher education, skills training, Rohingya

INTRODUCTION

History of Rohingya Refugees

In 1978, the Myanmar junta launched Operation Nagamin (Dragon King) to remove foreigners from the country's Rakhine districts (Ansar, 2020). Rohingya refugees were considered as illegal immigrants by the Myanmar junta, as the group was never included among the 135 distinct indigenous ethnic groups created by the Ne Win government in 1962, nor were they included in the subsequent national censuses (Alam, 2019). The exclusion of the Rohingya from *Taingyintha* (national race) resulted in their exclusion from the 1982 Citizenship Law. The Myanmar junta launched another operation, called Operation *Pyi Thaya* (Clean and Beautiful Nation), to expel foreigners and target the Rohingya in 1991 (Habiburahman & Ansel, 2019). The most recent wave of forced displacements among ethnic Rohingya was in 2017, when Myanmar launched another security operation (United Nations, n.d.).

Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia

Rohingya refugees comprised over 50% of the total refugee population registered with UNHCR in Malaysia as of May 2025. Rohingya refugees are one of the groups globally in protracted displacement. Some have been seeking asylum in Malaysia since the 1980s, and yet the population remains highly vulnerable in the country—without access to legal employment, formal education, or adequate healthcare services. While there has been discussion on refugee policy in Malaysia, there is yet to be a concrete plan that may significantly improve refugees' livelihood. In 2015, Dato' Seri Shahidan Kassim, then Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, explicitly stated that the government does not have any plan to become a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention (Palansamy, 2015).

Rohingya refugees in Malaysia continue to depend on civil society assistance for basic education services for their children and healthcare services. Non-government organisations (NGOs) such as Malaysia Relief Agency (MRA) have established community schools in locations like Cheras Baru and Klang to provide education for Rohingya children. Other NGOs such as MERCY Malaysia, in collaboration with funders like the Qatar Fund for Development, provide basic healthcare services for refugees in several locations including Ampang and Selayang. However, these healthcare services do not cover complex treatments like dialysis or other specialised needs of the community. Community members still must seek specialised care from government or private healthcare providers, incurring high charges for each visit.

On top of the unresolved situation in Myanmar, Rohingya refugees in transit countries such as Malaysia must wait for a long time before being resettled to a third country. The entire process—from registration to resettlement—can take many years, and as a result, the community must, by hook or by crook, find ways to support themselves. As a conservative and patriarchal society, often, the responsibility of earning money is put onto the shoulders of the male family members. Female family members stay at home, focusing on housework and other related chores like childcare. Hence, Rohingya women play an important role in keeping the family and community together. For example, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2014) in her book chapter “Gender and Forced Migration” dissects the issue of gender in forced migration studies. She argued that critique has deconstructed not only the stereotypical perspective of refugee women as caregivers but also that past literature, such as Abu Lughod (2002), Moser and Clark (2001) shows they can be victimised or incite violence in conflict-induced displacement. Hence, refugee women were perceived as having their own female agency, rather than being non-agentic

victims. And yet, Rohingya refugee women continue to face significant challenges in obtaining control over their own lives. These include gender bias and prejudice, social and cultural norms, as well as a lack of skills— all of which hinder their ability to be more proactive within their community.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Rohingya refugees in Malaysia continue to depend on community-run schools supported by UNHCR or civil society-run refugee schools to provide education for their children. Yet, limited research exists examining adult education access, particularly the differences between Rohingya men and women in Malaysia. Farzana et al.'s article (2020) are among the few that have discussed access to education among Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. The article noted that 50% of refugee children did not attend school due to factors such as school location, fees, and other economic issues. Specific discussion on education access for Rohingya refugee women in Malaysia remains missing, as the article only mentions in passing their need to stay home as caregivers for younger siblings—a situation that often leads to child marriage. While school locations and economic factors play a role in female Rohingya refugees' access to education, there is a clear need to better understand the distinct barriers they face in pursuing education in Malaysia.

We must also not undermine the impact of poor educational access on refugee women, particularly Rohingya refugee women in Malaysia. Rajaratnam & Azman (2022) stated that the normalisation of child marriage within the Rohingya refugee community prevents girls from receiving a proper education, thereby perpetuating a cycle of violence and abuse against women in the community. Quality education for all, including refugee women, would help break this cycle of violence and

abuse and better equip girls and women before entering the institution of marriage.

Dagar (2024) argued that some adult education opportunities provided to refugee communities in India fail to meet community needs for supporting sustainable livelihoods. The limited training opportunities, which often focuses on basic skills, results in refugee communities accessing only low-skilled jobs to earn money. However, the exclusion of training such as basic literacy means refugee communities remain trapped in the cycle of poverty, unable to improve their circumstances in other aspects of life. As such, this research is important both to identify Rohingya refugee women's needs in accessing adult education and to understand their general educational background for the group's empowerment.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This research aims to identify barriers that prevent female Rohingya refugees from accessing education in Malaysia. Specifically, this research would like:

- i) to understand the challenges faced by female refugees in getting education
- ii) to explore current resources and ways female refugees have in accessing education services and facilities

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted using a qualitative method, employing focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews with female refugee youths aged between 18 to 30 years who live in Kuala Lumpur or neighbouring districts. The researcher recruited 10 participants for the interview and 6 participants for the FGDs via two community liaisons, who were also Rohingya refugees. Such methods allow the

researcher to gather collective opinions of female refugees on education issues, as well as capture their personal experiences in accessing education throughout their life. Focus groups offer an ideal method for analysts to gain insight into group meaning-making processes (Walters, 2023). This approach thereby helps the researcher understand the value of education for female Rohingya refugee participants.

Meanwhile, the researcher employed semi-structured interviews. This method is particularly useful for research questions where the relevant concepts and their relationships are relatively well understood (Given, 2008). As such, it allowed for a deeper exploration of the research topic. The format enabled the preparation of key questions in advance while retaining the flexibility to adapt the conversation during the session. All FGDs and interview sessions were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. These transcripts were then uploaded to NVivo for thematic analysis. The analysis began with a familiarisation phase, involving repeated reading of the transcripts. Initial codes were then developed, after which similar codes were grouped under broader parent codes to form preliminary themes. Finally, these themes were reviewed, refined and selected based on their relevance to the research objectives and questions.

Research Ethics

As this research engages with the marginalised community of Rohingya refugees, several steps were taken to ensure it was conducted in accordance with research ethics. The researcher ensured that all participants received a detailed briefing to understand the research background, as well as how their data would be recorded, stored and used. To overcome language barriers, the researcher worked with community liaisons before and during data collection, as the researcher does not speak Rohingya or Burmese. All

participants were also given a researcher's name card containing contact details for any further enquiries.

Community liaisons, who are Rohingya refugees themselves, assisted the researcher in recruiting and introducing participants. The researcher engaged two community liaisons to mitigate potential bias from relying on a single individual. To ensure confidentiality, all interview and focus group transcripts were labelled with unique codes to ensure the confidentiality of the research participants. All transcripts are stored in the researcher's password-protected personal laptop and in an encrypted online storage system, with access restricted solely to the researcher.

Acknowledging the power gap between the researcher and the community, the researcher transparently communicated the expectations of the research process to participants and liaisons. The researcher also articulated the potential benefits of the research for the participants. Furthermore, the researcher clearly explained the research timeline and the intended final output of the research to all parties involved.

Significance to Malaysia's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Agenda

This research holds particular significance to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4): Quality Education. By examining educational access among female Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, this research can help the Malaysian government and other relevant education stakeholders identify and address the challenges that hinder the provision of inclusive and equitable quality education for all. SDG 4's target 4.1, for example, states that by 2030, all girls and boys should complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education that leads to relevant and effective learning

outcomes. Yet, in Malaysia, the refugee communities' access to education facilities and services continues to depend on civil society services that do not necessarily lead to globally or nationally recognised certificates. Current practices that restrict vulnerable communities' access to public education contradict SDG target 4.5, which aims to eliminate gender disparities and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for all, including vulnerable populations. This research aims to inform relevant stakeholders in forging ways for better, more inclusive, and equitable primary, secondary, higher, or vocational education. To fulfil SDG 4, the government and other stakeholders must establish mechanisms that ensure better educational access for vulnerable communities, particularly refugee women in Malaysia. This research represents an initial step towards achieving that goal.

FINDINGS

Demographic Background of Research Participants

Participants of this research comprises 16 Rohingya women refugees. All 16 participants currently live in Selayang, Gombak, and Ampang, while one lives in Rawang. The participants range from 21 to 35 years old. In terms of their arrival in Malaysia, 8 participants were born in Malaysia while the remaining arrived during their teenage years or recently.

In terms of marital status, 9 out of the 16 participants are married, three are divorced, one is widowed, and three are single. Most married participants married quite early, with the youngest marital age among them being 12 years old. The findings reveal that within Rohingya refugee culture, women are considered adults upon their first menstruation.

Table 1 below shows the background of each participant, encompassing their age, current living location, marital status, and year of arrival in Malaysia. The participants' names have been replaced by pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Table 1. Demographic background of research participants

NO	NAME	AGE	MARITAL STATUS	LIVING LOCATION	YEAR OF ARRIVAL	MARRIAGE AGE
1	Asma	26	Divorced	Gombak	2016	19
2	Frida	22	Married	Gombak	2023	16
3	Rusila	30	Married	Selayang	2017	18
4	Shila	28	Married	Selayang	2024	25
5	Tasnim	40	Widowed	Selayang	2013	15
6	Wasem	22	Divorced	Selayang	Born in Malaysia	15
7	Susila	30	Married	Ampang	Born in Malaysia	13
8	Jun	38	Married	Ampang	1989	12
9	Shahila	23	Married	Ampang	Born in Malaysia	18
10	Zuraini	21	Married	Ampang	Born in Malaysia	13
11	Fariza	28	Divorced	Ampang	Born in Malaysia	15
12	Sri	27	Single	Gombak	Born in Malaysia	-
13	Nurul	28	Married	Ampang	Born in Malaysia	19
14	Siti	29	Single	Rawang	Born in Malaysia	-
15	Kila	19	Single	Selayang	2012	-
16	Firas	32	Married	Selayang	2006	12

Some of the research participants received some form of education, either in Malaysia, Myanmar, or Bangladesh, albeit incomplete. For example, several of the participants have primary school experience until Standard 7 to 11 such as Asma, Frida, Rusila, Wasem, Susila, Fariza and Zuraini. Asma, Frida and Rusila received their basic primary education in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Asma and Rusila received their basic primary education from Myanmar government school while Frida received hers back in a refugee camp in Bangladesh. The remaining received their basic primary education in Malaysia. Wasem, Susila, Fariza and Zuraini received their basic primary education via a CSO-established school, private tuition centres and/or a Malaysian state religious department established school.

For example, Wasem attended a CSO-established school in Sentul that used the Malaysian syllabus from Standard 7 until 9 before she stopped and was sent to a Malaysian state religious department established school for a few months. Meanwhile, Susila received her basic primary education from a private tuition class—which uses the Malaysian syllabus—organised near her house, in combination with a civil society established school for almost 2 years, from 10 to 11 years old. Unlike Susila, Fariza and Zuraini, who only received basic primary education via the same private tuition class that Susila received.

There are only 2 out of the 16 participants, Shila and Tasnem, who have received some form of higher education in the past. Shila graduated with a bachelor's degree from a university in Cox Bazar, Bangladesh, while Tasnem completed her matriculation in physics back in Myanmar. The rest of the participants, particularly those born in Malaysia, were unable to receive any education because of the lack of education centres when they were young and their exclusion from government schools.

"It's not that common. It's just that when we are young, there's not many education centres like the one we can see now. And we can't go to the government schools either. You can say that the kids nowadays are lucky" (Nurul, FGD, Selayang)

When the participants were asked how they were able to learn and speak Malay, some responded by saying that they learnt from their younger siblings. For example, Jun learnt how to write her name and speak a little bit of Malay from her younger siblings, Fariza and Susila, whose parents sent to tuition class very briefly when they were young. *"Our sister, she never learnt A B C. Pity her. She was only allowed to learn from a religious teacher who our dad called to our home to learn the Quran. We are the ones who teach her how to spell her name and stuff"* (Fariza, Interview, Ampang)

Ironically, Fariza noted that her sister Jun is the one her father loves the most among all the daughters. Yet for this reason, he never allowed Jun to leave the house, instead requiring her to stay home and care for the younger siblings. Similarly, when asked how she learned to speak Malay fluently, Shila explained that she picked up the language from her younger siblings.

"I learnt from my younger siblings since they were fortunate to be able to go to schools" (Shila, FGD, Selayang)

It should be emphasised that Rohingya refugee communities often prioritise religious education. As such, most participants reported receiving at least some religious education, typically through studying the Quran.

Migration Background of Rohingya Refugee Women

As shown in Table 5.1 above, the Rohingya refugee women that participated in this research consist of first-generation and second-generation refugees. First generation refugees refer to the refugee individuals who migrated from their country of origin to the country of asylum when they are of age 7 years old and above. Meanwhile, second-generation refugees refer to children of first-generation refugees, usually born in the country of asylum or were brought to the country of asylum when they were 6 years old or younger.

In this research, 10 participants are classified as second-generation refugees, in which 8 of them were born in Malaysia, while the remaining 2 participants came to Malaysia when they were 2 and 6 years old. For example, Jun arrived in Malaysia in 1989 when she was 2 years old, while Kila arrived in Malaysia in 2012 when she was 6 years old.

For the first-generation refugee participants, some of them have been in Malaysia for more than a decade, while some are considered recent arrivals. For example, Firas arrived in 2006 when she was 13 years old while Frida and Shila arrived recently in 2023 and 2024. Often, the migration process started with their husband or other family members who arrived in Malaysia first before followed by the participants themselves.

Documentation for Rohingya Refugee Women

As the participants are a mix of first-generation and second-generation refugees, their documentation status varies. For the first-generation Rohingya refugee women, the first registration step they have to take is to register themselves online or with the help of community-based organisations such as the Rohingya Society Malaysia (RSM). They would be asked to provide details such as their

name and phone number. Once this initial registration is completed, the refugee women are given a specific case number for their application process. They will need to sit for interviews with UNHCR officials who will investigate their asylum claim before they are given a UNHCR card. Interview dates are given by UNHCR officials to the individuals via phone calls or other communication methods available, such as SMS. The refugee women are not permitted to go straight to the UNHCR office to request for an interview or directly apply for a UNHCR card. As such, refugee women who are waiting for the interview session to process their asylum claims often depend on community-based organisation issued documentation, which is not considered as a valid document. This is the case for Frida and Shila who stated that they are currently here with a RSM document.

Meanwhile, the second-generation refugee women who are born in Malaysia receive their documentation via their parents' documentation status. Their first-generation parents are responsible for reporting their birth and registering new family members to relevant authorities and UNHCR. A newborn baby in a Rohingya refugee family will need to be registered for the baby's birth certificate via the Malaysian registration department which usually involves documentation such as parents' UNHCR documents, marriage documents and hospital's letter on the newborn's birth documentations. The refugee parents later on will need to provide the birth certificate along with a UNHCR form on adding new family members to be granted with a UNHCR card for family members.

Rohingya refugee women who come later following their husbands or other family members have the option of being added as a new family member, if their family members have already received their UNHCR card, or registered individually, if none of their family members have received a UNHCR card.

Challenges Faced by Female Rohingya Refugees in Getting Education

Interviews and FGs with female Rohingya refugees reveal several challenges they face in accessing education. Many of these challenges are deeply gendered, stemming from inequalities they face in their everyday lives since they were young, which impacts their ability to access educational facilities.

Systemic Barriers in Education Access for Women

Existing systemic practices limit Rohingya refugee women's lives to the household, restricting their independence and reinforcing reliance on male household members. For some participants, even before they got married in their teenage years, they had been tasked with care work responsibilities including housework, taking care of their siblings, and even tending to sick family members like grandparents or parents. At the same time, these refugee women received very little to no basic primary education in their childhood. As such, some participants depended on their care work experience to find stable financial income. Only one of the participants (Nurul) works outside of care work. Nurul is employed at a food factory near her home in Ampang. Having a job near to her home allows her to balance domestic responsibilities with her work.

"[Referring to mode of transportation to the workplace] I walk. It doesn't even take me more than 5 minutes. The school [of my son] is at [the name of her current neighbourhood]. Ah yes. I send and took him from school myself [referring to picking up his son from school everyday]" (Nurul, FGD, Selayang)

For the rest of the participants who are able to earn income from care work, they lack job security as their work is contingent on demand. Income is earned via jobs introduced by friends, or in some cases, ex-employers, friends of family members, or any potential opportunities

their community can find. Often, care work related jobs are one-off tasks, rather than weekly or daily requests. As such, no requests for workers by social network means no income for the week.

This limits their ability to spend on certain things that are not on top of their priorities such as non-essential movements or education fees for themselves or their children. Non-essential movements, in this case, can be movements that are not related to job opportunities, healthcare, or food. Some of this movement may involve attending wedding ceremonies in another neighbourhood or visiting family members.

The cost of taking public transports may limit the ability of Rohingya refugee women in accessing education services, either for themselves or family members. In occasions whereby they were able to secure permanent care work related jobs, the pays are often lower than the minimum wage. Therefore, their limited earnings make it difficult for the Rohingya refugee women to consider enrolling in educational programmes without the support from humanitarian agencies or CSOs. Fariza, who earns income by cleaning houses, elaborated on what she makes from a single job:

"Ah, they calculate, a day of work about RM50, if there is an overtime, they will pay RM60" (Fariza, Ampang)

While most of the female Rohingya refugees stated that their family members support their desire to continue studying, their husbands or other family members are unable to share caregiving responsibilities due to long and tiring work hours. Their husbands typically work every day unless granted days off by their employers. This point was specifically highlighted by Nurul and Firas during the focus group discussion.

"He works every day. He, when the boss took the days off, only then he had his days off" (Nurul, FGD, Selayang)

"Boss take days off, he is off. Boss work, he work" (Firas, FGD, Selayang)

In situations where workplaces allocate days off for the male refugee workers, they are often given only one day off. This means that often, family responsibilities such as childrearing, cooking, cleaning, elderly care and sometimes supermarket trips are done by women. On occasions where Rohingya refugee husbands limit their wives' movement, the men will be in charge of grocery trips on their days off, on a weekly or monthly basis.

Since it is common for their community to marry off their girls at a very young age, Rohingya refugee women often experience teenage pregnancies and subsequently care for children instead of living a typical adolescent life. This means the burden of care work to the Rohingya refugee women is not just something that they can opt out of, especially in the absence of support from family members who live nearby. For example, Sri, an unmarried focus group participant, is unable to work due to her responsibility of caring for her ill parents, especially her mother. In her household, her father—despite his own sickness—is the one who works to support the family.

This kind of situation is common among Rohingya refugee women encountered in this study, particularly in the Klang Valley. Another systemic barrier faced by Rohingya refugee women in getting education is the absence of valid documentation. As mentioned previously, the process of registration with UNHCR in Malaysia takes years, meaning Rohingya refugees remain undocumented during this period. Some refugees awaiting UNHCR interviews rely on

documentation issued by community-based organisations such as the Rohingya Society Malaysia (RSM). Frida and Shila, who arrived in Malaysia in 2023 and 2024 respectively, are examples of this situation.

“Uhm..I am staying with the RSM [referring to Rohingya Society Malaysia] document” (Shila, Selayang)

Even when Rohingya refugee women obtain their UNHCR card, the documentation does not guarantee the right to work in Malaysia. Consequently, Rohingya refugees working in any business premises remain vulnerable to detention by enforcement authorities such as the police or immigration department. Such ambiguity in their documentation status, particularly regarding the UNHCR card, means that Rohingya refugees’ access to educational institutions like universities remain undertrained and are assessed on a case-by-case basis. Currently, Brickfields Asia College (BAC) is listed as one of the UNHCR partner institutions for private higher education providers in Klang Valley (UNHCR, 2025). BAC’s Make It Right movement is also known to collaborate with various humanitarian agencies and CSOs, offering scholarships to refugees.

Control and Agency in Obtaining Education

Rohingya refugee communities often prioritise boys when providing education for their children. This is primarily because boys—and later men—are viewed as the family breadwinners. Thus, with the limited finances that a family unit has, prioritising boys to obtain primary education is seen as the logical decision. For example, an interview with Wasem reveals that her own family members looked down on her childhood ambition to study, stating that she would ultimately become a housewife.

"They later said to me I do not need to study so much because I will only end up becoming a housewife anyway" (Wasem, Selayang)

The statement was said to her by her grandmother when she was 10 years old, after she begged to be allowed to attend school. While her father's financial constraints played a role, the decision was also influenced by her age and her family's concern over her impending menstruation. Experiencing their first period is highly significant for the Rohingya refugee girls, as it marks their transition to adulthood and eligibility for marriage. This is mentioned by several of the interview participants, including Tasnim, who thinks that this practice undermines Rohingya refugee women's agency and limits their ability to be independent.

"Most of our women have spent their whole lives depending on their husbands. Her responsibility is housework in her life, and her husband is the breadwinner, so that is already set up in her mind. That's why...if something happens with the husband, she needs to marry another person" (Tasnim, Selayang)

Not only do senior family members limit women's access to education in their childhood, their movements are also strictly controlled and restricted to a certain routine. Jun, the eldest sister out of three siblings, who was involved in this study alongside Susila and Fariza, was not only restricted from receiving a basic education, as mentioned above, but was also not allowed to go out without the accompaniment of her father. She spent her childhood days inside the house, doing housework and helping her mother.

"Ha, I will go out if it's with my dad. If he is not present, I will not go out" (Jun, Ampang)

Although she can now move freely as she is older, her inability to communicate properly in Malay has undermined her confidence in handling daily matters—whether family, work, or official dealings. Similar to Fariza, who has an unstable income from her work cleaning houses, Jun relies solely on care work skills to find employment. As such, many participants regarding the lack of educational services relate to language training, which will be discussed in the subsection after the following one. The following subsection will explore Rohingya refugee women’s perspectives on how education impacts their personal development, movement, and mobility.

Educational Importance to Personal Development, Movement, and Mobility

During interviews and focus groups, most research participants expressed interest in pursuing educational programmes through any institution. For example, Shila stated that,

“No, I am not (currently) studying...I have stopped my studies. I hope to study in the future” (Shila, Selayang)

Since Shila holds a bachelor’s degree from a university in Bangladesh, her concern extends beyond pursuing higher education to a higher level such as an MBA or doctorate to also applying her knowledge to contribute to her community. The inability to further her education or utilise her existing qualifications hinders her personal development, due to both her documentation status and refugees’ lack of employment rights. Ironically, her migration to Malaysia may have returned her to the starting point. Shila describes feeling ‘like a blind person’, having been raised in Bangladesh and now being unable to understand Malay.

"I mean for me that [one] question. Another question is that I have studied this much. For being an educated [person], I would like to do something in the future. I can't do anything after studying. For me. I have been required to come to Malaysia for some reason. I have grown up in Bangladesh. I have continued my studies in Bangladesh. But when required to come to Malaysia. Now [that I am] here, I am like a blind person. I can speak English, I can write and read, but I don't know the Malay language. I will learn it by practicing speaking [Malay] in the future" (Shila, Selayang)

Other participants, including Susila, Tasnim, Asma, and Frida, have also expressed their desire to continue their education. When all participants were asked why education matters to them, they provided examples illustrating their need for education.

"Because if the women's husbands passed away or their husbands happened to be in an accident, they can't do anything by going out because they don't know the language. The women can't do anything, [they] can't explain anything if their husband beats her up. They need to suffer by themselves" (Asma, Gombak)

Asma used examples such as the potential of domestic abuse or family accidents to emphasise the importance of women receiving education. Meanwhile, Frida used the issue of mobility and freedom of movement to stress education's importance for women.

"It is good to have education. I mean, if [she] goes somewhere, for example, she can read if there is a signboard and she would know where she has arrived. If she has education, she could mention to [people] that I am staying here, at this address, and this is how far my home is. I [she] could dare to go alone [somewhere if I [she] want]. So, having an education is very important" (Frida, Gombak)

Much of the conversation among the participants on the importance of education for Rohingya refugee women is for the empowerment of the groups, especially in terms of control and agency. Beyond these examples, other participants highlighted the importance for the Rohingya refugee women to receive education to enable them to distinguish between right and wrong, develop practical skills, and safeguard their mental wellbeing.

Access to Education Services and Institutions

Interviews and FGDs revealed limited adult education access for Rohingya refugee women, even within the Klang Valley. Based on the interviews and focus group discussions, only one organisation—the Rohingya Women Development Network (RWDN) in Selayang—has been identified as consistently providing classes of training for these women. One participant, Frida, reported receiving English language training from RWDN, along with assistance in securing work opportunities through the organisation.

“Uhm, [I have]. I am studying an English class at RWDN. Sometimes we also get work in there [referring to RWDN], it [referring to RWDN] helps us, it helps us a lot” (Frida, Gombak)

The researcher’s interactions with community liaisons indicated that RWDN has become some sort of an official channel for the Rohingya refugee women who are part of the organisation’s community to access work opportunities. Individuals approach the organisation with job offers, which are then directed to the Rohingya refugee women within the network. Although RWDN has previously offered skills training such as sewing classes, it currently provides only English language training to the women.

Some of the other participants also mentioned two other organisations, Refugee Network Centre (RNC), a refugee grassroots organisation which was established by refugees for refugees, and Women's Aid Organisation (WAO), a women's rights organisation focusing on supporting survivors of domestic violence in Malaysia. All three organisations—RWDN, WAO, and RNC—offer only short-term training or one-off workshops. For instance, RWDN's English language training typically spans just a few weeks.

The researcher's interaction with community liaisons familiar with the organisation indicate that RWDN's training offerings depend entirely on funding received by the organisation. As such, programmes are sometimes suspended due to funding constraints.

Based on the interview with Asma, WAO also provides online English language classes for the refugee women. However, the issue with accessing the online class for Asma is the absence of financial provisions that can support her while she receives the language training with WAO.

"About the education, they have given me once, after that, they couldn't give me anymore. WAO opened the online class for us, but they couldn't support us in the provision. That's why I need to teach [kids] at RSM's school. So, I couldn't attend the WAO online English class due to teaching [kids]. They opened an online class for me. I have requested them many times to open for me, but they couldn't provide the provisions and the accommodation for me" (Asma, Gombak)

Meanwhile, RNC seems to be more focused on one-off skills training programmes. For example, Tasnim stated that she attended a

supermarket training workshop that was organised by RNC in the past.

"It basically trained us how to work in a supermarket. Our roles, responsibilities, duty, and to handle tasks independently. It was organised by Refugee Network Centre (RNC)" (Tasnim, Selayang)

Tasnim reported receiving trauma care training from RNC in collaboration with a Canadian organisation. The training programmes provided by the RNC appear focused on refugee skills and character development, typically as one-off sessions. Such short term training sessions represent the typical educational service provided for refugee adults in Malaysia, resulting from the funding limitations most CSOs in the country face.

The limited opportunities to access education programmes for Rohingya refugee women in the Klang Valley has prevented them from establishing alternative ways to pursue education. For example, Wasem was able to attend a private tuition class to prepare for the General Education Development (GED) test. GED is a type of internationally-recognised certificate that proves an individual has a high school equivalent education. Her ability to pursue this opportunity, despite her lack of basic primary education since she was 10 years old, stems from the fact that she is a divorced Rohingya refugee woman without children who is also her household's breadwinner. Wasem was one of the Rohingya refugee women interviewed who has shown a strong determination to resume her education, picking up where she left off, after being denied an education by her late grandmother. Her current, albeit low, consistent wage enables her to have more control of her life, and as such, enables her to find a teacher from a nearby tuition centre in her

neighbourhood willing to teach her on weekends during her weekly leave.

The existence of private tuition centres was one of the loopholes that has been used by Rohingya refugee communities in the past to provide basic education for their children, as seen in the childhood experiences of Susila and Fariza's family, and currently with Wasem. Access to these centres depends not only on financial means but also on social networks, where community members connect with local teachers to accept refugee students. In all of these cases, the proximity of the private tuition centres—within walking distance from their homes—alleviates safety concerns for parents, while the affordable costs of attending the classes make them a viable alternative to send their girls for education rather than to a school far away from their house.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that gender inequality and financial vulnerabilities impact Rohingya refugee women's access to education. In the context of this research, financial vulnerabilities refer to the Rohingya refugee women's lack of consistent income and the limited funding for adult education service providers. There is an insufficient number of organisations that provide adult education services for refugees in the Klang Valley, and even when available, refugees, especially refugee women, cannot afford to take time off from caregiving duties to attend without financial, childcare, or transportation support.

For practical reasons, Rohingya refugees typically access resources within their neighbourhoods, so reaching education services beyond the places they can reach, or even online, requires additional support such as funding, child or elderly care, and materials like pens, paper, or internet access. Without such additional assistance, Rohingya

refugee women struggle to pursue adult education, including existing language training programmes.

The gender-discriminatory practice of early marriage in the Rohingya refugee communities traps women in the cycle of dependency on men. Child marriage typically restricts their education, limiting their ability to develop and expand their skills for the job market. Furthermore, child marriage imposes heavy caregiving burdens—for their husbands, parents, and children—that further constrain their opportunities. Without nearby family members to support them in shouldering the care responsibilities, Rohingya refugee women remain trapped in unpaid care work as they were taught since they were young. There is also a lack of discourse within these about distributing care work equally between Rohingya men and women. As a result, these women continue to be confined to the vicinity of their home, vulnerable to domestic abuse, violence, and sexual harassment with limited ways to escape apart from remarriage.

While the process of registering and managing refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia was under UNHCR, the Malaysian government has attempted to launch its own registration card in the past (BERNAMA, 2022). In the event that the Malaysian government decides to shut down the UNHCR office and take over the agency's role (The Vibes, 2022), there is a potential for private-public partnership opportunities to support education for refugees, especially refugee women. Private-public partnership on education for refugees in Malaysia will allow private sectors to reduce its demand for migrant workers, while the government is able to ensure more educated refugee pools in the country for better resettlement opportunities.

Initiatives such as local tuition centres in the neighbourhood opening their doors for refugees to pursue education, this step requires

extensive engagement with relevant stakeholders, especially refugee communities, to identify their financial capabilities, schedules that fit with the communities' timetable, as well as the subject matter that the communities wish to pursue. This research identifies that most Rohingya refugee women would like to receive language training, focusing on Malay and/or English language, to help them in their livelihoods. Some also pointed out some possible skills training such as childcare that may help them in their livelihoods as well.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that access to primary and secondary education for Rohingya refugee children in Malaysia remains poor, due not only to financial pressures but also to gender-discriminatory practices and cultural values that confine women to caregiving roles. Without access to adult education and work opportunities, Rohingya refugee women remain dependent on men for survival—especially in raising children and securing a place to live. While several Klang Valley organisations provide education for refugee children, there is a critical need to extend similar services to adult refugees, with additional support like childcare and financial aid, in order to address the gender gap and restore control and agency to Rohingya refugee women over their own lives.

This research discussion is limited to understanding challenges faced by Rohingya refugee women in accessing education as well as understanding existing resources present. As such, this research is unable to further discuss various education systems or syllabus experienced by Rohingya refugee communities in Malaysia. As such, it is suggested that further research is conducted to map the existing education system present among Rohingya refugee communities in Malaysia.

Another limitation faced in this research is its focus on Rohingya refugee women. The challenges faced in accessing education in this research is contextualised to the gender identity of the Rohingya refugee participants that have been interviewed. As such, this research cannot be used as a way to generalise challenges in accessing education among Rohingya refugee communities. Further suggestion would be to conduct a research encompassing both men and women to understand their challenges in accessing education and the existing resources that they have.

While this research may help in informing education services accessed by refugee women while they were in their childhood, it cannot be used to inform the current education services being provided to the children. As the focus of this research is access to education among adult Rohingya refugee women, knowledge gained from this research cannot be used to inform of the access to education to Rohingya refugee children, or even specifically Rohingya refugee girls. As such, further research to understand access to the education system and services given to Rohingya refugee children is needed.

Future research that may be conducted in this field must consider various issues such as language barriers and power gap to further improve on the existing research. It is suggested that language training provisions are provided to researchers who wish to conduct research involving refugee groups. These provisions enable the researcher to overcome any language barrier, without relying on community liaisons for interpretations. Existing language barriers may not only make it difficult for researchers to understand the responses from participants but also may discourage participants from participating in the research or further engage with the researcher during the data collection process. The researcher also has to bear in mind the existing power gap between researcher and research

participants and be clear of the research objectives, methodology, processes that are conducted, as well as the end product. This will help the research participants, especially refugee communities, to avoid perceiving such research participation as tokenistic.

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As of May 2025, there are 117,670 Rohingya refugees out of the 200,260 total refugees registered with UNHCR in Malaysia (UNHCR Malaysia, 2025). Due to the absence of a national refugee policy and Malaysia's non-signatory status to both the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Refugee Protocol, refugee access to basic healthcare, education, and economic opportunities remain severely limited. While many educational services in Malaysia are focused on refugee children, there is little discussion on adult education, including higher education and skills training programmes in the country. This paper examines educational access for Rohingya women in Malaysia, encompassing both skills training programmes and higher education. The paper reveals that some Rohingya women have received skills training programmes organised by civil society organisations (CSOs) in the past, although these were typically one-off sessions. While some Rohingya women express a desire to pursue higher education, they face challenges such as care responsibilities and financial constraints in obtaining the adult education they aspire to pursue. The paper argues that there is a need for an institution that provides Rohingya women with continuous adult education programmes, rather than one-off formats, to better empower them in their daily lives.

About the Author

Nur Nadia Lukmanulhakim is a doctoral candidate at the University of Nottingham Malaysia. Nadia's doctoral dissertation is on memories of home and agency of second-generation Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, focusing on Rohingya refugees living in urban Kuala Lumpur and Selangor area. Nadia is also currently director of IMAN Research, a think tank focusing on the issue of community resilience and peacebuilding in Malaysia and Southeast Asia.

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