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Gender-Based Violence within the Rohingya Community in Bangladesh: Intersectional Experiences of Victimization

Kazi Maruful Islam[1]
Sumaiya Iqbal[2]

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ABSTRACT

Experiences of Rohingya women in exile have long seen the need to be understood in the layered identities they carry. This article attempts to apply an intersectional lens to analyze the complex nature of gender-based violence (GBV) experienced by Rohingya women in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The study argues that a single-axis analysis is insufficient to understand the full length of victimization, as it fails to account for the compounded vulnerabilities that come about from intersecting identities such as gender, statelessness, displacement, religion, and poverty. Through the adoption of qualitative research using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 25 Rohingya women and 27 key informants, the study brings forth persistent patterns of GBV, including intimate partner violence, forced child marriage, dowry abuse, and abduction. The findings reveal that persistent patriarchal norms, a culture of shame, and inadequate legal protections normalize these crimes. The absence of formal justice within the Rohingya camps further enhances the vulnerability of statelessness, forcing Rohingya women to depend on informal, male-dominated power structures. The study argues for a shift from how victimization of this community is perceived and the application of intersectional approaches to understand the true nature of violence suffered and empower Rohingya women as agents of change.

Introduction

The humanitarian crisis facing the Rohingya community in Bangladesh is characterized by a confluence of extreme vulnerabilities, among which gender-based violence (GBV) remains a persistent and complex issue. Following the genocidal clearance operations by the Myanmar military in 2017, which included

[1] Professor, Department of Development Studies, University of Dhaka. Email: kazi.maruf@du.ac.bd

[2] Lecturer, Department of Criminology, University of Dhaka. Email: sumaiya.iqbal@du.ac.bd

the systematic use of sexual violence as a weapon of war (Amnesty International, 2017), nearly one million have sought refuge in overcrowded camps in Cox's Bazar. In this grave context, GBV continues to be both a significant public health issue and a profound human rights challenge. Empirical evidence underscores its alarming prevalence; a study found that 72% of married Rohingya women in the camps had experienced physical abuse from their husbands (Islam et al., 2022), while United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2023) data show that over 80% of reported GBV cases are intimate partner violence (IPV), with nearly all survivors being female. These forms of violence, ranging from forced child marriage and dowry abuse to abduction, are normalized by entrenched patriarchal norms, a culture of shame, and the absence of adequate legal protections. The lack of formal justice mechanisms within the camps compounds the vulnerabilities created by statelessness, forcing women to rely on male-dominated informal power structures.

While these statistics highlight the scale of the problem, the dominant research approaches to date have largely relied on a single-axis analysis, focusing on gender alone, or on ethnicity/religion alone, which is insufficient to fully capture the layered nature of Rohingya women's victimization. Building on the foundational work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), this study adopts an intersectional lens to analyze how oppression is shaped by the interplay of multiple and layered identities such as gender, age, disability, religion, socio-economic status, and status in exile. For Rohingya women and girls, vulnerability is not simply a matter of gender; it is compounded by statelessness, displacement, entrenched patriarchal norms, and the structural inequities of the camp setting (Bhuiyan, 2024). These intersecting factors produce distinct patterns of victimization, particularly for subgroups such as adolescent girls, widows, and women with disabilities, whose needs are often rendered invisible in broader humanitarian responses.

The victimization of the Rohingya, a stateless Muslim minority from Myanmar, has been a core focus of humanitarian and human rights discourse for decades. Literature on their persecution and displacement is extensive, but it rarely applies an explicit intersectional framework to understand the multifaceted nature of their marginalization. Instead, much of the existing work focuses on a single axis of oppression, portraying the community as a homogenous group with uniform vulnerabilities. Historical and political analyses, such as those by Leider (2013), have detailed the community's exclusion from citizenship and subsequent statelessness. Reports from Amnesty International (2017) provide strong documentation of systematic violence, rape, and forced displacement, framing these acts primarily as consequences of the Rohingya's ethnic and religious identity. While these works are critical to understanding the broader context of persecution, their single-axis framing, whether gender or ethnicity/religion, limits the capacity to uncover how multiple forms of oppression overlap to create unique and compounded victimizations.

Some recent works have begun to move toward more complex framings. For example, Priddy et al. (2022) in *Ethnic cleansing by sexual violence: The case of the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar* note that Rohingya women's and girls' experiences of victimization cannot be explained solely by their ethnicity or gender. Rather, these experiences emerge from the intersection of gender identity and statelessness within a patriarchal refugee community. Similarly, Guglielmi et al. (2021) document how such intersections produce unique forms of violence and exploitation, including GBV, forced marriage, and human trafficking, that Rohingya men do not experience in the same way. Nonetheless, much of the literature continues to treat GBV as a standalone issue rather than as an outcome of interlocking systems of oppression.

Evidence from other domains underscores the analytical value of an intersectional approach. A study on access to COVID-19 information in Rohingya camps (Parray et al., 2022) found that gender, age, socio-economic status, and physical disability combined to produce significant inequities in access. This finding reinforces that vulnerabilities cannot be understood through single categories, as the interplay between them fundamentally shapes outcomes. Within the Rohingya community, the lived reality of a young, able-bodied man differs drastically from that of an elderly, disabled widow with no male relatives. For the latter, statelessness intersects with age, gender, and disability to intensify barriers to humanitarian aid and protection. While some studies have examined specific subgroups like adolescent girls, documenting their experiences of loss, unsafety, uncertainty, and resilience (Bhuiyan, 2024), these accounts often remain disconnected from broader theoretical frameworks that could situate them within the larger humanitarian discourse.

Another gap lies in the limited examination of internal power dynamics within the camps. Research has explored the challenges of aid provision and tensions between refugees and host communities (Kamruzzaman et al., 2024), but has largely overlooked how intersecting identities shape access to resources, voice in decision-making, and vulnerability to exploitation both within and beyond the community. For example, Raihan et al. (2020) highlight that women's freedom of movement and access to digital technology are restricted by the combined effects of patriarchal norms and lack of legal status. Yet, such findings are rarely integrated into a systematic intersectional analysis that could explain how these layered vulnerabilities perpetuate GBV.

Theoretical and methodological gaps, therefore, persist. The prevailing discourse, by focusing on single axes of oppression, oversimplifies the deeply complex humanitarian situation. As Crenshaw (1989) argued, the absence of intersectional analysis risks obscuring the realities of those whose experiences are shaped by multiple, overlapping systems of discrimination. For the Rohingya, this means that humanitarian responses may fail to address the needs of the most marginalized, such

as disabled women, widows, adolescent girls, and those from poorer households, thereby reproducing inequalities within aid delivery itself.

This study addresses these gaps by applying intersectionality theory to examine the layered experiences of GBV among Rohingya women in Cox's Bazar. The research design employs qualitative methods, including 25 in-depth interviews with Rohingya women and 27 key informant interviews, to capture nuanced narratives across different subgroups. Rather than isolating gender or ethnicity as the primary explanatory factor, the study examines how gender-based violence emerges at the intersections of gender, statelessness, displacement, religion, poverty, age, and disability. This framing shifts the analysis from viewing Rohingya women as passive victims to recognizing them as potential agents of change, whose agency and resilience can inform more targeted, equitable, and effective policy and humanitarian interventions. In doing so, the study aims to contribute both to the academic discourse on intersectionality in humanitarian contexts and to the practical development of interventions that respond to the realities of compounded marginalization.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality and Gender-Based Violence among Rohingya Women

This study adopts intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) as its core analytical framework to examine the nuanced nature of gender-based violence (GBV) among the Rohingya women in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Originally put forward by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the lens of intersectionality provides an understanding of how multiple social identities, such as gender, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, legal status, and displacement, intersect and combine to produce unique and compounded experiences of oppression and vulnerability.

With emphasis on the Rohingya crisis, intersectionality as a framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how GBV is not simply a result of patriarchal violence, but rather a consequence of overlapping systems of domination, including statelessness, forced displacement, economic marginalization, ethno-religious discrimination, and institutional exclusion. Rohingya women do not experience violence only because of their gender, but also because they are members of a persecuted ethnic minority with no legal protection, limited mobility, and little access to justice. The intersection of these layered identities produces differential risks and outcomes among women. For instance, community-imposed gender norms, such as expectations around marriage, dowry, and sexual purity, intersect with camp-level governance failures, leading to normalized and unreported violence.

By employing intersectionality, the study challenges the tendency to view GBV through a single-axis framework that isolates gender from other forms of identity and oppression. It underscores that gender-based violence among Rohingya women

is structural, deeply embedded in the legal invisibility of refugee populations, the socio-political dynamics of camp life, and broader global systems of exclusion.

Ultimately, this framework supports arguments that any effective response to GBV must be intersectional in design, addressing not only individual acts of violence but also the institutional and societal structures that perpetuate them. Intersectionality thus provides both a diagnostic and strategic tool for understanding and addressing the entrenched nature of GBV within displaced, stateless populations.

Methodology

Adopting the paradigm of interpretivism to understand how realities were socially constructed by the respondents, the research used a qualitative design. This was done as the lines of enquiry focused on the experiences and lived realities of women at the camps. The paper adopted a qualitative approach to understanding the nature of gender-based violence at the camps. Respondents were all selected purposively for the nature of the research enquiries.

Focus group discussions and in-depth semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 Rohingya respondents in Camp 26, Camp 4 extension, and Camp 19. Focus group discussions were conducted as well in the respective camps, with 10 female members of the Rohingya community in each discussion (30 participants in total took part in the FGDs from the three camps combined).

Key Informant interviews were conducted with 27 individuals from various professions, including law enforcement, non-government organizations, international organizations, and civil society members.

The data was collected over a period of one year and then analyzed narratively as well as thematically using a coding paradigm that helped identify recurring themes, patterns, and categories. Proper consent was taken from the respondents after the purpose of the study was explained to them in detail.

All ethical protocols were strictly maintained throughout the data collection process in accordance with human subject research standards. Given the sensitive nature of the research, especially concerning gender-based violence, particular care was taken to ensure the safety, dignity, and autonomy of all participants. Informed consent was obtained verbally and in writing (where possible), after explaining the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. For Rohingya respondents, trained female translators were employed to facilitate culturally and linguistically sensitive communication. To minimize the risk of re-traumatization, interviews were conducted in safe, private spaces with empathetic interviewing techniques and the option for participants to skip any question or stop the interview entirely. Additionally, follow-up support options were provided, including referrals to

psychosocial services and legal aid via partner organizations. Pseudonyms were used, and all identifying details were removed to ensure confidentiality.

By adopting the paradigm of interpretivism, the research prioritized understanding how participants themselves construct and interpret their lived realities, thereby necessitating an ethical framework that upheld empathy, respect, and protection of vulnerable populations.

Findings

Findings pointed to an overwhelming situation of compounded marginalizations for Rohingya women. The themes that emerged from focus group discussions with the two host communities centered around the ideology of male entitlement, inability, and unwillingness of female community members to access justice systems, along with the influence of a culture of shame that may be looked at as one of the factors influencing the interaction of females with the criminal justice system.

Interviews with key informants, host community members, and Rohingya members all brought forth a high prevalence of gender-based violence. A total of 18 out of 27 KII respondents, for instance, identified Gender Based Violence as a top crime in Cox's Bazar. To elaborate on the responses, domestic violence was recorded to be the most common crime against women (6 out of 18 respondents) followed by forced prostitution (4 out of 18 respondents), rape (3 out of 18 respondents) and child marriage (2 out of 18 respondents) while the rest (3 out of 18 respondents) did not specify the type of crime.

Reasons brought forth included a lack of awareness about SGBV resulting from illiteracy (6 out of 18 respondents), a vulnerable Rohingya population that is forced into prostitution (4 out of 18 respondents), poverty (2 out of 18 respondents), inconsistent responses from the criminal justice system (2 out of 18 respondents), the strong patriarchal culture prevalent in the region (1 out of 18 respondents) and influence of religious dogmatism (1 out of 18 respondents) as an informal system of control.

> We hear a lot about drugs on the news, but a crime that is a silent epidemic is the daily violence being faced by women and girls in not only Cox's Bazar but the entire country as a whole. While there are many reasons why such crimes persist and continue to grow, we need to focus on the ways to increase access to the law for victims. (Senior Officer, BRAC)

In the focus group discussions conducted with host communities, the most frequently mentioned types of gender-based violence consisted of domestic violence, child marriage, dowry, eve teasing, and kidnapping cases. Female participants were also vocal about these issues and pointed to the frustrations of unemployment, illiteracy, and increasing prices when asked about how women were vulnerable.

> One of the main problems is the restricted mobility for women in this region, which is more so than in other regions that have more industry, such as the capital city. Women here lag behind not only in terms of education but also employment, making them dependents on men who end up becoming perpetrators. (Officer, UN Women)

One of the most recurring themes that came up within the discussions was the pressure placed on women to get married young and give dowry to their bridegrooms' families. Out of 19 female host community members, members of the host communities mentioned the considerable stigma that is faced by women when they remain unmarried beyond a certain age, which is also one of the reasons that was identified as the reason.

Drawing from the responses recorded from the three camps visited, namely Camp 26, Camp 4 extension, and Camp 19, we were able to assess which types of gender-based violence were experienced more commonly, along with themes that helped understand the prevalence and persistence of such crimes. While the camps differed spatially, in terms of resource availability, and infrastructure as well, a commonly recurrent theme was that of domestic violence, which stood out as the most reported type of violence faced by the females.

Other crimes included eve teasing, abduction, along with rape and dowry, but the frequency of crimes may have varied with the camp control systems in place, community engagement with authorities, and also the geographical location of the camps. Camps that are located in the Teknaf region are seen to be more vulnerable to crime, and in particular to sexual and gender-based violence, as expressed by seven key informant interviewees.

Responses from the female members of Camp 26 brought forth a culture of fear for intimidation by gangs living in the hilly areas, who they chose not to name, eve teasing and stalking that targeted female volunteers, domestic violence, and a culture of shame that regulated decisions on whether or not to report the crimes mentioned. Domestic violence was the most recurrent theme, followed by eve teasing, abduction, and finally an unwillingness to seek legal protection stemming from the shame that had to be experienced by female Rohingya members who would mention that they had been victimized in cases of sexual or gender-based violence.

In comparison, Camp 4 (extension) did not report gang-based violence against females, rape, or instances of eve-teasing. We also would like to add that, for the sensitivity of sexual and gender-based violence, any assumptions based on the infrequent mention of rape, forced prostitution, or other forms of SGBV would have to be made with caution and a quantitative check.

The following sections will elaborate on the findings related to the forms of gender-based violence, along with their intersectional nature.

Domestic Violence

In total, 25 female Rohingya members were part of the focus group discussions conducted in three camps, and 18 of them mentioned they had experienced domestic abuse at least once in their lives, if not more frequently. There was little variation in this theme across the camps, and the observation was confirmed by the camp in charge, who also mentioned that the largest number of cases they received from camp volunteers or community outreach members was of domestic abuse, mainly perpetrated by the males in the household:

> The highest number of occurrences we receive is of domestic abuse in Camp 4 extension from our camp volunteers. I really wish to see stricter law and order regarding this crime, but it is difficult when we have to engage with a number of institutions within and regarding the camps to have any form of accepted control over the community (CiC, Camp 4 extension)

Moreover, the nature of the violence rendered it one of the most underreported crimes, according to the CiC office at Camp 26:

> There is a severe underreporting of domestic violence in this camp. Often, cases are not even referred to the CiC office under the 'confidentiality' claim. This makes it very difficult to protect the community. (Assistant CiC, Camp 26)

While Camp 4 (extension) seemed relatively more within the authority and influence of the CiC office, as well as more structured, organized and logistically more resourced, Camps 19 and 26 shared similarities in more crowded structures, lower levels of influence of the Camp in charge office, and higher incidents of gang-based violence towards females by male perpetrators from outside the household. For the higher levels of community control, Camp 4 mentioned reporting fewer instances of gender-based violence by perpetrators outside the household, but overwhelmingly large numbers of domestic abuse.

In Camp 19, female Rohingya members interviewed expressed that domestic violence was an occurrence commonly dealt with. Similar to the response in Camp 26, females did not consider domestic violence a crime, and it was seen more as a family matter that would occur when the female had done something wrong or when the husband was troubled or frustrated for any circumstance.

"If we want to stay in the marriage, we have to get used to it. If we want to leave, we leave. It is that simple", expresses Respondent 3 from Camp 4 extension as she smiles along with the other respondents when they talk about their experiences of domestic abuse. "If my husband does not get angry at me, who will? At least he is still in the household," shares Respondent 7 of the same camp as she laughs with the others. All nine members at camp 4 (extension) and camp 19 expressed that

they had been victims of domestic violence at home. Such violence would be in the form of slaps, pushes or beatings. Reasons for the physical assaults included not doing household chores properly, being unable to have a baby, misbehaving with husbands or any senior family member.

While no mention of sexual violence was observed, we keep in mind that this interpretation would not mean that the crime is not prevalent, rather that it may be seriously unreported.

When asked how they respond to domestic abuse or what they do to tackle it, "Well, I make sure I go outside the shelter and stay out of his way!", Respondent 5 says laughing again while Respondent 8 mentions she makes sure the food is ready on time always. A deeper look into the scenario sheds light on how daily frustrations of the displacement experience are channeled through violence that most often is borne by the female members who are part of the even lower rungs of an underclass, very rarely seeking protection from a form of continued oppression that spills over to restrictions of bodily movement, financial access, and overall control of one's daily circumstances.

There is a culture of acceptance and an internalization of a patriarchal bargain which promises safety from external predators in exchange for a female's "sexual purity", "homemaking", and childbearing abilities. "My husband would not even fetch water for me when I did not have a baby. He was going to leave me because I could not have a baby. But now he does not do that anymore", says Respondent 5 from Camp Four Extension.

In exchange for protection offered from external threats and abuse, there is an acceptance of abuse within the internal circles or households by female members of the community. We may add an analysis of how female security is singularly handed to either the father or husband or a male member of the family for protection in a volatile environment with very little influence of formal legal infrastructures. What may be added as a suggestion to law enforcement is a method to strengthen protection from external threats within camp ecosystems, so as to encourage female confidence to speak out against domestic abuse while also reducing dependence on their partners.

Domestic violence was not as frequently mentioned in the focus group discussion that took place in Camp 26, but we believe that may have been because a majority of respondents in that particular camp were unmarried.

Pervasive Eve Teasing

The highest number of responses related to eve-teasing was recorded in Camp 26, whereas, on a whole, 9 out of the 25 female respondents from Camp 20 and Camp 19 expressed their concerns regarding eve-teasing within the camps. "A boy, along with his friend, regularly passes comments when we come to the school",

expresses Respondent 6 from camp 26 as she elaborates on the ordeal of working as a community outreach volunteer.

Instances of eve-teasing are more frequent after sundown and in areas that are less crowded, such as wash facilities or towards the roadside. “My shelter is on the roadside, and I get scared to go out since it is a little isolated from other shelters. Registered Rohingya members often eve-tease or even attack at night”, says respondent three from camp 26.

> Volunteers get more eve-teased because they get out of the shelters more frequently. It bothers the boys, maybe, when they see me going to work. I just ignore it most of the time, as it gets worse when you try to say anything. (Respondent 1, Camp 26)

Analyzing the higher instances of eve-teasing against volunteers, community outreach members, or female Rohingya members who have movement outside the shelters, we may look back again at the concept of how women who do not keep their side of the patriarchal bargain are more teased, disturbed, and have their work disrupted. Conversing with the CiC of Camp Four extension also highlights this:

> It was so difficult to convince the community that female humanitarian workers would be going into the camps. The leaders, who are always male, would demand no entrance. We had to undergo a lot of negotiation and discussions to make it possible to have such an active participation of female humanitarian workers here, and now the impact can also be seen with higher participation of female refugee volunteers as well (CiC, Camp 4 extension)

When Rohingya members were asked what they would do when eve teased, the most common responses included ignoring the act and getting on with work. Three respondents from camp 26 said they would not inform their family because such conversations would make them feel embarrassed. We assume that such conversations with their families would bring an uncomfortable sense of being sexually victimized, which is also influenced by the socio-cultural settings of how females would feel ‘impure’, ‘dishonored’, or ‘ashamed’ at a crime being committed against them. We see the burden of sexual purity placed on the females, making it their responsibility to prevent eve-teasing, thereby further limiting their mobility, access to resources, and pursuit of stable livelihoods.

> I do not want to tell *Anya*ne because it is really embarrassing. I get followed by two boys regularly, and they even came up to the school once to see what I was doing. This really scared me. I did not say anything because I was afraid they might do something worse to me. (Respondent 7, Camp 26)

The vacuum is evident in terms of protection and monitoring, both inside and outside camps, which points to the minuscule significance of law in the lives of

individuals. This is similar to the situation faced by host community members, as explained previously.

An observation was how camp 26 and camp 19 discussants brought forth instances of eve-teasing, while respondents from camp four extension did not mention anything regarding the crime. It is assumed that the higher mobility of camp 26 respondents, their higher levels of awareness against eve teasing (for being engaged with community service and daily movement) along with higher monitoring levels exercised within camp four extension may be attributed to the responses. Still, of course this would be a claim too soon without more data collected regarding the numbers of cases reported of eve teasing in the same regions.

Dowry

From perspectives of both the host and refugee communities, the burden of dowry and its impact on women and their families was a common issue touched upon. Both communities elaborated on the connection dowry had with other types of gender-based violence, while also explaining why it was so difficult to come out of a criminal tradition that has prevailed for generations on end in the region of Cox's Bazar.

One of the most recurring themes in discussions of dowry was the pressure placed on women to marry young and give large dowries to their bridegrooms' families, a symbol of status and a way to ensure the bride's well-being. Of 19 female host community members, 11 mentioned that dowry was one of the main concerns for women in the host communities. "It is a sort of unspoken culture that if dowry is not paid well, the bride will not be taken care of in the bridegroom's home. This is a reason why people do not even protest the act, knowing that if it is not given well, their daughter will not be respected in the husband's household," expresses respondent 3, a twenty-year-old student living in the Whykong area.

The case for girls who are considered not beautiful enough or not educated sufficient is even harder, with larger amounts of dowries being asked,

> What is even worse is that low-income families have larger burdens of dowry since the girls in such families are not always very educated. The same goes for girls who are not fair. It becomes difficult to find a groom for these girls, so parents even settle for the high amounts demanded of them. (Respondent 1, Whykong)

"And in some cases, hence, the girls from poorer families do not get married till they get older, and then they are able to pay dowry", says respondent 11 from the Ghulatolipara host community. What this does is plunge the girl into a further cycle of stigma wherein she is accused of being unfit for marriage and perceived as a burden by her family members. The considerable stigma that is faced by women when they remain unmarried beyond a certain age is also one of the reasons that was

identified for agreeing to pay dowry, and large amounts of it, too, when necessary.

From the focus group discussions and interviews with camp volunteers, nine respondents mentioned dowry as an issue in the camps. When asked questions about how much a bride's family would usually provide to the bridegroom, answers ranged from 1 lac Bangladeshi taka to 50 or 60 thousand Bangladeshi takas, depending on the household of the bride and bridegroom.

"Wealthier families usually ask for more dowry, gifts such as mobile phones, gold", mentions Respondent 3 from camp 19 as she explains how the wealthier family would offer a better life to the girl, so her family is expected to give more in terms of dowry. This financial bargain of sorts can be translated again as an offering of protection in exchange. However, as we have seen, that is rarely the case within households of both the host and refugee communities.

"Beautiful girls do not have to give large dowries compared to those who are not considered beautiful. It would depend on the bridegroom's family and what they want. Even cattle, land, and shelters within the camps are offered as dowry", expresses respondent five from camp 19. To understand the prevalence of dowry and its perception as a norm, we would also need to keep in mind the significance of marriage in the cultures of both refugee and host communities. The functionality of marriage in reducing the burden of feeding a mouth plays a role.

Another observation that came forth from the focus group discussion was the relationship between the burden of dowry and trafficking. "Marrying a man from the camps is a burden so many people prefer to marry from Malaysia", says respondent four from camp 26 as she explains that traffickers assist young women and even children in their journeys to men in Malaysia whom they usually have not met. The men pay for the travel expenses and require no dowry, which acts as an incentive to many families unaware of the risks involved in sending their girls and children through these risk-laden channels.

Abduction

Female respondents in camp 26 mentioned the frustration and helplessness they had to experience for members of gangs in the hilly areas engaging in acts of intimidation, abduction, and dacoity. While none mentioned the names of the gangs, three expressed that members of these groups would often come around at night time and forcefully take money, belongings, food and harass girls at times taking adolescent females with them. A member of the APBN made a similar comment, "Domestic violence is extremely high and so is kidnapping especially in areas near the hill areas. Gangs that have formed within the camps are mainly responsible for these acts."

"These groups come and check if we interact with or shelter any registered Rohingya members within our homes. There is an ongoing conflict between groups

of registered and non-registered Rohingya members, so they make sure that there are no registered groups in this camp", expresses Respondent 8. Households with unmarried female adolescents are considered more vulnerable to these groups, which consist mainly of young males, as mentioned by Respondent 4;

> Our young girls are taken forcefully to the hill areas by these groups. They visit more often at night and use weapons to intimidate families that have adolescent girls. (Respondent 4)

When we enquired whether the males in the households protected against these gangs or had ever asked for protection from the camp authorities, Respondent 9 mentioned that the groups had members within the shelters, thereby raising concerns about retaliation against the family or individual who would speak out. Expressing even further about other crimes these groups commit against the Rohingya members settled in camp 26, respondent 4 mentions how such groups often engage in property crime as well:

> These groups come and take our food, gold, and even our money. I had to give my gold chain [points to her neck] to them. I have to hide everything I have. They use the money to buy guns and knives in the hilly areas. (Respondent 4)

When asked about the groups involved in such occurrences, the CiC office explains that border controls are unable to protect areas, especially near the hills, due to porous borders and thick forests. "Border controls need to be constantly maintained so that there are no chances for crimes occurring transnationally. Instead of having periods of strict border control during selected times of the day, we need 24/7 monitoring", says the CiC office at Camp 26.

Discussion: Assessing the Victimization through the Lens of Intersectionality

Findings portray the various experiences of victimization in the Rohingya camps. An intersectional lens reveals that differences in reporting and visibility between the host and Rohingya communities are not accidental, but emerge from the way multiple identities, i.e., being female, stateless, refugee, often Muslim, and economically marginalized, intersect to magnify vulnerability and silence.

Host communities described an ideology of male entitlement, coupled with women's inability or unwillingness to access justice systems. Here, gender norms intersect with class and citizenship status, i.e., poorer women or those without formal Bangladeshi identity cards experience compounded barriers to legal recourse. At the same time, a pervasive culture of shame, shaped by religious and patriarchal expectations, further discourages any challenge to male authority.

Interviews with key informants, host community members, and Rohingya women all flagged GBV as a top crime in Cox's Bazar (18 of 27 respondents). When

broken down by type, domestic violence (6), forced prostitution (4), rape (3), and child marriage (2), an intersectional reading shows how particular forms of violence cluster around specific identity intersections;

Forced prostitution disproportionately affects adolescent and single women who, lacking male protection and legal status, are pushed into transactional survival sex. Child marriage is most prevalent among female-headed households and families living in deepest poverty, where dowry expectations intersect with statelessness to commodify girls' bodies. Domestic abuse spans all camps, but is most normalized among married women who internalize a patriarchal bargain: accepting household violence in exchange for perceived security in displacement.

Respondents attributed violence to illiteracy (6), forced prostitution (4), poverty (2), criminal-justice gaps (2), patriarchal culture (1), and religious dogmatism (1). An intersectional synthesis highlights that illiteracy and poverty intersect to limit women's awareness of, and access to, humanitarian and legal aid. The absence of formal justice within the camps compounds statelessness, forcing women to rely on informal male-dominated power brokers who reproduce patriarchal control. Religious dogma, when combined with displacement trauma, reinforces both community shame and the invisibility of sexual violence.

In host-community FGDs, the most frequently mentioned GBV types were domestic violence, child marriage, dowry, eve teasing, and kidnapping. Women's restricted mobility, rooted in gender norms, intersects with camp governance failures, creating zones where gangs and abusive kin networks prey on those who venture beyond the shelter.

Across the three camps (26, 4 extensions, 19), intersectional factors such as geographic isolation, resource scarcity and uneven camp-in-charge authority produced varying patterns of GBV; camp 26's proximity to the hills and porous borders amplified gang-related abduction and stalking, especially for female volunteers whose dual identity as *"*insiders*"* (Rohingya) and *"*outsiders*"* (humanitarian workers) placed them at unique risk. In the Camp 4 extension, which was more structured and resourced, public harassment was lower. Still, domestic violence remained endemic, showing how camp-level governance intersects with household patriarchy to contain violence behind closed doors rather than eliminate it.

Finally, the culture of shame documented among Camp 26 women, who often chose silence over reporting, must be understood intersectionally, i.e., as a product of statelessness, patriarchal control of sexual purity, and fear of economic reprisal, all of which collude to make formal protection mechanisms both inaccessible and untrustworthy.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that gender-based violence among Rohingya women in Bangladesh is not simply the product of individual pathology or cultural tradition, but a manifestation of broader structural and intersectional inequalities. It assesses victimization experiences beyond a single-axis framework and shows how the intersection of various identities impact lived realities of the Rohingya women. Applying intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) allowed for a deeper understanding of how gender interacts with other axes of identity, such as statelessness, displacement, religion, and poverty, to create compounded forms of vulnerability. The experiences of Rohingya women and the gender-based violence they face are a result of their simultaneous identity positioning as females, Muslims, stateless, and displaced individuals, all within a humanitarian context that needs to recognize and respond to these layered forms of victimization deeply.

The article brought forth persistent patterns of GBV, including forced child marriage, intimate partner violence, dowry abuse, and abduction. These crimes are often normalized due to entrenched patriarchal norms, inadequate legal protections, and the structural marginalization of the Rohingya population. The lack of access to justice, education, and secure livelihoods perpetuates women's dependency and exposes them to recurring cycles of abuse.

With the theoretical and empirical insights presented, the article argues for a shift from narrowly targeted interventions to more intersectional, systemic approaches that address the root causes of GBV, which are inherently intersectional. This includes challenging patriarchal community structures, reforming humanitarian governance mechanisms, and ensuring that legal frameworks are inclusive of stateless vulnerable populations. Furthermore, any sustainable solution must keep the voices and agency of Rohingya women at the center and recognize them not simply as victims but as critical agents of change. Only with an inclusive, intersectional, and justice-oriented approach, can the cycle of layered violence see an end, and meaningful protection and empowerment can be achieved for Rohingya women and girls in exile.

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