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The Role of Muslim Rohingya Refugee Community-Based Organizations in Malaysia

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Abstract

The Rohingya refugee crisis has spurred the formation of community-based organizations (CBOs) among Muslim Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. This qualitative research explores the role and impact of these organizations within the refugee community. By employing a mixed-methods approach, including semi-structured interviews and content analysis, the study delves into the motivations, activities, challenges, and outcomes of Rohingya CBOs. The findings suggest that these CBOs play a critical role in bridging the gap between formal assistance and the unique needs of the Rohingya population in Malaysia. They offer vital services, foster a sense of belonging, and contribute to mental well-being. However, challenges related to resources and sustainability are apparent. This research contributes to a better understanding of refugee agencies and grassroots initiatives

Keywords: Rohingya refugees, Muslim refugees, community-based organizations (CBO), grassroots initiatives, Malaysia, refugee agency.

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Introduction

The Rohingya refugee crisis has given rise to urgent global concerns, as it presents an intricate tapestry of human rights violations, displacement, and the search for safety and belonging.² This research endeavors to illuminate a vital yet understudied facet of this crisis: the role of community-based organizations (CBOs) formed by Muslim Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. In the face of adversity, these organizations emerge as grassroots responses, providing crucial support and advocating for the welfare of the Rohingya community. The plight of the Rohingya, driven from Myanmar due to persecution and violence, has led to their dispersion across multiple countries, with Malaysia hosting a significant number.³ Here, the refugees encounter a plethora of challenges including legal hurdles, economic limitations, and cultural adaptation difficulties. In such an environment, CBOs have emerged as agents of change, help, and resources, and provide a sense of belonging for their fellow refugees.

This study examines the complex nature of CBOs and their capacity for transformation. It aims to comprehend how these organizations support the resilience and self-determination of the Rohingya community in Malaysia by studying their organizational structures, initiatives, partnerships, and accomplishments.⁴ This study has the potential to contribute to a broader discussion about refugees and their agency in addressing their problems. It aims to expand understanding of refugees' potential to achieve meaningful change within their communities, even when displaced, by investigating the activities, motives, and impact of Muslim Rohingya CBOs.⁵ This not only acknowledges their efforts but also advocates for a more comprehensive approach to refugee support that recognizes the value of refugees' agency and initiatives.

² Khairi 2016.

³ Aziz 2020.

⁴ R. A. A. K. Putri & Gabiella 2022.

⁵ Mohajon & Uddin 2022.

Existing Scholarship on CBOs and Refugee Communities

The literature on refugee communities underscores the significance of grassroots initiatives in promoting the well-being and integration of displaced populations.⁶ CBOs have been recognized as essential agents of change, empowering refugees to actively engage in addressing their unique challenges. These organizations often bridge the gap between formal humanitarian assistance and the specific needs of refugees, thereby fostering self-reliance and resilience. While existing research has shed light on the role of CBOs in various refugee contexts, limited attention has been directed towards the specific case of Muslim Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. The Rohingya people's forced migration from Myanmar due to ethno-religious persecution has led to their resettlement in Malaysia, where they face distinct socio-political and economic dynamics.⁷ This context has prompted the formation of CBOs that are uniquely tailored to address the multifaceted challenges of the Rohingya community.

CBOs in refugee contexts have demonstrated their efficacy in several areas. They play a critical role in providing access to basic services, including education, healthcare, and legal support, often filling gaps left by governmental and international efforts.⁸ Moreover, these organizations cultivate a sense of belonging and identity preservation, fostering cultural ties and social networks that contribute to the refugees' mental and emotional well-being. However, the literature gap regarding Muslim Rohingya CBOs in Malaysia is apparent.⁹ Existing research tends to focus on broader themes such as forced migration, human rights violations, and regional politics, neglecting the agency and initiatives of Rohingya refugees themselves.¹⁰

⁶ Nasar *et al.* 2022.

⁷ Saw *et al.* 2022.

⁸ Siddiqi 2022a.

⁹ Irfan *et al.* 2021.

¹⁰ Wah & Fazal 2023.

This study aims to address this gap by scrutinizing the formation, activities, and impact of these CBOs in the Malaysian context. Malaysia was selected due to its substantial Rohingya refugee population, offering a unique and specific context for understanding the dynamics of CBOs within the community. The legal and socioeconomic environment in Malaysia poses distinct challenges and opportunities for Rohingya refugees, allowing for an examination of how CBOs navigate these circumstances. Additionally, choosing Malaysia enables a comparative analysis, exploring similarities and differences in the formation, activities, and impact of CBOs across other Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and Thailand.

The role of CBOs in supporting refugee populations has been well-documented, yet there is a distinct dearth of research examining the case of Muslim Rohingya refugees in Malaysia.¹¹ By exploring the activities and significance of these organizations within this specific context, this study strives to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic interplay between grassroots initiatives and refugee resilience.

This research employed a qualitative research methodology to comprehensively investigate the role and impact of CBOs established by Muslim Rohingya refugees in Malaysia.¹² The methodology integrated primary and secondary data collection methods, along with a case study approach, to provide a nuanced understanding of the phenomena under investigation. The primary data collection strategy centered on semi-structured interviews conducted with key stakeholders, including leaders and members of the Rohingya CBOs, as well as beneficiaries of their services. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for a flexible yet focused exploration of the motivations behind forming these organizations, their organizational structures, activities, challenges, and perceived impacts.

¹¹ Georgiou *et al.* 2023.

¹² Messner *et al.* 2019.

The sampling approach employed the snowball technique to identify and recruit interview participants.¹³ Initial contacts from within the Rohingya community, who were involved with CBOs, were approached, and they subsequently referred other potential participants. This approach leveraged the trust and connections within the community to access individuals who possessed valuable insights into the inner workings and effects of the CBOs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person or through virtual platforms, depending on participants' preferences and logistical constraints.¹⁴ The interviews were guided by a carefully designed questionnaire that ensured consistency in data collection while allowing for open-ended discussions. This approach enabled participants to share their past personal experiences, motivations, challenges, and aspirations related to their involvement with CBOs.

To complement the primary data, secondary data collection involved the gathering and analysis of existing literature, reports, and documents related to the Rohingya refugee crisis, CBOs, and the broader social and political context in Malaysia.¹⁵ This secondary data provided valuable context and additional insights into the dynamics of the Rohingya community and their organizational initiatives. A case study approach was employed to delve deeply into the activities of selected CBOs.¹⁶ This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of specific organizations, their internal dynamics, relationships with stakeholders, and the outcomes they achieved. By examining these cases, the research aimed to uncover the diverse strategies and approaches used by CBOs to address the challenges faced by the Rohingya community.

The qualitative data, gathered from interviews and secondary sources, underwent content analysis.¹⁷ This systematic approach involved

¹³ Coyne 1997.

¹⁴ Ullah *et al.* 2023.

¹⁵ Baxter & Jack 2015.

¹⁶ Werang & Leba 2022.

¹⁷ Morgan 2022.

categorizing, coding, and interpreting the data to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights. Content analysis enabled the extraction of meaningful findings that contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the role and impact of Muslim Rohingya CBOs in Malaysia. In sum, this qualitative research methodology employed primary and secondary data collection methods, a case study approach, and content analysis to provide a holistic view of the activities and effects of community-based organizations formed by Muslim Rohingya refugees in Malaysia.

Muslim Rohingya in Malaysia: Current Figures

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are 184,220 registered refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia as of October 2023.¹⁸ Many are from various ethnicities of Myanmar, totaling 161,150 individuals. The majority are Rohingyas, with a staggering number of 107,030, followed by Chin (24,600), and 29,520 other ethnic groups fleeing persecution and conflict in Myanmar. There are also refugees from outside of Southeast Asia region, including 6,510 Pakistanis, 3,210 Yemenis, 3,000 Afghans, 2,800 Somalis, 2,720 Syrians, 1,290 Sri Lankans, 660 Iraqis, 600 Palestinians, and others. UNHCR is one of the United Nations agencies which provides humanitarian assistance for people who have fled or are forced to leave their country of origin due to human rights abuse and internal conflicts. To recognize the people who deserve to be assisted, Article 1 of the 1951 Refugees Convention and 1967 Protocol provides some definitions of refugees:

¹⁸ M. R. M. Arshad & Ajis 2023.

“A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it”.¹⁹

The definition above assists UNHCR in determining who can be designated eligible refugees, those whose hardship is caused by persecution rather than economic distress. According to UNHCR, the Rohingyas are currently the most numerous refugees in Malaysia.²⁰ They become refugees because of government policy that does not recognize them as Myanmar citizens. They are accused of being Bengalis from Bangladesh due to their skin color and Muslim faith.²¹ The mistreatment of the Rohingyas has prohibited them from exercising their fundamental rights as citizens, and many Buddhists in Myanmar accept the government's approach²² and agree that the Rohingyas should leave the country. The scenario has left the Rohingyas in confusion and fear, prompting them to flee Myanmar in search of a better life.

Rohingya: A History of Persecuted People

After the Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists coexisted under the then-Burmese King's control, the British arrived and rejected

¹⁹ UNHCR 2019.

²⁰ Ramlan *et al.* 2022.

²¹ Rana & Riaz 2023.

²² See CNN 2017.

the throne. Discrimination against the Rohingya people began during British colonialization when they were denied even a single important position in the administration.²³ The Rohingya people's situation appeared to improve when Myanmar gained independence from Britain in 1948. U Nu, Myanmar's civil leader, vowed to grant the Rohingya people an autonomous territory in northern Rakhine. However, U Nu was deposed by military leader General Ne Win. During the period of military administration in Myanmar, Ne Win accused the Rohingyas of being illegal immigrants brought to Rakhine by the British government. In 1974, Myanmar's Immigration Act effectively revoked Rohingyas' rights as citizens of Myanmar. In 1977, the juntas initiated an operation named Dragon Min to track down illegal immigrants in Myanmar.²⁴ Throughout the operation, the authorities used brutal violence against the Rohingyas. As a result of the carnage of the Dragon-Min operation, the first significant influx of Rohingya refugees to Bangladesh occurred in 1978. Around 200,000 Rohingya people were forced to flee the nation, with the vast majority crossing into Bangladesh and settling in camps. Table 1 shows the series of mass exoduses of the Rohingyas.

²³ Islam 2020.

²⁴ Roy & Pedron 2021.

Table 1. Major Mass Exodus by Rohingya Refugees Source: Khairi, Ahmad & Zainal (2023)

YEAR	NUMBER (REFUGEES)	TRIGGERS
1978	200,000	Dragon-Min Operation to abolish 'illegal immigrants', mainly Rohingya
1991-92	100,000	Citizenship Act 1982 officially denied the rights of Rohingyas as citizens of Myanmar
2012	80,000	Ethnic conflict between local Buddhists and Rohingyas
2015	50,000	Rohingya human rights denied, Rohingya became boat people
2017	1,000,000	Conflict between the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Myanmar Army
2020	25,000	Statelessness issue, Rohingya boat people

In 2020, the Myanmar junta made an official statement about Rohingya citizenship:

“In actual fact, although there are 135 national races living in Myanmar today, the so-called Rohingya people are not one of them. Historically, there has never been a Rohingya race in Myanmar. The very name Rohingya is a creation of a group of insurgents in the Rakhine State. Since the First Anglo-Myanmar War in 1824, people of Muslim Faith from the adjacent country illegally entered Myanmar Ngain-Ngan, particularly Rakhine State. Being illegal immigrants, they do not hold immigration papers like other nationals of the country.”²⁵

According to the junta, the Rohingyas are not just stateless individuals or persons without a state, but also refugees. Despite having grown up and been born in Myanmar, they lack any formal documentation

²⁵ South 2020.

proving their citizenship.²⁶ As a result, they are not granted the same privileges as other ethnic groups residing in Myanmar, and are considered undocumented aliens in their own country. Moreover, they are not eligible for identity cards and are not permitted to use public facilities, because they are considered illegal aliens.²⁷ Thus, many Rohingya people have been driven to flee Myanmar due to violence, persecution, and citizenship concerns, hoping to find better lives abroad.

Movement to Malaysia

The freedom of movement of the Rohingyas is highly restricted, and the great majority of them have been denied Burmese citizenship. Extortion and arbitrary taxation are also used against them, as are land expropriation, forcible eviction, house destruction, and financial limitations on marriage.²⁸ The Rohingyas are forced to flee their homes due to junta rule and mistreatment by neighbors. Although becoming a refugee is difficult, the Rohingyas accept the risk in order to live a better life in a new place. The arrival of Rohingyas in Malaysia might be regarded as a combination of pull and push causes.²⁹ The push elements that pushes Rohingyas to flee include violence, persecution, abuse, and denial of rights by both the government and communities.

The pull factors for Rohingyas to migrate to Malaysia are that Malaysia enjoys economic progress and multiculturalism in daily life. Rohingya refugees enter Malaysia in a variety of ways.³⁰ First, some travel by plane, which requires them to transit into Bangladesh and meet with agents who can generate falsified passports. Second, some trek across Thailand to Malaysia by land. Typically, the trip takes two weeks or longer, depending on the agents and security concerns. The third option is to take

²⁶ Rahman & Mohajan 2019.

²⁷ Mahapatro & Gebauer 2023.

²⁸ Irwansyah *et al.* 2021.

²⁹ Kipgen 2019.

³⁰ Chaijaroenwatana & Haque 2020.

the sea route by boat, which has recently become a popular means for Rohingyas to exit their country. However, travel by boat is the most difficult for Rohingyas due to weather, time, and food shortages. They must cross the Bengal and Andaman Seas to reach Malaysia, which takes more than two weeks.³¹ This situation puts them in danger of running out of food or even of boat sinkings before they reach Malaysia.

Community-Based Organizations of Muslim Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia

In order to care for the welfare of the Muslim Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, the community in Malaysia developed informal organizations and became community leaders.³² Informal organizations are those that are not registered with the Malaysian Organizations Registration Department, which is part of the Ministry of Home Affairs and deals with non-governmental organizations and political parties.

The organizations are made up of Rohingya refugee leaders who took the initiative to establish organizations to improve the welfare of and assist Rohingya refugees in need. Meanwhile, community leaders are individual Rohingya refugee representatives who are regarded as leaders in certain locations and are well-liked by the local Rohingya community.³³ Throughout the stay of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, many different Rohingya organizations have emerged, as shown in Table 2.

³¹ Mahapatro & Gebauer 2023.

³² Muhammad *et al.* 2011.

³³ M. Alam 2022.

Table 2. *List of Rohingya Refugee Organizations Established in Malaysia. Source: Khairi (2019)*

NO	ROHINGYA ORGANIZATIONS	ESTABLISHED
1	Arakan Democratic Process (ADP)	No info
2	Arakan Rohingya Refugee Committee (ARRC)	September 2007
3	Burmese Rohingya Refugee Association (BRAA)	2008
4	Burmese Rohingya Refugee Community (BRRC)	No info
5	Community Rohingya Pro-Democracy Organization (CRIPDO)	February 2004
6	Ethnic Rohingya Committee for Balakong, Serdang and Puchong (ERP-ESP)	2007
7	Rohingya Ulama Council (RUC)	2002
8	Myanmar Ethnic Rohingya Human Rights Organization Malaysia (MEHROM)	2003
9	National Democratic Party for Human-rights Rohingyas (NDPHR)	No info
10	Organization of Refugee Muslim Women (ORMWM)	2008
11	Organization of Rohingya Stateless in Malaysia (ORSM)	2002
12	Rohingya Information Centre (RIC)	2000
13	Rohingya Welfare Society Arakan, Burma (ROW)	2009
14	Stateless Rohingya Refugee Society in Malaysia and the World (SLRFSMW)	2008
15	United Islam for Rohingya Development Arakan Group	2007
16	United Islam for Rohingya Development Group (Penang Branch)	2007
17	United Islamic Rohingya Organization for Development (UNIROD)	2008
18	Ethnic Rohingya Committee of Arakan Malaysia (ERCA)	2009
19	Rohingya Society in Malaysia (RSM)	2010

The impact of the numerous Rohingya organizations established in this country has resulted in undesirable outcomes like overlapping responsibilities, misunderstandings, and confusion among the refugees themselves.³⁴ This can be attributed to several interconnected factors. Firstly, there is a lack of effective coordination and communication among the numerous Rohingya organizations in the country. Operating independently without a centralized mechanism for collaboration leads to duplication and conflicting efforts. Additionally, the limited resources available to these CBOs, both in terms of funding and personnel, hinder their ability to plan and coordinate effectively, resulting in challenges in addressing the diverse needs of the Rohingya community. Furthermore, the diversity in goals, strategies, and agendas among these organizations can lead to misunderstandings and conflict, particularly when there is no shared framework for aligning their efforts. The complexity of the Rohingya refugee crisis, encompassing political, social, and economic dimensions, adds another layer of difficulty in achieving a unified and coordinated response. External pressures from interactions with governmental bodies, international organizations, and other stakeholders also play a role in influencing the operations of Rohingya organizations. This situation causes government agencies, UNHCR, and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to have difficulties cooperating with organizations that truly want to help Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, because unfortunately there are also organizations founded with just two members which aim to profit from the Rohingya plight.³⁵

As a result, Professor Azizah Kassim of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), who conducted research on Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, spearheaded the attempt to bring all Rohingya organizations under one umbrella. She attempted to gather together representative leaders from every Rohingya organization in a seminar to seek consensus

³⁴ Kingston & Seibert Hanson 2022.

³⁵ Kironka & Peng 2021.

and consent from all.³⁶ As a result, all representatives of Rohingya organizations in Malaysia agreed to form the Rohingya Society in Malaysia (RSM).

It is envisaged that RSM will become a major body that safeguards the welfare of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. Members will be given cards as proof of membership, which must be renewed every year for a price of RM 50.00. Members of RSM will receive perks such as assistance in managing funerals, assistance in collecting money for the needy, and assistance with wedding arrangements.³⁷

An issue arose after RSM served as Malaysia's sole organization for Rohingya refugees for nearly two years. This was due to internal turmoil (conflict of interest) among committee members and leaders of the Rohingya refugee community who were dissatisfied with RSM's top leadership.³⁸ Finally, some individuals choose to quit RSM and continue their fight for the welfare of Rohingya refugees, either by starting another organization, moving individually, or working in small groups. In an interview with one of the RSM leaders, he stated that there are internal problems among the Rohingyas in RSM. The Rohingyas consist of clans and groups, which affects their ideology and goals, which may not be line with RSM's struggle. The leader expected that some people would quit the organization. This is a major challenge for the Rohingya people to deal with this problem.³⁹

This division affects not only RSM, but all Rohingya organizations in Malaysia. The division will hinder the efforts of the government and UNHCR to better deal with the Rohingya refugee problem. The RSM leader hoped this problem can be solved with the help of outside parties so that the Rohingya can unite again for a better future.⁴⁰

³⁶ Siddiqi 2022b.

³⁷ Voothayakumar & Alavi 2019.

³⁸ Eyemoon & Zaman 2023.

³⁹ RSM Leader, personal communication, August 24, 2023.

⁴⁰ RSM Leader, personal communication, August 24, 2021.

Several Rohingya organizations operate independently of RSM, including the Myanmar Ethnic Rohingya Human Rights Organization Malaysia (MEHROM), the Rohingya Ulama Council (RUC), the United Islamic Rohingya Organization for Development (UNIROD), and the Ethnic Rohingya Committee of Arakan Malaysia (ERCA), as well as individual Rohingya refugee leaders.⁴¹ Although there are now organizations and Rohingya community leaders who have left RSM, the effort to safeguard the destiny of Rohingya refugees remains the key agenda, and they are continuing this endeavor depending on their different responsibilities and capacities. The following section discusses welfare activities carried out by organizations and leaders of Malaysia's Rohingya community.

Providing Shelter and Transit to Rohingya Refugees

In certain circumstances, Rohingya CBOs are required to provide temporary housing or transportation to asylum seekers and refugees.⁴² Rohingya refugees who have recently arrived in Malaysia will be taken by their closest contacts to meet with representatives of Rohingya refugee organizations to obtain temporary accommodation. "So, we let them stay temporarily till they are contacted by a close relative or find another job," according to Jabir, an RSM official.⁴³ This also happens when Rohingya migrants were arrested and later freed from immigration detention because, according to an interview with one of the detention center's immigration officers:

⁴¹ Farzana *et al.* 2020.

⁴² Shariff *et al.* 2022.

⁴³ Jabir, personal communication, August 25, 2023.

"After UNHCR comes to our immigration detention center, UNHCR staff will conduct an investigation and documentation process. After that, they came back for the last time to take the Rohingya refugees out and I once asked where the UNHCR took them to. I understand that the UNHCR will take them to meet the leaders of the Rohingya refugee community and they will provide temporary shelter to their community."⁴⁴

The third time for providing temporary protection is when Rohingya refugee women and mothers are facing hardships due to divorce, abandonment, or death of their husbands.⁴⁵ This was stated by the head of the Selayang Rohingya refugee community, Ustaz Rafik. His organization assisted women facing domestic problems and single mothers who lost their husbands by providing temporary accommodation. In certain cases, the organization lets them live with other members and give them work as cooks or cleaners in the premises of organization shelters. For the others, the organization tries to find them work so that they have their income and can leave temporary accommodation because the organization has limited places.⁴⁶

Organizations and leaders of the Rohingya refugee community in Malaysia commonly refer to their operational buildings or headquarters as shelters.⁴⁷ However, because the premises or operating headquarters are restricted in size and capacity, these shelters are temporary and primarily used in transit; they are also utilized for other reasons such as meetings, religious activities, and community activities.

⁴⁴ Immigration Personnel, personal communication, September 5, 2023.

⁴⁵ Sunam 2023.

⁴⁶ Ustaz Rafik, personal communication, August 30, 2023.

⁴⁷ M. U. Alam *et al.* 2020.

Becoming Facilitators and Intermediaries between Rohingya Refugees and UNHCR

Rohingya refugee organizations act as facilitators and intermediaries between Rohingya asylum seekers and UNHCR, particularly in terms of the documentation, registration, and application processes for refugee status.⁴⁸ This situation refers to Rohingya people who managed to cross the Malaysian border without valid travel documents. When they are placed in a shelter provided by a Rohingya organization, the representative of this organization will be a facilitator and intermediary for refugees to interact with UNHCR. This is important because Rohingya refugees who have just arrived in Malaysia do not know how to speak English or Malaysian.

Therefore, the Rohingya organizations act as translators and help begin the refugee registration process at the UNHCR office, with the aim of gaining refugee status and the subsequent refugee card.⁴⁹ While waiting for the documentation process to be completed, the CBOs will issue a notification letter for the reference of the relevant parties regarding the background of the individuals as well as the status of those who are waiting for the documentation process from UNHCR to be completed. Although it is not an official document recognized by the government or UNHCR, the letter explains about the individual's identity and status in the hope that the local authorities will release them at their discretion if detained.⁵⁰ In addition, Rohingya refugee organizations are intermediaries for UNHCR in terms of delivering information and announcements that need to be publicized to Rohingya refugees.

⁴⁸ Chowdhury *et al.* 2023.

⁴⁹ E. A. Putri *et al.* 2023.

⁵⁰ Tesseur 2019.

Becoming Facilitators and Intermediaries between Rohingya Refugees and the Government of Malaysia

Although the Rohingya refugee organizations are not recognized by the government because they are not legally registered, and its members are also considered illegal immigrants, the organizations nevertheless play an important role in conveying information to certain government agencies, such as the police and the National Security Council (NSC), on the number of Rohingya refugees living in an area, the issues and problems that exist, and the development of the Rohingya refugee community in that area.⁵¹

The information obtained is important to assist the government in monitoring, reviewing, and verifying security, social, and welfare issues. Actions taken by Rohingya organizations and leaders in cooperating with the government assist the process of building communication and trust. An RSM leader acknowledged that they, as Rohingya refugees, understand their position in Malaysia. Therefore, they often cooperate with the government, such as the NSC and the police, in providing the information they want. They say if they helped the Malaysian government, the latter would help them.⁵²

As a result of the cooperation provided by Rohingya organizations, there are government agencies such as immigration and the police who invite them to help the authorities as translators, especially for detained Rohingya refugees, to determine whether they are indeed Rohingya or are Bangladeshis pretending to be Rohingya. RSM official, Mr. Rafique, explained:

⁵¹ Rashidi Mohamed Tahir *et al.* 2022.

⁵² RSM Leader, personal communication, August 24, 2023.

"I am often called by the police to be a translator if any Rohingya are arrested and detained. I will translate it into Rohingya based on the questions asked by the police. I can detect if the arrested person is Rohingya or Bangladeshi based on his dialect and geographical knowledge in Arakan (Rakhine). I also got a certificate of appreciation from the police for helping them."⁵³

Another RSM staff member, Mr. Rahim, stated that he once helped evacuate Rohingya refugees detained by immigration authorities:

"At RSM we help the Rohingya who are detained at the immigration detention depot. I once went to the immigration detention depot in Bukit Jalil (Selangor) to help release the Rohingya detained there. I got the information from a close family member. While there I acted as a translator and facilitator between the detainees and the immigration authorities. I explained to immigration that the detainees were Rohingya refugees and had genuine cards. I also contacted UNHCR so that they can help release the Rohingya prisoners because they have more power."⁵⁴

In addition, there are Rohingya organizations that are related to state government agencies, especially the Department of Islamic

⁵³ Rafique, personal communication, September 10, 2023.

⁵⁴ Rahim, personal communication, September 10, 2023.

Religion.⁵⁵ For example, the Rohingya Ulama Council (RUC) strives to work cooperatively by channeling information to the State Islamic Religious Office regarding the status and religious beliefs of Rohingya refugees. The information provided by the RUC helps the State Islamic Religious Office in improving its understanding of the Rohingya refugees and supports the preaching and religious education efforts for the refugee community in Malaysia.

Becoming Facilitators and Intermediaries between Rohingya Refugees, Local NGOs, and Academics

Rohingya refugee organizations can be used as an intermediate medium for local NGOs to provide material contributions and financial assistance.⁵⁶ This effort can help local NGOs to identify what form of assistance is suitable for the Rohingya refugees based on discussions with organization representatives or community leaders. In addition, they also help local NGOs by bringing them to meet the Rohingya refugee community for distribution of aid and deepening understanding of the problems faced in their daily lives.⁵⁷ Many local NGOs in Malaysia have come forward to provide welfare assistance, but this effort cannot be implemented properly without the involvement of organizations and leaders of the Rohingya refugee community, as stated by Ustaz Jais, the Publicity Officer of the Malaysian Islamic Welfare Organization (MIWO). He acknowledged that thanks to the cooperation and assistance from the organizations and leaders of the Rohingya refugee community, MIWO are able to understand the situation and problems faced by the Rohingya refugees, especially in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. It helps MIWO in devising the appropriate form of assistance to provide. This is important because it involves the financial distribution of resources, and MIWO need to be careful so that the aid given reaches the targeted recipients. MIWO

⁵⁵ Ware *et al.* 2022.

⁵⁶ Salim *et al.* 2019.

⁵⁷ Khairi 2019.

officers know that many other NGOs have also helped the Rohingya refugee community in this charitable activity. Their help is important because they can act as mediators and understand more about their community.⁵⁸

ERCA Chairman Mr. Rafique is also positive regarding the assistance provided by local NGOs in Malaysia. He established ERCA to help the welfare of Rohingya refugees around Seri Kembangan, Serdang, and Balakong. sCA is a small organization, it often lacks funds to meet the community's needs. Rafique is grateful that ERCA has been approached by NGOs such as Islamic Relief Malaysia (IRM), Humaniti Malaysia, MyCare (Humanitarian Care Malaysia), and individuals in providing financial assistance and channeling donations in the form of clothes, food, and learning tools for Rohingya children. At first, they came just to visit and talk; when Rafique explained to them about the situation of the Rohingya people there, they understood and promised to come again with help.⁵⁹

Academics also contact and ask for help from representatives of organizations or leaders of the Rohingya refugee community when they want to conduct research related to this group. This is because it is quite difficult for academics as researchers to go to the field to obtain information from Rohingya refugees without the role and intervention of organizations and community leaders.⁶⁰ Researchers are likely to face security risks when going to Rohingya refugee community areas such as remote villages or informal urban settlements because they are strangers in those areas and are considered uninvited guests. The community may drive away the researchers due to worries that the researchers are imposters want to take advantage of them.⁶¹ In addition, even if the researchers managed to enter the community area without being expelled, the refugees would not necessarily cooperate to be interviewed

⁵⁸ Ustaz Jais, personal communication, September 12, 2023.

⁵⁹ Rafique, personal communication, September 10, 2023.

⁶⁰ Siang 2021.

⁶¹ Rajaratnam & Azman 2022.

due to their nature of not trusting people outside their community.⁶² This was explained by Dr. Andika, an Academic Fellow of the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), National University of Malaysia:

"When I conduct my research on Rohingya refugees, I will meet with representatives of organizations or heads of Rohingya refugee communities in the area. This is because I understand that these Rohingya refugees will feel threatened by the presence of people they do not know. By mistake, they can act harshly against us to defend themselves. Even if they can meet, it is not necessarily possible to interview because they will not communicate with people they do not know. Therefore, I have asked the help of the head of the Rohingya refugee community to take me to meet his community and managed to get the necessary information because the head of the community is a respected and trusted person, and they will just follow what is told."⁶³

The method described by Dr. Andika is also practiced by local academics who conduct research on Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, such as Professor Kamarulzaman Askandar, Professor Azizah Kassim, Dr. Nae'im Ajis, Dr. Che Mohd Aziz, and Aizat. Professor Azizah Kassim recalled:

⁶² Mustafa *et al.* 2023.

⁶³ Andika, personal communication, September 14, 2023.

"When we want to interview and get information from Rohingya refugees, we have to meet with representatives of organizations or Rohingya community leaders because these people have influence, are trusted and respected in a community, and usually what they instruct will be followed by the refugees in that community. This situation will help us to get the information we want to get and the risk we face is reduced because we go to the community with permission and mandate from the organization or the head of the Rohingya community."⁶⁴

Through assistance from organizations or Rohingya community leaders as facilitators and intermediaries between Rohingya refugees and academics, various types of data collection methods in qualitative research can be implemented such as in-depth interviews, group interviews, field observations, and participant observation. This is because representatives of organization leaders or community leaders can plan and arrange meetings with Rohingya refugees as requested by academics.⁶⁵

Establishing *Madrasah* for Islamic Studies of Rohingya Refugee Children

Realizing that Rohingya refugee children are not allowed by the Malaysian government to attend government schools, Rohingya organizations and community leaders have taken the initiative to establish *madrasah* as a place to gain knowledge and education. This effort is important because although the government allows refugees to study in

⁶⁴ Azizah, personal communication, September 16, 2023.

⁶⁵ Palik 2020.

private schools, it is an obstacle for Rohingya refugee children, as parents cannot afford the high costs of education for their children.

Setting up a learning center like these *madrasahs* is not easy because it involves high costs in terms of rent, teachers' allowances, water and electricity costs, food, and learning equipment. Therefore, organizations and community leaders launched a donation drive to collect funds from their communities to establish the *madrasah*. The syllabus for Rohingya refugee children in the *madrasah* is focused on the sciences based on the Islamic religion and the Arabic language. According to Ustaz Jaber, RUC Chairman, the RUC took the initiative to establish a *madrasah* for Rohingya children to study religion, because religious knowledge is important so that their creed, faith, and knowledge of Islam is preserved and not distorted when they grow up.⁶⁶

Madrasahs established by RUC, such as in Kelang, Selangor, focus on Islamic studies, Arabic language, and Al-Quran studies. Their teachers are Rohingya themselves who have a good knowledge of Islam.⁶⁷ According to Ustaz Jaber, the presence of Rohingya children in the *madrasah* can help them avoid getting caught up in social and criminal problems.⁶⁸ In addition, the RUC *madrasah* prepares simple meals for the children because they may not have enough food at home due to their families' difficult living conditions.

In addition to RUC, other Rohingya refugee organizations and communities also set up *madrasah* to empower the knowledge of Islam, especially among Rohingya children.⁶⁹ According to Ustaz Kamal, the Rohingya place great emphasis on Islamic subjects and religious knowledge, believing they should be taught from a young age so that when the children become adults, they will have good religious knowledge and a strong faith in God.⁷⁰ In addition, the *madrasah* are used as a center of

⁶⁶ Ustaz Jaber, personal communication, September 18, 2023.

⁶⁷ Mohamed Nawab Bin Mohamed Osman 2017.

⁶⁸ Ustaz Jaber, personal communication, September 18, 2023.

⁶⁹ M. Arshad & Islam 2018.

⁷⁰ Ustaz Kamal, personal communication, September 14, 2023.

worship for the Rohingya refugee community, such as congregational prayers, *tarawikh* prayers, breaking the fast, Eid prayers, religious study classes, and Al-Quran study for adults.⁷¹ Table 3 shows some of the religious-based *madrasahs* and study centers established by Rohingya refugee organizations and communities in Peninsular Malaysia.

Table 3. *List of Rohingya Madrasah and Islamic Schools Established in Peninsular Malaysia. Source: Khairi (2019)*

NO	ROHINGYA MADRASAH AND ISLAMIC SCHOOLS
1	Maahad Darul Hijrah & Tahfizul Quran Al-Karim
2	Ma'ahad Tahfiz Al-Quran Al-Sagoff
3	Madrasah Hashimiah Tahfiz Al-Quran
4	Madrasah Komuniti Rohingya Sungai Sekamat, Kajang, Selangor
5	Ma'ahad Al Islahiyah Al Islamiyah Ma Tahfidzul Quran
6	Pusat Pendidikan Muhajirin Muslim Rohingya, Cheras, Kuala Lumpur
7	Pusat Pembelajaran ERCA, Seri Kembangan, Selangor
8	Madrasah Muiinulislam Rohingya
9	Madrasah Rohingya Al Khariah
10	Ma'ahad Al Islahiyah Al Islamiyah Teluk Panglima Garang, Selangor
11	Pusat Pengajian Komuniti Rohingya Kok Lanas, Kelantan
12	Pusat Pengajian Komuniti Rohingya Abim Al Hikmah, Terengganu
13	Pusat Tarbiyah Rohingya Muslim Kota Tinggi, Johor
14	Madrasah Komuniti Rohingya Kluang, Johor
15	Madrasah Komuniti Rohingya Nilai, Negeri Sembilan
16	Madrasah Komuniti Rohingya Kuantan, Pahang
17	Madrasah RSM Gelugor, Pulau Pinang (Pulau)
18	Madrasah Komuniti Rohingya Bagan Dalam, Pulau Pinang (Seberang)
19	Madrasah RSM Sungai Petani, Kedah
20	Madrasah RSM Alor Setar, Kedah
21	Madrasah Komuniti Rohingya Selayang, Selangor

⁷¹ Harun 2022.

Managing the Marriages, Deaths, and Funeral Affairs of Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia

When a Rohingya refugee couple wants to get married in Malaysia, the Rohingya refugee organization and community will help arrange the marriage.⁷² This is because UNHCR does not provide such services for refugees who are Muslims. Furthermore, the State Department of Islamic Religion does not have specific guidelines to complete the marriage process for refugees in Malaysia. The Department cannot process a marriage if one or both spouses do not have a refugee card, because their immigration status is considered illegal, and this is an offense under national legislation. As a result of the difficulties and the complicated marriage registration process, Rohingya refugee couples who want to get married will try to find a way by meeting organizations or community leaders who live nearby.⁷³

Usually, most Rohingya refugee organizations and communities in Malaysia have *ustaz* who know about the Islamic religion, especially regarding the procedures for managing marriages according to Islam.⁷⁴ For this reason, they are often asked to act as officiants in marrying Rohingya refugees. The costs for the marriage processes depend on the values set by the organization and community. For example, when a wedding planner from RSM handles the wedding affairs, the couple will be charged RM75.00. The charges that are imposed cover costs such as the marriage ceremony allowance, marriage certificate, and marriage card issued by RSM. In addition to RSM, Rohingya refugee organizations such as ERCA also help manage the marriage affairs of Rohingya refugee couples. According to Mr. Rafique, ERCA also has an *ustaz* who can be used as a marriage officiant, and couples who want to get married must pay a wedding management fee of RM100.00.⁷⁵

⁷² Intan Suria Hamzah *et al.* 2016.

⁷³ Khan *et al.* 2019.

⁷⁴ Towadi 2017.

⁷⁵ Rafique, personal communication, September 10, 2023.

Refugee organizations and community leaders also help couples with domestic problems and divorces. For example, UNIROD based in Bukit Mertajam, Penang, often manages these problems by inviting couples to come to their office.⁷⁶ A counseling session will be held to attempt to resolve domestic problems and restore the relationship between the Rohingya refugee husband and wife. However, if the relationship cannot be saved then UNIROD will also manage and process their divorce so that the couple can separate amicably and according to the rules of Islam. UNIROD gives a divorce letter to the couple as proof that they have divorced and serves as a record and information to the relevant parties.

When there is a death of a Rohingya refugee, then refugee organizations or community leaders play an important role in helping to manage the related affairs.⁷⁷ They regularly encounter two common types of cases: Rohingya refugees who die in government hospitals, and Rohingya refugees who die in their homes. Representatives and community leaders help the next of kin of hospital patients who died as intermediaries and liaisons to the hospital, UNHCR, and the police. The process begins by obtaining a death report or post-mortem report from the relevant medical officer. After receiving the report, UNHCR is informed so that the process of confirming the remains can be done.⁷⁸

Among the information to be notified to UNHCR is the name, age, cause of death, hospital involved, UNHCR card number, and next of kin.⁷⁹ After UNHCR investigates the information provided, they issue a confirmation letter to the hospital for the matter of removing the remains. For the case of Rohingya who are not registered with UNHCR, the representative makes a report directly to the police. Once the investigation is done and the police are satisfied with the information provided, a confirmation letter will be issued, and it must be given to the

⁷⁶ Ustaz Islam, personal communication, August 22, 2023.

⁷⁷ Kassim 2015.

⁷⁸ Andika Ab. Wahab 2018.

⁷⁹ Faisal 2020.

hospital to release the body for burial.⁸⁰ Normally, the hospital will not charge anything in this process. However, the matter of bringing out the body and the burial process will be borne by the next of kin. Confirmation from UNHCR is important because, without such confirmation, the hospital will not issue a letter of permission to remove the body and will not issue a permit for burial.

For Rohingya refugees who die in residential areas, the representative reports the death to the police.⁸¹ Then, the police come and do the investigation and documentation. After being satisfied with the investigation report, the police will issue a permit for burial. The procedure for issuing death registers and burial permits carried out by the hospital and the police is in line with the approval of the Minister of Home Affairs under Section 39 (h) of the Birth and Death Registration Act 1957 (Act 299) which was implemented on 1 December 2011. According to the Director General National Registration Department, Datuk Jariah Mohd. Said, Effective 1 December 2011, anyone can report a death at any police station, hospital, or Kuala Lumpur City Hall. Once the report is received, the informant will be given a copy of the National Registration Department's Death Register/Burial Permit, issued by one stakeholder such as the police, hospital, or City Hall to be used for funeral matters. This new method will overcome the bureaucracy because the informant only needs to report once for a death to obtain both the Burial Permit and Death Certificate.

For the remains of Rohingya refugees who are not claimed because they have no next of kin, the hospital will contact the embassy and UNHCR. If both parties do not respond or fail to confirm the body, then the hospital contacts the representative of the organization or head of the nearby Rohingya refugee community for the removal of the body and burial. Mr. Rafique stated that hospitals like Serdang Hospital know him because he always deals with them when it comes to Rohingya refugees such as births

⁸⁰ Samad *et al.* 2019.

⁸¹ Lee & Jang 2018.

and deaths. Therefore, if the Rohingya person in question has no relatives, then the hospital will contact him to arrange burial.⁸²

After the body has been removed from the hospital and a permit has been obtained from the police, there is another process that needs to be carried out, which is the matter involving the finalization of the bodies. The cost to be borne by the next of kin to complete the process of the Rohingya refugees is around RM1500.00 to RM2000.00 depending on the location of the cemetery.⁸³ If the next of kin do not have enough money to complete the funeral arrangements, then the organization or community leader will help by using their organization's welfare fund or by collecting donations from the community. This cost is a little higher than the local Muslim population, for whom processes cost around RM800.00 to RM1000.00.⁸⁴ The cost of processing the remains includes transport from the hospital to the mosque and cemetery, the purchase of shrouds and tools for bathing and clothing the corpse, and wages for grave diggers.

There are challenges that the next of kin of Rohingya refugees must face when the mosque in a certain area does not cooperate to complete this matter. The organization representative or community leader will try to help to solve this problem, explained Ustaz Rafik:

⁸² Rafique, personal communication, September 10, 2023.

⁸³ Sulaiman, personal communication, August 19, 2023.

⁸⁴ Mahbub, personal communication, August 20, 2023.

"In my area (Selayang), there is a mosque that does not cooperate to help complete funeral arrangements. If the body of the deceased is a Rohingya then the mosque has a lot of stories, it must be done this way, it must be done this way (correspondence and documentation). The hearse van we use also does not belong to the mosque because they do not allow it. So, what I did was I dealt directly with the gravediggers. They are close to me. So, I paid less, and they helped by finding a suitable location to exhume and bury these remains. I am a little disappointed with this situation because we are also Muslims just like the Malays here, but we are not treated fairly".⁸⁵

Although there are mosques that do not want to cooperate when it comes to funerals of Rohingya refugees, other mosques are willing to help, as stated by Mr. Rafique:

"When there is a death of a Rohingya here (Seri Kembangan), I will help the next of kin to complete it. Usually, I will take the body to the UPM Mosque (Universiti Putra Malaysia) because I know the mosques there well such as the Ustaz and the imams. They also helped us bathe, shroud, pray for the body, and bury the body in the nearby cemetery."⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Ustaz Rafik, personal communication, August 30, 2023.

⁸⁶ Rafique, personal communication, September 10, 2023.

The statements show that not all mosques have the same commitment. Some are willing to help Rohingya refugees and some do not want to cooperate, especially when it comes to funeral arrangements.

The Vital Role of CBOs in Refugee Communities in Malaysia

The findings presented in this article illuminate the extensive role of Rohingya refugee organizations and community leaders in managing significant life events, including marriages, deaths, and funerals. The absence of formal matchmaking and marriage services for Rohingya refugees, coupled with the challenges posed by legal requirements for marriage in Malaysia, has led Rohingya CBOs to fill this void. These organizations, often equipped with individuals knowledgeable about Islamic procedures, play a crucial role in facilitating marriages among Rohingya couples. The fees charged for these services contribute to organizational funds and cover various aspects of the marriage process.

Moreover, the findings shed light on the sensitive and intricate process of managing deaths within the Rohingya refugee community. The lack of official recognition and documentation for many refugees necessitates close collaboration between organizations, community leaders, hospitals, and UNHCR to navigate the complexities of confirming deaths, obtaining permits, and facilitating burials. The financial burdens associated with funeral arrangements, particularly for unclaimed bodies, highlight the financial constraints faced by the Rohingya community, prompting community leaders and organizations to utilize welfare funds or donations to ensure dignified burials. The variations in cooperation from mosques, as described in the text, underscore the challenges faced by the Rohingya community in accessing consistent support for funeral arrangements. While some mosques actively participate in completing the remains of Rohingya refugees, others exhibit reluctance or impose additional procedural hurdles. These discrepancies suggest potential areas for advocacy and collaboration between Rohingya organizations,

community leaders, and religious institutions to ensure equal treatment and respect for the deceased within the Muslim community in Malaysia.

The analysis highlights the vital role of CBOs and individual community leaders in addressing the unique challenges faced by Rohingya refugees in managing life events. The findings underscore the importance of understanding the cultural, legal, and institutional contexts shaping the experiences of Rohingya refugees and the critical role played by CBOs in navigating these challenges.

Conclusion

The plight of the Rohingya people is deeply rooted in the denial of their identity by the Myanmar government, leading to their status as unrecognized and oppressed individuals in their homeland. The refusal to grant citizenship and the persecution they face has forced many Rohingya to seek refuge in nearby countries, including Malaysia. While our discussion has shed light on the challenging policies of the Malaysian government regarding the recognition of refugee status, it is crucial to underscore the resilience and crucial role played by Rohingya CBOs in the survival of these displaced individuals.

Despite the hurdles presented by Malaysia's policies, Rohingya CBOs have emerged as beacons of support, providing essential services and assistance to the Rohingya refugees. The CBOs, equipped with their understanding of the community's unique needs and challenges, play a vital role in facilitating marriages, managing deaths, and addressing domestic problems. They act as intermediaries, providing crucial assistance in navigating legal complexities and ensuring dignified burials for the deceased.

The emphasis here lies in acknowledging the instrumental contribution of Rohingya CBOs in mitigating the impact of restrictive policies and fostering a sense of community and support for the refugees. These organizations, often staffed with individuals familiar with Islamic procedures and well-versed in the challenges faced by the Rohingya

community, become key players in the refugees' adaptation and survival in a foreign land.

While Malaysia's policies may pose significant challenges to the recognition of Rohingya refugee status, the resilient efforts of CBOs stand as a testament to the community's determination to thrive. The invaluable contributions of these organizations in addressing the multifaceted needs of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia highlight the significance of community-driven initiatives in overcoming adversities and building a sense of belonging for those displaced from their homeland.

Rohingya refugees in Malaysia live in a state of uncertainty, dilemma, and instability. This is due to the policies of the Malaysian government, which do not recognize the status of refugees and consider them to be illegal immigrants. The observation that the Malaysian government does not officially recognize the status of Rohingya refugees underscores a significant challenge faced by this displaced community in their host country.

The Malaysian government categorizes all refugees as illegal immigrants. Despite this classification, Malaysia, for humanitarian reasons, permits Rohingya refugees to stay temporarily and engages with UNHCR to manage their documentation affairs. The government's stance raises questions about the broader context of refugee recognition and protection within the country. Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees nor its 1967 Protocol, which establishes the international framework for defining the rights and responsibilities of refugees. The absence of such ratification leaves refugees, including the Rohingya community, in a precarious position, lacking the legal protections and rights afforded by the convention.

This lack of recognition significantly impacts the daily lives of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. While they are permitted to stay temporarily, the absence of official refugee status hampers their ability to independently find work and manage their lives without relying on government assistance. Additionally, the lack of recognition increases

their vulnerability to detention, arrest, threats, and exploitation. Although the daily life of the Rohingya refugees is not as good and luxurious as other local communities, they are still able to continue their daily life modestly and simply, including performing acts of worship as Muslims.

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