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## Women Who Dare: Exploring experiences of participation among Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh

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### Abstract

Gender norms in the Rohingya community dictate that women's role is confined to the domestic sphere. As Rohingyas attribute these norms to religion, they are largely seen as immutable. Infringement of these norms can be severely punished, not only with violence but also with loss of individual and family honour. However, defying all odds many Rohingya refugee women in Bangladesh are active participants in camp governance spaces created by humanitarian organizations.

This paper explores how these women experience participation in their own narratives. It discusses women's motivations, their strategies to navigate gender norms within their families and communities, and their means to reconcile their new roles with personal and collective values.

Women's participation in the governance of refugee camps is greatly shaped by humanitarian organizations. Ever since the adoption of a human rights approach to humanitarian action, most organizations have made extensive commitments to participation and gender equality. However, neither concept is easily harmonized with the humanitarian principle of neutrality. Moreover, enduring humanitarian images of women as essentially vulnerable illustrate the contradictions between commitments to gender equality and disempowering practices that neglect the role of women as agents of change. This case study provides a strong argument to acknowledge these tensions as a first step to advance discussions in academic and practitioners' domains.

**Keywords** participation, gender, refugee, Rohingya, camp management



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## 1. Introduction

This paper explores the lived experience of participation in 'camp governance' structures of Rohingya refugee women in Bangladesh. Navigating an order of strict gender norms, humanitarian frameworks and life in refugee camps, many Rohingya women decide to take part in participatory spaces created by humanitarian organizations as part of 'camp governance'. Building upon existing literature, this paper aims to contribute to our understanding of refugee women's participation by offering an often-neglected perspective: that of participants themselves.

In August 2017 the Myanmar army launched an offensive against the Rohingya, a Muslim minority regarded as illegal Bengali migrants in the Buddhist majority country. The offensive, that would later be qualified as a 'textbook example of ethnic cleansing' by the United Nations, forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee to neighbouring Bangladesh, which had been hosting Rohingya refugees since the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Most refugees arrived after having walked for over 50 kilometres (6 days on average) in search of protection.<sup>2</sup> In a matter of weeks, landslide-prone hills and elephant trails in the touristic district of Cox's Bazar would be replaced by emerging refugee sites hosting close to 800,000 persons.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most significant challenges for the humanitarian response has been to address the specific needs, risks and vulnerabilities of women and girls given prevailing gender norms that considerably limit Rohingya women and adolescent girls' presence and mobility in public spaces. This challenge becomes particularly relevant for the enactment of community representative structures. Humanitarian organizations mandated to support the Bangladeshi government in managing the camps found themselves in a critical dilemma defined by the imperative to respect cultural norms, including gender norms (which have been found to be essential to Rohingyas' understanding of dignity), while also upholding women's rights.<sup>4</sup>

Gender norms in the Rohingya community provide rigid, almost inescapable roles for men, women, boys and girls. Rohingyas often understand these norms as rooted in Islam and therefore immutable. Given that the history of Rohingyas has been marked by persecution, it is not surprising that many of them defend their identity, including gender norms, zealously. This can curtail the enjoyment of rights of Rohingya women and girls, and even put them at risk of harm. Women who participate in the public life of the camps, profiting from employment opportunities with humanitarian organizations or participating in 'governance' structures, often face threats or witness their male relatives being intimidated or physically assaulted. However, and against all odds, many women choose to participate and play leadership roles in the camps.

In view of the above-described challenge and paradox this thesis will explore how Rohingya refugee women experience participation, from their own perspectives. Acknowledging the dual imperative for researchers in forced migration, the paper aims to advance academic knowledge on the subject while also providing valuable inputs to inform future programming and policy for the protection and assistance of refugees in general, and Rohingya refugee women in particular.<sup>5</sup>

While forms of resistance to women's participation in Rohingya camps are manifest and are sometimes seen as representative of the community's will, this dissertation gives visibility to the voices of women who decide to participate in governance structures. Understanding how women manage to participate despite prevailing gender norms can draw attention to women's agency in (re)negotiating their role in their families and communities, as well as the forms in which this agency can be supported.

The paper begins by analysing relevant academic and non-academic literature in order to provide a foundation for the discussion. The literature review analyses two intertwined concepts within the realm of hu-

1 'UN Human Rights Chief Points to "Textbook Example of Ethnic Cleansing" in Myanmar' (UN News, 11 September 2017) <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/09/564622-un-humanrights-chief-points-textbook-example-ethnic-cleansing-myanmar>> accessed 6 March 2020.

2 'Bangladesh: Humanitarian Situation Report No. 1 (Rohingya Influx), 5 September 2017 – Bangladesh' (*ReliefWeb*) <<https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/bangladesh-humanitariansituation-report-no-1-rohingya-influx-5-september-2017>> accessed 6 March 2020.

3 'Humanitarian Response Plan - Rohingya Refugee Crisis, September 2017 - February 2018' (2017).

4 Kerrie Holloway and Lilianne Fan, 'Dignity and the Displaced Rohingya in Bangladesh' (Overseas Development Institute 2018) Working and Discussion Papers <<https://www.odi.org/publications/11179-dignity-and-displaced-rohingya-bangladesh>> accessed 6 November 2020.

5 Karen Jacobsen and Loren B Landau, 'The Dual Imperative in Refugee Research: Some Methodological and Ethical Considerations in Social Science Research on Forced Migration' (2003) 27 *Disasters* 185.

manitarian action: participation and gender. Both have followed similar paths in their incorporation into humanitarian action and have been stripped of their political dimensions in the name of 'neutrality'. By problematizing this, the paper will challenge a common narrative that perpetuates disempowering images of people affected by conflict and disasters.

Then, the paper proceeds to explain the methodology employed for data collection and analysis. This chapter intends to help the reader assess the validity of the arguments, as well as the constraints that set limits to how the data can be interpreted. The section is followed by a description of 'camp governance' and gender norms in Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, which provide the necessary context to understand the findings offered in the following chapter.

The discussion is structured by the research questions. First, women's motivations, and how these changed over time are presented. Second, the paper describes how women overcome some of the gender-specific barriers to participation that they encountered. Finally, the chapter explores the more complex question of how participants have made sense of their evolving role in their communities. This paper concludes not only with a recount of the most salient findings, but with an account of how these women's experiences challenge the idea that participation and gender can be entirely disassociated from their political dimension.

## 1.1 Research questions

The overarching question of this research is how Rohingya refugee women experience participation in 'camp governance' structures. In order to answer this, the following questions will be addressed:

- a) What motivates Rohingya women to participate in camp governance despite existing barriers to women's participation?
- b) How do Rohingya women negotiate (with their families and communities) their participation in camp governance in the context of prevailing patriarchal gender norms?
- c) How do women make sense of their changing role in the community in their own narratives?

## 2. Participation and gender in humanitarian action: parallel trajectories and a crossroad

### 2.1 Participation in development: can it be rescued?

The concept of participation, as understood in this research, has mainly been studied within the field of development. Although participation in development already had a decades-long history, it gained unprecedented institutional support in the aftermath of the Cold War.<sup>6</sup> Then, the incorporation of participatory processes became fundamental to the emerging discourse of a human rights approach to development.<sup>7</sup> Participatory approaches were initially claimed to be a more democratic form of decision-making and community empowerment that would allow people to exercise their 'right to determine their path'.<sup>8</sup>

However, critics argue that participation in practice has been largely treated as a technical problem and stripped from its political character.<sup>9</sup> Participation, critics argue, has become a buzzword that enables the buy-in of actors with diverging agendas as it can conceal multiple meanings without compromising its legitimizing power.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the ubiquity of participation has rendered other forms of collective political expression (such as demonstrations, strikes and petitions) as less legitimate than taking part in participatory processes.<sup>11</sup> While this is a widely shared view, academics debate on whether participation also offers opportunities for contestation, or whether it merely reinforces existing power dynamics that make such approaches not only ineffective, but even harmful.

On one end of the spectrum of critics of participation, Cooke and Kothari's *The Case for Participation as Tyranny* is often cited.<sup>12</sup> The authors' purposeful choice of words is a call to reflect on the dangers of a discourse that, in their view, hides a systematic potential for 'tyranny'. Participation, they argue, masks and perpetuates inequalities not only between 'facilitators' and 'participants', among 'participants', and between 'donors' and 'beneficiaries', but also 'historically and discursively in the construction of what constitutes knowledge and social norms'.<sup>13</sup> This thought-provoking idea differs from others more in degree than in substance, and although it may contribute to problematize the often assumed benefits of participatory processes, it offers little on what desirable alternatives could substitute them. Moreover, it disregards individuals' and communities' capacity to manipulate participation discourse to their advantage and use these new spaces for social change.

Academics that support the idea that participation can be 'rescued' often acknowledge that participatory spaces can be used as a means to reinforce existing power relations, but argue that existing patterns of dominance can also be challenged in these spaces.<sup>14</sup> Participation cannot completely escape the limitations imposed by power dynamics in the wider society, and therefore these power dynamics must be fully acknowledged and considered when assessing the outcomes of participatory processes.<sup>15</sup> This view revives the idea that meaningful participation is essentially political; the absence of conflict in participatory processes being a sign of power dynamics remaining unchallenged.<sup>16</sup> While the dangers of participation as a 'buzzword' that can be easily manipulated are still warned against,<sup>17</sup> scholars also recognize that partici-

6 Andrea Cornwall, 'Historical Perspectives on Participation in Development' (2006) 44 *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 62.

7 Birgitte Hamm, 'A Human Rights Approach to Development' (2001) 23 *Human Rights Quarterly* 1005.

8 *ibid* 1019.

9 Sarah C White, 'Depoliticising Development: The Uses and Abuses of Participation' (1996) 6 *Development in Practice* 6.

10 Andrea Cornwall and Karen Brock, 'What Do Buzzwords Do for Development Policy? A Critical Look at "Participation", "Empowerment" and "Poverty Reduction"' (2005) 26 *Third World Quarterly* 1043.

11 Cornwall, 'Historical Perspectives on Participation in Development' (n 6).

12 B Cooke and U Kothari (eds), *The Case for Participation as Tyranny; Participation: The New Tyranny?* (Zed Books 2001).

13 *ibid* 14.

14 White (n 9); Marilyn Taylor, 'Community Participation in the Real World: Opportunities and Pitfalls in New Governance Spaces' (2007) 44 *Urban Studies* 297.

15 White (n 9) 152.

16 *ibid*. 155.

17 Cornwall and Brock (n 10) 1055.

pation can yield positive results, and indeed such examples abound.<sup>18</sup>

Since 'participation' can hide a multitude of meanings, the literature on the topic offers several typologies. Often referred to and adapted is White's 1996 typology that identifies four types of participation to reflect 'the diversity of form, function, and interest' that it can encapsulate.<sup>19</sup> Ranging from 'nominal participation' (where those who implement the process seek 'legitimation' and those who participate want 'inclusion') to 'transformative participation' (where both aim to attain 'empowerment'), this and other normative classifications should be interpreted and used with caution. Cornwall indeed warns that these typologies can be misleading and that the results of participation can only be appraised in its context and under the light of its intended outcomes, as different purposes necessitate different approaches to engaging different categories of participants.<sup>20</sup> When analysing participation in practice and in a specific case, as this paper intends to do, academic literature from the field of development can offer important pointers.

The question of 'who' participates is the obvious start. Paradigmatically, a process that is meant to be inclusive may require to make a decision on who is excluded from the process as full participation may be impracticable. Despite claims of 'participation by all stakeholders' a process in which 'everyone' participates may prove impossible or only allow for a 'shallow' form of participation.<sup>21</sup> A widely ignored aspect of participation is the fact that the mobilization of community members to attend participatory spaces (e.g. meetings) is often left to local volunteers who exert a hidden power by deciding who is included and who is not.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the opportunity cost of participation is almost always ignored and hence organizers may ignore that a number of people simply choose not to participate.<sup>23</sup> Self-exclusion allows people to decide to engage in the activities that offer them the highest benefits, however ignoring opportunity costs leads to unintended bias in what is usually meant to be an inclusive process.<sup>24</sup>

Importantly, organizers often decide who participates while ignoring or disregarding the diversity behind the word 'community'. Participatory approaches often depart from a mythical notion of community as a harmonious collective, and therefore reinforce existing power dynamics as those who already hold a position of power tend to be more capable of voicing their ideas.<sup>25</sup> The problem of ignoring the complex power dynamics that exist within communities is all too common, especially so when participation is treated merely as a technical issue and its political dimension is ignored.<sup>26</sup>

An apparent solution to overcoming this complexity is the creation of categories that represent the larger community: women, elders, members of a certain religious/ethnic minority, etc.<sup>27</sup> However, people's identities are too complex to be fully captured within one demographic marker.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the defined interest groups might not reflect how people identify and relate to each other, and hence participants may not represent their purported 'constituency'.<sup>29</sup> The approach of using categories to navigate the complex make-up of communities is typical when it comes to inclusion of women in participatory spaces. Gender has historically been an axis of exclusion, and the current mainstreaming of gender in development does not imply that women and men (let alone non-binary individuals) are equal actors in participation.<sup>30</sup>

18 Samuel Hickey and Giles Mohan, *Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation? Exploring New Approaches to Participation in Development* (Zed Books 2004).

19 White (n 9) 7.

20 Andrea Cornwall, 'Unpacking "Participation": Models, Meanings and Practices' (2008) 43 *Community Development Journal* 269, 272–273.

21 *ibid* 276.

22 Catherine Buerger and Elizabeth Holzer, 'How Does Community Participation Work? Human Rights and the Hidden Labour of Interstitial Elites in Ghana' (2015) 7 *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 72, 80.

23 Andrea Cornwall, 'Beneficiary, Consumer, Citizen: Perspectives on Participation for Poverty Reduction' (2000) 2 57 <<https://www.sida.se/contentassets/4bae59ebedb74236a9339c2b61e34123/15609.pdf>> accessed 4 March 2020.

24 *ibid*.

25 Irene Guijt and Meera Kaul Shah (eds), 'Waking up to Power, Conflict and Process', *The Myth of Community: Gender Issues in Participatory Development* (Practical Action Publishing 1998) 1.

26 *ibid*.

27 Cornwall, 'Unpacking "Participation"' (n 20) 277.

28 *ibid*.

29 Andrea Cornwall, 'Whose Voices? Whose Choices? Reflections on Gender and Participatory Development' (2003) 31 *World Development* 1325, 1330.

30 Guijt and Kaul Shah (n 25); Cornwall, 'Whose Voices?' (n 29) 1325.

After questioning who participates, the next logical question is ‘participation in what?’. This paper is specifically concerned with participation in ‘camp governance’ in the context of humanitarian action. This type of participation falls under a notion coined by Cornwall and adopted at large in the literature on participation: the concept of ‘invited participation’. This idea refers to spaces of participation that are not created by participants themselves, but by an external entity which establishes participatory spaces to engage community members.<sup>31</sup> These spaces are owned and structured by organizers, who usually invite people who they consider to represent different stakeholders or opinions within the larger community.<sup>32</sup> This paper studies spaces of ‘invited participation’ in ‘camp governance’ structures led by organizations working in Camp Management.

## 2.2 Participation in humanitarian action: the governance of refugee camps

Parallel to the evolution in development discourse, international humanitarianism observed a shift in the 1980s and 1990s from an approach focused on meeting basic needs to a vision of humanitarian action as particularly concerned with the fulfilment of human rights.<sup>33</sup> This shift was accompanied by an emphasis on humanitarian protection as an indispensable companion to assistance, especially under the light of shortcomings in the humanitarian responses in Bosnia and Rwanda.<sup>34</sup> Thus, humanitarian practitioners not only adopted the idea of participation within the new ‘human rights approach’, but they mainstreamed it by incorporating participation as an essential aspect of protection.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the *Transformative Agenda* of 2011 incorporated community participation as one of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee’s (IASC) goals under the Accountability to Affected Populations Framework.<sup>36</sup> Community participation in decision-making was also included as the fourth of the 2014 *Humanitarian Core Standards* within the widely-endorsed Sphere Project,<sup>37</sup> and as one of the most salient outcomes of the World Humanitarian Summit.<sup>38</sup> Finally, a ‘participation revolution’ was listed as the sixth goal of the *Grand Bargain* among some of the largest aid providers and donors in 2016.<sup>39</sup>

As the aforementioned initiatives attest, ‘participation’ is omnipresent in the humanitarian discourse, and governance in the management of refugee and internally displaced persons (IDP) camps is no exception. The *Camp Management Toolkit* (CM Toolkit) endorsed by the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Global Cluster defines community participation as ‘a process that requires planning and resources and where individuals and groups from the displaced community identify and express their own views and needs and where collective action is taken to significantly contribute to solutions.’<sup>40</sup> In the context of CCCM, the best expression of community participation is the enactment of participatory structures (camp leaders, camp committees and other community groups, focus groups and working groups/task-forces) that constitute or contribute to ‘camp governance.’<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, the CM Toolkit does not define ‘governance’ although it makes reference to the concept throughout the document.

As a concept, governance has emerged as an alternative to classic forms of governing communities that

31 Cornwall, ‘Beneficiary, Consumer, Citizen: Perspectives on Participation for Poverty Reduction’ (n 23).

32 Cornwall, ‘Unpacking “Participation”’ (n 20) 275.

33 James Darcy, ‘Human Rights and Humanitarian Action: A Review of the Issues’ (Overseas Development Institute 2004) 4 <<https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odiassets/publications-opinion-files/2311.pdf>> accessed 4 April 2020.

34 *ibid.*

35 ‘Protection Mainstreaming | Global Protection Cluster’ <<http://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/themes/protection-mainstreaming/>> accessed 25 October 2019.

36 ‘AAP Operational Framework Final Revision’ <[https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/legacy\\_files/AAP%20Operational%20Framework%20Final%20Revision.pdf](https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/legacy_files/AAP%20Operational%20Framework%20Final%20Revision.pdf)> accessed 20 March 2020.

37 ‘The Sphere Handbook’ <[https://handbook.spherestandards.org/en/sphere/#ch005\\_002](https://handbook.spherestandards.org/en/sphere/#ch005_002)> accessed 20 March 2020.

38 World Humanitarian Summit Secretariat, ‘Restoring Humanity: Synthesis of the Consultation Process for the World Humanitarian Summit’ <<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Restoring%20Humanity-%20Synthesis%20of%20the%20Consultation%20Process%20for%20the%20World%20Humanitarian%20Summit.pdf>> accessed 8 May 2020.

39 ‘The Grand Bargain – A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need’ <[https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/sites/default/files/resources/2018/Jan/Grand\\_Bargain\\_final\\_22\\_May\\_FINAL-2.pdf](https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/sites/default/files/resources/2018/Jan/Grand_Bargain_final_22_May_FINAL-2.pdf)> accessed 20 March 2020.

40 International Organization for Migration, Norwegian Refugee Council and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, ‘Camp Management Toolkit’ Chapter 3 <[https://ccccluster.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/CMT\\_2015\\_Portfolio\\_compressed.pdf](https://ccccluster.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/CMT_2015_Portfolio_compressed.pdf)> accessed 20 March 2020.

41 *ibid.*

incorporates the diversity and changing power dynamics that is typical of globalized, neoliberal societies.<sup>42</sup> Its application is especially suitable to the reality of refugee camps, where inhabitants' countries of origin often have broken political systems, and upon displacement face a new system of rules and authorities with a different political culture.<sup>43</sup> For local authorities, traditional forms of power are challenged by the reality of displacement and the formation of camps, as well as by the coexistence of diverse actors that intervene in the humanitarian response that follows. In this context, the discourse of community participation in governance allows for a form of 'government minus politics' that humanitarian actors use to navigate various layers of local, national, regional and donor States' politics.

Similar to participation in development processes, the real outcome of participation in camp governance is very contested in academic circles, with increasing scepticism on both real and intended goals. In fact, many authors have resorted to the Foucault-ian concept of 'governmentality' to explain how State power is simply reproduced in these 'new spaces'.<sup>44</sup> Community participation in governance is seen as a social technology that provides a democratic facade and seeks to create self-regulated subjects,<sup>45</sup> where the refugee is transformed from a victim to a resilient person, empowered yet not interested or involved in politics.<sup>46</sup> At the discursive level, community participation creates a narrative whereby refugees who seek other forms of collective expression and/or confront the status quo are seen as problematic and labelled as political.<sup>47</sup>

The discussion between the most uncompromising critics of camp governance and those that recognize both its dangers and the possibility for contestation has similarities with the discussions on participation in development. There seems to be a certain level of agreement in the refusal to take governance and participation at face value and in the need to identify the hidden interests that these may conceal. However, the camp is often misrepresented in the characterization of critics to camp governance, and the possibilities that participation can (inadvertently) create are often ignored.

Critics wrongfully dismiss refugees' agency and capacity to navigate or resist these attempts to control them and tame their political aspirations.<sup>48</sup> Despite the humanitarian discourse, camps remain highly political spaces. Lecadet narrates how Togolese refugees in Benin created a 'refugee government' by electing representatives while also establishing committees that mirrored the categories of vulnerability used by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian actors.<sup>49</sup> This hybrid system shows how refugees can evade humanitarian control, and navigate power relations by appropriating aspects of the humanitarian agenda.<sup>50</sup> In another example, in a refugee camp in Ghana, State authorities and UNHCR attempted to prevent a wide range of activities deemed as 'political'.<sup>51</sup> However, after failing to be allowed to participate in governance structures, groups of Liberian refugees organized themselves to oppose refugee representatives selected by the Ghanaian authorities.<sup>52</sup> This case study offered by Omata illustrates how camps remain political spaces, even when refugees' political agency is deemed undesirable or harmful by both State and humanitarian administrations.<sup>53</sup>

As is the case with participation in development, participation in humanitarian action and more specif-

<sup>42</sup> Taylor (n 14).

<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth Holzer, 'A Case Study of Political Failure in a Refugee Camp' (2012) 25 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 257, 275.

<sup>44</sup> Simon Turner, 'Negotiating Authority between UNHCR and "The People"' (2006) 37 *Development & Change* 759; Dan Bulley, 'Inside the Tent: Community and Government in Refugee Camps' (2014) 45 *Security Dialogue* 63; Elisabeth Olivius, 'Displacing Equality? Women's Participation and Humanitarian Aid Effectiveness in Refugee Camps' (2014) 33 *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 93; Simon Turner, 'What Is a Refugee Camp? Explorations of the Limits and Effects of the Camp' (2016) 29 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 139; Naohiko Omata, 'Unwelcome Participation, Undesirable Agency? Paradoxes of De-Politicisation in a Refugee Camp' (2017) 36 *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 108.

<sup>45</sup> Rose Jaji, 'Social Technology and Refugee Encampment in Kenya' (2012) 25 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 221.

<sup>46</sup> Suzan Ilcan and Kim Rygiel, "'Resiliency Humanitarianism': Responsibilizing Refugees through Humanitarian Emergency Governance in the Camp' (2015) 9 *International Political Sociology* 333.

<sup>47</sup> Elisabeth Olivius, '(Un)Governable Subjects: The Limits of Refugee Participation in the Promotion of Gender Equality in Humanitarian Aid' (2014) 27 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 42; Jaji (n 45) 232.

<sup>48</sup> Adam Ramadan, 'Spatializing the Refugee Camp' (2013) 38 *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 65.

<sup>49</sup> Clara Lecadet, 'Refugee Politics: Self-Organized "Government" and Protests in the Agamé Refugee Camp (2005–13)' (2016) 29 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 187.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Omata (n 44).

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*



ically in 'camp governance' calls for scrutiny. Participation remains a buzzword that can be used to give the impression of community empowerment in line with the human rights approach to humanitarian action, while power relations between organizers and participants, among participants themselves and between donor governments and participants remain unchallenged.<sup>54</sup> Participation in 'camp governance' can be used to delegitimize other forms of political engagement, and even within the channels created and controlled by humanitarian organizations participation that seeks to reclaim refugees' agency may be discarded as 'political' and problematic.<sup>55</sup> This is especially the case when participation is solely considered as a technical approach rather than a political process.<sup>56</sup> Even for the best-intentioned humanitarian practitioners facilitating spaces of genuine refugee empowerment may not be entirely feasible as forms of 'political participation' might be unacceptable not only to host countries and donors, but also to most humanitarian organizations. And the boundaries of what constitutes political participation may not be identical for these different actors.

However, camp inhabitants are not mere objects of humanitarian practice. As the examples above show, refugees respond to the opportunities and constraints created by participatory camp governance by engaging in 'official' (invited) spaces, creating parallel structures or openly opposing existing spaces altogether. Efforts to suppress political life in refugee camps ironically create a 'hyper-politicized space where nothing is taken for granted and everything is contested'.<sup>57</sup> Discarding participation in camp governance altogether neglects refugees' agency to profit from the opportunities that participation may create even if it falls short of its proclaimed goals. Participation in camp governance may well be a space where refugees are socialized into the humanitarian system, which enables them to learn 'the rules of the game' and be better positioned to make decisions.<sup>58</sup> These participatory spaces may also offer a platform for some refugees to create networks among themselves and to access those who 'keep the gates' of humanitarian resources. And given the sensitive political climate that often surrounds the hosting of large numbers of refugees, participation in 'camp governance' may be one of the very few viable venues for refugees to engage collectively.

### 2.3 The incorporation of gender in humanitarian action

Although this paper does not pretend to offer a comprehensive gender analysis on participation in camp governance, gender is a pivotal aspect of how women and men experience participation. Gender is here understood as a complex social construction that dictates different roles for men and women, as well as the relationship between those roles and the value and status associated with those roles.<sup>59</sup> Gender, therefore, differs from sex in that the former is socially constructed and amenable to change, whereas the latter is biologically determined.<sup>60</sup>

Women's participation in camp governance takes place within an existing set of rules that dictate what behaviour is acceptable for women in their communities. Relationships between men and women are situated in a system of unequal power relations denominated 'patriarchy', which takes different particular forms in different societies and different historical times.<sup>61</sup> These gender roles and gendered relations are profoundly affected by life in exile. Furthermore, the manner in which gender is understood and applied in humanitarian action also conditions the experience of women in participatory spaces.

Academic literature on gender and humanitarian action is rather limited as the inclusion of gender in humanitarian aid is fairly recent.<sup>62</sup> In parallel to the incorporation of the human rights agenda in humanitarian

54 Cooke and Kothari (n 12) 14.

55 Olivius, '(Un)Governable Subjects' (n 47) 42; Omata (n 44) 108.

56 White (n 9).

57 Turner, 'What is a Refugee Camp?' (n 44).

58 Lecadet (n 49).

59 Alice Edwards, 'Terms and Terminology', *Violence against Women under International Human Rights Law* (Cambridge University Press 2011) 13.

60 *ibid.*

61 *ibid.*

62 Hilde Van Dijkhorst and Suzzette Vonhof, 'Gender and Humanitarian Aid: A Literature Review of Policy and Practice' (Wageningen University and Cordaid 2005) <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/40111880\\_Gender\\_and\\_Humanitarian\\_Aid\\_a\\_Literature\\_Review\\_of\\_Poli](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/40111880_Gender_and_Humanitarian_Aid_a_Literature_Review_of_Poli)

action described in the previous section, feminist critics to international human rights frameworks led the way to the introduction of a gender perspective in both development and humanitarian work.<sup>63</sup>

In international human rights, development, and humanitarianism, androcentric understandings of the experience of persons affected by displacement and emergencies have resulted in the needs and rights of women being neglected. Decades of feminist activism led to the declaration by the United Nations (UN) of the Decade on Women 1976-1985.<sup>64</sup> Following the momentum created in the 80s, UNHCR published in 1990 its *Policy on Refugee Women* and in 1991 it issued its *Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women*, which make reference, albeit briefly, to women's participation.<sup>65</sup> These early documents were often based on an essentialist image of women as being vulnerable and in need of protection, as the classical merging of 'women and children' indicates.<sup>66</sup> Today, the trace of these early representations of women can still be noticed in the overemphasis on protection from gender-based violence in policies and guidelines pertaining to women in humanitarian action.

Another significant development was the issuance of a policy that required all UN agencies to 'mainstream' gender by the UN Economic and Social Council in 1997. This development took place partly as a consequence of the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, which also resulted in a number of other institutions introducing the practice of gender mainstreaming.<sup>67</sup> In parallel to the incorporation of 'participation' in all aspects of humanitarian action, gender became an inescapable reference in policies and guidelines. However, critics have argued that 'gender mainstreaming' has merely led to a discursive change that, as is the case with participation, has been stripped of its political connotation.<sup>68</sup>

More recently, the IASC has issued specific guidance not only to mainstream gender in humanitarian action but also framing the approach within the more ambitious goal of achieving gender equality.<sup>69</sup> This is an interesting development; even though the definition of 'gender mainstreaming' as adopted by the UN recognizes gender equality as the ultimate goal, for decades the agenda of gender equality was considered incompatible with humanitarian principles and interfering with local culture was frowned upon.<sup>70</sup>

In the humanitarian discourse, gender equality is addressed as a technical problem amenable to a solution by the 'enlightened' humanitarian worker, therefore sustaining power asymmetries between aid workers and 'beneficiaries'.<sup>71</sup> As is the case with 'participation', an essentially political process is depoliticized to be compatible with the 'neutrality' professed by humanitarianism. Treating men and women as passive aid recipients ignores how refugees (re)negotiate their roles in the often-changing hierarchies of exile and life in refugee camps. Once again, this discourse neglects refugees, and in particular refugee women, as political actors.<sup>72</sup>

Although the topic of gender has gained significant interest in the last decades leading to multiple and well endorsed standards and policies, in practice approaches to gender in humanitarian action vary greatly. Olivius has proposed a very useful classification which sheds light on how different modes of action are informed by different images of refugee women as well as of the role of humanitarian action *visa-vis*

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cy\_and\_Practice> accessed 18 April 2020.

63 Alice Edwards, 'Transitioning Gender: Feminist Engagement with International Refugee Law and Policy, 1950–2010' (2010) 29 *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 21/45, 22–23.

64 *ibid.*

65 'Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women' (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 1991) <<https://www.unhcr.org/publications/legal/3d4f915e4/guidelines-protectionrefugee-women.html>> accessed 1 November 2019.

66 Edwards (n 63) 32.

67 Caroline Moser and Annalise Moser, 'Gender Mainstreaming since Beijing: A Review of Success and Limitations in International Institutions' (2005) 13 *Gender & Development* 11.

68 Edwards (n 63) 36; Caroline Sweetman, 'Introduction' (2012) 20 *Gender & Development* 389; Olivius, 'Displacing Equality?' (n 44).

69 Inter-Agency Standing Committee Reference Group on Gender and Humanitarian Action, 'The Gender Handbook for Humanitarian Action' <[https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2018iasc\\_gender\\_handbook\\_for\\_humanitarian\\_action\\_eng\\_0.pdf](https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2018iasc_gender_handbook_for_humanitarian_action_eng_0.pdf)> accessed 4 November 2020.

70 Elisabeth Olivius, 'Constructing Humanitarian Selves and Refugee Others' (2016) 18 *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 270, 14; Deborah Clifton and Fiona Gell, 'Saving and Protecting Lives by Empowering Women' (2001) 9 *Gender & Development* 12 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13552070127750>> accessed 18 April 2020.

71 Olivius, 'Constructing Humanitarian Selves and Refugee Others' (n 70).

72 *ibid.*

gender norm change.<sup>73</sup>

The 'basic needs approach' focuses on ensuring that both men and women access life-saving services; it is based on the principle of 'neutrality' that allegedly prevents humanitarian workers from engaging with gendered power dynamics.<sup>74</sup> This approach disregards the gendered effects of humanitarian action itself and, by failing to address unequal relations it cannot ensure equal access to assistance.<sup>75</sup>

In the 'instrumentalist approach', women are presumed to have gender-specific qualities (being family-oriented, collaborative, honest) and capacities (e.g. as caregivers) based on their reproductive role.<sup>76</sup> Hence, this approach seeks to engage women in order to improve the efficiency of aid.<sup>77</sup> However, it does not challenge power inequalities nor does it seek to empower women; on the contrary, it reinforces their traditional gender roles.<sup>78</sup>

Finally, in the 'modernization approach', emergencies are presented as opportunities for 'enlightened' humanitarian workers to lead social change.<sup>79</sup> This approach recreates global hierarchies between 'beneficiaries' and humanitarian organizations,<sup>80</sup> and it distracts us from the ways in which aid can also contribute to gender inequality.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, by presenting gender norm change as 'a symbol in a cultural conflict' it risks creating further resistance within the community.<sup>82</sup>

## 2.4 Rethinking the relationship of participation and gender in humanitarian action

The tension between a promotion of community participation and the intention to depoliticize refugee camps severely affects people's experience of community life in exile. But it does not affect women and men equally as gender influences not only the share of power that people can claim, but also the costs of engaging in political matters. One of the most salient forms in which gender affects people's capacity to participate in camp governance is the representations of men and women inadvertently professed by humanitarian workers (as illustrated by Olivius typology above). Women's vulnerabilities and victimhood have been overemphasized in humanitarian action in detriment of the recognition of their agency as well as the impact that emergencies have on men.<sup>83</sup> In particular, discussions about women are usually framed in the context of sexual violence and other forms of abuse, perpetuating the image of women as eternal victims.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, women are often characterized as 'altruistic' and 'family oriented' whereas men are represented as 'politicized, corrupt and self-interested'.<sup>85</sup> For this reason, humanitarian organizations often tend to promote women's leadership in camp governance, sometimes ignoring more traditional forms of leadership which may only allow for a limited form of women's participation, if any.<sup>86</sup>

Gender-related representations also affect the manner in which refugees choose to participate in camp governance. Once refugees understand these gendered images that humanitarian workers hold about them, they act in consequence. For example, in her study of a Liberian refugee camp in Burundi, Holzer describes how women were mobilized by the larger refugee community to protest against camp governance

73 Elisabeth Olivius, 'Beyond the Buzzwords: Approaches to Gender in Humanitarian Aid' (Expertgruppen för Biståndsanalys (EBA) 2016) 27 <<http://umu.divaportal.org/smash/get/diva2:940987/FULLTEXT01.pdf>> accessed 6 November 2020.

74 *ibid* 7.

75 *ibid*.

76 *ibid* 8.

77 *ibid* 9.

78 *ibid* 10.

79 *ibid* 11.

80 Olivius, 'Constructing Humanitarian Selves and Refugee Others' (n 70).

81 Olivius, 'Beyond the Buzzwords: Approaches to Gender in Humanitarian Aid' (n 73) 13.

82 *ibid*.

83 Awa Mohamed Abdi, 'Refugees, Gender-Based Violence and Resistance: A Case Study of Somali Refugee Women in Kenya' in Alexandra Dobrowolsky and Evangelia Tastsoglou (eds), *Women, Migration and Citizenship: Making Local, National and Transnational Connections* (Routledge 2006) 203 <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/londonww/detail.action?docID=4414700>> accessed 23 August 2019.

84 Patricia Daley, 'Gender, Displacement and Social Reproduction: Settling Burundi Refugees in Western Tanzania' (1991) 4 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 248, 248.

85 Olivius, '(Un)Governable Subjects' (n 47) 15.

86 *ibid*.

actors as men were perceived by humanitarian organizations to be more belligerent and therefore would face a harsher response.<sup>87</sup> This, combined with concerted efforts by UNHCR to support women's leadership as part of its institutional commitment to gender equality opened up new spaces for women's political leadership.<sup>88</sup>

While the conception of women as less politicized and public-spirited may lead to their inclusion in camp governance, it also imposes severe limits to the ways in which they can participate, as deviations from the conduct expected by humanitarian organizations are discarded as 'problematic, unruly and illegitimate'.<sup>89</sup> Refugees adapt their public behaviour and speech to present themselves to suit aid providers' expectations in order to maximize the support available to them. This was the case in Zahrawi refugee camps studied by Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, where humanitarian projects targeted an 'idealized' type of women, therefore marginalizing and excluding women who did not meet the archetypes held by humanitarian organizations.<sup>90</sup> Hence, these gendered humanitarian representations may conceal and perpetuate inequalities, not only between men and women, but also among men and among women.

## 2.5 Displacement as a catalyst of gender norm change

Participation in refugee camps takes place in the midst of a disruption to social order. The mere enactment of the camp is usually a measure to contain 'the other'; an exceptional and temporary resort to accommodate outsiders to the political system of the nation-State.<sup>91</sup> The vacuum created by this disruption offers a unique opportunity for the emergence of new social structures or the reinforcement of previously existing ones; 'social life, power relations, hierarchies and sociality are remoulded in the camp'.<sup>92</sup> Power relations defined by gender differences are no exception. The host society may be perceived as a threat to the displaced community's values and identity, and as a consequence the subordinated role of refugee women may be intensified as a way to preserve the community's identity.<sup>93</sup> Alternatively, this can be a liberating experience for young men and women who may profit from the experience as a form to evade 'patriarchal control exercised through family and other kin relations'.<sup>94</sup>

When the process of gender-norm change is accelerated by the new environment and uncertainty of life in refugee camps, some factors play a significant role in shaping the options available to women. Patriarchy as a socio-political system can take many forms. Each of these types presents different 'rules of the game' and demands different strategies for women 'to maximize security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression'.<sup>95</sup> The 'patriarchal contract' between the genders is not experienced as a static, coherent system that cannot be contested, but rather through the lived experiences of everyday interactions where the contract is constantly being renegotiated, although from very unequal positions.<sup>96</sup> Importantly, women and men retain a level of agency in re-negotiating their relative status as well as in resisting change even in the most challenging circumstances.<sup>97</sup>

How agency remains a key aspect of gender norm change in displaced populations was a salient lesson in Grabska's study of southern Sudanese refugees.<sup>98</sup> Navigating conflict and displacement, young and old,

87 Holzer (n 43) 261.

88 *ibid* 262.

89 Olivius, '(Un)Governable Subjects' (n 47) 59.

90 Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "'Ideal" Refugee Women and Gender Equality Mainstreaming in the Sahrawi Refugee Camps: "Good Practice" for Whom?' (2010) 29 *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 64.

91 Turner, 'What is a Refugee Camp?' (n 44).

92 *ibid* 144.

93 Daley (n 84) 249.

94 *ibid*.

95 Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Bargaining with Patriarchy' (1988) 2 *Gender and Society* 274, 274.

96 Naila Kabeer, Ayesha Khan and Naysan Adlparvar, 'Afghan Values or Women's Rights?: Gendered Narratives about Continuity and Change in Urban Afghanistan' (2011) 211 *IDS Working Papers* 34 <<https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/123456789/4244>> accessed 12 August 2019.

97 Katarzyna Grabska, 'In-Flux: (Re)Negotiations of Gender, Identity and "Home" in Post War Southern Sudan' (DPhil Thesis, University of Sussex 2010) 37 <<http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/2525/>> accessed 18 April 2020.

98 *ibid*.

women and men exercised their agency in re-negotiating their place in society and adapting to new contexts.<sup>99</sup> Grabska uses the concept of in-flux to signal how gender identities evolve in a nonlinear process, they are fluid and in constant change in the process of displacement and return.<sup>100</sup> Conflict and displacement induce the emergence of new femininities and new masculinities, and challenge hegemonic gender practices. However, these new gender identities may either defy or reinforce inequalities between men and women, or among men and women themselves (e.g. between the youth and the elderly).<sup>101</sup>

Importantly, change is often resisted as gender roles are closely associated with the community's own identity; in the case of the community studied by Grabska, 'our culture' was used to convey a sense of pride and superiority of traditional practices.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, the fact that gender roles evolve as people adapt to new circumstances does not necessarily entail a change at the discursive level. Szczepanikova describes how Chechen refugee women often became the sole breadwinner of their families while living in refugee camps in the Czech Republic; however, refugees' ideal notions of femininity and masculinity remained unchanged, with the role of women still associated with motherhood and the domestic sphere and the role of men still linked with being the breadwinner and protector of the family.<sup>103</sup>

Humanitarian action can affect this process of gender-norm change towards gender equality, seizing the opportunity created by the emergency.<sup>104</sup> However, humanitarianism has a tradition of attempting to extend the principle of 'neutrality' to the social practices and norms of the displaced, including gendered power relations.<sup>105</sup> In her 1991 study of Burundian refugees in western Tanzania, Daley gives an account of how camp administrators adopted traditional Burundian patriarchal attitudes towards refugees under the excuse of 'minimum social disruption with tragic consequences for female headed households.'<sup>106</sup> In addition, humanitarian organizations' gender bias limited women's activities to their traditional roles (e.g. participation in church groups, childcare, sewing) without providing spaces for them to voice their political concerns.<sup>107</sup>

As discussed above, only recently has the agenda of gender equality permeated humanitarian action. Proper gender analysis remains elusive as gender equality is still often left for post-emergency development work.<sup>108</sup> As a consequence, many humanitarian programs risk exacerbating gender discrimination by ignoring existing inequalities in access to services and assistance, and putting women in danger when targeting support to women without consulting them regarding the potential resistance that this might create.<sup>109</sup>

## 2.6 Positioning the research in the literature

The academic literature on participation is packed with warning signs. The initial enthusiasm in the development field has given way to a more nuanced appraisal of what can be realistically expected from this approach. Participation has become a buzzword capable of providing legitimacy to a wide array of processes and therefore any claims made on its behalf must be critically analysed. In particular, to honour its original promises participation must be seen as an essentially political process aimed at allowing people to enjoy their right to make decisions over issues that concern them. Any assessment of how 'successful' a participatory process is, should be contrasted against this fundamental objective. Importantly, different forms of participation may be required for different purposes. The issue of who organizes the participatory

99 *ibid.*

100 *ibid* 37.

101 *ibid.*

102 *ibid* 213–215.

103 Alice Szczepanikova, 'Gender Relations in a Refugee Camp: A Case of Chechens Seeking Asylum in the Czech Republic' (2005) 18 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 281.

104 Clifton and Gell (n 70) 10.

105 Olivius, 'Constructing Humanitarian Selves and Refugee Others' (n 70) 14.

106 Daley (n 84) 255.

107 *ibid* 257.

108 Clifton and Gell (n 70).

109 *ibid* 9.

space in 'invited spaces', who selects and mobilizes participants and who actually decides to participate deserve proper attention.

This paper is concerned with participation in camp governance in the context of Camp Management operations. While governance remains a problematic concept, as illustrated by the discussed literature, this paper adopts the concept as referred to by Camp Management practitioners in an effort to facilitate dialogue with humanitarian professionals.

Participation is inescapable in humanitarian action, as it is a component of 'protection mainstreaming' and has now been widely institutionalized. Nevertheless, the depolitization of participation is also inescapable as the discourse of humanitarianism is grounded in its differentiation from any form of politics. Refugee camps, nonetheless, have a political life of their own despite of (and sometimes because of) efforts to suppress political action among refugees. In this context, participation in camp governance may fall short of its purported goals (as critics have shown), yet it might also create opportunities to open up spaces for collective action. Moreover, refugees' agency should not be underestimated, as refugees learn from, adapt and respond to humanitarian action.

Gender is a pivotal aspect of the refugee experience of participation, so it is also critical for the analysis presented in this paper. Similar to participation, gender was rather recently incorporated in humanitarianism as part of the 'human rights approach' to humanitarian action, but is now mainstreamed across numerous organizations, programmes and policies. Unsurprisingly, in the process of integrating 'gender' and 'participation' in the humanitarian discourse both concepts have been stripped of their political dimensions. In particular, gender equality still results problematic within the discourse of humanitarianism as it requires a deliberate challenge to the political status quo of the affected community.

Humanitarian approaches to gender create different opportunities for men and women to participate in camp governance, both purposefully and inadvertently. First, because the 'invited spaces' offered by humanitarian agencies will differ according to the organizers' approach to gender. Second, because humanitarian organizations' gendered representations lead to differential treatment of men and women and provoke adaptive behaviours in response.

In addition, participation in camp governance takes place in the social disruption created by forced displacement. In this context, power relations in the community, including gender relations, experience a crisis. While in exile and upon return, gender is 'in-flux' and new femininities and masculinities emerge, as do alternative configurations of relations between the genders and different forms of resistance to this change. However, this process of gender norm change does not necessarily result in more equal relations nor in changes in ideal notions of gender identities and roles.

This paper aims to contribute to an often-overlooked aspect in the literature on participation: the perspective of participants themselves. Participation is a lived experience which acquires meaning not only for the collective ('the community') but also for the individuals that decide to engage in the process. Focusing on individual experiences allows for an exploration on what participants expect from the process as well as why they decide to engage despite the opportunity costs presented to them. Moreover, this paper aims to bring attention to the political nature of participation in camp governance in the midst of gender norm change in displacement. By focusing on the experience of women, the paper will explore the role of women as agents of change who navigate the patriarchal system as well as the humanitarian ecosystem to maximize their gains.

### 3. Methodology

As this research aims to answer questions about ‘experience, meaning and perspective’ from the participants’ standpoints, qualitative methods have been applied.<sup>110</sup> Following the methodology adopted for existing research on similar topics,<sup>111</sup> participant observation and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Rohingya refugee women who are actively participating in camp’s governance structures were employed. The semi-structured nature of the questionnaire allowed the researcher to guide the conversation to collect answers to the paper’s questions while also providing enough flexibility for participants to discuss different topics of their interest which constituted essential parts of the larger narratives that the women decided to share. The data was analysed through a narrative analysis approach. Through narratives people give meaning to their experiences, making them intelligible within their own framework of concepts and symbols.<sup>112</sup> Hence, narrative analysis allows the researcher to connect ‘the intimate details of experiences, attitudes and reflections to the broader social and spatial relations of which they are a part.’<sup>113</sup>

Data collection took place in two camps, Leda and Camp 9, which present very different contexts as well as different approaches to women’s participation. The Rohingya interviewees were purposefully selected with support from Site Management Support (SMS) agencies, aiming to have diverse profiles (age, marital status, time of arrival in Bangladesh, etcetera). Given the sensitivity of the topic as well as the objective to learn about personal experiences, a small sample of twenty participants was used.<sup>114</sup> Participants’ age ranged from 25 to 50 years old. Ten of the participants arrived in Bangladesh before 2017, while another ten arrived with the latest influx in or after 2017. Eight of the interviewees do not live with their spouses (due to death, incarceration or the husband having remarried), while the rest live with their husbands and children.

#### 3.1 Ethical considerations

Acknowledging the power relations (existing and perceived) between all actors involved in this research and the specific vulnerabilities of refugee women, an iterative consent model was employed.<sup>115</sup> Some of the terms of this consent are listed below:

- Informed consent was sought from all participants; this involved discussing with them the object, questions and methodologies of the research. In the case of refugee women, consent was sought both from the groups in which they participate as well as from the interviewees individually before, during and after the interview.
- Confidentiality and anonymity was guaranteed by conducting the interviews in private, collecting only the personal information that was relevant to the research and using pseudonyms in this paper.
- As is customary in the camps, snacks were provided for lengthy interviews, but no other forms of remuneration were offered.

The principle of ‘do no harm’ was considered at all stages of the research; this included allowing the interviewees to choose the location of the interview, avoiding unnecessarily intrusive questions, as well as being prepared to offer referrals to relevant service providers.

<sup>110</sup> K Hammarberg, M Kirkman and S de Lacey, ‘Qualitative Research Methods: When to Use Them and How to Judge Them’ (2016) 31 *Human Reproduction* 498, 498–501.

<sup>111</sup> Grabska (n 97); Kabeer, Khan and Adlparvar (n 96); Szczepanikova (n 103); Linda Kreitzer, ‘Liberian Refugee Women: A Qualitative Study of Their Participation in Planning Camp Programmes’ (2002) 45 *International Social Work* 45.

<sup>112</sup> Janine L Wiles, Mark W Rosenberg and Robin A Kearns, ‘Narrative Analysis as a Strategy for Understanding Interview Talk in Geographic Research’ (2005) 37 *Area* 89, 90.

<sup>113</sup> *ibid* 98.

<sup>114</sup> Mira Crouch, Heather McKenzie, ‘The Logic of Small Samples in Interview-Based Qualitative Research’ (2006) 45 *Social Science Information* 4.

<sup>115</sup> Catriona Mackenzie, Christopher Mc Dowell and Eileen Pittaway, ‘Beyond “Do No Harm”: The Challenge of Constructing Ethical Relationships in Refugee Research’ (2007) 20 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 299, 306.

### 3.2 Data collection

The researcher was employed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in the Rohingya response during part of this research. Furthermore, IOM provided critical logistical support for the data collection, which took place in April 2019. The researcher discussed the purpose, scope and methodology of this research thoroughly with IOM to identify any aspects that could be against the organization's mandate or humanitarian efforts. Academic independence was agreed in advance, and data collection only took place in camps where the researcher had not worked.

Participants were asked to choose the location for the interviews. Interviews were conducted in private with the support of a female translator, recorded using a cellphone and later transcribed. Interviews lasted about one hour and comprised 62 pages of transcriptions.

Interviews took many different directions as participants often brought up topics that were not strictly part of the research. As stated above, the researcher refrained from asking questions that could trigger the disclosure of traumatic memories. However, some of the women decided to narrate the persecution faced in Myanmar and the journey that they went through. It has been documented that this is relatively common as often 'subjects benefit from the opportunity to unburden themselves, sometimes speaking for the first time about very troubling experiences'.<sup>116</sup>

Participants' stories were heard with empathy and silences were respected. At the end of each interview, women who shared traumatic events were offered to be referred to relevant humanitarian organizations that could provide psychosocial support. The researcher also debriefed the translator at the end of each day to check if support was needed.

### 3.3 Limitations

For the purpose of this research, it was essential to create a somewhat intimate, safe environment where women would feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics. Since the interviews were a one-time exercise, it was difficult to achieve a good level of 'familiarity' between researcher and participants. To mitigate this, the researcher opted for minimizing notetaking during the interviews and recording them instead.

Due to the unavailability of female Rohingya translators, the interviews were mediated by a female translator fluent in Chittagonyan, which is estimated to be 70% similar to Rohingya.<sup>117</sup> In analysing people's narratives it is important to appreciate the nuance in meaning of the words chosen by participants; the tone given to specific words can also be a relevant source of information. Unfortunately, some of the richness of participants' narratives might have been lost in the mediation of translation. Debriefings with the translator after each interview provided for a limited opportunity to mitigate this limitation.

In addition, some of the concepts essential to this research are rather abstract. Translation of these words was understandably more complex as exact equivalents often do not exist in different languages. This challenge was partially addressed by having the questionnaire translated into Chittagonyan and then back to English to identify any problematic words, discussing specific concepts in advance with the translator, debriefing sessions and, on occasions, requesting a second interpreter to verify the translation.

Finally, this research operated in a situation of 'high reflexivity' where the separation between the researcher and the 'object' is severed to the extent that the interactions between the two are 'increasingly direct and consequential'.<sup>118</sup> Hence, it is possible that some of the answers provided by the participants

116 Julia Powles, 'Life History and Personal Narrative: Theoretical and Methodological Issues Relevant to Research and Evaluation in Refugee Contexts' (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2004) Working Paper No. 106 16 <<https://www.unhcr.org/afr/research/working/4147fe764/life-history-personal-narrativetheoretical-methodological-issues-relevant.html>> accessed 25 April 2020.

117 Translators Without Borders, 'Rohingya Zuban, a Translators without Borders Rapid Assessment of Language Barriers in the Cox's Bazar Refugee Response' (2017) <<https://www.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=683a58b07dba4db189297061b4f8cd40>> accessed 6 March 2020.

118 Anna Schmidt, "I Know What You're Doing", *Reflexibility and Methods in Refugee Studies* 26 *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 82, 92–93.



might have been influenced by what they believed the researcher was expecting to hear. Whenever possible, the researcher used interview techniques to navigate this challenge.

## 4. Locating governance and gender norms within Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh

### 4.1 Asymmetrical spaces of camp governance

In an effort to coordinate the response in the midst of the 2017 influx, the Bangladeshi army enacted a system of *majhees*: unelected male refugees in charge of providing population estimates, organizing distributions and facilitating communications to the larger refugee community.<sup>119</sup> *Majhees* are often organized in structures that reflect the geographic divisions of camps into blocks and sub-blocks, e.g. sub-block *majhees* report to a block *majhee*, with a head *majhee* coordinating all the block *majhees*.

The *majhee* system was not new in Bangladesh. First established after the 1991/1992 Rohingya displacement, *majhees* were in place in the official refugee camps of Kutupalong and Nayapara until their abolition by UNHCR in 2007 motivated by concerns over abuse of power and corruption.<sup>120</sup> Despite protection concerns, the *majhees* soon became gate-keepers of humanitarian assistance in the nascent camps as well as the preferred mediators between government officials in charge of managing the camps (Camp in Charge, or CiC) and the refugee community.<sup>121</sup>

In the aftermath of the 2017 influx and in parallel to the *majhee* system, agencies mandated to support the CiCs (SMS) progressively established other forms of community participation that, without challenging the power of the *majhees*, provided spaces to engage with other sectors of the refugee community. These often take the name of camp or block committees, which may be thematically specialized (e.g. health committee) or group refugees that share a certain characteristic (e.g. women's committee, imams' committee). Importantly, the committees are not decision making bodies; they are mainly engaged by humanitarian organizations to disseminate information or for consultative processes.<sup>122</sup> Since the *majhee* system does not in principle include women (in some camps female *majhees* have been appointed, but without the same level of influence), these site committees provide a unique opportunity for women to participate in camp governance, as many of them either offer a segregated forum for women or they include a quota for them.<sup>123</sup>

In camps where Bangladeshi communities live side by side with refugees, governance structures take the form of Para-development Committees (PDCs, *para* meaning neighbourhood).<sup>124</sup> The PDCs include refugee and host community male and female representatives selected by their communities and serve as a forum to discuss common challenges and identify potential solutions.<sup>125</sup>

Due to the emergency context in which committees were created, members were mostly not democratically elected, and the organization and engagement of committee members varies widely among camps. SMS agencies developed plans to hold elections to progressively replace the *majhee* system,<sup>126</sup> following the experience of the first elections held in 2016 at Kutupalong Refugee Camp.<sup>127</sup> In the post-2017 scenario, elections were first piloted in June 2018 in Shalbagan Camp by UNHCR, ADRA and the Bangladeshi government, which included a quota for women and resulted in half of the elected representatives being women.<sup>128</sup> However, elected women faced challenges to exercise their role, especially from male *majhees*

119 ACAPS and NPM, 'Rohingya Crisis: Governance and Community Participation' (2018) 1 <[https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20180606\\_acaps\\_npm\\_report\\_camp\\_governance\\_final\\_0.pdf](https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20180606_acaps_npm_report_camp_governance_final_0.pdf)> accessed 6 March 2020.

120 *ibid* 2.

121 Caitlin Wake, Veronique Barbelet and Marcus Skinner, 'Rohingya Refugees' Perspectives on Their Displacement in Bangladesh' (Humanitarian Policy Group 2019) 24 <<https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12719.pdf>> accessed 30 April 2020.

122 ACAPS and NPM (n 119).

123 *ibid*.

124 *ibid*.

125 *ibid*.

126 Wake, Barbelet and Skinner (n 121).

127 'Women voters at Rohingya camp' (*UN Women | Asia and the Pacific*, 3 February 2016) <<https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/es/news-and-events/stories/2016/02/women-voters-atrohingya-camp>> accessed 1 May 2020.

128 Linah Alsaafin, 'The Woman Leading the Way for Rohingya at a Bangladesh Camp' (*Al Jazeera*, 18 August 2018) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/setting-rohingyacamp-elects-women-leaders-180812140132177.html>> accessed 1 May 2020.

who were not elected.<sup>129</sup> *Majhees* remain highly influential in the camps that have seen elections, especially as the army (which handles private donations) still works through them.<sup>130</sup>

Aside from the above mentioned 'invited spaces', it is important to mention that Rohingyas in Bangladesh are finding ways to engage as a political community. Some examples of this can be seen in the coordinated response to the plans of UNHCR and the Bangladeshi government to issue Rohingyas with ID cards,<sup>131</sup> or the organization of a peaceful rally with an estimated 200,000 attendants to commemorate the second anniversary of the 2017 exodus (that Rohingyas have denominated 'Genocide Day').<sup>132</sup> However, this 'political awakening' is being faced with fears of destabilization and communal violence.<sup>133</sup>

## 4.2 Not born a woman: gender norm, change and resistance

In the Rohingya society, gender is a determining (although not sole) factor in assigning roles and status to individuals in their families and communities. Traditionally, the head of household is in charge of making decisions at the household level.<sup>134</sup> This role is usually played by an older man; women may only become the main decision makers if their husbands, fathers-in-law or other male adults are absent.<sup>135</sup> The role of women is mostly to do domestic work, of which they are usually the sole responsible; 95% of Rohingya men and women surveyed in 2015 in refugee camps in Bangladesh expressed that the main role of women was cooking.<sup>136</sup> Both men and women believe that their gendered roles are a matter of religion.<sup>137</sup>

The role of religion in the lives of refugee women and men is often neglected both in academic literature and in humanitarian responses. It is often religious institutions which regulate the position of women and men within their communities.<sup>138</sup> Religion serves as a justification for customs and traditions which ensure refugee women's compliance with conventional gender roles.<sup>139</sup> A survey conducted by XChange in 2019 among Rohingyas living in camps in Bangladesh revealed that almost all interviewees (99.5%) have complete trust in religious leaders in the camps,<sup>140</sup> showing just how important religious institutions are for Rohingyas' way of life. Rohingya Islam is part of the Hanafi school within Sunnism, which is a particularly traditional branch of Islam.<sup>141</sup> As part of their religious practice, Rohingya women are expected to comply with *purdah*, discussed below.

129 'For Rohingya Women, Refugee Elections Bring New Opportunities – and New Problems' (*The New Humanitarian*, 26 August 2019) <<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/newsfeature/2019/08/26/Rohingya-women-refugee-elections>> accessed 1 May 2020.

130 'Why Aid Groups Want Rohingya Refugees to Vote' (*The New Humanitarian*, 26 August 2019) <<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2019/08/26/Rohingya-refugees-vote>> accessed 1 May 2020.

131 Simon Lewis, Poppy McPherson and Ruma Paul, 'In Rohingya Camps, a Political Awakening Faces a Backlash' *Reuters* (Kutupalong Refugee Camp, Bangladesh, 24 April 2019) <[https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-myanmar-rohingya-politics-insight/in-rohingyacamps-a-political-awakening-faces-a-backlash\\_idUKKCN1S000Z?utm\\_source=NEWS&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=2nd+section+2nd+story+reuters&utm\\_campaign=HQ\\_EN\\_therefugeebrief\\_external\\_20190424](https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-myanmar-rohingya-politics-insight/in-rohingyacamps-a-political-awakening-faces-a-backlash_idUKKCN1S000Z?utm_source=NEWS&utm_medium=email&utm_content=2nd+section+2nd+story+reuters&utm_campaign=HQ_EN_therefugeebrief_external_20190424)> accessed 30 April 2020.

132 "'Genocide Day': Thousands of Rohingya Rally in Bangladesh Camps' (*Al Jazeera*, 25 August 2019) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/08/day-thousands-rohingya-rallybangladesh-camps-190825055618484.html>> accessed 1 May 2020.

133 Lewis, McPherson and Paul (n 131).

134 BBC Media Action, 'Power Structures, Class Divisions and Entertainment in Rohingya Society' (2018) 16 <[https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/power\\_structures\\_class\\_divisions\\_and\\_entertainment\\_in\\_rohingya\\_society.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/power_structures_class_divisions_and_entertainment_in_rohingya_society.pdf)> accessed 30 April 2020.

135 *ibid.*

136 'Gender Profile No.1 For Rohingya Refugee Crisis Response Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh (as of 3rd December 2017)' (Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) 2017) 2.

137 'Myanmar Refugee Influx Crisis from August 2017 - Rapid Gender Analysis Report' (CARE Bangladesh 2017) 3 6 <[https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/assessments/171018\\_care\\_rapid\\_gender\\_analysis\\_of\\_myanmar\\_refugee\\_crisis.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/assessments/171018_care_rapid_gender_analysis_of_myanmar_refugee_crisis.pdf)> accessed 3 August 2019; Daniel Coyle, Mohammed Abdullah Jainul and Marie Sophie Sandberg Petterson, 'Honour in Transition: Changing Gender Norms among the Rohingyas' (IOM and UN Women 2020) 22 <[https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/honour\\_in\\_transition-reduced.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/honour_in_transition-reduced.pdf)> accessed 23 May 2020.

138 Elżbieta M Goździak, 'Pray God and Keep Walking: Religion, Gender, Identity, and Refugee Women', *Not Born a Refugee Woman: Contesting Identities, Rethinking Practices* (NED–New edition, 1, Berghahn Books 2009) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qvc2>> accessed 9 August 2019.

139 *ibid.*

140 Xchange, 'The Rohingya Survey 2019' (*Xchange*, 19 June 2018) <<http://xchange.org/reports/TheRohingyaSurvey2019.html>> accessed 1 May 2020.

141 Santiago Ripoll and others, 'Social and Cultural Factors Shaping Health and Nutrition, Wellbeing and Protection of the Rohingya within a Humanitarian Context' (2017) Rapid Synthesis 1 <[https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/13328/Ripoll\\_2017\\_Social\\_and\\_cultural\\_factors\\_wellbeing\\_and\\_protection\\_of\\_the\\_Rohingya.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/13328/Ripoll_2017_Social_and_cultural_factors_wellbeing_and_protection_of_the_Rohingya.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)> accessed 30 April 2020.

In the Rohingya society, women and men's roles are regulated through an honour (*izzot*) system that establishes which behaviour is 'honourable'.<sup>142</sup> The *izzot* system allows for three paths to gain social prestige: production of wealth, religious practice and educational achievement.<sup>143</sup> Rohingya women are at large prevented from accessing these paths; while men's actions can 'grow' their families' honour, for women honour can only be preserved or lost.<sup>144</sup> Men are mandated to police the behaviour of the women in their family, whose honour is subject to further scrutiny from the wider community.<sup>145</sup> The practice of *purdah* is the most evident form in which families preserve their honour.

*Purdah* (originally from Persian, meaning 'curtain') requires women to avoid being seen by men other than their relatives from the time they reach puberty.<sup>146</sup> To achieve this, women are expected to remain in their houses as much as possible, to avoid gatherings that are not gender segregated and to wear clothing that hides their skin and the shape of their bodies whenever they are in public.<sup>147</sup>

Being able to uphold *purdah* is a symbol of individual pride and the family's status.<sup>148</sup> In *Bargaining with Patriarchy*, Kandiyoti explains how exclusion of women from work outside the household as well as different forms of seclusion (e.g. *purdah*) are a sign of status in the 'classic patriarchies' predominant in South Asia.<sup>149</sup> Indeed, in Arakan wealthier families were more able to observe *purdah* since women did not need to work outside their homes, which made them more respected and reputable.<sup>150</sup> Rohingya women often describe *purdah* in connection to privacy and choice (e.g. 'not leaving the house unnecessarily') as opposed to an obligation imposed on them.<sup>151</sup> In this sense, *purdah* is essential to Rohingya women's understanding of dignity. The same is also valid for Rohingya men, as women observing *purdah* are regarded as upholding the dignity of the family and hence of their male relatives.<sup>152</sup> Compliance with *purdah* has been found to vary among Rohingya communities according to level of education, economic status, between rural and urban families, as well as between families who have remained in Arakan vis-a-vis those who have migrated.<sup>153</sup>

*Purdah* imposes severe limitations to women's movement outside their homes. In a survey among Rohingyas in Bangladesh, 53% of men and women indicated that women should not be allowed to leave their houses, while 42% of female respondents had spent between 21 and 24 hours a day inside their shelters.<sup>154</sup> Having access to culturally appropriate clothing (e.g. a hijab or burka) can enhance women's freedom of movement.<sup>155</sup> Lack of suitable clothing has been found to limit women and girls movement in refugee camps in Bangladesh, together with 'fear of harassment, trafficking and kidnapping' and fear of getting lost.<sup>156</sup>

There are signs that gender norms are changing in the Rohingya society. Generational differences can be observed, with the younger generations increasingly exhibiting less traditional views.<sup>157</sup> In addition, migration and disappearance of adult men has pushed many women in Rakhine State to work outside their homes, even if this is often restricted to their immediate neighbourhood.<sup>158</sup> Similarly, refugee women living in camps in Bangladesh are often becoming breadwinners and participating in paid labour to overcome

142 Coyle, Jainul and Sandberg Petterson (n 137) 14.

143 *ibid.*

144 *ibid.* 16.

145 *ibid.*

146 Ripoll and others (n 141) 1.

147 *ibid.*

148 *ibid.* 2.

149 Kandiyoti (n 95).

150 Ripoll and others (n 141) 11.

151 Holloway and Fan (n 4) 8.

152 *ibid.*

153 Ripoll and others (n 141) 13.

154 'Gender Profile No.1 For Rohingya Refugee Crisis Response Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh (as of 3rd December 2017)' (n 136) 2.

155 *ibid.*

156 'Myanmar Refugee Influx Crisis from August 2017 - Rapid Gender Analysis Report' (n 137) 8.

157 Ripoll and others (n 141) 1.

158 'Gender Profile No.1 For Rohingya Refugee Crisis Response Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh (as of 3rd December 2017)' (n 136) 2.

the dire economic conditions in camps.<sup>159</sup> In general, life in refugee camps in Bangladesh has allowed for new opportunities for women to play roles that would have been unforeseeable in Myanmar, with women joining the workforce of NGOs, joining camp committees and participating in activities in gender-segregated 'Women Friendly Spaces'.<sup>160</sup> Women are also playing leadership roles in grassroots organizations in Bangladesh, seemingly signalling a change in gender norms from those prevalent in Myanmar.<sup>161</sup>

However, these changes are being faced with resistance. Increasing numbers of women working outside the domestic sphere in Myanmar have caused social frictions, with women facing gender based violence and harassment.<sup>162</sup> The same has been noted in refugee camps in Bangladesh,<sup>163</sup> where changes may be perceived by many women and men as a threat to their collective identity that is being imposed on them by the circumstances.<sup>164</sup> Women are perceived as less educated and with less life experiences which has led to men opposing women's involvement in decision making roles;<sup>165</sup> in parallel, men who see their leadership positions being challenged by inclusion of women in leadership structures are openly opposing change.<sup>166</sup> This resistance is compounded by the violent threats faced by women who decide to participate in activities outside their homes, as well as by their male relatives.<sup>167</sup> Armed groups have issued warnings against women defying conservative Islamic norms and men have been beaten up at night for allowing their female relatives to venture outside their shelters.<sup>168</sup> Religious leaders have also made public announcements against women's participation.<sup>169</sup>

### 4.3 Leda and Camp 9

Leda is a village in the Teknaf *Upazila* (sub-district), in the southern part of Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh. Leda Camp (Camp 24) is a makeshift site enacted on public land in July 2008.<sup>170</sup> It currently hosts almost 26,000 Rohingya refugees.<sup>171</sup> In Leda most Rohingyas live side-by-side with local residents, in private land that they rent.<sup>172</sup> Camp governance includes *majhees*, imams, PDCs, and a women's committee.

The women's committee (where interviewees participate) was constituted in September 2018 as part of a global initiative on displaced women's participation.<sup>173</sup> A total of 100 women (86 refugees and 14 local residents) were selected by IOM and organized in a 'core committee' of 10 members (a chairperson and nine sector focal points), with similar structures for sub-committees at *para* level. The group meets biweekly with site management staff and in ad-hoc meetings with NGOs who provide services in the camp. At the time of data collection, an additional ten women with disabilities were being selected to join the committees.

Camp 9 is located in the Ukha *Upazila* and is almost entirely inhabited by Rohingya refugees (around

159 Ripoll and others (n 141) 2.

160 Belinda Goldsmith and Naimul Karim, 'From Sports to Work, Rohingya Women Face New Roles in World's Largest Refugee Camp' [2019] *Thomson Reuters Foundation* <<https://news.trust.org/item/20190206005130d43p9/?fbclid=IwAR0tJKR2ZK11ImSzjpQGZrkr4pIBkkGCdUJr0zKac>> accessed 30 April 2020.

161 Wake, Barbelet and Skinner (n 121) 25.

162 'Gender Profile No.1 For Rohingya Refugee Crisis Response Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh (as of 3rd December 2017)' (n 136) 2.

163 Ripoll and others (n 141) 2.

164 Coyle, Jainul and Sandberg Petterson (n 137) 21–22.

165 'Myanmar Refugee Influx Crisis from August 2017 - Rapid Gender Analysis Report' (n 137) 6; Coyle, Jainul and Sandberg Petterson (n 137) 24.

166 'For Rohingya Women, Refugee Elections Bring New Opportunities – and New Problems' (n 129).

167 Protection Sector Working Group, 'Strategy to Address Women's Security in the Rohingya Refugee Camps & Key Considerations' (2019) Second and final version.

168 Lewis, McPherson and Paul (n 131).

169 Protection Sector Working Group (n 167).

170 'Islamic Relief to Withdraw from Makeshift Refugee Camp' (*The New Humanitarian*, 25 February 2010) <<http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/report/88232/bangladesh-islamic-reliefwithdraw-makeshift-refugee-camp>> accessed 8 May 2020.

171 'RRRC and UNHCR Population Registration Data - April 2020' (2020) <<https://data.humdata.org/dataset/site-location-of-rohingya-refugees-in-cox-s-bazar>> accessed 8 May 2020.

172 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and REACH, 'Multi-Sector Needs Assessment: Cox's Bazar, Rohingya Refugee Response' 14–15 <[https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/document\\_92.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/document_92.pdf)> accessed 8 May 2020.

173 'Women in Displacement: Bangladesh' <<https://womenindisplacement.org/bangladesh>> accessed 8 May 2020.

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32,800).<sup>174</sup> Camp governance includes *majhees* (one male and one female per sub-block for a total of 94 men and 94 women), imams, and sectoral committees. These groups are organized by blocks and sub-blocks, meet with varying regularity and are inclusive of women (except the imam committee) at an estimated ratio of 2 women every 3 men. *Muhila* (female) *majhees* were selected by IOM in consultation with male *majhees*; at the time of the interviews, they had been active for over a year.

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174 'RRRC and UNHCR Population Registration Data - April 2020' (n 171).

## 5. Rohingya women's perspectives on their experience in camp governance participation

### 5.1 Evolving motivations: from unmet needs to inadvertent gains

Almost all women expressed that their initial motivation for joining the group was the expectation of material support. Women were invited to the groups by IOM staff or *majhees*, and initially did not know what the group was about. In some cases, they were told that in the future there might be some material support, in others they were explicitly told that no material incentives would be offered. Regardless of the information received, most of the women interviewed noted that they did expect some form of remuneration (e.g. livelihood opportunities). As stated by the women, this expectation operated as a motivation due to women's desire to cover the unmet needs of their children, especially their education.

Traditionally, it is the role of Rohingya men to provide for the family, and in fact fulfilling this role allows men to increase their social status. This role has been challenged by displacement, where NGOs and UN agencies occupy the role of providers and men's options to participate in economic activities are severely limited. Women's decision to participate in governance structures out of material needs points to the most problematic and often overlooked aspects of Rohingya women's participation. While for organizers having women participants may be an imperative due to organizational commitments to gender mainstreaming and/or gender equality, participation triggered by unmet basic needs undermines women's agency and could create disenchantment when the expectation is unmet. It also risks exacerbating social tensions if certain segments of the community see their positions challenged.

Expectations of material rewards may explain why women joined the groups in the first place, but they fail to explain why they stayed. In most cases, at the time of the interview participants had not received any form of remuneration as a consequence of their participation, despite having been active participants for over a year. Perhaps the only exception were *muhila* (female) *majhees*, who occasionally received tokens for distributions from their male counterparts. Inquiring further on the reasons to continue attending despite the unmet expectation of receiving a remuneration, other aspects of women's motivation emerged without difficulty.

One such motivation common to interviewees from Leda Camp and Camp 9 was access to information. Almost all women spoke about how learning about available services and ways to raise complaints was of value for them and their families and communities. Women narrated how information used to be only available to men, which meant that women could not access support by themselves. Access to information seems to have allowed participants to move outside their shelters, as fear of getting lost often prevented them from walking outside before.

Women often conflated access to information with learning opportunities. They explained how by joining the group they learnt about different topics, including hygiene practices, how to identify and react to common health conditions, and prevention of gender-based violence, among others. Many interviewees explained that they often share this knowledge with their families and communities, which gives them a sense of purpose and motivates them to continue attending the meetings. Here again women often expressed the desire to be able to contribute to their children's education by teaching their children what they learnt in participatory spaces.

Access to learning seems to be one of the most significant aspects of participation for participants themselves. Traditionally Rohingya women have been excluded from access to education, which has served to sustain the role of men as women's guardians. As women are regarded as incapable of governing their sexuality and prone to dishonouring their families, they need men educated in Islamic practices to control women's actions.<sup>175</sup> Interviewed women noted that having acquired new knowledge and accessing information had gained them the respect of their children and other community members.

Women also intimated that they were motivated by the opportunity to socialize with other women, es-

175 Coyle, Jainul and Sandberg Petterson (n 137) 24.

pecially *apas* (more senior women, because of their age or position). This slightly subtler aspect of their experience of participation was often articulated in terms of stress relief or simply 'feeling good' or 'happiness'. Peer support seems to have served to improve women's psychosocial wellbeing, as a number of them expressed that since they have joined the groups they do not think so often about the violence they experienced in Myanmar. In Leda, some of the women have built networks of women outside the groups as they are often tasked with disseminating messages or reaching out to other women. This seems to have served to alleviate the isolation experienced due to separation from their extended families and/or their neighbours in Myanmar.

Interviewed *muhila majhees* in Camp 9 spoke of being motivated to help the *majhees* to solve problems in their respective blocks. They explained that since the *majhees* are often busy in other areas of the camp, women have an added value as they mostly stay close to their homes and hence, they are more available to their neighbours. *Muhila majhees* also expressed that they felt that having a woman in the role is relevant to raise 'women's issues'. When asked if women should be involved in all decision making and not only issues that exclusively or particularly affect women, women's opinions varied. While some said women should always be involved, others stated that they trusted the men (e.g. *majhees*) representing the best interest of all the community. However, there was agreement that female leaders are relevant to deal with concerns arising from women. Similarly, in Leda Camp women's stories about their contributions to the overall community were mostly related to reaching out to other women and often dealing with cases of gender-based violence. It comes as no surprise that women see their role as mostly or entirely limited to working with other women as gender segregation is a basic component of the practice of *pardah*. Women's differential needs have also widely been used by aid agencies to convince Rohingyas of the need for women's participation.

The above-described motivations should be read in conjunction with the opportunity cost of participating in these groups. Rohingya women are almost exclusively responsible for household chores and are the main caregivers. Moreover, observing *pardah* would in principle prevent women from participating in most public activities.

## 5.2 Rediscovering women's agency in navigating gender norms

For Rohingya women to participate in activities outside their household, they must do so with the permission of the male relative responsible for them, usually their husbands or fathers (if unmarried). Except for widows and separated women, all the other women narrated a moment prior to joining the groups in which they had to negotiate with their husbands. Interestingly yet unsurprisingly, none of the interviewees was unmarried.

The recount of this negotiation with their husbands was very similar in all cases. Women received an invitation, often from SMS staff but also from *majhees* or other women who were already part of the groups. Husbands were initially very hesitant to allow their wives to attend meetings as neither husbands nor wives knew much about the groups. 'Maryam' is a refugee that arrived in Bangladesh at the age of 16.

Now a 35-year-old woman, married and with six children, she recounts the moment when she asked her husband for permission to join the group:

'My husband said the group was not good and I should not go. I also didn't know if it was good, so I told him that I would go one time and see. I joined and I learned so many things! So, I told my husband: "if I go there, my head is cool and I will not quarrel with you, it is good for our family". And my husband said that now I am not quarrelling so much, so I can go.'<sup>176</sup>

Some of these discussions between husband and wife turned into quarrels at the end of which similar agreements were reached: women would 'go and see' what the groups were about by participating in a few meetings, after which they would only continue attending if they saw any benefit. Some of the husbands seem to have agreed on the expectation of this resulting in future material support, which was also reflect-

<sup>176</sup> Interview with 'Maryam' (pseudonym), 35 years old, Leda Camp (10 April 2019).



ed in women's initial motivation. However, both women and men seem to have identified other positive outcomes that justified participation despite the expectation of material support remaining unmet.

Most of these negotiations also included discussions over household work. The patriarchal contract in the Rohingya community demands that women perform domestic work while men are expected to work outside their homes. Women had to demonstrate to their husbands that participation would not prevent domestic chores from being fulfilled. Most interviewees were able to 'delegate' household chores to younger female relatives (often their daughters, but also daughters in law, sisters or others). This highlights potential unintended consequences of trying to engage women in activities outside their homes without problematizing the current sexual division of labour.

In some cases, women managed to rearrange their schedule to attend the meetings while fulfilling household duties. However, having more than one young child (e.g. a baby and a toddler) or breastfeeding is perceived by the women as a barrier difficult to overcome. Some younger women relied on neighbours and relatives (often children themselves) to look after young children. Only in one exceptional case, a woman was able to negotiate with her husband about sharing responsibilities for household work.<sup>177</sup> This raises concerns over a double burden for women since leadership positions are voluntary. Indeed, Rohingya women in elected positions are struggling to balance volunteer work with domestic work.<sup>178</sup>

These instances of negotiation seem to be an important yet unexpected consequence of participation. Although it confirms that the role of men as the ultimate decision maker remains unchallenged, it also shows that many women are not passively complying with the behaviour expected from them but are seeking ways to adapt to the new circumstances within the normative framework of their community. It also illustrates the imperative to engage men in the process.

This resonates with the findings of Kandiyoti in his seminal work *Bargaining with Patriarchy*. Kandiyoti describes 'classic patriarchies' as an ideal type where girls are married at a young age and move into households headed by their husband's father, where the girl is subordinated to all men as well as more senior women.<sup>179</sup> Kandiyoti describes that in classic patriarchies women tend to use interpersonal strategies with their male relatives in order to guarantee that their subordination as young girls will be compensated by the possibility of exercising power over younger women in the future. This manipulation allows women to maximize their wellbeing but fails to address systemic inequalities.<sup>180</sup> Indeed, many women described the delegation of work to younger women as something unremarkable.

However, when the material basis of this system is challenged because the contribution of men is not sufficient to sustain the family, women tend to pressure men to meet their obligations instead of breaking the rules at the risk of losing their respectability.<sup>181</sup> Indeed, many women narrated that in their role as community leaders they had mediated in several quarrels between husbands and wives due to men's failure to provide for the material needs of the family. Women who decide to participate in camp governance groups are pursuing a slightly different strategy. They are also avoiding 'breaking the rules' as loss of their honour would be an unacceptable price. However, they are navigating the patriarchal system by seeking their husband's authorization. While the basis of the system remains unchallenged, women seem to be finding ways to circumvent the rules in their favour.

In general, women stated that the community was supportive of their participation and that at no point they were prevented from participating by community members. *Muhila majhees* in Camp 9 specifically explained that having support from the *majhee* was instrumental for the community to accept their role. However, some women in both camps narrated being confronted by neighbours about their decision to participate in meetings. These encounters often happened when women were on their way to attend meetings. Neighbours questioned the reasons for women leaving their homes, specifically disputing the benefits of participation in the absence of any material reward. Most women were able to overcome this

177 Interview with 'Zultana' (apseudonym), 25 years old, Leda Camp (11 April 2019).

178 'Why Aid Groups Want Rohingya Refugees to Vote' (n 130).

179 Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Gender, Power and Contestation: Rethinking Bargaining with Patriarchy' in D Jackson and R Pearson (eds), *Feminist Visions of Development* (Routledge 1998) 278.

180 *ibid* 280.

181 *ibid* 282.

challenge by simply ignoring the comments or explaining the reasons why they believed their participation is of value to them.

These objections became more problematic for women whose husbands were directly questioned by community members. In the Rohingya society, dignity and honour are collective goods which are realized in the public actions of men and women as members of a family and community.<sup>182</sup> As men are expected to ensure gender norms compliance by their wives and daughters, hence preserving the honour of the family, a question on the actions of women is also a criticism to her male guardian's and the family's honour.

To a lesser extent, women expressed that imams were sometimes against women being out of their homes, but that this was not a barrier as long as their husbands would give them permission. 'Zultana', a 25-year-old woman who lives with her husband and four children, explains: 'imams sometimes say on the microphone that if women go outside, married men want to marry them, which is bad for the first wife. But my husband allows me because I did not do anything wrong, and he is the one responsible for me.'<sup>183</sup>

When asked what could be done to enable women to participate, several interviewees mentioned the need for humanitarian organizations to hold discussions with men, and in particular with imams and *majhees* to explain the modalities and benefits of different activities available to women such as the different committees that have been formed. This request is somewhat problematic for humanitarian organizations due to the well-established nominal rule of non-interference with local culture, which is not easily reconciled with gender equality commitments.

However, since Rohingya men remain the ones responsible for guarding the honour of their families and groups, a sensitive engagement of men in the conversation regarding women and men's role in the public life of the community is paramount. The fact that a number of women have successfully participated in camp governance groups is proof that there are potential male allies in the Rohingya community. Interestingly, one of the participants in Leda Camp suggested to Site Management to engage with men (husbands, *majhees* and imams) and explain to them the purpose of the groups. According to her, this was instrumental for men to allow women to participate as they had several questions that needed answering for them to make such an important decision.<sup>184</sup>

Clearly, the experiences narrated in this paper are not representative of the experience of the majority of Rohingya women living in camps in Bangladesh. These are 'successful' cases that should not conceal the fact that many women may have been prevented from engaging in activities outside their homes. It should also not give the false impression that all women would participate in these groups given the opportunity. However, these experiences provide a glimpse in the small-scale processes that are taking place and that are often eclipsed by the narratives of 'the majority'. These minority of cases may be exceptions or may be pioneers of slowly changing norms.

Interviewed women not only proved able to manage the challenges associated with their role as women both in their families and communities, but also some were able to intervene on behalf of other women. 'Fatima' spoke eloquently about her active role in the women's group. Having arrived in Bangladesh as a child, she has now lived in Leda for over 17 years. She explains the changes she has observed, and how some women can lead the way for others:

'Before unmarried girls had more problems attending groups. But now these problems are not so big because they know how to manage their parents, to encourage them to give them permission to go to the groups. I told the mothers that the place is safe, and they can send their daughters. If they go, there they can learn something. If they stay at home, they won't know anything. (...) I told [my husband] that they were requesting to take my daughter to a group. "If you allow, then I will take her with me and bring her back home." He agreed, and then other girls saw this and now I have to go to every girls' home to take them, and then I bring them all back after the group meeting.'<sup>185</sup>

182 Holloway and Fan (n 4) 7.

183 Interview with 'Zultana' (pseudonym), 25 years old, Leda Camp (n 178).

184 Interview with 'Fatima' (pseudonym), 40 years old, Leda Camp (10 April 2019).

185 *ibid.*

### 5.3 Reconciling ideas and making sense of change

The issue of reconciling ideas and making sense of change was the most difficult to grasp. It was at this stage of the interviews, analysis and 'writing up' that reflexivity became the most relevant. First, because 'sense' is a very complex result of one's personal story, our capacity (linked to our physical, mental and social space) to reflect on our experiences, thoughts and emotions (i.e. our self-awareness) and our willingness to confront apparent or real contradictions between what we say, what we do and what we say we do. Second, because both researcher and participant are immersed in different cultures, which equip them with different sets of values, beliefs and rules that provide them different references to decode the other's ideas. And third, because of the potential personal costs associated with confronting real or apparent contradictions that may be discernible to the researcher (as an outsider) but perhaps not to the participant. Hence, this topic was approached sensibly through different aspects of the change that women had experienced. In all cases, the conversations tackled personal change, change in the environment and tensions between gender norms and women's participation.

#### 5.3.1 Participation as enabling personal change

Women narrated that participating in the groups had provided them a sense of self-worth. Many of them described other community members, especially women, coming to them for support when they faced problems. Most of these cases were related to women facing gender-based violence or marital problems. Participants expressed positive feelings connected to helping others and having the possibility to advocate on behalf of their communities towards humanitarian organizations. They also expressed that their interventions have been well received by the community and have prompted gratitude from others.

Women saw themselves in the role of advocates of others' needs, especially other women who are not able to speak up. In many instances, they used the time of the interview to raise problems that they do not face, but that they think need attention. For example, interviewed women in Leda often raised concerns about the needs of their Bangladeshi neighbours. They expressed that often Rohingyas and Bangladeshis live in similar conditions, and that providing support to Bangladeshis is important for social cohesion. Importantly, in Leda the women's group integrates Rohingya and Bangladeshi participants.

Feelings of self-worth were accompanied with an augmented confidence associated with 'knowing things', in particular being able to navigate the new physical environment outside their homes. Fear of losing their way in the camps was among the obstacles that women identified as preventing them to participate in public life,<sup>186</sup> hence knowing the location of service providers put participants in an advantageous position. Participants saw themselves as good leaders and articulated the characteristics of leadership as being strong minded, vocal/articulate, wise/clever (often associated with life experience) and 'older' (which enables them to be seen by men 'as a sister or a mother' as opposed to a potential sexual partner).

Participants also reflected on how their behaviour has changed. Most of them expressed being less stressed due to the peer support that they have in the group. This was associated with 'quarrelling less at home' which seems to have been noticed positively by their husbands. Some of the participants linked their change of behaviour with feeling responsible for setting a good example to others. Seeing themselves as leaders required coherence between their public behaviour and what they advocated to their neighbours.

Women shared that they have acquired a new role in their communities, which makes them feel respected. This role is associated with the fact that they are able to recognize and manage their peers' problems; they have made connections with organizations which allow them to raise other people's concerns. They also expressed (and demonstrated) that they feel comfortable speaking to others and being assertive about their ideas. Interviewed women expressed having a renewed sense of purpose in the community. 'Minara' moved to Camp 9 with her husband and two children in 2017, after over a decade of living in Bangladesh. She explains:

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'Myanmar Refugee Influx Crisis from August 2017 - Rapid Gender Analysis Report' (n 137) 8.

'I feel very happy when people listen to me and appreciate me because of what I know. (...) As a *muhila majhee* I get the respect that others don't have. (...) I am not elderly, which gives people respect, but I still can get respect because of my knowledge and my position.'<sup>187</sup>

The fact that women saw themselves as more respectable as a consequence of their participation in camp governance groups is an interesting finding. Practicing *purdah* was identified as the only path for women to maintain honour or *izzot*, since the avenues of education and wealth creation have been historically closed to them.<sup>188</sup> In the new context of displacement, participation seems to have opened a new path for women to achieve status in the community. This was clear in the case of a participant whose late husband was a chairman in Myanmar. This respondent asserted that the initial loss of status that she faced upon displacement and death of her husband was somewhat offset by her becoming a community leader.<sup>189</sup>

However, since these are rather recent developments it is still to be seen how social norms will evolve, not only during displacement but importantly upon a potential return.

### 5.3.2 Participation facilitated by contextual change or precipitated by displacement

After discussing their new role in their families and communities, women were prompted to discuss why this role is different from the one they had in the past. The most recurrent answer was related to fear of being in public spaces. In fact, in women's narratives, safety concerns justified both women's decisions to avoid going out and men's insistence in preventing women from being outside. Women who had lived in the camps before 2017 explained that before the latest influx and the increase of army presence and humanitarian agencies, they were afraid to move outdoors. Women also compared their new situation to that in Myanmar (to which they refer as Burma), where they were at risk of sexual violence if they ventured outside their homes.

Indeed, the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on Myanmar found that systematic and widespread sexual and gender-based violence against Rohingya women and girls was a common feature of the waves of violence of 2012, 2016 and 2017, and that it amounted to torture, war crimes, underlying acts of crimes against humanity and underlying acts of genocide under International Law.<sup>190</sup> Against this grim backdrop it is only to be expected that men, fulfilling their role of protectors not only of the honour but also of the safety of their families, would tenaciously prevent women and girls from participating in public life.

When describing the differences in context, women emphasized that Bangladesh being a Muslim majority country means that it is safer for them to be outside. Moreover, they described Bangladesh as a country where men and women are equal. This was often illustrated by the fact that the Bangladeshi Prime Minister is a woman, by having observed that men and women work side-by-side in Bangladesh and that women are able to go to the market on their own. Interviewees also associated their newly gained ability to move outside their homes with having escaped an oppressive government that did not grant Rohingyas freedom of movement. As 'Anwara', a refugee woman who fled in 2017 because of harassment by the army and the risk of sexual violence, illustrates:

'When a cow is on a rope, it is under control. But when the rope is taken, the cow is free. In Myanmar we were the cow, under the control of the government. But here we have nobody controlling us like that. That is why we are going everywhere.'<sup>191</sup>

Beyond being in a different country, reference to other changes in the external environment enabled women to explain their new roles in the community. Women often narrated how living conditions in Myanmar allowed them to stay at home comfortably. Many described how their former houses contrasted sharply

187 Interview with 'Minara' (pseudonym), 32 years old, Camp 9 (28 April 2019).

188 Coyle, Jainul and Sandberg Petterson (n 137) 16.

189 Interview with 'Rashida' (pseudonym), 33 years old, Leda Camp (11 April 2019).

190 United Nations Fact Finding Mission on Myanmar, 'Report of the Detailed Findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar' (2018) <[https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFMMyanmar/A\\_HRC\\_39\\_CRP.2.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFMMyanmar/A_HRC_39_CRP.2.pdf)> accessed 13 June 2020.

191 Interview with 'Anwara' (pseudonym), 40 years old, Camp 9 (22 April 2019).

with the small shelters in Bangladesh camps. Some of the features more often mentioned were private toilets within their homes that did not require women to walk in front of non-family members, and outdoor areas where women could move without exposing themselves to the gaze of strangers. Even for women who do not engage in public activities, the living conditions in Bangladesh require that they leave their shelters, hence interviewees see leaving their homes as inescapable.

Displacement has also prevented men from fulfilling their role as sole providers for the family. Interviewed women were very aware of this change and understood that given this situation women need to adapt and support their families. This often implies working outside the household, usually with NGOs or doing casual work. Confronted with this reality, deciding to participate in camp governance groups seemed less controversial than it would have been in different circumstances.

Moreover, interviewees explained that movement to the camps required them to get information on how to navigate the new physical environment, as well as on how to access the different services and assistance available. In the narratives of most interviewees, this was sufficient to explain the need for change in their behaviour. Interestingly, participation was mostly described as a positive experience, while we would initially think that if it is a result of 'needs' it is not experienced as a choice and therefore it is lived with sorrow and resignation. While some women said that they would rather not have to participate, most of them expressed being happy to do so.

### 5.3.3 Women's participation as compatible with personal and communal values

Finally, women were asked about their personal understanding of *purdah* and whether observance of *purdah* was a challenge for them to attend meetings. Interestingly, *purdah* was not mentioned by women among the challenges faced nor about their changing role until specifically prompted to discuss it. This is likely because *purdah* is seen as a choice and staying at home has been internalized as a preference, hence participants may not have identified *purdah* as an obstacle for participation.<sup>192</sup>

Women's idea of *purdah* was not identical. Whereas all women mentioned that *purdah* requires staying at home as much as possible and guarding themselves from the gaze of men, some stated that as long as they are well covered and do not talk to men, they may go out while observing *purdah*. In this sense, wearing 'appropriate' clothing seemed to enable women to participate in public life. Importantly, it is estimated that about 72% of Rohingyas in Bangladesh camps do not live with their former neighbours from Myanmar.<sup>193</sup> This, combined with the high population density in the camps increases the chances of women being seen by stranger men when outside their shelters.<sup>194</sup>

None of the women felt that participating in the meetings was contradictory to *purdah*, and contrary to findings in other studies participants did not express feelings of guilt for not meeting their religious or family expectations.<sup>195</sup> Talking to CiC, NGOs or community leaders (when necessary) does not violate *purdah* according to interviewees. Some of them, however, expressed feeling 'shy' in public because this is new to them, but they were able to reconcile in their narratives the practice of *purdah*, their gendered role, and their new role in the community. What is more, many women emphasized that *purdah* is not only about segregation from nonrelated men but also about general conduct both in public and in private. In 'Maryam's words:

'If [women] want to observe *purdah*, then they should not quarrel outside when they are in line for distributions. They maintain *purdah* in the house, but not outside. If they maintain *purdah* outside, there is no problem (...). If I am a good person inside, then I can go anywhere. If I know myself, I can do everything.'<sup>196</sup>

The idea of *purdah* is not static. Interestingly, some women lived in Bangladesh for years before moving to

<sup>192</sup> Holloway and Fan (n 4) 8.

<sup>193</sup> *ibid.* 21.

<sup>194</sup> *ibid.* 21.

<sup>195</sup> Ripoll and others (n 141) 11.

<sup>196</sup> Interview with 'Maryam' (pseudonym), 35 years old, Leda Camp (n 177).

the camp, and they adapted their observance of *purdah* to their environment (conforming to Bangladeshi practices outside the camp). Moreover, according to the interviewees observance of *purdah* allows for degrees - one can comply more or comply less. This contrasts with the idea of *izzot*, which has been described as only capable of being lost for Rohingya women.<sup>197</sup>

Participants stressed the importance of *purdah* in their religious practice while remaining pragmatic about its application. 'Amwara' exemplified this remarkably while resorting to her knowledge of Islam:

'Purdah is most important in our religion. But Allah also said that we should light a candle in the mosque. However, first we should check if our house has light or not. If your house is dark, we should take the candle. Once there is light in the house, we can light a candle in the mosque.'<sup>198</sup>

Interviewed women's understanding of *purdah* as something deeply embedded in their Rohingya identity, yet fluid enough to allow them to adapt their behaviour to a changing context seems to have enabled their active participation in governance structures. It is possible that this view is not widely shared, but that it either acted as a filter of potential participants or that it was developed as a consequence of participation itself.

Ideal notions of femininity, however, may not be evolving at the same pace as practices. Interviewed women were rather divided when contemplating how they would behave if they were to return to Myanmar, with some respondents indicating that they would resume the strict practice of *purdah* as it was before displacement, and others making their participation contingent on improvements in safety conditions. Women's narratives often recurred to their role as mothers and their desire to be better equipped to educate and look after their children. In most (although notably not all) cases public participation remained a need rather than an ambition, and participants still see their ideal role in rather traditional terms, which resonates with other findings in the study of gender norm change during displacement.<sup>199</sup>

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197 Coyle, Jainul and Sandberg Petterson (n 137) 16.

198 Interview with 'Amwara' (pseudonym), 40 years old, Camp 9 (n 192).

199 Szczepanikova (n 103).

## 6. Conclusion

Given prevailing gender norms, rooted in religious traditions and collective understandings of honour and dignity, it would be expected that Rohingya women experience participation with resignation and guilt. However, the narratives described in this work recount something very different. Rohingya women's experiences of participation are diverse, as are their views on the cultural and religious practices that are often seen as a barrier to women's participation. While for some Rohingya women the decision to participate might require a compromise on important religious values justified only by the exceptional circumstances of life in a refugee camp, for others these values are not incompatible with participating in camp governance. In all cases, these women have managed to reconcile their new roles with their values, exemplifying important personal adaptations that may signal similar changes happening among displaced Rohingya men and women.

Evidently, Rohingya women's potential to overcome barriers to participation should not be exaggerated as ultimately gender norms in the Rohingya community still dictate that men are the main decision makers, both at the community and family levels. However, exploring the barriers women face and how they are overcoming them reveals some successful instances in which women are agents of change. This is often disregarded when discussions on women's participation begin from an image of Rohingya women that overemphasizes their vulnerabilities rather than their capacities. This case study also reiterates the significance of 'male allies' (e.g. husbands and male community leaders) who, if not manifestly supportive, may tolerate gradual changes to women's roles.

Observing the micro-changes at personal, family and community level through the narratives of women provides a strong argument for humanitarian agencies to identify and support potential agents of change from the community itself, both men and women. The 'women who dare' are pioneers. They offer a counterargument to both humanitarian narratives that overemphasize women's vulnerabilities as well as to those that renounce humanitarian's involvement in gender equality in the name of neutrality.

The path to gender equality is complex. Displacement can be a catalyst for gender norm change, but the direction for such a change will depend on a myriad of factors. Humanitarian workers knowingly or inadvertently affect gender relations among the displaced. If change is perceived as a threat to the community's identity it is likely to trigger resistance, potentially reinforcing traditional norms and/or alienating dissenting voices. Importantly, while gender analyses undertaken as part of emergency responses usually regard communities as a single entity, this should not lead to neglecting the existence of dissenters or the possibility for socially constructed gender norms to change, especially as a consequence of the emergency itself.

At the macro-level, the adoption of the human rights approach to humanitarian action has incited deep tensions in the humanitarian system. When modern/western humanitarian action was conceived, neutrality was a needed banner to allow aid workers to access and deliver in the midst of armed conflicts. Initially, it simply implied not supporting a warring party (a legacy of the Swiss international political stance). But in its current iteration, neutrality includes disengagement from controversies 'of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature'.<sup>200</sup> As a consequence, 'humanitarians' have committed to a 'participation revolution' that must remain apolitical, and to the objective of 'gender equality' without disturbing the political status quo among 'beneficiaries' (i.e. the share of power that people can aspire to, based on their gender).

This uncomfortable, incomplete adoption of the human rights agenda has led to celebrated institutional commitments translated into sophisticated guidelines and frameworks which rarely materialize into meaningful changes in the ways humanitarian workers operate. The challenges faced in the context of women's participation in Rohingya refugee camps are paradigmatic of the complexity of the work ahead.

Gender equality is a political matter. Gender norm change alters power relations at the household and community levels. Meaningful participation is political insofar as it reinstates people's right to make decisions over the issues that affect their lives and enables collective action. The image of refugee camps

200 UNOCHA, 'What Are Humanitarian Principles' (UNOCHA, June 2012) <[https://www.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OOMhumanitarianprinciples\\_eng\\_June12.pdf](https://www.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OOMhumanitarianprinciples_eng_June12.pdf)> accessed 10 October 2020.

deprived of a political life and safeguarded from the frictions intrinsic to gender norm change is nothing but a fiction. Similarly, expecting humanitarian action to have a neutral impact on the political dynamics of displaced communities (including participation and gender norm change) while controlling the vast majority of life-saving resources, is fallacious.

Humanitarian organizations must come to terms with the fact that 'political' can have several different meanings. What 'neutrality' means in the context of a human rights approach to humanitarian action requires a re-examination of the 'political controversies' that humanitarian action must be safeguarded from, and those that require rigorous analysis and purposeful engagement. While such incongruities are being overcome, refugee women and men, like the participants of this study, will continue navigating the system as best as they can.