

---

# **ROHINGYA CRISIS**

**through gender and climate  
lens of forced migration**

**Aditi Anurag & Aryan Bajpai**  
**THE PARLEY PROJECT**



---

# CONTENTS

i.	Abstract	1
ii.	Introduction - Tracing the Plight of the Rohingyas	1
iii.	Gender and Forced Migration	2
iv.	Rohingya Crisis from Gender Lens	3
v.	Rohingya Crisis from Climate Lens	5
vi.	Rohingya Community as a Cause of Climate Degradation	5
vii.	Vulnerability of Rohingya Community to Climate Crisis	6
viii.	The Way Forward	7

---

## Abstract

In a desperate attempt to save their lives from the state-led military assault, the Rohingyas were compelled to flee from Myanmar to different places across the globe. The country of Bangladesh has received the maximum number of Rohingya refugees with the rest of the population distributed as far as the European Union. The narratives of abduction and mass rape of women questions the notion of migration in a collective form. There is a need to study the layers of atrocities and discrimination that Rohingya women face due to their gender. The Bangladesh government's recent decision to shift them from Cox Bazar to an isolated island named Bhasan Char has evoked major international concerns. One needs to see this through a climate change lens as Bhasan Char is more like a mud flat vulnerable to floods and cyclones. This paper tends to study the Rohingya crisis from the perspective of gender and climate change of forced migration to unfold the existing hierarchies and conclude by certain recommendations.

**Keywords:** Rohingya, gender, forced migration, violence, climate change.

## Introduction - Tracing the Plight of the Rohingyas

The 'Rohingya crisis' is well-known state-sponsored violence and persecution. The army crackdown led to the exodus of Rohingya Muslims to Bangladesh. Their persecution has a history spanning almost five decades. The latest one occurred in August 2017 wherein 700,000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh (Safi, 2017). The UN called the treatment of Rohingya minorities by Myanmar a "*textbook example*" of ethnic cleansing (ibid.).

The Rohingyas are an ethnic minority group, largely comprising of Muslims. They have predominantly lived in the western Myanmar province of Rakhine (also known as Arakan). They were well settled even before Burma got independence in 1948 (Habib, Jubb, Ahmad, Rahman and Pallard, 2018). They were National Registration Cardholders and even participated in elections until 2011. According to Amnesty International (2017), from 1962 onwards, when Burmese army general Ne Win seized power in a military coup, ethnic minorities across Myanmar faced human rights abuse and increasing discrimination. In 1977-78, about 2 lakhs of Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh but eventually they returned as lawful residents of Burma.

The 1982 Citizenship Law deprived Rohingyas of their citizenship and turned them stateless, overturning the 1947 Burmese constitution which recognized Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Animism as some of the 'religions' existing in the Union along with Buddhism (Islam, 2019). The 1982 Citizenship Law recognized only those people as citizens who from the beginning of the occupation of Arakan State by the British belonged to the national races or whose ancestors settled in the country before 1823 (Uddin, Rakshit, Mahmud & Jahan, n.d.). The Rohingya

---

Muslims were labelled as a threat to Myanmar and the Buddhist religion by Myanmar's Ma Ba Tha - the Committee for the Protection of Nationality and Religion - monks (Islam, 2019). Moreover, the protection of the Buddhist religion was conferred as catering to the national interest of the country.

Post the 1982 citizenship law, Rohingya fled the entrenched discrimination in 1991-92, 2012 and 2017. In 2014 Rohingyas were not enumerated in the census conducted and subsequently, in the 2015 elections Rohingyas were deprived of their right to vote as well. The Myanmar military unleashed unprecedented atrocities on Rohingyas in response to the attack on police and military posts by Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army's (ARSA) in August 2017 and thereafter the exodus. According to BBC, a report published by UN investigators in August 2018 accused Myanmar's military of carrying out mass killings and rapes with 'genocidal intent'. In December 2019, appearing before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in response to the case lodged by the Gambia representing dozen other Muslim countries. Aung San Suu Kyi denied allegations of genocide on Rohingya Muslims (ibid.). Aung San Suu Kyi has been castigated for the ill-treatment of Rohingyas globally.

The condition of Rohingyas in crowded refugee camps of Bangladesh is no better than that in Myanmar. Their conditions are lamentable. They face atrocities within camps, from among the refugees and from the locals as well.

## Gender and Forced Migration

The consequences of violent conflict, war and climate change migration are always gendered and intersectional. Affecting different categories of people differently. When a woman flees state-sponsored violence, she carries with her diverse identities, where her identity as a woman rests at the bottom of the ladder. Hankivsky (2014) explains intersectionality as keeping in view that human beings are shaped by the interaction of different social locations (e.g. race, gender, class, migration, geography, etc.) within structures of power. In other words, the intersection of various power relations, social locations and experiences leads to inequalities (ibid.). Policies arising out of intersectionality, take into account the perspectives of people who are normally excluded or relegated in the power structure. Many researchers have emphasized the need to develop policies and international laws on migration from a gender perspective.

Peterson (1992) says, "*Gender is relational, privileging what is masculine is inextricable from devaluing what is feminized.*" It's about codes, norms and rules institutionalized in society and not about individual choices. However, Peterson says the privilege of masculinity does not privilege all men, rather it

creates numerous hierarchies which are ultimately naturalized by feminizing those who are subordinated.

Discourse on migration often makes use of ‘refugee’ and ‘displacement’ interchangeably. However, both terms are distinct from each other. According to UNRISD 2005, “*Those who move within their own countries are known as displaced, those who leave their borders are designated as refugees*” (Butalia, 2008). Urvasi Butalia in her article ‘Migration/Dislocation: A Gendered Perspective’ talks about the complexities and gendering of forced transfers of the population following violent conflicts during the India-Pakistan partition. The mainstream refugee regime ignores the issues of stateless refugee women.

## Rohingya Crisis from Gender Lens

Women have always faced the consequences of war, ethnic conflict, persecution and violence at levels higher than the rest. The identity and honour of women during times of war and conflict have been used as objects of desecration and crucifixion (Chakrabarty, 2019). Gender-based violence unleashed at women is often used as a strategic tool to weaken the opponent.

Women were made easy targets by the military of Myanmar. The Human Rights Watch and the UN agencies have reported mass rape and violence against Rohingya women. Anuradha Chenoy in her article ‘Militarism and Women in South Asia’ writes that militarism is entirely masculine and patriarchal. The acts of violence by the military are ingrained in power relations. As said by Peterson above exploitation of men at subordinate level occurs in the hierarchy created by patriarchy. Not enough research has been done on sexual violence unleashed at refugee men. According to Chakrabarty (2019), some of the heinous forms of sexual abuse that Rohingya men have to go through are forced labour, castration, forced to witness horrors like rapes of women, which are often not reported.

The conditions of Rohingya women in the refugee camps of destination countries are miserable. UNHCR 2007 reported that the security systems in refugee camps consisting of Camp in charge (CiC) and the Mahjee are key abusers of human rights. The Mahjees perpetrate sexual abuses, genital mutilation, domestic violence, trafficking of girls and women and beating in the refugee camps. Another major challenge is the locals involved in the exploitation of refugees. UNHCR 2007 reported one such incident in the Kutupalong refugee camp, where a local married a refugee woman to secure residence in the camp and hasten criminal activities. Women in camps are not safe either from aid workers. Nordby (2018) writes that according to the UNHCR and Save the Children UK report, ‘Sexual Violence and Exploitation: The Experience of Refugee Children in Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone,’ humanitarian workers often trade food items for sexual favours. Teachers in the camp trade passed grades for sexual favours. Medical workers gave medicine and treatment in return for sex. This questions the organizational policies of

---

organizations involved in aid work. The only source on which the Rohingyas are dependent for aid is rather a source of their exploitation. These perpetrators should be held accountable and the organizations should develop policies on the conduct of workers.

During her visit to the Rohingya settlements in Cox's Bazar for a month, Nahida Akter, a development researcher at BRAC Research and Evaluation Division, found that about 60% of the newly arrived Rohingyas were women. Thousands of households were female-headed. Along with other challenges these women had to earn a livelihood as well. Akter writes these women find it difficult to earn livelihood to provide for themselves and the kids as they have never stepped out of their house (Akter, 2018). The camps have also witnessed a sudden surge in child marriages. Rohingya parents are worried about the security of their daughters and thus consider marrying them off would keep them safe.

UNHCR 2007 reported that insufficiency in humanitarian assistance to refugees, especially of food, conjugated with the absence of potential to generate income, has galvanized many refugee women to involve in survival sex. With no job opportunities available and having mouths to feed, Rohingya women heading a family resort to their body for survival. This further makes them vulnerable in terms of sexual, reproductive health and mental health. WHO reported the Sexual and Reproductive Health in Cox Bazar camp is inadequate, there were 100,000 expected births in 2018, from which 2.3% are expected to have obstetric complications. Only 22% of women are giving birth in health facilities (Palermo, 2018).

In the refugee camps of Bangladesh, humanitarian aid is primarily distributed by the UN organizations and various international as well as national NGOs. But still, these aids are scarce and unavailable to most of the Rohingya refugees. The camps lack adequate toilets, shelters, drinking water, and emergency medicines. These facilities are limited for women compared to men (Uddin. et al.). The refugee women feel uncomfortable in receiving treatment and often cannot talk freely about their problems with the male personnel due to the serious shortage of female doctors (ibid.).

In all likelihood, Rohingya women have been leading miserable life due to the existing intersectionalities and deprivation of basic rights. International organisations and governments of destination countries should develop gender-sensitive policies and laws, as half of the Rohingya refugees consist of women. Though the UNHCR 1991, issued its guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women essentially addressing issues relating to women in refugee camps. More efforts are required from international organizations to eradicate violence and atrocities unleashed at Rohingya refugee women. Countries should come forward on humanitarian grounds to provide gender-sensitive aid in particular. Job opportunities should be created within camps for women since they are the sole breadwinner of the family (Uddin et. al.). There have been few instances of Rohingya refugee women coming together through active participation at

---

the community level and learning new skills. But to bring that revolution at an international level, Chakrabarty (2019) writes the 1951 Refugee convention should be modified sufficiently to include provisions for women refugees and expand provisions for undocumented migrants, asylum seekers and stateless refugees.

## **Rohingya Crisis from a Climate Lens**

The displacement of the Rohingya community by local ethnic groups, Buddhist nationalists and military forces was described as an ‘ethnic cleansing’, a coercive and forceful action by the United Nations (Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect). The community, with a size of more than 3.5 million, fled to countries all across the world (Alam, 2019), to find refuge and a safe living place. The Rohingya migrants face several problems ranging from the availability of livelihood to the availability of resources for day-to-day needs. The migrants face several human rights violations such as trafficking, low-paid jobs, etc. which makes their condition worse. Among these troubles is the added vulnerability to the climate crisis.

The migrants live in poor conditions in the destination cities, which makes them vulnerable to environmental changes and disasters such as landslides, floods, droughts, cyclones, soil erosion, pollution, etc. This makes them prone to diseases and the lack of adaptive capacity of the migrants (in the form of economic aid, healthcare facilities, availability of livelihood) further worsens the problems. The migrants are not only the victims but are also the cause of environmental degradation in the destination countries (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2009). The sudden increase in population and demand for resources often leads to overexploitation of resources which is harmful to the native species of plants and animals.

## **Rohingya Community as a Cause of Environmental Degradation**

There is a consensus on the impact of climate change on migration, but little study has been conducted all across the world to support the claim. This is because of various reasons ranging from the availability of data to the complex nature of migration which intertwines with the socio-economic status of the migrant (Adamo, 2009). The most important problem, however, is the absence of a globally accepted terminology designated to the people who have been displaced due to climate-related reasons. The Rohingya community has been assigned with the status of refugees which qualifies them to receive humanitarian aid from different organizations, but such

---

terminology also prevents any scope of assistance in the future, especially since the community is highly vulnerable to the impacts due to the climate crisis.

Bangladesh has been the largest recipient of Rohingya refugees. According to the Rohingya Solidarity Organization, the country received more than 1.5 million refugees who settled in the city of Cox Bazar (Alam, 2019). The mass influx of Rohingya refugees has resulted in environmental degradation both within the refugee camps and the surrounding areas. According to the report released by the government of Bangladesh, titled ‘Report on Environmental Impact of Rohingya Influx’, 11 environmental impacts were identified that were or could have been exacerbated by the Rohingya influx (UNDP Bangladesh; UN WOMEN Bangladesh, 2018). These included physical impacts on groundwater, surface water, acoustic levels, indoor air quality, solid waste management and soils and terrain; and impacts on ecosystems such as natural forests, protected areas and critical habitats; vegetation, wildlife and marine and freshwater ecosystems. The expansion of existing campsites has led to more than 2000 ha of forest loss in the Cox Bazar’s region (Mukul, Huq, & Herbohn, 2019). The loss of habitat has also resulted in human-animal conflict (IUCN Bangladesh, 2018) near the campsites and the low availability of resources has also caused warfare among groups living in the campsite. The Rohingya refugees have also migrated to other countries, but the respective governments have conducted no environmental assessments to analyze the position of the environment post-arrival of the refugees. Environmental impacts also differ based on gender. Women and girls, who tend to handle food, collect water and hold responsibility for providing to the family are found to be more vulnerable to malnutrition and also to gender-based violence (Detraz & Windsor, 2013). Gendered insecurity is linked to the existing inequalities such as poverty, limited access to resources and mobility and culturally constructed expectations that shape work patterns, household divisions of labour and caretaking responsibilities.

## **Vulnerability of Rohingya Community to Climate Crisis**

The Rohingya community is not only responsible for causing environmental degradation but are themselves the victims of the climate crisis and related impacts. Bangladesh has been identified as the 7th most-affected country as per the Long-Term Climate Index created by German Watch (Eckstein, Kunzel, & Schafer, 2021). Bangladesh is situated at the head of the Bay of Bengal and the largest river delta on the planet. One-quarter of the country is less than seven feet above sea level. Melting glaciers in the Himalayas, coupled with more frequent and stronger cyclones and storm surges, have drastically pushed water up the delta’s rivers and caused serious flooding. The IPCC reports suggest that Bangladesh will lose 30% of food production by 2050 (IPCC, 2001).

---

As a result, much of the rural-dwelling majority is likely to be internally displaced, moving to urban centres in large numbers.

In such a scenario, the Bangladesh government is forced to think about its densely populated country and relocate the large population of the Rohingya communities. The ‘Report on Environmental Impact of Rohingya Influx’ mentions that ‘Paramount to the reversal of any physical environmental impacts will be the implementation of the closure of the Rohingya camps and initiation of land reclamation plans’ (UNDP Bangladesh; UN WOMEN Bangladesh, 2018).

As a result, the government of Bangladesh has also recently moved a large group of Rohingya communities to an island named ‘Bhasan Char’ (which means floating island in Bengali). The estuary landmass appears to have taken shape from silt in the 1980s and the 1990s. Dredging carried out by a Chinese company, among others, was intended to make it fit for habitation and to stop the high tide from flooding it (Beech, 2020). Bangladesh experiences cyclones almost every year during early summer and retreating monsoon. This is the reason why more than a million deaths have been recognized due to cyclones, so far since 1877 (Dasgupta & Huq, 2014). The relocation of the refugees has made the community vulnerable to such hydro-meteorological disasters, which might result in the Rohingya refugees to turn into environmental migrants.

## The Way Forward

With the current political instability in the country of Myanmar (Head, 2021) along with the increasing environmental degradation in Bangladesh, efforts must come from international organizations and governments in South Asia. Terminology must be decided for the environmental migrants which are accepted globally. There is a consensus that there is little opportunity to create an entirely new set of legal instruments to address environmental migration, but rather the possibility of revising those legal instruments that already exist to include the conceptually ‘new’ category of migrants (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2009). Moreover, to prevent more degradation near the camps, a forest and landscape restoration approach will provide ample opportunities to integrate environmental and humanitarian interventions, both inside and outside the refugee camps (Mukul, Huq, & Herbohn, 2019).

---

## SOURCES

- Adamo, S. B. (2009). Environmentally Induced Population Displacements. International Human Dimensions Programme.
- Akter, N. (2018, January 15). The uncertain fate of Rohingya women. Retrieved 10 February, 2021 from <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/human-rights/the-uncertain-fate-rohingya-women-1519819>
- Alam, S. (2019, August 24). *Infographic: Top Rohingya-Hosting Community*. Retrieved from AA: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/infographic-top-rohingya-hosting-countries/1563674>
- Amnesty International (2017). *Caged without a roof Apartheid in Myanmar's Rakhine State*. London.
- BBC News. (2020, January 23). Myanmar Rohingya: What you need to know about the crisis. Retrieved 08 February, 2021, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41566561>.
- Beech, H. (2020, December 4). *From Crowded Camps to a Remote Island: Rohingya Refugees Move Again*. Retrieved from The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/04/world/asia/rohingya-bangladesh-island-camps.html>
- Butalia, U. (2008). "Migration/Dislocation: A gendered perspective" in N.C. Behera (Ed.), *Gender, conflict and migration*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2008, pp.137-154.
- Chakrabarty, S. (2019). "Gender, Violence and Forced Migration: The State of Syrian and Rohingya Refugee Women". International Conference on Women's Empowerment, Laws, Feminism, Gender Discrimination, Gender Space and Women's Leadership: Issues and Challenges in 21st Century (Naareevaad - 2019).
- Chenoy, A.M. (2002). *Militarism and Women in South Asia*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2002, pp.1-34.
- Dasgupta, S., & Huq, M. (2014). Cyclones in a Changing Climate: The Case of Bangladesh. *Journal of Climate and Development*.
- Detraz, N., & Windsor, L. (2013). Evaluating Climate Migration: Population Movement, Insecurity and Gender. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 127-146.

- Eckstein, D., Kunzel, V., & Schafer, L. (2021). *Global Climate Risk Index*. Berlin: GermanWatch.
- Refugee Studies Centre. (2010). *Forced Migration Research and Policy Overview of current trends and future directions*. Oxford Department of International Development. University of Oxford.
- Habib, M., Jubb, C., Ahmad, S., Rahman, M. & Pallard, H. (2018). *Forced Migration Of Rohingya : The Untold Experience*. 1st edition Ontario International Development Agency Ottawa, Canada.
- Hankivsky, O. (2014). *Intersectionality*. The Institute for Intersectionality Research & Policy.
- Head, J. (2021, February 1). Myanmar coup: Aung San Suu Kyi detained as military seizes control. Retrieved from BBC: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55882489>
- Human Rights Watch. Retrieved 10 February, 2021, from <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/burma/burm005-01.htm>
- International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2009). *Migration, Environment and Climate Change: Assessing the Evidence*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration (IOM).
- IPCC. (2001). *Climate Change 2001- IPCC Third Assessment Report*. Geneva: UNFCCC.
- IUCN Bangladesh. (2018). *Survey Report on Elephant Movement, Human-Elephant Conflict Situation, and Possible Intervention Sites in and around Kutupalong Camp, Cox's Bazar*. Dhaka: IUCN Bangladesh.
- Islam, M.S. (2019). *Understanding the Rohingya Crisis and the Failure of Human Rights Norm in Myanmar: Possible Policy Responses*. *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations*.
- Mukul, S. A., Huq, S., & Herbohn, J. (2019, April 12). Rohingya Refugees and the Environment. *Science Vol. 364, Issue 6436*, p.138.
- Nordby, L. (2018). *Gender-based violence in the refugee camps in Cox Bazar -A case study of Rohingya women's and girls' exposure to gender-based violence*. Masters thesis. Uppsala University.

- 
- Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect. (n.d.). *Ethnic Cleansing*. Retrieved from United Nations: <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/ethnic-cleansing.shtml>
  - Palermo, F.M. (2018). Analysis of gender mainstreaming strategies for the Rohingya Refugee Crisis in the Cox Bazar, Bangladesh. Are we taking it seriously?. *Division of Risk Management and Societal Safety, Faculty of Engineering Lund University*. Sweden.
  - Peterson, V.S. (1992). “Security and Sovereign States: What Is at Stake in Taking Feminism Seriously” in V.Spike Peterson, (Ed.), *Gendered states: Feminist (Re)visions of International Relations Theory*, London, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992, pp.31-64.
  - Safi, M. (2017). Myanmar treatment of Rohingya looks like 'textbook ethnic cleansing', says UN. Retrieved 08 February, 2021, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/11/un-myanmars-treatment-of-rohingya-textbook-example-of-ethnic-cleansing>.
  - Uddin, Md., Rakshit, V., Mahmud, H. & Jahan, S. (n.d.). Gender-based violence in the Rohingya Crisis: A Postmodern analysis. Retrieved 08 February, 2021, from [https://www.academia.edu/44983549/Gender\\_Based\\_Violence\\_in\\_the\\_Rohingya\\_Crisis\\_A\\_Postmodern\\_Analysis](https://www.academia.edu/44983549/Gender_Based_Violence_in_the_Rohingya_Crisis_A_Postmodern_Analysis)
  - UNDP Bangladesh; UN WOMEN Bangladesh. (2018). Report on Environmental Impact of Rohingya Influx. Dhaka: UNDP Bangladesh.

The Parley Project is a student-led initiative which focuses on research-driven solutions for global agendas. Started in 2020 the project aims to be a platform where students like us can voice their opinions and hone the understanding of the world around them. It is an endeavour to explore the intricacies of the increasingly globalised world and to unpack the politics behind the same.

We aim to connect students to professionals for mutually insightful



<http://parleyproject.org/>



[projectparley@gmail.com](mailto:projectparley@gmail.com)



[@parleyproject](https://www.instagram.com/parleyproject)



<https://www.linkedin.com/company/parleyproject/>



<https://www.facebook.com/parleyproject>