

Lives Within the Cage: An Anthropological Inquiry into Power, Governance, and Statelessness in Rohingya Refugee Camps

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Abstract: This article examines the multidimensional realities of Rohingya refugee life in the camps of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, through an anthropological lens of power, governance, and statelessness. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2024 and 2025 in the Kutupalong registered and unregistered camps, the study analyzes how administrative categorization, humanitarian regulation, and everyday moral economies construct and sustain the Rohingya condition. The research employs qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and thematic analysis, to explore the intersections of social hierarchy, dependency, and control within camp life. Guided by theoretical perspectives from Foucault's concepts of *biopolitics* and *governmentality*, Agamben's notion of *bare life*, and Mbembe's theory of *necropolitics*, the article argues that the refugee camp represents a symbolic and political space where care and coercion coexist. In other words, the article advances these debates by conceptualizing the camps as regimes of governed waiting and by introducing the notion of a moral economy of humanitarian dependency. Humanitarian governance, while framed as protection, simultaneously functions as a mechanism of surveillance, exclusion, and moral discipline. Through the narratives of refugees themselves, the study reveals how the Rohingya negotiate survival, dignity, and belonging within structures that both sustain and subjugate them. Ultimately, the analysis redefines the Rohingya crisis as more than a humanitarian emergency; it is a deeply political and moral project that exposes the paradoxes of modern humanitarianism and the governance of stateless lives.

Keywords: Rohingya, statelessness, refugee camps, biopolitics, moral economies, power, humanitarianism, governance.

Introduction

The Rohingya crisis stands as one of the most protracted and complex cases of forced displacement in contemporary history. It transcends the boundaries of a conventional humanitarian emergency, encompassing interwoven political, ethnic, and governance dimensions. The Rohingya, an ethnic Muslim minority originating from Myanmar's Rakhine State, have endured decades of systematic disenfranchisement, persecution, and denial of citizenship. In August 2017, following a violent military campaign by Myanmar's

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armed forces, nearly 700,000 Rohingya were compelled to flee across the border into Bangladesh (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2023). This massive influx, widely described by the United Nations and human rights organizations as ethnic cleansing (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2019), must be understood not only as a humanitarian crisis but also as a manifestation of deeper structural and historical forces that shape power, identity, and belonging in the modern state system.

This study approaches the Rohingya crisis as a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses political governance, humanitarian administration, and the moral economy of care and control within refugee camps. By situating the Rohingya experience within anthropological and political theory, this paper investigates how the governance of displaced populations operates through both material and symbolic structures of power. It emphasizes the lived experiences and voices of the Rohingya themselves, foregrounding how they perceive, navigate, and contest the conditions of confinement and marginalization. Rather than treating the crisis solely through the lens of international policy or state administration, the analysis privileges the emic perspective: the internal hierarchies, social divisions, and moral negotiations that characterize everyday life in the camps.

The article argues that the Rohingya crisis reveals the inherent contradictions of humanitarian governance, where protection and control, care and coercion, coexist within the same institutional framework. Refugee camps, while designed to provide shelter and safety, also function as spaces of surveillance, discipline, and dependency. This condition reflects what Foucault (1978) terms biopolitical governance: the management of life through regulatory power, and what Mbembe (2003) extends as necropolitics: the power to define who may live and who must die. Within these overlapping regimes, the Rohingya's existence becomes one of bare life (Agamben, 1998), a condition of survival without political recognition. This study also argues that the Rohingya case offers conceptual refinements that extend these theories. The Rohingya camps demonstrate how humanitarian infrastructures, local political economies, refugee agency, and transnational geopolitics jointly co-produce a hybrid regime of containment, one in which protection and coercion are inseparably intertwined. By foregrounding Rohingya narratives of fear, aspiration, distrust, and negotiation, the article highlights forms of agency that fall outside classical biopolitical formulations. Thus, the study contributes to how power operates not only through sovereign exclusion but also through fragmented, negotiated, and multi-scalar systems of control shaped by both state and nonstate actors.

Understanding the Rohingya crisis, therefore, requires moving beyond humanitarian discourses of victimhood toward an anthropological analysis of governance, morality, and power. The Rohingya camps embody a paradoxical reality, spaces where compassion is intertwined with exclusion, and where human rights and humanitarianism coexist with control, exploitation, and symbolic violence. In this sense, the camps operate as what Agier (2011) calls "humanitarian spaces of exception", zones that are simultaneously within and outside the purview of state sovereignty, producing new forms of dependency, inequality, and identity.

This article seeks to illuminate these dynamics by examining how the everyday experiences of the Rohingya reveal the moral, political, and symbolic dimensions of displacement. Specifically, it explores how social hierarchies, administrative categorization, and humanitarian interventions collectively produce what might be described as a governed life of waiting, a temporality defined by uncertainty, dependency, and constrained agency. Ultimately, this research article aims to reframe the Rohingya crisis as an anthropological problem of governance, power, and statelessness, one that challenges the moral and political assumptions underpinning humanitarianism itself. By foregrounding the voices of the Rohingya and situating their lived experiences within the broader context of biopolitical control and moral regulation, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how displacement, exclusion, and governance intertwine to shape contemporary humanitarian realities.

Research Setting and Methodology

This research was conducted in several Rohingya refugee camps located in the Ukhiya Upazila of Cox's Bazar District, Bangladesh. Two distinct types of camps were selected for fieldwork: the older, officially recognized camps designated for registered Rohingya refugees who arrived before 1992, and the newer, unregistered camps established for refugees who fled Myanmar following the 2017 military operations. This dual focus allowed for a comparative ethnographic framework to analyze how differential administrative recognition produces contrasting lived experiences, rights, and hierarchies within the camps. The study concentrated particularly on the Kutupalong Registered Rohingya Camp, one of the two officially recognized camps, and the Kutupalong Expansion Camp (commonly referred to as the world's largest refugee settlement). This comparative approach facilitated the examination of variations in social organization, service access, internal governance structures, and patterns of inequality across different refugee categories. Through this framework, the study explores how registration status intersects with class, gender, and symbolic power to shape everyday life and survival strategies among the Rohingya.

A qualitative research design was employed, drawing on anthropological methods of data collection and analysis. The study sought to capture the multidimensional experiences, perceptions, and reactions of camp residents through immersive fieldwork and narrative inquiry. In total, 45 Rohingya informants were interviewed, representing a cross-section of the community: men and women, adolescents, widows, fishermen, madrasa teachers, local leaders, NGO workers, Majhies (camp leaders), volunteers, and community elders. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling strategies, beginning with trusted community intermediaries and expanding through peer referrals. This approach allowed access to socially marginalized groups, including women-headed households and individuals without formal camp leadership roles, whose experiences are often underrepresented in humanitarian reporting. Semi-structured interviews were guided by a predesigned questionnaire but remained flexible to allow respondents to elaborate on relevant themes and emergent issues. Most interviews were conducted in residential shelters, communal spaces, and NGO service areas, depending on security conditions and participants' preferences. Some interviews occurred with the assistance of locally recruited

Rohingya interpreters, while others were conducted directly in Rohingya and Bengali. In addition to interviews, participant observation was a key component of data collection. A thematic analysis approach was applied to the collected data. This analytical process emphasized how the microdynamics of camp life reflect broader structures of power and humanitarian regulation.

The researcher's identity as a Bangladeshi academic significantly shaped access and interpretation. While this facilitated entry into NGO spaces and communication with local administrators, it also required careful attention to power asymmetries and potential participant hesitation. To mitigate these concerns, trusted local assistants, fluent in Rohingya and Chittagonian dialects, supported interpretation and facilitated safe introductions. The research adhered to the ethical standards of anthropological fieldwork, emphasizing voluntary participation, anonymity, and cultural sensitivity. All participants provided informed consent, pseudonyms were used, and identifying details were altered to protect confidentiality. Given the population's vulnerability, particular care was taken to avoid traumatization and to ensure that participation did not expose individuals to risk within camp governance structures. Moreover, the study faced several constraints. Movement restrictions within camps limited the ability to observe nighttime activities or areas under heightened security. Sensitive issues, such as local group-based violence, gender-based violence, and illicit economies, were difficult for some participants to discuss openly. Additionally, the reliance on translators may have filtered certain nuances of dialect and expression. These limitations are acknowledged as part of the interpretive process.

Theoretical and Analytical Framework

The Rohingya crisis is one of the most important humanitarian crises in South and Southeast Asia in recent times. In recent years, several significant studies, policy reports, and humanitarian assessments have been published on the Rohingya crisis. However, most of the work focuses on ethnic cleansing, displacement, statelessness, human rights violations, refugee management, and international refugee policy (Southwick & Mayers, 2017; UNHRC, 2018; HRW, 2019). For example, Human Rights Watch (2018) and Amnesty International (2019) have described the crisis as 'ethnic cleansing'. The International Crisis Group (2019) traces the roots of the crisis to Myanmar's 1982 citizenship law and the formation of a Buddhist nationalist state. Moreover, academic research on refugees has mostly been limited to discussions on "statelessness" and "forced migration". Even the research that has been done on Rohingya camp life has been limited to assessing their poverty, education and healthcare deficiencies, or NGO activities (Wake & Yu, 2018). While these discussions are important, the article argues that they ignore the Rohingya's daily experiences, the underlying politics of camp life, and the internal divisions.

Although the Rohingya crisis has been the subject of political and humanitarian discourse in the international arena for a long time, it has been limited to human rights or state policy analysis. Therefore, the research in question considers it important to discuss social divisions, internal politics, symbolic governance, and daily survival patterns within the Rohingya camp. Leider (2013) has explored the history of the Rohingya in his research, showing how British colonial rule and the 1982 Myanmar Citizenship Act transformed the

Rohingya from an ethnic group into ‘undesirable intruders’. This statelessness of the Rohingya has been identified as ‘legal invisibility’ by Southwick and Mayers (2017). On the other hand, McConnachie (2016) argues that this statelessness is not just a legal term, but a form of structural deprivation, which is directly reflected in the discrimination of access to camp life, education and medical services. As a result, the Rohingya lose their identity and rights.

Farzana (2017) has highlighted the political motives and military repression behind the successive displacements of the Rohingya. She has shown that the repression of the Rohingya has created an ‘existential crisis’ among them, in which they are forced to adapt to new realities over and over again. The research in question has shown that registered and unregistered Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are facing various forms of discrimination while adapting to this temporary life. This has translated into not only administrative differences but also divisions of social class and status (Chaudhury, 2020; Ullah, 2019).

Wake and Yu (2018) and Hossain et al. (2021) have shown in their work that the administration, international organizations, the military, and local leadership systems create a kind of ‘hybrid governance’, where formal and informal power overlap. According to the article’s argument, this governance structure serves not only as a means of distributing administrative benefits but also as a form of symbolic reproduction of power. Where ordinary Rohingyas are repeatedly victims of deprivation. The ignorance among the informants collected in the article is also consistent with this explanation, as nepotism, corruption, and abuse of power among the fishermen and local leaders become evident. Moreover, through this governance structure, the behavior, expression, and even family ideologies of the camp residents are influenced.

Pritchard (2021) has analyzed NGO activities in refugee camps as a “humanitarian industry.” In which NGOs operate under the guise of providing aid, they create a soft but effective regulatory framework of governance. He argues that many NGOs go beyond meeting the basic needs of the Rohingya and engage in activities that sometimes conflict with the Rohingya culture. Fassin’s (2012; 2021) concept of “humanitarian reason” also explains this, where humanitarianism becomes a tool of governance and accountability. Research shows that Rohingya access to aid often depends on proper registration and compliance.

In explaining the gendered experiences within refugee camps, Tripura (2022) uses Judith Butler’s concept of “precarious life” to show how women in camp life face a dual regime of humanitarian assistance on the one hand, and religious and patriarchal control on the other. The narratives of the female informants in the article highlight sexual violence, child marriage, and lack of privacy, which are creating permanent insecurity in their lives and turning their lives into a ‘prison’. Similarly, Poyil and Chowdhory (2020) identify the collection of biometric data in Rohingya camps as a technique of “digital surveillance”. Such technology, on the one hand, creates conditions for assistance, on the other hand, limits the autonomy of refugees. This reveals the technological expansion of state control discussed in the article. In addition, Hoffman (2019) and Sandvik et al. (2020) show that

digital humanitarianism turns refugees into 'datafied bodies', transforming them into statistical numbers rather than political subjects.

Sakib et al. (2025) analyze patron-client relationships in refugee camps and local societies in Bangladesh, showing how exploitation and inequality are reproduced through the distribution of resources. In addition, some contemporary studies in the South Asian context have shown that Rohingya camps are not only a humanitarian crisis, but also deeply connected to regional security, environmental and climate politics. In the context of the relocation of Rohingya to Bhashanchar, Rahman (2023) argues that resettlement to climate-vulnerable islands is a type of environmental containment strategy. Similarly, Alam and Farzana (2024) note that climate change is making refugee management more complex, as resettling Rohingya in disaster-prone areas further increases their risk of survival. This further reinforces the concept of 'permanent instability' discussed in the article.

The analytical foundation of this research is built on some fundamental principles of modern sociology and political philosophy. For example, Giorgio Agamben's bare life, Michel Foucault's concepts of 'governmentality' and 'biopolitics', and Achille Mbembe's 'necropolitics' have been used to deeply understand the internal diversity, class division, oppression, governance, and control strategies of refugee life. Rohingya refugee camps are not just places of refuge, but also symbolic and biopolitical spaces where Rohingyas are under governance and control due to statelessness. As a result, it is possible to understand the Rohingya crisis not only as a humanitarian disaster, but also as a multidimensional structure of governance, control, internal discrimination and existential uncertainty.

Agamben, in his book *Homo Sacer* (1998), presents the concept of bare life, in which the individual is deprived of political recognition by the state and reduced to a mere body. A body that has no right to defend itself, but which can be killed. The Rohingyas are the exact embodiment of this bare life. Because they are stateless, citizenless, deprived of political recognition and protection, yet included in the governance structure. Controlled movement within the camps, lack of employment and an uncertain future, all this turns the Rohingyas into such a 'bare life'. Currently, their lives depend solely on human compassion.

Foucault's concept of biopolitics refers to the state's control and management of life and life processes. On the other hand, governmentality is the strategy or method of governing people. It refers to how the government influences people's behavior, thinking, and lifestyles. He showed that biopolitics and governmentality are related. The government uses biopolitical strategies to shape people's lives, which are part of governmentality. Foucault's (1979) concepts of biopolitics and governmentality are helpful for understanding the governance of the state and NGOs in refugee camps. Every aspect of camp life, such as rations, coupons, health, transportation, education, etc., serves as a means of exercising power over the lives of the refugees. Governance here does not only work in the sense of maintaining external order; rather, it ensures its intervention in the smallest parts of the lives of the Rohingyas.

Mbembe's (2003) concept of necropolitics analyzes the relationship between power and death. He says that modern states not only control individual lives, but can also push certain populations towards destruction or death. This is what he calls necropolitics. This means that the power to decide which lives and which die lies in the hands of the structure called

the state. In short, necropolitics is a political system in which power structures use the strategy of death and destruction to control human life. This does not only include physical death, but also social and civil death. In the reality of the Rohingya camps, we see that the movement of the Rohingya is restricted, there is no employment, and there is no guarantee of the future, which is like prolonging a kind of death. In short, this situation is a real manifestation of necropolitics.

This theoretical framework helps us understand how the internal symbolic structures of the camps, power relations, the ethics of governance, and the daily lives of refugees are intertwined to create a complex reality. Through this, we can see the Rohingya camps as a place of crisis, as well as a symbolic form of modern governance and humanitarian politics. This theoretical framework helps us analyze Rohingya camp life not only as a place of administrative support but also as a site of governance, resistance, discrimination, and existential uncertainty. This creates an opportunity to critically understand the internal social realities of the Rohingya, the symbolic structures of power, and the ethics of humanitarian governance.

Historical Trajectories of Rohingya Statelessness and Displacement

The history of the Rohingya, their ethnic identity and statelessness have roots spanning many decades and are full of political-historical ambiguities. The Rohingya living in the Rakhine State of Myanmar have an ethnic, linguistic and religious identity distinct from the majority Burmese people. This difference has long marked them as ‘other’. This part of the discussion analyzes the history of the Rohingya and the process of constructing statelessness.

The Rohingya claim that they have lived in the Rakhine region for hundreds of years and are the original inhabitants of the region. Their language (called Rohingya) is related to the regional Bengali of Chittagong and contains Persian, Urdu, and Arabic words (Leider, 2018). However, the Myanmar government describes the Rohingya as ‘Bengali infiltrators’ who migrated to Rakhine from Bangladesh (then British India) during British colonial rule. This portrayal has led the Myanmar government to label them as ‘illegal’. Even after Myanmar gained independence in 1948, the Rohingya still enjoyed civil rights. However, the Myanmar Citizenship Act of 1982 effectively rendered the Rohingya stateless. Under this law, only people belonging to 135 ethnic groups recognized by the state are considered citizens, which excludes the Rohingya (Cheesman, 2017). As a result, they are deprived of basic civic amenities, including access to public education and healthcare, as well as the right to travel.

The forced displacement of the Rohingya population is the result of a continuous and planned state persecution. In 1978, about 200,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh during the ‘Nagamin’ (King Dragon) operation. In 1991-92, about 250,000 Rohingya also took refuge in Bangladesh. However, the events of 2017 were the most horrific form of persecution. After attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on several police posts in Rakhine State, the Myanmar army, with the support of local Buddhist Rakhines, launched a massive military operation. As a result of this operation, more than 700,000 Rohingya were forced to flee to Bangladesh. The United Nations has described this incident as a

‘textbook example of ethnic cleansing’ (UNHRC 2018). This statelessness of the Rohingya population is not only a political-legal situation; it creates a kind of insecurity and humiliating existence in all walks of life. Stateless Rohingya do not have the right to receive any education, own property, or get a job in Myanmar. They even need government permission to marry. In this situation, they have become a ‘legally non-existent’ population in the eyes of the state (Southwick, 2018).

The Myanmar state’s anti-Rohingya policies are driven by nationalist Buddhist political forces who want to legitimize their own ethnic identity by positioning the Muslim Rohingya as the ‘other’. This process of ‘othering’ has been going on for a long time, leaving the Rohingya outside an organized and legally legitimate identity. Therefore, in the words of Foucault and Agamben, this kind of biopolitical exclusion is not just a strategy of governance, but a strategy of reducing an ethnic group to an indefinite death or ‘bare life’.

Between August and December 2017, an estimated 745,000 Rohingya crossed the Myanmar border into Bangladesh (ISCG 2018). Thousands of Rohingya continue to risk their lives by crossing the Naf River, trekking through mountainous terrain, or trawling into Bangladesh every day (Johnston, 2020). The influx has been so massive that the global media has described it as one of the world’s fastest-growing and largest refugee crises. Many risked their lives as they traversed mountains, rivers, and military checkpoints. As one informant, Roxana (28), recalled: *“My sister was taken away before my eyes. I left home that night. I walked for seven days without food. I don’t know how many people died on the way.”* Such testimonies reveal the embodied trauma of displacement. Veena Das (2007) has described this violence as part of everyday life, consistent with the trauma that remains in the bodies and memories of the Rohingya.

The Bangladesh government opened its borders to the Rohingya on humanitarian grounds. Temporary camps were built for the Rohingya who arrived in Ukhia and Teknaf in Cox’s Bazar district. The government, NGOs, international organizations, and volunteers quickly began relief efforts. However, this emerged as a challenge from the beginning. Ensuring shelter, food, medical care, and security for such a large number of people so quickly is a huge humanitarian and administrative task. This large mass influx of Rohingya attracted the attention of the international community. Many international organizations, including the United Nations and Amnesty International, described the incident as a ‘crime against humanity’ and an ‘ethnic cleansing campaign’. Again, some present this slow-moving state-led genocide against the Rohingya as a silent failure of international politics (e.g., Zarin and Cowley 2014). On the other hand, the UN fact-finding mission recommended that Myanmar’s military leadership be tried by the International Criminal Court (UNHRC 2018).

The Rohingya who have come to Bangladesh after breaking their roots are facing a new and uncertain future. A female informant, Adiba (40), said, *“We lost many people when we crossed the Myanmar border. We didn’t get a chance to look back. After coming here, I feel like I’m alive now. However, I’m unsure how long we will stay here. What if they send us back again? What if the soldiers find us again? What will we do then? We can’t sleep thinking about this.”* This statement indicates the extreme insecurity and uncertainty that

governs the existence of the displaced Rohingya. For the Rohingya, the experience of crossing the border, the violence, and the uncertain life in the camps can be called an example of the death penalty of the state and international politics according to Mbembe's concept of 'necropolitics'. According to Foucault's concept of 'biopolitics,' the state controls the lives and deaths of its people. In this situation, the statelessness of the Rohingya and their push to the death can be described as the ultimate form of this control. On the other hand, according to Agamben's concept of 'bare life', in the current reality, the stateless Rohingya have become 'stateless bodies' whose lives, while preserveable, are not deserving.

The Politics of Registration and Differential Protection

A fundamental administrative and political distinction within the Rohingya population in Bangladesh is the distinction between 'registered' and 'unregistered' refugees. This distinction highlights an inherent dualism in the international human rights framework. Under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, refugees are protected by certain fundamental rights, including the right to education, medical care, movement, and employment. However, since Bangladesh is not a member of this convention, the protection of refugees here depends on political will and bilateral diplomacy.

The Rohingya currently living in camps in Bangladesh are broadly divided into two categories: 'registered' and 'unregistered'. Registered Rohingya are those recognized as refugees by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), while unregistered Rohingya have not yet been fully recognized. It is important to note that registered Rohingya are those who arrived in Bangladesh before 1992 and are officially registered with the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). On the other hand, unregistered Rohingya who arrived after 2017 are only biometrically registered at the national level and are outside the full protection framework of UNHCR. Those recognized as refugees are living in the permanent Kutupalong registered camp in Ukhia and the Nayapara registered camp in Teknaf. All others are living in 34 temporary and expanded registered camps (Jerin & Kamruzzaman, 2020).

Those recognized as refugees by the United Nations Refugee Agency enjoy a number of benefits. For example, no one can forcibly return them against their will to a country where they fear deprivation of their liberty. In addition, they have access to justice, basic education, work opportunities, and the ability to complete necessary documents (including passport forms). Moreover, if they have spent more than three years in the same country, they are also allowed to participate in wage-based work in the labor market of the country of asylum. As a result, recognized refugees have the legal right to enjoy almost all the benefits of citizens. They are given the right to join various workplaces, including traveling abroad. But refugees who arrived after 1992 are not covered by this opportunity. They do not have much access to the justice system. Because they do not have legal documents (Abrar, 2017). Without legal documents, they are considered illegal immigrants. And being labeled as an 'illegal immigrant' puts them in a difficult position.

Bangladesh's dual refugee policy is, in a way, creating a crisis. Policy and administrative differences pave the way for new forms of discrimination and tension among camp residents (Ullah & Khatun, 2020). The formal recognition or lack thereof of refugees

creates social stratification, which creates inequality and division in the camps (Islam et al., 2022). This lack of citizenship creates new problems (Agier, 2005). If they are not permanent residents of the camps, they are deprived of many areas of humanitarian assistance (Claudio, Khan, and Minca 2022). In particular, this spatial disparity in aid distribution and benefits exacerbates inter-communal conflicts (Habib, 2023). Rohingya refugees express the view that, in some cases, the state itself creates them. According to the Rohingya, this system accelerates the process of othering. That is, one group within the same group is considered 'other' than another group. This process of alienation continues mainly through various state practices (Pittawaz & Bartolomei, 2001).

Incidentally, an informant, Liton (54), an unregistered Rohingya, said about the registered Rohingya, *"They have cards; when they go to the doctor, they see them first. We don't have cards. When we go, they write our names, and they make us wait for hours. Moreover, even when help comes, it goes to their names first."* This testimony makes it clear that institutional recognition is not just on paper; it creates real differences in opportunities and status. This difference creates a kind of hierarchy of symbolic power within the camp. In other words, registration is not just a way to get help, but it becomes a recognition of existence. According to Foucault's concept of biopolitics, the modern state makes human life measurable. And the identity of registered and unregistered Rohingya reflects that measurement. Because this identity determines who will get which benefits, and who will be deprived of these opportunities.

This division between registered and unregistered creates a context for permanent distrust and violence among the Rohingya. Moreover, it brings to the fore the dual reality of 'illegal vs. legitimate' identities. This 'legitimate' and 'illegal' division makes refugees politically viable (Islam et al., 2022). This reveals a new, divided thought of being 'powerful' and 'powerless' even within the identity of stateless refugees. This can be said in light of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital: the institutional recognition of registered Rohingyas becomes a symbol of their social status. As a result, they see themselves as 'legal' and consider the unregistered as 'inferior' or 'temporary'. A female informant, Amina (34), said about the registered Rohingya, *"They say they came first; they are Rohingya. We are new. But we have also been displaced in the same way."* Such testimonies underscore how bureaucratic classifications foster intra-group othering and disrupt communal solidarity. This internal 'othering' creates an organizational hierarchy that divides the social relations in the camp.

Registered Rohingyas receive guaranteed food and medical benefits through ration cards. But unregistered people face various restrictions and irregularities in ration collection. Since the legal protection of registered people is relatively high, they are less at risk of arrest, transfer, or repatriation. On the other hand, unregistered people are deprived of these legal protections. Due to this legal protection and separation of existence, unregistered Rohingyas become people without laws and rights. They are alive but politically and legally invisible. In other words, the lives of unregistered people have no political value; they are bare lives (Agamben, 1998). They are considered a defenseless, rights-less existence even under the rule of law. Moreover, because unregistered people lack legal recognition, they become a marginalized group even within the humanitarian aid system (Bourdieu, 1991). In this context, Rohingya Ramiz (34), who lives in a temporary camp,

said sadly, *“Even if we die, no one cares. Because we have no existence in the books and papers.”* This means that even if they die, there is no liability to the state and international structures. Registration becomes recognition of existence. This creates a class division among the Rohingya. Where unregistered Rohingyas become ‘second-class refugees’.

This symbolic and structural inequality often manifests as open conflict. Conflicts and violence between the two groups can be observed over issues such as food distribution, access to religious institutions, or opportunities for volunteer work (HRW, 2021). This administrative hierarchy creates a dual refugee system. Formal Entitlement is for those who are registered, and Contingent Survival is for those who are unregistered. This hierarchy is part of a power-centered governance structure. Where some lives are more valuable, while others receive minimal recognition for survival.

The division between registered and unregistered Rohingya is a real biopolitical reflection of the humanitarian assistance framework and state governance. This division is not only administrative, but also serves as the basis for determining social status, legal security and human rights. As a result, it plants an inherent discrimination and divisiveness in the refugee community. As a result, social conflict and mutual distrust are created. Internal tolerance among the Rohingya is weakened. The strength of the movement to realize their just demands on the basis of collectivity is reduced. Therefore, it can be said that although this classification was initially part of the refugee management of the state and international organizations, it eventually turned into a deep social, political and existential discrimination over time.

Internal Power Structures and Social Stratification in the Camps

Although the Rohingya population is often portrayed as a uniformly oppressed, stateless, and homogenous group, internal differentiation, class hierarchies, and mutual intolerance exist within this community. These divisions have intensified following displacement to Bangladesh, complicating social relations and undermining collective coexistence within the refugee camps. Hierarchies among the Rohingya predate exile, originating in Myanmar and structured around family occupation, land ownership, religious leadership, and education (Farzana, 2020). Some Rohingya now residing in the camps were previously landowners, merchants, clerics, or laborers. These preexisting social distinctions continue to shape contemporary status and influence in camp life. As one informant, Mamun (36), a former laborer, remarked, *“Even before, those who were rich are still respected more. They go to NGOs first, they talk first, they get the benefits first.”*

The previously discussed disparity between ‘registered’ and ‘unregistered’ Rohingyas contributes to the formation of internal hierarchies within the Rohingya community. Incidentally, informant Akhter (42) said, *“When the registered ones say, ‘You are new, there is less room for you.’ Hearing this makes my heart even sadder. We are Rohingya, they are Rohingya. But this division among ourselves really hurts.”*

There is no formal or structured elite class in the Rohingya camps. However, between the divisions between registered versus unregistered Rohingya, intermediary leaders versus

ordinary Rohingya, Rohingyas employed in NGOs versus unemployed Rohingya, an invisible but active camp-based elite class has emerged in the camps. Those who benefit from maintaining close relationships with NGOs and the administration. On the other hand, ordinary Rohingya families, especially those with female-dependent families and widows, are deprived of these practices.

Moreover, a camp-based political power structure can be observed (Turner, 2021). In the hierarchy of power, the influential community leader is at the top, followed by the Rohingya leader, the head Majhi, volunteers, and finally the sub-Majhi, who usually has 100 Rohingya families under their supervision. The leadership structure called 'Majhies' has created a kind of local elite in the Rohingya camps. These Majhies are employed by the state or administration; they act as a shadow administration. Individuals in this power structure most often influence administrative decisions in the camp, play a role in distributing opportunities, and sometimes face various accusations, including allegations of nepotism. As one informant, Sabuj (40), stated, *"The majhi put their relatives first on the NGO list. Even though we have told them several times, they do not listen to us."* Similarly, Keya (40) noted, *"At night, young women and Rohingya women are often forcibly taken from their tents to provide sexual services to influential people. The Majhies are supposed to protect the women, but they usually do nothing."*

Although Majhies formally represent their communities, many act in the interests of kin networks and influential camp officials (Parveen et al., 2019). Accusations of corruption, favoritism, and exploitation are common, illustrating how class and power asymmetries have been reproduced within refugee governance structures. Field data reveal that distinct class divisions have crystallized within the camps over time. Groups such as Majhies, volunteers, NGO workers, and criminal networks all compete for influence. Those lacking education or fluency in Bengali or English are marginalized from these networks and endure extreme deprivation. Linguistic variation further reinforces hierarchy: Rohingya from urban or educated backgrounds in Myanmar often view rural or uneducated refugees as "unsophisticated" or "unclean." Moreover, NGO-affiliated individuals, particularly those proficient in English or Bengali, are accorded higher prestige and social standing. As Rukaiya (18) explained, *"They say we can't speak well, so we don't get a chance to work in NGOs."* Another informant, Mini (32), added, *"She knows how to go to NGOs and speak. That's why help comes first in her name."* These testimonies demonstrate how social capital, linguistic proficiency, and bureaucratic familiarity function as markers of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991). The informants' comments suggest that this creates an informal hierarchy, making camp life an unequal, competitive arena. These differences further exacerbate social hierarchies and feelings of deprivation.

Class and cultural differences among camp residents sometimes turn into open conflicts. Grouping, competition, and disagreements are clearly visible during NGO or relief aid distribution. Sometimes, these factions lead to threats and fights. Informant Sajeda (33) said, *"Their names come first in the relief distribution. When we ask questions, they say, 'You are nothing, keep quiet.'"* This is an example of psychological oppression that reveals the violent culture within the camp.

There is also evidence of group-based division within the camp. In reality, groups are formed due to dominance, clan dominance, past animosity, disputes over relief distribution, family disputes, and conflicts within their own country. Several such groups are known to be present in the Kutupalong camp. Among them are the Munna Group, Hakim Group, Zakir Group, and Puthia Group. There is also competition among the Rohingya themselves to get more opportunities. As a result, class divisions are also evident within the camp. It is often seen that one group engages in violence to dominate another group or force. These disputes are observed to take control of the camp. As a result, members of the force are involved in incidents such as kidnapping, gun violence and murder inside the camp. When this news was published, it created a sense of fear and insecurity among the locals regarding the Rohingya (Jerin & Kamruzzaman, 2023). In addition to internal divisions, armed and ideological groups such as the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), and Al Yakin have become active within the camps, while others, such as the Arakan Rohingya National Union and the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights, advocate for civil and political rights. Informants noted that such groups often deepen class and power divisions within the community.

The internal hierarchy and intolerance of the Rohingya highlight the reality that power, status and cultural hegemony operate within a persecuted and stateless population. Analyzing this issue in the light of Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of social capital and symbolic power, we see that the silent struggles within refugee life are not only against external oppression but also an expression of internal rivalries, discrimination, and violence. As a result, the solution to the Rohingya crisis requires an understanding of the psychological and cultural complexities of their internal social structure, rather than being limited to external security or aid.

The lives of the Rohingya people in Bangladesh are not only in crisis regarding food, clothing, shelter, education and medical care; they are also trapped in a complex social reality where identity, inequality and oppression constantly take on new forms and cross each other. A young informant, Kausar (18), said, *"There are rules, so I can't go outside the camp; but some people, I see, pay the Majhi money and go out. They go outside the camp and do some work and then get back to the camp."* This statement reflects the emergence of a form of convenient disobedience within the controlled structure. A female informant, Roksana (28), stated, *"You have to listen to the Majhi; if you don't listen, your rations will be stopped. Your name will also be removed from the NGO list."* Yet, even the Majhies remain trapped between competing forces. As one leader, Hamid (50), recounted, *"Even the Majhies are not always safe. The authorities want them to gather information about the terrorists, while the terrorists want them to work for them. If they refuse the government, they face jail; if they defy the militants, death is inevitable."* This dual entrapment reflects Foucault's (1978) notion of *power relations*, where individuals are simultaneously agents and subjects of governance.

Amid insecurity, uncertainty, and environmental vulnerability, refugees struggle to envision a stable future. Junaid (49) lamented, *"We are living in the mountains; if they collapse, we will be homeless again. Diseases spread, and we cannot get treatment. We are stateless. No one wants to keep us."* This reflects what Agamben (1998) conceptualizes as *bare life*, existence stripped of political and legal significance.

The number of children, women and the elderly is relatively high among the Rohingya. Therefore, it is important to raise the issue of the kind of insecurity families without men face. Incidentally, informant Mohammad Ibrahim (50) said, *"I may be fine. I have strength; I work as a laborer. I can provide for my family to some extent. But what about the families where there are no men, who have died? Girls are being sold to brothels with the lure of jobs. Some are choosing this profession themselves. Some are getting involved in illegal smuggling, yaba smuggling, and terrorist activities. What kind of life is this, you ask? Our current life is like the life of a chicken in a cage."* Female informants reported restricted mobility, lack of healthcare, and constant surveillance. Nahida (30) added, *"The life of Rohingya women is like a prison. There is no privacy, no education, no real life."* Such testimonies exemplify both the *biopolitical control* (Foucault, 1978) and *necropolitical neglect* (Mbembe, 2003) that define camp existence.

Sexual violence and gender-based subjugation remain pervasive. Roxana (22) described, *"Whenever we go to the Bengali neighborhood to collect water, they call us bad names. Sometimes they rape us and lock us in their houses for days. We can't tell anyone. There is no justice."* Women's bodies, therefore, become sites of both symbolic and material violence, embodying the ultimate form of statelessness and disposability (Olivius, 2021).

Many informants are also very concerned about restricted movement, the lack of business and financial opportunities, security problems, inadequate health care and services, and inadequate security and shelter. Young people and adolescents report depression, low mood, and a lack of interest in daily activities. Most informants are also skeptical about their future lives. In this context, informant Razia (53) said, *"You and your children have all got your own country. What will happen to my children? They are stateless, they have no country."* In the same context, Borhan (41) said, *"We are living here, but this is not our country! When I think about it, I feel suffocated."* In other words, the Rohingya living in the camps live a life where they are separated from the legal recognition of the state, yet under the control of the state, which is consistent with Agamben's concept of 'bare life'. Their lives are just attempts to survive. Without treatment, death occurs; without education, the future is blocked, but they cannot claim any full rights anywhere.

Field reports repeatedly highlighted the limitations on women's movement, work, and decision-making in the camps. For example, a female informant, Shabana (49), said, *"My neighbor took my daughter to Dhaka to get a job. I couldn't find her later. I don't even know if she is alive or dead."* Incidentally, Nahida (30) said, *"The life of Rohingya women in the camps is like a prison. Women cannot move around freely here. They don't get much education or health care. They have to spend their days inside tents or huts. There is no privacy for women here. This is no life."* Such a senseless death or life within a certain category is like a silent reckoning (Mbembe, 2003). It is not only inherent in camp life, but also a political form of state neglect. This experience of female refugees is consistent with Foucault's concept of biopolitics. Strict control over women's movements is part of the regime's process, which creates double constraints for women.

Some informants lamented that the traditional social structure of camp life has collapsed. Women and adolescents are most vulnerable. They are subject to sexual violence, child marriage, domestic violence, and health problems. Despite this, status in families is

determined by performance, and mental illness is on the rise as men become unemployed. This creates an environment for family conflict and violence (Tripura, 2022). Male unemployment, laziness, and depression lead to polygamy in men. Men blame women's disobedience to their husbands as the cause of polygamy (Khan, 2019). There is pressure on wives to please their husbands in every way possible to prevent their husbands from marrying other women. One result of this is that women become pregnant every year. Moreover, having more children increases men's social status among the Rohingya community, as children are considered a 'gift from Allah' (Ainul et al., 2018). Women risk their reproductive health to help men increase their social status and to sustain their families. That is, control over women's bodies and sexuality is imposed through marriage, sexual violence, birth control, and social taboos (Azad & Jasmin, 2020). Incidentally, Rabeya (32) says, *"Men now stay at home, get angry, beat their wives. We can't do anything."* This reflects a social and psychological crisis in which the meaning and structure of life collapse. The displacement of women as refugees and the fragility of refugee life highlight women's bodies as centers of control and violence (Krause, 2021; Olivius, 2021).

In the midst of this instability of camp life, religious bigotry and violence often rise to the surface. Debates and violence can also be observed in the camps regarding women's education, family planning, or women's work in NGOs. Incidentally, informant Nuha (26) said, *"I know some Rohingya women who used to work as health workers. They were forced to quit their jobs after receiving threats from militants. They are currently unemployed."* On the other hand, informant Nurjahan (52) said, *"My daughter used to work for an NGO. People in the community said it was un-Islamic. Later, she got scared and decided to quit her job."* This kind of religious narrow-mindedness hinders women's empowerment and creates obstacles to building a tolerant society. That is, control comes not only from external authority pressure but also from the community's internal leadership and religious social norms, indicating the multidimensional nature of necropolitics.

In summary, refugee camps have transcended their function as temporary shelters to become enduring social spaces structured by governance, resistance, hierarchy, and exclusion. Understanding this lived reality requires moving beyond administrative or humanitarian frameworks to engage with the organic, social, and symbolic dimensions of refugee life. The Rohingya experience reveals that camp existence is not merely about survival; it is about navigating a complex web of power, dignity, and death that continuously reshapes what it means to live as a stateless subject.

Symbolic Order and Moral Governance in the Camp

The Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar and Ukhiya regions of Bangladesh operate within a specific paradigm and structure. However, this structure is not just organizational or logistical; it is a kind of symbolic structure. It involves administrative control, supervision by international humanitarian organizations, and power relations in local politics. Access to the Rohingya camps is controlled and each camp is surrounded by barbed wire, guards, and regular CCTV monitoring. While this may seem like a measure of security on the surface, in reality, it is a symbolic 'cage' in which life is limited to survival and regulated by the power processes of the state, humanitarian aid structures, and

local society. That is, people exist here, but they are not free citizens. Their lives are controlled by someone else.

An informant named Naveen (23) said, *"It is true that we live in an open space, but in reality, this is a prison. There are guards, rules, obligations, everything is here."* Informant Ambia (33) said, *"Here we live like animals in a cage. We have to do everything according to others' will. We have no such thing as our own."* This cage is an exceptional place, where normal law and civil rights do not apply. In the words of Giorgio Agamben, this is the place where the state itself bypasses the law and creates a 'bare life' of submission for those living in the camp. In short, it is a symbolic structure to maintain rule, control, and 'statelessness'.

Moreover, refugee camps, both permanent and temporary, are not just places of shelter and emergency food aid. These are places where special people make decisions about others, who gets a plastic triple and who doesn't, who gets rations and for how long. Here, the individual loses his or her own identity, individual personality, and moral authority. That is, this refugee camp becomes a place of suffering and weakness for an individual (Nawyn, 2011). Here, the individual is transformed into a docile body. He or she has no identity. He or she falls under the contested power of humanitarian agencies. That is, the camps take on a hybrid social form. This takes the form of something completely new to its inhabitants (Booth, 2012). That is, the camps become a field of power in the name of humanitarian aid. And this subordination exposes refugees to undesirable situations.

Humanitarian aid is a fundamental humanitarian process, based on empathy for vulnerable populations and the provision of essential services. However, recent research suggests that humanitarian aid, rather than just an endeavor, is in many cases becoming a form of power, domination, and exploitation. It is seen that international and national institutions are establishing social, political, and cognitive control over refugee populations in a given place through humanitarian aid. For example, many refugees report that the relief distribution process is carried out in exchange for political loyalty and silent support. Those who have good relationships with NGOs receive relief first. Here, aid is not just a means of survival, but a form of governance that reproduces self-discipline and political control. Therefore, it can be said to reinforce the analysis centered on Foucault's biopolitics and Mbembe's necropolitics.

Humanitarian aid in the camps is actually a 'strategy of life management'. Cards or coupons, rations, health checks, and birth registrations are all used to ensure governance. Everything is based on a specific registration. The bodies of refugees here become data-producing objects. Biometric data are collected for surveillance, which acts as a biopolitical tool. According to Foucault's concept of biopolitics, ration cards, coupons, and biometric data collection in refugee camps are not merely means of humanitarian aid; they are also strategies for governing refugees' bodies and identities. That is, refugee camps become a place of surveillance and control, where everybody is subject to statistics, cards, and cameras. This turns refugees into 'data objects', which become tools for surveillance by the state and international organizations. The Bangladesh government uses this biometric information to isolate Rohingya from the local community and to deny them access to any opportunities available to Bangladeshi citizens (Poyil & Chowdhory, 2020). Here, access

to aid is made conditional on compliance and registration. That is, aid becomes a conditionality, creating new forms of governance and control. Aid is a gift, not a right. It is a 'moral debt' to refugees; in return, support, compliance, fear, respect, and silence are expected. As a result, state accountability is controlled and power is transferred to international organizations.

International humanitarian organizations such as UNHCR, IOM, WFP, etc., while playing a crucial role in the livelihood of the Rohingya, create a form of control, conditionality and silent subordination in exchange for assistance. Where the existence of refugees is limited to the identity of a 'beneficiary'. Informant Siraj (48) said, *"They assist us, but they also want us to be accountable. If we do not follow their rules, they stop the assistance."* This relationship exemplifies Foucault's (1980) concept of power/knowledge: power is exercised not through coercion alone but through systems of classification, information, and monitoring that shape the conduct of subjects.

The Rohingya cannot enjoy the basic right to freedom of movement (Verdirame & Harrell-Bond, 2005). Their freedom of movement is not seen as a human right; they are the exception (Odolma, 2021). They are considered an economic burden and a security threat. They are required to present sufficient evidence to obtain day passes to seek emergency medical care; they must also obtain permission slips to move around. Anyone found outside the camps faces harsh treatment, including physical beatings by the police (Parnini, 2013). Through constant surveillance, counting, and movement control, camp residents are transformed into 'obedient bodies'. The body here is a passive entity controlled by others, reminiscent of Foucault's concept of the docile body.

In addition, each camp has a local leader, a 'Majhi', selected from among the refugees, who helps implement the administration's instructions. The majhies play an influential role in NGO listing, relief distribution, security reporting, etc. According to informants, this position is also an important part of the camp's governance structure. There are many complaints against the majhies. For example, the majhies illegally collect rent from the huts in the camp. They demand bribes to add names to the list of aid recipients, etc. Informant Rehan (45) said, *"If you don't know the majhi, your name won't be on the list. They decide who will get relief aid and who won't."*

In addition, humanitarian workers in the camps help implement the administration's orders. In addition to providing assistance and support to camp residents in various ways, they also serve as controllers. Using their power over the administration, these humanitarian workers greatly control the daily activities of the refugees (Hoffman, 2019). For example, humanitarian workers determine when and where refugees can access the water their families need. As a result, women in the camps cannot use the shower and toilet facilities as they wish and need. In other words, women are left in a vulnerable position and are subject to control (Olivius, 2021).

In addition, within the camps, there is the Rohingya's own human regime, which controls women more than men. The human regime confines Rohingya women in camps and uses their bodies as a means of control by imposing certain expected behaviors through various policies and regulations (Tripura, 2022). Rohingya women are controlled not only by their male family members, but also by community leaders. Religious leaders consider it

unreligious for women to talk to strangers and leave the house. Moreover, various restrictions on social movement establish the ruling class's right over women's behavior and bodies. That is, through social taboos, women's bodies become the main means of control and domination (Azad & Jasmin, 2020).

Every aspect of camp life, such as receiving relief, medical care, and education, is subject to a kind of controlled, prescribed rules. These rules distance the Rohingya from their natural independence and way of life. Each family receives rations on a specific day of the week. For this, they have to stand in long lines. If they do not come on a specific day, rations are not given. Health care depends on UNHCR or NGO cards. Incidentally, Aslam (52) stated, *"If you want to see a doctor, you have to stand in line before 8 a.m. If you miss it, there is no chance. If you don't come at the right time, you don't get rations."* This rigid routine is internalized by refugees, becoming a symbolic form of self-discipline. In light of Foucault's concept of biopolitics, such activities of NGOs and international organizations can be said to actually make the lives of refugees governable (Hoffstaedter, 2021). Moreover, some NGOs have introduced behavioral monitoring scores in camp schools. So that children become accustomed to the correct behavior as determined by the authorities. This is reminiscent of Foucault's concept of governmentality. It refers to the strategy of guiding people in a certain direction. In fact, such practices establish a kind of covert rule through assistance rather than the traditional exercise of power.

In addition, the government often imposes various restrictions on the Rohingya. For example, without prior notice, the government has ordered telecommunications service providers to limit or, in some cases, shut down mobile networks and internet services in the camps, preventing refugees from organizing and isolating them from the outside world (Hossain & Lee, 2021). As a result, the Rohingya are forced to be completely dependent on humanitarian aid due to the lack of mobility, communication, and livelihood opportunities.

After dusk, control within the camps shifts. Informants described a "night government" operating through clandestine networks of Majhies, armed groups, and criminal organizations. These groups exercise coercive power through violence, trafficking, and extortion. Speaking against them often results in death. Women, in particular, live under the constant threat of sexual violence, choosing to remain confined in their tents for safety. This condition mirrors Agamben's (1998) bare life and Mbembe's (2003) necropolitics, wherein individuals remain biologically alive but socially and politically dead.

Moreover, in camp life, there are cases of inadequate medical care, the absence of emergency services, and a lack of protection during disasters. Incidentally, informant Rahim (42) recounted, *My son had a fever. There was no doctor or medicine, and we weren't allowed to leave the camp. As a result, my son died without having any medical assistance.* This experience indicates the moral crisis of a regime. Here, the Rohingya are not only deprived of the right to live as individuals; rather, they are sometimes neglected even in the face of death. In other words, the ultimate form of regime is reflected here. Which reminds us of Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics. According to this concept, a regime takes its ultimate form only when it chooses who will live and who will die.

It would be wrong to view refugee camps as mere humanitarian aid infrastructures, but rather as symbolic structures, sites of power and governance (Betts & Collier, 2017; Fassin, 2012). This symbolic structure of the Rohingya camps represents a complex and multi-layered system of governance. At the top of this symbolic governance structure are the government, international aid agencies, specific government institutions and officials. Then there are INGOs, NGOs, Rohingya community leaders, fishermen, terrorist groups, sub-fishermen, regional circles of humanitarian governance, etc. All of them together create a kind of control structure (Agier, 2011; Ramji-Nogales & Lang, 2021). Each layer of which is accompanied by expectations of obedience and a ring of governance. It is not just a question of food, shelter, or security; it is a question of existential control. Here, life is limited to survival as an obedient, inanimate body. In this context, the camp becomes a political arena between life and death. Modern states and international organizations use the human body as a means of control. This control, power and rule is exercised over refugees by essentially isolating them from society (Oesch, 2020). Where everything from the refugees' identity to their movement, income, residence, personal communication and even daily habits is restricted. That is, normal civil rights are suspended here, and people only survive as bare life (Agamben, 1998). The camp becomes an extra-legal, controlled area, where the state, international organizations, various local groups and terrorist organizations make decisions about all matters concerning refugees.

Multidimensional Nature of the Rohingya Crisis

According to Article 1 of the UN Refugee Convention, a refugee is a person who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. Being a refugee is more than being an alien. It means being in exile. Being dependent on others for basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter (Barman, 2020). In this situation, refugees live at the mercy of others for basic needs, including food, clothing and shelter, which is an example of dependence on humanitarian assistance (Havil, 2011). The history of the Rohingya inflow into Bangladesh is long. While the Rohingya who took refuge in Bangladesh before 1992 were recognized as refugees by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the Rohingya who came later were not recognized in the same way (Abrar, 2017). Rather, they are currently referred to as 'forcibly displaced Myanmar citizens'.

The identities of people living in refugee camps are constructed without their consent, which is essentially an institutionally imposed identity. When observing these camps, one clearly sees barbed wire fences, cement walls, and regular armed guards. It is like a controlled environment. Although these security measures appear to be for the safety of the camp residents from the outside, or at first glance, they are actually designed to protect the local population from potential 'threats' posed by the camp residents (Fernbach, 2011). As a result, a negative social attitude towards refugees develops. As a result, suspicion, distrust, and distance towards the camp residents increase among the locals, creating a kind of hostility between the two sides. Refugees are identified as unexpected and unwanted by the locals. No one wants to talk to them; they are deprived of social interaction or sports. As a result of these negative attitudes and behaviors, various social crises and divisions

arise. For this reason, refugees believe it is important to foster positive changes in locals' attitudes and social behavior towards those living in refugee camps.

Rohingya refugees are not taught the local language. This is because a section of the locals believes that learning this language will empower them, integrate them into the mainstream population, and create opportunities to secure permanent settlement in Bangladesh. This will complicate their prospects for repatriation (Onley et al., 2019). However, the Rohingya consider this idea to be baseless and irrational. According to them, learning the language will make communication with the locals easier, increase mutual understanding and solidarity, and reduce the chances of social misunderstandings. At the same time, they believe that receiving vocational training will enable them to acquire livelihood skills and greatly reduce their dependence on humanitarian assistance.

According to Rohingya refugees, various 'conspiracy theories' are being deliberately propagated against them. One of these is that 'refugees will never leave Bangladesh.' The refugees reject this theory as baseless and absurd. In their words, they came to Bangladesh only to save their lives, not with the intention of any permanent settlement. They have been forced to take refuge in this country due to the pressure of the situation, but that does not mean that they want to stay here permanently. Rather, they are ready to return to their homeland voluntarily if opportunities and security are ensured. The refugees can see their homeland before their eyes from the camp and feel deep emotions towards it. They believe that some dishonest and self-interested groups are deliberately spreading such conspiracy theories to create conflict between the refugees and the local population.

There is a sense of apprehension and a negative attitude towards the Rohingya among a section of the local population. According to the refugees, this attitude stems mainly from a lack of mutual communication. The study's data show that the mutual relations between the Rohingya who have established contact with locals for needs or work purposes are relatively more cordial. Most informants believe that increasing regular interaction and communication will reduce misunderstandings between both parties and reduce the existing fear. The positive impact of such communication has also been observed among Congolese refugees in Rwanda (Fajth et al., 2019).

One of the allegations against the refugees is that they are involved in crimes such as drug trafficking and human trafficking. On-site information has also found some truth in these allegations. However, the refugees say that the number of people involved in these criminal activities is very small and it is unfair to blame the entire refugee community for these activities. Several informants have mentioned that a joint (Rohingya-Bangladeshi) criminal gang, which operates from the surrounding hilly areas, is active behind these crimes. According to them, some dishonest local policemen and representatives of other security forces are also involved in these illegal activities.

According to many refugees, unwarranted and careless comments by influential figures further complicate the scale of the crisis. They point out, for example, that statements by heads of government and foreign ministers often portray the Rohingya as a threat to their security. Such comments, which are not adequately explained in terms of their context or purpose, risk destabilizing regional stability (Macdonald, Mekker, and Moonez 2023). This is because ordinary people are easily influenced by influential leaders' words and often

disseminate these statements widely without verifying them. As a result, hostility and misconceptions about refugees are deepened among the local population.

According to Rohingya refugees, a key aspect of the ongoing crisis is misconceptions and a lack of accurate information. Many local people believe that the Rohingya have become refugees through their own fault. There are other common misconceptions. For example, *“Rohingyas are more powerful because they are more numerous”*; *“They receive more aid than they need”*; or *“They do not deserve the amount of government and private aid they receive.”* Refugees claim that these views are irrational and baseless. In their words, *“We took refuge in Bangladesh to escape military persecution. Although we are more numerous, we live in camps and have to constantly rely on humanitarian aid. After breakfast, we are not even sure if we will get another meal at noon.”* Another refugee stated, *“Our life is very difficult. We know that it is not possible to get all kinds of facilities here. Earlier, we did not eat pulses regularly; now, they are an essential part of our daily diet. Because donor agencies provide food items such as rice, pulses, oil, and salt. Our favorite food was meat or fish stew or curries with pulses. Now they are just a part of memory.”*

Refugees believe that members of the local community view them as rivals. They find this notion to be completely unfounded. Refugees clearly state that their position is not against the locals. Many locals believe that the arrival of Rohingya refugees has reduced their employment opportunities. However, statistics and research indicate that various humanitarian organizations are currently recruiting workers from other districts of the country rather than from the Ukhia and Teknaf regions (Islam et al., 2022). In addition, international donor organizations are also gradually limiting their activities (Higuchi et al., 2023). As a result of this process, employment opportunities for local people are decreasing, and it is baseless to blame the refugees for this. They do not consider themselves responsible for this situation in any way.

Refugees say they do not feel completely safe even inside the camps. Their children are being abducted and women are being tortured. For example, 42-year-old Ismat Ara stated, *“We came here hoping to save our lives. At first, we lost a lot by falling into the brokers’ trap. We had to pay a fee to get a tent in the camp. Now, of course, the situation has changed a bit. But many children and young women still disappear from the camp and are never found. Then we can do nothing but wait for our children.”* Basically, organizations called ‘ARSA’, ‘RSO’ and ‘Islami Mahat’ are involved in these criminal activities, which the Rohingya are afraid of. These organizations are run by local and international terrorist groups, each with its own goals. The presence of these groups has a negative impact on the normal life of refugees. Many believe that keeping refugees in camps for a long time will exacerbate the problem, as it is not uncommon for them to engage in illegal activities while they are idle (Codjoe et al., 2023). In addition, some unscrupulous individuals are using the Rohingya to carry out various illegal activities, which is causing conflict and crisis between locals and refugees (Krcmaric, 2016; Millar, 2018).

Rohingya refugees believe that it is not appropriate to adopt a hostile and intimidating attitude towards them. They say that how a group is identified is entirely the state’s responsibility. Because the state has the power to maintain control over the formation of identities. In this regard, it is necessary to hold camp officials more accountable and ensure

they are responsible for their work. As a result, informants believe that violence within the camps will decrease and there will also be a positive change in the attitude of the locals towards the refugees.

The local community's initial response to the Rohingya was sympathetic, but this has changed over time (Ansar & Khaled, 2021). Locals now see the Rohingya as a burden, as they compete with the locals for services, facilities, and limited resources (Habib, 2021). This competition has weakened relationships and created tension and conflict. Therefore, to reduce tensions between refugees and local communities, various aid agencies have introduced ration and cash transfer programs, with 20–25 percent of the benefits allocated to local residents (Habib, 2023). However, unscrupulous groups use personal and political connections to seize these benefits, leaving those who really need them disadvantaged. Poor hosts living near the camps receive some assistance, but those living far from the camps are often ignored (Khaled, 2021). The irregularities and inequities in this distribution system can exacerbate conflicts between groups in the area (Habib, 2023). Overlapping beneficiary selection, corruption in aid distribution, and neglect to identify the real poor are obstacles to addressing the Rohingya crisis. Lack of coordination between humanitarian and development agencies and government departments is responsible for all of this (Siddiqi, 2017). Refugees believe that if government authorities and humanitarian and development partners implement projects properly and pay due attention to the local people, negative attitudes towards the Rohingya will be greatly reduced. Informants point out that the main reasons for the current problems are the lack of planning by those in charge, the controversial use of force in the name of humanitarian assistance, and the impunity of those responsible.

Competition for scarce resources is helping to create this 'us' and 'them' distinction between local and refugee communities (Swain, 1996). In addition, a process of 'othering' or separation based on values and ethics is ongoing (Mohiuddin, 2019). Refugees are even being identified as 'other' by being separated by barbed wire fences. Many refugees want to see this as part of a response to international politics. They believe that state indifference and discriminatory policies have perpetuated their marginalization (Ahmed, 2010). State policies and actions are dividing citizens and non-citizens into different categories, symbolically 'injustice' in the context of nationalism (Chowdhory & Mohanty, 2021). And this crisis can be described as a 'limitation of national planning' (Farzana, 2015). As a result, the Rohingya experience of statelessness is becoming more and more prolonged. In addition, refugees are being restricted in their freedom of movement and expression, which is further exacerbating the crisis.

Moreover, through the international framing of Rohingya refugees as victims, they are being presented as eligible for humanitarian aid. But the questions of their political rights, citizenship and self-governance are being marginalized (Betts & Collier, 2017). In the name of humanitarian aid, the existence of refugees is being made governable under the guise of 'moral responsibility'. As a result, refugees are reduced to mere statistical numbers, and their lives are constantly observed and controlled (Agier, 2011). As a result, in Foucault's words, the camp is emerging as a biopolitical field. Where refugees are falling under the governmentality of governments and international organizations. As a result,

Rohingya refugees are not surviving as citizens but as, in Agamben's words, as governable bare life.

In light of the above discussion, it can be said that the Rohingya are a displaced, stateless and traumatized people who have taken refuge in Bangladesh, risking their lives to survive and have traveled difficult routes. This population is spending their daily lives amidst various crises. The Rohingya are constantly facing various pressures. These include difficulties in achieving basic needs, crowded living conditions, limited privacy, insecurity and lack of livelihood opportunities. In addition, there is a conflict with the host population over trust, confidence and limited resources. And all of this is having an adverse impact on their physical and mental well-being. There is nothing more tragic than if those who have become refugees to escape communal conflict and violence face a similar experience in their new shelter. Although living as a refugee can be accepted for a temporary period, no one wants to remain a refugee with no future for life. In this case, no matter how many opportunities are provided, the Rohingya want their own identity, their own citizenship, their own permanent residence, and above all, security of life and livelihood.

Conclusion

This study examines the inherent complexity, political construction, and lived experience of Rohingya refugee life through an anthropological lens. It interrogates the intersection of power, governance, and statelessness that defines the Rohingya condition, an existence shaped by displacement, dependency, and systemic marginalization. The analysis demonstrates that refugee life cannot be understood merely as a humanitarian concern but must be situated within broader social, historical, and political processes that sustain inequality and exclusion. The history of the Rohingya is one of chronic statelessness, evolving through cycles of forced displacement, ethnic persecution, and bureaucratic denial. This crisis did not emerge spontaneously; rather, it is the cumulative outcome of colonial legacies, entrenched ethnic hierarchies, and deliberate state policies of exclusion. The migration to Bangladesh, initially conceived as an act of survival, has become a protracted experience of confinement, in which the search for safety paradoxically produces a new form of imprisonment. Upon arrival, the Rohingya were divided into two administrative categories, registered and unregistered, under state and international frameworks. This distinction, though bureaucratic in appearance, has materialized as a profound social and political inequality, institutionalizing discrimination and differential access to rights, resources, and recognition. The daily realities of camp life, spatial restriction, surveillance, and dependency, reflect a system in which humanitarian aid functions as a mechanism of both care and control.

Inside the camp, education, healthcare, and food are distributed under strict supervision, generating what Foucault (1978) would call a biopolitical regime of managed existence. Within this regime, the Rohingya experience resonates with Agamben's (1998) notion of bare life, life reduced to biological survival without political recognition, and Mbembe's (2003) concept of necropolitics, in which the power to decide who may live and who must die operates as the ultimate form of sovereignty. The camp becomes the concrete manifestation of these theoretical paradigms: a space where life is simultaneously protected and constrained, governed and abandoned. Humanitarian governance, though premised on

moral obligation, thus reproduces a condition of dependency and invisibility. Furthermore, the internal hierarchies within the camps and the circulation of power among community leaders, NGOs, local leaders, and state agencies have created a complex microcosm of domination. Social divisions based on registration status, linguistic competence, gender, and access to aid perpetuate inequality and internal conflict, intensifying the multidimensionality of the crisis. Refugee existence in this context embodies both the violence of exclusion and the politics of survival.

The Rohingya crisis transcends the boundaries of humanitarian discourse. It is not solely a tragedy of displacement but a political construction of governance, discrimination, and contested identity. The Rohingya continue to live in a condition where the “right to life” remains unfulfilled, where survival is permitted, but dignity, autonomy, and citizenship are denied. Any sustainable resolution to this crisis must therefore move beyond short-term aid and relief, toward a framework of restorative justice that ensures the Rohingya’s right to live with dignity, security, and recognized humanity. Ultimately, the findings demonstrate that the Rohingya camps are complex moral and political arenas shaped by competing forms of authority. Moreover, by situating Rohingya narratives at the center of analysis, the study expands existing theoretical frameworks of biopolitics and exception, showing that lived experiences of confinement exceed the analytical boundaries established by Agamben, Mbembe, and Foucault. The Rohingya case thus pushes us to rethink refugee life not only as “bare life” but as a domain of negotiated agency embedded in multilayered systems of power. It also highlights how power operates not only through abandonment or violence but also through care that constrains, protects, contains, and sustains life without offering political resolution. Understanding refugee camps as sites of everyday governance rather than temporary shelters allows for a more critical engagement with the paradoxes of humanitarianism and underscores the urgent need to rethink protection beyond containment.

Acknowledgements

This article forms part of a research project funded by the Faculty of Social Sciences, Jahangirnagar University, for the 2024–2025 fiscal year. I gratefully acknowledge the institutional support provided by Jahangirnagar University. I am sincerely indebted to all interlocutors who generously shared their lived experiences and personal narratives; their insights constitute the empirical foundation of this study. I also extend my appreciation to my Research Assistant for their sustained commitment, diligence, and invaluable contribution to the data collection process.

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