



# Education Development for Rohingya Muslims in Bangladesh: Contributions of Local and International Organizations

Md. Ziaul Hoque

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9653-3028>

University of Chittagong, Bangladesh

\*e-mail: [myziaul@gmail.com](mailto:myziaul@gmail.com)

## Article Information

Received: April 11, 2025

Revised: May 12, 2025

Accepted: May 28, 2025

Online: June 16, 2025

## Keywords

Rohingya Muslims

Education Development

Bangladesh Context

Local and International

Organizations

## ABSTRACT

*Despite residing in Myanmar since the eighth century, Rohingya Muslims were rendered stateless under the 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law, leading to systemic exclusion and large-scale displacement. Today, over one million Rohingya refugees live in Bangladesh, where education remains a critical and underdeveloped area of response. This study provides a holistic analysis of the educational crisis facing Rohingya children, emphasizing the historical, legal, and social barriers to access, and evaluating the role of local and international organizations in addressing these challenges. Employing a qualitative research design, the study combines historical analysis, document reviews, and thematic analysis with insights from 12 semi-structured interviews involving NGO representatives, educators, and local authorities. Secondary quantitative data from Cox's Bazar Education Sector supported trend interpretation. Findings reveal that initiatives such as the Learning Competency Framework and Approach (LCFA) and the Myanmar Curriculum Pilot Programme have expanded access for over 300,000 children across 3,400 learning centers. However, ongoing issues include a lack of formal certification, high dropout rates, teacher shortages, sociocultural restrictions, and declining enrollment. This research contributes a layered understanding of the Rohingya education crisis by integrating historical context with field-based evidence. It offers evidence-based recommendations to support formal curriculum recognition, expand long-term funding, enhance teacher training, particularly for women, and integrate psychosocial support and community-led models. The findings aim to inform policy, advocacy, and sustainable planning in refugee education across protracted crisis contexts.*

## INTRODUCTION

Globally, access to education remains one of the most urgent and under-addressed challenges in refugee crises. For displaced populations, education is a basic human right and a crucial pathway to stability, empowerment, and long-term development (Ferris & Kerwin, 2023; Minasyan et al., 2023).

However, millions of refugee children worldwide face significant barriers to formal education due to legal status, resource constraints, and limited institutional support ([Demir et al., 2024](#); [Hossain, 2023](#)).

The Rohingya Muslims represent one of the most persecuted and displaced communities in the world. Although they have lived in Myanmar since at least the eighth century, their citizenship was revoked under the 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law. This legal exclusion has systematically denied them access to essential services, particularly formal education ([Shohel, 2022](#); [Zahed, 2021](#)). As a result of state-led violence and prolonged discrimination, many Rohingya fled to Bangladesh, where over one million now reside as refugees ([Chowdhury & Mostafa, 2020](#); [Riley et al., 2020](#)). Despite international attention, education for Rohingya children remains fragmented, often limited to informal or non-certified learning opportunities.

Global research on refugee education underscores recurring challenges such as restricted access, lack of accreditation, inadequate teacher training, and limited psychosocial support. [Dryden-Peterson \(2023\)](#) argues that education for refugees is often framed within short-term humanitarian responses rather than long-term development strategies, which hampers consistency, sustainability, and formal recognition. Similar patterns have been observed in other protracted crises, such as Syrian and Palestinian refugee education programs, where the lack of coordinated national policies and host country restrictions has led to fragmented learning pathways ([Hammad & Cochrane, 2025](#); [Honein-AbouHaidar et al., 2024](#)). These global insights reinforce the need to design inclusive, adaptable, and durable education models for refugee populations, including the Rohingya.

While recent studies in the context of Bangladesh, such as those by UNICEF, Save the Children, and BRAC, have documented the implementation of informal education initiatives and the Myanmar Curriculum Pilot Programme, limited attention has been given to the historical evolution of Rohingya education access or the interplay between local and international organizational roles. Most assessments focus on current programmatic challenges without tracing the legal, political, and structural barriers to their roots. This research addresses this gap by offering a historical and multi-scalar perspective, examining how past policies and current actors converge to shape Rohingya educational experiences. By integrating these dimensions, the study contributes a layered understanding that complements existing program-based literature and strengthens policy dialogue for sustainable education interventions in refugee settings.

Previous literature has focused on Rohingya identity, religious conflict, and geopolitical concerns. In contrast, this paper addresses the historical development of education for the Rohingya in Myanmar and Bangladesh. It aims to (1) examine the historical, legal, and social factors that have shaped Rohingya educational access, (2) assess the contributions and challenges faced by local and international organizations in supporting Rohingya education, and (3) propose strategic, evidence-based solutions to improve access, quality, and sustainability in education services for Rohingya refugees. By offering this comprehensive analysis, the research contributes to the global discourse on refugee education and informs future interventions targeting marginalized populations in protracted crisis contexts.

## **METHODS**

### ***Research Design***

This study adopts a qualitative historical-exploratory design, rooted in an interpretivist paradigm ([Lauterbach et al., 2022](#)). This design is considered appropriate given the complexity and sensitivity surrounding the educational experiences of Rohingya Muslims. The interpretivist lens allows the researcher to explore social realities shaped by historical oppression, political exclusion, and statelessness. While the study primarily applies qualitative techniques to capture depth and context, secondary quantitative data were also reviewed to strengthen the narrative and illustrate descriptive trends, especially in tracking enrollment and dropout statistics. The design thus emphasizes both documentary and experiential evidence in order to comprehensively understand the challenges and interventions related to Rohingya refugee education in Bangladesh.

### ***Data Collection***

Data were collected from multiple sources to achieve triangulation and ensure credibility. First, document and archival reviews were conducted to trace both historical context and contemporary developments. These included policy documents issued by the governments of Myanmar and

Bangladesh, sector strategies from the Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG), and reports from international and local non-governmental organizations such as UNICEF, Save the Children, BRAC, and UNHCR. Scholarly publications, UN reports, and historical records from 1978 to 2024 were also analyzed to understand the legal, social, and educational evolution of the Rohingya crisis.

In parallel, secondary quantitative data were accessed through publicly available platforms, particularly from the Cox's Bazar Education Sector. These datasets comprised statistics on enrollment, attendance, dropout rates, teacher-student ratios, and learning center coverage between 2017 and 2024. While not analyzed through complex statistical models, this data was used descriptively to support qualitative findings and identify changes over time.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve purposively selected informants who had direct involvement in Rohingya education programs. The participants included NGO education coordinators, camp-based teachers, government officials, and Rohingya community representatives. Interviews were guided by an open-ended protocol and focused on topics such as policy constraints, curriculum implementation, teacher challenges, gender-based limitations, and organizational strategies. To complement these interviews, several published case studies were reviewed, especially those describing grassroots educational efforts in the camps. These case studies helped illuminate how specific programs addressed education gaps, engaged community perspectives, and tailored learning strategies to the refugee context.

### ***Data Analysis***

The qualitative data gathered from interviews and documents were analyzed using thematic analysis. Following Braun and Clarke's six-phase method, the researcher first familiarized with the data, generated initial codes, identified recurring themes, reviewed and defined those themes, and finally constructed a coherent narrative for presentation. Themes such as policy and legal constraints, dropout behavior, curriculum alignment, community engagement, and gender disparities emerged organically from the coding process. NVivo software was used to support the organization and visualization of coded data, particularly useful when managing large textual datasets.

The secondary quantitative data were interpreted using basic descriptive statistics to identify shifts in access, participation, and dropout patterns over time. These numerical insights were not treated as standalone findings but were integrated with qualitative results to reinforce and contextualize patterns identified through interviews and document reviews. This mixed approach allowed the study to present a more holistic and grounded understanding of Rohingya refugee education.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Ethical standards were strictly upheld throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants after clearly explaining the objectives and voluntary nature of the study. Anonymity was maintained by assigning pseudonyms and removing any identifying information from transcripts and reports. Sensitive data were stored securely and not shared beyond the research team. The research also respected local cultural norms and community sensitivities, particularly when discussing gender, trauma, and religious practices. Ethical approval for the study was obtained through the appropriate institutional review process.

## **RESULTS**

### ***Historical, Legal, and Social Barriers to Rohingya Education***

Rohingya Muslims have faced systemic exclusion from formal education beginning with the 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law, which denied them legal recognition and effectively barred them from state-run schools beyond the primary level. This legal exclusion reinforced deep-rooted social marginalization, particularly in the Rakhine State of Myanmar. After the 2012 riots, the state implemented segregated schooling, forcing many Rohingya students into overcrowded madrasa-based systems lacking formal curricula or certification. Reports also document increased illiteracy and early marriage among youth, especially girls, due to limited educational access and restrictive social norms.

Social stigma and xenophobic policies contributed to a cultural environment in which education became a low priority or entirely inaccessible. Even in Bangladesh, despite decades of hosting Rohingya

refugees, formal education remains restricted under policies intended to prevent local integration. Rohingya children, labelled as "Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs)," continue to be excluded from national certification and are often denied access to mainstream schools.

**Contributions and Challenges of Local and International Organizations**

International and local organizations have played a central role in delivering education to Rohingya refugees, particularly after the 2017 mass influx. In partnership with over 30 NGOs, UNICEF and Save the Children have implemented non-formal learning programs and the Myanmar Curriculum Pilot Programme, reaching over 300,000 children in Cox's Bazar through 3,400 learning centers.

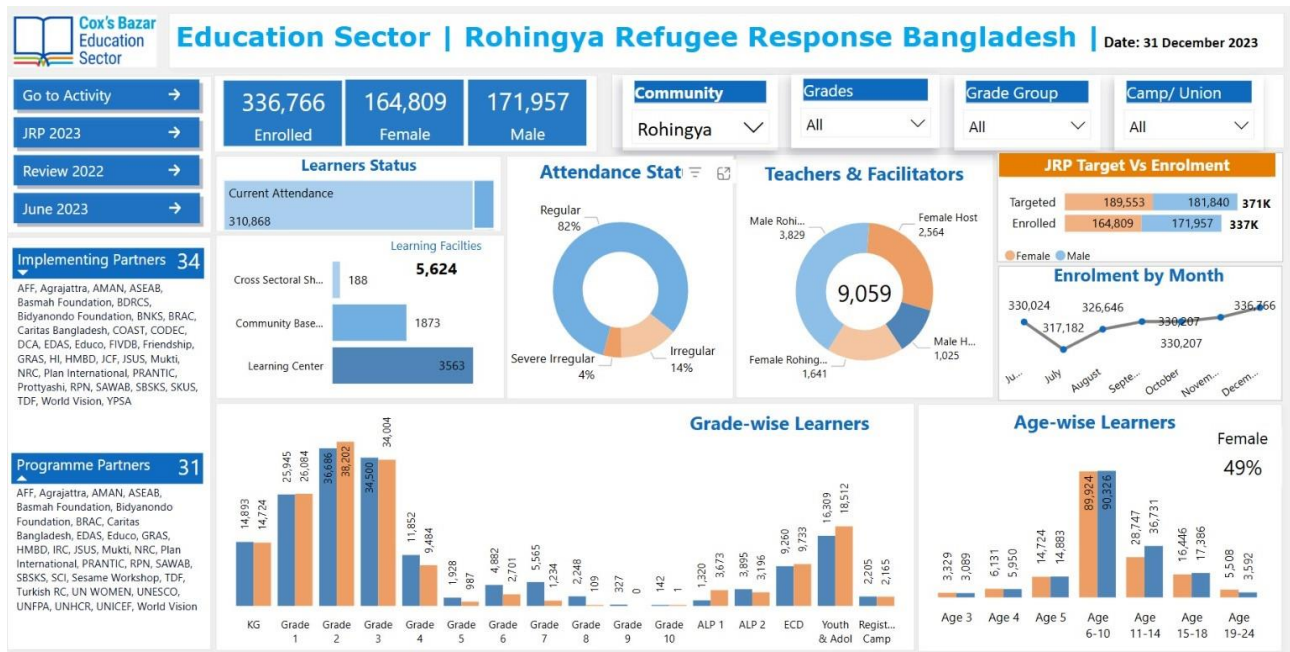


Figure 1. Number of Enrolled Learners in Learning Centers, 2023 vs. 2024

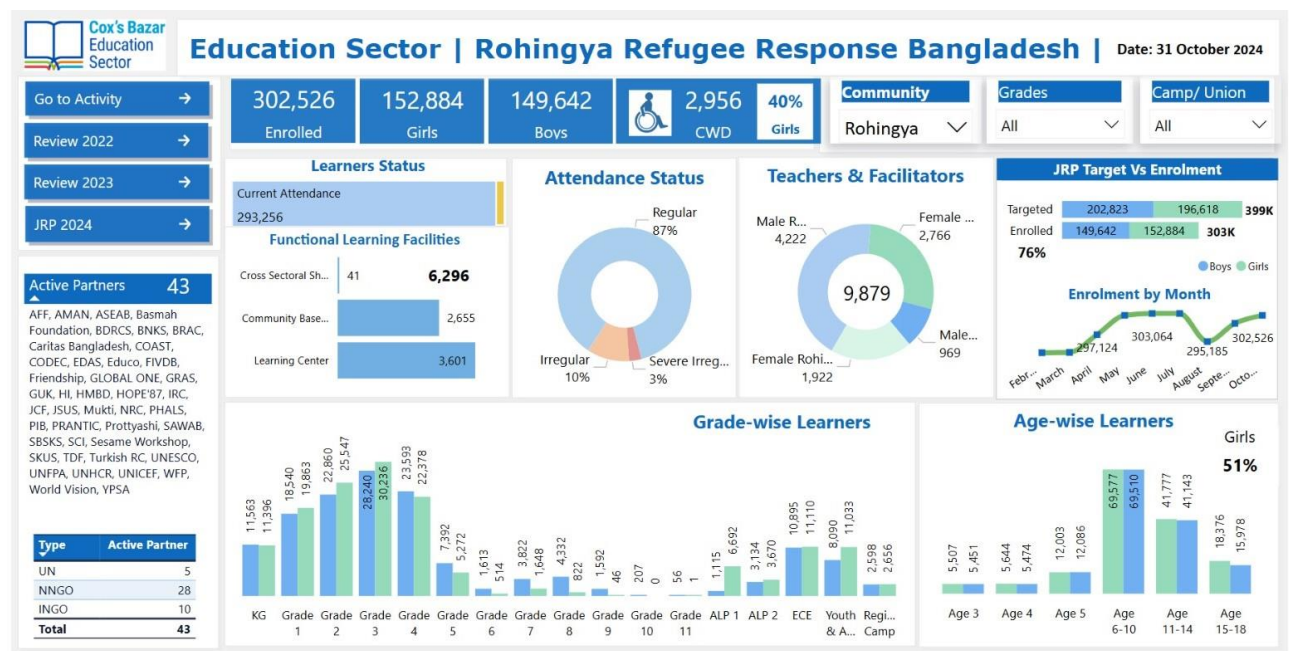


Figure 2: Comparison of Learning Center Indicators (e.g., Teacher-Student Ratio, Dropout Rate, Access to Myanmar curriculum)

The quantitative data presented above reveal both progress and emerging concerns. While certain indicators, such as curriculum alignment and infrastructure, have improved in 2024, the total number of enrolled learners declined compared to 2023. It suggests an urgent need to re-engage out-of-school children and address dropout causes.

Programs like the Learning Competency Framework and Approach (LCFA) and early childhood education initiatives have improved foundational literacy and psychosocial recovery. However, these interventions face persistent obstacles. These include limited space, resource constraints, high dropout rates, especially among adolescents, and ongoing government restrictions on formal recognition of learning. Cultural norms, early marriage, and limited availability of female teachers further hinder female participation in education. Organizational efforts have also been challenged by fluctuating funding and a lack of long-term strategy alignment between host country policies and international humanitarian standards.

### ***Toward Sustainable and Inclusive Education Solutions***

Several strategic solutions are emerging from the data and stakeholder feedback. These include sustained advocacy for formal accreditation of the Myanmar curriculum, integration of psychosocial support within learning centers, and investment in teacher training for women and bilingual educators. The development of digital learning tools and community-based education models has also shown promise, especially during disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite growing programmatic coordination under frameworks like the Joint Response Plan (JRP), long-term success depends on formal policy shifts by the Government of Bangladesh and international diplomatic engagement with Myanmar. Expanding multi-year funding commitments, encouraging public-private partnerships, and involving Rohingya voices in program design are essential for promoting ownership and sustainability. The findings suggest that while short-term solutions address immediate needs, long-term educational development for Rohingya children requires systemic change, policy reform, and durable cooperation among all actors.

## **DISCUSSION**

### ***Historical, Legal, and Social Barriers to Rohingya Education***

This study reaffirms that the denial of citizenship under Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law is a primary factor behind the Rohingya's long-standing exclusion from formal education. The law created a closed system of identity verification, disqualifying Rohingya Muslims based on language (e.g., Chittagong dialect) and ancestry. As the article notes, this led to their classification as "foreigners" and restricted access to state-run educational institutions beyond the primary level ([Brett & Hlaing, 2020](#); [Watch, 2000](#)). Although some Rohingya students previously attended integrated schools before the 2012 riots, post-conflict state policy enforced separation, forcing reliance on overcrowded and under-resourced madrasahs, as reported by Al Jazeera and openDemocracy.

Social and religious discrimination further deepened these barriers. Cultural norms within the community, such as restrictions on girls' mobility during puberty, significantly reduced female participation in education ([Psaki et al., 2022](#)). After their displacement to Bangladesh, the challenges persisted. The Government of Bangladesh, which does not recognize Rohingya as refugees under international conventions, officially bars them from national education systems and primary school certification exams ([Dryden-Peterson, 2023](#); [Reliefweb, 2017](#); [Shohel, 2022](#)). Instead, they are categorized as "Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs)" and confined to non-formal, camp-based learning.

The social consequences of these barriers are evident: a reported illiteracy rate of 73% after the 2012 violence ([Bangladesh, 2023](#); [Sohel, 2022](#)), high dropout rates, and increased cases of early marriage and child labor in the camps. These findings underscore that without legal recognition, citizenship, and formal access to national education systems, Rohingya children remain trapped in structural cycles of exclusion.

### ***Contributions and Challenges of Local and International Organizations***

The study illustrates substantial contributions by local and international organizations in expanding educational access for Rohingya children since the major influx in 2017. According to the

article, as of 2024, over 300,000 children are enrolled in 3,400 learning centers, with approximately 2,800 centers supported by the government of Bangladesh ([Bangladesh, 2022](#)). These initiatives, including the Myanmar Curriculum Pilot Programme and Learning Competency Framework and Approach (LCFA), represent major strides in aligning refugee education with formal learning standards for eventual repatriation.

The LCFA initially served 192,000 children aged 4–14 in 2019, providing instruction in Burmese, English, and mathematics, with science added at levels 3 and 4. By 2022, the Myanmar curriculum expanded to include grades 6–9, targeting adolescents aged 14–16, previously excluded from education interventions. The Joint Response Plan (JRP) 2024 now supports educational access for 399,441 Rohingya children, with a budget of USD 68.5 million allocated to 26 implementing partners ([Bangladesh, 2023](#)).

Despite this progress, several challenges hinder the sustainability and effectiveness of these programs. The 2024 education sector data shows a decline in total learners compared to 2023, despite curriculum coverage and teacher training improvements. It indicates increased dropouts or barriers to enrollment. Overcrowded classrooms (student-teacher ratios exceeding INEE's 1:40 standard), space shortages, limited female teacher availability, and high adolescent disengagement remain critical concerns. Furthermore, host community teachers face burnout and low retention due to poor salaries and limited career growth.

Cultural norms also affect participation. Girls frequently drop out due to early marriage, family restrictions, and safety concerns when walking to learning centers. Language barriers persist, as Rohingya children must learn Burmese, a foreign language to most, while many host teachers are not fluent in it. Bangladesh also prohibits Bangla instruction in camps, which limits children's engagement and the teaching community's effectiveness.

### ***Toward Sustainable and Inclusive Education Solutions***

Based on the findings, several strategic pathways emerge for improving access and sustainability in Rohingya refugee education. One of the most critical steps is formal recognition and accreditation of the Myanmar curriculum, which is currently being taught up to grade 10 but is not yet endorsed by the Government of Bangladesh or Myanmar. Without certification, adolescents see little value in continuing education, leading to dropouts and early marriage.

Organizations such as UNICEF have advocated expanding the LCFA and ensuring Myanmar curriculum certification through bilateral agreements and support from UN agencies. The 2024 Joint Response Plan demonstrates a shift toward longer-term planning and emphasizes community-based learning, early childhood development, and accelerated learning programs. NGOs like BRAC and VSO have also piloted home-based learning models and community education networks that reach underserved populations—e.g., VSO's early-years initiative in Camp 15, which reached over 6,000 children through 60 refugee volunteers ([Volunteer, 2018](#)).

The findings also highlight the need for increased female teacher recruitment. Socio-cultural barriers currently limit the availability of women in teaching roles, yet female educators are shown to be more effective in supporting traumatized children and encouraging girls' retention. Safe, gender-sensitive workplaces, in-camp teacher training, and targeted scholarships could enhance women's participation.

Digital innovation also offers potential, as seen in other refugee contexts. The article references the EduApp4Syria program and Tanzania's e-library model, suggesting that similar approaches could be introduced in Cox's Bazar to address the lack of ICT infrastructure. However, implementation would require overcoming the challenges of electricity, device access, and language content.

Lastly, shrinking donor support due to global crises (Ukraine, Gaza, etc.) threatens the continuity of Rohingya education programs. The article calls for multi-year funding commitments, public-private partnerships, and diversification of funding sources (e.g., CSR, crowdfunding). These strategies are vital to prevent the deterioration of existing services and scale up future interventions.

### **CONCLUSION**

The findings demonstrate that the systemic denial of citizenship under Myanmar's 1982 law initiated decades of exclusion from formal education, which continued even after displacement to

Bangladesh due to restrictive national policies and social norms. These legal and cultural barriers have disproportionately affected vulnerable groups, especially adolescent girls, resulting in high illiteracy, dropout rates, and limited future opportunities for Rohingya youth. Despite these challenges, the contributions of local and international organizations have been critical in establishing foundational education services for Rohingya refugees. Implementing the Learning Competency Framework and Approach (LCFA) and the Myanmar Curriculum Pilot Programme has provided structured learning opportunities for over 300,000 children. Organizations such as UNICEF, Save the Children, BRAC, and others have worked collaboratively under the Joint Response Plan to improve access, train teachers, and promote community-based models. However, the progress remains fragile due to funding shortfalls, political constraints, lack of formal certification, and declining enrollment trends. The most significant contribution of this research lies in its comprehensive analysis of the Rohingya education crisis from historical and practical perspectives, bridging the gap between policy-level understanding and grassroots implementation. It offers evidence-based insights and integrated strategies that can inform NGOs, policymakers, and education stakeholders working in protracted refugee contexts globally.

To ensure long-term educational inclusion and dignity for Rohingya children, several key actions are recommended. First, stronger diplomatic engagement is needed to advocate for the formal recognition and certification of the Myanmar curriculum. Second, multi-year funding strategies must be developed to stabilize and expand existing programs. Third, targeted efforts to recruit and train female and bilingual educators are essential to improving gender equity and learner engagement. Finally, integrating psychosocial support, digital tools, and community participation can strengthen education outcomes and enhance resilience. Ultimately, addressing the educational needs of the Rohingya is not only a matter of humanitarian response—it is a critical investment in social justice, human development, and regional stability. This research offers a foundation for immediate action and future academic inquiry into refugee education in politically complex settings.

### **Funding and Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no funding and conflicts of interest for this research.

### **REFERENCES**

- Bangladesh, U. (2022). *UNICEF: Education Milestone for Rohingya Refugee Children as Myanmar Curriculum Pilot Reaches First 10,000 Children*. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-education-milestone-rohingya-refugee-children-myanmar-curriculum-pilot#:~:text=The Myanmar Curriculum Pilot initially,nine are aged 14-16>
- Bangladesh, U. (2023). *Joint Response Plan: Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis*. <https://rohingyaresponse.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/JRP-2024.pdf>
- Brett, P., & Hlaing, K. Y. (2020). Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law in Context. *Policy Brief Series*, 22, 1–4. <https://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/122-brett-kyh/#:~:text=The Law creates a closed,1982 to become a citizen>
- Chowdhury, S. A., & Mostafa, A. T. (2020). Rohingya Refugees: Risks and Safety in Bangladesh. In N. Chowdhury & B. Mohanty (Eds.), *Citizenship, Nationalism and Refugeehood of Rohingyas in Southern Asia* (pp. 155–170). Springer Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-2168-3\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-2168-3_8)
- Demir, Sebnem Manolya, Sahinyazan, Feyza G, Kara, Bahar Y, & Buluc, Elfe. (2024). No Country for Young Refugees: Barriers and Opportunities for Inclusive Refugee Education Practices. *Production and Operations Management*, 34(4), 612–626. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10591478241243382>
- Dryden-Peterson, S. (2023). Civic Education and the Education of Refugees. In *Global Migration and Civic Education: Research, Policy, and Practice* (pp. 94–108). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003380825>
- Ferris, E., & Kerwin, D. (2023). Durable Displacement and the Protracted Search for Solutions: Promising Programs and Strategies. *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 11(1), 3–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23315024231160454>

- Hammad, S. H., & Cochrane, L. (2025). Disrupted Education a View from inside Syria: Critical Literature Review and Lessons for Policy and Practice. *Development in Practice*, 35(5), 719–736. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2025.2478496>
- Honein-AbouHaidar, G., Bou-Karroum, L., Parkinson, S. E., Majed, R., Salameh, S., Daher, N., Hemadi, N., Fouad, F. M., & El-Jardali, F. (2024). Integrating Syrian Refugees into Lebanon's Healthcare System 2011–2022: A Mixed-method Study. *Conflict and Health*, 18(1), 43. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-024-00600-w>
- Hossain, A. N. M. Z. (2023). Educational Crisis of Rohingya Refugee Children in Bangladesh: Access, Obstacles, and Prospects to Formal and Non-formal Education. *Heliyon*, 9(7), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e18346>
- Lauterbach, A. A., Bettini, E., Mathews, H. M., Rossetti, Z., & Hughes, O. E. (2022). Beyond Exploratory: How Varied Qualitative Methodologies Can Inform and Advance the Field of Special Education. In *Handbook of Special Education Research, Volume I: Theory, Methods, and Developmental Processes* (pp. 171–186). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003156857>
- Minasyan, S., Malihah, E., & Maftuh, B. (2023). Towards Sustainable Solutions: Educational Challenges Among Forcibly Displaced Students Up To Junior High School. *Heritage: Journal of Social Studies*, 4(2), 208–232. <https://doi.org/10.35719/hrtg.v4i2.115>
- Psaki, S., Haberland, N., Mensch, B., Woyczynski, L., & Chuang, E. (2022). Policies and Interventions to Remove Gender-related Barriers to Girls' School Participation and Learning in Low-and Middle-income Countries: A Systematic Review of the Evidence. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 18(1), 1–78. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1207>
- Reliefweb. (2017). *Historical Review - Rohingya influx since 1978*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/historical-review-rohingya-influx-1978>
- Riley, A., Akther, Y., Noor, M., Ali, R., & Welton-Mitchell, C. (2020). Systematic Human Rights Violations, Traumatic Events, Daily Stressors and Mental Health of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh. *Conflict and Health*, 14(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-020-00306-9>
- Shohel, M. M. C. (2022). Education in Emergencies: Challenges of Providing Education for Rohingya Children Living in Refugee Camps in Bangladesh. *Education Inquiry*, 13(1), 104–126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2020.1823121>
- Sohel, I. M. (2022). *The Urgency of Reforming Madrasa Education in Myanmar*. OpenDemocracy. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/urgency-of-reforming-madrasa-education-in-myanmar/>
- Volunteer, U. (2018). *Providing Community-based Education to Rohingya Refugee Children*. <https://knowledge.unv.org/practices-and-experiences/providing-communitybased-education-to-rohingya-refugee-children>
- Watch, H. R. (2000). *Discrimination in Arakan*. [https://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/burma/burm005-02.htm#P138\\_37503](https://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/burma/burm005-02.htm#P138_37503)
- Zahed, I. U. M. (2021). The State against the Rohingya: Root Causes of the Expulsion of Rohingya from Myanmar. *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 22(3–4), 436–460. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2021.1995716>