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FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH CHILD MARRIAGE AMONG ROHINGYA REFUGEE GIRLS IN MALAYSIA: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: Rohingya refugees have fled Rakhine state, Myanmar for decades due to persecution. While Malaysia has been a preferred destination, the Rohingya are considered illegals and struggle with protection, poverty, and poor access to healthcare and education. Child marriage is prevalent in this environment, impacting Rohingya girls. This study examined factors associated with child marriage among the Rohingya in Malaysia.

Methodology: This qualitative study was guided by both ecological and social exchange theory. The main methods of this study included in-depth interviews (IDIs) with Rohingya women married as girls (n=14), focus group discussions (FGDs) with community stakeholders (n=18), and FGDs with older Rohingya men (n=20). Criterion and snowball sampling were used, and data were analysed for themes with the assistance of Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software.

Findings: The research showed that various factors associated with culture as well as displacement combined to push Rohingya families toward child marriage for their girls. Cultural factors impacting child marriage included patriarchal values of arranged marriages, girls needing to be protected, and girls and women not working outside the home. Religious factors such as Islamic beliefs also played a role. Factors related to displacement, such as poverty, lack of education, and the fact that there are more Rohingya men than women in Malaysia also contributed to child marriage.

Contributions: This paper provides insight into the factors associated with Rohingya child marriage in Malaysia. This information can assist NGOs and UNHCR in developing programs to prevent child marriage among the Rohingya in Malaysia.

Keywords: Child marriage, Malaysia, refugees, Rohingya, sustainable development goal.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Child marriage is defined as a customary or legal union in which either or both of the spouses are under age 18 (Wodon et al., 2017). Child marriage negatively affects girls and their families, including increased poverty, decreased education, and health problems (Williamson, 2013; Wodon et al., 2017). Child marriage has other negative effects on girls, including putting them at greater risk of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) (Erulkar, 2013; Guglielmi et al., 2021; Varia, 2016) and decreasing their use of contraceptives, resulting in early childbirth (Wodon et al., 2017). Child marriage is common among refugees, as issues of war and displacement cause refugees to flee and increase their vulnerability to child marriage (Ainul et al., 2018; Kohno et al., 2020).

Rohingya people, from Rakhine state in Myanmar, are a Muslim people group, making them a religious minority in predominantly Buddhist Myanmar. When the Myanmar government excluded the Rohingya from the 1982 Citizenship Law, it rendered them stateless (O'Brien & Hoffstaedter, 2020). The persecution of Rohingya has led to their mass exodus from Myanmar for several decades (Kiragu et al., 2011), including the flight of over 600,000 to Bangladesh that started in August 2017 (Mason & Kaye, 2017).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Rohingya refugees comprise the largest group of refugees in Malaysia. As of May 2024, Rohingya refugees registered through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Malaysia number 109,230 (USA for UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency, 2024), though that excludes the thousands of those who are unregistered. Rohingya refugees flee to Malaysia because it is a predominantly Muslim country, there are economic opportunities in low-skilled job markets, and there are established routes with traffickers, making it easier to

reach than some other countries (Franck, 2019; Khairi, 2018; O'Brien & Hoffstaedter, 2020; Rajaratnam, 2020; Wahab & Khairi, 2019).

The Rohingya in Malaysia are considered illegal (Laws of Malaysia: Immigration Act of 1959, 1959; UNHCR Malaysia, 2017), and, even if they possess a UNHCR card, they fear arrest and detention (Equal Rights Trust, 2014; Nazri et al., 2022). The Rohingya do not live in camps but instead assimilate into nearby communities (Khairi, 2018). They are not able to work legally, instead working in jobs that are, "dirty, dangerous, and difficult" (Todd et al., 2019). They are denied government education and usually send their children to poorly funded refugee learning centres that function without properly trained teachers (Hoffstaedter, 2015; Khairi, 2018; Zhooriyati et al., 2021). Their work in the underground sector limits their income, making health care unaffordable. While those with UNHCR cards/letters are given 50% off the foreigner's rate at government hospitals, most still find these costs for health care too expensive (Rajaratnam & Azman, 2022; Verghis, 2013).

Rohingya marriages in Malaysia are not recognized by the government because of the Rohingyas' status as illegal (Kassim, 2015). To marry in Malaysia, Rohingya go to a local Community-Based Organization (CBO), such as the Rohingya Society of Malaysia, to obtain a marriage certificate. CBOs have no system to verify the identity or ages of the bride and groom, which easily allows for child marriages (Kassim, 2015).

Though child marriage is thought to be common in Rohingya communities (Chowdhury et al., 2018; Islam et al., 2021; Tay et al., 2018), the prevalence is hard to ascertain because the diaspora is widespread. Recent research from the camps in Bangladesh, however, has suggested a high rate of child marriage. In a cross-sectional survey of 486 Rohingya women who had married or given birth after arriving in Bangladesh, researchers found a 61.32% rate of child marriage (Islam et al., 2021).

There are a variety of factors associated with child marriage that are also applicable to the Rohingya. These include poverty, giving a dowry, and lack of education (Williamson, 2013; Wodon et al., 2017). There are also cultural norms associated with child marriage that are common among the Rohingya, including religious beliefs, the desire to protect girls, and the desire to uphold family honour (Guglielmi et al., 2021; Kohno et al., 2020; Varia, 2016).

Recent studies of child marriage among the Rohingya in the camps in Bangladesh identified factors related to the high prevalence of child marriage (Gausman et al., 2022; Guglielmi et al., 2021; Melnikas et al., 2020). First, while laws and fees related to marriage in Myanmar forced most Rohingya to wait until age 18 to marry, the lack of restrictive marriage laws or fees in Bangladesh has likely caused an increase in child marriage (Melnikas et al.,

2020). In addition, many Rohingya believe that girls should marry before age 18 so that they are not too old (Gausman et al., 2022; Guglielmi et al., 2021; Melnikas et al., 2020). Some Rohingya believe that Islam dictates that they marry when they are physically able, which for girls, is when they begin menstruating (Melnikas et al., 2020). Protection is also a factor in that parents want their girls to marry around the time of menstruation to avoid being sexually abused or being perceived as sexually active (Gausman et al., 2022; Guglielmi et al., 2021; Melnikas et al., 2020). Additional factors related to child marriage among the Rohingya in Bangladesh were poverty, lack of education, adolescent girls' confinement to home, and girls' lack of agency (Gausman et al., 2022). While displacement is a major factor contributing to child marriage, cultural and group norms also encourage child marriage among the Rohingya in Bangladesh (Gausman et al., 2022; Melnikas et al., 2020).

United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 includes empowering girls and women and ending child marriage (United Nations, 2023). To reduce child marriage, it is important to understand the factors associated with child marriage. While research has targeted child marriage among the Rohingya in Bangladesh (Gausman et al., 2022; Guglielmi et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2021; Melnikas et al., 2020), little research has focused on Malaysia.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Two theories provided a framework for this study: the ecological theory and the social exchange theory. The ecological theory's essential tenet is that multiple systems in an individual's life interact to affect the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). These systems include: the microsystem (roles and relationships including family, friends, neighbours, etc.), the mesosystem (how all elements of the microsystem interact), the exosystem (community), and the macrosystem (the overall culture and society). This robust theory has been used by other studies on child marriage in general and for the Rohingya ethnic group (Kohno et al., 2019; Low et al., 2014); therefore, it appears a useful and relevant framework for of this study.

When studying the factors associated with child marriage among Rohingya girls in Malaysia from the ecological theoretical framework, one explores the systems in a girl's life. First, the microsystem includes the girl, her parents, her siblings, her neighbours, the man whom she marries, etc. Next, the mesosystem consists of interconnected relationships within her microsystem. In addition, the exosystem impacts the girl and her marriage and includes things like the laws of Malaysia, which currently deem refugee status to be illegal. Rohingya refugees' illegal status in Malaysia often leads refugees to work low paying jobs, limits their access to education, and increases their vulnerability to exploitation (Hoffstaedter, 2015; Todd

et al., 2019). These factors all contribute to living in poverty and may pressure Rohingya fathers to use child marriage as a solution for their family struggles. Finally, the macrosystem involves cultural norms that impact a girl and her marriage as a child, including conservative religious values and patriarchal norms. Using ecological theory to further understand child marriage among Rohingya girls provides a structured method to explore these factors within the literature.

A second theory used to guide this study was social exchange theory. Social exchange theory's key principles are that all interactions involve costs and rewards, and that power imbalances affect the distribution of these costs and rewards. This balance of costs and rewards can often lead to exploitation (Ekeh, 1974; Homans, 1961). This theory is helpful for this study, as child marriage often involves costs and rewards for the girl, her family, the groom, and others involved in a child marriage. To illustrate, in Rohingya child marriage arrangements in Malaysia, the groom is expected to pay for the girl's travel to Malaysia, which can be a heavy cost; however, he gains a reward of a wife, who provides domestic labor and serves as an intimate partner for him. For the girl, as she navigates a patriarchal and conservative culture, she holds little autonomy and power in deciding her groom, marital duties, or personal life decisions, such as education.

Combining ecological theory and social exchange theory allows for a more nuanced lens through which to interpret the findings. For instance, integrating social exchange theory with the ecological framework allows researchers to explore how power dynamics within each system (micro, meso, exo, macro) influence the costs, rewards, and balance of power associated with child marriage for the girl, her family, and the community. This integration will aid research's understanding of child marriage among the Rohingya in Malaysia and the field overall.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODS

Data were collected as part of a research study about child marriage among the Rohingya in Malaysia. This study was part of a qualitative research project that included in-depth interviews (IDIs) with Rohingya women married as girls (n=14), focus group discussions (FGDs) with community stakeholders (n=18), and FGDs with older Rohingya men (n=20).

IDIs and FGDs used criterion sampling because the number of Rohingya in Malaysia that met the specific criteria was small. This study also used snowball sampling, as respondents referred acquaintances who might be interested in participating in the study. IDIs with women and FGDs with men were conducted in Penang state. FGDs with community stakeholders

included respondents from Penang and the Klang Valley/Kuala Lumpur area of Malaysia. This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Pilot studies were conducted among all three types of respondents and tested recruitment methods, assessed questions and responsiveness, and tested translation and data analysis methods.

IDIs with Rohingya women included women aged 18-30 who married before age 18 (n=14). Other inclusion criteria were that they had a UNHCR refugee card or letter, lived in Penang state, and were married in Malaysia. Exclusion criteria included those who were married to a husband with an ethnicity other than Rohingya and those who lived outside of Penang state.

Interviews were held from January to April 2022. The respondent's UNHCR refugee card or letter was used to determine the respondent's age and that she was Rohingya. Interviews with Rohingya women were conducted by a female Rohingya research assistant. Interviews were held in the women's homes in Penang, were conducted in the Rohingya language, and were audio recorded with the respondents' consent.

Four FGDs with older Rohingya men were held between February and April 2022, with five respondents in each group. Inclusion criteria included that they held a UNHCR refugee card or letter, were age 35 or older, and that they lived in Penang state. Exclusion criteria included those younger than age 35 and those who did not yet have a UNHCR refugee card or letter.

Respondents in IDIs with women and FGDs with older men were identified through contacts of community workers for Penang Stop Human Trafficking Campaign and Jom Serve, Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) in Penang that work regularly within the Rohingya community. Respondents in FGDs with community stakeholders were identified through contacts of community liaison workers for Penang Stop Human Trafficking Campaign and through contacts of the lead researcher. The lead researcher or research assistants obtained written informed consent for respondents to join the study.

The FGDs with Rohingya men were conducted by a male Rohingya research assistant and a community worker from Penang Stop Human Trafficking Campaign. The assistant served as the facilitator, while the community worker served as the note-taker. Before the study, the lead researcher trained the research assistants on topics such as ethical concerns, the meaning of questions, and good listening techniques. FGDs with Rohingya men were held in local community centres in Penang, were conducted in the Rohingya language, and were audio recorded with the respondents' consent. Interviews were transcribed into English by the person

conducting the interview, a Rohingya research assistant who is fluent in both Rohingya and English. Later, another Rohingya person fluent in English and experienced in using English daily back-translated 25% of the transcriptions and any discrepancies were addressed.

In the second set of focus group discussions, the lead researcher interviewed community stakeholders. These community stakeholders worked with Rohingya in Malaysia through NGOs, learning centres, community organizations, and UNHCR. Inclusion criterion for respondents in the FGDs with community stakeholders (n=18) was that they had at least one year of experience working (paid or unpaid) directly with Rohingya people. Exclusion criteria were that they worked primarily with ethnicities other than Rohingya and that they had worked with Rohingya less than one year. For this set of FGDs, four groups were held between February and March 2022.

Since the community stakeholders had tertiary education and were fluent in English, the FGDs with community stakeholders were conducted online in English via Google Meet. These FGDs were recorded with the consent of respondents and transcribed for data analysis purposes. ATLAS.ti, a type of computer-aided qualitative data analysis software, was used to help with data analysis. Atlas.ti was used to code and organize data and to identify common themes.

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

A variety of factors are associated with child marriages among Rohingya refugee girls in Malaysia. This section will include six major factors, with one factor (culture) broken down into sub-topics. These six factors include education, poverty, culture, elopement, marriage laws, and the fact that there are more Rohingya men in Malaysia than women.

4.1 Education

The most prevalent factor associated with child marriage that respondents emphasized was the Rohingya's general lack of education.

> *"But in Malaysia, people are simply getting married. This is because of education. It's all because of education. People do not know how to read the signboard, and this person do not know. This people are based on what third party say. If a person, like say ustad (religious leader), say as long as she is 13, 14 she can get married. This is the mentality of, I can say I'm sorry to say: It's illiterate mentality of my community. This is from my community, and I'm so sorry to say that this is the thing. This shameful thing is happening in the community. It's because the father and mother is not educated."* (Community Stakeholder 4-1)

Rohingya in Malaysia are not allowed to attend government schools, and the limited number of refugee learning centres and their fees to study further prohibit Rohingya refugees' access to education.

> *"Sometimes the parents say, I have 5 children. The refugee school: I have to pay one person is 100 RM. I have 5 children; how do I pay 500 RM in this school? This is a problem also face a lot of family members. They want their children to learn, but financial is a big problem for the school fees. Only the name is refugee school, but the fees are too expensive."* (Community Stakeholder 1-4)

4.2 Poverty

Poverty was a factor in child marriages that involved a Rohingya girl traveling from Myanmar or Bangladesh to Malaysia for the purpose of marriage. First, respondents explained that brides give an expensive dowry to the groom in Myanmar and Bangladesh, and this dowry was cost-prohibitive for poor Rohingya families. In contrast, Rohingya girls who came to Malaysia to marry Rohingya men were not obligated to give this dowry. Instead, Rohingya men in Malaysia pay all the human trafficking costs for girls to come to Malaysia, so families save the cost of the dowry and also have their daughter's way paid to Malaysia.

> *"In Myanmar, the girls have to give furniture, money, clothes and everything. Even if a girl is already aged, but still she can't marry if she does not have money. But here (Malaysia), the boy has to pay the bride instead. They will be very thankful because the boy has to pay for the expenses."* (Rohingya Woman Who Married as a Girl 6)

Many Rohingya girls who come to Malaysia from Bangladesh or Myanmar for marriage are from families where one or both parents are deceased, leading to increased poverty.

> *"The reason I got married is that: I didn't want to come here to Malaysia and get married to an old man. My parents passed away when I was young, and my relatives there in Burma were poor and couldn't afford my marriage costs there. My relatives have told me earlier already where the bride has to give a lot of things to the groom."* (Rohingya Woman Who Married as a Girl 10)

Poverty is also a factor among Rohingya families in Malaysia who choose child marriage for their daughters.

> *"Financial difficulties are mostly why there's child marriage among the Rohingya community. For example, there is a big family, and they have so many daughters. Only one person is earning to run the family. So they think it would be better choice to get their daughter married."* (Community Stakeholder 2-2)

4.3 Culture

i. Patriarchy

In patriarchal Rohingya culture, marriages are arranged by the parents, usually the father.

> *"I didn't have much knowledge about marriage, so I obeyed my parents. They arranged the marriage, so I married."* (Rohingya Woman Who Married as a Girl 5)

In Rohingya culture, girls do not have independence, and decision-making is the responsibility of men. For girls, decisions are made by their fathers and, once married, their husbands. Girls are expected to obey their parents and agree to any decision they make.

> *"As you know, the majority of the marriages, they are arranged marriage, whether the arranged marriage is child marriage or just the normal marriage. Our Rohingya society, parents are too much protective. They don't want to see their children to be independent, so they want to make all decisions."* (Community Stakeholder 2-1)

In patriarchal Rohingya culture, girls need to be protected.

> *"Our elders support it (child marriage) because they (Rohingya girls) become out of control, so getting them married is a way to solve it."* (Older Rohingya Man 3-5)

Older Rohingya men viewed protecting girls as important in that the family protects the girl's reputation and therefore her family's reputation. If she were perceived to be sexually or even romantically involved with a boy, this would damage her reputation.

> *"If someone comes with a proposal and he is a good boy, then people say it is better to get them (Rohingya girls) married before something happens and bring a bad image to the family."* (Older Rohingya Man 3-3)

Many Rohingya families are poor, and girls are viewed as a burden.

> *"The only benefit (of child marriage) for the family is that they won't have to take care of her anymore. In our Rohingya language, we will say there is no more burden for the parents."* (Older Rohingya Man 3-2)

Yet another aspect of patriarchy in Rohingya culture is that the preferred role of girls and women is homemaker.

> *"I thought that I would come to Malaysia and work here to help my parents. My brother said that you won't have respect if you do work, and they found my husband to get me married."* (Rohingya Woman Who Married as a Girl 13)

ii. Islamic beliefs

Older Rohingya men stated that Islam allows for child marriage.

> *"According to the world law, child marriage is a problem, but according to the law of Islam, it's helpful."* (Older Rohingya Man 4-3)

iii. Preference for younger brides

In Rohingya culture, there is a preference for younger brides, and there seems to be an age where girls are considered too old to get married. When discussing why she got married, one woman said,

> *"Because of society. Whenever we step out of the house, they tease and humiliate us by saying we are 'getting old, nobody wants to marry us, etc.'"* (Rohingya Woman Who Married as a Girl 4)

4.4 Elopement

Girls eloping is another factor in Rohingya child marriages. Girls may find a boyfriend and elope before their parents can marry them off or to enjoy freedom instead of being confined to home.

> *"You need to understand the situation here, our girls in Malaysia. For example, when they are young, from 8 to 14 years old, I think they have the opportunity to go to a learning centre and learn. But from 12 or from 14 and above, they just need to stay at home. So, you just imagine someone just stay at home, having at the teenage time, they cannot learn, they cannot do anything, they cannot go out. So, within this age, they get bored a lot at home, so they make friends, so if the boy is very smart, then they just take the girl and they get married and they just live as wife and husband."* (Community Stakeholder 2-1)

4.5 Marriage Laws in Malaysia

Most respondents lacked knowledge of marriage laws in Malaysia and mistakenly thought the legal minimum age for marriage was 18.

> *"But again, in Malaysia, law is helping us to do that (prevent child marriage). It's because Malaysia also have a law that they are not allowed to marry if below 18. So that's really a good positive point that we got in Malaysia."* (Community Stakeholder 2-4)

Another factor related to marriage laws among refugees is that, due to their illegal status in Malaysia, marriage laws are not enforced among the Rohingya.

> *"In Burma, a person can't get married below 18 years old… but here in Malaysia, ages are not required to get married."* (Rohingya Woman Who Married as a Girl 9)

4.6 More Rohingya Men than Women in Malaysia

Another factor impacting child marriage is the fact that there are more Rohingya men than women in Malaysia, and many Rohingya men are looking for brides.

> *"In Myanmar, there are no more Rohingya. Why? Because most of the Rohingya were all sent out of the country. Some people are in China, some people are in Malaysia, some guys are in Thailand, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia. So there mens are lesser than girls. That is why. So in Malaysia, girls are lesser than boys. So that's why girl have value in Malaysia. In Myanmar, boys have value."* (Community Stakeholder 3-2)

Ecological theory provided an excellent lens to view the results of this study because many factors associated with child marriage, such as poverty, lack of education, and marriage laws in Malaysia, are related to the girl and her environment. Social exchange theory was also helpful because other factors, such as girls being viewed as a burden, were impacted by costs and rewards in relationships.

Our study found that poverty and lack of education were major factors contributing to Rohingya child marriage in Malaysia. This agrees with previous studies on the Rohingya from Bangladesh (Gausman et al., 2022; Guglielmi et al., 2021; Melnikas et al., 2020). Poverty and lack of education are both a cause and a consequence of child marriage. Rohingya in Myanmar are denied education, and educational opportunities in the Bangladesh camps are very limited (Gausman et al., 2022; Guglielmi et al., 2021; Kiragu et al., 2011; Toma et al., 2018). When Rohingya flee Myanmar and/or Bangladesh to Malaysia, their hopes of education do not improve, as they are considered illegal and are not permitted to attend government schools (Hoffstaedter, 2015). Rohingya refugees in Malaysia have trouble accessing education due to the limited number of schools, schools already being full, and/or high fees (Letchamanan, 2013; UNICEF Malaysia, 2022). The cycle of the Rohingya being deprived of education in Myanmar and Bangladesh continues in Malaysia, leading to uneducated Rohingya parents who are unaware of the problems associated with child marriage.

Research shows that less education is directly related to higher levels of child marriage (Glick et al., 2015), and the Rohingya's lack of education is attributed to their systematic and

continued oppression. Their illegal status in Malaysia also prohibits them from working legally (Pereira et al., 2019). As they work in the margins of society, they struggle to afford what they need. Because the Rohingya are a patriarchal culture that does not support women working outside the home (Rajaratnam, 2020; Tay et al., 2018), the entire family relies on the father's income, also contributing to increased poverty.

Kohno et al. (2020), in a meta-analysis of 12 qualitative studies about child marriage, found that insecurity among refugees contributed to child marriage because refugees felt an increased need for protection and had increased financial problems. Gausman et al. (2022), in a study of child marriage among Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and Syrian refugees in Jordan, had similar findings. The authors found that restrictive gender norms for girls became stronger in displacement due to poverty, lack of education, protection issues, and lack of laws (Gausman et al., 2022). In similar fashion, in this current study, respondents noted poverty and protection, both related to their displacement because they are refugees, as contributing factors to child marriage.

The fact that Rohingya culture is patriarchal cannot be overstated (Rajaratnam, 2020; Ripoll, 2017). Patriarchal beliefs affect a Rohingya girl's/woman's ability to earn a living, her ability to leave the home, and every aspect of her life. Women respondents who were married before age 18 mentioned that they obeyed their parents when their parents told them to marry. In Rohingya culture, older males, usually the father, make all decisions on matters related to their household (Ripoll, 2017; Shaw et al., 2019; Toma et al., 2018), including arranging marriages for their daughters. Child marriages are more likely to be arranged than marriages where the bride and groom are over age 18 (Erulkar, 2013), likely because girls are younger and lack agency.

One of the major factors in Rohingya child marriage that our study found was girls being viewed as needing protection, which is related to patriarchal Rohingya culture. This finding is also consistent with other studies about child marriage among the Rohingya (Gausman et al., 2022; Guglielmi et al., 2021; Melnikas et al., 2020). Girls and women are viewed as needing protection from sexual assault and their reputation of sexual purity being compromised. Older Rohingya men respondents pointed out that girls need to get married before their reputations become tainted and that they cannot protect their daughters when they are at work. In patriarchal societies where child marriage is common, the father's burden of protecting a daughter is transferred to her husband when they marry (Williamson, 2013). Rohingya parents protect their daughters until their daughters are married, and then the husband takes on that responsibility (Guglielmi et al., 2021).

Some authors suggest that child marriage itself is a type of sexual and gender-based violence (Tay et al., 2019; Wodon et al., 2017). While many Rohingya parents marry off their girls early to protect them, they are subjecting them, perhaps unintentionally, to violence at the hands of their husbands, as girls in a child marriage are at higher risk of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) (Guglielmi et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2021; Varia, 2016). Possible reasons for this are that girls in a child marriage are often uneducated and younger than their husbands (Williamson, 2013).

While IPV has been labelled as normal among the Rohingya in the camps in Bangladesh (Toma et al., 2018), other studies also suggest a high rate of IPV (Guglielmi et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2021; Welton-Mitchell et al., 2019). Islam et al. (2021) found that more women in a child marriage experienced beatings/being hit (76%) than those who did not marry as children (65%). Guglielmi et al. (2021) also found higher rates of IPV among girls who were married than girls who were not married. Welton-Mitchell et al.'s (2019) study of IPV among the Rohingya, significant because it was in Malaysia, showed a high acceptance of patriarchal values and IPV. In addition, 100% of respondents believed a husband owns his wife (Welton-Mitchell et al., 2019). Since protecting their daughter's honour and reputation is very important (Guglielmi et al., 2021), Rohingya parents arrange child marriages before their daughter's honour is compromised. Culturally, protecting honour appears more important than protecting their daughters from violence by their husbands.

Islamic beliefs, an important part of Rohingya culture, were found to play a prominent role in Rohingya child marriage. Islam as a factor in child marriage is also consistent with other findings (Guglielmi et al., 2021; Melnikas et al., 2020). While all three types of respondents in our study mentioned Islam, older Rohingya men spoke about it most. They attributed Islam to allowing child marriage and helping people avoid sin. Rohingya culture is a conservative type of Islam that correlates well with the Rohingyas' cultural norms of girls and women needing protection and being viewed as homemakers (Rajaratnam, 2020; Tay et al., 2018). This also ties in well with other aspects of their patriarchal culture, such as men being the sole income earners and the primary decision-makers. Respondents mentioned that it is better to get a girl married before something bad happens. This type of conservative thinking, which respondents attributed to their Islamic faith, encourages child marriage among the Rohingya.

Although it was not mentioned by older Rohingya men, Rohingya women and community stakeholders discussed a cultural preference for younger brides. That is, there is an age at which girls/women are considered too old to marry. While it's unclear what this

exact age is, this preference for younger brides is consistent with other findings that suggest it contributes to child marriage among the Rohingya (Gausman et al., 2022; Guglielmi et al., 2021; Melnikas et al., 2020). A girl's readiness for marriage is linked to her physical maturity, such as having started puberty and begun menstruating (Melnikas et al., 2020). In the same way, an older Rohingya man mentioned that, according to Islam, puberty signals that a girl is ready for marriage. The cultural and religious norms of Rohingya refugees are interrelated and are dominated by patriarchy, with Islamic beliefs linked to protection as well as a cultural preference for younger brides.

This study found girls eloping as a factor related to Rohingya child marriage, which is a previously unseen factor among studies of this sort. Because previous studies were conducted in Bangladesh, girls eloping may be less prevalent in that setting. In Rohingya culture, once a girl reaches puberty, her parents keep her home to protect her reputation and to protect her from any sexual assault (Gausman et al., 2022; Guglielmi et al., 2021; Melnikas et al., 2020). At this time, they are expected to stay home, take care of household chores, and never leave the house (Ripoll, 2017; Toma et al., 2018). In Malaysia, however, girls, especially those who attended school when they were younger, find staying at home when they reach puberty a severe restriction of freedom, leading some of these girls to find a boyfriend and elope. The cycle of protecting girls and keeping them at home can backfire on parents when the girl elopes with a boyfriend whom she has chosen. At the same time, parents may arrange the girl's marriage earlier to prevent her from eloping.

Older Rohingya men mentioned girls eloping more than community stakeholders and noted that the elopement was the girls' choice. They focused on girls eloping and minimized patriarchal values and beliefs and the role that these beliefs play in Rohingya child marriages. Rajaratnam and Azman (2022), whose study is significant because it was conducted with Rohingya in Malaysia, concluded, "The issue of child marriage is difficult to address because it became a norm, and many of the community members hold on to it, especially the older men" (p.6).

Our study findings suggest that marriage laws, specifically lack of enforcement of marriage laws among the Rohingya, are a factor related to child marriage. This agrees with the previous studies from Bangladesh (Guglielmi et al., 2021; Melnikas et al., 2020). While knowledge about marriage laws in Malaysia varied among respondents, most respondents thought that child marriage is illegal for Muslims in Malaysia. Under Sharia law, however, Muslim girls can marry at age 16 and 17 with no special permission required. In addition, they can receive special permission from the Sharia court to marry below age 16 (The Commissioner

of Law Revision Malaysia, 1984). Because the Rohingya are Muslims, they would fall under Sharia law.

Changing child marriage laws has been suggested as a solution to child marriage in general (Varia, 2016; Williamson, 2013), in Malaysia (Sisters in Islam & Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW), 2018), and for the Rohingya. Though some respondents suggested changing child marriage laws, the challenge is that the Rohingya exist in Malaysia outside the law. Because they are illegal (Laws of Malaysia: Immigration Act of 1959, 1959; UNHCR Regional Office for South-East Asia, 2017), their daily lives in Malaysia operate outside the law. For example, any work they do is considered illegal, even if they have a UNHCR card (Todd et al., 2019). It can be argued, therefore, that changing laws in Malaysia so that the minimum age for marriage is 18 years old would have little effect on the Rohingya.

The fact that there are more Rohingya men than women in Malaysia as a factor contributing to child marriage is a unique finding of this study. Again, this is likely because previous recent studies about child marriage among the Rohingya were conducted in Bangladesh (Gausman et al., 2022; Guglielmi et al., 2021; Melnikas et al., 2020). There are more Rohingya men than women in Malaysia (Todd et al., 2019). Many men have fled Myanmar due to years of persecution, oppression, and violence, and many of these men have fled to Malaysia to work (Franck, 2019). At the same time, in the refugee camps in Bangladesh, 78% of the Rohingya refugees are women and children (International Organization for Migration Bangladesh, 2023). Many women and children are also left in Rakhine, Myanmar. The situation of Rohingya families in Myanmar and Bangladesh, steeped in poverty, combined with Rohingya men in Malaysia searching for a wife creates a scenario where child marriage thrives.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The factors associated with child marriage among the Rohingya in Malaysia are diverse. Some are environmental, such as lack of education and the fact that there are more men in Malaysia than women. Other factors are cultural, such as arranged marriages and Islamic beliefs. Many factors are interrelated, for example, girls eloping often occurs because girls elope to avoid an arranged marriage. At the same time, parents arrange a marriage to avoid their daughters eloping. In the same way, their status as refugees contributes to their poverty, which leads to a lack of education, continuing the cycle of poverty. It is important to consider that Rohingya

child marriage reflects the complexity of Rohingya refugees' lives and likely involves a combination of factors.

Social workers, NGO leaders, and policy advocates in Malaysia should urge the Malaysian government to strengthen its commitment to human rights by ratifying the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol Related to the Status of Refugees. These advocates should also push the Malaysian government to grant refugees the right to work and to attend government schools. UNHCR should partner with local NGOs to hold community education programs that are led by Rohingya, ensuring that they are culturally relevant.

Limitations of this study include that it used criterion and snowball sampling, limiting potential respondents, and that FGDs with community stakeholders were conducted in English, potentially yielding different results than if they were in Bahasa Melayu or Rohingya language. An additional limitation involves the potential loss of meaning in the IDIs with women and the FGDs with older Rohingya men due to translation from the Rohingya language to English. Further research is needed on the factors associated with Rohingya girls who elope. In addition, it would be helpful to study Rohingya men who married girls (below age 18) to understand their perspective.

If the Rohingya had rights in Malaysia and could work legally, their financial situation would improve, reducing their poverty. Instead, they continue to struggle financially and think of their girls as another mouth to feed. According to Rajaratnam (2020), "Rohingya women bear the double-edged brunt of marginalization" (p. 217) in that they lack rights in Malaysia due to their refugee status and lack rights in their community due to being women. Their displacement increases their chances of child marriage, further marginalizing girls. While SDG 5 looks to improve equality for women and girls and end child marriage, displacement as refugees and patriarchal cultural norms combine to create a challenging environment where SDG 5 appears out of reach for Rohingya girls in Malaysia.

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