

Education for Rohingya Refugee Children in Malaysia

Rohingya refugee children face immense challenges in getting access to education. Research shows that Rohingya children in Bangladesh are facing an educational crisis: they cannot attend public schools, and their education is restricted to limited non-formal education from NGOs and sporadic refugee-organized teaching efforts. Of the five countries that prohibit refugees from accessing public schooling – Bangladesh, Burundi, China, Malaysia and Nepal – Malaysia hosts the second largest number of Rohingya refugees. What level of access do these children have to schooling? This policy brief investigates Rohingya refugees' access to non-formal education in Malaysia through the cases of two community-based refugee schools.

Brief Points

- In the absence of access to public education, Rohingya refugees attend UNHCR-funded learning centers or community-based schools.
- More teacher training is needed to provide quality education for refugee children.
- Rohingya parents often consider education to be of secondary importance, compared to having a job.
- Girls' education is severely limited, due to parents' unwillingness to send adolescent girls to mixed gender educational facilities.
- Malaysia and other host states should recognize the needs of refugee children and allow them access to quality education.

Introduction

The Rohingya refugee situation remains one of the most complex refugee crises in the world. To date, there has been little systematic analysis of Rohingya refugee children's opportunities to access non-formal education in their host countries. This is problematic because we lack knowledge on the variation in terms of access to and quality of education across the different host countries. This inhibits policymakers' and practitioners' ability to identify best practices and to evaluate their programs. Our PRIO research team has published a comprehensive report on community-led education in refugee camps in Bangladesh¹ and we have mapped 126 learning centers in the refugee camps of Bangladesh's Cox's Bazaar district.² While Bangladesh has experienced the largest number of Rohingya refugees, there are several hundred thousand Rohingya refugees residing in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, India and elsewhere.

To gain a better understanding of Rohingya children's access to education in Malaysia, we rely on a combination of fieldwork, interviews, and secondary source reviews. In August 2019, we conducted fieldwork at the local Rohingya community school, Sekolah Komuniti Rohingya (SKR), in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In March 2020, we conducted interviews with the head of education at the United Arakan Institute Malaysia (UAIM). We complemented this data with a comprehensive secondary source review. During our interviews, we asked school managers and teachers for their views on Rohingya's

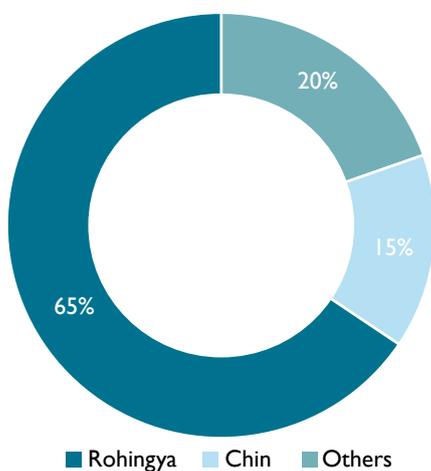


Figure 1: Ethnic composition of refugees from Myanmar in Malaysia. Source: UNHCR

access to education in Malaysia, their organization's programs, and the content and organization of education, as well as about the future prospects of these children. We secured informed consent from all research participants.

We contacted 16 organizations working with refugees in Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, some of which specifically worked with Rohingya refugees. The response rate has been remarkably low, which might be explained by the sensitive nature of the topic. Gathering data on Rohingya education is further complicated by the scarcity of primary and secondary sources, especially in the case of Indonesia.

Malaysia and the Rohingya Crisis

Malaysia is an important transit and destination country for refugees. At time of writing, approximately 178,990 refugees and asylum seekers are registered with UNHCR. Among these, 154,080 are from Myanmar, including 101,010 Rohingya. Figure 1 shows the ethnic composition of refugees from Myanmar in Malaysia. Besides the more than 100,000 registered Rohingya refugees, estimates suggest that tens of thousands more Rohingya remain unregistered. In the total refugee population, more than 46,000 are below the age of 18.³ Our interviewees, however, estimate that there are more than 60,000 refugee children below the age of 18. Refugees in Malaysia are considered by authorities to be "illegal" migrants under the Immigration Act, and they are thus at risk of arrest and detention. Rohingya refugees also lack any legal status and are thus unable to access healthcare or enroll in public schools. Refugee status determination is carried out by the UNHCR. Registered refugees or asylum seekers get a UNHCR identity card that offers them some basic legal protections.

Rohingya refugees have been arriving to Malaysia since the late 1990s. Although their status has not been regulated, they have been tolerated by the government.⁴ In contrast to Bangladesh, Rohingya refugees in Malaysia do not live in camps. They reside with the local community, often in overcrowded housing situations. Our interviews confirmed previous findings regarding the Malaysian authorities' "blind-eye policies" when it comes to detaining refugees.⁵ The total Rohingya population consists of a mix of new arrivals (since 2015) and first- and second-generation refugees living in protracted displacement. Rohingya children born in

Malaysia "inherit" their statelessness from their parents, as Malaysia does not grant *jus soli* (commonly referred to as birthright citizenship).

In the absence of access to public education in Malaysia, Rohingya children receive education from UNHCR and other non-governmental organization sponsored learning centers (LCs), community-based organizations (CBOs), and madrassas. According to 2017 UNHCR figures, there are 128 learning centers across the country. Our interviewees estimated that, as of 2020, there are more than 148 LCs due to the large number of new arrivals since 2017, most of whom are Rohingya refugees. Only 30% of refugee children are enrolled in UNHCR-funded LCs, while the remaining 70% attend education programs provided by CBOs. These often operate under resource constraints, including a lack of qualified teachers, adequate teaching materials, and classroom facilities.⁶ Our interviewees explained that in order to set up a CBO in Malaysia, UNHCR has to conduct a site visit to decide whether the school fulfills requirements concerning infrastructure and teacher qualifications, amongst other criteria. It is also possible to obtain registration from the Ministry of Education, which categorizes CBOs as "alternative education centers" that correspond to private schools. Rohingya children who receive education in Malaysian LCs or by CBOs are however unable to enter into local public schools or access the labor market.

Non-Formal Education

There are both challenges and opportunities regarding non-formal education for Rohingya refugees. Sekolah Komuniti Rohingya (SKR) and the United Arakan Institute Malaysia (UAIM) are two CBOs that serve as illustrative examples of non-formal refugee education.

Sekolah Komuniti Rohingya (SKR)

SKR was founded 10 years ago. In 2019, 91 students received education from seven teachers. SKR is operated by the Malaysian Relief Agency and funded by UNHCR and private donors. SKR staff estimated that between 20,000 and 30,000 refugees are below the age of 18 in Malaysia. SKR provides primary education and limited pre-school education to Rohingya refugee children. Classes at SKR run from 08:30 to 13:00, with usually 5–6 classes each day.

United Arakan Institute Malaysia (UAIM)

UAIM was founded in 2017 and is located in Selangor state, Malaysia. UAIM caters to Rohingya refugee children who have lost one or both of their parents. UAIM relies solely on funding from private donors. The stated goal of UAIM is to educate the next generation of Rohingya community leaders. Life and education at UAIM are organized between two separate premises: one is for sleeping and after-school activities and the other is for education. Due to the sudden increase in students over the past three years, UAIM went from 40 students in 2017 to 120 in 2020 – 110 of whom are Rohingya and 10 are Indonesian. As a result, some children now have to sleep in teaching facilities. The institute provides comprehensive care for refugee children: besides education, children are provided with three meals a day and medical check-ups every three months. UAIM employs 15 teachers (3 Rohingya and 12 Malaysian), a third of which are part-time. UAIM provides vocational training for the children. Children sew and UAIM helps them to sell their products online. In the morning, the students learn Math, English, Science, and Malay language. After lunch, students are enrolled in Arabic and religious classes, followed by sports and vocational training. After dinner, children do their homework with the supervision of Rohingya teachers.

Common Challenges

Staff retention and quality

Both institutions rely on a mixture of Rohingya and non-Rohingya teachers. Non-Rohingya teachers are usually Malaysian and Chinese-Malaysian volunteers. Besides providing education to children, they also train Rohingya teachers. Interviewees pointed out that teachers often lack necessary training, hence the quality of education varies across subjects. Teachers who start working at the school frequently find it difficult to teach refugees and therefore leave. Replacement of these teachers presents a challenge for CBOs. Teachers at UAIM are present when children are doing their homework, yet homework completion rates are low. Teachers often find it difficult to help with homework after a full day of teaching. Both CBOs stressed the need to hire additional and permanent staff, as well as trained psychologists who can help Rohingya children with their behavioral challenges, which likely stem from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Overview	Sekolah Komuniti Rohingya (SKR)	United Arakan Institute Malaysia (UAIM)
Founding year	2010	2017
Funding source	UNHCR and private donors	Private donors
Number of refugee children	91	120
Age-bracket	6–14	6–15
Number of teachers	7	15
Gender ratio	50% girls, 50% boys	25% girls, 75% boys
Classes	Malay language, Math, English, Science, Rohingya language, Religious Studies, Arts and Theater.	Malay language, Math, English, Science, Arabic, Religious Studies, Sports, and vocational training.

Table 1: Overview of SKR and UAIM. Source: Author's interview data

Parent–teacher relations

Both CBOs established parent–teacher associations and are committed to organizing regular personal meetings with parents. At the same time, both schools stressed that parents rarely show up to these meetings unless some compensation is provided, usually in the form of food or clothing. UAIM replaced in-person meetings with online solutions (Whatsapp messaging groups), yet the adaptability of this practice elsewhere is questionable due to the lack of smartphones and broadband connectivity, as well as potential internet shutdown by governments. Interviewees highlighted that Rohingya parents often resist sending their children to school, particularly the girls and older boys. Their resistance stems from cultural, religious, and material reasons.⁷ Parents' inability to cover daily living costs often compels them to send their sons to contribute to household income, whereas Rohingya women and girls are traditionally discouraged from working. UAIM helps parents to recognize the value of education by hiring the best performing students as teaching assistants and providing them with some salary.

Girls' education

Rohingya girls are the most likely to miss out on education or to drop out from school. UNHCR found that refugee girls at secondary level are only half as likely to enroll in non-formal school as boys. There are some 1,300 refugee youths in non-formal secondary-level education in the country and only 612 are girls. Amongst these 612 refugee girls, only 5% are Rohingya.⁸ Parents are often reluctant to send their adolescent daughters to schools, as it is considered inappropriate that girls are sitting together with boys during classes. Parents rather expect girls

to take over house duties at home. There are no all-girls schools in Malaysia and CBOs do not have the necessary infrastructure in terms of space or staff to set up girls-only classes within the same school. Probably the most worrisome consequence that interviewees cited is that girls who are missing out on school are more likely to enter into early child marriage. Marriage remains a primary means of attaining social and economic security for Rohingya girls. Girls who marry at an early age have limited knowledge about reproductive health and family planning. UAIM aims to establish an all-girls school by 2025.

Prospects for the future

Malaysian public schools do not accept refugee children and do not recognize the non-formal education refugee children receive elsewhere. These supply-side constraints on refugee education can further disincentivize parents to send their kids to schools. Interviewees agreed that Rohingya refugees are going to stay in Malaysia for several more decades, and they called for more flexible government policies, the cross-recognition of certificates, and expansion of education provision to the secondary school level. It is time for Malaysia and other host states to recognize the needs of refugee children and to allow them a future that only access to quality education can provide.

Conclusion

As in Bangladesh, Rohingya refugee children in Malaysia are experiencing an educational crisis. Both countries deny Rohingya refugees access to the public education system. While Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are



Food preparation with Rohingya children for the festival, Kuala Lumpur, 2019. Photo: Júlia Palik

attending non-formal schools in refugee camps, Rohingyas in Malaysia do not live in camps, but reside with the local community as illegal migrants. The non-formal education system in Malaysia is largely coordinated by UNHCR. Rohingya refugee children's access to quality non-formal education is limited by at least three different factors: Malaysia does not allow children to enter into public schools; parents are often unable or reluctant to send their children to school; and teachers often lack the necessary training or motivation to provide quality education.

Recommendations for Future Research

This brief provides an overview of Rohingya refugee children's access to non-formal education in Malaysia, illustrating the situation through two CBOs. In order to improve our knowledge of the challenges faced by these organizations, Rohingya refugee children, and their teachers, there are significant knowledge gaps that need to be filled.

We need to understand more about parents' perception of education and the reasons for not sending their children to schools. We also need to know more about the reasons why they take their children out of school. This is particularly important in the cases of Rohingya refugee girls and older boys. Collecting data on the reasons for dropping out of school, as well as drop-out timing and consequences, could help to identify critical intervention points and to design effective measures to reduce drop-out rates.

We also need to collect data on teachers, both Rohingya and non-Rohingya, to capture the differences between the quality of education they are able to provide to children.

Future research should focus on collecting comparable data on non-formal schools in host-states, Rohingya refugee host-states' policies, and host-states' relations to non-formal education centers. This data could improve our understanding of the structural challenges NGOs and community-based organizations face

and the practices they adopt to overcome those challenges. This in turn could help to identify transferable best practices. ■

Notes

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THE AUTHOR

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THE PROJECT

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