



# AL-SHAJARAH

JOURNAL OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT AND CIVILIZATION  
OF  
THE INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA (IIUM)

SPECIAL ISSUE:  
MIGRATION AND REFUGEE STUDIES

2018

# AL-SHAJARAH

*EDITOR-IN-CHIEF*

ABDELAZIZ BERGHOUT, IIUM, Malaysia

*COPY EDITOR*

SUZANA SUHAILAWATY MD. SIDEK, IIUM, Malaysia

*GUEST EDITORS*

ARSHAD ISLAM, IIUM, Malaysia

AIDA MOKHTAR, IIUM, Malaysia

*EDITORIAL BOARD*

THAMEEM USHAMA, IIUM, Malaysia

MOHAMED ASLAM BIN MOHAMED HANEEF, IIUM, Malaysia

AWANG SARIYAN, IIUM, Malaysia

HAZIZAN MD NOON, IIUM, Malaysia

HAFIZ ZAKARIYA, IIUM, Malaysia

DANIAL MOHD YUSOF, IIUM, Malaysia

*ACADEMIC COMMITTEE*

MD SALLEH YAAPAR, USM, Malaysia

MOHAMMAD ABDUL QUAYUM, IIUM, Malaysia

RAHMAH AHMAD H OSMAN, IIUM, Malaysia

RASHID MOTEN, IIUM, Malaysia

SPAHIC OMER, IIUM, Malaysia

*INTERNATIONAL ADVISORY BOARD*

SYED ARABI IDID (Malaysia)

OSMAN BAKAR (Malaysia/Brunei)

ANNABELLE TEH GALLOP (UK)

SERDAR DEMIREL (Turkey)

AZYUMARDI AZRA (Indonesia)

WAEEL B. HALLAQ (USA)

AFIFI AL-AKITI (Malaysia/UK)

IBRAHIM ZEIN (Qatar)

*Al-Shajarah* is a refereed international journal that publishes original scholarly articles in the area of Islamic thought, Islamic civilization, and Islamic science and Malay world issue. The journal is especially interested in studies that elaborate scientific and epistemological problems encountered by Muslims in the present age, scholarly works that provide fresh and insightful Islamic responses to the intellectual and cultural challenges of the modern world. *Al-Shajarah* will also consider articles written on various religions, schools of thought and ideology and subjects that can contribute towards the formulation of an Islamic philosophy of science. Critical studies of translations of major works of major writers of the past and present and original works on the subjects of Islamic architecture and art are welcomed. Book reviews and notes are also published.

The journal is published twice a year, June-July and November-December. Manuscripts and all correspondence should be sent to the Editor-in-Chief, *Al-Shajarah*, F4 Building, IIUM Journal Publication, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), No. 24, Persiaran Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin, Taman Duta, 50480 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. All enquiries on publications may also be e-mailed to [alshajarah@iium.edu.my](mailto:alshajarah@iium.edu.my). For subscriptions, please address all queries to the postal or email address above.

Contributions: Submissions must be at least 5,500 words long. All submissions must be in English or Malay and be original work which has not been published anywhere else in any form (abridged or otherwise). In matters of style, *Al-Shajarah* uses the *University of Chicago Manual of Style* and follows the transliteration system shown on the inside back cover of the journal. The Editor-in-Chief reserves the right to return accepted manuscripts to the author for stylistic changes. Manuscripts must be submitted to the Editor-in-Chief in Microsoft Word. The font must be Times New Roman and its size 12. IIUM retains copyright to all published materials, but contributors may republish their articles elsewhere with due acknowledgement to *Al-Shajarah*.





# A SCATTERED LIFE: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ROHINGYA REFUGEE MOTHERS IN MALAYSIA<sup>1</sup>

*Munira Arshad  
Arshad Islam*

## **Abstract**

*This phenomenological study explores the lived experience of refugee mothers in Malaysia, specifically Rohingya asylum seekers (the most persecuted Muslim minority from Myanmar), using a qualitative research design. Semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth interviews were held with 20 Rohingya refugee mothers with the aim of providing rich description of the lived experiences related to mothering among refugee and asylum seeking women in Malaysia, thereby filling a significant gap in the research literature. The mothers shared a range of lived experiences that affected their experiences as mothers, including negotiating an opaque and hostile asylum system, and unemployment leading to poor living conditions. Children's education, well-being, and religion were found to be coping mechanisms that enabled them to feel comforted. As the experiences of these mothers were threatening, they were inhibited from giving the best to their children, yet some of the mothers developed a sense of resilience in dealing with their situation. The implications of the findings are discussed in light of the roles that government agencies and professional bodies share when working with refugee mothers.*

**Keywords:** Malaysia, Mothers, Myanmar, Refugees, Rohingya

---

<sup>1</sup> Article received: 15 January 2018; Article submitted: October 2018; Article accepted: 30 October 2018

## 1.0 Introduction

Brutality, torture and violations of basic human rights were causes for several thousands of Rohingya people to flee; they are a minority group from Myanmar.<sup>2</sup> They were compelled to seek asylum in neighbouring countries whilst the latter have been reinforcing restrictive immigration laws. Thus, their asylum claims were rejected and they were forcefully returned to their country of origin.<sup>3</sup>

To investigate the above phenomenon, this research explores the experiences of Rohingya, a well-known persecuted minority.<sup>4</sup> In 2012 and 2013, further to violence from Buddhist fanatics with the covert or open support of elements of the state<sup>5</sup> the number of Rohingya Muslims attempting the gruelling boat voyage to Malaysia skyrocketed.<sup>6</sup> This study examines the ever increasing number of Rohingya women refugees in Malaysia.<sup>7</sup> These immigrants undergo harrowing experiences before landing in Malaysia, without realizing that worst may be ahead of them as “once they arrive, they are abused, exploited, arrested and locked up-in effect, treated like criminals.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Malaysia is ranked as one of the worst countries for asylum seekers. For Rohingya women, this translates into serious rights violations such as gender-based violence, precarious living and

---

<sup>2</sup> "Burma: Government Forces Targeting Rohingya Muslims," *Human Rights Watch*, last modified September 13, 2017, accessed October 1, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/07/31/burma-government-forces-targeting-rohingya-muslims>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Bemma, "One Rohingya's Struggle to Empower Women in Malaysia," *Al-Jazeera*, last modified November 30, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/rohingya-struggle-empower-women-malaysia-171129205523653.html/>.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Smith, "All You Can Do is Pray: Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma's Arakan State," *Human Rights Watch*, Last modified April 22, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/04/22/all-you-can-do-pray/crimes-against-humanity-and-ethnic-cleansing-rohingya-muslims>.

<sup>6</sup> Bemma, "One Rohingya's Struggle to Empower Women in Malaysia,".

<sup>7</sup> "Malaysia Factsheet," *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, accessed October 15, 2017, <http://www.unhcr.org/protection/operations/56167f6b6/malaysia-fact-sheet.html>.

<sup>8</sup> "Refugees In Malaysia Arrested, Abused And Denied Right To Work," *Amnesty International*, last modified June 16, 2010, [http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-229083843.html?refid=easy\\_hf](http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-229083843.html?refid=easy_hf).

working conditions, and struggling to obtain basic health and education services for themselves and their children.<sup>9</sup>

Existing research in the setting of several Western countries shows that refugee and asylum seeking mothers face a host of challenging experiences. Many refugee mothers have experienced post-migrating stressors that can have an unhealthy impact on their children in regards to physical, mental and overall well-being.<sup>10</sup> The children have also experienced extreme trauma and stress.<sup>11</sup> Upon arrival to the new country refugee mothers face various challenges, such as starting the process of asylum seeking, immersing in new culture and battling with language barriers required to negotiate the legal battle of seeking asylum, language and cultural barriers and unemployment, exacerbating the fact that they generally live in poverty.<sup>12</sup>

Previous studies have correlated being employed with positive effects on mental health and well-being.<sup>13</sup> Employment has been associated with reducing stress and depression, and linked to increasing self-esteem and life satisfaction.<sup>14</sup> Rutter<sup>15</sup> found that education is a key factor in building resilience in adults and children, mainly due to helping in building self-esteem and improving the ability to solve problems. Past studies with asylum-seeking individuals have found that religious belief systems played a significant role in coping strategies, sparking a sense of hope, keeping them grounded to their culture and helping them to deal with

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Deacon Zermarie and Cris Sullivan, "Responding to the Complex and Gendered Needs of Refugee Women," *Affilia* 24, no. 3 (2009): 272-84.

<sup>11</sup> Barenbaum Joshua, Vladislav Ruchkin, and Mary Schwab-Stone. "The Psychosocial Aspects of Children Exposed to War: Practice and Policy Initiatives," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 45, no. 1 (2004): 41-62.

<sup>12</sup> Jan Penrose, *Poverty and Asylum in the UK* (Refugee Council, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Denise Zabkiewicz, "The Mental Health Benefits of Work: Do They Apply to Poor Single Mothers?" *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 45, no. 1 (2009): 77-87.

<sup>14</sup> Karsten I. Paul and Klaus Moser, "Unemployment Impairs Mental Health: Meta-analyses," *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 74, no. 3 (2009): 264-82.

<sup>15</sup> M. Rutter, "Resilience in the Face of Adversity. Protective Factors and Resistance to Psychiatric Disorder," *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 147, no. 6 (1985): 598-611.

extreme stress with the strength that they do not need to depend on others for coping, as God alone can help them.<sup>16</sup>

The fundamental aim of this study is to address the gap in the existing scholarship pertaining the lived experience of Rohingya women in Malaysia. Firstly, the experiences of Rohingya refugee and asylum seeking mother is under-researched, particularly outside developed Western countries such as the UK, the US, Canada and Australia.<sup>17</sup> Overall, there is lack of academically sound, publically available information pertaining to refugees in Malaysia.

## 2.0 Methodology

### 2.1 Research design

A qualitative approach was employed to answer the research questions of the present study. Qualitative research explores “people’s lives, lived experiences, behaviour, emotions, and feelings” or social experiences.<sup>18</sup> The phenomenological approach was used for the study. Patton<sup>19</sup> states that phenomenological research is the study of essences; it is a search for what it means to be human. Kruger<sup>20</sup> points out that phenomenological research attempts to describe people’s everyday world, rather than providing explanations.

### 2.2 Method

Semi-structured interviews were used for the current study. This method was chosen as interviewing would enable the researcher to extract in-depth, narrative answers from the subjects. A semi-structured interview includes requesting participants a series of

---

<sup>16</sup> Raghallaigh Muireann Ní and Robbie Gilligan, "Active Survival in the Lives of Unaccompanied Minors: Coping Strategies, Resilience, and the Relevance of Religion," *Child & Family Social Work* 15, no. 2 (2010): 226-37.

<sup>17</sup> Kalwant Bhopal, "South Asian Women Homeworkers in East London," *Women, Work and Inequality* (1999), 129-38.

<sup>18</sup> Juliet M. Corbin and Anselm Strauss, "Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons, and Evaluative Criteria," *Qualitative Sociology* 13, no. 1 (1990): 3-21.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (Estados Unidos: Sage Publications, 2002), 104-106.

<sup>20</sup> Dreyer Kruger, *An Introduction to Phenomenological Psychology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Cape Town: Juta, 1988).



“predetermined but open-ended questions”.<sup>21</sup> Utilizing this methodology enables the acquisition of information which would meet the research objectives, simultaneously enabling subjects to share experiences pertinent to them. Participants were given full information on the nature of the study and they were made fully aware the responses they gave would not be included into their UNHCR files and it would not affect their status with UNHCR.

### *2.3 Participant recruitment and procedure*

From the hundreds of refugees who visit the UNHCR office in Kuala Lumpur daily, 20 Rohingya women were recruited for the study. The participants were identified from the registration waiting area, as all refugees are required to attend appointments with the registration department periodically to renew their UNHCR cards or other official work. Purposeful sampling is the recommended method for most the qualitative research,<sup>22</sup> “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned”.<sup>23</sup> The participants were recruited subject to the inclusion criteria: they had to be Rohingya mothers with children under the age of 18 living with them.

First, informed consent was taken prior to the interview. Pseudonyms were used in reporting data and consent was also obtained for the audio recording to protect the participants from being identified. The 20 confirmed volunteers were requested to suggest a convenient location and time for the interviews. The individual interviews began with demographic questions that provided information about the participant’s age, number of children, place of origin in Myanmar, length of time in Malaysia, and place of residence in Malaysia. This was followed by the semi-structured interview questions; whereby the researcher was able to obtain saturated and thick description across participants, while remaining

---

<sup>21</sup> L. Ayres, “Semi-structured interview,” In *The SAGE Encyclopaedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. L. Given. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Michael Quinn Patton. *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*.

<sup>23</sup> Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

open for additional perspectives that may emerge.<sup>24</sup> The researcher employed self-constructed interview questions that were developed from the reading of past researches.

Further questions and associated probes were utilized to generate dialogue during the interview to gather concrete description of the experience. With this freedom, it was possible for themes and sub-themes to emerge over the course of the interview. This flexible approach to conducting interviews is consistent with phenomenological interview methods.<sup>25</sup> The interview session was audio recorded and lasted for 45 minutes to one hour. Some of the participants required up to three follow-up sessions to gather enough data to reach saturation point. A research assistant was available to help in interpreting some of the interview, but most of the time this was not required as most of the participants spoke Urdu, in which the chief researcher is fluent. Data saturation can occur in phenomenological studies with greatly varying numbers of participants according to the context, with most studies reaching this point with 5-25 participants.<sup>26</sup> The current study utilized 20 participants to reach the saturation point.

#### 2.4 Data analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis accompanies data collection and is considered a fluid process.<sup>27</sup> Data analysis of this study was iterative and recursive.<sup>28</sup> Data analysis in this qualitative research began as soon as data were collected and continued until the collection process was completed. This recursive process allowed for the coding and categorization of data while it was being collected, so

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Clark Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Traditions* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Lisa Lopez Levers, "Samples of Indigenous Healing: The Path of Good Medicine," *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education* 53, no. 4 (2006): 479-88.

<sup>28</sup> Lisa Lopez Levers, "Examining Northern Namibian Teachers Impressions of the Effects of Violence, Gender, Disability, and Poverty on Young Children's Development: School-based Countermeasures," *Journal of Children and Poverty* 8, no. 2 (2002): 101-40.

that the codes became more precise as more data was reviewed. The first step of qualitative data analysis began by transcribing all interviews verbatim. The second step was identifying common themes/ units of meaning and lived experiences<sup>29</sup> and coding them as they emerged. The coding analysis was considered complete by the researcher reached the theoretical saturation,<sup>30</sup> when the researcher was no longer able to identify more new meanings, and the constructed meanings were consistent across all the 20 interviews.

### 3.0 Results

The findings were reported with particular respect to the anonymity of the participants. The number of children the women had ranged from 1 to 6 (average = 2.9) and they indicated they were living with their children (as per the inclusion criteria). The vast majority of participants (n = 17) were married, and the remainder (n = 3) were widows. In terms of their origin, 9 participants said they came from cities, while 11 came from rural villages. The residential location of the participants indicated that most of them lived in and around Kuala Lumpur (8 in Ampang, 5 in Selayang, 3 in Sri Gombak and 4 in Petaling Jaya). The mothers in the sample shared their encounters of myriad lived experiences as refugees and asylum seekers. The themes that were generated are elaborated below.

#### 3.1 *Negotiating an opaque and hostile asylum system*

The majority of the participants expressed their experience with the asylum seeking system as frightening and confusing. The women shared their fears of being in an uncertain situation about their future, with a poor knowledge about the system, and their perception of the institutional hostility of the system heightened their fear. A large number of women described the asylum system as a complicated and an unfamiliar process to deal with. They expressed how they barely had any knowledge of the procedure they were required to sieve through. They expressed how the delay in application resulted in

---

<sup>29</sup> M. Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for An Active Sensitive Pedagogy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990).

<sup>30</sup> Herbert. J. Rubin and Irene. S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995).

being fearful of applying for asylum, as they worried they would be rejected due to the delay in application. As one of the women shared:

“we did not know how to get help... my baby was very ill we were so afraid to go to the clinic we were scared to be caught by police, my husband’s friends helped us to find way to go to register as an asylum seeker”  
(Maria)

All the participants shared the feeling that their lives were being held ransom due to the long waiting process for a decision. They echoed sentiments of living an unsettled and bleak life until they see a clear future. The uncertain waiting process has resulted in heightened stress, pain and depression:

“You know how hard it is to become asylum seeker... we have to wait for so long and we never know long all this will go on for... I am waiting for last four years, many others are even up to twelve or more years, we don’t know where life is going... just waiting, waiting, waiting... The stress of the wait is too much...”  
(Fatimah)

“This wait is killing me from inside more and more... I was already crushed and dead from my country till reaching Malaysia but now... I am scared drop by drop by drop about what is next for my children... I am in constant physical and mind pain” (Aisha)

Most participants felt that the asylum-seeking process was designed in a way to intentionally create fear, confusion, uncertainty and a sense of haplessness, particularly the initial interviewing process. The participants felt the hostile environment was purposefully created to make them tired and confused, and when they did share their past distressing experience they appeared more confused and traumatized.

“We are asked to come early in the morning, we come with our little children all scared and hungry we just keep waiting, they ask us to go here and there and they keep asking the same questions... sometimes I feel

numb in recalling the pain... with the hunger and fear I almost feel faint...” (Nida)

“They ask same question in so many ways... that you begin to doubt yourself, asking ‘am I wrong or do they not understand me?’... At one time all I could see was black in front of my eyes... everything was dark and scary even my tears would not come out...” (Shazia)

### *3.2 Unemployment leading to poor living conditions*

All of the participants collectively expressed living in extremely poor living conditions and poverty. This scenario was consequence of being unable to work due to the fact that Malaysian law does not give the right to work for individuals holding refugee or asylum seeking status. About 6 of the participants lived in a house where no one worked and they resorted to begging and living off charity. Another 14 women lived in households with one or two adults working in a menial job with below-average salary. The majority of the participants echoed their aspiration to work legally in order to supplement their sustenance.

“Because we cannot do legal work we cannot get money, we cannot live in a better house or eat better” (Asifa)

“Even if we find work there is always a risk of being caught by the police, and worse still everybody knows we are not allowed to work, everybody takes advantage of us, we work long hours and get very, very little pay” (Aisha)

Two participants spoke of their children being taken by the local people in her neighbourhood and expressed kindness in providing for her child.

“We have no proper home. I live with my two children in one small house with two other families... but one local neighbor is so good, they adopt our children and take them to live with them they get better food... but it kills me every minute as a mother to be without my

children... I am constantly worried how they are... the guilt also gives me pain to not able to do anything good for my children” (Shazia)

Most participants felt they had failed to be good mothers due to their inability to provide the basics for their children.

“Because I earn so little from my dish washing job, I can never buy new clothes or good meal for my children. I feel sad... I feel hopeless... ..I really feel there is no point in bringing a child in the world and not being able to provide the basic to them... I feel like a failure as a mother” (Rashida)

Such situations indicate a negative self-perception of their mothering skills and widespread feelings of inadequacy as mothers thus, manifesting negative psychological health outcomes arising from their material status.

### *3.3 Children’s education and well-being*

Many participants felt the importance of education in their lives and the Rohingya community at large. One of the participants shared how education is important for the betterment of the Rohingya community and how her contact with school in Myanmar made her value the importance of education.

“I want to give education to my children, so they can be respected they can change their living condition, but we don’t know how to educate them with the asylum status and no money on hand to spare for education” (Latifa)

Other women also shared the same view on the consequence of limited education and were focused on ensuring their children receive the education that they were denied in Myanmar.

“We are already destroyed and hopeless without education, I want to give education to my children... I did not get the opportunity to study in my hometown” (Aisha)

Most of the mothers also shared similar views of not knowing where their children's future was heading.

“It's like I am living a blank life... but for my child I wanted a better life... I thought with the hellish journey to Malaysia I can give better education and environment to my children... but here we are, similar but much better... I feel weak as a mother... but I am praying always to Allah” (Noora)

Despite their gloomy situation, most of the participants indicated a high level of self-esteem and self-efficacy in seeing positive aspects of their abilities as mothers under extreme conditions.

“I know I cannot give him proper education, but I can teach him at home to be a good human being to respect other, to be kind and loving... I have to be a good mother first and then a teacher” (Fatimah)

Some women showed signs of hopefulness, talking about working illegally in any menial job they could find in order to provide the best they could for their children.

“I work really long hours cleaning, shop assistance, I am blessed I am lucky to be financially ok not struggling. I have been able to buy my children the bare basics... I send them to the community school” (Yasmin)

Another participant recognized that she has the capacity within her limited means to develop her child's wellbeing:

“By taking them out to mosques and doing other fun activities at a nearby park, it is run down and not nice, but they play and get some fresh air and make friends with the other children... it makes me happy see them smile and play... I just pray it helps them too to feel less stressed and sad to be in the situation they are in” (Aliya)

By doing the little things the mothers could do besides trying to give them a proper education, the mothers feel better in doing other things

like taking them to playgrounds, teaching them good values. They feel a sense of fulfilment in undertaking their duty as mothers.

### *3.4 Religion*

A strong religious belief system stood out significantly in many of the women's statements as something that gave them comfort in being the mothers they are, conferring a sense of hope, and an outlet to complain, cry and share their pain and suffering. Praying was described as a tool to seek comfort and create a sense of someone being there to listen to them, guide them and to watch over them and protect them. Almost all of the participants reported that praying, reading the holy book and visiting the mosque were great sources of comfort.

“Pray to Allah, never give up... Allah will answer our prayer and open our door for better time... if not here than in our hereafter” (Amina)

“Praying one day, five times, gives us peace in our heart... Lots of tension inside our heads and hearts goes away... reading the Quran just calms your heart... and gives strength to your soul.” (Razia)

Nearly half of the participants used prayer to assuage their difficulties and pain and seek comfort in their inability to give the best to their children, believing in divine preordainment and tests.

“Everything is dependent on Allah, whatever Allah gives me and my children is good for us” (Salma)

“My Allah, keep providing them food and protection” (Rubina)

Most participants found that their strong religious belief system helped them to cope with the mental and emotional stress.

“We are so appreciative and thankful to Allah for helping us to come to Malaysia, our kids are safe back home people are worst of then us... we are still safe” (Sakina)



#### 4.0 Discussion

The findings of this study corroborate previous research work which also indicated that women reported a hostile asylum process that is frightening and opaque.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, previous research also mentioned unemployment among refugees as leading to poverty.<sup>32</sup> Oneill<sup>33</sup> also found that asylum-seekers and refugees experience poverty and financial struggle. Similarly, past studies also reported that asylum-seekers experience an inability to buy basic essential items and often suffer from food scarcity.<sup>34</sup> These experiences result in women feeling inadequate in fulfilling expected motherhood roles.

At the same time, many of the women in the research study adopted numerous life-saving skills in response to the challenges faced. In particular, in response to food scarcity, the women resorted to visiting mosques regularly and getting food for their families from the dinners served there, or leftovers from generous and kind neighbours. A few of the participants shared the risk of being detained while begging, yet they took their children to beg for money and food. These strategies were noted to be a form of resilience, as stated by,<sup>35</sup> as the women undertook an uncommon strategy to survive.

In line with the previous research, acquiring education was also a recurrent theme amongst women as they were aware of that having limited educational opportunities would limit their children's

---

<sup>31</sup> Christel Querton, "I Feel Like as A Women I'm not Welcome: A Gender Analysis of UK Asylum Law, Policy and Practice," (London: Asylum Aid, 2012), [https://www.asylumaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Ifeelasawoman\\_EXEC\\_SUM\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.asylumaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Ifeelasawoman_EXEC_SUM_WEB.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> C. M. R. Sulaiman-Hill and S. C. Thompson, "'Thinking Too Much: Psychological Distress, Sources of Stress and Coping Strategies of Resettled Afghan and Kurdish Refugees," *Journal of Muslim Mental Health* 6, no. 2 (2012).

<sup>33</sup> Maggie Oneill, "Women Refugees and Asylum Seekers: Asylum, Migration and Community," *Social Policy and Society* 7, no.3 (2010), 205-31.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Dwyer and David Brown, "Meeting Basic Needs? Forced Migrants and Welfare," *Social Policy and Society* 4, no. 04 (2005): 369.

<sup>35</sup> Y. Chan, "Factors Affecting Family Resiliency: Implications for Social Service Responses to Families in Hong Kong," *The Indian Journal of Social Work* 67, no. 3 (2006): 201-214.

job prospects. Corroborating Phillimore, and Goodson<sup>36</sup> findings that asylum seekers are often impacted by unemployment, the current study found this was a common theme. Whilst some subjects noted constraints regarding work conditions, including exploitation, long working hours and manual labour, others reported job satisfaction and financial freedom. A strong religious belief system was used as a form of coping mechanism, which helped them feel better as mothers in doing whatever they could to provide for their children. This was in line with previous study by Zabkiewicz<sup>37</sup> in which found that employment was important for positive life satisfaction. Ni Raghallaigh and Gilligan<sup>38</sup> were concurred in the finding of the current study that a strong religious belief system was used as a form of coping mechanism.

#### *4.1 Limitations of the study*

This study has a number of limitations. Firstly, the sample size of the study is small, however, in qualitative research, as long as saturation is achieved in the data collected, results can be considered to be achieved; however, generalization for larger populations is inadvisable. Moreover, due to the sensitive nature of the study, it was difficult to recruit participants to share their life stories. Nevertheless, it is important to note that a small number of participants are acceptable in such qualitative studies.<sup>39</sup> Another limitation is that data obtained is characteristic of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, as such, it cannot be generalized to other refugee experiences.

#### *4.2 Recommendations for further research*

Future research work should explore the experiences of fathers and children among Rohingya asylum-seekers and refugee populations in Malaysia. An exploration of mothering experiences of other populations of refugees is required such as Syrian, Somalian and other Myanmar ethnicities.

---

<sup>36</sup> Jenny Phillimore and Lisa Goodson, "Problem or Opportunity? Asylum Seekers, Refugees, Employment and Social Exclusion in Deprived Urban Areas," *Urban Studies* 43, no. 10 (2006): 1715-736.

<sup>37</sup> Denise Zabkiewicz, "The Mental Health Benefits of Work".

<sup>38</sup> Raghallaigh Muireann Ní, and Robbie Gilligan. "Active Survival in the Lives".

<sup>39</sup> Michael Quinn Patton. *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*.

### *4.3 Implications for policy/ program*

The results from this research can be utilised towards the formulation of policies and designing of programs, particularly for Malaysia, and carefully used to inform similar contexts. The most effective strategy to alleviate and better the lives of these Rohingya women would be the amendment or laws pertinent to refugees. Malaysia should primarily assent to the Convention on Refugees (1951); other vital policy changes would be the provision of the right to employment and access to education. These proposals are in order for Malaysia to fulfil its humanitarian obligations and expectations, and should not be considered politically motivated by anyone with common decency.

The results of this study clearly highlight that access to education was of foremost importance to Rohingya women: therefore, investing in it would yield long-term gains. Likewise, the Education Department at UNHCR could fund learning centres which caters for the education of Rohingya children thereby, alleviating the financial burden of these parents to pay school fees; and promoting school feeding programs.

Another area which would benefit Rohingya women would be livelihood support, a critical point of intervention owing to the ramifications of deficient income. Livelihood support could include skills training (designed towards the type of jobs allocated to refugee women); income yielding prospects (e.g. cooperatives); and assistance to find employment. Numerous departments could tackle the issues related to food insecurity; for example, by providing for lunches at school for refugee children.

Finally, a culturally-sensitive mental health service, such as counselling, could be provided to the refugees with culturally aware trained professionals. They can also include spirituality, talk therapy and social support to give culturally appropriate service.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Dora Bernardes et al., "Asylum Seekers Perspectives on Their Mental Health and Views on Health and Social Services: Contributions for Service Provision Using a Mixed-Methods Approach," *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care* 6, no. 4 (2011): 3-19.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

The stateless and illegalized Rohingya women refugees in Malaysia are generally affected by the mental and the physical well-being; this happens at the behest of meagre social policies and scanty programmes, inequitable economic plans, and “bad politics”, according to the World Health Organization. Negotiating Malaysia’s complex, insensitive and hostile asylum system while attempting to provide maternal care is a massive challenge to refugee women, who develop numerous coping mechanisms in response to the difficulties they encounter. The findings of this research must be used as a stepping stone and they should be built upon by a coherent long-term strategy, underscoring the resilience that Rohingya women have displayed by migrating and surmounting agonizing experiences and making every effort to alleviate their difficult conditions.



# AL-SHAJARA

Special Issue

Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| RETHINKING UNHCR AND OIC RESPONSE TO FORCED MIGRATION<br><i>Fethi B Jomaa Ahmed</i>   | 1   |
| RAWA MIGRATION TO THE MALAY PENINSULA IN THE 19 <sup>TH</sup> CENTURY:<br>THE CASE OF PAHANG, PERAK, AND SELANGOR<br><i>Fauziah Fathil, Wan Suhana Wan Sulong &amp; Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf</i> | 27  |
| A USES AND GRATIFICATIONS PERSPECTIVE ON MEDIA<br>USE BY REFUGEES FROM MYANMAR AND PAKISTAN IN MALAYSIA<br><i>Aida Mokhtar &amp; Nurul Miza Mohd Rashid</i>                                     | 51  |
| A SCATTERED LIFE: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES<br>OF ROHINGYA REFUGEE MOTHERS IN MALAYSIA<br><i>Munira Arshad &amp; Arshad Islam</i>   | 107 |
| ERDOĞAN'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND FOREIGN POLICY NEXUS:<br>THE CASE OF THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS AND TURKEY'S ROLE<br><i>Suleyman TEMIZ</i>  | 123 |
| FROM IMMIGRANTS TO SPORTS FIGURES: THE CASE STUDY<br>OF THE IOC REFUGEE TEAM IN RIO OLYMPICS 2016<br><i>Baidruel Hairiel Abd Rahim, Nurazzura Mohamad DiaH &amp; Mohd Salleh Aman</i>           | 137 |
| CHINESE MIGRANTS AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF SABAH:<br>LOCAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH CULTURAL COOPERATION<br><i>Rosdianah Yacho</i>  | 155 |
| MUSLIM MIGRATION TO THE WEST:<br>THE CASE OF THE MUSLIM MINORITY IN INDIA<br><i>Zulqernain Haider Subhani, Nor Azlin Tajuddin<br/>&amp; Nurazzura Mohamad Diah</i>                              | 173 |
| THE CRISIS ON THE BORDER OF TURKEY: AN ANALYSIS<br>OF SYRIAN REFUGEES' EDUCATION, SHELTER AND HEALTHCARE<br><i>Ahmed Cagri INAN</i>   | 195 |
| GENOCIDE OF ROHINGYA MUSLIMS: A CLASSICAL MODEL<br>OF ETHNIC CLEANSING<br><i>Noor Mohammad Osmani, Belayet Hossen, Qutub Shah<br/>&amp; Maulana Akbar Shah @U Tun Aung</i>                      | 215 |
| NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS   | 237 |

WoS-Indexed under Arts & Humanities Citation Index, Current Contents/Arts and Humanities and Scopus

ISSN 1394-6870



9 771394 687009