



Drivers of Child Marriage among Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia

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Abstract: Child marriage is a significant issue among refugee populations, often driven by instability, migration, and poverty. This study aims to explore the drivers of child marriage within the Rohingya refugee community in Malaysia, addressing a research gap that has primarily focused on refugees from other countries. A qualitative methodology was employed, consisting of semi-structured interviews with 20 Rohingya males and females who married before the age of 18 in Malaysia. The study found that poverty, limited access to education, and bride trafficking were the main factors leading to child marriage. Many Rohingya families viewed marriage as a way to reduce financial burdens, and bride trafficking to Malaysia for marriage was identified as a concerning practice that requires urgent intervention. The significance of this study extends beyond Malaysia, calling for both international and domestic authorities to address child marriage in refugee contexts and propose targeted interventions, such as improving access to education and dismantling bride trafficking networks.
Keywords: Child marriage; Rohingya refugees; Refugees Protection; Bride trafficking; children's rights

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Abstrak: Pernikahan anak merupakan masalah signifikan di kalangan populasi pengungsi, yang sering kali dipicu oleh ketidakstabilan, migrasi, dan kemiskinan. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi faktor-faktor pendorong pernikahan anak dalam komunitas pengungsi Rohingya di Malaysia, guna mengisi kesenjangan penelitian yang sebelumnya lebih berfokus pada pengungsi dari negara lain. Metodologi kualitatif digunakan, terdiri dari wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan 20 pria dan wanita Rohingya yang menikah sebelum usia 18 tahun di Malaysia. Studi ini menemukan bahwa kemiskinan, akses terbatas terhadap pendidikan, dan perdagangan pengantin perempuan merupakan faktor utama yang menyebabkan pernikahan anak. Banyak keluarga Rohingya melihat pernikahan sebagai cara untuk mengurangi beban finansial, dan perdagangan pengantin perempuan ke Malaysia untuk tujuan pernikahan diidentifikasi sebagai praktik yang mengkhawatirkan yang memerlukan intervensi segera. Signifikansi studi ini melampaui Malaysia, sekaligus menyerukan otoritas internasional dan domestik untuk menangani pernikahan anak dalam konteks pengungsi serta mengusulkan intervensi yang tepat sasaran, seperti meningkatkan akses pendidikan dan membongkar jaringan perdagangan pengantin perempuan.

Kata Kunci: Pernikahan anak; Pengungsi Rohingya; perlindungan pengungsi; Perdagangan pengantin; Hak anak-anak

Introduction

Child marriage among refugee populations has gained international attention, where instability, migration, and poverty are widespread. Children, particularly girls, are often the most vulnerable in these situations, as their families may resort to early marriage as a survival strategy in response to economic hardship and social insecurity.¹ Previous research has identified various factors that put children at risk of marriage, including poverty, fear of sexual violence, the need to protect family honour, and the desire for stability during crises.² This

¹ Qahar, Jabbar Abdulrahman, Dr Azlin Hillaluddin, and Dr Fatimah Ramli. "Factors Contributing to Child Marriage among Syrian Refugees in Domiz Camp-Kurdistan-Iraq." *Journal of International Studies* 20, no. 1 (May 12, 2024), p. 1–25.; Elnakib, Shatha, Ligia Paina, Bothaina Attal, Rumana Akter, Ghada Khoury, Loqman Karim, Hemeda Houssein Barkat, et al. "Incidence of Child Marriage among Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in the Middle East and South Asia: Evidence from Six Cross-Sectional Surveys." *BMJ Open* 13, no. 6 (June 15, 2023), p. e070056.

² Elnakib, Shatha, Salma Abou Hussein, Sali Hafez, May Elsallab, Kara Hunersen, Janna Metzler, and W. Courtland Robinson. "Drivers and Consequences of Child Marriage in a Context of Protracted Displacement: A Qualitative Study among Syrian Refugees in Egypt." *BMC Public Health* 21, no. 1 (April 7, 2021), p. 674; Gausman, Jewel, Fauzia Akhter Huda, Areej Othman, Maysoon Al Atoom, Abeer Shaheen, Iqbal Hamad, Maysoon Dabobe, Hassan Rushekh Mahmood, Rifah Ibnat, and Ana Langer. "Girl Child Marriage and the Social Context of Displacement: A Qualitative Comparative Exploration of Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh." *BMC Public Health* 22, no. 1 (December 23, 2022), p. 2417.

issue is particularly relevant among refugee communities, where displacement exacerbates these challenges. In addition to Muslim refugee communities like Syrians, the Rohingya, one of the largest stateless populations in the world, face this issue severely.³ As they seek refuge in countries such as Malaysia, many Rohingya girls are married off at a young age due to complex drivers such as poverty, limited education, and the broader challenges of displacement.

While research on child marriage in refugee camps in countries like Bangladesh, Jordan, and Lebanon exists, there has been little attention given to the unique context of child marriage among Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, a transit country, before resettlement to third countries. Most studies related to refugees in Malaysia have focused on broader humanitarian issues, such as the lack of legal recognition, access to healthcare, and education, but few have explored the specific issue of child marriage.⁴ This study aims to fill that gap by focusing on the drivers of child marriage within the Rohingya refugee community in Malaysia, where cultural traditions, economic constraints, and legal vulnerabilities have created an environment conducive to early marriage. Additionally, there has been a lack of focus on the impact of bride trafficking in Malaysia and its role in facilitating child marriage within this community, an issue that previous researchers have not seriously addressed.

This article seeks to explore the drivers that lead to child marriage among Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. The discussion begins by exploring the broader issue of child marriage within refugee populations globally, reviewing existing literature on key drivers such as poverty, lack of education, and cultural practices. It also delves into the specific context of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, examining how their unique challenges influence child marriage. After outlining the qualitative methodology, the findings section highlights key factors such as poverty, limited education, and bride trafficking, along with policy recommendations and interventions aimed at reducing child marriage within this vulnerable community.

This study utilised a qualitative research approach, employing semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of child marriage among Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. The participants consisted of 20 Rohingya males

³ Islam, M. Mofizul, Md Nuruzzaman Khan, and Md Mashiur Rahman. "Factors Affecting Child Marriage and Contraceptive Use among Rohingya Girls in Refugee Camps." *The Lancet Regional Health. Western Pacific* 12 (2021), p. 100175; Melnikas, Andrea J., Sigma Ainul, Iqbal Ehsan, Eashita Haque, and Sajeda Amin. "Child Marriage Practices among the Rohingya in Bangladesh." *Conflict and Health* 14 (2020), p. 28.

⁴ Abdullah, Azlinariah, Azharudin Mohamed Dali, and Mohamad Rodzi Abd Razak. "Surviving Stateless Refugees: The Uncertain Future of Rohingya's Children in Malaysia." *Jebat: Malaysian Journal of History, Politics & Strategic Studies* 45, no. 1 (June 25, 2018); Samuri, Mohd Al Adib, and Peter Hopkins. "Navigating 'Purdah' Culture in Urban Space: The Restricted Lives of Young Married Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia." In *Refugee Youth*, 81–99. Bristol, England: Bristol University Press, 2023.

and females who had married before the age of 18 within the past five years. The inclusion criteria required that participants be Rohingya refugees, married in Malaysia, have their marriage taken place within the last five years, and hold or not hold a UNHCR card. A purposive sampling method was used to select participants for the study. The researchers worked with community gatekeepers from among Rohingya leaders, particularly women and religious figures, to identify suitable participants for the study.

To ensure cultural sensitivity and comfort, the interviews were conducted by researchers of the same gender as the participants, creating a conducive environment for open and honest discussions. The interviews were held in the participants' homes to establish a familiar and relaxed setting. Translators, who were native Rohingya speakers, were present throughout the interviews to facilitate clear communication between the participants and the researchers. These translators played a crucial role in translating conversations from Rohingya to English. In some cases, the translators further elaborated on what the participants were saying for clarity. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. For those under 18, consent was also obtained from their guardians or husbands, while adult participants provided their own consent. Additionally, the researchers sought permission to record the interviews for transcription and data analysis purposes, and all participants agreed. To protect confidentiality, participants' names were not recorded in the files. The interview data was transcribed verbatim by research assistants to accurately capture the participants' voices and perspectives.

The collected interview data was analysed using thematic coding with the Nvivo software. This process enabled the researchers to systematically organise and identify recurring themes across the interviews. Key themes that emerged included drivers of child marriage in refugee communities, life after marriage, the impact of marriage, and the experiences of Rohingya refugees. Due to the large volume of data, this article presents only a portion of the findings, specifically focusing on the drivers of child marriage within the context of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. All participant names have been anonymised, and pseudonyms are used throughout the article to maintain confidentiality and prevent identification.

Child Marriage Among Refugees

Migration, instability, and poverty are driving factors that can increase the rate of child marriage among refugee populations.⁵ The United Nations Human Rights Council states that the risk of child marriage is “highly exacerbated in humanitarian settings” due to factors such as poverty, insecurity, gender

⁵ UNFPA. “New Study Finds Child Marriage Rising among Most Vulnerable Syrian Refugees.” Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth, February 8, 2017. <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2017/02/new-study-finds-child-marriage-rising-among-vulnerable-syrian-refugees/>

inequality, and lack of access to education.⁶ A meta-analysis of data from six countries (Djibouti, Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq, Bangladesh, and Nepal) found that, on average, displaced populations have a 30% higher risk of child marriage compared to the host populations. However, Elnakib et al. argue that there is no strong support that migration and humanitarian crises lead to an increase in child marriage rates. Instead, the researcher found evidence of both surges and declines in child marriage rates in various countries.⁷ This suggests that a child's refugee status and background may allow for early marriage.

Various complex and interrelated factors drive child marriage practices among refugees. For example, among Syrian refugees, child marriage is influenced by multiple aspects such as customs, religious beliefs, poverty, displacement, violence, discrimination, lack of educational and employment opportunities, as well as immigration status and economic insecurity.⁸ Migration heightens the vulnerabilities of Syrian girls, leading parents to often see child marriage as the best option for their daughters.⁹

Child marriage is often rooted in cultural traditions and existing beliefs prior to displacement, particularly in societies where sex outside of marriage is considered taboo. For instance, a 2013 UN Women study found that child marriage was a traditional practice accepted among Syrians even before the crisis.¹⁰ Similarly, child marriage among refugees in Gaza continues in some communities, driven by cultural customs and beliefs.¹¹ Among Rohingya refugees, child marriage is

⁶ OHCHR. "Child and Forced Marriage, Including in Humanitarian Settings." OHCHR. Accessed September 30, 2024. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/women/child-and-forced-marriage-including-humanitarian-settings>

⁷ Elnakib, Shatha, Ligia Paina, Bothaina Attal, Rumana Akter, Ghada Khoury, Loqman Karim, Hemeda Houssein Barkat, et al. "Incidence of Child Marriage among Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in the Middle East and South Asia: Evidence from Six Cross-Sectional Surveys." *BMJ Open* 13, no. 6 (2023), p. e070056.

⁸ Mehmetali, Ibrahim. "Causes and Consequences of Female Child Marriage among Displaced Syrians in Turkey: An Intersectional Approach." *Contemporary Islam*, June 24, 2024, p. 1–24.

⁹ Bartels, Susan A., Saja Michael, and Annie Bunting. "Child Marriage among Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: At the Gendered Intersection of Poverty, Immigration, and Safety." *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 19, no. 4 (2021), p. 472–87.

¹⁰ Women, U. N. "Gender-Based Violence and Child Protection among Syrian Refugees in Jordan, with a Focus on Early Marriage." United Nations Women, 2014. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/39522>.

¹¹ Hamad, Bassam Abu, Samah Elamassie, Erin Oakley, Sarah Alheiwidi, and Sarah Baird. "'No One Should Be Terrified Like I Was!' Exploring Drivers and Impacts of Child Marriage in Protracted Crises Among Palestinian and Syrian Refugees." *The European Journal of Development Research* 33, no. 5 (2021), p. 1209–31.

described as a “strong cultural phenomenon,” particularly rooted in socio-cultural and religious beliefs about marriage readiness.¹²

In addition, economic challenges are often cited as a primary factor in decisions related to child marriage.¹³ In host communities facing economic difficulties, refugee families may see child marriage as a way to reduce financial burdens or ensure economic stability.¹⁴ A lack of education and awareness of the negative consequences of child marriage can contribute to its prevalence. There may be misconceptions about marriage laws and the appropriate age for marriage. Gender inequality also influences marriage expectations in many communities. This can result in girls being viewed primarily in terms of their marriageability rather than their potential for education and personal development. Similarly, a limited understanding of the health risks associated with child marriage among refugee families may contribute to its persistence.¹⁵

Limited access to education is both a driver and a consequence of child marriage. Not attending school and adult female unemployment in households are associated with a higher likelihood of child marriage in those families. Refugee adolescent boys face a lack of employment opportunities, and girls are expected to take on household roles, both of which make education a low priority. Some adolescents prefer to leave school after marriage and focus on supporting their families. Among girls who wish to continue their education after marriage, many are forced to quit due to the responsibilities of marriage, which affect their academic performance.¹⁶

¹² Melnikas, Andrea J., Sigma Ainul, Iqbal Ehsan, Eashita Haque, and Sajeda Amin. “Child Marriage Practices among the Rohingya in Bangladesh.” *Conflict and Health* 14 (2020), p. 28.

¹³ Sharma, Vandana, Adaugo Amobi, Samuel Tewolde, Negussie Deyessa, and Jennifer Scott. “Displacement-Related Factors Influencing Marital Practices and Associated Intimate Partner Violence Risk among Somali Refugees in Dollo Ado, Ethiopia: A Qualitative Study.” *Conflict and Health* 14, no. 1 (2020), p. 17.

¹⁴ Hunersen, Kara, Bothaina Attal, Allison Jeffery, Janna Metzler, Tareq Alkibsi, Shatha Elnakib, and W. Courtland Robinson. “Child Marriage in Yemen: A Mixed Methods Study in Ongoing Conflict and Displacement.” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 4 (2022), p. 4551–71; Bartels, Susan Andrea, Saja Michael, Sophie Roupetz, Stephanie Garbern, Lama Kilzar, Harveen Bergquist, Nour Bakhache, Colleen Davison, and Annie Bunting. “Making Sense of Child, Early and Forced Marriage among Syrian Refugee Girls: A Mixed Methods Study in Lebanon.” *BMJ Global Health* 3, no. 1 (January 7, 2018), p. e000509.

¹⁵ Fowler, Rachel. 2014. “Syrian Refugee Families’ Awareness of the Health Risks of Child Marriage and What Organizations Offer or Plan in Order to Raise Awareness.” *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection.*, 2014, 1925. https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1925

¹⁶ Hunersen, Kara, Allison Jeffery, Luqman S. Karim, Katherine Gambir, Janna Metzler, Ali Zedan, and W. Courtland Robinson. “Child Marriage and Displacement: A Qualitative Study of Displaced and Host Populations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 37, no. 2 (2024), p. 324–35.

Some refugee communities view child marriage as a way to protect girls from premarital sex and unwanted pregnancies, preserving family honour and reputation. Many refugee families see early marriage as a protective measure against violence and sexual harassment. In refugee camps and unstable environments, parents are often concerned about the safety of their daughters. Marriage is seen as a way to provide protection and reduce the risk of sexual assault or exploitation.¹⁷ There is a belief that marriage can protect girls from potential sexual encounters or assaults that could bring shame to the family.¹⁸

Why does child marriage in refugee communities matter? This practice has a negative impact on both children and the refugee community. Previous studies have found that child marriage poses health risks to young girls in refugee communities. Premature pregnancy and childbirth are major concerns, as adolescent girls are not physically or emotionally prepared to become mothers.¹⁹ Early pregnancy can lead to complications during childbirth and an increased maternal mortality rate. Additionally, child brides are more vulnerable to domestic abuse, which can have severe physical and psychological consequences. This is worsened in the context of children in refugee communities, who are already experiencing various pressures from their migration to uncertain environments.

Moreover, one of the most devastating effects of child marriage is the reduction of educational opportunities for young girls in refugee communities. When girls marry at a young age, they are often forced to drop out of school, limiting their future opportunities and perpetuating the cycle of poverty.²⁰ This loss of education affects individuals and has broader societal implications, as educated women are more likely to contribute positively to their communities and make informed decisions about the health and well-being of their families. Refugee children are often forced to leave school due to their migration, and marriage is seen as one of the options for survival. Furthermore, child marriage in refugee communities can contribute to the perpetuation of poverty. Without

¹⁷ Bartels, Susan A., Saja Michael, and Annie Bunting. "Child Marriage among Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: At the Gendered Intersection of Poverty, Immigration, and Safety." *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 19, no. 4 (2021), p. 472–87.

¹⁸ Qahar, Jabbar Abdulrahman, Dr Azlin Hillaluddin, and Dr Fatimah Ramli. "Factors Contributing to Child Marriage among Syrian Refugees in Domiz Camp-Kurdistan-Iraq." *Journal of International Studies* 20, no. 1 (2024), p. 1–25.

¹⁹ Ben Hamida, Amen, Kara Hunersen, Hemeda Houssein Barkat, Yacin Doualeh Aden, Robleh Hersi Doualeh, Nika Elmi, Janna Metzler, and W. Courtland Robinson. "Prevalence of Child Marriage Among Yemeni and Somali Refugee and Host Communities in Djibouti, 2019." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 4 (2021), p. 4534–50.

²⁰ Hamad, Bassam Abu, Samah Elamassie, Erin Oakley, Sarah Alheiwidi, and Sarah Baird. "'No One Should Be Terrified Like I Was!' Exploring Drivers and Impacts of Child Marriage in Protracted Crises Among Palestinian and Syrian Refugees." *The European Journal of Development Research* 33, no. 5 (2021), p. 1209–31.

education and opportunities for personal development, child brides often remain trapped in a cycle of dependency and limited economic prospects. This affects the individuals involved and can have long-lasting effects on the entire refugee community.

Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia: Vulnerability to Child Marriage

In 2024, UNHCR reported that Malaysia hosts approximately 188,210 refugees and asylum seekers. The majority of these refugees (89%) are from Myanmar, including around 108,862 Rohingya, while the remainder come from 50 other countries. In terms of gender, 65% of the refugees and asylum seekers are male, while 35% are women and girls. Notably, 27% of them are children under the age of 18.²¹ This demographic indicates that child refugees are quite prevalent in Malaysia, yet the data does not specify the ethnicity or country of origin of these children.

In the Southeast Asian context, Malaysia, Indonesia (Aceh), and Thailand have been favoured destinations for Rohingya refugees seeking protection for several decades.²² The primary reason for the Rohingya migration is the severe persecution and conflict they face in their home country, Myanmar (Burma). Studies and media reports have confirmed that the Rohingya have endured a “long history of persecution and systematic discrimination in their homeland, particularly in Rakhine State in Myanmar.”²³ This violence against the Rohingya has been described as genocide by international organisations.²⁴ The Rohingya in Myanmar are victims of various forms of oppression, such as denial of citizenship, excessive taxation, property seizures, destruction of mosques, torture, extrajudicial killings, restrictions on freedom of movement and marriage, forced expulsion, and the destruction of homes and villages.²⁵

Several factors explain why Rohingya refugees choose Malaysia as their destination for protection. Ismail et al. argue that Malaysia’s close geographical location makes it a preferred destination for Rohingya fleeing Myanmar. Its proximity to Myanmar and the availability of various cross-border migration

²¹ UNHCR Malaysia. “Figures at a Glance in Malaysia.” UNHCR. Accessed April 18, 2024. <https://www.unhcr.org/my/what-we-do/figures-glance-malaysia>.

²² Shukri, Shazwanis. “The Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Southeast Asia: Asean’s Role and Way Forward.” *Journal of International Studies* 17 (2021), p. 239–63.

²³ Khairi, Aizat, and Andika Abdul Wahab. “The Smuggling Activity and Irregular Migration to Malaysia: A Case Study of the Muslim Rohingya from Myanmar.” *Global Journal Al-Thaqafah* 8, no. 1 (2018), p. 73–81.

²⁴ Rahman, Md Mahbubur, and Mohan J. Dutta. “The United Nations (UN) Card, Identity, and Negotiations of Health among Rohingya Refugees.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 4 (2023).

²⁵ Faisal, M. D. Mostafa. “The Rohingya Refugee Crisis of Myanmar: A History of Persecution and Human Rights Violations.” *International Journal of Social, Political and Economic Research* 7, no. 3 (2020), p. 743–61.

routes, including by land, sea, and air, have facilitated both planned and unplanned entry into the country.²⁶ Furthermore, the most crucial factor attracting Rohingya refugees to Malaysia is the shared Islamic identity.²⁷ As Muslims, the Rohingya feel a sense of cultural and religious connection with the majority Muslim population in Malaysia, leading them to believe that the Muslims in Malaysia would provide comfort and support to their community.²⁸ Malaysia's relative political stability and the general acceptance of refugees by Malaysian society have made it an attractive destination for the Rohingya. Although Malaysia does not officially recognise refugees, it has allowed the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and non-governmental organisations to assist them on humanitarian grounds.

Malaysia's economic opportunities and prosperity also influence the Rohingya refugees' decision to come to Malaysia. Some Rohingya view Malaysia as a place to build a better life, partly motivated by economic opportunities, as they believe they can find work. Moreover, the presence of an existing Rohingya community and their family networks in Malaysia plays a role in attracting more refugees. These well-established networks provide a support system and information for new arrivals migrating from refugee camps in Bangladesh to Malaysia.

Despite their arrival and settlement in Malaysia, Rohingya refugees do not enjoy full rights and access to basic services. Their hopes, which motivated their migration to Malaysia, have been shattered. This is because Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol.²⁹ This means that Malaysia does not officially recognise refugees, including the Rohingya, as it lacks a specific legal or administrative framework to govern refugee status and rights. As a result, this has limited their rights and protection in the country, leaving them in legal limbo. Without official recognition, Rohingya refugees are

²⁶ Karimah Ismail, Napisah, Aida Zahirah Samsudin, Farid Mat Zain, Izziah Suryani Mat Resad, and Ammalina Dalillah Mohd Isa. "Rohingya Refugees Migration to Malaysia: A Preliminary Study." *International Journal of Advanced Research* 11, no. 09 (2023), p. 1366–75.

²⁷ Lukmanulhakim, Nur Nadia, and Mohd Al Adib Bin Samuri. "The Religious Identity of Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia." *Studia Islamika* 30, no. 3 (April 4, 2024), p. 439–68; Kusrin, Zuliza Mohd, Zaini Nasohah, Mohd Al-Adib Samuri, and Mat Noor Mat Zain. "Legal Provisions and Restrictions on the Propagation of Non-Islamic Religions among Muslims in Malaysia." *Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies* 31, no. 2 (2013), p. 1–18.

²⁸ Abas, All-Mu'izz, and Mohd Al Adib Samuri. "Islamic Legal Perspectives on Refugee Protection and Welfare: A Case Study of Malaysia." *Journal de Jure* 16, no. 1 (2024), p. 141–60.

²⁹ Mahaseth, Harsh, and Samyuktha Banusekar. "Living in the Shadows: Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia." *Asian Journal of International Law* 12, no. 2 (July 2022), p. 259–66; Salleh, Mohd Afandi, and Mohd Mahbubul Haque. "Malaysian Policy towards Refugees and Asylum Seekers: A Case Study of Rohingya Refugees." *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development* 8, no. 3 (2019), p. 110–17. https://hrmars.com/papers_submitted/6291/Malaysian_Policy_towards_Refugees_and_Asylum_Seekers_A_Case_Study_of_Rohingya_Refugees.pdf.

considered “undocumented persons” in Malaysia,³⁰ exposing them to legal actions such as deportation and immigration detention.

The undocumented status of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia affects their access to essential services. Regarding healthcare, the Malaysian government has allowed refugees holding UNHCR cards to receive treatment at public hospitals, but they must pay for the services due to limited subsidies. Consequently, they face financial barriers to accessing adequate healthcare. Regarding education, Rohingya children are not permitted to attend public schools for formal education.³¹ In response to this restriction, NGOs and civil society organisations have established alternative education centres, and the Rohingya community itself has set up madrasahs focusing on Quranic education.³² Additionally, Rohingya refugees are not legally allowed to work in Malaysia,³³ forcing them into the informal sector, where they are vulnerable to exploitation. Furthermore, not all refugees in the country receive any form of consistent social protection. Even zakat is only provided to them as one-off or in-kind assistance, based on need, as refugees are not considered priority recipients. Finding stable and safe housing can also be challenging for refugees without legal status.³⁴ Since Malaysia does not provide designated settlement areas for refugees, most of them live in cities and towns across Peninsular Malaysia, with significant populations in the Klang Valley, Johor, and Penang. They reside in cramped, dilapidated homes and often share them with other refugees to save costs.

The situation faced by Rohingya refugees has contributed to the practice of child marriage, driven by several complex and interconnected factors. However, previous studies have mostly focused on child marriage among Rohingya in refugee camps in Bangladesh, leaving a gap in understanding within the Malaysian context. It is important to note that child marriage has been a common practice in the Rohingya community even before the conflict and migration, rooted in their cultural and traditional norms, which they believe are

³⁰ Surendran, Rajaratnam, and Azman Azlinda. “Refugee and Asylum Seeker Women’s Experiences with Healthcare and Social Environment in Malaysia.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 11 (2022), p. 6542.

³¹ Khairi, Aizat, Ibrahim Ahmad, and Suadi Zainal. “Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Education for Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia.” *Environment and Social Psychology* 8, no. 2 (2023).

³² Ismail, Napisah Karimah, and Aida Zahirah Samsudin. “Pendidikan Alternatif Sebagai Wadah Dakwah dalam Kalangan Minoriti Rohingya di Malaysia.” *International Journal of Islam and Contemporary Affairs* 2, no. 2 (2023).

³³ Letchamanana, Hema. “Myanmar’s Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia: Education and the Way Forward.” *Journal of International and Comparative Education* 2, no. 2 (2013), p. 86–97; Haque, Md Mahbulul, Zarina Othman, and Bakri Bin Mat. “Rohingya Refugees and Their Right to Work in Malaysia.” *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 50, no. 2 (2023), p. 95–119.

³⁴ Samuri, Mohd Al Adib, and Peter Hopkins. “Navigating ‘Purdah’ Culture in Urban Space: The Restricted Lives of Young Married Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia.” In *Refugee Youth*, 81–99. Bristol, England: Bristol University Press, 2023.

based on Islamic teachings.³⁵ This pre-existing custom, combined with the challenges of migration, contributes to the occurrence of child marriages among Rohingya refugees.³⁶ Secondly, economic hardship is a key driver of child marriage among Rohingya refugees. Families that have migrated often face extreme poverty and financial instability, leading them to view child marriage as a way to alleviate economic burdens.³⁷ By marrying off their daughters, families can reduce their financial strain and potentially gain some economic benefits through dowries or having one less mouth to feed. Moreover, Rohingya families often perceive child marriage as a way to protect their daughters and ensure their safety.³⁸ The unstable and potentially dangerous environment of refugee camps can make parents feel that marrying their daughters off early will provide them with protection and stability. However, the question remains whether the same drivers are present in the context of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, given the different background conditions. This article will explore this issue in greater depth.

Results and Findings

This study identified three key factors contributing to child marriage among the Rohingya refugee community in Malaysia: limited education opportunities, poverty, and bride trafficking. Although sexual and reproductive health issues were not seen as a significant factor for this community, the study uncovered several vital insights on the subject.

Poverty

This study identifies poverty as the primary reason behind child marriage among the Rohingya participants, whether in Myanmar or Malaysia. According

³⁵ Melnikas, Andrea J., Sigma Ainul, Iqbal Ehsan, Eashita Haque, and Sajeda Amin. "Child Marriage Practices among the Rohingya in Bangladesh." *Conflict and Health* 14 (May 25, 2020), p. 28; Samuri, Mohd Al Adib, Muhammad al-Ghazalli Abdol Malek, Muhammad Nazir Alias, and Peter Hopkins. "Hadith of Aisha's Marriage to Prophet Muhammad: An Islamic Discourse on Child Marriage." *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 21 (2022), p. 93-105.

³⁶ Gausman, Jewel, Fauzia Akhter Huda, Areej Othman, Maysoon Al Atoom, Abeer Shaheen, Iqbal Hamad, Maysoon Dabobe, Hassan Rushekh Mahmood, Rifah Ibnat, and Ana Langer. "Girl Child Marriage and the Social Context of Displacement: A Qualitative Comparative Exploration of Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh." *BMC Public Health* 22, no. 1 (2022), p. 2417.

³⁷ Guglielmi, Silvia, Khadija Mitu, and Jennifer Seager. "'I Just Keep Quiet': Addressing the Challenges of Married Rohingya Girls and Creating Opportunities for Change." *European Journal of Development Research* 33, no. 5 (2021), p. 1232–51.

³⁸ Islam, M. Mofizul, Md Nuruzzaman Khan, and Md Mashiur Rahman. "Factors Affecting Child Marriage and Contraceptive Use among Rohingya Girls in Refugee Camps." *The Lancet Regional Health. Western Pacific* 12 (July 2021), p. 100175; Uddin, M. Ala. "The Meaning of Marriage to the Rohingya Refugees, and Their Survival in Bangladesh." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 2 (2021), p. 2036–51.

to them, marriage was seen as a way to reduce the financial burden on their families and ensure their survival. One Rohingya girl, Khadija, shared, “I was happy to lessen [my parents’] burden. If they are happy, then I am happy. When I see my dad working, I feel sad. His work isn’t enough to support my siblings. We are poor, and life is hard.” However, another participant, Sofea, mentioned that her father forced her to marry due to their difficult financial situation. She explained that if she ate more than her share of rice, her father would scold her, saying, “Go and get married!” She was still in school at the time, but her father regularly beat her to pressure her into marriage. In another case, a girl who married at 15 said she agreed to her brother’s suggestion to marry his colleague, who worked in a clothing factory. “My brother explained to me. He said my husband was a good man. He didn’t smoke, didn’t chew betel nuts, and came from a good family. So I agreed to get married,” she said. Although she felt unprepared, her brother convinced her that her husband-to-be was a good person. Her brother, who had been financially supporting them while working in Malaysia, felt that marriage would reduce his financial burden since he also had his own family to support.

For refugees without family in Malaysia, marriage was seen as a means of survival and security. Dania, who arrived in Malaysia at 16, said, “I had no choice. So when someone offered to take care of me, I accepted.” ‘Take care’ referred to marriage, even though her husband was twice her age. She explained that since she couldn’t speak Malay, had no idea what kind of work she could do, and had no one in Malaysia to help her, she believed marriage was her only option. “If I had money, I would have waited until I was 25 or 30. Without money, I needed to get married,” she added. Participants also cited the high cost of marriage in Myanmar as a reason for marrying early while living as refugees in a foreign country. Aminah explained that due to poverty, she was forced into a marriage that involved being sent to Malaysia. Her future husband paid for the journey, and her family in Myanmar did not have to bear the cost of the wedding. “There was no choice. In Myanmar, if I wanted to marry, they would ask for a lot of money,” she explained. “My parents don’t have money.”

Limited Education Opportunities

Rohingya children face restricted access to education both in Myanmar and in Malaysia. According to participants, the Myanmar government denied them the right to education by barring their entry into national schools. Both male and female participants reported that they only attended religious schools (madrasahs) where they studied the Quran. One female participant, Zarina, shared, “I attended [Quran] recitation classes. I couldn’t go to school there. It wasn’t easy. Then, it was hard to get money, and people were always fighting.” With only religious education, many participants lacked basic literacy skills and

had no exposure to academic subjects like science and mathematics, nor any knowledge of sexual and reproductive health.

Several reasons contributed to their lack of schooling or dropping out from madrasahs in Myanmar. All the female participants reported that they stopped attending school after reaching puberty, typically between the ages of 10 and 12. Arifah explained that girls were pressured to stay home: "Once we reached puberty and got our periods, we were considered teens, so when we went to school, we were teased." This belief was echoed by a religious teacher in Kuala Lumpur who taught the Rohingya refugee community. He stated that girls who reached puberty should not attend school as their interactions could not be controlled. Additionally, other factors such as accessibility issues, discrimination from Buddhist teachers, safety concerns, and poverty contributed to the children's discontinuation of schooling. Begum mentioned that she was forced to leave school in Primary 4 due to poverty and her large family. In Malaysia, Rohingya refugees face similar challenges, as they are unable to enrol in the national school system and instead attend community schools set up by NGOs and international agencies. This limits their access to standardised public exams, which hinders their ability to pursue higher education.

The study highlighted several significant factors that led to Rohingya children dropping out of school and resorting to early marriages. These factors included the high cost of living, parental financial struggles, the children's refugee status, and the closure of schools. Aisha explained, "When I arrived here, I struggled to find food and had no money, which is why I couldn't attend school." Her husband earned between RM200 and RM500 per month, making it impossible for her to continue her education. Another participant, Salimah, shared, "My mother had no money, so I couldn't go to school," while a third mentioned that she had to leave school in Primary Year 2 because the school had closed down. With their daughters unable to attend school, many parents prepared them for homemaking and eventual marriage.

Despite leaving school at an early age, many female participants expressed a strong desire to return to education. Fatima shared, "I like being educated" and "If I had the opportunity, I would like to go to school." Several male teenagers shared similar sentiments, with one emphasising the importance of education despite not having the chance to study himself. Another participant, Ahmad, who grew up in a refugee camp in Bangladesh before moving to Malaysia, shared that he started working at a young age because he was an orphan and had never attended school, despite encouragement from his aunt. He now regrets not following her advice and feels disappointed that poverty prevented him from attending school in Malaysia, forcing him to work as a labourer in local markets. "If I had studied before, I could have been educated," he reflected, placing his hopes on his one-year-old daughter and wishing for her to pursue education.

However, some participants did not view education as important due to their limited financial resources and challenging circumstances in Malaysia.

Sexual and Reproductive Health Not a Pressing Issue for Rohingya Refugees

The study found that all Rohingya participants had never engaged in sexual activity before marriage. They expressed discomfort with the question and firmly stated that their religion and culture prohibited premarital sex. When the researchers posed follow-up questions to verify this claim, the participants reiterated that they only had intimate relations with their spouses after marriage. However, this study uncovered a few concerns regarding sexual behaviour that are worth noting. First, two teenage male participants admitted that they had often watched pornographic videos on their smartphones before marriage. However, they both emphasised that they had never engaged in sexual activity with anyone before marrying. Secondly, some girls marry after forming romantic relationships through communication platforms. They had never met their boyfriends in person and did not have sexual intercourse during the courtship. For example, Salma recounted how she had been in love with a 20-year-old man for a year, with whom she communicated by phone. She married him when she was 14, without her parents' consent. At the time, her parents were in the process of applying for resettlement in the United States and feared that approving her marriage could negatively impact their application. However, they accepted her decision a few days after the wedding. Another girl, Zaynab, fell in love with a man living in the same apartment in Malaysia. After expressing her desire to marry him, her father, a religious teacher, arranged for the marriage within a week. The girl said that even though she was deeply in love, she would have respected her parents' decision if they had refused to consent to the marriage.

Love was also the motivation for another participant, Zubaydah, whose future husband proposed that they move to Malaysia to get married. At the time, she was 15, and her parents initially disagreed, believing she was too young. Despite their disapproval, the girl ran away to Malaysia with her future husband, who paid RM7,500 for her 12-day journey. Her parents eventually gave their consent after seeing her determination. Many of her relatives had also married young, and she described her marriage by saying, "...because we were in love, we were ready." They married seven days after arriving in Malaysia. Most participants' marriages were arranged by their parents, although some parents allowed them the freedom to choose for themselves. Liza shared, "My mum told me someone had come to ask for my hand. She said, 'If you agree, we agree. If you don't, we won't.' I told her if Mum and Dad agreed, then I would agree too. They didn't force me at all."

Bride Trafficking in Malaysia

This study also discovered cases of human trafficking where brides were sold at the Malaysia-Thailand border. Human traffickers would sell unmarried girls, who had arrived on refugee boats alone, to single Rohingya men in Malaysia for marriage. Negotiations took place over the phone, and interested men had to pay the agreed price before the girl was handed over. Several participants shared their experiences of being trafficked into Malaysia as brides through sea and land routes. Some explained that they had migrated to Malaysia specifically to marry male Rohingya refugees who had been living there for some time. When a Rohingya man in Malaysia wished to marry, he would request his family in Myanmar to find him a suitable partner. Once the girl's parents consented after discussions over the phone, the man would pay between RM3,000 and RM5,000 to smuggle the bride into Malaysia. When a researcher asked a participant's husband why he insisted on marrying a Rohingya girl from Myanmar, he responded that women from Myanmar were considered more chaste, meaning they had never had sexual relations before marriage. In another interview, Ain recounted how she had to emigrate to Malaysia to marry her future husband, who had already been in the country for some time. They had never communicated before the marriage, and their families made the arrangement. The girl expressed regret, stating that, given the choice, she would not have gone through with the marriage and would have preferred to continue her education. However, her father remarried, and she felt responsible for caring for her younger sisters. Her husband agreed to support her and her siblings. She explained, "I got married because I have younger sisters. Who knows what would happen to them if I didn't get married? My father took another wife, so I had to get married. Because they're all girls, you know?"

In other interviews, Fatin described their experiences of being trafficked into Malaysia via land and sea, with journeys lasting from 10 days to over a month. Hayati shared, "I was afraid to come to Malaysia. I had heard so many stories of people dying on the ship, with the ship sinking in the water. Even though I was worried, I decided to come because I have six younger sisters, and I worried for them." Another girl, Shahida, said she had never met her future husband, who paid RM5,000 to have her smuggled into the country by boat. She explained that she married for survival, although she initially feared her husband would not be able to support her in Malaysia as he did not speak Malay. However, once the arrangement was made, she felt she had no way out of the situation. To make matters worse, a year after their marriage, her husband began to frequently mention the amount of money he had spent on traffickers, which led to anger and physical abuse towards her.

The findings from this study reveal the complex and intricate issue of child marriage within the Rohingya refugee community in Malaysia. The key factors contributing to child marriage among the participants—poverty, limited

educational opportunities, and bride trafficking—are closely tied to the social, economic, and cultural challenges faced by refugees in Malaysia. As a transit country before resettlement in third countries, Malaysia's unique context makes it an important case for study. Interestingly, this research identifies that sexual and reproductive health issues are not the main drivers behind child marriage among the Rohingya, compared to other communities as studied before.³⁹ However, these issues remain an important aspect that requires attention in understanding the broader context of child marriage in refugee settings.

The findings indicate that poverty is the primary factor pushing Rohingya families to marry off their daughters. Marriage is seen as a solution to alleviate financial pressure on families, especially when there are many children to support during migration. Economic survival becomes the main rationale for marriage, not only for parents making these decisions but also for the children involved. This finding is consistent with previous research, which suggests that in refugee communities, where economic instability prevails, child marriage is seen as the most practical option to ensure the survival of their children.⁴⁰ This study also reveals an interesting dynamic where the agency of young girls is often compromised, particularly when they are forced into marriage by their families due to severe financial circumstances. This suggests that some families facing extreme hardship may feel compelled to make decisions that sacrifice their children's well-being and future potential.

Education disruption emerges as another important factor driving early marriage. Limited access to formal schooling in both Myanmar and Malaysia leaves many Rohingya children without the academic or life skills needed for future success. This limitation means that they are not well-prepared to become productive citizens or contribute to the economy of third countries after resettlement due to inadequate education. Additionally, the preference among Rohingya refugees for religious education in madrasahs, which focuses on religious knowledge rather than comprehensive subjects like science and mathematics, further limits the children's readiness for the challenges of life in third countries. This educational gap not only limits their potential but also reinforces the perception that marriage is the only viable option for their future.

³⁹ Loutet, Miranda G., Carmen H. Logie, Moses Okumu, Isha Berry, Simon O. Lukone, Nelson Kisubi, Alyssa McAlpine, Simon Mwima, and Peter Kyambadde. "Sexual and Reproductive Health Factors Associated with Child, Early and Forced Marriage and Partnerships among Refugee Youth in a Humanitarian Setting in Uganda: Mixed Methods Findings." *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 26, no. 12s (December 2022), p. 66–77.

⁴⁰ Bartels, Susan Andrea, Saja Michael, Sophie Roupetz, Stephanie Garbern, Lama Kilzar, Harveen Bergquist, Nour Bakhache, Colleen Davison, and Annie Bunting. "Making Sense of Child, Early and Forced Marriage among Syrian Refugee Girls: A Mixed Methods Study in Lebanon." *BMJ Global Health* 3, no. 1 (January 7, 2018), p. e000509.

Cultural factors also play a role in limiting girls' educational opportunities, as seen in the study. Some participants mentioned that girls were discouraged from attending school after reaching puberty, a practice reinforced by the cultural concept of *purdah*, which restricts gender roles and interactions for women, as discussed by the previous research.⁴¹ When girls stop schooling at such a young age, it further strengthens the cycle of child marriage, as these girls are then prepared for marriage rather than pursuing educational or career aspirations. Despite these barriers, the study also found that many female participants expressed a strong desire to continue their education, demonstrating the transformative potential of education if given the opportunity. This highlights the need for advocacy on the right to education within refugee communities, focusing on changing parental attitudes toward their daughters' education.

This study also exposes a bride trafficking syndicate within the Rohingya refugee community, where women and girls are trafficked into Malaysia to marry Rohingya men who have already settled in the country. This study supports previous findings by other scholars who have identified this practice, further reinforcing the fact that Rohingya girls are trafficked to Malaysia for the purpose of child marriage.⁴² This practice is deeply troubling, as these children are exposed to multiple harms, including being trafficked across borders, smuggled into Malaysia, and sold to individuals seeking to marry them. This also highlights how demand for smugglers and traffickers persists, driven by adult Rohingya men's desire to marry young girls. This finding is rarely discussed in previous research, which often focuses on migration due to religious persecution. Bride trafficking disguised as refugee migration to Malaysia underscores the vulnerability of refugee women in situations of displacement and instability. The trauma experienced by these girls may be prolonged, as they are constantly reminded by their husbands of the financial transaction that brought them to this country.

Conclusion

The findings from this study have significant implications for policy and intervention efforts aimed at reducing child marriage among Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. First, bride trafficking syndicates must be dismantled by tightening border controls to prevent the smuggling of girls into Malaysia. Without these girls arriving in Malaysia, they cannot be married, which would consequently

⁴¹ Samuri, Mohd Al Adib, and Peter Hopkins. "Navigating 'Purdah' Culture in Urban Space: The Restricted Lives of Young Married Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia." In *Refugee Youth*, 81–99. Bristol, England: Bristol University Press, 2023.; Guglielmi, S., N. Jones, J. Muz, and S. Baird. "I Don't Have Any Aspiration Because I Couldn't Study": Exploring the Educational Barriers Facing Adolescents in Cox's Bazar." *Policy Brief. London*, 2020.

⁴² Uddin, M. Ala. "The Meaning of Marriage to the Rohingya Refugees, and Their Survival in Bangladesh." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 2 (August 25, 2021), p. 2036–51.

reduce the rate of child marriage in the community. Proposals to eradicate poverty within the refugee community may be unproductive due to the sheer number of refugees, which would place a heavy burden on the government, NGOs, and Islamic agencies that provide assistance. The priority should be shifting parental and family attitudes about girls' education and raising awareness of the potential personal development of girls if they receive proper education. International agencies should fund alternative schools for Rohingya children so they can follow international curricula that would enable them to continue their education when they are resettled in third countries. Continuous advocacy is needed to raise awareness within the community about the harmful effects of child marriage and to promote alternative pathways for children, so they do not marry at a young age. In conclusion, this study highlights the complex interaction of economic, educational, and cultural factors that contribute to child marriage among Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. Poverty and bride trafficking emerge as the main drivers, exacerbated by limited educational opportunities and cultural norms that prioritise marriage over other life choices. Efforts to curb child marriage in this context must address these factors holistically through education and child rights advocacy within refugee communities. Only then can the cycle of child marriage be broken, giving refugee children the opportunity to build a better future.

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