

Navigating Cultural Dignity in Refugee Aid: A Case Study of the Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Bangladesh

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Abstract: This study explores the relationship between development aid and cultural dignity in the context of the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh. It examines the impact of humanitarian aid programs on the cultural identity of the Rohingya refugees, the challenges in balancing short-term aid with long-term cultural preservation, and the role of refugee participation in aid program design. Additionally, it investigates the political and social factors influencing the integration of cultural dignity into aid efforts and assesses the recognition of the Rohingya's cultural rights by national authorities. The findings indicate that while humanitarian aid has addressed immediate survival needs, it has often overlooked the cultural practices and values of the refugees. A significant gap exists between the provision of material aid and the preservation of cultural identity, with refugees reporting feelings of cultural marginalization. The study also highlights the limited involvement of refugees in decision-making and the challenges posed by political reluctance to recognize their cultural rights. The paper concludes by offering recommendations to improve the integration of cultural dignity in refugee aid programs, including increased refugee participation, cultural sensitivity, and the recognition of cultural rights by national authorities.

Keywords: Rohingya Refugees, Cultural Dignity, Humanitarian Aid, Development Programs, Refugee Participation, Bangladesh.

1. Introduction

The Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh is one of the most significant humanitarian challenges of the 21st century. Over the past decade, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims have fled violence and persecution in Myanmar, seeking refuge in neighboring Bangladesh. As one of the world's largest refugee camps, the Kutupalong Refugee Camp in Cox's Bazar stands as a testament to the scale and urgency of the crisis (H. T. A. Khan et al., 2022). While humanitarian aid and development efforts have provided essential support, the intersection of cultural dignity and refugee assistance remains underexplored. The concept of cultural dignity refers to the right of individuals to maintain and practice their cultural identity, even in the face of displacement and adversity (Verma, 2024). This article seeks to examine the nexus between development initiatives and the preservation of cultural dignity for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. In humanitarian contexts, development programs often prioritize immediate survival needs such as food, shelter, and health care—while cultural considerations may be marginalized. However, the preservation of cultural dignity is crucial for the long-term well-being of displaced populations, as it affects their mental health, social cohesion, and resilience. Through a case study of the Rohingya refugee crisis, this article explores how development interventions can strike a balance between meeting basic needs and respecting cultural identity. It delves into the challenges and opportunities faced by aid organizations in navigating this delicate balance and emphasizes the importance of integrating cultural dignity into refugee aid strategies. Ultimately, the aim is to offer insights into how cultural dignity can be preserved while promoting sustainable development in refugee settings, contributing to more effective and respectful humanitarian responses.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between development initiatives and the preservation of cultural dignity in refugee contexts is an area that has garnered increasing attention in recent years. Several scholars and organizations have explored the significance of cultural identity in refugee aid, with a particular focus on the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh. This literature review examines the key themes and findings from the academic and humanitarian discourse on

cultural dignity, development, and the Rohingya refugees, aiming to provide a foundation for understanding the challenges and potential solutions in balancing development goals with cultural respect. Cultural dignity is the recognition and preservation of an individual's cultural identity, traditions, and values, which are integral to their sense of belonging and well-being. In the refugee context, this concept has often been overlooked in favor of immediate survival needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare (Sudheer & Banerjee, 2021). However, scholars like (Kamruzzaman et al., 2024a) argue that cultural dignity plays a crucial role in refugees' mental and emotional recovery, as well as their social integration into host societies. Refugees, particularly those displaced by violence and persecution, often face a double threat to their dignity—physical harm and the loss of their cultural identity (Kamruzzaman et al., 2024b). For the Rohingya, the loss of their cultural identity is deeply tied to their displacement. The Rohingya people have faced systemic discrimination in Myanmar, including restrictions on their rights to education, employment, and movement, as well as the denial of their citizenship. As a result, their sense of cultural pride and dignity has been severely undermined, making the preservation of their cultural identity in refugee settings all the more important (Ansar & Md. Khaled, 2021). Ensuring that development aid respects and fosters cultural dignity is, therefore, a key component of effective refugee assistance. Humanitarian aid has traditionally focused on addressing the immediate needs of displaced populations such as food, shelter, and healthcare. However, development aid, which aims to support longer-term recovery and self-sufficiency, has become an increasingly important component in refugee assistance. The shift towards development assistance is particularly evident in the context of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, where international agencies have been working to provide not only emergency relief but also opportunities for education, economic empowerment, and social cohesion (UNHCR, 2020). While these interventions are necessary for the survival and well-being of refugees, scholars like Obaidullah et al. (2024) argue that development aid can sometimes overlook the cultural dimensions of refugee lives. Aid programs designed with a "one-size-fits-all" approach may fail to take into account the cultural values, customs, and social structures that shape the experiences of different refugee groups. This can lead to the unintended consequence of eroding cultural identity, further marginalizing refugees rather than empowering them. Several studies have examined the challenges faced by humanitarian organizations in balancing development objectives with the need to respect cultural dignity. Celeste & Bean, (2021) argue that a cultural framework should be embedded in all stages of humanitarian aid—from assessment and planning to implementation and evaluation. They stress the importance of involving refugees in the decision-making process and tailoring development programs to fit their cultural needs and aspirations. In the case of the Rohingya, this might include recognizing the central role of religion, language, and social structures in shaping their daily lives. In practice, however, this is easier said than done. The Rohingya refugees, for example, face complex challenges related to gender, religion, and intergenerational conflict. Nazmul & Laskar, (2023) highlights how traditional development programs, which may focus on individual empowerment or gender equality, can sometimes conflict with the deeply ingrained communal values of refugee groups like the Rohingya. Programs designed without cultural sensitivity can inadvertently disrupt social bonds and undermine the dignity of refugees. Moreover, the political context in Bangladesh adds another layer of complexity. The Bangladesh government and local communities often face pressure from the international community to provide shelter and aid, while at the same time managing limited resources and addressing security concerns related to the large refugee population. As such, development agencies operating in Bangladesh must navigate a delicate balance between local political realities, the needs of the host population, and the cultural dignity of the refugees. The Rohingya refugee crisis offers a unique case study of the challenges of navigating cultural dignity in refugee aid. Since 2017, over a million Rohingya refugees have fled Myanmar and sought refuge in Bangladesh, leading to one of the largest refugee settlements in the world. The scale of the crisis has prompted a massive international response, with various actors including the United Nations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the Bangladeshi government working together to provide humanitarian aid and support long-term development initiatives. However, the crisis has also highlighted significant gaps in the protection of cultural dignity. As Nilsen et al. (2023) points out, the lack of formal recognition of the Rohingya's cultural rights in Bangladesh has made it difficult for aid organizations to develop culturally sensitive programs. For example, many refugees report a sense of loss and isolation due to the inability to practice their traditional livelihoods, such as fishing and farming, in the camps. While NGOs have made efforts to provide educational opportunities and income-generating activities, the lack of space for cultural expression, including religious practices and community gatherings, has been a point of contention. Further, the long-term prospect of Rohingya refugees remaining in Bangladesh or returning to Myanmar raises questions about how to foster cultural resilience in a protracted displacement situation. A. K. Khan & Kontinen (2022) suggests that development programs aimed at ensuring the cultural dignity of refugees must incorporate strategies for both short-term relief and long-term cultural preservation.

In conclusion, the literature indicates that development and cultural dignity must be considered together in refugee aid programs. While the provision of basic needs is essential, it is equally important to respect and preserve the cultural identities of displaced populations, such as the Rohingya, to ensure their long-term well-being. For effective and sustainable refugee aid, a more culturally sensitive approach to development is needed—one that involves the refugees themselves in shaping interventions and prioritizes their cultural dignity alongside their immediate needs. The following sections of this article will delve deeper into the challenges and opportunities for integrating cultural dignity into development efforts for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

3. Problems of the study

The study on navigating cultural dignity in refugee aid, specifically focusing on the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh, confronts several key challenges and issues that complicate the effective integration of cultural dignity within development efforts. These challenges arise from both the complexity of the refugee context itself and the inherent tensions between humanitarian aid goals and the preservation of cultural identity. A significant issue identified in the Rohingya refugee crisis is the marginalization of cultural dignity in the design and implementation of humanitarian and development aid programs. Many existing programs, whether focusing on food distribution, healthcare, or education, tend to adopt a standardized approach that does not account for the unique cultural practices, religious beliefs, and social structures of the Rohingya refugees. As a result, these programs may unintentionally disrupt or neglect key aspects of cultural identity, such as language, traditional customs, and community structures (Ullah, 2024). This lack of cultural sensitivity can undermine the refugees' sense of dignity and social cohesion, leading to feelings of alienation and frustration. Humanitarian aid often prioritizes immediate needs, such as providing shelter, food, and medical care, especially in large-scale refugee crises like the Rohingya situation (M. M. Rahman et al., 2023). However, the long-term development goals of self-reliance, education, and economic empowerment may not align with the immediate need for cultural preservation. The challenge lies in striking a balance between addressing urgent humanitarian concerns and ensuring that cultural dignity is preserved for refugees (Lough et al., 2021). For the Rohingya, this means that any development initiative must respect and integrate their cultural values, which may be difficult to achieve when the focus remains largely on short-term survival. One of the central challenges in ensuring cultural dignity in refugee aid is the limited involvement of refugees in decision-making processes related to the design and execution of aid programs (M. Rahman, 2022). Despite growing recognition of the importance of participatory approaches in refugee aid, many interventions are still imposed top-down by international organizations and governments. This lack of refugee agency in shaping the aid they receive can result in a disconnect between the needs and aspirations of the refugees and the programs implemented on their behalf. For the Rohingya, involving them in decision-making is particularly important to ensure that development programs align with their values, cultural practices, and priorities (Halimuzzaman et al., 2023). The Rohingya refugees are not only marginalized within the camps but also face tensions with the local Bangladeshi population. These social and political dynamics can further complicate the delivery of aid programs. There is often a political reluctance to provide extended support for the cultural and educational needs of the refugees, driven by fears of resource depletion, social unrest, or security concerns (Islam et al., 2024). Moreover, cultural misunderstandings between the refugees and the host population can exacerbate tensions, making it harder for aid organizations to promote cultural dignity in both the refugee camps and the surrounding areas. The Bangladesh government has provided refuge to the Rohingya, but their legal status remains precarious. The lack of official recognition of the Rohingya as citizens or legal residents creates barriers to the full protection of their cultural rights.

The problems outlined above illustrate the complex challenges in integrating cultural dignity into the development aid framework for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. While significant progress has been made in providing humanitarian assistance, the cultural needs of the refugees are often sidelined. Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach that not only meets the immediate survival needs of the refugees but also respects and upholds their cultural identity, ensuring long-term resilience and dignity. This study aims to provide insights into these challenges and offer recommendations for improving the balance between development goals and cultural dignity in refugee aid.

4. Research Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to explore the relationship between development aid and cultural dignity for

Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. The research will focus on understanding the challenges and opportunities in integrating cultural dignity within humanitarian and development programs. The following are the key research objectives of the study:

1. To assess the impact of humanitarian aid programs on the cultural dignity of Rohingya refugees.
2. To examine the challenges in balancing short-term aid and long-term cultural preservation.
3. To analyze the role of refugee participation in aid program design.
4. To explore political and social factors affecting the integration of cultural dignity in refugee aid.
5. To investigate the recognition of cultural rights of the Rohingya by national authorities.

5. Methods and Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the nexus between development aid and cultural dignity for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities in integrating cultural dignity into humanitarian and development programs. A case study design was chosen for this research due to its ability to provide an in-depth understanding of the specific context of the Rohingya refugee crisis. The study focused on the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, where over a million Rohingya refugees are located. The case study design enabled the examination of the experiences of both the refugees and the aid organizations involved in providing support. Data for this study were collected through both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were gathered through surveys and in-depth interviews, while secondary data were obtained from relevant reports, policy documents, and academic literature. A structured questionnaire was developed to collect quantitative data from a sample of 200 Rohingya refugees. The survey focused on their perceptions of humanitarian aid, their cultural needs, and the challenges they face in maintaining cultural dignity. The sample was selected using convenience sampling from various camps in Cox's Bazar. The survey aimed to capture the refugees' experiences with aid programs, their involvement in decision-making processes, and the extent to which their cultural values were respected. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 representatives from international NGOs, government agencies, and local authorities involved in refugee aid. These interviews aimed to gather qualitative insights into the design and implementation of aid programs, with a focus on how cultural dignity was incorporated or neglected in these initiatives. The interviews allowed for a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by aid organizations and the political, social, and legal factors influencing aid delivery. A review of secondary data included reports from UNHCR, Bangladesh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and various NGOs working in the refugee camps. These documents provided context on the official stance on cultural rights and the implementation of development aid in refugee settings. Quantitative data from the surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns and trends in refugees' perceptions of aid and cultural dignity. The responses were coded, and frequencies and percentages were calculated to understand the extent to which cultural dignity was acknowledged in the development efforts. Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic coding was used to identify key themes related to cultural dignity, refugee agency, and the integration of cultural considerations in aid programs. Patterns in the responses were identified and grouped into themes that aligned with the research objectives, such as cultural marginalization, the role of refugee participation, and the challenges of balancing immediate aid with long-term cultural preservation. Although the mixed-methods approach provided valuable insights, the study faced several limitations. The use of convenience sampling may have introduced bias, as the refugees surveyed might not represent the entire population of the camps. Additionally, language barriers and cultural differences posed challenges during interviews, despite the use of translators.

6. Results and Discussion

This section presents the results in relation to the research objectives of the study, focusing on the impact of humanitarian aid on the cultural dignity of Rohingya refugees, the challenges in balancing short-term aid with long-term cultural preservation, the role of refugee participation, political and social factors, and the recognition of cultural rights by national authorities.

1. Impact of Humanitarian Aid Programs on the Cultural Dignity of Rohingya Refugees

The results from the survey indicated that humanitarian aid programs in the Rohingya refugee camps have had a mixed impact on the cultural dignity of the refugees. While essential survival needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare are being addressed, the refugees expressed concerns over the lack of cultural sensitivity in the implementation of these programs. Nearly 60% of respondents felt that their cultural practices, particularly religious and traditional activities, were not adequately respected or facilitated in aid programs. For example, many refugees reported that they were unable to fully practice their religious rituals due to limited space, restricted access to religious leaders, and lack of culturally appropriate resources. Interviews with aid workers revealed that while many NGOs strive to incorporate cultural sensitivity into their programs, challenges persist. The focus on immediate needs often results in the prioritization of material aid over cultural considerations. In many cases, the standardization of aid delivery, such as providing education in languages other than Rohingya or Burmese, has inadvertently marginalized their cultural identity.

2. Challenges in Balancing Short-Term Aid and Long-Term Cultural Preservation

One of the most prominent findings of this study was the difficulty in balancing the immediate survival needs of refugees with the long-term goal of cultural preservation. The survey showed that while refugees acknowledged the necessity of urgent humanitarian aid, they expressed frustration over the lack of initiatives aimed at sustaining cultural practices. Many refugees noted that, in the absence of culturally relevant development programs, their traditional livelihoods, including fishing and farming, could not be practiced in the camps, leading to a sense of cultural loss. Aid workers highlighted that development programs in refugee settings often prioritize economic self-reliance and education, which are critical for the long-term stability of refugees. However, these programs frequently overlook cultural elements such as the preservation of traditional skills, language, and community structures. The study found that only 35% of aid programs had integrated cultural dignity into their long-term goals, with many refugees feeling that their cultural identity had been sidelined for the sake of economic empowerment and education.

3. Role of Refugee Participation in Aid Program Design

The research revealed that the participation of Rohingya refugees in the design of aid programs was limited, with only 25% of respondents indicating that they had been involved in any decision-making processes related to the assistance they received. This lack of refugee agency was seen as a major barrier to the effective integration of cultural dignity in aid efforts. Refugees expressed a desire to have more say in the development of programs that directly affected their lives, particularly those related to education, livelihood, and cultural activities. Aid workers also acknowledged that the top-down approach to aid delivery often led to a disconnect between the needs of the refugees and the programs implemented. The absence of refugee input in program design often resulted in interventions that were not culturally appropriate or aligned with the refugees' values. The study found that incorporating refugee participation could enhance the cultural relevance of aid programs and ensure that they better align with the needs and aspirations of the refugees.

4. Political and Social Factors Affecting the Integration of Cultural Dignity in Refugee Aid

Political and social dynamics played a significant role in shaping the delivery of culturally sensitive aid to Rohingya refugees. The results showed that tensions between refugees and the local Bangladeshi population, as well as political reluctance to extend cultural support, complicated the integration of cultural dignity into aid programs. Local communities often viewed the Rohingya as a burden on resources, which led to resistance to programs that promoted cultural preservation, such as support for religious practices or the teaching of the Rohingya language. Additionally, political factors, including the Bangladesh government's limited recognition of the Rohingya as legal residents, further complicated the situation. Refugees' cultural rights were often disregarded, as they did not have legal status in Bangladesh. Interviews with national authorities revealed that the lack of legal recognition prevented the government from supporting initiatives aimed at preserving the cultural dignity of the Rohingya, such as establishing educational programs in their native language or recognizing their traditional customs as legitimate.

5. Recognition of Cultural Rights of the Rohingya by National Authorities

The study found that the Bangladesh government has made some efforts to provide basic humanitarian support to the Rohingya refugees but has largely neglected their cultural rights. While refugees have access to basic services, such as healthcare and food, their cultural rights—such as the right to practice religion, education in their native language, and cultural expression—have not been fully acknowledged. The lack of formal legal status for the Rohingya has hindered their ability to claim cultural rights under national law. Interviews with local government officials revealed that while there is recognition of the humanitarian needs of the refugees, cultural rights are often viewed as secondary to survival needs. The Bangladesh government has expressed concerns about the long-term implications of supporting cultural preservation for refugees, fearing that it could lead to the entrenchment of refugee populations or create political instability. The results from this study indicate that while humanitarian aid programs have played a critical role in addressing the immediate survival needs of Rohingya refugees, there are significant gaps in integrating cultural dignity into these efforts. The challenges in balancing short-term aid with long-term cultural preservation, limited refugee participation, political and social tensions, and the lack of recognition of cultural rights by national authorities have all hindered the effective incorporation of cultural dignity into refugee aid. To improve the situation, aid programs must adopt more culturally sensitive approaches, involve refugees in the design of aid initiatives, and encourage the recognition of cultural rights by both aid organizations and national governments.

7. Findings

The findings of this study are based on the research objectives that aimed to explore the relationship between development aid and cultural dignity for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. The following key findings have emerged from the analysis of surveys, interviews, and document reviews.

1. Impact of Humanitarian Aid Programs on the Cultural Dignity of Rohingya Refugees

The study found that humanitarian aid programs, while essential in addressing basic survival needs, have had a limited positive impact on the cultural dignity of the Rohingya refugees. The majority of refugees (approximately 60%) reported feeling that their cultural identity particularly religious practices, traditional customs, and social structures—was not fully respected or integrated into aid programs. Refugees highlighted the lack of access to spaces for religious activities, limited availability of culturally relevant resources (such as materials in the Rohingya language), and the absence of support for traditional practices as significant challenges. Aid workers acknowledged that although efforts were made to integrate cultural sensitivity into programs, these were often overshadowed by the urgency of meeting survival needs, such as food distribution and healthcare. While some NGOs attempted to provide spaces for religious practices, these were often inadequate and limited by resource constraints. This finding suggests a gap between the intentions of aid programs and their actual implementation in terms of cultural respect.

2. Challenges in Balancing Short-Term Aid and Long-Term Cultural Preservation

The study revealed a significant challenge in balancing immediate survival needs with the long-term goal of preserving cultural identity. While refugees expressed gratitude for the provision of essential services, many felt that their cultural needs were deprioritized. A large proportion of respondents (nearly 70%) emphasized that traditional livelihoods, such as fishing and farming, were no longer possible in the refugee camps, leading to a loss of cultural practices tied to these activities. Refugees indicated that they felt disconnected from their cultural heritage, as many aspects of their lifestyle and community structures were disrupted by the camp environment. Interviews with aid workers confirmed these concerns, noting that while long-term development initiatives were focused on education, vocational training, and economic self-reliance, there was insufficient attention to cultural preservation. Only about 35% of aid programs had incorporated cultural preservation as part of their long-term objectives. These findings highlight the difficulty in balancing the urgent needs of refugees with the sustainable integration of cultural dignity.

3. Role of Refugee Participation in Aid Program Design

A significant finding of this study was the limited involvement of refugees in the design and implementation of aid programs. Only 25% of the refugees surveyed reported having had any meaningful involvement in the decision-making processes regarding the programs they received. Many refugees expressed frustration at the top-down approach of aid delivery, feeling that their cultural preferences and needs were often overlooked. They voiced a strong desire for more involvement in shaping the development programs, particularly in areas related to education, livelihood, and cultural expression. Aid workers acknowledged the importance of refugee participation but noted that practical constraints, such as language barriers and the sheer scale of the refugee population, made it difficult to include refugees meaningfully in the decision-making process. The findings indicate that increasing refugee participation in aid program design could improve the cultural relevance and effectiveness of these interventions.

4. Political and Social Factors Affecting the Integration of Cultural Dignity in Refugee Aid

The study found that political and social factors played a significant role in shaping the integration of cultural dignity into refugee aid programs. Refugees in the camps faced tensions not only with the local Bangladeshi population but also with government policies that did not fully recognize the Rohingya as legal residents. This lack of formal recognition hindered efforts to support cultural practices, such as the provision of education in the Rohingya language or the recognition of religious customs. The social dynamics between the refugees and host communities also contributed to difficulties in implementing culturally sensitive programs. Local communities were often reluctant to support programs that promoted the cultural preservation of the refugees, due to fears of resource strain, social unrest, or security concerns. This finding underscores the importance of addressing both refugee and host community needs in a culturally sensitive manner to foster social cohesion and respect for cultural dignity.

5. Recognition of Cultural Rights of the Rohingya by National Authorities

The study found that the recognition of the cultural rights of the Rohingya refugees by national authorities in Bangladesh was minimal. While the Bangladesh government has provided refuge to the Rohingya, they are not officially recognized as legal residents or citizens, which has led to the denial of certain cultural rights. Refugees reported limited access to cultural education and the inability to freely practice their religion or celebrate cultural events in the camps. Government representatives indicated that while humanitarian support was being provided to meet the basic needs of refugees, cultural rights were not a priority, given the legal and political complexities surrounding the status of the Rohingya. The lack of legal recognition for the refugees means that their cultural rights are not protected under national law, which further complicates efforts to preserve their cultural identity. This finding highlights the need for legal reforms and greater political will to ensure the cultural dignity of displaced populations. The findings of this study underscore the complex challenges of integrating cultural dignity into development aid for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. While humanitarian aid has been critical in addressing basic survival needs, there remains a significant gap in the incorporation of cultural considerations into long-term development initiatives. Refugees have expressed the need for more involvement in the design of aid programs, greater political recognition of their cultural rights, and a better balance between short-term aid and long-term cultural preservation. These findings provide valuable insights for improving the effectiveness of refugee aid programs and promoting the cultural dignity of the Rohingya in Bangladesh.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made to improve the integration of cultural dignity into humanitarian and development programs for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. These recommendations are aimed at both aid organizations and national authorities to foster a more culturally sensitive approach to refugee aid.

1. Incorporate Cultural Sensitivity in Aid Program Design

Aid programs should integrate cultural sensitivity into all stages of development. This includes ensuring that

refugee cultural practices, such as religious observances and traditional customs, are respected and facilitated. For example, providing designated spaces for religious activities and supporting cultural events can help maintain the cultural dignity of the Rohingya. Furthermore, educational programs should be designed in the Rohingya language and should consider the community's social structures and traditional learning methods.

2. Promote Refugee Participation in Decision-Making

The study highlights the need for increased participation of refugees in the design and implementation of aid programs. Refugees should be actively involved in the planning stages to ensure that their cultural values and needs are considered. This can be achieved by setting up refugee-led committees or focus groups that allow for direct input from the refugee community on the types of programs they would like to see implemented. By empowering refugees in the decision-making process, aid programs will better reflect their cultural and practical needs.

3. Develop Long-Term Programs for Cultural Preservation

Humanitarian aid programs must move beyond immediate survival needs to incorporate long-term strategies for cultural preservation. This includes supporting traditional livelihoods, such as fishing and farming, where feasible, and ensuring that these activities are not lost due to the camp environment. Additionally, long-term cultural education programs that teach Rohingya history, language, and traditions can help preserve their identity and cultural resilience over time.

4. Strengthen Legal Recognition of Cultural Rights

National authorities in Bangladesh should consider recognizing the cultural rights of Rohingya refugees. Legal recognition would allow refugees to fully participate in cultural and educational activities and have access to legal protections for their cultural identity. The Bangladesh government could collaborate with international organizations to create frameworks that acknowledge the cultural rights of refugees, including the right to practice their religion, teach their language, and preserve their customs.

5. Encourage Collaboration Between Host Communities and Refugees

To address the political and social tensions between refugees and the host community, there needs to be a greater emphasis on fostering understanding and cooperation. Joint cultural exchange programs, shared community projects, and awareness campaigns can help reduce tensions and promote respect for cultural diversity. Aid organizations can facilitate dialogue between refugees and host communities to foster social cohesion and mutual respect.

6. Allocate More Funding for Culturally Sensitive Programs

Donor organizations should allocate more funding to programs that address the cultural needs of refugees. While survival needs are crucial, it is essential to ensure that cultural dignity is not overlooked. Resources should be directed towards initiatives that preserve the cultural heritage of the refugees, such as cultural education programs, religious support, and the development of culturally appropriate economic activities.

9. Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the integration of cultural dignity in refugee aid programs, it is important to acknowledge several limitations that could affect the generalizability and depth of the findings.

1. Sampling Limitations

The sample size for the survey (200 refugees) and interviews (15 aid workers and government officials) was limited and may not be fully representative of the entire refugee population in Bangladesh. The use of convenience sampling for refugee participants also means that the views of certain subgroups within the refugee community,

such as women or elderly individuals, may not have been adequately captured. Future studies could benefit from a larger and more diverse sample to ensure a broader perspective on the issues (Obaidullah & Hossain, 2024).

2. Language and Cultural Barriers

Language barriers posed challenges in conducting interviews and surveys, despite the use of translators. Some nuances in refugee responses may have been lost or misinterpreted, particularly in discussions of cultural practices and experiences. While every effort was made to ensure accurate translation, language remains a significant obstacle in conducting research in a multilingual refugee setting (Faye, 2021).

3. Focus on a Single Refugee Population

This study focused specifically on the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, and the findings may not be directly applicable to other refugee populations with different cultural backgrounds. The experiences and needs of refugees from other regions may differ significantly in terms of cultural identity, development needs, and the level of integration into host communities. Future research could compare the experiences of different refugee populations to gain a more holistic understanding of the challenges surrounding cultural dignity in refugee aid (Halimuzzaman et al., 2024).

4. Limited Longitudinal Data

This study presents a snapshot of the current situation but does not include longitudinal data to assess the long-term impact of development aid on the cultural dignity of refugees. The effects of protracted displacement on cultural identity and social cohesion among the Rohingya could be better understood with a longitudinal approach, which would allow for the tracking of changes over time (Halimuzzaman & Sharma, 2022).

5. Potential Bias in Refugee Responses

Given the vulnerable status of the refugee population, some respondents may have been reluctant to express criticisms of aid programs or the government due to fear of retaliation or distrust of external researchers. This may have led to response bias, particularly in interviews with refugees, where participants may have underreported negative experiences (Halimuzzaman & Sharma, 2024).

The recommendations provided aim to address the critical gaps in refugee aid programs, particularly in ensuring that cultural dignity is fully integrated into humanitarian and development efforts. The limitations of this study emphasize the need for further research with a larger and more diverse sample, longitudinal data, and better engagement with refugees in the decision-making process. By addressing these recommendations and limitations, future aid programs can create more sustainable and culturally respectful solutions for the Rohingya refugees and other displaced populations worldwide.

10. Conclusion

The Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh presents a complex and urgent humanitarian challenge, one that requires not only the provision of essential survival aid but also a thoughtful integration of cultural dignity into development programs. This study has highlighted the significant gaps between the immediate needs of refugees and the long-term preservation of their cultural identity, revealing that while humanitarian assistance has alleviated basic survival needs, it has often overlooked the cultural rights and practices of the Rohingya. The findings indicate that humanitarian aid programs, despite their importance, tend to prioritize short-term relief over cultural preservation. Refugees expressed frustration over the marginalization of their cultural identity, including the lack of support for religious practices, traditional livelihoods, and the Rohingya language. Moreover, the limited involvement of refugees in decision-making processes has further alienated them from aid interventions, leading to a mismatch between aid programs and their cultural needs. Additionally, political and social factors, including the lack of legal recognition of the Rohingya by the Bangladeshi government, have exacerbated the challenge of integrating cultural dignity into refugee aid programs. The tensions between the refugees and the host community, compounded by political reluctance to extend cultural support, have further complicated efforts to deliver

culturally sensitive aid. Despite these challenges, this study has also provided valuable insights into the ways in which refugee participation, cultural sensitivity, and legal recognition can significantly enhance the effectiveness of aid programs. By incorporating refugees into decision-making processes, fostering social cohesion between refugees and host communities, and recognizing the cultural rights of refugees, aid organizations and governments can ensure that humanitarian interventions are more respectful of cultural dignity. Furthermore, increasing funding for culturally sensitive programs is crucial to sustaining the cultural resilience of displaced populations.

In conclusion, this research underscores the importance of adopting a holistic approach to refugee aid, one that balances immediate survival needs with the long-term goal of preserving cultural dignity. Only by integrating cultural identity into development programs can we ensure the well-being, resilience, and empowerment of refugees like the Rohingya, ultimately contributing to more sustainable and humane responses to displacement crises. It is hoped that this study will inspire policymakers, aid organizations, and national authorities to rethink the design and implementation of refugee assistance, ensuring that cultural dignity is not sidelined but celebrated as an integral component of recovery and development.

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