



## Research Article

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## Challenges and Strategies to Conduct Research at Restricted Rohingya Refugee Camps of Bangladesh

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**Abstract:** Rohingya refugees have been living in Bangladesh for decades. Before the latest 2017 exodus only two registered camps and some unregistered spots lying with the registered camps were present in the Cox's Bazar area of Bangladesh. However, now 33 makeshift camps are hosting around one million Rohingyas coming from Myanmar. The government of Bangladesh prohibits visitors' access in those camps without prior official permission. The bureaucratic hurdles for securing permission from the respective office to get into the camps are lengthy, difficult and time consuming. Besides research in any humanitarian settings like Rohingya camps having vulnerable communities require some special ethical consideration. This paper draws fieldwork experiences among the makeshift camps of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. It sheds light on practical experience and challenges in the field and the required strategies taken by the author to do a productive fieldwork overcoming all the challenges.

**Keywords:** Rohingya Refugee Camps, Research, Challenges, Strategies, In-Depth Interviews.

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## INTRODUCTION

Research work in any emergency setting like a Refugee camp is critical to find out the needs of refugees living in that camp and for the development of existing policies and programs taken for the refugees (Beogo *et al.*, 2018). These Research help the humanitarian bodies and/or donor agencies to take appropriate decisions on how to efficiently deliver the most effective interventions under acute resource and time constraints (Blanchet *et al.*, 2018). Effective collaboration between humanitarian actors (like donor agencies, UN bodies, national and international Non-Government Organisations- NGOs) and researchers can ensure that the resources allocated for the refugees are noteworthy, as well as properly distributed and utilized, as per need, and not wasted (Turner *et al.*, 2011). However, Research works in a refugee camp area with vulnerable populations - such as displaced people, documented/ undocumented refugees, and people who have experienced decades long persecutions and violence - involves various challenges that need to be negotiated by the researcher during the fieldwork (Farzana, 2018). Besides now-a-days Covid-19 also places a serious threat or often limits the works of researchers in the refugee camp settings.

Reliable, and relevant information is very much needed to handle complex humanitarian crises like the Rohingya refugee crisis. Based on the accurate information, appropriate need-based service packages and interventions that address refugees' requirements can be designed and resources mobilised accordingly (Checchi *et al.*, 2017). However, research-based information becomes challenging if evidence fails to apprehend the wider socio-political, socio-economical, and socio-cultural dimensions of the problem, along with the actual needs of the vulnerable population living at the humanitarian settings (Bradt, 2009; & Darcy *et al.*, 2013). Overcoming the challenges created on the ground, a researcher always tries to find out the evidence-based data of the community living in the humanitarian settings. This paper contributes to the challenges and proposed strategies of ethnographic study by considering the researcher's field experiences of the Rohingya refugees living in various camps of Cox's Bazar<sup>1</sup>, the South-eastern district of Bangladesh. This study may help other researchers to understand the potential challenges and identify appropriate strategies for conducting research in humanitarian settings like Rohingya refugee camps of Bangladesh.

## ROHINGYA CAMPS OF BANGLADESH

<sup>1</sup> Cox's Bazar is one of the 64 districts of Bangladesh, which is famous for its longest unbroken sandy sea beach. The name Cox's Bazar was derived from its founder, Captain Hiram Cox, an officer of the then British East India Company (Steel, 2016).

Cox's Bazar, a border district of Bangladesh, close to the Rakhine state of Myanmar, is now hosting more than 1.3 million Rohingya refugees who fled from persecutions and violence in Myanmar (Rahman, 2022a). The first forced migration of the Rohingya community towards Bangladesh occurred in 1977-78, and then again in 1991-92, 2012, 2016, and 2017 to the present days (Ahmed, 2009; HRW, 2012; & Acaps, 2017). In 1977-78 more than 250,000 Rohingyas landed in Bangladesh facing persecutions, torture, rape, jail by the then Burmese Army, in the name of registering Burmese citizens and screen out foreigners (Rohingyas) (Rahman & Mohajan, 2019; & Habib, 2021). At that time 12 refugee camps were established in the Cox's Bazar area and one camp in the Bandarban area of Chittagong Hill Tracts (HRW, 2000). After the 1977-78 exodus, through an agreement between Bangladesh and Burma in 1979, most of the Rohingyas returned to their homeland and all camps of Bangladesh were closed (Akhter & Kusakabe, 2014). Then again in 1991-92 when more than 270,000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh facing forced labour, rape and religious persecution at the hands of the NaSaKa and other Myanmar state agencies, as many as 20 camps were established at the Cox's Bazar area to give shelter to the Rohingyas (Yesmin, 2016).

Then after an agreement between Bangladesh and Myanmar in 1992, during between 1992 and 1997, maximum Rohingyas were repatriated, but this time some thousands Rohingyas stayed back and some again returned from Myanmar. At this time also all camps of Bangladesh were closed except two: Nayapara and Kutupalong camp which are still present as registered camps (MSF, 2020).

The Rohingyas who entered Bangladesh from 1977 to 1991 were recognised as 'Refugees' by the Bangladesh Govt. but after 1992 Bangladesh refused to recognise Rohingyas as refugees rather labelled them as "undocumented Myanmar nationals (UMN)" or "unregistered refugees" or "illegal migrants" to Bangladesh (UNHCR, 2007; & Bashar, 2012). In September 2013, Bangladesh Govt. has acknowledged the presence of an estimated 300,000-500,000 "Undocumented Myanmar Nationals" or Rohingyas in Bangladesh through its first strategy paper titled 'National Strategy on Myanmar Refugees and Undocumented Myanmar Nationals' (Abrar, 2014) but among them only around 30,000 Rohingyas were staying as registered refugees (IRIN, 2013; & Tan, 2013). From 1992 to 2016, no new camps were established though there was a steady Rohingya movement towards Bangladesh within this period. Then in the end of 2017 when more than 750,000 Rohingyas entered Bangladesh after the genocidal acts of Myanmar Army, Tatmadaw, (UNICEF, 2018; & Haar *et al.*, 2019) Bangladesh had to establish new 32 makeshift camps in addition to two previous registered camps to provide shelter to the Rohingyas (Rahman *et al.* 2021). During this time the undocumented Rohingyas living outside of the registered camps also got shelter in the 34 camps of the Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh (Ullah *et al.*, 2021). From 2017 Bangladesh labelled the Rohingyas as FDMN (Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals) but not as refugees, since the country is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 protocol (Dempster & Sakib, 2021).

Among the 34 camps of Cox's Bazar, one camp named Shamlapur (Camp # 23) was closed by the Bangladesh Govt. in 2021 and the residents of the camp were relocated to other camps of Ukhiya and Teknaf (WFP Situation Report, December 2021; & JRP, 2022). Now, nearly one million Rohingyas, including 750,000 newly arrived, have been living in the 33 refugee camps of Cox's Bazar and some thousands in Bhasan Char<sup>2</sup> of Bangladesh (JRP, 2022). All the 33 camps are situated in the hilly areas of Cox's Bazar, which is within 3 km of the Bangladesh-Myanmar border and this border area is vulnerable and prone to individual and collective security threats (Thakur, 2022). As a result, the camps are under continuous surveillance of Bangladesh security forces. Fencing around the camps and watchtowers have already been installed to increase surveillance of the Rohingya refugee camps (Sakib, 2021; & Rahman, 2022b). There are paramilitary and Armed Police Battalion (APBn) check posts around the camps (Azad, 2021). Law enforcing agencies also started to use the drones to expand the scale of surveillance throughout the camp area (Sumon, 2022). In the refugee camps, the movement of Rohingyas are strictly restricted and they can go outside of the camps only for health or other emergency reasons, subject to prior permission from the camp authority (Islam, 2021a). The Rohingya refugees are not allowed to travel anywhere, within or outside of Bangladesh.

Among the 33 refugee camps, 23 camps are present under the mega Kutupalong refugee camp network (largest refugee camp of the world), and it gives shelter to over 600,000 of the roughly 900,000 Rohingya refugees living in 33 camps of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh (Akter *et al.*, 2021; & Biswas *et al.*, 2021). These 33 camps are present in the Ukhiya and Teknaf Upazila (Bengali terms for subdistricts) of Cox's Bazar district but over 80% of Rohingyas have been living in Ukhiya Upazila (Biswas *et al.*, 2021; & Rahman, 2022c). To maintain the overall security of the camps, members of security forces (Bangladesh Army, Border Guard Bangladesh-BGB, Rapid Action Battalion-RAB) are deployed in the camp area and APBn are working to maintain the security inside the camps (Jinnat & Khan, 2020). There are at least 27

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<sup>2</sup> Bhasan Char is a remote silt island in the Bay of Bengal, located around 60km (37 miles) from the mainland. Bangladesh government constructed the Bhasan Char project costing USD 350 million with an intention to relocate 100,000 Rohingyas from congested refugee camps of Cox's Bazar. As of March 2022, more than 29,000 Rohingyas had been relocated to Bhasan Char (UNB, 2022).

security checkpoints present on the roads in and out of Ukhiya and Teknaf to prevent Rohingya refugees from moving beyond the camp and to check outsider's entry/exit to the camps (JRP, 2018). Anybody's entry to any refugee camp of Bangladesh is highly restricted though in the initial stage of formation of the new camps in 2017, the entry was not controlled. After getting allegations of entry into the camps without proper documentations like visas, work permits, official approval etc., the authority of Bangladesh limits anybody's entry to the camps without proper permission since March 2018 (Rashid, 2018). As a result, access to Rohingya refugee camps to reach the Rohingya respondents to collect data is always a challenging job of a researcher.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Before starting a fieldwork, a researcher should be aware of the ethical principles of a research. In any research, there are four main areas of ethical principles (Diener & Crandall, 1978) which are:

- whether there is *harm to participants*;
- whether there is a *lack of informed consent*;
- whether there is an *invasion of privacy*;
- Whether *deception* is involved.

Bryman (2012) mentioned that in any research activity, ethics must be attributed in the way that no stakeholder should be harmed in the research process and researchers should keep in mind that they are not over-interpreting or misinterpreting the data. In a humanitarian setting like in the refugee camps, especial ethical consideration should be taken by a researcher as the refugees are vulnerable people and the flow of refugees takes place in the "midst of complex emergencies" (Leaning, 2001; p. 1432) and the refugees in any host country enjoy minimum rights (Edwards, 2005). However, until recently, there are no specific, widely accepted ethical guidelines to conduct research in humanitarian settings like refugee camps (Müller-Funk, 2021). There are some emerging literatures on ethics in humanitarian settings but those do not have a practical, comprehensive set of guidelines on which inter-disciplinary and cross-sectoral consensus can be made (Clark-Kazak, 2019). In 2015-16 following the resettlement of some Syrian refugees to Canada, a broader Code of Ethics was developed by the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM) and it has some key ethical principles to the specific contexts of forced migration (Müller-Funk, 2021).

Again, refugees are perceived by many host countries as 'illegal migrants' like Rohingya refugees living in various countries and in this case ethical consideration to safeguard the refugee right is a key to any researcher. In case of academic research, some ethical questions can be addressed through one's university's ethics board procedure before data collection starts, other issues that come up during the fieldwork should be solved according to the demands of the situation. The author of this paper learnt about the situations in the Rohingya refugee camps before starting the fieldwork. As a researcher with a background in Communication and Journalism, I oriented myself with the code of ethics of Massey University, New Zealand. Before leaving New Zealand to do the fieldwork in Bangladesh, I obtained full ethics approval from the Human Ethics Committee (HEC) of Massey University. This approval included respect and dignity of the participants, voluntary participation, consent taking, and participants' rights, safety of the participants and the researcher, and many other important ethical considerations. The ethics approval also examined other ethical issues regarding accessing, storing, retrieving data and anonymity of the participants. Ethical issues relating to Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi) are also addressed in the HEC review process of Massey University.

To conduct research in any refugee camp, the researcher should keep in mind that the research work may not create any situation that puts the participants in further risk. Hugman *et al.* (2011) argue that research with vulnerable populations like refugees may fail if the refugees are left with further risk by the process of the research. To avoid this type of situation and to make appropriate ethical decisions, researchers have to fully understand the legal contexts in which refugee communities live. My work as a Journalist of Bangladesh Television (BTV) helped me a lot to know about the context of the Rohingya refugee camps. Again, before starting the fieldwork I have collected enough information about the field from the relevant government offices, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), my personal networks and searching relevant scholarly articles relating to the Rohingya refugee camps context. Staying in New Zealand I contacted one of my BTV colleagues living in Cox's Bazar town to know more about the context of Rohingya refugee camps and took advice from him on how I could fruitfully conduct my fieldwork at the Rohingya refugee camps. His advice helped me a lot as he has the field experience of Rohingya refugee camps.

Making trust with the research participants is one of the major ethical issues to collect data from the vulnerable population like Rohingya refugees. During data collection through in-depth interviews, the participants often provide personal information as they trust the researcher and with a hope that providing their present scenario may improve their situation, however, at one point they sometimes "find that their information is treated like a commodity" (Hugman *et al.*, 2011, p. 1277). The refugee participants sometimes fade-up with the research works as Pittaway & Bartolomei (2003) in their research works in Thailand mentioned as refugee voice, "we are really fed up with people just coming and stealing

our stories, taking our photos and we never get anything back, not even a copy of the report. Nothing ever changes (p. 36).” This type of situation I had to handle while collecting the data from the refugee camps of Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh and here I followed the ethics of Culture-Centered Approach (CCA). CCA is a health communication methodology that works through dialogue with the research participants so that the local meanings of participants’ problems and probable solutions can be articulated and understood (Dutta, 2008). CCA believes listening as the main tool to know about the participants’ lives and it argues partnerships of solidarity or trust with subaltern communities can be made through the concept of placing the researcher’s “body on the line” (Dutta *et al.* 2019, p. 1). CCA also advocates placing the researcher’s “body on the line” as a starting point to depict the ways of everyday meanings of life of the participants who live within the capitalist-colonial structures of humanitarian settings (Dutta *et al.* 2019).

## CONTEXT OF THE STUDY AREA

### Geographical Context

Among the 33 Rohingya refugee camps, 26 camps (including the Kutupalong, the largest refugee camp of the world) are situated in Ukhiya Upazila and 7 camps are present in the Teknaf Upazila of Cox’s Bazar district. The main city of Cox’s Bazar is famous for its 120 km long sea beach, and it is the district headquarter in south-eastern Bangladesh. Maximum researchers stay in the Cox’s Bazar main town (or Cox’s Bazar Sadar) which is 37 km or about two-hour drive from the closest Rohingya refugee camp of Ukhiya Upazila (Akhter & Kusakabe, 2014). There was no good accommodation facility near to the camp area and so the researchers generally travel each day from the Cox’s Bazar main town to the Rohingya camp area (Shahabuddin *et al.*, 2020). However, for an ethnographic study if anyone wants to stay one month or more in the study area then it is not economically feasible to stay in Cox’s Bazar town as the city is as expensive as Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh (Aziz, 2020). In this case, a researcher should try to find any accommodation near the refugee camp area where he/she can save the daily transport cost.

### Weather/Climate Context

Though Bangladesh is a country of six seasons but due to the rapid climate change and unplanned urbanisation, it is now a country of three seasons: a hot and muggy summer (March – May), a hot rainy monsoon (June – October), and a warm-cool dry winter (November – February) (Karim & Zhang, 2021). The whole of Bangladesh including Ukhiya-Teknaf region, is situated in the tropical monsoon region with broad seasonal distinctions in rainfall, high temperature, and humidity. Heavy rainfall is common in Bangladesh causing it to flood almost every year. As most of the Rohingya camps are built in hilly areas of Cox’s Bazar, they are highly vulnerable to floods, landslides, and cyclones (Zaman *et al.*, 2020). In 2021, 30 out of 33 Rohingya refugee camps in Ukhiya-Teknaf were affected by the flash floods (Islam, 2021b; & Patwary & Rodriguez-Morales, 2022). In Bangladesh maximum summer temperatures range between 38 and 41 °C (100.4 and 105.8 °F). April is the hottest month in most parts of the country. December and January are the coolest months when the average temperature for most of the country is 16–20 °C (61–68 °F) during the day and around 10 °C (50 °F) at night. As the road conditions of the camps are not good and heavy rainfall creates the road conditions more miserable and so it is not feasible to conduct any research in Rohingya camps in the rainy season. Considering temperature and all other weather factors, November to March is the most suitable time to conduct research in the Rohingya refugee camps of Bangladesh.

## ACCESS TO STUDY

Before starting the fieldwork, official permission from the Govt. authority to access the Rohingya refugee camps is a must. While I was in New Zealand, I contacted my BTV colleague to get the official permission before my arrival in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. He informed me that I have to apply physically to the RRRC<sup>3</sup> (Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner) office situated in Cox’s Bazar town to get the official permission.

My initial plan was to visit the Rohingya refugee camp area in the middle of June 2021. But due to Covid-19 pandemic I had to reschedule my visit as at that time the COVID scenario was not good in Bangladesh. From New Zealand, I came to Bangladesh at the beginning of December 2021. In Bangladesh I stayed some days in Dhaka with my family and then in the middle of December I went to Cox’s Bazar town. After reaching Cox’s Bazar town, I met one of the Govt. officials of RRRC and handed over my application to get my official permission from RRRC. As a Bangladeshi researcher I had to submit my application, and the RRRC official asked me to provide a set of research questionnaire and he also wanted to know about the objective of my research. During the meeting I assured that my research has no political motive and is not involved with any agenda that may be applied against the sovereignty or against the rules and regulations of Bangladesh. For foreign nationals, along with the application and questionnaire, photocopy of passport with visa page, two passport sized photographs and proof or authentication from implementing

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<sup>3</sup> RRRC is the lead Bangladesh government institution situated in Cox’s Bazar town in charge of managing the Rohingya refugees. To access to the Rohingya refugee camps, one has to collect the camp pass/permission document from the RRRC (Iqbal *et al.*, 2022)

agency / partner (copy of contract, appointment letter, ID, letter from concerned agency on official letterhead) are needed to get the camp pass (RRRC, 2021).

My appointment schedule with RRRC was confirmed by my BTV colleague. Taking assistance from a local contact is very much needed to get things easy in an unknown or even known place of a researcher. Jenkins (2018) argued for communication with local contacts in a complex humanitarian setting to conduct research in a fitting way. Before entering the Rohingya refugee camp area, I had to stay in Cox's Bazar town for three days to get the official permission from RRRC. Being a Bangladeshi citizen knowing all the procedures of getting permission, I got the required permission document within three days of my application. However, the time to get the official permission may vary as per the communication network of a researcher with the RRRC. In total, I have spent 22 days in the field (Cox's Bazar town and Ukhiya) between December 2021 and January 2022 to do my PhD fieldwork. Before doing my PhD fieldwork, I visited the Rohingya refugee camps two times. First, in July 2018 as a BTV Journalist, to cover the news of the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres who visited the Rohingya camps to see their plight and sufferings and second in February 2020, before going to New Zealand to do a pilot work of my PhD study. Using a pilot study, a researcher can optimise the research process as it might give advance warning on the full-scale research work in the field (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001).

## ACCESS TO FIELDWORK

### Accommodation in the Field

While I was in New Zealand, I communicated with my BTV (Bangladesh Television) colleagues to find out a good accommodation near the refugee camp area of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. As BTV was my previous working station and it is the only state-owned TV channel in Bangladesh I tried to utilize my connections to do my PhD fieldwork in a convenient way. With the assistance of my BTV colleagues I could manage my accommodation at the Ukhiya Upazila of Cox's Bazar. After coming from New Zealand, while staying in Dhaka, I was also looking for someone who is known to me working/living in the Ukhiya Upazila. Luckily, I found one of my friends from my local district, Patuakhali, staying in Ukhiya Upazila and he has agreed to assist me to collect the data from the Rohingya refugee camps. It was my planning to stay close to the Rohingya refugee camps and getting an accommodation in Ukhiya Upazila and finding one of my friends living at that Upazila fulfilled my desire. The Kutupalong refugee camp network is just walking distance from my accommodation spot of Ukhiya and in some cases I used local transport like Tom-Tom (Bangladeshi version of auto rickshaw) and Buses to get into the camps. Finding my own accommodation, and not taking accommodation facilities from any source like NGOs, political parties/personalities or any agency working in Ukhiya Upazila kept me neutral and free from possible biases. During my stay in Ukhiya for 19 days I could visit five Rohingya refugee camps situated in Ukhiya Upazila and collected the required primary data of my study.

### Data Collection Procedure

The broader purpose of my fieldwork was to explore and understand the construction of health among the Rohingya refugees living in various camps of Bangladesh, since refugees have a documented history of health issues after resettlement in various camps of Bangladesh. To address the health meanings of Rohingya refugees in the dominant discourse, the culture-centered approach (CCA) was used to conduct the in-depth case study of the healthcare issues faced by the refugees. CCA is a health communication methodology having the tenets of structure, culture and agency (Dutta, 2008). In keeping with the tenets of CCA, in-depth interviews have been conducted among Rohingya refugees living in camps of Bangladesh to facilitate the emergence of concepts of health from the ground level through engagement with the participants. In the in-depth interview process in CCA, participants lead the dialogue, where the role of the researcher is to listen to their narratives and then to place those stories from the 'margins of the margins' in the dominant communication narratives. Here, the researcher works as an active listener, encouraging the participants to give their narratives of lives by using follow-up questions and probes. In CCA, most of the questions are kept open-ended, grounded in explorations of the meanings of health and wellbeing in the lives of Rohingya communities. In in-depth interviews, open-ended questions create an environment where interviewees "feel relaxed and unassessed" while expressing their opinions to the researcher (Hannabus cited in Sandy & Dumay, 2011, p. 245).

During my fieldwork, I was engaged with the Rohingya refugees living in old Kutupalong RC (Registered Camp) and four other camps of Ukhiya Upazila. On most days, I left my accommodation at 9 O'clock in the morning and spent the next six hours in the refugee camps to collect the data. In the Camp permission letter, it is mentioned that I had to leave the refugee camps before 3:30 pm and no fieldwork can be done in Bangladesh Govt. holidays (Friday and Saturday are the weekly holidays in Bangladesh). On the third day of my tour I left Cox's Bazar town and on the fourth day of my journey, I could start my visit inside the Rohingya refugee camps of Ukhiya Upazila. On a sunny Sunday morning of December 2021, I along with my friend (who stayed at Ukhiya for his job) and a Rohingya interpreter entered a Rohingya refugee camp, (one of the camps of mega Kutupalong refugee camp), after showing our camp permission

letter to the CIC<sup>4</sup> (Camp-In-Charge) office. Now-a-days, the main gates of each camp are patrolled by APBn (Armed Police Battalion) police of Bangladesh and so while entering into the camp the APBn police first stopped us and interrogated us about our entry into the camps and then we could reach the CIC office.

### **Interpreter and Sample Selection**

After confirming my accommodation in Ukhiya Upazila, I made an appointment with my friend living there and sought his help to find a Rohingya interpreter. The Rohingya language is quite different from Bangla language but has some similarity with the Chattogram<sup>5</sup> language, and it is quite difficult to understand the Rohingya language even by a Bangladeshi who do not speak the Chattogram language (local language of Chattogram area that includes Cox's Bazar as well). So, I requested my friend to find a Rohingya interpreter who knows Bangla and Rohingya language fluently and who is familiar with the camp area. As my friend has been staying in Ukhiya Upazila for more than five years, it was easy for him to find an experienced Rohingya interpreter. My Rohingya interpreter himself is a Rohingya and he came to Bangladesh in the 1991-92 exodus. The role of my interpreter is to translate my open-ended Bangla language questions into Rohingya language and then convert the answers of the participants into Bangla language. In this study I used a purposive and random sampling method to select my interview participants. I have selected Rohingya participants randomly because the research questions do not suggest any specific categories of people, rather the Rohingya refugee participants. I told my interpreter that both male and female Rohingya refugees, both new (who came to Bangladesh in 2017 exodus) and old (who came before 2017 exodus), were ideal, and so the samples were chosen randomly but to be relevant to my research.

The main criteria for the participation in the in-depth interview was that each of the participants should be 18 years and older, living in the various camps of Cox's Bazar. To get their consent to take part in the interview, the participants were requested to sign a consent form. In case of low literacy of the Rohingya respondents, verbal assent and consent was sought by the researcher. The objective of the interview was read out (and translated where required) to the participants and explained in detail by the researcher. Though the in-depth interviews were taken by open-ended questionnaires, still a pretested semi structured questionnaire in the Bengali language was used to collect the information through face-to-face interviews. An audio tape recorder was used for recording of the qualitative interviews in order to collect full and intact thoughts of the participants. Each in-depth interview or discussion session was held for 40 minutes to 1.5 hours. During my field work I have taken 41 in-depth interviews and among the respondents 20 participants were male, 21 were female Rohingya refugees.

### **Strategy Adjusted**

During the first two days of my field study, I along with my friend and a Rohingya interpreter, after showing our camp permission document to APBn police, went directly to the CIC office, introduced ourselves and showed my camp permission document again to CIC. Then CIC asked me whether I would continue my in-depth interview in the CIC office area or visit the camp area. I responded that I would like to visit the camp and then take the in-depth interviews at the shelter of the participants. CIC agreed but he provided us with a representative (Rohingya volunteer) who helped us find the participants. While taking the in-depth interviews, I observed that the Rohingya participants were not comfortable to share their lived experiences, feelings etc. in front of the CIC representative. So, after two days I had to change my strategy to collect the data from the Rohingya camp area. The rest of the days of my field study I only showed my camp permission document to APBn police and then entering into the camp, found out the Rohingya participants by ourselves. As my interpreter is also a Rohingya, who came to Bangladesh in 1991, could easily select the participants of my interviews. We could find out the Rohingya participants easily as most of the male Rohingyas are staying in the shelter as they are not allowed to go outside of the camps and most of them do not have any jobs inside of the camps. The female Rohingyas are somewhat busy with their household work or childcare, and still gave me time to share their life story.

After entering each camp, to find out the participants, maximum researchers generally communicate with the majhiis<sup>6</sup> (the local Rohingya leaders), explaining to him (almost all the majhis are male) the purpose of the study. Then through the majhi's support a researcher finds out the respective Rohingya participants and gets access to their shelters.

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<sup>4</sup> CIC is a designated official of the Bangladesh government in charge of each camp. CIC coordinates services of the camps, liaises with governments and UN bodies and he is the front-line decision maker and have influence over every actor present in the Rohingya camps (Krehm & Shahan, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Bangladesh Govt. has changed the name of Chittagong into Chattogram effective from September 10, 2018, through a Gazette Notification (Sarkar, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> The Rohingya refugee camps operate with an intricate system of "majhi", or Rohingya camp leaders, reporting to the CIC. A majhi is selected by the camp authorities to serve as an intermediary between authorities and the Rohingya refugee population. However, over the years, the majhi system has been criticised for being prone to abuse of power and exploitation (Acaps, 2018).

Accordingly in the beginning of my study I tried to build up rapport with the majhis to find out Rohingya respondents and conducted in-depth interviews. However, every day to find out a majhi is time consuming and a researcher needs to seek help from CIC to find out the majhis. Again, I observed that some Rohingya participants do not believe in majhi and consider him as a part of power dynamics and the respondents also feel shy to describe their sufferings in front of the majhi. So, after two days of my field study inside the camp I did not search for the majhi, rather I and the Rohingya interpreter tried to find out the participants and we successfully conducted the fieldwork.

To take female Rohingyas' interviews, my plan was to recruit a female Rohingya interpreter. However, I could not manage to recruit any female Rohingya interpreter as the female Rohingyas are maintaining purdah<sup>7</sup>, not interested to go outside of their shelters and most of them do not know Bangla language. As a result, I had to rely on my male Rohingya interpreter to take the female Rohingyas' interview. With the assistance of my male Rohingya interpreter, I could manage to take the interviews of the female Rohingya refugees living in the camps by utilizing my previously known Rohingya culture. During the interview process of the female Rohingyas, the male Rohingya interpreter generally sits beside the female as they are part of the same community, and I take my seat in the distance so that the female can maintain her purdah. Being a Bangladeshi and a member of Muslim community also helped me to understand the Rohingya culture. For example, while entering any shelter I generally used Islamic culture of greetings, "Assalamualaikum – Peace be upon you" (the culture used by all Muslim Rohingyas) and gave our identity to the residents of the shelter and describe the purpose of our visit. Then we tried to build up the rapport and trust of the Rohingya participants. After that I sought permission to record our discussions and then we started our conversations.

### **Covid-19 Safety Protocols**

After completing my PhD confirmation in April 2021, I have had the plan to do my PhD fieldwork ASAP. In Australia-New Zealand, the researchers generally go to the field to collect primary data after completing their PhD confirmation and PhD confirmation is done after one year of PhD study by the respective candidates. However, due to Covid-19 pandemic worldwide, specifically in Bangladesh's refugee camp area, I could not start my fieldwork immediately after my PhD confirmation. Then in November-December 2021, when the Covid-19 scenario of Bangladesh developed with infection rate less than 2%, I started my journey from New Zealand to Bangladesh in early December 2021. I think I was the luckiest of some researchers who could complete the primary data collection through fieldwork in Covid-19 pandemic period (2020 to 2021). During taking of the in-depth interviews though I could not maintain 2 metre social distancing (social distancing is virtually impossible in the congested Rohingya refugee camps), however wearing of masks by the researcher, interpreter and the participants and other safety protocols, that were realistic and applicable given realities of the context, were followed.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The general aim of a research in humanitarian setting like in any refugee camp is to find out the challenges of vulnerable people living there and inform their struggles to the world to raise awareness and to take appropriate measures by the stakeholders to develop their lives. However, researchers often face challenges in conducting research in such humanitarian settings and understanding of the challenges can enable researchers to adopt appropriate strategies before commencing the study. Based on my fieldwork experience in the Rohingya refugee camps of Bangladesh, some suggestions are discussed below for future researchers.

- Researchers should start planning first and communicate with the relevant stakeholders to know about the context of the field,
- Thinking about the geographical context of the camps and seasonal variation including monsoon and rainfall is very much needed. Dry season (from November to February) is the best time to conduct research at Rohingya refugee camps,
- Sometimes an initial visit or pilot study to the camps and interviews with various stakeholders may be helpful,
- Accommodation is a vital component in an ethnographic study and so researchers should think about the accommodation in advance so that he/she can easily find the living spot near the fieldwork,
- Special attention needs to be taken to get the camp permission to access into the refugee camps,
- Researcher should take inclusion strategies for the respective authorities (RRRC, CIC), and inclusion/exclusion strategies for gatekeepers (majhis, religious leaders, camp site management authority),
- Interpreters from the respective study community are very much helpful to establish communication between researchers and the respondents. To collect data from the female respondents, a female interpreter is very much needed,
- Researchers should be respectful to the culture, religion, choices, and privacy of the participants and the community,

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<sup>7</sup> Purdah (translated as 'veil' or 'curtain') is a set of social norms in Muslim culture (also in Rohingya culture) by which women are kept out of the view of men other than their husbands (Parmar *et al.*, 2019).

- Last but not the least a researcher should put his/her “body on the line” of the respondents’ struggle to know about their lives.

## CONCLUSION

This article finds relevant challenges and adaptation strategies of research in a humanitarian context like the Rohingya refugee camps of Bangladesh. The multi-dimensional complexities of a refugee camp may introduce unforeseen challenges and interrupt research plans but overcoming those challenges collecting data from the vulnerable communities should be the main chore of a researcher. Contextual and time bound adaptation of strategies are the key lessons learnt from the study. The lessons learned from this study will be very helpful for sensitising future researchers about the underlying issues of a refugee camp. This might be useful to draw a parallel study in a different setting of refugees and/or displaced communities living in other parts of the world.

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## ETHICS APPROVAL

This study received ethical approval from the Human Ethics Committee (HEC) of Massey University, New Zealand.

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