

What Factors Have Led to Increased Access to Education for Rohingya Refugee Girls in Camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh Since 2017?

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ABSTRACT

Since the mass displacement of Rohingya refugees to Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, in 2017, access to education has remained one of the most significant humanitarian challenges, particularly for girls. While existing scholarship has extensively documented the barriers restricting girls' educational participation, comparatively little attention has been given to the factors associated with recent improvements in educational access. This literature review examines the research question: *What factors have contributed to the increased access to education for Rohingya refugee girls in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar since 2017?*

Using a qualitative literature review methodology, this study synthesises peer-reviewed academic literature alongside reports from humanitarian organisations, including UNICEF, UNHCR, Human Rights Watch, Plan International, and the International Rescue Committee. Sources published from 2017 onwards were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring explanations for changes in girls' educational participation.

The review identifies four interconnected factors associated with increasing educational access: changing cultural attitudes towards girls' education, continued support from non-governmental and international organisations, practical economic motivations among refugee families, and the growing visibility of educated girls as role models within refugee communities. Rather than acting independently, these factors appear to reinforce one another, contributing to gradual shifts in educational participation despite the continued presence of structural barriers such as poverty, early marriage, and limited access to secondary education.

The findings suggest that improvements in girls' educational access are best understood as the result of interacting social, institutional, and economic processes rather than any single intervention. By focusing on the factors associated with positive educational change, this review contributes to a more balanced understanding of refugee education and highlights the importance of sustained, community-based approaches to promoting gender equity within humanitarian contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the mass displacement of Rohingya refugees following the 2017 military crackdown in Myanmar, approximately one million Rohingya refugees have sought refuge in camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Among the many humanitarian challenges facing this population, access to education remains one of the most significant, particularly for girls. Previous research has consistently identified numerous barriers preventing Rohingya girls from accessing education, including poverty, restrictive gender norms, concerns regarding safety, limited educational infrastructure, and the absence of secondary education opportunities. These barriers often become more pronounced during adolescence, when girls are increasingly expected to undertake domestic responsibilities, marry at a young age, or remain within the household.

While these challenges remain substantial, more recent studies indicate gradual improvements in girls' educational participation within the refugee camps. Although educational opportunities continue to be limited compared with national standards, increasing numbers of Rohingya girls are enrolling in learning centres and remaining in education for longer periods than in the years immediately following displacement. Existing research suggests that these improvements are associated with a combination of social, institutional, and economic changes occurring within the refugee communities.

In this review, increased access to education refers to improvements in girls' enrolment, attendance, availability of educational opportunities, and their ability to participate in formal and non-formal learning within the refugee camps. Although numerous studies have examined the barriers restricting girls' education, comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding the factors contributing to these recent improvements. Much of the existing literature focuses on educational deprivation rather than the processes through which access has gradually expanded.

This review therefore seeks to synthesise existing literature to examine the factors associated with increasing educational participation among Rohingya refugee girls since 2017. It argues that four interconnected factors appear to have contributed to these developments: changing social attitudes towards girls' education, support from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations, practical economic motivations, and the increasing visibility of educated girls as role models within refugee communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational access for Rohingya refugee girls has become an increasingly important area of research following the large-scale displacement of refugees to Cox's Bazar in 2017. Existing scholarship has predominantly focused on identifying the barriers preventing girls from participating in education, while comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding the factors associated with recent

improvements in educational access. Consequently, although there is considerable evidence documenting educational disadvantage, there remains a need to synthesise research examining the processes contributing to increasing educational participation.

A consistent finding across both academic literature and humanitarian reports is that educational exclusion results from the interaction of structural, economic, and socio-cultural barriers rather than from a single cause. Human Rights Watch (2025) argues that many girls discontinue their education after reaching puberty because families become increasingly concerned about their safety, family honour, and marriage prospects. Similarly, Plan International identifies restrictive gender norms, domestic responsibilities, and limited access to secondary education as major factors contributing to declining school attendance among adolescent girls. Together, these studies suggest that gender inequality continues to shape educational opportunities despite ongoing humanitarian interventions.

More recent research, however, indicates that important changes have begun to emerge within refugee communities. Reports published by UNICEF and UNHCR suggest increasing enrolment among girls at the primary level, indicating gradual improvements in educational participation since 2017. While these reports provide valuable evidence regarding programme outcomes, they often focus primarily on documenting improvements rather than critically examining the broader social processes responsible for these developments. Consequently, understanding why educational access has improved requires consideration of wider institutional, cultural, and economic factors.

One emerging theme within the literature concerns changing attitudes towards girls' education. Earlier research frequently characterised education for girls as a low priority because of expectations surrounding domestic responsibilities, gender roles, and early marriage. More recent studies suggest that some families increasingly perceive education as a valuable investment capable of improving girls' future opportunities and strengthening household resilience. Researchers also note that younger parents and community leaders are generally more supportive of girls' education than previous generations, indicating gradual changes in community attitudes rather than abrupt cultural transformation.

Another major theme concerns the contribution of NGOs and international organisations. Organisations such as UNICEF and UNHCR have expanded educational opportunities through learning centres, teacher training, awareness campaigns, and girl-friendly educational programmes. The recruitment of female teachers has been particularly important in increasing parental confidence and reducing concerns surrounding girls' attendance. Nevertheless, much of the available evidence regarding these interventions originates from NGO reports rather than independent longitudinal studies, making it difficult to determine the extent to which individual programmes alone account for increasing educational participation.

Economic and practical considerations also emerge consistently throughout the literature. Living under prolonged displacement and economic uncertainty, many refugee families increasingly view education as providing benefits beyond academic achievement. Studies suggest that education may improve future livelihood opportunities, strengthen life skills, and contribute to delaying early marriage. However, these

relationships remain largely associative rather than causal, indicating that educational participation should be understood alongside broader social and economic changes.

Finally, scholars increasingly recognise the importance of social visibility and role modelling within refugee communities. As greater numbers of girls participate successfully in education, families become more familiar with girls attending school and are more likely to perceive education as socially acceptable. The increasing visibility of educated girls may therefore reinforce positive community attitudes and contribute to the gradual normalisation of girls' education.

Overall, the literature suggests that improvements in educational access cannot be attributed to a single intervention. Rather, they appear to result from the interaction of changing cultural attitudes, institutional support, economic considerations, and evolving community norms. While previous studies have examined these themes individually, comparatively few have explored how they interact to contribute collectively to increasing educational access for Rohingya refugee girls. This review addresses that gap by synthesising evidence across these four interconnected factors.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative literature review methodology to examine the factors associated with increasing educational access for Rohingya refugee girls in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar since 2017. Rather than collecting primary data through interviews or surveys, this review synthesises existing academic and policy literature to identify recurring explanations for recent changes in girls' educational participation.

The literature search included peer-reviewed journal articles alongside reports published by humanitarian organisations, including UNICEF, UNHCR, Human Rights Watch, Plan International, and the International Rescue Committee. Literature was identified using Google Scholar, JSTOR, and institutional publications through combinations of keywords including "*Rohingya refugee girls*," "*education*," "*Cox's Bazar*," "*Bangladesh*," "*gender*," "*girls' education*," and "*refugee education*."

Sources published from 2017 onwards were prioritised to reflect developments following the large-scale displacement of Rohingya refugees. Publications were included if they examined educational access among Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar or discussed factors influencing girls' educational participation. Studies focusing primarily on refugee populations outside Bangladesh or unrelated educational issues were excluded.

Following the literature search, sources were analysed using thematic analysis. Recurring explanations for increasing educational participation were grouped into four interconnected themes: changing cultural attitudes, support from NGOs and international organisations, economic and practical motivations, and the increasing visibility of educated girls as role models. Rather than evaluating individual programmes independently, the review considers how these themes interact to influence educational access.

This methodology has several limitations. A considerable proportion of the available literature consists of reports produced by humanitarian organisations, which may emphasise successful interventions and therefore introduce publication bias. Furthermore, relatively few longitudinal studies examine the long-term educational experiences of Rohingya girls, particularly regarding secondary education. Consequently, although the available literature provides valuable insights into recent developments, caution should be exercised when drawing conclusions regarding long-term educational outcomes.

CHANGING CULTURAL ATTITUDES

One of the most significant factors associated with increasing educational access for Rohingya girls is the gradual shift in community attitudes towards girls' education. Historically, traditional gender norms within Rohingya society placed greater emphasis on girls' domestic responsibilities than on formal education. As girls approached adolescence, many families prioritised protecting family honour, maintaining cultural expectations, and preparing daughters for marriage rather than encouraging continued school attendance. Human Rights Watch and Plan International both report that concerns regarding safety, mobility, and early marriage continue to contribute to girls leaving education after puberty.

However, displacement has also altered many aspects of daily life within refugee communities. Living in humanitarian settings has exposed families to educational programmes, awareness campaigns, and discussions surrounding gender equality that were previously less accessible. Although these initiatives have not fundamentally transformed traditional beliefs, existing research suggests they have contributed to gradual changes in attitudes among some families, particularly younger parents and community leaders, who increasingly recognise education as beneficial for their daughters' future wellbeing.

Rather than viewing education solely as an unnecessary expense, some families now perceive it as an investment capable of improving girls' future opportunities and increasing household resilience. This changing perception reflects a broader shift in the perceived value of education, particularly within communities experiencing prolonged displacement and uncertainty.

At the same time, these developments should not be interpreted as evidence that traditional cultural norms have disappeared. Numerous studies continue to demonstrate that early marriage, gender expectations, and concerns surrounding girls' safety remain significant barriers to educational participation. Consequently, changing attitudes should be understood as gradual rather than universal, with improvements occurring unevenly across different families and communities.

The literature therefore suggests that cultural change is best understood as one factor operating alongside institutional support and broader social developments rather than as an independent explanation for increasing educational access. As humanitarian organisations continue to engage with refugee communities through awareness campaigns and community dialogue, changing attitudes may contribute to creating environments in which girls' education becomes increasingly accepted. Nevertheless, further

longitudinal research is required to determine the extent to which these attitudinal changes will be sustained over time.

THE ROLE OF NGOS

Support provided by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations has been consistently identified as one of the most significant factors associated with increasing educational access for Rohingya girls since 2017. Following the mass displacement of Rohingya refugees to Cox's Bazar, organisations including UNICEF, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Plan International, and the International Rescue Committee expanded educational provision by establishing learning centres, developing educational programmes, training teachers, and providing learning materials. These initiatives significantly increased the availability of educational opportunities within the refugee camps.

Beyond expanding access, humanitarian organisations have increasingly adopted approaches specifically designed to encourage girls' participation in education. Many learning centres have introduced girl-friendly spaces, gender-sensitive teaching practices, and safeguarding measures intended to create safer learning environments. The recruitment of female teachers has also been particularly important, as previous research suggests that many parents feel more comfortable allowing their daughters to attend school when female staff are present. Female teachers additionally provide visible examples of educated women, reinforcing the perception that education can create opportunities for girls within their communities.

However, the contribution of NGOs extends beyond the direct provision of educational services. Community outreach initiatives, awareness campaigns, and discussions surrounding gender equality have sought to engage parents and community leaders in recognising the value of girls' education. Rather than focusing solely on increasing enrolment, these programmes attempt to address the social attitudes that have traditionally discouraged girls from attending school. Existing literature suggests that educational provision is more effective when accompanied by community engagement that builds trust and addresses parental concerns regarding safety, cultural expectations, and future opportunities.

Research published by the International Rescue Committee similarly emphasises the importance of community-based approaches, arguing that sustained engagement with parents and local leaders is essential for increasing long-term support for girls' education. These findings suggest that educational access is influenced not only by the availability of schools but also by the willingness of communities to accept girls' participation in education.

Nevertheless, caution is required when evaluating the overall impact of humanitarian organisations. Much of the available evidence documenting programme success is produced by the organisations implementing these initiatives, raising the possibility of publication bias. While existing studies consistently associate NGO interventions with increasing educational participation, relatively little independent longitudinal

research has examined whether these improvements are sustained over time or whether they can be attributed solely to humanitarian programmes. It is therefore more appropriate to conclude that NGOs have contributed significantly to improving educational access while recognising that their impact operates alongside broader social and cultural changes occurring within refugee communities.

ECONOMIC AND PRACTICAL OBSERVATIONS

Economic and practical considerations also emerge consistently throughout the literature as important factors influencing family decisions regarding girls' education. Rohingya refugee families in Cox's Bazar continue to experience prolonged displacement, economic insecurity, and dependence on humanitarian assistance. Within these circumstances, decisions regarding education are often shaped not only by cultural expectations but also by practical assessments of how education may contribute to future household wellbeing.

Recent studies suggest that some families increasingly perceive education as offering practical benefits beyond academic learning. Rather than viewing schooling solely as a social or moral obligation, education is increasingly understood as a means of developing literacy, communication skills, problem-solving abilities, and other competencies that may improve future opportunities. These perceived benefits appear to have contributed to changing parental attitudes regarding the value of educating daughters, particularly in situations where families face long-term uncertainty about their future livelihoods.

The relationship between education and early marriage also receives considerable attention within the literature. Several studies suggest that girls who remain engaged in education are less likely to marry during adolescence, leading some families to perceive continued schooling as a means of delaying marriage and expanding future opportunities. However, the available evidence remains largely correlational, making it difficult to conclude that education alone is responsible for delaying early marriage. Instead, educational participation should be understood as one component of broader social and economic changes influencing family decision-making.

In addition, a number of humanitarian organisations have introduced vocational training and life-skills programmes alongside formal education. These initiatives seek to demonstrate the practical value of education by equipping girls with skills that may enhance their future independence and resilience. For many families, the combination of academic learning and practical skills increases the perceived usefulness of continued education, particularly within contexts of displacement where employment opportunities remain limited.

Collectively, the literature suggests that economic motivations are closely interconnected with cultural and institutional factors rather than functioning independently. Families are unlikely to support girls' education for purely economic reasons; instead, decisions appear to reflect a combination of perceived future benefits, changing social expectations, and increased educational opportunities created through

humanitarian interventions. Consequently, practical considerations should be viewed as reinforcing broader changes in community attitudes rather than acting as an isolated explanation for increasing educational participation.

INCREASED VISIBILITY OF EDUCATED GIRLS

The increasing visibility of girls participating in education has also emerged as an important factor associated with improving educational access within Rohingya refugee communities. In close-knit environments such as refugee camps, community members frequently observe and respond to the behaviour of those around them. As increasing numbers of girls enrol in learning centres and remain in education, families become more familiar with girls attending school, contributing to the gradual normalisation of girls' educational participation.

Research on social norms suggests that individuals are more likely to adopt new behaviours when they observe them becoming accepted within their communities. Within the context of Cox's Bazar, families who witness neighbouring households successfully supporting their daughters' education may become more willing to make similar decisions themselves. Consequently, education becomes increasingly viewed as an acceptable and achievable option rather than an exception to traditional expectations.

The presence of educated girls and female role models also appears to reinforce positive perceptions of education. Girls who remain in school demonstrate that education can coexist with cultural values while providing opportunities to develop knowledge, confidence, and practical skills. Although relatively few Rohingya girls have progressed to higher levels of education, even small examples of educational success may influence community perceptions by demonstrating the potential long-term value of educating daughters.

However, the influence of role models should not be considered in isolation. Existing research suggests that visibility alone is unlikely to transform community attitudes without continued support from educational programmes, humanitarian organisations, and broader changes in social norms. Rather than acting as an independent driver of educational participation, increasing visibility appears to reinforce changes already taking place within refugee communities by making girls' education progressively more socially accepted.

Overall, the literature indicates that social visibility contributes to a gradual process of norm change. As girls' educational participation becomes increasingly common, families may become more willing to support their daughters' education, creating a reinforcing cycle in which growing participation encourages further acceptance within the community.

CONCLUSION

Educational opportunities for Rohingya refugee girls in the camps of Cox's Bazar have gradually expanded since the mass displacement of refugees in 2017. Although significant barriers remain, including poverty, early marriage, restrictive gender norms, safety concerns, and limited access to secondary education, the literature suggests that important changes have occurred within refugee communities over recent years.

This review identified four interconnected factors associated with increasing educational participation: changing attitudes towards girls' education, continued support from non-governmental and international organisations, practical economic motivations, and the increasing visibility of educated girls as role models. Rather than operating independently, these factors appear to reinforce one another, contributing collectively to gradual improvements in educational access. At the same time, the available evidence indicates that no single factor can fully explain these developments, highlighting the importance of understanding educational change as the product of interacting social, institutional, and economic processes.

The findings also demonstrate the value of examining positive developments alongside persistent challenges. While previous research has predominantly focused on the barriers preventing Rohingya girls from accessing education, this review highlights the factors associated with improving participation despite ongoing humanitarian constraints. Such an approach contributes to a more balanced understanding of refugee education by recognising both continuing inequalities and emerging opportunities for change.

Nevertheless, important limitations remain. Much of the available evidence is derived from humanitarian organisations, and relatively little longitudinal research has examined whether recent improvements in girls' educational participation will be sustained over time. Future research should therefore investigate the long-term educational experiences of Rohingya girls, particularly at the secondary level, while examining how changing community attitudes continue to influence educational access.

Although progress remains gradual, the available literature suggests that increasing educational participation among Rohingya girls represents a meaningful indicator of broader social change within the refugee camps. Continued investment in inclusive educational policies, community engagement, and gender-sensitive humanitarian programming will be essential for sustaining these improvements and expanding educational opportunities for future generations of Rohingya girls.

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