



**The Transformative Role of Higher Education in Empowering Rohingya Refugee Youth
Across Educational Contexts: Pathways to Sustainable Futures**

A Thesis: Submitted for the partial fulfillment for the Master of Arts in Education, Asian
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By

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Declaration of AI Use

After writing each section of this thesis by myself, I used ChatGPT only to improve the language, sentence structure and readability. It was not used to generate the research content, conduct data analysis, interpret the findings, or develop the conclusions. All research, analysis, and interpretations presented in this thesis are my own, and all sources have been properly cited.

Contents

Abstract.....	7
Chapter 1: Introduction	
1.1 Background of the Study.....	9
1.2 Research Problem Statement.....	11
1.3 Novelty of the Study.....	12
1.4 Aim of the Study	12
1.5 Research Questions.....	12
1.6 Research Objectives.....	13
Chapter 2: Literature Review	
2.1 Higher Education and Refugee Empowerment.....	13
2.2 Educational Barriers Faced by Rohingya Refugees.....	14
2.3 Transformative Role of Higher Education.....	16
2.4 Higher Education and Sustainable Community Development	17
2.5 Global Policy Frameworks Supporting Refugee Higher Education	18
2.6 Research Gap	19
2.7 Theoretical Framework	20
2.7.1 Capability Approach.....	21
2.7.2 Empowerment Theory.....	21
Chapter 3: Methodology	
3.1 Research Design	23
3.2 Study Setting.....	23
3.3 Study Population	24

3.4 Sample Size.....	24
3.5 Sampling Strategy	24
3.6 Data Collection.....	25
3.7 Data Analysis	25
3.8 Ethical Considerations	26
3.9 Trustworthiness of the Study.....	26
3.10 Data Dissemination.....	27

Chapter 4: Results

4.1 Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants.....	27
4.2 Higher Education as a Pathway to Personal Empowerment.....	29
4.3 Higher Education and the Reconstruction of Identity and Sense of Belonging	32
4.4 Challenges and Opportunities in Accessing Higher Education Across Educational Contexts	35
4.4.1 Limited Educational Opportunities Before Higher Education.....	35
4.4.2 Documentation and Mobility Challenges.....	36
4.4.3 Language and Academic Adjustment.....	37
4.4.4 Family and Community Expectation.....	37
4.4.5 Financial Barriers and the Importance of Scholarships	38
4.4.6 Opportunities That Made Higher Education Possible.....	39
4.5 Higher Education, Leadership, Community Engagement, and Pathways to Sustainable Futures.....	39

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Higher Education as a Pathway to Personal Empowerment	45
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5.2 Higher Education as a Process of Identity Reconstruction	46
5.3 Challenges in Accessing and Completing Higher Education Across Educational Contexts	49
5.4 Higher Education as a Pathway to Community Leadership and Sustainable Futures ...	53
5.5 Strengths and Limitations of the Study	57
Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations	
6.1 Conclusion.....	58
6.2 Recommendations	59
Chapter 7: References	62

List of Figure

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of the Study	22
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List of Table

Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 30)	28
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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet	65
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form	67
Appendix C: Interview Guide	71

Abstract

Background: Higher education is widely recognized as an important pathway to empowerment, leadership, and sustainable development. However, Rohingya refugee youth continue to face significant barriers to accessing higher education because of the displacement, limited educational opportunities, financial hardship, and restrictive policies. Although a small number of Rohingya youth have accessed higher education in Bangladesh and abroad, little research has explored how these experiences have transformed their lives. **Aim:** This study aimed to explore how higher education shapes the personal empowerment, identity reconstruction, leadership, and sustainable community-oriented aspirations of Rohingya refugee youth across diverse educational contexts. **Methods:** A qualitative study using a narrative inquiry approach was conducted among 30 Rohingya refugee youth who were studying or had completed higher education across educational contexts. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in English and Rohingya and analyzed using thematic analysis. **Results:** The findings showed that higher education played a transformative role in participants' lives by strengthening their confidence, independence, critical thinking, leadership, and sense of identity. Participants viewed higher education as a pathway to overcoming the limitations of displacement while creating opportunities to contribute to their community through education, advocacy, research, and humanitarian work. However, they also experienced multiple challenges, including documentation barriers, financial hardship, language barriers, limited educational opportunities, mobility restrictions, and family responsibilities. **Conclusion:** Higher education is more than obtaining a university degree for Rohingya refugee youth; it is a pathway to personal empowerment, identity reconstruction, leadership development, and sustainable futures.

Keywords: Rohingya youth, higher education, empowerment, identity reconstruction, leadership, narrative inquiry, sustainable futures.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Education is widely recognized as a powerful tool for individual empowerment and social transformation, particularly for people affected by conflict, displacement, and marginalization. Beyond providing academic knowledge, education helps individuals develop confidence, critical thinking, leadership skills, and opportunities for personal and professional growth. For refugees, education also provides hope, stability, and a pathway to rebuild disrupted lives and plan for the future (Education Cannot Wait, 2020; UNICEF, 2022). Among all levels of education, higher education plays a particularly important role by preparing individuals with the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to participate actively in society, achieve self-reliance, and contribute to the development of their communities (UNHCR, 2022).

Rohingya are one of the world's most persecuted minority groups who have faced decades of systematic discrimination, deprivation of citizenship, and denial of basic educational rights in Myanmar (United Nation, n.d). These long-standing challenges became even more severe following the violence in 2017, when more than 700,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh, joining earlier refugee populations in Cox's Bazar (UNHCR, 2018). Although Bangladesh has provided protection and humanitarian assistance, educational opportunities for Rohingya refugees remain limited till today. Most children and adolescents attend learning centers that provide basic education, while opportunities for accredited secondary and higher education are still scarce (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Hossain, 2023).

The limited access to higher education has significant consequences for Rohingya refugee youth. Without opportunities to continue their education, many young people face restricted career options, financial dependence, and limited opportunities to contribute to their communities.

Previous studies have shown that higher education can strengthen confidence, leadership, critical thinking, and resilience while creating opportunities for employment and social participation (Education Cannot Wait, 2020; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; UNHCR, 2023). For refugee communities, higher education is not only a pathway to individual success but also an investment in future community development, as educated youth often become teachers, researchers, health professionals, humanitarian workers, and community leaders who bring changes to the society and beyond.

Despite these challenges, a small number of Rohingya refugee youth have successfully accessed higher education through universities in Bangladesh, scholarship programs, and institutions in countries such as Japan, Canada, Australia, Turkey, the United States and others. These educational journeys provide valuable opportunities to understand how higher education influences empowerment, identity, confidence, leadership, and future aspirations across different educational contexts. Their experiences also demonstrate how education can shape long-term commitments to community development and sustainable futures.

Furthermore, international policy frameworks have also recognized the importance of refugee education. The Global Compact on Refugees encourages governments and development partners to expand access to quality education, including higher education, as part of refugee protection and long-term development (UNHCR, 2018). Similarly, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development identifies education as a key driver of inclusive development, peace, and social equity through Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Sustainable Development Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) (United Nations, 2015). In support of these commitments, UNHCR's 15by30 initiative aims to increase global refugee enrollment in higher education to 15 percent by 2030 (UNHCR, 2023). Although these global commitments have

created new opportunities for refugees, many Rohingya youth continue to face significant barriers to accessing and completing higher education.

This study explores the lived experiences of Rohingya refugee youth who have accessed higher education in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Japan, Canada, Australia, Turkey, and the United States. Through their personal narratives, it examines how higher education has influenced their personal empowerment, identity, leadership, future aspirations, and commitment to supporting their communities. It also explores the challenges and opportunities they experienced while accessing and completing higher education across different educational contexts. By documenting these experiences, this study contributes to a better understanding of the transformative role of higher education and provides evidence to inform universities, humanitarian organizations, and policymakers in expanding equitable higher education opportunities for displaced and stateless populations.

1.2 Research Problem Statement

Despite global commitments to equitable and inclusive higher education, Rohingya refugees continue to face significant barriers to accessing tertiary education due to statelessness, documentation challenges, financial constraints, and restrictive policies in host countries. As a result, only a small number of Rohingya youth have been able to pursue higher education. While existing studies have largely focused on access to basic and non-formal education, little is known about the experiences of those who have accessed higher education and how it has influenced their lives. There is limited empirical evidence on how higher education shapes the empowerment, identity, leadership, and future aspirations of Rohingya refugee youth across different educational contexts. This study addresses this gap by exploring the transformative role of higher education through the lived experiences of Rohingya students and graduates, providing evidence to inform

policies and programs that support equitable higher education opportunities for displaced and stateless populations.

1.3 Novelty of the Study

This study is one of the few to explore the transformative role of higher education in the lives of Rohingya refugee youth across multiple educational contexts. Rather than focusing only on access to education, it examines how higher education influences personal empowerment, identity reconstruction, leadership, and community-oriented aspirations. By drawing on the lived experiences of Rohingya students and graduates from different countries, this study provides new insights into how higher education can support sustainable futures for displaced and stateless populations. The findings offer practical evidence to inform higher education policies and programs that promote equitable access and meaningful opportunities for refugee youth.

1.4 Aim of the Study

This study aims to explore the transformative role of higher education in shaping the empowerment, identity, leadership, and sustainable future aspirations of Rohingya refugee youth across different educational contexts.

1.5 Research Questions

1. How do Rohingya refugee youth describe the influence of higher education on their personal empowerment and transformation?
2. How does higher education shape their identity, confidence, leadership, and sense of belonging?
3. What challenges and opportunities do Rohingya refugee youth experience in accessing and completing higher education across different educational contexts?

4. How does higher education influence their aspirations to contribute to their communities and support sustainable futures?

1.6 Research Objectives

This study seeks to:

1. Examine how higher education influences the empowerment, confidence, and decision-making abilities of Rohingya youth
2. Explore how higher education shapes their identity, sense of belonging, and leadership development
3. Understand the challenges and opportunities Rohingya youth experience while accessing and completing higher education across different educational contexts
4. Examine how higher education influences their commitment to community development and aspirations for sustainable futures
5. Generate evidence to inform policies and programs that expand higher education opportunities for Rohingya and other displaced populations

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Higher Education and Refugee Empowerment

Higher education is widely recognized as an important pathway for empowering refugees and supporting long-term social, economic, and personal development. Beyond academic learning, higher education helps individuals develop confidence, critical thinking, leadership skills, and the ability to make informed decisions about their lives (Education Cannot Wait, 2020; UNHCR, 2022). For refugees who have experienced conflict, forced displacement, and interrupted

education, access to higher education provides hope, stability, and opportunities to rebuild their lives while preparing for the future.

Previous studies have shown that higher education contributes to refugees' personal and professional growth. It strengthens self-confidence, improves communication and leadership skills, and increases opportunities for employment, further education, and community participation (UNHCR, 2023). Menashy and Zhakaria (2018) argue that education also supports refugees' social inclusion by helping them develop language skills, build relationships, and adapt to new educational and social environments. Similarly, Miller and Rasmussen (2010) suggest that structured educational environments can reduce the psychological effects of prolonged displacement by providing routine, stability, purpose, and hope for the future.

For Rohingya refugees, higher education has become an important opportunity to overcome years of exclusion from formal education. Ahmad (2023) explains that higher education strengthens leadership, community participation, and empowerment while contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Although only a small number of Rohingya refugee youth have been able to access universities, existing studies suggest that higher education offers benefits beyond obtaining a degree. It helps build confidence, independence, resilience, and future aspirations while encouraging young people to become active contributors to their families and communities. These studies demonstrate that higher education is not only an educational opportunity but also an important pathway toward empowerment and sustainable futures.

2.2 Educational Barriers Faced by Rohingya Refugees

Despite the recognized importance of higher education, Rohingya refugees continue to face multiple barriers in accessing and completing their education. These barriers begin with decades

of discrimination and denial of educational rights in Myanmar and continue after displacement because of legal, financial, social, and institutional challenges. As a result, many Rohingya children and youth are unable to progress beyond basic or non-formal education, leaving very limited opportunities for higher education. One of the most significant barriers is the lack of legal documentation and citizenship. Many students are unable to meet university admission requirements or obtain the travel documents needed to continue their education in other countries (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Hossain, 2023). Documentation challenges also affect access to scholarships, visas, and other educational opportunities, making it difficult for many qualified students to continue their studies.

Additionally, financial hardship is another major challenge. Although some students receive scholarships, many still struggle with costs related to transportation, accommodation, learning materials, internet access, and other daily expenses (Ahmad & Ahmed, 2023). Limited financial resources often prevent students from continuing their education or participating fully in university life. These challenges are even greater for students who receive little or no family support because of the economic conditions faced by refugee households in the camps. Language also remains an important barrier for many Rohingya students. Most have experienced interrupted schooling and have limited opportunities to learn English or the languages used in higher education institutions. Menashy and Zhakaria (2018) note that language barriers affect classroom participation, communication, academic performance, and students' confidence, particularly during the early stages of higher education. Many refugee students therefore require additional time and support to adjust to new academic environments.

The researchers have reported that traditional gender expectations, early marriage, family responsibilities, and concerns about safety often discourage girls from continuing their education

(Hossain, 2023; Sadia, 2021). In addition, restrictions on movement within refugee settings and limited access to accredited educational institutions continue to reduce opportunities for higher education. Although these barriers remain significant, the research also suggests that students who successfully access higher education often develop greater confidence, resilience, and determination to overcome these challenges (Ahmad, 2023; UNHCR, 2023). Therefore, understanding these barriers are important for identifying ways to improve access to higher education and support the long-term empowerment of Rohingya refugee youth.

2.3 Transformative Role of Higher Education

Higher education has the potential to transform the lives of refugees by creating opportunities for personal growth, social inclusion, and professional development. Previous studies suggest that higher education strengthens refugees' confidence and self-esteem while expanding their aspirations for the future. It enables students to build new skills, communicate effectively, and interact with people from different cultural and educational backgrounds (Menashy & Zhakaria, 2018). Miller and Rasmussen (2010) further explain that educational environments provide stability and purpose, which can reduce the long-term psychological effects of conflict and displacement. As a result, higher education becomes more than a place for learning; it also supports personal development and resilience.

In the Rohingya context, access to higher education has created opportunities for young people to challenge long-standing barriers and redefine their future. Ahmad (2023) argues that higher education strengthens leadership, increases participation in community activities, and encourages young people to become agents of positive change. Similarly, Ahmad and Ahmed (2023) note that higher education enables Rohingya youth to develop the knowledge and skills needed to contribute to education, humanitarian work, research, and community leadership. These

opportunities help students move beyond survival and begin planning for long-term personal and community development. Although only a small number of Rohingya refugees have been able to continue to higher education, existing studies consistently show that education has a transformative influence on their lives.

2.4 Higher Education and Sustainable Community Development

While higher education benefits individual students, its impact extends beyond personal achievement to the wider refugee community. Educated refugees often use their knowledge and experiences to support others through teaching, mentoring, community service, advocacy, and humanitarian work. Previous studies suggest that higher education strengthens leadership, civic participation, and social responsibility, enabling refugees to contribute to long-term community development (Education Cannot Wait, 2020; UNHCR, 2023).

For the Rohingya community, higher education has the potential to develop a new generation of leaders who can contribute to education, health, human rights, and social development. Ahmad (2023) argues that expanding higher education opportunities for Rohingya refugees contributes directly to the achievement of SDG 4 (Quality Education) by increasing access to learning and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by creating opportunities for one of the world's most marginalized populations. The Global Compact on Refugees also recognizes education as an important investment for promoting self-reliance, inclusion, and long-term development among refugee populations (UNHCR, 2018). Higher education equips refugee youth with knowledge, professional skills, and leadership abilities that enable them to contribute to their families, communities, and society. Rather than remaining dependent on humanitarian assistance, educated refugees are more likely to participate in employment, research, education, and

community development. These findings highlight the importance of expanding higher education opportunities as part of long-term strategies for refugee empowerment and sustainable futures.

2.5 Global Policy Frameworks Supporting Refugee Higher Education

Education is recognized as a fundamental human right and an essential part of achieving sustainable development. Several international frameworks emphasize the importance of providing inclusive and equitable education for refugees and other displaced populations. These policies encourage governments, humanitarian organizations, and educational institutions to expand educational opportunities and remove barriers that prevent refugees from accessing quality education.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development identifies education as a key driver of social and economic development through Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015). The Sustainable Development Goals also recognize the close relationship between education and other development priorities, including reducing inequalities (SDG 10), promoting decent work (SDG 8), achieving gender equality (SDG 5), and supporting peaceful and inclusive societies (SDG 16). These goals highlight that education is not only important for individual success but also for long-term social and community development.

Moreover, the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), adopted by the United Nations in 2018, further emphasizes that refugees should be included in national education systems whenever possible and that access to higher education should be expanded through partnerships, scholarships, and international cooperation (UNHCR, 2018). The GCR recognizes higher education as an important pathway for increasing refugees' self-reliance, strengthening their skills, and preparing them to contribute to both host communities and future reconstruction efforts.

To support these commitments, UNHCR launched the 15by30 initiative, which aims to increase refugee enrollment in higher education from approximately 7% to 15% by 2030 (UNHCR, 2023). Although progress has been made globally, refugee participation in higher education remains far below the global average, particularly for displaced populations such as the Rohingya. Many continue to face barriers related to legal status, documentation, financial hardship, language, and limited educational opportunities. These international frameworks provide an important foundation for improving refugee education. However, achieving these commitments requires greater attention to the specific experiences and needs of refugee communities. Understanding how higher education influences the lives of Rohingya refugee youth can provide valuable evidence to support more inclusive policies and educational programs.

2.6 Research Gap

Previous studies have made important contributions to understanding the educational experiences of Rohingya refugees. Most research has focused on access to basic education, learning conditions in refugee camps, non-formal education, and the barriers that prevent children and adolescents from continuing their education (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Hossain, 2023). Other studies have examined the role of humanitarian organizations, education policies, and challenges faced by refugee learners in Bangladesh and other host countries (Sadia, 2021; UNHCR, 2023). These studies have increased understanding of the educational challenges faced by Rohingya refugees, but significant gaps remain.

Although a small number of studies have discussed higher education opportunities for Rohingya refugees (Ahmad, 2023; Ahmad & Ahmed, 2023), there is still limited empirical research exploring how higher education shapes the lives of Rohingya refugee youth across different educational contexts. In particular, few studies have examined how higher education

influences their confidence, identity, leadership, decision-making, aspirations, and commitment to supporting their communities. Existing research has also paid limited attention to the experiences of Rohingya students studying in different countries and how these different educational environments influence their personal and professional development.

Another important gap is the limited evidence connecting higher education with sustainable community development. While international policy frameworks recognize education as a key driver of sustainable development, little research has explored how educated Rohingya refugee youth contribute to their communities, advocate for educational opportunities, or prepare for future leadership roles. This study addresses these gaps by exploring the lived experiences of Rohingya refugee youth who have accessed higher education in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Japan, Canada, Australia, Turkey, and the United States. Using a narrative inquiry approach, this study examines how higher education has influenced their lives, the challenges they faced while accessing and completing higher education, and how these experiences have shaped their future aspirations and commitment to sustainable community development. By documenting these experiences, this study contributes to the growing literature on refugee higher education and provides evidence that may support universities, humanitarian organizations, and policymakers in expanding higher education opportunities for displaced populations.

2.7 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (Sen, 1999) and Zimmerman's Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman, 1995). These two theories complement each other and provide a useful framework for understanding how higher education influences the lives of Rohingya refugee youth across different educational contexts. While the Capability Approach explains how education expands people's opportunities and freedoms, Empowerment Theory helps

explain how these opportunities contribute to confidence, leadership, participation, and community engagement.

2.7.1 Capability Approach

The Capability Approach, developed by Amartya Sen (1999), views development as the expansion of people's freedoms and opportunities to achieve the lives they value. Rather than focusing only on income, qualifications, or resources, the Capability Approach emphasizes what individuals are actually able to do and become. It highlights that education is valuable because it expands people's capabilities by increasing knowledge, skills, choices, and opportunities.

For refugees, access to education is particularly important because displacement, discrimination, and legal restrictions often limit their opportunities and life choices. Higher education can expand their capabilities by improving knowledge, developing professional skills, increasing confidence, and creating opportunities for employment, leadership, and social participation. For Rohingya refugee youth, who have experienced restricted access to education for many years, higher education represents more than obtaining a university degree. It creates opportunities to make independent decisions, pursue future goals, and contribute to their families and communities.

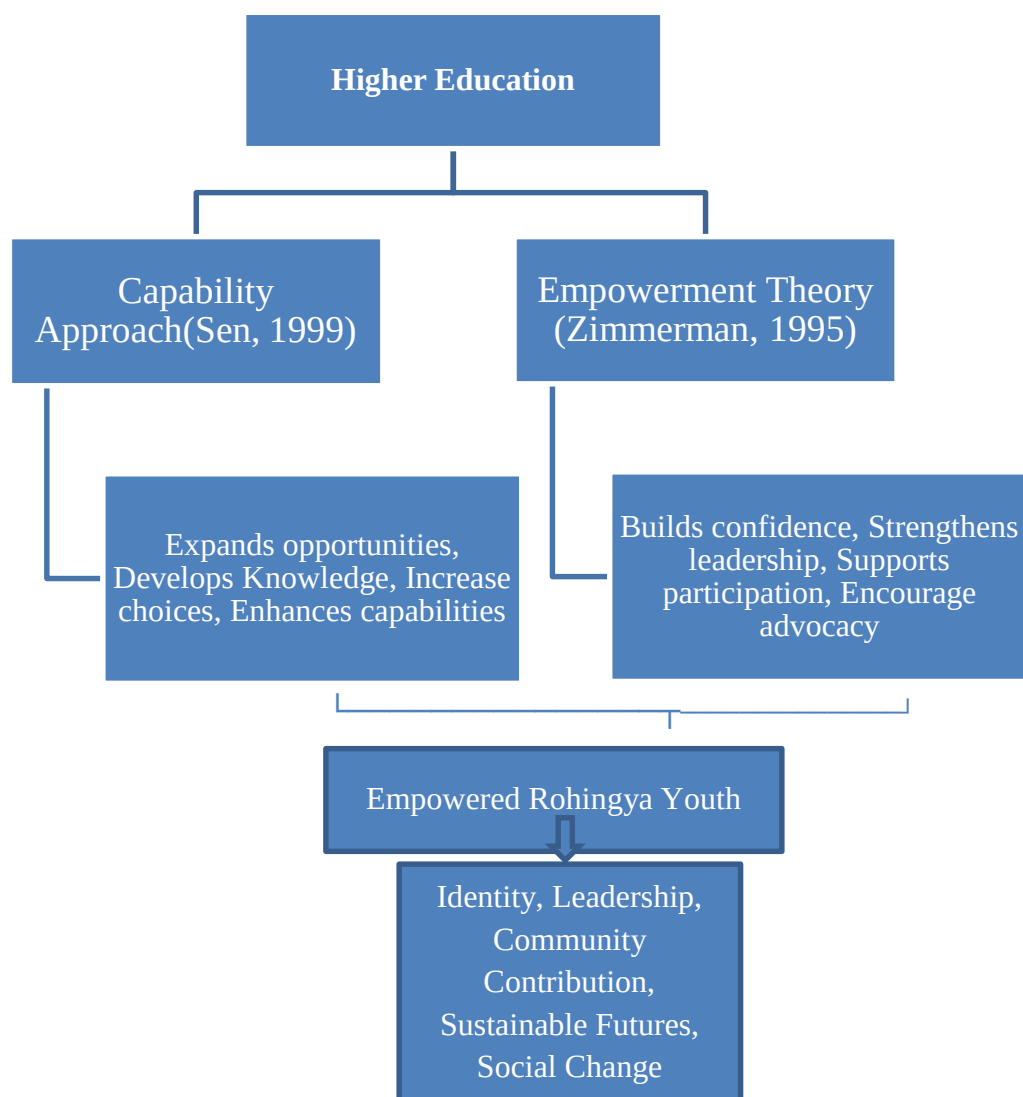
2.7.2 Empowerment Theory

Empowerment Theory, developed by Zimmerman (1995), explains how individuals gain greater control over their lives through increased confidence, knowledge, participation, and access to opportunities. The theory emphasizes that empowerment is not only an individual process but also a social process that enables people to participate in decision-making, influence their communities, and create positive change. According to Zimmerman (1995), empowerment includes psychological empowerment, which refers to increased confidence, self-belief,

motivation, and the ability to make decisions. It also includes participation in community activities, leadership, and collective action that contribute to broader social change.

This theory is particularly relevant to Rohingya refugee youth because higher education can strengthen their confidence, leadership skills, decision-making abilities, and commitment to supporting their communities. As shown in this study, many participants described becoming more confident, independent, and motivated to advocate for education, mentor younger generations, and contribute to the development of the Rohingya community.

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of the Study



The Capability Approach and Empowerment Theory complement each other in explaining the transformative role of higher education. Together, these theories provide a strong framework for understanding the experiences of Rohingya refugee youth across different educational contexts. These concepts are aligned with the objectives of this study and help explain how higher education can contribute to both individual well-being and sustainable community development.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design with a narrative inquiry approach to explore how higher education has influenced the lives of Rohingya refugee youth across different educational contexts. A qualitative approach was chosen because the study aimed to understand participants' personal experiences, perspectives, and educational journeys. Narrative inquiry allowed participants to share their stories in their own words and explain how higher education had shaped their lives. This approach provided insights into the challenges they faced while accessing and completing higher education in different educational contexts. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with Rohingya refugee youth who were currently studying or had completed higher education in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Japan, Canada, Australia, Turkey, and the United States.

3.2 Study Setting

This study was conducted with Rohingya refugee youth studying in different educational contexts in Bangladesh and abroad. Participants were from Bangladesh, Myanmar, Japan, Canada, Australia, Turkey, and the United States. Data were collected through both face-to-face and online interviews. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants who were available in

Bangladesh, mainly at the Asian University for Women (AUW) campus and other locations chosen by the participant. Online interviews were conducted through Zoom with participants living in other countries. Using both methods made it possible to include Rohingya youth from different educational contexts and gather diverse experiences of higher education.

3.3 Study Population

The study population consisted of Rohingya refugee youth who were currently studying in higher education or had already completed their higher education. Participants were selected from different educational contexts, including Bangladesh, Myanmar, Japan, Canada, Australia, Turkey, and the United States. They included high school, undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate students. To be eligible for the study, participants had to self-identify as Rohingya, have experience in higher education, and be willing to share their educational journeys and personal experiences.

3.4 Sample Size

A total of 30 Rohingya refugee youth participated in this study. In qualitative research, the aim is to collect rich and detailed information rather than a large number of responses. Therefore, a sample of 30 participants was considered appropriate to explore participants' experiences in depth and to answer the research questions. The participants represented different genders, educational levels, marital status, and countries of study, providing diverse perspectives on higher education across different educational contexts.

3.5 Sampling Strategy

This study used purposive sampling to recruit participants who could provide rich and relevant information related to the research topic. Participants were selected because they were Rohingya refugee youth with experience in higher education and were able to share their educational journeys and personal experiences. Snowball sampling was also used to recruit

additional participants. After completing an interview, some participants introduced other Rohingya students and graduates who met the study criteria. This approach helped reach participants studying in different countries and educational contexts who might not have been easily accessible otherwise.

3.6 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews using an interview guide developed based on the research objectives and questions. The guide included open-ended questions that encouraged participants to share their educational journeys, experiences, challenges, personal growth, and future aspirations. Follow-up questions were asked when needed to gain further information. A total of 30 interviews were conducted both face-to-face and online, depending on participants' location and availability. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in Bangladesh, while online interviews were conducted through Zoom with participants living in other countries. Interviews were conducted in either English or Rohingya, based on the participants' preference. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded. The English interviews were transcribed using TurboScribe and later reviewed by myself. The Rohingya interviews were transcribed by two Rohingya research assistants and then carefully reviewed by myself while listening to the audio recordings to ensure accuracy. All transcripts were checked and organized before data analysis.

3.7 Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-step approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). After completing the transcription, all interview transcripts were read several times to become familiar with the data and gain a better understanding of the participants' experiences. Initial codes were then developed by identifying important ideas and

experiences related to the research objectives. Similar codes were grouped into categories, and related categories were organized into broader themes. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the participants' experiences and addressed the research questions. Relevant quotations from the interviews were selected to support each theme and provide evidence for the findings. Throughout the analysis, the interview data were compared across participants to identify common experiences, different perspectives, and patterns related to the transformative role of higher education.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee (ERC) of the Asian University for Women before data collection began. Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the interview process, and their rights as participants. Written or verbal informed consent was obtained before the interview, depending on whether the interview was conducted face-to-face or online. Participation in the study was completely voluntary, and participants were informed that they could refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. To protect participants' privacy, pseudonyms and interview identification numbers (e.g., IDI-1, IDI-2) were used instead of real names. All interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely and used only for this research. Since the participants are from a refugee community, the interviews were conducted with care and respect to ensure they felt comfortable throughout the interview.

3.9 Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, a consistent interview process was followed with all participants by using the same semi-structured interview guide. All the interview transcripts were carefully reviewed to ensure they accurately reflected the participants' responses.

During the data analysis, the transcripts were read several times, codes were developed systematically, and the themes were reviewed to ensure they were supported by the data. Direct quotations from participants were included in the findings to present their experiences in their own words and to support the interpretation of the results.

3.10 Data Dissemination

The findings of this study will be submitted as part of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Education at the Asian University for Women. With the support of my supervisor and the university, the findings may also be presented at academic conferences or published in a peer-reviewed journal. The results may be shared with universities, NGOs, and organizations working in refugee education to support policies and programs that improve higher education opportunities for Rohingya refugee youth.

Chapter 4: Results

4.1 Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants

A total of 30 Rohingya participants took part in this study. Participants represented diverse educational backgrounds and countries, allowing the study to capture a wide range of experiences regarding higher education across different educational contexts. The participants included both male and female students and graduates who had pursued higher education in Bangladesh and abroad, including Myanmar, Japan, Australia, Canada, the United States, and Turkey. Their educational backgrounds ranged from high school graduates to postgraduate students.

Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 30)

Participants (n=30)	Characteristics	No
Gender	Male	12
	Female	18
Age (Years)	18-25	18
	25-30	8
	30-40	4
Marital Status	Married	6
	Unmarried	24
Location	Bangladesh	14
	Myanmar	3
	Japan	3
	Australia	2
	Canada	3
	USA	3
	Turkey	2
Education	High School	4
	Undergraduate	10
	Graduate	10
	Post-graduate	6

4.2 Higher Education as a Pathway to Personal Empowerment

One of the strongest findings that came from the interviews was that higher education became a powerful pathway for personal empowerment among Rohingya refugee youth. Regardless of where participants studied, almost all described higher education as a life-changing experience that transformed the way they viewed themselves, their abilities, and their future. Before entering higher education, many participants explained that they had limited confidence, little exposure to the outside world, and few opportunities to make decisions independently. Through higher education, however, they developed greater self-confidence, communication skills, critical thinking, independence, leadership skills and a stronger belief in their own potential. Many participants also explained that these experiences strengthened their commitment to supporting their communities and contributing to positive social change.

For many participants, empowerment was not only about obtaining a university degree. Instead, they described empowerment as a gradual process of becoming more confident, learning to express their opinions, making independent decisions, and believing that they could contribute meaningfully to society. Participants frequently compared their lives before and after entering higher education, illustrating the intense personal changes they experienced. One participant who completed her undergraduate degree in Bangladesh explained that studying at university fundamentally changed her confidence and decision-making abilities. She reflected:

“When I was in the camp, I was not able to make decisions for myself. Even simple decisions were made by my family. After coming to university, everything changed. Now my family asks for my opinion before making important decisions. I feel confident expressing my ideas and making choices about my own future.” (IDI-7)

Similarly, another participant described how higher education helped him become independent after years of depending on others for guidance.

“After completing my degree, I became independent. Education taught me how to think for myself, make decisions, and understand what is right for my community. Before, I only followed others, but now I can guide myself and also guide other people.” (IDI-14)

Many participants associated higher education with increased confidence in communicating with others. Several explained that they had struggled to speak English, interact with people from different backgrounds, or participate in discussions before entering university. Over time, they became more comfortable expressing their ideas in classrooms, presentations, conferences, and professional settings. These experiences helped them develop confidence that extended beyond academic life into their personal and professional relationships (IDI-3; IDI-9 & IDI-18).

One participant shared:

“When I first came to university, I could hardly speak English. I was afraid of making mistakes, so I stayed quiet most of the time. But through classes, presentations, and discussions, I gradually became confident. Now I can speak in front of many people without fear.” (IDI-9)

Participants also emphasized that higher education expanded their thinking beyond survival. Before attending university, many explained that their primary concern was meeting daily needs or securing basic employment. Exposure to higher education encouraged them to think critically, set long-term goals, and imagine broader possibilities for their lives.

One participant explained:

“Before university, I only thought about finding a job to survive. Now I think differently. I think about leadership, education, research, and how I can help improve my community in the future. University changed the way I think.” (IDI-22)

Another participant similarly reflected that education transformed not only knowledge but also mindset.

“Higher education opened my mind. It helped me understand the world differently. I learned to ask questions, analyze problems, and think about solutions instead of simply accepting difficult situations.” (IDI-5)

Several participants also highlighted that empowerment involved recognizing their own value despite years of discrimination. Growing up as Rohingya, many had internalized feelings of exclusion and believed that opportunities were beyond their reach. Higher education challenged these beliefs by providing opportunities to succeed academically, interact with diverse communities, and receive recognition for their achievements.

As one participant explained:

“Being Rohingya, we were always told that we could not do many things. University proved that we can achieve our dreams if we get the opportunity. Education helped me believe in myself.” (IDI-16)

For participants studying outside Bangladesh, higher education also increased exposure to multicultural environments and international networks. They explained that interacting with classmates from different countries broadened their perspectives, strengthened intercultural communication skills, and increased confidence in representing the Rohingya community internationally (IDI-2; IDI-11 & IDI-24).

4.3 Higher Education and the Reconstruction of Identity and Sense of Belonging

Another important finding of this study is that higher education played a significant role in helping participants rebuild their identity and develop a stronger sense of belonging. Many participants explained that before entering higher education, they often felt excluded because of their refugee status, and limited educational opportunities. They described living with uncertainty about their future and feeling that they had little place in society. However, their experiences in higher education gradually changed how they viewed themselves and their role in the world.

Many participants shared that university was the first place where they felt respected as individuals rather than being identified only as refugees. Studying alongside students from different countries and cultures allowed them to recognize their own strengths and abilities. They explained that higher education helped them move beyond the identity of being only a refugee and instead see themselves as students, future professionals, researchers, educators, and leaders.

One participant described this personal change by saying:

“Before joining university, I always introduced myself as a refugee because that was how everyone saw me. After studying here, I began to introduce myself as a student first. I still have my Rohingya identity, but now I also have confidence in my education and what I can contribute.” (IDI-12)

Another participant explained that education helped them regain dignity after years of discrimination.

“Growing up, we were always treated differently because we are Rohingya. Sometimes we felt that we were less important than others. University changed that feeling. I realized that I have knowledge, skills, and something valuable to offer.” (IDI-20)

Several participants explained that higher education also strengthened their pride in their Rohingya identity. Instead of trying to hide their background, many said they became more comfortable sharing their stories and speaking about the challenges faced by their community. They believed that education gave them the confidence to represent the Rohingya community in academic, professional, and international settings (IDI-4; IDI-10 & IDI-17).

One participant shared:

“Education did not change who I am. It made me understand my identity more. I became proud to say that I am Rohingya because I know I can represent my community in a positive way.” (IDI-17)

For several participants studying abroad, meeting people from different countries also helped them understand the importance of cultural identity while appreciating diversity. They explained that interacting with classmates from different backgrounds encouraged mutual respect and allowed them to share the history, culture, and experiences of the Rohingya community.

One participant studying in Canada explained:

“Many of my classmates had never heard about the Rohingya before. When I shared my story, they listened carefully and wanted to know more. I felt proud that I could represent my community and help others understand our situation.” (IDI-25)

Participants also described a stronger sense of belonging after entering university. Before receiving higher education, many felt isolated because they had few opportunities to interact outside the refugee community. University life allowed them to build friendships, participate in student activities, work with people from different cultures, and become part of wider academic communities. These experiences helped reduce feelings of isolation and increased their confidence in building relationships with others (IDI-6; IDI-15 & IDI-27).

One participant reflected:

“University became like a second home for me. I met friends from different countries who accepted me for who I am. For the first time, I felt that I belonged somewhere.”

(IDI-15)

Female participants particularly described higher education as an important step toward gaining respect within their families and communities. Several explained that before entering university, their opinions were often ignored because of traditional gender expectations. However, after pursuing higher education, they noticed that family members increasingly valued their advice and encouraged them to take part in important decisions.

One participant shared:

“Before university, no one asked what I thought. Now my parents and relatives ask for my opinion when making family decisions. Education has changed how they see me.” (IDI-8)

Many participants also explained that higher education helped them reconnect with hope. Although they continued to face uncertainty as refugees, education gave them a clearer sense of purpose and direction. They described feeling more optimistic about their future because they believed they had the knowledge and skills needed to create positive change.

As one participant explained:

“I still do not have citizenship, and many challenges remain. But education gave me hope. It made me believe that my future is not only defined by being a refugee.” (IDI-21)

4.4 Challenges and Opportunities in Accessing Higher Education Across Educational Contexts

Although participants described higher education as a life-changing opportunity, they also shared many challenges throughout their educational journeys. These challenges began long before entering university and continued during their studies. Participants explained that barriers such as limited access to education, lack of legal documentation, financial difficulties, language barriers, family responsibilities, and social expectations made their educational journeys much more difficult than compared to other students. At the same time, participants emphasized that scholarships, supportive mentors, universities, NGOs, and personal determination created opportunities that enabled them to continue their education.

4.4.1 Limited Educational Opportunities Before Higher Education

Many participants explained that one of the greatest challenges was the lack of educational opportunities available to Rohingya youth. Most had experienced interrupted education because of conflict in Myanmar or because of restrictions on education after arriving in Bangladesh. Several participants explained that they spent years without formal schooling before receiving another opportunity to continue their education.

One participant shared:

“After coming to Bangladesh, I stopped studying for almost five years. During that time, I worked with NGOs because there was no opportunity for higher education. I thought my education had ended, but later I received the opportunity to continue my studies.” (IDI-9)

Another participant described a similar experience.

“When we arrived in Bangladesh, education was not available for us. We had to wait for years before we found any opportunity to study again. It was a very difficult time because we were afraid we would never return to education.” (IDI-18)

Several participants explained that this interruption affected their confidence when they returned to education because they had forgotten much of what they had previously learned (IDI-2; IDI-9 & IDI-18).

4.4.2 Documentation and Mobility Challenges

Participants studying in different countries explained that documentation was another major challenge. As refugees, many experienced difficulties obtaining passports, travel documents, visas, or other official papers required for university admission and international travel.

One participant explained:

“Getting admission was only one part of the process. The biggest challenge was obtaining travel documents because we are refugees. Every step took a long time and created uncertainty.” (IDI-26)

Another participant shared:

“Sometimes I was accepted by the university, but the document process delayed everything. We always worry because one missing document can stop our education.” (IDI-13)

Participants studying abroad explained that these challenges created emotional stress because they were uncertain whether they would be able to travel or continue their studies even after receiving scholarships (IDI-5; IDI-13 & IDI-26).

4.4.3 Language and Academic Adjustment

Language was another common challenge mentioned by participants. Many explained that they had very limited English proficiency before entering university because of interrupted schooling and restricted educational opportunities. As a result, they initially struggled to understand lectures, participate in discussions, complete assignments, and communicate with classmates.

One participant recalled:

“When I first joined university, I could not speak English confidently. I was afraid to ask questions because I thought people would laugh at me. Slowly, through practice and support from teachers, I became more confident.” (IDI-7)

Another participant explained:

“Everything was difficult during the first semester. Reading academic articles, writing assignments, and giving presentations were completely new experiences for me.” (IDI-16)

Despite these difficulties, participants explained that continuous practice, academic support, and encouragement from lecturers and classmates gradually improved their communication skills and academic performance (IDI-3; IDI-7 & IDI-16).

4.4.4 Family and Community Expectations

Several participants, particularly women, explained that gaining permission from their families was one of the most difficult parts of their educational journey. Traditional expectations, concerns about safety, and social norms often discouraged girls from pursuing higher education.

One female participant explained:

“The biggest challenge was convincing my family. They wanted me to stay at home because they worried about what people would say. It took a long time before they agreed to let me continue my education.” (IDI-8)

Another participant shared:

“Many girls in the camp get married at a young age because they do not have educational opportunities. I was fortunate that my family finally supported my education.” (IDI-11)

Some male participants also explained that they experienced family pressure to earn an income rather than continue studying because of financial hardship within the household (IDI-1 & IDI-14).

4.4.5 Financial Barriers and the Importance of Scholarships

Financial hardship was another challenge discussed by almost every participant. Most explained that their families could not afford university education, making scholarships and financial support essential for continuing their studies.

One participant said:

“Without a scholarship, I would never have been able to attend university. My family could not support my education because they were already struggling to meet basic needs.” (IDI-4)

Another participant shared:

“Higher education is expensive for refugees. Scholarships changed my life because they removed the financial burden and allowed me to focus on learning.” (IDI-20)

Several participants also explained that they worked with NGOs before entering university to support themselves and their families while continuing to pursue educational opportunities (IDI-6; IDI-9 & IDI-22).

4.4.6 Opportunities That Made Higher Education Possible

Although participants described many challenges, they also identified several opportunities that helped them continue their education. Scholarships were mentioned most frequently, followed by supportive teachers, mentors, NGOs, friends, and universities that believed in their potential. One participant explained:

“Many people supported me during my journey. My teachers encouraged me to apply for scholarships, and they believed in me even when I doubted myself.” (IDI-10)

Another participant described how a simple conversation changed her future.

“I was working for an NGO when one of my colleagues told me about the university opportunity. If he had not shared that information with me, I might never have applied.” (IDI-9)

Participants studying internationally also appreciated universities that provided academic support, counselling, language assistance, and inclusive learning environments, which helped them adjust to new educational systems (IDI-17; IDI-24 & IDI-27).

4.5 Higher Education, Leadership, Community Engagement, and Pathways to Sustainable Futures

One of the most consistent findings across the interviews was that participants viewed higher education as more than an opportunity for personal achievement. Instead, they saw education as a responsibility to support the Rohingya community and contribute to its long-term development. Regardless of where they studied, participants repeatedly explained that their

educational goals were closely connected to improving educational opportunities, raising awareness, supporting vulnerable people, and creating a better future for the next generation.

Many participants explained that growing up without access to quality education motivated them to continue their studies so that future generations would not face the same difficulties. They believed that education is one of the most effective ways to break the cycle of poverty, dependence, and limited opportunities experienced by many Rohingya families.

One participant explained:

“I grew up in a village where there was no proper education. That experience always stayed with me. My dream is to establish a school for children in my community so they can receive a better education than we had.” (IDI-3)

Another participant shared similar aspirations.

“Education changed my life, so I want other Rohingya children to have the same opportunity. If we can educate more young people, we can change the future of our community.” (IDI-14)

Several participants described themselves as role models for younger Rohingya students. They explained that because very few Rohingya youth have reached higher education, many younger students now look to them for advice, encouragement, and guidance. Participants believed that sharing their educational journeys could inspire more young people to continue their education despite the many barriers they face (IDI-7; IDI-18 & IDI-26).

One participant reflected:

“Many young students contact me because they want to know how I reached university. I always tell them that education is difficult, but it is possible if they keep trying. I want them to believe in themselves.” (IDI-18)

Leadership was another important aspect discussed by participants. Many explained that higher education strengthened their ability to communicate, organize activities, solve problems, and work with people from different backgrounds. These experiences increased their confidence to take leadership roles within both university settings and the Rohingya community.

One participant stated:

“University taught me how to work with different people, speak in public, and organize activities. These are leadership skills that I can use to help my community in the future.” (IDI-22)

Another participant explained:

“Education gave me confidence to speak for people who cannot speak for themselves. Now I am not afraid to represent my community in meetings and discussions.” (IDI-11)

Participants studying abroad also emphasized that international education gave them opportunities to share the experiences of the Rohingya community with people from different countries. Many described participating in conferences, seminars, community events, or awareness programs where they introduced others to the history, challenges, and resilience of the Rohingya people.

One participant studying in Japan explained:

“People in my university did not know much about the Rohingya. Through presentations and discussions, I could explain our history and the challenges our community faces. I felt that I was representing my people.” (IDI-24)

Similarly, another participant studying in Canada shared:

“Studying abroad gave me opportunities to speak about refugee education. I realized that by sharing our stories, people understand our community better and become more willing to support us.” (IDI-28)

Many participants also described higher education as creating new hopes for sustainable community development. Rather than focusing only on immediate needs, they explained that education helped them think about long-term solutions. Their plans included improving access to education, promoting women's education, supporting children's learning, strengthening community leadership, improving health awareness, and advocating for the rights of the Rohingya community.

One participant explained:

“Before university, I was only thinking about how to survive. Now I think about how we can improve education, health, and opportunities for the next generation. Education changed the way I think about the future.” (IDI-9)

Another participant said:

“My goal is not only to have a good career. I want to use my education to support community development because if our young people are educated, our whole community will become stronger.” (IDI-5)

Several participants particularly highlighted the importance of investing in children and young people. They believed that improving access to quality education from an early age would create more professionals, teachers, doctors, researchers, and leaders within the Rohingya community.

As one participant explained:

“If our children receive quality education from the beginning, they can become doctors, teachers, engineers, and leaders in the future. Education is the foundation for everything we want to achieve.” (IDI-8)

Another participant added:

“Sustainable development starts with education. If we continue educating more Rohingya youth, they will return with knowledge and skills that can improve the whole community.” (IDI-17)

Although participants had different educational backgrounds and future career goals, almost all expressed a strong commitment to supporting their community. Many were already applying the knowledge and skills gained through higher education in their professional and community work. Some participants were working with humanitarian organizations, educational institutions, research projects, and community-based initiatives that support Rohingya refugees through education, advocacy, translation, research, and capacity-building (IDI-2; IDI-11; IDI-19; IDI-24).

One participant from the United States described how higher education enabled them to advocate for the rights of the Rohingya community at the international level:

“Higher education gave me the knowledge and confidence to represent the Rohingya community in international forums. Today, I work with international organizations and engage with policymakers to advocate for the rights and future of my people.” (IDI-28)

Similarly, a participant from Canada explained that higher education provided opportunities to raise awareness about refugee education and the experiences of the Rohingya community:

“Studying in Canada opened many opportunities to speak about refugee education. Thorough conferences, public events, and community discussions, I have been able to share our experiences and help others better understand the challenges and aspirations of the Rohingya people.” (IDI-26)

Another participant, who works as a teacher trainer under an AUW-UNICEF project in Cox’s Bazar, described using the knowledge and skills gained through higher education from AUW to strengthen the quality of education in the refugee camps:

“As a teacher trainer, I work for Rohingya teachers in the camps and help build their teaching skills. Through the AUW-UNICEF project, we have trained more than 1,000 Rohingya teachers, helping improve the quality of education for thousands of children in the camps. I feel that this is one of the most meaningful ways I can contribute to my community.” (IDI-15).

Several participants also mentored younger Rohingya students by sharing information about scholarships, university admissions, and educational opportunities, encouraging them to pursue higher education despite the many barriers they faced (IDI-7; IDI-18). These examples demonstrate that participants were not only planning to contribute in the future but were already using their education to advocate for refugee rights, strengthen educational capacity, raise public awareness, and support community development across different contexts.

Overall, participants viewed higher education as a pathway toward sustainable futures for both individuals and the wider Rohingya community. Participants consistently believed that investing in higher education would create future leaders who could contribute to improving education, promoting human rights, and supporting the sustainable development of the Rohingya community across different contexts.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Higher Education as a Pathway to Personal Empowerment

One of the main findings of this study is that higher education played an important role in empowering Rohingya refugee youth. Participants described empowerment as becoming more confident, independent, and capable of making decisions about their own lives. Many explained that before entering higher education, they had limited opportunities and often depended on family or community members to make important decisions. Through university education, however, they developed greater self-confidence, improved communication skills, and stronger belief in their own abilities. These changes enabled them to express their opinions more freely, take leadership roles, and plan for their future with greater confidence.

This finding is consistent with previous research showing that higher education is more than an opportunity to earn a degree; it is also a process that strengthens confidence, resilience, and personal development among displaced learners. Education Cannot Wait (2020) emphasizes that access to higher education equips refugees with the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to participate meaningfully in society and rebuild their lives after displacement. Similarly, UNHCR (2022) highlights that tertiary education creates opportunities for refugees to become self-reliant, improve their well-being, and contribute positively to their communities.

The findings also support the argument of Miller and Rasmussen (2010), who explain that education can reduce the effects of prolonged uncertainty by creating hope, purpose, and opportunities for personal growth. Many participants in this study described university as the first place where they felt encouraged to think independently, communicate with people from different backgrounds, and believe that they could achieve meaningful goals despite their experiences of

displacement. These experiences suggest that higher education contributes not only to academic learning but also to psychological empowerment.

Although previous studies have discussed the barriers faced by Rohingya refugees in accessing education (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Hossain, 2023), very few have examined what happens after Rohingya youth successfully enter higher education. This study extends the existing literature by showing that access to university can transform the way Rohingya youth see themselves and their future. Participants consistently described education as a turning point that increased their confidence and strengthened their ability to make independent decisions. These findings demonstrate that the value of higher education goes beyond educational attainment and includes personal transformation that prepares young refugees to become active members of society.

The findings are also linked to the broader goal of sustainable futures. As participants became more confident and independent, they expressed a stronger commitment to supporting their communities through education, leadership, and social service. This suggests that personal empowerment is not only an individual outcome but also an important foundation for building community resilience and promoting long-term sustainable development among Rohingya refugees.

5.2 Higher Education as a Process of Identity Reconstruction

One of the most significant findings of this study is that higher education helped participants reconstruct their identities beyond being viewed only as refugees. Before entering higher education, many participants described themselves as feeling invisible, dependent, or defined by displacement. Their educational experiences gradually changed how they viewed themselves and how they wanted others to see them. University education provided knowledge,

confidence, exposure to different cultures, and opportunities to interact with diverse people, allowing participants to develop a stronger sense of identity, purpose, and belonging.

Many participants explained that before attending university they had little confidence in expressing their opinions or making decisions. As they progressed through higher education, they became more confident in communicating with others, participating in discussions, and making independent choices. For many, education was not only about earning a degree but also about discovering who they were and what they could contribute to society.

One participant explained:

“Before coming to university, I never thought I could make my own decisions. Even in my family, nobody asked my opinion. Now they ask me before making important decisions because they believe I can think carefully and give good advice.” (IDI-9)

Another participant shared:

“When I was in the camp, I only thought about surviving every day. After studying at university, I started thinking about my future, my community, and how I can make positive changes. My thinking became much bigger.” (IDI-14)

Similarly, another participant reflected on how higher education changed their understanding of themselves:

“Education changed my identity. Before, I only saw myself as a refugee. Now I see myself as a student, a researcher, and someone who can contribute to society.” (IDI-22)

These findings suggest that higher education supports identity reconstruction by creating opportunities for self-discovery, critical thinking, and personal growth. Rather than remaining defined by forced displacement, participants developed new identities based on their abilities,

aspirations, and achievements. Many also described becoming role models within their families and communities, where younger students began looking to them for guidance and encouragement.

These findings are consistent with previous research showing that higher education plays an important role in rebuilding identity among displaced populations. Education Cannot Wait (2020) argues that education enables refugees to regain dignity, rebuild confidence, and strengthen resilience after experiencing conflict and displacement. Similarly, UNHCR (2023) highlights that access to higher education creates opportunities for refugees to develop their potential and participate in society rather than remaining dependent on humanitarian assistance.

The findings also support Miller and Rasmussen's (2010) psychosocial framework, which explains that opportunities such as education can reduce the long-term effects of displacement by restoring hope, purpose, and social connectedness. Several participants described university as a place where they could imagine a future beyond refugee camps, which helped reduce feelings of uncertainty and hopelessness.

Furthermore, participants' narratives demonstrate that identity reconstruction extends beyond individual transformation. As their confidence increased, participants also felt a stronger responsibility to represent the Rohingya community positively. Many expressed that succeeding in higher education challenged negative stereotypes about refugees and demonstrated that Rohingya youth have the ability to contribute academically, professionally, and socially when given equal educational opportunities.

This finding also reflects the broader goals of the Global Compact on Refugees, which emphasizes education as a pathway toward inclusion, self-reliance, and social participation (UNHCR, 2018). For the Rohingya community, rebuilding identity through higher education is

particularly important because legal recognition alone cannot restore dignity without opportunities to learn, participate, and contribute.

5.3 Challenges in Accessing and Completing Higher Education Across Educational Contexts

Although participants described higher education as a transformative experience, they also emphasized that reaching and completing university education was a long and difficult journey. Their stories revealed that success was achieved despite numerous structural, financial, social, and personal barriers. These challenges began before entering higher education and, for many, continued throughout their academic journey. The most commonly reported barriers included the lack of legal documentation, financial hardship, language difficulties, family and community pressure, and restrictions on movement. While the nature of these challenges varied across educational contexts, participants consistently described them as obstacles that required determination, external support, and personal resilience to overcome.

One of the most frequently discussed challenges was the lack of legal documentation and recognized identity. Participants explained that being a refugee created uncertainty throughout their educational journey, particularly when applying for scholarships, visas, university admission, or international travel. Several participants stated that they constantly worried about whether missing or temporary documents would prevent them from continuing their education.

One participant explained:

“Sometimes I was accepted academically, but I still worried about whether I would get permission to travel because I did not have a passport like other students. Every application became more complicated because I am Rohingya.” (IDI-7)

Another participant shared:

“Being stateless means you always have extra barriers. Other students only need to prepare their academic documents, but we have to think about legal documents, travel documents, and permission.” (IDI-18)

These findings are consistent with previous studies showing that legal identity and documentation remain major barriers to higher education for refugees. Human Rights Watch (2019) reported that Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh face significant restrictions in accessing formal education because of legal and policy barriers. Similarly, UNHCR (2023) recognizes that documentation requirements, legal status, and movement restrictions continue to limit refugee students' participation in higher education worldwide. For the Rohingya, these challenges extend beyond university admission and affect opportunities for international mobility, scholarships, and future employment.

Financial hardship was another challenge repeatedly mentioned by participants. Although many received scholarships that covered tuition fees, participants explained that other educational expenses, including travel, accommodation, learning materials, internet access, visa processing, and daily living costs, remained difficult to manage. Some participants also described feeling responsible for supporting family members living in refugee camps while continuing their studies. One participant reflected:

“The scholarship helped with my education, but there were many other expenses. Sometimes I worried about my family in the camp while trying to focus on my studies.”
(IDI-11)

Another participant stated:

“If I did not receive financial support, I could never continue my education because my family had no ability to support university expenses.” (IDI-24)

These experiences support findings reported by UNHCR (2022), which highlights financial constraints as one of the primary reasons refugee students are unable to access or complete higher education. Education Cannot Wait (2020) similarly argues that scholarships alone are often insufficient because displaced learners continue to face indirect educational costs that affect academic participation and well-being. Financial insecurity therefore remains an important factor influencing educational continuity among refugee students.

Language was another significant challenge during participants' transition into higher education. Many participants explained that they had limited opportunities to learn English before entering university because of interrupted schooling and restricted educational opportunities in refugee settings. As a result, they initially struggled to communicate with lecturers, participate in classroom discussions, write academic assignments, and build relationships with other students.

One participant explained:

“When I first joined university, I could not speak English confidently. I understood very little during class and was afraid to ask questions because I thought people would laugh at me.” (IDI-3)

Another participant shared:

“Everything was new. The language, teaching style, and academic expectations were completely different from what I had experienced before.” (IDI-16)

These findings agree with Menashy and Zakharia (2018), who argue that language barriers are among the greatest challenges affecting refugee students' academic integration and educational success. Refugees often enter higher education after experiencing interrupted education and multiple language transitions, making academic adjustment particularly difficult. However,

participants in this study also described how continuous practice, institutional support, and interaction with classmates gradually improved their confidence and communication skills.

Family and community expectations also shaped participants' educational journeys. Several participants explained that pursuing higher education, particularly for women, was initially questioned by family members or community leaders. Traditional expectations surrounding marriage, gender roles, and family responsibilities often conflicted with educational aspirations. Some participants reported that convincing their families to allow them to continue studying required years of discussion and persistence.

One female participant stated:

“When I wanted to continue studying, many people told my family that girls should get married instead. My family was worried because nobody in our community had done this before.” (IDI-9)

Another participant explained:

“My family kept asking me to return home because they did not understand why higher education was important. I had to explain many times that education would help not only me but also our community.” (IDI-2)

These findings reflect previous studies showing that social norms and gender expectations continue to influence educational participation among Rohingya refugees. Hossain (2023) found that gender inequality, cultural expectations, and early marriage remain significant barriers to education, particularly for young women. Likewise, reports by the Global Partnership for Education (2024) demonstrate that changing community attitudes toward girls' education remains essential for improving educational access among displaced populations.

Finally, participants discussed restrictions on mobility and educational opportunities resulting from displacement. Several explained that living in refugee camps limited their access to quality schools, academic resources, and information about higher education opportunities. Even after receiving university admission, travel restrictions and administrative procedures often delayed or complicated their educational journeys.

These findings support reports from Human Rights Watch (2019) and UNHCR (2023), both of which describe how movement restrictions and limited access to formal education continue to affect Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Without greater educational freedom and legal mobility, many capable students remain unable to pursue higher education despite their academic potential.

5.4 Higher Education as a Pathway to Community Leadership and Sustainable Futures

A major finding of this study is that participants viewed higher education not only as a means of achieving personal success but also as a responsibility to contribute to the development of the Rohingya community. Nearly all participants expressed a strong commitment to using their education to improve the lives of others through education, advocacy, leadership, healthcare, public service, or community development. Rather than seeing higher education as an individual achievement, participants described it as an opportunity to create positive change for future generations.

Several participants were already translating their education into meaningful contributions to the Rohingya community. For example, one participant working under an AUW–UNICEF teacher training project in Cox's Bazar explained that higher education enabled them to train Rohingya teachers, contributing to improved teaching practices and educational quality in the refugee camps (IDI-15). Another participant from the United States described using higher

education to engage with international organizations and policymakers to advocate for the rights of the Rohingya community at the global level (IDI-28). Similarly, a participant from Canada explained that higher education created opportunities to raise awareness about refugee education through conferences, public events, and community engagement (IDI-26).

Research also developed as an important avenue for community contribution. One participant studying in Japan described publishing research on issues affecting the Rohingya community and emphasized that research provides evidence that can influence policy, increase international awareness, and strengthen advocacy efforts (IDI-23). Other participants were involved in research projects focusing on refugee education, health, and community development, believing that evidence-based research could help inform policies and programs that better address the needs of displaced populations (IDI-10 & IDI-21). These examples demonstrate that higher education has encouraged participants to think beyond their own educational and career goals toward broader social responsibilities while actively contributing to education, research, advocacy, and community capacity development.

Moreover, participants explained that their educational experiences had changed how they viewed leadership. Before entering higher education, most focused primarily on meeting their own immediate needs and surviving difficult circumstances. However, after attending university, they began to recognize the importance of becoming role models and contributing to long-term community development. Several participants believed that educated Rohingya youth have a responsibility to guide younger generations and encourage them to continue their education.

One participant explained:

“Before university, I only thought about how to survive. Now I think about how I can help other Rohingya students continue their education. If we become educated, we can guide the next generation.” (IDI-5)

Another participant shared:

“Education is not only for getting a job. It gives us knowledge to solve problems in our community and to become responsible leaders.” (IDI-20)

These findings support previous research showing that higher education strengthens civic engagement and leadership among displaced populations. UNHCR (2023) argues that tertiary education equips refugees with the knowledge, confidence, and skills needed to participate actively in their communities and contribute to long-term development. Participants also described education as a tool for breaking long-standing cycles of poverty, dependency, and educational disadvantage. Many believe that the lack of educated professionals within the Rohingya community has limited access to quality education, healthcare, and social services. Consequently, they expressed a strong desire to use their qualifications to fill these gaps by becoming teachers, researchers, doctors, policymakers, or development practitioners.

One participant stated:

“Our community needs educated people in every sector. If we have teachers, doctors, researchers, and leaders from our own community, we can solve many problems ourselves.” (IDI-14)

Another participant reflected:

“Education gives us opportunities, but it also gives us responsibility. I want to return what I have learned to my community because many young people are still waiting for the same chance.” (IDI-27)

These findings are consistent with the Global Compact on Refugees, which recognizes education as an important investment in refugee self-reliance and community resilience (UNHCR, 2018). Likewise, the United Nations (2015) identifies education as a key driver of sustainable development, social inclusion, and reduced inequalities under Sustainable Development Goal 4. Participants' aspirations demonstrate that higher education contributes not only to individual advancement but also to strengthening the social and human capital necessary for sustainable community development.

An important finding was that participants' visions for the future extended beyond the countries where they currently study. Whether living in Bangladesh, Japan, Canada, Australia, Turkey, or the United States, many expressed a continued commitment to supporting Rohingya communities through mentoring, educational initiatives, advocacy, research, or humanitarian work. Their sense of belonging to the Rohingya community remained strong despite living in different educational contexts.

One participant explained:

“Wherever I study or work in the future, I want to support Rohingya education because education changed my life.” (IDI-9)

Another participant shared:

“Even if I cannot return to Myanmar now, I can still help my community by sharing knowledge, creating opportunities, and supporting young students.” (IDI-18)

These findings demonstrate that higher education helps develop transnational forms of community engagement among refugee youth. Research by Ahmad (2023) similarly found that educated Rohingya refugees increasingly contribute to community development through education, knowledge sharing, and advocacy across different countries. Rather than weakening

their connection to their community, international educational experiences often strengthened participants' commitment to supporting other Rohingya youth.

The findings also highlight the close relationship between higher education and sustainable futures. Participants consistently viewed education as the foundation for creating lasting improvements within their community. They believed that investing in education would contribute to stronger leadership, better educational opportunities, improved healthcare, increased gender equality, and greater community resilience. These aspirations reflect the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 4, which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education as a foundation for sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). As several participants explained, sustainable change cannot be achieved without developing educated individuals who are capable of leading future social and institutional development. These findings reinforce the central argument of this thesis that higher education represents an important pathway toward sustainable futures by preparing educated Rohingya youth to become future leaders and agents of positive change within their communities.

5.5 Strengths and Limitations of the Study

One of the main strengths of this study is that it explores the experiences of Rohingya refugee youth in higher education, an area that has received limited attention in previous research. By including participants from Bangladesh, Myanmar, Japan, Canada, Australia, Turkey, and the United States, the study provides diverse perspectives across different educational contexts. The qualitative narrative approach also allowed participants to share their personal experiences in their own words, providing rich and detailed information.

The study also has some limitations. It included only 30 participants, so the findings may not represent the experiences of all Rohingya refugee youth. Some interviews were conducted online, which occasionally depended on internet access and participants' availability. In addition, the findings are based on participants' personal experiences and memories, which may have influenced some of their responses. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the transformative role of higher education among Rohingya refugee youth.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

This study explored the transformative role of higher education in empowering Rohingya refugee youth across different educational contexts. Through the narratives of 30 Rohingya participants studying or graduating from Bangladesh, Myanmar, Japan, Canada, Australia, Turkey, and the United States, the study examined how higher education influenced their personal empowerment, identity, leadership, and aspirations for sustainable futures.

The findings show that higher education has transformed participants in many ways. It increased their confidence, independence, critical thinking, and decision-making abilities while strengthening their sense of identity and belonging. Many participants described higher education as a turning point that changed how they viewed themselves and their future. It also encouraged them to become role models, advocate for education, and contribute to the development of the Rohingya community through teaching, research, humanitarian work, and community leadership.

At the same time, the study found that participants faced significant barriers in accessing and completing higher education. Documentation problems, financial hardship, language barriers, limited educational opportunities, mobility restrictions, and family responsibilities created

challenges throughout their educational journeys. Despite these difficulties, participants demonstrated resilience and determination to continue their education and pursue their goals. Therefore, investing in higher education for refugee youth benefits not only individuals but also their families, communities, and society. Expanding equitable access to higher education can play an important role in promoting inclusion, reducing inequalities, and supporting sustainable futures for displaced populations.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Expand higher education opportunities for Rohingya refugees:** Governments, universities, and humanitarian organizations should increase scholarships, university partnerships, and alternative admission pathways to enable more Rohingya refugee youth to access higher education.
2. **Address documentation and legal barriers:** Policymakers and relevant authorities should work together to simplify documentation requirements and develop flexible admission processes for displaced students.
3. **Increase financial support:** More financial assistance should be provided to cover tuition fees, accommodation, transportation, internet access, learning materials, and other educational expenses that often prevent students from continuing their education.
4. **Strengthen academic and language support:** Universities should provide language preparation, academic writing support, mentoring, counseling services, and academic advising to help refugee students successfully adapt to higher education and complete their studies.

5. **Strengthen leadership development and student engagement:** Universities and humanitarian organizations should provide Rohingya students with opportunities to participate in leadership training, student organizations, volunteer activities, community engagement, and research projects during their studies. These experiences can strengthen leadership skills, professional development, and civic responsibility while preparing graduates to contribute effectively to their communities.
6. **Support female participation in higher education:** Targeted scholarships, mentoring programs, family awareness initiatives, and safe learning environments should be expanded to encourage more Rohingya girls and young women to pursue and complete higher education.
7. **Create post-graduation employment and professional opportunities for Rohingya graduates:** Governments, United Nations agencies, humanitarian organizations, international and national NGOs, universities, and development partners should recognize the qualifications and professional capacity of Rohingya graduates by creating merit-based employment opportunities, graduate fellowships, research positions, teaching roles, and professional placements. Where legal restrictions limit access to formal employment, appropriate mechanisms should be developed to enable qualified Rohingya professionals to contribute to education, research, healthcare, community development, humanitarian response, and policy initiatives. Creating effective professional opportunities would allow graduates to apply their knowledge and skills for the benefit of their communities, promote self-reliance, reduce long-term dependency on humanitarian assistance, and maximize the long-term impact of higher education.

8. **Conduct further research:** Future studies should include larger and more diverse samples across different countries and examine the long-term impact of higher education on employment, leadership, social inclusion, mental well-being, and sustainable community development among Rohingya refugees.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet

My name is Omar Salma, and I am a student in the Master of Arts in Education program at the Asian University for Women (AUW). I am conducting my senior thesis titled: “Transformative Role of Higher Education in Shaping Empowerment and Future Aspirations among Rohingya Refugee Youth.” This sheet provides information about the study and explains your participation.

To the Participant

- Your participation is voluntary. You may take time to decide, skip any question, or withdraw at any time without any consequences. You will receive a copy of this information sheet.

Description of the Project

- This study explores how higher education shapes the experiences, identity, and future aspirations of Rohingya refugee youth. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews about your educational journey. With your consent, interviews will be audio-recorded or notes will be taken, and can be conducted in English or Rohingya based on your preference.

Investigators and Contacts

- **Student Name:** Omar Salma
- **Program:** Master of Arts in Education, AUW
- **Email:** auw234054@auw.edu.bd

Funding

- This research is supported by the Asian University for Women (AUW).

Benefits and Risks

- There are no physical risks involved in this study. However, some questions may involve personal experiences, which may cause slight emotional discomfort. You are free to skip any question or stop the interview at any time.
- There are no direct benefits to you, but your participation may help improve understanding of higher education experiences among Rohingya youth and inform future education programs and policies.

Privacy and Confidentiality

- Your identity will be protected by using pseudonyms and removing any identifying information.
- All data will remain confidential and used only for academic purposes, except in cases where there is a risk of harm.

Data Storage

- All data will be securely stored on my password-protected laptop and recording devices. Only I will have access to the data. After the completion of the study, all data will be safely deleted.

Sharing of Findings

- The findings will be presented as part of my MA thesis at AUW.
- The research may also be shared in academic conferences or publications
- Your identity will remain anonymous in all forms of reporting.

Further Information

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints, you may contact thesis advisor:

Dr. Sayed Mohammad Nazim Uddin

Associate Professor of Environmental Sciences

Founding Director, Center for Climate Change and Environmental Health (CCCEH)

20/A, M M Ali Road, Chittagong, Bangladesh

Mob: +88 017 2113 0505

Email: sayed.uddin@auw.edu.bd

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Protocol Title: Transformative Role of Higher Education in Shaping Empowerment and Future

Aspirations among Rohingya Refugee Youth: A community Based Cross- sectional study

Principal Investigator: Omar Salma

Supervisor: Dr. Sayed Muhammad Nazim Uddin

Organization: Asian University for Women (AUW)

Hello, I am Omar Salma, a Master of Arts in Education student from the Asian University for Women in Chittagong, Bangladesh. I am conducting a study on “Transformative Role of Higher Education in Shaping Empowerment and Future Aspirations among Rohingya Refugee Youth.” This study aims to understand how higher education shapes the lives, empowerment, identity, and future aspirations of Rohingya refugee youth who have studied in Bangladesh and abroad.

Purpose of the Research: The purpose of this study is to explore how higher education influences empowerment, confidence, identity development, leadership, and aspirations for sustainable

community futures among Rohingya refugee youth. The findings of this study will contribute to improving educational opportunities and support programs for Rohingya students and other displaced learners.

Why Are You Invited to Participate in This Study?

You are invited to participate in this study because you are a Rohingya youth who has experience with secondary or higher education. Your experiences and perspectives are valuable in understanding how education shapes the lives and future opportunities of Rohingya students.

What Is Expected from the Participant/Respondent?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to share your experiences related to education, challenges, achievements, and future aspirations.

The interview will include questions about:

- Your educational journey
- Your experiences in school or university
- Challenges and opportunities in accessing education
- Your personal goals and future plans
- Your views on how education can support your community

The interview will take approximately 30–60 minutes. With your permission, the interview may be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy.

Risk and Benefit: There are no anticipated physical risks for participating in this study. However, some questions may be personal or emotional. You may choose not to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable. Although there is no direct financial benefit, this study may help

improve understanding of educational opportunities for Rohingya youth and support future programs, policies, and services that benefit refugee communities.

Privacy, Anonymity, and Confidentiality: All information provided by you will be kept strictly confidential. Your name will not be used in any report, publication, or presentation. Instead, a pseudonym (fake name) will be used to protect your identity. Your responses will be stored securely, and only the researcher and supervisor will have access to the data. If you feel uncomfortable at any time, you may skip any question or stop the interview.

Right Not to Participate and Withdraw: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason. You may stop the interview at any point if you feel uncomfortable. However, once the data has been collected and analyzed, it may not be possible to remove your information.

Principle of Compensation: This study does not provide financial compensation. However, your participation will contribute to research that aims to improve educational opportunities and support systems for Rohingya youth and displaced learners.

For Further Information: If you have any questions about this study or your rights as a participant, you may contact the researcher using the information below.

Contact Address:

Student's Name: Omar Salma

Principal Investigator

Master of Arts in Education, Asian University for Women

Email: auw234054@auw.edu.bd

Do you have any questions?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Do you agree to participate in this research project?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Consent: I acknowledge that the study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the goals and procedures of the study. By signing this consent form, I agree to participate in this study voluntarily.

Signature of Participants

Date: _____

Signature of Investigator

Date: _____

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Study Title: Transformative Role of Higher Education in Shaping Empowerment and Future Aspirations among Rohingya Refugee Youth

Section 1: Background Information

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and your educational background?
2. Where are you currently studying or where did you complete your higher education?
3. What motivated you to pursue higher education?

Section 2: Educational Journey and Experiences

4. Can you describe your journey to accessing higher education?
 - What were the key steps or turning points?
5. What challenges did you face in getting into university?
 - (Prompts if needed: documents, finances, language, restrictions, family expectations)
6. What kinds of support helped you along the way?
 - (Prompts: scholarships, mentors, NGOs, family, friends)
7. How would you describe your overall experience in higher education?

Section 3: Personal Empowerment and Transformation

8. In what ways has higher education changed you as a person?
9. How has your confidence or self-belief changed since entering university?
10. Do you feel more able to make decisions about your life now? Why or why not?
11. Can you share a moment or experience that made you feel empowered?

Section 4: Identity and Sense of Belonging

12. How do you see yourself now compared to before you started higher education?

13. Has your sense of identity changed through your educational experience? How?
14. Do you feel a sense of belonging in your university or host country? Why or why not?
15. How do you balance your Rohingya identity with your experiences in different educational contexts?

Section 5: Challenges and Barriers

16. What challenges have you faced during your university studies?
17. Have you experienced any discrimination or exclusion? If yes, how did it affect you?
18. What are the biggest barriers for Rohingya youth in accessing higher education today?

Section 6: Community, Leadership, and Future Aspirations

19. How has higher education influenced your goals for the future?
20. Do you feel a responsibility to give back to your community? Why or why not?
21. In what ways do you think you can contribute to the Rohingya community in the future?
22. Have your leadership skills or interests changed through your education?

Section 7: Meaning of Higher Education

23. What does higher education mean to you personally?
24. How is higher education important for Rohingya youth as a community?
25. If you could improve access to higher education for Rohingya students, what would you suggest?

Closing Question

26. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience that we did not discuss?