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Sex Trafficking and Emerging Clandestine Sex Working among the Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: A Sociological Study

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Abstract: This study explores the deeply rooted issue of sex trafficking and clandestine sex work among Rohingya refugee women in Bangladesh. Taking a 100-sample size and drawing on mixed methods, including structured interviews, in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and case studies, the study examines the socio-economic and structural vulnerabilities that contribute to the exploitation of Rohingya women. Findings reveal that gender-based violence, dowry practices, poverty, statelessness, and lack of employment are major drivers of trafficking. The research also uncovers the roles of brokers, local complicity and transnational networks in perpetuating this crisis. With trafficking occurring both within and beyond the refugee camps, and victims often lured through deception, coercion, or fake marriages, the need for urgent intervention is evident. Four interrelated theories (1. Intersectionality Theory, 2. Social Disorganization, 3. Rational Choice Theory, and 4. Demand Theory) have upheld the situations of Rohingya women's trafficking and clandestine sex work at the Bangladeshi refugee camps. The study recommends a multi-tiered response, including legal reforms, economic empowerment, community surveillance, and international resettlement initiatives to ensure safety, dignity and justice for Rohingya women.

Keywords: *Rohingya Refugee, Rohingya Women, Trafficking, Sex-Trafficking, Clandestine Sex-work, Rohingya Camp, Ukhiya, Teknaf, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh*

1. Introduction

Among the biggest humanitarian disasters of the twenty-first century caused by human activity is the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis. With more than a million people seeking asylum, mostly in the overcrowded camps of Kutupalong and Nayapara in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh has become the largest host of displaced Rohingya refugees since August 2017 (IOM, 2018c). Triggered by the Myanmar military's extensive campaign of persecution and cruelty, the crisis has been distinguished by the mass rape, torture, and murder of Rohingya civilians, particularly targeting women and girls. While these women sought safety across the border, many instead confronted a new set of risks, most notably, sex trafficking and involuntary involvement in covert sex work (Aronowitz and Koning, 2014). According to many reports, Bangladeshi officials detain up to 60 Rohingya women and girls every day as they try to escape the camps. About two-thirds of them are victims of human trafficking, mostly for forced labor or sexual exploitation (IOM, 2018a). Due to a lack of legal protection, poverty, and statelessness, trafficking continues to occur in the shadowy areas of refugee life (IOM, 2018b; Refugees International, 2023). The post-exodus rise in displaced persons, especially unaccompanied women and children, significantly increased their vulnerability to exploitation, even though Rohingya trafficking was already a problem before 2017 (IOM, 2018c).

In the context of sex trafficking and clandestine sex work, this study examines how socioeconomic, political, and gender-related vulnerabilities connect to increase the risks that Rohingya women and girls confront. The application of four interconnected theories: Intersectionality Theory, Social Disorganization Theory, Rational Choice Theory, and Demand Theory, to the dynamics of trafficking in the Rohingya refugee camps is what makes this study significant. These frameworks aid in our comprehension of the ways that economic survival tactics, the dissolution of social institutions, overlapping social identities, and outside demands all contribute to the continuation of exploitation.

According to Intersectionality Theory, Rohingya women are especially vulnerable because of overlapping identities including gender, ethnicity, and statelessness, as each layer of marginalization increases their chance of being trafficked (Carastathis, 2014). Social Disorganization Theory highlights the disintegration of social institutions in refugee camps, where women are increasingly isolated and vulnerable to trafficking networks

due to the lack of official law enforcement and community support systems. According to rational choice theory, women may turn to sex labor as a last-ditch survival tactic when faced with severe financial difficulties and few other options (Wickert, n.d.). Lastly, Demand Theory clarifies how local and international trafficking networks target Rohingya women due to external demand for cheap labor and sexual exploitation (McKenzie, 2017).

Rohingya women endure layers of vulnerability stemming from patriarchal norms, loss of male guardians, absence of employment opportunities, and displacement trauma. Many are widows or have had their spouses and sons killed or lost during migration, leaving them as sole providers under harsh circumstances (Tayeb, 2022). These social and economic pressures push many women into the sex industry, either through coercion or as a desperate survival strategy (ABS-CBN News, 2017).

More Rohingya women and girls are trafficked than men and boys, indicating a disproportionately high demand for Rohingya women as domestic workers and sex workers (Human Trafficking Case Data Analysis, 2019). Regional and transnational trafficking networks that reach into Thailand, Malaysia, Nepal, and India are the main source of this demand (Amnesty International, n.d., 2020; Commonwealth, n.d., 2023). These women are tricked by traffickers by promises of marriage or work, only to be sexually exploited in private houses or covert brothels (Iqbal, 2017; Akter, 2022). There is still a culture of dread and silence inside the camps. Women are not given enough support by justice systems, which prioritize control over rehabilitation and are frequently mediated by local mosque committees or camp officials (Refugees International, 2023). Even though there are many allegations of sexual assault and human trafficking, survivors hardly ever get justice, and few of the offenders are brought to justice. Despite the magnitude of the crisis, international agencies have observed that law enforcement actions are still inadequate and disorganized (US Department of State, 2020; Relief Web, 2023).

Cox's Bazar, a popular tourist destination, now faces the grim reality of having brothels within and around refugee camps, where hundreds of women are forced into sex work under the guise of employment (Tayeb, 2022). The trafficking of Rohingya women is no longer limited to local exploitation; many are smuggled across borders using forged documents and illicit networks to India, Malaysia, and the Middle East (Chowdhury, 2020). Adolescents, especially girls, are prime targets due to their vulnerability, with brokers exploiting their desperation for profit (London College of Legal Studies, n.d.; Khan, 2022).

The problem has not received enough attention despite its size. The subject's gender sensitivity and the covert nature of sex labor both contribute to the paucity of information and public discussion. Most of the information that is currently available comes from media stories, grey literature, or is included in larger trafficking research. Therefore, comprehensive academic research that focuses exclusively on sex trafficking and covert sex work among Rohingya refugee women in Bangladesh is desperately needed. By providing evidence-based insights into one of the most important human rights issues resulting from the Rohingya crisis, this study seeks to close that gap. The study also intends to add to larger discussions on trafficking, refugee vulnerability, and the relationship between migration and exploitation by utilizing important theoretical frameworks.

Objectives of The Study

To examine the causes and conditions that lead Rohingya refugee women in Bangladesh into sex trafficking and clandestine sex work.

2. Literature Review

The convergence of gender-based exploitation, statelessness, and socioeconomic vulnerability in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, is highlighted by research on sex trafficking among Rohingya refugee women. Rohingya women are particularly vulnerable to trafficking and the illegal sex trade because of these conditions. Prior research reveals a complicated network of structural flaws and socioeconomic circumstances, which traffickers take advantage of by making fictitious promises of employment, marriage, and a better life.

Types of Trafficking Faced by Rohingya Women and Girls

There are two types of trafficking in the Rohingya refugee community: labor trafficking and sexual exploitation, with the former being more common. The main types of violence Rohingya women and children experience are

sexual exploitation and trafficking for forced labor, according to the US State Department (2023). Furthermore, Barua (2021) talks about the wider definition of trafficking, which encompasses forced labor and organ trafficking, both of which put many Rohingya refugees in a terrible circle of exploitation.

Age and Vulnerability to Trafficking

Younger girls and women are especially susceptible to human trafficking. Teenage females, especially those between the ages of 15 and 19, are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, according to studies like Tayeb (2022) and Akter (2022). Many young girls, some as young as 10, are trafficked into prostitution in the camps, according to the BBC (2018). Furthermore, according to the IOM (2018), Rohingya girls are frequently targeted because of their ignorance, loneliness, and desperate need for financial support.

Clandestine Sex Work and Social Stigma

Trafficked women and girls are frequently kept out of the public eye because of societal stigma, and clandestine sex work takes place in secret within the camps. According to the Thomson Reuters Foundation (2017), there are covert brothels in and around the camps where women are coerced into performing sex work under false pretences or coercion. The Rohingya community's stigma around sex work makes it more difficult to recognize and manage the problem, since women are frequently compelled to work covertly to prevent social rejection (Tayeb, 2022).

Socio-economic Drivers and Lack of Livelihood Opportunities

One of the main causes of trafficking is the financial hardship that Rohingya families endure. According to research by Palma (2021) and Khan (2022), the majority of Rohingya women are unemployed and have little access to possibilities for education or employment. Due to a lack of possibilities for earning money, many women resort to dangerous jobs, which are frequently made possible by traffickers who take advantage of their precarious situation. Without other options, many women are lured into being trafficked for sex or labor after being promised jobs outside of the camps, according to IOM (2018c).

Statelessness and Legal Vulnerability

The statelessness of Rohingya women increases their susceptibility to human trafficking. According to Sattar (2021), Rohingyas lack legal protection and recognition due to their statelessness, which makes it simpler for traffickers to take advantage of them. Due to their lack of legal status, many Rohingya women are unable to obtain legitimate employment, healthcare, or education, which forces them to fall into the hands of traffickers who offer them a route out of their unstable living conditions (Global Citizen, 2017).

Social and Family Structures Contributing to Vulnerability

Family breakdowns, particularly the loss of male protectors, leave Rohingya women more exposed to exploitation. Tayeb (2022) reports that many women in the camps have lost husbands, fathers, or sons due to the violence in Myanmar or migration, leaving them without economic support or protection. This lack of male guardianship, combined with a patriarchal society, increases their susceptibility to trafficking. Additionally, Human Trafficking Case Data Analysis (2019) highlights that many trafficked women and girls come from female-headed households or those where men are unable to provide due to illness or unemployment, making these women more vulnerable.

The Role of Family Dynamics in Trafficking

Family relationships frequently have an impact on Rohingya women's experiences of human trafficking. Extremely poor families or those under social pressure might be more likely to send their daughters abroad in search of employment, unintentionally putting them at risk of human trafficking. According to Tayeb (2022) and Human Trafficking Case Data Analysis (2019), traffickers usually take advantage of families' despair by promising young girls marriage or employment, only to use them for sex.

Barriers to Reporting and Legal Challenges

The fear of humiliation and the social stigma associated with sex work keep many women from disclosing their experiences of trafficking. According to IOM (2019) and Tayeb (2022), victims of human trafficking frequently keep quiet out of concern for societal rejection or family consequences. Furthermore, women in the refugee camps have limited alternatives for pursuing justice due to the absence of legal procedures. The lack of law

enforcement and inadequate security measures in the camps further exacerbate this obstacle to reporting (Tayeb, 2022).

Poverty and Limited Resources

One major element that continues to push women into sex trafficking is poverty. According to IOM (2018b) and Akter (2022), Rohingya women are especially susceptible to human trafficking because of the dearth of economic options in the camps. Many are lured into exploitative situations after being promised false promises of better lifestyles or jobs. According to Glinski (2017), forced sex work is frequently the result of trafficking, which frequently starts with the promise of employment in hotels or restaurants.

3. Methodology

Research Design and Approach

This study adopted a mixed-method approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative research techniques. This design was chosen to gain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the sensitive and complex issue of sex trafficking and clandestine sex work among Rohingya refugee women. Using both types of data facilitated triangulation and strengthened the validity of the findings.

Study Area and Population

The research was conducted between June 2023 and September 2023 in registered Rohingya refugee camps located in Teknaf and Ukhiya sub-districts of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The specific camps included Camp Nos. 2, 5, 1W, 2W, and 27. The study population comprised Rohingya women and girls, community leaders (Majhis), and relevant stakeholders such as NGO staff, local villagers, and host community members.

Sample Size

A total of 100 individuals participated in the study, distributed as follows:

- 50 Structured Interviews (with both men and women),
- 25 In-Depth Interviews,
- 15 Key Informant Interviews,
- 10 Case Study Interviews involving Rohingya women and girls affected by trafficking or clandestine sex work.

Sampling Techniques

This study utilized three distinct sampling methods to ensure a comprehensive representation of Rohingya women's experiences with trafficking and clandestine sex work.

- Cluster Random Sampling was employed to select participants from the Rohingya refugee camps. This method ensured that diverse groups from different camp sections were represented, capturing the broad spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds and experiences of exploitation.
- Purposive Sampling was applied to identify key informants and participants for in-depth interviews (IDIs) and case studies. This method targeted individuals with direct experiences of trafficking or involvement in NGO interventions, ensuring the inclusion of experts and survivors whose insights are critical to understanding the problem.
- Snowball Sampling was utilized for recruiting hard-to-reach participants, particularly those involved in clandestine sex work or trafficked women, who are often reluctant to speak out. This method proved effective in uncovering hidden networks of trafficking and providing insights into less visible forms of exploitation.

Data Collection Tools

The study utilized four main instruments:

- Structured Questionnaire for quantitative interviews.
- Checklist for Key Informant Interviews (KII).
- Guideline for In-Depth Interviews (IDI).
- Case Study Template for Collecting Personal Narratives.

The structured questionnaire included 20 questions organized into three segments: demographic profile, socio-economic background, and issues related to trafficking and sex work.

Data Sources

Primary Data: Collected directly from the field through interviews, discussions, and observations.
Secondary Data: Reviewed from existing literature, news articles, policy papers, and reports to provide context and support interpretation of field data.

Data Analysis Techniques

- Quantitative Data from structured interviews were coded and analyzed using SPSS, producing descriptive statistics and trends.
- Qualitative Data from IDIs, KIIs, and Case Studies were transcribed, translated, and thematically analyzed. A narrative approach was applied to preserve the integrity of individual experiences. Case study data were categorized by type of experience and analyzed thematically to draw insights.

Ethical Considerations
Ethical protocols were strictly followed. Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose and procedures and were given the option to provide written or verbal consent. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was assured. Personal identifiers were removed or replaced with pseudonyms. The study was approved by relevant academic oversight bodies, and all activities were conducted by international ethical standards for research involving human subjects.

4. Results

This section presents the empirical findings derived from structured interviews, case studies, in-depth interviews (IDIs), and key informant interviews (KIIs), organized around key demographic variables and thematic dimensions of trafficking and clandestine sex work among Rohingya women.

Demographic Characteristics
Among the 50 respondents, the majority (60%) were aged 18–25, highlighting the heightened vulnerability of young adult women to trafficking and exploitation. Educational levels were low, with 56% having no formal education and only 12% completing primary school, limiting awareness and economic mobility. Just 18% of women reported any income-generating activity, mostly through informal or NGO-supported work, while 82% remained economically inactive.

Gender dynamics were also stark: 80% of households were male-headed, and 74% of women reported limited or no decision-making power. These patterns underscore structural gender inequality and economic deprivation, key drivers of vulnerability to sex trafficking and clandestine sex work in the camps.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 50)

Variables	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age Group	18–25 years	30	60%
	26–35 years	11	22%
	36+ years	9	18%
Educational Attainment	No formal education	28	56%
	Primary education	6	12%
	Secondary or higher	16	32%
Income-Generating Activity	Yes	9	18%
	No	41	82%
Household Headship	Male-headed	40	80%
	Female-headed	10	20%
Decision-Making Power	Limited or none	37	74%
	Moderate to full	13	26%

Awareness and Nature of Trafficking

While 68% of respondents were aware of trafficking, many lacked a detailed understanding of its types and mechanisms, with 32% completely unaware, indicating gaps in outreach efforts. Gender-based violence (GBV) was widespread: emotional abuse was most common (72%), followed by physical violence (48%) and marital rape (22%).

Respondents identified labor smuggling (38%), sex trafficking (34%), and forced marriage abroad (28%) as the main trafficking types. These are often facilitated by brokers or Majhis through deception and coercion. Weak camp security, poor grievance systems, and social stigma further reinforce vulnerability and silence.

Table 2: Awareness and Nature of Trafficking among Respondents (N = 50)

Variables	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Awareness of Trafficking	Aware	34	68%
	Unaware	16	32%
Types of Gender-Based Violence	Emotional abuse	36	72%
	Physical violence	24	48%
	Marital rape	11	22%
Types of Trafficking Identified	Labor smuggling	19	38%
	Sex trafficking	17	34%
	Forced marriage abroad	14	28%

To illustrate these patterns more vividly, several participants shared personal experiences and observations:
"I was too afraid to report what happened. Even if I tried, who would believe me?"
— Young woman, Nayapara Rohingya Camp

Social and Economic Conditions Enabling Exploitation

The findings from Figure 1 clearly illustrate that poverty (84%), statelessness (76%), and lack of employment opportunities (70%) are the most dominant push factors for sex trafficking and clandestine sex work. Respondents repeatedly emphasized that the inability to legally work, compounded by their stateless status and exclusion from Bangladesh's formal economy, created a precarious survival environment. The burden of dowry and exploitative marriage practices was reported by over half (56%) of the respondents, further intensifying the pressure on women and girls to seek unsanctioned or high-risk avenues for income.

Figure 1: Primary Drivers of Sex Trafficking and Clandestine Sex Work

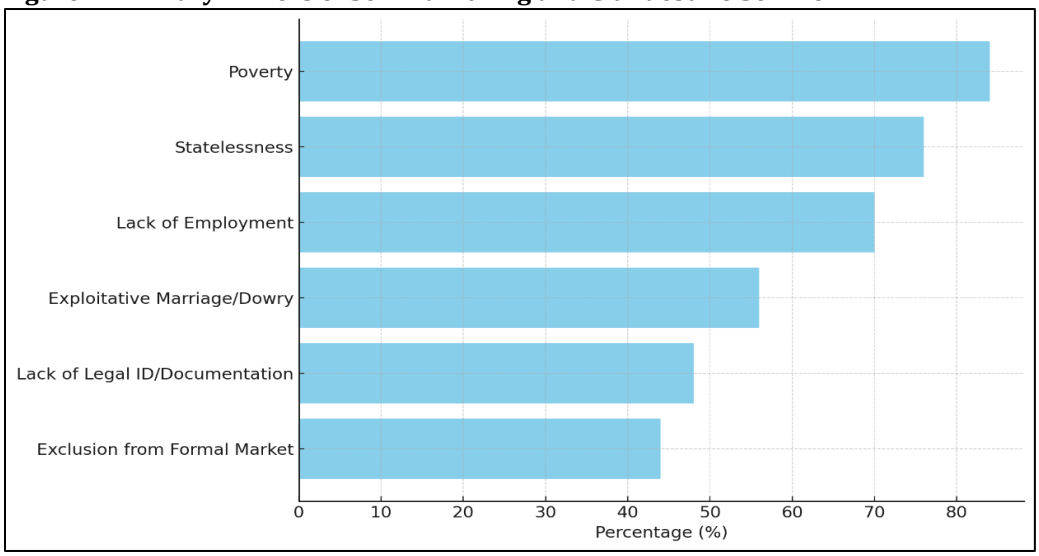
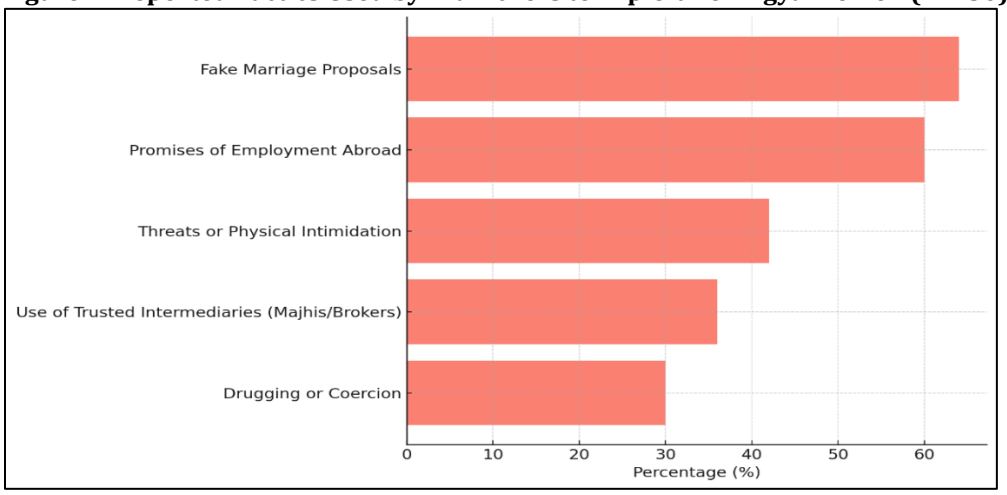


Figure 2 illustrates how traffickers exploit these vulnerabilities through deception and coercion. The most frequently reported tactic was fake marriage proposals (64%), often presented as a way to secure a better life

abroad. Promises of employment (60%) were also common lures, especially to countries like Malaysia or the Middle East. A significant number of participants reported intimidation or threats (42%), as well as manipulative involvement by camp brokers or Majhis (36%), who use their social position to recruit or coerce victims. Notably, drugging and physical coercion (30%) were also cited, indicating a violent dimension to many trafficking operations.

Figure 2: Reported Tactics Used by Traffickers to Exploit Rohingya Women (N = 50)



Drivers of Trafficking and Sex Work

Table 3 shows that extreme poverty (46.67%) is the leading economic driver of sex trafficking and clandestine sex work among Rohingya women. Limited income opportunities (20%), lack of cash (20%), and inadequate aid targeting women (13.33%) further compound their vulnerability. These factors reflect a harsh economic reality that forces many into risky survival strategies.

Table 3: Economic Reasons of Rohingya women's sex trafficking and clandestine Sex work

Economic Reason of Rohingya women Sex trafficking and clandestine Sex-working	Percentage
Extreme Poverty	46.67%
No work opportunity for income generation inside the camp	20%
No cash in hand	20%
Not enough aid support and an economic safety net targeted for women	13.33%
Total	**100%**

The structural economic hardships Rohingya women face were echoed in qualitative accounts:
"My father couldn't pay the dowry, so he agreed to send me abroad with a broker. But I never reached the promised groom." —17-year-old girl, Camp 2W

Social and Economic Conditions Enabling Exploitation

Figure 3 shows that 33% of trafficking and clandestine sex work occurs within the refugee camps, often unnoticed by authorities. Cox's Bazar follows at 23%, driven by tourism and trafficker mobility. Other key locations include Chattogram (13%), and Teknaf, Dhaka, and Sylhet (10% each), revealing that trafficking extends beyond camps to major urban and transit hubs. This spread highlights the need for coordinated monitoring across multiple regions.

Figure 3: Common places in Bangladesh where Rohingya women are trafficked for sex or involved in clandestine sex work

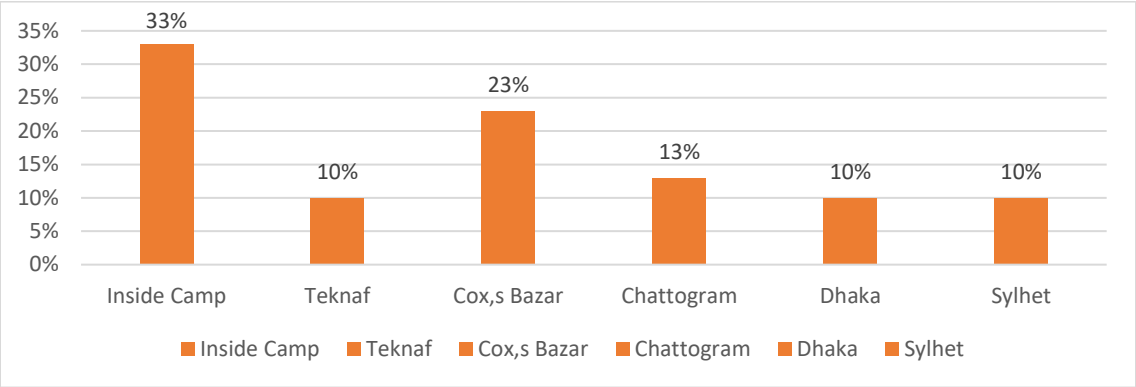
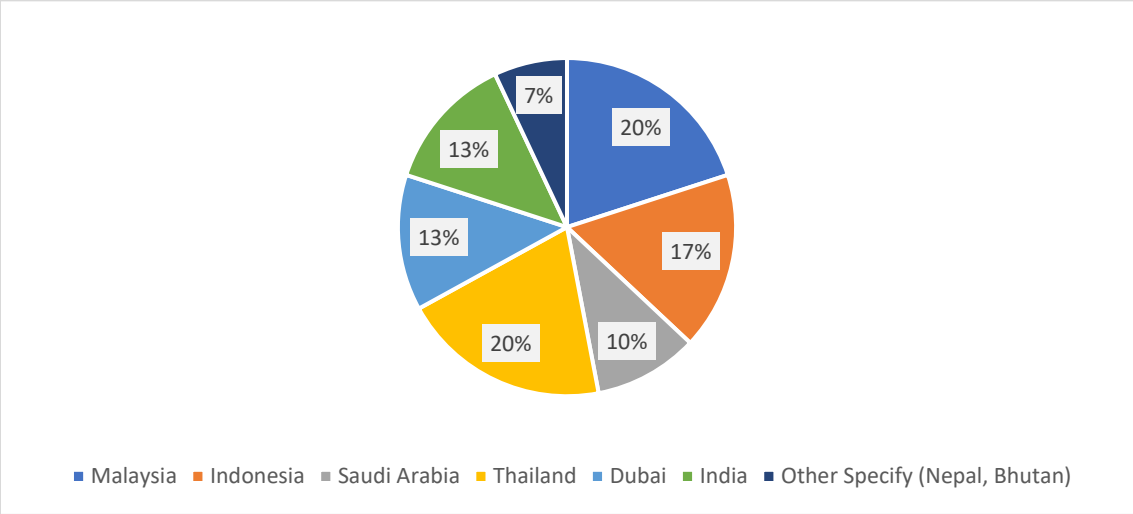


Figure 4 shows Malaysia and Thailand (each 20%) as the top trafficking destinations, followed by Indonesia (17%), India and Dubai (13% each), Saudi Arabia (10%), and Nepal/Bhutan/others (7%). These routes reflect regional trafficking patterns and the exploitation of religious and cultural ties. Thailand often acts as a transit hub, highlighting the organized and transnational nature of networks targeting stateless Rohingya women.

Figure 4: Common countries where Rohingya women are trafficked and sold for sex



The normalization of trafficking within the camps and nearby towns was expressed by several respondents: "Everyone knows who arranges the girls' escape from the camp, but no one talks — even some Majhis are involved."— Local NGO worker, Ukhiya

Volume and Modalities of Trafficking

Table 4 presents community estimates indicating that 400–500 Rohingya women and girls are trafficked annually (57%), with the majority trapped in sex trafficking (62%) or involved in clandestine sex work (60%). Although exact numbers are hard to verify due to secrecy, these figures underscore the widespread and ongoing nature of the crisis.

Table 4: Number of Rohingya women and girls generally trafficked each year

Number of Rohingya Women and Girls Generally Trafficked Each Year	Percentage	Trap in Sex trafficking	Percentage	Clandestine Sex Work	Percentage	p-value
400-500	57%	100-200	62%	500-600	60%	0.340
501-600	20%	201-300	25%	601-800	20%	
601-700	14%	301-400	10%	801-1000	14%	
801-900	6%	401-500	3%	1000-1200	6%	
More than 900	3%	More than 500	0.00%	1201-above	0.00	
Total	**100%**	**Total**	**100%**	**Total**	**100%**	

Note: Chi-Square test p-value not significant

Participants described how traffickers exploit hope and desperation:
"They promised marriage and work in Malaysia, but I was instead taken to a locked room in Chattogram and told to obey." — Rohingya woman, 21, Camp 5

Figure 5 illustrates key push factors behind trafficking among Rohingya women. The leading cause (33%) is the pressure of dowry and the desire for freedom outside the camps. Another 17% cited hopelessness about repatriation and poverty linked to marriage. Additional factors (each 3%) include lack of education, job scarcity, polygamy, insecurity, and harassment. These combined vulnerabilities drive many toward risky migration or sex work.

Figure 5: Push Factors of Rohingya Women Trafficking

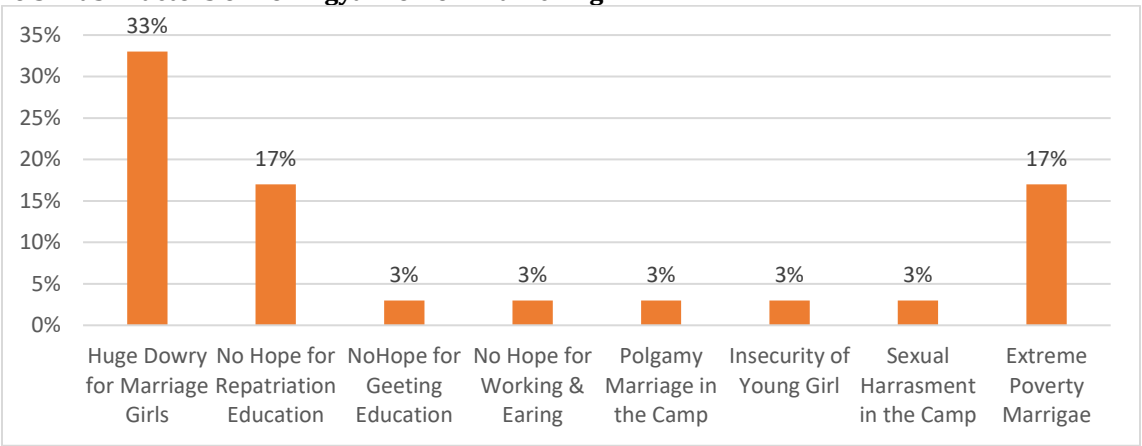
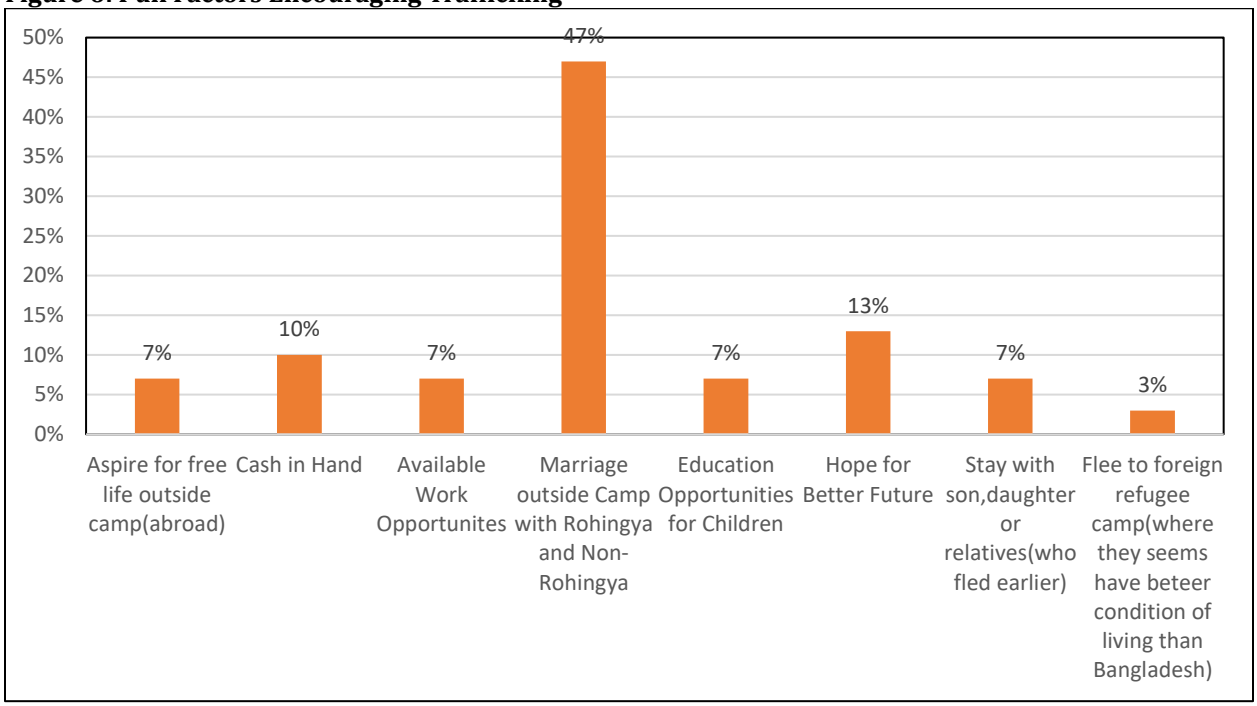


Figure 6 illustrates that the strongest pull factor behind Rohingya women's trafficking is the desire to marry Rohingya men living abroad, reported by 47% of respondents. Other key motivators include better educational opportunities for children, work and cash needs (17% combined), and aspirations for freedom, family reunification, or improved living conditions abroad (31% collectively). These factors reflect a preference for perceived stability outside the camp over dependence on aid and restricted camp life.

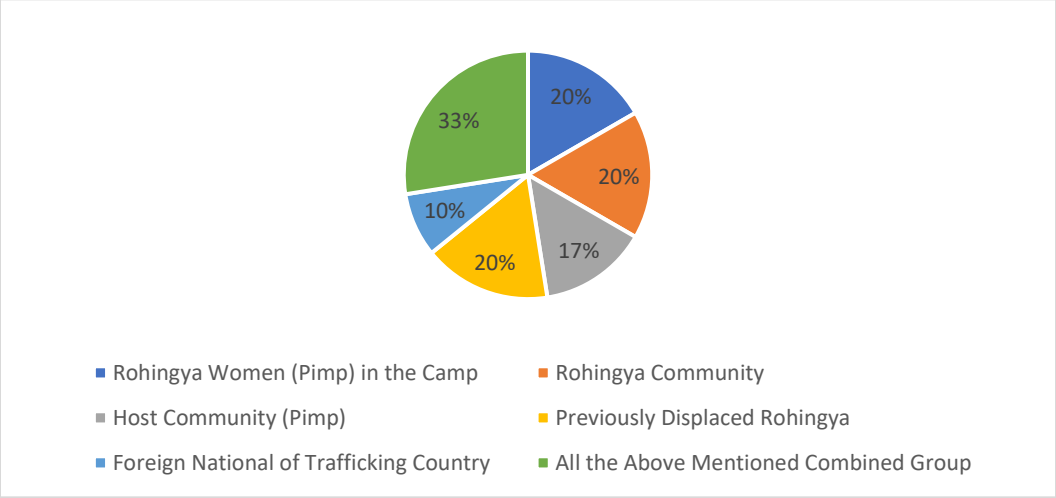
Figure 6: Pull Factors Encouraging Trafficking



Role of Brokers and Media

A chain of a mixed category of people are involved in trafficking of Rohingya women 33% people answered that women trafficking is a coordinated effort of (Rohingya pimp in the camp 20%, previously displaced Rohingya community 20%, Rohingya men in the camp 20%, host community 17%, foreign national of trafficking country 10%) altogether they cover 67% according to the answer of the participant.

Figure 7: Types of Brokers Engaged in Rohingya women trafficking and clandestine sex work



In Figure 8, we found that the most popular social media that traffickers use for trafficking/smuggling of women is IMO, with 33% responding and another 33% replying about using at least three media/social media at a time (In-person communication in the camp, IMO, Facebook Messenger/Phone call). Facebook Messenger is used lowest in percentage of use only 7% people replying in this regard.

Figure 8: Types of media & social sites used for trafficking of Rohingya women

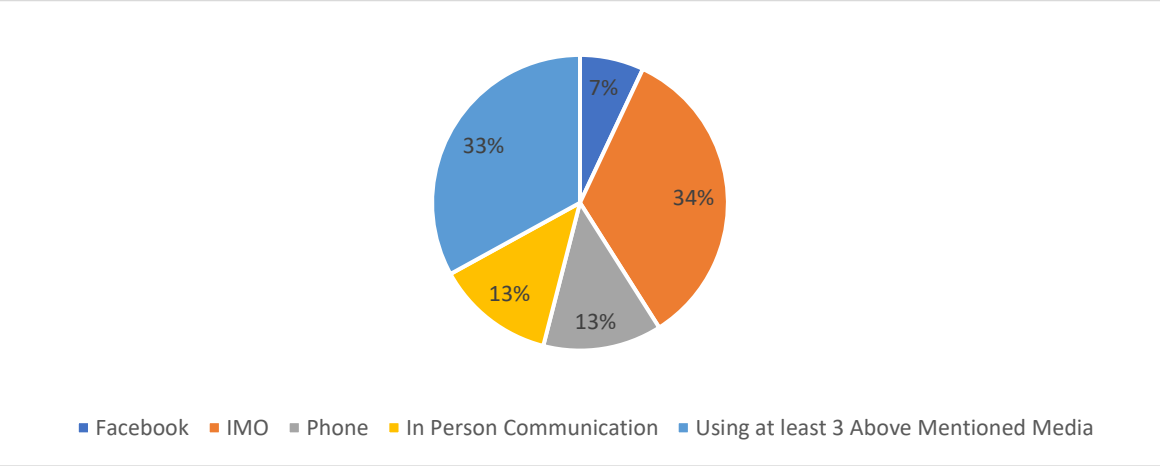


Table 5: Age-wise Awareness of sex trafficking pairwise t-test and ANOVA Results

Test / Comparison	t-statistic / SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Pairwise t-tests					
18–25 vs 26–35	-0.37	—	—	—	0.719
18–25 vs 36+	0.00	—	—	—	1.000
26–35 vs 36+	0.28	—	—	—	0.785
One-Way ANOVA					
Between Groups	0.020	2	0.010	0.068	0.934
Within Groups (Error)	6.990	47	0.149	—	—
Total	7.010	49	—	—	—

Note: Both the t-test and the ANOVA p-value were not significant

Discussion

This study reveals that sex trafficking and clandestine sex work among Rohingya women in Bangladesh's refugee camps are deeply rooted in intersecting vulnerabilities, gender-based marginalization, statelessness, economic deprivation, and systemic neglect. These phenomena are not isolated but are enabled by long-standing socio-political fragilities and regional trafficking networks.

Gendered Vulnerabilities and Statelessness

Study that vulnerability by gender, statelessness and lack of guardianship that makes them easy targets of being prey of trafficking for sex and clandestine sex-working. Rohingya women, often arriving in Bangladesh without male family members due to killings or forced displacement, face heightened risks in the absence of protection and support. Within the patriarchal refugee community, women's roles as sole providers increase their susceptibility to exploitation, as they navigate survival in overcrowded camps with limited resources and no legal status (Akter, 2024a; Refugees International, 2023). Their stateless condition deprives them of rights, leaving them invisible to protective legal frameworks (London College of Legal Studies, n.d.).

Economic Desperation and Survival Sex

The study's findings, there is no specific economic safety net for Rohingya women, and funding cuts are also a compelling factor in the cash generated by clandestine sex work and the trafficking of those involved in the sex industry. That a very minimal aid support $11 per month per person has left women vulnerable to coercive economic survival strategies (Akter, 2024b). In the absence of employment, some Rohingya women turn to sex work as a last resort, a pattern consistent with the theory of rational choice under constrained conditions (Khan, 2022). Many women interviewed reported choosing clandestine sex work to feed their children or repay trafficking debts (Setara Begum, Case Study with Rohingya Women, Nayapara Refugee Camp, Bangladesh-2023).

Dowry, Marriage, and Exploitation

Social practices like dowry emerged as a critical driver of trafficking, Sex-trafficking and clandestine sex-work of Rohingya women in Bangladeshi camps. The economic burden of marrying daughters within camps leads some families to accept offers for overseas marriages, unknowingly placing their daughters in exploitative situations (Ahmed, 2019). These "marriages" are often facilitated by traffickers through online platforms and false documentation, luring victims with promises of jobs or reunification with family abroad (Chowdhury, 2020; Commonwealth, n.d., 2023).

Organized Trafficking and Local Collusion

A well-structured trafficking network involving brokers, transport operators, and even local officials operates in Cox's Bazar. These networks smuggle women and girls across borders into India, Nepal, Malaysia, and beyond, often for forced sex work or domestic servitude (US Department of State, 2020; Alam et al., 2023a). The widespread use of communication apps like IMO and complicity of some authorities facilitate these operations (Refugee International, 2023; Rahman, 2024).

Hidden Economies and Tourist Demand

The Tourist-heavy areas such as Cox's Bazar and Teknaf have become epicenters of the clandestine sex trade. Driven by demand from local and foreign clients, a hidden economy has developed, often with the complicity of hotel staff, restaurant workers, and community insiders (The Daily Star, 2018; ABS-CBN News, 2017). The sex trade's commodification of human bodies aligns with global trends, where trafficking for sexual exploitation is among the most lucrative forms of trafficking, generating an estimated $99 billion annually (Aronowitz & Koning, 2014; Woode et al., 2014).

Stigma, Silence, and Policy Gaps

The challenge of Rohingya women being trafficked and sex-trafficked is exacerbated by social stigma hurdles, taboo in the camps, insecurity, and highly limited mobility, as well as by lack of education, ability to speak up, information and legal initiative by authorities. Social stigma deters victims from reporting abuse, while grievance mechanisms within the camps are male-dominated and unresponsive to the needs of women (Amnesty International, 2020; ReliefWeb, 2023). Despite existing interventions by humanitarian actors, efforts remain fragmented. Bangladesh's failure to ratify international refugee and statelessness conventions further compounds the problem, as Rohingyas lack legal recognition and access to justice (London College of Legal Studies, n.d.; USDS, 2023).

Alignment of Study Results with Prior Research

Table 6: Findings from prior study

Themes	Evidence from Prior Studies	References
Gender inequality and a lack of decision-making increase vulnerability to trafficking	Previous studies note that patriarchal structures in refugee communities exacerbate women's dependency and make them more susceptible to sexual exploitation.	Hossain & Korban (2021); Ullah (2016)
Poverty, dowry pressures, and lack of livelihoods are key drivers of trafficking and clandestine sex work	Research highlights poverty, economic exclusion, and harmful marriage practices as major push factors behind the trafficking of stateless and displaced women.	Zimmerman et al. (2011); Karim (2020)
Limited education reduces awareness of trafficking risks	Studies show that low literacy and lack of access to formal education restrict women's ability to recognize or resist trafficking.	Farzana (2017); UNHCR (2020)
Traffickers exploit vulnerabilities using fake marriage and job offers	Similar patterns of deceptive marriage proposals and false employment abroad have been reported in South Asia and Southeast Asia.	Sidhu & Christie (2022); Rahman (2019)

Clandestine sex work and trafficking extend beyond camps to urban hubs	Previous research confirms that Cox's Bazar, Chattogram, and Dhaka serve as transit and destination points for trafficking networks.	Mohajan (2019); IOM (2021)
Social stigma and gender-based violence silence victims	Prior studies also emphasize how stigma, fear of disbelief, and normalized violence prevent Rohingya women from reporting abuse.	Human Rights Watch (2019); Yousafzai & Hossain (2022)
Use of digital media (IMO, Facebook Messenger) by traffickers	Other studies note the rising role of digital platforms in facilitating trafficking and recruitment in refugee populations.	Latonero (2019); IOM (2020)
Transnational trafficking routes to Malaysia, Thailand, and the Gulf	Regional trafficking research identifies Malaysia, Thailand, and Gulf countries as key destinations for Rohingya women.	Mahmood et al. (2017); Ehsan (2021)

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Recommendations

The study highlights multiple overlapping challenges faced by Rohingya women that make them vulnerable to sex trafficking and clandestine sex work. Deep-rooted gender inequality limits women's autonomy and decision-making, while poverty and lack of livelihood opportunities leave them economically dependent and exposed to exploitation. Limited education and awareness further weaken their ability to recognize and resist trafficking risks. Social stigma and widespread gender-based violence silence victims, preventing them from reporting abuse or seeking help. In addition, trafficking is facilitated by local brokers, community leaders, and transnational networks, exploiting both the absence of strong protective mechanisms and the desperation caused by statelessness and camp restrictions.

Strengthen education and empowerment: Expand literacy, skills training, and income-generating programs targeting young women to reduce economic dependence.

Improve awareness and reporting systems: Launch culturally appropriate campaigns in the Rohingya language, enhance GBV reporting mechanisms, and ensure confidential grievance redress.

Economic safety nets: Introduce women-focused cash transfers, small business grants, and vocational opportunities to address immediate financial precarity and dowry-related pressures.

Regulate marriage and migration processes: Establish stricter oversight on marriage brokers and provide safe migration information to prevent exploitation through fake proposals and job offers.

Enhance multi-level monitoring: Strengthen surveillance in camps, urban hotspots, and border routes; develop cross-border rescue and repatriation frameworks with regional partners.

Disrupt trafficking networks: Hold complicit Majhis and pimps accountable, increase community-based monitoring, and implement digital literacy and online safety workshops.

Support survivors: Provide safe shelters, psychosocial counseling, legal aid, and reintegration opportunities to reduce stigma and foster resilience among trafficked women.

Practical Contribution of the Study

This study provides an in-depth understanding of the socio-economic and structural factors that fuel sex trafficking and clandestine sex work among Rohingya refugees. It contributes practically by identifying the specific vulnerabilities, exploitation methods, and trafficking routes, offering concrete evidence-based for designing interventions. The insights can guide policymakers, humanitarian actors, and international agencies in developing gender-sensitive livelihood initiatives, strengthening anti-trafficking monitoring, and establishing survivor-centered protection frameworks. Ultimately, the study bridges the gap between empirical evidence and actionable policy measures to safeguard Rohingya women from exploitation.

Conclusion

The complicated vulnerabilities that Rohingya women and children in Bangladesh suffer from sex trafficking and clandestine sex work are grave human rights abuses. They are particularly susceptible to exploitation because of their gender inequity, economic suffering, lack of legal protection, and statelessness. The patterns of supply and demand in the sex trade, which occurs both domestically and abroad, exacerbate this problem. A

multifaceted strategy is necessary to address this, with an emphasis on bolstering community-based protective systems, increasing educational and economic prospects, and fortifying legal frameworks. Since Bangladesh cannot handle this situation on its own, international cooperation is required to develop long-term solutions, such as repatriation with full human rights or reintegration into a third country. To lessen the continued exploitation of Rohingya women and children, this study highlights the necessity of thorough, coordinated measures.

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