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Examining the Role of Transnational Solidarity Beyond Aid: A Case Study of the Rohingya

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Abstract

This article examines the persistence of statelessness, focusing on the organised persecution of the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar. Statelessness, as experienced by the Rohingya, encompasses more than the mere absence of nationality – it represents a grave state of liminality that strips individuals of their rights, protections, and personhood. This study argues that while the international community's response has largely focused on humanitarian aid, such efforts fail to address the structural causes of statelessness and exclusion. This article explores the potential of transnational solidarity to redefine citizenship and belonging, arguing that solidarity must go beyond short-term crisis response and contribute to a systemic shift in international norms and policies. Drawing on constructivism and postcolonialism, this discussion addresses the limitations of current humanitarian frameworks, which are often rooted in exclusionary practices and colonial legacies. This article further examines the emerging role of digital advocacy and NGOs, illustrating how these mediums have enabled the Rohingya to increasingly reclaim their voices, mobilise international support, and challenge dominant representations of their suffering. Ultimately, this paper contends that redefining transnational solidarity, inclusive of the Rohingya's experiences and histories, is essential for addressing their statelessness in a way that goes beyond mere relief and leads to long-term justice and recognition.

Keywords: Rohingya, transnational solidarity, statelessness, human rights, refugees, constructivism, postcolonialism

1. Introduction

How can the unrecognition of an entire people persist in an international order ostensibly grounded in universal human rights and principles of social inclusion? Statelessness does not simply mean the absence of nationality¹ or documentation – it constitutes a deliberate erasure of personhood, severing individuals from the rights, protections, and connections that underpin one's existence in the world. For stateless populations, exclusion is institutionalised and their existence relegated to the periphery of an international society that fails to address their needs, rights, and securities.

Nowhere are the consequences of this exclusion more evident than in the case of the Rohingya. By definition, they are a Muslim ethnic minority from Myanmar's Rakhine State (Parnini et al., 2013). By experience, they are a people who have been systematically denied the right to belong in any nation – they have been denied citizenship, persecuted by their own government, and relegated to the status of non-recognition both domestically and internationally (Ansar, 2020; Alam, 2019; UNHCR, 2024).

Home to approximately a million of the world's 3.5 million Rohingya, Myanmar is one of Southeast Asia's most ethnically diverse countries, with over 130 distinct ethnic and religious groups (MIMU, 2025; Harvard Divinity School, 2025). However, its political structure reflects the challenges of governing such a diverse society. While the Union Election Commission lists 73 political parties as of 2015, only a few, such as the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Part (USDP) and the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), maintain national prominence, chiefly by appealing to Buddhist majoritarian nationalism (Nehru, 2015).

Rakhine state itself has a unique political landscape. Historically alienated from Myanmar's central government and Buddhist majority, Rakhine has seen growing fragmentation amongst

¹ Nationality refers to the legal relationship between an individual and a state, granting rights like residence and imposing duties such as military service or allegiance. Stateless individuals, lacking this bond, are denied these rights and duties, rendering them foreigners everywhere but nationals of no country (ISI, 2014). See ISI, *The World's Stateless*, pp. 19-22, for further discussion.

its political elites, particularly with the rise of the Arakan Army (AA), which has divided the state's political parties into two rough factions: those aligning with military junta and those advocating for the AA's vision of self-governance (Hlaing, 2022).

The current post-coup context further compounds these power dynamics. Following the 2021 military seizure of power, Myanmar has descended into civil conflict, in which the Tatmadaw (military) views domestic threats – be it armed ethnic movements or marginalised groups like the Rohingya – as existential threats to the regime's survival (Bi, 2018). It is in this context that the Rohingya have been securitised and scapegoated, with their persecution serving the dual-purpose of reinforcing Bamar-Buddhist ethno-nationalism and distracting from broader public discontent (Passeri, 2021; Bi, 2018). For the military, political survival depends on the control of urban centres and suppression of dissent, making repression – notwithstanding its brutality – a rational strategy (Walker, 2024).

Indeed, the centralisation and personalisation of political power, with a strong emphasis on unity – often tied to religious and societal values – can largely explain this shifting political dynamic in Rakhine State. In Myanmar, ideas of power are often directly correlated with wealth, influence, and personal freedom, creating a societal values in which the maintenance of power is paramount; this is frequently expressed through the metaphor of “holding the tiger's tail” (Lubina, 2021). Unity, deeply rooted in Buddhist monastic traditions, is valued, with self-sacrifice for the collective good regarded as a moral virtue. Conversely, failing to do so is seen as unethical (McKay, 2019; Lubina, 2021). However, the Rohingya face a unique challenge, as they are not recognised as indigenous (*tainyinth*) by the Bamar majority or other ethnic groups (Lubina, 2021). In this context, the dominance of the Bamar-Buddhist majority, reluctant to share power with ethnic minorities, has stifled the development of an inclusive, or even pluralistic, society. Myanmar has thus never truly realised a vision of “unity in diversity”; religion's influence has far more frequently exacerbated political tensions than it has offered meaningful solutions to societal problems (Lubina, 2021).

Hence, for the Rohingya, “home” remains an inaccessible concept – a place that exists more in memory and longing than in any secure, physical form. A state of profound liminality defines the Rohingya plight – an affront to the fundamental principle of the right to belong and be recognised within a given polity (Ahsan Ullah, 2016).

2. Historical Background

Understanding the unrecognition of the Rohingya requires situating their plight within Myanmar’s fraught historical and political experience, which has long been shaped by exclusionary nationalism and colonial legacies. While historical debates persist over whether Rohingya presence in Myanmar (also known as Burma)² dates back to the ninth century or whether they are the progeny of Bengali labourers brought by British colonial authorities during the 19th century (Alam, 2019), these contested origins serve as a pretext, rather than a legitimate basis, for denying their existence and rights. The Rohingya’s claim to belonging is not contingent on historical consensus; the erasure of their rights reflects a broader history of exclusionary Burmese nationalism that prioritises ethnic homogeneity over pluralism.³ Regardless of their precise historical origins, the Rohingya’s claim to citizenship and belonging is undeniable, and something no historical ambiguity can challenge. Yet, it is this very disputed past which underpins their current exclusion from society.

The alienation of the Rohingya is inextricably bound with the conflation of nationalism and religious identity in Myanmar. Colonial-era British policies labelled them as “Indian Muslims,” and these were later appropriated by Burmese nationalists to justify their characterisation as foreign interlopers – a narrative that gained traction following Myanmar’s independence in 1948 and has intensified under the military junta’s policies since 1962 (Bhattacharya & Biswas, 2021).

² The US and others reject the name change to Myanmar as illegitimate due to lack of public consent, while the military argues “Burma” is not inclusive of the country’s other 134 ethnic groups. Both terms, however, have historically coexisted – “Burma” for speech and “Myanmar” for formal writing (Selth & Gallagher, 2018). See Selth, A., & Gallagher, M. (2018). *What’s in a name: Burma or Myanmar?* United States Institute of Peace, for further discussion.

³ For further contextual discussion on Myanmar’s ethnic homogeneity and administrative history that led to such systemic exclusion of ethnic minority groups, such as the Rohingya, from the national framework see: International IDEA. (n.d.). *Deciphering Myanmar’s ethnic landscape*, pg. 21-49.

In the post-independence period, the Burmese nationalist project sought to construct a homogenous national identity centred on the Buddhist majority, systematically excluding minority groups like the Rohingya, who were not only deemed “foreign” but also cast as “existential threats” to the nation’s cohesion, thereby rationalising their marginalisation as a people “worthy of expulsion” (Alam, 2019). Communal violence during World War II, particularly the 1942 massacres between the Rohingya and Buddhist Arakanese, exacerbated ethnic polarisation, which was subsequently institutionalised by the military regime following the 1962 military coup (Leider 2017; Alam, 2019). The population policies of General Ne Win’s nationalist regime – notably the 1973 and 1983 censuses – codified the Rohingya’s erasure by excluding them from newly declared 135 “official” ethnic groups, deliberately situating them outside the bounds of national belonging (Alam, 2019).

The 1982 Citizenship Law proved to be a watershed moment in the Rohingya’s descent into statelessness as it formally institutionalised their exclusion and deprived them of fundamental rights, including access to education, healthcare services, legal employment, marriage, and participation in political processes (Ahsan Ullah, 2016). By dividing citizenship into rigidly hierarchical categories – the full, associated, and naturalised – the law effectively excluded the Rohingya from all three by labelling them “resident foreigners” (Ahsan Ullah, 2016). Subsequent policies, such as the introduction of colour-coded identity cards in 1989, visually reinforced their outsider status and left the Rohingya without legal recourse to lay claim to their rights (Ansar, 2020). Even the issuance of temporary ‘white cards’, following international pressure, offered no genuine remedy, functioning instead as hollow tokens of recognition – labels of provisional existence devoid of legal security or permanence (Ansar, 2020).

This legal exclusion was accompanied by systematic social and economic marginalisation which permeated every aspect of the Rohingya’s lives. Confined to segregated areas, they were subjected to forced labour, arbitrary arrests, and severe restrictions on mobility (Ahsan Ullah, 2016). These conditions were justified through a narrative shift that reframed colonial-era racialised Indophobia into a broader Islamophobia, perceiving Muslims as a

“foreign and security threat” to Myanmar’s identity. Islamophobia’s supplanting of colonial-era racialised narratives turned the systemic erasure of a vulnerable population into an emotive, not merely administrative, process (Ansar, 2020).

The Rohingya’s persecution has been accentuated by cycles of state-sponsored violence that reflect both opportunistic repression and deliberate state strategy. In 1978, Operation Nagamin marked one of the first large-scale campaigns to expel “illegal immigrants,” displacing tens of thousands of Rohingya to neighbouring Bangladesh. Subsequent events, such as the 2012 Rakhine riots, saw escalating communal violence evolve into systemic campaigns of ethnic cleansing, as documented by Human Rights Watch (Ansar, 2020).

The crisis reached unprecedented levels in 2017, when attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) provoked a disproportionate military response characterised by mass killings, sexual violence, and village burnings (Amnesty International, 2018). These atrocities forced over 742,000 Rohingya – half of whom were children – to flee to Bangladesh, swelling the refugee population to nearly one million and creating the world’s largest refugee camp in Cox’s Bazar (UN Refugees, 2024; Bowden, 2019). Indeed, this exodus is the culmination of decades of unaddressed structural violence, laying bare the international community’s failure to meaningfully intervene.

The human consequences of this protracted crisis are profound. In Cox’s Bazar, refugees face dire conditions, with 95% reliant on international aid for survival, and children suffering from malnutrition and limited access to education (UN Refugees, 2024). Natural disasters, including monsoon-triggered landslides, compound these challenges, further exacerbating already precarious living conditions (Ahmed et al., 2018). Within Myanmar, over 630,000 Rohingya remain stateless, and the broader conflict has displaced 3.4 million people (UNHCR, 2024). Women and children shoulder the burden of these crises as they face heightened risks of exploitation and gender-based violence (UN Refugees, 2024). These issues, coupled with the rising trend of Rohingya undertaking perilous sea journeys from

Bangladesh in 2023 – a form of secondary displacement – reflect the absence of meaningful solutions in the regions of initial refuge (MMC, 2024).

In present-day Myanmar, the distribution of power has departed increasingly from the centralised, military-dominated governance of the past. While the 2008 Constitution still structurally mandates Tatmadaw control – guaranteeing 25% of parliamentary seats and command over key ministries – the military’s monopoly on political authority is being actively dismantled by an expanding and increasingly effective armed resistance (Than, 2016, p. 249; Middleton & Win, 2021, p. 47). Since the 2021 coup, resistance actors such as the People’s Defense Force (PDF) and various ethnic resistance organisations (EROs) have steadily gained ground, “liberating” townships and asserting alternative centres of power (Martin, 2024). These are not merely military gains but rather foundations for new governance. As local SAC officials are displaced, the resistance is constructing its own local governance frameworks in the political vacuum left behind; from the Chinland Council to the Chin People’s Administrative Committee, emergent state structures now challenge the junta’s presence (Martin, 2024). Yet even within the opposition, power is diffused. Competing visions of political legitimacy – some even rejecting the Federal Democracy Charter and the National Unity Government (NUG) – reveal the highly fragmented nature of authority in what has become a fragile landscape of competing visions of sovereignty (Martin, 2024). What emerges is not a clear successor state, but a phase of contested rule, where hybrid governance and zones of limited statehood reflect both opportunity and volatility (South, 2018; Middleton & Win, 2021, p. 48).

Indeed, this deep-seated fragmentation in Myanmar’s political architecture is a product of the 2008 Constitution, which was designed by the military to safeguard its tutelary role in governance, even during nominal democratic transitions (Pedersen, 2018; Middleton & Win, 2021, p. 47). The political opening was not a genuine move toward democracy but rather an “imposed transition” aimed at entrenching military authority under a reformist façade (Stokke & Aung, 2019). In this context, the persecution of the Rohingya can be understood as a politically expedient strategy. Faced with growing domestic dissatisfaction and economic

collapse, the state – under both the military and the NLD – found in the Rohingya a convenient scapegoat (International Crisis Group, 2021). The securitisation of the Rohingya as existential threats to national identity and border integrity allowed the regime to consolidate domestic support through fear and nationalism (Passeri, 2021, p. 227). As Bi (2018) argues, ethnic violence surged during the democratic transition because the Tatmadaw needed such conflict to remain politically relevant, while civilian leaders like Aung San Suu Kyi – wary of estranging a nationalist electorate – tacitly complied. The result was a convergence of domestic political interests – authoritarian and electoral – around the systematic persecution of a stateless people. In this light, the Rohingya crisis cannot be understood in isolation; it is both a symptom and consequence of Myanmar's fractured political order and the enduring logic of militarised ethno-nationalism.

Thus far, the international response to the Rohingya's plight has largely been defined by humanitarian assistance, political condemnation, and diplomatic stasis. Major regional powers, particularly China and India, have played a predominant role in complicating efforts to hold Myanmar accountable. China has repeatedly blocked resolutions in the United Nations Security Council, using its veto power to obstruct international attempts to address the ongoing violations against the Rohingya, thereby protecting its strategic ties with Myanmar (Ismail & Dolan-Evans, 2017). Meanwhile, India has strengthened its military relationship with Myanmar to counter China's rise, and has announced plans to deport tens of thousands of Rohingya refugees from its own territory (Ismail & Dolan-Evans, 2017). Even Bangladesh – having long been a place of refuge for the Rohingya – has recently begun pushing refugees back into Myanmar, violating the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits the return of individuals to places where they would face persecution (Wade, 2017).

Furthermore, the international community has largely deferred diplomatic responsibility to ASEAN, a Southeast Asian regional body ultimately constrained by internal divisions and its foundational commitment to non-interference (Epstein, 2024). Although ASEAN attempted to take a leading role after Myanmar's 2021 coup, the implementation of its five-point consensus faltered almost immediately amid a lack of cooperation from the junta, and even

symbolic measures such as excluding junta leader Min Aung Hlaing from key summits have failed to produce substantive change (International Crisis Group, 2021, p. 2). Engagement from broader international groupings such as the G7, the Quad, and the UN Security Council has noticeably declined. While these bodies have expressed rhetorical support, they have provided minimal concrete assistance to ASEAN or to broader accountability efforts, with many governments deprioritising the crisis due to its perceived limited strategic relevance to their national interests (International Crisis Group, 2021, p. 12-14). Meanwhile, proposals to strengthen internal resistance to the regime remain unfeasible without serious external investment. As Walker (2024) notes, any effort to dislodge the junta would require substantial international funding, training, and military support – assistance that is unlikely to materialise, particularly given regional actors like Thailand and India are actively increasing engagement with Myanmar’s military leadership. Simultaneously, with Myanmar’s gradual descent into state failure, civil society groups and aid organisations face a complex dilemma: how to deliver large-scale assistance without inadvertently legitimising the military regime or endangering recipients to harm (International Crisis Group, 2021, p. 2, 15).

Despite these setbacks, the international community has not been entirely passive. There have been condemnations made by the United States, Canada, and Norway, alongside humanitarian organisations such as Human Rights Watch, the Arakan Project, and Amnesty International, calling for accountability and greater support for Rohingya refugees, especially in Bangladesh (Ismail & Dolan-Evans, 2017; Albert & Maizland, 2020). However, their impact remains constrained by deeply entrenched political and social biases within Myanmar. As noted by journalist Francis Wade (2017), until Myanmar confronts its “culture of pervasive prejudice” and treats the Rohingya as equals, any progress in resolving the crisis will be limited. Thus, given the reluctance of Myanmar’s government, there is a need for the international community to find sustainable solutions to address both immediate humanitarian needs and the structural causes of the Rohingya’s persecution. Without legal recognition, protection, and a safe path to citizenship, the Rohingya risk remaining a forgotten people.

3. Rationale and Research Question

As the Rohingya face the unimaginably harsh realities of statelessness and systemic persecution, the world is reminded of how easily entire populations can be rendered invisible when their rights are seen as inconvenient for those in power. While the international response has largely focused on immediate humanitarian relief – a vital endeavour – this approach has not and cannot address the underlying structural issues that perpetuate the Rohingya’s disenfranchisement. This article explores whether transnational solidarity – conceived as encompassing far more than humanitarian relief – can serve as a truly transformative force that redefines the parameters of citizenship and justice for the Rohingya. Thus arises the critical question: can transnational solidarity, if reconceptualised, advance not only the alleviation of suffering but a systemic shift that might reframe the very notion of belonging, citizenship, and rights for the Rohingya? Can it become a solution, not merely a response, to suffering?

To unpack these questions, two contrasting theoretical frameworks will be applied to the case of the Rohingya: constructivism and postcolonialism. Subsequently, two key mechanisms of transnational solidarity – humanitarian aid and digital advocacy – will be critically evaluated through the lenses of the two aforementioned theories.

4. Constructivism

The theory of constructivism helps analyse the nexus between identity, belonging, and systemic exclusion faced by the Rohingya, while also opening possibilities for reconceptualising transnational solidarity for structural change. As a theory which prioritises ideational factors in international relations, constructivism appears particularly relevant to analyses of the Rohingya, whose plight can largely be attributed to issues of identity. Alexander Wendt’s assertion that “people act toward objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them” (1992, p. 396) emphasises the centrality of constructed meanings and identities in shaping state behaviour and societal interactions. These constructed meanings are particularly salient in the context of Myanmar’s official state

narrative, which categorises the Rohingya as “Bengali illegal immigrants” rather than as a legitimate ethnic group (Ansar, 2020, p. 441; Milton et al., 2017, p. 2). Such constructed labels are not only descriptive, but also function as a means of exclusion, thereby legitimising systemic human rights violations.

Constructivist approaches emphasise the “meanings in terms of which action is organised arising out of interaction” (Wendt, 1992, p. 403), highlighting the potential for identity to evolve through sustained engagement. The Rohingya crisis therefore, although a profound humanitarian emergency, also presents an opportunity to challenge and transform the constructed meanings which uphold and fuel the ongoing persecution. Indeed, identity is central to understanding state and non-state actors’ preferences and behaviours (Collins, 2013, p. 74), suggesting that the international community can play a role in reconstructing narratives of belonging for stateless populations. Transnational solidarity networks – comprised of NGOs, legal actors, international organisations, humanitarian actors, and more recently the digital space – have the capacity to intervene in these social constructions, challenging exclusionary state narratives through strategic norm creation. By depicting and defining the Rohingya’s experiences as a violation of universal human rights rather than as a domestic issue reliant on solely regional support, these networks can rouse global attention and galvanise states into forms of meaningful action.

Transnational solidarity, if reconceptualised within a constructivist framework, has the potential to limit, if not altogether cease, state-centric systems of exclusion for the Rohingya. Wendt emphasises how states operate within a system that reproduces both identities and structural norms, which can result in the transformative potential of sustained resistance within these structures (1999, p. 10-11). Efforts by transnational networks to advocate for the Rohingya exemplify this resistance through their leveraging of international mechanisms, representing efforts to collectively engage in the “strategic social construction” of new norms (Baylis et al., 2023, p. 199). When human rights organisations challenge the Burmese government through mechanisms like international legal petitions, they do not simply aim to

address and alleviate suffering – they also contest the very legitimacy of exclusionary state practices.

The legal category of “refugee” is itself a historical construct that has been altered over time to reflect shifting political and moral imperatives (Baylis et al., 2023, p. 200). The conflation of ‘refugee’ and ‘migrant’ in contemporary media discourse misrepresents the distinct legal status of refugees, thereby undermining their access to asylum, restricting protections, and releasing states from their responsibility to ensure refugees’ safety (Mantoo, 2023). Today, the Rohingya crisis presents a chance to expand the moral and legal imagination of the international community, challenging the artificial boundaries that exist between the labels ‘refugee’, ‘migrant’, and ‘stateless person’. The potential for such a structural shift lies in constructivism’s principle that “identities can change” (Baylis et al., 2023, p. 198). Through sustained interaction, transnational solidarity efforts can construct a counter-narrative that frames the Rohingya not as passive victims of forced displacement but as active agents of resistance, deserving of recognition and fundamental rights. This shift thus necessitates that the international community move beyond its fixation on temporary relief measures and instead embrace a truly transformative agenda. In this context, constructivism offers a lens that not only exposes the structural impediments to transformative change but also provides a theoretical framework for reimagining and reconstructing the normative and institutional structures that perpetuate exclusion of the Rohingya – not to mention other stateless, forcibly displaced, marginalised peoples – creating room for the possibility of achieving systemic justice.

5. Postcolonial Theory

When analysing the marginalisation of the Rohingya and the enduring legacies of colonialism, postcolonial theory provides a critical lens for understanding how historical systems of power continue to shape contemporary injustices. It is through a postcolonial lens that the voices and lived experiences of the Rohingya become central to dismantling colonial narratives; the theory’s focus is on the ways colonialism has reconfigured societies,

embedding its influence into modern power structures, political economies, and identities (Chennells, 1999, p. 110). Parshar and Schulz (2021, p. 869) argue modernity has “piggybacked on the colonial enterprise of ‘the civilising mission’,” shaping discourses of progress and development that often marginalise indigenous perspectives. A postcolonial lens thus demands moving beyond superficial humanitarian responses to address the root causes of the Rohingya’s plight, acknowledging how colonial histories shape contemporary injustices.

The marginalisation of the Rohingya epitomises the enduring legacies of both colonialism and the racialised hierarchies it institutionalised. British colonial rule did more than establish a bureaucratic system; it imposed rigid ethnic and religious categories that continue to influence Myanmar’s socio-political order (Clarke et al., 2019, p. 18). These classifications, embedded in 19th-century European assumptions about identity, helped construct ethnic boundaries with fixed qualities linked to specific “races” and territories (Clarke et al, 2019, p. 18; Ferguson, 2015, p. 5). Constructivist understandings of ethnicity emphasise that such identities are socially constructed, with boundaries shaped by human interaction rather than naturally existing traits (Burke, 2016, p. 261). Yet, colonial categorisations continue to shape Myanmar’s political and social landscape, where post-independence rulers adapted these classifications to exclude communities like the Rohingya from the Burmese state, thereby preserving the former’s visions of national identity (Burke, 2016, p. 262). Consequently, such colonial legacies inform contemporary narratives of “insiders” and “outsiders” in Myanmar, where ethnic identity is central to subnational politics, conflating ethnicity with territorial and racial purity (Clarke et al., 2019, p. 38).

In this context, a decolonial approach to transnational solidarity is imperative. Such an approach requires reimagining solidarity not simply as a form of humanitarian aid, but as a mechanism for systemic transformations that address the underlying structures of colonial power. Humanitarian aid has historically been instrumentalised to sustain colonialism, warmongering, and economic exploitation, revealing the need for a shift beyond Eurocentric frameworks (Aloudat and Khan, 2022, p. 3). Decolonisation involves rejecting the

paternalistic “white saviour” narrative that often dominates humanitarian responses, instead advocating for frameworks – like justice and citizenship – that dismantle racialised hierarchies embedded in state practices (Aloudat and Khan 2022: 1).

However, Myanmar’s contemporary authoritarian structure reveals a key shortcoming to postcolonialism: the theory’s limited capacity to account for how present-day regime incentives and elite strategies independently drive exclusion and repression. While the legacy of colonial state formation and ethnic categorisation remains vital (Clarke et al., 2019; Burke, 2016), the current patterns of violence – notably against the Rohingya – are perhaps better understood through the lens of elite incentive structures and institutional power dynamics. In this sense, selectorate theory offers a useful corrective. As Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003, p. 23) argue, leaders remain in power by choosing between two core strategies: they can offer broad-based public goods to the population at large, or allocate private goods to a narrow group of supporters. The latter strategy is far more attractive in systems governed by small winning coalitions, where loyalty, not popularity, determines political survival

Myanmar’s military junta exemplifies this logic. Protected from electoral accountability and backed by a limited coalition composed of military elites and business cronies, the regime has little incentive to invest in minority rights, legal protections, or equitable access to services. It instead allocates “excludable and rival” private goods, including land rights and military patronage, in ways that reward loyalty and suppress dissent (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003, p. 29). This logic is starkly conveyed in the systematic repression of the Rohingya, who are denied access to such public goods. As Beiser-MacGrath and Metternich (2021, p. 151-153) illustrate, personalist autocrats often exclude large ethnic groups from ruling coalitions to avoid empowering potential challengers; in Myanmar, the Rohingya’s demographic concentration in the Rakhine State makes them especially threatening to the military’s monopoly on power. This logic is entrenched by Myanmar’s hybrid institutional architecture: the 2008 Constitution enshrined military prerogatives, including veto powers and control over key ministries, creating a façade of democratisation while safeguarding elite dominance (Stokke & Aung, 2019, p. 3; cited in Middleton & Win, 2021, p. 47).

Selectorate theory thus complements postcolonial critiques by revealing not only why ethnic exclusion persists, but how it is institutionally sustained through rational calculations made by elites, which are ultimately aimed at survival, centralisation, and the avoidance of internal threats (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003, p. 23). Yet postcolonial analysis remains indispensable in comprehending the deeper historical and global power structures that underpin such exclusion. Indeed, the Rohingya crisis is not only a consequence of domestic authoritarian logics, but also of international systems of power that have long prioritised geopolitical interests over justice for marginalised communities. The entanglement of humanitarianism with colonialism conveys the need to rethink aid systems that, far from resolving crises, can perpetuate them (Aloudat and Khan, 2022, p. 1). Moving beyond Eurocentric paradigms, a decolonial approach advocates for dismantling entrenched hierarchies and amplifying subaltern voices, transitioning humanitarian efforts from “willing complicity to active solidarity” (Aloudat and Khan, 2022, p. 3). In this light, selectorate theory provides a critical lens for understanding how exclusion operates, but postcolonial critique is essential for understanding why it endures, and how it might ultimately be undone. Only then, when the colonial roots of modern power structures are addressed, can international aid responses evolve into mechanisms for justice and meaningful systemic change.

6. The Shortcomings of Humanitarian Aid

Humanitarian access in Myanmar is profoundly constrained by a militarised state apparatus, systemic mistrust and restrictive operating conditions for local NGOs. For civil actors, this means having to confront a complex and often perilous regulatory landscape where permission to operate is conditional, informal, and liable to be revoked at any time. And even with authoritarian tendencies from high-level authorities, local officials frequently obstruct field activities due to fear or suspicion, necessitating relationship-building across multiple layers of governance (Desaine, 2011, p. 63). Unregistered organisations in Myanmar face constant risks of arbitrary shutdowns or surveillance, while limited access to national decision-makers – especially within the military – combined with the Army’s Bamar-centric

dominance over political and humanitarian spheres, systemically marginalises NGOs that fall outside dominant ideological frameworks (Desaine, 2011, p. 82).

These domestic constraints foster a climate of fear and compliance, which is compounded by fraught relationships with international humanitarian actors, who are often seen by local organisations as untrustworthy, self-interested, and overly focused on bureaucratic compliance (Wells and Mung, 2024). Moreover, local leaders criticise externally-driven “capacity building” as little more than a tool for donor risk mitigation – what they describe as teaching the “capacity to comply,” rather than empowering local initiatives (Wells and Mung, 2024). A harmful dynamic in which Myanmar-based organisations are treated as subcontractors rather than partners is thus created, despite the personal risks they face on the ground. Meanwhile, regional responses have been slow and structurally limited. For example, ASEAN’s AHA Centre lacks both the mandate and experience to operate effectively in conflict zones, and its reliance on the Myanmar Red Cross – an organisation perceived to be aligned with the junta – raises concerns about tacit legitimisations of military rule (Centre for Strategic and International Studies, p. 20). Although some regional actors and Western governments have expressed willingness to work with alternative stakeholders – including the NUG and ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), there remains no unified or politically robust mechanism to ensure coordinated humanitarian access into Myanmar (Centre for Strategic and International Studies, p. 21).

Ultimately, these power dynamics expose the chronic inadequacies of the global humanitarian system, which has repeatedly fallen short in addressing the statelessness and exclusion of the Rohingya in Myanmar and Bangladesh. While the humanitarian sector has mobilised significant resources, systemic issues – including insufficient funding, exclusionary practices, and the perpetuation of colonial legacies – have limited its effectiveness as a mechanism of transnational solidarity.

The scale of humanitarian need in Myanmar is staggering, with one-third of the population – 18.6 million people – requiring assistance in 2024, marking a sharp rise from one million

before the military takeover in 2021 (European Commission, 2024). Despite aid reaching 3.2 million people in 2023 and 950,000 in early 2024, efforts remain largely underfunded, with the 2024 Myanmar Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan only attaining 12% of its required funding by mid-year (UNOCHA, 2024). This persistent underfunding forces aid agencies to make “impossible choices about cuts to planned assistance” (UNOCHA, 2024), placing millions at greater risk. Such inadequacies are magnified in the case of the Rohingya, where donor fatigue has resulted in severe ration cuts, with food assistance dropping to just 27 cents per day in 2023, exacerbating malnutrition and stunted growth in refugee camps (Tinmaung, 2024; Li, 2023). This lack of funding thus highlights a systemic failure to meet the Rohingya’s needs, even as global attention remains fixated on such short-term responses.

The exclusion of the Rohingya from meaningful participation in humanitarian aid efforts further illustrates the failure of the humanitarian system to address their broader sociopolitical marginalisation. Lough et al. (2022, p. 8) argue that the historical erasure of the Rohingya’s identity, language, and rights has undermined the inclusivity of aid initiatives, rendering standard accountability measures ineffective. Moreover, communication barriers, including the use of unfamiliar languages and literacy-dependent feedback systems, alienate the Rohingya from decision-making processes, thereby exacerbating their exclusion from the aid process (Lough et al. 2022: 51). As such, these exclusionary practices are symptomatic of a humanitarian system that has failed to dismantle the very inequalities it seeks to address.

The principle of “do no harm” further illustrates the complexities of aid delivery. While the principle is well-intentioned in its aim to avoid further harming vulnerable populations, humanitarian aid in practice often inadvertently worsens intergroup tensions and conflict (Anderson 1999: 69). The Rohingya’s dependency on external assistance – particularly from the World Food Programme – exposes them to additional vulnerabilities, including access restrictions during natural disasters and political upheavals (Ahmad et al., 2020, p. 5155). When compounded with the general diversion of global funding to crises in the Global North such as the Ukraine conflict, humanitarian responses in the Global South remain critically underfunded and this fragility is only deepened (IIRR, 2023).

A constructivist examination of the role of shared norms, identities, and perceptions in shaping humanitarian action suggests that humanitarian actors could foster a “principled issue network” driven by shared values rather than material concerns (Keck and Sikkink, 1998, p. 2). However, the persistent exclusion of the Rohingya themselves from aid initiatives reveals that these norms remain underdeveloped in practice. The “saviour” and “recipient” roles often perpetuated through humanitarian aid arguably align with constructivism’s focus on identity and perception; these roles are socially constructed through repeated interactions and institutional practices (Büthe et al., 2012, p. 575).

Contrastingly, postcolonialism critiques these identities through a racialised and historical – not normative – lens, revealing how humanitarian aid’s entanglement with colonial legacies and power hierarchies further compounds these issues. For example, Belloni (2007, p. 454) argues that humanitarianism does not arise from a transnational morality but instead perpetuates the unequal power dynamics between the West and less developed nations, with Western states harnessing humanitarianism to further their own interests rather than addressing the needs of those they purport to help. This critique is especially relevant to aid structures that have continued the narrative of victimhood over empowerment for the Rohingya.

Moreover, some postcolonial scholars emphasise the complicity of humanitarian aid in unintentionally prolonging disasters (Aloudat and Khan, 2022, p. 1), while others critique the appropriation of “humanitarian” principles by actors whose agendas often conflict with the core values of aid, including “neutrality, impartiality, and independence” (Ferris, 2011, p. 16). This dynamic is particularly evident in Cox’s Bazar, where aid distribution frequently reinforces existing hierarchies, sidelining local voices and reducing the Rohingya to passive recipients of assistance (Lough et al., 2022, p. 44). For example, Daigle (2022; cited in Lough et al., 2022, p. 44) notes that the dominance of white, European, or North American men in leadership roles in humanitarian missions often leads to the prioritisation of life-saving concerns over gender issues – a dynamic which not only results in marginalisation on

gendered lines, but moreover perpetuates the process of ‘othering’⁴ the recipients of aid (Daigle, 2022; cited in Lough et al., 2022: 44). Whilst diversity in the staffing of humanitarian responses is important, research has suggested it is not enough if local actors have little power to influence decisions, with inclusion being counterproductive if they are only reduced to “tokenised roles” or expected to single-handedly transform organisations (Lough et al., 2022, p. 44). As a result, such practices further perpetuate a “state of being of vulnerability,” which depoliticises the Rohingya’s plight and undermines their agency (Clark, 2007; Miller et al., 2010; Turner, 2019; Sözer, 2019; cited in Lough et al., 2022, p. 15).

Indeed, another critical flaw in current humanitarian responses is that of a tendency for “inclusion” to emerge as a late priority, often after “bad habits or flawed assumptions from the early days of response get locked in and are hard to change” (Lough et al., 2022, p. 8). Consequently, a prioritisation of immediate needs arises often without critically examining the historical and systemic exclusions that have contributed to the crisis. It thus becomes clear that the limitations of current humanitarian efforts cannot be overcome without a significant shift in how the Rohingya’s plight is understood and addressed. As such, there is arguably an opportunity for constructivist and postcolonial frameworks to work in tandem. Constructivism stresses the importance of rethinking roles and relationships between those who receive and provide humanitarian assistance – an invaluable contribution – but is ultimately unable to address the historical structures which gave rise to and sustain these identities. Postcolonialism’s emphasis on the inertia of empire arguably provides the necessary critique of the power dynamics that persist behind seemingly neutral or altruistic acts of aid. Given the evident ongoing legacies of colonialism and the persistent power imbalances that continue to affect the Rohingya, a more historically conscious and informed approach to humanitarian aid is essential. Constructivist conceptions of the centrality of identity to the plight of the Rohingya must be accompanied by postcolonial critiques of the legacies which underpin the crisis. It is this fusion which is perhaps best suited to meaningfully challenging the domestic incentives and frameworks which make repressing the Rohingya a politically attractive strategy. Without such a shift, the humanitarian response will

⁴ ‘Othering’ refers to the process where “staff begin to treat marginalised groups as caricatures based on flawed and simplistic assumptions around their behaviour or capacities” (Lough et al., 2022: 44).

continue to perpetuate a cycle of exclusion and dependency, further entrenching the Rohingya's disempowerment rather than alleviating it.

7. The Role of Digital Advocacy and NGOs

Digital platforms offer new possibilities for advocacy. However, prevailing power dynamics in both Myanmar and other countries like Bangladesh often determine who can participate in these digital spheres, and on what terms. In Myanmar, the military's systemic repression of online spaces, through internet shutdowns, surveillance, and the criminalisation of VPN use, severely restricts the flow of information and marginalises civil society organisations (Human Rights Myanmar, 2025). Although there was an initial opening of media freedoms under the USDP, this stalled under the NLD and has regressed sharply since the 2021 coup (Khine, 2020; Crispin, 2019; cited in Middleton & Win, 2021, p. 54). Meanwhile, the digital sphere has been manipulated through disinformation campaigns, the militarisation of platforms like TikTok, and inadequate content moderation, particularly in Burmese and minority languages (International Crisis Group, 2021, p. 30). These dynamics constrain the operational capacity of NGOs, while simultaneously distorting democratic discourse and silencing refugee voices, revealing the critical link between digital access and political agency.

Nonetheless, digital platforms and NGOs have exhibited a capacity to emerge as critical arenas for advocacy and refugee self-representation during the Rohingya crisis. For many Rohingya refugees, access to the internet is linked with their sense of identity and visibility; as one refugee participant in Sonia's (2023, p. 1) study noted, "Without the internet, we have no existence." Yet, this essential connection to the rest of the world's media coverage was denied to refugees in Cox's Bazar until August 2020 – three years after their displacement – leaving the camp residents isolated from global news and critical updates, further marginalising an already vulnerable population (Chowdhury and Barua, 2020). Internet access was only granted after significant international pressure, suggesting the need for global support to push forward local policies that enable the Rohingya to gain greater access to advocacy tools.

Social media platforms, notably Facebook, have demonstrated both their destructive and constructive potential throughout the crisis. As to the former, in 2017, the Burmese military and Buddhist nationalists weaponised Facebook to spread anti-Rohingya hate, with over 1,000 posts inciting violence. Additionally, Facebook systematically removed pro-Rohingya content and disabled activist accounts, silencing voices of resistance. This damaging role of social media reflects what Morozov (2012) termed the “dark side” of the internet, where technology appears to be a medium for advocacy but ends up propagating genocidal rhetoric (Aziz, 2024, p. 5221).

At the same time however, Rohingya advocacy networks, NGOs, and the Rohingya themselves have increasingly utilised digital platforms to amplify their voices and mobilise transnational support. Organisations such as the Free Rohingya Coalition, European Rohingya Council, and Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights have used Facebook, Twitter/X, and YouTube to share updates from camps, document human rights abuses, and push for legal action, including bringing the “Rohingya Genocide Case” to the International Court of Justice (Aziz, 2024, p. 5227-5228). As such, these networks demonstrate how diasporic communities leverage digital tools to resist oppressive narratives set by the Burmese national government and military junta, build solidarity, and assert their identities in transnational spaces (Cottle and Lester, 2011; Khazraee and Novak, 2018; cited in Aziz, 2024, 5223).

Indeed, the emergence of social media has transformed the nature of advocacy and communication, enabling horizontal networks that connect local and global audiences in real time. As Castells (2007, p. 249) argues, technology is not merely a tool but a medium that facilitates the autonomy of social movements, allowing them to confront institutional power on their own terms. This transformation is exemplified by an increase in citizen-generated content, such as demonstrations by Buddhist monks in Myanmar in 2007, which bypassed traditional gatekeeping mechanisms and allowed global audiences to witness spectacles of violence that mainstream media might have otherwise ignored (Gillmor, 2004; Cooper, 2007; Chouliaraki, 2008, p. 330-331). Similarly, platforms like Twitter/X have amplified such

grassroot efforts, as seen through viral hashtags like #Pray_For_Rohingya, which generated 1.2 million tweets in August 2017 alone, drawing international attention to the Rohingya's plight (Elsayed, 2020, p. 29). The increasing salience of user-generated content has thus redefined how crises are communicated, democratising the flow of information while challenging traditional media hierarchies.

As a result, this advent of social media has generally enabled the Rohingya to reclaim certain narratives, providing platforms for self-representation and challenging the dominant subject-object dynamic inherent within traditional humanitarian systems (Sonia, 2023, p. 18-19). In response, NGOs and humanitarian organisations are increasingly recognising the presence and role of connectivity in refugee empowerment. The UHCR has thus advocated for universal internet access by 2030 for all refugees and internally displaced populations, emphasising its importance in simultaneously achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and improving the lives of displaced populations worldwide (UNHCR, 2018; UN News, 2017; Sonia, 2023, p. 5).

Through a constructivist lens, the solidarity generated through digital advocacy challenges traditional norms of sovereignty by emphasising human-centric, rather than state-centric, forms of identity. This shift is exemplified by increasing international support for the Rohingya as digital platforms have mobilised global audiences to pressure states and institutions to act on moral and humanitarian grounds. As such, it can be argued that the advent of digital mobilisation for the Rohingya is pushing for an inclusive norm of citizenship that counters the exclusionary practices rendering the Rohingya stateless. For example, the international social media mobilisation following the Burmese military's 2017 violence against the Rohingya demonstrated the power of digital activism in condemning human rights violations and creating a "space of visibility" for the once-voiceless Rohingya to raise their voices and catalyse the international community into advocating for legal recognition of their rights (Aziz, 2024, p. 5227-5230). Indeed, The Gambia's 2019 case against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the U.S. declaration of genocide not only garnered substantial online engagement and support, but also provided

legal recognition to the Rohingya (Aziz 2024: 5230). However, despite its ability to create ‘spaces’ to amplify voices – whether those of the Rohingya or their advocates – and influence global discourse, social media’s impact is fundamentally constrained by the military junta’s resistance to international pressures and the slow pace of international legal processes. Furthermore, the fact that the UN Security Council has thus far failed to enforce the ICJ’s decision in favour of the plaintiffs – due to the veto power of states like China – reveals how social media activism struggles to translate into concrete action when faced with powerful states who hold opposing interests (Ibrahim, 2020). Consequently, this lack of enforcement risks eroding the authority of international law (Ibrahim, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2022), illustrating how digital spaces, while impactful in public discourse, ultimately cannot challenge entrenched geopolitical power and compel meaningful legal or political action.

Despite these limitations, international sanctions remain an important avenue through which digital advocacy can reinforce material accountability, particularly when used to pressure states and institutions into acting against perpetrators of repression. While digital mobilisation alone may not dismantle entrenched geopolitical structures, it can amplify calls for justice, increase visibility, and generate the political will necessary for sanctions to be imposed and strengthened. Sanctions – especially when linked to transnational advocacy campaigns – serve both instrumental and expressive functions; even if they rarely succeed in altering state behaviour on their own, they indicate global condemnation and restrict the material and political resources available to violators (Asia Justice Coalition, 2021). Despite being limited in impact, multilateral sanctions also send a stronger collective message and reinforce diplomatic isolation (Asia Justice Coalition, 2021). It should thus be considered that sanction-implementing states have actionable tools at their disposal, including treating violations as strict liability offences and prosecuting actors who had “reasonable cause to suspect” wrongdoing (Asia Justice Coalition, 2021). However, the effectiveness of sanctions is highly contingent on regional coordination whereby proper enforcement requires ongoing political will – often best supported through online activism – as it raises awareness and moral urgency.

Moreover, the digital landscape has exposed critical power dynamics in refugee representation, which can be examined through a postcolonial lens. Mainstream media and humanitarian agencies often portray refugees either as victims deserving of sympathy, or as threats to host communities, perpetuating an “us vs. them” dichotomy (Chatterjee, 2016; d’Haenens et al., 2019; Yeung and Lennette, 2018; Sonia, 2023, p. 2, 23). Not only does this dehumanise refugees, but it also reinforces their dependency on external actors – an inescapable fact, but one which need not be framed in discourses that contribute to marginalisation. As Belloni (2007, p. 455-456) warns, humanitarianism and media often exploit victims for shock value, simplifying complex crises to evoke sympathy while leaving systemic issues unaddressed. It can be argued that ‘compassion fatigue’ – driven by the media’s tendency to shift focus once a crisis has reached a saturation point – contributes to the dehumanisation and simplification of the Rohingya’s plight, often through the use of well-worn stereotypes (Moeller, 1999, p. 2, 43). The framing of their suffering within familiar tropes – such as that of helpless victims fleeing from brutal oppressors – perpetuates a cycle in which international attention wanes as soon as the crisis narrative becomes ‘exhausted’, despite the ongoing grief of those in strife. Consequently, the urgency and incentives for long-term political solutions are diminished, while the portrayal of suffering by distant ‘others’ reinforces unequal power relations between the West and the ‘rest’, where the “poor South” is consistently portrayed as a passive recipient of aid in the eyes of Western audiences (Moeller, 1999; Tester, 2001; Chouliaraki, 2008, p. 329-330).

Taken in isolation, constructivist approaches risk reducing the complexity of the Rohingya’s plight to a battle over ideas and norms. While it emphasises the transformative power of advancing global narratives, it fundamentally overlooks a critical question: *whose* narratives are being reshaped, and moreover *why*? This oversight arguably cannot be challenged without the incorporation of postcolonial theory, as it requires confronting the mechanisms of power that determine whose voices are elevated and whose are silenced. It insists that the oppression of the Rohingya is not simply a matter of changing perceptions, but rather one of confronting the entrenched structures of violence and power that continue to subjugate the population. These structures are not abstract norms or ideals; they are legacies of colonialism

that persistently have and continue to systemically deny the Rohingya of their humanity and rights.

Yet, the two theories need not be in opposition; on the contrary, they can complement each other. While constructivism conveys the potential for mobilising transnational solidarity to challenge state-centric norms, postcolonialism ensures this is not superficial, but rather engages with the systemic and structural causes of the Rohingya's marginalisation. When combined, they call for a two-pronged approach: a global effort to shift norms toward inclusivity and solidarity, alongside an uncompromising critique of the historical and contemporary power imbalances that underpin the oppression of the Rohingya. As Manuel Castells (2007, p. 246) argues, the digital age's transformative potential lies in its ability to facilitate decentralised networks that empower social movements to confront institutional power on their own terms.

For the Rohingya, this means ensuring digital spaces do not become forums for external actors to promote self-interested agendas under the veneer of solidarity, but instead become a platform for the Rohingya to reclaim their own stories and assert their dignity – a genuine expression of their humanity and rightful place in the world. As such, it is only by incorporating both the power of narrative and critique of power itself that a truly just and inclusive solution for the Rohingya can be envisioned – one which not only changes the way the world sees them, but also transforms the conditions that have historically marginalised them.

8. Concluding Discussion

The ongoing experience of statelessness and systemic persecution faced by the Rohingya reveals the vulnerability of populations whose rights are overlooked and disregarded by those in positions of power. Despite the ongoing global focus on humanitarian relief efforts – an undeniably necessary approach – this response has proven insufficient in addressing the underlying structural issues that perpetuate the Rohingya's marginalisation. This article has

examined the need for a shift in transnational solidarity to be reconceptualised as more than a short-term solution, and to instead act as a transformative force in reshaping the very foundations of citizenship, justice, and belonging for the Rohingya. By exploring the limitations and potential of current advocacy efforts, the critical question addressed has been directed towards whether transnational solidarity can achieve more than merely temporarily alleviating the suffering and discrimination faced by the Rohingya.

As discussed, the Rohingya crisis conveys the profound inadequacies of the global humanitarian system, which, despite mobilising significant resources and aid, has repeatedly failed to address the root causes of the Rohingya's plight. The systemic failures of aid are evident in the severe underfunding of immediate relief efforts like food aid by organisations like the World Food Programme, leaving millions of people without essential support. Compounded by the endurance of colonial legacies in these aid efforts, the marginalisation of the Rohingya has only grown more entrenched. As a result, existing aid efforts can only be framed as a stopgap measure, unable to offer sustainable solutions to the underlying issue of Rohingya statelessness.

This article has examined how, through a constructivist lens, identities and perceptions shaped by humanitarian actors and organisations could foster a norm-driven network, rather than one based on material interests. However, the persistence of exclusionary practices – even if unintended by aid organisations and digital advocacy platforms – suggests that such norms remain underdeveloped and fail to address the systemic dynamics at play. Contrastingly, a postcolonial lens provides an alternative perspective on humanitarian aid, characterising it not as a neutral force but rather one which often perpetuates the unequal power relations between the Global North and Global South. The persistence of these power dynamics, portraying the Rohingya as passive recipients of aid, only further reduces their humanity to a state of vulnerability, preventing narratives based on belonging and inclusion from being advanced. As such, the limitations of aid reveal the failure of humanitarianism alone to challenge the power structures perpetuating the Rohingya's societal exclusion. It has accordingly been suggested that adopting constructivist conceptions of identity construction

and reformulation, but crucially alongside postcolonial critiques of exclusionary imperial structures, would enable a more historically conscious and structurally accountable approach to humanitarian efforts.

It is only such an approach – one at the intersection of forms of repression against the Rohingya – which can meaningfully challenge internal political dynamics within Myanmar, which remain predisposed to policies of repression. If anything, Myanmar's oppressive political equilibrium has been bolstered and strengthened both by international inaction and the flaws inherent within existing aid systems. As long as the regime's ethnic power structures and exclusionary visions remain unchallenged, it is likely that no form of support will meaningfully alleviate the Rohingya plight. As such, genuine transnational solidarity requires a more explicit confrontation with the internal political structures that perpetuate the Rohingya's marginalisation.

In this context, transnational solidarity must evolve beyond the current paradigm of humanitarian aid alone. As this article has argued, digital advocacy – although heralded for its potential to challenge exclusionary narratives by providing a 'space of visibility' for the Rohingya – has ultimately had a limited impact. Despite the growing emergence of digital platforms, such as social media and NGO-led initiatives, their capacity to challenge entrenched power structures remains limited. Whilst the very nature of transnational advocacy in the digital space is transforming due to grassroots movements pushing for legal action, the international legal and political responses to enact change remain slow and ineffective. Therefore, it has been argued that in the absence of substantial political will and structural change, digital advocacy risks devolving into a form of symbolic resistance, failing to generate the meaningful change necessary to benefit the Rohingya. Digital forms of resistance must consequently be repurposed in a similar vein to humanitarian aid – transformed into highlighting and addressing the root causes of suffering, not its most visible expressions.

This article has also addressed the potential portrayal of refugees as passive victims or threats to host communities in media coverage through a postcolonial lens. Moreover, it has explored the constructivist perspective of digital mobilisation, which can contribute to the emergence of a new, human-centric norm of citizenship advanced by the Rohingya themselves, rather than by Myanmar's state-centric understanding of belonging. By prioritising the advancement of Rohingya agency, digital mobilisation has the potential to ensure that Rohingya voices are not merely used as tools for mobilising short-term support, but are recognised as broader expressions of the humanity and dignity they deserve.

In conclusion, by reconceptualising the role of transnational solidarity and centring the agency of the Rohingya in humanitarian efforts, the international community can begin to move toward a more inclusive and just understanding of citizenship and belonging – one that recognises the fundamental rights of the Rohingya and challenges the power structures that have long rendered them invisible.

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