

The Rohingya crisis and geopolitical tensions driving the failure of humanitarian governance and legal accountability among refugees in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The Rohingya crisis represents a protracted humanitarian and geopolitical emergency shaped by structural statelessness, constrained international accountability, and evolving forms of humanitarian governance. This study examines how these macro-level dynamics are experienced at the micro level through a qualitative investigation of 100 Rohingya refugees residing in camps in Cox's Bazar District, Bangladesh. Adopting an interpretive research design and a geopsychiatric analytical lens, the study explores the intersection of displacement, identity, governance, and psychosocial well-being. The findings reveal that trauma among Rohingya refugees is not limited to past experiences of violence but is continuously reproduced through conditions of chronic uncertainty, restricted mobility, and indefinite encampment. Humanitarian governance, while essential for survival, has evolved into a system of containment that reinforces dependency and limits agency. Statelessness emerges as a central structural and experiential condition, shaping identity fragmentation, non-belonging, and diminished self-worth. Additionally, gendered vulnerabilities intensify exposure to insecurity and psychological distress, particularly among women living under conditions of constrained mobility and protection gaps. By integrating qualitative evidence with insights from international relations and humanitarian governance, the study demonstrates how geopolitical tensions transform humanitarian response into a substitute for political resolution. The analysis contributes to geopsychiatric scholarship by highlighting how structural conditions of displacement produce sustained mental health impacts. The study argues that durable solutions require a shift from containment-based approaches to rights-oriented strategies that link humanitarian assistance with legal accountability and pathways to citizenship restoration or safe repatriation. Without addressing these structural drivers, the Rohingya crisis will remain a persistent condition of managed displacement and institutional uncertainty.

1. Introduction

The Rohingya crisis constitutes one of the most protracted and structurally complex humanitarian emergencies in the contemporary global order, shaped by the interplay of statelessness, forced displacement, geographical proximity, and constrained international accountability [1]. Since the large-scale military operations in Myanmar in 2017, marking more than eight years of sustained crisis, over one million Rohingya refugees—belonging to a stateless Muslim minority—have fled into Bangladesh. This large-scale displacement has transformed a localized issue of ethnic marginalization into a multidimensional crisis with significant regional and global implications [2]. More broadly, the crisis unfolds within an international landscape marked by intensifying

instability, where 61 active conflicts across 36 countries were recorded in 2025, underscoring the expanding scale and complexity of forced displacement worldwide.

Earlier scholarship predominantly framed the Rohingya crisis through ethnic persecution and refugee protection perspectives. However, more recent studies emphasize its structural foundations, particularly the institutionalized denial of citizenship under [3] Citizenship Law, which rendered the Rohingya stateless [4,5]. In this context, statelessness extends beyond a legal classification and functions as a political mechanism of exclusion that perpetuates marginalization, restricts rights, and legitimizes recurring cycles of violence and displacement (Song, 2025). Consequently, the Rohingya remain positioned outside formal state protection, where vulnerability is continuously

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reproduced through institutional and geopolitical processes [6].

Bangladesh has emerged as the principal destination for Rohingya refugees, driven not only by geographical proximity but also by its broader positioning as a migration-prone and climate-vulnerable country [7]. Situated along the Bay of Bengal and sharing a porous border with Myanmar, Bangladesh provides immediate refuge for those fleeing violence in Rakhine State. The spatial closeness of Cox's Bazar significantly reduces barriers to cross-border movement, making it a critical entry point during periods of crisis. Simultaneously, Bangladesh has a long history of diverse migration flows, including labor migration, internal displacement, and cross-border population movements, which have shaped its socio-economic and political landscape [8,9]. This historical exposure has fostered adaptive mechanisms that facilitate the reception and accommodation of displaced populations, even in the absence of formal integration policies [10].

At the same time, Bangladesh's role as a "migration hub" must be understood in relation to its environmental vulnerability [11]. The country faces recurrent environmental challenges, including riverbank erosion, coastal flooding, salinity intrusion, cyclones, and extreme weather events [12]. These pressures have already generated substantial internal displacement, particularly in coastal regions where livelihoods are increasingly threatened [13,14]. The arrival of a large refugee population into this fragile context intensifies existing environmental stressors. In Cox's Bazar, rapid and unplanned camp expansion has resulted in deforestation, land degradation, and ecological imbalance, thereby increasing susceptibility to landslides and flooding during monsoon seasons [15]. These transformations not only challenge the sustainability of humanitarian interventions but also heighten competition over resources between refugees and host communities [16].

This convergence of forced migration and environmental vulnerability necessitates a geographically grounded understanding of the Rohingya crisis. Cox's Bazar represents a critical spatial setting where displacement, environmental risk, and humanitarian governance intersect. Refugee camps, primarily located in Ukhia and Teknaf, are characterized by high population density, fragile infrastructure, and restricted mobility, shaping both material conditions and psychosocial experiences. In this setting, geography operates as an active determinant rather than a passive backdrop. The camps function as spaces of "geographical containment," where movement is regulated and opportunities are constrained, shaping access to resources, social interaction, and perceptions of agency [17]. The proximity to Myanmar further creates a paradoxical spatial condition, where return remains geographically conceivable yet politically uncertain, reinforcing instability and anticipation among refugees [2,18].

The humanitarian response in Cox's Bazar has been essential in preventing immediate catastrophe but has gradually evolved into a long-term system of containment characterized by dependency, restricted mobility, and limited livelihood opportunities [19]. This transformation reflects a broader shift in which humanitarian assistance becomes a form of governance, managing populations rather than enabling autonomy or integration [15,17]. Such a system generates a structural paradox: while aid sustains life, it simultaneously constrains agency, producing conditions of structured dependency and prolonged vulnerability.

Alongside these structural dynamics, growing research highlights the significant psychosocial impacts of displacement among Rohingya populations. Elevated levels of trauma, anxiety, and depression have been widely documented, reflecting both past violence and ongoing uncertainty [20]. However, existing studies often treat mental health as an isolated outcome, overlooking its embeddedness within broader structural and geographical conditions. In contrast, this study conceptualizes trauma not as a post-event condition but as an ongoing and structurally reproduced process, shaped by uncertainty, restriction, and protracted displacement. Within this framework, mental health outcomes are understood as deeply interconnected with spatial confinement, environmental instability, and governance structures.

Despite the expanding body of literature, several gaps remain.

Several studies continue to prioritize macro-level political and legal analysis while neglecting everyday lived experiences [5,6,21,22]. There is also limited integration of humanitarian governance and geographical perspectives, particularly in understanding how spatial conditions shape vulnerability and resilience [4,23]. Furthermore, existing research frequently fails to connect psychological outcomes with structural and environmental drivers, resulting in fragmented analysis [6,24]. These limitations underscore the need for a more integrated analytical approach.

In response, this study adopts a geographically grounded and geopsychiatric framework that emphasizes the role of place, environment, and spatial organization in shaping displacement experiences. Rather than focusing exclusively on international relations or legal structures, the analysis situates the crisis within the specific context of Cox's Bazar, where environmental vulnerability, spatial confinement, and demographic concentration interact to produce complex social and psychological outcomes. From this perspective, refugee camps are understood as 'psychosocial environment' in which structural and spatial conditions—such as overcrowding, restricted mobility, and environmental risk—generate chronic stress and mental health challenges.

The contribution of this study lies in its integration of qualitative evidence with a spatially grounded analytical perspective that connects statelessness, humanitarian governance, and mental health. By focusing on lived experiences, it moves beyond abstract policy discourse and provides empirical insight into how structural conditions are internalized in everyday life. This approach advances understanding of the Rohingya crisis as both a spatial and psychosocial phenomenon. Accordingly, the study is guided by several objectives. It seeks to examine the lived experiences of Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, with particular emphasis on how geographical conditions and spatial constraints shape daily life. It further explores how statelessness influences identity, belonging, and dignity within protracted displacement. Additionally, the study analyzes the psychosocial impacts of chronic uncertainty, restricted mobility, and environmental stress within a geopsychiatric framework. Finally, it situates these findings within broader structural and geographical contexts to highlight the need for integrated policy approaches addressing both material and psychological dimensions of displacement.

2. Study area

The study was conducted in Cox's Bazar district, located in the southeastern part of Bangladesh, bordering Myanmar's Rakhine State along the Bay of Bengal (Fig. 1). Geographically, Cox's Bazar is a strategically significant coastal frontier that serves as a major entry point for cross-border migration, particularly for Rohingya refugees fleeing persecution [25]. The district lies within a climatically vulnerable zone characterized by hilly terrain, coastal ecosystems, and exposure to extreme weather events such as cyclones, heavy rainfall, landslides, and flooding. This geographical positioning makes Cox's Bazar not only a humanitarian hub but also a critical site where forced migration intersects with environmental vulnerability and climate-related risks. The Rohingya influx since 2017 has transformed this region into the largest refugee settlement globally, with over one million refugees concentrated in a relatively small geographical area, significantly altering land use patterns and demographic structures [23].

Bangladesh itself is widely recognized as one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world, where internal displacement due to environmental factors such as river erosion, coastal flooding, and salinity intrusion is already a persistent challenge [8,11]. This broader context of climate-induced migration provides an important analytical backdrop for understanding the Rohingya crisis. The arrival of a large refugee population into an already environmentally stressed region has intensified existing pressures on land, resources, and infrastructure. In Cox's Bazar, rapid and unplanned settlement expansion has led to

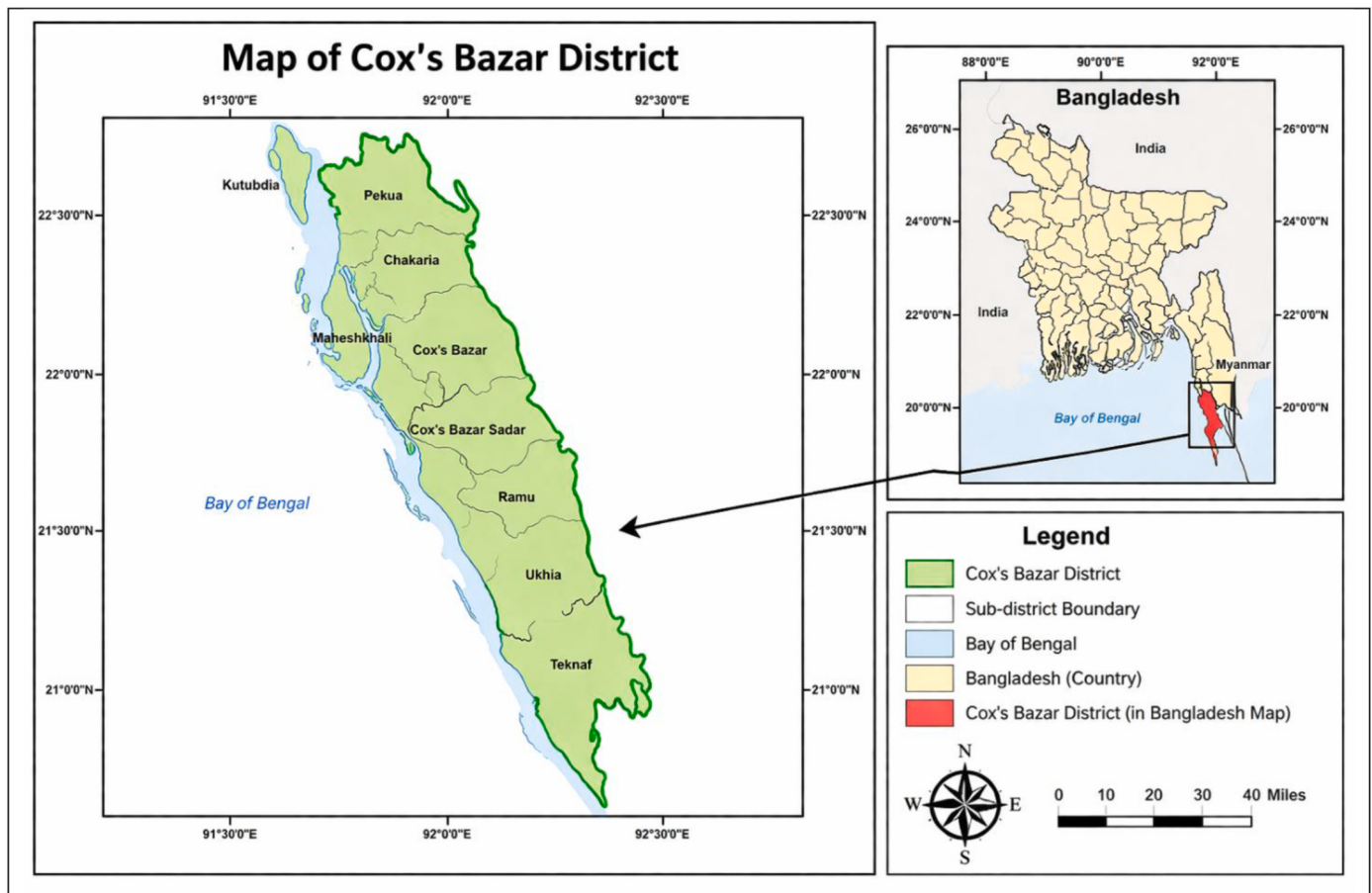


Fig. 1. Study area map.

large-scale deforestation, land degradation, and ecological imbalance, increasing vulnerability to landslides and flooding, particularly during the monsoon season [15]. These environmental transformations are closely linked to humanitarian governance challenges, as resource scarcity and ecological degradation complicate service delivery and long-term sustainability [17,19]. As a result, the Rohingya crisis can be understood not only as a case of forced displacement but also as part of a broader pattern of environmental and climate-related migration pressures in Bangladesh.

Within Cox's Bazar, the sub-districts of Ukhia and Teknaf host the majority of refugee camps, including Kutupalong and Balukhali, forming a highly dense and spatially constrained humanitarian environment. The camps are situated in ecologically fragile zones, including deforested hills and environmentally sensitive areas, which further complicates the relationship between human settlement and environmental sustainability. The high concentration of refugees in these areas has created what can be described as a “crisis within a crisis,” where humanitarian needs and environmental degradation reinforce each other. Resource scarcity, waste management challenges, and increased demand for fuel and water have intensified both environmental stress and social tension within host communities [21,23]. At the same time, the geographical proximity to Myanmar creates a paradoxical spatial condition, where return remains physically conceivable but politically constrained, reinforcing uncertainty among refugees [2,9,18].

From an analytical perspective, the study area represents a convergence point of forced migration, climate vulnerability, and humanitarian governance. The spatial concentration of displaced populations within a climate-sensitive coastal region transforms Cox's Bazar into a unique geographical setting for examining how displacement, environment, and human well-being interact. The camps are not merely sites of

shelter but are embedded within a broader ecological and socio-economic system that shapes everyday experiences, risk exposure, and long-term sustainability. This geographical context is therefore essential for understanding the Rohingya crisis not only as a political or humanitarian issue but also as a spatial and environmental phenomenon, where climate pressures, migration dynamics, and governance structures intersect to produce complex and layered vulnerabilities [15,17].

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design (Fig. 2) to explore the lived experiences of Rohingya refugees and to examine how structural conditions shape displacement, vulnerability, and psychosocial outcomes. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for this study, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of subjective experiences, meanings, and perceptions that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods. By focusing on narrative accounts and personal testimonies, the study aims to connect macro-level political dynamics with micro-level lived realities, aligning with a geopsychiatric perspective that emphasizes the interaction between geopolitical contexts and mental health. The research was conducted among Rohingya refugees residing in camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, which hosts the largest refugee settlement in the world. These camps represent a context of protracted displacement characterized by restricted mobility, limited access to formal employment, dependence on humanitarian assistance, and ongoing uncertainty regarding repatriation. The study draws on qualitative data collected from a total of 100 Rohingya participants, ensuring a substantial and diverse sample for thematic analysis. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation across key demographic and social categories, including adult

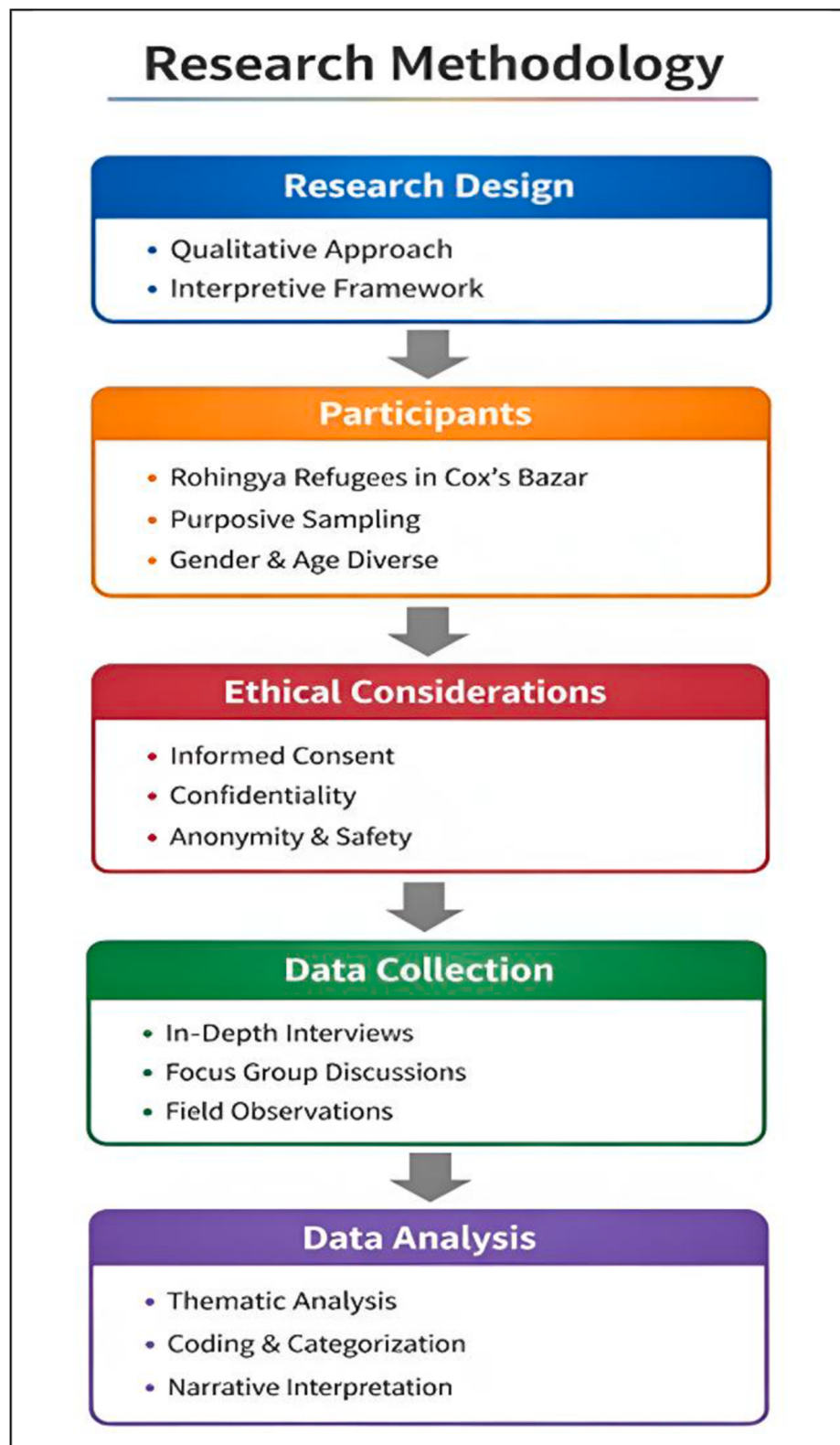


Fig. 2. Methodological flowchart of the study.

men, adult women, youth, and elderly individuals. This approach enabled a nuanced exploration of how experiences of displacement, vulnerability, and coping vary across gender and age groups.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which provided flexibility to explore participants' narratives while maintaining consistency across key thematic areas. The use of semi-

structured interviews enabled participants to articulate their experiences in their own words, thereby capturing nuanced insights into their perceptions of displacement, identity, and well-being. Interviews were guided by a set of thematic domains relevant to the study's objectives. These included: experiences of violence and forced displacement; daily life and living conditions within the camps; perceptions of identity,

belonging, and statelessness; mental health and emotional well-being; gender-specific vulnerabilities and protection concerns; and perceptions of the future, including aspirations and uncertainties surrounding repatriation. This thematic focus ensured that the data captured both structural and experiential dimensions of the crisis.

The data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within textual data [26]. The analytical process involved multiple stages. First, interview transcripts were carefully reviewed and subjected to open coding, during which recurring ideas, expressions, and narratives were identified. Second, these initial codes were organized into broader categories through axial coding, allowing for the identification of relationships between different themes. Finally, selective coding was employed to integrate these categories into a coherent analytical framework that connects individual experiences with broader structural conditions. This iterative process enabled the identification of core themes such as trauma and uncertainty, humanitarian dependency, identity and statelessness, and gendered vulnerability.

To ensure analytical rigor and credibility, the study adopted several qualitative validation strategies. Consistency in coding was maintained through repeated review of transcripts and refinement of thematic categories. Attention was given to capturing diverse perspectives within the sample to avoid overgeneralization. Furthermore, the interpretation of findings was guided by the study's analytical framework, which integrates insights from international relations, humanitarian governance, and geopsychiatry. This triangulation of theoretical perspectives strengthens the validity of the analysis by situating individual narratives within broader structural contexts.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant institutional review authority prior to data collection. Given the vulnerability of the refugee population, ethical considerations were central to the research process. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before interviews were conducted. Strict measures were implemented to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, with no identifying information recorded. Particular attention was given to minimizing the risk of retraumatization during interviews, especially when discussing experiences of violence and loss. Participants were allowed to decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any point, ensuring that their safety, dignity, and well-being were fully protected throughout the research process.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Trauma, chronic uncertainty, and geopsychiatric distress

The qualitative findings demonstrate that trauma among Rohingya refugees cannot be adequately conceptualized as a discrete psychological response to past events, but must instead be understood as an evolving and structurally sustained condition shaped by ongoing uncertainty, spatial confinement, and political stagnation. Participants' narratives consistently indicate that while the violence experienced in Myanmar constitutes the initial rupture, the psychosocial burden has been transformed and prolonged through conditions of indefinite encampment and lack of future orientation. This supports geopsychiatric perspectives which argue that mental health outcomes in forced migration contexts are not merely clinical phenomena but are deeply embedded in geopolitical arrangements, governance systems, and environmental insecurity [22]. The camps in Cox's Bazar function not only as sites of protection but also as spaces where uncertainty is institutionalized, producing a form of temporality characterized by suspension, where individuals are neither integrated nor able to return. Within this suspended condition, psychological distress becomes normalized and chronic, as individuals are unable to construct stable narratives about their future or regain control over their life trajectories. One participant captured this condition by stating:

“We escaped death, but we are not living in peace. Every day we think, what will happen next?” (Male refugee, age 42)

Another participant emphasized how fear has shifted from physical violence to existential uncertainty:

“In Myanmar we feared soldiers, here we fear the future. There is no end to this fear.” (Female refugee, age 35)

These accounts illustrate that trauma is no longer anchored in past events but is reproduced through ongoing structural conditions. The concept of “chronic uncertainty” emerges as a central analytical lens, where the inability to anticipate outcomes, plan for the future, or access stable pathways to resolution generates sustained anxiety and emotional exhaustion. This condition is further intensified by the absence of legal status and the stagnation of repatriation processes, which reinforce a sense of temporariness that has become permanent. Unlike conventional models of trauma recovery, which assume the possibility of stabilization and healing over time, the Rohingya context reveals a cyclical dynamic in which uncertainty continuously reactivates and reshapes psychological distress. This supports the reconceptualization of trauma not as a post-event condition but as an ongoing, complex, and structurally embedded process.

At the collective level, trauma is experienced as a socially distributed phenomenon that permeates family structures, community relations, and intergenerational dynamics. Participants described how emotional distress is shared, transmitted, and reinforced within households, affecting parenting practices, social cohesion, and the development of children who have grown up entirely within camp environments. This suggests that the camps operate as “trauma-producing ecosystems,” where structural conditions sustain psychological vulnerability across time and generations. From a policy perspective, these findings challenge the marginalization of mental health within humanitarian programming. Psychosocial distress is not a secondary outcome but a central feature of protracted displacement, requiring integrated interventions that address both individual and structural drivers. This includes expanding mental health services, embedding psychosocial support within education and community programs, and addressing the root cause of uncertainty through credible political pathways. Without such integration, humanitarian responses risk treating symptoms while leaving the underlying conditions of distress intact, thereby perpetuating cycles of psychological vulnerability within displaced populations.

4.2. Humanitarian containment, restricted agency, and structured dependency

The findings indicate that humanitarian governance in Cox's Bazar has evolved into a complex system of containment that simultaneously enables survival and constrains agency, producing a condition that can be analytically described as “regulated dependency.” While participants acknowledged the critical role of humanitarian assistance in sustaining life, their narratives reveal a deep sense of frustration with the restrictions imposed on mobility, livelihood opportunities, and decision-making autonomy. This reflects a structural paradox identified in humanitarian governance literature, where systems designed for emergency relief gradually transform into long-term mechanisms of population management [17,27]. Within the camps, governance practices are characterized by regulatory controls that limit movement, restrict economic participation, and centralize decision-making authority, effectively shaping everyday life through external structures rather than individual agency. One participant articulated this condition by stating:

“We receive food, but we cannot choose how to live. Everything is decided for us.” (Male refugee, age 38)

Another emphasized the erosion of dignity embedded within this system:

"We are alive because of aid, but we are not living with respect."
(Female refugee, age 29)

These accounts highlight the distinction between biological survival and meaningful existence, suggesting that humanitarian provision alone is insufficient to ensure well-being. The restriction of mobility plays a central role in this dynamic, limiting access to employment, education, and social interaction, thereby reinforcing both economic dependency and psychological confinement. The camps thus function as controlled environments where stability is prioritized over autonomy, and where governance practices inadvertently reproduce the vulnerabilities they seek to address.

Analytically, this condition can be understood as a feedback loop in which dependency is both produced and justified by governance structures. Limited access to livelihoods and education constrains individual capability, increasing reliance on aid, which in turn reinforces the need for continued control and regulation. This creates a self-sustaining system in which refugees are maintained in a state of managed vulnerability, unable to transition toward self-reliance or integration. Participants also highlighted the temporal dimension of this condition, expressing concern about the long-term consequences of prolonged inactivity, particularly among youth who face limited opportunities for skill development and future planning. This results in what can be described as a "frozen life trajectory," where individuals are unable to progress socially, economically, or psychologically. From a policy perspective, these findings underscore the need to move beyond containment-based models of humanitarian governance toward approaches that prioritize capability-building and autonomy. This includes expanding access to education, vocational training, and regulated employment opportunities, as well as rethinking mobility restrictions that limit social and economic participation. Without such shifts, humanitarian systems risk institutionalizing dependency and undermining long-term resilience, thereby transforming temporary protection into permanent marginalization.

4.3. Statelessness, identity fragmentation, and existential non-belonging

The analysis reveals that statelessness is not merely a legal condition but a deeply embedded experiential reality that shapes identity, dignity, and perceptions of existence among Rohingya refugees. Participants consistently described themselves as existing outside recognized political and social frameworks, reflecting a profound sense of exclusion that extends beyond formal citizenship status. This aligns with theoretical perspectives that conceptualize statelessness as a form of structural and symbolic violence, where individuals are denied not only rights but also recognition and legitimacy within the global order ([4]; Song, 2025). One participant expressed this condition in stark terms:

"We are not accepted anywhere. In Myanmar we are not citizens, and here we are not from this country." (Male refugee, age 45)

Another participant articulated the psychological consequences of this exclusion:

"Without a country, we feel like we do not exist. We are people, but we have no place." (Female refugee, age 32)

These narratives indicate that statelessness is internalized as a form of existential non-belonging, where individuals experience themselves as socially and politically invisible. The absence of legal recognition translates into a lack of social validation, affecting self-perception, dignity, and emotional well-being. Participants frequently associated statelessness with feelings of worthlessness and erasure, suggesting that exclusion operates not only at the institutional level but also at the level of identity formation.

From an analytical perspective, statelessness disrupts the continuity of identity by removing the foundational structures through which individuals define belonging and citizenship. This leads to fragmentation,

where individuals are unable to anchor their identity within stable political or social categories. The findings also reveal that this condition has significant intergenerational implications, as participants expressed uncertainty about the identity and future of their children, who are growing up without formal recognition or clear pathways to citizenship. This suggests that statelessness functions as a long-term structural condition that reproduces exclusion across generations and the geopolitical tensions in Southeast Asia (Fig. 3). From a policy standpoint, these findings highlight the limitations of humanitarian responses that do not address the root condition of statelessness. While aid can mitigate immediate suffering, it cannot resolve the psychological and social consequences of exclusion. Durable solutions must therefore prioritize legal recognition, whether through citizenship restoration, safe repatriation, or alternative forms of protection that provide meaningful rights and status. Without addressing statelessness, the Rohingya crisis will remain fundamentally unresolved, as the core condition driving both displacement and psychological distress persists.

4.4. Gendered vulnerability, protection gaps, and layered insecurity

The findings demonstrate that gender plays a critical role in shaping the experience of displacement, producing distinct and intensified forms of vulnerability for women within the Rohingya refugee population. Female participants consistently reported concerns related to safety, restricted mobility, and limited access to resources, reflecting broader patterns of gender-based inequality within humanitarian settings [20, 28]. These vulnerabilities are not isolated but are embedded within the structural conditions of camp governance, socio-cultural norms, and economic dependency. One participant described the constraints on mobility:

"We cannot move freely. Even going outside feels unsafe for us."
(Female refugee, age 27)

Another participant highlighted the intersection of dependency and insecurity:

"We depend on others for everything, and that makes us more vulnerable." (Female refugee, age 34)

These accounts illustrate how gendered experiences of displacement are shaped by overlapping structural factors that limit agency and increase exposure to risk. Restricted mobility reduces access to services, social networks, and economic opportunities, while dependency on external assistance creates conditions where exploitation and vulnerability are more likely to occur. This produces what can be analytically described as "layered insecurity," where multiple forms of vulnerability intersect and reinforce one another.

From a geopsychiatric perspective, gendered vulnerability also has distinct psychological implications. Women often carry the dual burden of managing their own trauma while supporting family members, which intensifies emotional stress and contributes to chronic fatigue and anxiety [20,28]. Participants described feelings of fear, isolation, and responsibility, indicating that mental health outcomes are closely linked to gender roles and expectations within the camp environment. The findings also reveal significant gaps in protection mechanisms, with participants reporting inconsistencies in access to safe spaces, limited responsiveness of services, and ongoing concerns about personal security. This suggests that existing protection frameworks, while present, are insufficiently adapted to the complex realities of gendered vulnerability. From a policy perspective, these findings underscore the need for gender-responsive approaches that are integrated across all aspects of humanitarian governance. This includes enhancing safety measures, expanding access to gender-sensitive mental health services, and creating opportunities for women's participation in decision-making processes. Without addressing the structural roots of gendered vulnerability, humanitarian interventions risk reproducing existing inequalities and failing to provide adequate protection for one of the most



Fig. 3. The Rohingya crisis: Regional power dynamics and humanitarian fallout in southeast asia.

at-risk segments of the refugee population.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the Rohingya crisis as a structurally produced condition shaped by the interaction of statelessness, humanitarian governance, and geopolitical constraints, while grounding this analysis in qualitative insights from Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar. By integrating lived experiences with broader analytical frameworks, the study demonstrates that the crisis cannot be understood solely as a humanitarian emergency but must be approached as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing legal exclusion, political stagnation, and geopsychiatric distress. The findings reveal that trauma among Rohingya refugees is not confined to past violence but is continuously reproduced through conditions of prolonged uncertainty, restricted mobility, and lack of future prospects. This highlights the importance of recognizing mental health not as an isolated issue but as an outcome of structural and geopolitical conditions that shape everyday life in displacement contexts. The analysis further shows that humanitarian governance in Cox's Bazar has evolved into a system of containment that sustains life while simultaneously constraining agency and dignity. Although humanitarian interventions have been critical in preventing large-scale catastrophe, they have also institutionalized dependency and limited opportunities for self-reliance, reinforcing a cycle of vulnerability. This paradox underscores a key limitation of current global responses, where humanitarian assistance substitutes for political resolution rather than complementing it. The findings also demonstrate that statelessness operates not only as a legal condition but as a lived experience of exclusion that profoundly shapes identity, belonging, and

perceptions of self-worth. Participants' narratives reveal that the absence of citizenship translates into a persistent sense of non-existence within the global political order, reinforcing both social and psychological marginalization.

At the macro level, the persistence of the crisis reflects the influence of geopolitical dynamics that constrain accountability and delay durable solutions. Regional norms such as ASEAN's non-interference principle, combined with the strategic interests of major powers, have limited coordinated pressure on Myanmar and weakened the effectiveness of international legal mechanisms. As a result, the Rohingya crisis remains a "managed emergency," where humanitarian care mitigates immediate suffering but fails to address the root causes of displacement. This disjunction between normative commitments and political action reveals a broader crisis within global governance systems, where responsibility is acknowledged but not enforced. The study contributes to existing literature in three significant ways. First, it advances the conceptualization of the Rohingya crisis as a geopsychiatric condition, demonstrating how geopolitical and governance structures produce measurable psychological effects. Second, it provides empirical depth through qualitative data, offering insight into how structural forces are experienced and interpreted by displaced individuals. Third, it bridges disciplinary divides by integrating international relations, humanitarian governance, and mental health perspectives into a unified analytical framework. These contributions highlight the need for more interdisciplinary approaches in understanding protracted refugee crises.

From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the urgency of shifting from containment-based humanitarian approaches to rights-based strategies that prioritize dignity, agency, and long-term well-being. This includes expanding access to education, livelihoods, and

psychosocial support within refugee settings to reduce dependency and enhance resilience. At the same time, humanitarian efforts must be linked to sustained political and legal strategies aimed at addressing the root causes of displacement. This requires coordinated international pressure to ensure accountability, as well as credible frameworks for safe, voluntary, and dignified repatriation that include guarantees of citizenship and protection. Without such integration, humanitarian systems risk perpetuating the very conditions they seek to alleviate. The Rohingya crisis illustrates a fundamental contradiction in contemporary global governance: while humanitarian systems are capable of sustaining life, they are often unable to secure justice or resolve structural inequalities. The persistence of statelessness, combined with geopolitical inertia, transforms displacement into a long-term condition of uncertainty and exclusion. Addressing this crisis therefore requires not only humanitarian commitment but also political will, legal enforcement, and a reconfiguration of international responsibility. Only through such a multidimensional approach can the Rohingya move beyond survival toward dignity, recognition, and a secure future.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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