

GENDERED DISPLACEMENT AND EVERYDAY NEGOTIATIONS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ROHINGYA REFUGEE WOMEN IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Rohingya women living in India negotiate displacement through everyday practices that secure survival, dignity, and belonging within a tightening regime of legal precarity and social exclusion. This qualitative paper synthesizes peer-reviewed research (2018–2025), rights reports, court documents, and humanitarian briefs to examine how gender structures vulnerability and agency across five domains: legal status and bordering; safety and care within camp and city peripheries; livelihoods and labor; access to health, education, and documentation; and digital mediation of risk and opportunity. While India is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, UNHCR registers refugees and provides limited services; yet the policy environment has grown more restrictive. The operationalization of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) rules in March 2024 excludes Muslim refugees, including Rohingya, from accelerated pathways to citizenship; subsequent judicial developments in 2025 reinforced their deportability (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024; The Economic Times, 2025). Drawing on recent ethnographic and policy literature, we show that women’s “everyday negotiations” hinge on gendered mobility, informal networks with NGOs and local authorities, and care work that remains undervalued and under resourced (Jana, 2025; Gopal, 2025; *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2024). This article argues for a gender-responsive protection approach that recognizes non-refoulement as customary international law, expands alternatives to detention, invests in women-led services, and removes documentation barriers that disproportionately disadvantage women and girls.

Keywords: *Rohingya, India, refugee women, gendered displacement, everyday negotiations, CAA, detention, livelihoods, GBV*

INTRODUCTION

The forced displacement of Rohingya from Myanmar has produced one of the world’s most protracted refugee crises. A smaller but visible Rohingya population has settled in India’s urban and peri-urban fringes, most notably around Delhi (Kalindi Kunj, Madanpur Khadar/Shram Vihar), Jammu, Hyderabad, Mewat, and Jaipur, where women shoulder the intersecting burdens of legal precarity, care labor, and the continual re-making of social life in fragile spaces (Refugees International, 2023; IndiaSpend, 2024; *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2024). India is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol, and it lacks a national refugee law. Refugees are therefore governed by a patchwork of executive orders, foreigner and passport laws, and local policing practices. UNHCR registers and supports refugees in collaboration with partners, but its mandate operates within the constraints of national policy. By the end of 2024, UNHCR recorded over 240,000 refugees and asylum-seekers in India, nearly half of whom were women and girls (UNHCR, n.d.-a).

The policy context has become more exclusionary. The policy environment has become less welcoming. In March 2024, the Ministry of Home Affairs sent out rules to put the CAA into effect. These rules sped up citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who came to the country before December 31, 2014 (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024; Reuters, 2024). Muslim refugees, such as the Rohingya from Myanmar, are not allowed to enter, which makes them more likely to be stateless and deported (Guardian, 2024). The Supreme Court of India ruled on May 8, 2025, that there is no general right for Rohingya people to live in India.

This made it more likely that unauthorized immigrants would be deported (The Economic Times, 2025; Supreme Court Observer, n.d.). In this context, detention has increased: as of September 2024, at least 676 Rohingya, over half of whom were women and children, were in immigration custody throughout India (Refugees International, 2025).

This article examines how Rohingya refugee women navigate structural restrictions by employing everyday negotiation strategies such as bargaining, caregiving, micro-entrepreneurship, and alliance formation, which help sustain their homes and reconstruct their futures within precarious legal contexts (Jana, 2025; Gopal, 2025). This article adopted a qualitative, interpretive approach, synthesizing recent scholarship and grey literature to foreground women's voices and strategies without claiming new field data.

Background and Context

The displacement of Rohingya women should be perceived as a convergence of historical and modern manifestations of gendered marginalization. In Myanmar, Rohingya women encountered entrenched hierarchies that systematically denied them citizenship, restricted their mobility, and subjected them to sexual and structural violence (Parnini, 2013; Ullah, 2017). Gender-based violence, encompassing rape, sexual assault, and coerced marriages, has been consistently recorded as a tool of persecution against Rohingya communities during state-sanctioned operations in Rakhine State (Canning et al., 2021; Human Rights Council, 2018). These violations persist beyond displacement; they engender "gendered afterlives" in refugee contexts, where women face both patriarchal norms and systemic exclusion in host societies (Canning et al., 2021). Rohingya refugees, whose numbers range from 20,000 to 40,000 according to different sources, are often forced to live in marginal lands, urban peripheries, or informal settlements where they don't have secure tenure (Refugees International, 2023; UNHCR, n.d.). These weak geographies put families through repeated cycles of eviction, displacement, and disaster. Fires, both accidental and suspected to be intentional, have devastated settlements: the 2018 blaze in Kalindi Kunj, Delhi, destroyed over 200 shanties, while a 2021 fire in Madanpur Khadar rendered more than 400 people homeless (The Caravan, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2021). Women are most affected by these kinds of disasters because they must rebuild homes, take care of children and elderly relatives, and set up basic water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) routines when supplies are low (International Rescue Committee, 2022).

Recent ethnographic studies have illuminated the practice of mothering and social reproduction "from the margins." For Rohingya women, caregiving entails not only nurturing families but also managing physical insecurity, restricted mobility, and the constant fear of eviction or detention (Gopal, 2025). Daily activities like getting water, taking kids to school, or working outside the settlement become places where people have to choose between safety and necessity. These negotiations highlight the pivotal role of women in maintaining refugee existence, despite systemic exclusions that strip them of dignity and stability (Jana, 2025).

The unclear law in India exacerbates these problems. Because India doesn't have a system in place to protect refugees, doesn't want to sign the 1951 Refugee Convention, and is making its borders more secure, Rohingya refugees are always at risk of being detained and deported (Chaudhury, 2022; Refugees International, 2025). The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which went into effect in March 2024, gives non-Muslim migrants from nearby countries a fast track to citizenship. This has made Rohingya Muslims even more marginalized by cutting them off from legal protection pathways (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024). This exclusion has real-world effects every day.

As a result, many Rohingya families are pushed into precarious forms of informal labor. Women frequently engage in low-paying, insecure jobs such as domestic work, waste picking, or home-based production, while also carrying the bulk of unpaid care responsibilities (IndiaSpend, 2024; IDR, 2024). Debt cycles and reliance on humanitarian aid further deepen economic vulnerability. The constant

negotiation of survival within such restrictive conditions illustrates how gender, displacement, and statelessness intersect to shape everyday refugee experiences in India.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative design, relying on a purposive synthesis of secondary sources to analyze the experiences of Rohingya women in India. The study uses a purposive review of peer-reviewed articles (2018–2025) indexed in scopus-covered journals, complemented by reports from UNHCR, Refugees International, humanitarian partners (e.g., The Azadi Project), media investigations, and legal analyses. Sources were selected for relevance to India-based Rohingya women and for recency (2023–2025 prioritized). The researcher coded materials for themes related to gendered risk and agency: (a) legal status and bordering; (b) safety and GBV; (c) livelihoods and unpaid care; (d) health, education, and documentation; and (e) digital mediation.

Findings: Everyday Negotiations in Five Domains

Legal Precarity and Bordering

Indian law labels Rohingya people as "illegal immigrants," putting women at risk of arrest and deportation to their home countries. The CAA's start date of March 2024 made it possible for people to become citizens based on their faith, but it did not allow Rohingya Muslims to do so (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024; Reuters, 2024). The Supreme Court said again in May 2025 that only citizens have the right to live in the country and not unauthorized foreigners. It also refused to stop deportations (The Economic Times, 2025). These changes make women's "everyday bordering" tasks harder, like getting new UNHCR cards, avoiding checkpoints, and dealing with police and local officials (Refugees International, 2025; Supreme Court Observer, n.d.). Women often take on document-seeking tasks with language barriers, caregiving duties, and safety concerns compounding the challenge (Jana, 2025; *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2024).

Negotiation strategies:

1. Developing connections with local NGO workers can facilitate mediation with the police and facilitate access to legal aid.
2. Rotating mobility women venture out during hours perceived as safer, sometimes accompanied by peers.
3. Careful digital practices storing scans of UNHCR cards on phones; using WhatsApp groups for alerts about checks.

Safety, GBV, and the Home/Camp Interface

Settlement geographies expose women to harassment, intimate partner violence exacerbated by stress and unemployment, and risks during WASH activities and nighttime mobility (Canning et al., 2021; Gopal, 2025). Al Jazeera, 2021, and The Caravan, 2024, highlight that fires and evictions escalate the burden of care work and the trauma of displacement. Limited lighting, unsafe shelter, and a lack of private toilet facilities all make the risk of GBV higher. Detention policies also have an impact on family integrity and mental health; almost half of those detained in 2024 were women and children (Refugees International, 2025).

Negotiation strategies:

1. Women's committees function informally, coordinating watch schedules, WASH access, and GBV referrals with non-governmental organizations.
2. Tactical settlement design placing women-headed households near better-lit lanes or near NGO centers when possible.
3. Within households, women quietly establish boundaries by pooling their earnings to influence changes in spending or children's school attendance.

Livelihoods, Labor, and Care

Women can make money by doing housework, picking up trash, doing piecework at home (such as tailoring and needlework), or selling little items. Women have a hard time getting formal occupations

because of legal uncertainty, which leads them to work in unsafe, low-paying positions where they are likely to have their salary stolen (Refugees International, 2023; *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2024). Women's income-earning options include domestic work, waste picking, home-based piecework (tailoring, embroidery), and micro-vending. Legal precarity makes it hard for women to get formal jobs, which forces them to work in dangerous, low-paying jobs where they are likely to have their pay stolen (Refugees International, 2023; *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2024). Care responsibilities, including childcare, elder care, and health navigation, are demanding and frequently unrecognized. Ethnographies reveal both stability and transformation: certain women utilize displacement to redefine gender norms, assert public presence through employment, and sway domestic decisions (Jana, 2025). Legal precarity limits formal employment, pushing women into low-wage, hazardous work with high risks of wage theft (Refugees International, 2023; *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2024). Care obligations childcare, elder care, and health navigation are intensive and often invisible. Ethnographies show both continuity and change: some women leverage displacement to renegotiate gender roles, claim public space through work, and influence household decisions (Jana, 2025).

Negotiation strategies

1. Women participate in savings groups and use rotating credit to help manage financial shocks.
2. Skills programs offered by women-led NGOs, such as the psychosocial and livelihood initiatives reported by The Azadi Project, aim to build income and confidence (IndiaSpend, 2024; IDR, 2024).
3. Strategic invisibility choosing home-based production allows individuals to avoid police scrutiny while still maintaining their earnings.

Health, Education, and Documentation

Public health services are not equally available. Maternity care, sexual and reproductive health services, and mental health services are still not being supplied enough compared to what is needed (IndiaSpend, 2024; UNHCR, n.d.-b). Documentation deficiencies, such as Aadhaar and local residence proofs, make it harder for females to enroll in school and stay in school. This is especially true for girls who are pressured to marry early because of money problems (*Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2024). Displacements after a fire stop immunization and prenatal care (Al Jazeera, 2021).

Negotiation strategies

1. Cultivating "documentation literacy" via NGO camps learning what to ask for, how to fill forms, and which offices to visit.
2. Mothers organize shared childcare to facilitate clinic visits and school admissions.
3. Using UNHCR documentation and NGO letters to secure hospital admissions and fee waivers.

Digital Mediation

Smartphones and texting apps are becoming essential for the daily survival of Rohingya refugee women in India. WhatsApp groups and calls share important information on job openings, police activity during evictions, and NGO relief disbursements. This fills the gap left by insufficient institutional support (IDR, 2024; UNHCR, n.d.-b). Digital tools help people stay connected with family and friends who live far away in Myanmar and Bangladesh. They also help people feel better during long periods of displacement (Jana, 2025).

But these benefits come with hazards. Women are more likely to fall for false information and online scams since they're not very knowledgeable about technology. They are also less likely to participate in political or advocacy areas online because they are afraid of being watched (IndiaSpend, 2024; Refugees International, 2023; Chaudhury, 2022). In a risky legal context, the digital world becomes a battleground where being seen can bring both support and peril. NGOs have changed by combining in-person programming with follow-ups that are done online. WhatsApp now hosts women's support circles, and tele-counseling keeps things going when evictions or restrictions on movement make it hard to get settlement-based assistance (IndiaSpend, 2024; UNHCR, n.d.-c). Digital literacy courses

also teach women how to spot false information and stay secure online (International Rescue Committee, 2022).

Younger Rohingya women increasingly use social media to share testimonies of eviction and campfires, collaborating with activists and journalists to make their struggles visible (The Caravan, 2024; Gopal, 2025). Thus, digital mediation operates as a double-edged practice enabling survival, care, and resistance while also deepening exposure to surveillance and precarity.

DISCUSSION

The synthesis confirms that gender shapes both exposure to harm and the repertoire of survival. Three cross-cutting insights emerge:

1. Legal exclusion structures every facet of everyday life. The adoption of the CAA and the expected changes in the law in 2025 make deportation more likely, which makes people feel less safe at home and makes it harder for women to find work, get medical care, and go to school (Amnesty International, 2024; The Economic Times, 2025; Reuters, 2024). Even though the UNHCR recognizes them, this does not stop them from being put in jail. In 2024, approximately half of the Rohingya women and children in jail were women and children (Refugees International, 2025).
2. Care is political. Fires, evictions, and detentions pose further hazards to people's lives; women confront trauma by taking care of others and getting involved in their communities (Gopal, 2021; Al Jazeera, 2021; The Caravan, 2024). Care work also becomes a claim to space, and services women's committees act as de facto governance units negotiating with NGOs and authorities.
3. Change within continuity. Displacement can open narrow corridors for renegotiating gender roles (income earning, public presence) even as patriarchal norms persist (Jana, 2025; Canning et al., 2021). Programs that couple livelihoods with psychosocial support and GBV services show promise (IndiaSpend, 2024; UNHCR, n.d.-b).

Implications for policy and practice

1. Recognize non-refoulement as binding under customary international law and institute a moratorium on Rohingya deportations while conditions in Myanmar remain unsafe (Law & Other Things, 2025; IMISCOE Blog, 2023).
2. Expand alternatives to detention and ensure gender-sensitive screening, legal aid, and family unity safeguards (Refugees International, 2025).
3. Invest in women-led, locally anchored services UNHCR reported increased partnerships with women-led organizations in 2024, a trend that should be scaled with core funding (UNHCR, n.d.-c).
4. Remove documentation barriers to health and education; accept UNHCR cards and NGO attestations for school enrollment and hospital access.
5. Support safe livelihoods and wage protection mechanisms; formalize employer pledges against wage theft and harassment in domestic work and home-based supply chains.
6. Make settlements safer by designing lighting, gender-segregated and lockable WASH, and fire-safety infrastructure (post-fire hazard assessments, safe cooking spaces).

Limitations and Future Research

This synthesis relies on secondary sources and cannot substitute for in-depth fieldwork or participatory research with Rohingya women. Security risks, fast-changing legal contexts, and uneven documentation complicate inference. Future studies should combine ethnography with participatory action methods led by Rohingya women, examine long-term impacts of detention on family structures, and evaluate the effectiveness of women-led governance and livelihood models over time.

CONCLUSION

Rohingya refugee women in India perform the arduous work of sustaining life at the intersection of displacement, patriarchy, and hostile bordering. Their everyday negotiations, care, coalition-building,

livelihood innovations, and tactical uses of documentation and digital tools keep households afloat amid legal precarity, periodic disaster, and the threat of detention or deportation. Recent legal-policy shifts, especially the CAA's operationalization and the 2025 Supreme Court posture, have narrowed protection space. However, the literature highlights that the support of women's associations, gender-responsive services, and the lowering of documentation hurdles lead to the expansion of women's agencies and the improvement of community resilience. are lowered, women's agency expands, and community resilience improves. A humane response must therefore be gender-just: end deportations to danger, halt the detention of women and children, invest in women-led protection and livelihoods, and guarantee access to healthcare and schooling without punitive documentation filters. These steps are both feasible and urgent.

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