


ROHINGYA BACKGROUNDER

JULY 2023



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Purpose of this Backgrounder

This backgrounder contains historical, political, and cultural information intended to cultivate a general understanding of Rohingya arriving in the U.S. through the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP).

The [Cultural Orientation Resource Exchange](#) (CORE) produced this backgrounder to aid U.S. Resettlement Agencies (RAs) and their local affiliates to provide culturally appropriate Cultural Orientation (CO) and other services to newly arrived Rohingya. The information provided is intended as guidance and does not represent the needs and challenges of all Rohingya. As such, resettlement staff are encouraged to adapt their services as appropriate.

Information in this document is based on a variety of trusted resources, including, but not limited to, scholarly books, articles, and reports from websites of trusted research organizations, as well as interviews with resettlement staff experienced in working with the more than 12,000 Rohingya refugees who have resettled in the U.S. since 2011. For the complete list of resources used, see the Bibliography section of this document.

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Overview

Decades of discriminatory behavior have spawned the Rohingya refugee crisis that has been ongoing in varying stages since the 1970s. The United Nations and the United States have described the actions in Burma as ethnic cleansing and genocide, and crimes against humanity against Rohingya.

In 2016 and 2017, the violence across northern Rakhine State, Rohingya's native state within Burma, was "extreme, large-scale, and widespread," according to the U.S. Department of State. These events, perpetuated by the Burmese military in most cases, led to the displacement of more than 700,000 Rohingya.

August 2022 marked the fifth anniversary of these brutal attacks. With around 1 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, the events and current situation represent what the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) defines as a protracted crisis.



Brief Historical Overview

Rohingya living in Burma experience high risks of human rights abuses that have been documented for over half a century, including discrimination, persecution, extortion, over-taxation, identity/citizenship rights denial, theft, arbitrary imprisonment, restricted movement, forced labor, and slavery, assault, torture, rape, murder, and arson.

During the 20th century, two nations occupied Burma, the United Kingdom, and Japan, briefly following its invasion during the Second World War. In 1948, Burma gained independence, which brought an end to British rule. The following decades saw general instability, with borderland states vying for greater autonomy and communist groups contributing to unrest. Burma's leaders struggled to form a cohesive government.

In 1962, the Burmese military, or Tatmadaw, overthrew the previous ruling party via military force. The Tatmadaw used their power to create an ethno-state agenda that restricted the rights of certain racial and ethnic groups.

These new laws cemented the Burmese identity as ideally Buddhist, leaving the Rohingya Muslims and other religious and ethnic minorities out of the new national agenda. The Tatmadaw instituted policies and restrictions eroding the ability of Rohingya to live peacefully among their neighbors in their native Rakhine State.

Government policies, as well as mob violence from Buddhist citizens, Rakhine neighbors, and Burmese authorities, including local police, paramilitary, and military forces, have driven multiple waves of Rohingya exodus. From 1977-1978 more than 200,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh amid allegations of human rights abuses. While most returned, in the early 1990s, following general elections, more than 250,000 Rohingya once again fled to Bangladesh.

In the 1970s and 1990s, Burma and Bangladesh established agreements for volunteer return, leading to repatriation for many. Unfortunately, in 2017, an attack by Rohingya militants set off widespread violence and genocide in the Northern Rakhine state. This violence resulted in more than 700,000 Rohingya fleeing the country. Since this time, Rohingya have not been able to return to Burma safely; a point further solidified following the February 2021 military coup and increased fighting within Rakhine in 2022.

Geography

Burma is situated in Southeast Asia and shares a border with five countries. Burma's population center is in the Irrawaddy River basin in the southern central part of the country. The borderland states surround the center like a horseshoe, with hills and mountains forming natural barriers. Burma's seven major ethnicities are also the names of the seven states in Burma. The country's western and southern parts include the poorest states and the most persecuted ethnic and religious minorities, including Rakhine, Chin, and Kayin (Karen).

The Rohingya are native to northern parts of Rakhine State (formerly Arakan) in southwestern Burma along the Indo-Burma divide. Rakhine's geography includes a long coastline and mountain range extending north to south. Township centers are mainly coastal and are surrounded by village communities. Infrastructure development has been extremely limited in this rural area, with basic utilities and amenities in short supply.



Conditions in First-Asylum Countries & Refugee Camps

When working with Rohingya, it will be beneficial for welcoming communities and resettlement agencies to identify the country of asylum, when possible, as this will provide context for experiences of that case prior to arrival. For example, resettlement agencies should consider whether a person has been in a refugee camp in Bangladesh or living as an urban refugee in Malaysia.

The lives of Rohingya in first-asylum countries are fraught with difficulties. Given few options to make a safe life for themselves, many Rohingya fled to neighboring countries to find refuge and live. Most Rohingya do not opt to flee into mainland Burma because it is a considerably longer journey and much more dangerous due to hostile citizens and authorities. Bangladesh is overwhelmingly the first destination for fleeing Rohingya due to its proximity to Rakhine State.



Rohingya in Bangladesh

Around one million Rohingya refugees live in Bangladesh refugee resettlement camps in Cox's Bazar district, which borders the northern part of Rakhine. Following the arrival of more than 700,000 refugees in 2017, Bangladesh, supported by international donors and humanitarian actors, focused on providing basic needs. However, prolonged displacement has presented many challenges, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which further limited refugee movements and reduced access to livelihood opportunities and education.

While humanitarian activities fully resumed in mid-2021, the impacts of COVID-19 persist. A report from Refugees International in 2022 lists access to education, livelihood opportunities, and restrictions on freedom of movement and civil society, among other challenges for Rohingya in Bangladesh. Additionally, safety and protection are other critical issues. For example, in 2021, fires ravaged the camps, and there are ongoing concerns about attacks from militant groups, rival factions, and criminal gangs.

Destinations with significant Rohingya asylum seekers include Malaysia, Thailand, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Australia.

Other Asylum Destinations

From Bangladesh, Rohingya have fled to other countries in the region and beyond. Without documentation, Rohingya find difficulty traveling using conventional means, often relying on human traffickers to facilitate migration. Destinations with significant Rohingya asylum seekers include Malaysia, Thailand, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Australia. Rohingya are considered illegal immigrants in these countries and generally are not afforded citizenship or residency status. Rohingya fear discrimination, arrest, and deportation

and have limited opportunities to better their situation without identity documents. Without documentation, Rohingya are subject to exploitation, unable to work legally, move freely, and access healthcare and education.

For more information and details about conditions in first-asylum countries and refugee camps that go beyond the scope of this backgrounder, visit [UNHCR: Culture, Context, and Mental Health of Rohingya Refugees](#).

Caseload Composition

Currently, there are Rohingya communities in more than 20 countries. The U.S. has resettled more Rohingya than any other country. In the past, many Rohingya refugees resettled to the United States have come from Malaysia, with a smaller number coming out of Thailand. However, there is an anticipation that more Rohingya will be arriving from Bangladesh starting in 2024.

The journey to Malaysia often utilizes human trafficker networks making it extremely dangerous. However, it has been a common route, especially for men. Approximately 66% of Rohingya asylum seekers in Malaysia are men. While waiting for resettlement applications,

many men get married, some to women of different backgrounds, and start families. Because of this, it is not uncommon to see some resettled Rohingya families with parents that speak different primary languages.

As of 2023, the U.S. has resettled over 12,000 Rohingya. The first Rohingya began arriving in the U.S. in the mid to late 1990s, but only in small numbers. Over 90% of Rohingya began arriving in the United States in 2011, primarily from Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. A large percentage of Rohingya have resettled in Wisconsin, with many others going to Indiana, Illinois, and Texas.



Language

Rohingya is primarily a spoken language, and illiteracy rates are high in this community. Decades of poverty and oppression meant that attaining education was historically difficult for most Rohingya. As a result, language barriers make it difficult for service providers to find qualified interpreters. Rohingya often face difficulties finding credible information in their language, making them susceptible to misinformation and exploitation.

The Rohingya writing system was once widespread but is now nearly nonexistent. Rohingya writing was mainly destroyed by Burmese invaders and not preserved well by subsequent colonialists. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, engineer Mohammed Siddique Basu developed the Rohingyalish writing system, a simplified Rohingya script that uses Latin letters. Rohingya, particularly those that use technology to communicate, have embraced Basu's system, as the alphabet can be used on phone and computer keyboards.

In the context of language and diaspora, many Rohingya fled to other countries and started new lives in their first asylum countries. This creates a situation where parents might speak their original primary language while their children speak the language of the first asylum country. Then, if resettled to a high-income country, the family is introduced to yet another language. These factors compound what already were complicated language barriers and exacerbate a decline in the use of the Rohingya language. Identifying individual language strengths and needs is essential to ensure appropriate interpretation services while working with Rohingya refugees.

Resettlement agencies should avoid using Burmese as the language of communication with Rohingya refugees. Although many Rohingya speak Burmese, interpreters who use that language may be part of ethnic groups that the Rohingya view with fear or suspicion. Resettlement agencies should try to use Rohingya speakers as interpreters whenever possible.



Social and Cultural Characteristics

Role of Family

Family roles in the Rohingya culture are patriarchal, with the eldest male children generally assuming household responsibilities. It can be common for mothers to stay home with their children while fathers work. In divorce and separation cases, women often face challenges, as establishing independence can be difficult for those with less work experience and language fluency.

As resettled Rohingya are often the bread winners for their immediate and extended families, they tend to provide additional financial support for their families abroad.

Decades of oppression have negatively impacted Rohingya cultural growth, increasing the importance of the Rohingya people to recover their cultural heritage and livelihoods.

Religion

Islam is important in Rohingya culture and dictates many cultural and social norms, formal contracts, ceremonies, marriage, and diet. Their religion can also be a source of struggle in that being Muslim in certain places can be a basis for discrimination. Rohingya have historically dealt with these forms of discrimination and

developed defensive characteristics and resilience, but it has also manifested in trauma in many forms. Decades of oppression have negatively impacted Rohingya cultural growth, increasing the importance for the Rohingya people to recover their cultural heritage and livelihoods.

Cultural Orientation

Considerations (by Topic)

The resettlement experience can be difficult for Rohingya populations. Various factors contribute to challenges; transitioning to a new culture that is non-Muslim majority, increased expectations to integrate and build wealth, and language, cultural, and technological barriers. The following sections contain detailed and contextualized information about working with Rohingya clients while navigating different Cultural Orientation topics.

For each topic, guidance and tips have been identified, drawing on expertise gleaned from interviews and observations from resettlement staff. As noted previously, RAs and their local affiliates providing services through the Reception and Placement Program (R&P) should adjust this information based on specific cases and needs.

Resettlement Services

The resettlement experience can be difficult for Rohingya populations. Various factors contribute to challenges; transitioning to a new culture that is non-Muslim majority, increased expectations to integrate and build wealth, and language, cultural, and technological barriers. The following sections contain detailed and contextualized information about working with Rohingya clients while navigating different Cultural Orientation topics.

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Tips

- Ensure providers are culturally competent and trained on norms and potential risks of Rohingya clients experiencing exploitation.
- Meet families where they are, including visiting homes or meeting in familiar places where trusted interpreters are available.
- Adjust the service model to meet Rohingya-specific needs, including persistent barriers to language, technology, and literacy. For example, identify qualified interpretation services and consider the role of technology and literacy in accessing services.

Community Services

Non-profit and other service organizations that serve Rohingya clients are vital for families that need language, education, and other services. While support service organizations take many forms, Muslim organizations play a pivotal role in supporting resettled Rohingya. Religious support structures are often the most effective institutions to reach and serve Rohingya clients after arrival, providing cultural links in a largely foreign place.

Tips

- Use partnerships with schools, healthcare, and religious organizations to increase access to services and opportunities with Rohingya clients as they work toward independently accessing services.
- Make identifying effective and professional interpreters and cultural brokers a priority. Be inclusive and provide equitable access for women to become interpreters or cultural brokers.
- Understand cultural and religious customs. Begin dialogue early and often to ensure cultural competence among providers and community partners, including state workers, healthcare providers, and educators.
- Create information in their language and use community spaces and platforms to share it more effectively. Create forums for discussion in venues that Rohingya clients are more familiar with, including mosques and other religious centers.



U.S. Laws

While Cultural Orientation covers major U.S. laws and customs, more time is often needed to ensure that individuals have a comprehensive understanding. Additionally, existing knowledge and prior experiences may contradict U.S. laws and norms. These distinct cultural differences may prove difficult to navigate. Some challenging situations may include differences in gender and marriage equality, financial rules and regulations, driving laws, domestic disturbances, citizenship and immigration, housing and land use, mental health, and homelessness.

Tips

- Invite open dialogue between the Rohingya community and local police and legal workers to help this new population learn U.S. laws. Invite these professionals to appropriate Cultural Orientation sessions to strengthen their understanding of their role in the community.
- Review with Rohingya clients the consequences of illegal and inappropriate actions; otherwise, there may be an assumption that it will continue to go unpunished, or worse, that it is seen as acceptable.
- Explain the legal expectations surrounding marriage, including the legal age to marry based on location.
- Prepare to answer questions about U.S. citizenship. Rohingya clients will need assistance with citizenship applications and preparing for the citizenship test, particularly in cases where individuals have low English literacy.
- Prepare to answer questions on topics such as family reunification and marriage. If possible, organize local immigration legal resources to support Rohingya clients looking into these topics.
- Advocate, as needed, that community service providers, like law enforcement, have access to quality interpreters. Equitable services cannot be provided without quality interpretation.

Cultural Adjustment

Adjusting to the U.S. can be quite complicated for Rohingya clients. Like other newcomers, they may experience a range of feelings, including relief and happiness, alongside stressors in their new lives. For many, previous trauma and lapses in education make learning, communicating, and making meaningful connections difficult.

Tips

- Be proactive in building meaningful relationships with Rohingya clients. These connections are truly appreciated by families that struggle with accomplishing daily tasks and have many questions.
- Learn about the Rohingya culture to understand the differences in cultural norms. For example, it is not generally acceptable to shake hands with women, stare, and wear shoes inside the home.
- Serve halal food if you provide food at a session or event. If halal food is not available, serving vegetarian dishes is acceptable. Also, ensure any food donations are culturally appropriate.
- Consider providing access to community or personal gardens as well as to livestock from farms, as Rohingya have a very close relationship with the food they eat. If possible, invite local community partners who run farms or community gardens to Cultural Orientation programming.



Health

Rohingya have historically lacked access to adequate healthcare systems. Limited experience with modern medicine means that upon resettlement, Rohingya receive what is often their first comprehensive medical exams. This can be difficult for individuals who may receive a previously unknown diagnosis. Language barriers can make discussing sensitive health topics challenging, including taboo subjects such as sexual habits and mental health. Overall, Rohingya clients will likely value access to healthcare but require considerable assistance navigating systems and bridging the cultural gaps.

Limited access to healthcare combined with previous trauma negatively affects the mental and physical health of the Rohingya community. Service organizations should be mindful that misconceptions, misinformation, pseudo-science, and generally inadequate understanding are often prevalent, so extensive planning from healthcare professionals may be required to facilitate equitable access and care.

Tips

- Ensure understanding through effective communication with Rohingya clients. Don't just accept a nod as complete understanding; verify knowledge of essential information.
- Ensure information geared towards the Rohingya community is forward and concise. Much is lost in translation, so use simple language whenever possible.
- Follow up and keep following up. This will help impart the importance of timeliness and communication etiquette, such as calling to cancel an appointment.
- Consider that Rohingya clients may prefer to see healthcare professionals of the same sex, particularly women. While this should not be the only factor in choosing a provider, it is important to take into consideration.

Housing

Provided housing for incoming Rohingya clients varies by state, but most have been resettled in urban settings in over a dozen U.S. cities. Rohingya clients will likely value living near family and friends and prioritize access to religious centers, social services, schools, and hospitals.

Family values and financial growth make homebuying a desirable option for many Rohingya clients eager to start their new lives, but certain areas are prohibitively expensive. Reports of Rohingya buying homes has grown significantly since 2015, particularly in less expensive markets with established Rohingya communities. Rohingya migration patterns suggest that Rohingya may choose to migrate to areas with more affordable housing. Still, the availability of social services, jobs, and religious community support also factor heavily into decision-making.

Tips

- Make sure housing rules and regulations are understood, including standards of cleaning, maintenance, pest prevention, landlords, leases, property ownership, and respecting neighbors and property.
- Relay important safety information, such as basement care, pests and insects, children's safety, lead safety, and appropriate food preparation and storage.



Employment

Prior to arriving in the United States, Rohingya refugees may have limited opportunities for employment. This may be particularly true for those coming from camps. Those coming from urban areas may have more work history but may have had experiences with exploitation.

Due to language and education, Rohingya clients are often limited to positions that don't require much English or prior education. In many cities, light industry and food production factories are top employers. Other popular jobs may include service and hospitality industries. Compared to other incoming groups, Rohingya clients may have fewer technical professionals.

As a traditionally patriarchal culture, males are expected to work, leaving fewer women entering the workforce. It isn't uncommon for high school aged male Rohingya to work and assume many of the family responsibilities. Rohingya families are generally prudent with their money, like many newcomers, opting to work hard and save, purchase a vehicle, and invest in single or multi-family houses.

Rohingya are industrious, opportunistic and have developed community-centric self-sufficiency, but entrepreneurship is somewhat slow to grow due to education gaps and limited previous professional experience. However, there has been a noticeable increase in Rohingya-owned food markets, restaurants, landlords, and community-based organizations that have proliferated in virtually every community.

Tips

- Ensure employers understand the language and cultural barriers in the hiring process in Rohingya communities. Many Rohingya clients will need help filling out applications and other onboarding requirements.
- Ensure understanding of the importance of timeliness. Assist Rohingya clients in mapping out how much time to allot for commuting to and from work.
- Consider other workplace preferences, including scheduling and overall environment. For example, in Islam, Friday is a day of prayer. As such, Rohingya clients may appreciate having that day off. Additionally, be aware that jobs in cold environments or that are physically demanding may be less desirable.

Education

Education is important to resettled Rohingya, as they have been historically denied access or their education has been disrupted due to displacement. Parents often lack the language and previous education to participate fully in their children's learning. Students often surpass their parents' education by a young age, which can create an imbalance in the parent-child relationship. The relationship between educators and parents is intrinsically valuable. This relationship is often the most consistent resource for Rohingya families and is instrumental in facilitating effective education.

Children in schools can benefit from adept newcomer and ESL programs, culturally competent administrative staff and teachers, and access to interpreters. Establishing and maintaining communication with schools is difficult for parents. Children are often used as interpreters, which can create an undesirable dynamic and is reflective of poor interpretation services. When available, schools with Islamic curricula are generally preferred over public schools.

Educational attainment for adults can be slow, and the likelihood of continuing education for adults may be limited due to time, logistics, resource availability, and previous education gaps. Retention rates in adult education could be better due to time deficits, family priorities, and inconsistent availability of adult ESL programs that cater to pre-literate populations.

Tips

- Avoid using children as interpreters during discussions with parents. Request a professional interpreter, especially when covering complex or sensitive topics.
- Develop or direct newcomers to ESL programs specifically for pre-literate learners.
- Engage community partners or guest speakers, including teachers, as part of Cultural Orientation.
- Facilitate connections with relevant community or faith-based education programs that can assist in providing services specifically for pre-literate populations.



Digital Literacy

Rohingya have historically had limited access to technology. Underdeveloped rural infrastructure and education systems, broad discrimination, rolling internet blackouts, and poverty limited almost all access to technology, except for cell phones with spotty connections. Rohingya in first asylum countries may have increased access and exposure to technology and devices.

Digital literacy in the resettled Rohingya community is often split into two different groups. The first group is parents, made up of older adults who have had limited access to any technology for most of their lives and resettled to the U.S. as adults. The second group includes the children of this generation who grow up in the U.S. with much greater access. This divide in digital literacy often means that children support parents in accessing digital platforms and devices.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Rohingya families have had to bridge the technical divide in immediate ways, particularly with remote schooling. In homes, many newcomer families sign up for discounted broadband services. While these plans are affordable, spotty connections can make accessing a reliable network challenging. Other barriers include the costs of buying or requesting devices and parental governance of the technology their children use.

Tips

- Model the use of technology with Rohingya clients to ensure they can access and use the devices and programs independently.
- Identify and assist Rohingya clients with accessing programs that offer free or discounted technology and services such as broadband internet, PCs, Chromebooks, and headsets.
- Use platforms that newcomers are comfortable with when communicating, including messaging applications that can send voice records. These applications are helpful for Rohingya clients with little to no literacy.

Public Transportation

The lack of English language literacy makes public transportation difficult for Rohingya newcomers, specifically older adults, to navigate. Providers should be prepared to spend more time working with Rohingya clients to learn public transportation and be aware of differences in comfort between male and female adults. In areas with no public transportation system, it is common for adult males in the household to learn to drive and purchase a vehicle. However, Rohingya clients may have never driven a car before arriving in the U.S., and the rules and norms of traffic may differ significantly from what they have experienced.

Tips

- Review information and answer questions about obtaining a driver's license, including requirements and the importance of learning driving laws.
- Escort newcomers on public transportation for multiple rides until they feel comfortable riding independently. Wherever possible, meet them at their home to show them exactly what their commute will look like.
- Use creative solutions to address logistical issues, like community rideshare arrangements and meeting at places that Rohingya clients are familiar with and comfortable.



Conclusion

With support from local RAs and communities, Rohingya newcomers can mobilize their inherent strengths and attitudes to help them successfully resettle in the U.S. As with other populations, Rohingya will require RAs and other service providers to incorporate various teaching methods and approaches into CO and throughout the R&P service period to ensure maximum retention of CO topics. RAs can visit CORE's website to learn more about successful approaches to delivering CO to Rohingya clients.



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In addition to interviews and guidance from resettlement staff that have worked with Rohingya refugees, the backgrounder also drew on the following resources.

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