



Polygamy in Displacement: A Study of Rohingya Refugee Practices in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This research focuses on the polygamous practices of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, exploring how displacement and life in the refugee camps have affected the community's marital practices and gender relations. Although polygamy is practiced within the context of Rohingya culture, the reasons why it has been practiced underwent a significant change due to forced migration, economic decline, and disruptions to established social order. Conducting ethnographic research in the form of interviews with refugees, community leaders, and aid workers, the study examines the socio-political and religious factors that support polygamous marriages in the camps. This research shows that the practice of polygamy tends to be greatly influenced by uncertainty; it aids in easing some social burdens on women while granting men the ability to meet socially defined roles. While providing some benefits, these practices heighten intra-family conflict, gender and socially structured inequality, and mental suffering. The research calls attention to humanitarian initiatives that inform policy and programming using culture methodologies that consider the gendered realities of displacement.

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Introduction

The Rohingya are a Muslim ethnic minority from Myanmar's Rakhine State who, as of 2017, faced systemic persecution which led to a mass exodus to Bangladesh. Currently, over one million Rohingya live in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar where their precarious legal status severely restricts freedom of

movement, education, and employment opportunities. Polygamy has existed in Rohingya society for a long time, often sanctioned on religious or cultural grounds. In Myanmar, the practice was curbed by legal frameworks and state supervision. Nevertheless, polygamous marriages can be undertaken with little legal restriction in the Bangladeshi refugee camps.

Some men use religious arguments to justify taking multiple wives, while others do so to bolster household help or access more aid resources [1]. The informal legal regime regarding the marriage custom in the camps enables unchecked polygamous marriages [2].

Considered a means to increase household expenditure or gain additional support, multiple marriages could be viewed as a coping mechanism for unemployed men [1]. Societal norms that support the devaluation of women's independence enable systems of subordination in which women are oppressed in marriage. Blaming all violence and seeking polygamous marriages because of trauma induced by displacement and lack of employment among men is a phenomenon [1,3].

Women in polygamous unions report underlining instances of physical and emotional abuse. The first wives along with their children suffer from some level of resource neglect as more attention is given to new spouses. The acceptance of polygamy amplifies the rate of child marriages where young girls are auctioned off to older men which deepens the cycle of poverty and diminishes educational prospects. Some community members embrace polygamy as part of the culture; others lament its impacts. Community leaders and humanitarian groups have developed projects aimed at spreading the negative impacts associated with polygamy and the need for balanced gender relations. Designated women's spaces and these educational initiatives aimed at men have been effective in changing perceptions and some of the practices considered harmful in marriage [4].

Methodology

Study Design and Participant Selection

In January and February of 2025, a cross-sectional study was carried out to evaluate the dowry culture of the Rohingya minority in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. Ten trained volunteers participated in the data gathering method. The study was carried out at the Cox's Bazar refugee camps of Kutupalong and Balukhali, which together are home to the greatest number of Rohingya refugees worldwide [5]. Participants of all ages, excluding children, must be present during the participation period in order to satisfy the inclusion requirements. The participants were

selected by door-to-door recruitment.

Sample Size Detection

The infinite population formula [$S = (Z)^2 \times P \times (1-P) \div (M)^2$] was used to calculate the sample size. A 95% confidence level was used to get the Z-value (1.96). The population proportion (P) and margin of error (M) were calculated at the 50% (0.50) and 5% (0.05) levels, respectively. A total of 385 data points were collected for this study.

Study Tools and Data Collection

The survey was created in Bengali and English for convenience. The questionnaire was piloted to guarantee readability and clarity. Prior to being placed into a spreadsheet, cleaned, and then rewritten for reliability and principal component analysis, it underwent a pilot test for face validity. Ten trained interviewers assisted in conducting the poll. The interviewers approached the respondents and invited them to fill out the questionnaire in person after outlining the survey's goals and design. While the second component of the questionnaire inquired about marriage times, the first section gathered demographic data. Two potential answers were offered in order to reduce the likelihood that the right and intended response would be selected by chance. There were two possible answers: a) yes and b) no. The dataset displays the ages' mean and standard deviation. Additionally, frequencies were converted to percentages for convenience of reading.

Statistical Analysis

All of the data were saved in a master Microsoft Excel file before being imported into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program (version 22.0). The Kruskal Wallis and Mann Whitney U tests were used to evaluate mean differences among demographic variables. If a P-value was less than 0.05, it was deemed significant.

Results:

Variables	Frequency (%)	Mean \pm SD
Age (Years)		40.13 \pm 9.031
20-29	39 (10.1%)	
30-39	113 (29.4%)	
40-49	193 (50.1%)	
50-59	35 (9.1%)	
60-69	5 (1.3%)	
Sex		
Male	192 (49.9%)	
Female	193 (50.1%)	
Marital Status		
Married	348 (90.4%)	
Unmarried	0 (0%)	
Divorced	37 (9.6%)	
Widow	0 (0%)	
Educational Qualification		
Illiterate	218 (56.6%)	
< Class 5	167 (43.4%)	
Class 5-10	0 (0%)	

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Participants.**Demographic Characteristics**

385 Rohingya refugees living in camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, were included in the study. The average age of the participants was 40.13 (SD \pm 9.031). The following was the age distribution: The following age groups are represented: 20–29 (10.1%), 30–39 (29.4%), 40–49 (50.1%), 50–59 (9.1%), and 60–69 (1.3%). The distribution of genders was roughly equal, with 293 females (50.1%) and 192 males (49.9%). Of the participants, 348 (90.4%) were married, 37 (9.6%) were divorced, and none were unmarried or widowed. Regarding academic achievement, 167 participants (43.4%) had less than Class 5 education, while 218 participants (56.6%) were illiterate.

		Educational Qualification		P value (Mann-Whitney U Test)	P value (Kruskal Wallis 1-way ANOVA Test)	Decision
		Illiterate	< Class 5	0.008	0.008	Reject the null hypothesis
	Single marriage	144 (37.4%)	131 (34%)			
How many have you married?	Two marriages	74 (19.2%)	36 (9.4%)			

Table 2: Crosstabs, Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal Wallis 1-Way ANOVA Test Results. Here Significant Level is 0.05.

Interpretation

Since the data does not follow a normal distribution, non-parametric tests such as the Mann-Whitney U Test and the Kruskal-Wallis Test are employed. The p-value for both tests is 0.008, below the standard significance level of 0.05. We reject the null hypothesis since the p-value is statistically significant. The number of marriages among the participants and educational attainment are significantly correlated. Put more simply, there are statistically distinct trends in the number of marriages between people with varying degrees of education.

Recommendations

- The following actions are advised in order to alleviate the difficulties that polygamy presents in the Rohingya refugee camps:
- Legal Reforms: Put in place precise laws that govern marital customs and safeguard the rights of women in the camps [2-4].
- Economic Empowerment: To lessen the financial reliance that supports polygamous relationships, give men and women access to sources of income.
- Educational Initiatives: Encourage gender-sensitive instruction that opposes patriarchal standards and supports women's independence.
- Community Engagement: Hold discussions with religious and local leaders to reframe traditional customs in a way that respects gender equality and human rights.

Conclusion

The problem of polygamy among Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh is complex and has roots in socio-economic, cultural, and historical elements. Displacement has made the practice worse, but it also offers a chance to reconsider and change damaging customs. It is possible to lessen the harmful effects of polygamy and advance a more just society in the refugee camps by combining coordinated measures incorporating community engagement, economic initiatives, and legal reforms.

Ethical Considerations

All participants provided written informed consent. We maintained all humanitarian principles during collecting the data from the refugees.

Funding Issue

For conducting this study, we didn't get any fund. We studied for our own responsibility to these refugees.

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