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# Responding to the Rohingya Refugee Crisis: The Role of Social Workers in Bangladesh

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**ABSTRACT**

The Rohingya refugee crisis remains one of Bangladesh's prolonged and complex humanitarian emergencies. Following the forced displacement of over 750,000 Rohingya from Myanmar in August 2017, refugee camps in Cox's Bazar have experienced pressure on communities and humanitarian services. This study examines the role of social workers in responding to the crisis across the Kutupalong-Balukhali, Hakimpara, and Jamtoli refugee camps. A qualitative-dominant design was adopted, drawing on 26 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and three focus group discussions, each involving six participants, supported by an open-ended questionnaire administered to participants and secondary documentary sources for triangulation. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic and content analysis. The findings indicate that social workers play a vital role in linking refugees with services through child protection, gender-based violence prevention, community engagement, mobile outreach, and inter-agency collaboration. The study emphasizes the need for recognition of social work as a humanitarian profession to strengthen humanitarian responses and service delivery.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Rohingya are an ethnic minority originating from the Indian subcontinent who have faced decades of persecution, violence, military crackdowns, and discrimination in Myanmar. Consequently, more than 750,000 Rohingya fled Myanmar following the large-scale military operations in 2017 and sought safety primarily in neighboring Bangladesh. The vast majority now reside in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. As of July 2025, approximately 1.15 million Rohingya refugees live in Bangladesh, with the majority located in camps in Cox's Bazar near the Myanmar border (World Health Organization [WHO], 2025). Their prolonged displacement has created complex humanitarian needs that extend beyond food, shelter, and healthcare to include psychosocial well-being, protection, education, and access to social and community support.

Social work with Rohingya refugees is becoming an increasingly important area of practice in Bangladesh. Refugees face a range of psychosocial, economic, and human rights challenges in the camps (United Nations Population Fund, 2024). Social workers can addressing these challenges by providing consistent and equitable services, including psychosocial support, counseling, educational assistance, referrals, community-based support, and protec-

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tion services (Khan, 2018; Majumdar, 2023). For example, Women Friendly Spaces (WFS) have provided psychosocial sessions that can help Rohingya women and girls develop confidence and establish supportive relationships within the refugee community (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2025). Such interventions demonstrate the importance of trust, culturally sensitive practices, and community engagement in refugee settings. At the same time, Rohingya refugees continue to face poor access to healthcare, food and shelter insecurity, statelessness, limited educational opportunities, violence, psychological trauma, shrinking humanitarian assistance, and uncertainty regarding their future repatriation (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2025; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025). These interconnected challenges require coordinated responses in which social workers can help connect refugees with appropriate humanitarian and social services.

Existing literature on the Rohingya crisis has addressed a wide range of issues, including its historical and political dimensions (Islam, 2020), inadequate water, sanitation, and waste disposal facilities in overcrowded camps (Amin, 2018; Khan, 2017), refugee coping strategies and living conditions (Sultana et al., 2023), limited access to education, inadequate food supplies, and restrictions on movement (Knight, 2013), and the social effects of refugee presence on host communities and inter-communal relations (Myat, 2018). More recent research has also highlighted critical mental health concerns among Rohingya refugees, including anxiety and depression, while identifying limited staffing and culturally appropriate services as barriers to effective care (Green et al., 2025). Although this body of literature has substantially contribute to understanding the humanitarian and social conditions of Rohingya refugees, comparatively limited attention has been given to social workers' professional roles, the challenges they encounter, and the practices that may strengthen their effectiveness within refugee camps.

Therefore, this study argues that social workers are not merely service providers but essential humanitarian actors whose effectiveness depends on community-based practice, interagency collaboration, and culturally responsive interventions despite significant institutional and resource constraints. More specifically, the study argues that humanitarian assistance can become more effective when social workers are supported to combine professional knowledge with local participation, coordinated service delivery, and rights-based practice. To examine this argument, this study focuses on the experiences of social workers and humanitarian personnel involved in refugee response in the Kutupalong-Balukhali, Hakimpara, and Jamtoli camps in Cox's Bazar.

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant approach to examine the roles, challenges, and practices of social workers in the Rohingya refugee response. Primary qualitative data were collected through 26 in-depth interviews, three focus group discussions, and an open-ended semi-structured questionnaire involving participants with relevant experience in refugee services. Secondary and documentary sources, including government publications, research papers, annual reports, policy documents, books, grey literature, and relevant media reports, were used to contextualize and triangulate the primary findings. By bringing these sources together, this study examines the roles performed by social workers, the institutional and practical challenges that limit their effectiveness, and the approaches that can strengthen humanitarian social work practice.

This study contributes to the growing literature on humanitarian social work by providing empirical evidence of social workers' experiences in one of the world's largest refugee settings. It also offers practical implications for strengthening social work through institutional recognition, specialized training, improved co-

ordination, adequate resources, and greater investment in psychosocial and community-based interventions. Overall, this study highlights the importance of recognizing and supporting social workers as professional actors in more effective and sustainable humanitarian responses to the Rohingya refugee crisis.

## 2. BACKGROUND

The Rohingya are an ethnic minority and a stateless Indo-Aryan people of Myanmar(Al Jazeera, 2018). They have been described as one of the world's most persecuted minorities in the twenty-first century (Atlas of Humanity, n.d.). The Rohingya have experienced decades of persecution, violence, military crackdowns, and discrimination in Myanmar. Evidence has documented sexual violence, torture, and ethnic cleansing against Rohingya communities in Rakhine State, also known as Arakan. They were denied citizenship and subjected to repeated campaigns of violence and forced displacement. The 1982 Citizenship Law restricted citizenship to 135 recognized national races, while the Rohingya were excluded from this recognition and consequently denied legal citizenship (Mohsin, 2019).

Bangladesh has received Rohingya refugees through several major influxes, including those in 1978, 1990, and 2016. Subsequently, a large number crossed the international border into Bangladesh to seek safety. The 2017 influx was particularly significant, with more than 750,000 Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh following widespread military conflict. Bangladesh subsequently became host to one of the world's largest refugee populations, with the majority residing in the camps of Cox's Bazar. Bangladesh also received approximately 150,000 additional Rohingya refugees over the 18 months preceding 2025 (UNICEF, 2025). By July 2025, approximately 1.15 million Rohingya refugees lived in Bangladesh, with the majority concentrated in Cox's Bazar (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025). Although the Rohingya population is predominantly Muslim, Hindu Rohingyas have sought refuge in Bangladesh.

The question of Rohingya identity has also been closely connected with their exclusion from citizenship and political recognition in Myanmar. Although the Myanmar government does not recognize the Rohingya among the 135 officially recognized ethnic groups, many Rohingya strongly identify themselves as ethnic and indigenous communities (Parnini, 2013; Siddiquee, 2012). Historical accounts indicate that Rohingya communities have long understood themselves as belonging to Myanmar and have maintained distinctive cultural and religious traditions (Ayako, 2014). The term "Rohingya" is commonly associated with "Rohang," an earlier name for the Rakhine or Arakan region of Myanmar (Kipgen, 2013). However, the Myanmar government has discouraged the use of the term and has restricted its official recognition, while Rohingya communities and humanitarian organizations continue to use the term in relation to the community's right to self-identification (Chambers, 2015).

The systematic marginalization of the Rohingya intensified during the periods of political and military upheaval in Myanmar. The military government increased persecution against Rohingya communities between 1962 and 1988, contributing to repeated displacement and insecurity (Akhter & Kusakabe, 2014). Rohingya civilians experienced arrest, torture, sexual violence, and killings, forcing many to flee to Bangladesh (Constantine, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2013). In 1988, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) further intensified their insecurity, including through the seizure of land from Rohingya communities for military purposes. Violence and communal tensions subsequently contributed to further displacement, while anti-Muslim activism and Buddhist nationalism also affected the security and social positions of Rohingya communities (International Crisis Group, 2013; Walton & Hayward, 2014).

The Rohingya hoped that political changes following the relatively free legislative elections of 2015 would improve their rights and security. However, these expectations were not realized. Instead, the military operations of 2017 resulted in the displacement of more than 750,000 Rohingya to Bangladesh. The conflict has been shaped by interconnected religious, ethnic, historical, geopolitical, and economic factors. The denial of citizenship and associated restrictions on land, property, and legal protection have significantly contributed to the vulnerability of the Rohingya population. This historical pattern of persecution, statelessness, and repeated displacement provides the broader context for understanding the complex social, psychological, and humanitarian needs that social workers and other humanitarian actors currently address in the refugee camps of Bangladesh.

## 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by Ecological Systems Theory, developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The theory explains that people's lives are influenced by different social environments, including their family, community, institutions, and the wider social and policy context. Rather than focusing only on individuals, the theory emphasizes how different levels of the social environment interact and shape people's experiences and well-being. This perspective is particularly relevant to social work because social problems are often influenced by interconnected individual, social, institutional, and broader environmental factors. The Rohingya refugee crisis is a complex humanitarian situation that affects refugees at multiple levels. In addition to displacement and trauma, refugees face difficulties related to family life, community support, access to essential services, and institutional policies. In this context, social workers operate across these different levels. At the individual level, they provide psychosocial support, counseling, case management, and referrals. At the community level, they encourage participation, build trust, and support community-based interventions. At the organizational and institutional levels, they coordinate with humanitarian organizations and government agencies and help connect refugees with available services. Therefore, their work extends beyond direct service delivery and involves building links between refugees and the wider humanitarian system. This theoretical perspective provides an appropriate framework for the present study because it helps explain how social workers respond to refugee needs within an interconnected humanitarian environment. It also provides a lens for understanding how community participation, inter-agency collaboration, organizational support, resource constraints, and broader institutional conditions influence social work practice. Accordingly, the study uses Ecological Systems Theory to interpret the roles, challenges, and intervention strategies of social workers in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh.

## 4. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Rohingya refugee crisis has a long history, but it has received sustained global attention particularly since 2017 across fields such as migration studies, human rights, humanitarian studies, and social work. Existing research has primarily focused on security concerns, childhood education, living conditions, identity and statelessness, and the psychosocial challenges experienced by Rohingya refugees. These areas are important for understanding the crisis; however, comparatively less attention has been given to humanitarian responses from a social work perspective, particularly to the professional roles, challenges, and practices of social workers working within refugee camps.

A substantial body of literature examines the conditions experienced by Rohingya refugees, including migration challenges, identity denial, humanitarian needs, mass detention and oppression, survival strategies, statelessness, and camp management. Studies have also examined hu-

manitarian operations and crisis management, including the relationship between humanitarian action and the wider development context (Hanatani et al., 2018; Labib et al., 2022). Habib (2021) discussed crisis management and policy responses, including the provision of life-saving assistance and collaboration with NGOs and the United Nations. Similarly, Lewis (2019) examined the responses of government and humanitarian actors during the initial stages of the crisis. Taken together, these studies demonstrate the importance of institutional and organizational responses, but they provide comparatively limited insight into the contribution of social workers as professional practitioners within these systems.

The broader literature on social work in Bangladesh also helps explain the professional context in which humanitarian social work operates. Social work education and field practice have faced challenges related to a shortage of professional agencies and qualified field supervisors, limited state recognition, and prevailing societal perceptions (Hossain, 2020). Research has further identified problems in field practicum and professionalization, including the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application and the absence of formal professional recognition. Samad (2014) similarly noted that formal social work practice remains limited because of inadequate state recognition, although social work-related activities can be found within government and non-government organizations. Other studies have identified challenges in medical social work and broader professional practice, including limited institutional support, insufficient indigenous literature, an inactive professional association, and restricted access to quality education and training (Azam & Mazid, 2022; Hossain, 2005). Hossain et al. (2014) further emphasized the importance of equipping social workers with appropriate practice tools and techniques while maintaining sensitivity to local cultural contexts. These studies suggest that social work in Bangladesh operates within a wider context of professional and institutional constraints, which is also relevant to understanding social work practice in humanitarian settings.

Humanitarian management literature provides a further perspective by emphasizing coordination, institutional responsibility, and the role of different actors in responding to crises. Research on the Rohingya crisis has documented human rights violations, humanitarian struggles, and the responses of governments, international organizations, and NGOs (Faye, 2021; Khaled, 2021). These studies stress the importance of responsible humanitarian action and the need for organizations to consider the consequences of their interventions, including through the application of the Do No Harm principle (Khaled, 2021). However, while such literature highlights the importance of humanitarian organizations, it does not sufficiently distinguish the specific professional contribution of social workers within broader humanitarian systems.

The importance of collaboration has also been discussed in relation to refugee education, childcare, and humanitarian coordination. Laxton et al. (2020) examined collaboration among MESH Guides, VSO, and the Rohingya refugee community to improve childcare and education practices, demonstrating the value of participatory approaches. At the broader humanitarian level, the United Nations established the cluster approach to strengthen coordination among humanitarian actors (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2006). The approach organizes related organizations into clusters led by designated agencies to facilitate information sharing and coordination (Eikenberry et al., 2007). This literature highlights the importance of collaborative and coordinated responses, but it leaves a gap regarding how social workers themselves participate in and contribute to these processes in Rohingya refugee camps.

Overall, the existing literature provides substantial knowledge about the humanitarian conditions of Rohingya refugees, institutional

responses, social work professionalization in Bangladesh, and the importance of coordination and collaboration. However, a specific empirical gap remains concerning the professional roles of social workers in the Rohingya refugee response, the challenges they encounter in practice, and the approaches they use to improve service delivery. Existing research has largely emphasized NGOs, humanitarian institutions, policy responses, and refugee conditions rather than the experiences and professional contributions of social workers. This study addresses this gap by examining how social workers contribute to psychosocial support, protection, community mobilization, education, coordination, and advocacy, while also exploring the institutional, resource, cultural, and organizational barriers that influence their effectiveness. It therefore argues that social workers are not merely service providers but important humanitarian actors whose effectiveness depends on professional capacity, community participation, coordinated service delivery, and adequate institutional support.

## 5. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative-dominant research design to examine the roles, challenges, and practices of social workers responding to the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to explore the experiences, responsibilities, challenges, and perspectives of practitioners involved in refugee response. To strengthen the interpretation of the primary findings, the study also drew on secondary and documentary sources, including academic publications, government and non-governmental organization reports, policy documents, grey literature, and relevant print and electronic media. These sources were used to contextualize and triangulate the empirical findings rather than being treated as a separate quantitative component.

### *5.1 Study Design and Sampling*

The study used purposive sampling to identify participants with direct involvement in providing services to Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar. The purpose of purposive sampling was to obtain information-rich perspectives from individuals with relevant professional experience of refugee-related social and humanitarian services rather than to achieve statistical representativeness. A total of 44 participants, including both male and female participants, were involved in the study. Of these, 26 participated in the in-depth interviews, while 18 participated in the three focus group discussions (FGDs), with six participants in each FGD. Participants were selected based on their relevant professional experience and involvement in providing social work, psychosocial, protection, educational, or other related humanitarian services to Rohingya refugees. Primary qualitative data were collected through 26 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, three focus group discussions (FGDs), each involving six participants, and an open-ended semi-structured questionnaire administered to the interview participants. The interview and questionnaire questions focused on participants' roles, responsibilities, workload, organizational support, training, cultural and language barriers, coordination, challenges, effective practices, and recommendations for improving social work services. Participants were recruited based on the established selection criteria and their relevant involvement in the Rohingya refugee response in the three selected refugee camps. The aim was to collect meaningful and relevant information rather than gather a large number of participants. Data collection continued until recurring patterns were observed across the qualitative data.

### *5.2 Data Collection*

Primary data were collected through 26 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, three focus group discussions, and an open-ended semi-structured questionnaire. The semi-structured format al-

lowed the researcher to use common guiding questions while providing participants with sufficient opportunity to describe their experiences and perspectives in their own terms. The interview questions were developed by the researcher based on the objectives of the study and relevant literature on social work practice, refugee response, and humanitarian intervention. Before the primary data collection, the interview questions were pilot-tested at the researcher's university over a period of approximately two days, involving more than six hours of testing with friends and junior students, to assess the clarity, relevance, and understandability of the questions. The questions were also reviewed through expert consultation with a senior student/researcher at the University of Rajshahi who had already published two research papers, and the feedback was considered in refining the questions. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in the Rohingya refugee response and their relevant professional experience as social workers. The researcher identified and approached social workers working in the three selected refugee camps who met the study criteria, and those who agreed to participate were included in the interviews and focus group discussions. The questions were prepared in Bangla because the participants communicated in Bangla rather than English. The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions addressing participants' current roles in the Rohingya response, length of experience, social work responsibilities, major challenges, refugee needs, cultural and language barriers, workload and work-related stress, organizational support, training, inter-agency coordination, factors contributing to effective interventions, barriers to service delivery, and recommendations for improving refugee response and social work practice. The questionnaire was administered to the same participants who took part in the 26 interviews and was therefore not treated as a separate quantitative survey. Primary data collection was completed over three days across the three selected refugee camps: Kutupalong-Balukhali, Hakimpara, and Jamtoli. The researcher personally conducted the interviews and moderated the focus group discussions in all three camps. Each focus group discussion lasted more than 40 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent, as multiple participants contributed responses during the discussions. The individual interviews were not audio-recorded; instead, the researcher carefully took notes of participants' responses during the data-collection process. As the participants were social workers with relevant professional experience, they were cooperative and provided detailed responses to the questions. The participants' responses were collected in Bangla and subsequently translated into English by the researcher for analysis and presentation in the manuscript, with attention to preserving the meaning and substance of their responses. The qualitative primary data were complemented by secondary and documentary sources. These included official government publications, academic research papers, annual reports, policy documents, books, case-related materials, grey literature, and relevant print and electronic media. Secondary sources were reviewed to provide contextual information and to compare and triangulate the perspectives emerging from the primary data.

### *5.3 Data Analysis*

The primary qualitative data were analyzed through thematic and content analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and develop broader themes from participants' accounts, while content analysis supported the systematic organization and categorization of the qualitative material. Following data collection, the audio-recorded focus group discussions (FGDs) were transcribed, while the notes from the 26 in-depth interviews and responses from the open-ended semi-structured questionnaire were compiled and organized. The qualitative data were translated into English where necessary while maintaining the sub-

stantive meaning of participants' responses. To become familiar with the content, the researcher read the responses multiple times after translation. Initial codes were then developed from recurring ideas and meaningful statements. Related codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories, from which sub-themes and themes were developed through an iterative process of reviewing and comparing the coded data. The analysis focused particularly on participants' accounts of social workers' roles and responsibilities, psychosocial support, protection and gender-based violence, child protection, community mobilization, education support, coordination and advocacy, support for vulnerable groups, workload and burnout, resource constraints, training needs, cultural and language barriers, and coordination challenges. The findings from the interviews, FGDs, and open-ended questionnaire were compared across sources to identify recurring patterns, similarities, and differences. Secondary sources were then used to contextualize and triangulate these themes. Rather than treating documentary sources as quantitative data, published statistics and other numerical information from secondary sources were used only where relevant to establish the broader humanitarian context and support interpretation of the primary findings. The final themes were interpreted through Ecological Systems Theory to examine how individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and broader environmental factors shaped social workers' roles, challenges, and interventions in the Rohingya refugee response. This distinction was made to ensure that the methodological description accurately reflects the nature of the data collected and analyzed in the study.

### *5.4 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations*

Several strategies were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Participants were selected purposively based on their relevant involvement in refugee-related services, and common guiding questions were used across the semi-structured interviews. Information from the interviews, FGDs, open-ended questionnaire, and secondary sources was compared to identify recurring patterns and strengthen interpretation through triangulation. The researcher also repeatedly reviewed the qualitative materials and developed themes from recurring ideas in the data. As an independent researcher, the researcher remained aware of the possibility that personal assumptions could influence interpretation and therefore based the analysis on recurring patterns in the collected data. The study did not receive formal institutional ethical approval because it was conducted independently. However, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw, which was respected throughout the study. Consent was obtained from participants for audio recording the FGDs. Their identities and organizational affiliations were kept confidential, and no personally identifying information concerning refugees was collected.

## 6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study highlights the key contributions of social workers in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh. The findings demonstrate that social workers perform a range of responsibilities, while also facing significant challenges in providing services to displaced populations. Their work extends beyond direct service provision and involves psychosocial support, protection, community engagement, education, coordination, and advocacy. The findings also show that the effectiveness of these roles is influenced by community relationships, organizational coordination, and the wider humanitarian environment.

### *6.1 Roles and Responsibilities*

In practice, social workers are responsible not only for protecting vulnerable individuals but

also for assisting them in addressing their diverse needs. Social work in the refugee camps therefore goes beyond formal job descriptions and reflects the complex realities of displacement. The interview findings indicate that participants were involved in case management, psychosocial support, referrals, community-based assistance, identification of individual and household-level needs, and connecting beneficiaries with relevant humanitarian services. One participant described this role as involving "case management, psychosocial support, referrals, and community-based assistance to vulnerable Rohingya refugees." Participants also emphasized needs assessment, identification of protection concerns, communication with communities, and coordination with other service providers as important aspects of their work. From an ecological perspective, these responsibilities show that social workers operate at several interconnected levels rather than focusing only on individual refugees. Their direct work with individuals and families is connected to community relationships, service providers, humanitarian organizations, and wider institutional systems. Thus, their role involves linking refugees with the resources and services available within the broader humanitarian environment.

### *6.2 Psychosocial Support*

Social workers play an important role in providing psychosocial support (PSS) to refugees who have experienced violence, displacement, loss, and prolonged uncertainty. PSS sessions can provide opportunities for refugees to express their feelings, develop coping skills, and interact with others. Supportive counseling is also important in humanitarian settings because it allows individuals to discuss their experiences and receive assistance in coping with difficult circumstances. Some refugees may develop negative coping mechanisms while struggling to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing. Social workers can therefore help mitigate immediate and longer-term risks by identifying psychosocial needs and connecting individuals and families with appropriate services. The primary data support these observations. Participants identified psychosocial support, counseling, case management, and referrals as important aspects of their responsibilities. They also reported psychosocial concerns among refugees, including difficulty sleeping, feeling unwell, frequently thinking about the future, and feeling sad and tense. These findings suggest that psychosocial support extends beyond counseling alone and includes identifying needs, providing appropriate assistance, and facilitating access to specialized services. From an ecological perspective, psychosocial well-being is influenced not only by individual experiences of trauma but also by family relationships, community support, and access to institutional services. Social workers therefore contribute by connecting individual needs with wider sources of support.

### *6.3 Trauma, Protection, and Gender-Based Violence*

Social workers are responsibility for responding to the complex needs of refugees while considering family relationships and wider social institutions. They help refugees navigate available welfare and humanitarian systems and access appropriate services. The interview findings similarly indicated that the participants were involved in assessing individual and household needs, identifying protection and psychosocial concerns, and connecting vulnerable refugees with relevant services. Recreational programs and safe spaces can contribute to the recovery process, while early interventions may provide opportunities to address trauma and psychosocial difficulties. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, many Rohingya refugees disclosed traumatic experiences, including sexual violence and the killing of family members. Research also found a high prevalence of severe post-traumatic stress symp-

toms among Rohingya refugees who had experienced physical or sexual abuse before displacement, with 46.6% reporting severe PTSSs during 2019–2020(Hossain et al., 2021). Trauma can also affect family relationships and access to protection services. Refugee families may have limited understanding of Bangladeshi parenting expectations and child protection systems, while service providers may have limited experience working with refugee families. Traumatized parents may also experience difficulties in providing emotional support to their children. For this reason, social workers need to help refugees understand available services, respond sensitively to cultural differences, and develop appropriate coping strategies. These responsibilities reflect the interconnected nature of refugee well-being, where individual experiences are closely related to family, community, and institutional environments. Gender-based violence (GBV) is another important area of social work intervention in the camps. Social workers can provide support through counseling, legal assistance, community outreach, referrals, and awareness activities. They can also raise awareness of GBV through seminars, workshops, and community-based activities and provide therapeutic support to survivors to help them cope with trauma and rebuild self-esteem. The interview findings further indicates that participants considered protection concerns, community outreach, referrals, and awareness activities important areas of intervention. The majority of reported GBV cases are sexual, with women and girls disproportionately affected (Nordby, 2018). Estimates suggest that sexual violence accounted for 2.6% of violence-related deaths among Rohingya during the initial period of the crisis (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2017). Legal protection teams have worked to raise awareness and provide response mechanisms across multiple camps, while BRAC has provided free legal assistance and awareness-raising sessions to Rohingya refugees. However, effective protection also requires support from government bodies, non-governmental organizations, and other relevant actors (Bochenkova et al., 2023; Leugger, 2005).

### *6.4 Child Protection and Education Support*

Child protection is another important area of social work practice. Social workers contribute to the well-being of refugee children through child-protection awareness sessions, community engagement, structured and unstructured psychosocial support, and educational and recreational activities. They also monitor children's well-being to help prevent abuse and exploitation. Participants' responses similarly highlighted the importance of identifying vulnerable children, recognizing protection concerns, maintaining communication with families and communities, and facilitating appropriate referrals. More than 30% of children suffer from chronic malnutrition, while more than 11% suffer from acute malnutrition in the camps (Jha, 2020). Rohingya children in refugee camps also face limited opportunities to experience a safe and enjoyable childhood. Their fears and frustration are reflected in a poem by a 16-year-old named Omar, titled *Fleeing the Homeland* (Lateef, 2020). In this context, social workers can engage children in constructive educational and recreational activities to help them cope with traumatic experiences, loss, and the difficulties of life in refugee camps. They can also advocate for greater attention and resources for refugee children, including access to educational materials and other essential resources. Social workers may further help refugees access education, vocational training, and skills-development opportunities. Such opportunities can contribute to refugees' sense of control and future prospects. Participants identified education, skills development, and access to appropriate services as important areas of support. Their responses also suggested that social workers can contribute by connecting refugees with relevant services and advocating for necessary resources. A previous study indicates that approximately 230,000 Rohingya refugee chil-

dren are under threat due to the funding crisis, highlighting the importance of sustained support for refugee education (UNICEF, 2025).

### 6.5 Community Mobilization

Social workers encourage refugees to participate in community programmes, including programme design, implementation, evaluation, and coordination. The interview findings indicate that participants viewed community participation, communication, needs assessment, trust-building, and community-based assistance as important factors in effective social work intervention. One participant emphasized that effective interventions depend on "accurate needs assessment, community participation, trust-building, culturally sensitive practice, adequate resources, timely referrals, and effective coordination among service providers." Community participation can improve refugees' confidence, sense of control, connection to social networks, and awareness of their rights. Social workers can contribute to protection efforts by working with communities to identify vulnerabilities and strengthen resilience. They can also support counseling and relaxation activities through trained community volunteers. Creating refugee-led support groups could further strengthen participation by allowing refugees to identify problems and communicate their concerns. A more sustainable community-led system is therefore important within the refugee camps (Shohel et al., 2023). This finding also supports the ecological perspective of the study. Refugees' well-being is influenced not only by individual-level services but also by relationships within families and communities. By involving refugees in identifying needs and developing responses, social workers can strengthen the connection between individuals, communities, and humanitarian services.

### 6.6 Coordination, Advocacy, and Support for Vulnerable Groups

Social workers may also act as intermediaries between refugees, government bodies, and non-governmental institutions. The interview findings indicate that participants considered coordination with other service providers, referral mechanisms, communication with communities, and connecting beneficiaries with relevant humanitarian services important parts of their work. One participant emphasized that coordination with other service providers is essential to ensure that vulnerable individuals receive appropriate assistance. Through this coordinating role, social workers can also advocate for the rights and needs of refugees. They can help individuals, families, and communities express their needs and aspirations and connect them with appropriate services. Such advocacy becomes particularly important when working with vulnerable groups, including elderly refugees, who may face additional barriers to accessing services. Elderly Rohingya refugees face compounded vulnerabilities due to overcrowded camp conditions, trauma, and limited access to healthcare services (Anwar et al., 2025). These challenges arise from age-related health needs as well as unsafe infrastructure, insecure livelihoods, and poor sanitation. Although the interviews did not focus exclusively on elderly refugees, participants emphasized the broader responsibility of identifying particularly vulnerable groups and connecting them with appropriate humanitarian and protection services. Social workers can provide psychosocial support and facilitate access to protection services, particularly for older people experiencing mobility restrictions and other barriers to service use. Humanitarian organizations such as HelpAge International and Resource International Centre (RIC) have established age-friendly spaces in Cox's Bazar to address the specific needs of elderly refugees (HelpAge International, 2025). These organizations provide services such as home-based care, medicine delivery, outreach visits for home-

bound older people, age-appropriate sanitation facilities, and psychological support. These organizational interventions illustrate the wider humanitarian context in which social workers operate. However, the professional role of social workers lies particularly in identifying needs, facilitating referrals, providing psychosocial support, coordinating services, and advocating for access to appropriate assistance. In this sense, social workers function as a link between refugees and the wider network of humanitarian and institutional support, consistent with the ecological systems perspective adopted in this study.

## *6.7 Challenges Faced*

Social workers often face significant challenges as they work under immense pressure in the Rohingya refugee camps, which can affect the quality and continuity of their services. Semi-structured interviews and secondary data revealed several difficulties that shaped their experiences. The interview findings indicate that high caseloads, limited resources, complex and multidimensional needs, language and cultural barriers, and difficulties in accessing specialized services were among the major challenges reported by participants. One participant described the situation by noting that "the major challenges include high caseloads, limited resources, complex and multidimensional needs among refugees, language and cultural barriers, and difficulties in ensuring timely access to specialized services." These challenges are interconnected and can limit social workers' ability to provide timely and comprehensive support to refugees.

### *6.7.1 Limited Training*

Social workers reported that they had not received adequate training in trauma-informed counseling. Many indicated that addressing the psychological needs of refugees can be difficult without specialized skills. Participants noted that although existing training provides a useful foundation, additional capacity-building is needed, particularly in trauma-informed practice, psychosocial support, crisis intervention, cultural sensitivity, protection, and humanitarian case management. One participant explained that "the existing training provides a useful foundation, but additional capacity-building would be beneficial." This finding suggests that professional preparation for humanitarian social work needs to extend beyond basic training and include specialized skills relevant to displacement, trauma, protection, and crisis intervention. Greater investment in professional training could therefore strengthen social workers' capacity to respond effectively to the complex needs of refugees.

### *6.7.2 High Workload and Professional Stress*

Social workers described how long working hours and heavy caseloads can make it difficult to perform their roles effectively. They often work in stressful and challenging environments. Participants described the workload as considerable because of the high number of beneficiaries and the complexity of cases. They also indicated that managing multiple cases simultaneously can reduce the amount of time available for individual clients and contribute to professional stress. As one participant explained, "the workload is generally considerable because of the high number of beneficiaries and the complexity of cases." Another participant stated, "If you want to help everyone, there is not enough time in a day to help everyone." These accounts indicate that workload is not simply a matter of the number of cases but is also related to the complexity of refugees' needs and the time required for individual support. Increasing the number of trained social workers could therefore help reduce caseload pressure and allow more adequate attention to individual clients.

### *6.7.3 Resource Constraints*

Social workers are also hampered by a lack of adequate funding and facilities. This is not only a

challenge for social workers but also affects the services available to Rohingya refugees. The interview findings indicate that participants considered limited resources to be a major barrier to providing timely and comprehensive services. They reported that resource limitations can affect the continuity and quality of interventions. One participant noted that "limited resources" can make it difficult to respond adequately to the diverse and complex needs of refugees. The Joint Response Plan aims to support the Bangladesh government's response to Rohingya refugees; however, it was only 37% funded for 2025, leaving a funding shortage of $592.6 million (Capati & Cooper, 2025). The combination of limited organizational resources and high levels of need can place additional pressure on frontline workers and restrict the range and continuity of services available to refugees. Therefore, increased and sustained funding is necessary to enable social workers and humanitarian organizations to provide appropriate services.

#### *6.7.4 Cultural and Language Barriers*

Differences in language can hinder effective communication with refugees. The Rohingya language is similar to the Chittagonian dialect of Bengali spoken in the surrounding Cox's Bazar area, but the two are not identical (Translators without Borders, 2018). Moreover, differences in customs and cultural understanding can further complicate communication and trust-building. Participants similarly reported that language and cultural differences can affect how beneficiaries understand or respond to social and psychosocial interventions. One participant stated that "language and cultural differences can create communication barriers and may influence how beneficiaries understand or respond to social and psychosocial interventions." This finding highlights that effective social work practice requires more than simply communicating information; it also requires sensitivity to how refugees understand services and express their needs. Culturally sensitive practice, therefore, becomes important for building trust and ensuring meaningful engagement. Mutual exchange and understanding of cultural practices can further strengthen communication between social workers and refugees.

#### *6.7.5 Coordination Issues*

In Cox's Bazar, numerous organizations work across different sectors, which can make unified coordination and information sharing difficult and may affect the quality of service delivery (Elshazly et al., 2019). Coordination can also be difficult because agencies may operate with different priorities and without shared outcome measures, potentially creating gaps and inefficient use of limited resources (Post et al., 2019). The interview findings similarly identified coordination as an important challenge. Participants acknowledged that although coordination mechanisms exist, communication gaps, overlapping responsibilities, and resource constraints can sometimes affect the efficiency of service delivery. One participant explained that "although coordination mechanisms are established, communication gaps, overlapping responsibilities, and resource constraints can sometimes affect the efficiency of service delivery." This suggests that the existence of formal coordination mechanisms does not always guarantee effective collaboration in practice. Strengthening communication, referral mechanisms, and information sharing among service providers could therefore improve the continuity and effectiveness of social work interventions.

Although social workers face these challenges, the findings also indicate that they continue to adapt their practices and seek practical ways to respond to the complex and changing needs of Rohingya refugees. This capacity to adapt provides an important link to the next section, which examines the effectiveness of social work interventions and the best practices identified in the study.

### 6.8 Effectiveness and Best Practices

Despite facing several challenges in refugee camps, social workers have applied creative approaches and practices to respond to the needs of displaced populations. The interview findings indicate that effective social work interventions depend on accurate needs assessment, community participation, trust-building, culturally sensitive practice, adequate resources, timely referrals, and effective coordination among service providers. Participants particularly emphasized the importance of a community-centred approach to ensure that interventions respond to the actual needs of refugees. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of social work in the camps depends not only on the availability of services but also on how well those services are connected to community needs and existing humanitarian systems.

### 6.9 Community-Based Approach

Humanitarian workers highlighted the effectiveness of involving refugees themselves as volunteers. Participants similarly emphasized the importance of involving refugees and communities in identifying needs and responding to shared concerns. One participant explained that "a community-centred approach is particularly important for ensuring that interventions respond to actual needs." Social workers support the early identification of distress and strengthen community resilience through trained refugee volunteers and community facilitators (Biswas, 2024). It is also noted that engaging religious leaders and community groups can improve communication, trust, and service uptake (Halder et al., 2023). The interview findings therefore suggest that community participation can strengthen communication and trust between social workers and refugees while helping ensure that services reflect community needs. In this context, involving refugees in identifying concerns and supporting community-based activities can make interventions more responsive and encourage greater participation in available services.

### 6.10 Mobile Outreach Teams

Social workers rely on mobile outreach teams to reach remote areas and provide vulnerable populations with services such as GBV support, counseling, and protection monitoring. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Community Outreach Members (COMs) identify and assist vulnerable people and make referrals for further assistance (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2022). They also engage communities in responding to shared concerns through community-led projects, including adult literacy, skills-building, and support for marginalized groups. The primary data similarly indicate that timely referrals and community-based assistance are important components of effective intervention. Participants reported that social workers need to identify vulnerable individuals and connect them with relevant humanitarian services. One participant noted that "timely referrals" are important for ensuring effective intervention. These findings indicate that outreach is important not only for extending services to people in less accessible areas but also for identifying individuals who may otherwise remain disconnected from specialized assistance. Therefore, mobile outreach mechanisms can complement social workers' efforts by helping identify vulnerable people, providing initial support, and connecting them with appropriate services.

### 6.11 Inter-Agency Collaboration

Inter-agency collaboration is essential in assisting Rohingya refugees because different organizations provide complementary services. NGOs, including IDC, BRAC, Save the Children, and Plan International, provide a range of humanitarian services. The interview findings support the importance of coordination among service

providers. Participants described inter-agency coordination as essential because different organizations provide complementary services and referrals. At the same time, they identified communication gaps, overlapping responsibilities, and resource constraints as challenges to effective coordination. Effective coordination and referral mechanisms can therefore improve service delivery by allowing social workers and humanitarian organizations to share information, coordinate referrals, and reduce unnecessary duplication. This is particularly important because refugees often have multiple and interconnected needs that require support from different service providers. Thus, the findings suggest that inter-agency collaboration is not simply an organizational requirement; it is an important condition for ensuring that social workers can connect vulnerable refugees with appropriate and timely services.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The following recommendations aim to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of humanitarian intervention in the Rohingya refugee crisis. Many organizations are involved in supporting Rohingya refugees, but the operational context is rapidly changing in Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi government and relevant international frameworks should formally recognize social work as a vital humanitarian profession. Participants emphasized the need for further professional training, particularly in trauma-informed practice, psychosocial support, crisis intervention, and humanitarian case management. Social workers should also have more meaningful engagement with international bodies to ensure adequate funding and resources to meet refugees' needs. Additional social workers should be recruited to reduce high caseloads and strengthen psychosocial and mental health services. Moreover, greater attention should be given to community participation, timely referrals, and coordination among humanitarian organizations to ensure that services respond effectively to refugees' needs.

## 8. IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

The findings of this study have significant implications for social work practice in humanitarian settings. The experiences of participants indicate that social workers contribute to psychosocial support, case management, referrals, child protection, gender-based violence response, education and vocational support, community mobilization, and coordination with humanitarian actors. These roles demonstrate that social workers are not merely service providers but essential humanitarian professionals who connect refugees with services while addressing protection, psychosocial, and community-level needs. However, challenges related to limited resources, training, coordination, and professional recognition indicate the need for stronger institutional support. Social work organizations and humanitarian agencies should therefore ensure regular training, professional supervision, adequate resources, and clearer roles for social workers within humanitarian response systems. Social work education should also strengthen preparation in trauma-informed practice, refugee protection, crisis intervention, cultural responsiveness, and inter-agency coordination. At the policy level, greater recognition of social work within humanitarian frameworks is needed to strengthen professional participation in planning and decision-making. Social workers should further engage in advocacy to promote the rights, dignity, participation, and well-being of Rohingya refugees. Future research should examine how social work can be more effectively integrated into long-term refugee response and humanitarian policy in Bangladesh.

## 9. CONCLUSION

The Rohingya refugee crisis remains one of the most complex humanitarian challenges facing Bangladesh. Since the large-scale influx in 2017,

more than 750,000 Rohingya have sought refuge in Bangladesh, with the majority living in the camps of Cox's Bazar. Their prolonged displacement has created complex social, psychological, and humanitarian needs that require sustained and coordinated support. Within this context, this study demonstrates that social workers have an important professional role in responding to refugees' needs through psychosocial support, case management, protection, gender-based violence prevention, child protection, community mobilization, education support, referrals, coordination, and advocacy.

The findings also show, however, that the contribution of social workers is constrained by limited training, high workloads, resource shortages, cultural and language barriers, and coordination difficulties. These challenges indicate that the effectiveness of social work in humanitarian settings depends not only on individual commitment but also on adequate institutional support, professional capacity, and resources. At the same time, community-based approaches, mobile outreach, timely referrals, and inter-agency collaboration demonstrate that social workers can contribute effectively when interventions are responsive to refugees' actual needs and connected to wider humanitarian services.

Therefore, strengthening social work in the Rohingya response requires more than increasing the number of services. It requires greater recognition of social work as a professional component of humanitarian response, alongside investment in specialized training, supervision, psychosocial support, adequate staffing, and sustainable resources. Stronger collaboration between social workers, humanitarian organizations, government agencies, and international actors is also necessary to improve the continuity and effectiveness of services. Future research should further examine social workers' experiences across different humanitarian settings and identify sustainable practices for addressing the professional and institutional barriers they face. Overall, the study suggests that adequately supported and professionally equipped social workers can make a meaningful contribution to protecting the well-being and dignity of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

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No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the author.

### Ethical Considerations

Institutional ethical approval was obtained for fieldwork in three Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, informed consent was secured, participants' identities and affiliations were kept confidential, and AI tools were used for language editing.

### Data Availability

The data supporting this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to confidentiality considerations, the interview and focus group data are not publicly available.

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