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Forsaking Females in the Face of Famine: Re-Evaluating Displaced Persons Rations to Decrease Child Marriage of Refugees

Food insecurity in displacement camps has longer, unintended consequences beside immediate famine and persisting malnutrition. Being without reliable access to food in refugee camps, largely due to flawed ration systems, has long-term effects on the progress of women to get an education, earn a living wage, independently support their families and receive job training – ultimately, halting development of women’s rights in developing countries. By looking at the plight of Myanmar’s Rohingya population, who have fled to neighboring Bangladesh after appalling acts of ethnic cleansing, this essay brings focus to how problems arise among displaced people when facing food insecurity that leads to acts of gender-based oppression. Specifically, among the Rohingya, this oppression is apparent in the rise of girls and young women being forced into marriage to supplement their families rising need for access to rations. While displaced Rohingya in Bangladesh barter their daughters to make up for the lack of food their family receives from the World Food Programme ration system, solutions to this food insecurity issue, and subsequent rise in child marriages, lie with other countries’ use of food voucher programs to address similar humanitarian crises.

The Rohingya are a Muslim ethnic minority group from Myanmar (formerly Burma) that are being persecuted, attacked and forced to leave their homes by government troops. The conflict first started in 1948, after Myanmar was able to gain independence from British rule (Hunt). Fighting between the Buddhist majority and Muslim minority began to fester because of rebellions and attacks made by both groups. Tensions dramatically escalated as the Myanmar government committed acts of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya and forced many to flee from their home to seek safety. The United Nations estimates that as of February 2018, approximately one million Rohingya refugees have fled Myanmar and almost all displaced persons from the ethnic group have relocated to refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh (Alam). The Rohingya are currently considered stateless due to their displacement.

Although the Rohingya are not identified as nationals of any state, the remaining group’s living conditions and basic needs (food rations) are tied to the actions of Bangladesh, a south Asian country that holds the eighth largest population in the world (“Bangladesh”). The massive number of people moving into Bangladesh has put a tremendous strain on the country’s resources and already underfunded humanitarian aid. Since the state opened its border to Rohingya refugees, Bangladesh has been unable to organize the international diplomatic support needed to decisively end the humanitarian crisis. Basic services are now badly outstripped, particularly food and water. In one of the largest refugee camps in Bangladesh, Cox’s Bazar, 671,000 new arrivals have entered since February 2018. Details of the camp includes 2,000 acres with basic infrastructure and services still being developed (ISCG). Due to its refugee population, Bangladesh is now known as “one of the world’s largest, most crowded settlement of asylum-seekers” (Allard).

The Rohingya living in Bangladeshi refugee camps are living off of rations funded by government and non-government agencies, primarily the United Nations’ World Food Programme (WFP). According to the WFP, Rohingya families receive the same rations — based on an average family of five — that include rice, lentils and vegetable oil every two weeks (Bazar). This ration does not change in proportion to the size of the family, meaning a family of five is receiving the same amount of resources as a family of 11 (“Some Rohingya”). Part of the reason for this system of food distribution is because of the speed at which the Rohingya arrived in Bangladesh seeking asylum. The Bangladeshi government contends that

they did not have enough time to get information on the number of people per family, so they instead calculated a “rough average of members per family and started distributing relief” (“Some Rohingya”). But the flaws in this ration system can be seen in the latest survey conducted by the International Rescue Committee, which showed that almost 40,000 Rohingya children (ages 6 months to 5 years) who are living in the refugee camps suffer from acute malnutrition (“October 2017”).

While the struggle to survive, especially among larger families of Rohingya refugees, has been accelerated through a flawed and inequitable food distribution system, this food crisis has led to an even more disturbing human rights crisis. Food insecurity in these camps has been directly tied to young Rohingya girls and young women being forced to marry simply to secure more food for their extended family. Early marriage reduces the number of people needed to be fed in families already strapped for enough resources and creates new households with food quotas of their own (“Child Marriage”). With the food crisis being exacerbated within the confines of the refugees camps in Bangladesh, girls and young women are not only facing malnutrition but also major limitations of growth and stability that will persist for generations by being forced into underage marriage.

One example of this can be seen through Marium, a 14-year-old Rohingya girl who fled to the refugee camp of Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh, after her village was burned. Marium was married off just three weeks after arriving at the displacement camp, because her family told her they could not support her with their given food rations. Marium said, “I have no father and I was a great burden on my mother so it’s better I got married. Of course if my mother had the ability to feed me I would be happy to stay single,” (Bazar). Child marriage is becoming more popular among the Rohingya as poverty and food insecurity increase with the rising population of displaced persons arriving to the camps. And the Rohingya are not the only refugee population with a troublesome connection between rising food insecurity and child marriages.

While impoverished parents may believe that marrying off their girls will be a means of securing their daughters’ futures and allow them to eliminate a “burden” from their responsibilities of care, their actions are a short-term approach that leads to catastrophic generational impacts to women in their communities. According to the United Nations Population Fund, child marriage “threatens girls’ lives and health, and it limits their future prospects” (“Child Marriage”). These girls will not be allowed an access to education and their marriages are often followed by pregnancy. The UNFPA also reports that nine out of 10 births to adolescent girls occur within a marriage or a union in developing countries. Unsurprisingly, these countries’ mother mortality statistics show that complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the number one cause of death among girls between the ages of 15 to 19 (“Child Marriage”). Bangladesh, which has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, also continues to foster this practice of child marriage. The country’s government passed a new provision in 2017 that would allow child marriage to take place under “special circumstances,” which is with permission from the court and parental consent (Guha).

Solutions to correct these food insecurity and child marriage problems in Bangladesh can stem from a review of the distribution of rations by the Bangladeshi government and the World Food Programme. A household with more than eight family members are supposed to receive two ration cards while any household with seven family members or fewer receives one card. In one case, eighteen people in a family are given sixty kilograms of rice. For one family’s case, every two weeks they are given fifteen kilograms of rice, two kilograms of lentil and two liters of oil per card provided by the World Food Programme. Refugee Samsun Nahar said, “The food ration which we get is not enough and I cannot feed my children as much as they want,” (Uttom). Nahar does not have the only family suffering due to the supplying of ration cards and something must be done so that families like Nahar’s are able to live a sustainable life.

One potential solution that could be developed is currently being used in Kilis, Turkey. The displaced persons food program allows Syrian refugees to use debit cards when they register to participate in the program. Every month, the family receives a balance of \$40 per person for food and \$10 per person for sundries. The camp has been praised for its resemblance to a comfortable living space for refugees to reside in for the time being (McClelland). Benefits of this program being that the money given to refugees is not determined by the number of family member. This would help as the primary reason for child marriages would be demolished. The program also allows refugees a sort of freedom of choice as they are able to make decisions on what they would like to spend their money on.

The problem with this solution is that the displacement camp is not supported by international non-profits but is instead staffed and largely funded by the Turkish government. Expenditures at the Kilis camp cost approximately \$2 million a month and by the end of 2013, the Turkish government had spent \$2.5 billion on its Syrian refugees (McClelland). This solution has the structure of a good possibility but it lacks the alliance between non-profit organizations and the government. All of the internal backlash is put on the government that is taking in the refugees and the refugees themselves, and it is not necessarily preparing displaced individuals in the camps to be self-sufficient so that they can eventually contribute to the local economy, instead of solely relying on government assistance.

New developments to affect change with the issue of food insecurity among the Rohingya were recently announced. The World Food Programme (WFP) has created an evolving plan for 2018 to support the Rohingya and create a more advanced system. The WFP is installing an “e-card” system to encourage a variety of food choices for the refugees (Ready). As this was the same concept as the solution written above when this essay was first researched in 2017, progress is in fact being made around the malnourishment the Rohingyas have had to face. However, even with these improvements being made by organizations such as the WFP, more needs to be accomplished to help Rohingya women who have already been denied independence, a lack of education and equal treatment by being married off solely for the purpose of gaining more rations from foreign aid organizations. A generation of young women have been denied a future, and additional steps need to be made on their behalf.

Another solution presently being worked on by the World Food Programme is a system called the food voucher program. This distribution plan to address food insecurity in refugee camps has been tested in Dadaab, a refugee camp in Kenya. This program allows refugees to purchase a wide range of nutritious items not available in WFP food rations, similar to the United States’ Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program. One concern with this new system is that people must have access to local markets and markets must be able to sustain the demand (Sugow). This new system also is in use in Ethiopia. Refugees are able to work with the voucher system through another avenue called the Fresh Food Project. This expansion allows refugees the ability to open shops in the displacement camp. One man named Negash Ayele usually sells carrots, onions and tomatoes by scanning the customer's card which then gives them a set balance. The Fresh Food project is funded by UK Aid Direct which targets and tries to improve the conditions of children and pregnant women. Refugees with five family members receive a card of 200 birr, the Ethiopian currency, and 300 birr for households of more than six family members (Nødhjælp). This program could be a viable option for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, and it also offers a measure of checks and balances to avoid corruption through the use of technology.

Developing the infrastructure for this food voucher program in Cox’s Bazar would include building alliances, particularly between the government, civil society organizations (nonprofits) and large international organizations such as the UN. These partnerships also should include local merchants and refugees with a background of running a business, so there can be a platform for concerns and solutions by the local community and the increasing number of refugees entering the country. The government and nonprofit organizations would need to first approve the project and then help fund the voucher program as the food must be imported to the camp’s market. A study done by Kenyatta University reported that the

cost effectiveness of this voucher program was a “positive and significant effect” on refugees’ lives in other camps, such as Dadaab refugee camp. The study came to a conclusion that prices of the food stock depend on the seasonal production cycles (Sugow). This plan needs to be built slowly and steadily as different sectors of industry can play a part in the program. For example, if the markets are secure then an additional farming unit can be established so that refugees are able to create a functioning support system for themselves which can evolve into a society that doesn’t need additional help from outside donors.

The second part of the food voucher solution comes from the actual building of a physical structure. This structure being an open marketplace for refugees to participate in purchasing and selling of nutritional valued foods. If the Rohingya are able to provide for themselves and make advancements in their agriculture, daughters will no longer be sold for food rations but can instead work with the rest of the community to provide more. This overall solution would have an initial cost of about one million dollars, based off of past market systems, though the production and the selling of products done by the refugees can make a profit that benefits the country as a whole.

Through the second solution, the Rohingya are able to make a society they can call their own and help the community become more independent until they are able to stand on their own feet to provide for themselves. Unlike the first solution, which doesn’t give jobs to the refugees but only provides food for those who need it, the food voucher program and the Fresh Food project combined are able to cause a major difference in the way that agriculture is adapted by the Rohingya. The number of family members per card shouldn’t be a factor in how much food a family gets as only conflict arises. The end goal of the final solution is to create a support system for those displaced people that can be maintained even after support from outsiders has ceased.

The past has proven that when those in need are welcomed and accepted by local leaders, developments regarding the issue can be accomplished. Iowa Governor, Robert Ray, welcomed refugees from an ethnic group called the Tai Dam in 1975. The state of Iowa helped nearly 1,500 Tai Dam resettle into new homes and communities, allowing them to prosper in a new safe environment (“Robert”). Ray, who died just recently, said in his testimony before Congress in 1979, “After watching it, I saw that we really only had two choices: we could either turn our backs as countless others suffered and died, or we could extend a hand to help, and in so doing prevent tragic loss of innocent lives. Actually, I saw only one real choice. I wrote President Carter January 17, informing him that Iowa would resettle an additional 1500 refugees during this year” (“Iowa Governor”). Maybe it is by his example that another potential solution could be found for this food insecurity and human rights abuses problem among the Rohingya in Bangladesh. If Iowa, or states across America, would be willing to resettle Rohingya refugees, their communities could once again flourish, while our American cities can benefit from the diversity and additional labor needed to rebuild our small towns - similar to what we saw in Storm Lake, Iowa, with the southeast Asian refugees.

Ultimately, the issue at hand is that girls and young women being married off in exchange for more rations or short-term relief of food insecurity within displacement camps is a rising issue in Bangladesh as the number of Rohingya refugees increases. These salient issues need to be corrected immediately as they not only lead to vast bouts of malnutrition in the camps but also to generations of women being denied basic access to education, job training, reproductive rights and ultimately, independence. It is evident that when women are able to gain an education and financial independence that they are able to have more important role in society which allows them to help the community in different aspects of industry or agriculture. One way to address oppression of young women and girls in these Bangladeshi refugee camps is to reassess and change the current food ration distribution system so women can no longer be used as barter chips. Some of the solutions discussed above include providing independence per family with their ration choice through pre-loaded debit cards, as well as a voucher system and Fresh Food Project that offers meaningful alternatives to refugee families through building partnerships in their local

communities to provide and distribute goods. Solutions like these are needed to educate refugee families and the countries they relocate to that there are tangible options to feed these individuals instead of forcing their girls to give up their futures for rations.

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