



“Our Heart is Always in Burma”: Rohingya Narratives of Return Amid Ongoing Genocide in Myanmar

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16.1 INTRODUCTION

Every person has a right to return to their own country according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 13.2, 1948) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (article 12.4, 1996). At the same time, states should not return people to a place where they may face torture and their lives may be threatened, according to

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the Convention Against Torture (1984). Rohingyas, an ethno-religious-linguistic minority (predominantly Muslim) from the Rakhine State (also known as North Arakan) in Myanmar (former Burma), are not recognised as citizens by the Myanmar government. Rohingyas have been facing persecution, discrimination, human rights violation, and genocide since the 1970s (Amnesty International, 2018; Human Rights Council, 2016–2019; Ibrahim, 2016; Martuscelli et al., 2024a; Uddin, 2020; Zarni & Cowley, 2014) when the Myanmar government started to deny their citizenship rights (Cheesman, 2017; Kyaw, 2017; Parashar & Alam, 2019). The United Nations (UN) has classified the Rohingyas as the most persecuted minority in the world (Human Rights Council, 2017). At the International Court of Justice (ICJ), The Gambia has brought the genocide case against Myanmar on 11 November 2019, which is still ongoing. The Court ordered provisional measures in January 2020 to protect the Rohingya and Myanmar continues to submit reports on compliance and monitoring (ICJ, 2026).

The root cause of the crisis has been identified as the statelessness of the Rohingya population, which was deliberately created by the Myanmar military/Tatmadaw in the 1960s (Rahman, 2024). The Rohingyas were accepted as citizens of Myanmar immediately after the country's independence in 1948; however, their citizenship was snatched away in 1974 by making them foreigners in their own motherland. In 1978, the Myanmar State expelled over 200,000 Rohingyas who took refuge in Bangladesh (Aall, 1979; Lindquist, 1979); however, majority of them (187,250) managed to return to Myanmar through a bilateral agreement between the two countries (Sabriet & Mohsin, 2024). In 1982, the Myanmar authority introduced a new citizenship law that made the entire Rohingya population stateless, which resulted in the second mass exodus of about 300,000 Rohingyas into Bangladesh in 1992 (ICJ, 2020, p. 128). Later with the support of UNHCR, approximately 230,000 Rohingyas were repatriated to Myanmar. However, the atrocities, gender-based violence (GBV), torture, extortion, and systematic discrimination culminating into genocide against them continued by the Myanmar State, and consequently, the Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh in 2012, 2015–2016, and the record breaking mass exodus of over 750,000 Rohingya people in 2017 (Sabriet & Mohsin, 2024).

Different moments of escalation of violence forced the Rohingyas to leave their country/Myanmar in 1978, 1991–1992, 2012, 2015, and most recently in 2017 and look for safety in Bangladesh, India, Malaysia,

Indonesia, Thailand, and other countries (Uddin, 2020). The main countries hosting Rohingyas (Bangladesh, India, and Malaysia) are not part of the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) and its Protocol (1967). It means that Rohingyas' presence is tolerated. Still, they have no perspectives on integrating into the host countries and accessing rights like work, education, healthcare, and free movement. These three countries see the Rohingya's return to Myanmar as the only solution for their protracted situation. The governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar coordinated previous repatriation programmes for Rohingyas in 1978 and 1992 that have been criticised for forcing Rohingyas to return to an unsafe environment (Aall, 1979; Dock, 2020; Saha, 2001). Rohingyas were persecuted in Myanmar again and went to Bangladesh in higher numbers in 2017, which shows that their previous return experiences were not sustainable and safe. According to Bradley (2009, p. 379), “return is simply not a real option if it is not sustainable”, reinforcing the need to involve refugees in return discussions and consider their aspirations. With the recent military coup in February 2021 and ongoing civil war and genocide in Myanmar (Vrieze, 2024), Rohingyas' perspectives of return are even more precarious, which demands an analysis of how these refugees consider their return possibilities.

Rohingyas living in makeshift camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, and informal settlements and cities in India and Malaysia “find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo” (Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, 2004, p. 1), resulting in a protracted refugee situation as defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Overall, the Rohingya situation can also be classified as a political emergency, that is, “a humanitarian crisis in a country, region or society [...] which requires an international response that goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency and the ongoing United Nations (UN) country programs” (OCHA, 1999, p. 6). While return is the preferred solution to address the Rohingya crisis, their return should be voluntary, safe, informed, dignified, and sustainable (Black & Gent, 2006; Bradley, 2008, 2009; Chimni, 2004; Crisp & Long, 2016; Gerver, 2018; UNHCR, 1996). Most studies on refugees' return discuss the politics of return (Bradley, 2009; Chimni, 2004; Crisp & Long, 2016; Macdonald & Porter, 2020); host countries narratives on the return of refugees (İçduygu & Nimer, 2020; Şahin-Mencütek, 2021), the voluntariness of return (Gerver, 2015, 2018), and the sustainability of refugees' return (Black & Gent, 2006). However, few studies consider

the return aspirations of refugees living in protracted situations (Kayaoglu et al., 2021; Khan, 2020; Omata, 2013; Zimmermann, 2012).

The goal of this article is to understand how Rohingyas living in Bangladesh, India, and Malaysia perceive their return aspirations to Myanmar. We also want to investigate whether the ongoing genocidal act and violence, systematically perpetuated by the Myanmar authority, especially the Tatmadaw, is obstructing the process of sustainable Rohingya return. We understand that the only way to recognise return as a viable and sustainable solution to this humanitarian crisis is to understand what elements would be necessary for their voluntary return according to their perspectives. We recognise that Rohingyas are experts in their experiences that should be considered in discussions involving their return (Bradley, 2009). In this article, we employ the term return, not repatriation, because repatriation presupposes the active participation of different actors, including the host countries and international organisations (Şahin-Mencütek, 2021). Rohingyas living in Bangladesh, Malaysia, and India used the term “return” and not repatriation in their 259 micronarratives collected between March 2019 and April 2020.

16.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

What Are the Determinants of Refugees’ Decision to Return?

Initial studies on refugees’ decision to return to their home countries discussed the ‘myth of return’. They criticised how refugees and host countries conceptualise ‘home’ may not translate the reality (Black, 2002; Zetter, 1999). Time, nostalgia, and memory may influence refugees’ desire to return to a ‘home’ that no longer exists (Warner, 1994). Chimni (2004) criticises this idealised view of voluntary repatriation as the primary durable solution for refugees. Refugees may miss their homes but still decide not to return. Refugees who faced violence in Myanmar, lost loved ones, or lost property may not want to return (Camarena & Hägerdal, 2020). Besides that, the economic situation in the home country may also adversely affect refugees’ aspirations to return. For example, Camarena and Hägerdal (2020) concluded that economic perspectives and emotions (having suffered violence) are the two factors that better explain why many Lebanese Christians displaced in the 1980s never returned to Lebanon.

Using this logic, Kayaoglu et al. (2021) problematise refugees' return. In their study on Syrian refugees residing in Turkey and their aspirations to return, the authors concluded that refugees' decision to return is complex and may depend on conditions and time. Refugees may decide not to return at the moment but return in the future with conditions; refugees may choose to return at the moment with no conditions, and refugees may decide to never return depending on what they faced in their home countries and what they suffered in their host countries. Overall, return is a complex decision for both refugees and other migrants. Koser and Kuschminder (2015) explain that the return decision depends on political, social, and economic factors both in the host and home country, individual characteristics and social relations (like family decisions). Policy interventions (including official repatriation programmes) may also affect the decision level. Omata (2013) explained that Liberian refugees' decision to leave Ghana and return to their country depends on their family and personal lives in Ghana, future objectives (like access to education), chances to survive in both countries (e.g., return to properties in the home country), possibility to access other durable solutions (e.g., local integration or resettlement in a third country), and safety and support networks in Liberia.

Integration possibilities in the host countries may affect refugees' aspirations to return. For example, Di Saint Pierre et al. (2015) studied how integrating refugees from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Somalia in the Netherlands impacted their wishes to return to their home countries. Using a survey of these refugees, the authors concluded that refugees that perceived discrimination (higher educated and proficient in Dutch) and those that identified less with the Netherlands were more likely to return.

Return decisions may also depend on individual and family circumstances and plans. Khan (2020), analysing the refugees' return motivations with the support of UNHCR from South Africa to their home countries, concluded that their decisions are based on personal factors, including their situation in the host countries and their home countries. Most refugees explain that they perceived their countries were safe. Women alone in the host countries mentioned loneliness and family reunification to justify their decision to return. Emanuelsson (2008) also reflected that family life is the main factor that affected the decision of Kurdish families to leave Sweden. Access of children to education and women's empowerment are core themes that appeared in their research.

Moreover, Emanuelsson (2008) reflected that return is a circular process and that many Kurdish families visit their home countries often and gather information from families and friends to decide about their return.

Different studies with refugees concluded that political factors in the host countries, including the end of the conflict, security and safety, peace and stability, change in the government and access to justice, are the main factors that affect refugees' decision to return (or not) to their countries of origin. In their research with refugees in more than 150 countries from 1991 to 2018, Zakirova and Buzurukov (2021) concluded that political factors like the end of wars and genocide and a decrease in human rights violations are the main factors to explain refugees' return and not economic incentives (access to jobs, lands, and services). Safety, freedom, peace, elimination of persecution, and the rule of law in the home countries also impact refugees' decision to return (Bradley, 2008; Zakirova & Buzurukov, 2021).

Syrians residing in Turkey, Jordan, Germany, and Lebanon also explained their conditional approach to return in different studies (Kaya & Orchard, 2020; Kayaoglu et al., 2021; Keith & Shawaf, 2018; Müller-Funk & Fransen, 2020; Yahya et al., 2018). In their survey of 889 Syrian refugees living in five cities in Germany in 2015, Kaya and Orchard (2020) found that the restoration of stability (for those who suffered direct safety threats) and the adoption of a democratic regime (for those with higher education) are the main factors affecting their decision to return to Syria. Keith and Shawaf (2018) reflected that most Syrians in Lebanon do not intend to return at the moment. Some conditions are necessary for their return, including the end of the conflict, safety and no reprisal, detention, or arrest for those who fled. In a survey with 757 and 41 in-depth interviews with Syrian refugees in Turkey and Lebanon, Müller-Funk and Fransen (2020) also found that the Syrians' return is complicated, depending on their life aspiration and are conditional to the end of the conflict, safety and political conditions in Syria. Youngsters, men, and highly educated people were also less likely to return than women and people living in larger households.

In their study with 21 focus group discussions with Syrian refugees in Jordan and 18 in Lebanon, Yahya et al. (2018, p. 1) concluded that "a majority are unwilling to go back unless a political transition can assure their safety and security, access to justice, and right of return to areas of origin". Overall, Syrians were pessimistic about their return possibilities and achieving a peace agreement. One in eight participants never wanted

to return because they suffered severe trauma and felt nothing left for them in Syria. They perceived resettlement in another country as their only option. Kayaoglu et al. (2021) conducted mixed-methods research involving 41 interviews and a survey with 1,197 Syrian refugees living in Turkey on their return aspirations. They concluded that 82% of the respondents would like to return to Syria conditional to the end of the conflict and establishment of a new government. However, 16.75% of the respondents would never want to return to Syria. A specific situation in Syria is that if a family had sons, they would be more concerned about return because their children could be forcibly conscripted (Yahya et al., 2018). Kayaoglu et al. (2021) did not find any differences in return wishes considering the gender and age of the participants. The authors conclude that "like in other protracted refugee situations, Syrian refugees' aspirations are shaped mainly by fear, uncertainty and lack of trust regarding Syria's situation" (Kayaoglu et al., 2021; UNHCR, 2019).

Refugees from other nationalities also do not trust their home countries and fear their safety and living conditions if they return home. Eidelson and Horn (2008), in their survey of 235 South Sudanese refugees living in the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Uganda, discovered that trust was the main issue preventing their return because many perceived that previous peace agreements were violated. Although most refugees wanted to leave Kakuma, they were worried about safety, mines, infrastructure and access to education, money, and water in South Sudan. In addition, refugees perceived as more vulnerable and wanted justice were less likely to return. Sullivan (2019) also reflected that both Rohingyas and South Sudanese refugees face the same barriers to return to their countries: the ongoing insecurity, impunity of perpetrators and the existence of root causes of their displacement, the destruction and confiscation of their homes, the lack of services and job opportunities in the countries of origin, the exclusion of refugees in discussions about their return and lack of information.

Bradley's (2009) reflections on return and return in dignity for refugees also presuppose a conditional return. The author explains that "the conditions of just return match the core duties a legitimate state must provide for its citizens: equal, effective protection for their security and basic human rights, including accountability for any violations of these rights" (p. 286). The author also highlights that when refugees do not have citizenship like the Rohingyas, a just return presupposes that

they will (re)gain active citizenship. Bradley (2009, p. 372) also reinforces “the principle of refugee choice, and [...] the need to redress the injustices that cause and characterise displacement” as necessary for a dignified return. Finally, the author recognises the need for the restitution of properties and houses as fundamental for a return to dignity.

Rohingyas' Situation in Bangladesh, Malaysia, and India

According to UNHCR (2026a), there were over 1.34 million Rohingya refugees residing in the camps in Cox's Bazar district (includes 146,989 biometrically identified new arrivals since 2024) and 34,000 in the Bhasan Char Island in Bangladesh (see Fig. 16.1), including about 39,500 who arrived in the 1990s. Among them, 52% were female and 48% male, that includes 45% children, 25% young adults, and 4% elderly persons (UNHCR, 2026a). Bangladesh is a least developed country facing severe structural setbacks to sustainable development (UN/DESA, 2024). In Bangladesh, Rohingyas live in camps and receive relief from international and national organisations. However, they are not allowed to leave the camps and have no right to work or permanent residency in Bangladesh. Their access to education and health is also limited to what is offered in the camps (UNHCR, 2021a). The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) recognises Rohingyas' as Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMN), not refugees; considers their stay in Bangladesh as temporary, manages the crisis through administrative directives and letters, and defines voluntary repatriation as the only possible solution (UNHCR, 2026a). Between 2006 and 2010, 920 Rohingya were resettled from Bangladesh to Australia, Canada, and the USA (Paul & Das, 2020). However, the government ended the resettlement programme in 2010, fearing that having a chance to go to a developed country could motivate Rohingyas to come to Bangladesh. At present, not a single Rohingya repatriated to Myanmar, apart from a few thousand Rohingyas have been resettled in the USA and other developed countries (Martuscelli et al., 2024b; U.S. Mission in Geneva, 2024).

Bangladesh, India, and Malaysia are developing countries, who are also not signatories of the UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) and its Protocol (1967). They do not have national legislation on asylum. It means, although UNHCR recognises Rohingyas' as refugees, but their presence is tolerated as temporary in these countries. Their situation is unstable because any government could return them to Myanmar

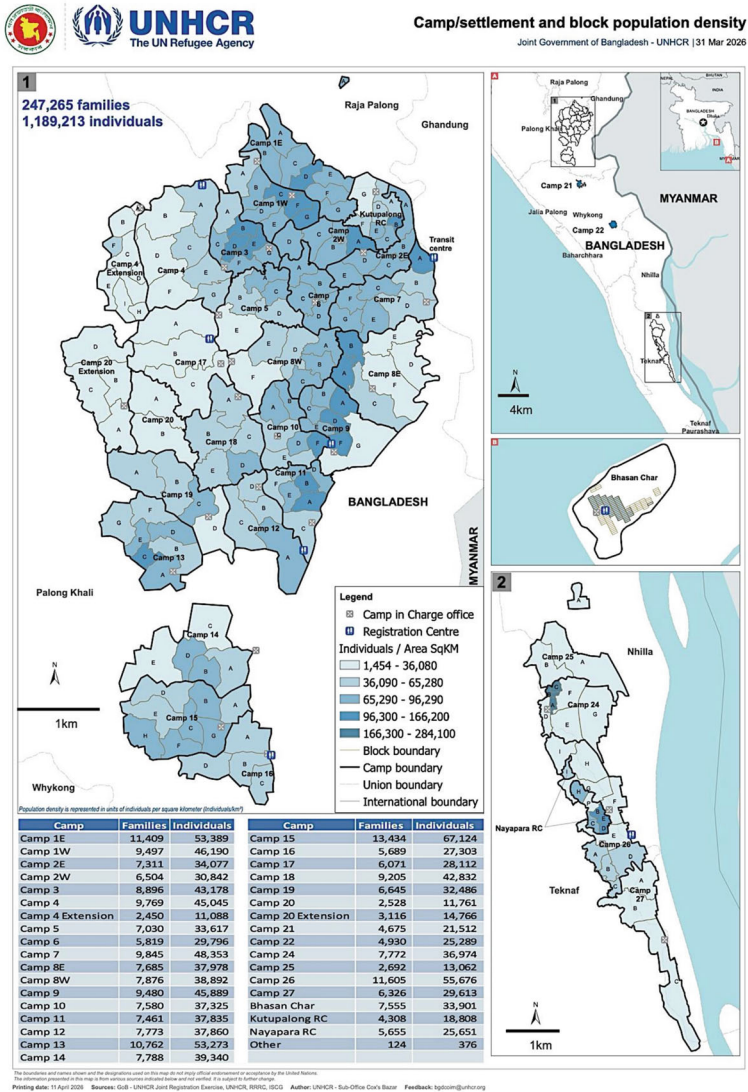


Fig. 16.1 Map showing the distribution of the Rohingya population in Bangladesh (Source UNHCR (2026a). <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/121946> (accessed on 19 April 2026))

against their will. Rohingyas do not have perspectives of integrating into the national societies, receiving permanent residency (documents) and accessing all rights like the nationals. Another problem is that Rohingyas are stateless; that is, they do not have documents (like passports and identity cards) which prevent them from accessing services (like buying a cell phone or renting a house) that other migrants could access in these countries (Milton et al., 2017). In this session, we briefly discuss why voluntary repatriation is the leading solution that these host countries advocate for this population.

At the end of February 2026, about 215,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, including over 126,000 Rohingyas, were in Malaysia (UNHCR, 2026b). Most refugees in Malaysia live in precarious situations in the country's cities or informal settlements (Equal Rights Trust, 2014; Wake & Cheung, 2016). Refugees are not legally allowed to work in Malaysia, which put them at risk of abuse and dangerous work. They can also be arrested if they work without a work permit. Rohingyas do not have documents, which prevents their children from accessing education. They also have difficulty accessing healthcare in Malaysia (Wake & Cheung, 2016). It is acknowledged that resettlement and voluntary repatriation as the leading solutions for refugees in Malaysia (Martuscelli et al., 2024b). Resettlement is a limited possibility for them because more refugees are needed than countries willing to receive this population. For example, between 2013 and 2014, only 625 Rohingyas left Malaysia for resettlement countries, among the thousands that applied for this (Equal Rights Trust, 2014).

In India, by the end of 2024, more than 240,000 individuals were listed as refugees (70%), refugee-like situation (25%), and asylum-seekers (5%); comprising 46% women and girls, and 36% children (UNHCR, 2024). The UN estimates that there are currently about 23,300 Rohingyas in India (UNHCR, 2026c). Most Rohingyas live in informal settlements or slums in cities in India, and many are not registered with UNHCR. In India, the UNHCR recognises resettlement and voluntary repatriation as the leading solutions for refugees (UNHCR, 2024). However, Rohingyas face the same challenges in achieving resettlement as Rohingyas in Malaysia. Refugees in India are not legally allowed to work and face challenges in accessing education and healthcare. They also face exploitation, economic insecurity and marginalisation, facing the risk of deportation (Field et al., 2020).

It should be noted that no Rohingya entered into India and Malaysia following the influx in 2017. These three countries, Bangladesh, India, and Malaysia, are struggling to integrate the Rohingyas due to challenges in cultural, social, legal, and economic aspects (Habib & Chowdhury, 2023). Resettlement is also not a feasible solution for this population (Martuscelli et al., 2024b; Taylor, 2020). Therefore, voluntary repatriation or safe return to Myanmar is the only option left (Taylor, 2020; Uddin, 2024). Previous return programmes were negotiated between Bangladesh and Myanmar in 1978 and 1991–1992. While thousands of Rohingyas returned to their country, studies discuss that their return was not safe (Aall, 1979; Dock, 2020; Saha, 2001). Dock (2020, p. 21) argues that:

Repatriation operations in the 1970s and the 1990s were profoundly flawed and violated principles of voluntary return. In the 1970s, coercive tactics, such as the denial of food aid and the use of physical abuse, violated international norms of refugee protection. UNHCR was not directly involved in the operation but was passive in the face of such violations. In the 1990s, coercive tactics by Bangladeshi officials persisted. Though officially involved in the process, UNHCR failed to be transparent with refugees about the level of protection they could offer, instead prioritising the agency’s relationships with the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar.

The Rohingyas living in camps in Bangladesh demanded their citizenship and political and civil rights as conditions for their return to Myanmar (Ahmed et al., 2021). However, the unsafe conditions for Rohingyas persist in Myanmar, although the Bangladesh government continues to insist on their return (Dock, 2020). In 2017, the GoB signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Myanmar concerning the return of Rohingyas (Taylor, 2020), which never saw the light of day. Although Rohingyas see Myanmar as their home, they do not want to return yet because they fear new persecution, violence, and genocide (Ahmed et al., 2021; Dock, 2020). Statelessness (not being recognised as citizens by Myanmar) is the main barrier to the repatriation of Rohingyas living in Indonesia (Susetyo & Chambers, 2020) and Bangladesh (Faulkner & Schiffer, 2019). Besides that, Rohingyas do not trust the Myanmar government that they will have peace and security if they return to the Rakhine state (Susetyo & Chambers, 2021). The Rohingya Repatriation Survey (Xchange, 2018) conducted between April and May 2018 with

1,700 Rohingya refugees residing in 12 refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, concluded that:

Overall, 97.5% of the Rohingya population would consider returning to Myanmar. Most respondents (99%), however, mentioned that they would go back only if certain conditions were met, with the majority saying citizenship of Myanmar with the acknowledgement that they are Rohingya, freedom of movement and religion, and their rights and dignity restored. However, 40 individuals (36 women) refused to return to Myanmar.

The survey also concluded that 80% of the Rohingyas did not receive enough information about the repatriation process and that 98% feared returning to their origin country (Xchange, 2018). Rohingyas in camps presented 13 demands to the UN to be repatriated to Myanmar that included a guarantee of citizenship and equal rights; access to identity cards recognising them as Rohingyas before the repatriation; guarantee of law and order for Rohingyas, involvement of the UN and the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the repatriation access; return of their original land in Rakhine State; prosecution of perpetrators of killing, gang-rape, and destruction of their properties and access to the UN Fact-finding mission to investigate the incidents of August 2017 (Siddiqui, 2018). Although the Rohingya Repatriation Survey (Xchange, 2018) is vital to understand a general perspective of the return of Rohingyas, it considers only Rohingyas living in Bangladesh.

Gaps in Literature

The existing literature on Afghan, Syrian, Venezuelan, and South Sudanese refugee return is extensive (Alrababah et al., 2023; Naseh et al., 2018; Ochoa, 2020), yet certain areas remain underexplored. Significant gaps remain on the Rohingyas' return aspirations from the perspective of those living in non-signatory countries of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Additionally, while majority of the works prioritise the involvement of refugees in return discussions, there is limited research that deeply explores the stateless populations such as the Rohingyas in this case and their specific conditions for a sustainable and voluntary return, such as ongoing genocide and mass-scale atrocities in Myanmar. Furthermore, the gendered dimensions of return aspirations, particularly the impact of GBV on women's willingness to return, have not been

adequately addressed. To overcome the research gaps, our study analyses the micronarratives of Rohingyas living in Bangladesh, India, and Malaysia. Micronarratives also allow us to conduct an in-depth analysis of Rohingyas’ narratives on return, which is limited to a survey (Ahmed, 2019).

Research Aim and Objectives

This article aims to analyse Rohingya narratives of return from Bangladesh, Malaysia, and India, given the context of how ongoing genocide, statelessness, conflict, and insecurity in Myanmar continue to hinder the possibility of voluntary, safe, and sustainable return. We have two research objectives:

- i. To identify the specific conditions under which Rohingyas living in Bangladesh, India, and Malaysia would consider returning to Myanmar.
- ii. To examine how ongoing genocide and atrocities in Myanmar shape Rohingya return aspirations.

By highlighting the unique challenges and perspectives of one of the most persecuted and stateless populations in the world (IIFMM, 2019), this study ultimately aims to contribute to new knowledge creation for the broader disciplines of genocide and refugee studies, and to their return in a safe, voluntary, and dignified manner in the context of genocidal violence.

16.3 METHODOLOGY

This study was part of a research project composed of researchers from the UK, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and India, funded by the British Academy. The project received institutional high-risk ethical approval and all formal data protection, consent, local-level permissions, and risk assessment procedures were in place before data collection. The entire project employed different methodologies of data collection, including field visits, focus groups discussions, and key-expert interviews; this paper analysed selected micronarratives of 259 Rohingya adult refugees residing in Bangladesh (145 participants), India (58 participants), and Malaysia (56 participants)

collected between March 2019 and April 2020. Each research partner leader had previous experience conducting research with Rohingyas in their respective country, facilitating access to field organisations and community leaders that helped recruit participants. In addition, they employed purposive sampling and a snowballing sample to guarantee a diversity of narratives, including gender, age, social status, and occupation (Ahmed, 2019).

The research leaders in each country trained research assistants (both male and female) from the community (in India, including one Rohingya refugee) to collect the micronarratives. In micronarratives, it is crucial to construct a trusting relationship between the storyteller and the story collector (Ahmed, 2019), facilitated by the contribution of research assistants from the local community. Research leaders in each country supervised the entire data collection process to provide feedback and ensure the enumerators were collecting the narratives of the refugees in the best way. Female enumerators collected the narrative of female participants. However, many Rohingya women felt uncomfortable being part of this research due to cultural and religious barriers. Most participants were male (166 or 64% of all the participants, of which, 72% in Bangladesh, 55% in India, and 64% in Malaysia). Most Rohingyas fled Myanmar after 2012 (Malaysia, and India) and 2017 (Bangladesh). The micronarratives were collected in the local Chittagong dialect close to the Arakanese dialect and Bengali (Bangladesh), Rohingya dialect (Malaysia), and Hindi (India). When Rohingyas could not communicate in Hindi, family members voluntarily helped with translations in India. The micronarratives were collected in the camps in Bangladesh, and in the houses, places of work or settlements (according to the participant's preferences) in India and Malaysia. More information on the participant's profile can be found in Table 16.1.

After the data collection, the research team anonymised all the data following data protection guidelines and professionally translated the interviews into English. We collected the oral informed consent of all participants (after explaining the project, risks involved, and participants' rights) because many Rohingyas could not read and write. We also considered this as an extra protection to avoid confidentiality breaches following recommendations from the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration on research involving refugees (IASFM, 2019). We initially used descriptive and focused coding (coding return in general) to code the micronarratives using NVivo12 software. We also wrote coding

Table 16.1 Age range and civil status of the participants

<i>Age range (in years)</i>	<i>Number (%)</i>	<i>Civil status</i>	<i>Number (%)</i>
18–24	48 (18.53%)	Married	190 (73.36%)
25–34	85 (32.82%)	Single	26 (10.04%)
35–44	40 (15.44%)	Widow	16 (6.18%)
45–54	29 (11.20%)	Divorced	6 (2.32%)
55–64	21 (8.11%)	Unknown	21 (8.10%)
65+	11 (4.25%)	Total	259 (100%)
Unknown	25 (9.65%)		
Total	259 (100%)		

Source The authors

memos (Saldaña, 2013). After this first cycle of coding, we adopted values coding (to understand participants’ values, motifs, and beliefs about return) and pattern coding (to visualise the themes that emerged when refugees reflected on their return to Myanmar) (Saldaña, 2013).

16.4 RESULTS

Rohingyas’ aspirations of return to Myanmar were marked by previous experiences of forced displacement and return from Bangladesh to their home countries. Thirty-four participants (13%) mentioned that they previously returned from Bangladesh to Myanmar. However, we could not find any patterns that people who previously returned did not want to return to Myanmar: twelve would not return to Myanmar, eighteen would return to Myanmar, and others did not explicitly mention their preferences on return. A Rohingya man of 45 years old living in Bangladesh narrated his experience of fleeing to Bangladesh three times:

I have come to Bangladesh three times. It was in 1978 when I came here for the first time, then in 1991, and finally in 2017. I came here every time after being persecuted by the Mogs [extremist Buddhist nationals]. [...] I was a 5-year-old kid when I came here back in 1978. I stayed here for three years during that time. An agreement between the Bangladesh government and the Myanmar government took place, and we were repatriated back to Myanmar after staying for three years in Bangladesh. Ironically, we ended up facing persecution once we got back. For this reason, I came back to Bangladesh again in 1991. I was 18 years old then. I married a Rohingya

girl here at that time. [...] It was sorrowful that the Bangladesh government repatriated us again, and we started to face torture and abuse like the last time. But the torture became unbearable in 2017 when I left my country for the third time. (Interview, 06/12/2019)

The narratives indicate that previous forced return experiences impact the future return of Rohingyas to Myanmar. Just like reflected by Kayaoglu et al. (2021), Rohingyas' aspirations of return are complicated and conditional. In our narratives, 133 Rohingyas (51%) wanted to return to Myanmar, but they presented some conditions. 60 Rohingyas (23%) said they did not want to return to Myanmar (35 or 58% of them were female), and 66 (26%) did not mention their return preferences. Among those that did not want to return, 31 were in Bangladesh, 5 in India, and 24 in Malaysia. The following subsections explain the conditions Rohingyas mentioned to justify their aspirations to return to Myanmar.

What is Necessary for Rohingyas' Return to Myanmar?

Most Rohingyas mentioned political factors in Myanmar that condition their return to their country. They highlighted access to citizenship as the primary condition for their return, followed by security/safety/protection from the government, recovery of lands and properties, access to rights, justice, non-discrimination/equality of treatment, recognition of their ethnicity, access to identity papers (identity cards/passports), freedom of movement and peace (Ahmed et al., 2021). The following quotes illustrate the political factors that emerged in Rohingyas' narratives in Bangladesh, India, and Malaysia, from both women and men:

We seek justice for all the atrocities inflicted upon us. We want our citizenship, lands, house, and everything around us. Though the Government of Bangladesh provides us with all the facilities, I still do not want to live here for my entire lifetime. I want to return to my country as soon as possible and want sufficient security there (Rohingya man, Bangladesh, 45 years old, 13/12/2019)

We will only go back to Myanmar in only one condition. We must be allowed to move freely. We must have the opportunity to move like the Mogs/local Buddhists. They must not look down upon our religion. Our children must have the opportunity to be educated and get jobs. We must have our citizenship certified as Rohingyas. Only then will we go back (Rohingya woman, Bangladesh, unknown age, 24/11/2019)

In a word, I want my right, freedom and other fundamental human rights from the Burmese government as a citizen. If one day I see these changes, I will then voluntarily go back to Myanmar (Rohingya man, Malaysia, 28 years old, 15/05/2019)

If we get back our rights and properties, I will return there voluntarily. The government must accept us as citizens of Myanmar and must recognize us as Rohingya. Then, I will return home (Rohingya woman, Malaysia, 21 years old, 15/09/2019)

If the Burma government accepts us being Rohingya and gives us citizenship of Burma, I don't know when I will go there, but many people will go there before me (Rohingya man, India, 29 years old, 11/12/2019)

If they give us nationality, we will immediately return to our places. We also don't want to stay here (Rohingya woman, India, 38 years old, 09/12/2019)

In these six narratives (like others that mentioned a favourable preference for a return to Myanmar), we perceive citizenship and Rohingya identity as the main political factors shaping Rohingyas' return aspirations. Other factors such as access to jobs/economic activities: *“The government must give us rights to take jobs and freedom of movement, including educational opportunities in the country, I will surely return voluntarily”* (Rohingya man, Malaysia, 20 years old, 16/08/2019); education: *“We want the opportunity for girls to study and to do better jobs”* (Rohingya woman, India, unknown age, 26/11/2019); and compensation: *“I want us to be compensated for all those endless harms did to us”* (Rohingya woman, Bangladesh, 26 years old, 30/12/2019), were also mentioned.

The situation in the host countries was not a factor affecting Rohingyas' aspirations of return because none of the participants had concrete integration possibilities in the host countries (Islam et al., 2022). However, while participants focused on citizenship as the primary condition for their return, there were some geographical differences in the additional requirements. People in Bangladesh focused more on justice and punishment for perpetrators of atrocities. We perceive this position in the following two illustrative quotes: *“what I want most is justice. We want justice for the brutalities and atrocities perpetrated against us”* (Rohingya man, Bangladesh, 34 years old, 04/12/2019); *“As soon as the Burmese government will be punished, we will return to our country”* (Rohingya woman, Bangladesh, 30 years old, 26/12/2019). Rohingyas living in Malaysia spoke more about changes in legislation and policy as additional conditions for their return: *“So if the government of Burma accepts us*

as Burmese citizens and changes their Anti-Rohingya policy then we will certainly go. Otherwise, I wish to die in Malaysia instead of going back there" (Rohingya woman, Malaysia, 22 years old, 16/06/2019); and *"Burma needs to change many things. They need to stop discrimination. The government of Myanmar must give us full citizenship rights and security. They must change the 1982 citizenship law"* (Rohingya man, Malaysia, 32 years old, 17/08/2019).

Rohingyas in India employed different expressions to justify their return when referring to the situation in Myanmar that included "things get better", "improve", "normal", and "issues solved". We did not see these expressions in other participants' narratives on their return aspirations. This pattern is evident in the following two illustrative quotes: *"Government is saying that we will be deported to Burma, but there is no need to do so, if situations become normal, we will go on our own"* (Rohingya man, India, 33 years old, 07/12/2019); *"[the] political condition in our country is not good. If things get better there, we will immediately go back"* (Rohingya woman, India, 25 years old, 05/12/2019). Rohingyas in India also stressed the need to change the governance system. This was the case of this 25-year-old woman: *"Like there is democracy in this country, if we have such a government in Myanmar, if that happens today, I will go to my country today itself. I will not even wait for another day"* (India, 05/12/2019).

However, a return is not possible for Rohingyas due to the current situation in Myanmar. Even among those that said they wanted to return, they mentioned that they could not return at the moment because of fear: *"I also want to go back to my own country, to my village. But only due to the fear of repression, I cannot muster the courage to do so"* (Rohingya man, Bangladesh, unknown age, 06/11/2019); and the situation of violence in Myanmar: *"We are ready to go back to our country, but how can we go back when the violence is still ongoing? Our future now seems uncertain. It seems that they will kill us next time"* (Rohingya man, Malaysia, 52 years old, 01/07/2019). Furthermore, many Rohingyas feared persecution: *"I would not like to go back to Myanmar because Rohingyas in Myanmar are still being persecuted"* (Rohingya woman, Malaysia, 18 years old, 24/09/2019); torture: *"If I am send back to Myanmar, I would be brutally tortured and burnt alive"* (Rohingya woman, Bangladesh, 62 years old, 04/11/2019); and violation of rights in Myanmar: *"I want to go back, but we can't go back in the present condition"* (Rohingya man, India, 56 years old, 20/01/2020); and *"I want to go back right away, but Buddhists are*

killing people, how can we return?” (Rohingya woman, India, years old, 09/12/2019).

This fear of returning is connected to the fact that most Rohingyas do not trust the Myanmar government. This distrust may be explained by the previous Rohingya experiences of return that were not sustainable. Our results show this narrative of a lack of trust in the government of Rohingyas in all three countries, like previous studies on refugees’ return aspirations (Ahmed et al., 2019; Mallick, 2020). The following three quotes illustrate this theme: *“We don’t trust them anymore, the government, so we are very stressed because we see our hopes of returning fading”* (Rohingya man, India, 48 years old, 10/08/2019); *“If the government can build trust among us, it would be ok for us to return our homeland”* (Rohingya man, Malaysia, 35 years old, 14/07/2019); and *“I don’t trust the Myanmar government. I have seen that the Myanmar government doesn’t act according to its commitment. So now I expect that the big powers of the world will take a fruitful decision to ensure our safety [when returning]”* (Rohingya man, Bangladesh, 50 years old, 09/12/2019).

Finally, this fear of returning and distrust of the government creates much uncertainty considering if, when and how Rohingyas would be able to return to their country. This uncertainty is reflected in the following quotes of Rohingyas refugees: *“I wish to return to my own country. I do not know if that will ever be possible”* (Rohingya man, Bangladesh, 55 years old, 14/11/2019); and *“I am not able to go back home at this time, and I am not quite sure if it will ever happen in the future”* (Rohingya man, Malaysia, 32 years old, 20/07/201). Overall, Rohingyas felt pessimist about their return possibilities: *“Now I have no hope from my country. It’s been from our grandparents that this problem is there, so it’s not going to get resolved that soon. I don’t think if anything would change there”* (Rohingya woman, India, 19 years old, 01/12/2019); *“Negotiations for repatriation have been in the table for a long time, but I do not see any confidence or assurance for peace from the Myanmar government”* (Rohingya woman, Malaysia, 21 years old, 01/07/2019).

Why Do Some Rohingyas Not Want to Return to Myanmar?

Among the people that expressed that they did not want to return to Myanmar, we perceived three main narratives to justify their decision: (a) they did not trust the government; (b) they felt they had nothing left for them in Myanmar, and (c) they suffered unbearable tortures and

violations of human rights. Some people want to return to Myanmar, but this return is conditional, and they cannot return now because they need to trust the Myanmar government. However, some Rohingyas that want to avoid returning to Myanmar mentioned the unlikelihood of trusting the Myanmar government to justify their decision. This was the case for these two Rohingyas living in Bangladesh and India, respectively:

I will not return to Burma even if I die of starvation here in Bangladesh. This is because I no longer believe the Burmese authority, no matter how much assurance they give us about providing us with security. This is the third time I have fled to Bangladesh and returned to Burma twice, but we received inhumane torture every time (Rohingya man, Bangladesh, 55 years old, 23/12/2019)

Who will go back to Burma? Things are fine one day, and they again start killing people the next day. My brother died there; he was put in jail. No one is left there for me (Rohingya woman, India, 55 years old, 23/01/2020)

This last quote also shows that this woman does not want to return to Myanmar because she feels nothing is left there for her. This narrative of “nothing left behind” justified why some Rohingyas do not wish to return to Myanmar. Losing family members because they were killed, imprisoned, or disappeared and having their houses and properties destroyed and confiscated created a situation of hopelessness for Rohingyas that do not want to return. We can also notice this feeling in the following two quotes.

I have no one in Myanmar. The Mogs grabbed all my houses and lands. I have nothing to do there (Rohingya woman, Bangladesh, 22 years old, 01/12/2019)

I do not want to go back home. I feel upset if I think of my past again. We lost everything there. All of our properties had gone, and we are not happy. We lost our children’s future (Rohingya woman, Malaysia, 36 years-old, 31/08/2019)

This feeling of “nothing left behind” is also connected with human rights violations and tortures experienced by the Rohingyas in Myanmar. Since they suffered in Myanmar and they do not trust the government that they will not suffer again, they do not want to return to Myanmar. We observed this theme in the following three illustrative quotes: “*I do*

not want to go back to Burma ever because I have been subject to torture many times in my life” (Rohingya man, Bangladesh, 47 years old, 19/11/2019); *“They abuse us a lot and even beat, that’s why we don’t feel like going back”* (Rohingya woman, India, 25 years old, 04/08/2019); and *“I am interested in going anywhere in the world except Myanmar. Because I had a lot of terrible & painful stories over there”* (Rohingya woman, Malaysia, 22 years old, 16/06/2019).

Most Rohingyas that do not want to return were women. In our analysis of micronarratives, 29 out of 93 female participants (31%), explicitly described why they never wished to return to Myanmar. The fact that more women do not want to return at all may be connected with the GBV suffered in Myanmar. This was the case of these two women: *“I never want to remember my life in Burma. I am doing well with my family here in Bangladesh [...] whether they let us return in Burma or not, I do not want to return to Burma again”* (Rohingya woman, Bangladesh, 20 years old, 27/12/2019); and *“A lot of us wants to go back to Myanmar, but I do not. I want to die here. I do not want to lose my mind again. I want to live happily. I do not want to remember my past”* (Rohingya woman, Bangladesh, unknown age, 13/11/2019). Although this woman did not mention that she suffered sexual or gender-based violence in her micronarrative, she also felt insecure as a Rohingya woman in Myanmar. Therefore, she did not want to return there: *“I feel distraught when I think about my suffering and insecurity in the past. I do not want to return home”* (Rohingya woman, Malaysia, 27 years old, 28/07/2019).

Overall, our analysis reveals that while a significant number of Rohingyas express a desire to return to Myanmar, their perspectives are not uniform. For instance, Rohingyas in Bangladesh emphasised on the need for justice and punishment of the perpetrators who committed genocide and crimes against humanity towards them (Ibrahim, 2016; IIFFMM, 2019; ICJ, 2026; Martuscelli et al., 2024a). In contrast, Rohingyas in India focused on a democratic transformation of the governance system in Myanmar, while those in Malaysia demanded for the recognition of their rights and identity. Additionally, we found that women who suffered violence expressed a stronger reluctance to return to Myanmar.

16.5 DISCUSSION

This study's findings provide critical insights into the Rohingyas' aspirations to return amid ongoing genocide in Myanmar, which both align with and extend the existing literature on refugee return and ensuring justice.

Alignment with Existing Literature

Our findings echo the outcomes of numerous scholars who have emphasised that refugee return is linked to a range of personal, social, economic, cultural, and political factors (Omata, 2013; Ahmed, 2024). For instance, Arababah et al. (2023) and Kayaoglu et al. (2021) found that Syrian refugees' return aspirations are shaped by improvements in security and trust in governance in Syria. Similarly, the importance of safety and the end of persecution as preconditions for return, as discussed by Bradley (2008) and Zakirova and Buzurukov (2021), is clearly evident in our Rohingya narratives. The emphasis on justice through the trial of the perpetrators, as found in our case of the Rohingyas in Bangladesh, aligns with the findings from Ahmed et al. (2021) and Bradley (2009).

Rohingyas currently living in the camps and on Bhasan Char Island in Bangladesh are protected and supported by various humanitarian stakeholders and provided with facilities like shelter, food, health, education, sanitation, and other logistics. However, despite getting numerous facilities in Bangladesh, sometimes even better than those available to their host communities in Cox's Bazar (Islam et al., 2022), most of the Rohingyas wish to return to Myanmar. Arababah et al. (2023) found similar results where the majority of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon wanted to return to their homeland despite better job prospects and access to public services in their host country. However, in both cases, the refugees demanded economic, physical, and social well-being, as well as justice for the genocide and atrocities committed against them.

New Contributions to the Literature

This study contributes new insights to the literature on refugee return. Unlike many other contemporary refugee groups, the Rohingya case study portrays a unique perspective that is influenced by their statelessness and the historical failures of previous return attempts. The Rohingyas

developed a profound mistrust of the Myanmar government/authorities based on their experiences of past returns from Bangladesh, which were neither safe nor voluntary (Rahman, 2024). The UN Human Rights Council (2019, p. 18) concluded that the Tatmadaw used sexual and GBV against the Rohingya population as a weapon of war to intimidate, terrorise, and punish them. This distrust, coupled with the ongoing fear of persecution, particularly among Rohingya women who have suffered GBV, and the present political landscape in Myanmar, such as the military coup in 2021, continued armed conflict, and atrocities towards civilian populations, has created a significant barrier to the Rohingyas' willingness to return. Moreover, while existing literature focuses more on economic factors as key determinants of return decision-making (Camarena & Hägerdal, 2020; Naseh et al., 2018; Ochoa, 2020), our study found that political conditions such as citizenship, legal rights, justice, cultural identity, and security are far more important for the Rohingyas.

The Uncertainty of Rohingya Return Under Ongoing Genocide

A major element contributing to the possibility of the Rohingyas' return is the fear of returning and distrust in the Myanmar government. This creates much uncertainty even for people who want to return to Myanmar. The fact that previous forced return experiences from Bangladesh to Myanmar appeared spontaneously in many Rohingyas' narratives may reinforce this fear and distrust. Rohingyas were returned, and they were persecuted again. The risk of a third major return (after 1978 and 1992) may be too high for Rohingya communities, without ensuring justice, safety, and a liveable environment in Myanmar. Additional guarantees of non-repetition of atrocities by the Myanmar authorities, the Myanmar military/Tatmadaw, and local Buddhists/Mogs should be put in place if the international community expects a durable and sustainable return of the Rohingyas to their home country. Some Rohingyas do not want to return to Myanmar at all. One in three women in our study did not want to return to Myanmar. This view is connected to a total disbelief in the Myanmar government, the feeling that a person has nothing left in their home country, and the repeated torture and human rights violations suffered in Myanmar.

(a) Recent Developments

According to UNHCR (2026a, 2026c), over 1.5 million Rohingyas are taking refuge in neighbouring countries, including 1.34 million in Bangladesh, 119,000 in Malaysia, 23,300 in India, 2,500 in Indonesia, and 500 in Thailand, while 519,000 are living as internally displaced stateless persons in Myanmar (UNHCR, 2026c). Such a prolonged protracted crisis has created immense physical and mental distress among the Rohingya population as a whole, while the majority of them are living in the camps in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, and others on the remote Bhasan Char Island, and many inside IDP camps in Myanmar. The Rohingya population is traumatised. The majority escaped genocidal violence and serious crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Tatmadaw, and the remaining population is still inside Myanmar, facing the continuation of the same genocide. In Bangladesh, although they have been ensured security, protection, and safely and have a much better life compared to that in Rakhine State, many are still isolated while living on the remote island, distant from their relatives, and some are disturbed due to lack of freedom of movement, no means of livelihood, no prospect of higher education for their children and a professional career, women facing GBV in the camps, and continual armed conflict, while other types of drug-related and illegal businesses are common in the camps of Bangladesh. The continuous refugee influx from Myanmar into Bangladesh creates immense pressure on the GoB, the local people, and the already vulnerable ecosystem. The UN is struggling to cope with the ever-growing need to manage more and more refugees from Myanmar. At the same time, the UN is facing significant funding cuts (UNHCR, 2026d).

As such, out of desperation and in search of a safer and better life, the Rohingyas are undertaking daring maritime movements towards some South and South-East Asian countries, primarily Malaysia and Thailand (see Fig. 16.2). Since 2012, nearly 200,000 Rohingya refugees have taken this dangerous sea journey, risking their lives to escape misery and persecution in Myanmar (UN, 2026), and over 5,000 of them have died during the journey. Only in 2025, more than 6,500 Rohingya attempted these precarious sea crossings, and nearly 900 of them were reported missing

or dead in the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal, making it the deadliest year on record (UNHCR, 2026d).

Such forced displacement and sufferings among the Rohingya population did not just start with the “clearance operations” by the Tatmadaw during 2016–2017. A similar pattern of atrocities has been recorded since 1978 and it is still continuing at varying levels. For example, between March and July 1978, approximately 200,000 Rohingya refugees entered Bangladesh for the first time to escape beatings, abductions, the killing of Muslim men, and the rape of Muslim women. Among them over 12,000 refugees died, including some 6,300 children, in the camps in Cox’s Bazar due to a serious lack of food supply, starvation, and widespread malnutrition. However, by the end of March, about 107,000 had been repatriated to Burma, and 82,000 Rohingya remained in the camps in Bangladesh (Lindquist, 1979). Another similar major influx of Rohingya

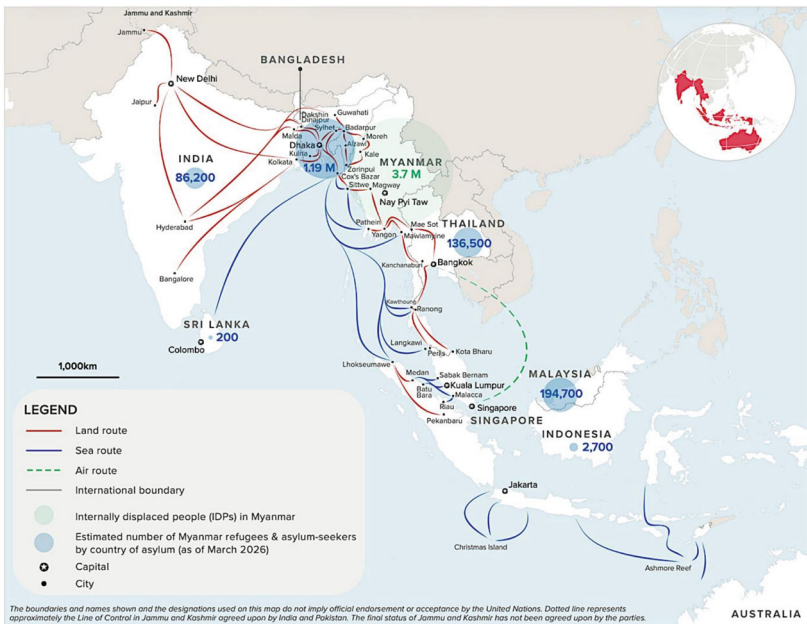


Fig. 16.2 Routes taken by refugees fleeing Myanmar, including Rohingya refugees (Source UNHCR (2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d, 2026e). <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/122069> (accessed on 19 April 2026))

refugees happened in 1992, although the majority of them returned to Myanmar, many remained in Bangladesh permanently. Other major military crackdowns and displacement were recorded in 2012, 2016, 2017, 2019, and 2024. Unofficially, an estimated more than 250,000 undocumented Rohingyas were either integrated locally or living illegally in Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2010; Ahmed et al., 2019).

(b) Arguments Related to Repatriation at ICJ

The ICJ documents show two opposing narratives (ICJ, 2026). Myanmar emphasises repatriation through bilateral agreements, a continuous verification process, and administrative measures. As per the Court's order of 23 January 2020, Myanmar submits a compliance report every six months on progress made on provisional measures related to civilian accountability, military justice system, international humanitarian law training, hate speech, repatriation to Myanmar from Bangladesh, resettlement of IDPs, preservation of property, sexual violence, birth registration, citizenship and residence rights, education for Bengalis, healthcare services, maternal and child support, social cohesion, and humanitarian assistance. In its eleventh compliance report published on 23 May 2025, Myanmar acknowledged that no repatriation had commenced. Myanmar received a total of 829,192 individual Rohingya verification forms from Bangladesh; Myanmar scrutinised 259,834 individuals and of these, 184,046 persons (70.83%) were verified as former residents of Rakhine State (ICJ, 2025a, p. 14). Myanmar also reported that there was a total of 16 Bengali IDP camps in Rakhine State, accommodating 124,604 people (ICJ, 2025a, p. 16). However, Myanmar consistently says that the ongoing civil war and conflict, particularly the Arakan Army's seizure of the townships, are hindering for repatriation and bringing normalcy back to Rakhine State.

The Gambia argues that these repatriation-related claims, that have not even started yet, are procedural and do not actually ensure safety, dignity, and civic rights for the Rohingya in Myanmar. Myanmar's continual denial of Rohingya identity, lack of citizenship, restrictions on free movement, confinement in IDP camps, and discriminatory policies regarding healthcare, education, and livelihoods, as well as its unwillingness to hold accountable to military and other officials accountable for crimes they perpetuated, the burning of 178 villages, rape and mutilation of Rohingya

women and girls, and overall denial of genocide are the major barriers to a safe and sustainable return of the Rohingya (ICJ, 2024).

Overall, in terms of repatriation, Myanmar portrays itself as having constructive bilateral engagement with the GoB and a willingness to receive returnees, with no action in reality. The Gambia, on the other hand, views Myanmar’s strategy as unconvincing, because Myanmar’s genocidal state policies against the Rohingya continue to remain unchanged, which ultimately creates a barrier to a safe, voluntary, dignified, and sustainable return (ICJ, 2025b, pp. 7–8).

(c) **Genocide Continues in Myanmar**

Genocide denial is part of the wider process of continuing genocide. Genocide does not suddenly happen in a day, but rather it is a layered process that culminates over years or decades through systematic, interlinked, and multi-stage steps such as classification, symbolisation, discrimination, dehumanisation, organisation, polarisation, preparation, persecution, extermination, and denial (Stanton, 2023). Denial is also not the last stage, but rather it is embedded before, during, and after genocidal atrocities and processes (Theriault, 2021). From a long-term perspective, Myanmar’s atrocities, systematic torture, and crimes against the Rohingya should be understood as an ongoing genocidal process, rather than a closed episode of violence that ended in 2016–2017.

For example, the “Operation Clean and Beautiful Nation” launched by the Tatmadaw in 1991, resulted in several thousand deaths among the Rohingya and about 300,000 people being forcibly displaced into Bangladesh. At that time, Myanmar’s Permanent Mission to the UN stated (ICJ, 2020, pp. 126–128):

The so-called ‘Rohingyas’ never belonged to the national races or national racial groups of Myanmar. The Rohingyas do not exist in Myanmar either historically, politically or legally.

This is a clear example of discrimination and also of classifying the Rohingya as Bengalis, intruders, foreigners, terrorists, or illegal immigrants. For long, the Myanmar authorities and military officials imposed anti-Rohingya laws and policies to isolate them, deprive them of fundamental human and civil rights, dehumanise, and ultimately persecute

them (ICJ, 2020, p. 115). Myanmar's adoption of the 1982 Citizenship Law deprived the Rohingya of their citizenship and all rights, even if they were born in Myanmar or their families had lived there for generations. Although the Rohingya have continuously lived in Rakhine State since the eighteenth century (ICJ, 2020, p. 118), such discriminatory laws, designed to segregate the so-called pure-blood national races whose ancestors were settled in Myanmar before the British conquest in 1824, could be considered a form of dehumanisation (ICJ, 2020, p. 122). Afterwards, in October 2014, Myanmar introduced the National Verification Card (NVC) and registered them as "Bengali", thus imposing the stage of symbolisation in the genocidal process (ICJ, 2020, p. 130). Myanmar's decades of systematic exclusion through the denial of citizenship and suddenly making the Rohingya stateless, restrictions on movement, marriage, and childbirth; repeated episodes of mass killings, rape, village burning, and forced displacement; identity erasure, segregation, confinement in internal camps and ghettos, the deliberate weakening of Rohingya social and economic life, the spread of hate speech and propaganda, and the restrictions of their access to food, health, and educational facilities constitute genocide (ICJ, 2020).

The atrocities never stopped but rather continue. Rohingya refugees are entering Bangladesh continuously. For example, since 2024, over 150,000 new arrivals in Cox's Bazar were recorded (UNHCR, 2025) due to ongoing genocide, civil war, and communal violence in Myanmar. Overall, Myanmar's consistent and long-term discriminatory policies and actions against the Rohingya, its dehumanisation of them through a racial supremacist and purification system, the removal of their citizenship, humanitarian and civil rights, the orchestration of well-organised military crackdowns in conjunction with local Mogs or Buddhist extremists, and continuing persecution and extermination are the major barriers to the Rohingyas' safe return to Myanmar.

16.6 CONCLUSION

In UN policy, the future of displaced and refugee populations is often understood through three pathways to solutions: repatriation, local integration, or third-country resettlement (UNHCR, 2026c). For most Rohingyas, these are not meaningful or clear policy options. Rather, what makes sense to most of them is to return to Myanmar, because it is where

their identity is rooted, and where their homes, memory, land, and livelihoods belong. Currently, the majority of the Rohingya are spread out across a few countries, mostly in Bangladesh, and some remain inside IDP camps in Myanmar. However, they do not enjoy a normal civic life. In that sense, these policy discussions can become overly academic, when compared with the real life of the Rohingya, who still do not have a dignified and secure life ensured. A future ICJ judgement in their favour may bring hope, recognition, accountability, and justice, but the law alone cannot resolve the crisis as a whole. The ultimate issue is not simply that the Rohingya fled the mass atrocities of 2016 and 2017, but that the entire crisis should be framed within a long-term and complex interconnected system of genocide, racial supremacy, statelessness, violence, acknowledging the true history, and denial of identity. A safe, successful, and sustainable return remains impossible so long as the root causes of the crisis are not identified, and the conditions that drove them out of Myanmar are not resolved.

We found that most Rohingyas want to return to their country; however, their return is conditional on their access to citizenship and identity documents, rights, community services, recognition as Rohingya, justice and punishment of perpetrators and return of their lands and properties. At the same time, Rohingyas fear returning to Myanmar because they do not trust the current governance system ruled by the indirect military regime. Rohingyas who feel that nothing is left for them and those who experienced gross human rights violations (especially women survivors) do not want to return to Myanmar. Different elements make the Rohingyas return complex, as appears in our analysis, including the experiences of Rohingyas who were previously returned to Myanmar from Bangladesh. Finally, while we perceive the same elements of return in different narratives, Rohingyas in Bangladesh mentioned more often justice and punishment of perpetrators for conducting genocide as additional conditions for their return. Rohingyas in India focus on a change of the government and explain that they will return to Myanmar when things get back to “normal” or “get better”. Rohingyas in Malaysia explained the need to change the laws and policies that excluded their citizenship and created discrimination as an additional demand for their return.

We recognise that Rohingyas’ return to Myanmar is multifaceted. In this chapter, we contributed to the debate on refugees’ return aspirations by studying the case of Rohingyas living in Bangladesh, India, and Malaysia, and by analysing their collected micronarratives. Further

studies should consider how contemporary issues like the Court's judgement (ICJ, 2026), global geopolitical uncertainty or the ongoing civil war and conflict in Myanmar may have affected their return aspirations. Nevertheless, decision-makers and the global community should consider Rohingyas' views on their return possibilities as the only way to guarantee their voluntary, safe, and sustainable return to Myanmar.

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