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RESEARCH PAPER

Bridging the Information Divide: Information Literacy, Digital Exclusion, and Gender Disparities among Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the information literacy experiences of Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, focusing on their access to and utilization of information in a humanitarian context. Access to essential services is largely based on reliable information, with displacement presenting communication barriers. There are also intermediaries over which refugees can turn to for timely update. The study employed a mixed-method, qualitative-dominant approach that was exploratory. Fifteen Rohingya adults were selected for the purposive sampling. All filled-in questionnaires (five subject to interviews, six to focus group). Data was reported using descriptive counts and participant descriptions. Community leaders and NGOs were prominent information sources. The lack of access to the language of the instruction, literacy problems, and insufficient digital literacy were experienced. Women reported physical difficulties and need for intermediaries for mobility. Humanitarian communication should prioritise Rohingya-language and visual resources. Outreach, training in digital skills and coordinated updates can help to strengthen access.

Keywords: Information Literacy, Rohingya Refugees, Digital Exclusion, Gender Disparities, Humanitarian Communication, Bangladesh

Introduction

Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are one of the largest stateless populations in the world, who suffered the persecution and violence of Myanmar because of their social inferiority and marginalisation (Awan 2020; Kamal, Kaiser and Mariano 2024). Their expulsion has caused a continuous humanitarian emergency; over a million Rohingya have taken shelter in makeshift camps in the town of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh (Rahman and Sakib 2021). Humanitarian actors and the Bangladeshi government have been doing much to provide food, water and shelter, however, access to timely and accurate information is a huge challenge that's often neglected. Information is key for refugees to maneuver, to get health, social and legal services, to the educational system and to engage in decisions that impact their lives (Matlin et al. 2018).

The concept of information literacy is generally agreed as describing the ability to identify, locate, evaluate, and use information effectively (Bundy 1998). This has been rated a basic competency for personal and professional empowerment in the Digital Age (Cordell 2013). Refugees' knowledge about information and how to access it is, however, of far greater importance when applied in the refugee context, where it is instrumental to their survival, integration and ability to access their rights and services (Taylor and Jaeger 2021). Nevertheless, the Rohingya refugees are presented with several challenges in

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accessing accurate information such as language barrier, literacy rate, technology (or digital) underrepresentation or lack of, misinformation, and socio-cultural restrictions, including women (Uddin 2024). In turn, they are required to rely on semi-institutionalized resources like community leaders, religious figures, and social networks, which result in differential (mis) information from their sources of stress, adding to already fragile lives (Monir 2024).

The non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community based information dissemination measures were identified as having the potential to improve information access among the refugee groups by Cheng et al. (2018), Nungsari and Chuah (2022) and Soe et al. (2017). To overcome communication barriers, NGOs have creativity adopted methods like employing visual aids and organizing community meetings, as well as communicating in multiple languages during the Rohingya camps. Furthermore, gender difference exists in accessing information, and women are more disadvantaged when compared to men because of limited mobility, on-going dependence on men to deliver information and lower participation in educational and training initiatives (Chisamya et al. 2012). Digital technology is also very crucial in relation to information literacy in the Rohingya camps (Dodul 2019). Mobile phones and social media have dramatically changed how people communicate around the world; but many refugees are lacking in digital literacy. Youth have more access to mobile devices than older adults, but have fewer opportunities to information verify and apply Digital tools in education, employment, and healthcare services (Ehlers 2024). In addition, many older refugees, especially women, have no access to the mobile phone, expanding even further the information gap (Hussain and Lee 2021). In addition, there is a lack in social media platforms, misinformation and false information has spread like wildfire and influences on how people behave and think.

The objectives of this study were to investigate the information literacy experiences of Rohingya refugees in (i) their sources of information; (ii) the trustworthiness and accessibility of the sources of information; and (iii) the impact of the lack of information on their life. It also focuses on how digital literacy can be used to make the information more accessible and the potential of community-based and NGO-based interventions in the dissemination of information. This study aims at providing evidence-based recommendations to improve information literacy and addressing gaps in information access among Rohingya Refugees based on understanding these challenges.

Literature Review

Information literacy and vulnerable populations

Information literacy is critical to empower vulnerable populations, enabling them to safely navigate through complicated information environments and effectively promote their needs. Skills for information literacy promote self-advocacy and independence, especially when using healthcare, educational, legal and other systems (Green, 2023). Yet, low literacy level and misinformation combined with lack of digital skills are obstacles to accessing critical resources (Choukou et al., 2022). The impacts of social isolation and trauma are compounded by these challenges and make vulnerable people less likely to utilise services available (Rohwerder and Szyp 2022). Rong et al. (2024) highlighted the need to tailor information resources to answer specific needs of these groups and to ensure the equitable access to the essential information. Language barriers, low literacy rates and incomplete access to information and communications tools offers significant obstacles for vulnerable populations such as refugees to access accurate and appropriate information (Caidi and Allard, 2005). While refugees have some reliance on informal networks, NGOs and community leaders, these sources are not necessarily reliable and timely sources of information (Carlson, Jakli and Linos 2017). These challenges are compounded by the need for information literacy in the Rohingya refugee context given the cultural and language differences. Hasan et al. (2022) emphasized that refugees depend on the oral language and

trusted persons like Central religious leaders or the representatives of the NGO's to orient themselves in their surroundings.

Refugees issue: problem in access to information.

During the refugee crisis, both the need for critical information and resources and the difficulty individuals face in accessing such information is very evident. This unfamiliar setting can also pose significant difficulties for refugees' ability to navigate systems and access information due to language barriers, cultural differences, and limited, or nonexistent, social networks for them to rely on in their new home. (AlKharouf et al. 2024, Taha, Anabtawi and Al Wreidat 2024) Limited access to health service is one of the major problems. Refugees might not know what health care services are available to them, the procedures to access health care or what to do to get required medications or treatment (Philbrick et al. 2017, Krystallidou et al. 2024, Zeidan et al. 2019). Gendered vulnerabilities and oppression compound refugee women and children's barriers to this problem, placing them at greater risk (Kang, Tomkow and Farrington 2019, Sansonetti 2016). Language and literacy barriers can significantly delay and reduce refugees' ability to understand and communicate with health care providers, resulting in missed/reduced health care access (Pandey et al. 2021, World Health Organization 2021). Moreover, refugees may face transport challenges and social barriers such as financial and socio-cultural stigmas, creating difficulties in accessing health services.

The importance of NGO's and community level interventions

NGOs are also the key actors in closing the information gap, but offer tailored programmes for the specific needs of refugees, such as language issues, IT skills, culture and integration (Jones et al. 2018). This is especially relevant in today's world where digital platforms have become more common tools of service provision, learning and communication, but also make for great challenges for refugees as many lack the digital skills or infrastructure (Alam & Imran 2015). As well as offering new approaches, community-based interventions typically involve local organizations or refugee run efforts and provide a more culturally relevant lens on the work done by NGOs, helping to build trust. The interventions are rooted in the participatory poverty alleviation framework, in which refugees are actively engaged in designing and implementing interventions and activities, and in which contextual adaptations are made to ensure interventions and activities are relevant to the needs of the community (Pallas 2017). For instance, community libraries and information centres are now becoming important places for refugees to listen to information, build new competencies and meet fellow members of their community (Carlson, Jakli and Linos 2017) (Lauersen 2018). Additionally, peer to peer learning models, which refugee teachers impart and assist other refugees have been found effective in creating refugees' confidence and agency (Diab, Jasiukaitis and El-Zakka 2024).

Gendered Dimensions of Information Literacy

It is found that gender significantly impacts on refugees' information needs, source of information and accessibility of information system (Klugman, 2022). However, women refugees are not always equipped to overcome this access to information and technology, for example in terms of digital literacy, mobility or access to the right technologies and information, due to cultural norms (Bešić and Aigner 2023). In many refugee settings, for example, women are less likely to own mobile phones and have internet access than men, allowing their male relatives or male community networks to reach them, and reducing women's autonomy and decision-making power (Alencar 2020). This gender gap in digitalization has intensified inequalities, with women having less access to online education and health care, and fewer opportunities to join the labor market, compared to men (Awad and Tossell 2021). These gender distinctions highlight the need for gender

sensitive interventions catering to women and men. Likewise, some initiatives that are sensitive to gender can help to defy the negative norm and can facilitate the equitable access to information resources (Debbarma and Sharma 2023).

Importance of Information Literacy for Refugees

Assisting refugees' survival and self-reliance in the context of displacement, where they may experience limited access to resources, language problems, and cultural differences, information literacy plays an important role in their lives (Hossain 2023). Access to information about the law, for example, can be enabled through digital tools, enabling refugees to maneuver through asylum processes, while on the other hand, digital literacy can enable them to access online learning, job search and family oriented activities (Abood et al. 2021).

Information literacy is not just a means of equipping and empowering learners for the here and now, it should also have the longer-term effects of instilling resilience and social inclusion (Becker 2018). If refugees have good information literacy skills, they are more likely to actually access information, as well as advocate on behalf of their rights and for their communities in the countries to which they fled (Potocky 2022). Access to technology, poor educational levels, and a lack of culturally relevant information resources are major obstacles for many refugees to developing such skills, however (Bloch 2002). Community-based organisations (CBOs) and not-for-profit organisations (NGOs) can provide the necessary programmes to tackle such issues and contribute to improving digital literacy, which include digital literacy training, language courses and information centres (Zainal Abiddin, Ibrahim and Abdul Aziz, 2022). The initiatives help increase the capacity of refugees to access information and foster empowerment and self-efficacy.

There has been a growing awareness on the value of information literacy for refugees, but evidence is sparse. Research largely has been conducted around the/refugee group as a whole, and few studies have investigated the experiences of the Rohingya community. Furthermore, studies have tended to be mostly technocentric without acknowledging the cultural and contextual context of information access and literacy in the context of refugees.

Material and Methods

It is an exploratory study, which employed a qualitative dominant mixed research method to analyse Rohingya refugees' information access and information literacy in Bangladesh. Responses to the questionnaire were descriptive frequencies and interviews and a focus group provided accounts of experiences and barriers perceived in living with the disability. The design enables contextual inferences of this small purposive sample and doesn't allow for estimates of prevalence at the population level or for causal conclusions.

Research Design

The study used a tool of questionnaires and one focus group discussion (FGD) and individual interviews. The questionnaire gathered the demographic data as well as reported information practices and barriers. One to one interviews gave reports regarding access, reliability, gender-based access impediments and misinformation. This FGD run for about an hour to an hour-and-a-half involved a discussion of the experiences of information seeking in a group context. The quantitative and qualitative sections are presented side-by-side, for the purpose of providing context for frequencies reported in the former, in terms of the participant accounts reported in the latter. The manuscript contains no coding schema and no inferential statistics, assumptions should not be made.

Participants

The study included 15 Rohingya refugees residing in Bangladesh, with a gender distribution of 9 males (60%) and 6 females (40%), aged between 18 to 65 years. As shown in Table 1, participants were categorized into three age groups to capture a broad range of perspectives.

Table 1
Age distribution of the participants

Age Group	Number of Respondents	Percentage
18–29 (Youth)	5	33.3%
30–49 (Middle-aged)	6	40%
50–65 (Older Adults)	4	26.7%

Participants were purposively recruited in the refugee support centres, NGOs and places of worship by spreading the flyers. Eligibility was referred to as language and cognitive competence to participate. This sample is non-probability and the sample results should not be assumed as representative of the entire refugee population of Rohingya.

Data Collection and Analysis

All 15 participants completed the questionnaire. Five participants (2 women, 3 men) were interviewed individually and 6 (2 women, 4 men) participated in an FGD. There were 10 persons (9 reported) who were involved in two methods, and 1 woman involved in all three methods, as evidenced by the original study records. The interviews took about 8-10 minutes and the FGD took about 60 minutes. Data from the questionnaires are presented in counts and percentages (15 is the denominator as multiple sources / hindrances can be reported by the participant). Participant statements aren't identified to determine the availability of themes, but they are used to represent the experience. Transcription, translation, coding procedures, handling of missing data, and the use of a formal way of integrating data with the original account are not detailed in the original paper and must be verified by the author before the paper is accepted for publication.

Results and Discussions

Respondents pointed to some channels where they found information related to camp life, services and assistance that overlapped each other (Table 2). The numbers refer to the 15 in this study.

Table 2
Sources of information of the Rohingya people

Source	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Community Leaders	12	80%
NGOs	11	73.3%
Social Networks	9	60%
Religious Leaders	8	53.3%
Mobile Phones	5	33.3%

The primary sources of information for the respondents include:

Community Leaders, Religious Leaders and NGOs:

A lot of respondents depend on and trust community leaders and religious/NGO workers as a source of information and advice. The community leaders, NGO and religious leader are the most common sources of information for 80%, 73.3% and 53.3% of the responders, respectively. For instance, Responder One and Responder Five rely on community leaders and a member of NGO's to disseminate information on food, health care, and other services. There is however differences in the amount of trust in these sources,

with some respondents stating that they were not certain or did not receive consistent communication.

For R1, the information comes from fellow members of the camp, such as community leaders and friends, or NGOs' announcements or loudspeakers regarding food distribution, health services or other types of service provision within the camp.

R5's main sources of information are family and community leaders; NGO visits for health and nutrition updates; and announcements on loudspeakers in the camp.

Family and social networks:

Family and social networks are vital channels of communicating information and providing support in refugee camps of the Rohingya community. 60% of the respondents use internal social networks and family for information. Families are an important source of information, update and key resources, often being the main conduit for this flow between the communities. The integrated system ensures that residents stay well informed about events and changes when significant events happen. People share knowledge and information and refer each other to others or make suggestions about how to help, as part of the sharing.

R2 and R6 get most information from husbands, fathers or neighbours. This dependence illustrates the gendered nature of the access to information of which women have only limited direct access to reliable information sources.

Mobile Phones and Social Media:

Using mobile phones and social media is critical to accessing information in the Rohingya refugee camps. A large number of refugees indeed rely on mobile phones as their primary source of information (33.3%) when it comes to keeping up with important news and events. Social media like WhatsApp and Facebook allows refugees to communicate, provide information with other people, connect and learn about relevant issues.

“With WhatsApp, I can get updated but am not sure if the news is true or fake,” added R7.

Though the new mobile phone and social media craze has its advantages, it does have its disadvantages. The misinformation and fake news can lead to confusion, tensions and rifts in the various group(s). Additionally, one should also take into consideration that refugees utilizing these platforms are also vulnerable to cyber-attacks, surveillance, and violations into their privacy. This illustrates how refugees need computer literacy and the need to be safe and effective in using the internet.

R3 said, “I use my phone to communicate with family and friends, but don’t know how to use someone's phone to have good information. Challenges in Accessing Information in Rohingya camps

Table 3
Barriers to information access by Rohingya people

Barriers	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Language Barriers	11	73.3%
Literacy Challenges	10	66.7%
Inconsistent Communication	8	53.3%
Limited Digital Literacy	7	46.7%

Language challenge

73.3% of Rohingya refugees reported that language barriers are one of the major challenges blocking their access to information in the refugee camps. Some refugees cannot

read and comprehend material in Bangla or English, and they are unable to receive timely information on health, education, food distribution and legal aid. R13 explained, “Most of the work that comes to us is in Bangla but we don't read or understand it, makes it very difficult for us to know what is happening or what we need to do. “Localised comms is important,” R12 said, “if they feed us this info in our language, we can understand.” Otherwise, R12 continued, “we have to depend on others and sometimes it's not the right message.”

Low literacy rates among refugees, especially within camps among women and older people, further compound the issue as they are relying on secondary sources for updates. R15 commented, “I don’t know what is going on in the school or where I am going to work, nothing is explained in another language.” That's a problem that R10 explained: “By the time we get the right information we're done about it.”

To overcome these obstacles, respondents strongly recommended to provide information in Rohingya language and at the same time suggest using visual aids such as posters, diagram and drawings for better understanding. R9 said, "If there are no pictures, or simple message written Rohingya, it would be beneficial to everybody including those who are unable to read it. Localised and culturally responsive approaches to communication may help all stakeholders reach the right refugee people and provide timely, accurate, and actionable information, thus giving the refugee audience the agency to make decisions and better manage their everyday needs. “When we know the info ourselves we don't need to depend on others. This makes us feel confident," said R4.

Literacy challenges

Access to information is severely impeded by literacy challenges affecting 66.7% of respondents, restricting access to vital information and updates in the Rohingya refugee camps. Many refugees are not functionally literate, which makes it challenging for them to make sense of disaster-related information, health and education announcements that are printed. When she reads health information, R10 said, “I can’t read it, I don't know what to do” – we need someone to explain what it means.” “Everything they write—like one reads the papers in school, and for a job—people can't read,” R8 explained. “Sometimes, when we realize what is happening it would already be too late to act,” said R8.

To overcome these difficulties, answers to the question centered on the use of alternative communication techniques such as the use of orals and visual aids. I agree with R13's suggestion: posters that include a picture or a simple drawing would be useful for people who cannot read to know what to do. Overcoming the literacy barriers can make it easier for stakeholders to represent refugees' choices and give them a voice in enhancing their situation. As R2 said, “If we had to read ourselves, then we wouldn't be so reliant on others.”

Inconsistent communication

The lack of consistent communication in the Rohingya refugee camps was one of the major challenge faced by accessing information for more than half (53.3%) of respondents. Unreliability, contradictory information, delayed or difficulty in communicating updates, or lack of communication platforms among refugees may occur due to mental health problems. Among the problems the refugees encounter are being subject to unclear or conflicting messages, difficulty sharing information updates, or not having communication platforms at their disposal. I felt, he said, “Sometimes they tell us at the Morning and tell us something else at the Evening. It would be difficult to know which is right.” Likewise R11 said “we are just told of changes however these changes do not happen until an hour, sometimes in the days after... Further, verbal notifications or word of

mouth are commonly used by many refugees but these are not always accurate or up-to-date.

R15 emphasized that this is a challenge as: "As women, sometimes we do not attend the community meetings; we are not always updated."

R13 recommended, "Putting up noticeboards with all the updates would help us know what's going on without having to rely on others." It was also discussed that building trust and reducing confusion was crucial as community leaders were needed to give the clear and accurate information.

You can probably listen to Noor's (27) words and understand what she means: "We need clear and timely information to make good decisions for ourselves and our families."

Limited digital literacy:

46.7% of the respondents face challenges with digital literacy affecting the ability to access digital technologies as a knowledge resource, in particular older adults and women.

R7 explained, "I use my phone to communicate with others and friends and family but I don't know how to get information on the internet which is reliable."

R12 commented, "If I had a mobile, I don't know how to use it, somebody should teach us to get reliable information.

A challenge was reported regarding getting access to and evaluating reliable information digitally. R7 reported being unable to feel confident in using a phone to communicate with others when checking information online. The accounts indicate that the acquisition of information literacy abilities is not guaranteed through access to the device.

R12 said they needed help in using the phone to retrieve quality information. These accounts together suggest the relevance of accessible and hands-on training, but did not assess a training intervention in this study.

Gender Disparities in Information Access

The gender gap in information access in Rohingya camps is inherent due to socio-cultural, economic and structural factors. The inequalities are greatly affecting women and girls, especially in times of crisis such as COVID-19. Gender norms, age and socio-economic factors are key in shaping women's access to relevant information. This section examines these differences in women's voices with a focus on the specific barriers that result from an absence or lack of information and opportunities for improvement.

Women's Reliance on Male Intermediaries:

The foundational elements of a culture can often lend to the traditional roles and status of women within the Rohingya community which are often defined by men as decision-makers and mediators, thus giving women limited access to information. Women often get the news about food provisioning, health and community events from their husbands, fathers, or brothers.

"As for me, I can't be able to attend all these meetings, my husband tells me what he sees when he comes home from work," explains R4. "Sometimes, however, I spend some time waiting until my husband returns from work and then it's too late."

Also shared by R6, "when there is a call in a camp, it is my brother or father who hears it, I just call them later and ask them what they heard."

Mobility Constraints:

Women's mobility is limited by socio-cultural norms, which limits their direct engagement in meetings or with other NGO workers. This limitation has a trickling effect on their ability to get first-hand information; it puts them in a situation of relying on secondary sources.

"That this is a situation that is not acceptable for us to have the NGOs come to camp and present what it has to offer, we don't get the guys involved, we don't get them in the sessions, we miss out on so much," R12 said.

"Sometimes I wish I could go and get more information about what is going on but I can't go. It's not seen as appropriate for women to go to meetings," said R10.

Lack of Women-Focused Initiatives:

One of the challenges cited by the respondents was the lack of any programs specifically related to women to enhance their capacity to access and understand information. NGOs are an essential source of information and information sharing, and reaching those targeted by them isn't always approached in a way that meets the specific needs of women.

"If there were sessions where the discussion was only told to a woman we could learn so much more, we could ask more questions, there wouldn't be an implication of being judged because you're a woman," said R2.

R6 said, "The ladies of the NGO's should come and discuss issues with us in our mother tongue language – we need somebody who is going to know our problems and be able to teach us."

Gender, Age and Socio-Economic Status Intersections:

Age and socio-economic factors have been shown to further impact on women's access to information. Younger women may not have a restricted range of primary sources of information and broader social networks; older women may have even more restrictions.

R10 commented, "For the older women they do not have other ways to get information other than from their husbands or sons, but for the younger girls, they use their phones to get the information or they talk to other women of their own age."

"My mother-in-law doesn't ask me anything about what is going on, if I tell her, she will wait for us to tell her because she doesn't want to know;" said R4.

Broader Implications of Gender Disparities:

Gender disparities in access to information hold even bigger consequences for the welfare and empowerment of women in the Rohingya camps. Access constraints, in terms of women having access to information; limit their capacity to decide on their health, education and living conditions, which perpetuate cycles of dependency and marginalisation.

"How will us of women take care of our families?" asked R8, "If we are not informed!" Information about health and education and ways to enhance our health and education is important."

"As women are left out, the whole community suffers; we can't contribute the same as we desire," added R4.

It is not only equitable in terms of women's rights, but important for the refugees community's general resilience and development to be empowered with access to information.

Digital Literacy and Technology

The usage of technology and digital literacy in Rohingya refugee camps is influenced by socio-cultural, economic and political factors, which pose challenges and opportunities. A mobile phone is a common digital medium with the capacity to fill information gaps and give refugees information, communication and stay connected transnationally. However, their use remains limited due to low access rates and a lack of digital literacy among the camp population (see Table 4).

Table 4
Digital technology usage and literacy by Rohingya people

Digital Use Category	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Use Mobile Phones	5	33.3%
Interested in Digital Training	6	40%

Only 33.3% of respondents reported using mobile phones to receive information, with younger age groups stating that they use their phone to keep up with updates from their friends or family, but they don't know how to tell whether the news is true or false (R7). Likewise, R14 said, "I will sometimes share message with WhatsApp but I don't know how to locate important information for myself." By comparison, many of the respondents, including R11, noted their difficulties, and noted that they need to rely on friends or family telling them what is happening if they don't have a cell phone. Even if I did have a phone, I wouldn't know how to use it, said R2, adding that she needed someone to teach her.

It was found that there was a need for training in digital skills and 40% were interested in getting to know how to use mobile tools. As one example, R11 was able to explain that, "In case we had been taught to use phones we would go and look for information". Likewise, R3 noted, "I want to know how to use apps / websites to get updates directly but staff haven't shown these to me."

Although not widely used, mobile telephones are a potential tool to enhance information literacy skills in the camps. Refugees might be able to effectively use these tools with the help of targeted training programs on how to use digital literacy, and not rely on intermediaries, enabling them to tap into vital information, services, and educational resources directly. This is pretty much the full extent of what was said in R15's comment, "If we know how to use these tools, it will make us less dependant on others and more confident to find the right information. Covering these gaps not only will improve the availability of information but will also help refugees to be more self-reliant and connected.

Types of Information Needed for Rohingya People in Bangladesh

Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh have a need for wide variety and range of information to meet the different and multi-facet nature of the refugee population's needs. Information associated with food distribution, health, education, and legal rights are extremely important for the improvement of the living conditions, refugees safety and well-being. Insights from respondents highlight the critical areas where

information is most needed, emphasizing the gaps and priorities that should be addressed to empower the community (Table 5).

Table 5
Types of information needed for Rohingya people

Information Need	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Food Distribution	13	86.7%
Healthcare	12	80%
Education	9	60%
Legal Assistance	7	46.7%

Food Distribution

Among the respondents, one of the most important information need is accurate and timely information on food distribution, a statement made by 86.7% of them. In the camps, rations are a family's main means of sustenance, so food distribution schedules are critical in helping families to receive their rations without any confusion or delays.

R13 explained, “Without the correct information for my family’s food time, we could miss our food collection date; once I got to the store but didn't realize that the time had changed, and I wasn't able to collect food with my family for that day.”

R5 said, “Usually, the announcements made regarding food distribution are not precise and the information may vary or change without warning. This adds a great deal of stress for us.”

Healthcare

Another important need is education-related information specifically for health care, with what 80% said is crucial (and 8% said somewhat important). This need is more acute for young children and pregnant people or those with long-term health needs, as they need frequent health care, health education and support.

The health camps must be advertised to me, “the Mama, I need to know you have organised health camps and what services you are providing sometimes I hear about it after the events happened”, said R6.

R5 noted that good health data is necessary, saying, “We need accurate data about vaccination initiatives, common illnesses, if we don't we have no way to help keep ourselves and our families safe.”

Education

60% said education was a priority, especially for the young who view it as an opportunity to create a better future. Access to information related to the education sector is essential for children or youth within the camps to share knowledge regarding the various opportunities that are available to them and how to access them, and to participate in learning programmes.

One of R6's first comments was: “My kids need to be educated but I do not always know where and how to send them to school, there is little guidance for parents like me.”

There is also information regarding the need for adult education or skill training courses for adults, “We also need to get information about learning something new that could be helpful as far as earning or more independent are concerned.” R2 added.

Legal Assistance

Forty-six percent indicated that the need for legal assistance is important, mainly to understand refugee rights, to mediate claims and to obtain legal documentation. Numerous refugees experience difficulties accessing legal systems or obtaining identification documents – these are critical for their access to services and for the promotion of their rights.

R10 said, “We don't know how to get our papers or who we can ask for help and get stuck without proper papers.”

R11 concluded that, “Rules are plentiful and we don't understand them. I feel like someone would be taking us step-by-step.”

The major objectives of the present study were to examine the information literacy experiences through the "information sources", the "reliability" and the "accessibility" of information sources and the "information gaps" affecting the information literacy experiences of Rohingya refugees. The results of this study revealed some salient points about the information landscape in Rohingya refugee community in Bangladesh. They need to access to reliable information to keep them fit and healthy; and to make informed decisions about their health, legal rights, food distribution and education. The study revealed, however, that there are a number of obstacles that impede Rohingya refugees' ability to acquire information literacy, especially language barriers, low literacy level, inadequate digital skills, language gaps, and gender differences. These findings are placed in the context of the literature, how they can be applied to the solving of access to information in refugee settings as well as findings that the need for additional solutions.

This study reveals several important and surprising trends, particularly, the high dependence on community leaders and NGOs as sources of information. Community leaders serve as a link from refugees to other organizations, and they are often the first to hear vital details about food distribution, health, legal help, and more. The study identified a variation in trust in information sources; although NGOs are of great importance in providing structured and credible information. The results are similar to earlier research which indicated that community leaders play a crucial role in disseminating information (Apata and Ogunrewo 2010, Chan, Zhang and Peipei 2021, Cunningham-Erves et al. 2020); however, they are not always perceived as honest because of potential preference or information bias (Chowdhury et al. 2024, Korin et al. 2022). Increasing the accuracy of information and the capacity of community leaders to communicate information, which would improve trust and reliability in this critical information channel, might benefit by strengthening communication protocols and training community leaders on information accuracy.

Language and literacy barriers also are a key challenge to access information as illustrated in the study. Most respondents had problems reading information in Bangla or English. They also shared difficulties in understanding written text, and extensively relied on oral communication. The findings here are consistent with previous studies that found language barriers as one of the main reasons for refugees' limited access to essential services (Chiarenza et al. 2019, Hunter-Adams and Rother 2017 and Kletecka-Pulker et al. 2019). To tackle this issue, it is recommended that NGOs and humanitarian organizations adopt multi-lingual approaches to communicating and ensure that information is disseminated in Rohingya, and that visual aids, audio recordings and community workshops be used to enhance understanding.

The other major conclusion is the gender imbalance in access to information, such that women experience greater barriers to information than men. Women do not have a wide open access to community meetings or NGO programmes, due to cultural norms. A

large proportion of female respondents said that they took inputs from their husband, father or neighbours which led to the lack of timely or complete inputs. In line with previous studies that raised the issue of gender roles affecting information-seeking behaviours in refugee communities (Longanga Diese et al. 2022; Zainal Abiddin, Ibrahim and Abdul Aziz 2022). To address this, specific action should be taken, such as through providing women-only education on digital literacy, recruiting more women into community-based decision making roles, and expanding the participation of women in digital literacy courses.

Another major focus of this study was the role of the digital technology in information access. The respondents are actively seeking for information through mobile phones; however, restricted digital literacy levels and limited affordability are significant barriers to the use of the mobile phones. A great deal of young refugees came across social media and mobile applications, whereas many didn't feel confident in recognising reliable and false information online. This is an extension of a prior study that had examined the harmfulness of misinformation in people's lives living in deprived communities (Lee, Moore and Hancock 2023). Increased digital literacy training programmes in refugee camps could enable the acquisition of skills to check information and to effectively use mobile platforms among the Rohingya refugees. Also, NGOs and humanitarian organizations can develop agencies with integrity that should provide people with appropriate, timely and reliable information and alternative to misinformation.

Another issue was on the reliability of the communication in which most of the respondents were observed as having hinderances due to confusion occurring in food distribution and health care services in their communications. These findings align with previous research findings which have linked poor collaboration among humanitarian actors as a cause of inaccurate information and mistrust (Do, Nguyen and Dang 2022). To solve this problem one could use more than one synchronised communication channel simultaneously in order to transmit information. Minimizing information confusion and increasing information availability could be achieved by having community noticeboards, SMS alert (the Rohingya language) systems, and dedicated radio broadcasts (the Rohingya language).

In spite of these problems, the study points out the positive contribution of NGOs with regard to information literacy. Using visual materials, NGOs have reached great progress in bridging information gaps by making multilingual resources and organization of community meetings. But, due to their resource constraints and inability to adapt to the culture at times, they become less effective.

Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations of this study that must be taken into consideration when reviewing the results of this study. First, the study did not sample the larger population of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh but only 15 were selected through purposive sampling; hence findings cannot be generalised to the bigger population. Second, the sample size is still small in the number of women (six) and men (nine), which limits the amount of comparisons possible on a gender-specific basis. Thirdly, as five single interviews and one focus group discussion were realized, qualitative part of the study may not have got respondents' experiences in a full sense. Also, there may have been recall and social desirability bias due to depending on self-reported information. Digital literacy was measured through participant's reports and not by skill based assessment. Lastly, no assessment in the research was made of the effectiveness of specific interventions for enhancing access to information. Nevertheless, the results offer meaningful clues to information barriers, digital exclusion and gender-related inequalities for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

This research can inform about nation's major problems in information management and dissemination in Cox's Bazar camp, Rohingya refugee in Bangladesh. The results indicate that refugees' information literacy is a crucial factor when it comes to navigating their daily lives, seeking health care and other basic services, and exercising their legal rights and making informed choices about education and food distribution. Still, there are major challenges including language differences, a lack of literacy, poor communication, lack of digital literacy, and gender gaps that have made it difficult for them to gain access to reliable information.

The community-based sources of information were community leaders and NGOs, and this use reinforces the importance of these as information sources however, they demonstrated poor levels of communication and trust between them which further indicates a need for more training and standardization of procedures. Language and literacy problems add to the picture, particularly for women (and for older people who receive information from their family members). Absence of information to both genders will exacerbate inequalities and opportunities to women to participate in decision-making.

The use of digital technology is not taking full advantage but could be a way forward for improving the access to information. This however is an issue arising out of digitally literate population and the spread of misinformation. Refugees might be able to benefit from targeted digital literacy initiatives for using their mobile phones and social media efficiently, without relying on third-party intermediaries or experiencing mistrust in information.

To overcome these barriers, the following culturally driven, multilingual communication strategies are recommended: use of visual aids, community workshops, and understanding. Gender specific interventions, including women-only information sessions and more women's community leaders' participation, are key to mitigating gender gaps. Additionally, there needs to be a routine area for communication, such as on community noticeboards or sending SMS alerts, to make things less confusing and to help keep what is shared on track. There is an urgent need to enhance information literacy for achieving the goals of resilience, empowerment and social inclusion among Rohingya refugees. If these identified information access and usage barriers can be addressed and appropriate interventions put into place, stakeholders can assist the refugees to gain access to and use information to the best of their ability, resulting in the long-term wellbeing and integration of the refugees into their host communities.

Recommendations

This research indicates the need for more attention in making people more accessible to information in the Rohingya refugees' community. A lot of information, in Rohingya in simple words, pictures and few sounding message should be provided by NGOs and humanitarian agencies. Community gatherings may also benefit refugees who struggle to read or understand written documents. Health, Food and Water, Education and other critical services should provide timely updates to people.

Women and older refugees are especially vulnerable to others using technical information and need to be paid particular attention. Small group discussions, particularly for women, might be helpful to enable them to pose questions and discuss concerns. There may also be a need for refugees to learn and understand how to use a mobile phone for information, which could be achieved through basic training.

Finally, NGOs and community leaders should work more closely to ensure that information is accurate and reaches everyone, including those who are often left out.

Future research with larger sample sizes demonstrates the need to better understand how to enhance information access and digital divide within Rohingya communities.

Declaration

The author declares that this article is an original scholarly work prepared for academic publication. The study is based on a critical review and analysis of published scholarly literature and relevant historical and documentary sources, all of which have been appropriately acknowledged and cited. The author further declares that the manuscript has not been published previously and is not currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.

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Ethical Considerations

This research used human participants and the dignity, privacy and consent of these individuals were taken into account. Data was gathered after first obtaining informed consent verbally from all participants. Partici pants were assured of the purpose of research and participation was freely given.

All participants were kept anonymous. Throughout, respondents' identities have been presented anonymously (R1, R2, etc.) to ensure confidentiality in intercepting contributions and anonymity.

Interviews and participant interactions were conducted in the Rohingya language as this was helpful to ensure clarity in the communication and the comfortability to express their experiences among participants.

The study used exploratory mixed approach (qualitative-dominant) with 15 purposively selected Rohingya adults. The results are reported in some descriptive statistics and by presenting participants' accounts. The results are exploratory and not representative and should not be interpreted as generalizing to the broader Rohingya refugee community due to the small, non-probability sample size.

AI Use Statement

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used to assist with language refinement, grammatical correction, clarity, and manuscript organization. The author retains responsibility for the scholarly arguments, interpretation of evidence, accuracy of citations, and final content of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data collected during this study are not publicly available to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the Rohingya refugee participants. The corresponding author will make anonymised data available upon reasonable request, taking into account ethical and confidentiality issues.

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