

## How does the social structure of the Rakhine state shape the fertility behavior of Rohingyas?

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### Abstract

The purpose of the study to discover that how the fertility behavior of the Rohingya community is shaped by the social structure in Rakhine state. The average number of the fertility of Rohingyas is higher than other similar traditional agrarian society like Bangladesh. Generally, it seems that religion is the main factor for the fertility behavior of Rohingya. But the study found, that religion plays an indirect role in the fertility behavior of the Rohingya community. Survival from extinction, longer family time, culture, security, early marriage, gender discrimination, resistance to contraceptives plays a very important role and have direct impacts on the fertility behavior of Rohingyas. Manipulative use of religion, lack of education, less demand from life, living with less supports the above characteristics. But the vital reason is the social structure of Rohingyas in the Rakhine state, which shapes the all characteristics that are responsible for the fertility behavior of Rohingyas. Oppressive government, highly traditional agrarian society are the two major elements that create this different social structure of Rohingyas in Rakhine. Therefore, the traditional agrarian social structure of Rohingyas are quite different from other traditional agrarian society. This structure also prevents the social factors which are responsible for decreased fertility, like, the emergence of the middle class. The study is guided by a qualitative research method with a macro-sociological perspective. This research was conducted based on both primary and secondary data. Case studies and FGD are used to collect data.

**Key Words:** Rohingya, Social Structure, Fertility

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## Introduction

According to the report of UNHCR 2017, Myanmar is the 4th refugee-producing country after Syria, Afghanistan, and South Sudan. Bangladesh is the 7th refugee-hosting country after Germany, and the number of refugees is 9,32,200. Recently it crossed 1.1 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. An estimated 537,000 Rohingya have been driven into Bangladesh (UN Women, 2017). 51% of them are children (UN Women, 2017). The momentum and scale of arrivals make this the world's fastest-growing refugee crisis.

So there is no doubt that the Rohingya crisis is one of the biggest upcoming crisis in Bangladesh. This crisis has multidimensional problems. The environmental crisis, social crisis, economic crisis, increasing crime rate, a huge number of dependent population, and so on. But if we think deeply the main crisis is the huge dependent population and their behavior.

Rohingyas have a long history in their society. And they are bearing the legacy of their social structure in their behavior. After 1948, they are living under an oppressive government, where all basic human needs are absent and human rights were violated. This social structure created a distinct belief and culture of having more children. And their purpose of having more children is also different. This paper will show that the reason for this fertility behavior is the oppressive social structure of Rakhine.

At present the biggest crisis of Bangladesh is Rohingya. and the biggest problem of the Rohingya community is there a huge population. Among them almost half of the population is children. More than 60 Rohingya babies are born in Bangladesh refugee camps every day (UNICEF, 2017). So in near future, this huge number of children will be the main problem of the Rohingya crisis. And based on this problem other problems will spread. So it is the demand of time that we should understand why the Rohingya community has such a fertility rate.

## **The Objectives of the Study Area**

1. To know the Social structure of the Rohingya community in the Rakhine State of Myanmar.
2. To identify the impact of social structure on the fertility behavior of Rohingya people.

## **Literature Review**

Rohingya minorities are considered as one of the most unfortunate stateless people in the world. If we give a glimpse into the history of this community the scenario of discrimination, deprivation, hatred, violation of Human Rights, and gradual oppression from the Myanmar authorities can be seen clearly. This kind of continuous persecution directly affects the social structure of Rohingya minorities.

'Rohingya' as an identity of a community cannot be found in any govt. documents of Myanmar or in any administrative records of the British rule in Barma but this community has its history covering many centuries.

The term 'Rohingya' is used as an ethnoreligious identity for the Muslim population and they are living ancestrally in the Rakhine State of Myanmar (Zarnif Cowley, 2014).

Since the eighth or ninth century, this community started living in this particular area for trade objectives with the sea route. The Rohingyas gradually resided in the state with different quantities of the population at different periods (Coclanis, 2013).

The government of Myanmar always denied the claims of the Rohingyas but this minority group presents their history significantly and got the sympathy of the international community.

The language and culture of Rohingya people are different from their neighbor communities which are mostly Buddhist in Rakhine state. That shows there were religious and cultural differences from the beginning. However, the serious problem began with the independence of Myanmar in 1948 and since then the Rohingya minorities were gradually excluded from every aspect of national rights. Even, the government of Myanmar never recognized the Rohingyas neither as

their citizens nor as foreigners.

The main aim of the 1982 Citizenship law was to exclude the Rohingyas from Myanmar. The law identifies three categories of citizens which are Full citizen, Associate citizen, Naturalized citizen, and the Rohingya people were not included in that list.

In 1989, the Myanmar government introduced three types of color-coded Citizens Scrutiny Cards (CRCs) for their categorized citizen, and Rohingyas were excluded again in this process.

After UNHCR's recommendation for the Rohingyas in 1995, the authority issued a white-colored Temporary Registration Card (TRC). But the place of birth of the cardholder was not mentioned in the card and it cannot be used to claim citizenship. And that is how gradually they became officially stateless by the government of Myanmar. Often, the authorities of Myanmar described them as 'illegal immigrants from Bangladesh'.

According to General Khin Nyunt, the former Prime Minister of Myanmar "These people are not originally from Myanmar but have illegally migrated to Myanmar because of population pressures in their own country." This statement was given in a letter to UNHCR in 1998.

Restrictions, discrimination, deprivation against the Rohingya minorities are taken as a strategy of Myanmar authority to suppress the community. They have to face violations of human rights and several difficulties in their daily life. Several arbitrary treatments are implemented on the minority group by the Myanmar government. Such as,

- ┆ Restriction of movement.
- ┆ Obstacles on Marriage authorization.
- ┆ Deprivation on Education and Health care.
- o To visit a neighboring village, they need to purchase a travel pass from the authorities. Therefore, these restrictions are also applied even in emergency cases. Moreover, there seems serious restrictions are applied on their daily movements and no one can overstay the time mentioned in the past. Some of them have legal barriers to travel without permission. This kind

of limitation affects their access to education, economic development, health facilities and it makes them more marginalized day by day. It is strictly prohibited to travel to Bangladesh for the Rohingya people and those who are seeking medical treatment in Bangladesh have lost their right to return to Myanmar.

- o The power to authorize the marriages of the Muslim community of North Arakan was given to local authorities like NaSaKa, the security forces of Myanmar in the late 1990s. The process was lengthy and couples have to pay fees for the authorization. It increased the suffering of the poor marginalized people to collect the money for getting a legal conjugal life. The authority stopped the marriage authorization for a while in 2005. After restarting the process, they added some additional conditions like the couples have to sign an agreement not to have more than two children.

Most of the Rohingya women are suffering a lot from this kind of legal obligation. Because the birth rate of Rohingya people is excessively high and when Rohingya women became pregnant without official marriage authorization they have to risk their lives for an illegal abortion. It directly affects the increasing rate of maternal deaths.

- o In North Arakan, access to employment for the Rohingya community is forbidden. The opportunity of getting jobs in the health and education sectors is considered for the Rakhine or Burmese employees. Apparently, they are unfamiliar with the local language and some Rohingya got a chance to work in the government schools under the food for work program. They are paid with rice-paddy and they cannot be recognized as teachers. In the same way, Muslim health workers are deprived of training opportunities from international organizations. Lack of access to education and restriction on movement increased the illiteracy rate of the Rohingyas, estimated at 80%.

Nearly all of the Rohingya in Myanmar live in the western coastal state of Rakhine and are not allowed to leave without government permission. It is one of the poorest states in the country, with ghetto-like camps and a lack of basic services and opportunities.

Due to ongoing violence and persecution, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya have fled to neighboring countries either by land or boat over many decades. (AlJazeera, 18, Apr 2018)

The continuous persecution of the Rohingyas for many years has turned the state of Arakan into an open prison. These suffocated circumstances bring nothing but hatred and calamities. It increases their sufferings and they have become more marginalized. The consequences have a serious impact on their social structure and lack of basic needs and rights are making their life miserable.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research types***

This is qualitative research. Explanatory and descriptive nature was applied to conduct the research.

### ***Data Collection methods***

To operate the research successfully we used the following methods.

### ***In-depth case study***

Case study The in-depth examination of a single instance of some social phenomenon, such as a village, a family, or a juvenile gang (Babbie,2013) Semi-structured case study method is applied to collect the data. The research includes some personal information and sensitive issues. That's why the personal relationship or report building was important in this study. So case study method is a comparatively better way to do in-depth research in less time.

### ***Extended case methods***

The extended case method is a technique developed by Michael Burawoy in which case study observations are used to discover flaws in and to improve existing social theories. "to layout as coherently as possible what we expect to find in our site before entry" (Burawoy *et al.* 1991: 9). Burawoy sees the extended case method as a way to rebuild or improve theory instead of approving or rejecting it. Thus, he looks for how observations conflict with existing theories and what he calls "theoretical gaps and silences" (1991:10). (Babbie, 2013)

### ***Focused group discussion (FGD)***

A focused group discussion is a form of group interview in which: there are several participants (in addition to the moderator/facilitator); there is an emphasis in the questioning on a particular fairly tightly defined topic; and the emphasis is upon interaction within the group and the joint construction of meaning (Bryman, 2012).

### ***Study area***

Data have been collected from a Rohingya camp called 'Unchiprang Camp'. It is situated in a Teknaf Thana, district of Cox'sBazar, Chittagong. This camp was established after the last massacre held upon Rohingya's on 25 August 2016.

### ***Population***

The population refers to the group to which the outcome of the research can be generalized (Black 1993, p.42). All adult Rohingya men and women living in Arakan are the population of this research.

### ***Sample size***

The sample is a part of a population that represents the whole (Macionis, 2017). I have taken 20 case studies and one FDG with 7 respondents to operate my research. So the total number of respondents is 27.

### ***Sampling method***

Sampling is the act, process, or technique of selecting a suitable sample (Merriam- Webster). The "Purposive random sampling" method is used to choose the sample. The sample was purposively selected from adult Rohingya males and females. To collect proper data also considered the background of respondents. We preferred the married respondent and have children.

### ***Data Analysis***

Only qualitative data analysis was used in this research. To analyze qualitative data theory was used. Several theories of fertility were used to explain the collected data. Descriptive analysis, narrative analysis, hermeneutic analyses have been used to analyze the data.

## **Results and discussion**

### ***Fertility behavior of Rohingyas***

Rohingyas are a highly traditional, agrarian, captive, Muslim community that belongs from the Rakhine state of Myanmar. As a traditional, agrarian, and Muslim community, they have some fertility behavior like other traditional, agrarian, and Muslim communities. But as a resident of open prison society, they also have some unique attitudes towards their fertility behavior. The common features are briefly discussed below.

### ***Similar Characteristics like other traditional agrarian society***

Primary economic sectors like agriculture and fishing are bases for large extended families. Family-based agrarian work and homogenous culture help them to live together in a big family structure. Religious doctrines and values encourage having more children. Less demand for white-collar jobs, which shortened graduation periods and creates space for early marriage. Early marriage is a way to longer fertility period. Sacred values and norms influence them to preserve their tradition of having a large number of children. Extended family also supports taking care of many children. A rigid pattern of social inequality and resistance towards social mobility create constrain to social change. Less demand from life is another vital element. Satisfaction with fewer facilities and goods prevents the desire for personal achievement. Which plays an important role in late marriage.

### ***Unique Characteristics of Rohingya Community***

Along with traditional agrarian society, Rohingyas are people of an open prison. They are deprived of many basic human facilities and also have some critical struggles. That is why they have some unique behavior and belief regarding fertility. The population is not only a matter of number to Rohingyas. It is directly connected to their existence, power and security. They have no alternative power like technology or education. Therefore, they are more likely to have children than other traditional agrarian societies.

They are more fatalistic in behave than other traditional religious



communities. It is because of their uncertain destiny, not only because of religion.

Maloney found that the sorrow of a child's death has more impact on parents than the happiness of newborns to have more children. It is also the truth about Rohingyas. The sorrow of the death of their children influences them to have more children. This sorrow also strengthens the taboo of birth control. All male respondents said that they consider abortion as murder. Most of the respondents consider any kind of birth control policy as the indirect murder of an unborn child.

They have much manipulative understanding of the religious doctrine on birth control. This is because of a lack of education.

Men are more likely to have more children. They are not very conscious about the health of the mother. Childbearing is mainly a duty of the mother. So, a mother has the main struggle. On the other side, the child-rearing cost is very low, which is mainly a father's duty. But the decision-maker is a father. So, patriarchy plays a role to have more children.

Their restricted life prolongs their family time. Family is the primary source of their recreation. This Prolonged family time influences fertility.

### **Social Structure**

Tradition and irrationality is not the only reason for the worldview of a society. If tradition and irrationality is the only reason, then all traditional society will be the same. But the traditional societies are different from each other. So it is also true in the case of Rohingya and other traditional societies like Bengali society. Though Rohingya and Bengali peasant society both are traditional agrarian society and both have same religious background, both societies ' world view towards fertility is different from each other, only because of the social structure.

#### ***The social structure of Rohingyas***

We have very little information about the social structure of the

Rohingya community. Because outsiders are not allowed in the land of Burma to examine the situation of Rohingya. That's why field data is the main source to personally understand the social structure of Rohingyas. Rohingyas live in a highly traditional agrarian society. Most of the members of the society involved with agriculture. Besides agriculture, some people are involved with the business. But one notable thing here is that; Rohingyas live in a highly restricted area. Government imposes strict control on them. All the social and economic aspects of their lives are controlled by the Burmese Army. Here is a very brief description of them.

### ***Education***

There are two types of education in the Rohingya Muslim community in Burma. One is religious other is the modern education system.

### ***School:***

As the respondent said there are very few schools in their areas. And there are no colleges in the village. Colleges are situated in the towns. But as unrecognized civilians of Burma, Rohingyas cannot go outside their village without the permission of the Army. Moreover, Rohingyas do not get government or private jobs. That's why most people are not interested in modern education. Parents who send the children to the schools, not for engaging in Jobs. Most of their aim is to send their children abroad. That's why they only study until School. An inconsiderable number of students goes for higher studies.

### ***Madrasa:***

There are many small to big Madrasas in Rohingya villages. Madrasas are the main educational institute of Rohingyas villages. Madrasas also very reputed among the Rohingya people, as it is a religious Institute. So almost all children go to Madrasa. Girls get primary education but not higher education. Many male students get higher education. After graduation, they called "Maulana". Maulana is a respectful position in the Rohingya community.

### ***Business***

Businesses are also controlled by the Burmese Army. Local Rohingya people have to give them Texas or fulfill the demands to run the business. If a businessman wants to business outside the village they have to take shelter from local Burmese people.

### ***Occupation***

As far they are not recognized by the government, they are not eligible to apply for government jobs. On the other side, lack of education restricts their entry into private jobs. Additionally, Burmese oppression limits their smooth access or operation in a job. This absolute control stopped the emergence of new types of occupations in Rohingya communities. As a result, the whole community is involved in the non-specialized agrarian occupation. They have no skills to do modern jobs.

### ***Rural-urban relation vs home-abroad migration***

As far Rohingyas are restricted to migrate between rural-urban areas they continued to migrate outside the country. They always migrated from Burma to outside as labor. Some Rohingyas first migrated to Bangladesh then migrated as Bengali to another country. Other Rohingyas migrate directly from Burma to other countries.

### ***Government***

Government is the most important element that shapes the structure of the Rohingya community. Firstly, Myanmar has a long history of Army rule. Though they experienced a very short period of elected government, it is also highly influenced by the Burmese Army. Secondly, both the government show the same towards Rohingyas. From controlling the personal life to genocide all are directly operated by the Government.

So from the above discussion, it is clear that the Rohingya community is not like other traditional communities. For example, Bangladesh village communities get outstanding support for education, production, Healthcare, and other civil rights. Rural-urban migration between cities and villages creates a huge opportunity for Bangladesh's traditional agrarian society. But in terms of the

Rohingya community, they were deprived of all those opportunities.

### ***Healthcare and Fertility***

Most of the mothers and children are suffering from malnutrition. But still, their fertility is very high. It seems like; it is because of a culture of poverty. But this is not the full scenario. Wealthy people also have many children.

Myanmar's government tries to apply many policies to decrease fertility. But Rohingyas consider these policies as a conspiracy against them. Because the government does not ensure other basic facilities. As a result, a cultural lag is created between healthcare and population control policy. This cultural lag is the direct effect of the client-patron relationship between Rohingyas and the government. On the other side, they believe the population is their power. So, they strictly rejected the population control policies.

### ***Social Structure and fertility: A Theoretical discussion***

This research is operated based on 3 theoretical backgrounds. Many findings are associated with those theories and some are not. They are discussed below:

According to Karl Marx, political economy shapes society. The elite class makes the law and imposes it on the lower class people to achieve their goals. If a government is ruled by the elite class and has absolute power, they ignore the needs of ordinary people. Sometimes it turns into state terrorism.

In the case of Rohingyas, this paper finds that all aspects of Rohingyas life are controlled by the government, and that influences the behavior of Rohingyas. We found that all the fertility behaviors are influenced by Government activity towards Rohingyas. Rohingyas are highly fatalistic, though they are not highly religious. It is because of a lack of education and an unsecured future. And this uneducated population is created by the government. The government also restricted the outer world to give them education and facilities. Rohingyas are not only deprived but also segregated. That's why they have no knowledge or motivation to change their situation.

If we discuss Maloney's theory, there are many similarities with the findings of Maloney. He found that traditional Bengalis mainly depend on a God about the number of children. It is also true in the case of Rohingya. That means they are fatalistic in nature. Many findings match with Maloney's findings discussed in the finding section. But the different findings from Maloney is that the present situation of Rohingya. Rohingya's fertility behavior is influenced by their survival strategy, security, longer fertility period, family time, and more fatalistic worldview. These findings are apart from Maloney. And the reason is the different social structures of the Rohingya community in Rakhine.

Through the lenses of gender perspective, we see that the Rohingya Community has many gender issues. Rohingya males are more interested than females to have a large number of children. Male is also religiously conscious about the number of children. But they are not so much conscious about the health of the mother. Though most of the respondents believe that contraceptives can be used if mothers have a critical situation, they don't use them. Many women complained that they didn't want more child but they have to compromise with their husbands. This strict patriarchy is also part of their social structure.

## **Conclusions**

There are basically 3 major contexts behind the worldview of the Rohingya community.

1. Rohingyas are a highly traditional, agrarian society.
2. Historically, they are deprived of civil rights, oppressed, and living in open imprisonment.
3. They are Muslim.

This is the actual reality of their life. Their worldview is based on this reality. Because of that reality, their worldview is mainly irrational. They have a no calculator view towards life. Their educational base is religion and tradition.

The social structure makes them segregated from the outer world.

Denying civil rights prevents their development towards modernity. They have very few demands from life and from people. They know how to live with less.

We cannot judge them by our viewpoint. In past they had no career, in present, they don't have one and in the future, they won't have one. So they don't have dreams like us, demands like us. So how could be their life like this? A large number of children is not a problem or barrier to their dreams. They have no reasons to delay their marriage. A small number of children or small family will provide no such benefit to their life. And the reason behind this behavior is their social structure in Rakhine state in Myanmar.

So without creating the opportunities we cannot make them work on it. If the world can give them civil rights like education, healthcare, occupation, and freedom then they will willingly come out from this harsh reality.

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