

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

“A place to call home”: A process of liberation for Rohingya Refugees in the United States

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Funding information

Psi Chi through the Graduate Mamie Phipps Clark Diversity Research Grant.

Abstract

This study explores the experiences of Rohingya refugees in the United States following their forced migration and years as stateless refugees. Qualitative strengths-based phenomenological analysis was applied to individual interviews with eight key informants, all identified as Rohingya refugees. Interviews focused on experience and meaning-making concerning the complexities of Rohingya identity and belonging, rights and liberation in the United States, and the impact of generational, gender, and migration patterns. Five superordinate themes were initially identified. The first theme focused on the adaptive and resilient responses to institutionalized discrimination, emphasizing changes in Rohingya identity and values. The second theme examined how these adaptive responses influenced participants' perceptions of American culture and society. The final three themes underscored participants' reflections on their sense of agency, efforts to preserve Rohingya culture, and their journey to find belonging. These themes were further analyzed and discussed through a liberation framework. The findings demonstrate how Rohingya diaspora communities are impacted by their pre-, intermediary, and post-migration experiences as they create cultural roots and establish permanency, actively claim their agency, and promote liberation.

KEYWORDS

forced migration, liberation, resettlement, resilience, Rohingya refugees

Highlights

- This study demonstrates the importance of centering newcomer communities' unique narratives and experiences.
- Emphasizing resilience in forced migration should not justify or sustain systemic inequities.
- Recognizing structural injustices is crucial for protecting newcomers' rights and dignity in resettlement.

At the end of 2023, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimated that 43.4 million people are registered as refugees worldwide (UNHCR, 2023). Many of these individuals are considered in need of third-country resettlement due to urgent vulnerabilities or stagnant sociopolitical conditions. While resettlement can offer stability and security, it can be a disorienting process, particularly for individuals and communities who have faced intense systemic marginalization and prolonged statelessness during their forced migration (Sim et al., 2023). For these individuals and communities, the resettlement process extends beyond integration into the receiving country, encompassing a more dynamic and

multifaceted process of reclaiming individual and collective agency, identity, and a sense of belonging in a new sociocultural context (Frazier & van Riemsdijk, 2021).

The resettlement experience can be conceptualized as a dual process, involving both the reconciliation with past trauma, oppression, and disenfranchisement and the simultaneous endeavor to shape a new future. This duality aligns with Prilleltensky's (2008) framework of liberation, which builds on Fromm's notions of “freedom from” and “freedom to.” Prilleltensky (2008) asserts that liberation encompasses the dual processes of overcoming internal and external sources of oppression (freedom from) and the active pursuit of wellness (freedom to).

Nonetheless, the capacity to overcome oppression and pursue wellness can be seen as having a mutually reinforcing impact on each other. While oppressive practices have been attributed to negative outcomes such as internalization of negative group identities, low self-esteem, processes of habituation and accommodation, and poor mental health outcomes (Kira et al., 2019), research also suggests that individuals and communities exhibit resilience when faced with oppressive conditions (Sonn & Fisher, 1998). Research on resilience has shown that agency helps enable individuals to respond proactively to risky situations and challenges by adapting, withstanding, resisting, and/or thriving despite ongoing threats (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013). Individuals who demonstrate resilience are more likely to perceive themselves as capable of making meaningful choices and taking action to shape their lives, ultimately leading to empowering actions of agency that can actually change the world around them (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013). Together, agency and resilience can empower individuals and communities to resist oppression, envision alternative futures, and work collectively toward the pursuit of wellness and the realization of justice (Cattaneo et al., 2014).

At this point, little scholarship exists exploring the resettlement experience from a liberation framework. Most available research focuses on the integration outcomes of refugees, considering constructs such as employment, language acquisition, and civic participation. While these domains are undoubtedly important, they may fail to capture the more nuanced and holistic processes of how refugees, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, make meaning of and respond to their displacement and resettlement journeys. In contrast, a liberation framework allows for examining how refugees engage in both the internal and external processes of overcoming oppression and pursuing wellness in the context of resettlement.

ROHINGYA REFUGEES

The Rohingya are an ethnic Muslim¹ minority group from the Arakan region of Burma,² a predominantly Buddhist nation. Since Burma's independence from British colonial rule in 1948, the Rohingya as an ethnic group have struggled to receive formal recognition and

citizenship within the country (Ansar, 2020). This has resulted in decades of systematic discrimination, violence, and displacement for the Rohingya people. In 2017, the Burmese military conducted actions that the United Nations has described as a textbook example of “ethnic cleansing,” resulting in a mass exodus of Rohingya refugees into neighboring Bangladesh (UNHCR, 2020). The Rohingya refugee crisis escalated to unprecedented levels, as hundreds of thousands fled Burma in a matter of months. Following the mass exodus in 2017, more than half of the entire Rohingya population now reside outside of their ancestral homeland (Tay et al., 2019). Many are displaced and reside in refugee camps, trapped in persistent subpar conditions, and often forced to assimilate or linger as marginalized stateless people (Parashar & Alam, 2019). The Rohingya diaspora in Western countries is a relatively recent migration development facilitated through the third-country resettlement process (Leider, 2018).

In the United States, the years 2015 and 2016 witnessed the largest resettlement of Rohingya refugees, with an estimated 7000 individuals resettled (U.S. Department of State, 2016). However, the Trump administration's 2017 travel bans and refugee cuts significantly slowed down the flow of Rohingya resettlements, reducing the numbers to only a few hundred annually (Pierce & Meissner, 2017). Albeit slowly, the Rohingya community in the United States is growing, and their experience warrants deeper attention. Only one study, to date (de Los Reyes et al., 2023), has examined the resettlement experiences of Rohingya refugees in the United States. This study explored the different dimensions of integration and its relationship to well-being in a newcomer Rohingya community in Chicago and found that not all dimensions of integration (economic, social, cultural, and political) positively predicted well-being. Notably, greater social integration, defined as having Americans within one's social network, was associated with increased psychological distress. The researchers speculated that while social integration can indicate greater assimilation, it may also weaken ties with one's ethnic community, potentially leading to increased psychological distress, for individuals living in close-knit ethnic enclaves (de los Reyes et al., 2023). Given the Rohingya community's history of displacement and statelessness, a claim to their ethnic identity is possibly a “source of pride, and in many ways a show of resistance to oppression” (Leider, 2018, p. 20).

Research on the experiences of resettled refugee communities tends to examine the experiences of oppression as a static premigratory stressor that predicts psychological wellness in the post-resettlement context (Sangalang et al., 2019). However, it is crucial to consider how the responses to oppression throughout the forced migration experience persist and adapt in the context of resettlement as well. Without this lens, the narrative of the “vulnerable refugee” who is a passive recipient of

¹Although the majority of Rohingya are Muslims, not all Rohingya are Muslims. Because the narrative of the Rohingya experience has become intertwined with the Muslim identity, this study will focus on the Rohingya identity as an ethno-religious identity.

²The internationally recognized name of the country is Myanmar. However, there is tension in recognizing the name change from Burma to Myanmar due to its military association, especially for the Rohingya people (Uddin, 2020). Although calling the country Burma can be seen as problematic because of its colonial roots and refers to a single, large ethnic group, this study will use the name Burma to respect the position of the Rohingya community.

services may be reinforced, missing important examples of agency, resilience, and liberation. Furthermore, a liberation framework encourages scholars to consider how resettlement systems, policies, and programs may reproduce or exacerbate oppression. It also allows for an investigation into how refugees work to transform these systems to align with their self-determined needs and visions of justice.

Thus, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of one specific community—Rohingya refugees resettled in the United States—with a particular focus on their complex and multifaceted journeys of liberation and agency. By taking a qualitative approach, this study seeks to capture the nuances of Rohingya refugees' resettlement experiences, as they navigate new systems, reforge their identities and communities, and pursue wellness and self-determination.

METHOD

This study began as a dialog between the first author and the Burmese Rohingya Community of Wisconsin (BRCW), a community-based organization serving local resettled Burmese and Rohingya communities, regarding how research could be leveraged to support Rohingya communities in the United States. Considering how little information exists about the Rohingya diasporas outside of asylum countries and humanitarian spaces, an exploratory study was chosen to explore Rohingya refugees' adaption throughout their migration and resettlement journey in the hopes that it might yield helpful information for the community as well as scholars and practitioners. As the study progressed, additional support was provided by the International Literacy and Development (ILAD) Rohingya Program, a community-based organization in Texas.

Participants

To participate in this study, participants were required to be 18 or over, proficient in English, willing to share their lived experiences as Rohingya refugees, and speak about the broader experiences of the resettling Rohingya community in the United States. Recruitment was selective and solely based on the recommendations from BRCW and ILAD Rohingya Program staff. Recommended community members were invited via email texts, or phone calls from the first author, to participate in the study. Eight Rohingya adults (five men and three women) ranging in age from 21 to 40 ($M = 28$) participated. Seven participants registered as refugees in Malaysia and arrived in the United States through third-country resettlement; one participant came to the United States as an asylum seeker from Singapore. Five were born in Burma, while the remaining three were born in

Malaysia. All eight participants resided in major cities in the United States and were actively serving the resettled Rohingya community as interpreters, community liaisons, cultural brokers, or refugee resettlement employees.

Procedure

A semi-structured interview guide was developed in collaboration with BRCW. All involved in the development process approved the final interview guide questions. The questions broadly covered the interviewee's beliefs and values of Rohingya culture, migration and resettlement experiences, and factors contributing to their sense of belonging and home.

Participant interviews were conducted in English via Zoom. The first author's election to conduct the interviews in English was primarily driven by the linguistic diversity within Rohingya communities and the challenges of transcription and translation of those various languages spoken. Before the interview, participants were sent a link to the informed consent form. Before interviews began, the interviewer reviewed all elements of the consent form and allowed participants to ask any questions. The interviews lasted 60–90 min, were audio and video recorded with the participant's consent, and were facilitated by the study's first author and a BRCW affiliate volunteer. Demographic data was also collected. For further clarification and to ensure an accurate portrayal of the participant's experience, the first author followed up with each participant as needed after the interviews had been reviewed. As a token of gratitude, participants were compensated with a \$35 gift card of their choice. To ensure participants' confidentiality, all data files were anonymized, assigned unique identifier numbers, and participant names were changed to pseudonyms. All interviews were initially transcribed with dictation software and then checked for accuracy by the first author. Final transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose.

Data analysis

This study utilized interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA emphasizes the nuances of people's experiences to explore sense-making in a range of perceptual phenomena (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is a particularly useful methodology for examining complex, ambiguous topics regarding the human experience. Using the framework of IPA, the analyst attempts to engage in a “double hermeneutic” process (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35) wherein the participants interpret their own experiences while being interviewed and the analyst then interprets the meaning-making of the participants. IPA was carried out iteratively for each of the eight transcripts. This involved detailed reading and rereading of each transcript, followed by initial memoing of any notable

TABLE 1 Guiding table of superordinate themes.

Superordinate theme	Subordinate theme
1. Withstanding institutionalized discrimination	1.1 Adaptive values 1.2 Rohingya identity
2. Perception of American culture and society	2.1 Adaptive responding
3. Agency in the post-resettlement context	3.1 Access to basic rights 3.2 Freedom to say "Rohingya"
4. Defining and preserving Rohingya culture	4.1 Language 4.2 Values and legacy
5. Belonging and home	5.1. National identity and citizenship 5.2 Property ownership 5.3 Envisioning a future

experiences, salient emotions, or patterns of thought or expressions. These initial memos were then reviewed to identify emergent themes. Emergent themes were then condensed and examined using a process of abstraction (i.e. putting like with like), subsumption (i.e. emergent theme identified as a main superordinate theme), and contextualization (i.e. identifying contextual or narrative elements) (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 66). A table of superordinate themes was then created. Once all the transcripts were analyzed, all the superordinate themes were examined for patterns and connections. This yielded a *guiding table of superordinate themes* (see Table 1).

This article is the product of a secondary iterative exploration of the findings, concentrating more specifically on how the superordinate themes from the data can be further understood within the context of liberation.

Methodological integrity

As recommended by the American Psychological Association task force report on qualitative research reporting standards (Levitt et al., 2018), this study aimed to demonstrate methodological integrity, which included conducting member checks, providing in-depth thick descriptions, contextualization, keeping an audit trail, and engaging in memoing and journaling throughout the entire research process as a mode of structured method of reflexivity.

Positionality

The first author is a Korean immigrant researcher and mental health clinician, who worked directly with the

community organizations of this study, conducted all interviews, and was the analytic lead. She grew up socialized in the United States and South Korea, exposed to both Euro-American and Korean cultural values. Throughout her life, she has grappled with understanding the complexities of migration, acculturation, and identity formation. These personal experiences are the primary motivator for her current commitment to newcomer communities and this research. The second author is a Gen X, European American woman who was socialized and experienced the world within a number of more transparent minority identities. Her decades-long focus on community, belonging, identity, inclusion, cultural contexts, and access to resources began with early experiences of difference and a desire to understand how inclusive communities that respect both micro and macro senses of belonging, are created and maintained.

RESULTS

In the first round of analysis, five superordinate themes emerged that captured Rohingya refugee participant's resettlement experiences in the United States and the ways in which their prior multiphasic refugee experiences impacted these. Throughout the five themes, various context-dependent examples of resilience, liberation, and agency emerged as well, these are detailed in the discussion section.

Withstanding institutionalized discrimination

All participants recounted enduring substantial societal and institutionalized discrimination before resettling in the United States. Participants unanimously reported being denied citizenship, legal residency, livelihood, healthcare, and education elsewhere because of their Rohingya identity or their status as refugees. The participants endured these conditions in varying ways, most utilizing strengths-based, resilience approaches such as embracing adaptive values and taking pride in their Rohingya identity.

Adaptive values

After so many years of experience applying resilient approaches to the extreme conditions in their preresettlement lives, seven of the eight participants described embracing these adaptive values as part of their United States resettlement experience. Two participants, Ebrahim and Tansima, notably exemplified this phenomenon. They described adopting a mindset of gratitude as an adaptive mechanism to endure oppressive conditions. Ebrahim stressed how discrimination and being a "refugee" has led him to navigate the world with gratitude:



...you know, for the people who (are³) raised and born here would be different. But for us? You know, we can find gratefulness in everything.

Tansima explained that many Rohingya had become accustomed to unequal opportunities and disadvantages in Burma. While cognizant of this discrimination, she shared that for herself and other Rohingyas, there were no other options but to endure the given circumstances. Finding gratitude in some ways helped her to enjoy aspects of her life despite the circumstances:

Even though it was so difficult—we try to deal with that...So, we are used to difficulties. We were happy over there living and enjoying our lives. It is ok—as much (as) god (can) give us, we are grateful with that.

Rohingya identity

The participants described how claiming the Rohingya identity had empowering effects. Several of the participants explained that while their experience of marginalization was rooted in their Rohingya identity, embracing their collective identity served to counteract the marginalization. Among the eight participants, Sabera provided the most explicit description of this phenomenon. In the interview, Sabera began by sharing how the denial of a national identity in Burma significantly disrupted the Rohingya people's sense of self-identity. She shared, "for many years, my people have suffered there because they don't have identity." Sabera then recounted her childhood struggles with her Rohingya identity, noting how her perspective gradually evolved. She described internalizing early experiences of institutionalized discrimination, which drove her to initially reject her Rohingya identity. However, once she was able to reframe the marginalized experience as a testament of resilience, she found acceptance and pride in being Rohingya:

But slowly, I realized that I (represent) a lot of people's struggles, and my people are the example of resiliency. My people are the example of love, unity. You can see my people everywhere in this world. Wherever Rohingyas are, they will never live alone. They will bring culture. They will bring a community together. We are the example of unity.

Based on his decades of Rohingya advocacy work, Abul saw how an increasing awareness and recognition of the Rohingya genocide was bolstering a sense of pride in the Rohingya identity:

They wouldn't even say they are Rohingya... after coming to the US, they would just say "Oh, I'm a Muslim from Burma." But now things are getting (better)...I remember President Obama—he gave a speech...He went to Yangon University. He talk(ed) about the Rohingya...I got goosebumps when he mentioned Rohingya because this is the first time in history (and at a) main university in Burma. And the Burmese people, I know, were mad. Why would he mention Rohingya instead of Bengali? So that kind of increased the morale of being a Rohingya, and I, myself, was kind of proud. Finally, the Rohingya name was said.

Abul believed the events of the 2017 ethnic cleansing may have inadvertently strengthened the collective Rohingya identity: "I think in a way the incidents back home in Burma might make them more somewhat stronger, somewhat united."

The notion of the Rohingya identity as both a result of and a reaction to marginalization and discrimination resonated throughout participants' views on the intersectionality of Rohingya and Muslim identities. Several of the participants described how being Muslim was woven into the fabric of being Rohingya. Sabera believed this intertwined identity was partially attributed to the nature of discrimination Rohingyas faced in Burma for being a religious minority. She explained, "Rohingya got discriminated against the highest because of the religion, which is our strongest thing." Sabera's gradual transformation to finding acceptance and pride in her Rohingya identity also extended to her Muslim identity, "I am super, extremely proud that I am Muslim. And I don't want my upcoming generation to forget or not practice Muslim. I will do whatever (is needed) for my generation to stay Muslim." Affirming and endorsing Muslim identity appeared to have protective qualities for several of the participants.

Perception of American culture and society

As part of the interview guide, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences and impressions of American culture and society. The participants' attitude and perception of the United States was profoundly influenced by their experiences of enduring institutionalized discrimination during migration. The values that were developed as a means to endure oppressive conditions (e.g., gratitude) seemed to persist in the post-resettlement context toward

³Quotes have been lightly edited where necessary to ensure clarity and reduce redundancy, while all efforts were made to retain grammar, speech particularities, and meaning.

the receiving country. Ebrahim explained: ...while we are living in Arakan, I think many people cannot afford because it's a refugee life...people come here (United States), people have nice house, nice rooms, beautiful rooms, decorated rooms, nice beds, nice mattress. All the things that we need to be thankful of, you know?

Ahmed also described how in comparison to Burma and Malaysia life in the United States is "fantastic." Tansima shared that she chose to accept American culture because it offered opportunities that were previously denied to her:

I am OK with this culture because (it does not make me feel) unsafe or small or make me uncomfortable. This country is different but also makes me happy, helps me to improve myself, helping me to (be) independent, and also helping, the biggest thing, is to the community people and my family. So that's why for me, I will never forget my culture, but I'm OK with this culture.

When participants experienced discrimination in the United States, they often applied adaptive strategies that they had used previously (Case & Hunter, 2012). Mohammed shared an experience he had with a barber-shop owner who endorsed xenophobic rhetoric about refugees. Mohammed recalled not being deterred or personally offended by the barbershop owner but deciding instead to befriend her. He attributed this attitude to his "survivor instinct":

I had to start working when I was 13 years old to support the family, you know. And every day, we have to go through all this like discrimination from the village people.... Rohingya people are like fighters, survivors...and I think that's one of the inner strengths that I have to survive here, you know, like the survivor instinct.

Abul echoed this perspective about how Rohingya communities have become resilient toward discrimination:

(Recent) Islamophobia in the media, and we, Rohingya, have seen it and experienced it, but it's kind of similar to Burma...(so) some of the Rohingya, they might get used to it.... At least here, we can walk freely. (In Burma if you) pass by a Rakhine village or a military area in the city—you are wearing a traditional Muslim attire, they might even kick you...But here, if you just wear the Muslim (attire), you might get some stares and stuff but other than that, they are not going to bother you like majorly...So, I would say that the Rohingya might get used to that kind of Islamophobia...

AGENCY IN THE POST-RESETTLEMENT CONTEXT

Before resettlement, participants experienced persistent concerns for their safety and security. However, resettlement marked a notable shift in agency for all eight participants.

Access to basic rights

As part of the third-country resettlement process, Rohingya refugees are given access to residency, citizenship, education, healthcare, and property ownership opportunities. For several participants, these basic rights were crucial in fostering a sense of agency. Tansima explained how fundamental rights, such as citizenship, were crucial to declaring ownership of her life:

And here, I can say now I'm a citizen of the United States, and this is my country too. And I have a house—this is my house. This is my car, and it is my family, my neighbors, my relatives. So, I can say everything is mine.

Ebrahim noted how citizenship offers the freedom to travel, "But now, you are free, you have American passports. You can go to London and go to Saudi Arabia, Japan, Malaysia. So, it's a big thing." Ahmed's enhanced sense of agency was reflected in his ability to pursue job opportunities free from exploitation. He explained how employment for Rohingya individuals in Malaysia was generally restricted due to their "illegal status" and characterized by low wages. In the United States, however, he described having more job opportunities with more earning potential. Zurah, one of the two participants who completed high school in the United States, believed that access to education fosters agency to speak out against injustice:

If you have education, I don't think you have any issues such as violence, such as no freedoms. Because if you have education, you know how to speak out for yourself. You know how to tell people (to stop) being violent. You know how to speak for what's right and what's wrong.

FREEDOM TO SAY "ROHINGYA"

Several participants shared how the post-resettlement context enhanced their agency to claim their Rohingya identity and culture. Zurah explained:

So, you've got a chance to show the world about (our) culture, about the Rohingya, the



people. You get to tell because in the United States, there are so many people that are willing to hear about us. And I would say living in the United States, it is always been a chance for us to let the world know about Rohingya.

This freedom to openly claim the Rohingya identity and culture, however, also appeared to be an adaptive response to participants' previous migratory conditions. For example, Javiet described how persecution in Burma and illegal migrant status in Malaysia denied him opportunities to claim his identity as Rohingya. He shared, "Even if you say the word 'Rohingya', you might be (in danger) to your life." Thus, the post-resettlement context allowed him to openly endorse his Rohingya identity: "So now after we moved to the United States, I can say 'as a Rohingya'.... You can call me Rohingya. ...But that thing, we never get a chance in Burma."

Overall, participants described a profound post-resettlement shift in the level of risk linked to being Rohingya. As with many immigrants who arrive in the United States from more dire circumstances, their prior experience and ability to adapt to risk contributed to the profoundly felt decrease in relative risk even as they saw that the United States was in no way a panacea.

DEFINING AND PRESERVING ROHINGYA CULTURE

While all participants shared ideas about their understanding and experience of Rohingya culture, their definition of "Rohingya culture" and the aspects of it they considered most significant varied. There was a general sense, however, that Rohingya culture was shaped by language, a collective experience of forced displacement and institutionalized discrimination, and the values forged from these elements.

Language

Several of the participants believed the Rohingya language was a unique distinguisher of their culture. This seemed especially significant given the overarching narrative that portrays Rohingya as lacking a distinct cultural identity. Sabera explained:

We are unique because our Rohingya language is not a Bengali language. It is not a Hindi language, but it is a Moor language—we have a lot of words from Arabic... we have a unique language that only we (speak) it.

Abul elaborated on this uniqueness, noting its predominantly oral tradition. He explained, "there's no like proper written language for Rohingya, so it is mostly

conversation, by speaking." Sabera, Ebrahim, Javiet, Ahmed, Tansima, and Abul all expressed a desire to pass down the Rohingya language to younger Rohingya now growing up in the United States. Participants believed that their language was a pillar of cultural and historical preservation for the diaspora communities. Tansima explained, "You have to know that your mother language is important for you. If you totally forget that, you will never know where you come from, where your parents' generation and all come from." Yet, the participants expressed that the unique, oral tradition of the Rohingya language creates difficulties for preservation and transmission in the post-resettlement context. For this reason, Javiet speaks Rohingya at home to his children:

We have the speaking language... I always talk to my children in the Rohingya language, that's the most important. Do not lose your language. We are left with this only thing.

Ahmed and Sabera both felt that language loss was already happening. Sabera reflected, "the new generation are forgetting their language. They don't really speak in Rohingya or Burmese anymore. They are (speaking) in English." Because of the centrality they saw of language to culture, participants described a need for more collective effort to preserve their language.

Values and legacy

When participants were asked what aspect of Rohingya culture they hoped would persevere in the diaspora, seven of eight responded with moral and cultural values. Ebrahim saw Rohingya culture as being family-oriented and stressed the importance of social obligations toward the family. He shared, "In our culture, we're very family-centered people. So, we take care of the elderly parents... You know, this is part of the culture." Javiet, Tansima, and Zurah believed that Rohingya culture's family-centric values encapsulated how one thought of one's neighbors as well as other broader communal values. As Tansima stated, "Like our neighbors are like a family." Javiet explained further, "Whenever we celebrate, we all gather together. If something happened, we ask each other about what's going on? How can I help you? I think that's a very good cultural thing." Tansima and Javiet both saw these community-oriented values as a strength and resource for the community that was crucial throughout the migration experience. Javiet recalled how the resettled Rohingya community helped him find a job when he first arrived in the United States. Zurah echoed similar experiences, describing how the Rohingya community was vital in easing the transition to the United States for her family. Harkening back to their description of gratitude as an adaptive value that helped them

persevere in difficult conditions, Ebrahim and Tansima hoped that the value of gratitude can be preserved as part of the Rohingya culture and adopted by future generations to guide them towards helping others who are in need, Tansima shared:

So I would say to my son...(do) not make someone feel small and always think that all humans are (the) same. We are all equal. We have to help each other. I don't want you to being like people like how they treated us.

Sabera, Javiet, and Abul believed the Rohingya diaspora communities are experiencing loss of some cultural values like the loss of language. Sabera shared, "Even my own cultural people, my own Rohingya people have changed a lot after resettling to the United States." Abul worried that early exposure to different cultural values would inevitably influence the younger generations. He expressed, "(kids)... may prefer the mainstream culture of individualism—you work hard, you get where you want to be, which is a good thing, you know?" But he hoped that broader moral values would persevere, saying, "I think it be the moral values, you know—respecting the family, family unity, a love for one, mutual respect for all. That is what I hope the Rohingya values, we can carry." He continued, reflecting on his own acculturative experience and those of other Rohingya community members:

Maybe moving forward...we might have certain cultures, certain things we do differently. Like "Oh this is part of the Rohingya American culture." We want to develop some kind of unique culture within the Rohingya and within America.

BELONGING AND HOME

The final superordinate theme that arose was participants' collective descriptions of how the sense of security, belonging, and home were intricately connected and mutually reinforcing.

Citizenship and national identity

Participants described citizenship and national identity as integral to fostering a sense of security and belonging and ultimately a feeling of "home." Javiet expressed, "I even become a citizen...I feel very safe. I feel very secure, and I feel freedom. I feel no one can discriminate (against) me." Ebrahim explained the connection between this increased security and a sense of belonging. He explained, "I belong here now (because) I have (an)

ID card, I've got Social Security, and I get all the benefits." Tansima further elaborated this perspective:

Even when I was living in Malaysia, I can't even say (even though it is a) Muslim country 'this is my country,' or this is my house. I can't say that because I always have a fear. (But), I can say now I'm a citizen of the United States, and this is my country too.

Property ownership

Property ownership appeared to have a specific importance within the Rohingya diaspora. Ebrahim explained that for many Rohingyas, including himself, owning a home establishes roots and permanency that were unattainable for most Rohingyas in other countries. After years of displacement, Ebrahim reflected on how property ownership relates to the experience of home:

From Burma, to Malaysia, Bangladesh, Thailand, Vietnam. This is our last stop. From here we go down to the earth, right? When you die, you get buried, right? So, people are realizing that, ...so people are buying property.

Property ownership was also tied to the sense of security and safety. Sabera explained how housing insecurity had caused her and her mom to experience harassment and sexual assault while living in Malaysia. Because of these experiences, home ownership was a specific goal for Sabera as a mother to a young daughter:

I want to own a house so that if anything happened to me in future, my daughter will not rent a house or be in a state where people will (be) able to assault her, attempt to sexually harass her. And so, yeah, she will have a safe wall for her to live in.

Property ownership was significant to Ahmed as well. He viewed buying a house and having his own family as pillars of "home." Because he has yet to attain these goals, Ahmed expressed difficulty feeling a sense of home in his post-resettlement life.

Envisioning a future

Increased agency and the affirmation of a "home" signified a profound and meaningful shift that appeared to enable participants to envisage a future. For most, this future was also directed towards not just their personal

success but uplifting the entire community. For example, Zurah expressed:

I want to be a police officer because I want to let them know, tell them that I can too. Being a Rohingya, being a hijabi, I want them to know that there's nothing stopping us from being someone that we want (to be), especially in the United States.

She notes that as she has yet to see a Rohingya woman police officer, she is determined to be one of the first ones. She hoped it would inspire other Rohingya girls to pursue diverse careers. Education was another important element in shaping all eight participants' future aspirations, both for themselves and their community. Ebrahim believed education was more than a means for upward social mobility, it was a protective factor against future discrimination, violence, and marginalization:

So, yeah, I have very high hopes for my kids, for the Rohingya kids here. If you have the education, then nobody can look down on you. Nobody can treat you differently...It is not to rule other people but to protect yourself. For our kids to not become like us.

Tansima, who aspired to go to nursing school, described how education would enable her to help her community:

So, I'm just hoping to graduate and to help my community, any family who come new. Because it is too hard to find the Rohingya language. So, I'm learning about medical words and also to pass my GED test and also (taking) the other programs so I can really help improve my speaking and to translate clearly.

More than the resources, such as education that were found in their new "home," several participants noted how more integral aspects of the community, including their enhanced sense of safety, belonging, and home, elicited a sense of obligation to the larger displaced Rohingya community. Ebrahim shared, "Now (we've been) here for maybe 5 years, 6 years, and now you are a little bit better off...you send \$100, that makes a lot of money over there." Abul stated:

In a way I feel at home right now. I've been here for years, and I tend to see things differently. I look out for a future...There's more things we can do for the people back in Burma...lobbying, providing support, assistance... counseling and advice.

As long as Rohingyas continued to face displacement and oppression, participants predicted they would feel a lingering sense of duty to any Rohingya people still seeking what they have found.

DISCUSSION

The unfolding experience of liberation

Qualitative, phenomenologically informed studies have the advantage of allowing the meaning of those with expertise in a lived experience to come to the surface. Thus, although this study was not originally framed within a liberatory framework, it became apparent early on that both agency partners and participants saw this concept as central to their experiences. Just as their migratory journey was one of the unfolding experiences, liberation can be seen as playing out in four stages in their resettlement experience: (1) adapting to the United States; (2) discovering agency to pursue wellness; (3) addressing collective needs; and (4) establishing cultural roots.

Adapting to the United States

Participants from this study reported experiencing both political and psychological oppression, as defined by Prilleltensky (2008). Their awareness of these oppressive conditions demonstrated *conscientization*, and in response, they engaged in numerous adaptations that are hallmarks of resilience and liberation. Some participants developed values such as gratitude, while others leveraged pride in their collective identity as a marginalized group. These resilient responses were tied to nascent feelings of agency among the participants, and despite their inability to alter their surroundings while living in Malaysia and Burma, the values nurtured an intrinsic sense of control. An interesting finding from this study was how resiliency to prior oppressive conditions seemed to endure into post-resettlement life, influencing their perception of America and providing ready skills for adjusting to this new context. Most distinctly, the participants expressed a generally positive attitude toward American culture, particularly in comparison to harsher conditions of marginalization. Even when faced with Islamophobia and xenophobia in the United States, participants saw it as *comparatively* less stressful. Over time, individuals and communities can become habituated and internalize oppressive conditions (Sonn & Fisher, 2003) and their ongoing appreciation for the relative advantages of life in the United States seems to exemplify this habituation. Research has also shown that perceived acceptance changes as future generations become more established in their receiving countries (Maliepaard et al., 2010). Even among the current

generation, as the priority shifts from surviving to thriving, the systems of discrimination that were initially perceived as *comparatively better* may come to be seen as having a more negative impact on well-being (Kirmayer et al., 2011). Therefore, it is crucial to guard against allowing habituation and learned adaptive responses of previous oppressed peoples and communities to excuse the perpetuation of oppressive practices in the new context.

Discovering agency to pursue wellness

In addition to applying old and new adaptive values as they resettled, participants also found that the new freedoms in the United States led to a sense of enhanced personal and community agency. In this study, access to basic rights and resources in the post-resettlement context shifted the participants' agency and ability to pursue wellness, both of which led to processes of liberation. Systematic changes are essential in enabling processes that lead to well-being among marginalized individuals and communities (Case & Hunter, 2012; Prilleltensky, 2003). Each of the participants described experiencing more personal fulfillment in the United States largely because of their newfound legal status. Studies have consistently supported the notion that secure legal status allows migrants and refugees to better integrate into their host communities, contributing to social cohesion and economic development (e.g., Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019; Strang & Quinn, 2021). Legal status was critical in fostering belonging and promoting well-being for the participants and their communities. Additionally, citizenship, which allowed participants to engage in the democratic processes, had a notably empowering influence.

Addressing collective needs

As enhanced post-resettlement agency led to a newfound capacity to pursue wellness, prior confines of liberation in the form of resisting and enduring oppressive conditions shifted to a focus on participants' enhanced capacity to fulfill personal, relational, and collective needs. This study found a noticeable relationship between personal fulfillment and collective fulfillment. As participants' secure legal status increased their agency, they also felt a deepened sense of obligation to their community. Community well-being and individual well-being are thus intertwined in a complex and dynamic relationship. While healthy and thriving communities provide supportive environments that enable individuals to flourish (Maton, 2008), physically and psychologically well inhabitants are also more likely to contribute to the resilience and vitality of their communities (Prilleltensky, 2008). Thus, participant's voiced need to preserve Rohingya culture in the post-resettlement context referenced both a personal and collective need.

Establishing cultural roots

In the post-resettlement context, participants described experiencing "comparatively" less discrimination; in some ways, it meant less threat to their cultural identity. Without this old threat however, the preservation of the Rohingya culture experienced new challenges. While legal residency and citizenship fostered belonging and home ownership, the participants attributed the integration into American society as an implicit threat to the continuation of Rohingya culture. This echoed other findings on the generational effects of immigration and migration (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). Nonetheless, preservation of Rohingya culture and identity appeared to be occurring as a form of resilient adaption in the United States. Thus, echoing the findings from de los Reyes et al. (2023), enforcing a singular form of integration in resettlement may elicit distress and yield less favorable outcomes for the community. When communities have experienced displacement and marginalization, the agency to establish cultural roots is arguably a critical component of liberation (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Comas-Diaz et al., 1998), as it provides the process of self-determination to build a foundation to imagine a life for themselves and their future generations. This study suggests that enforcing a singular, unnuanced form of integration in resettlement can strip away the agency to establish cultural roots, which thwarts the process of liberation for displaced and marginalized refugee communities.

LIMITATIONS

The participants' willingness and capacity to share with the interviewer may have been influenced by factors such as their physical and mental state at the time of the interview, comfort level with the interviewer, and general expectations. As previously mentioned, the decision to facilitate the interviews in English was due to the limitations in linguistic capacity for qualitative analysis. Nonetheless, this resulted in several limitations. Participants were asked to verbally express themselves in their nonprimary language, which may have limited their expressions and vocabulary. Furthermore, it can be argued that the participants' proficiency in English reflects a degree of acculturation that is not representative of the larger resettled Rohingya population in the United States. Therefore, although their English proficiency enabled them to serve as cultural and linguistic bridges for their communities and to provide valuable insights to this research, their specific lived experiences may not generalize to other Rohingya in the United States. The participants' endorsement of agency and adaptive tendencies may be more prevalent in individuals who also endorse a certain type and degree of bicultural navigation, rather than representing the broader Rohingya



experience. However, the views shared here still provide important insights into at least a part of the Rohingya immigrant experience. Another limitation of this study was the unequal distribution of men and women who could participate. Rohingya women experience an intersectional marginalization that warrants further and more specialized attention. Lastly, this study is limited by the size of the sample and the specific point in time in which it was conducted and focused.

Concluding remarks

This study highlights the critical importance of understanding and contextualizing the diverse resettlement experiences of refugee communities. Most research on resettled refugee communities emphasizes the capacity and ability to adapt to new cultures and environments with little acknowledgment of what refugee individuals and communities define as empowering and liberating. Comas-Díaz et al. (1998) wrote that a liberation framework can be a “resource for rescuing cultural memories and archetypes to reconstruct a new transformed, and more egalitarian future” (p. 790) for oppressed communities. This was evident in this study and suggests understanding the experience of Rohingya refugees and others from a context of oppression, liberation, and wellness. The insights gained from participants of this study underscore that their journey toward liberation is integral to their adaptation and agency and reflects a collective endeavor to meet shared needs and foster cultural identity.

In this study, access to legal residency and citizenship had liberating and wellness effects for the participants and, in turn, for their communities. This reinforces the need for more inclusive refugee policies that prioritize the rights of refugees, including pathways to citizenship. Policies and interventions that facilitate refugees' access to citizenship can help promote personal and collective wellness. Furthermore, participants described how the resettled Rohingya communities in the United States are in the midst of defining and establishing cultural roots—a critical process of liberation in the resettlement context. Thus, community-driven efforts for cultural preservation should be supported as part of the broader agenda for immigrant justice.

A natural next step for research would be to capture a wider spectrum of Rohingya experiences to help diversify or confirm the emerging narratives from this study. Another critical way to expand this study would be to facilitate the interviews in the primary language of the interviewees, allowing the subject matter expert their full range of linguistic expression, which is vital to the richness of qualitative data. This would also enable more individuals to participate, providing a more accurate representation of the population. Additionally, further exploration is needed regarding the nuanced experience

of displacement and resettlement faced by Rohingya women. Lastly, qualitative research albeit a powerful tool to explore complex human experiences is limited in capacity to generalize across larger populations. Taking a quantitative approach to some of the key themes from the qualitative data may allow more applicability, especially on a policy level.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to express gratitude to Mohamed Anwar and Andrew Trumbull from the Burmese Rohingya Community of Wisconsin for their continued support throughout the research process. We would also like to acknowledge the involvement of the staff and volunteers of the International Literacy and Development Rohingya Program. Special appreciation is also extended to Jason Garrison for his assistance during the interview phase. Lastly, we like to extend profound gratitude to the participants of this study. Their openness and readiness to share their insights and lived experiences form the foundation of this study. Funding for this research was provided by Psi Chi through the Graduate Mamie Phipps Clark Diversity Research Grant.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting this study's findings are not publicly available due to the sensitive nature of the participants' personal experiences and the need to protect their privacy. However, anonymized data may be made available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author, contingent on approval by the relevant ethical review board and in accordance with the participants' informed consent agreements.

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How to cite this article: Zhao, J., & Brodsky, A. (2025). "A place to call home": A process of liberation for Rohingya Refugees in the united states. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12776>