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The educational, social, and emotional impact of COVID19 on Rohingya refugee youth: Implications for educators and policymakers

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted the lives of many around the world, particularly refugee and immigrant communities. In the United States, millions of children and youth had to quickly shift from in-person to remote learning, encountering new challenges and uncertainties in their overall educational experiences. This study explored some of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational, socialization, and mental and emotional health wellbeing of Rohingya refugee youth from Myanmar resettled in the United States. Through in-depth qualitative interviews with 15 Rohingya refugees ages 12–17, we found that Rohingya youth’s experiences with COVID-19 pandemic presented both challenges and opportunities. The challenges included unavailability of personal space to conduct school work, difficulties adjusting to online school due to computer literacy levels, and familial responsibilities that often conflicted with their schooling, as well as feelings of boredom and sadness that consequently impacted their emotional and mental health state. Youth also noted opportunities such as spending more time with their parents who were unable to work due to the pandemic as well as feeling helpful in acting as caregivers to their siblings and in working alongside their parents. Implications for policymakers and educators are also discussed.

1. Introduction

The Rohingya – a stateless Muslim ethnic minority group from Myanmar – constitute one of the largest refugee populations in the world (UNHCR, 2018; UNHCR, 2020). The Rohingya refugee crisis is a continuation of a decades-long campaign of state-sanctioned persecution (Chan, 2005; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [UNOCHA], 2018; Rahman & Mohajan, 2019). As a militarized state with a predominantly Buddhist population, Myanmar engages in both a systematic and systemic erasure of Rohingya existence, despite its deep historical roots in the country (Chan, 2005; Lee, 2020; Rahman & Mohajan, 2019). The ongoing religious persecution of the Rohingya people dates back to the 1970s, involving denial to citizenship (a prerequisite to statelessness), education, and a systemic disconnection and eradication of all essential supports and services (Rahman & Mohajan, 2019; UNOCHA, 2018; Zine, 2016). Over a million Rohingya refugees have fled violence in Myanmar since the early 1990s to neighboring countries of Bangladesh, India, Thailand, and Malaysia, making them among the largest displaced populations in the world (UNHCR, 2018; UNOCHA, 2018).

With escalating conflict over decades, state-sanctioned genocide broke out in August 2017 in Myanmar’s Rakhine state, where much of the Rohingya population lives. More than 800,000 Rohingya were left without legal identity or citizenship in their home country, causing them to flee and seek refuge in Bangladesh (UNHCR, 2018; UNOCHA, 2018). An estimated 860,000 Rohingya currently reside in the Kutupalong refugee camp – one of the world’s largest refugee camps – located in Bangladesh’s Cox Bazar District (United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2020a; UNICEF, 2020b). Over 400,000 of the displaced Rohingya community consists of children and youth who are uniquely vulnerable to gender-based violence, exploitation, abuse, and trafficking (UNICEF, 2020a). Lack of access to adequate health care and education compounds problems for Rohingya children and youth who are deprived of opportunities to learn and grow due to their forced displacement (UNICEF, 2020a). Furthermore, COVID-19 adds to the plethora of socio-political challenges faced by the displaced Rohingya community, making the exploration of their experiences within the pandemic especially crucial.

A joint report by UNHCR and Plan International (2012) indicates that there are an estimated 6 million stateless children around the world.

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Among the countries hosting the 20 largest stateless populations, at least 70,000 stateless children are born each year (UNHCR, 2015). Children can either be born stateless by slipping through the cracks of citizenship laws, or may inherit statelessness from their caregivers, particularly if they belong to ethnic groups facing systemic oppression (UNHCR & Plan International, 2012). Given the growing numbers of stateless children and youth around the world, it is imperative that we understand their experiences of displacement as well as resettlement in a new land. Moreover, the novel coronavirus has severely impacted displaced populations, particularly refugee children. This study provides an insight into Rohingya refugee youth’s experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic. Our paper addressed the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the education, socialization, as well as the mental and emotional health and wellbeing of Rohingya youth.

2. Literature review

Some 100,000 Rohingya refugees have resettled in the United States, with most arriving between 2007 and 2017 (Refugee Processing Center [RPC], 2021). As of 2021, reports from the Refugee Processing Center indicate that most live in Wisconsin, Texas, Illinois, and Indiana (RPC, 2021). Our study is situated in Chicago, IL. Illinois, in particular, hosts one of the largest Rohingya populations within the United States, with over 2,000 refugees to have resettled within the city of Chicago alone (Ali & Oosterom, 2020; Alley, 2018). Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map, 2019), nearly all of them arriving between 2015 and 2017 (Ali & Jazeera, 2019; New American Economy, 2018; Holland, 2018; RPC, 2019). However, there is a lack of reliable statistics around the resettlement of Rohingya refugees within the United States, which reflects the systemic erasure of stateless populations.

Although the global refugee population has increased by about 50 percent over the past five years (National Immigration Forum, 2020), refugee admissions in the United States have fallen by two-thirds from nearly 85,000 in 2016 to 18,000 in 2020, with a particular decline in the number of Muslim refugees admitted into the country (Migration Policy Institute, 2019; National Immigration Forum, 2020). The decline in Muslim refugees can largely be attributed to the country’s deeply-rooted Islamophobia. However, this cannot be seen in isolation from the broader context of refugee resettlement in the United States. The current and growing body of literature on Rohingya refugee youth focuses upon their education (Guglielmi et al., 2020b), literacy (Ali et al., 2020), mental health (Frounfelker et al., 2019), and identity (Bakali & Wasty, 2020; Oosterom et al., 2019). In exploring identity, a qualitative case study elucidates the experiences of two Rohingya refugee boys in Malaysia who, in light of being legally unrecognized as refugees, utilize linguistic and social capital through performing patriotism and assimilating to local culture to cultivate a sense of belonging (Lee, 2020). In Myanmar, youth in Kachin State resist state actors through active political participation to defend the multi-ethnic Arakanese population, including Rohingya displaced populations, to build, maintain and reify self-identity (Oosterom et al., 2019). These differences in identity formation highlight the importance of context in the lives of Rohingya refugee youth.

Mental health literature pertaining to Rohingya refugee youth primarily highlights prevalence and risks of developing mental health problems. Studies evaluating mental health found that over half of Rohingya youth in Bangladesh between the ages of 2 and 16 experience emotional and peer problems (Shaw et al., 2019) and nearly 97% of all participants screened positive on measures of emotional distress (Shaw et al., 2019) in Malaysia. Rohingya refugee youth reveal social and psychological difficulties due to non-Western conceptualizations around mental health experiences (Frounfelker et al., 2019), calling for interventions with cultural salience that display the protective nature of religion and its positive contribution to meaning making. A qualitative study exploring psychological difficulties of eight Rohingya refugee youth due to forced migration through non-directed sand play therapy revealed risk factors of death and fighting, but also displayed resilience through picture narratives of survival on boats and pictures of permanence through creating schools and safe space (Lee & Jang, 2018). Rohingya youth report supportive relationships that provide hope from their parents; at least 82% reported having one friend they trust (Guglielmi et al., 2020a). It is evident that physical, social and relational aspects of Rohingya refugee youth lives are significant contributors to their mental health and well-being.

2.1. Rohingya refugee education

Literacy and educational experiences of Rohingya youth in refugee camps have received considerable attention in light of the centrality of schooling in child development. Despite their interests in acquiring English literacy, a qualitative study with fifteen Rohingya refugee youth shows that experiencing a different alphabet system and intersecting with a lack of formal education pre-migration seriously affects Rohingya youths’ educational outcomes (Ali et al., 2020). A policy brief from Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh highlights specific needs for equal and adequate access to formal education and focuses on improving quality of education, engaging parental support and reducing teacher violence (Guglielmi et al., 2020b). Limited and disrupted learning opportunities, language barriers, inadequate quality of education and discrimination within school settings are all also found among refugee children in countries of first asylum (Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

Yet despite these barriers, Rohingya refugee youth display strong resistance and resilience through the preservation of Rohingya culture and identity using language, while also highlighting the centrality of Islam in Kutupalong (Bakali & Wasty, 2020). Rohingya youth have shown similar resistances in an ethnographic theatre project in Canada, where themes of agency, identity and diaspora emerge from the rich narratives of Rohingya youth (Zine, 2016). Community approaches to addressing gaps in Rohingya refugee youth education highlight the provision of flexible ‘stopgap’ education models with community ownership, coupled with teacher training within refugee camps to enhance and maintain communal investment in Rohingya refugee youth learning outcomes (Smith, 2017). Overall, Rohingya refugee youth face significant interruptions to traditional educational trajectories but continue to display resistance and capacities for growth. However, very little is known about Rohingya youth experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The longevity of the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every sector, with schools and learning being particularly affected, resulting in overwhelming evidence of existent digital inequalities in education (Karalis, 2020; Cardenas et al., 2020). While educational interruptions are commonplace, this large-scale debilitating disruption begs for responsive curricula, program changes, and strengthened community involvement in buffering impacts (Chang-Bacon, 2020). Banati et al. (2020) conducted 500 qualitative phone interviews with youth across Ethiopia, Lebanon, and Côte d'Ivoire, finding few avenues to stable online learning, which forced students to permanently drop out of school in Ethiopia while combating a host of social stressors through changing family and peer relationships, increasing stigma and violence around contracting COVID-19 and facing serious food insecurity. The widespread impacts of COVID-19 on education continue to be documented and published, posing unique challenges for refugee youth educational continuity and outcomes.

2.2. COVID-19 and refugee youth education

The negative effects of COVID-19 on education are particularly stark for refugee youth, who are affected by barriers to accessing both digital and language learning in host countries. An ethnographic study of refugee youth, teachers, and social workers in Germany reveals...
structural difficulties, namely under compensation of educational advantages, difficulties in maintaining contact (Prindahl et al., 2021) and individual inequalities of lower quality youth participation and digital literacy in a population already attempting to gain and utilize vital language skills (Fujii et al., 2020; Sugarman & Lazarin, 2020). In a COVID-19 policy brief, Germany and Turkey report similarities in lack of accessibility to technological devices, internet connections and rooms and equipment for refugee youth living in shelters, exacerbated by communication problems due to language barriers (Kollender & Nimer, 2020). Medina et al. (2020) find that COVID-19 is forcing refugee youth into learning independently, while adult family members struggle with varying levels of English proficiency and being newcomer parents that often work essential jobs. Guglielmi et al. (2020c) find that despite experiencing these difficulties and lack of learning supports, Rohingya youth expressed hope for returning to school and disappointment with the inability to attend madrasa (religious school), indicating complications in how youth envision their education. Increasingly, refugee youth display eagerness and resilience in their desire to learn and gain an education despite significant ongoing structural barriers.

2.3 COVID-19 and mental health

In conjunction with educational issues, widespread mental health concerns exist in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and youth are particularly subject to the development and persistence of post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and behavioral problems (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020; Benner & Mistry, 2020). Human Rights Watch (2020) reports that Rohingya children in Cox’s Bazar, who were completely cut off from internet and education access, were left uninformed about the severity and healthcare precautions surrounding the pandemic. Rousseau & Miconi (2020) highlight various external stressors associated with the pandemic, including death and grief, become contributors to PTSD and anxiety diagnoses with the added stress of families experiencing vulnerabilities of overcrowding and food insecurity. These external stressors, owing to experiencing protracted crises prior to migration, are reflected in refugee families that displayed both resilience and worry in coping, as evidenced by a Chicago-based community mental health service center working with refugee families (Endale et al., 2020).

In this study, we fill an important gap in the literature by exploring the impact of the COVID19 pandemic on refugee youth education, socialization, and mental and emotional health and wellbeing of resettled Rohingya refugee youth in Chicago. We explore their experiences within the context of their migration(s), familial relationships, school expectations and their mental and emotional health experiences within the overarching protracted experiences of being refugees during a global pandemic.

3. Methods

This study utilized qualitative methods to gain an understanding of the experiences of Rohingya refugee youth arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and associated impacts on their education, social life, and emotional health and wellbeing. An Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved all study protocols. By employing a qualitative research approach, the participants’ voices were centered and researchers engaged in a process of reflexivity (Padgett, 2016). The process of reflexivity was carried by all authors listed in this manuscript. All authors acknowledge their positionalities as women of color who come from refugee and immigrant backgrounds. The first author identifies as a Black Muslim woman who was a former refugee. Second and third authors identify as South Asian immigrant women. First and third author both identify as Muslim women and second author, although not Muslim, has extensive lived experiences in Muslim-majority countries. Given the nature of the study, all authors acknowledge the potential for research bias due to their positionalities. To ensure accuracy and consistency of data, authors engaged in a process of reflexivity throughout data analysis. Although all study interviews were conducted in English language, study participants often used Islamic phrases such as “Insha’Allah” translating into “God willing” and those were translated by authors who have knowledge in Islamic phrases.

3.1. Participants

This study utilized some elements of youth Participatory Action Research (yPAR) approaches by involving members of the Rohingya community in the study. As such, the first author hired two community liaisons to assist in the process of recruitment as well as provide guidance on the overall study. Employing purposive sampling, first author initially recruited a total of 17 Rohingya youth. All study participants were informed that their participation was completely voluntary and that they may withdraw from the study at any point. Each participant was also offered a $25 gift card for their participation. After the initial stage of recruitment, two potential participants were unable to participate due to family emergencies. Although those two youth were unable to participate, they were still provided the $25 gift card, given that they had passed the initial screening phone call. All remaining 15 participants completed interviews via Internet (using Zoom or Google Hangouts) ranging from 35 to 80 min each. All interviews were conducted by first author. All participants went through a process of assent and a parent provided consent. As noted in Table 1, participants’ ages ranged from 12 to 17, with education levels that ranged from seventh to twelfth grade. All participants arrived in the United States as refugees between 2012 and 2019. There were ten participants that self-identified as female and five that self-identified as male. All participants have been attributed pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

4. Data analysis

With participants’ permission, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Upon the completion of every interview, the first author began the process of memoing by writing down initial thoughts and key points from each interview. This process was important in that it allowed the first author to reflect on the interview and begin identifying codes and themes that emerged. Each interview transcription was triple-checked by authors to ensure accuracy and consistency. Following this process, the first author began the process of data analysis employing a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis proceeded in several stages, under leadership of the first author: (1) a careful review of each interview transcript, occasionally alongside reviewing original audio files of interviews; (2) line-by-line coding process to ensure that participants’ voices were centered in analysis and in development of preliminary codes; (3) comparing the

| Participants* | Gender | Ethnicity | Age | U.S. Arrival Year | Grade |
|---------------|--------|-----------|-----|-------------------|-------|
| 1. Abdulkareem | Male   | Rohingya  | 16  | 2016              | 11th  |
| 2. Zakari      | Male   | Rohingya  | 13  | 2015              | 7th   |
| 3. Naama       | Female | Rohingya  | 14  | 2013              | 8th   |
| 4. Taleha      | Female | Rohingya  | 17  | 2013              | 12th  |
| 5. Ayesha      | Female | Rohingya  | 13  | 2015              | 7th   |
| 6. Halmaz      | Female | Rohingya  | 17  | 2012              | 11th  |
| 7. Rania       | Female | Rohingya  | 12  | 2012              | 6th   |
| 8. Bilal       | Male   | Rohingya  | 15  | 2016              | 9th   |
| 9. Abdulrazzaq | Male   | Rohingya  | 15  | 2015              | 10th  |
| 10. Layla      | Female | Rohingya  | 13  | 2012              | 8th   |
| 11. Yara       | Female | Rohingya  | 16  | 2016              | 10th  |
| 12. Nadiah     | Female | Rohingya  | 14  | 2016              | 8th   |
| 13. Noorah     | Female | Rohingya  | 17  | 2013              | 12th  |
| 14. Ahmed      | Male   | Rohingya  | 15  | 2019              | 10th  |
| 15. Sameera    | Female | Rohingya  | 16  | 2018              | 10th  |

* Note: Participants have been attributed pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.
differences and similarities between codes across the data and identifying preliminary themes that emerged from the data; (4) meeting of authors to review and compare perspectives on themes identified, and to reach consensus on major themes and definitions; (5) presentation of preliminary findings to community members.

It is crucial to note how our own positionalities as women of color from Muslim and immigrant backgrounds informed our analysis process. In particular, the first author not only comes from a refugee background, but has been working closely with the Rohingya community in Chicago since 2015. Thus, we have utilized both inductive and deductive approaches in our analysis. An inductive approach was useful in our data analysis as we identified the ways in which our themes directly emerge from the data and center the participants voices. We also acknowledge that our analytic process was also inductive, in particular, given our own positionalities as authors with immigration histories and ethnic and racial diversity cannot be completely negate from the lens in which we approach this research.

5. Findings

The focus of this qualitative study was to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Rohingya youth’s education and socialization as well as their mental and emotional health and wellbeing. We asked specific questions related to their experiences of migration, familial relationships, school expectations and their mental and emotional health experiences as refugee youth during a global pandemic. Three main findings emerged from our data: (1) significant challenges in the transition to online schooling; 2) the importance of family in the lives of Rohingya youth and how their familial responsibilities play a role in their adjustment to online schooling during a pandemic; and 3) the significant impact of COVID-19 on mental and emotional health and wellbeing of Rohingya youth. The following section provides a detailed description of each theme accompanied by data from our qualitative interviews with Rohingya youth.

5.1. Experiences with virtual learning: Challenges and facilitators

This theme emerged from the data as participants discussed how they are experiencing online schooling. In describing their virtual learning experiences, participants spoke about what is challenging about virtual learning and what has been working for them. All fifteen participants in this study stated that the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures have significantly impacted their learning. All study participants spoke about the difficulties of adopting to a new virtual learning model, particularly those with very limited experience with computer-based learning. For example, Layla (female, age 13) noted:

“Oh, last quarter [in online school], I got Ds because I was really not focused like the first quarter. I didn’t know what was going on. I didn’t know how to use Google docs, Gmail. I literally forgot everything. So, I asked my friend, ‘How do you copy this thing? How do you do this? How do you use docs?’ I was just really confused and it was really hard. So, that’s why I got Ds. And I got a lot of missing work, because I didn’t know.’

Layla (female, age 13) continued to describe how, in addition to struggles with computer literacy, her grades were impacted by her experiences being a student in a virtual learning which prompted fears associated with asking questions during virtual class time:

“(With) in-person schooling I learned, I understood. When I have a question, I tell the teacher but during online class, I feel scared to ask the teacher. ‘It’s fine, I’ll tell her later [the teacher].’ During school [in-person], I’m like, ‘Wait, I want to learn right now.’ When I get the lesson, when I don’t get it, I ask her, ‘Teacher, what do you do for this?’ When I get out, I was like, ‘Oh, okay, I get it now.’ So, I could ask questions in real life.”

Layla’s fear of asking questions during online school was shared by other participants who compared the differences between their in-person experience and online learning experiences. For some participants, not only were they uncomfortable asking questions during the virtual class time, but they also felt uncomfortable turning on their cameras during class, instead preferring not to be seen. Nadia (female, age 14) noted, “Yeah, so in online, I don’t like to open my camera, also like it’s hard to answer a question.” Nadia continued to describe how the students who open their camera earn extra points in the classroom, and although she would “sometimes” open her camera, overall, she did not feel comfortable doing so. The feeling of discomfort with appearing on screen was primarily linked to participants’ learning environment at home.

A majority of participants described not having their own private space to do schoolwork or attend online classes. Many shared their space with siblings who were also attending online schooling, often times in very close proximity to where they do their own schoolwork. Noorah (female, age 17) spoke about sharing a room and a desk with her other siblings who are also in online school and described the experiences as “It’s, I don’t know, it’s weird. Because you know, like so many things go… [my siblings] teachers are talking, my teacher is talking. I have to speak, [my siblings] have to speak. I have to be quiet. It’s not cool. Not very, it’s not good. I always hear about online schooling, but I never think it’s going to be very difficult. I don’t know how people do. For me, it’s difficult.” When asked about her overall feelings towards online schooling, Noorah (female, age 17) responded by noting the adjustment she had to make, “…like it’s normal. If they [her siblings] have to talk, I have to come out of that room, and I sit somewhere like a quiet place, because they have to talk, I can’t say anything.” When asked, “So how does that work for you, like when you are trying to learn?” Noorah stated,

“Not good. Not good… It’s like, like you are… you’re sitting in one place, and you have to move and you have to talk with the teacher. It’s not a good thing. It’s like so many things or like learning like what are the teachers saying. What my teacher saying is difficult, I will say so many issues.”

Similarly, Zaki (male, age 13) described his inability to concentrate while in the virtual classroom, because he also shares space with his two younger siblings, “when your brother and sister are yelling, and when the teacher is trying to say something about the answers, but you wrote a different answer by mistake.” When asked how he feels when this happens, Zaki responded, as his two siblings began to speak to him in the background, “Like, annoyed. Like, you cannot do your work. Which is happening right now [during the interview].” The disruptions due to home environment were noted by a majority of the participants (N = 12) as a key component of what makes online learning difficult. Taliba (female, age 17) described the limited space in her home and how it impacts her attention, and consequently, her ability to do schoolwork:

“Actually, all of us have school. All my siblings, five of us, we all have school. And then my mom have work, is working from home so it gets so, so like— I don’t know, like so annoying. Like, my sister is there doing her class and then the other one is there and then we’re like all like— cause it’s like one small house, and every-one is there you know. It gets so, so annoying and it’s like, I’m trying to do my work but my attention is going everywhere.”

Taliba continued to describe her work environment:

“I used to work in the room but then, we— Because you know, I just get lazy in the room you know, I just, you know, I don’t know, the bed is so comfortable sometimes I just lay down and be sleeping in the middle, fall asleep in the middle of class but now I’m in the living room, which you know, help me get my work done better and yeah. So, I work in the living room and then there’s another desk for my sister that goes to kindergarten. And then my other two sisters are in
the dining room, my mom works in the kitchen and then my brother, he’s just everywhere.”

Additionally, majority of the participants (N = 14) noted how important it is for them to receive in-person instruction. Naima, (female, age 14), discussed the importance of “seeing” what the teacher is “saying”, “So, I’m an 8th grader and like, you know, with uh I have uh– virtual home learning is hard like you know not being in front of teacher and not being able to see what the teacher is saying properly.”

The challenges the participants experienced while in the virtual classroom were compounded with learning disruptions due to unreliable internet connections to their homes and/or unreliable wireless internet coverage at home. Although all of the participants in this study had access to a computer, a majority of the participants (N = 14) discussed how not having a reliable internet connection significantly impacted their attendance and classroom participation. An unreliable internet connection at home effected participants’ grades, reduced their ability to focus, and created emotional distress. Participants also discussed how internet connection issues led their teachers to believe that they were missing class or leaving class early, “the internet issue is a very big thing. Teacher feels like, I like to go out [of the online class] early, but that is not the problem, they don’t know that I have a problem with the [internet] connection,” Noorah (female, age 17) stated. Ahmed (male, age 15) shared how internet caused him to miss a week of school, “sometimes [the Internet] goes slow and I cannot meet the teacher. Like even the last time, my home internet cable, like the whole thing broke. It [the main cables outside] got hit by truck. The truck was huge so it got into an accident and hit the cable box and destroyed everything. So, almost for a week I could not use [the Internet].” Participants also attributed the limited internet connection due to sharing the WiFi with other members of the household, “Sometimes I’ll wonder that - we have like nine people in our house, so every-one uses the internet, and it’s difficult to use the internet together. So, my WiFi is like very slow, so I can’t pretend to even hear my teacher,” Rania (female, age 12).

Participants also noted the isolation of online school as a challenge, particularly as they struggled to communicate with their teachers and classmates. Halima (female, age 17) described such experiences, “I mean when the pandemic started, at that time, it was hard for me, because I didn’t know what to do in school and stuff. It was hard for me and my teachers to communicate, and no one opens camera, no one speaks, only the teacher gives the talks and everything. And then, I felt so weird. I felt like I was talking to only the teacher, no one else is with me. And another, and then, the difficulty is that, I couldn’t see the people that I used to talk to, that I used to communicate with, but not friends

Furthermore, the difficulties of adjusting to online schooling impacted how participants approached their school, and in return, changed their perceptions about education: “I just feel like I’m not getting a proper education with this online learning stuff” Taliba (female, age 17). Despite the challenges associated with online learning, participants also discussed the benefits of being home with their families:

“Um, kind of happy and kind of sad because like in a happy way, I get to play to like play around my brothers a lot and it’s kind of fun and it’s sad because I don’t get to focus a lot, learn a lot” Zaki (male, age 13).

Taliba (female, age 17) described how thankful she is for her father to be at home for the first time in his adult life, and how this enables him to spend time at home with the family,

“… he [dad] has been home for a year now, almost a year now. Because he works at a hotel. Definitely cause, you know, for safety reasons and because COVID is spreading, really, really crazy. So, he [dad], for every-one’s safety, his hotel has, has been, you know, shut down since like, almost a year now and he’s been home. And then he’s just, you know, um, here you know, and its, a, actually good that we’re all here at home, as a family together. But then, sometime, it gets really, really, you know, like, um, I don’t know how I would say it but like it does get very overwhelming.”

Participants also illustrated a sense of gratitude amidst describing the challenges associated with the virtual learning experience during a pandemic. For example, participants would often describe how grateful they are to their parents and the opportunities they are given. When asked about access to a computer at home, Zaki (male, age 13), noted how his computer is “slow, not that great, it was so slow.” He further explained that he does not complain much about his computer due to his gratitude to his father who constantly works to provide for him and his siblings, “I don’t want to complain cause my, my dad bought it for me to learn, so I don’t complain that much.” Zaki also noted that he does not like to share this information regarding his computer not working properly with others and that only some of his friends know about this issue. This sentiment of gratitude was reflected in other participants who also shared how grateful they are to their parents who work around the clock to provide for them and their siblings.

5.2. Familial responsibilities

This theme brings insights into the role participants play in their family. As young people, all participants in this study spoke about having some sort of a responsibility at home. The types of responsibilities varied, but participants who were the eldest and/or had younger siblings in their family spoke at length about the types of expectation placed on them. Furthermore, participants also spoke about how they manage online school while taking care of their responsibilities at home. Halima (female, age 17) describes her role in the family, her responsibilities, and how they impact her online schooling:

“So, if I’m in class right now [online], I don’t talk or open my camera right, so I just leave it like there and go head over to my [younger] sister and ask her why she’s crying, or what she wants, or change her diapers and stuff. Yeah. And sometimes my mom is not at home. She’s outside, and most of the time, all four adults, which is my big sister, my big brother, my mom and my dad, they go outside for work, or sometimes run some errands. And I got to be the one who handles everything. So, yeah, just today, I cleaned everything… They [younger siblings] ate lunch and everything. They’re all back, but my sister, and my mom, and my dad, and then every-one is back, and everything is okay now. But I sometimes miss what teacher says things, like during that time, like during when I helped my sister or clean bed or something, yeah. Sometimes I have to cook rice, or maybe clean the dishes.”

Similar to Halima, Layla (female, age 13) described her responsibilities in the household as taking care of her siblings and assisting with cooking when her mother and older sister are not at home. Layla (female, age 13) stated such responsibilities were part of her “job” and that she “really likes” to help her mom. When asked how taking on responsibilities makes her feel, Layla responded, “I feel so happy. If you help your family, Allah (God) will be so happy.” The sentiments of feeling happy to help were shared by majority of the participants. Furthermore, these sentiments were in direct relation to participants’ awareness of the amount of work their parents engage in outside of the home, and in return, wanting to be helpful in their respective roles. These sentiments were expressed by Ayesha (female, age 13) as she reflected on her own development:

“I see myself as like a responsible girl. But I’m happy that I am responsible. Uh, because like, I don’t want to still be a little girl. Like, I want to help my mom out a lot and yeah. Like, so she don’t have to do a lot of work because she always do a lot of work at her job and now she have to do it here, so I want to help her.”

Rania (female, age 12) also noted how the responsibilities she holds
as an older sister whereby she takes care of her younger sisters, would often make her feel like as she described it, “a big sister taking responsibility of her mother.” Rania, (female, age 12) further noted how she would take care of her younger sister: “I make her milk, I make her go to sleep, I change her diapers, and I like literally make the shower and do those things.” Rania described how her mother “does a lot of work” both outside and inside of the home, and thus she “feels good” by helping out her mother. Rania concluded that taking care of her younger sister is in fact education as it, “it makes me learn more about kids.”.

Familial responsibilities were not only relevant to Rohingya girls but were also noted by Rohingya male participants in this study. Zaki (age, 13) shared how he helps his mother navigate the technology she needs “as a way of helping her to do those things.” Rania described how her mother “does a lot of work” both outside and inside of the home, and thus she “feels good” by helping out her mother. Rania concluded that taking care of her younger sister is in fact education as it, “it makes me learn more about kids.”.

Participants also spoke about responsibilities in relation to expectations of parents, especially as it concerns education. A majority of participants (N = 14) in this study spoke about their parents’ emphasis on education and how despite their parents not having formal education, they as children were expected to excel in school and aspire to becoming formally educated. For example, when asked about familial responsibilities, Taliba (female, age 17) described the expectations her parents had and how she sees her role in the family:

“Um, because I’m the oldest in the family, my parents have the highest expectations on me, so like, my parents really, really have a lot of hopes and dreams on me that I succeed, cause once I succeed into like, once I become a successful person, I’ll be able to support my siblings, be a role model to my siblings so they can, you know, look up to me and you know, want to, you know, be successful and to, definitely.”

5.3. Impact of COVID-19 on mental and emotional health and wellbeing

A majority of the participants (N = 13) spoke about feelings of emotional distress including sadness, loneliness, and unhappiness due to the pandemic. Participants described emotional distress due to a range of issues including not seeing their extended family and friends, as well as the simple inability to go outside the home to play or gather with others. Abdulkareem (male, age 16) offered an insightful lens into his life as he described his days as “it goes fast. It’s like you do nothing and the day is done.” He continued to describe his situation, it is “boring and stuff, you know? Not seeing my friends, just staying home, doing your own work and stuff, you know? It’s like kinda of boring, but I have to deal with it.”.

This feeling of time passing by, or hyper awareness of time, was noted by participants especially as they described their daily routine and the amount of time they spend at home. Taliba (female, age 17) described in detail the emotional and mental challenges of the pandemic:

“...For me, definitely, it’s been mentally and emotionally challenging, you know. Being at home, especially with everything going around me. My, you know, environment, myself, my, everything — everything basically. So, like usually when we had school, if something were happening, you know, it’s like, I have a mental breakdown, anything was school related or like my own personal and my emotions you know, um, I would be able to go to school. At least, like you know, I’m there, and it’s like I get to meet, you know, my friends, my peers and the teacher. Um, it would feel like okay, I’m fine and when I get home, I’ll be like okay I’m fine but like, with being home 24/7, it’s like I don’t get to see different people, it’s like same faces every day. Like, I love every-one but like some— seeing the same faces for like the past one year, it’s like for a year now it definitely get really, really— cause it’s like I want to be able to do definitely things that I thought I would be able to do. Like, Covid-19 have definitely affected me a lot...”

Similar to Taliba (female, age 17), participants described the emotional challenges presented by being at home and not being able to see friends or attend school in person. Abdulkareem (male, age 16) described being “stressed” and “tired” due to being “in front of computer all day.” Yara (age, 16) spoke about being feeling “so sad” due to pandemic restrictions of physical distancing which caused her family to isolate and not meet with extended family members and larger community. Yara also spoke about feeling “nervous” and the stressors of “doing everything online.” Nadiah (age, 14) shared similar sentiments when asked about the pandemic, noting she felt “sad” and “nervous” about the uncertainty and public health risk of contracting the COVID-19 virus. Nadiah, similar to other participants, also discussed not feeling happy, and emotionally sad about how the virus impacted the world, and how it may impact her family. Zaki (male, age 13) spoke about feeling lonely and sad, in particular, he spoke about the inability to meet new people and connect with new friends.

“[the pandemic] makes me feel like alone: lonely and sad. ‘Cause there’s people out there like— umm—like, you know, I don’t get to meet. ‘Cause sometimes new people come and they live toge— they live, uh, over here ‘cause they move and all, like, you know, I don’t have chance to meet them, get to know them... like, yeah.”

While a majority of the participants spoke about feeling sad and lonely due to not seeing their friends and connecting with peers, others have noted how the pandemic has created a distance between them and their friendships. When asked about friendships, Rania (female, age 12), stated, “My friends? I haven’t seen them in a while. I even forgot their names.” This statement by Rania was evident throughout the interviews as some participants described the challenges of maintaining friendships and/or meeting new people in the era of COVID-19. Despite the emotional and mental challenges described by the participants they also described their faith as a coping mechanism:

“The first time when it happened [pandemic], I was really scared. I was like, ‘Wait, I’m going to get COVID, I’m going to have…. I was really scared. I was like what should I do? I prayed to a lot, that I hope my family and every Muslim over here stays safe, and all of that stuff. I prayed a lot. And then, after a few months, do you know how COVID started in December 2019, like around March 2020. I was like, ‘It’s fine nothing is going to happen since Allah [God] is with us. Then I was fine, I was not scared anymore. And then my aunt, my parents—my grandpa—my big sister and her husband got it, and we were really scared. So, we prayed a lot, make du’a a lot, and they became fine. And then, we were good, because I don’t know the COVID passed quickly. As long as they were healthy and taking care of themselves.

6. Discussion

This study utilized a qualitative approach to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Rohingya youth’s education and social life, as well as their mental and emotional health and well-being. Rohingya youth illustrated the challenges and opportunities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study was guided by a strength-based perspective by highlighting not only the challenges, but also the adaptability and strengths displayed by Rohingya youth throughout our study. A strength-based perspective (Saleebey, 1996) was crucial to this
study as it provided insight into not only the challenges faced by youth, but also their resilience and strength in adapting to life in a global pandemic as refugees. A strength-based perspective also contributes to literature on refugees as it positions the youth not only as people facing difficulties, but also as experts of their own stories.

It is evident from this study’s findings that the COVID-19 pandemic presented both challenges and opportunities. Among the challenges, Rohingya youth noted struggles with adapting to online learning, particularly given their limited computer literacy as well as difficulties maintaining a reliable internet connection. These findings support existing literature on the need for schools to evaluate refugee youth’s digital literacy as well as their access to reliable internet (Fuji et al., 2020; Sugarman & Lazarin, 2020; Santiago, Bustos, Jolie, Flores Toussaint, Sosa, et al., 2021). Rohingya youth in this study also spoke at length about the challenges in maintaining a suitable home learning environment. Attending school online while in close proximity with siblings and other family members disrupted participants’ focus during lessons. Moreover, participants did not feel comfortable fully participating in class activities, which would have required turning on their microphones and cameras while lacking personal space. These findings are crucial for educators to consider, particularly as refugee families are often resettled and placed in poor housing with very limited space.

In discussing the challenges associated with online learning, it is also vital to understand the environment in which Rohingya youth are situated. Rohingya youth in our study discussed their families and the role they, as young people, play in the family. As illustrated in the finding ‘familial responsibilities,’ it is clear that Rohingya youth play a crucial role within their respective families. Despite their young age, every participant in our study noted the responsibilities they hold in the family. The discussion on responsibilities did not differ greatly between genders, however Rohingya youth that were first-born or with eldest child status in particular discussed additional pressures and responsibilities. One consequence of online schooling during the pandemic is that participants’ school attendance and their household duties are co-located and in practice often overlap in ways that also disrupt their education.

Thus, the physical changes, from school environment to home environment, presented additional challenges and disruptions to youth’s learning. This finding contributes to existing literature that argues that understanding the family context is crucial to engaging refugee youth in resettlement services (McMichael, Gifford, & Correa-Velez, 2011).

Along with the challenges related to familial responsibilities, it is vital to acknowledge the ways in which youth discussed the rewards of taking care of their family. A majority (N = 14) of the youth in this study described their familial responsibilities as an important aspect of their lives. This point is also linked to participants’ gratitude to their parents for providing them with a better life. Furthermore, youth were also aware of their role and contributions in the family as essential to the success of the family. As noted in the findings, Rohingya youth discussed feeling good about assisting their family members, and often approached such responsibilities as both a learning opportunity as well as a way to serve the family unit. Furthermore, a majority (N = 13) Rohingya youth in this study come from tightly knit families, often in multigenerational households. Our study findings contribute to existing literature that refugee families play a significant role in refugee youth lives, contributing strongly to their identity and academic development. Wein (2008) focuses on family resiliency in refugee youth resettlement, highlighting the family’s centrality in youth development across domains of academic success and mental health. Our study findings are also in line with Fuligni’s (1998) review of immigrant youth and their adjustment in a new land, noting that immigrant youth play a significant role in contributing to the family through conducting chores and providing assistance to the family. Our study adds to previous work by critically examining not only the ways Rohingya youth contribute to their families, but also how they speak about such contributions. Thus, the role of family is critical to understanding how the youth experience not only the pandemic, but also resettlement and integration in the United States.

Our third study finding addresses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental and emotional health and well-being of Rohingya youth. Although there are existing literature exploring the mental and emotional health and well-being of Rohingya youth (Magan et al., 2022), there is very limited literature on how this population is impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. As highlighted in the findings, study participants spoke about the myriad of sentiments associated with life in a pandemic. All participants in this study acknowledged that COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted their mental and emotional health and wellbeing. Key factors that contributed to mental and emotional health struggles include long periods of quarantine, the inability to see family and friends, lack of structure in regards to online school and being at home, as well as uncertainties and fears surrounding the coronavirus. The majority of the participants spoke about feelings of sadness and boredom. These findings add to existing work by Brooks and colleagues (2020) who found quarantines and social distance protocols, despite being important, significantly impact mental and emotional health.

Our findings contribute to the existing literature on the impact of COVID-19 on refugee youth (Fuji et al., 2020; Kollender & Nimer, 2020; Medina et al, 2020; Sugarman & Lazarin, 2020). Rather than focusing only on Rohingya youth’s experience in schooling contexts, our research also contextualizes the academic experience in day-to-day family environments. Acknowledging the role of family ties and impact of familial responsibilities on broader educational outcomes, we are able to capture the totality of Rohingya youth’s experiences in and outside of the classroom. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge how the COVID-19 pandemic not only impacted the refugee youth in this study, but also their entire families, as youth described and reflected on how their families have experienced the pandemic. Youth in this study discussed family members being laid off from work, surviving the COVID-19 virus, and being quarantined together in a limited space.

Our study findings also contribute to the refugee mental health literature, in particular the emotional and mental health challenges and needs of refugee youth during a global pandemic. As noted in our findings, it is evident that pandemic-related changes such as online schooling, long quarantine periods, and inability to see friends and extended family members all contributed to the mental and emotional challenges experienced by Rohingya youth. Regarding refugee youth, it is vital to acknowledge limited access to culturally grounded and linguistically appropriate health and mental health services. It is also important to note that as a recently arrived population without a pre-existing diasporic community in the U.S., Rohingya refugees face additional challenges in accessing culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health services. As such, it is crucial that mental health providers consult with Rohingya community leaders in establishing and implementing culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health services for Rohingya refugee youth.

These findings may inform future work on the emotional and mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on refugee youth and family. As such, it is important for future interventions to center not only youth, but also engage the family and critically examine not only individual level impact but collective struggles as well.

7. Implications for educators and policymakers

Our study findings shed light on the experiences of Rohingya refugee youth during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in particular the impact of the pandemic on their education, social life, and overall emotional health and well-being. These findings illustrate how Rohingya refugee youth, most of whom are newly resettled refugees, experience schooling in a pandemic while also navigating their responsibilities at home as sisters, brothers, daughters, and sons. For educators, particularly those who teach refugee youth, it is vital to assess how refugee youth are
experiencing schooling during a pandemic (Couch et al. 2021). In particular, it is vital understand how online schooling presents additional challenges considering their computer literacy and knowledge of computer-based applications their home environment, and the availability of resources such as a reliable internet connection at home (Santiago et al. 2021; Fuji, et al., 2020; Kollender & Nimer, 2020). It is critical that teachers and school administrators to provide a space for refugee youth to discuss their concerns and seek the support they need.

In thinking about how best to support Rohingya refugee youth, it is imperative that school teachers and administrators find ways to include the family members. The inclusion of the family, through a culturally and linguistically appropriate model, will ultimately benefit the youth as most the Rohingya youth in our study highlighted the importance of family and family ties. The inclusion of the family is key in understand the various roles refugee youth play within their families and communities (Couch et al. 2021; Marlowe & Bogen, 2015; Mogan et al., 2022).

As such, policymakers, particularly those who work on refugee youth issues, should acknowledge the resources provided to not only one child, but across the family. The findings clearly highlight that Rohingya refugee youth share space with their siblings, share resources with their families, and often play a critical role within their family as caregivers. These findings should inform education policymakers about the varying roles played by Rohingya refugee youth and thus allocate resources to support their learning while respecting their contributions to their families and centering their culture. Finally, policymakers should allocate additional funding support for refugee and immigrant youth to access additional resources such as after-school homework help as well as classroom assistance during school. Additional funding to support the needs of refugee youth will not only play a vital role in their educational success, but will also alleviate stressors linked to inequities and lack of resources available to refugee youth.

8. Limitations and future research

One limitation is that our study was conducted with a small sample of 15 Rohingya youth. Given the qualitative nature of the study, the sample size cannot be generalizable and thus our findings are not representative of the experiences of every Rohingya refugee youth. Another limitation is that our study included 10 females and 5 males, and such a more gender balanced sample may have provided more insight into the experiences of Rohingya male youth. Lastly, study recruitment site was a Rohingya community organization and majority of the participants (N = 14) were members of this center and lived in close proximity to the space. Recruitment from various spaces in the community may have offered a more diverse sample of Rohingya youth who lived in different parts of the city. Furthermore, majority of the youth in this study (N = 14) attended Chicago Public Schools, and thus the experiences of Rohingya youth in private or charter schools may or may not differ.

Future research may further explore the emotional and mental health experiences of Rohingya refugee youth, in particular, as it relates to their educational experiences and transition into US schooling systems. Additionally, future research should investigate the role of faith and family in the lives of Rohingya youth and how such may impact their educational experiences. A possible next step for future research may also include qualitative interviews with school teachers and administrators to understand their insights including challenges and best practice methods they employed to help assist Rohingya refugee youth. Finally, a follow-up study with Rohingya parents would shed light on the how the pandemic has impacted their parenting and offer insights into how educators and policymakers may best assist families.

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