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Arkanabad- where drowning is as common as dying a natural death

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ARKANABAD- WHERE DROWNING IS AS COMMON **AS DYING A NATURAL DEATH**

This Research Report is submitted to the Faculty of Business Administration as partial fulfillment of Masters of Science in Journalism degree

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Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Karachi, Pakistan

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List of Abbreviations

| | |
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| UNHCR | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |
| CNIC | Computerised National Identity Card |
| NADRA | National Database and Registration Authority |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNODC | United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime |
| NARA | National Alien Registration Authority |

Abstract

Today, the world faces the highest number of displacements ever recorded (United Nations [UN], n.d.), with refugees and asylum seekers amounting to 28.5 million, according to data released by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (UNHCR, n.d.). Rohingya Muslims, belonging to the Rakhine district in Myanmar (Ahmed, 2009), form a large section of these displaced individuals (UNHCR, n.d.), who are forced to flee their homeland in the face of atrocities afflicted by the Government of Myanmar (Warr, & Wong, 1997).

According to UNHCR, Rohingya are one of the most persecuted minorities in the world (Baloch, 2017), subjected to brutal oppression and denied the right of citizenship in Myanmar (Yusuf, 2017). This has resulted in a mass exodus of Rohingya from the Buddhist-majority Myanmar, as they seek refuge in the neighboring Bangladesh, Malaysia, Pakistan and other countries (Kyaw, 2008).

Presently, after Bangladesh, Pakistan is home to the largest population of those Rohingya migrants who left Myanmar during 1960s and 1970s (Malik, 2017). Though unlike Bangladesh, in Pakistan these migrants are not recognized as refugees but are identified as illegal migrants and stateless individuals (Yusuf, 2017). This further raises the question of the citizenship and status of individuals born to these stateless Rohingya migrants in Pakistan.

This project aims to answer to this very question while shedding light on the predicaments these stateless individuals face and how they have been able to go about their daily lives lacking as essential a document as a Computerised National Identity Card (CNIC).

The project also aims to explore problems that are a direct outcome of their illegal migrant/stateless status including restricted movement, dearth of work opportunities, inadequate pay-scale, lack of education and healthcare facilities and subjection to harassment by police. More importantly, it will seek answers to questions like are these refugees entitled to the citizenship of their parents' homelands and what's their future and identity. It will also probe reasons that have hampered them from attaining citizenship so far.

Chapter 1



A fisherman sets sail surrounded by boats line the shore along the Ibrahim Hyderi fish harbour in Karachi.

On a cloudy April afternoon, five fishermen huddled around a broken piece of their boat's hull, holding on to it for their lives, surrounded by hammering tides and gusty winds. Their boat had capsized, unable to withstand the cataclysmic storm that had brewed hours after they had foraged into the deeper part of the sea to catch fish. While all of them were aware that letting go of their hold on the sunken boat's wrecked hull they would likely end up lifeless in the very depth of the sea, Abdul Majeed, 27, a Rohingya fisherman among them was finding it hard to maintain his grip on his only instrument of survival.

Majeed felt his hold loosen with each tempestuous tide hitting him hard, spiking the pain in his bruised and bleeding hand. He finally let go off the wooden piece he had held onto for hours, under the darkening sky, when the pain in his hand became unbearable, depending on his swimming skills to battle against the ferocious sea.

“I must have kept swimming for around 15 hours,” Majeed later said, sitting amongst his family members. “I wanted to reach the shore alive so that I could send help for others.”

Though he had given into exhaustion before reaching the shore, he was lucky enough to catch the attention of a crew aboard another boat. As he fell unconscious- darkness and silence shrouding his senses- he knew that he had successfully caught the attention of the crew on the boat and would be rescued.

Next morning, as the storm sub-sided, the Ibrahim Hyderi fish harbor in Karachi, from where Majeed had left for sea, was in a state of lull. Looming blue skies over the harbor had turned hazy, sea had receded after a ferocious display of anger and fishermen stood around in groups of three or four, conversing in hushed whispers- the only sign of life at the otherwise silent harbor. It was mid-April and the first episode of devastation this year, which fishermen at the harbor and their families residing in nearby localities anticipated all year round but are never truly prepared for.

Majeed, who resides with his sister, lives in Arkanabad, mainly a Rohingya settlement located few minutes’ drive away from the Ibrahim Hyderi fish harbor, where drowning is as common as dying a natural death.

According to Muhammad Zakria, 58, a resident of Arkanabad, “Most of the widows you will come across here [in Arkanabad] have lost their husbands to the sea.”

“Majority of the people in our community [of Rohingya migrants] work as fishermen and they often die amid cyclones, leaving behind helpless widows and unsheltered children to survive in dismal conditions,” he said.



Crew aboard a fishing boat unload their catch at the Ibrahim Hyderi fish harbor. .

Rohingya women in Pakistan solely depend on their husbands for their economic needs, primarily due to illiteracy, lack of agency and the strict observance of *pardah* (gender segregation in Islam). Hence, once widowed, they find themselves helpless, with little to no means of earning. To add to it, they are further burdened by the challenges of identity crisis and statelessness, as Rohingya migrants in Pakistan are still not given a legal status.

“Lacking essential identification documents they are prone to exploitation at work and staunchly observing *pardah* leaves them with very few options for earning a livelihood,” explained Zakria. “Apart from this, in case their drowned husbands didn’t have a Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC) issued by the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA), which is most likely, it is near to impossible for them get a death certificate and prove themselves as widows when approaching a charity organization for aid,” he added. “Then they have no evidence that they are actually needy because their husbands have died.”

Matters take a turn for the worse for these Rohingya widows if the bodies of their husbands can't be found, lost in depth of the sea, as happened for 29-year-old Aziza (who does not want to reveal her last name).

Aziza's husband, Hussain, who she estimates would have been around 30 at the time of his death, used to work as a fisherman. He died in 2011 while out at sea, fishing, when his small boat sank in the water.

"They [other fishermen and rescue teams] had searched for his body for seven days. They searched for him for a long time," recalled Aziza, trying to restrain her emotions, while speaking from behind the veil of her *burqa*. "They found the boat but couldn't find my husband," she said. It has been seven years since Hussain's death but troubles for Aziza and her children have only increased with time. A mother of four, she wants all her children to study but her circumstances don't permit her to pay for their education. Still she has managed to enroll her older son, 9-year-old Ali Ahmed, in a charity school, "but the process wasn't that simple and easy," she said.

"The school administration would constantly ask him [Ahmed] for my husband's death certificate as a proof of me being a widow and not having enough means to pay for my son's education. In fact, whichever organization I approached for help, all asked me to present my husband's death certificate," said Aziza.

According to Muhammad Saleh Hayat Madni, general secretary of Burmese Muslim Welfare Organization, "Families of fishermen, whose bodies are found, still have an evidence of their death in the form of a letter issued by the hospital they are taken to, even if the dead don't have a CNIC and their death certificates cannot be issued. However, if the dead body of a fisherman couldn't be found, it becomes very hard to produce evidence of his death, newspaper clippings coming closest to the proof of death, provided that the incident of drowning was reported by the media."

Aziza has no newspaper clippings reporting her husband's death.

She now lives with her parents and despite not having to pay for basic necessities like food, she still has to earn enough to pay for other needs of her children. Not having a CNIC of her own and observing *pardah*, the only option left for her is to make fishing net and sew clothes at home, from which she manages to earn between Rs. 3,000-4,000 per month. Still she rues that she is not going to be able to give her children the future she wants for them.

“I want my children to study further. My eldest daughter often says that she wants to be a doctor when she grows up,” she said with a mirthless laugh. The fact that it is near to impossible remained an unsaid truth.

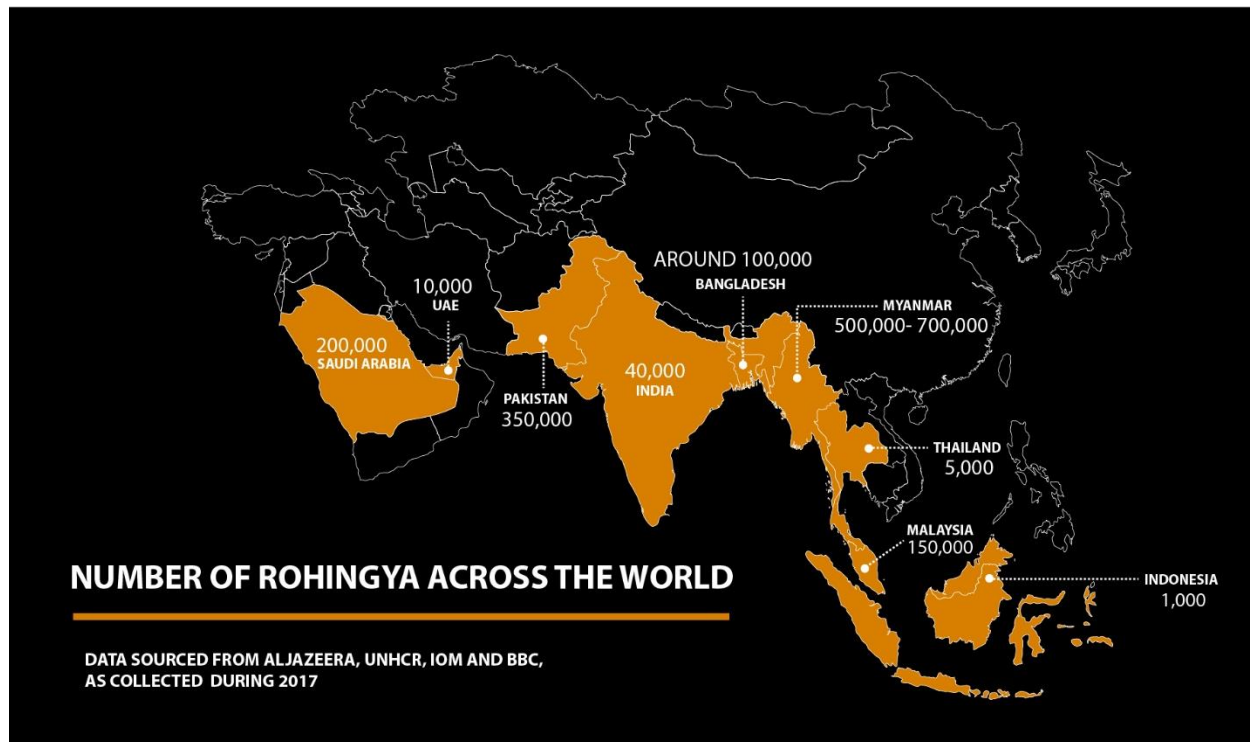
She is certain, however, that her sons are never going to work as fishermen.

“I won’t let it happen,” she said with defiance. “Even they [my sons] don’t want it. They literally scream at the prospect of working as fishermen. They know their father had been working as a fisherman since childhood and look where he ended up. They don’t want the same for themselves. They fear dying a death after which even their death bodies couldn’t be found.”

Originally belonging to the Rakhine province of Myanmar, Rohingya are one of the largest ethnic minorities in the state and have been subjected to violence and oppression, initially by the military regime in Myanmar and later by the democratic government of Aung San Suu Kyi, since 1960s (Warr, & Wong, 1997). United Nations (UN) has termed brutality exercised against the ethnic minority of Rohingya in Myanmar as “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing” (Safi, 2017).

According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Rohingya are one of the most persecuted minorities in the world, subjected to brutal oppression and denied the right of citizenship in Myanmar. They are subjected to violence, including rape, arson and mass killings, by the Government of Myanmar (Yusuf, 2017).

This has resulted in a mass exodus of Rohingya from the Buddhist-majority Myanmar, as they seek refuge in Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan and other countries, though neighboring Bangladesh, which was once East Pakistan, continues to be their primary destination (Kyaw, 2008).



Rohingya refugees and migrants are forced to flee to different countries, primarily to Bangladesh, due to the violence exercised against them by the Government of Myanmar. They have mainly moved to other countries in Asia, in a mass exodus, as evident from the map explaining country-wise distribution of the Rohingya population. The findings displayed in the map date back to October 2017. (Some of the elements in the illustration are from freepik.com, an open source, which are used after modification.)

From Bangladesh, many of them had travelled to what was then West Pakistan, via India, in desolate conditions, up until 1980s during General Ziaul Haq's regime (Yusuf, 2017). According to Zia Awan, an advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan and a human rights activist, "They are mostly Muslims and possibly preferred to come here [in Pakistan] because they are religiously closer to us."

Under General Ziaul Haq's religious policies and his stance on Soviet-Afghan war, Rohingya considered Pakistan as the most plausible alternative to shift to, the increased inclination towards religiosity in the country resonating with their ideals (Yusuf, 2017).

Immigration of Rohingya into Pakistan virtually ended with the formation of Bangladesh and increase in India-Pakistan border tensions, which eventually resulted in tighter security measures along what was previously a porous boundary separating India and Pakistan. However, a significant number of them still reside in Pakistan, many of their children being Pakistani-born.

“Presently, a large majority of them is settled in areas lining the Pakistani coastline and most of them work in the fishing industry,” said Noor Hussain Arkani, who heads the Pakistan chapter of the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation and Burmese Muslim Welfare Organization.

Most Rohingya in Pakistan live in low-scale colonies and slums formed along ethnic lines, mainly concentrated in Karachi, in closed social setups, not welcoming and open to talk to outsiders (Yusuf, 2017).

Arkanabad, named after the Arakan, now Rakhine, state in Myanmar, is a shanty locality mainly inhabiting Rohingya fishermen families. Situated on the outskirts of Karachi, it is home to numerous other widows like Aziza.

Zakria estimated that “there must be at least 2,000 such Rohingya widows in the area,” but he is unable to provide a definite figure. The actual number could be far greater or lesser.

“This is because there is no official record of Rohingya migrants with the Government of Pakistan and the exact number of these undocumented residents cannot be accounted for unless steps are taken to register them with NADRA,” explained Saleh. “A survey needs to be conducted to get their exact number and enumerate them so that it becomes easier to provide the deserving ones with the required aid,” he said.

Though he is certain that “there is a huge number of such widows in the Rohingya community.”

Saleh, who is a resident of Burmi colony, another settlement housing Rohingya migrants, is Majeed’s older brother. He was staying over at his sister’s house in Arkanabad and had been awaiting news about his younger brother all day long, fearing the worse, like many others in Rohingya localities, following the recent storm that had hit Karachi.



A bird's eye view of Arkanabad, a shanty slum area mainly housing Rohingya migrants in Pakistan and named after the Arakan state- now Rakhine- in Myanmar. It is located a few minutes' drive away from the Ibrahim Hyderi fish harbor.

Arkanabad seemed to have fallen under a spell of disconcerting silence, with worry etched on the faces of its residents. As they roamed the slum's dusty and littered lanes, a loudspeaker's crackle and the following announcement, made every now and then by a nearby mosque, would break the heavy stillness in the air. Each announcement informing of the arrival of yet another fisherman's body raised the residents' fears and further dwindled their hopes of meeting their loved ones.

While the announcements added to the fear of some, it enlivened painful memories for others including 35-year-old Mariam (who does not want to reveal her last name).

Mariam, a mother of five, had lost her husband, Noor Muhammad, to the sea four years back. Her husband, the eldest of four brothers and two sisters, had gone fishing along with a crew of 11 others. The crew also included three of Muhammad's brothers, his brother-in-law as well as one of his friends. All of them lost their lives along with Muhammad as their boat catapulted.

"Six dead bodies came to our house," said Mariam, remembering the day of her husband's funeral. "We weren't able to think properly and had no sense of what was happening around us.

We don't know how the bodies were brought and taken away [for burial]. We don't know anything. We have no memory of it at all.”

As Mariam recounted her misery, her mother-in-law, Rahat Jahan, sat beside her and wept silently, tears soaking the edges of her veil circling her wrinkled face. Interjecting Mariam in the middle of the conversation, she said in a voice thick with tears, “It took them an entire day. They would bring one [body] in ambulance and take away another, they would bring one and take away another.”

Later, Mariam related the day her husband's funeral was held, along with that of his brothers and brother-in-law, Jahan had remained unconscious for almost the entire day. She never realized how and when the funeral happened.



Residents of Arkanabad use wood and stoves made of clay to prepare food, as there is no gas supply in the locality.

Jahan now lives with her only remaining son, her widowed daughters-in-law, a widowed daughter and their children in a small two-room, cramped dwelling, which is too small to accommodate her large family. Children in her household are made to work after school so that

they can arrange for meals twice a day and yet, according to Mariam, their physical hardships can in no way match the extent of emotional turmoil they have experienced.

“All of my children were unwell at the time of their father’s death. When they were taking away their father’s body for burial my daughters weren’t able to see his face for the last time as they were unconscious. They lost three *chachas* (uncles) and their father. How they would have felt, only Allah knows,” she said.

One of her daughters has been unwell since Muhammad’s death.

“Doctors say it’s all because she is in trauma. She feels dizzy, her eyes hurt and her nerves swell up. She has been ill since that unfortunate incident. She has to be taken to the hospital around three to four times a week and it costs a lot,” said Mariam.

“Another of my grandson, Noor Muhammad’s younger brother, Muhammad Noor’s son, didn’t even get to see his father,” added Jahan. “Noor’s wife was expecting when he died but his son doesn’t know what it’s like to live under the shelter of a father”.

“Now four years old, Noor’s son longs for a father figure and has settled for calling his *chacha abbu ji*,” said Mariam.

Mariam, like the rest of the women in her household, spend long hours every day stitching beads on clothes. They get orders from contractors outside Arkanabad and are paid Rs. 30 to 50 for each shirt they work on, depending on the intricacy of the design pattern they are sewing beads over.

“If the design is too intricate we have to miss our meals and prayers because it takes time,” said Mariam.

However, presently Mariam is not getting work orders as often as she used to, which has added to her family’s financial troubles.

“Many of the shops from where they would get work have closed down in the aftermath of the recent anti-encroachment drive at Bolton Market in Saddar,” said Saleh. “Business has dried up and getting work has become difficult.”

In such a situation, finding work elsewhere is not really an option for Mariam. She lacks necessary identification documents and prefers to work from home, considering working outside her home premise a violation of the *pardah* she strictly practices.

“These women belong to a family where females don’t even get to witness sunlight,” said Zakria. That’s how strictly they observe *pardah*. If their husbands die, who are the breadwinners of the family, in what condition would their wives and children live?” he asked.

“Survival has become extremely difficult for us after the incident [in which Muhammad and his brothers died],” said Mariam. She had to take her eldest daughter out of school, who now works along her all day and at times even have to complete Mariam’s share of work due to her ailing health.

Most of the children in Arkanabad are unable to attend school because of scarce financial resources or the need to work and earn from a young age, as is the case with Mariam’s daughter. Though, these may not be the only reasons behind them not attending school. A large majority of them is unable to get admission in schools because their fathers don’t have identity cards.

Identifying this as one of the core reasons for high illiteracy rate in the disadvantaged migrant Rohingya community in Pakistan, Awan said: “They [Rohingya] don’t send their children to schools but *madrassahs*, as they don’t ask for an identity card at *madrassahs*. Their children don’t attend schools because there is a possibility that they might be asked to produce the father’s identity card and if they are unable to do so, it might lead to citizenship issues.”

However, even Rohingya children studying at *madrassahs* have no surety of continuing education to a higher level, most of them being subjected to child labor to support their families and leaving studies to earn a livelihood.



A young boy sorting shrimps from a pile of seaweed at the fish market near Ibrahim Hyderi fish harbor.

Muhammad Talha (name changed), 13, used to regularly attend *madrassah* for Quran lessons until his father, Muhammad Hashim's demise, approximately 6 years back. He now works as a fisherman and is the only earning member in his family. His widowed mother, Hameeda (who does not want to reveal her last name), is unable to work due to an injury she acquired after a road accident.

Hameeda, who estimates herself to be of at least 30 years of age, is a mother of four and is not aware of the details about her husband's death.

"My husband did not have a [CNIC] card [but] he was employed at a poultry feed processing plant," she said. At the time of hiring, they did not ask for his documents, neither did they make him sign an agreement or bother with any such formalities," she added.

"He had night duty [at the factory] and went to work at around 8 pm. It must have been 11 pm or 12 pm when I received the news of his death. I was told that he fell and was injured by the poultry feed processing equipment," she recounted. "That's all I know."

Hashim is not the only Rohingya migrant who managed to get a job at a processing plant or a factory, instead of working as a fisherman, and eluding the possibility of drowning, despite not having an identity card. There are others too. These Rohingya, working in factories and processing plants, are more likely to face workplace exploitation and in case they die incurring an injury at the workplace, like Hashim, their families can do little to hold the factory owners or management responsible.

According to Saeed Baloch, former secretary of the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum and an activist, “Factory owners and investors are not as hesitant to hire labor lacking the necessary identification documents as it would place them at a greater advantage”.

He explains: “Here, they don’t hire [laborers] directly in processing plants and factories, but through middlemen. The factory [management] is in touch with a middleman who allocates laborers in different areas and workplaces. The hired laborers are paid a daily wage, a portion of which they have to give to middlemen, and are not necessarily issued appointment letters. They don’t need a CNIC in this scenario.”

“Unfortunately, many business owners in this country require laborers who have no backing, whom they can overwork and those who wouldn’t raise their voice [against workplace exploitation],” added Baloch. “The [employers] don’t even issue appointment letters at times so later they [employees] cannot claim that were employed by them. Because the employee doesn’t have any documentary evidence he would be in no position to question the employer.”

This mode of hiring comes in direct contention with the labor laws of Pakistan, which under The Industrial and Commercial Employment (Standing Orders) Ordinance, 1968 say, “Every workman at the time of his appointment, transfer or promotion shall be provided with an order in writing, showing the terms and conditions of his service.”

Additionally, The Sindh Terms of Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 2015 states, “Every worker, at the time of his appointment, shall be given an appointment letter showing expressly, the terms and conditions of his employment including wages.”

Hashim was not issued an appointment letter and did not have any documentation establishing where and by whom he was employed. Consequently, his family had no premise to build a case, probing his death and initiating any further action. Hence, after his death Hameeda was forcefully made to impress her thumbprint on a set of documents, contents of which she is

unaware of hitherto, before she was handed over her husband's body quite a few weeks after his death.

Recounting her ordeal, she said "We hadn't even recovered from the shock [of Hashim's death] completely and weren't able to think properly. I was observing *iddah* [a period Muslim women observe after their husband's death, during which they may not marry again and preferably not leave the premises of their house] and wasn't able to leave the house premises. It was then when I was told that I need to present myself in front of the police. They took me [to the police station] forcefully and made me impress my thumbprint on some papers."

According to Baloch, "This is the norm here. In case a worker incurs some injury at workplace, the injured or dead's family cannot claim anything. Employers give them a certain amount, say Rs. 50,000 or Rs. 1 lac, and absolve themselves of any responsibility."

However, Station House Officer (SHO), Zaman Town, Shafiq Afridi said, "It has been too long and yet some details of the case are unclear," without which it is not possible to reach a conclusion regarding the misdemeanor of police in this particular case.

"The injury incurred could have been purely accidental [which leaves little ground to hold the employer accountable] or it could have been a result of negligence, for instance mishandling of the machinery by the employer or higher-ups," he said. "If latter is the case then a first information report (FIR) could be lodged by the parents or family members of the victim under the Article 322 of the Pakistan Penal Code of *Qatal-Bis-Sabab* (causing death or harm without having the intention of doing so)."

Speaking about Hameeda's case in particular, he also said, "Provided that she has accepted compensation, she can no longer proceed with any further action against the employer." Additionally, he also made clear that, "nobody could be called to a police station forcefully. She might have been called and asked what further action she wants to take and it is likely that the widow opted to accept compensation than filing a case."

Talking about the documents Hameeda said she was forced to impress her thumbprint on, Afridi said, "Usually such documents are signed as a surety that the person under consideration does not demand the initiation of any action against the employer later, despite accepting compensation [and agreeing to proceed with no further action]."

Hameeda was given Rs. 3 lacs in compensation, from which she bought a small house for her family, but it did little to allay her concerns and troubles. Except for her youngest daughter,

who is 10 years of age now, she had to take all her children out of school because she couldn't afford to continue with their education. Her older son, now 15, went senile not being able to bear the trauma of his father's death.

“When their [Hameeda's children's] father died, my older son went senile. He was 10 back then,” she said. “He screams *abbu abbu* whenever he gets a fit and gets violent, screaming ‘they are killing my father.’”

After Hashim's death, not having a CNIC, she couldn't find work that would pay enough for the sustenance of her family. Eventually, once she managed to get an identity card for herself, she met with an accident that rendered her invalid to work long hours due to physical pain. Hence, as her older son had lost his mental balance, she had to send off her younger one, Talha, to work despite not wanting to.

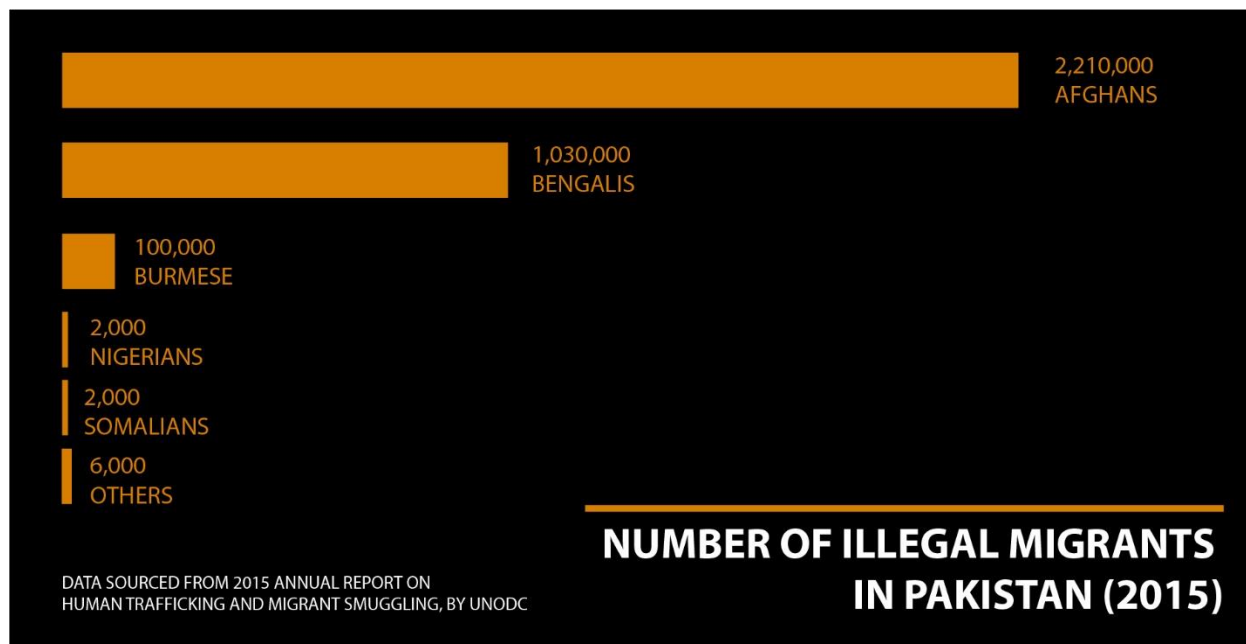
“I feel woeful and distressed sending him out in the open sea but what other choice do I have? We have to feed ourselves too,” she said, adding “Had I had an identity card back then, maybe I could have got B-forms made for my children and Talha would have had other options for work when he grew up.” (B-forms or Child Registration Certificates are a requirement when one applies for a CNIC for the first time, reaching the age of 18.)

Despite having her own house, Hameeda is living with one of her sisters and her husband because she feels unprotected otherwise. It is for this reason too that she got her oldest daughter married at the tender age of 14, only a year after her husband's death.

“I got married when I was 14 and I think it was the right age to get my daughter married too, considering my circumstances and the way our society behaves towards widows,” she said. According to Awan, “Widows and divorcees in general find themselves at a disadvantage in our society and are often looked upon by men in a disrespectful manner.” Though he also points out that given the history of Rohingya women and children being subjected to human trafficking in Pakistan, despite the criminal practice being curbed to a great extent, “a Rohingya widow, as well as her daughters, are vulnerable to being trafficked even today.”

Human trafficking of Rohingya women to, from and via Pakistan goes a long way back, when they first started immigrating to the country during 1960s. An annual report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2015, cited “complicity between law enforcement & border agents and traffickers & migrant smugglers” as one of the reasons behind the incidents of human trafficking in the country (UNODC, & Research and Analysis Centre Federal Investigation

Agency. n.d.). Data available in the same report revealed that migrants from Myanmar form the third largest migrant community in the country, adding up to 100,000, back then. Their number has increased significantly over the course of three years (UNODC, & Research and Analysis Centre Federal Investigation Agency. n.d.).



A graph illustrating the number of illegal migrants, of different origins, in Pakistan, as published in a report published by the UNODC, in 2015.

According to data collected by the United Nations (UN), “today there are about 350,000 Rohingya in Pakistan,” said Hafeezullah Kakar, a representative of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Going by this figure, the number of Rohingya migrants in Pakistan is largest in the world after Bangladesh and Myanmar, though most of them are undocumented and are living as invisible aliens in the country.

With no legal status, they are living in derelict conditions in slums, leading a poor lifestyle and being denied basic facilities that would be in easy access of a legal citizen in the country.

Rohingya in Pakistan were initially registered under National Alien Registration Authority (NARA), which was formed in 2000, with the intent to document migrants and foreign nationals in Pakistan. Those registered, were issued essential documents like driving license, which enabled them to opt for better work opportunities and other necessary facilities like education and healthcare amenities.

With the merger of NARA and NADRA in 2015 (Raza, 2015), a step taken to improve the process of documenting aliens, Rohingya in Pakistan are currently in search of an identity and a legal status.

“NADRA has no record of migrants in Pakistan and it only deals with documenting Pakistani nationals,” said Faiq Ali Chachar, NADRA spokesperson. “NADRA is not authorized to issue cards to migrants like Rohingya and Afghans,” he added.

Rohingya on the other hand demand recognition as citizens on the basis of their long duration of stay in Pakistan.

“We [Rohingya] have been living here from as long back as 1962, when General Ayub Khan was in power. We are called Burmese but having settled here for such a long duration, Rohingya are as Pakistani as other people living here,” said Arkani.

Despite being in Pakistan for decades, Rohingya have still not been able to legalize their status in the country.

“Unlike Afghans, who are issued a valid identity document, a Proof of Registration card, granting them the status of refugees recognized by the Government of Pakistan, they [Rohingya] are not documented and registered with the Government of Pakistan. Consequently, they do not have legal status in Pakistan,” said Kakar. “They would have been given a refugee status had there been sudden influx of Rohingya in Pakistan but they have been living here since 1960s,” he added.

However, as evident from Arkani’s statement, Rohingya, themselves, seem unwilling to settle for anything less than Pakistani citizenship, which in Awan’s opinion is actually adding to their predicament.

“Rohingya organizations too don’t look for a solution, other than getting citizenship, to their problem. Their only demand is the issuance of identity cards, when there are many other international instruments which could be used to legalize their status [in Pakistan], for example, getting a refugee status,” he said.

This sense of entitlement towards having Pakistani citizenship and increase in their numbers due to immigration into the country spanning nearly a period of two decades, bar Rohingya from recognized as refugees and availing aid and protection by UNHCR, as they would get in Bangladesh and other countries. In Pakistan, neither Rohingya nor most others consider them to be refugees, resulting in them being labelled as stateless people, undocumented foreigners or illegal migrants.

Most of them claim that they, their parents or grandparents came to Pakistan prior to the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 and had been issued identity cards during Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's regime in 1973-74. The intent behind this claim, whether true or false, is to usually prove themselves eligible to be issued an identity card or get the older ones renewed, if they have one.

Many Pakistani-born Rohingya also build their case citing the Citizenship Act of Pakistan 1951, which states:

“Every person born in Pakistan after the commencement of this Act shall be a citizen of Pakistan by birth, provided that a person shall not be such a citizen by virtue of this section if at the time of his birth:

- His father possesses such immunity from suit and legal process as is accorded to an envoy of an external sovereign power accredited in Pakistan and is not a citizen of Pakistan ; or
- His father is an enemy alien and the birth occurs in a place then under occupation by the enemy.”

While the act does state that Pakistani-born individuals are eligible to get the country's nationality, conditions following this statement, as elaborated above, leave it to the discretion of government authorities to decide on the status of an applicant's father at the time of his or her birth and whether that person qualifies to get citizenship.

In Awan's view too, it is a misperception that every Pakistani-born is entitled to get Pakistani citizenship. Further elaborating on this, he explained, “According to the Citizenship Act of Pakistan, if a foreigner is born in Pakistan, he or she does not automatically becomes a Pakistani citizen. If he is a migrant, whether he is documented and undocumented, he is not eligible to be given citizenship here. There is no such provision in our regulations and laws to give them [migrants] citizenship.”

Awan further clarified that, “Citizenship is only given [to migrants] in one situation: If a Pakistani man marries a foreign woman and brings her here legally, then the woman under consideration would be given citizenship but if a Pakistani woman marries a foreigner man and brings him here than he is not eligible for citizenship.”

Another decree of the Citizenship Act states:

“A person born after the commencement of this Act, shall be a citizen of Pakistan by descent if his parent is a citizen of Pakistan at the time of his birth.”

However, this decree too is subject to provisions that define citizens of Pakistan on the basis of their residence in the country preceding a specified date.

Hence, as Kakar said, “To get a CNIC card made, they [migrants] need to present proof that they or their parents have been living here since 1969 or before. This documentary evidence can be anything from an electricity or gas bill to their parents’ identity cards, but most of them fail to produce the required documents.”

On the other hand, these developments have also led to the surfacing of claims by Rohingya migrants that NADRA officials demand considerable sums of money from them in return for making their identity cards.

“There are some individuals who work as agents and are in contact with corrupt officers. Now, even if someone is able to produce all the required documents, they are not given [an identity card by NADRA], and eventually they have to approach these agents who are likely to demand between Rs. 20,000 to 40,000 to get the identity cards made,” said Arkani.

Adding to this, Kakar said, “Government officials had even issued fake identity cards to them [migrants] between 1970 and 2015, so that their votes could be utilized during elections but no further registration process was ever ensued. When the elections are over MNA’s don’t even bother to ask after these migrants.”

In response to allegations of these malpractices by NADRA officials, Chachar said, “It is not as easy [to get an identity card made illegally by NADRA]. All of NADRA’s systems are integrated and we have records of entire family trees. It is not as easy to become a part of any family.”

However, time and again, [Dawn](#) (Dawn, 2013) and [Express Tribune](#) (Haq, 2017) have reported of NADRA officials being dismissed on charges of issuing CNICs to migrants illegally.

These differing statements and reports not only leave a grey area which need to be tended to, to find a Rohingya solution in Pakistan, but also provide a plausible explanation of why many from the Rohingya community claim to be Bengalis or have arrived from Bangladesh than Myanmar, hiding their identities.

“Here nobody would get an identity card if they identify themselves as Burmese. Almost all [Rohingya] here have changed their identity to Bengali. If they claim to be Burmese, they wouldn’t be given an identity cards without which they are faced with many challenges and

difficulties,” explained Arkani. They [Rohingya] are calling themselves Bengalis not because they want to but because they are left with no other option,” he added.

Inclination among Rohingya to identify themselves as Bengalis increased after Prime Minister Imran Khan announced last year that Pakistani-born Afghan and Bangladeshi migrants are to be given citizenship, in order to provide them with better work opportunities and curb their involvement in crime.

During one of his visits to Karachi last year, he said, “These poor migrants from Bangladesh, they have been here for more than 40 years, their children are grown now ... we will give them passports and ID cards, as well as those Afghans whose children have been raised here, who were born here, we will also give them [citizenship],” reported Al Jazeera (Hashim, 2018).

Normally mistaken for Bengalis by others, and Rohingya themselves identifying with the former, Khan’s statement gave them further ground to portray themselves as Bengalis, in a bid to legalize their residence in Pakistan, amid fears of hostility.

Rohingya in Pakistan fear estrangement, more so due to the stance of nationalist political parties, who consider allowing foreigners or migrants to live in Pakistan and giving them citizenship a plot to convert the locals of the region into a minority and initiating a conflict power and resources.

“We consider them [Rohingya] illegal immigrants. They have come from outside and do not belong to Pakistan. We consider it [granting them citizenship] a conspiracy against Sindhis. Allowing the influx and settlement of foreigners including Burmese, Bengalis and Afghans, in the region is a plot to convert local Sindhis into a minority,” said Roshan Buriro, general secretary of the Sindh United Party, in this regard.

“Obviously when such a large number of people will come from outside, there will not be enough jobs left for the locals,” he added. “Already Sindh is suffering economically. In the interior there are no medicines in the hospitals, there are no schools for children and there is no drinking water available in the villages. There is a severe dearth of water and jobs and if foreigners are given access to same rights and facilities as locals, there is a possibility of clashes over economic resources. Granting migrants with citizenship is akin to trampling our [locals] rights.”

Amid such opposition from different sectors, “fear of being recognized as a Rohingya has increased among our community to such an extent that many might not even talk to you if you address them as Rohingya or Burmese,” said Saleh.

In line with these statement, Noor Alam, who Saleh said is a Rohingya fisherman, is quick to say that he is Bengali when addressed as Burmese.

“No, no, I am not Burmese. I am Bengali,” he said.

Adorning a white *shalwar kameez*, he sits atop a flat rock along the shore of the Ibrahim Hyderi fish harbor. “I have been working here as a fisherman for 25 years,” he said.

Alam has managed to get an identity card for himself, identifying himself as a Bengali.

The distinction between the people from two communities has blurred to such an extent that most now confuse the two to be belonging to the same community- that of Bengalis.

“Burmese here are mostly Rohingya. You might have noticed that they call themselves Bengalis but there faces have a more yellowish in complexion in comparison to Bengalis,” said Baloch. “They [Burmese] are often taken into account with Bengalis because we don’t really differentiate between the two. To us Burmese and Bengalis are same,” he said, speaking of fishermen belonging to different ethnicities.



Fishermen working at the Ibrahim Hyderi fish harbor include a large number of Rohingya and Bengali migrants.

Mostly working as fishermen, Rohingya have become an integral part of the fishing industry in Pakistan. They are not only involved in fishing but also make fishing nets and work as laborers in factories associated with the fishing industry, forming the backbone of the fishing industry.

Hence, they contribute towards “earning billions for the government through the export of seafood and adding to foreign reserves [of Pakistan],” said Arkani.

Yet, they are facing innumerable challenges, primarily because they are not recognized as locals or Pakistani nationals. Alam, despite having an identity card faces similar issues at work as a fisherman not having an identity card would face- that is to pass customs check and get documents verified by coastguard officials to enter deep waters.

In order to enter deep sea for fishing, all the crew members on a boat need to have a crew card, or *samanadar card*, as an ordinary fisherman would call it. It is issued after a commissioning

agent lists down the details of all the crew members on a boat, which are verified by concerned authorities.

Elaborating further on this, Alam said, “Even those who have a [crew] card are not able to go further in the sea if even a single member on the boat is not issued a [crew] card. We need to have sufficient number of people in the crew and all of them need to have a crew card. If not, then the boat cannot get past a certain point and continues to stand by the shore.”

“It is necessary to have a CNIC to get a crew card,” said Baloch. “You cannot get it made without a CNIC. Previously when the identity cards were not computerized, people did manage to get a crew card through different means but it is impossible now, with computerized cards replacing the older [manual] identity cards,” he added.

According to Alam, “only 25 per cent of the people have identity cards here.” While this is only a rough estimate and is impossible to corroborate in the absence of any official record, this statement by Alam is reaffirmed by Zakria who said, “Approximately 80 per cent people in the Rohingya community do not have identity cards.”

To be able to earn enough to support their families entering deep sea is essential for fisherman, as it is where they find most of their catch.

“There is no fish on the shallow side of the sea and it is no use fishing there,” said Alam.

Abdul Hakeem, who does not have a CNIC and hence neither a crew card, have to make do with a small boat which he somehow maneuvers in deeper sea to a certain extent. He has been working as a fisherman for 15 to 20 years. His oldest son, Laal Mian, had drowned in the sea and yet he continued to be a fisherman to be able to provide food for his family. However, his earnings barely suffices to fulfill his family’s dietary requirements.

“Officials often catch us but they let us go because we have a small boat and they know we can’t go too far in the water. So we fish in relatively shallow water but don’t get to earn much,” said Hakeem. “In a one round trip I am able to earn between Rs. 500 to 600 on average but there is no hard and fast rule. If I am lucky I am also able to earn up to Rs. 1000 and then there are days when I only manage to earn Rs. 100.”



Boats anchored along the shore, near Ibrahim Hyderi fish harbor.

“If they have a small boat, fishermen can manage to stealthily sail into deeper water not having to bother with getting their documents verified by the officials. Small boats are not checked as strictly and thoroughly as the bigger ones,” said Zakria.

Coastguard and custom officials carry out a check before they let a boat enter deep sea, beyond a certain point. All the crew members’ crew cards need to be presented to them for verification and if not, they don’t let the boat pass.

However, Alam says otherwise.

“They [custom and coastguard officials] demand between Rs. 1,500 to 2,000 to let us go further in the sea and we cannot question them. If we question them, they will not let us go further in the water for a week. Then how will we earn?” asked Alam.

According to Baloch, “everyone from custom and coastguard officials to lower staff and commissioning agents as well as those authorized to undertake paperwork takes bribes.” Though, he also points out that “A poor person has to pay bribe everywhere. It is not only limited to Bengali and Rohingya fishermen but Sindhi fishermen too have to give money. This is our system.”

Yet, discrepancies on the basis of lack of identification documents put Rohingya fishermen at a disadvantage, making them more vulnerable to exploitation. At some level they feel that they are facing discrimination, or at least are deprived by virtue of their background, as they compare themselves with fishermen of other ethnicities.

This is because “Sindhi fisherman’s language is his card. On the other hand, a Burmese fisherman can’t ever fish without paying bribe,” said Arkani.

Furthering elaborating on it, Baloch said, “Whosoever’s documentation isn’t complete, he is more vulnerable than others. If a Sindhi or Balochi fisherman doesn’t have an identity card, they still speak a local language and are identified as a local on that basis. Also, Bengalis have been here for a long time and they have their own political organizations so they are able to sustain somewhat better. But Burmese, not having any identity documents, suffer the most.”

Hounded by this feeling of isolation and fearing the possibility of continuing to lead the dreadful life of illegal migrants, Rohingya in Pakistan feel vexed and anxious. If not attended with immediacy, it is likely that the frustration building up within the Rohingya community may coerce them to get involved in criminal activities.

“If you don’t have an identity card, you sit idle and look for menial odd jobs or starve,” said Zakria.

Not being offered well-paying jobs and better earning opportunities, “they [Rohinya] would be forced to get involved in criminal activities- theft, robbery, fraud and deception,” said Arkani. “It is because of the wrong policies of the government [of not issuing identity cards to Rohingya migrants] that they are getting involved in militancy and terrorism. Their youth is forced to choose the wrong path and that’s why they need to be facilitated immediately,” he said.

According to Baloch, “State needs to decide whether the people who live here, earn here and whose dead are buried here, deserve to be given citizenship or not, because if you think about it, almost everyone in Karachi is an outsider.”

“Our people go to Europe and America and then tell us proudly that they have been given citizenship over there. Then why are Bengalis and Burmese children born here denied citizenship?” he asked.

Over the span of many years that Rohingya have been living in Pakistan, their growth has stunted due to lack of educational opportunities and better earning options, which has given rise to evils like crime, child marriage, human trafficking and exploitation at different levels. Today, a

Rohingya fisherman, despite trying his hardest, cannot think of providing his children with quality higher education. Trapped in a nexus of statelessness, illiteracy and financial troubles, there is little this community can do to improve its condition.

Alam, who wishes for a better lifestyle for his family, is unable to consider the possibility of approaching government officials and authorities with his complains or requests.

“We can’t approach the government. We are illiterate and not capable of doing so. Only educated people can access the higher-ups,” he says.

Hakeem, despite having lost his son to the sea, continues to work as a fisherman because without a CNIC he knows he wouldn’t be employed elsewhere.

“My son drowned, still I go into the sea because we have no other source of livelihood,” he said.

And Majeed, having gone through the traumatic experience of getting caught in a storm, is unable to overcome his fear of the sea. His sister, Haleema (who does not want to reveal her last name) said, “At night he still wakes up from nightmares, imagining himself in the middle of the sea.”

Yet, as soon as he was brought home in an ambulance, within few hours he was back at the harbor. He wanted to know about other crew members.

“He told us he needs to get help for others. Some of them were married and if they did not survive, he feared their widows would have to lead a dismal life,” said Haleema.

“Still one of them died leaving a widow behind. Majeed wasn’t even able to recognize him initially and neither was his wife, because his body was very swollen. Finally, his wife remembered that her husband had lost three teeth in the front and that’s how they recognized him. Majeed was devastated,” she said.

As Haleema communicated her brother’s suffering, Majeed had gone out to search for work elsewhere. His future was uncertain but he knew he cannot fish anymore, no more finding the courage in himself to go back to the sea.

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