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Living Under Restriction: Structural Exclusion, Distress, and Security Perceptions among Rohingya Refugees

Emadul Islam (PhD)
Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Tokyo, Japan
e-islam@spf.or.jp

Mohammad Zainuddin (PhD)
Australian National University, Canberra, Australia
mohammad.zainuddin@anu.edu.au

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Abstract

Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh live under one of the most restrictive encampment regimes in the world. Formal work is prohibited, mobility is tightly controlled, and humanitarian agencies manage most aspects of daily life. Despite the prominence of security concerns and widespread discussion of social tensions in the camps, little empirical research examines how structural exclusion shapes psychosocial wellbeing and everyday security perceptions. Drawing on pilot survey data from 210 respondents, this working paper assesses four interrelated domains of exclusion—economic, social, political, and digital—and analyses their associations with psychological distress, refugee–host estrangement, and perceived youth vulnerability to criminal networks. The findings show that structural exclusion strongly predicts higher levels of distress and estrangement, while livelihood participation, even in modest forms, has a stabilising effect: work days and involvement in programme activities are associated with lower distress and reduced relational strain. Respondents consistently reported that youth vulnerability arises from unemployment, prolonged uncertainty, and restricted movement rather than from individual behaviours. These results challenge prevailing assumptions within refugee governance and highlight how exclusion itself produces many of the insecurities observed in the camps. The paper argues that restrictive work policies may undermine protection and stability by deepening distress and eroding social cohesion. A rights-based, evidence-driven approach— one that expands livelihood opportunities, enhances agency, and reduces unnecessary constraints—offers a more effective and humane pathway for managing protracted displacement.

Keywords   *Rohingya refugees, Structural exclusion, Psychosocial harm, Security perceptions, Livelihood participation*

Contents

1.   Introduction

1.1   Encampment, work restrictions, and refugee protection

Encampment continues to define the everyday lives of millions of refugees worldwide and remains a central modality through which displacement is governed. Although often framed as a humanitarian necessity—particularly in large-scale or emergency contexts—encampment has long been criticised for restricting mobility, limiting autonomy, and structuring the terms under which protection is delivered [1]. Early anthropological and socio-legal studies of refugee camps have shown how encampment transforms refugees from rights-bearing subjects into managed populations, governed through bureaucratic and spatial controls that prioritise containment over participation. These dynamics are not unique to any single context but recur across protracted refugee settings in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, where camps have evolved from temporary responses into enduring systems of governance [2].

The Rohingya camps in Bangladesh represent one of the most visible contemporary manifestations of this governance model. Since 2017, close to one million Rohingya refugees have been confined to large and densely populated settlements in Cox's Bazar, where formal employment is prohibited, educational opportunities remain limited, and movement outside camp boundaries requires administrative permission.[3] Such restrictions profoundly shape the social and psychological wellbeing of refugees living under encampment. Research across multiple refugee settings— including long-term camps in Kenya, Tanzania, as well as protracted displacement contexts in the Middle East and South Asia—demonstrates that constrained agency, prolonged uncertainty, and opaque camp administration contribute to emotional distress, dependency, and weakened social cohesion [4]. The absence of meaningful participation in decisions that govern daily life can deepen feelings of marginalisation and strain relations between refugees and host populations, particularly where displacement becomes prolonged and prospects for change remain unclear. Despite these well-documented concerns, encampment continues to function as a central pillar of refugee governance in Bangladesh, shaping both the everyday experiences of Rohingya refugees and the broader policy environment in which protection is enacted.

1.2   Security concerns and everyday uncertainty

Security considerations play a major role in shaping policy decisions within the Rohingya response. Authorities frequently cite concerns about crime, social unrest, and the presence of armed or coercive groups operating in and around the camps [5]. These concerns influence restrictions on mobility, information access, and livelihood opportunities, even though the everyday drivers of insecurity inside the camps remain poorly understood [6].

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1   Barbara E Harrell-Bond, "Can Humanitarian Work with Refugees Be Humane?," *Human Rights Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (2002): 51–85, https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2002.0011; Simon Turner, "What Is a Refugee Camp? Explorations of the Limits and Effects of the Camp," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 29, no. 2 (2016): 139–48, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fev024.

2   Michel Agier, *Managing the Undesirables* (Polity, 2011).

3   Caitlin Wake and John Bryant, *Capacity and Complementarity in the Rohingya Response in Bangladesh*, Working Paper (Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, 2018), https://odi.org/en/publications/capacity-and-complementarity-in-the-rohingya-response-in-bangladesh/.

4   Cindy Horst, Transnational Nomads: How Somalis Cope with Refugee Life in the Dadaab Camps of Kenya (Berghahn Books, 2006); Liisa H. Malkki, Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology Among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania (University of Chicago Press, 1995).

5   ICG, *A Sustainable Policy for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*, 303, Crisis Group Asia Report (International Crisis Group, 2019), https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia-pacific/bangladesh-myanmar/303-sustainable-policy-rohingya-refugees-bangladesh.

6   David Lewis, "Humanitarianism, Civil Society and the Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Bangladesh," *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 10 (2019):

Public discussions often portray security vulnerabilities as emerging from within refugee communities, yet little attention is given to how structural conditions—such as restricted movement, lack of work opportunities, or prolonged uncertainty—shape perceptions of risk [7]. This creates a disconnect between security governance and the lived experiences of refugees, many of whom understand insecurity as a product of constraint rather than deviance [8].

1.3   Gaps in evidence

Although scholarship on the Rohingya crisis continues to grow, few studies systematically examine how structural exclusion—economic, social, political, and digital—shapes psychosocial wellbeing in the camps [9]. Even fewer analyse how these experiences relate to everyday security perceptions, including concerns about youth vulnerability, exposure to coercive actors, or willingness to engage in protest or disruption [10].

Security concerns are often invoked to justify restrictive policies, yet empirical evidence on the relationship between exclusion and security dynamics remains scarce [11]. As a result, key policy decisions continue to rely on assumptions rather than data-driven insights. Understanding how refugees perceive risk, how exclusion influences these perceptions, and how involvement in livelihood activities shapes wellbeing is essential for designing effective and humane governance frameworks.

1.4   Contribution

This working paper provides one of the first quantitative assessments of how structural exclusion affects psychosocial wellbeing and perceptions of everyday security among Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Drawing on pilot survey data from 210 respondents, we analyse how economic, social, political, and digital exclusion are associated with psychological distress and refugee–host estrangement. We also explore how these experiences relate to perceptions of youth vulnerability to criminal networks, and whether participation in informal work or NGO-supported livelihood activities has stabilising effects.

The analysis offers three contributions. First, it provides empirical evidence that structural exclusion is strongly associated with elevated distress and weakened relational cohesion. Second, it shows that livelihood participation—whether through occasional work days or involvement in programme activities—is associated with lower distress and reduced estrangement. Third, it reveals that refugees overwhelmingly interpret insecurity not as a behavioural phenomenon but as a structural outcome of restricted opportunities, limited mobility, and prolonged uncertainty.

1884–902, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1652897.

7   Turner, "What Is a Refugee Camp?"; Karen Jacobsen, *The Economic Life of Refugees* (Kumarian Press, 2005).

8   Cindy Horst and Katarzyna Grabska, "Introduction: Flight and Exile—Uncertainty in the Context of Conflict-Induced Displacement," *Social Analysis* 59, no. 1 (2015), https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2015.590101; Alexander Betts et al., *Refugee Economies: Rethinking Popular Assumptions* (University of Oxford, Humanitarian Innovation Project, 2014).

9   A. K. Tay et al., "The Culture, Mental Health and Psychosocial Wellbeing of Rohingya Refugees: A Systematic Review," *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* 28, no. 5 (2019): 489–94, https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796019000192; Abu Naser Zafar Ullah et al., "Exploring Mental Health Status and Psychosocial Support among Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: A Qualitative Study," *Mental Illness* 2023, no. 1 (2023): 6128286, https://doi.org/10.1155/2023/6128286.

10   Lewis, "Humanitarianism, Civil Society and the Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Bangladesh."

11   ICG, *A Sustainable Policy for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*.

Together, these findings contribute to broader debates on refugee protection, rights, and governance. They underscore the need to ground policy discussions in evidence and to acknowledge how exclusionary structures shape both wellbeing and perceptions of security within protracted displacement settings.

2.   Context

2.1   Overview of the protracted Rohingya displacement

The Rohingya crisis remains one of the most protracted and politically complex displacement situations in the world. For decades, the Rohingya in Myanmar have faced systematic discrimination, severe movement restrictions, and a denial of citizenship that has rendered them effectively stateless [12]. The mass displacement of 2017, triggered by targeted military operations, forced more than 700,000 Rohingya to flee into Bangladesh within weeks, adding to earlier waves of asylum seekers who had escaped previous cycles of violence [13].

Today, the majority reside in Cox's Bazar, primarily in Kutupalong and neighbouring settlements, which together constitute the largest refugee camp complex globally [14]. Conditions in these camps remain difficult: infrastructure is fragile, space is limited, and humanitarian operations operate under significant constraints [15]. Prospects for safe, voluntary, and rights-respecting return to Myanmar remain remote due to continued instability and the absence of guarantees for citizenship or protection.

The result is a situation of long-term displacement without viable durable solutions, where refugees face restricted horizons and limited pathways for the future.

2.2   Legal and policy environment

Bangladesh hosts the Rohingya population under the administrative designation "Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals," rather than recognising them as refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention. This legal framing shapes the policy environment and the rights available in practice. In the absence of formal refugee status, Rohingya residents in the camps do not have recognised rights to work, cannot pursue accredited higher education, and face stringent restrictions on freedom of movement [16]. Camp residents are expected to remain within designated boundaries, and travel outside the camps requires administrative permission that is difficult to obtain. These restrictions are not temporary measures but form part of the enduring governance architecture of the camps, structuring everyday life and limiting opportunities for autonomy and participation.

Restrictions on work carry particularly wide-ranging implications in this context. Without access to formal employment, refugees depend primarily on humanitarian assistance or engage in informal and low-paid activities that operate at the margins of regulation [17]. Humanitarian agencies and international actors have highlighted the potential benefits of expanding livelihood opportunities, including improved psychosocial wellbeing and reduced reliance on aid. At the same

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12   Nick Cheesman, "How in Myanmar 'National Races' Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 461–83, https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476; Akm Ahsan Ullah, "Rohingya Refugees to Bangladesh: Historical Exclusions and Contemporary Marginalization," *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 9, no. 2 (2011): 139–61, https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2011.567149 .\\uc0\\u8221{} {\\i{}Journal of Contemporary Asia} 47, no. 3 (2017

13   ICG, *A Sustainable Policy for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*.

14   UNHCR, "Inside the World's Five Largest Refugee Camps," 2023, https://www.unrefugees.org/news/inside-the-worlds-five-largest-refugee-camps/.

15   UNHCR, *Bangladesh: Joint Multi Sector Needs Assessment: Cox's Bazar, Rohingya Refugee Response – 2023, Refugees* (UNHCR Bangladesh, 2023), https://microdata.unhcr.org/index.php/catalog/1128.

16   Wake and Bryant, *Capacity and Complementarity in the Rohingya Response in Bangladesh*.

17   Mateusz J. Filipski et al., "Refugees Who Mean Business: Economic Activities in and Around the Rohingya Settlements the Rohingya Settlements in Bangladesh," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 1 (2021): 1202–42, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feaa059.

time, policy decisions remain shaped by concerns about labour market impacts, social tensions, and administrative control, resulting in tightly circumscribed economic activity within the camps. The consequence is a regulatory environment in which economic engagement is possible only in limited and precarious forms, reinforcing dependency and constraining everyday agency.

Taken together, these legal and policy arrangements produce a governance environment characterised by restricted autonomy, institutionalised dependency, and pervasive regulation of daily life [18]. Rather than operating as neutral administrative measures, such constraints structure the conditions under which refugees navigate work, movement, participation, and access to services. These arrangements provide the institutional backdrop for the forms of economic, social, political, and digital exclusion examined in this study and are central to understanding how camp governance shapes psychosocial wellbeing and perceptions of security among Rohingya refugees.

2.3   Everyday governance and informal control structures

Camp governance involves a complex network of actors, including Bangladeshi authorities, humanitarian agencies, and security forces. Alongside these formal structures, a variety of informal systems also shape daily life. Community leaders, volunteer groups, and other actors exert influence over the distribution of resources, information flows, and access to opportunities [19]. These systems mediate disputes, enforce local norms, and structure interactions with humanitarian organisations.

In settings characterised by prolonged uncertainty and limited opportunities, informal governance sometimes intersects with coercive networks or criminal groups. Research from comparable protracted displacement contexts shows that constrained environments—especially those with restricted work opportunities and limited mobility—can create conditions in which non-state actors fill governance gaps or exert control over youth who face few viable alternatives [20]. While the specific dynamics vary across the Rohingya camps, these patterns illustrate the broader structural pressures shaping everyday life.

Understanding camp governance therefore requires attention not only to formal policies, but also to the social and political microstructures that influence experiences of safety, agency, and belonging.

2.4   Why examining exclusion and security perceptions matters for refugee law

Refugee law is concerned not only with protection from persecution, but also with ensuring dignity, agency, and meaningful rights in exile. Conditions that foster exclusion—across economic, social, political, or digital domains—can undermine these principles by constraining autonomy, generating distress, and weakening the foundations of safe and dignified living [21]. Structural exclusion may also erode trust, strain relationships with host communities, and reduce cohesion within

18   Rashedur Chowdhury, "The Mobilization of Noncooperative Spaces: Reflections from Rohingya Refugee Camps," *Journal of Management Studies* 58, no. 3 (2021): 914–21, https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12612.

19   Jacques Leider, "Rohingya: The History of a Muslim Identity in Myanmar," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History* (2018), https://oxfordre.com/asianhistory/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277727-e-115?d=%2F10.1093%2Facrefore%2F9780190277727.001.0001%2Facrefore-9780190277727-e-115&p=emailA6DPzG0XzY15g.

20   Jacobsen, *The Economic Life of Refugees*.

21   Guy S. Goodwin-Gill and Jane McAdam, *The Refugee in International Law* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

camps, all of which have implications for stability and protection. These concerns are reflected in international legal standards governing refugee protection. The 1951 Refugee Convention sets out minimum guarantees intended to support autonomy and social participation, including access to employment (Articles 17–19), freedom of movement within the host territory (Article 26), and access to education (Article 22). While Bangladesh is not a signatory to the Convention, these provisions represent widely recognised benchmarks for assessing whether protection regimes support dignity, self-reliance, and social inclusion in practice. When restrictions across these domains become prolonged and structural, they raise questions about the adequacy of protection beyond the provision of basic humanitarian assistance.

Security discourses play a significant role in shaping refugee policy. In Bangladesh, concerns about crime, radicalisation, and loss of control are often cited to justify restrictions on mobility, information access, or livelihood opportunities. From a legal and protection perspective, such measures must be assessed in terms of necessity and proportionality, particularly where they limit everyday rights linked to autonomy and wellbeing [22]. Without empirical evidence, security-based rationales risk becoming self-perpetuating narratives rather than accurate assessments of risk, potentially legitimising governance arrangements that intensify distress and weaken social cohesion rather than addressing underlying vulnerabilities.

By examining how refugees understand exclusion and perceive security in their daily lives, this study contributes to a more grounded understanding of how governance, protection, and stability intersect in protracted displacement settings. It demonstrates how legal and administrative choices—especially those affecting work, movement, participation, and access to information—are experienced on the ground and how they shape psychosocial wellbeing and perceptions of risk. In doing so, the paper highlights how policy choices that restrict autonomy may inadvertently produce the very vulnerabilities they aim to mitigate, including heightened distress and weakened social cohesion.

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22   Alice Edwards, "Human Security and the Rights of Refugees: Transcending Territorial and Disciplinary Borders," in *International Refugee Law*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2010); James C. Hathaway and Michelle Foster, *The Law of Refugee Status*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511998300.

3.   Methods

3.1   Study design and setting

This study draws on quantitative data from a pilot survey conducted in the Rohingya refugee camps of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The purpose of the pilot was to test the feasibility, clarity, and reliability of a broader survey instrument designed to examine how structural exclusion shapes psychosocial wellbeing and everyday security perceptions. Data were collected through structured, face-to-face interviews conducted by trained enumerators fluent in Rohingya and Bangla.

The pilot covered selected camp blocks in both Ukhiya and Teknaf, the two sub-districts hosting the majority of Rohingya refugees. While the camps in these areas share similar humanitarian pressures, they differ in population density, mobility constraints, and patterns of informal governance [23]. These contextual differences were not the focus of the pilot but helped inform item phrasing and field procedures.

The questionnaire was developed using existing research on refugee exclusion, distress, and security dynamics [24]. Items were adapted to local linguistic norms, with simple phrasing and context-specific examples to support respondent comprehension.

3.2   Sampling and participants

A total of 210 adult refugees participated in the pilot. Enumerators used systematic sampling to select households within predefined camp blocks. Within each household, one adult respondent was invited to participate based on availability and willingness.

The sample reflects a range of experiences, including variation in education, exposure to informal work, involvement in NGO programs, and length of stay in Bangladesh. Although the pilot was not designed to be statistically representative of the full Rohingya population, it provided sufficient diversity to assess scale performance and explore preliminary empirical relationships.

All participants gave verbal informed consent. No identifying information was collected, interviews were voluntary, and respondents could skip questions at any time.

3.3   Measurement and scale construction

To evaluate the relationships in our model, we constructed multi-item scales capturing structural exclusion, psychosocial wellbeing, and security perceptions. All items were coded on a 1–5 Likert scale, with higher values representing a greater intensity of the construct. Reliability coefficients for all scales are reported in Table 1.

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23   ICG, *A Sustainable Policy for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*.

24   Betts et al., Refugee Economies; Horst, Transnational Nomads.

Table 1: Measurement scales and reliability statistics

Construct / Scale	No. of items	Cronbach's α
Economic Exclusion	4	0.79
Social Exclusion	5	0.57
Political Exclusion	5	0.68
Digital Exclusion	5	0.91
Structural Exclusion Index (Composite)	19	0.86*
Psychological Distress	6	0.83
Refugee–Host Estrangement	3	0.80
Perceived Risk Environment	4	0.80
Protest / Risk Orientation	3	0.47

Note: *Composite alpha is approximate, based on combined subscale items.

We created an overall Structural Exclusion Index combining four domains: *economic exclusion* - perceived lack of opportunity to earn, forced idleness, and inability to use skills; *social exclusion* - experiences of being left out of community activities, feeling undervalued, and limited collective capacity; *political exclusion* - perceived lack of influence in camp decision-making, fear of expressing opinions, and concerns about unrepresentative leadership; *digital exclusion* - limited access to the internet, difficulty using digital services, and feelings of technological isolation. Internal consistency ranged from acceptable to high. Economic exclusion showed strong reliability (α = 0.79), political exclusion moderate reliability (α = 0.68), and digital exclusion very high reliability (α = 0.91). Social exclusion performed less strongly (α = 0.57), likely reflecting contextual variation in how social participation is understood in densely populated camp environments.

For psychological distress, six items were adapted from established distress scales that measured nervousness, hopelessness, restlessness, depressive feelings, effortfulness, and worthlessness. Reliability was strong (α = 0.83). For refugee–host estrangement, three items assessed perceptions of limited cooperation, few shared goals, and mistrust toward the host population. Reliability was high (α = 0.80). Next, the perceived risk environment scale measured whether respondents believed that unemployment, restricted movement, and prolonged uncertainty were pushing young people toward armed or criminal groups. Reliability was strong (α = 0.80). For protest / risk orientation, three items captured willingness to participate in disruptive activism, perceived effectiveness of such actions, and past involvement. Reliability was weak (α = 0.47), suggesting high sensitivity or a need for item refinement. Finally, livelihood engagement was measured through: *work type* - unemployed, day labourer, small business, volunteer teacher, and other roles; *work days per month* - a continuous measure of labour intensity; *training or program participation* - involvement in NGO-led skills or livelihood activities. These variables allowed us to explore whether livelihood exposure mitigates or amplifies the effects of exclusion.

3.4   Analytical strategy

The analysis proceeded in three steps. First, we computed descriptive statistics to map overall levels of exclusion, distress, estrangement, and security perceptions (see Table 2). We also examined the distribution of key constructs to understand where variation was greatest (see Figure 1). Second, we estimated bivariate correlations to assess the direction and strength of relationships among structural exclusion, psychosocial wellbeing, livelihood variables, and security-related outcomes (see Table 3). Third, we fitted linear regression models to evaluate whether structural exclusion predicts psychological distress and refugee–host estrangement. Additional models assessed predictors of perceived security risks and protest orientation. We also explored whether livelihood participation moderated relationships between exclusion and wellbeing. Finally, we conducted

group comparisons between respondents who had participated in livelihood programs and those who had not. This allowed us to examine potential stabilising effects of work exposure in a restricted environment. All analyses were performed using standard statistical software. The findings should be interpreted as exploratory, guiding the design of the full-scale study and informing refinement of measurement tools.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for key variables

Variable / Construct	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Economic Exclusion	3.76	0.94	1.00	5.00
Social Exclusion	2.62	0.79	1.00	5.00
Political Exclusion	3.10	0.87	1.00	5.00
Digital Exclusion	2.89	1.13	1.00	5.00
Structural Exclusion Index	3.04	0.63	1.32	4.74
Psychological Distress	3.37	0.88	1.00	5.00
Refugee–Host Estrangement	2.48	1.09	1.00	5.00
Perceived Risk Environment	4.01	0.78	1.25	5.00
Protest / Risk Orientation	1.98	0.74	1.00	4.67
Work Days per Month	10.03	11.27	0.00	31.00
Training Participation (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	0.24	0.43	0.00	1.00
Livelihood Program Participation (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	0.27	0.45	0.00	1.00

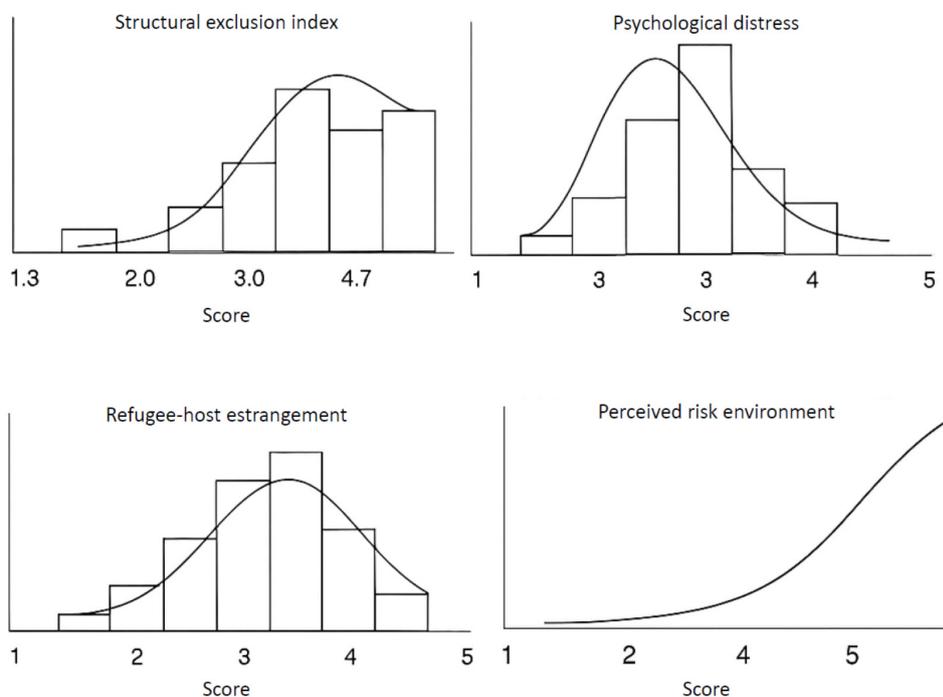Figure 1: Distribution of key constructs

Table 3: Pearson correlation matrix of key variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
Structural Exclusion Index	1.000	.307***	.385***	−.051
Psychological Distress	.307***	1.000	.243***	−.146*
Refugee–Host Estrangement	.385***	.243***	1.000	.056
Work Days per Month	−.051	−.146*	.056	1.000

Notes:

- $p < .05 = *$, $p < .01 = **$, $p < .001 = ***$
- Structural Exclusion Index = mean of economic, social, political, and digital exclusion domains.
- Distress = mean of five psychological distress items.
- Estrangement = mean of refugee–host estrangement items.
- Work Days = self-reported days worked per month.

4.   Findings

4.1   Structural exclusion in the camps

Structural exclusion emerged as a prominent feature of camp life across all measured domains. Economic exclusion was the highest, with respondents frequently reporting limited opportunities to earn income, rely on their skills, or participate in meaningful work. Social exclusion was moderate but notable, particularly around feelings of being left out of community activities or not treated with dignity in everyday interactions. Political exclusion was also high, with many respondents perceiving little influence over decisions affecting their lives and expressing concerns about unrepresentative leadership structures. Digital exclusion showed the widest spread. Some respondents reported limited but occasional access to mobile data or online platforms, while others felt almost entirely disconnected from digital services. These patterns mirror the highly regulated governance structure of the camps, where autonomy is restricted and daily life is shaped by external authorities.

Although exclusion was generally high, individual experiences differed. Digital exclusion varied most widely, reflecting uneven access to mobile phones, data packages, and Wi-Fi hotspots. Political exclusion also showed considerable variation, likely influenced by differences in exposure to community meetings, interactions with camp leadership, or proximity to NGO activities. Economic exclusion remained consistently high across respondents, consistent with strict work prohibitions and limited livelihood alternatives. Social exclusion showed moderate variation, potentially tied to differences in household networks, gender norms, and levels of community engagement.

Taken together, the data reveal layered and overlapping forms of exclusion. Economic, social, political, and digital constraints reinforce one another, creating an environment in which agency is limited and dependence on external structures is high. These conditions are common in restricted refugee settlements, yet the Rohingya case is intensified by the size of the camps and the absence of clear future pathways.

4.2   Psychosocial effects: distress and refugee–host estrangement

Structural exclusion was strongly associated with psychological distress. Respondents experiencing higher levels of economic, social, political, and digital exclusion were more likely to report nervousness, hopelessness, restlessness, and emotional exhaustion. Correlation analysis showed a moderate but consistent association between exclusion and distress. Regression models demonstrated that a one-unit increase in the exclusion index predicted a meaningful rise in distress, even after adjusting for work days (see Table 4). These findings align with research showing that limited agency and prolonged uncertainty increase emotional strain in displacement settings. A fitted line illustrating this relationship appears in Figure 2.

Table 4: OLS regression models predicting distress and estrangement

Predictor	Model 1: Psychological Distress			Model 2: Refugee–Host Estrangement		
	B	SE	p	B	SE	p
Structural Exclusion Index	0.37	0.09	< .001 ***	0.73	0.11	< .001 ***
Work Days per Month	−0.012	0.005	.013 *	0.005	0.006	.410
Constant	2.36	0.28	< .001 ***	0.22	0.34	.520
Model Fit						
R^2	0.14			0.21		
Adjusted R^2	0.13			0.20		
F-Statistic (df = 2, 207)	16.80		< .001 ***	28.02		< .001 ***

Note: $p < .05$ = *, $p < .01$ = **, $p < .001$ = ***
Higher scores indicate greater distress or estrangement.

Figure 2: Fitted line plot
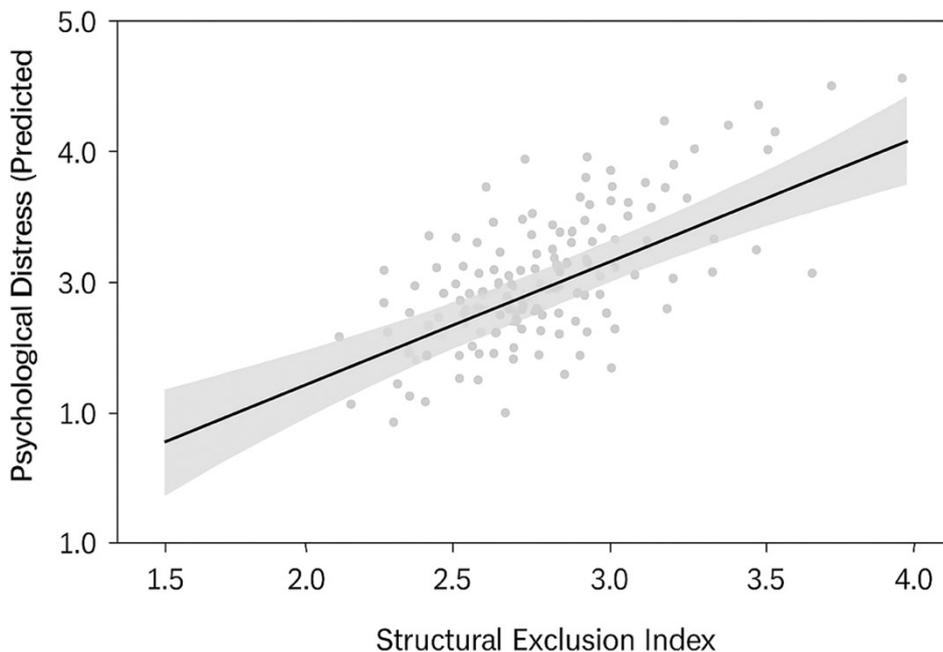
Structural exclusion also predicted refugee–host estrangement. Respondents who felt more excluded within the camp environment were more likely to perceive low trust, few shared goals, and limited cooperation with the host community. The strength of this association suggests that exclusion is not confined to camp structures but may shape broader relational dynamics beyond the camp boundary. This pattern echoes research on how constrained environments weaken social cohesion and contribute to perceived isolation.

These findings show that structural exclusion has both psychological and relational consequences. Distress emerges from constrained daily life, while estrangement reflects how exclusion shapes social perceptions. The dual impact suggests that exclusion may undermine both individual wellbeing and intergroup relations, thus affecting the overall social fabric of camp life.

4.3   Livelihood participation and wellbeing

Work—however limited—appeared to reduce distress. Respondents who worked more days per month reported lower emotional strain. Although modest, the effect was statistically significant and consistent across models. Even irregular earnings or short-term work may offer a sense of purpose and routine. Participation in livelihood training or NGO programs was associated with lower refugee–host estrangement, and modestly lower psychological distress. These differences were statistically meaningful in several cases (see Table 5). The patterns mirror studies showing that livelihood engagement can strengthen coping, build confidence, and promote social connection.

Table 5: Group comparisons (livelihood participation and psychosocial outcomes)

Panel A: Training participation (0 = No, 1 = Yes)

| Outcome variable	No training (n = 160)	Training (n = 50)	Mean diff.	p-value
Structural Exclusion Index	3.13 (0.61)	2.74 (0.54)	−0.39	< .001 ***
Psychological Distress	3.43 (0.89)	3.19 (0.80)	−0.24	.102
Host Estrangement	2.52 (1.12)	2.34 (1.01)	−0.18	.307

Panel B: Livelihood program participation (0 = No, 1 = Yes)

Outcome variable	No program (n = 153)	Program (n = 57)	Mean diff.	p-value
Structural Exclusion Index	3.12 (0.60)	2.83 (0.64)	−0.29	.007 **
Psychological Distress	3.42 (0.90)	3.24 (0.80)	−0.18	.243
Host Estrangement	2.62 (1.15)	2.10 (0.85)	−0.52	< .001 ***

Does work buffer exclusion? Our interaction analyses did not show significant moderating effects between work days and structural exclusion. This suggests that work reduces distress directly, but does not change how exclusion shapes emotional outcomes. This may reflect limited variation in work opportunities within the camps or the pilot nature of the data.

Overall, the data suggest that even small-scale livelihood engagement has stabilising effects. Work provides structure, social connection, and a degree of autonomy. Importantly, none of the livelihood measures were associated with increased protest intentions or security concerns. Predicted distress across different work intensities is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Predicted psychological distress by work days
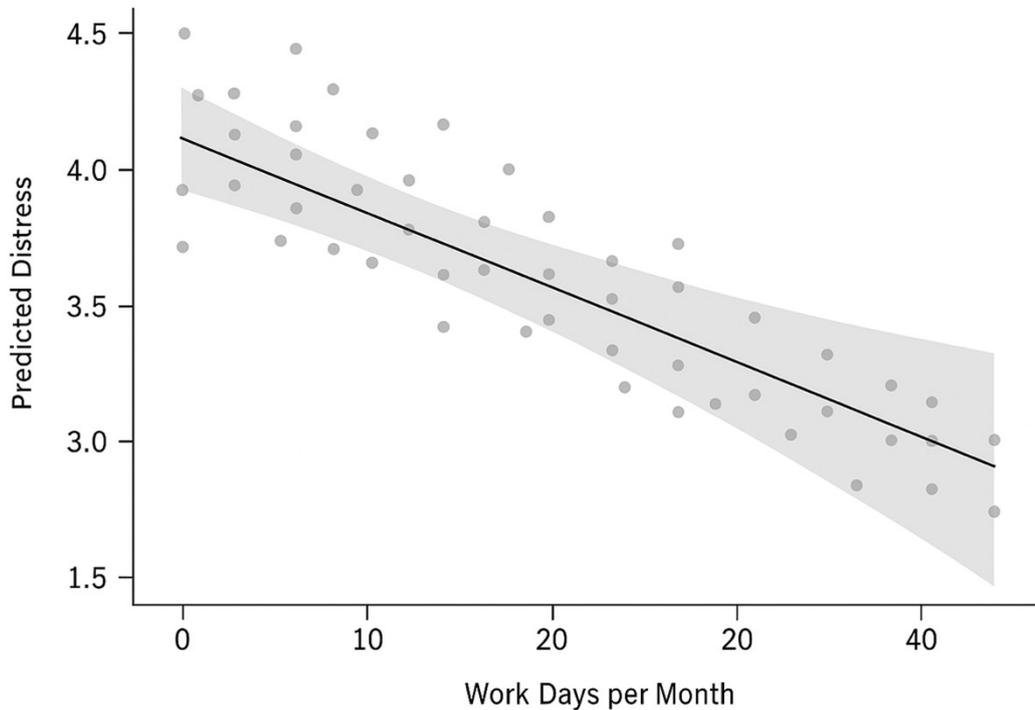
4.4   Security perceptions

Respondents strongly agreed that unemployment, prolonged camp confinement, and restricted movement are exposing young people to criminal networks. Agreement levels were consistently high across individuals. Psychological distress was a strong predictor of these perceptions: more distressed respondents were more likely to view youth as vulnerable to coercive groups. This aligns with research linking emotional strain to heightened perceptions of risk. Structural exclusion showed a weak and slightly negative association. One possible interpretation is that those experiencing the highest exclusion may view insecurity as a systemic condition rather than a behavioural one. Qualitative research will be needed to explore this finding further.

Support for disruptive activism was very low. Respondents generally saw protest as ineffective and reported almost no participation in past actions. Scores were clustered at the bottom of the scale. Importantly, protest orientation did not correlate with exclusion, nor with distress or estrangement, and the three-item scale showed weak reliability, likely due to sensitivity and fear of disclosure. These patterns challenge assumptions that hardship or exclusion lead to political radicalisation.

Across models, the findings point to a consistent conclusion: security vulnerabilities in the camps arise from structural conditions, not from refugees' intentions or behaviours. Respondents identify unemployment, uncertainty, and restricted movement as drivers of youth vulnerability. At the same time, the data show no indication of increased protest behaviour or destabilising tendencies among adults. Regression models supporting these findings appear in Table 6, and Figure 4 presents the distribution of risk-environment perceptions.

Table 6: OLS regression models predicting everyday security perceptions

Predictor	Model 1: Perceived Risk Environment			Model 2: Protest / Risk Orientation		
	B	SE	p	B	SE	p
Structural Exclusion Index	−0.18	0.06	.003 **	0.02	0.05	.830
Psychological Distress	0.19	0.06	.004 **	0.03	0.05	.590
Work Days per Month	−0.003	0.003	.340	−0.002	0.003	.480
Constant	3.04	0.25	< .001 ***	1.85	0.21	< .001 ***
Model Fit						
R^2	0.11			0.01		
Adjusted R^2	0.10			0.00		
F-Statistic (df = 3, 206)	8.56		< .001 ***	0.88		.452

Note: $p < .05$ = *, $p < .01$ = **, $p < .001$ = ***
Higher scores indicate stronger agreement with security-related statements.

Figure 4: Perceived risk-environment distribution

FIGURE 7. PERCEIVED RISK ENVIRONMENT DISTRIBUTION
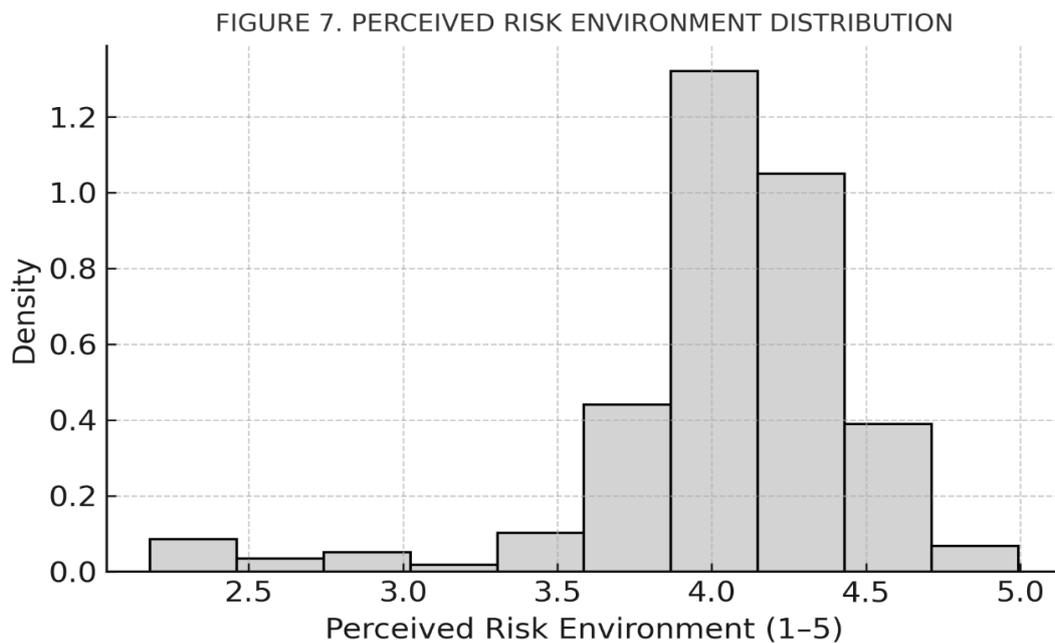
In sum, four conclusions emerge clearly from the pilot data: (1) Structural exclusion predicts psychosocial harm - higher exclusion is associated with elevated distress and greater estrangement; (2) Livelihood participation has stabilising effects - work days and training involvement reduce distress and relational strain; (3) No evidence links livelihood engagement to activism - protest intentions remain uniformly low, regardless of exclusion or distress; (4) Refugees interpret youth vulnerability as structural, not behavioural - unemployment, restrictions, and prolonged uncertainty (not intrinsic motivations) explain perceptions of risk.

Together, these findings indicate that restrictive policies may undermine protection and stability

by intensifying exclusion and distress. In contrast, livelihood engagement appears to strengthen wellbeing and cohesion, offering a promising pathway for more humane and effective camp governance.

5.   Discussion

5.1   Encampment and protection

The findings show that encampment, as practiced in the Rohingya context, generates structural conditions that undermine core principles of refugee protection. Structural exclusion—economic, social, political, and digital—is not an incidental feature of camp life but a defining characteristic of the governance system. High levels of exclusion correspond with elevated psychological distress and weakened social cohesion. These outcomes echo earlier work demonstrating that prolonged dependency, limited autonomy, and opaque governance structures erode wellbeing in displacement settings [25].

Protection encompasses more than freedom from physical harm. It also includes the ability to live with dignity, maintain mental health, and participate meaningfully in community life [26]. The results from this study suggest that current encampment practices risk falling short of these standards. Restrictions on mobility, limits on work, and centralised decision-making appear to reinforce feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, and social isolation.

This pilot therefore provides empirical grounding for themes long documented in qualitative research: exclusion in the camps is layered, cumulative, and deeply embedded in the everyday governance of displacement. When economic, political, social, and digital constraints converge, their effects become mutually reinforcing, producing a structural environment that diminishes both agency and wellbeing.

5.2   Livelihood participation as a stabilising force

This study offers important insights into the role of livelihood participation within a highly restricted environment. The findings show no evidence that livelihood involvement is associated with political mobilisation, disruptive behaviour, or heightened activism. Protest intentions remained extremely low across the sample, regardless of exclusion or distress. Instead, livelihood participation was associated with reduced psychological distress and stronger relations with the host community. Respondents who engaged in work—whether through informal labour, small-scale business, or NGO training—reported more positive psychosocial outcomes and less relational strain. These stabilising effects align with research in other protracted displacement contexts, where access to work has been shown to improve coping, strengthen community ties, and reduce negative or harmful coping strategies [27]. Even modest work opportunities appear to provide structure, routine, and a sense of purpose.

The margins analyses deepen this interpretation by showing how different forms of livelihood participation intersect with structural exclusion. Training participants reported lower overall exclusion, yet training did not significantly buffer distress at higher exclusion levels (see Figure 5). This suggests that when exclusion intensifies, the emotional strain may surpass what training alone can mitigate. It is also possible that some participants self-selected into training due to already heightened vulnerability, which future qualitative work may help clarify.

25   Harrell-Bond, "Can Humanitarian Work with Refugees Be Humane?"; Horst, Transnational Nomads.

26   Goodwin-Gill and McAdam, *The Refugee in International Law*.

27   Betts et al., *Refugee Economies*.

Figure 5. Margins plot: Training participation
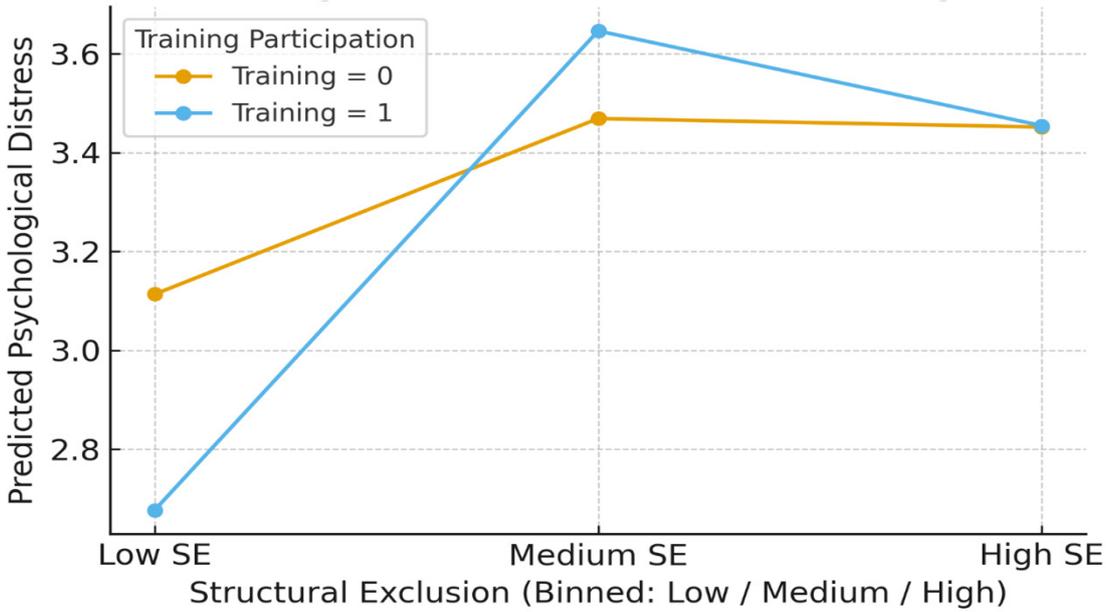
The strongest buffering effect appears in relation to livelihood program participation. Across all levels of exclusion, respondents involved in structured livelihood programs reported substantially lower estrangement from host communities (see Figure 7). While exclusion still predicts relational strain, program participation consistently softens this effect, helping preserve social ties even in harsh institutional conditions. This finding reinforces the view that programmatic engagement strengthens cohesion rather than creating security risks.

Figure 6. Margins plot: Livelihood program participation
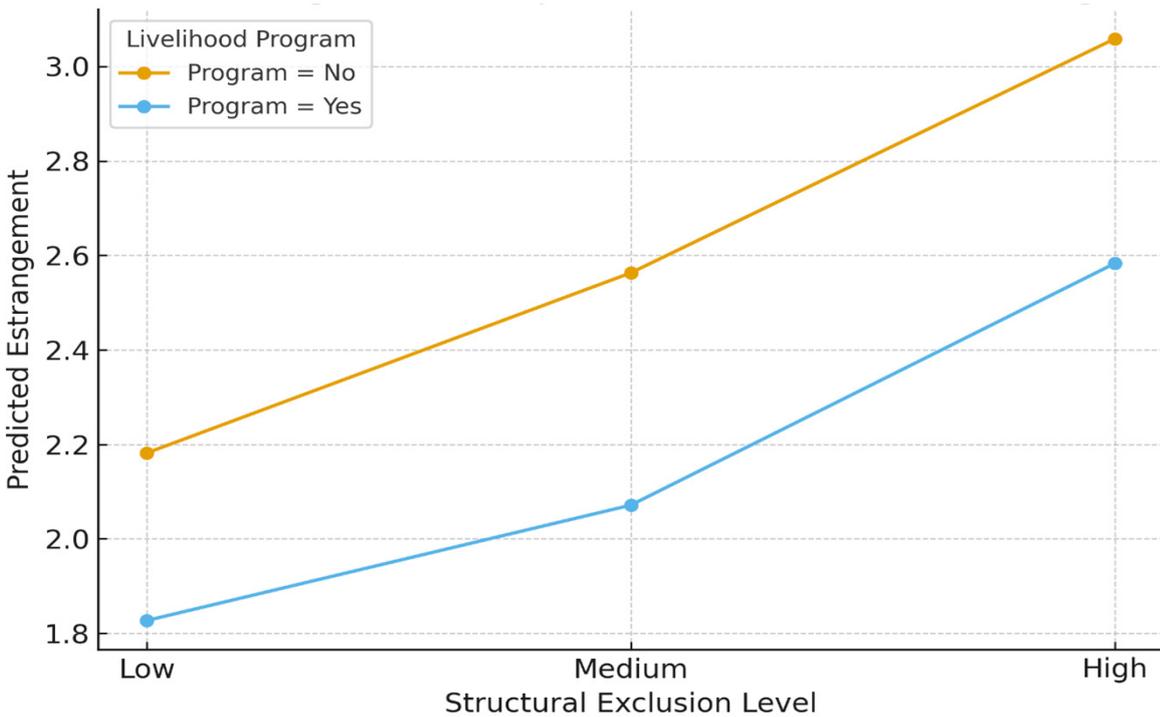
Taken together, these patterns emphasise that livelihood participation functions as a stabilising force in multiple ways—reducing distress, improving relational dynamics, and mitigating some of the social consequences of exclusion. Importantly, none of these activities correlate with indicators linked to instability. Rather than intensifying tensions, livelihood participation appears to soften the pressures created by prolonged uncertainty and restricted agency. In this context, livelihoods operate as a protective factor, supporting wellbeing and strengthening social relations even within a highly constrained humanitarian system.

5.3   Rethinking refugee stability and security

Security concerns often shape refugee policy, particularly in contexts of large-scale displacement. Restrictions on mobility, information access, and work are frequently justified on the basis of preventing crime, radicalisation, or unrest. Yet the findings from this study do not support the logic that such restrictions produce stability. Instead, they point to a different causal pattern: security vulnerabilities arise primarily from structural conditions of uncertainty and exclusion.

Respondents overwhelmingly believed that unemployment, prolonged displacement, and restricted movement place young people at risk of being drawn into criminal networks. Psychological distress further amplified these perceptions, suggesting that emotional strain heightens awareness of structural vulnerabilities. These findings align with evidence that social and economic deprivation often shapes pathways into coercive or criminal networks. At the same time, respondents expressed very low willingness to join protests or disruptive activism themselves. This distinction is important: it indicates an awareness of community-level risks, but not a desire for confrontation or mobilisation. In other words, refugees recognise structural pressures without endorsing disruptive responses.

Taken together, the results suggest that restrictive policies may be counterproductive. By intensifying exclusion and distress, such policies risk creating the very vulnerabilities they aim to prevent. Livelihood opportunities, social inclusion, and a reduction in unnecessary constraints may therefore be more effective routes to promoting stability.

5.4   Rights-based interpretation

From a rights-based perspective, these findings highlight the centrality of autonomy, participation, and agency in refugee protection. The ability to work, participate in community decision-making, and access information is not only instrumental but also fundamental to dignity and meaningful social existence. When these rights are curtailed, the consequences are visible in heightened emotional strain, weakened social relations, and a reduced capacity to navigate daily life under conditions of uncertainty. International refugee protection frameworks consistently emphasise the importance of safeguarding dignity, supporting self-reliance, and avoiding unnecessary restrictions that undermine wellbeing, even in contexts of temporary or emergency protection [28]. Although Bangladesh is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, these principles function as widely recognised benchmarks for evaluating how protection is realised in practice.

The results of this pilot suggest that measures which expand agency—whether through liveli-

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28   Goodwin-Gill and McAdam, *The Refugee in International Law*; James C. Hathaway, *The Rights of Refugees under International Law*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863537.

hood engagement, opportunities for participation, or improved access to information—can enhance psychosocial wellbeing without generating security risks. Rather than increasing instability, such measures appear to mitigate some of the pressures produced by prolonged restriction and exclusion. These insights are particularly relevant in settings where governance is heavily shaped by security concerns and precautionary logics. A rights-based approach therefore points toward policy frameworks that prioritise inclusion, support safe and regulated livelihood opportunities, and reduce structural barriers that constrain everyday agency. Aligning camp governance with these principles would not only strengthen compliance with international protection standards but also contribute to more stable and socially cohesive displacement settings.

6.   Implications for refugee law and policy

6.1   Exclusion as a protection failure

The findings demonstrate that structural exclusion is not merely a socioeconomic hardship but a challenge to the very foundations of refugee protection. Economic, social, political, and digital barriers collectively weaken refugees' ability to maintain wellbeing, participate in community life, and access support systems. When distress rises and social relations deteriorate, the protective function of the camp system is compromised. International protection principles emphasise dignity, agency, and meaningful inclusion [29]. Environments marked by pervasive exclusion run counter to these principles, creating emotional strain and reducing the capacity of individuals and communities to cope with uncertainty. This study suggests that protection cannot be achieved through physical shelter alone; it requires governance models that reduce harm rather than reinforce it.

The implication is clear: reducing exclusion is not an optional enhancement—it is part of safeguarding protection itself.

6.2   Livelihoods as protective infrastructure

Across the pilot data, livelihood engagement—whether through work days, small economic activities, or training programs—was consistently associated with lower distress and better social relations. These patterns suggest that livelihoods function as a form of *protective infrastructure*, supporting emotional stability and community cohesion. Work provides routine, purpose, and social connection. These elements help individuals navigate prolonged displacement and counteract the stagnation produced by restricted environments. Contrary to concerns that economic activity may destabilise camp life or weaken administrative control, the evidence here suggests that even modest opportunities can contribute to a calmer and more resilient social environment. Livelihood engagement aligned with indicators that support stability and psychosocial wellbeing.

The implication is that livelihood programs are not merely economic interventions but integral components of protection and stability.

6.3   Reconsidering restrictive governance models

The data also raise questions about the effectiveness of governance strategies that rely heavily on restriction—of work, mobility, information access, and decision-making. These measures aim to manage risk, yet the findings suggest that they may inadvertently intensify the conditions that generate insecurity. Restrictions appear to deepen distress, weaken social ties, and exacerbate perceptions of vulnerability among youth. In contrast, opportunities for agency—through work, inclusion, and better access to information—align with positive psychosocial outcomes. From a legal perspective, many of these freedoms are connected to broader human rights obligations concerning autonomy, livelihood, and participation in community life. Even outside formal refugee conventions, these principles provide guidance on what humane and rights-respecting governance should entail.

The implication is that risk management should focus on reducing harmful conditions, not limiting refugee autonomy. Stability is more likely to arise from environments that foster resilience and inclusion.

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29   Goodwin-Gill and McAdam, The Refugee in International Law.

6.4   Building evidence-driven policy

The findings demonstrate the importance of grounding refugee policy in empirical evidence—particularly in protracted situations where assumptions tend to harden into practice. Narratives about risk, cohesion, and community behaviour often dominate public debate, yet they rarely reflect the lived realities of refugees. An evidence-driven governance approach would involve integrating psychosocial wellbeing into protection planning, recognising distress and exclusion as central concerns rather than secondary effects; expanding opportunities for agency, including safe livelihood pathways, digital access, and meaningful participation in community decision-making; designing security policies that address structural drivers of vulnerability, rather than restricting everyday freedoms; and monitoring how governance interventions shape social relations, both within the camps and with surrounding communities.

Such an approach would move policy conversations beyond assumptions and toward a clearer understanding of what actually strengthens protection, stability, and dignity in displacement settings.

7.   Conclusion

This working paper has presented one of the first quantitative examinations of structural exclusion, psychosocial wellbeing, and everyday security perceptions among Rohingya refugees living in the camps of Cox's Bazar. The findings show that exclusion—economic, social, political, and digital—is deeply embedded in camp life and carries clear consequences for wellbeing. Respondents who felt more excluded reported higher psychological distress and greater estrangement from the host community. These patterns reinforce longstanding concerns that encampment, as a governance model, can undermine the protective aims of humanitarian responses by constraining agency and producing emotional strain [30].

A key insight from this study is that livelihood participation appears to function as a stabilising element, not a destabilising one. Respondents involved in work or training reported lower distress and stronger interpersonal relations. These benefits emerged even though overall work opportunities remain limited and highly constrained. Protest intentions were consistently low across the sample, irrespective of exclusion or emotional strain. These patterns suggest that opportunities for meaningful activity and skill-building may support resilience and social cohesion within the camps. The findings also highlight the structural roots of perceived security risks. Respondents attributed youth vulnerability not to ideology or deviance but to unemployment, prolonged displacement, and restricted movement. This shift in perspective moves the focus away from refugee behaviour and toward the governance conditions that shape risk environments. It suggests that policies centred on restriction may not address the core drivers of insecurity and may inadvertently intensify the challenges they seek to manage.

Taken together, the evidence points to a broader conclusion: exclusion does not advance protection, and restriction does not guarantee stability. When autonomy is limited and avenues for participation are scarce, distress rises and social relations weaken. By contrast, policies that expand agency—through livelihoods, access to information, or meaningful involvement in community life—may reinforce both protection and stability. These findings echo broader rights-based arguments that refugee governance must prioritise dignity, participation, and opportunities for self-reliance [31].

7.1   Limitations and future directions

As a pilot study, this analysis comes with important limitations. The dataset includes 210 respondents drawn from a limited number of camp blocks, and therefore cannot capture the full diversity of experiences across the Rohingya settlements. Some measures—particularly those related to protest and security—showed restricted variation, possibly due to the sensitivity of such topics or respondents' understandable caution in expressing views on coercive actors [32]. Scale refinement or expanded sampling will be essential for strengthening these constructs.

These limitations point toward clear avenues for future research. A larger and more representative dataset will allow for stronger causal inference, more complex modelling (including mediation and moderation pathways), and meaningful comparisons across camp clusters. A longitudinal design would be especially valuable, enabling researchers to track how exclusion, distress, and perceptions of security evolve over time, and how policy changes—such as the introduction of new livelihood programmes or shifts in camp administration—shape these trajectories.

Qualitative work will also be crucial. Interviews and field observations can help clarify why certain associations are strong—such as the link between exclusion and estrangement—and why others, like the relationship between exclusion and protest, remain weak. Mixed-methods triangulation will strengthen the

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30   Harrell-Bond, "Can Humanitarian Work with Refugees Be Humane?"; Horst, Transnational Nomads.

31   Goodwin-Gill and McAdam, *The Refugee in International Law*.

32   Karen Jacobsen and Loren B. Landau, "The Dual Imperative in Refugee Research: Some Methodological and Ethical Considerations in Social Science Research on Forced Migration," *Disasters* 27, no. 3 (2003): 185–206, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7717.00228.\\uc0\\u8220{}The Dual Imperative in Refugee Research: Some Methodological and Ethical Considerations in Social Science Research on Forced Migration,\\uc0\\u8221{} {\\i{}Disasters} 27, no. 3 (2003

interpretive depth of the final study and ensure that statistical patterns are grounded in lived experience [33].

7.2   Closing reflection

Despite its exploratory nature, the pilot yields compelling insights for refugee law and policy. It suggests that improving agency and reducing structural exclusion are not merely humanitarian ideals—they are practical strategies for enhancing stability, resilience, and protection in protracted displacement settings. As Bangladesh, humanitarian actors, and the international community navigate the evolving Rohingya response, evidence-driven policy grounded in actual refugee experiences will be essential.

A more complete dataset will deepen our understanding, but the message emerging from this pilot is already clear: enhancing refugee agency is not a risk to be managed—it is a foundation for effective and humane governance.

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[33]   Amanda Hammar, *Displacement Economies in Africa: Paradoxes of Crisis and Creativity* (Zed Books Ltd., 2014).