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Global TIES for Children

Understanding Settings for Early Childhood Socialization: Evidence from the Rohingya Camps

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Introduction

Since 2019, NYU Global TIES for Children (NYU-TIES), in collaboration with *Play to Learn* partners, has been exploring ways of better understanding and assessing playful learning in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. A critical part of this process has been an intentional focus on the context in which play, and more fundamentally child socialization, takes place for young Rohingya children. One way we were able to examine this was through the use of rapid ethnographic approaches to describe everyday life in the camps. The research described in this brief was conducted with children who had attended BRAC's Humanitarian Play Lab programs (HPLs), as well as those who had not. In this brief, we aim to 1) understand the socialization context Rohingya children living in the Cox's Bazar Camps experience; and 2) explore the utility of rapid ethnography to understand evolving sociocultural contexts like refugee camps, where factors such as economic instability, natural disasters, and the Covid-19 pandemic have continued to change the individual- and family-level environment for Rohingya communities.

We supplement data collected using rapid ethnography with in-depth parent interviews, which together highlight several key elements contributing to the socialization of young Rohingya refugee children. The Rohingya camps are comprised of dense clusters of interconnected households, and our data begin to reveal the implications of this context on the physical and social settings in which children's day to day interactions are taking place. Specifically, we summarize our findings into the following themes: 1) supervision and care of children often extends beyond biological parents and immediate family; 2) Rohingya children move fluidly between physical locations and social groups that extend beyond immediate family; 3) parents tend to consider the space near or around their homes to be unsafe – while children's actual behavior indicate otherwise; 4) the presence of learning "pockets" or HPLs within household clusters provides unique opportunities for children to learn and play; and 5) HPL children have access to artifacts for socialization beyond the improvised objects from the immediate environments.

Main themes of the findings:

- 1** Supervision and care of children often extends beyond biological parents and immediate family
- 2** Rohingya children move fluidly between physical locations and social groups that extend beyond immediate family
- 3** Parents tend to consider the space near or around their homes to be unsafe – while children's actual behavior indicates otherwise
- 4** The presence of learning Humanitarian Play Lab (HPL) sites within household clusters provides unique opportunities for children to learn and play
- 5** HPL children have access to artifacts for socialization beyond the improvised objects from the immediate environments

Background

Early childhood development and socialization are culturally structured¹. Learning and acquisition of skills, attitudes, values, and behaviors are inherent in socialization processes, which make dynamically evolving sociocultural contexts, such as humanitarian crises, uniquely challenging for research and program development that targets children and their caregivers. As children and their families face social, economic, and cultural transitions, understanding the interplay between children and their new contexts is a critical component for understanding their socialization and development². Physical and environmental changes are readily apparent, but the relational changes within and between individuals may not be as easily discernible to researchers.

Resettlement brings about changes in family and relationship patterns as individuals learn about and acquire elements of their new living environment and host culture³. Families, in particular, undergo notable changes in parental roles and obligations as part of the adaptation process⁴. For example, several studies cite longer working hours for parents and lack of time with children as a significant contributing factor to the changes in family dynamics⁵. Yet for Rohingya families, lack of steady work, particularly for fathers, means that the opposite is true⁶. Under such uncertain conditions, collective management of children through siblings or other adults has the potential to enable families to be more adaptive to their changing circumstances and more efficient with their child care⁷. These are methods of child-care practices that are already well-evidenced in many non-Western contexts⁸. When parental time and resources are sparse, sending young children off to the care of siblings or other peers becomes an essential component of socialization – where they can learn through emulation, observation, and play⁹. In fact, interaction with other children, and of mixed ages, is more likely to be the predominant type of interaction for many children in non-Western settings; and such interactions provide learning opportunities that will be different than in settings of same-aged, similarly skilled children¹⁰.

As children and families are actively amalgamating elements of old and new cultures into their daily lives, researchers and service providers need nuanced and accessible ways for understanding such contexts. To unpack the cultural expectations and values that are communicated by parents and caregivers to young children, we need to familiarize ourselves with the everyday: activities, occurrences, and practices that surround these children¹¹. Of course, not all observed activities, occurrences, and practices will necessarily constitute socialization. However, when we do not yet have clear ideas about which specific activities constitute socialization, such as in the Rohingya communities, we need to consider all the various features of a refugee child's environment (e.g. physical spaces, social interactions and customs, individual and caregiver beliefs). These environmental features are systematically observable and describable,¹² and in humanitarian contexts, the timeliness and usability of locally grounded, contextualized data becomes a pivotal factor in ensuring humanitarian actors are able to meet the needs of target populations.



Methods

Rapid ethnography was included as a part of a larger pilot conducted by NYU under the Play to Learn project, consisting of semi-structured interviews, surveys with a number of different demographic groups, child direct assessments, and focus groups. Of all these methodologies, rapid ethnography, or “Child Point of View”, data provided us with the most prompt, vivid, and detailed glimpses into the everyday interactions and activities that children are partaking in. To support and contextualize the ethnographic data, we use semi-structured interviews conducted with mothers and fathers. These methods are described in detail below, followed by a summary of key emerging themes and a brief discussion of the conclusions drawn from these themes.

Rapid Ethnography

Traditional ethnographic fieldwork can often span weeks or months, if not longer¹³. However, humanitarian settings often do not allow researchers free or extended access to research subjects, which was the case in this study context: enumerators had limited access to the camps, for a limited amount of time, with a limited number of families. We therefore utilized an ethnographic approach to observation, chronicling children’s everyday experiences from their ‘points of view’¹⁴. Enumerators from Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) Bangladesh were trained to conduct rapid but detailed 5-minute observations. This narrative form of data collection takes on the literary equivalent of a third person (objective) point of view in which a neutral observer takes a bird’s eye view of the subjects’ interactions and behaviors to gain an overview of their environment but does not have direct access to the subjects’ thoughts or feelings. The approach builds upon ethnographic observation within anthropology, and integrates elements of Rapid Ethnographic Assessment (REA), a qualitative method used to elicit rich contextual descriptions as well as locally relevant information about systems, processes, and relationships¹⁵.

Observations came from eight camps within Cox’s Bazar and took place concurrently with other survey data collection to avoid the potential that families would feel singled out or scrutinized. Enumerators were trained to shadow a focal child within a brief timeframe and to take in-depth, play-by-play descriptions of the child’s activities, including with whom the child interacted. In addition, enumerators recorded details of the child’s physical and social setting. Field notes were written directly in English, finalized, and submitted immediately after field visits. This allowed us to receive the data promptly (i.e. the day the observation took place), without multiple layers of translation. All quotes in this brief are drawn directly from these field notes, with small edits as necessary for clarity/readability.

RAPID ETHNOGRAPHY is a narrative form of data collection in which a neutral observer takes a bird’s eye view of the subjects’ interactions and behaviors to gain an overview of their environment but does not have direct access to the subjects’ thoughts or feelings.

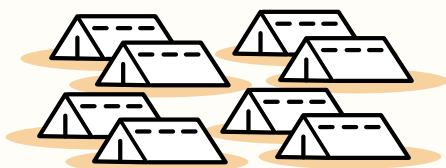
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS with mothers and fathers help support and contextualize the ethnographic data.

The sample included N=61 focal children, aged 2-5 years. Of the total sample, 41% had participated in BRAC's Humanitarian Play Lab (HPL) program and 59% had not. These were small-group child care programs that met every day in homes in the camps, facilitated by community mother volunteers. A variety of play-based activities and materials were provided during these sessions.¹⁶ HPL participants were verified through IPA, and non-HPL participants were found via inquiry with the local *majhee* (community leader) or randomly via consent from a child's caregivers. Children were observed to have engaged with fathers aged 24-45; mothers aged 20-35; other adults aged 24-52; and non-focal children aged 8 months – 12 years.

Semi-Structured Interviews of Parents

A total of 25 Rohingya father-mother dyads from six camps were interviewed from November 2020-January 2021. Parental ages ranged from 23 and 48, and each family had between one and seven children, of whom at least one child, the focal child of the interview, was 2-4 years old. These interviews covered a wide set of topics regarding parents' socialization goals for their children, experiences of arriving and settling in Cox's Bazar, and their aspirations for their families. The interviews were analyzed iteratively by a team of multilingual researchers (Rohingya, Bangla and English-speakers) at NYU Global TIES, using Bengali transcripts from enumerators, audio files from interviews, and, to a limited extent, English translations of the Bengali transcripts. A codebook was created based on an initial set of themes and underwent revisions through multiple rounds of analysis. Here, we extract themes relevant to support our understanding of child socialization.

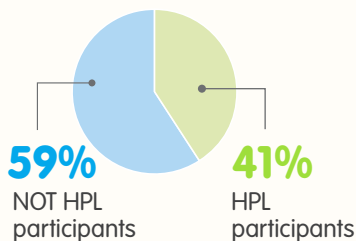
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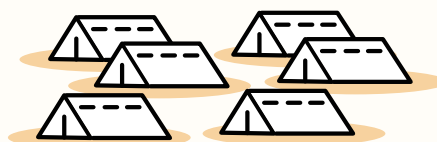
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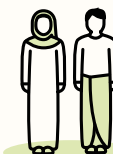
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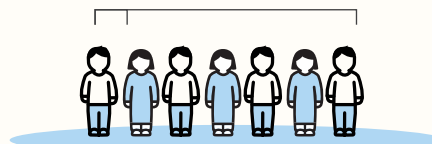
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS



6 camps in Cox's Bazar



25 mother-father dyads



1-7 children in each family, at least one between 2-4 years old

Findings

Supervision and care of children often extends beyond biological parents and immediate family

While parents are broadly considered to be the main caretakers for their children, the Rohingya seem to share those responsibilities with communities that extend beyond the biological parents. This includes siblings, relatives, and community members.

In the excerpt below, a neighborhood shopkeeper not only playfully interacts with our focal child, but he also plays a role in monitoring the child's behavior by supporting the father.

"Ishrat (3) came out of the house after around 90 seconds with a 10 taka note in her right hand. She crossed the road and went to the grocery. Hairul (30) was cleaning his products standing there. Ishrat entered the grocery and sat on Hairul's chair which was kept in front of the shelf. Ishrat started shaking that 10 taka note in the air with her right hand. Hairul said to Ishrat, smiling, "Ishrat! Give me that 10 taka note." Ishrat immediately stood up from the chair without saying anything and hid behind the shelf in such a way that Hairul couldn't see her anymore. She kept standing like this and peeked at Hairul for around 40 seconds. Suddenly, Hairul left the place. Ishrat moved and stood cross-legged leaning against a bamboo pole just in front of the shelf. Then, she started staring at the 10 taka note, holding it close to her eyes, stretching the money from the opposite sides with both of her eyes.

Abu (28, father) came out of the house at that time and called Ishrat shouting, "Hey Ishrat! Come here." Ishrat ran to Abu (from the grocer to the pharmacy crossing the road) and stood in front of him. Abu asked her, "Where are your sandals? Hu?" Rather than saying anything to Abu, Ishrat started looking for sandals without moving herself from the place. Hairul then dragged her holding her right hand and sent her inside the house saying, "Go! Search inside the house or ask your mother." (Focal Child: Ishrat, 3)

Here, we find an older neighborhood child is helping to keep track of a toddler whose mother is unable to locate her young child who has wandered off into the camp alone.

"People are going up and down through a stair randomly. Hafsa (2.5) was wearing a pink top and pink frock. Some food was stuck all around his mouth. Hafsa was sitting on a stair step stretching her legs frontwards. She had a tiny torn part of a red balloon in her hands. She was trying to tear that tiny part by stretching it from opposite sides with both of her hands. She had a long fixed-look at it. Samira crossed the stairs with a pot of water in her hands. Hafsa looked at her just for once and started shaking that tiny torn part of a balloon with her right hand. Meanwhile, Hafsa sat cross-legged and again started trying to tear that part. Suddenly, Naima (12) came from upstairs. She touched Hena lightly on her back and said, "Go home! Your mother is looking for you." Hafsa immediately stood up and started walking upstairs holding that balloon in her right hand. When she reached the door of the house, Sehera (26, mother) came out and took Hafsa in her arms without saying anything to her." (Focal Child: Hafsa, 2.5)

Aspects of care such as grooming and hygiene are often considered to be the responsibility of parents.

"Parmin (25, mother) came out of the house and sat on the stair at the door. Watching Parmin, Menara (3) immediately left the stick down and picked up the tiny pieces of plum in her hands from the ground. Then, she stood up and sat on the thighs of Parmin. Parmin started searching for lice from Menara's hair. Menara kept sitting without moving anymore. After a while, Menara stretched both of her hands frontwards leaning against the ground. Parmin was still searching for lice from her hair." (Focal Child: Menara, 3)

However, such roles are also taken on by children who are not necessarily even family members. Here we find an instance of one friend helping to groom another.

"The door was open such that what's happening outside could easily be seen from inside the room. Anwara (6) was finding out lice from Rubaida's (7) hair." (Focal Child: Anwara, 6)

Rohingya children move fluidly between physical locations and social groups that extend beyond immediate family

The environment in which Rohingya children live seems conducive to social interactions without "boundaries". They move fluidly between both physical locations and different social groups, including groups of adults, and this freedom of movement into different social spheres is a critical avenue through which Rohingya children may learn. Social groups for children can change quickly and frequently, providing a wide range of interactions.

"Anowara (3) was standing with four other children while her father pointed her out. Another child came and stood beside them. Anowara along with all five children followed her father back but stood beside a house, while her father entered the house... Anowara then sat on the road and started touching the soil with her nails while picking her nose with another hand. She stood up after some moments and started to stare at us while we were taking notes. Now six children were beside her. Anowara was still picking her nose while looking at other children. She was standing against the roof of the house and stretching her body. She was trying to reach the wall of the house by stretching her legs behind... The next moment, she moved back again and started talking to Mahi (9) and Kabir (3). Then Mahi had both her hands rested on Anowara and Kabir's head. Three of them were then looking at us while standing with their back balancing on the roof. Anowara was still biting that leaf. Seven children were then standing side by side. Mahi moved her head towards Anowara's head and rested hers on top of Anowara's head softly which seemed like an adoring movement. Mahi then told Anowara which sounded like "ja ga" as if she was telling Anowara to go away and Anowara started moving right towards the house door." (Focal Child: Anowara, 3)

Furthermore, observing and copying others is a critical aspect of social learning through which children can obtain key social and cognitive skills¹⁷. For Rohingya children, older siblings/children and their peers are important sources of social learning.

"Zaman (6) and Mostafa (4.5) went beside the big blue drum and brought out few more plastic bags cut into the shape of a square. Zaman, the big brother had the plastic in his hand and Mostafa said 'Give me that'. Then he was scrutinizing the square size plastic for a brief amount of time. After that, he looked behind at me touching the plastic in his pocket but looked the other side immediately. Another child came and gave them a long thin stick and left the place. Mostafa took the stick in his mouth and was trying to cut. He was telling something to the other kid which was in their language. His whole attention was in the stick and plastic he had in front of him. Again, Mostafa is biting the stick to cut a part of it and after that he was comparing it with the length of square size plastic he had. At a moment he was talking about not having something in a complaining voice with his brother. The place they were sitting was in front of another house and someone from inside threw waste water on them mistakenly and they look back again and their face looked quite vexed and angry at the same time.

They got up from there and Mostafa had his (polythene) plastics and a 250 ml green (empty) soft drinks (zeal brand) bottle with him which had a small amount of cotton thread spiraled on it. Gathering all the plastics they had, they sat in front of their own house this time and concentrated on the plastic and thin sticks again. Then they were resizing (with mouth) the sticks according to the size of the square plastic and binding both with the help of the cotton thread from the green bottle. Zaman was helping him in the meantime to keep the sticks and plastic stable. On their left two child (2y) started to cry at a moment and both of them looked at them for a moment but concentrated back in a short time. Mostafa's brother was helping him actively to make the kite by holding parts for him. At a point, he looked very cautious and told 'give me this side'. And suddenly he cried looking at Zaman probably because he made a mistake. Zaman took a comparatively thick stick and divided it into two parts longitudinally. Mostafa was laughing very loud in rejoice and pointed that dividing the sticks in two parts was very neat.

Now, Mostafa was trying to divide another stick copying the method of Zaman. They were talking about the wind direction for flying the kite. Mostafa was praying that the wind stays blowing when they go to fly the kite. Mostafa was again shouting in joy "we got 3, we got 3" and was laughing happily after being successful in dividing the stick. Then they both started to fit the sticks in polythene but soon Mostafa took the full to him being annoyed on his brother. He was angry and crying like throwing a tantrum. In a moment, mood changed and he fixed his gaze at the cotton thread with kite. Zaman tried to spiral a small thread around his head in a witty (loving) way, Mostafa was still unhappy in his face." (Focal child, Mostafa, 4.5)

Children might not necessarily integrate themselves into all social interactions to which they have exposure, but they are often able to openly observe them, whether they are child or adult interactions.

"Ansar (4) picks up the cone and wraps the yarn around it again. He then starts walking towards a house and goes inside. He walks into the other room inside. This room was very dark. There were about 10 women sitting cramped together on a floor mat and a few other women standing around. Ansar stands against the wall opposite to the women sitting and stares at them for a while. He scratches his head. He then sits down on the floor, legs crossed. He sits and stared at the

congregation of women for about a minute. Then a man comes in and lightly slaps his head and says something. He walks outside while singing something that sounded like "lul...lul...lul" He then walks towards a boy (Mohammad, 6) holding a plastic bag. He holds the other end of the bag and the two of them stretch it from the two ends. They laugh and have a conversation." (Focal Child: Ansar, 4)

"Maryam (3.5) stood beside another house and listened to the sound of children laughing inside. She peeked inside the house and saw five children were playing with Old Danish condensed milk cans. They were placing one can over another in a statue-like structure. They were laughing every time one milk can was losing balance and falling down. Maryam sat on the doorstep for a minute or more and looked at them playing with the cans. She didn't talk and kept rinsing the mehendi from her hand by rubbing. After a minute, she stood up and went to the previous house to wash again. This time she used a soap bar to cleanse. After that, she came outside and climbed up the stairs. A few children were feeding leaves to a goat on top of the stairs. She stood beside the children. She was humming a song in a rhythmic tune. She was moving around on the road humming and dancing." (Focal Child: Maryam, 3.5)

In the above example, the focal child is observing a roomful of other children engaging in a tower building learning task – an activity that might conventionally be modeled to a child by a parent or teacher.

Parents tend to consider the space near or around their homes to be unsafe – while children's actual behavior indicates otherwise

Social, cultural, and economic resources can shape the environment and subsequent parental goals for socialization¹⁸. When it comes to safety and danger, parents are the primary agents for socialization, including communications about risk¹⁹. Insights about parents' perceptions of their children's surroundings were gleaned from the semi-structured interviews with the parents. Mothers, in particular, complained about acute scarcity of clean water, poorly managed sanitation systems, and chronic illness among their children; but fathers too shared concerns regarding the dangerous environment in which children spent their time, specifically worrying about kidnapping. While parents admit the proximity to other families means that their children are able to play with others (*"This place is congested and lots of kids are here. So she can play more" (Father)*). Both mothers and fathers expressed worries about the children getting lost or hurt when playing with other children.

"Even in Islam, we are asked to stay 'safsuutra' (clean). But look at my block and the toilets, everything is dirty. And I worry for my health and my children's health. They remain sick all the time". (Mother)

"...Worry about her going out of the home because anything can happen – a road accident might happen or she can get kidnapped." (Father)

"...Here I am more worried for my kids because this area is very overcrowded and kids easily get lost in the crowd." (Father)

Rapid ethnography confirmed the physical conditions shared by the parents, indicating the potentially unsanitary or physically dangerous terrain the children were playing in. However, there were generally little to no behaviors observed in the children that indicated fear or displeasure of such surroundings. In fact, observers even noted behaviors of laughter or engagement.

"There was a narrow alley right by sewage that was situated between two rows of houses. In one corner there was a pile of red mud. Nurul and Mohib were sitting there on the ground with their legs straightened up facing one another.

Nurul (3) was holding a white plastic bag. He was filling the bag with red mud while talking to Mohib (2.5). Nurul saw us coming. He left the mud and stood up. He gave us a stare and then looked at Mohib. We looked away. After a while, he sat down and again started putting more mud into that white plastic bag. In between, Nurul was talking with Mohib with a low voice. They chuckled together. Nurul threw a little ball made of mud towards Mohib. Mohib moved his body to let that mud ball pass. Nurul laughed out loud. Nurul twisted the open part of the white plastic bag and picked it up on his shoulder. At first, he could barely pick that bag up as it was slipping from his shoulder. After trying a few times, he got the grip and his face beamed with a subtle smile. There was a bridge made of bamboo on the sewage between the alley and his house. He crossed that bridge by jumping over that. Reaching his house's yard, he poured all the mud in front of the door of his house. Then he dropped that plastic bag into the sewage. Finally, he went inside the house." (Focal Child: Nurul, 3)

"Amir (3) is sitting beside the open sewerage line with three other children... A kid sitting five feet apart is crying in a very high frequency and Amir's attention is drawn toward the kid and he kept his mouth open which made him look inquisitive. Another kid of six years of age came to them with a football without air in their hand and Amir is looking at that guy while he is trying to inflate the ball by pumping with mouth. This 6-year kid took a handful of sand and threw it inside the drain without any reason. Amir seemed to be interested in that and he came closer to the drain to observe inside it, drain is with strong odor but he showed no sign of being bothered" (Focal Child: Amir, 3)

While we do not have data on Rohingya children's perceptions of their environment, our observations provide some indication that their sense of risk or danger about their environment may differ from their parents. Children have the ability to actively create their spaces and develop unique relationships with those spaces based upon the experiences they associate with them²⁰. If they have not experienced their environments as unsafe, it is possible that they do not perceive them to be so. Moreover, they could actively be choosing to inhabit these spaces outside the home in spite of the fact that they are unsafe, a behavior that has been noted in refugee children in Palestine, for example²¹.

Socialization messages about danger and risk in the surrounding environment are most commonly communicated through primary caregivers such as parents. However, it is yet unclear whether parents are communicating their fears about the environment to the children or what the content of those messages might be.

The presence of learning “pockets” or HPLs within household clusters provide unique opportunities for children to learn and play

Learning “pockets”, such as the BRAC-run home-based HPLs, are often nestled within these household clusters in the camps. They tend to be operated out of particular households, with the cooperation of the owner and residents of that household, or in a center specifically set up for the purpose. Most families are able to easily access these groups, and parental interviews indicate the positive changes in children because of attendance in these home-based centers, particularly noting improved hygiene habits, the opportunity to play with other children, and their children’s increased etiquette and capacity for engaging in social interactions with others.

“...after going there, he is concern about cleanliness, and food habit. He was not ... concerned about appearance and cleanliness before.” (Mother)

“...But the teachers sent booklets to draw flowers at home and they often came to check. Zaheda missed going to school and playing. She was eager to go again when it will reopen.” (Mother)

Observations of children attending HPLs also indicate that children engage in activities learned from these pockets in ways that seem to be distinct from non-HPL children. HPL children are not only able to interact with their play leader and with their “classmates” regularly outside of the HPLs, they can essentially continue or transfer whatever activities that are happening inside the HPLs into other surrounding spaces.

“Yasir (3 or 4) slapped on the mat twice with a big smile on his face. Ahmed (3 or 4) flattened Yasir’s hair. Yasir spiked his hair up. He again started talking to Ahmed and chuckled in between. Yasir picked up a black zipper lying next to him. After looking at the zipper for a while, he gave the zipper to Ahmed. He talked to his friends. Ahmed again flattened his hair. At this point he went back to their room. Coming back, he immediately laid down on the mat. He got up and recited rhymes with his friends. He smiled all the way. He supported his back with the wall and sat down with his legs folded. Yasir started clapping and following him everyone started clapping. After that Yasir again started talking to his friends. They all giggled in between the conversation. Yasir picked up a pink rectangular pink mobile toy and kept holding it. Yasir and his friends started singing. They all swayed together with the music. After that Yasir and his friends started talking again.” (Focal Child: Yasir, 3 or 4, HPL participant)

“She [Samira, 4] takes out a drawing book and opens the last page on it. She had drawn a big flower in the middle of the book and a girl on the top corner. She doesn’t flip through the pages. She only stares at me with her head slightly tilted low, a small gape and her index finger touching her lips; as if looking for approval. Another child, Fatema (11) comes inside the home and sits beside me on the floor. She tries to flip a page of the drawing book. Samira slaps Fatema’s hand and makes an “aaaii” sound. She holds up her book and flips through the white pages. She keeps it down after a while. Fatema holds my dupatta and tries to put it in place. Samira sees this and hits Fatema on her shoulder and instantly leans back. For the next few seconds, she had an angry look on her face, her eyes fixated on Fatema.

Then she opens the red bag again. One by one she brings out an old surgical mask, a pencil, an eraser and a small sized picture book and carefully placed each one in front of her on the floor mat. She opens a page on the drawing book which had some black marks on it. She took the pencil and used the eraser on the back to erase the marks. She tried with a lot of force but the marks were permanent. She finally gave up and closes the book and puts all of the materials inside except the picture book.

She then opens the picture book and flips through the pages. The book was telling a story with colored pictures of characters. Fatema and her started to play a game. They would point at each of the characters on a page and tell if it's a "fua (boy)" or "maya fua (girl)". They do this for a few minutes. Fatema then puts the book inside the bag and takes the bag inside the other room." (Focal Child: Samira, 4, HPL participant)

Because of the proximity of the HPLs to the families' households, the play leader (the instructor of the HPL) is able to have personal, frequent connections with the children's caregivers. Mothers in particular express that they speak to the play leader regularly, who advise them on caring for their children.

"... talked once in a week. We talked about my son's update. Practice him poems, counting and storytelling at home otherwise he will forget everything." (Mother)

"... She talks about how to keep the kids clean. Wash hands 8/10 times a day. We speak once a week." (Mother)

The play leaders also interact with the children, outside of the structured HPL environment.

"Habib (3) finally managed to go out of the house. He stood beside his play leader [Shaheda, 25] in front of the door frame for a while. He walked a few steps from his house on the alley. There was a red drum next to him. He slapped the drum a few times. Habib saw me. He ran away. I couldn't keep track. I found him after ten minutes. Habib was holding a green broken gun in his hand. He was licking the broken gun. Habib saw me and started to run again. I looked away and cautiously followed him. He turned around two times.

Shukkur (4) called Habib. Habib smiled and sat beside Shukkur. They talked and giggled for a while. Habib saw me and started running again. I was following him hiding behind the bamboo pillars. He looked around and then he started walking idly. Habib walked towards the hospital and got inside of the hospital. There were a lot of people gathered outside. He looked around while touching his chin. He stared at a girl next to her for a while. Shaheda took the broken gun from Shukkur's hand and threw it away in the drainage canal. Shukkur giggled. Shukkur held Shaheda's fingers while bending his one toe." (Focal Child: Habib, 3, HPL participant)

"There was an alley between two lines of houses. There was a tea stall by the ally. Right across the tea stall there was a bench made of bamboo. Mariam (40, play leader) was sitting there with her students encircling her... Mitu (4) showed up and sat in front of a door frame of a house that was on the opposite side of the bench. She had a box of crayons in her hands. She looked at me with keen eyes. Mariam was talking with the children. Mitu went to Mariam. Mitu was silently listening to Mariam. After a while she started to suck her thumb. Then she bit her nails for a few seconds.

Mitu wrapped her hands around Saad's (4) waist. Saad also wrapped his hands around Mitu's back. They both swayed together while hugging each other. Mitu released Saad and he went away. Mitu looked back to her teacher. She licked the crayon box in her hands for a good amount of time. She smiled looking at Mariam. After a while she looked at me. Mitu hopped for a few seconds. She sat beside Mariam on the bench. She said something to Ala (3.5), which I couldn't understand. Ala chuckled but Mitu maintained a straight face.

Mitu ran to the front door of her house but instead of going inside of the house, she came back. Again, she sat with Mariam. She was staring at the passerby while licking the crayon box. She scratched her nose for a bit. Mariam stood up and went to the tea stall to buy the children something to eat. Mitu followed Mariam there. She stood there with her friends. She talked to her friends while sucking her thumb. She whispered something to Ala and touched his face." (Focal Child: Mitu, 4, HPL participant)

HPL children have access to materials for socialization beyond the improvised objects from the immediate environments

Rohingya children demonstrate incredible resourcefulness, creativity, and flexibility as they engage with their environment and the objects around them²². Observations reveal household objects, sticks, leaves, sand, plastic bags, cups, and bottles to be some of the most common items that children engage with in their camps. Even with simple, found objects, we witness various forms of object use (i.e., exploration, construction, play, tool use, and tool making) that we would expect in childhood play²³. However, what is yet unclear is whether children are using objects to act out familiar cultural practices or creating new ones given their environment.

"Ayaz (3) got up and looked at the lane between two houses again and walked inside. I paused. Got him after 10 minutes, he was walking and found two parts of bamboo beside the road. He took those and was walking toward his house, I followed. He went inside and sat just inside. With those two bamboo parts he is making a sound like "THOK THOK" by hitting on the ground. He then took a chopper/Da [large curved knife] from behind and was hitting the bamboo. In 10 seconds, he divided the bamboo in two parts longitudinally. Mother is asking him from a distance to leave that but he's not paying heed. Again, he took the chopper and divided the bamboo in two parts very easily. He was quite sincere in holding the risky chopper and using it like an adult. Now, he's measuring the symmetry of both the parts. And kept the chopper. Took all the parts and was arranging the parts like a plus sign like Christian cross. He looked at me once, smiled and said something (maybe told me to sit on the red stool just in front of the door). Now, he is arranging the short sticks like a star shape. And moving around again and again. Now he is trying a formation like spiral and soon he dismissed all and gathered them together. He took all his small sticks and getting up from his place and went back inside." (Focal child: Ayaz, 3, non-HPL)

In some cases, children found and engaged with objects that were more culturally specific; such objects, that children recognize as belonging to their culture, are important as they allow children to play out and validate their own knowledge of common events from their life at home²⁴.

"Rumi (3.5) was facing downwards. She was wearing only a long skirt. There was an old torn Mehendi [henna] tube in her hands. The cone and the tube were detached and she was trying to apply Mehendi directly from the tube. It was getting smudged and she was trying to fix the design with the pointed end of the cone. She found a thin dried leaf on the road and used that to clean the hole of the tube..."

The Mehendi tube fell inside a drain-like structure beside the staircase. Rumi went near the drain. It was dry but deep for her to reach inside. She tried twice to reach with her hands but failed. Then she balanced herself to stand on top of the drain and finally got a hold of the Mehendi tube. She stood straight, looked at the tube in her hand, and smiled for a while.” (Focal child: Rumi, 3.5, non-HPL participant)

By contrast, HPL children have access to more traditionally play and learning-purposed objects such as kitchen toys and pens, as evidenced in the next examples.

“Hasan (30, play leader) asked Asma (5) to call Tasnim (3.5) to come out of the house. Asma entered the house and came out with Tasnim. She saw her friends are sitting there on the concrete block. Hasan asked Tasnim to sit there. Tasnim sat beside Salma (3). Tasnim took the laces on her hands and tried to put a knot. Fatema (4) came and sat by the other side of Tasnim. She started whispering something to Tasnim. After finishing, Tasnim frowned at Fatema and Fatema started smiling. Then Fatema left the place.

Arif (6) came with a balloon in her hand and stood at that place where Fatema was sitting. Arif showed the balloon to Tasnim. Tasnim said to Arif, “Blow it up!” very calmly and Arif started doing so. After asked Arif, “Who have got pens from school amongst you all?”. Arif pointed fingers to Fatema, Salma, and Tasnim and replied, “ They all have got including me!” Hasan then asked Tasnim, “Have you got pens from school?” Tasnim replied in positive by nodding her head up and down.” (Focal child: Tasnim, 3.5, HPL participant)

“The premises of a house (Probably Nur’s (4) house) where a mat was spread on the ground. There’s a setup of kitchen toys on the mat which includes 5 small plates, one broken fork, one half coconut shell, one bottle cork and a big plastic box. Two of the plates were full of sand, one plate had some water with small pieces of leaves in it and two plates were empty. The coconut shell had some big green leaves. The plastic box was empty. A stair went downwards to the road by the side of the premise.

...Zura (25, aunt) came at the door out of the house and called Salema (2) shouting, “Oiii, come here.” Salema left the place and went to Zura. Zura combed Salema’s hair. Salema again went to the playing zone. Zannat (5) took an empty plate and put some sand and some leaves on it. Kolima (3) said to Zannat, “Don’t give me much broth.” Suddenly, Zannat stood up and left the place without saying anything to anyone. Everyone there except Kolima also stood up and followed Zannat. Kolima kept sitting on the mat alone. After a while, Kolima stood up with that tiny bag in hand and left the place. She went to a pile of sand at a distance and sat on the ground. She started picking up sand in her handgrip from that pile and put them in that tiny bag. She filled the bag with sand. After finishing, she stood up and walked back to the playing zone(stair). Meanwhile, everyone came back. Zannat was filling an empty plate with sands taken from another plate. Kolima gave that bag full of sand to Zannat. Zannat took the bag and kept it in the arrangement. Then, Kolima sat beside Salema. Suddenly, they all stood up again and started leaving the place taking different things from the arrangement in their hands.” (Focal Child: Kolima, 3, HPL participant)



Conclusion

This brief is undergirded by the notion that to “find” out how Rohingya children are being socialized (and essentially what they are learning), we must follow them around rather than being comfortably seated in a particular setting²⁵. The findings presented here are a first step towards understanding those contexts – both the physical environment and the social interactions that make up children’s day-to-day lives. Rapid ethnographic observations reveal the unique ways in which the Rohingya children and families in Cox’s Bazar interact together in fluid ways beyond conventional family structures. However, the methodology is not without its limitations. First, we were able to view the children sometimes in homes, but primarily in outside spaces and for very limited amounts of time. Therefore, we are missing more in-depth knowledge of the interactions in children’s most crucial niche, the home. Furthermore, observational tools are subject to demand characteristics: children know they are being observed, and we do not know how they may change their behaviors accordingly.

Nevertheless, our observations allowed us to gain a more nuanced understanding of the context, which can inform how we, as researchers and practitioners, may conceptualize our interventions and our interactions with these families in three important ways:

As participants in “cultural practices and circumstances of their communities—which also change”²⁶, children experiencing displacement are creators of cultural practices, not simply reproducers of them²⁷. Rohingya children are creating their own spaces for exploration and play, be it through HPLs, community spaces, or even alleyways and sewage canals. They use found objects creatively in their interactions and play. These data reveal processes of generative activities that have been witnessed similarly in displaced youth,²⁸ but in this study at much earlier points in their development. Given the potential differences in children’s perceptions (e.g. about their environment) from their caregivers, we should understand what children actively integrate from the various socialization messages that are being presented to them, both by adults and others around them. Our evidence suggests that Rohingya children are shaping the practices and circumstances of their communities to meet their own needs and goals²⁹.

The above has implications for both for selecting targets of intervention as well as for choosing and adapting tools for measuring child development. Generally, we know much more about the perspectives and experiences of adults and children, more so by proxy of adults³⁰. And in the case of a refugee population such as the Rohingya where more than half of the population are children³¹, **increasing our focus on approaches that privilege child-centered perspectives could provide us with a more complete range of socialization and learning experiences of children.** For instance, children may be expected to take on more personal initiative to learn

the new culture because traditional socializing agents (i.e. parents or other adults) do not have a mastery of the new culture, are more absent from the lives of children, or become less relevant³². While these perspectives may be more relevant to children in middle childhood or adolescence, they will have implications for those children in early childhood, and understanding the perspectives of older children and siblings would become invaluable. With regard to the physical conditions of the camps, the risks, and opportunities, provided by the terrain and congestion of the camps provides information on both the children's capacities to care for themselves and creatively use the environment around them while also drawing attention to parents' concerns regarding health and safety. Knowing what sorts of physical objects children are familiar with on a daily basis can inform choices we make when adapting instruments for directly assessing child development, such as materials used in the International Development and Early Learning Assessment (IDELA).³³

Young Rohingya have the opportunity to observe, mimic, and learn from a large variety of individuals from across multiple nearby households. There is evidence that in Rohingya culture, as in many non-WEIRD societies, children are raised collectively, by caregivers, siblings, peers, and other adults, who also serve as cultural representatives and, thus, as agents of socialization as well³⁴. Therefore, we want to promote practices that are supportive of more "collaborative and interdependent ways of being"³⁵ that are clearly evidenced in Rohingya culture in the Cox's Bazar camps. Interventions focused on parenting/caregiving almost always exclusively target the parents of the children. Our sample of children spent extensive time in the company of other children and adults whose relationship to them are not immediately obvious. Relatedly, the proximity of learning centers/HPLs to the households allows BRAC play leaders to interact with caregivers frequently – interactions which could serve as a valuable source of support for these caregivers. These relationships, often neglected in traditional conceptions of child development, are a source of resilience that could be tapped to inform interventions even beyond humanitarian contexts. **For example, it may be particularly important to work with clusters of households rather than individual ones and potentially integrate social networking measures to better understand the relationships and functioning of household clusters.**

All of the themes extracted from our data reflect the reality of children's lives in the Rohingya camps. This brief glimpses into their daily lives serves not only to expand our understanding of their developmental context, but also show the value of socialization practices in refugee contexts. Moreover, this qualitative inquiry into the lives of children in the Rohingya camps has underscored how rapid ethnography can be a suitable and effective tool for gathering rich, contextually relevant information.

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