

8 Limits of Belonging: Interconnected Geographies of Precarity and Dependency in the Everyday Lives of Rohingyas

8.1 Introduction

The empirical findings discussed in the previous chapters present the perpetual inability of the Rohingyas to escape the systems of exploitation as a result of the interplay amongst (il)legality, (in)visibility and (im)mobility. They highlight the factors that contribute to the processes and continuums of precarity and offer a grounded perspective on the peculiarity of their ambiguous socio-legal status, which have been long-practised in Myanmar and recently re-imagined in Bangladesh and Malaysia. The results reveal how the structural predicaments and socio-political circumstances continue to influence the manner in which Rohingyas make sense of their exiled lives and act on them at different stages of migration. By connecting historical accounts with contemporary practices, the findings argue that the various forms of precarity in the lives of Rohingya refugees ‘do not just historically emerge but are actively produced’.¹ Within the realm of refugee governance, a twilight nature of state practices produces and reinforces ambiguity, which leads to institutional vulnerability.

Similarly, the stories underscore the ambivalence, ordinariness, practices, chaos, resistance and agency experienced by the Rohingyas in Bangladesh and Malaysia. It provides a granular detail on their capacity to make decisions and their strategic navigation of various forms of structural inequality. Providing an in-depth examination of the wide scope of refugeehood, it redefines the parameters and contours of precarity and its geographic shifts whilst remaining essentially the same at its core. Highlighting the subjective experiences of refugees and their various manifestations along the lines of identity, mobility, space, gender and labour, the findings underscore ‘the necessity of applying an intersectional lens’ in the investigation of precarity from the social, political, cultural and labour geographic perspectives.²

The onward journey from Bangladesh to Malaysia is marked by the persistence of ambiguity between adapting (in Bangladesh) and imagining a future in Malaysia (or elsewhere). At the micro level, it illustrates how particular arrangements of social capital and emotional and psychological elements influence the decision making of refugees that migrate amidst conflict and forced displacement, that is, whether to stay (in Bangladesh) or to move onward in the pursuit of a new life. At the macro level, it

¹ Stel, *Hybrid Political Order and the Politics of Uncertainty: Refugee Governance in Lebanon*: 216.

² Kathleen Sexsmith, “The Embodied Precarity of Year-Round Agricultural Work: Health and Safety Risks among Latino/a Immigrant Dairy Farmworkers in New York,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 39, no. 1 (2022): 359.

chronicles the aspirations, imaginations and expectations that shape their (in)ability to realise further migration. Their lives are constantly being othered and politicised in both countries, and they are exposed to the capricious policies of the state. In doing so, it sheds light on different arrangements and meanings attached to the places in their life-making as refugees.

The refugee camps in Cox's Bazar serve as a transitional place for the Rohingya community or a space between exile and home. Whilst they continue to refer to Malaysia as *Bidesh* (foreign country), this explicit expression of foreignness is muted when addressing life in Bangladesh, which is simply framed as *ekul-okul* or 'different banks of the same river'. Bangladesh is *home* when they speak the same language and share the same landscape, food, culture and frequent interactions with the local population. On the contrary, it also reminds them of *exile*, when they are encamped and need carry an ID card as FDMNs, attend the headcounts by NGOs and government officials, be discriminated against at workplaces, and constantly reminded of their state of liminality and expected return to Myanmar.

Since 2017, with the arrival of more than one million Rohingyas, refugee camps in Bangladesh also become the new 'centre of gravity' for the reinvigoration of the Rohingya identity, community formation and the cultivation of a sense of togetherness. A Rohingya man in Malaysia explains: 'No matter which part of the world you live in, you must have a family member living in Cox's Bazar'. The majority of his family members live in different camps in Bangladesh. Cox's Bazar has evolved into a 'point of reference' for this dispersed community for making new beginnings, starting families, forging communities of shared consciousness and, importantly, defending their ethnic identity, culture and personhood. Thus, despite their predicaments, the neighbouring Bangladesh remains the 'best choice' in their lives in waiting. The country offers an immediate escape from violence, persecution and poverty, whilst moving to Malaysia is seemingly a more calculated step and collective decision. In a transnational setting, Rohingyas in Malaysia are connected to those in Bangladesh through social, familial and economic responsibilities. The culture, language, religion and physical attributes provide a sense of invisibility in Bangladesh. However, the physical separation of camps and the encampment process continue to create a gap between the local and refugee populations. Malaysia stands in opposition in terms of visibility. Physical and non-physical attributes, including language and ethnicity, make the Rohingyas easily detectable amongst the local population despite their scattered settlement across the Malay Peninsula.

The relatively structured humanitarian support and interaction with the locals and previous family ties in Bangladesh offer the Rohingyas certain degrees of flexibility and relative freedom to choose their employment. On the contrary, in Malaysia, they are pushed to the informal labour market due to the absence of a system that provides immediate humanitarian support. Survival and livelihood in this context is dependent on the speed in which one can find a job and a source of earning. A conspicuous aspect for both countries, however, is the permanence of temporality and

the boundaries of belonging that characterise ‘an existential angst of living a life of ambient insecurity, strongly suggestive of the breakdown of stable social bonds’ and solidarity.³ Rohingyas continue to be locked away from the consciousness of society and are ‘trapped in a limbo where they are unable to move backwards, forwards or sideways’.⁴ Regardless of the specific articulations of drivers, journeys, settlement spaces and patterns of economic and social interactions, precarity remains the key feature across diverse geographic locations. In this new reality, perception about life, prospects and the limits of belonging are continuously reconfigured in the course of exiled life.

The practical limitations of the discourse on *Muslim solidarity and brotherhood* are evident in the expectations that emerge from the imagined religious solidarity and the manner in which it ultimately provides contrasting quotidian experiences. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the resentment of politicians and the society fuelled xenophobia and arbitrary state actions, which added more layers of precarity to the previously multi-dimensional vulnerability faced by refugees. Therefore, in the context of the changing social, political and economic dynamics in the host countries, labour relations and other outcomes must be explored through the prism of the social fabric. Rohingya experiences in Bangladesh and Malaysia depict how myopic state policies that aim to regulate labour constitute contradictory processes and generate ambivalent effects. Their forced and arbitrary categorisation have been inconsistent and vague for a very long time. Through this labelling, the states pursue a system of control displayed in mobility restrictions, encampment and exclusion from the formal protection system. Conversely, the same people are tolerated in the informal labour market as cheap, flexible and disposable labour. These factors perpetuate a situation in which everyday life is characterised by the ‘scene of exclusion’, whilst their participation as a cheap and submissive labour force can be regarded as the ‘obscene of inclusion’.⁵ Through flexibility, disposability and contingent employment, the states practice a form of ‘adverse incorporation’, which deepens the pre-existing inequality.⁶

Based on empirical research, the following section analyses the myriad manifestations of the precarity of the Rohingyas in exile. Firstly, I present the daily phenomenon of precarity by broadening its spectrum as a process and address the acts of resistance as an expression of agency within the ‘precarious hope’ framework. In the final part, going beyond the boundaries and scales of precarity, I explain the interconnection between precarity and dependency and build on a number of intersectional aspects that produce and reproduce different forms of asymmetrical dependency.

3 Cruz-Del Rosario and Rigg, “Living in an Age of Precarity in 21st Century Asia”: 517.

4 Hoffstaedter, “Place-Making: Chin Refugees, Citizenship and the State in Malaysia”: 874.

5 De Genova, “Spectacles of Migrant ‘Illegality’: The Scene of Exclusion, the Obscene of Inclusion”: 1180.

6 Nicola Phillips, “Unfree Labour and Adverse Incorporation in the Global Economy: Comparative Perspectives on Brazil and India,” *Economy and Society* 42, no. 2 (2013): 171.

8.2 Making of the Interconnected Geographies of Precarity

According to many critics, the evaluation of precarity mainly focuses on the labour market and linked it to the effects of neoliberalism or late capitalism.⁷ This viewpoint emphasises how the increasing casualisation of the workforce has resulted in the diminished bargaining power and economic instability of workers. Additionally, a few critics point out that this strategy frequently exhibits a Eurocentric bent, lacks historical context and pays insufficient attention to the interactions of precarity with race and gender across contexts. Furthermore, scholars argue that the focus on working conditions ignores the idea of ‘precarity of place’.⁸ However, another corpus of literature endeavours to address these apparent limitations by revealing precarity from an intersectional lens and as a broad phenomenon of life. In other words, it highlights the interplay of different arenas in which precarity pertains to the continuum of exploitation in everyday life.⁹ These manifestations are evident in geographical spaces, which demonstrates the analytical value of precarity as a process that is not exclusive to labour relations.¹⁰

Thus, the empirical findings in the previous chapters elucidate the mobilisation and manifestation of precarity across settings and spaces to explain the reciprocity and persistence of vulnerability. It reveals the multi-dimensional vulnerability associated with the spatial, legal, material and political exclusion of refugees.¹¹ For the Rohingya refugees, statelessness, ambiguous legal status and the arbitrary practices of the states create *legal vulnerability*. Social exclusion and resentment from the local population and politicians further add to *political vulnerability*. Meanwhile, the lack of financial resources, limited access to jobs and savings and involvement in the informal and highly conditional labour market exacerbate *material vulnerability*. Additionally, *spatial vulnerability* exists in relation to the characteristics of physical spaces, such as the sprawling camps in Bangladesh, perilous maritime voyages and small apartments in Malaysia. Rohingya refugees are vulnerable for various reasons apart from employment circumstances. For example, long-term disenfranchisement as a stateless community in Myanmar is one of the key factors of their vulnerability. Furthermore, the status as marginalised refugees with constrained mobility in Bangladesh and as undocumented migrants in Malaysia worsen the situation and add to the difficulties. Hence, the interlink between forced migration and precarity

7 Dennis Arnold and Joseph R. Bongiovi, “Precarious, Informalizing, and Flexible Work: Transforming Concepts and Understandings,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 3 (2013): 289.

8 Susan Banki, “Precarity of Place: A Complement to the Growing Precariat Literature,” *Global Discourse* 3, no. 3–4 (2013): 450.

9 Neilson and Rossiter, “From Precarity to Precariousness and Back Again: Labour, Life and Unstable Networks”: 2.

10 Cruz-Del Rosario and Rigg, “Living in an Age of Precarity in 21st Century Asia”: 524.

11 Dima Al Munajed and Elizabeth Ekren, “Exploring the Impact of Multidimensional Refugee Vulnerability on Distancing as a Protective Measure against COVID-19: The Case of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon and Turkey,” *Journal of Migration and Health* 1–2 (2020): 1.

offers ‘a productive point of departure for analysing social and economic conditions and attempts to create a common ground for struggle, agency and contestation beyond their deplorable reality in the labour market’.¹²

From this vantage point, the results highlight that labour market experiences are not a separate aspect of precarity; instead, they are intricately associated with the ongoing production of marginalisation, the social construction of illegality and the hierarchical structure of life value. This chapter explains how diverse actors, policies and practices ‘produce and govern precarity and these interventions foster further complexities and ambiguities, which in turn influence the condition of precarity’.¹³ Its objective is to revitalise the debate on precarity: less on the re-definition of precarity per se but more on understanding precarity as a process. It comprises diverse and frequently complementary forms of inclusion and exclusion, which expand across spaces, settings and movements and form the lived experiences of migrants and refugees. This paradox and ambiguity of being simultaneously deserving and non-deserving and being within (the nation-state) but outside (citizenship rights) could be understood as ontological features that are deeply embedded in the everyday life of refugees. Defined as the ‘ambiguous architecture of precarity’, the process encapsulates a ‘condition of vulnerability and an element of ambiguity’.¹⁴ Taking together the diverse manifestations of precarity in terms of identity, space, mobility, gender and labour, the study provides empirical evidence to expand the precarity spectrum, which is conceptualised as the ‘interconnected geographies of precarity’ (Fig. 8.1).

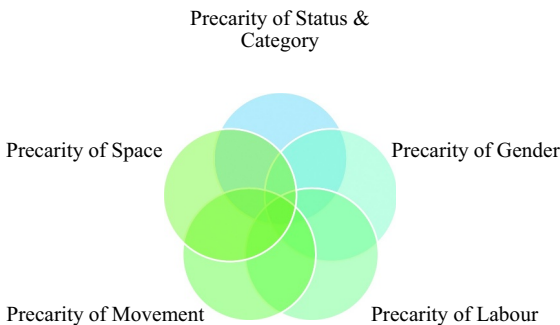


Fig. 8.1: Interconnected geographies of precarity in the everyday lives of the Rohingyas (author's illustration).

¹² Martin Bak Jørgensen, “The Precariat Strikes Back – Precarity Struggles in Practice,” in *Politics of Precarity*, ed. Martin Bak Jørgensen and Carl-Ulrik Schierup (Brill, 2017): 54.

¹³ Ilcan, Rygiel and Baban, “The Ambiguous Architecture of Precarity”: 55.

¹⁴ Ilcan, Rygiel and Baban, “The Ambiguous Architecture of Precarity”: 55.

8.2.1 Precarity of Status and Category

In the legal and social sense, citizenship represents ‘an unearned form of social power and capital’.¹⁵ However, the inheritance of stateless category continues to disqualify the Rohingyas from citizenship practices in exile. Despite protracted displacement, they are confined to the ‘everyday circuit, which is short-term, individuated and materialistic’, in a capitalistic social life.¹⁶ The state-imposed insecure and ambiguous conditions place them in a status in which they are entangled in different precarious relationships with the host country according to their access or negotiation of this arbitrary and totalitarian governance. The absence of legal protection indicates that their presence is contingent on the goodwill of the host country, which arbitrarily changes. Therefore, they do not wish to challenge this status quo due to their ‘deportability in everyday life’.¹⁷ The inherent statelessness has fallen between the cracks of a system built on nation-states and citizens and remains in political dispensation. Receiving states can now easily declare Rohingyas as ‘illegal migrants’ as opposed to refugees eligible for protection due to generations of statelessness. This practice of expulsion ‘constitutes a distinct realm for the social (re)production of certain forms of governmentality’, which is closely related to the contested political dynamics of ordering and managing refugees.¹⁸ These *de jure* and *de facto* statelessness enmeshed in the Rohingya identity is particularly challenging since the COVID-19 outbreak, ‘when hostility toward outsiders is exacerbated, the availability of essential humanitarian services is compromised, and an informal labour market generating subsistence income is brought to a halt’.¹⁹

Disjuncture and ambiguity are manifested in the politics of semantics, in which the systems of the UN and the host countries are in opposition, which created further confusion. For instance, in Bangladesh, the UNHCR refers to this population as ‘Rohingya refugees’ in line with the applicable international framework, whereas the government calls the same population as FDMN.²⁰ Moreover, categorisation continues to change, adjust and readjust over time, as explained in Chapter Five. Thus, opportunities for asserting an affirmative identity in opposition to the discriminatory policies of the state are few due to the overlapping labels that prevent people from receiving legal protection. In Malaysia, the official non-existence of refugees is also evident in the absence of governmental structures for the registration and administration of ref-

15 Chakraborty and Bhabha, “Fault Lines of Refugee Exclusion: Statelessness, Gender, and COVID-19 in South Asia”: 238.

16 Azis, “Urban Refugees in a Graduated Sovereignty”: 850.

17 De Genova, “Migrant ‘Illegality’ and Deportability in Everyday Life”: 419.

18 Hedman, “Refuge, Governmentality and Citizenship: Capturing ‘Illegal Migrants’ in Malaysia and Thailand”: 366.

19 Chakraborty and Bhabha, “Fault Lines of Refugee Exclusion”: 238.

20 “The Protection Framework for the Humanitarian Response, January–December 2020”: 20.

ugees, including refugee camps. This categorical expulsion results in their systemic marginalisation as well as the social and political construction of illegality and labour exploitation.

Thus, this practice of exclusion creates a distinct realm for the social (re)production of certain forms of fear and ambiguity, which arguably continue to constrain the states from the performance of their obligation to protect refugees under the humanitarian pretext. The Rohingya population in Bangladesh and Malaysia are considered an anomaly due to their *ad hoc* and reactive interventions, which are shaped by various external factors, including social, political, economic and cultural. The careful avoidance of the use of the term refugees, whilst adhering to the principle of non-refoulement, illustrates the creation of a situation of conditional (non)belongingness induced by government policies and normative practices.²¹ Moreover, the constantly shifting political and social bases of classification and its implications underscore the classification struggle. The definition of a refugee is a relational one that reflects the outcome of social and political negotiations and the positioning of the states. The process of categorising the Rohingyas under specific circumstances exerts profound consequences that render the Rohingyas invisible and vulnerable and maintain ambiguity that ramify labour relations and other life aspects. This classification also results in the hierarchisation of the value of life and produces an asymmetrical distribution of precarity in which certain populations are considered less than human.²²

The study also demonstrated the precarity of identity in the (re-)production of racialised hierarchies in the framing of ‘the refugee’ as a form of ‘social illegality’, that is, the designation of illegality to certain bodies.²³ A Rohingya living in Georgetown, Penang Island, explains as follows: ‘It is not about whether or not you hold a UNHCR card. It is about being a Rohingya, being an undeserving foreigner, which is written on your face’. This statement refers to the recurring harassment he encounters in the streets, workplaces and even places of worship. This racial profiling represents the notion described by Therborn as ‘unequal recognition of human individuals as persons’.²⁴ According to the author, the inequality derived from this ‘institutionalised ranking of social actors, some high, others low, from some super- and subordination’ is ‘inequality by hierarchisation’.²⁵ The ‘hierarchy of rights’ based on the ‘filtering of wanted and unwanted migrants’ has long been an integral feature of the Malaysian

21 Dominika Blachnicka-Ciacek et al., “Do I Deserve to Belong? Migrants’ Perspectives on the Debate of Deservingness and Belonging,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47, no. 17 (2021): 3807.

22 Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*

23 Flores and Schachter, “Who Are the ‘Illegals’?”: 839.

24 Göran Therborn, ed., *Inequalities of the World: New Theoretical Frameworks, Multiple Empirical Approaches* (Verso, 2006): 13.

25 Therborn, ed., *Inequalities of the World*: 13.

immigration system.²⁶ In recent years, the state has established an ethnicised and racialised system of addressing refugee issues with the arrival of refugee populations from diverse backgrounds.

In this 'two-tier system', the Arab refugees who primarily originate from Syria received first-tracked protection services and access to employment. In contrast, refugees from Myanmar, who have been in the country for many years, remain in the 'waiting zone'.²⁷ The Rohingya refugees are treated as objects of pity, which indicates an inferior racial positioning that is reflected in their social position within Malaysia. Vividly reminiscent of the manner in which contemporary Europe currently handles European versus non-European refugees, refugees from Bosnia, Syria, and other Arab nations are also regarded as 'guests' in Malaysia. In contrast, Rohingya refugees are addressed as 'illegal migrants' or 'free riders'. The state establishes the class system, but ordinary locals reinforce these racial manifestations of rights by viewing Arabs as authentic Muslims. This view is also evident in the obsession of society with *light-skinned* Arabs or *white* Bosniaks in contrast to the impoverished and *dark-skinned* Rohingyas. This process leads to the (re)production of racialised hierarchies and highlights the internalised hierarchy within Muslim societies, which is arguably less evident in the mainstream international discourse on race (and racism). In Bangladesh as well, Rohingyas are associated with national security threats and blamed for the deterioration of the law and order situation in the camp-adjacent border areas.²⁸ Moreover, they are portrayed as spreaders of COVID-19,²⁹ which is a typical display of prejudice and scapegoating of minorities. The Rohingyas are also marked as security threats, which refers to their involvement in deadly armed violence, illegal drug and human trafficking, illegal logging, environmental degradation and other petty crimes.³⁰ The marginal social position and collective branding of the Rohingyas as a threat provides 'the basis of race prejudice' and forces them to live a sub-human life.³¹

The contextualisation of irregular migrants in Malaysia, where they are associated with crime and disease, and a long history of the construction of the other as a

26 Robert Rydzewski, "Hope, Waiting, and Mobility. Migrant Movement in Serbia After the EU-Turkey Deal," *Movements. Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies* 5, no. 1 (2020): 77.

27 Mayberry, "First-Class Refugees: Malaysia's Two-Tier System."

28 Tripura, "Confined, Controlled, and Violated: The Rohingya Women in Bangladesh Refugee Camps": 3.

29 Chakraborty and Bhabha, "Fault Lines of Refugee Exclusion: Statelessness, Gender, and COVID-19 in South Asia."

30 Abdullah Hossain Mallick, "Rohingya Refugee Repatriation from Bangladesh: A Far Cry from Reality," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 7, no. 2 (2020): 203; Syeda Naushin Parnini, "The Crisis of the Rohingya as a Muslim Minority in Myanmar and Bilateral Relations with Bangladesh," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 33, no. 2 (2013): 294.

31 Herbert Blumer, "Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position," *Pacific Sociological Review* 1, no. 1 (1958): 4.

potential threat is another means of comprehending their precarious existence. For instance, this notion was emphatically articulated during the Malayan Emergency, that is, the post-Second World War communist insurgency. At the time, ‘the communist’ became the dangerous *other* within, and the categories of ‘Chinese’, ‘communist’ and ‘terrorist’ became all too readily linked.³² By legislating the 1960 Internal Security Act, emergency laws were introduced to contain the ‘communist threat’, which advocated detention without trial and remained in place until 2012. The same law was re-branded in 2012 under a new name (i.e. Security Offences [Special Measures] Act). The long-serving ‘communist threat’ that served the political purpose of the successive regimes was then replaced by the threats of ‘illegal migrants’. This change was exemplified by a remark from the Director-General of RELA, the People’s Volunteer Force involved in immigration raid: ‘We have no more Communists at the moment, but we are now facing illegal immigrants’. He further adds that in Malaysia, ‘illegal immigrants are enemy no. 2’ – drugs are at the top of the list.³³ This negative construction of migrants as the dangerous other feeds into the ‘affirmative production of Malaysian identity’, in which the ‘illegal migrant’ is a ‘product primarily of practices of governmentality’.³⁴

Therefore, the observed categorical fetishism profoundly impacts the Rohingya community. In several instances, arbitrary categorisation has been discursively reconstructed to de-emphasise the notions of refugee and protection rights and to exclude them from political and social entitlement. Their situation also offers valuable insights into the discourse on eligibility and deservingness to be treated with empathy. These articulations are inextricably connected to the development of uncertainty, ambiguity and confusion in which the Rohingyas continue to be exposed to a precarious everyday life. The social narratives and media portrayal that reinforce the perception of Rohingyas as ‘quintessentially undocumented’ combine to produce ‘the racialisation of illegality’.³⁵ This construction of illegality lies at the root of the perception of Rohingyas by ordinary people, the state and institutions, and of the deployment of racialised illegality in various spheres of life, which, thereby, expands status-induced precarity.

32 Ansems de Vries, “Politics of (In)Visibility: Governance-Resistance and the Constitution of Refugee Subjectivities in Malaysia”: 880.

33 Quoted in “A Growing Source of Fear for Migrants in Malaysia,” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/10/world/asia/10malaysia.html> [accessed 20.04.2023].

34 Ansems de Vries, “Politics of (in) Visibility”: 881.

35 Menjivar, “The Racialization of ‘Illegality’”: 98.

8.2.2 Precarity of Space

Referring to physical locations, precarity of space is a multi-layered situation in which refugees and asylum seekers are subjected to removal, containment or deportation, which is similar to the concept that Banki presented as ‘precarity of place’.³⁶ These spaces are given meaning ‘through the precarious experiences and everyday living’ in refugee camps, that is, marginalised neighbourhoods where refugees, the state and precarious daily routine encounter one another as a way of life.³⁷ These spaces are not only a physical demarcation of the dwellings of refugees but also a marker of inclusion/exclusion. For Rohingya refugees, social inclusion and exclusion are highly ‘place specific’ – a practice that challenges the nation-state as a singular body. The space of inclusion and exclusion is localised and dynamic, which leads to corresponding perceptions in relation to their experiences of place.³⁸

For example, although the Rohingya campisation in Bangladesh is an exclusionary practice, a limited space of inclusion exists within the broad frontier dynamics between locals and refugees through social, familial and economic relations. It is constrained in its practice of frontierity, such that mobility beyond Cox’s Bazar invokes linguistic and cultural boundaries and, therefore, provincialises precarity within the borders of the nation-state. Their ‘social embeddedness in the surrounding space’ alleviates social exclusion and provides crucial spaces for interaction.³⁹ This place-making is evident in the narratives of the Rohingyas relocated to the remote Bhasanchar Island (Chapter Six). The Rohingya continue to find it unsettling and recurrent that the dilemma of inclusion and exclusion also inspires a different form of social imagination that capitalises on the cultural matrix and modality of space and boundaries.

In Malaysia, space is also ingrained in the precarity spectrum. A notable increase of non-citizens, including foreign workers, has occurred to satisfy the needs of a rapidly expanding economy. However, Rohingya refugees continue to be systematically pushed to the cramped and impoverished immigrant neighbourhoods in the urban peripheries. Embodying the state of liminality, they dwell in a multiplicity of *ethnoscapes*: ‘the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live’.⁴⁰ In an apparent practice of securitisation at the internal level, the state perpetu-

³⁶ Banki, “Precarity of Place: A Complement to the Growing Precariat Literature”: 453.

³⁷ Ilcan, Rygiel, and Baban, “The Ambiguous Architecture of Precarity”: 56.

³⁸ Neil Spicer, “Places of Exclusion and Inclusion: Asylum-Seeker and Refugee Experiences of Neighbourhoods in the UK,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34, no. 3 (2008): 491.

³⁹ Shahd Seethaler-Wari and Zeynep Yanasmayan, “Unfolding Intersecting Forms of Socio-spatial Exclusion: Accommodation Centres at the Height of the ‘Refugee Reception Crisis’ in Germany,” *International Migration* 61, no. 3 (2023): 43.

⁴⁰ Arjun Appadurai, “Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology,” in *Interventions: Anthropologies of the Present*, ed. R.G. Fox (School of American Research, 1991): 192.

ates an internalisation of the border. This securitisation is manifested in frequent raids and crackdown on Rohingyas living in the pockets of immigrant neighbourhoods. Raids in these apartments are even broadcasted live in the middle of the night to instigate fear and to remind the Rohingyas of their legal non-existence. Their disqualification from the urban metropolis as dirty, poor and illiterates who lack knowledge of modern living is vividly exhibited in urban Malaysia, which was even exacerbated in the aftermath of the pandemic. The narrative of Jonuara (38), a Rohingya woman living in Shah Alam, depicts this situation. She recalls that her son went missing one day, such that she immediately rode a bus and forgot to buy a ticket. When she asked the driver for a ticket, the driver shouted at her and warned her to stay away from him. The humiliation continued as he threw the ticket and asked her to pick it up with her *dirty hand*. This unfortunate incident was very inherently normalised, such that no one in the bus even reacted to the events that unfolded that day. Sahida (49), the neighbour of Jonuara in Shah Alam, shares how she always felt comfortable wearing *thami* (a traditional Burmese attire) but now forbids her daughter from wearing it in public: ‘Since my adulthood, I always felt comfortable in wearing Thami (traditional Burmese attire for women. But I do not let my daughter to wear it when she goes to public places’. This statement highlights the prevalence of fear that prevents Rohingyas from embracing their Burmese identity in Malaysia in an effort to ‘fit in’.

Marginalisation in social spaces also leads to the absence of stable trajectories that prompt a state of mobility within the evident immobility in the dispersion of many Rohingyas into small peripheral towns and rural villages in Malaysia. Apart from the financial challenges, these new places alleviate social exclusion with temporary respite from police harassment and public resentment.⁴¹ However, relocating from urban centres to semi-urban and rural areas adds new challenges to job pursuit, financial instability and disconnection from the little support available from humanitarian NGOs.

(In)visibility attached to a place also creates precarity of space. This aspect is evident in Bangladesh and Malaysia in terms of the depiction of the traditional discourse on visibility and invisibility in the context of migration as a ‘disciplinary gaze’ with different implications.⁴² In Malaysia, amidst the systematic practice of exclusion and the social and racial construction of illegality, ‘visibility is a trap’ that serves to discipline unwanted non-citizens such as the Rohingyas.⁴³ Nevertheless, many Rohingyas attempt to ‘blend in with the cityscape’ as they commute to and from work to assert their invisibility.⁴⁴ Conversely, in Bangladesh, their (in)visibility enables them to claim a distinct form of citizenship and belonging. In contrast to Malaysia, they can

⁴¹ Spicer, “Places of Exclusion and Inclusion”: 493.

⁴² Ansems de Vries, “Politics of (in) Visibility”: 888.

⁴³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Penguin, 1998): 200.

⁴⁴ Nah, “Seeking Refuge in Kuala Lumpur”: 149.

exercise agency by participating in the local labour market and by boosting mobilisation in and around refugee camps whilst posing as locals. Nevertheless, they are physically confined within the camps, and the authorities continuously monitor and control their movements. This constant adjustment and readjustment with spaces perpetuate a condition of endless in-betweenness in which refugees are ‘not quite, not yet’, that is, ‘not quite homeless, not yet deported or detained’, which upsets the limited choices and responses to their precarity.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, they claim different forms of ownership over the space they inhabit to maintain a ‘sense of normalcy’ and build social relationships as an act of resistance.⁴⁶ A sense of community is re-created by establishing religious schools, Mosques and political and social organisations inside the camps. Arakan is re-imagined within the confined spaces of the camps through a vibrant celebration of religious, social and cultural festivals. This act of resistance makes this place a ‘space of exception’, which enables the disenfranchised and unwanted refugees to ‘voice grievances’ and ‘perform their daily functions’.⁴⁷

8.2.3 Precarity of Movement

To escape systematic persecution and to pursue a dignified life, the pervasive culture of migration renders the precarity of movement a key marker of the collective struggle of the Rohingyas. The journey from one place to another becomes the norm in conjunction with persecution, violence, despair and hope. It stems from the governance practices of containment in the host countries and their resistance to this control, which shapes their ‘social status and ability to physically move’.⁴⁸ In reaction to their dispossession by the state and to resist this bare form of life, they continue to move to seek a better life. In Bangladesh, the imposition of waiting to be repatriated back to Myanmar pushes them to endure ‘hyper mobility’.⁴⁹ In Malaysia, the state of illegality and the ‘generalised condition of homelessness’⁵⁰ transcends the precarity of movement, which characterises their deterritorialisation within the contemporary ‘socio-political construction of space and place’.⁵¹ It is not simply an act of resistance; they also justify the risks associated with these perilous journeys. Siraj (40) initially

45 Banki, “Precarity of Place: A Complement to the Growing Precariat Literature”: 454.

46 Seethaler-Wari and Yanasmayan, “Unfolding Intersecting Forms of Socio-spatial Exclusion”: 39.

47 Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*: 62.

48 Ilcan, Rygiel and Baban, “The Ambiguous Architecture of Precarity”: 56.

49 Claudio Minca et al., “Rethinking the Biopolitical: Borders, Refugees, Mobilities . . .,” *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 40, no. 1 (2022): 3.

50 Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir*: 18.

51 Malkki, “National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorilization of National Identity Among Scholars and Refugees”: 25.

left the Teknaf coast in Bangladesh in mid-2018 and reached Malaysia during the late 2020s. His journey lasted nearly after two years of a long voyage across the Andaman Island of India, Thailand, Indonesia and, finally, in Lankawi Island (of Malaysia):

I know it (the Sea route) was deadly and uncertain. But what else I could do when I see myself doing nothing to provide to my family members and my kids. I was able to escape the army not to get stuck in Bangladesh. It was a chance given to me to (re-start) a new life. *Dhuki Dhuki Moron* (dying in silence and without dignity) in the camps is worse than taking the risk and becoming *Shaheed* (martyr) by sacrificing for the family (while crossing the Sea).

Accepting these enormous difficulties and dilemmas, the Rohingyas defy the ‘slow death’ in the camps with a conviction that leaving would be better than being indefinitely stuck in a condition of social liminality.⁵² In this context, onward migration to escape persecution, seek refuge and pursue a new life is the only certainty in their profoundly uncertain life in Myanmar and in exile. In Myanmar, firstly, they have left ancestral villages in Northern Rakhine to seek protection in Maungdaw and Buchidong towns. The military atrocity in 2017 forced them to escape Myanmar and seek refuge in the bordering villages in Bangladesh. Subsequently, in Bangladesh, the protracted displacement, socio-economic deprivation in a state of limbo and aspiration for a better future compelled them to re-migrate to other neighbouring Asian countries such as India, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. This endless ‘journey of the abandoned’ through rough mountains, soulless borders and perilous sea routes creates a ‘passage of precarity’.⁵³ This relentless movement captures an essential character in the multiplicities of precarity entangled in their life. Moreover, these journeys are sustained by social networks, dependency on smugglers and a fragile reliance on digital communication.⁵⁴

Hope is another driving force of their movement, where they ‘make sense of their everyday lives by imagining the outside world as a place of hope and achievements’.⁵⁵ It is the ‘generator of movement’ that liberates them from ‘*stuckedness*’, which pertains to the absence of choices in Bangladesh camps, limited prospects for dignified repatriation and the lack of global attention on the constantly evolving global political order.⁵⁶ This persuasion of hope normalises the deadly boat journeys from Bangladesh to Malaysia, in which nearly all of them narrate stories of tragic loss: family members or friends who perished in the sea en route to Malaysia and were held hos-

52 Milena Belloni, *The Big Gamble: The Migration of Eritreans to Europe* (University of California Press, 2019): 53.

53 Quynh-Giao N Vu, “Journey of the Abandoned: Endless Refugee Camp and Incurable Traumas,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32, no. 3 (2007): 580.

54 M. Collyer, “Stranded Migrants and the Fragmented Journey,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 23, no. 3 (2010): 276.

55 Belloni, *The Big Gamble*: 25.

56 Rydzewski, “Hope, Waiting, and Mobility. Migrant Movement in Serbia After the EU-Turkey Deal”: 89.

tage in 'death camps' and buried deep in the jungle on the Thailan–Malaysian border. Amidst the political stagnation, systemic lack of legal protection, fundamental absence of long-term solutions and uncertainty in everyday life, these tragic aspects have become normative of onward precarity. As legal migration is a remote possibility, relying on the assistance of smugglers to reach Malaysia is a precarious norm. Desperate to escape containment and dispossession by the state, the Rohingya people are lured onto boats in the hope of a secure life. Severe human rights abuse and frequently harmful criminal activity persist as people are crammed into boats, crammed against one another and forced to sit with their knees bent into their chests for weeks and months on end with little food and water. En route, people risk death due to starvation, dehydration, hyperthermia and beatings, rape and intimidation by traffickers. Traffickers lure men with the promise of employment opportunities and young girls with the prospect of marriage.

Nevertheless, the demand for smuggling activities continues in which smugglers adapt routes, prices and business models in response to changing border policies and the stringent operations of the law enforcement agencies in the region.⁵⁷ It bears the testimony of dire consequences when the discovery of mass graves of Rohingyas in the Thailand–Malaysia border made global headlines in 2014–2015 and how the nexus between smugglers and the state apparatus continue to profit from desperate Rohingyas that seek a future in Malaysia.⁵⁸ According to a UN press briefing in January 2023, in 2022 alone, more than 3,500 Rohingyas attempted deadly sea crossings in 39 boats to reach Malaysia. Out of them, 348 have died or are missing. This number denotes an increase of 360% from the year 2021, when approximately 700 people made the same journey.⁵⁹

The precarity of movement is not only confined to the possibility of mobility and implied risks en route but also comprises the inability to move legally despite the requisite to leave their place of habitat. Perpetuating abject precarity, this contained mobility, which is characterised by powerlessness, enigmatic political belongingness and spatial in-betweenness, justifies the 'multi-modal and multi-axial forms of direct and indirect violence through extreme regulations, exceptional policies, the brutality of the police, border controls and profound exclusion of ordinary citizens'.⁶⁰ Multi-sited in nature, this immobility encompasses the control of movement amongst the vast majority of those who remain in the refugee camps (in Bangladesh) or the camps for displaced people (in Myanmar). It includes being stuck inside cramped apartments or

57 Jennifer Valentine, "A Perilous Journey: Protection Risks Facing Rohingya En Route to Malaysia," Mixed Migration Center, 08.07.2021, <https://mixedmigration.org/a-perilous-journey/>.

58 Roy Chowdhury and Abid, "Treading the Border of (Il)legality"; Missbach and Stange, "Muslim Solidarity and the Lack of Effective Protection for Rohingya Refugees in Southeast Asia."

59 For details, see "Steep Increase in Deadly Boat Journeys Reflects Rohingyas' Desperation," UNHCR | UN News, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/01/1132517> [accessed 20.04.2023].

60 Sutapa Chattopadhyay and James A. Tyner, "Lives in Waiting," *Geopolitics* 27, no. 4 (2022): 1231.

immigrant neighbourhoods due to the fear of hostile immigration police, RELA forces and ordinary public resentment (in urban Malaysia).

Therefore, the precarity of movement is complex, multi-faceted and multi-dimensional. On the one hand, it involves precarity in immobility (inability to escape violence and discrimination). On the other hand, it augments precarity in mobility (i.e. financial burden, debt, life risks and, importantly, abuse by smugglers by trapping refugees in the deep sea as hostages to seek ransom). The precarity continuum is prolonged even after arriving at the aspired destination (i.e. constantly changing places to avoid detention and remaining invisible to the police and other governing actors upon reaching Malaysia). In the midst of the heavy securitisation of migration, the territorial control and large-scale containment effort exerted by the states demonstrate that the precarity of movement, which stems from the involvement of multiple stakeholders (governing authorities, immigration police, coast guards and border forces) and non-state (smugglers, traffickers and fellow refugees) actors foster the intersectionality of the forms of vulnerability.

8.2.4 Precarity of Gender

Gender in displacement increasingly received attention from scholars and practitioners primarily in two ways. They are 'either equated with vulnerability and victimhood, or portrayed as capable of remarkable resilience and agency, leaving little room for complexity or the multiple factors that condition their lives'.⁶¹ Several internal and external factors contribute to the conspicuous gendered precarity amongst the Rohingya communities. Prior to this discussion, noting that the gender dynamics have been mainly underrepresented in my empirical reflection in terms of interviewees and narratives is imperative. The reason has been explained in the chapter containing the methodology of the study. In this regard, I would like to stress the fact that in the mundane settings of the refugee lives, women face persistent challenges in making themselves visible in the patriarchal social structure, because even humanitarian relief coordination is mainly facilitated by and through men. Thus, I argue that the inability to provide a nuanced gender perspective in the empirical notes is an indicator of gendered precarity, which generally pre-exists in two ways. The lack of citizenship, rape and other forms of gendered violence and denial of rights to healthcare, education and freedom of movement in Myanmar are examples of external gendered precarity. Additionally, patriarchy and male-dominated, culturally and religiously prescribed norms are examples of internal factors that restrict the opportunities of women to achieve meaningful and active engagement in society. The repeated prac-

61 Kerrie Holloway, Maria Stavropoulou and Megan Daigle, "Gender in Displacement: The State of Play," Overseas Development Institute, London, 2019: 19.

tice of being excluded from citizenship procedures, living in camps, being invisible in the refugee governance structure in Bangladesh and indefinitely traveling to Malaysia to join prospective husbands has created a gender spectrum that is distinctly precarious.

In Myanmar, the statelessness and violence experienced and claimed in gendered ways different affect men and women. The essential role of women in reproduction transforms their bodies 'prime targets for domination and destruction in times of crisis'.⁶² The history of sexual violence in the context of conflict illustrates this point vividly. Women's bodies often serve as the terrain on which 'enemies are subjugated and the superiority of nations is claimed through the assertion of brute masculinity' – the Rohingya community is a powerful case in point.⁶³ Bearing more than two children is forbidden of Rohingya women in Myanmar, which indicates the control of the state over the reproductive rights 'of a certain group of women' and is a clear sign of 'ethnic cleansing'.⁶⁴ For decades, the Myanmar army instrumentalised rape as a form of torture and psychological and social intimidation.⁶⁵ Approximately 70,000 Rohingya women who arrived in Bangladesh after the 2017 conflict in Myanmar were pregnant or new mothers, which is a strong 'indicator of increased conflict-related sexual violence and abuse'.⁶⁶

Thus, without socio-legal support and the persistence of rightlessness, the male–female dichotomy and discriminatory practices become further evident. Women are compelled to accept the roles and responsibilities designated by society in an already fragile society that views women as inferiors and subservient to men. In hetero-patriarchal Rohingya societies, the life of women is moulded by the 'male gaze' of society in which men have 'social entitlements and responsibilities to control women's behaviours' in the name of protection.⁶⁷ For instance, many Rohingya women are uncomfortable talking to outsiders without permission from their husbands or being accompanied by a male family member. Any woman who breaks this norm is treated with harsh punishment often through physical abuse (ibid). The pre-existing cultural norms, perceptions of safety and security and religious beliefs also influence behavioural differences between women and men. The conservative religious interpretation of the role of women in society also limits their civic participation in a society that considers men as 'natural leaders', whilst women are mainly confined to the

62 Mithun, "From Hell to High Water: The Life of Rohingya Refugee Women in Bangladesh": 5.

63 Chakraborty and Bhabha, "Fault Lines of Refugee Exclusion": 239.

64 Susan Hutchinson, "Gendered Insecurity in the Rohingya Crisis," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 72, no. 1 (2018): 5.

65 Annekathryn Goodman and Iftkher Mahmood, "The Rohingya Refugee Crisis of Bangladesh: Gender Based Violence and the Humanitarian Response," *Open Journal of Political Science* 9, no. 3 (2019): 490–91.

66 Hutchinson, "Gendered Insecurity in the Rohingya Crisis": 2.

67 Sengupta, "Being Stateless and Surviving: The Rohingyas in Camps of Bangladesh": 117.

household. A number of Rohingya women even view ‘female leadership as a sin’.⁶⁸ Many gendered consequences of structural barriers exacerbate the position of women in society, where they are devoid of bargaining power compared with their male counterparts.

In terms of the pre-existing gender disparity, the Rohingya experiences of displacement and refuge are heavily gendered.⁶⁹ The protection system in Bangladesh ignores the gendered aspect of displacement in a number of ways. It downplays the significance of gender-based violence as a reason for escape and fails to sufficiently consider the gender perspective when developing policies for resettlement and return. Moreover, aid programmes essentially ‘go through men’, which perpetuates patriarchy.⁷⁰ The manifestation of gender inequality and gender-based violence occurs in multiple ways: deep-rooted sexism and the subjugated role of women in Rohingya society;⁷¹ the practice of polygamy by Rohingya men in which ‘marriage is viewed as social and economic security for Rohingya women’;⁷² and the tendency of men as heads of household except in cases wherein no male member is alive. This gender configuration also poses a significant implication to labour market participation. Apart from volunteering for the ‘gender-sensitisation’ projects of NGOs that operate in the camps, only 2% of Rohingya women are involved in certain types of income-generating activities outside the headquarters. Thus, they often face challenges from conservative forces who are critical of the external role of women.⁷³ This stance is also reflected in community decision-making within the camps. For instance, the *majhis*, who act as a liaison amongst the NGOs, government agencies and Rohingya communities, are nearly entirely composed of men. In the arbitrary decision making from a male perspective, the *majhis* view the roles and responsibilities of women as biologically defined instead of socially constructed.

Encampment in Bangladesh poses divergent implications that make the Rohingya women most vulnerable within the vulnerable refugee communities. For many women-headed households, the new gender roles and routines imposed on them oppose their gendered embodiment, which is characterised by women in charge of the household and child-rearing, whereas men are out to deal with the outside world.⁷⁴ For example, women must fetch water at approximately 11 AM regardless of other tasks. At this time, water is released from reserved tanks in certain camps, and fetch-

68 Mohsin, “Caught Between the Nation and the State: Voices of Rohingya Refugee Women in Bangladesh”: 155.

69 Field, Pandit, and Rajdev, “Coping Practices and Gender Relations”: 329.

70 Rita Manchanda, “Gender Conflict and Displacement: Contesting ‘Infantilisation’ of Forced Migrant Women,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 37 (2004): 4183.

71 Azis, “Urban Refugees in a Graduated Sovereignty”: 851.

72 Mithun, “From Hell to High Water”: 5.

73 Mithun, “From Hell to High Water”: 8.

74 Shamima Akhter and Kyoko Kusakabe, “Gender-Based Violence among Documented Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh,” *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 21, no. 2 (2014): 234.

ing water traditionally falls under the responsibility of women. Furthermore, a number of women never leave their houses without being accompanied by male family members. However, they are now systematically compelled to face camp administrators to collect rations and the everyday administrative requirements to demonstrate their entitlement. They attend various NGO events on beneficiaries and participate in the regular headcount by the camp in charge. For other women, the new system can be empowering, because it provides access to targeted aid delivery and an avenue for interacting with the public space within the humanitarian system.⁷⁵ For the majority of women, however, it can be an overwhelming experience, because they are not accustomed to performing work outside the home.⁷⁶ The space of transformation, the dissolution of conventional structures and the disruption of norms and practices have seemingly created new avenues for opportunity and positively impacted change but ultimately resulted in chaotic and unsustainable practices.

Similarly, humanitarian aid organisations and camp management pose different implications on the perception of men about women in society and their sense of self. Physical confinement within the camps indicates that they cannot fulfil their traditional gender roles as decision makers and income earners, which they strongly believe to be their assigned duties as men. In this humanitarian system, where the role of NGOs becomes pertinent in the management of households, Rohingya men feel frustrated and emasculated and unable to adequately support their families, which leads to the fear of losing their status within the family and in the community. Their responses to uphold their masculinity as decision makers and heads of household include irresponsible sexual behaviour, domestic violence and the restriction of female family members from asserting the opportunities created in the changing situation.⁷⁷

The commodification of marriage is another aspect of gendered vulnerability. Child marriages are held on Thursday nights in Rohingya camps, because Friday is a government holiday in Bangladesh. In the absence of officials from the operating NGOs and government agencies, ARSA (aka Al Yakin), ARSO and other armed political groups active inside the camps literally control Fridays and Saturdays. In Malaysia, an increase is noted in 'mail-order brides' from refugee camps in Bangladesh. This phenomenon is evident in the increasing number of young Rohingya women smuggled from Bangladesh to Malaysia to join their future husbands.⁷⁸ In September 2022,

75 Shamna Thacham Poyil and Nasreen Chowdhory, "Biometrics, Notion of Governmentality and Gender Relations in Rohingya Refugee Camps," Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2020, <http://www.mcrg.ac.in/PP114.pdf> [accessed 14.02.2025]: 23.

76 Tripura, "Confined, Controlled, and Violated: The Rohingya Women in Bangladesh Refugee Camps": 4.

77 Tripura, "Confined, Controlled, and Violated: The Rohingya Women in Bangladesh Refugee Camps."

78 Hesbon, "Evolving Patterns, Unchanged Suffering: Rohingya Trafficking Trends in 2022," COAR, 28.08.2023, <https://coar-global.org/2023/03/28/evolving-patterns-unchanged-suffering-rohingya-trafficking-trends-in-2022> [accessed 12.12.2023].

I met Rashid (38) in Changlun town of Malaysia, which borders Thailand, who was waiting for his newly married wife via telephone:

My first wife died in the Sea with my two kids in April 2020. I then re-married in October 2020 and paid *dalals* to bring Setara (second wife), but she could not make it to Malaysia. I don't know if she died or ran away with someone in Thailand because *dalal* told me they brought her to the Sangkhala coast (in Thailand). I charged her parents and demanded to return the money (reverse dowry). They requested I marry Setara's youngest sister, and I thought, OK. I already paid the *dalal* to bring her (in Malaysia) in December.

Thus, to make sense of everyday precarity, the gendered impact of displacement and ingrained exploitation is a quintessential feature in the life of the Rohingya women, which leads to profound implications. It expands the expression of precarity in which patriarchy, bodily violence and exploitation continue to affect the Rohingya women in particular. With its recurring manifestation across borders, gender not only impacts socio-economic transformation but also disrupts harmony within the community, which exceeds the predicaments of the governance structure in exile.

8.2.5 Precarity of Labour

As the scale and scope of precarity take a globalised form, the nexus between migration and precarious labour has recently garnered significant attention.⁷⁹ In Global North countries, entanglement with hyper-precarious lives in the 'contested inter-connections between neo-liberal work and welfare regimes, asylum and immigration controls' has become a key feature in the examination of the everyday life experiences of migrants and refugees.⁸⁰ It also adds contention 'whether precarity is regionally contingent', because the term bears particular traction in the industrialised countries of Europe and North America.⁸¹ An in-depth investigation of the experiences of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and Malaysia illustrates how labour precarity is vivid in their embeddedness at the bottom of the labour market. It is also associated with the uncertainty, deportability and inability to challenge the exploitative conditions of work arrangements. The modes of labour organisation, flexibility, disposability, and place-specific vulnerabilities within the wide geographical domains in which Rohingya workers participate as a workforce reveals the 'distinct trajectories of the development of precarity' in their lives in exile.⁸²

⁷⁹ Waite et al., *Vulnerability, Exploitation and Migrants*: 2.

⁸⁰ Lewis et al., "Hyper-Precarious Lives: Migrants, Work and Forced Labour in the Global North": 580.

⁸¹ Cruz-Del Rosario and Rigg, "Living in an Age of Precarity in 21st Century Asia": 519.

⁸² Strauss, "Labour Geography 1: Towards a Geography of Precarity?": 623.

Rohingyas are viewed as a cheap, disposable, exploitable and rightless group of labourers due to their inherent struggle with statelessness, perceptions of 'race inferiority' by the locals and the social construction of illegality. Observing how they tirelessly work to internalise oppressive conditions not only reinforces the idea of daily deportability and embraces life in a state of liminality but it also makes their 'embodied precarity' evident.⁸³ This precarity is also connected to pre-existing social, spatial and legal constraints, which link them to asymmetrical dependencies with employers and the structure of the labour market in the host countries. It sparks the long-standing debate on which elements constitute unfree or forced labour as 'a common error' in the discussion of labour as 'the assumption that all non-slave persons have a choice on the sale and withdrawal of their services, whereas slaves do not'.⁸⁴ According to Patterson, the notion of 'choice' in a labour relationship is fundamental in ascertaining the autonomy of workers. However, the idea of autonomy and choice remains contentious 'because workers first consent to and then are bound by the terms of the contract' in a situation in which coercive factors are inherent in the broad spectrum in which they function.⁸⁵ For Rohingya workers, the social exclusion, persistent ambivalence of refugeehood and the limits of their belongings are placed in opposition to 'choice' or 'consent'. The majority of their decisions are of 'constrained choice';⁸⁶ thus, their unfavourable integration into the labour market and the maintenance of dependency must be understood from the perspective of the 'structural production of vulnerabilities' that reinforce precarity.⁸⁷

Labour precarity is also associated with the increased visibility of the Rohingya refugees in the labour market, where 'the more is the messier'. Refugees working in both countries long before the 2017 mass exodus witness a 'dramatic change' in the perception of the host society, as explained by Jobbar (40) who is working in the Teknaf port in Bangladesh:

Working outside the camps was easier until 2017 . . . now that thousands of new Rohingyas moved here from the other side (of the border), there is a constant fear when looking for work in other places (far from the camp vicinities). Whenever we leave our homes to seek work, there are at least five check posts before we reach the main township. If we get caught, the police ask us for money and there is no end to harassment.

⁸³ Sexsmith, "The Embodied Precarity of Year-Round Agricultural Work": 367.

⁸⁴ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Harvard University Press, 1982): 25.

⁸⁵ Thu Huong, "A New Portrait of Indentured Labour: Vietnamese Labour Migration to Malaysia": 881.

⁸⁶ Marcel van Der Linden, "Dissecting Coerced Labor," in *On Coerced Labor: Work and Compulsion after Chattel Slavery*, Studies in Global Social History, ed. Marcel M. van der Linden and Magaly Rodríguez García (Brill, 2016): 296.

⁸⁷ Waite et al., *Vulnerability, Exploitation and Migrants*: 3.

In a similar vein, the increasing number of Rohingya refugees in the labour market in Malaysia is a symbol of precarious work and unfair competition to gain access to the same market to quickly recoup the investment made for travel, which is further exacerbated by limited options. The case of Malaysia also illustrates that the ubiquitous internalised border not only functions as an absolute marker of exclusion but also as a means of constructing and governing subordinated labour, that is, one that can be ‘imported’, ‘controlled’ and, when necessary, ‘expelled’ at will.⁸⁸ This everyday deportability reproduces physical and imagined borders in navigating their life in exile; by so doing, it ‘constructs a spatialised and racialised social condition that would indeed sustain the vulnerability and tractability’ of refugees and undocumented migrant workers.⁸⁹ Under the hegemonic ideologies of racialisation at work and the ardent governance practices in the creation of hierarchies of citizens, migrants and workers, Rohingyas are confined to ‘the ‘brown areas’ of marginalisation and neglect.’⁹⁰

A cautious interpretation is that the state is not in confrontation with Rohingya refugees *per se* but with workers. In the face of ‘oppressive everyday governmentality’, the notion of illegality/legality comes to the forefront at the moment when a refugee endeavours to overcome passive refugeehood and dependence on humanitarian aid to active workers.⁹¹ In other words, a person is tolerated as a passive victim of conflict and persecution but not as a worker who attempts to make a living. As a result, the labour market produces a confusing environment, which creates a dichotomy between inclusion and exclusion. It involves walking a tightrope between risk and survival, between opportunity and profit maximisation, solidarity and the use of cheap labour, which is essential and profitable in ‘normal’ times to support the function of the informal economy. In a similar vein, it leaves out employees during economic downturns, and someone has to take the biggest hit from the economic downturn. These contrasting and arbitrary practices expose the fractures, paradoxes and myths of solidarity as the examination of the challenges related to labour market integration becomes deeper.

8.3 Precarious Hope: Constrained Expressions of Agency and Resistance

Understanding precarity that represents ‘both a condition and a possible rallying point for resistance’ is also imperative in the context of social marginality and every-

⁸⁸ Garcés-Mascareñas, “Legal Production of Illegality”: 82.

⁸⁹ Garcés-Mascareñas, “Legal Production of Illegality”: 79.

⁹⁰ Azis, “Urban Refugees in a Graduated Sovereignty”: 852.

⁹¹ Louise Waite, “A Place and Space for a Critical Geography of Precarity?” *Geography Compass* 3, no. 1 (2009): 416.

day life practice in exile.⁹² A study of the structures that create and perpetuate precarity would be incomplete without engagement in with the acts of agency used by refugees to navigate systems of exploitation and inequality. Situating their aspirations and forging multiple strategies between the disciplinary regimes of state, refugee governance, ethnicity and religion, Rohingya refugees endeavour to counter the victimhood that was systematically imposed on them. Parla defines this double-edged position of precarity as a pursuit of hope in opposition to its construction as enmeshed in risks and vulnerabilities as ‘precarious hope’,⁹³ which highlights the limitations of belonging amongst the Bulgarian migrants in urban Turkey. This complex constitution of hope ‘reflects both the central motivation that leads people to migrate and the ambivalence and uncertainty that shape migrants’ worlds’.⁹⁴ From an immanent and non-prescriptive position, they manifest agency through *collaboration* with locals, express *resistance* through onward migration and acts of citizenship and exhibit *resilience* in the face of oppressive governance practices in the host countries.

Although no single label can well explain the multiplicities of vulnerability amongst the Rohingya refugees, this precarisation, nevertheless, ‘harbingers new modes of participation’.⁹⁵ Many Rohingyas negotiate with the norms in the host countries, which not only lead to their involvement in the informal labour sectors and participation in social life but also offer an ethical and psychological anchor. For example, in Bangladesh, a number of refugees establish partnerships with locals to operate restaurants and market stalls within the vicinity of their camps, operate transportation businesses using refugee capital under local licenses or engage in sharecropping in the agricultural and salt mining industries. Whilst labour and, to a certain extent, capital are derived from the Rohingyas, the locals deal with the *system*, that is, the police and government agencies, to ensure the smooth operation of this collaboration. A similar arrangement is also typical in Malaysia, because locals rent their licenses to Rohingyas to establish businesses and, in certain cases, even rent their Malaysian citizen card, specifically in the online delivery sectors. By destabilising the tendency to homogenise Rohingyas as passive victims and confronting the hostile governance structure, this interplay of selective and profit-oriented solidarity fosters a ‘fragile togetherness on the margins of the state’.⁹⁶ In this context, agency and resource mutually reinforce each other and shape possibilities to realise this capacity in collaboration.

⁹² Waite, “A Place and Space for a Critical Geography of Precarity?": 412.

⁹³ Ayse Parla, *Precarious Hope: Migration and the Limits of Belonging in Turkey* (Stanford University Press, 2019).

⁹⁴ Nikos Christofis, Review of *Precarious Hope: Migration and the Limits of Belonging in Turkey*, by Ayse Parla, *PoLar: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 44, no. 2 (2021): 103.

⁹⁵ Jørgensen, “The Precariat Strikes Back – Precarity Struggles in Practice”: 61.

⁹⁶ Sealing Cheng, “The Poetics of Togetherness: Conviviality of Asylum-Seekers in the Shadow of Hong Kong,” *Migration Studies* 10, no. 2 (2022): 130.

As an act of resistance, Rohingyas prudently play with the politics of identity and space. In Bangladesh, the Cox's Bazar region provides a space of exception, where the frontiery and cultural proximity enable them to navigate as locals. Beyond Cox's Bazar, they engage in an 'act of camouflage' by hiding their Burmese identity, acquiring Bangladeshi passports or national ID cards by deceiving the state or by *managing* the police and prosason. On the one hand, effort is exerted to build a camp-based network of solidarity by carefully crafting narratives of their plights based on human rights, online political and social campaigns to draw global attention and collaboration with external actors.⁹⁷ On the other hand, many desperate Rohingyas produce false documents, obtain national identity cards and even passports as a 'pathway to physical and social mobility'.⁹⁸ Using this 'power of sociality and interdependence', they attempt to address 'the precarity and divisiveness on the margins'.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, this desperation has its limitations, as evident in the case of Rohingyas in Malaysia who face abuse from travel agents and immigration authorities in Bangladesh for each time that they plan to visit their family members in Cox's Bazar.

Similarly, in Malaysia, they use a self-dispersal strategy to contest police abuse and public resentment when they relocate to remote towns far from the Klang Valley, which is the epicentre of political and social resentment against the Rohingyas since 2020. Those who remain in the urban areas of the Klang Valley frequently change their identity depending according to the context. They pose as Bangladeshis in immigrant neighbourhoods as they coexist with primarily Bangladeshi, Nepali and Burmese guest workers. When interacting with humanitarian organisations and the UNHCR, they instrumentalise their persecution and status as refugees. Similar tactics are also common when they are faced with random interrogation by immigration police: 'We say Burma will kill us, where we go, Malaysia is our ma-bap (parents) and then they (police) slap us or ask for money, and we leave (after paying bribes)'. By demonstrating resistance and articulating navigational capacity, which can occasionally be relatively submissive, Rohingyas not only highlight issues on the validity of their subordination but also challenge the governmental policy of containment. Nevertheless, these attempts remain ambiguous, precarious and abusive. Through tireless cultural and social manoeuvring, they 'weave multiple webs of resistance' that displays fragile acts of negotiation with 'a keen awareness of their subordination as well as their agency that generates these tactics and strategies'.¹⁰⁰ In doing so, they chal-

97 Ansar and Khaled, "In Search of a Rohingya Digital Diaspora: Virtual Togetherness, Collective Identities and Political Mobilisation."

98 Dasgupta, "Geneva Camp, Dhaka: 'Bihari' Refugees, State of Exception, and Camouflage": 613.

99 Cheng, "The Poetics of Togetherness: Conviviality of Asylum-Seekers in the Shadow of Hong Kong": 130.

100 Sealing Cheng, *On the Move for Love: Migrant Entertainers and the US Military in South Korea* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011): 223.

lenge the seemingly benevolent discourse of victimhood which, in effect, flattens experiences and reproduces marginality.

Displaying resilience is an expression of resistance. Resilience is a collective practice of ‘finding a way to get on with daily life without acquiescing to the prevailing political, economic, or social situation’.¹⁰¹ It pertains to perseverance, dedication and ‘pragmatic attempts to re-appropriate norms within a constraining social context’.¹⁰² The testimonies of numerous Rohingyas demonstrate not only a state of limbo and sheer precarity as a result of living as refugees but also their capability of navigating the opportunities and limitations that emerge from living outside military control. Their diverse trajectories also illustrate that the capacity to aspire, instead of structural inequality, determine their everyday life on the move.

Resilience is manifested in multiple ways and shaped by the intersectionality amongst space, governance, capacity, gender and personal relationship, amongst others. An essential feature of resilience is the performance of everyday life. At the *personal level*, they aspire to start a new life, get married, raise families and maintain family relations. At the *social level*, they perform ethnic rituals and observe cultural and religious traditions to pursue a collective Rohingya identity. At the *political level*, they continue to allocate a space for the recognition of their plight and a dignified solution to their protracted displacement by engaging with humanitarian actors, government agencies and the local population. These small but significant acts of resilience demonstrate ‘everyday agency’ in exile.¹⁰³ Their resilience also displays a form of spatiality. Despite their forced exodus, they consciously opt whether or not to remain in Bangladesh or continue onwards to Thailand, India or Malaysia. They traverse territorial jurisdictions and negotiate with traffickers and smugglers. In this light, migration embraces the condition of indeterminacy over familiarity and certainty at home, which makes one open to new ideas, challenges and potential transformation. Therefore, migration is a source of existential mobility and a ‘method of setting hope in motion’.¹⁰⁴ In Malaysia, demonstrating agentic capability, ‘they negotiate or bribe the hostile, predatory police, law, mafia, and brokers, or they hide and resist, or they work even in conditions where they are victimised’.¹⁰⁵

An important criticism of the resilience method in the literature is the inclination to adapt to a given situation or shock without questioning the underlying condi-

101 Philippe Bourbeau and Caitlin Ryan, “Resilience, Resistance, Infrapolitics and Enmeshment,” *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 1 (2018): 229.

102 Hamza Safouane, Annette Jünemann and Sandra Götsche, “Migrants’ Agency: A Re-Articulation Beyond Emancipation and Resistance,” *New Political Science* 42, no. 2 (2020): 197.

103 Ryan Joseph O’Byrne, “Resistant Resilience: Agency and Resilience among Refugees Resisting Humanitarian Corruption in Uganda,” *Civil Wars* 24, no. 2–3 (2022): 329.

104 Cheng, *On the Move for Love: Migrant Entertainers and the US Military in South Korea*: 223.

105 Roy Chowdhury and Abid, “Treading the Border of (Il)legality”: 72.

tions.¹⁰⁶ However, things are always dynamic, including interactions between refugees and locals and the perception and policies of the host governments. Rohingya resilience is not only about coming to terms with the reality in place. Instead, it is an important first step towards a promising yet long waiting future. Thus, resilience is also a tactic of collective and strategic resistance.¹⁰⁷ Although it is exploitative, the conditional (and contained) mobility and the paid labour performance mark a significant departure from familiar aspects in Rakhine State, where they lived in open incarceration. Thus, recognising that marginalisation, violence, and persecution shaped their lives in Myanmar prior to migration is crucial. Their ability to flee Myanmar and attempt to start over in Bangladesh or Malaysia to change these circumstances has resulted in resilience, which can be described as a ‘process of self-making’.¹⁰⁸

Despite the contradiction between imagined and lived realities in exile, the passage of hope continues to inspire them to pursue a new beginning. However, it is conditioned by the opportunity structure that enables or constrains the expression of agency. Despite acute hopelessness and profound uncertainty, they leave things to *God’s will* and a spirit of ‘wherever life takes to find a place and peace’. They dream of the personal and material rewards of migration success, imagine life’s adventures abroad and yearn to participate in the dream promised by life in exile. Therefore, taking refuge in Bangladesh or Malaysia opens up a space for the exploration of their aspirations and imagination of what they could become with ‘saturated questions about what, who, where, when and how’.¹⁰⁹

With ‘such strategic but uneasy appropriations’ of limited capacity and resilience, the Rohingya people overcome the spaces of exception and circumstances of bare life, which are marked by acts of risk-taking, resistance, in-betweenness and resilience.¹¹⁰ Instrumentalising this navigational capacity, a few of them may adopt ‘limited agency’ as a survival strategy, whilst others frame a different narrative by drawing attention to their motivation, resilience and potential for success. In this manner, they refuse the narrative of refugees as a victim of circumstance. These acts of resistance reveal ‘resistant resilience’, wherein people at the margins of society resist exploitation or oppression to survive.¹¹¹

Therefore, the concept of ‘bare life’, which brings up images of helplessness and immobility and a subject that lacks agency, must be contextualised. Nonetheless, despite its oppositional nature, resistance frequently exerts an ‘unintended effect’ of

¹⁰⁶ Bourbeau and Ryan, “Resilience, Resistance, Infrapolitics and Enmeshment”: 225.

¹⁰⁷ Caitlin Ryan, “Everyday Resilience as Resistance: Palestinian Women Practicing Sumud,” *International Political Sociology* 9, no. 4 (2015): 300.

¹⁰⁸ Cheng, *On the Move for Love: Migrant Entertainers and the US Military in South Korea*: 222.

¹⁰⁹ Cheng, *On the Move for Love: Migrant Entertainers and the US Military in South Korea*: 222.

¹¹⁰ Parla, *Precarious Hope: Migration and the Limits of Belonging in Turkey*: 67.

¹¹¹ O’Byrne, “Resistant Resilience: Agency and Resilience among Refugees Resisting Humanitarian Corruption in Uganda”: 329.

perpetuating one's oppression.¹¹² These choices are contingent on contexts and situations. However, hope is also precarious because no guarantee exists and everything is up to the capricious whim (positive or negative) of security officials, employers, neighbours, NGOs and other groups. It also draws attention to the hierarchy of vulnerability and uneven access to optimism, which seems humane and inappropriate at the same time.

A crucial observation I drew from the fieldwork is the perception of ordinary people about refugees. A refugee remains a '*refugee*' given that they embody sheer vulnerability and exhibit a life in a state of liminality. In this state of helplessness, they are eligible to receive empathy and solidarity from the rest of society. Once they overcome this passive submission to their refugeehood and exercise agency (i.e. through labour) in an effort to be self-dependent or to re-claim self-worth, they are branded as illegal people and deemed a threat for the social, cultural and economic equilibria of the host countries.

This expression of the agency is multivalent and, therefore, does not necessarily change the status quo *per se*. Instead, it is a re-articulation of life that exceeds emancipation, hierarchisation, marginalisation and the othering of the precarious everyday life.¹¹³ They are constantly fluctuating 'between expectation and uncertainty, entitlement and refusal'.¹¹⁴ Whilst they may not engage in overt revolt, they are also unlikely to adopt the hegemonic ideology that fully underlies responsible their subordination. These examples of refusal to acquiesce are not easily viewed from a top-down or state-centric view. Therefore, greater attention must be paid to the complementarity between resilience and resistance and the instances wherein resilience is a condition for resistance.¹¹⁵

8.4 Expanding the Precarity Spectrum Through Embodied Dependency

The predicaments that emerge from statelessness, refugeehood, imposed uncertainty and policy ambiguity reveal the manifestation of a silent yet ingrained dependency that continuously produces and reproduces the vulnerability and the limitation of belonging of Rohingya refugees. The interconnection and overlap between various forms of precarity and dependencies are channelled into an asymmetrical form of dependency that is embodied and embedded in everyday life. To extend the discussion, I argue that precarity is, by all means, a by-product of asymmetrical dependency that

¹¹² Cheng, *On the Move for Love: Migrant Entertainers and the US Military in South Korea*: 223.

¹¹³ Safouane, Jünemann and Götsche, "Migrants' Agency: A Re-Articulation Beyond Emancipation and Resistance": 197.

¹¹⁴ Parla, *Precarious Hope: Migration and the Limits of Belonging in Turkey*: 5.

¹¹⁵ Bourbeau and Ryan, "Resilience, Resistance, Infrapolitics and Enmeshment": 226.

is augmented and instrumentalised through legal, socio-political, spatial and economic dimensions in addition to the abovementioned features. Prior to the discussion on dependency, defining dependency in the field of migration and development studies in particular is pertinent. In the context of contemporary displacement, forced migration and humanitarian crisis, dependency is defined as follows:

Dependency is a fuzzily-used term, which often conceals as much as it reveals and can have many different meanings. Its very vagueness and lack of definition have their own usefulness in providing justifications for action or inaction. Certain assumptions and meanings do, however, underpin its common usage within the discourse of humanitarian aid.¹¹⁶

In this framework, dependency is ‘the antithesis of development approaches that aim at empowerment, participation and sustainability’.¹¹⁷ Another aspect of the examination of dependency in the humanitarian context is its critical interactions with the notion of ‘dependency syndrome’ amongst refugees in protracted displacement.¹¹⁸ However, my observations extend beyond this binary of displacement and humanitarianism by expanding the landscape of dependency. I adopt a detailed perspective and refer to Winnebeck et al. to examine a ‘broader spectrum of elements and processes as crucial for the formation of social relations of asymmetric dependency’. In this regard, I contend that dependency, similar to precarity that was previously discussed, is a process that extends across times and spaces and is linked to numerous factors.¹¹⁹ I propose four dimensions of dependency, namely, legal, socio-political, spatial and economic (Fig. 8.2).

Legal dependency is derived from the inheritance of statelessness in Myanmar and the ambiguous construction of refugeehood in Bangladesh and Malaysia, where none of the countries recognise Rohingyas as refugees. Both countries use arbitrary strategies to accommodate and, occasionally, to exclude them from any form of protection provision. Stateless and legal exclusion as non-citizens in Myanmar persists in a different form in exile as the host countries construct and reconstruct illegality, (un)deservingness and (non)belongingness, as per their convenience. In this context, rightlessness and invisibility under the current legal frameworks of the concerned states perpetuate legal dependency.

Socio-political dependency continues from the inaction of the states against the injustice committed against them and their exclusion from social and political self-representation. In Myanmar, Rohingyas are marginalised not only by revoking citizenship in 1982 but also by the tireless framing of their religious and cultural differences

¹¹⁶ Paul Harvey and Jeremy Lind, “Dependency and Humanitarian Relief: A Critical Analysis,” Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, London, 2005: 3.

¹¹⁷ Harvey and Lind, “Dependency and Humanitarian Relief: A Critical Analysis”: 3.

¹¹⁸ Awa M. Abdi, “In Limbo: Dependency, Insecurity, and Identity amongst Somali Refugees in Dadaab Camps,” *Refuge: Canada’s Journal on Refugees* 22 (2004): 8.

¹¹⁹ Julia Winnebeck et al., “The Analytical Concept of Asymmetrical Dependency,” *Journal of Global Slavery* 8, no. 1 (2023): 3.

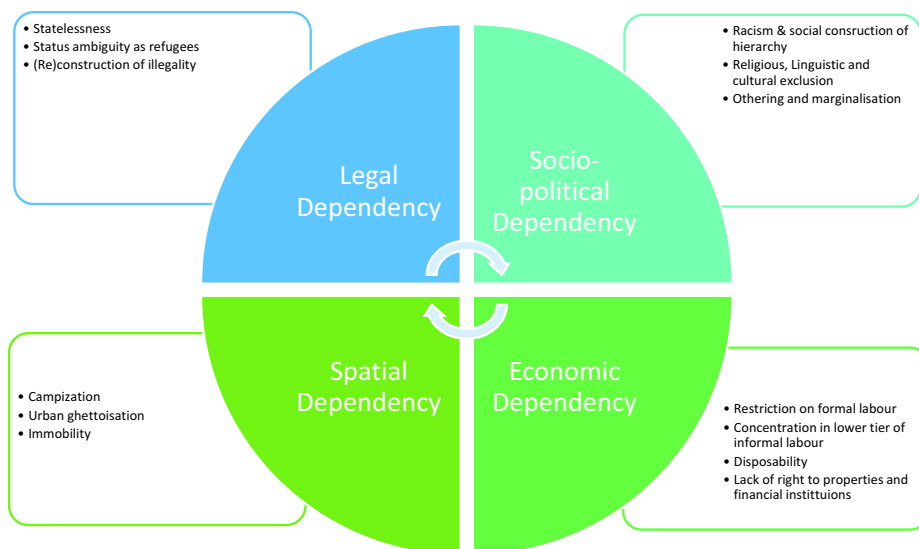


Fig. 8.2: Dependency spectrum shaping Rohingyas' everyday lives (author's illustration).

from the majority Buddhist population. They remain at the margin of governance and are excluded from the national order by portraying them as *kalar*, foreign invaders, and intruders. In a similar vein, the state of everyday deportability also forces them into a marginal space in the host nations. Under totalitarian refugee governance, their right to self-organisation is curtailed, and legitimate claims to refugee status are disregarded. Moreover, they are not only living in uncertainty but are also governed through it, which triggers a deliberate policy of ambivalence.¹²⁰ This state of uncertainty marked by precarity and unpredictability make their life profoundly dependent on whimsical state practices.

Moving between places and enduring protracted encampment, contained mobility and space-specific belonging manifest spatial dependency. Bangladesh employs a containment policy by encamping Rohingyas in the sprawling camps in the borderlands. In 2021, it started a controversial relocation of Rohingyas to Bhasanchar Island. Through this imposition of the practices of campisation and arbitrary relocation, the state displays its superiority over the refugees. Similarly, in Malaysia, Rohingyas are forced to live in cramped immigrant neighbourhoods in the outskirts of cities as a practice of ghettoization and contained mobility. Within its internalisation of bordering practices, Malaysian immigration authorities frequently raid immigrant neighbourhoods and harass refugees in public places to intimidate and restrict the freedom of movement.

¹²⁰ Norman, "Ambivalence as Policy: Consequences for Refugees in Egypt": 28.

These large-scale restrictions and marginal social and legal positions are vivid in the livelihood strategies of the Rohingyas, which has led to *economic dependency*. By systematically denying the right to work, states create a condition in which refugees are pushed into the lower tier of exploitative and labour-intensive workforces. Furthermore, by restricting access to financial institutions and the right to purchase properties and conduct income-generating activities to become self-sufficient, the system constitutes Rohingyas as a hyper-precarius group that functions under exploitative terms and conditions in the labour market and elsewhere in terms of access to livelihood options.

These textured accounts of dependency processes are enmeshed as a continuity in the lives of the Rohingya communities. Dependency is not only connected to labour; it is more complex and entangled in the social, cultural, legal and political positioning navigated by the Rohingyas. It exerts an asymmetrical, non-linear effect on the Rohingyas' lives in the vertical and horizontal dimensions. In Myanmar, the legislation renders them stateless, whilst in Bangladesh and Malaysia, it denies them refugee status, which imposes precarity in a *vertical* manner. Additionally, it poses *horizontal* implications regarding the multiplicity of places, actors and conditions that produce and reproduce vulnerability. It denotes the impunity and sense of entitlement of the state to impose control, contain and dispose of them through ambiguous methods employed in both situations. Thus, not only the law affects their lives but also the assertion of the military, Buddhist fundamentalists and even ordinary Buddhist Rakhines of their superiority over the Rohingyas. NGOs, security services, the local populace and workplaces in exile used similar practices of othering, which creates a systemic framework that encourages precarity.

Notwithstanding, these dimensions of dependencies do not necessarily coincide simultaneously but are relatively scattered across places and times. It is not only about the right to work or the lack of it; dependency is embedded in a broad set of factors that comprise uncertainty, immobility, statelessness and submission to the arbitrary refugee governance structure. De Vito frames this widespread yet interconnected spectrum of dependency and precarity as 'connected singularities' that foregrounded 'the dialectics between the specificity and connectedness' of each site, context and condition.¹²¹ These various forms of dependencies take an asymmetrical turn in three ways, which complement the definitions of asymmetrical dependencies.¹²²

Firstly, in terms of the relations between two or more actors and in the context of the complex web of dependency in the life of Rohingyas, state authorities, NGOs, im-

¹²¹ Christian G. De Vito, "Connected Singularities: Convict Labour in Late Colonial Spanish America (1760s–1800)," in *Micro-Spatial Histories of Global Labour*, ed. Christian G. De Vito and Anne Gerritsen (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): 171.

¹²² Definitions are adopted from the work of Winnebeck et al., "The Analytical Concept of Asymmetrical Dependency": 7–8.

migration forces, border guards, smugglers and local people are interconnected and exercise uneven dominance and control over the Rohingyas across contexts.

Secondly, the manifestation of coercive influence by one entity over another is exemplified through the orchestration of actions: the utilisation of encampment and compelled resettlement by the state serves as a tangible demonstration of its capacity to regulate the mobility of the Rohingya population. Similarly, employers decide on the terms and conditions under which Rohingya workers are compelled to function. The everyday disposability and arbitrary practice by state and non-state actors over the life and livelihood of the Rohingyas suggest their inherent entanglement with asymmetrical dependency.

Thirdly, within the institutional framework, the limitations on the avenues for the withdrawal and expression of dissent restrict options for individuals. In both countries, stringent policies are in place to contain civil disobedience that prioritises the rights of Rohingyas over the position of the state. The absence of legal status in the host countries perpetuate exploitation not only by the states and government institutions but also by ordinary locals. None of the countries enable the Rohingyas to voice dissent against government policies and positions. It encapsulates the practice of biopolitics in which the state asserts total governance by controlling, containing and establishing hierarchy in the value of their lives.

At the core, dependency is multi-faceted and affects Rohingyas at the origin (Myanmar) and in destination countries (Bangladesh and Malaysia). The omnipresence of illegality and insecurity across times and spaces illustrates how the fundamental outlines of their lives in exile are shaped by their precarious history and legacy, which creates a dependency continuum. It also reveals that history sets a precedent to the continuation of this exclusion and coercion. It remains unopposed and reimagined in exile through arbitrary policies and the everyday practices of othering.

8.5 Conclusion

This study aimed to refocus scholarly attention on the refugee situation of the Rohingya in South and Southeast Asia by highlighting the myriad of precarities that are embedded in their lives. I approach the everyday life of Rohingya refugees from various disciplinary approaches, ranging from history, geography, sociology, development studies, political sciences and international politics. It considered previous and current policies and the formation of the lives of the Rohingya refugees through the prevailing political climates. In an attempt to bring new insights, I adopted transnational and onward migration dimensions in presenting the experiences of the Rohingya refugees in a wider geographic region in Asia, which has been, until now, primarily discussed from the origin–destination binary. I explained how the structural conditions (pre-existing [in Myanmar] and gradually unfolding [in exile]) under the pretext of handing the undesirables constitute the political subjectivity of the Rohingya people.

The findings illustrate how legal, social and political environments, along with power relations between the state and the precarious subjects (refugees), produce structural impediments that coerce Rohingyas to endure liminal lives and occupy marginal spaces. This systematic exclusion and othering trigger their perpetual inability to challenge the conditions, processes and manifestations of precarity across multiple yet interconnected spaces.

On the one hand, it adds to the precarity discourse by offering analytical perspectives on the depiction of precarity in various contexts and practices.¹²³ Conversely, it encapsulates ‘both a condition of vulnerability and an element of ambiguity’, which generates space for precarious hope.¹²⁴ Therefore, the findings extend beyond the understanding of precarity as a condition ‘emerging from a generalised societal malaise’ or ‘generated from particular neo-liberal labour market’ practices.¹²⁵ Whilst labour market engagement reveals their hyper-precarity, it is expanded and reinforced by consolidating different dimensions: legal, spatial, socio-political and economic dependencies. This labour market de-centring implies that labour precarity needs to be re-oriented from a broad socio-political web that must be weaved by the refugees. In this manner, the findings penetrate the discourse on precarity and dependency as a continuum of everyday life, which is more intricate, contextual and multi-faceted.

The findings allude to the notion of precarity as a ‘politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death’.¹²⁶ They also broaden the discourse by revealing the manner in which the intersectionality amongst gender, labour, location, mobility and identity contributes to and inflates the precarity spectrum through various productions of precarities. By critically engaging with the emergence of precarity and its potential shapes and prevalence, the study introduces the elements of interconnectivity in the different dimensions of precarity that Rohingya refugees endure in daily life. It further introduces the components of dependencies that reinforce asymmetry and expand the precarity landscape and, thereby, necessitate the inclusion of diverse dynamics of precarity and their interfaces in the analysis. To foreground the arguments, the insights presented contain a wide array of mutually complementary information and thematic aspects that converge into and are augmented by the interconnected geographies of precarity that incorporate the social, political, cultural and economic aspects, which produce and reproduce precarious conditions across wide geographies.

Going beyond the realm of labour, this study highlights the multi-faceted aspects of precarity linked to the socio-economic, cultural and political lives of Rohingyas en-

123 Schierup and Jørgensen, “From ‘Social Exclusion’ to ‘Precarity’. The Becoming-Migrant of Labour: An Introduction”: 6.

124 Ilcan, Rygiel and Baban, “The Ambiguous Architecture of Precarity”: 66.

125 Waite, “A Place and Space for a Critical Geography of Precarity?”: 417.

126 Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*: 25.

twined with the complex expressions of (il)legality, (im)mobility and (in)visibility in the regions under study. Revealing the entanglement between selective inclusion and systematic exclusion, the narratives illustrate that the daily susceptibility to exploitation not only perpetuates labour market precarity but also expands through racialisation and the social construction of illegality. The study proposes several important insights that contribute to the existing literature on forced migration, refugees, statelessness and precarity.

Firstly, combining historical and contemporary perspectives, the study offers a comprehensive account of the transformation in the Rohingya refugee crisis. Specifically, it references the protracted historical evolution of violence, persecution, systemic exclusion and marginalisation in Myanmar. Conversely, by practising ambivalence as policy and producing contingent categorisation through totalitarian and arbitrary refugee governance, it reveals the persistence of discrimination and othering, extend and take a new turn in the traditional Rohingya refugee-hosting countries.

Secondly, the findings point to the interconnected spectra of precarity in which the intersection amongst category, mobility, space, gender and labour are entangled and shape the everyday lives of the Rohingyas across places and contexts. Building on this complex interplay of the different dimensions of precarity, the research contends that to obtain a nuanced understanding of precarity, comprehending the practices and constellations of bordering, othering and excluding, which vividly influence and shape the limits of belonging, is imperative.

Thirdly, placing a spotlight on identity, race, racism and the social and contextual constructions of illegality in the everyday lives of the Rohingyas, the study expands the increasing interest in the nexus amongst race, religion and migration from the Asian perspective. Highlighting the internalised hierarchy within Muslim societies in relation to deserving and non-deserving refugees, the findings also challenge the popularly held narrative of 'Muslim solidarity'.

Fourthly, one of the key findings is the formation of transnational living amongst the Rohingyas, which is composed of exchanges, networks, connections, practices and precarities across borders. These spatially ruptured practices of migration and family-making may be seemingly limited due to their constrained mobility. Nevertheless, they are enduring given the nature, extent and scope of transnational practices in bringing transformative change.

Fifthly, drawing from the experiences of Rohingya refugees in Myanmar, Bangladesh and Malaysia from the onward migration dimension, this study extends the understanding of onward migration, which, until now, has been examined as a European phenomenon. Contesting the dominant narrative of upward mobility that is typically associated with onward migration, the findings also demonstrates that the Rohingyas are mainly concerned with not only the pursuit of a better life but also a mundane survival strategy.

Sixthly, precarity is not a static or singular situation; instead, it is experienced in diverse ways and through complex entry points and exit routes, which results in a

broad spectrum of dependencies that combines legal, social, spatial and economic dimensions. These interlocking dependencies are factored in and applied to accelerate inequalities and unfreedom. Thus, precarity and dependency are not isolated phenomena. Instead, they are reciprocal and complement one another in the construction of the precarious everyday life of the Rohingyas.

Dissecting precarity along the temporal, scalar and spatial dimensions, this study proposes a comprehensive approach for identifying a long-term solution to the protracted Rohingya refugee crisis. Given the persistent making and unmaking of Rohingya identity (in Myanmar) and the oblivious and chaotic refugee governance (in exile), a political solution to their statelessness is imperative. Moreover, in terms of policies and humanitarian intervention strategies, synergy amongst NGOs, INGOs, UN agencies and national governments is indispensable. Highlighting the interplay amongst socio-economic conditions, family-related factors and risk perceptions that shape aspirations for onward migration, the current protection policies also need to acknowledge this individual expression of agency by enabling refugees to pursue their aspirations beyond restrictive and arbitrary protection frameworks. Whilst countries in South and Southeast Asia exhibit reservation regarding the ratification of the UN 1951 Refugee Convention, a regional mandate within the auspices of SAARC and ASEAN is indispensable given the increased cross-border and involuntary mobility within the region. Finally, given the intertwined material and social markers of othering and subjectivity, any future policy should recognise the critical nuances and intersectionality of precarity that are entangled in Rohingya lives. A re-orientation of precarity that is grounded on various interconnected factors, including ethnicity, race, gender and space, is imperative to replicate, perpetuate and expand the landscape of shared struggles.

