

**Attempting Assimilation, Creating Difference:
How U.S. Refugee Policy Undermines Its Own Objectives**

By

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Table of Contents

***Introduction* 3**

***Methods* 4**

***Literature Review* 6**

***Humanitarian Governance & Administrative Indentureship*6**

***The Rohingya Crisis*8**

***Rohingya Refugees in the United States*10**

***The Rohingya in the Midwest*11**

***Refugee Resettlement in the United States*12**

***The Creation of Refugee Enclaves*.....14**

***Discussion of Findings*.....17**

***The Creation of a Rohingya Ghetto*18**

Navigating Cultural Barriers 20

A Resource Scarce Environment 25

Employment Sector Consolidation 27

***Conclusion*.....31**

***References*33**

Introduction

The United Nations has called Myanmar's Rohingya the "most persecuted people in the world" (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.). The Rohingya have been subjected to ongoing violence and discrimination since they were stripped of citizenship in 1982. However, the conflict has escalated in recent years, culminating in a brutal military crackdown in 2017. As a result of this ongoing struggle, a small number of Rohingya have made their way to the United States. In 2015, the U.S. admitted 4,071 Rohingya refugees, and another 3,000 in 2016. Migration slowed to a trickle in the past couple of years due to the anti-immigration policies of the Trump administration. Just 593 Rohingya refugees were admitted in 2019, and even fewer in 2020 (Jordan, 2019). Nonetheless, communities of Rohingya have begun to form in Chicago and Milwaukee, with approximately 2,000 refugees currently residing in each city. This paper seeks to examine the engagement of Rohingya refugees with the U.S. resettlement system within the local contexts of these two Midwestern cities.

"We have enough Rohingya here in Chicago to become our own village. If [our organization] becomes the center of the village, they can start feeling like they can put down roots [and] belong to a community." This comment, from an administrator at a Rohingya cultural organization, highlights a trend of building insular communities or "villages" amongst the groups of Rohingya refugees residing in the U.S. The goal of these communities is to build support networks wherein the Rohingya can both preserve their cultural identity and help each other navigate the culturally specific challenges of resettlement. While they have become vital resources for the Rohingya, the creation of these refugee communities stands in staunch opposition to the United States Refugee Admissions Program's (USRAP) stated goal of rapid

assimilation. Paradoxically, in this paper, I find that the design of the resettlement system itself creates these communities and renders them essential to the resettlement process.

Now more than ever, the refugee resettlement system in the U.S. is concerned with getting refugees to the point of economic self-sufficiency as rapidly as possible to minimize the risk of refugees becoming a financial burden on the state. Refugees are thus pushed into low-wage job opportunities concentrated in employment sectors with limited opportunities for career advancement, a phenomenon that scholar Jessica H. Darrow (2018) characterizes as *administrative indentureship*. In this paper, I expand upon the theoretical concept of administrative indentureship and argue that the system's orientation around economic self-sufficiency as a vehicle for assimilation has a paradoxical effect on refugee resettlement. Rather than increasing self-reliance, refugees are often pushed into the workforce before acquiring the necessary language skills, employment training, and cultural knowledge; all of which would decrease their reliance on the resettlement system. While USRAP was originally designed to provide long-term support for refugees to ensure they had the necessary resources to assimilate successfully, the program is no longer equipped to provide this kind of assistance, thus leaving refugees to create their own networks of extended support.

Methods

For this research, I interviewed 12 professionals who work for or volunteer with organizations that help facilitate refugee assimilation. In all, ten organizations are represented in this study including government-funded VOLAGs (Voluntary Agencies), Rohingya and Islamic cultural organizations, and local NGOs. Due to the decentralized nature of refugee resettlement

in the U.S., this variety was included to contrast the work of VOLAGs with the emerging network of supplementary resettlement organizations.

Of the participants, five were administrators, two were interpreters, four were caseworkers, two were English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors, one was an intern, and one was the instructor for a program aimed at early learning and child development in Rohingya children. Some participants held multiple roles, and some were involved in the work of multiple organizations. This study was carried out in Chicago and Milwaukee and took place from June 2020 to October 2020. Participants were recruited initially through organizational contact listings online and later through peer referrals.

I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews through Zoom or on the phone, which I recorded and subsequently transcribed. Through semi-structured interviewing, I asked participants a general set of questions and probed relevant points of interest as they arose. The questions covered a range of topics that included their specific job responsibilities, professional experiences with Rohingya clients, and organizational knowledge. I also asked them to identify what they perceived to be the primary challenges for the Rohingya during resettlement and how their work succeeded or failed to address them. The subsequent data was made anonymous and all research participants named in this paper have been assigned pseudonyms.

My subsequent analysis of my findings was done through multiple rounds of coding. In my review of the literature, I will describe the power structures that resettlement professionals unwittingly participate in as part of both the global system of humanitarian governance and the U.S. system's orientation around labor market participation. Furthermore, I will provide background on the Rohingya crisis to provide context to many of the assimilation barriers noted by participants in this study which USRAP is ill-equipped to address.

Literature Review

Humanitarian Governance & Administrative Indentureship

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1950 to cope with the massive influx of displaced Europeans following World War II. In the 70 years since then, it has grown into an *international refugee regime*, encompassing an “interconnected set of humanitarian institutions, policies, protocols, and practices” (Besteman, 2016). At the end of 2019, the UNHCR estimated that there were 79.5 million forcibly displaced people globally, a number that has been trending upward in recent years. The international refugee regime was constructed to perform the business of placing the displaced. Displacement in the post-war era, Liisa Malkki (1992) has argued, became a politico-moral problem, wherein refugees’ uprootedness was perceived to make them more susceptible to becoming morally wayward, turning them into objects of suspicion.

However, when refugees are not viewed as a potential threat, they are often viewed as helpless. *Humanitarian governance* has been defined as “the increasingly organized and internationalized attempt to save the lives, enhance the welfare, and reduce the suffering of the world’s most vulnerable populations” (Barnett, 2013). This definition of humanitarian governance emphasizes the term’s more positive underpinnings, wherein the international system focuses on providing care. However, more recent scholarship has argued that the international refugee regime is rooted in the power of international organizations, governments, and NGOs to exercise control over the lives of vulnerable parties without oversight or accountability for their actions (Garnier et al., 2019). As subjects of humanitarian governance, refugees must prove their legitimacy and innocence as victims in accordance with the expectations of what a ‘deserving’

subject looks like (Besteman, 2016). These narratives serve to create a universally recognizable refugee archetype. Malkki argues in her later work that this system removes refugees from their specific political, historical, and cultural contexts to fit into a universal narrative of what it means to be a 'refugee' (Malkki, 1996). In the media, refugees are often depicted as part of a crowd, a 'corporeal mass' of indistinguishable bodies (Malkki 1996). In policies, they are similarly reduced to a 'numerical mass' wherein governments weigh the costs and the benefits, both financial and political, to determine whom they will allow to immigrate and how to help them upon arrival. The danger of designing a system that strips refugees of their specific cultural and personal contexts is that it risks being unable to address these highly specific barriers to assimilation.

The primary focus of this paper is show how humanitarian governance functions during the last step of the process: resettlement in a host country, and in this case, the U.S. The Refugee Act of 1980, which serves as the basis for today's resettlement system, provides the four following Conditions and Considerations for lending assistance to refugees:

Sec. 412

- (A) Make available sufficient resources for employment training and placement in order to achieve economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible
- (B) Provide refugees with the opportunity to acquire sufficient English language training to enable them to become effectively resettled as quickly as possible
- (C) Ensure that cash assistance is made available to refugees in such a manner as not to discourage their economic self-sufficiency
- (D) Ensure that women have the same opportunities as men to participate in training and instruction

Especially during recent years, the system has become increasingly oriented around pushing refugees toward rapid economic self-sufficiency. This occurs at the expense of other essential aspects to assimilation, like language, skills acquisition, or civic engagement. As previously

mentioned, Jessica Darrow's theoretical concept of *administrative indentureship* is used to describe the pattern wherein resettlement workers push their clients into low-wage jobs with little opportunity for advancement and motivate compliance by choosing to give or withhold system resources (Darrow 2018a). Though this precise term came later, anthropologist Catherine Besteman alludes to it in her book *Making Refuge*, where she writes about the resettlement of Somali Bantu refugees in Lewiston, Maine. She chronicles with incredulity a conversation with a resettlement worker who says he expects the refugees to be entirely self-sufficient in ninety days (Besteman 2016, p. 104). Like most of the Rohingya arriving in Chicago, the Somali Bantus were often illiterate and non-English speaking upon arrival. The Hmong, who came from a similar educational and linguistic background in the 1970s and 1980s, received up to three years of direct federal assistance and better access to language classes (Besteman 2016, p. 104). The duration of care has shortened drastically since that time, while expectations for early self-sufficiency have risen. My subsequent analysis seeks to show the impact this has had on the assimilation outcomes of the Rohingya populations in Chicago and Milwaukee.

The Rohingya Crisis

Rohingya refugees face unique assimilation barriers upon arriving in the U.S. due to the severity of the conflict in Myanmar in recent years. In 2012, there were violent flare-ups wherein Buddhist villagers took it upon themselves to attack Muslim villages in nine townships throughout Rakhine with machetes, swords, Molotov cocktails, and other weaponry (Toosi, 2018). The military crackdown in 2017, which had prompted 745,000 refugees to flee Myanmar into neighboring Bangladesh, was just the latest escalation of many years of ethnic conflict (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, n.d.). One survey conducted on the 2017 violence conservatively-estimated 6,700 Rohingya were killed in a single

month after the military crackdown, (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2017). During this time, entire communities were decimated. By mid-December 2017, 354 villages had been burned and pillaged, their inhabitants driven away or murdered (Human Rights Watch 2017). In all of Rakhine, there are now fewer than 320,000 Muslims (Ware & Laoutides, 2018).

Following these events, there are now 877,710 Rohingya refugees in the Kutupalong-Balukhali Expansion Camp located in Cox's Bazar, which is the largest refugee camp in the world (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2021). The conditions in the camp are overcrowded and squalid, leaving refugees vulnerable to communicable diseases, fires, cyclones, community tensions, domestic violence, and sexual abuse. The children do not go to school and are instead sent to 'temporary learning centers' where they receive about two hours of instruction a day (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Another popular destination for Rohingya refugees is Malaysia. However, lately the country has grown hostile to refugees, turning away boats and jailing hundreds of those who arrive on their shores (Al Jazeera, 2020).

Aung San Suu Kyi, State Counsellor and global icon of democracy, has done nothing to stop this conflict. Suu Kyi, a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, received support from global leaders in her role as President of Myanmar's National League for Democracy. In a show of support for Myanmar's new 'partial democracy' in 2016, President Obama scrapped several of the remaining economic sanctions on Myanmar, despite the country's ongoing abuse of the Rohingya population (Toosi, 2018). Some argue that this show of international support despite these human rights violations contributed to the subsequent brutality and migration crisis (Toosi, 2018).

On February 1, 2021, this brief experiment in partial democracy came to an end. Parliament was scheduled to hold its first session after the elections in November, in which the

National League for Democracy (NLD) won 83% of the seats. Aung San Suu Kyi, President U Win Myint, NLD cabinet ministers, the chief ministers of several regions, opposition politicians, journalists, and activists have all been detained and the country has been restored to full military rule (Goldman, 2021). The implications this ever-evolving situation will have for Myanmar's Rohingya population are unclear at this time. The military was responsible for the 2017 crackdown but Suu Kyi also recently defended Myanmar in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against accusations of ethnic cleansing (Simons & Beech, 2021). Given the turbulent political climate and ongoing hostility toward the Rohingya, it appears that talk of repatriation efforts will not be happening anytime soon, leaving thousands of refugees without a country. However, for this project, I will be focusing on the few who have immigrated to the U.S. in recent years.

Rohingya Refugees in the United States

The Rohingya immigrating to the U.S. face a unique set of challenges. In Myanmar, the Rohingya are denied access to education and thus have extremely high rates of illiteracy (Bhatia et al., 2017). This puts them at a disadvantage in acquiring sufficient English skills to obtain self-sufficiency and enter the workforce. They also struggle with technological literacy and access, which have become essential, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, to American daily life. These refugees also bear both physical and emotional scars from their lives prior to arriving in the U.S. Recent research has shown that before leaving Myanmar, most Rohingya refugees witnessed gunfire, the destruction of their homes, dead bodies, torture, and sexual violence. Many suffer from PTSD and symptoms of anxiety and depression as a result (Riley et al., 2020). Their physical health also has been damaged by the poor conditions in the crowded refugee camps. A study of Rohingya in the Bangladeshi camps identified that many suffer from

unexplained fevers, acute respiratory infections, and diarrhea, as well as non-communicable diseases like hypertension and diabetes. The study also identified extremely high rates of sexual abuse amongst Rohingya women, which are almost certainly underreported (Joarder et al., 2020). The lasting effects of these issues present obstacles to assimilation, which the U.S. resettlement system has struggled to address.

The Rohingya in the Midwest

The Rohingya communities in Chicago and Milwaukee have begun to provide the culturally-specific and long-term support that USRAP does not. In Chicago, the Rohingya Cultural Center Chicago (RCC) provides social services, which include ESL and citizenship courses, Quran classes, case management, homework help, and interpretation for Rohingya families in the West Ridge/West Rogers Park Neighborhood (Rohingya Cultural Center Chicago, 2018). Founded by Nasir Zakaria, a Rohingya refugee who arrived in Chicago in 2013, the Center aims to preserve the Rohingya culture and assist with the particular needs of Rohingya families in Chicago. A similar organization, called Burmese Rohingya Community of Wisconsin, was co-founded by Anuwar Kasim, a Rohingya refugee with experience working for the United Nations and international NGOs in Burma and Malaysia prior to arriving in Milwaukee, and Andrew Trumbull, a Midwestern native with a background in ESL teaching (Burmese Rohingya Community of Wisconsin, 2017). This organization offers similar services to the RCC and is working on recruiting funding for their community center in Milwaukee. These communities have arisen out of the need for more assistance than the U.S. resettlement system is able to provide.

Refugee Resettlement in the United States

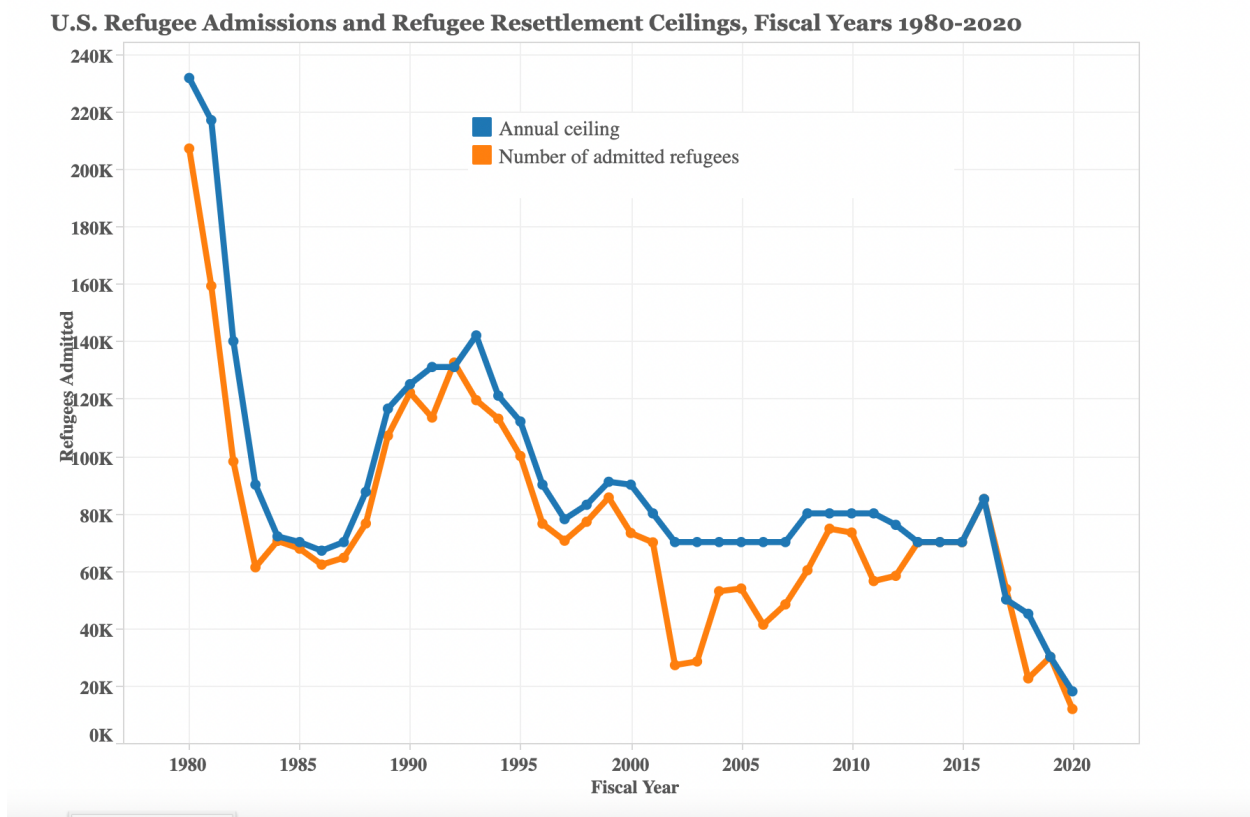
It is unsurprising that refugees have become dependent on their own communities in order to get the care that they require. The United States Refugee Assistance Program has been losing federal funding for almost the entirety of the 41 years since its founding. The Refugee Act of 1980 originally stipulated that the Director of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) would provide reimbursements to states and public or private nonprofit agencies for the first 36 months of cash and medical assistance provided to refugees. By 1986, the timeframe for reimbursement was cut to 31 months for the state share of Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and to 18 months for Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA). General Assistance (GA), including medical assistance, was limited to only 19-36 months after the initial date of arrival (U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement Report to Congress, 1993). Federal reimbursement for refugee welfare assistance continued to be slashed until it reached the final form that still exists today, with the final cuts coming midway through George H.W. Bush's presidency. Currently, states receive reimbursement for up to eight months of RCA and medical assistance, no reimbursement for Medicaid, SSI, or AFDC, and no reimbursement for General Assistance costs (U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement Report to Congress, 1993).

The only other major source of federal funding for resettlement comes through the Department of State's Reception & Placement (R&P) program. The R&P Program provides VOLAGs (Voluntary Agencies), the private resettlement agencies that do the actual case management and boots-on-the-ground labor of refugee resettlement, a one-time grant of \$2,175 per refugee to assist with expenses during their first three months after arrival. The VOLAGs must then subsequently connect refugees with the state-based or private sources of financial

assistance. Critically, only a portion of this grant goes toward the material needs of the refugee. One VOLAG, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Service, states that at their agency, \$925-\$1,125 of the grant goes to the needs of the refugee. The other \$1,050 goes toward the local resettlement office for administrative expenses (Refugee Resettlement Core Services, HIAS, 2018). On all counts, federal funding for refugee resettlement has been stripped down to its bare bones and the remaining costs, although pared down, have subsequently become a burden shouldered by state and local institutions (Brown & Scribner, 2014).

The Trump Administration’s immigration policies sought to further decrease the resettlement system’s funding by lowering the annual refugee admissions ceilings to historically low levels (see Figure 1)

Figure 1



(Migration Policy Institute, *U.S. Refugee Admissions and Refugee Resettlement Ceilings, Fiscal Years 1980-2020*, 2020)

This transition has been devastating for the U.S. resettlement infrastructure. The VOLAGs receive the vast majority of their funding from the Department of State's grants, the amount of which is determined based on the number of refugees they receive.

The VOLAGs struggled mightily during the Trump presidency. Over 100 local refugee resettlement offices closed during his term, with even more significant scaling back of operations (Watson, 2021). These agencies provide a lifeline for refugees for up to five years, meaning that arrivals who came before the administration scaled back admissions were adversely affected by these cuts (Rosenberg, 2014). Many academics and resettlement professionals are concerned that rebuilding the system's capacity to what it once was will take years.

Scholar Daniel J. Beers (2020) argues that the destruction of this infrastructure was an intentional use of *strategic* disruption: "Short of systemically deconstructing targeted programs, I contend that the Trump administration is engaged in an improvisational and deliberately antagonistic campaign to upend existing policies for the sake of disruption itself." While the Trump administration's policies did not seek to alter the legal or institutional framework of refugee resettlement, they starved the program of resources. As I will describe in my analysis, these policies negatively impacted not just the refugees waiting in the camps in other countries, but recent arrivals who still need the ongoing support programs that VOLAGs provide.

The Creation of Refugee Enclaves

Concentrating refugees in the same neighborhoods allows resettlement agencies and host communities to consolidate meager resources. In Chicago's Rogers Park neighborhood, Sullivan High School has become the destination of over 300 immigrant children, many of whom are newly arrived refugees (Fishman, 2017). The school has recently come to be heralded as a

success story as it has established its “Newcomers Academy” program. The “Newcomers Academy” works in partnership with refugee agencies, elementary schools, community organizations, and healthcare professionals to help new arrivals during their adjustment period (“Our Mission,” n.d.). This program and others are possible because Chicago Public Schools designated Sullivan as its first newcomer center, giving them federal funding for specialized programs to help students with cultural adjustment and English acquisition (Fishman, 2017). These schools are few and far between but are valuable tools for helping newly arrived students and their families assimilate.

The high degree of refugee enrollment is also indicative of the more significant trend of resettling new arrivals only in specific neighborhoods. In Chicago, refugees tend to be placed in Rogers Park and Uptown, while in Milwaukee, there are many in Midtown. As the State Department does not keep data on what neighborhoods refugees are resettled into, there is a lack of quantitative research in this area, but some professionals have expressed concerns over refugees being placed into neighborhoods with high rates of gun violence (McLaughlin, 2018). Some resettlement agencies struggle to find housing that is safe, sanitary, and affordable. The housing they provide is often not compliant with federal requirements. One VOLAG, Catholic Charities Milwaukee, was audited in 2014 and was only ‘partially compliant’ with federal requirements. One refugee who required a wheelchair was placed in an apartment only accessible by stairs. Another family was placed in a basement apartment that was only partially finished with peeling paint, an exposed light fixture near the shower, broken glass by the entrance, and rot underneath the bathroom tiles. Others reported similar issues with safety, cleanliness, and upkeep (Brookes & Thayer, 2014, pg. 3).

The creation of these refugee enclaves has been the subject of recent scholarship in European countries. This scholarship discusses whether concentrating ethnic groups into certain communities is important for encouraging employment and entrepreneurship through net positive social network effects, or if it instead creates a separation from the native population, which inhibits opportunities for immigrants. One study found that across multiple ethnic groups from backgrounds of both forced and voluntary migration, segregation effects in ethnic enclaves were consistently negatively or insignificantly related to employment or entrepreneurship outcomes, and that the potential benefits of ethnic concentration were highly variable (Klaesson & Öner, 2021). This study illustrates the central tension within the spatial segregation of newly arrived refugees. While it leads to the creation of vibrant communities of culturally-tailored support, it also creates barriers to integration.

As I have described here, the resettlement infrastructure plays a vital role in the overall system of humanitarian governance. Contrary to how they are often framed within the broader system, the Rohingya in Chicago and Milwaukee do not come free of context and must navigate their own unique set of cultural barriers and circumstantial challenges. Professionals who work in resettlement are thus given the difficult task of helping Rohingya refugees to assimilate, but are forced to do so within an infrastructure that treats all refugees as archetypes: the victim, the burden, the terrorist in disguise.

The additional challenge to contend with comes from the federal level of USRAP, wherein decisions made concerning refugee admissions impact the financial resources available for resettlement workers to do their jobs. This is also the origin of the directive that prizes economic self-sufficiency above all other forms of assimilation. In the subsequent analysis, I seek to further investigate how resettlement professionals and the organizations they work for

influence the assimilation outcomes of the Rohingya in Chicago and Milwaukee. As I have shown in this literature review, their work cannot exist outside of its context, which has been heavily influenced by both recent policy changes from the Trump administration and the shifting of resettlement costs from the federal to the state level that took place thirty years ago. In my findings, I have identified that this complex humanitarian infrastructure, which has so much power and influence over the lives of refugees, has gaps in care which refugee communities like the Rohingya are struggling to not fall through.

Discussion of Findings

The process of refugee resettlement at the local level is managed through a network of government-funded NGOs, state and local officials, and service organizations. The refugees whom they serve are completely reliant on this patchwork of support. James, an administrator at a Rohingya cultural organization in Milwaukee, described some of the challenges facing the Rohingya and those trying to help them upon arrival in the U.S.

The Rohingya have been denied access to pretty much all social services, so when they came here, they needed to learn everything. And then the language barrier just adds to that in addition. [They have a] really high illiteracy rate. It's issues across the board. Like I said before, just doing day-to-day stuff, reading mail, setting up e-mail, using a computer, applying for anything, everything, all those things, they require help.

Participants highlighted the language barrier, technological literacy, and cultural barriers as some of the main problems with regard to assimilation. In the face of these challenges, professionals described being tasked with providing the best care they could, but dissatisfaction with the resources they had to deliver it. Those working at VOLAGs were frustrated with the short duration of the care they provide and the assimilation outcomes it produces, particularly regarding employment and language acquisition. Many of them also attributed problems in their

work to a lack of adequate resources to meet the needs of their clients. They attributed the sudden loss of funding to the political shift which occurred when President Trump took office in 2017.

Participants also described how the resettlement system itself has attempted to consolidate meager resources, inadvertently concentrating Rohingya refugees into certain neighborhoods, employment sectors, and high schools. Those working for Rohingya community organizations identified many areas in which USRAP's generalized approach to serving refugees fails to recognize the cultural context of Rohingya refugees, leaving the refugee community to help its members navigate cultural barriers. While the creation of these communities may run contrary to the assimilation goals of USRAP, the Rohingya communities in Milwaukee and Chicago have become vital support networks for new arrivals.

The Creation of a Rohingya Ghetto

Most of the Rohingya refugees in Chicago live in Rogers Park. It's been a hub for new arrivals for a long time, which may be part of the reason the Rohingya have found a home there. One participant, Kelly, mentioned that this history has made it a particularly comfortable location for the Rohingya. "The area that our folks live in now, the Pakistanis used to live there before that, and the Indians used to live there. So that's convenient for our community." She implies that the presence of the South Asian immigrant population has made the neighborhood more friendly to refugees, particularly those from similar backgrounds. This likely is part of the reason resettlement workers can find housing for clients there, as landlord discrimination was an issue brought up by several participants. One commented, "first of all, yes, landlords don't rent to refugees. Those that do – some are goodhearted. Some are from the ethnic group themselves. And a lot are there to make money, and they sometimes don't keep their apartments in good

shape. If you have four to six kids, there are even fewer places you can find where you can get an apartment.” Finding housing for the Rohingya when they first arrive often presents a challenge. After their initial government aid package runs out, there may be delays with applying for benefits or struggles with finding a job. This requires empathy on the part of landlords who can be flexible with a few late payments as they settle in. The Rohingya also tend to have large families, further limiting their options to units that can accommodate that. To navigate this problem, some professionals mentioned that they have relationships with certain landlords who are willing to provide this kind of flexibility, some of whom were once immigrants themselves. A lot of these landlords happen to be located in Rogers Park.

The result has been a somewhat insular refugee community. Rogers Park, particularly Devon Ave and the surrounding area, is colloquially referred to as ‘Little India’ by Chicagoans. However, it now is home to refugees from Pakistan, Syria, Myanmar, Rwanda, and many other countries. As a result, Sullivan High School has adapted, putting resources into its “Newcomers Academy” program for refugee students, which allows them specialized curriculum options, robust academic support services, access to mental health and medical services, and additional education for parents (Newcomers Academy: Our Mission, n.d.). A similar example can be found in Lewiston, Maine, which was similarly challenged to build up their English Language Learners (ELL) program to accommodate their large Somali refugee population (Besteman, 2016). Schools receive little money or guidance to help refugee students, and thus the establishment of such programs can be a rocky adjustment, as it was in Lewiston. Sullivan has similarly faced challenges in coping with refugees from so many different backgrounds, with 40 percent of students still learning English and with the student body speaking 35 different languages (Fishman, 2017). While attending the same schools and living in the same

neighborhoods as other refugees can provide a sense of belonging, coping with such a diverse and vulnerable student population in the classroom presents a challenge in itself. Concentrating refugee students at certain high schools to conserve meager resources presents another way that these migrant communities become inadvertently isolated.

In addition to allowing resettlement agencies and city officials to consolidate resources, placing the Rohingya in Rogers Park has inadvertently led them to create a tight-knit and vibrant community. One caseworker described this dynamic from an outsider's perspective,

I noticed that a really important thing was making sure that the community was very strong in everyone's life and everyone kind of supported each other. I know they always referred to each other as like brother and sister, even if they were from different families. I noticed [it was] very different from American culture. They treated each other very much like if you were with the Rohingya, [then] you were *with* the Rohingyas. Even if you didn't know them before, you were just kind of, you know, embraced fully because maybe of the shared identity, but also the shared cultural and religious aspects.

Part of the dynamic this caseworker describes is a bond centered around a shared culture and experience. However, the support he mentions is rooted in the community's role in ensuring collective survival by providing culturally-informed, long-term support that the VOLAGs and local governments do not.

Navigating Cultural Barriers

A frequent obstacle that participants working in VOLAGs and other organizations outside of the Rohingya community faced in providing care was misunderstanding the culturally-specific needs of the Rohingya. The 'refugee' as a humanitarian object is often stripped of context. Other scholars have noted that humanitarian administrators have an ideal expectation for how refugees should look or behave, assuming an anonymous corporeal form that embodies perfect suffering and helplessness (Malkki, 1996). As such, the resettlement process is designed around this notion of a universally defined experience of suffering but can fail to address

population or individual needs in the assimilation process. Professionals who were not Rohingya themselves described instances where they noticed cultural dissimilarities and expressed discomfort with them, either from not knowing why a particular behavior was occurring or being uncertain about whether or not it was their place to teach them how to conform.

Tom, who did medical casework at his agency, recounted that his Rohingya clients tended to have a more reserved and distrustful attitude toward doctors, as well as stronger emotional reactions to diagnoses than are typically seen in the U.S.: “A lot of times, I would go to appointments with clients, and they would be very kind of quiet, or they wouldn't express the true depth or breadth of their problems to a practitioner.” He said it didn't seem to matter the gender of the doctor or the client, their race, or whether they spoke a common language. He also described a phenomenon wherein patients would react very negatively to any sort of diagnosis.

I noticed, like, if someone was diagnosed with something or had an issue, it didn't matter if that was like a mental health issue or more of a physical issue, there would be...it was very intense for them. It would cause a lot of distress, a lot of emotional distress. I saw many clients crying either before, during, or after doctor's appointments, just being completely stressed out about their diagnosis, really taking a toll on their lives.

Tom admits to never understanding where these reactions came from or how to make this a less distressing experience for the refugees. This anxiety around diagnoses could be due to unfamiliarity with Western medicine or spiritual beliefs surrounding illness and healing (Tay et al. 2019). However, it is most striking that the cause of such emotional distress was not intelligible to the person tasked with teaching them how to navigate the U.S. medical system. The ability to understand and relieve such distress goes beyond standardized training courses in cultural competency, and it is vital to refugees feeling comfortable engaging with the medical system.

Reticence to engage with the medical system was shown to be a problem in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Mohib, an organization founder and medical interpreter who is Rohingya himself, mentioned that Covid-19 spread rapidly in parts of Milwaukee's Rohingya population, which he partially attributed to a communal reticence to seek medical treatment:

The worst thing is, you know, they don't know that they have this virus and there is a stigma as well in my community. You know, they are so shy, and they are shy to go to the hospital and get tested.

This concern about engagement with the medical system had real consequences for Milwaukee's Rohingya. Mohib himself was hospitalized with the virus for several days before our interview and recounted that many other Rohingya became sick because they didn't understand the mask mandates and other prevention measures early on due to the language barrier. The Rohingya organization he founded sought to remedy this by creating videos in the Rohingya language to educate the community. However, the other Rohingya organization included in this study found tremendous success in spreading the public health messaging through Rohingya WhatsApp networks.

Another cultural barrier a participant encountered had to do with childrearing practices. Brenda was brought into a Rohingya cultural organization in Chicago to help with establishing an early childhood education program, similar to one she had started with the Latinx population of a Chicago suburb. The program was designed to prepare Rohingya children for the classroom environment and educate their mothers on how to support them in their schooling, as many Rohingya experience little to no formal education in Myanmar or the refugee camps. However, Brenda described many challenges that the staff encountered in trying to set up this program. The first problem was that volunteers and staff struggled with pronouncing and remembering Rohingya names. Furthermore, they were unable to match which child was with which mother as

the mothers were dressed in burqas. She attributed this to the fact that they weren't used to only identifying women by their eyes. A second problem arose with communicating to the mothers what the program's purpose was meant to be. Brenda felt that she, along with the others involved in the program, failed to convey the educational motivations behind the class but was unsure what could have been done differently in that respect.

The final problem Brenda identified had to do with cultural differences between how Rohingya and American mothers discipline their children. Brenda said, "It was not abusive. But it was, you know, they use punishment. They use spanking and hitting a lot for their kids." She said this hesitantly, clearly uncomfortable speaking on the subject. Research has been done on these patterns in other Southeast Asian immigrant parenting styles in the U.S., which has found that breaking the cycle of using physical discipline within these households is significantly linked to the acculturation of parents (Tajima & Harachi, 2010). With these first-generation immigrant mothers, it's unsurprising that these disciplinary measures were standard. However, Brenda struggled with what to do about it in this program. Despite her disagreements with some of the parenting methods of the Rohingya mothers, Brenda didn't believe they would be receptive to an alternative way of parenting:

One of the [program] philosophies was that you tell the mother how to approach their child when they're misbehaving. I didn't really believe in that work because they didn't have the foundation inside to understand why that was right and the way they were doing it was wrong besides that [the Department of Child and Family Services] will come after them.

Brenda believed that the Rohingya mothers were incapable of understanding why physical punishment was not an accepted parenting practice in the U.S. Her reasoning behind this was unclear, but could have been linked to communication problems due to the language barrier or feeling that the cultural gap was simply too wide to be breached. In our interview, she articulated

some information about the research behind alternative corrective behavior strategies, but ultimately she did not feel it was possible to convey this information to the Rohingya mothers.

In this study, the two Rohingya participants, Htay and Mohib, described other barriers to engaging with U.S. institutions that were culturally specific and went unmentioned in any other interviews. To me, this highlighted a heightened awareness that can only be achieved through belonging to the Rohingya community yourself. In contrast to some of the other participants I interviewed who only described problems with technology access, both mentioned problems with technological literacy, which is just as vital to navigating the current job market and essential for remote schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. Htay said,

You know, nowadays if you want to apply [for] jobs, some companies require online application. In order to do online application, you have to create a new account and do a lot of things. My people don't know anything. So, if they know how to use the internet, how to open the computer, close, login and logout, it would really be helpful for them when they apply for a job.

Htay and Mohib said most Rohingya families have access to at least one computer because schools in Chicago and Milwaukee provided their students with Chromebooks. However, basic computer skills can sometimes be a challenge, particularly for Rohingya adults. Mohib mentioned that his children had missed school days at the beginning of the pandemic because he did not know how to log into the virtual learning platform they were supposed to use.

Other problems arise when the Rohingya are asked to participate in U.S. institutions of population tracking. From birth, U.S. citizens are accounted for through birth certificates, medical records, the census, school enrollment, etc. This process of careful accounting is foreign to the Rohingya. For example, birth certificates are not issued to the Rohingya in Myanmar. Mohib shared that this can present problems when filling out government or medical forms in the U.S. "Say if you ask my people, 'What is your date of birth?' They don't know their date because

they never thought somebody would ask them their date of birth in their life.” Another issue that came up with government documentation was the census. In Milwaukee, James described a campaign his organization did to educate Rohingya about the 2020 Census so that they wouldn’t throw the petitions in the garbage because they didn’t know what they were.

Though some of these challenges are shared by other refugee populations, their existence provides an argument in favor of systems where care is driven by the needs of a refugee community as determined by the community itself, as the concept of *administrative inclusion* calls for (Darrow, 2018). The one-size-fits-all approach to resettlement which treats assimilation as a kind of rebirth, stripping refugees of their history and culture, often does not adequately address or understand the needs of the refugees it is designed to serve.

A Resource Scarce Environment

“The VOLAGs are in very poor shape,” Andrew, a caseworker at an Islamic cultural organization, told me. As previously described, VOLAGs receive their funding based on the number of refugees they serve, and these budget cuts have completely destabilized the existing resettlement infrastructure. Participants working at these agencies brought up the financial and organizational devastation that these recent policies have created. One participant, Tom, described the environment at the resettlement agency where he worked as a medical caseworker in 2015, to show how it has changed drastically over the past five years.

When I started in 2015, we probably had four full-time case managers, maybe four or five full time case aids, and maybe every semester we probably had between five and six interns from [local universities]. [...] We were resettling about four hundred clients each year, and that was in 2015.

Tom worked for a large VOLAG and viewed this positively. However, some smaller agencies were overwhelmed by the number of refugees coming in at the end of the Obama administration because they had yet to build sufficient capacity. Jonathan, a former ESL teacher at a smaller

resettlement agency, said, “There were more refugees coming in during the ending of the Obama administration than many of our agencies were equipped to handle.” In Illinois during this time, Gov. Rauner was making massive cuts, including \$26 million in social services to cope with the \$1.6 billion budget shortfall (Chicago Tribune Wire Reports, 2015). The victims of these cuts were programs that provide services like citizenship application assistance, ESL classes, and health and nutrition programs to refugees and recent migrants. As a result, some resettlement agencies during this time were eliminating state-funded, long-term assistance programming and pouring all their resources into resettling new arrivals. The existing situation in Illinois made things that much worse when refugee admissions were slashed in subsequent years.

After the election in 2016, the program’s culture and structure changed drastically and provoked an emotional response from both clients and staff. Tom worked primarily with Rohingya clients and described their reaction to the election results as one of fear and devastation as they anticipated the policies to come. He said, “Many people had like family members in the pipeline to come to the United States already in the refugee process. And like, inevitably, those people didn’t make it.” Stressing over the fates of family members back home was mentioned as a primary mental health stressor from other participants. He also described the severity of the layoffs in stark terms. “We had so many full-time staff and all of these, like, really great interns, too. But now the program just has two full-time staff. I don't even know how many clients they're resettling anymore.” It was emotionally devastating for the staff after the election results came in, likely because Trump’s campaign rhetoric had been so hostile about refugees, and in particular, Muslim refugees. Tom and his team worked primarily with Rohingya clients and knew that these political changes would likely have direct consequences for their clients: “I

was just – I remember like my coworkers crying, my boss crying.” Jonathan described a similar scene at his resettlement agency.

We had a staff in January of [2017] of about a dozen folks. From that, because of pressure from the board of directors and just the shock of losing basically primary stream of income for the agency at the end of January, at the beginning of February five folks were laid off and everybody was put on furlough just to keep the ship afloat. I was technically laid off.

Jonathan was able to return to work part-time eventually, but many other resettlement professionals were not so lucky and staff sizes have remained a fraction of what they once were.

The State Department called for the closure of offices set to resettle less than 100 refugees around the country in 2018, after they slashed the number of new arrivals to 45,000 for that fiscal year, thus depriving refugees of the longer-term services these agencies provide (Torbaty & Rosenberg, 2017). All nine federally-funded resettlement agencies have faced similar problems, forcing them to lay off staff in large numbers, eliminate local office locations, pare down their programming for both new arrivals and ongoing support services, and begin to seek out more and more private funding (Mento, 2018). The ESL program at Jonathan’s organization is privately funded, and as such, he described how the program had to be altered to meet some of the donor organization’s specifications. One outcome of forcing these organizations to seek more private funding for their long-term programming is that it allows donors to exert influence on how these programs are run. Another outcome is that they simply won’t be able to make up the deficit, and these programs will be eliminated. Participants described both scenarios as they played out in their work over the past four years.

Employment Sector Consolidation

In the face of such instability and resource scarcity, it is unsurprising that USRAP is oriented toward making refugees economically self-sufficient as soon as possible. The State

Department provides assistance for the first 90 days after a refugee arrives. After that, they can apply for state benefits, which in Illinois last for eight months and require refugees to be employed to be eligible. The U.S. Department of State's website makes this explicit:

Refugees are eligible for public assistance when they first arrive. Nevertheless, the U.S. government seeks to promote early economic self-sufficiency through employment to speed integration into American society. Refugees receive unemployment authorization upon arrival and are encouraged to become employed as soon as possible. (U.S. Refugee Admissions: Reception & Placement, 2020).

With fewer resources in recent years for resettlement agencies to provide long-term assistance, the drive towards economic self-sufficiency is overwhelming. With little time to learn English and receive vocational training, participants said the Rohingya have disproportionately ended up employed in low-skill jobs in hotels or airports in Chicago, and manufacturing and meatpacking plants in Milwaukee. The luckier ones with some language skills can work in resettlement as caseworkers or interpreters. Some of these job placements come through relationships developed between the VOLAGs and training programs. One Chicago resettlement agency has a hospitality training program that caseworkers at other agencies will refer their clients to as well, making working in hotels an accessible option.

Other jobs come purely through relationships between aid organizations and specific employers. A caseworker and program administrator at a privately-funded aid organization said that,

There are standard employers that we know about who we refer people to. The airports [are] one which is way, way down because there's no flights. Hotels are another, which is way, way down because people aren't using hotels, [which] we've learned are two big employers for the folks we work with, especially the recent immigrants. And one of our programs is giving people cars and they use those cars to work.

With the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on tourism and travel, two of the primary fields of employment for Chicago's Rohingya have been decimated. To help them find other sources of

employment, this organization is now trying to get them cars, presumably to work for ridesharing companies or make deliveries.

Htay, who works for a Rohingya cultural organization doing casework, mentioned that the pandemic led to a crush of people requesting his help with unemployment applications. His organization has been working overtime to help as people have been laid off by the dozens.

They don't have any place to go to ask for help because all the resettlement agencies through the government shut down because of the government order. They are working from home, so people are not able to see them. They are not able to talk to them because of the language barrier.

An already-clunky system wherein casework relies on scarce in-person or teleinterpreters to guide refugees through things like applying for government benefits, became unmanageable for many Rohingya with the pandemic. Htay has been working to provide this assistance instead by continuing to meet with people in-person to provide help with interpretation and casework. This is one of the clearest examples of the Rohingya community's vital role in filling the gaps left by the resettlement infrastructure. Particularly during the pandemic, the community network of support has been crucial for their survival.

Htay mentioned the language barrier as one of the difficulties in assisting with unemployment benefits applications, but it's an obstacle that spans much further than that. Every participant in this study repeatedly cited the language barrier as a challenge that severely impacted their assimilation and independence. This premature shove into the labor market makes the language barrier almost insurmountable for Rohingya adults. Jonathan approximated that many of his students were unable to remain in his ESL class for longer than two or three months before leaving to enter the workforce.

From my perspective, having people forced to leave the classroom and go into a really crummy job because their support from the government and the refugee services that the

government funds [are] running out [is hard]. And they just have, like the bare, less than the bare, minimum honestly sometimes of English that they need to get by.

He recalled having some students who tried to continue their studies after they started work.

I had some students who tried to continue English classes while they were working third shift like janitorial at the airport. And they couldn't do English classes because they would come to class and fall asleep in class.

Another participant, Kelly, similarly mentioned the grueling nature of the jobs refugees were forced into and the lengthy commute they often had to take to get there. In this case, rather than “speeding integration into American society,” the push toward economic self-sufficiency can actively undermine it.

James expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of employment diversity amongst the Rohingya in Milwaukee.

Oftentimes, refugees and people who arrive end up getting kind of pigeonholed into manufacturing, and especially in the [Midwest], meat processing is the big one. And it's a fine job to do, of course, but to pigeonhole someone just based on the fact that they're a new arrival kind of sucks, in my opinion. So, we want to really expand job opportunities and economic opportunities and using childcare as the foundation is our way forward. Some other communities in the United States have been able to open businesses at a faster clip. I'd like to see that. I'd like to see more diversity in the workforce.

His mention of childcare, in particular, is an important issue. In the 1980 Refugee Act, one of the key provisions to “ensure that women have the same opportunities as men to participate in training and instruction.” However, Jonathan said that in teaching his ESL classes, there were usually very few women in the room because they were watching the children. One of the Rohingya organizations included in this study instead sends volunteer ESL tutors to the home, rather than making students come to class. One of those volunteers, Madeleine, described how she would do in-home visits where she primarily worked with a Rohingya woman and her children. This way of administering the program works much better to suit the cultural needs of the Rohingya, but it is not done by all VOLAGs, likely because they lack the resources to staff it

and don't have enough volunteers. With few resources at their disposal, it only makes sense for VOLAGs to invest in programs that will allow refugees to begin earning as soon as possible.

Conclusion

One of the most common themes amongst all participants included in this study was frustration. Those working at VOLAGs expressed dissatisfaction with the constraints put upon their work due to lack of resources and organizational structure. Those working at Rohingya cultural organizations did not criticize the work of resettlement agencies, but described feeling overwhelmed by the needs of the community, which were not being addressed elsewhere. Consistent with Darrow's (2018) theory of administrative indentureship, I find that the system's orientation around economic self-sufficiency inhibits assimilation by forcing Rohingya refugees into the workforce prematurely. However, my findings expand upon this theory to show how refugees are concentrated into certain sectors, like hospitality or manufacturing, working primarily alongside other refugees. My findings further show that they are spatially segregated into neighborhoods like Rogers Park and schools like Sullivan High School wherein they are able to build refugee communities of support. The resulting ghettoization inhibits the integration that USRAP wishes to prioritize.

However, these communities are essential under the current resettlement system for the Rohingya. As participants described, many refugees are unable to grasp even basic English proficiency before they are expected to begin working long hours. Without language or employment skills, there are few avenues for them to move up the socioeconomic ladder. The lack of opportunities to acquire these skills leaves refugees vulnerable. This vulnerability has become even more apparent due to the additional challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, which

served as the temporal backdrop for this research. With only a short duration of care provided from the VOLAGs, Rohingya cultural organizations are trying their best to fill the void by providing casework and interpreting services.

With the Biden administration taking charge in 2021, whether or not he will build the resettlement infrastructure back up to Obama-era capacity to admit the 125,000 ceiling he set for FY 2022 has been a burgeoning topic of conversation (Montoya-Galvez, 2021). In building back organizational capacity, the administration would be well-served to reconsider its emphasis on early labor force participation as a means of accelerating assimilation.

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