

Voice and power at the intersection of art, technology and advocacy

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Insights from the Rohingya refugee response reveal how art and digital technologies can offer opportunities for refugees and IDPs to lead, advocate and share their voices in forced displacement contexts.

How can the agency of Rohingya refugees and IDPs be more fully embraced as part of responses to their displacement? How can advocacy in such contexts go beyond their voices being ‘amplified’ by intermediaries, instead enabling Rohingya themselves to steer the narratives and priorities that form the basis of humanitarian interventions and durable solutions? As advocates working with Rohingya communities in Bangladesh and Myanmar, these are questions we reflect on often.

Art and technology are tools to change not just whom we are listening to but also how we are listening: how voices are or are not filtered, how dialogue is framed and constrained, and how this affects what different actors – including humanitarians – hear and ultimately act upon. These may be relatively small elements in the context of the fundamental shifts needed to achieve more equal sharing of resources and power. Nonetheless, we see art and

technology as promising and much needed channels to more fully mobilise shared leadership across humanitarian action.

The Rohingya crisis has been playing out over the course of decades, with multiple cycles of violence, persecution and displacement. Humanitarian actors have responded both to Rohingya that are internally displaced and confined to a series of camps in Rakhine State, Myanmar, and to those who have fled to the sprawling camps in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. Advocacy efforts have tended to be more prominent in Cox’s Bazar where, although still constrained, dialogues are more open compared with the camps in Myanmar. These efforts have been important drivers of more participatory approaches to advocacy, grounded in the priorities of Rohingya communities.

Rohingya refugees and IDPs, however, face real barriers to advocating for their rights and raising their voices. Many are still suffering from deep trauma and

are sometimes unsure whom to trust with their stories and how to raise their concerns safely and without repercussions. Many struggle to access education and, without English language skills, are often blocked from opportunities to directly engage with media or decision-makers driving the humanitarian response.

Digital technology

Rohingya leaders and activists in the Cox's Bazar camps have been increasingly at the forefront of using digital technologies to directly engage humanitarian and political decision-makers.

As in many places, the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing access restrictions for international actors accelerated the shift towards increased leadership roles for local organisations and community members. Digital technology has played a crucial enabling role in this shift, from remote data collection and monitoring reliant on capable Rohingya staff, to frontline COVID-19 information campaigns and response led by community members.¹

Social media in particular has become a space where Rohingya activists interact without their voices being filtered or constrained. Refugee-led groups and individual Rohingya activists have used social media to draw the attention of global audiences to the ongoing crisis, which long ago dropped out of mainstream news headlines. Multiple Twitter accounts managed by Rohingya refugees offer daily insights into the fear, boredom and deprivation of refugees' lives as well as their joys, aspirations and wish to return one day to their homes and homeland.²

Twitter has also been strategically leveraged by Rohingya living in camps to enable them to highlight their concerns and discuss their ideas with humanitarian decision-makers. The Rohingya Camp Voice (formerly the RYA Media Team,) for example, is a Twitter account run from the Cox's Bazar camps which documents hazardous areas through photography (flooded walkways, unstable slopes, damaged bridges), tagging the Twitter accounts of

various humanitarian response actors.³ This approach cuts through traditional feedback and reporting mechanisms. During major floods and fires, refugees in the camps were able to document the scale of the emergency and sound the alarm quickly, while also sharing recommendations for improved response, such as using loudspeakers for fire education purposes. The tagged humanitarian agencies frequently respond to the Rohingya Voice posts, saying they will send teams to investigate conditions.

Rohingya activists and community members have also led coordinated advocacy campaigns on social media. Using the #EducationForAll hashtag on platforms such as YouTube and Twitter, camp-based activists have highlighted the harmful impacts of the authorities' increased restrictions on the community-based schools in the Cox's Bazar camps. Activists have also used the hashtag #GoingHome, to share the continued desire of many Rohingya to have their rights recognised in Myanmar and to return to their homeland.

At various points this advocacy has extended beyond the local humanitarian response. For example, during the COP26 UN Climate Change Conference, refugee photographers in Cox's Bazar shared images of the flooding and natural hazards they were experiencing, tagging the COP26 Twitter account to call for more urgent action from global leaders.⁴

Humanitarian actors, including advocacy staff, are increasingly recognising the value of these spaces to better inform their work. A recent guide published by UNHCR, for instance, explores how social media can be used to monitor protection efforts and serve as a feedback mechanism.⁵ Yet important questions remain regarding who has access to social media and what risks they may face. As demonstrated by the promotion of violence and hate speech against the Rohingya on Facebook in Myanmar, social media itself can be used as a tool of exclusion and incitement. Likewise, access to social media often falls along gendered lines in the camps, reflecting the unequal access to resources that many women and girls



"The Life of Rohingya Women in the Refugee Camp" by Mayyu Khan, a 19-year-old artist living in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, was a winning entry in Oxfam International's 2021 Rohingya Arts Competition (Credit: Mayyu Khan)

face – to smartphones, tablets and internet access, as well as to an electricity supply to keep devices charged. For those without access to social media, it is important to consider what alternative opportunities might be supported to enable the same degree of space for advocacy efforts and direct engagement with decision-makers that digital channels can provide.

Arts-based initiatives

The last few years have seen the emergence of a range of arts-based initiatives, including Artolution, the Rohingya Photography Competition, and IOM's Rohingya Cultural Memory Centre, plus exciting Rohingya-led initiatives such as Omar's Film School, the Art Garden Rohingya, and *Rohingyatographer Magazine*.⁶ Such efforts are helping to open up more spaces where Rohingya can reflect upon past traumas, critically engage with current issues and directly articulate

their aspirations while exercising agency over narratives and representation.

These arts-focused efforts are not always viewed as 'advocacy initiatives' but nevertheless they can have influence. *Rohingyatographer Magazine*, for example, is a newly launched collaboration of 11 Cox's Bazar-based refugee photographers. The first edition of the magazine explored Rohingya identity through portraits of camp residents, and was displayed at the Liberation War Museum in Dhaka for World Refugee Day 2022 – attracting many high-profile viewers and media attention.⁷ Similarly, Oxfam's Rohingya Arts Campaign created the space for Rohingya artists and activists to share their perspectives through poetry, painting, photography, film, creative writing or any other artistic medium.⁸ Strong advocacy points were raised through the different creative pieces featured online – the need for meaningful justice and accountability

processes, the importance of access to education for displaced adolescent girls, the continued desire of Rohingyas to return to their homeland and the unaddressed traumas of past violence and ongoing exile. While some artists submitted creative writing pieces in English, others shared traditional Rohingya folk songs or expressed their views through visual arts, breaking through language barriers to reach a global audience. Many artists used their creative pieces not just to explore their own perspectives but also to advocate for their community as a whole, paying particular attention to how existing barriers to services such as education can be addressed and participation more fully supported. By sharing immediate and unfiltered perspectives of the experience and views of people in the camps, these initiatives produce knowledge that engages decision-makers in a way that would not previously have been possible.

Photography and photojournalism in particular are areas where Rohingya are increasingly taking a leading role in framing their lives and narratives. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the Bangladeshi government drastically reduced permits to enter the Cox's Bazar refugee camps, including for foreign journalists. Rohingya journalists stepped in to fill that space, providing high-quality photos to be published by international media and NGOs.⁹ Rohingya photojournalists who had traditionally been uncredited were suddenly in the spotlight. Additionally, refugee photographers felt that they were able to capture more nuanced portraits of the refugee community, moving away from the heavy focus on disaster and tragedy to more complex perspectives on refugee capacity and resilience.

Conclusion

Art-based initiatives and digital technologies are tools which are not without risks and limitations, but many individuals and agencies – including ourselves – have experimented with using them as channels for change in terms of whose voices and knowledge are placed at the

centre and, ultimately, who has access to power and decision-making. Both have proved valuable in enabling Rohingya activists and humanitarians to promote alternative narratives and to have a more direct dialogue with decision-makers. This has pushed our collective advocacy work forward, broadened our alliances and fostered important connections, including collaboration on this article itself, which came about through us meeting on Twitter.

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1. bit.ly/covid-Cox-Bazar
2. bit.ly/covid-Cox-Bazar See for example: @SahatZia_Hero, @Rohingya_Camp, @Mainul139525825, @RoAnamulHasan1
3. See @Rohingya_Camp
4. bit.ly/jamal-photography-tweet
5. UNHCR (2021) *Using Social Media in Community-Based Protection: A Guide* bit.ly/UNHCR-social-media
6. See Omar's Film School, IOM's Cultural Memory Centre, Rohingya Photography Competition, Art Garden Rohingya and Field Photography Collective.
7. See www.rohingyatographer.org. The first issue was covered by publications including Al Jazeera, NBC News, and Lacuna Magazine.
8. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/rohingyaart>
9. See for example NRC bit.ly/NRC-aid-celebrations; Al Jazeera bit.ly/Aljazeera-fatal-floods; the Guardian bit.ly/Guardian-rebuild-camps; and Reuters <https://reut.rs/3zvdMm9>

