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The Role of Local NGOs in Promoting Peace and Conflict Resolution in Rohingya Refugee Camps in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh represents one of the world's largest humanitarian emergencies. While international agencies dominate large-scale relief, local NGOs play crucial but often overlooked roles in sustaining everyday peace within the camps of Cox's Bazar. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork between 2022 and 2024, this paper explores how local NGOs promote conflict resolution through youth engagement, community mediation, psychosocial support, gender-sensitive programs, and rumour management. Findings indicate that these organizations function as trusted intermediaries and informal peacebuilders, yet face severe structural barriers including short-term funding, bureaucratic control, and political sensitivities that limit rights-based work. The paper situates these efforts within broader debates on humanitarian localization and concludes with recommendations to strengthen the role of local actors in sustainable peacebuilding.

Keywords: *Rohingya refugees, Local NGOs, Peacebuilding, Conflict resolution, Humanitarian localization*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In anthropological perspective, displacement and humanitarian crises focus on locally constructed environments to emphasize how local actors frame the circumstances of everyday survival via culturally entrenched processes. This is most evident in the refugee camps of the Rohingya in Cox Bazar, Bangladesh, which is inhabited by more than a million hapless individuals who are stateless people having escaped the systematic persecution in the Rakhine State of Myanmar (UNHCR 2022). Although institutions such as international humanitarian agencies are involved in the dispensation of relief measures on a large scale, local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have increasingly been the key players in relaxing tensions, discussion, and maintenance of peace within the high-density and politically-sensitive camps. In the case of the Rohingya, interest was driven by the international community after the military crackdown that affected Myanmar in 2017, which was referred to as ethnic cleansing or, perhaps, genocide (UNHRC 2018). More than 700,000 Rohingya, most of whom are Muslim minorities, chose to flee into Bangladesh in a few months, and therefore, they joined previously existing groups of refugees and formed the currently largest refugee camp in the world (ISCG 2023). Such camps, especially in the Ukhiya and Teknaf districts, are complicated humanitarian areas where trauma and displacement meet statelessness and insecurity such as violence, fear, or inter-group tensions.

The district of Cox's Bazar itself is a highly marginalized and ecologically fragile district in Bangladesh with poor infrastructure and poverty rates. The influx of this massive number of refugees has worsened rivalry over land, employment, water, and firewood that usually sparks host-refugee tensions. Inside the camps, insecurity is both determined by structural limitations and the daily occurrence of gang violence, gendered abuse, panic caused by rumours and disagreements in obtaining access to humanitarian aid (UN Women & ISCG 2021). Being in a volatile environment, peacebuilding comes as an instant humanitarian necessity rather than a distant political dream. However, most peacebuilding activities seldom occur through rather formal negotiations. Rather, it is regularly manifested in what Mac Ginty (2014) has termed as everyday peace; those lower level mechanisms of accommodation or through non-hierarchical mediations and trust-building that occur on the grassroots.

These NGOs are strongly rooted into local languages, religions, and kinships systems of the refugee and the hosts due to lengthy experiences in the region; the NGOs being local organizations. It is this embeddedness through which they are able to be culturally trusted agents, channels of psychosocial healing, and informal peacekeepers in a way that international actors are not always able to (Chowdhury and Rahman 2021). This research can be theoretically addressed based on the model that focuses on conflict transformation, not top-down peacebuilding (Lederach, 1997). Based on the literature on the localization of humanitarian aid, especially critiques that despite the policy commitments like the Grand Bargain (2016), local actors have been structurally deprived of decision-making and their direct funding (Barbelet 2019) is also used. How can local NGOs play an active role guiding peace processes in the Rohingya refugee camps, and what are the obstacles hindering this too in a very controlled and politically sensitive environment? That is the question that this paper will address in response to such debates.

By means of ethnographic fieldwork in the period of 2022-2024, the research is going to look into the practices, problems, and relevance of the local NGO peace work in the camps. Its focus on local narration and locally anchored strategies also reflects on the current development of the literature in anthropology of humanitarianism, which points to the realization that peace is maintained not only by the policies, but by relationships, resilience, and such hyper-local concepts, as caring.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Localization and the Humanitarian Governance of local NGOs

Humanitarian aid localization has become a topic of urgent debate within the international humanitarian policy, especially due to the pledges of Grand Bargain of 2016 which tried to enhance local-actor activity in the receiving of aid. Yet, the gap has been pointed out between rhetoric and practice by the scholars. Local NGOs are frequently subcontractors of international organizations in the Bangladesh reaction to the Rohingya, having only a minor impact on choosing the action and complete independence in the use of funds (Barbelet, 2019). It has been revealed that local actors, despite their excellent contextual knowledge, linguistic proficiency, and cultural flexibility, are marginalized during the discussions of strategic planning. This structural imbalance has brought into question the possibility that localization, in its current form, may indeed reinforce the current disparities rather than contending with these disparities (Howe et al., 2020). Case *Wake and Bryant (2018)* and *Barbelet et al. (2021)* report how local NGOs operate in the Rohingya context and their importance to operational processes, but that their input toward peacebuilding is not valued in official coordination machinery.

2.2 The Grassroots Conflict Transformation and everyday Peace

This theory of everyday peace focuses on the latent or implicit, informal, and relational practice that exists to stabilize a coexistence within a community (Mac Ginty, 2014). In contrast to top-down formal peace processes, micro-level-level peace consists of day-to-day efforts to compromise, use humour and empathetic conversation. The conflict transformation model presented by *Lederach (1997)* also stresses repairing relationships rather than punishment, which is why it is especially useful in a situation where the formal justice system is not present. Within Rohingya camps, these frameworks help shed light on how local NGOs employ local process of community mediation, youth mobilization, and the management of rumour to maintain weak social cohesion. These practices are in line with anthropological traditions that focus on themes of trust, cultural embeddedness and moral economies as essential in the maintenance of peace in conflict stricken environments (Scheper-Hughes, 1992; Good, 1993).

2.3 Gender-Sensitive Peacebuilding

The feminist peacebuilding literature argues that women are the most central aspects in grassroots peacebuilding, which takes place both informally through networks and within the home (Chowdhury & Sultana, 2021). When women gather in the Women Circles in the Rohingya camps (e.g. Shanti Adda), they relieve trauma in a safe space before being able to support each other and build solidarity against gender-based violence (UN Women & ISCG, 2021). Such efforts problematize conventional, masculinized understandings of peacebuilding by recasting it as a process of embodiment and relation that is premised on care and the care work of emotional labour. Nevertheless, even though ♀-led initiatives may result in profound changes, they tend to be underfunded and deprioritized in humanitarian agenda (Chowdhury & Rahman, 2021).

2.4 The Psychosocial Healing and Healing

Psychological effects of conflict and displacement have to be addressed to ensure sustainable peace. Social suffering models (Kleinman et al., 1997) of humanitarian anthropology pay much attention to the reciprocal relationship between social and psychological recovery. During their treatment, local NGOs carry out culturally informed psychosocial programs targeting trauma processing using art therapy, group discussions, and Hope Circle in the Rohingya camps. Such interventions also do not use clinical

terms as they present culturally agreeable language and metaphors to promote openness and trust. The strategies help in reconstructing the social fabric that is dislocated due to violence and displacement.

2.5 Host-Refugee Relations

Competition over resource access, destruction of the environment, and unbalanced rations in the aid attributable to Rohingya refugees and host communities in Cox's Bazar contributes to tensions (Hassan et al., 2020; Southwick, 2020). The intergroup understanding has been supported through joint activity that has been facilitated by local NGOs, including sports events, tree planting, and cultural exchanges (Lewis, 2020). Such efforts are indicative of the larger peacebuilding efforts, involving an attempt to deal with the relational aspects of the politics of displacement as well as establishing common ground in cooperation (ICG, 2023).

2.6 Communication/ Rumour Management

Misinformation is something that can easily lead to increased tensions in the context where there are not many formal channels of communication available. Local NGOs within the Rohingya camps have prepared community volunteers to check and share reliable information and rely on interpersonal networks of trust to spread information instead of broadcasting (Barbelet et al., 2021). This conforms to evidence that witnessed the effectiveness of trusted voices on a local level during crisis situations, especially in a setting where access to digital technologies is very low.

2.7 Structural barriers and Humanitarian Localization

Localization in humanitarianism and most notably with the Grand Bargain in 2016 has been moved as a solution in empowering localities in crisis response. However, various reports claim that localization has been more of a rhetoric than formal structure (Barbelet, 2019). Local NGOs in action are usually subcontracted to foreign NGOs (INGOs) or the United Nations agencies in the Rohingya response, which restricts their strategic independence (Wake & Bryant, 2018). This has manifested itself through other longstanding conflicts around the world, including South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo where local organizations can offer vital services but are not a part of the funding discussions and decision making tables (Howe et al., 2020). This structural marginalization in the context of Bangladesh not only leads to hampering innovation but it also limits sustainability because short-term funding cycles hinder peacebuilding and long term efforts (Knox Clarke, 2018). The literature also argues that meaningful localization entails evolving the situation where programs are subcontracted out and instead have them be co-created so that local actors are brought on board in terms of designing and evaluating.

2.8 Grassroots framework of Everyday Peace

Mac Ginty (2014) inspires a reorientation of peacebuilding around what he refers to as everyday peace, a concept that situates peacebuilding as a series of small-scale usually informal and consensual practices through which local order is stabilized where there is no political settlement. This point of view goes hand-in-hand with the conflict transformation theory developed by *Lederach (1997)* that suggests focusing on relationship-building and reconciliation instead of punishment. The anthropological insights (*Scheper-Hughes, 1992; Good, 1993*) also underline that this kind of work at the grassroots level peace is based on cultural norms, moral economy, and local traditions of administration, including bamboo houses of Bangladesh and its shalish mediation system. NGOs use these mechanisms that are culturally entrenched at the Rohingya camps to resolve conflicts, address misinformation, and build social

connections, similar to the grassroots approaches in refugees in Uganda and Lebanon. These models depict how the humanitarian form of peacebuilding is usually conducted at the fringes and not in the form of a formal institution but through the establishment of trust networks.

2.9 Feminist views and Gender-Sensitive Peacebuilding

The literature on feminist peacebuilding criticizes mainstream peace processes because they focus on masculinized, public, and political spaces and ignore domestic and relational aspects of peace (Chowdhury & Sultana, 2021). Women in conflict prevention, in the case of refugees, may do that in an informal, domestic environment: kitchen, backyard, communal meetings. Such programs as Shanti Adda help women to express their trauma and offer women a safe community where they support each other and experiment with destructive gender norms in the Rohingya camps (UN Women & ISCG, 2021). This is reflective of similar women-led peacebuilding processes in the context of post-conflict traditional societies in Liberia and Nepal in which narration, nurturing, and reciprocity are the primary conflict transformation devices. However, regardless of their significance, there are often gaps in funding and visibility of said initiatives, which is a broader representation of gender inequities when it comes to humanitarian programming (Chowdhury & Rahman, 2021).

2.10 Social Suffering and the Psychosocial Healing

Such psychosocial consequences of displacement and violence go far above the individual traumas and includes a collective loss and fear and marginalization—a subjective term that is grasped by the anthropology of social suffering (Kleinman et al., 1997). When implementing psychosocial interventions in Cox's Bazar, the local NGOs adapt them to the local culture, and they do not use clinical terms but terminology that makes sense in the context of a particular culture. Such group activities as art therapy, drama and group Hope Circles are used to express emotions and to develop a community. Studies of similar culturally accommodated psychosocial programs in Syrian refugee camps in Jordan and Palestinian camps in Lebanon provide evidence that such interventions are more effective when they are based on local narratives as far as trust and engagement are concerned (OECD, 2012). This points to the fact that the psychosocial healing cannot be accomplished without the extensive social cohesion initiatives.

2.11 Shared spaces and host-Refugee Relations

More than one million Rohingya refugees have increased the strain of scarce resources, further straining relationships with host populations in Cox's Bazar. The responsive activities organized by the local NGOs include collaboration in the establishment of sports between communities, various environmental restoration projects, and cultural exchange, which positively interact with each other (Lewis, 2020). This has been found to be the case through similar methods in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya and Gambella region in Ethiopia where shared spaces and working together produce loss of intergroup prejudice and building trust. Nevertheless, as the International Crisis Group (ICG, 2023) observes such undertaking requires continuous and contextual work so that such matters do not revert back to hostilities.

2.12 Information Trust Rumour Management

A rumour can spread easily and cause panic or violence especially in the low digital refugee camp settings and even in high density. The studies demonstrate that local messengers (those individuals, members of the community who may be trusted and trained to verify rumors) work better than external actors to counter misinformation (Barbelet et al., 2021). Comedy shows, information vehicles, and peer

to peer conversations have helped to tackle disinformation related to repatriation, distribution of aid and even health emergencies in the Rohingya context. Similar tactics to the West African responses to Ebola disease reveal that trust in the community is the key element of crisis communication, and not the correctness of the message.

3. METHODS

3.1 Study Design

This paper took a qualitative ethnographic research study as an instrument of understanding why local non-governmental organizations in this research study can contribute to peacebuilding and conflict resolution in Rohingya refugee camps of Cox's Bazar. The fieldwork took place during the period of January 2022 and December 2024; its task was the documentation of the daily activities, confusions, and social interactions that determine peacebuilding in displacement sites. The research design included in-depth interviews, key informant discussions, and use of participant observation to come up with knowledge on how the local actors respond to conflict in a culturally supportive manner. This research was also informed by the anthropology approaches applied in crisis-afflicted communities (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Good 1993). With such approaches, a thick description, employment of social contexts, and inclusion of the marginalized voices (or in this case, community peace workers and women-led projects) were central in this research.

3.2 Study Setting

Fieldwork was done within a chosen number of Rohingya camps in Ukhiya and Teknaf sub-districts in the Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh. The camps found in these areas are 34 and carry more than 1 million Rohingya people (UNHCR 2025). The camps are co-governed with the direction of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC), and humanitarian coordination is organized by sector-based clusters (ISCG 2023). The camps are hyper-congested and infrastructurally weak with limited flows of movements, informal economies and have high levels of social tensions. International NGOs like the BRAC, SHED, CODEC, Mukti Cox and NONGOR devices are located in these locations-offering a variety of provisions to society such as education, psychosocial health care, and informal justice.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

Purposive and snowballing were combined during the selection of participants. The first engagement was done by contacting offices of local NGOs, peace dealers in the communities, and community leaders who were conversant with peace-based programming. The sample was the field workers of NGOs, peace educators, psychosocial counsellors, Rohingya refugee volunteer workers, and members of the host communities who were involved in social cohesion activities. The applicants had to fulfil the selection criteria that considered prior knowledge of the potential candidate related to mediation, facilitation of dialogues, working with youth or gender-based work on peace.

3.4 Methods of Data Collection

The data were collected using 31 semi-structured interviews (17 with NGO staff and peace facilitators, 9 with Rohingya refugee participants, 5 with the host community members), 4 focus group discussions with Community Peace Volunteers, and participant observation of the activities of the NGOs in their community centers, youth clubs, and women spaces. It was conversed in Bangla, Rohingya dialects or

in English according to the context and language ease. The observed included a chance to participate in training workshops and drama but also the informal dispute mediation activities, since ethnography was applied, as per the same displacement studies conducted previously (Manderson 2020; Farmer 2003). All the interviews took place by means of audio recording in the condition of verbal consent, which was followed by transcribing the conversation scene-by-scene and where the necessity appeared, in translation. There was the taking of observations when in the field or immediately after the visit to ensure there is contextual accuracy

Table 1: Categories and Characteristics of the Respondents (n = 31)

Category	Gender (M/F)	Age Range	Role Examples	Interview Type	n
NGO Staff / Peace Facilitators	8 M / 9 F	25–50	Field officers, program coordinators, psychosocial workers	IDI / KII	17
Rohingya Refugee Participants	4 M / 5 F	20–48	Youth club members, women’s circle participants, volunteer mediators	IDI	9
Host Community Members	3 M / 2 F	28–55	Local leaders, teachers, joint program participants	IDI	5
Total	15 M / 16 F	20–55	—	—	31

Source: Authors compilation, 2025

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to define the major patterns of the data. It was guided by frameworks of everyday peace (Mac Ginty 2014), conflict transformation (Lederach 1997) and criticism on humanitarian localization (Barbelet 2019). Deductive (deduced based on existing literature) and inductive (generated based on field narratives) coding was performed along thematic lines with the concern of how the NGOs see conflicts, how they decide to respond, their connections with population in need, and structural limitations associated with them. Data saturation was reached when additional interviews yielded no new information.

3.6 Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Fieldwork in Cox’s Bazar faced several constraints. Access to some camps and populations was restricted by government permissions and security protocols, limiting the sampling frame. Political sensitivities occasionally constrained open discussion about repatriation and justice issues, potentially leading to self-censorship among respondents. Language barriers required interpreters for some interviews, which may have introduced translation bias. Ethical safeguards included informed consent, confidentiality, and referral pathways for participants disclosing acute distress. These limitations mean the findings should be read as contextually grounded insights rather than statistically representative generalizations.

4. RESULTS

Local NGOs in Cox’s Bazar act as flexible, community-embedded peace actors operating across several complementary domains: (a) preventive education and youth engagement, (b) community dispute mediation, (c) gender-sensitive interventions and psychosocial support, and (d) host–refugee social cohesion and rumour management.

Youth-focused informal education (e.g., peace clubs, sports activities) reduces recruitment into criminal networks and creates safe spaces for dialogue. Community-level dispute resolution often led by trained volunteers or respected elders provides an accessible alternative to absent formal justice mechanisms, resolving domestic and inter-household tensions quickly and with social legitimacy. Women's spaces and psychosocial programs serve dual functions of trauma healing and family mediation, preventing escalation of domestic violence and early marriage in many cases. NGOs' information management (rumour verification teams, mobile info sessions) mitigates panic and prevents rumour-driven conflict.

These roles are mutually reinforcing psychosocial work increases trust that aids mediation; youth engagement reduces incidents requiring mediation; and trust built via repeated interactions enables NGOs to act as intermediaries between refugees and host communities. However, the overall impact is fragile dependent on short funding cycles, restricted operational autonomy, and political sensitivities that limit rights-based work. The evidence suggests that while local NGOs are essential for maintaining everyday peace, their capacity to generate durable, systemic change remains constrained by structural and resource limits.

5. DISCUSSION

This study illustrates how local NGOs act as indispensable agents of everyday peace within the Rohingya camps of Cox's Bazar. They are embedded in local trust networks, share the cultural and linguistic environment of the refugees and hosts, and rely on interpersonal relationships as the foundation of conflict resolution. Rather than relying on formal negotiations, peacebuilding occurs through small-scale, relational gestures listening, empathy, humour, and mutual assistance.

The findings demonstrate that these organizations go beyond service delivery: they mediate disputes, provide psychosocial healing, and foster community cohesion. Women's peace circles such as *Shanti Adda* and household-level dialogues show how feminist peacebuilding functions through emotional and relational labour rather than formal institutions. Such work contests traditional, masculinized understandings of peacebuilding and highlights the significance of care, solidarity, and mutual recognition.

However, these grassroots efforts face serious structural constraints. Local NGOs operate under subcontracted relationships with international actors and depend on short-term project-based funding. Bureaucratic approval processes, restrictive regulations, and the political sensitivity surrounding rights-based discourse restrict their autonomy and innovation. Donor priorities often demand visible, quantifiable outputs rather than patient social change, thereby undermining sustainability. These dynamics reinforce power asymmetries and risk turning localization into symbolic inclusion rather than genuine empowerment.

5.1 Comparative Perspective

The dynamics observed in Cox's Bazar mirror patterns found in other protracted refugee settings. For instance, Syrian refugee contexts in Jordan and Lebanon show that community-based mediation and youth engagement can reduce local violence and rumour-driven panic. In Kenya's Kakuma and Uganda's Bidi Bidi camps, direct funding to refugee- and host-led initiatives enhanced legitimacy and adaptability. These parallels demonstrate that lessons from Cox's Bazar particularly the importance of trust-based, culturally grounded peace work, are transferable, though always shaped by national policies and political environments.

5.2 Structural Limitations

Beyond funding shortages, local NGOs face opaque approval processes, limited representation in coordination platforms, and a lack of legal protection. Short project cycles erode institutional memory and create staff burnout. Political and social pressures often force organizations to frame peace work as “education” or “family welfare” instead of rights-based engagement, curbing their transformative potential. These structural barriers constrain both scale and autonomy, preventing local NGOs from addressing the root causes of displacement-related tensions.

5.3 Policy and Programmatic Recommendations

- Flexible, long-term funding: Donors should provide multi-year core support to credible local NGOs to strengthen institutional stability.
- Inclusive coordination: Ensure that local NGOs have decision-making power in humanitarian and protection sector meetings.
- Streamlined approvals: Simplify and standardize government authorization processes to reduce delays and uncertainty.
- Capacity partnerships: Move from one-off training to mentorship and co-learning models focused on mediation and trauma-informed care.
- Safety and wellbeing: Provide legal and psychological support for peacebuilders, especially women working in sensitive environments.
- Localization monitoring: Require annual transparency on the proportion of funding reaching local actors.

Support refugee-led projects: Allocate micro-grants for joint host–refugee initiatives that foster trust and shared ownership of peace.

6. CONCLUSION

Peacebuilding cannot be disentangled with day-to-day survival in humanitarian situations defined by protracted displacement, legal ambiguity and social fragmentation. The discussion in this study demonstrates that local NGOs in the Rohingya camps of Cox Bazar, though they regularly receive less attention, are crucially instrumental in the establishment and maintenance of informal infrastructures of peace. They deal with the micro-conflicts that constitute daily life in the context of displacement through culturally informed practices, such as youth clubs, trauma circles, women-led dialogue, and community mediation. Whereas the international actors can offer scale and resources, local NGOs can offer something instead: trust, continuity and cultural fluency. These bodies are not merely agents of other frameworks, but of care, flexibility and informal justice within a system that in many cases denies the refugee legal entitlements and social respectability. Yet, the results also outline the structural factors that restrain the sustainability and independence of grass roots peace building. Local NGOs lack the ability to lead due to donor dependency, restrictions by various bureaucratic procedures that are involved, political sensitivities and security threats. International interest in so-called localization should then not stop at outsourcing and rhetorical participation but instead results to actual collaboration and decentralized authority. Anthropologically, peace in the camps is neither a far-fetched dream to be worked out in Geneva or Naypyidaw. It is reproduced and reproduced daily in classrooms, kitchens,

prayer rooms and in courtyards by people who live with differences and continue to prefer dialogue. To notice and reward these minor gestures of peace does not just mean doing a good deed, it is a need that allows keeping our hope alive in one of the most intricate humanitarian dilemmas worldwide.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

No conflicts of interest.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

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