

## Life in Limbo: Why Do Rohingya Refugees Remains Reside in Malaysia?

### *Kehidupan dalam Limbo: Mengapa Pelarian Rohingya Kekal untuk Tinggal di Malaysia?*

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#### ABSTRACT

*We do not deny that residing in Malaysia presents formidable challenges, particularly for Rohingya refugees, due to the increasingly prevalent xenophobic attitudes towards them. Consequently, the question arises: "Despite the numerous hardships they must face, why do they remain to reside in Malaysia?" The theoretical aim of our study is to elucidate that despite the challenges, refugees still have the capacity to lead meaningful lives. Based on interviews with seven Rohingya refugees, our findings suggest that factors including the peaceful region, family members and friends, acts of kindness and generosity, and support from organizations, especially the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), motivate refugees to remain in Malaysia. These indicators stem from Malaysia's status as a peaceful region, which facilitates the emergence of these factors in refugees' lives. In summary, refugee life is not as dire as previously portrayed in much of the literature; they still possess what we refer to as "spaces," as this group is capable of leading lives that include informal employment, education, and receiving aid and support, whether from state or non-state actors. These spaces serve as a crucial function in justifying why Rohingya refugees choose to remain in Malaysia.*

*Keywords: life in limbo; Malaysia; Rohingya refugees; space*

#### ABSTRAK

*Kami tidak menafikan tinggal di Malaysia memberi cabaran yang sengit dan sukar untuk mengekalkan daya tahan pelarian khususnya Rohingya kerana ekor fenomena xenophobia yang makin menebal terhadap mereka. Disebabkan itu, muncul persoalan yang bermain di fikiran kami "walaupun banyak kesukaran yang perlu dihadapi tetapi mengapa mereka masih memilih untuk terus tinggal di Malaysia?" Secara teoritikalnya tujuan kami adalah untuk menggambarkan sebenarnya walaupun terdapat cabaran tetapi pelarian masih mempunyai ruang untuk terus menjalani kehidupan. Penemuan kami bersama tujuh orang pelarian Rohingya- wilayah aman, saudara dan kawan, kebaikan dan sifat pemurah dan sokongan daripada organisasi termasuk UNHCR dan NGO mempunyai kaitan antara satu sama lain yang menyebabkan mereka kekal memilih untuk tinggal di Malaysia. Semua indikator ini juga berpunca daripada wujudnya Malaysia sebagai wilayah aman yang membenarkan faktor tersebut untuk muncul dalam kehidupan pelarian. Sebagai rumusan, kehidupan pelarian bukanlah menemui jalan mati seperti kebanyakan kajian lepas bincangkan, mereka masih mempunyai apa yang kami angkat sebagai "ruang" kerana jelas kumpulan ini masih mampu menjalani kehidupan termasuk bekerja dalam sektor tidak formal, bersekolah, bantuan dan perjuangan yang sentiasa dihulurkan sama ada daripada kerajaan atau aktor bukan negara. Ruang ini yang menjadi fungsi penting kepada justifikasi kenapa pelarian Rohingya kekal memilih untuk tinggal di Malaysia.*

*Kata kunci: kehidupan di limbo; kekal untuk tinggal; Malaysia; pelarian Rohingya; ruang*

## INTRODUCTION

We acknowledge that sustaining life for refugees in Malaysia is not an easy endeavor, and their existence is akin to being in a state of despair. While many view refugees in Malaysia as marginalized, we perceive them as exposed individuals who have fled conflict-ridden countries. Their lives, still bound by multiple constraints, form the basis for our subsequent exploration of their interconnectedness with the space they inhabit. Although the presence of refugees is temporary, they deserve to be treated humanely. Furthermore, viewing Malaysia as a transit country is no longer relevant, especially when many have lived here from one generation to another for decades and raising their families. Therefore, to us, the transit status is necessary in framing the question of why they continue to reside in Malaysia when this country is merely a transit point.

We highlight the Rohingya refugees' experience, offering a narrative that delves into their life and space dynamics. The Rohingya considered one of the most vulnerable ethnic groups, encounter multifaceted challenges in comparison to other nationalities or ethnicities, owing to their more significant numbers and their less hospitable reception by local communities (Putri & Gabiella 2022; Muzafarkamal & Hossain 2019). Furthermore, recently, increasing xenophobic sentiments among the local populace towards refugees have further complicated their lives, limiting movements and freedoms.

Given the numerous studies conducted before, our study does not intend to discuss aspects of resilience and resistance among Rohingya refugees, the role of state or non-state actors, or community-based organizations (CBOs). Thus, our main concern revolves around why Rohingya refugees remain to reside in Malaysia. It is important to distinguish why refugees choose Malaysia as a destination and why they remain in Malaysia.

The reasons for choosing Malaysia as a destination are often depicted as pull factors, including geography, social networks, visa exemption policies, and religious freedom. Geography plays a significant role because refugees seek refuge in nearby countries for safety and cost-effectiveness. Social networks within the refugee community and the information they provide about job prospects and housing facilities facilitate the decision to choose Malaysia. Visa exemption policies make Malaysia easily accessible to refugees, mainly from Muslim countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Palestine, and Yemen. Lastly, the freedom to practice their religion in Malaysia, coupled with its status as an Islamic country, attracts a noticeable influx of Muslim refugees to the country (Nazri & Zainuddin 2023).

Meanwhile, the question of why Rohingya refugees remain in Malaysia depicts their experiences after enduring hardships here. Therefore, to avoid confusion, we ask Rohingya refugees: "*Why do you choose to stay in Malaysia despite facing multifaceted challenges?*" In answering this question, we emphasize space as essential for justifying the raised question (Dell 2022). Refugees' experience of space and place is not solely determined by external factors such as legal constraints and socio-economic conditions. Internal hopes and aspirations also shape it for a better future, which guides their daily actions and interactions within the environment (Rajan 2023). Urban areas provide suitable habitats for displaced populations due to the necessary infrastructure for housing and daily life, informal economies enabling diverse livelihoods, the anonymity of urban life protecting from eviction, and the freedom to live outside camp environments offering a certain level of flexibility. However, challenges in the complex world characterized by poverty, violence, and instability make the struggle to survive a nuanced daily negotiation process (Basu & Ascii 2020).

Our study aims to highlight the role of space in shaping refugees' life narratives and influencing their decisions to remain in Malaysia. We have formulated a succinct hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Despite numerous challenges making refugee life difficult, they still have space that leads them to choose to continue living in Malaysia.

We believe that this study does not only contribute empirically by uncovering justifications for Rohingya refugees' continued settlement in Malaysia, but it also contributes conceptually by introducing the relationship between space and refugees in the context of Malaysia, which indeed plays a role embedded in ensuring their well-being amidst life's obstacles. What is significant in this study is that we attempt to elucidate that space still exists for refugees to continue breathing, not too constricted to inhibit living. They still exist within society, their voices are still heard, their rights are still acknowledged, their presence is still recognized, and they can still socialize with the local community — all of which undoubtedly highlight the existence and functionality of space.

### LIFE IN LIMBO: RESISTANCES AMONG ROHINGYA REFUGEES IN MALAYSIA

In general, a transit country is one through which refugees and migrants pass on their way to their preferred country of asylum; it can be located anywhere between their country of origin and destination (Kilibarda 2017). However, the experience of living in a transit country like Malaysia does not always match expectations, as fate and stories often go unheard. Assistance from UNHCR and other NGOs has significantly contributed to refugees' ability to survive. Transit countries play a crucial role in protecting these refugees, not only in adherence to international laws and the global community but also based on humanitarian principles (Sahak, Nordin & Kalthum 2020; Nazri & Zainuddin 2023). Previous studies have extensively discussed the types of resistance among Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, eventually conceptualized as "life in limbo."

We identify a key issue contributing significantly to the resistance when UNHCR cards are not recognized in Malaysia (Togoo & Ismail 2021). The primary concern for Rohingya refugees in Malaysia revolves around their safety; even if they possess UNHCR cards as proof of identity, it does not guarantee their immunity from arrest or detention by the enforcement authorities. The second major issue refugees face is the denial of proper education for their children.

Rohingya refugees in Malaysia face numerous challenges, including disruptions, exploitation, detentions, deportations, risks of detention and punishment for unauthorized entry (including imprisonment), discrimination, limited access to fundamental rights such as legal status, employment, healthcare, and education, as well as the risk of refoulement (Mahaseth & Banusekar 2022). The study also revealed instances of sexual and economic exploitation, as well as other human rights violations and limited protection for women and children, resulting in risks of sexual abuse and violence. Additionally, they noted inhumane practices such as caning as punishment for immigration violations contributing to psychological issues.

We posit that the right to work restricts the mobility of refugees who opt to remain in Malaysia. Rohingya refugees in Malaysia face challenges related to their right to work due to Malaysia not being a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, making them ineligible for legal protection under existing laws. Without the right to work, Rohingya refugees in Malaysia often work in modern slavery conditions, with low or unpaid wages and notorious working conditions. The Malaysian government has shown a lack of consistent policy and coordination with international agencies working to improve the welfare of the Rohingya, leading to inadequate support for their right to work. The Malaysian government initiated a pilot

project in 2016, allowing a limited number of Rohingya refugees to work in the plantation and manufacturing sectors legally, but the success and failure of this project have been widely debated (Haque, Othman & Bin Mat 2023).

Aside from work issues, Rohingya parents expressed concerns about their children's future due to a lack of formal education. The primary factor was their stateless status, as they lacked identification documents such as identity cards and passports. However, many could still access schools managed by Malaysian humanitarian NGOs, albeit with the need to pay fees. For those less privileged, parents would send their children to community-run schools or community learning centers, often facing shortages of resources and teaching materials (Mustafa et al. 2023).

Financial difficulties are a significant barrier to accessing healthcare services in Malaysia for refugees, and restricted access to low-paying jobs due to their status. The journey to Malaysia itself poses health challenges, with refugees facing diseases and a lack of necessities such as proper food and clean water. Furthermore, the absence of employment rights denies refugees the opportunity to earn more and afford better healthcare. The lack of identity documents, except for the UN card, makes refugees vulnerable to suspicion and illegal status in Malaysia, impacting their daily experiences related to health and well-being. Additionally, the denial of citizenship rights in Myanmar, rendering Rohingya refugees stateless, further complicates their access to healthcare and other necessities (Rahman & Dutta 2023).

Over the past seven years, the escalating xenophobia manifested as animosity toward Rohingya refugees has become increasingly pronounced (Rashid & Saidin 2023). Rohingya refugees in Malaysia face discrimination and animosity from the local population, as evidenced by discriminatory messages on Twitter. Tweets containing the term "*pendatang*" (immigrant) in a derogatory manner were identified, reflecting negative sentiments towards Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. "*Please reject the incoming Rohingya immigrants! Those who have entered, please ask them to leave!*" The absence of a distinction between refugees and undocumented migrants in Malaysia contributes to inconsistencies in the government's policies towards refugees. Malaysians express dissatisfaction with Rohingya refugees, a sentiment amplified on social media during the COVID-19 crisis. The surge in COVID-19 cases in Malaysia led to an increase in discriminatory messages towards Rohingya refugees on Twitter.

Interestingly, in our review of past studies, the issues frequently discussed revolved around documentation or UNHCR cards, the right to work, education, and health. However, there was a limited discussion on how Rohingya refugees often fall victim to exploitation through human trafficking (Wahab & Khairi 2020). The study illustrated that issues of human trafficking and arbitrary detention by law enforcement were the most complicated hurdles. Simultaneously, their study discussed two types of resistance as consequences when Rohingya refugees were denied legal assistance, even though this service is a crucial aspect that should be provided to refugees. There are four main obstacles in providing legal aid services to vulnerable non-citizens: a) Limited scope of legal aid protection. b) financial constraints; c) restriction on private lawyers' participation in legal aid schemes; d) lack of awareness. Their study concluded that the failure of social institutions, especially legal aid institutions, to provide sufficient access to legal aid for refugees indicates unfair adjudication in Malaysia.

Based on the discussion above, we probably conclude that the types of resistance among Rohingya refugees in Malaysia include issues related to documentation, lack of recognition of UNHCR cards, prohibition from working, limited access to education and healthcare, frequently becoming victims of human trafficking exploitation, vulnerability to detention, xenophobic victimization from the local community, and limitations in obtaining legal assistance. Therefore,

we are inquisitive about why, despite the numerous resistances they are forced to endure, they still choose to continue residing in Malaysia. We hope that future studies will contribute more to exploring other aspects rather than focusing solely on the challenges confronted by Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, as this aspect has been extensively discussed.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: REFUGEE AND SPACE

Refugees lacking legal status are often depicted as occupying a transitional space, residing in a legal grey area, embodying an unusual, in-between existence markedly distant from desired potential futures (Eriksen 2020: 58). While successfully fleeing conflict in their own country and relocating to Malaysia in hopes of a better life, past studies have shown that Rohingya refugees still face barriers that make their lives vulnerable and fragile, a situation we refer to as 'life in limbo.' Once again, we do not consider these refugees as marginalized but rather as vulnerable because numerous of them still live amidst the local communities, assimilate, enroll in government schools, and work in the informal sector or with Malaysians. Marginalized individuals are excluded from society, but this is not the case for Rohingya refugees. Therefore, we introduce the concept of 'space' here to illustrate that the actual living conditions play a determining role in the fluctuating lives of the refugees.

Migration without space is non-existent, whether in the imaginaries of migration or migration practices. In refugee studies, space is also crucial because, firstly, the necessities of life, from food to shelter, must be provided by local institutions. Secondly, integration processes, even under restricted conditions for refugees, such as the usual work ban in the initial phase, primarily occur at this level. Unlike other migration categories, refugees depend significantly more on local authorities. This increased reliance poses challenges for local offices in organizing financial and human resources to secure basic needs (Wehrhahn & Hathat 2022: 513). Thus, we strongly argue that space is not solely about the physical location of - the city but also about how the space becomes inclusive and grants rights to refugees (Tsavdaroglou 2020);- in a nutshell, how do refugees participate in and contribute to the social, economic, cultural, and political life of cities where they reside, including protection, access to housing, employment, education, healthcare, public services, and others? (Oomen 2020; Basu & Asci 2020; Lyytinen 2015).

We build on the concept of relational space as an entry point to examining why refugees stay despite exclusions. Most studies juxtaposing refugees and space refer to the materialities of space, such as the politics of dwelling and inhabitation (Lancione 2023), residential, cities, place, and camp (Liempt & Staring 2021; Lombard 2014; Sampson & Gifford 2010). While scholarly debates on material spaces are essential, these tangible spaces are entwined with immaterialities that comprise the social spaces of refugees. We draw on scholarship in social infrastructures (Silver & McFarlane 2019) and invisible politics (Miller 2003) to examine how refugee communities co-(re)produce a network of alternative support systems that are not usually recognized as formal and legal infrastructures. Such immaterial support systems are often invisible and silent because they are embedded in the ordinary, day-to-day lives of refugees, in contrast to the more visible and vocal protests in support of refugees that often capture public attention (Caldeira 2015).

In particular, we aim to open a conversation on relational space among refugees by foregrounding AbdouMaliq Simone's (2015) notion of "infrastructures of relationality" (p. 18)—how refugees as community members themselves become "people as infrastructure" (Simone 2021) through organizing themselves and creating support infrastructures comprised of people,



communities, and relationship networks for survival. In other words, refugees' support systems are heavily designed and produced by human relations, which creates relational infrastructures to mediate the lack of formal and legal infrastructures and recreates physical infrastructures that cater to their specific needs (Larkin 2013). We see human relationships as a productive space that enables refugees to negotiate their everyday existence within a foreign material space. This perspective is pertinent in understanding why and how refugees thrive amidst struggles and exclusions. Therefore, we also posit that refugees do not confine themselves solely to their groups but integrate with the local community. Back to an example from Rajan (2023), who highlights Afghan refugee women in Delhi, in terms of spatial conditions, refuse to confine their lives solely to refugee areas, integrating larger urban areas into daily lives by periodically occupying public spaces.

We extend scholarship on relational infrastructure by focusing on human networks among refugees in Malaysia, which create a particular space for them to practice solidarity. We argue that relations forge a space for refugees to negotiate their every precarity in Malaysia. The aim is to show how, through relational infrastructures, camaraderie continually emerges from refugees' trivial everyday interactions (Simone 2010). We also recognize that outside parties impact such negotiations. Relational infrastructures among refugees are complex because refugees are not the only party involved in the co-(re)production of relational infrastructure. A landscape of non-refugee actors, practices, and social institutions meddle with how refugees self-organize, such as local citizens, NGOs/socio-civic groups, the private sector, the state, and other refugee communities. The presence of such parties creates asymmetries in how refugees can act on their relational infrastructures, directly or indirectly. As such, we also unpack how such a web of parties is a part of the negotiation among refugees to create a convivial space for themselves, whereby "materials, spaces, and people may come together, wrap themselves tangled up in impenetrable knots that can be undone only by expenditures of violence and coordination that for one reason, or another prove too costly" (Simone 2014: 229).

## METHODOLOGY

We conducted this study over five months, from October 2023 to February 2024. The methodology in this study utilized an investigative approach, a case study. We positioned ourselves as researchers seeking to explore in-depth the lives of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia because this approach offers a rich method for acquiring information (Widdowson 2011: 26). The primary sample cases consisted of Rohingya refugees residing in and around Kuala Lumpur and Selangor (details in table 1). Why do we choose Rohingya instead of other nationalities or ethnic refugees in Malaysia? Based on the UNHCR record, most refugee population in Malaysia is Rohingya, and they are the most extended group waiting for resettlement.

Meanwhile, the selection of these two states was justified due to the larger population residing here compared to other states. We believe that based on the investigative method it can assist us in understanding the narratives of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia and how the study's objective, namely why they persist in staying in Malaysia, is linked to 'space.' Therefore, all Rohingya refugees whom we interviewed had been residing in Malaysia for more than five years.

TABLE 1. Details of informants

Informant	Date of Interview	Location
Imam Husin	2 November 2023	Selangor
Ali	2 November 2023	Selangor
Iman	2 November 2023	Selangor
Anuar	1 November 2023	Kuala Lumpur
Asiah	2 November 2023	Selangor
Sharif	1 November 2023	Selangor
Yunus	2 November 2023	Selangor

We successfully interviewed seven Rohingya refugees between the ages of 25 and 40, including six men and one woman. All refugee informants are Muslims because they were more comfortable and open to conducting interviews compared to informants from non-Muslim backgrounds who exhibit a fear of sharing information formally. Additionally, the majority of refugees in Malaysia are Muslims. We also used several criteria to ensure that the study's findings could be analyzed from different perspectives to understand refugees and their living conditions. We ensured that those interviewed possessed UNHCR identity cards, could articulate their thoughts effectively, and were willing to share their experiences openly.

During the interview sessions, we took several steps, as illustrated in Figure 1, to ensure that the interview environment ran smoothly and to respect all informants. These steps included:

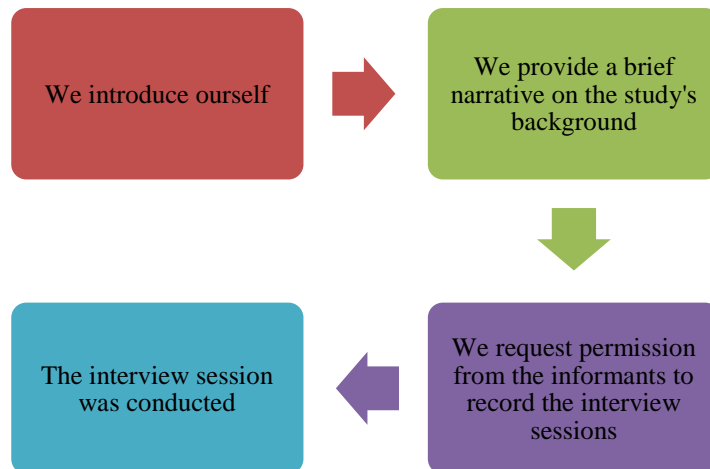


FIGURE 1. The steps taken during the interview

There are several ethical considerations to adhere to when conducting interviews, namely obtaining consent from informants, ensuring interview questions are not burdensome, offensive, or provocative, and allowing informants to decline to answer without coercion. Before concluding the interview session, we allow informants to add additional information. After refugees recount the hardships of life in Malaysia, we ask direct questions, "*Why do you choose to continue staying in Malaysia despite facing multifaceted challenges?*" Since the methodology is in-depth interviewing, we endeavor to dissect questions further based on the responses. For instance, if they respond with "*NGOs always help,*" we ask, "*In what ways do NGOs assist?*" This approach aids the study in exploring and categorizing the various forms of spaces more deeply, elucidating why

they opt to remain in Malaysia, such as "NGOs establishing schools." Typically, an interview session lasts between 30-45 minutes per informant.

#### PARTICIPANTS OBSERVATION

We have undertaken several measures while conducting observations, as suggested by Altricher, Posch, and Somekh (2013: 84-85), to prepare ourselves for enhancing sensitivity and focusing observations on the selected research questions. These steps include 1) focusing on observation, 2) linking observations with the study, 3) observing suspected behaviors, and 4) recording information, especially dates, times, locations, and brief notes after conducting observations. Meanwhile, to record observational events, we have adopted Angrosino's (2007: 40) perspective to ensure that observation notes encompass who is involved, the chronological atmosphere, behaviors, and surrounding interactions.

Observing alongside refugees involves visiting settlements, community centers, NGO-managed refugee schools, and communities. This observational period commenced before the study to identify areas with a substantial concentration of settled refugees and continued until the completion of the study. The observation location selection parallels interviews and encompasses Kuala Lumpur and Selangor.

#### ANALYZE DATA

Thematic analysis is considered the most suitable method for any study to uncover interpretations. It provides a systematic approach to data analysis and enables us to correlate the frequency of theme analysis with the overall content. We believe this technique enhances the accuracy, complexity, and overall meaning of the research (Alhojailan 2012: 40). The goal of thematic analysis is to identify themes that are significant or interesting patterns in the data and to use these themes to address the research problem we pose: "*Why do you still choose to stay in Malaysia?*" Good thematic analysis can interpret and understand it (Maguire & Delahunt 2017: 3353).

In the initial step, we generate initial codes from the data. We work systematically through the entire data set, giving full and equal attention to each data item and identifying exciting aspects that can form the basis of recurring pattern themes throughout the data set. The coding process encompasses all data findings, i.e., interview transcriptions. For example, when generating codes from interview transcription data, taken together with refugees for analysis: "*There are no challenges with the local residents... Alhamdulillah, nobody disturbs us,*" we interpret Malaysia as a peaceful place. Subsequently, we form themes based on this interpretation of a peaceful region. The formed themes will be reviewed repeatedly to ensure alignment with our research objectives and verify the interview data's validity.



## FINDINGS

### FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO THE CHOICE OF ROHINGYA REFUGEES TO REMAIN IN MALAYSIA

#### PEACEFUL REGION

Refugees fleeing conflict zones to safe havens aim to save themselves and ensure survival. Typically, geographical factors play a significant role in their choice to escape to a particular country, with a tendency to opt for neighboring or nearby countries as places of refuge due to ease and cost-effectiveness. However, geography is a determinant before arriving in the chosen country. Therefore, geography cannot be considered a factor explaining why refugees settle in Malaysia. We have found that for those who have lived in Malaysia for decades, it is because the country is safe in terms of the absence of conflict, and there is no tendency towards any disturbances, making them feel more secure and safe.

Based on the report issued by the Institute for Economic and Peace (2023), 84 countries recorded an improvement as peaceful nations last year, while 79 countries experienced a decline in peace. Figure 2 also illustrates that Malaysia ranks 19th as a peaceful country globally, which signifies a significant increase and provides a positive outlook for Rohingya refugees in their decision to continue residing there.

RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	CHANGE	RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	CHANGE	RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	CHANGE
1	Iceland	1.124	↔	29	Poland	1.634	↓ 6	57	Moldova	1.873	↑ 4
2	Denmark	1.31	↑ 1	30	Bulgaria	1.643	↓ 5	58	Chile	1.874	↓ 5
3	Ireland	1.312	↓ 1	31	Romania	1.649	↑ 4	59	The Gambia	1.888	↓ 8
4	New Zealand	1.313	↑ 2	32	Spain	1.649	↔	60	Greece	1.89	↓ 6
5	Austria	1.316	↓ 1	33	Taiwan	1.649	↑ 2	61	Bosnia and Herzegovina	1.892	↓ 4
6	Singapore	1.332	↑ 4	34	Italy	1.662	↓ 2	62	Jordan	1.895	↑ 6
7	Portugal	1.333	↑ 1	35	Kuwait	1.669	↑ 3	63	Zambia	1.898	↓ 4
8	Slovenia	1.334	↓ 4	36	Lithuania	1.671	↓ 2	64	Cyprus	1.904	↑ 1
9	Japan	1.336	↔	37	United Kingdom	1.693	↓ 1	65	Serbia	1.921	↓ 7
10	Switzerland	1.339	↑ 1	38	North Macedonia	1.713	↓ 1	66	Armenia	1.929	↑ 3
11	Canada	1.35	↑ 2	39	Costa Rica	1.731	↑ 2	67	France	1.939	↔
12	Czechia	1.379	↓ 5	40	Albania	1.745	↔	=68	Panama	1.942	↓ 8
13	Finland	1.399	↑ 3	41	Vietnam	1.745	↑ 4	=68	Paraguay	1.942	↑ 12
14	Croatia	1.45	↑ 1	42	Botswana	1.762	↑ 6	=70	Trinidad and Tobago	1.946	↑ 1
15	Germany	1.456	↑ 2	43	South Korea	1.763	↑ 2	=70	Kosovo	1.946	↑ 5
16	Netherlands	1.49	↑ 5	44	Mongolia	1.765	↓ 5	=70	Liberia	1.946	↑ 8
17	Bhutan	1.496	↓ 5	45	Montenegro	1.772	↑ 5	73	Cambodia	1.947	↓ 1
18	Hungary	1.508	↓ 4	46	Laos	1.779	↑ 3	74	Malawi	1.97	↓ 4
19	Malaysia	1.513	↔	47	Sierra Leone	1.792	↔	75	United Arab Emirates	1.979	↑ 3
20	Belgium	1.523	↑ 4	48	Oman	1.794	↑ 18	76	Kazakhstan	1.98	↑ 21
21	Qatar	1.524	↑ 1	49	Timor-Leste	1.796	↑ 3	77	Jamaica	1.986	↑ 3
22	Australia	1.525	↑ 4	50	Uruguay	1.798	↓ 5	78	Bolivia	2.001	↓ 1
23	Mauritius	1.546	↑ 5	51	Ghana	1.799	↓ 8	79	Nepal	2.006	↓ 5
24	Norway	1.55	↓ 6	52	Senegal	1.827	↑ 4	80	China	2.009	↑ 6
25	Estonia	1.563	↑ 1	53	Indonesia	1.829	↓ 12	81	Tunisia	2.01	↑ 1
26	Slovakia	1.578	↓ 6	54	Argentina	1.837	↑ 10	82	Equatorial Guinea	2.013	↓ 19
27	Latvia	1.582	↑ 3	55	Madagascar	1.846	↔	83	Dominican Republic	2.019	↑ 5
28	Sweden	1.625	↑ 1	56	Namibia	1.859	↑ 6				

FIGURE 2. Peaceful countries in the world  
 Source: Institute for Economic and Peace (2023)

Based on our observations, for refugees, the concept of security means having the freedom to move anywhere without any disturbance from others, especially from the local community, as described by Anuar. This freedom is a crucial right, particularly for refugees who seek their livelihood in the informal sector (see Figure 3), such as scavenging used goods, where they are

more exposed to the risk of harassment from the local population, who may feel uncomfortable with their presence or perceive them as challenging local job opportunities.



FIGURE 3. Rohingya refugees engage in the informal sector by gathering used items for refurbishment and resale

"Alhamdulillah," said Anuar, "There are no challenges with the residents... Alhamdulillah, nobody disturbs us." Muslim refugees, in particular, also have the freedom to go to mosques and perform prayers together with the congregation without any hindrance or disturbance. Anuar's expression, "Can go to the mosque or something like that," indicates that refugees feel comfortable and at ease in performing their religious duties in Malaysia. Furthermore, we argue that security is a significant concern for refugees who seek the freedom to visit and meet with family and friends, both in the privacy of their own homes and in public places such as restaurants and shopping centers. Additionally, many refugees have successfully navigated border crossings between districts or states, whether for purposes of relocation, travel, or meeting their acquaintances.

#### MUSLIM COUNTRY

Aside from the peace factor, Rohingya refugees choose to continue residing in Malaysia because it is a Muslim country. We acknowledge that this factor serves as the primary consideration for Rohingya refugees in choosing Malaysia as a destination for protection while they are in their home country, as Malaysia is a Muslim-majority country that practices Islam faithfully (Nazri & Zainuddin 2023). However, we still question whether the factor of Malaysia being a Muslim country remains relevant when Rohingya refugees reside in Malaysia, especially for those who have settled for an extended period despite being forced to confront numerous difficulties.

The results of the interviews indicate that the majority of Rohingya refugees, namely Anuar, Yunus, Ali, and Iman, affirm that Malaysia, being a Muslim country, remains an essential factor. For them, it is easy to practice Islam without any hindrance, as expressed by Anuar in the

previous section, where he mentions the freedom to go to mosques. We also found that Ali shares the same view- Malaysia's status as an Islamic country facilitates his religious practices.

Yunus expresses his concern about living in Thailand due to the attitude of the population, which is unfavorable towards Muslims. He states:

*"I fear they will treat me like in my own country because they are Buddhists. Malaysia is an Islamic country with good people; I like living here."*

The word "fear" here indicates Yunus's sense of threat in choosing Thailand as a place to settle. Analysis of Yunus's statement indicates that he experiences apprehension about the environment in Thailand due to the population's unfavorable attitude toward Muslims. By mentioning his personal experience and concerns, Yunus emphasizes the discomfort and apprehension experienced by Rohingya refugees when in a country that may not sympathize with their religion and identity.

Iman expresses his satisfaction because all residents in Malaysia are Muslims, making the living environment more comfortable. Iman expresses his satisfaction because all residents in Malaysia are Muslims, making the living environment more comfortable. This shared religious identity suggests that Rohingya refugees find comfort and security in the social environment of Malaysia, as they share the same religious beliefs as most of the local population. This shared faith fosters their sense of acceptance and integration into Malaysian society.

We observe how all Rohingya refugees interviewed appreciate the positive relationship between Islam and the kindness of the Malaysian people, which motivates them to choose Malaysia as their place of residence. This appreciation illustrates how religion and perceptions of the country as an Islamic state play a significant role in the decision-making process of Rohingya refugees in selecting Malaysia as their place of residence.

#### FAMILY MEMBERS AND FRIENDS

The Rohingya refugees choose to remain in Malaysia due to significant pull factors, primarily because many of their acquaintances, including family members and friends, are already in Malaysia - this justification also contributes to their decision to settle in the country. Our observations indicate that in most areas where Rohingya refugees reside, such as Gombak, Selayang, Ampang, Hulu Langat, and Kajang, they live in clustered groups adjacent to family members or friends (see Figure 4). Moreover, some refugees live under the same roof with married family members. For instance, married daughters with children still reside under the same roof as their parents. We observed that the main factor contributing to this trend is to save costs on rent and daily expenses, especially since the women do not work and solely depend on the irregular income of the men, who work informally.





FIGURE 4. Rohingya refugees reside nearby and form a community in Hulu Langat, Selangor

However, we observed several other factors regarding refugees' tendency to live in areas with relatives or friends. Firstly, the presence of relatives or friends in the area provides crucial social support. They can provide emotional support and address needs and concerns to help sustain life. For example, if a family member runs out of food supplies, is short on money, or faces difficulties, acquaintances will immediately aid without seeking help from others, UNHCR, or NGOs. We found that refugees have strong bonds and support networks - CBO - among themselves. CBOs are vital in empowering communities, fostering social cohesion, and addressing local challenges through grassroots initiatives and collective action.

Furthermore, living adjacent to relatives or friends provides a sense of security to the refugees. They feel more protected and supported in terms of safety and well-being. Relatives or friends living in the area for longer can also be a vital source of reference and information for refugees. They can guide registration procedures, local regulations, job opportunities, and access to other essential services. Additionally, the presence of relatives or friends with similar cultural backgrounds can help refugees feel more comfortable and easily interact in a familiar environment. Lastly, refugees feel socially and emotionally connected to their relatives or friends, making them more inclined to stay in areas that offer them opportunities to maintain relationships and build strong bonds. We also observed other needs arising from family factors, especially for parents who have sent their children to school for regular education - causing disruptions to learning if they were to move to another country. For example, Sharif stated:

*"Even though some family members have gone for resettlement, how can I follow? My child is still learning to read the Quran, but the learning process is incomplete."*

This statement shows that he is a responsible father, emphasizing spiritual learning, and he has to set aside the desire to follow other family members for resettlement to ensure that his child can continue learning the Quran.

KINDNESS AND GENEROUS

Malaysia is renowned for being a country whose populace embodies good morals, friendliness, and hospitality, even towards the "unknown." Hence, most immigrants prefer to settle within the local community. We discovered that one of the reasons Rohingya refugees choose to remain in Malaysia is the kindness prevalent among the local populace. Kindness extends beyond mere service and encompasses a generous nature that enjoys and frequently aids others, even if unfamiliar.

Statements from Imam Hussin and Asiah depict the kindness and hospitality that characterize Malaysian society. Imam Hussin articulates the positive impact of residing in Malaysia by highlighting the kindness of the residents. Meanwhile, Asiah states that refugees experience no disturbance, reflecting the peaceful and welcoming environment they perceive in Malaysia. Both statements reflect how kindness and hospitality are primary traits of Malaysian people.

An interview with Iman emphasizes his positive experiences with Malaysian society, which is always ready to help regardless of background or lack of information about the refugees. His statement underscores the importance of support and assistance from Malaysian society in aiding Rohingya refugees to integrate and adapting to life in Malaysia. It illustrates how Malaysians are known for their kindness and voluntary assistance to others, including refugees needing help and support.

We also discovered that kindness exists among the local community and the Malaysian government, significantly assisting refugees. For instance, Anuar mentioned that the government offers a 50 per cent discount on treatment charges at government hospitals. *"Actually, it is 50 per cent; I have had two surgeries for gastric issues."* Anuar himself underwent two surgeries for gastric issues, and each surgery entailed a significant discount. Without this assistance, he might have faced difficulties continuing the surgical process, which could ultimately have profound implications for his health. The circumstances underscore the significance of the support rendered by the Malaysian government in safeguarding the welfare and health of refugees such as Anuar.

In addition to focusing on healthcare, we observed how the Malaysian government prioritizes humanitarian aspects for the Rohingya community. They are provided optimal space to conduct social activities, including establishing community centres and schools. In an interview with Anuar, he stated, *"Because Malaysia has a lot of facilities for refugees. So, there are many schools for the Rohingyas,"* indicating Malaysia's provision of numerous facilities for refugees, including many schools for Rohingya people. This statement highlights that these schools provide opportunities for the Rohingya community to continue their education, even in scarcity or distance from urban areas. Ultimately, this reflects the openness and concern of the Malaysian government for the educational needs and welfare of Rohingya refugee children.

UNHCR AND NGOS DELIVER AID CONSISTENTLY

The consistent assistance provided by UNHCR and NGOs is a factor that encourages refugees to continue residing in Malaysia despite facing numerous challenges. NGOs in Malaysia offer a variety of aid to refugees, including livelihood support, provision of food packages, healthcare services, education, counseling services, micro-credit facilities, and skills development programs.

However, we have discerned that the primary assistance provided by NGOs and UNHCR is in the areas of health and education. In terms of health, the support given to Rohingya refugees in Malaysia significantly influences their decision to stay. For instance, in a conversation with



Iman, he shared his friend's experience: "*He had a stroke on his head. Oh, a stroke. He received financial assistance. Now he can work. Thanks to UN.*" Iman's friend, who suffered a stroke, received necessary healthcare and financial assistance for recovery, enabling him to return to work.

Regarding education, there are many schools operated by Malaysian humanitarian NGOs that allow Rohingya refugee children to attend. Moreover, many Rohingya refugees choose to remain in Malaysia due to the accessibility of free education. As mentioned in a conversation with Imam Hussin, he stated: "*Education does not require payment; it is free. MyCare helps.*" Education programs in Malaysia offer free access, making them more affordable and appealing to refugees. For instance, the MyCare program supports individuals like Imam Hussin in education without paying fees. Furthermore, schools also organize supplementary aids such as clothing assistance, equipment provision, food packs for needy families, healthcare treatment programs, visits to interesting places, and celebration events. All of these initiatives are aimed not only at education but also at supporting and celebrating those who are less fortunate.

#### NO CHOICE

However, most Rohingya refugees are forced to remain living in Malaysia because they have no other choice. They face a dilemma- obstructed from returning to their home country or migrating to another country, leaving them trapped in an uncertain situation—like birds in a cage. The lengthy process of UNHCR's resettlement to a third country also contributes to their difficulty. Imam Hussin stated that despite his efforts to contact UNHCR for assistance, he did not receive a satisfactory response, and the process proved slow. Furthermore, life in their previous country or choosing to move to another country, such as Bangladesh, does not guarantee a better life. As Imam Hussin described, they also face difficulties with food and shelter, and Bangladesh has an unstable economy. Therefore, the factors illustrate the challenging situation Rohingya refugees face in deciding to stay in Malaysia.

#### DISCUSSION

The decision for refugees to remain in Malaysia is multifaceted. Nevertheless, merely acknowledging the presence of diverse reasons for staying fails to capture the processes through which refugees arrive at this decision, nor does it explain how space serves as a framework for understanding these choices. Such layered narratives prompt further questions such as: to what extent is the support system a necessary factor for staying, or is the sense that they have "no choice" so powerful and intuitive that it overshadows all other reasons? In other words, would the refugees choose to stay even without the presence of a Muslim community, acquaintances, or NGO support due to having no alternative options? We return to space as an analytical lens to disentangle the connections among the various reasons for staying in Malaysia. Refugees' reasons for staying are differentiated by the kind of space their urban environment affords them and where, when, and how they navigate these spaces.

#### A BIFOLD SPACE FOR REMAINING

As refugees attempt to build and rebuild their lives, they are influenced by various convivial spaces. This evolution in refugees' perceptions of their lives reflects a space characterized by gratitude and estrangement, highlighting both the grace and hardships they encounter in

establishing a sense of belonging and stability in Malaysia. On the one hand, refugees respond to the challenges and complexities of engaging with life in Malaysia, viewing it as a disruptive yet possibly worth-trying aspect of urban existence (Wilson 2017; Darling 2016). A Muslim community, friendships, and support from UNHCR and NGOs open a space for them to keep trying to rebuild their lives in Malaysia. Such support systems provide "navigable channels" (Dunn & Cons 2014; See also Darling 2021) for refugees to endure their seemingly bare lives (Agamben 1998; Sunam 2023). They organize themselves and create support infrastructures of people, communities, and relationship networks for survival (Silver & McFarlane 2019). Kuala Lumpur and Selangor became settings where refugees create spaces for their advantage through the networks they have forged. Along with solidarity, they have learned to respond to the complexities of urban life and do not expect sufficient support from the government, notably from NGOs and amongst themselves (see Figure 5). Such a space provided a manageable condition for staying in the country of refuge within the processes of its urban space through the various spaces they created in their urban life.



FIGURE 5: NGOs and CBOs are allowed to facilitate the establishment of refugee schools in Klang Valley

On the other hand, the choice to stay and establish a life in Malaysia is often born out of a lack of alternatives. For refugees, Malaysia may represent the only viable option available to them. Leaving comes with social and political costs, rendering staying a more feasible choice (Durodola 2023). Being a refugee is not just a short-term adjustment and disruption but a socio-cultural and political process that critically impacts decision-making (Omata 2014). Leaving Malaysia for

another transit point means starting anew, requiring tireless improvisation and adaptation (Pineteh 2017). Their decision to stay is informed by a strategic calculation of their capacity to navigate future uncertainties once they decide to leave. It is a choice between the potential loss of what they have already established and the gamble for better opportunities, albeit uncertain. This situation suggests the interplay between their agency and limits in carving out spaces of resilience amidst limited choices.

We strongly argue that the status of Malaysia as a Muslim country, family and friends, kindness, generosity, and support from organizations such as UNHCR and NGOs are interrelated in motivating refugees to remain in Malaysia. However, this would not be possible without a peaceful region. Therefore, from our perspective, all these factors are contingent upon and facilitated by Malaysia's status as a peaceful space - its back-to-space, which signifies a significant enabling condition for its presence. Without a peaceful region, how could NGOs create spaces for establishing refugee schools? (see details NGO, government, and space in Nazri 2022). Or if Malaysia were not safe, how could spaces for refugees to freely meet with relatives or friends be possible?

#### LIFE IN LIMBO

In such a context, there is a bifold space regarding how far and long refugees can try to live in Malaysia—a state of limbo characterized by perpetual striving and uncertainty. Their lives are marked by constant negotiation and compromise as they get used to being unable to control or fully predict their future in Malaysia. The narratives refugees shared have shown how the meanings of space are and how "limbo" is experienced in their everyday lives.

The stories shared in this paper open up a theoretical conversation about how refugees make meaning and practice the act of trying a life in Malaysia. The decision to stay in Malaysia involves multiple reasons, all contending for significance and necessitating negotiation among and between these diverse considerations. While there may be numerous motivations for leaving, the stories of our participants also showed a handful of compelling reasons that persuaded them to remain in Malaysia, and all of them pertain to what we conceptualize as "space."

#### IMPLICATIONS

There are two implications of such an analysis of migration and urban studies. First, it implies that imagining alternative lives outside Malaysia is not productive. Imagining life otherwise might mean a more significant loss in rebuilding their lives, which they constantly negotiate, shape, and restructure. Second, it implies that staying in Malaysia is not solely an either/or choice of either staying or leaving; it allows for a range of possibilities that encompass multiple options, depending on individual circumstances and preferences. Refugee life is produced and reproduced in different urban contexts, whereby challenges/fortune may escalate or dwindle at different points. Such an understanding of the choice to stay in Malaysia demands an alternative way to understand how refugee lives are governed. When viewed in this manner, space becomes a helpful lens through which to focus attention on the various players involved in sustaining the decisions of refugees in Malaysia. This concept relates to Simone's (2014) account of convivial spaces as intertwined networks where individuals, spaces, and materials are interconnected.

## CONCLUSION

The lives of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia are often portrayed negatively, depicting them as victims of state discrimination and injustice, exposed to arrests and detention, prohibited from working, denied access to education, facing difficulty in accessing healthcare services, and often experiencing food shortages. However, we have initiated a conversation about the reality that their dire circumstances are not as exaggerated as portrayed, thus failing to find a resolution. We have opened a new chapter that contradicts previous studies, highlighting that Rohingya refugees are still resilient, with space existing within their life narratives.

The concept of "space" described here denotes a multifaceted process aimed at facilitating Rohingya refugees to sustain their lives, even when they declare no alternatives. Our research findings regarding Malaysia's identity as a Muslim-majority country, the presence of relatives and friends, acts of kindness, generosity, and support from various organizations, including UNHCR and NGOs, all interplay and contribute to the refugees' decision to remain in Malaysia. We interpret all these interconnected factors as constituting a form of space. Furthermore, we contend that these factors would not have manifested themselves if Malaysia did not exist as a perceived peaceful region, emphasizing the significance of Malaysia as a spatial entity conducive to the refugees' continued existence.

Despite Malaysia often being criticized for imposing oppression and denying rights to refugees, our analysis suggests that both the state and the local community have provided a space for refugees to navigate their own lives. This underscores the situation's complexity, wherein Malaysia's portrayal as inhospitable to refugees contrasts with the tangible support and opportunities available to them within the Malaysian context. Therefore, we argue that despite challenges and criticisms, Malaysia serves as a dynamic space where refugees can exercise agency and enjoy a range of opportunities that shape their everyday lives and their children's futures.

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