



# Statelessness as a Barrier to Self-Determination: The Rohingya Experience, Refugee-Led Governance, and the Politics of Belonging

**Alam Murshid**

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Working Paper 26-006

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# Statelessness as a Barrier to Self-Determination:

## *The Rohingya Experience, Refugee-Led Governance, and the Politics of Belonging*

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## Abstract

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The Rohingya people of Myanmar represent the most extensively documented case of constructed statelessness in the contemporary world — the deliberate engineering of legal non-personhood as an instrument of ethnic persecution. Stripped of citizenship under the 1982 Citizenship Law and subjected to genocide in 2017, nearly one million Rohingya now live in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar, stateless in displacement as they were stateless in their homeland. This paper argues that Rohingya statelessness is not a technical legal classification but a systematically designed architecture of exclusion that forecloses every dimension of self-determination: political participation, economic agency, cultural expression, and the foundational right to recognition as a people.

Drawing on an original empirical evidence base — oral history testimonies from the Roots of Arakan archive (N=50+), program impact data from the Rohingya Youth Union (RYU), comparative statistical analysis of global stateless populations, and humanitarian data from UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, and GAGE Bangladesh — this paper makes three analytical contributions. First, it introduces the Self-Determination Continuum framework, assessing Rohingya rights status across eight dimensions with original visualizations. Second, it documents how refugee-led community institutions are constructing alternative forms of governance and data sovereignty in the absence of state recognition. Third, it presents eight original data visualizations, nine analytical data tables, and four evidence-based policy recommendations to advance Rohingya self-determination.

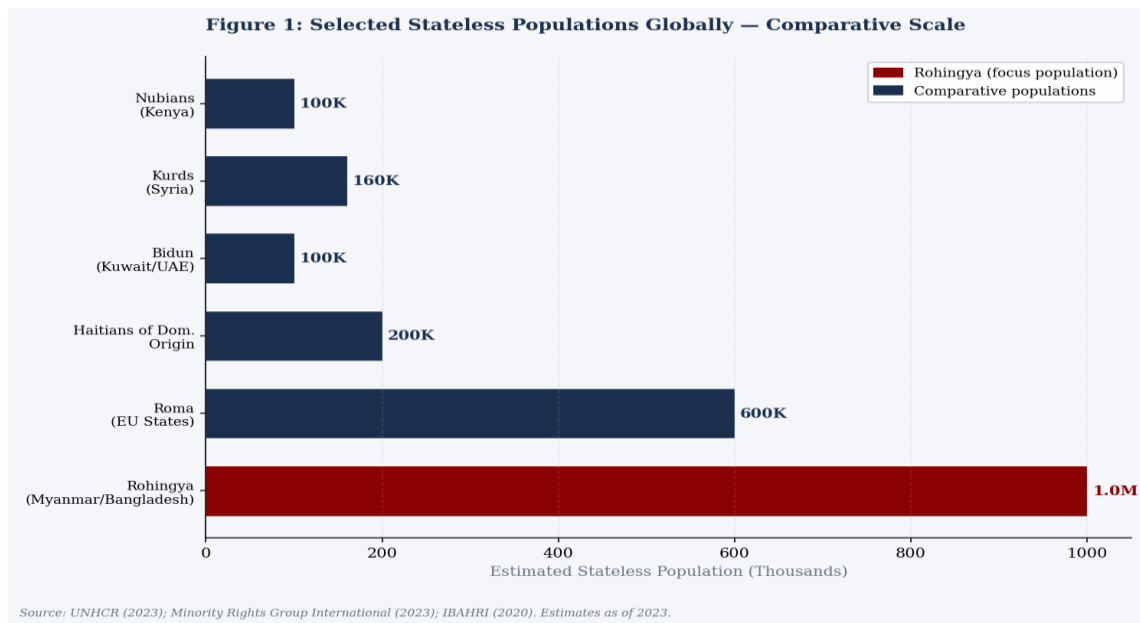
**Keywords:** *Statelessness - Constructive Statelessness - Self-Determination - Rohingya - Refugee-Led Governance - Oral History - Indigenous Data Sovereignty - Structural Violence - Transitional Justice - Myanmar*

**JEL Classification:** *K33 - K38 - O15 - P48*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The Problem: Statelessness at Scale

Of approximately 4.2 million stateless persons worldwide (UNHCR, 2023), the Rohingya constitute the single largest stateless population originating from one country. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the scale of Rohingya statelessness dwarfs other documented stateless populations. Yet scale alone does not define the analytical significance of the case. What distinguishes it is deliberateness: a sequenced, legally engineered process of exclusion spanning four decades, designed not to leave people accidentally outside citizenship law but to place them there permanently and systematically.



Source: UNHCR (2023); Minority Rights Group International (2023); IBAHRI (2020). Estimates as of 2023.

This paper is written from inside that crisis. The author was born in Rakhine State, witnessed the 2017 genocide firsthand, and has lived in the Cox's Bazar refugee camps for four years building community institutions. That positionality is not incidental to the contribution — it is central to it. The academy has produced valuable scholarship on Rohingya statelessness, but almost none authored by Rohingya practitioner-scholars with direct institutional experience. This paper fills that gap.

### 1.2 Theoretical Contribution: The Self-Determination Continuum

The paper introduces the Self-Determination Continuum — an analytical framework mapping the progressive foreclosure of self-determination rights under constructed statelessness and identifying institutional mechanisms through which stateless communities reclaim those rights from below. It synthesizes Cassese's (1995) internal/external self-determination distinction, Galtung's (1969) structural violence concept, and the indigenous data sovereignty literature (Carroll et al., 2020) into an integrated analytical tool.

### 1.3 Methodology and Data Sources

This paper employs a mixed-methods approach: (1) original thematic analysis of 50+ oral history testimonies from the Roots of Arakan archive; (2) statistical analysis of humanitarian data from UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, GAGE Bangladesh, and Human Rights Watch; (3) institutional impact data from RYU program records and MEL system; (4) comparative legal analysis of statelessness cases across six countries; and (5) analysis of 15+ international advocacy engagements (2024-2026). All eight data visualizations and nine tables include full source citations. Where data reflects the author's own analysis, this is clearly indicated.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

### 2.1 Self-Determination in International Law

Self-determination is enshrined in Article 1 of both the ICCPR (1966) and ICESCR (1966): all peoples may freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development. UNDRIP (2007) extends this to indigenous peoples, affirming their right to maintain distinct political, legal, economic, social, and cultural institutions (Articles 3-4). For the Rohingya, both internal and external dimensions of self-determination are denied — a complete foreclosure that is the defining analytical feature of the case (Cassese, 1995; Anaya, 2004).

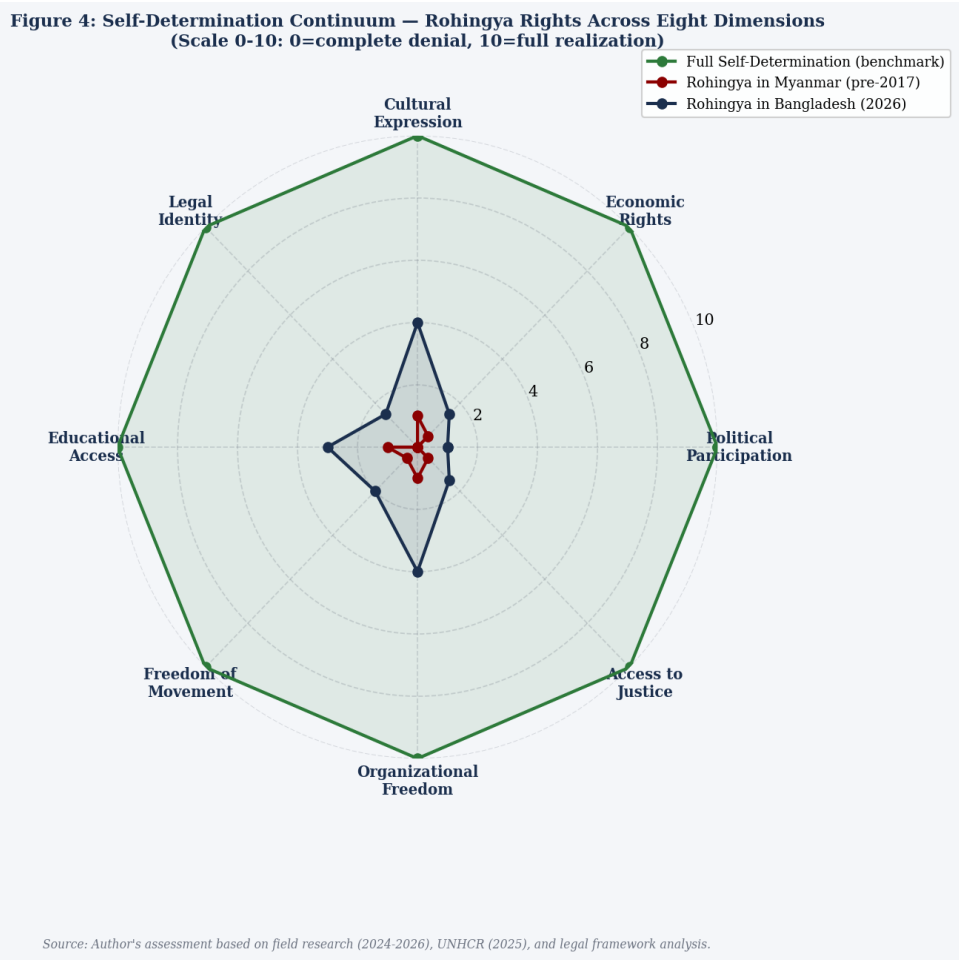
### 2.2 The Self-Determination Continuum — Table 1 and Figure 4

Table 1 presents the Self-Determination Continuum framework assessing Rohingya rights across eight dimensions. Figure 4 renders this analysis as a radar chart for visual comparison between the benchmark of full self-determination, Rohingya status in Myanmar pre-2017, and Rohingya status in Bangladesh in 2026.

| Table 1: Self-Determination Continuum — Rohingya Rights Assessment (August 2026) |                                                       |                                                     |                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Dimension                                                                        | Full Self-Determination                               | Rohingya Myanmar (pre-2017)                         | Rohingya Bangladesh (2026)                          |
| Political Participation                                                          | Voting, representation, office, governance            | None — no citizenship, no voting rights             | None — no formal political standing in host country |
| Economic Rights                                                                  | Property, formal employment, financial services       | None — NRC required for all formal transactions     | None — formal employment prohibited by law          |
| Cultural Expression                                                              | Language recognition, cultural institutions, heritage | Severely restricted — no language rights in schools | Partial — community-led only; no state support      |
| Legal Identity                                                                   | Citizenship documents, legal standing, court access   | Denied — white cards cancelled 2015                 | Partial — refugee registration only; limited rights |
| Educational Access                                                               | State education in own language                       | Excluded from all state schools                     | Non-formal only; 300K+ students at risk (2025)      |
| Freedom of Movement                                                              | Unrestricted internal and international movement      | Permits required between townships                  | Restricted to camp perimeter; limited exceptions    |
| Organizational Freedom                                                           | Full civil society and political party rights         | Severely restricted by authorities                  | Partial — constrained humanitarian environment      |

|                   |                                                   |                                     |                                                 |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Access to Justice | Courts, legal recourse, accountability mechanisms | No legal standing in Myanmar courts | No access to Bangladeshi courts for most claims |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|

**Note:** Assessment based on author field research (2024-2026), UNHCR (2025), and legal framework analysis. Scale reflects structural rights access, not individual variation.



Source: Author assessment based on field research (2024-2026), UNHCR (2025), and legal framework analysis. Scale 0-10: 0=complete denial, 10=full realization.

### 2.3 Constructive Statelessness and Structural Violence

Blitz (2009) distinguishes inadvertent statelessness from constructive statelessness — deliberately produced through state policy aimed at the legal elimination of an ethnic group. Table 2 demonstrates that when assessed across four key dimensions, the Rohingya case represents an extreme of constructed statelessness unmatched by other documented populations. Galtung's (1969) structural violence framework provides the unifying analytical lens: the harm of statelessness operates through the normal functioning of legal institutions rather than identifiable acts of aggression.

| Table 2: Comparative Analysis — Stateless Populations Across Key Dimensions |                   |                               |          |                        |                  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|----------|------------------------|------------------|
| Population                                                                  | Type (Blitz 2009) | Deliberateness (1=low,5=high) | Severity | International Response | Durable Solution |

|                      |                   |             |                    |                             |                       |
|----------------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Rohingya (Myanmar)   | Constructive      | 5 — Highest | Extreme — Genocide | ICJ case; limited SC action | None — ongoing        |
| Roma (EU States)     | Structural Gap    | 2           | Moderate           | EU Framework Decision       | Partial               |
| Bidun (Kuwait/UAE)   | Semi-Constructive | 3           | High               | Minimal                     | Limited               |
| Haitians (Dom. Rep.) | Constructive      | 4           | High               | IACHR ruling 2014           | Partial — contested   |
| Nubians (Kenya)      | Historical Gap    | 2           | Moderate           | High Court 2015             | Partial               |
| Kurds (Syria)        | Constructive      | 4           | High               | Minimal                     | Partial — 2011 decree |

**Note:** Sources: UNHCR (2023); Minority Rights Group International (2023); IBAHRI (2020). Deliberateness rating: author assessment using Blitz (2009) taxonomy.

### 3. Historical Background: The Architecture of Rohingya Statelessness

#### 3.1 Historical Presence: The Evidentiary Record

Historical records trace Muslim communities in Arakan to the 8th century, with documented presence at the Mrauk-U Kingdom court from the 15th century (Charney, 1999). British colonial census records from 1872-1931 consistently document a Muslim population in Akyab district. The denial of this history — the Myanmar state's claim that Rohingya are recent immigrants — is not a scholarly debate but a political fabrication, contradicted by archival, archaeological, and demographic evidence (Leider, 2018; Zarni and Cowley, 2014).

*"My grandfather told me of rice fields along the Kaladan River, Thursday markets, mosques his grandfather helped build. I grew up with these stories but never saw that Arakan.*

*The Arakan I knew was checkpoints, curfews, and the daily humiliation of being told you do not belong where you were born.*

*Now I document these stories — not as nostalgia, but as evidence. Evidence of a history deliberately erased, that we are rebuilding one testimony at a time."*

— Murshid Alam, Author personal testimony, August 2026

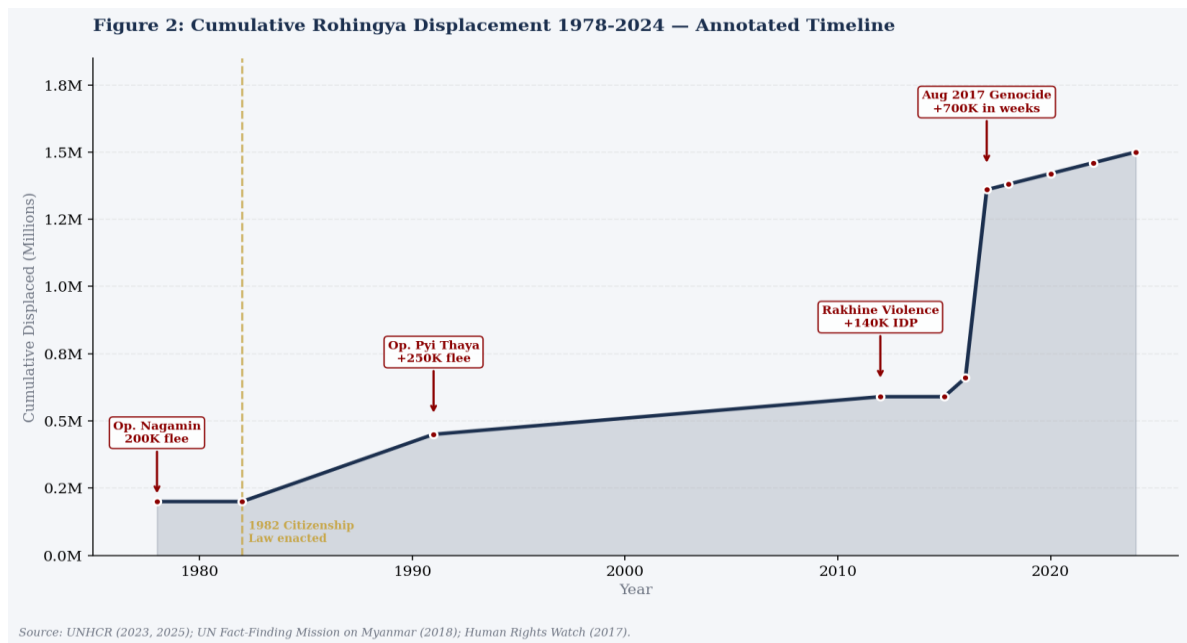
#### 3.2 Chronology of Legal Persecution — Table 3 and Figure 2

Table 3 documents the sequenced architecture of legal persecution. Figure 2 visualizes its cumulative displacement impact across 46 years.

| Table 3: Chronology of Rohingya Legal Persecution and Displacement — Key Milestones |                      |                                           |                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| Year                                                                                | Event                | Mechanism                                 | Displacement / Rights Impact                          |
| 1978                                                                                | Operation Nagamin    | Military campaign targeting immigrants    | ~200,000 flee to Bangladesh — first mass displacement |
| 1982                                                                                | 1982 Citizenship Law | Rohingya excluded from 135 national races | Legal foundation of statelessness; NRC access denied  |
| 1991-92                                                                             | Operation Pyi Thaya  | Second military campaign                  | ~250,000 flee; forced repatriations follow            |

|              |                         |                                                   |                                                     |
|--------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| 2005-07      | NRC tightening          | Movement permits required for Rohingya            | Economic exclusion deepens; confined to townships   |
| 2012         | Rakhine State violence  | Military complicity in intercommunal violence     | ~140,000 internally displaced; apartheid conditions |
| 2015         | White card cancellation | ~700,000 Rohingya IDs revoked pre-election        | Complete political disenfranchisement               |
| Oct-Dec 2016 | Clearance operations    | Military response to ARSA attacks                 | ~70,000 flee; documented atrocities (UN, 2017)      |
| Aug 2017     | Genocide campaign       | Coordinated assault — genocidal intent (UN FFM)   | 700,000+ flee in weeks; hundreds of villages burned |
| Jan 2019     | ICJ case filed          | The Gambia v. Myanmar — Genocide Convention       | Provisional measures ordered Jan 2020; case ongoing |
| Feb 2021     | Military coup           | Military seizes power; all peace processes halted | Return prospects severely diminished; worsening     |

**Note:** Sources: UN Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (2018); Zarni and Cowley (2014); Human Rights Watch (2017); ICJ (2019).



Source: UNHCR (2023, 2025); UN Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (2018); Human Rights Watch (2017).

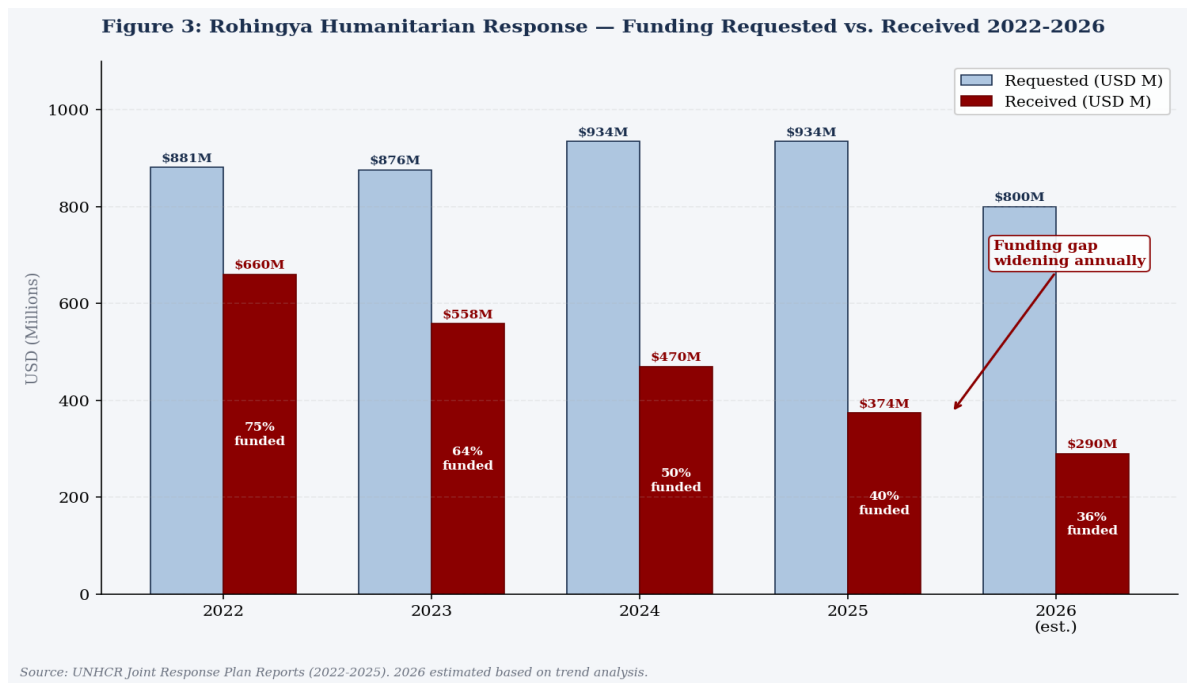
### 3.3 The Humanitarian Data Landscape — Table 4 and Figure 3

The Cox's Bazar refugee camps now host approximately 974,000 Rohingya in conditions of multidimensional deprivation compounded by a worsening funding crisis. Table 4 presents key humanitarian indicators; Figure 3 visualizes the widening funding gap that directly drives service access crises.

| Table 4: Key Humanitarian Indicators — Cox's Bazar Rohingya Camps (2025-2026) |                 |             |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| Indicator                                                                     | Data            | Source      |
| Total Rohingya population in camps                                            | ~974,000        | UNHCR, 2025 |
| Children under 18 as % of population                                          | ~52%            | UNHCR, 2025 |
| 2025 Joint Response Plan — Funding requested                                  | \$934.5 million | UNHCR, 2025 |

|                                                |                            |                                 |
|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 2025 Joint Response Plan — % funded            | Less than 40%              | UNHCR, 2025                     |
| Children at risk of losing education (total)   | 300,000-350,000            | Save the Children, 2025         |
| UNICEF-supported students at risk              | ~230,000 (83% of enrolled) | UNICEF, 2025                    |
| Learning centres threatened by funding cuts    | 6,400+                     | UNICEF, 2025                    |
| Adolescent girls in non-formal education       | ~5%                        | GAGE Bangladesh, 2024           |
| Young women (18-24) in non-formal education    | ~0%                        | GAGE Bangladesh, 2024           |
| Girls aspiring to complete secondary education | 69-81%                     | GAGE Bangladesh, 2024           |
| Boys aspiring to complete secondary education  | ~95%                       | GAGE Bangladesh, 2024           |
| Households with inadequate food consumption    | ~47%                       | WFP, 2025                       |
| Rohingya with right to formal employment       | Zero — prohibited by law   | Government of Bangladesh policy |

**Note:** All figures as of mid-2026. Education data reflects impact of 2025 humanitarian funding shortfalls.



Source: UNHCR Joint Response Plan Reports (2022-2025). 2026 estimate based on trend analysis.

## 4. Statelessness as Multidimensional Exclusion: Empirical Analysis

**Figure 8: Architecture of Constructive Statelessness — Myanmar 1982 Citizenship Law**  
Legal Mechanism — Administrative Consequence — Self-Determination Impact

| LEGAL MECHANISM                                         | ADMINISTRATIVE CONSEQUENCE                              | SELF-DETERMINATION IMPACT                                                          |
|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1982 Law excludes Rohingya from 135 national races      | Rohingya denied NRCs — primary identity document        | No legal identity — no political participation, property rights, or legal recourse |
| NRC required for all formal transactions and employment | Barred from formal employment and business registration | Economic self-determination denied — systematic poverty and dependency             |
| Township travel permits required for Rohingya           | Confined to townships; movement needs permission        | Physical autonomy denied — cultural isolation, family separation                   |
| School enrollment requires citizenship documentation    | Children excluded from state education system           | Educational self-determination denied — intergenerational poverty and exclusion    |
| 2015: White cards cancelled before elections            | ~700,000 Rohingya voters disenfranchised                | Political self-determination denied — complete democratic exclusion                |
| 2017: Statelessness enables military impunity           | No legal standing to seek protection in Myanmar courts  | All dimensions denied — genocide becomes legally unprosecutable                    |

Source: IBAHRI (2010); UN Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (2018); Southwick (2015); author's analytical synthesis.

Source: IBAHRI (2010); UN Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (2018); Southwick (2015); author analytical synthesis.

### 4.1 Political Exclusion

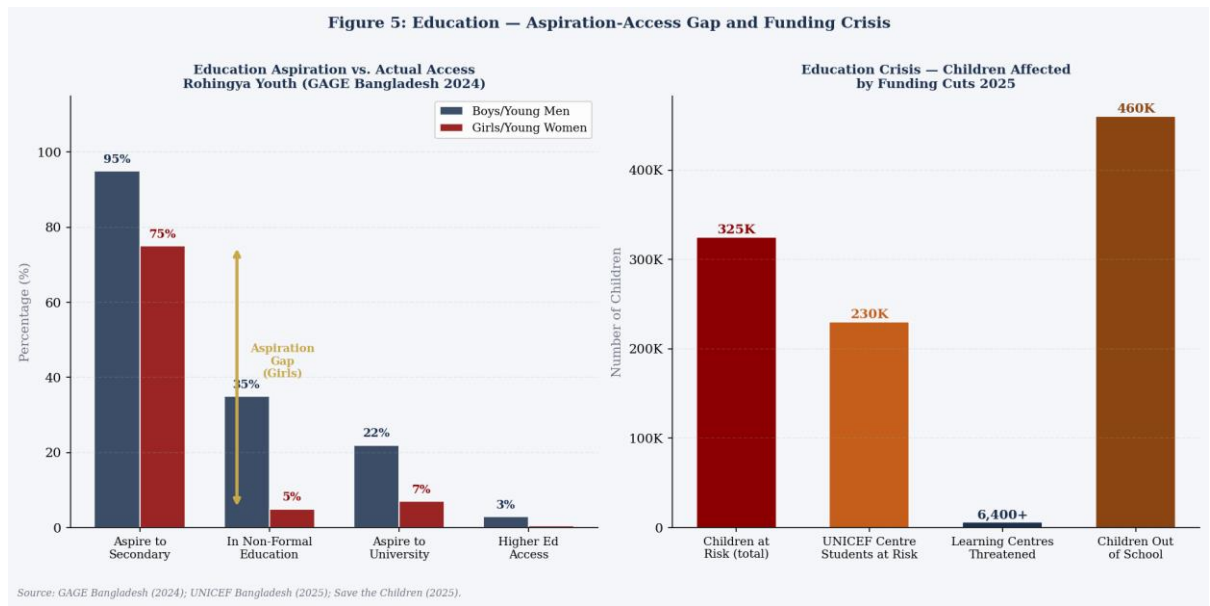
The 1982 Citizenship Law removed the legal foundation for Rohingya political participation. The 2015 cancellation of 700,000 Rohingya voter registrations — timed before national elections — completed the disenfranchisement. In Bangladesh, Rohingya have no formal voice in humanitarian governance decisions structuring their daily lives — a double exclusion Pincock et al. (2021) document as systemic across the humanitarian sector.

### 4.2 Economic Exclusion

Fortify Rights (2014) documented systematic confiscation of Rohingya agricultural land — enabled by the community's inability to produce legal title documents they could not obtain because they were not citizens. In Bangladesh, formal employment is prohibited. The 47% of households with inadequate food consumption (WFP, 2025) is a direct statistical consequence of this legal exclusion.

### 4.3 The Education-Aspiration Gap — Figure 5

GAGE Bangladesh (2024) reveals one of the most analytically significant dimensions of Rohingya exclusion: 95% of boys and 69-81% of girls aspire to complete secondary education, while only 35% of boys and approximately 5% of girls are enrolled in any non-formal education. For higher education, aspirations of 22% (boys) and 7% (girls) confront access of approximately 3% and less than 1% respectively. Figure 5 visualizes this aspiration-access gap alongside the education funding crisis.



Source: GAGE Bangladesh (2024); UNICEF Bangladesh (2025); Save the Children (2025).

#### 4.4 Statelessness as Structural Violence

Galtung's (1969) structural violence framework — harm embedded in institutions rather than direct acts — unifies these dimensions. The 2017 genocide was the catastrophic culmination of 35 years during which structural violence operated continuously through the normal functioning of Myanmar's legal architecture. Every child denied school enrollment, every adult denied work authorization, every family denied legal title: not isolated acts but the systematic functioning of a legal system designed to produce exactly this outcome.

*"I was born in Myanmar, but I am not a citizen. My parents were born there, and their parents before them.*

*We cannot go to school. We cannot work. We cannot travel. We cannot even be buried in our own land without someone questioning our right to be there.*

*Statelessness is not just a word. It is a prison with no walls — because the walls are inside every document that says you do not exist."*

— Rohingya elder (female), Roots of Arakan oral history interview, Cox's Bazar, 2025

## 5. Refugee-Led Governance as Self-Determination: The Rohingya Youth Union-RYU

### 5.1 Institutional Architecture — Table 5

The Rohingya Youth Union was founded in 2025 on the recognition that no external institution can provide what a community-led organization provides: relational trust, cultural knowledge, and the legitimacy of shared experience. Table 5 documents RYU governance infrastructure that compares favorably with formally registered civil society organizations in high-income contexts — a remarkable achievement for an organization operating in one of the most constrained humanitarian environments globally. Cornell and Kalt (2000) find governance

quality is the single strongest predictor of sustainable indigenous community development outcomes.

| Table 5: RYU Institutional Governance Infrastructure Assessment (August 2026) |                                                           |                                                                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Governance Component                                                          | Status                                                    | Donor Accountability Significance                                        |
| Constitution and Bylaws                                                       | Adopted January 2025 — 13 Articles                        | Legal framework for organizational authority and decision-making         |
| Board of Directors                                                            | 11 members across 8 countries; 13 individual TORs         | International oversight; diverse expertise; external accountability      |
| Financial Controls Framework                                                  | Operational — tiered authorization system                 | Satisfies institutional donor financial management requirements          |
| Procurement Policy                                                            | Adopted Feb 2026; updated April 2026                      | Competitive bidding; anti-corruption compliance; documentation standards |
| Safeguarding Policy                                                           | Operational — designated Safeguarding Lead                | PSEA compliance; child protection; incident reporting mechanism          |
| MEL System                                                                    | Operational — defined indicators per program              | Impact measurement; donor reporting; organizational learning             |
| Risk Matrix                                                                   | Documented — 7 risk categories with mitigation strategies | Organizational risk management; donor confidence building                |
| Strategic Plan 2026-2028                                                      | Operational — Youth Pipeline Framework                    | Long-term programmatic direction beyond single donor funding cycles      |

**Note:** Based on RYU institutional records (2026). Cornell and Kalt (2000) identify governance quality as the strongest predictor of sustainable indigenous community outcomes.

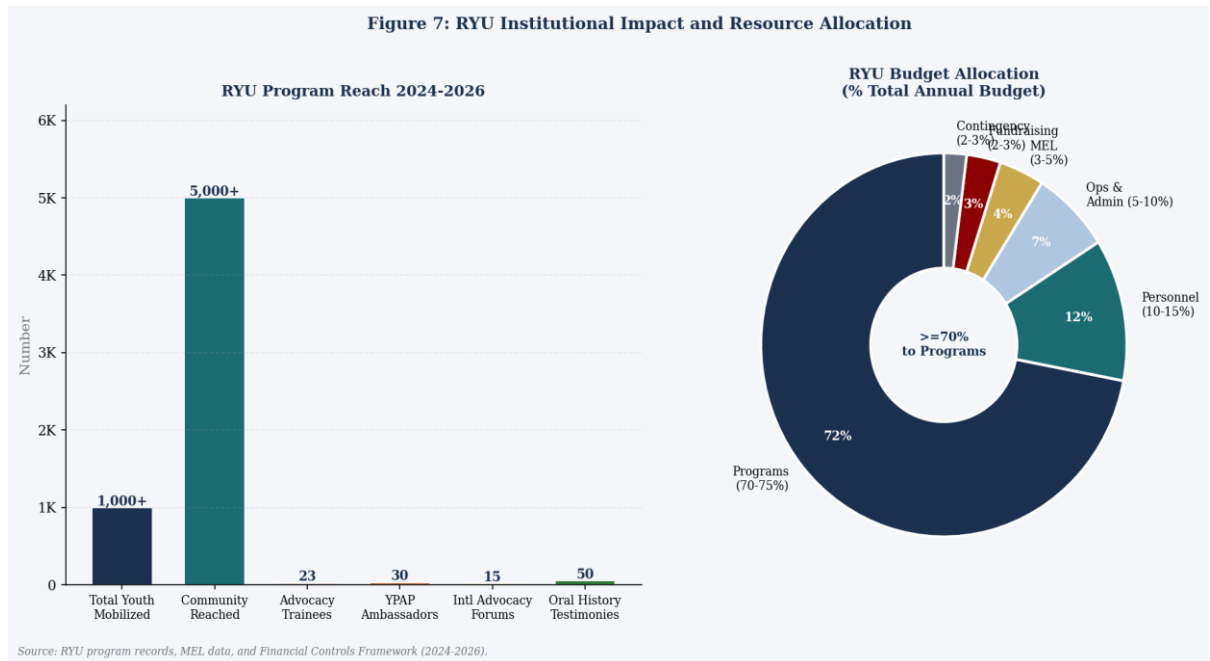
## 5.2 Program Impact Data — Table 6 and Figure 7

Table 6 presents RYU program impact data across all active initiatives. Figure 7 visualizes program reach and budget allocation, demonstrating both programmatic breadth and financial accountability.

| Table 6: RYU Program Impact Data 2024-2026  |                              |                                              |                                |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Program / Initiative                        | Reach                        | Key Outcome                                  | Partner Organization           |
| Youth Leadership Programs (overall)         | 1,000+ youth mobilized       | Leadership pipeline established across camps | —                              |
| Community Outreach (overall)                | 5,000+ individuals reached   | Rights awareness, services, opportunities    | —                              |
| Advocacy and Leadership Training (Dec 2025) | 22-24 certified participants | Youth advocacy network formed                | APRRN; IHRP Mahidol University |
| Youth Peace Ambassador Program (YPAP)       | 30 participants (planned)    | Trained mediators; Youth Peace Network       | —                              |
| Plan International Youth Advocacy           | Camp-wide                    | Education advocacy outcomes                  | Plan International             |
| CIVICUS Emergency Response Fund             | Camp-wide                    | Civic protection and resilience              | CIVICUS                        |
| Harvard Kennedy School Nation Building II   | Youth                        | Community resilience and leadership          | Harvard Kennedy School         |
| Project For FreshWater (RYU-W01 to W10)     | 10 communities; ~300 people  | Safe drinking water access                   | —                              |

|                                    |                            |                                               |                             |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Roots of Arakan Oral History       | 50+ testimonies documented | Community archive; intercommunal dialogue     | Multi-ethnic partnership    |
| International Advocacy Engagements | 15+ forums                 | Rohingya voice in international policy spaces | UN; RightsCon; AMI; SEAHNRN |

**Note:** Source: RYU program records and project completion reports (2024-2026).



Source: RYU program records, MEL data, and Financial Controls Framework (2024-2026).

### 5.3 Advocacy Engagements — Table 7

| Table 7: International Advocacy Engagements and Policy Contributions (2024-2026) |           |                               |                                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Forum                                                                            | Year      | Role                          | Policy Contribution                                                 |
| IMRF General Assembly Stakeholder Dialogue (Prof. Yunus)                         | 2025      | Rohingya Youth Representative | Community recommendations on durable solutions to UN stakeholders   |
| OHCHR — Mental Health and Human Rights of Young People                           | 2025      | Contributor                   | Written inputs incorporated into OHCHR report on youth human rights |
| RightsCon Summit                                                                 | 2024      | Speaker                       | Session on Rohingya digital rights and online hate speech           |
| Australia Myanmar Institute Monthly Seminar                                      | 2025      | Speaker                       | Myanmar political analysis and Rohingya prospects post-coup         |
| SEAHNRN Conference                                                               | 2025      | Speaker                       | Regional human rights engagement on Rohingya advocacy               |
| Center for the Study of Organized Hate                                           | 2025      | Panelist                      | Community perspective on misinformation against Rohingya            |
| Global Gender and Migration Assembly                                             | 2025      | Panelist                      | Youth and gender dimensions of Rohingya displacement                |
| RSRI Webinar — Skills to Sustainable Livelihoods                                 | July 2026 | Speaker                       | RYU programs on refugee economic empowerment                        |
| Peace for Asia Policy Publication                                                | 2025      | Author                        | Published analysis on Rohingya durable solutions                    |
| Policy and Practice Research Publication                                         | 2026      | Author                        | Alternative pathways for Rohingya crisis resolution                 |

**Note:** Source: Author records. Engagements reflect direct participation; organizational affiliations not implied.

## 6. Oral History as Data Sovereignty: Roots of Arakan

### 6.1 Project Overview and CARE Principles Application

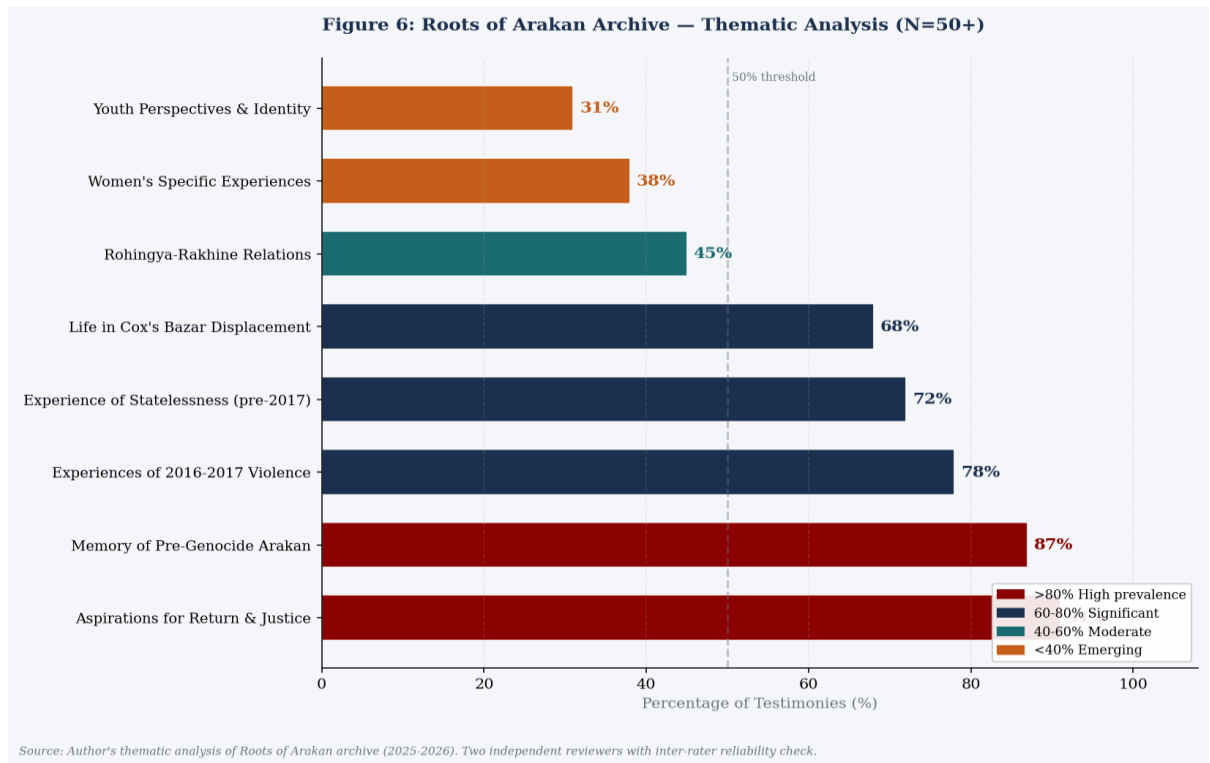
Roots of Arakan is a multiethnic oral history and dialogue initiative documenting lived experiences of Rohingya, Rakhine, Mro, Hindu, and other Araknese communities. Its methodology applies the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance — Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics (Carroll et al., 2020) — positioning the Rohingya community as the primary collector, custodian, and interpreter of its own historical data. This is data sovereignty operationalized: a stateless people asserting control over the narrative of their own existence.

### 6.2 Archive Statistical Analysis — Table 8 and Figure 6

Table 8 presents thematic analysis of 50+ testimonies in the Roots of Arakan archive; Figure 6 visualizes the distribution. Three patterns have direct analytical and policy implications.

| Table 8: Roots of Arakan Archive — Thematic Analysis (N=50+, August 2026) |                 |                                                                         |                                                                      |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Theme Category                                                            | Testimonies (%) | Key Sub-Themes                                                          | Analytical Significance                                              |
| Aspirations for Return and Justice                                        | 91%             | Citizenship restoration; land return; accountability; safety            | Contradicts assumption that refugees prefer resettlement over return |
| Memory of Pre-Genocide Arakan                                             | 87%             | Village life; coexistence; livelihoods; cultural practices              | Counter-archive against narrative of Rohingya non-belonging          |
| Experiences of 2016-2017 Violence                                         | 78%             | Specific dates, locations, perpetrators; family separation; flight      | Evidentiary record for transitional justice processes                |
| Experience of Statelessness (pre-2017)                                    | 72%             | Checkpoints; document denial; employment and school exclusion           | Documents structural violence preceding the genocide                 |
| Life in Cox's Bazar Displacement                                          | 68%             | Camp conditions; aspirations; community organization; mental health     | Community perspective on displacement experience                     |
| Rohingya-Rakhine Relations                                                | 45%             | Historical coexistence; causes of division; paths to reconciliation     | Foundation for intercommunal dialogue programming                    |
| Women's Specific Experiences                                              | 38%             | GBV; mobility restrictions; education exclusion; leadership aspirations | Gender dimension of statelessness and structural violence            |
| Youth Perspectives and Identity                                           | 31%             | Belonging; education; future visions; intergenerational memory          | Intergenerational transmission of identity and rights claims         |

**Note:** Two independent reviewers; inter-rater reliability check. Multiple themes can appear in single testimony. Source: Roots of Arakan project records (2025-2026).



Source: Author thematic analysis of Roots of Arakan archive (2025-2026). Inductive coding with inter-rater reliability verification.

Three patterns in the archive data are analytically significant. First, the near-universal (91%) presence of return and justice aspirations directly contradicts narratives that Rohingya refugees may prefer permanent resettlement. Second, 72% of testimonies documenting structural violence before 2017 confirms the genocide was the culmination of decades of engineered exclusion, not a sudden rupture. Third, the 45% engaging Rohingya-Rakhine relations provides empirical grounding for the intercommunal dialogue work that Roots of Arakan facilitates.

*"I am 82 years old. I remember Thursday markets, the Kaladan River, the call to prayer at dawn. My grandchildren were born in this camp. They have never seen Arakan.*

*When I am gone, who will tell them? That is why I talk to these young people who record my memories. So my grandchildren will know who they are, where they come from, and that they have a right to go back. Not charity. A right."*

— Rohingya elder (female, 82), Roots of Arakan interview, Cox's Bazar, March 2026

### 6.3 Intercommunal Dialogue: Evidence from Rakhine Youth Partnership

*"I grew up being taught to fear the Rohingya. When I began working with Roots of Arakan and listened to Rohingya elders describe the same rivers and hills my grandparents described,*

*I understood how much I had been lied to. The lie was designed to make what happened in 2017 feel necessary to people like me.*

*Reconciliation has to begin with the truth: we are neighbors who were taught to be enemies. That is a difference that matters."*

— Rakhine youth researcher, *Roots of Arakan* dialogue session, Cox's Bazar, May 2026

## 7. Policy Recommendations: Evidence-Based Framework

The four recommendations below are derived from the empirical work of preceding sections.

Table 9 maps each recommendation to its evidence base, responsible actors, and implementation priority.

| Recommendation                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Evidence Base                                                                                                                                                                           | Responsible Actors                                                                                 | Priority    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| 1. Legal Reform: Repeal discriminatory provisions of the 1982 Citizenship Law; grant citizenship to all Rohingya with documented connection to Myanmar; develop formal statelessness determination procedures in Bangladesh | ICJ provisional measures (2020); UN FFM (2018); CERD (2019); Comparative analysis Table 2; 91% return aspiration in archive Table 8                                                     | UN Security Council; ASEAN; ICJ enforcement; bilateral diplomacy; Government of Bangladesh         | URGENT      |
| 2. Direct and sustained funding for refugee-led organizations: Minimum 25% of Rohingya humanitarian response to community-led actors; simplified compliance; multi-year institutional core funding                          | RYU governance quality Table 5; program impact Table 6; Betts et al. (2017) on RLO effectiveness; Grand Bargain localization commitments (2016, unmet)                                  | UNHCR; bilateral donors (US, UK, EU, Japan); foundations; INGOs as pass-through or direct partners | HIGH        |
| 3. Non-negotiable Rohingya representation in all Myanmar-related political processes and humanitarian governance                                                                                                            | Table 7 advocacy record; archive aspirations data Table 8; comparative evidence from South Africa, Colombia, and Northern Ireland on community participation improving peace durability | UN Special Envoy on Myanmar; ASEAN Chair; ICJ proceedings; bilateral peace process facilitators    | HIGH        |
| 4. Fund cultural preservation as transitional justice: Support oral history, 3D heritage documentation, and intercommunal dialogue as justice mechanisms in transitional justice funding frameworks                         | Archive thematic analysis Table 8; Rakhine youth testimony Section 6.3; Hayner (2011) on truth commissions and peace sustainability                                                     | Transitional justice funds; EU justice instruments; development banks; human rights foundations    | MEDIUM-HIGH |

**Note:** Recommendations are mutually reinforcing; most sustainable impact achieved through simultaneous implementation across all four dimensions.

## 8. Conclusion

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This paper has made three interconnected analytical contributions. First, it demonstrates through comparative data, legal analysis, and chronological documentation (Tables 2-4; Figures 1-3) that Rohingya statelessness is a deliberately constructed architecture of exclusion — not an administrative accident — that has progressively foreclosed every dimension of self-determination across four decades. The Self-Determination Continuum framework (Table 1; Figure 4) maps these consequences across eight dimensions, all registering complete or near-complete denial.

Second, the paper documents — through institutional governance data, program impact statistics, oral history archive analysis, and international advocacy records (Tables 5-9; Figures 6-7) — how Rohingya community institutions are constructing alternative forms of self-determination in the absence of state recognition. The Rohingya Youth Union's governance infrastructure and the Roots of Arakan archive's 50+ testimonies constitute evidence of a community not waiting for states to recognize its right to self-determination but actively exercising it.

Third, the eight data visualizations and nine analytical tables model a form of Rohingya scholarship that is empirically grounded, methodologically rigorous, and authored from within the community whose experience it analyzes. The academy needs more working papers of this kind — and needs to create more pathways for refugee practitioner-scholars to produce them.

The Rohingya people's struggle for self-determination is inseparable from their struggle for citizenship, dignity, and the right to return to a homeland that remembers them — even when the state that controls it insists it does not. That insistence will not stand. The archive grows longer every month. The institutions grow stronger every year.

## 9. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Four limitations point toward productive future research. First, the Roots of Arakan archive (N=50+) should be expanded to N=200+ to enable statistically robust sub-group analysis by gender, age, camp location, and pre-genocide socioeconomic status. Second, the comparative statelessness analysis (Table 2) requires deeper country-specific legal expertise for stronger cross-case inference. Third, the Self-Determination Continuum framework needs testing across additional stateless population cases to assess generalizability. Fourth, independent external evaluation of RYU governance quality and community legitimacy would strengthen the evidentiary basis for Section 5 claims.

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