

Rohingya Refugees: Lessons for Women in South Africa

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Due to massive violence and armed attacks in 2017, thousands of Rohingya were forced to leave their homes in Myanmar's Rakhine State. They undertook a perilous journey through the sea and across jungles to Bangladesh, while others are found in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. There are now nearly one million refugees in Bangladesh, with the bulk located in the Cox's Bazar region, according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

It is important to note that the Rohingya lack refugee status, and where this is in combination with being a woman, they are at high risk for Gender Based Violence (GBV). The Rohingya, who are majority Muslim, currently do not have citizenship in Myanmar, where they are displaced from, making them stateless. Despite these challenges, some Rohingya people are making good efforts to secure their livelihoods.

Umar Katun, who ran a small clothing shop, moved it to a women's market operated by Action Aid, an NGO, and she has since learnt business skills as part of a vocational skills program. Previously, she was illiterate but has since learnt how to count. She now has income to support her family, which has been a challenge as her husband became paralysed. They are no longer solely dependent on rations. The market is a great space for her as it is for women only and therefore safer.

Another vocational training program shared by Al Jazeera and aired on YouTube teaches women to install and repair solar panels. This has empowered the women and the community by employing the women and providing valuable lighting for the community.

Working class women in South Africa can be empowered similarly. The community must initiate similar vocational training programs that can give skills to women and working opportunities for those with skills. They can then become independent and provide for their families and the wider community. This would be very helpful for economically dependent women stuck in abusive relationships for example.

It is also crucial to set up women-only safe spaces like the women-only market Katun was able to benefit from. In that way, women can be safer and conduct their business with dignity and safety from GBV. This is a very important goal as the labour force participation rate for women in 2023 stood at a measly 54,3% compared with 64,9% for men. This is a gap of 10,6 percentage points. Additionally, only 54,3% of working-age women in South Africa participate in the labour force, either as employed or actively seeking work. This means that men continue to dominate the labour market, an issue which needs to be addressed urgently so that women achieve employment equity, noted a Stats SA report from 2023.

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