Precarious Lives of Rohingya Refugee Women Emerging as Caregivers: A Visual Analysis of the Refugee Webcomic *I Am a Leader of My House*

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Abstract

The paper offers a close analysis of the refugee webcomic titled *I am a Leader of My House*, produced online in 2021 by the non-profit organization PositiveNegatives in partnership with The New Humanitarian, to decipher the everyday struggle of Rohingya refugee women through the interaction of the two female protagonists, Romida and Hafsa whose roles as agentic survivors tend to transform the lives of other refugee women in the Cox's Bazaar refugee camp in Bangladesh. Drawing on Judith Butler's concepts of "precarity" and "frames of recognition" the paper textually and visually examines the individual challenges they face, as women emerging in leadership roles against the cultural and neoliberal norms, to "care" for the vulnerable women and children in the camps. The gendered dimension adds another layer to the form of life already burdened with a precarious legal status as women's reproductive health, maternal care, and the specific challenges they face are often overlooked. The paper argues for recognizing such challenges and assigning them more responsibilities which can be a strategic and empathetic response to address their specific needs while it is also a culturally sensitive approach considering the conservative cultural norms and restricted interactions between genders in the Rohingya society.

Keywords: Rohingya refugee women, Webcomic, precarious lives, Care ethics, Agentic survivors

Introduction

Visual storytelling in comics and graphic narratives offers a rich and dynamic medium for exploring diverse stories, themes, and artistic expressions, captivating audiences through its

unique blend of visual and textual elements in dialogue with each other. Artists rely heavily on images to communicate ideas, emotions, and actions with the style of artwork ranging from realistic to abstract, depending upon artistic intent and genre of the story. Text, including dialogues, narration and sound effects, integrated in harmony with imagery provides additional context, information, and voice to the characters, essential for maintaining readability and flow. Hilary Chute argues how the rich documentation produced by comics is "always calling attention to the relationship of part to whole, to the self-conscious buildup of information that may or may not coalesce into meaning" (17). Comics besides being about "presence. . . is also about erasure —in the interruption provided by the ambiguous spaces of gutter, its spaces of pause" (Chute 17). More than representation, it calls for an interpretation of what is presented, and how, by allowing readers to participate in "those interpretive spaces that are paradoxically full and empty" (Chute 17). Comics thus represent the unimaginable, and even the seemingly unrepresentable, which makes the form suitable, as Rifkind notes, for "many recent refugee and migrant comics projects that use the form to interrupt static media images with the plenitude, fragmentation, and unruliness of the comic's page" (649). This paper is also an investigation into the visual landscape of PositiveNegatives and The New Humanitarian's refugee webcomic, *I am a Leader of My House*. The medium has a special ability to produce affective responses among its audiences (Sani et al. 160) beyond national and international boundaries and the availability of comics on digital platforms and recent webcomics projects on refugees such as *I Am a Leader of My House* have made these stories significantly accessible and affordable like never seen before. Aggleton defines digital comics or webcomics as the ones that are published in a digital format, containing a single-panel image or series of interdependent images and having a semi-guided pathway (404). They are also likely to contain visible frames, iconic symbols, and handwritten style writing while they must not be purely moving image and purely audio (Aggleton 404).

Manaysay observes how these visual narratives have mostly been ignored as a source for studying the discursive and visual representation of the various socio-political actors and issues confronting Southeast Asia (46). She also demonstrates how the ability of most of the graphic narratives about Southeast Asian politics "to 'speak' certain political realities still depend on international news sources and wider debates, which shape the ways in which cartoonists are able to frame their work" (Manasay 47). Earle states that "no comic is a true representation of the world as it is; instead, it is constructed by the artist to present an image of the world, according to their perceptions and personal inclinations" (14). While the select webcomic *I Am a Leader of My House* is a sincere effort by its makers to be as authentic as possible in representing the realities of Rohingya refugee women's lives in the camps, its features of "autographics" (Whitlock 965) protect it from falling prey to any personal inclinations and perceptions of its artists. The webcomic incorporates direct quotations from the refugee women living in the camps instead of depending upon influential international news sources and debates for their framing. The paper shows how the unique design of the webcomic allows the reader to immerse in its world, draw visual metaphors, and interpret meanings from it. The paper though primarily focuses on drawing visual metaphors and analysing the precarious lives of refugee women as caregivers in the camps, it also thus fills the academic void in the visual analyses of the graphic narratives about Southeast Asian refugees.

In recent years, the Rohingya refugee crisis has emerged as a poignant and multifaceted humanitarian challenge, drawing global attention to the plight of forcibly displaced persons. This paper engages with the intricate dynamics of these refugees in Bangladesh through the conceptual lens of Judith Butler's profound exploration of "precarious lives" (17). In the crucible of this crisis, an intricate tapestry of human suffering unfolds, and within its folds lies a distinct narrative concerning the experiences of Rohingya refugee women. The research

endeavors to unravel the complexities of their plight by employing Butler's "frames of recognition" (5) which designate certain individuals as unrecognized and stripped of legal rights and protection, in the select webcomic. Through the struggles of Romida and Hafsa, the two refugee women protagonists, the paper also examines the challenges these women face especially while emerging as caregivers, through Joan Tronto's conceptual lens of "moral boundaries", for understanding their obstacles in the realm of care within the refugee context.

Theoretical Frameworks for the Analysis

By juxtaposing Butlerian theoretical insights on precarity and the frames of recognition with Tronto's examination of moral dimensions within the caregiving domain, this study aims to elucidate the intersecting layers of vulnerability and resilience characterizing the lives of Rohingya refugee women, especially those assuming leadership roles, in the camps. Through this interdisciplinary exploration the study endeavors to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the crisis, offering insights that extend beyond legal and existential dimensions to encompass the profound ethical considerations embedded in the challenges of caregiving for marginalized women in refugee settings influenced by norms of the neoliberal world.

Care ethics was conceived as a normative moral theory specifying how we should conduct ourselves concerning other individuals. It was advanced by feminist philosophers such as Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, Virginia Held, Joan Tronto and Eva Feder Kittay. Tronto argues "that care can serve as both a moral value and as a basis for the political achievement of a good society" (9). She stresses the "need to stop talking about 'women's morality' and start talking instead about a care ethic that includes the values traditionally associated with women" (3). Her focus on understanding the political context behind the moral actions surrounding women is significant while analyzing the challenges faced by Romida and Hafsa

in the select webcomic, and Rohingya refugee women in general, amidst the neoliberal political tactics and the dominance of male members of their society in the camp. Tronto defined four "ethical elements of care" in her work with Berenice Fisher: "attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness" (Fisher and Tronto; Tronto 127). All these elements are assessed in the visual narrative of the two protagonists to examine the role of women acting as agentic survivors, care received by the refugee women in the camps, their needs and requirements, and what measures can be taken to ensure the same. In the age of precarity characterized by exponential rise in incidents of wars, climate change and other crises, the need of care and the critical attention around its conceptions have become all the more relevant and indispensable. Care ethics in the age "offers a hopeful tone in the growing valorization of care, demonstrating the need for an innovative approach to precarity within entrenched systems of oppression and a change in priorities around the basic needs of humanity" (Hamington and Flower).

In her work *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Butler examines issues regarding vulnerability, violence, and the politics of grief. Her prior research on performativity and vulnerability serves as a foundation for her this examination (Shaw). Deviating from these political and economic interventions into the labour conditions (Bourdieu 1998; Millar; Castel; Fudge and Owens; Kalleberg; Vosko; Standing; Neilson and Rossiter; Scully) Butler's "precariousness denotes the ontological condition of interdependency, vulnerability, and bodily exposure to socioeconomic and political forces" (Mulaj 3). It is "coextensive with birth" (Butler, *Frames of War* 14) as it is intricately bound to human existence. It follows "from our social existence as bodily beings who depend upon one another for shelter and sustenance and who, therefore, are at risk of statelessness, homelessness, and destitution under unjust and unequal political conditions" (Butler, *Notes* 148). Butler expands her research to address the normalizing of state violence and the ways in which some lives are

deemed more precarious than others. This global viewpoint emphasizes the interconnectedness of lives and the responsibility to confront the structures that support inequality and precarity. Based on this, scholars and researchers across disciplines have analysed the plight of forcibly displaced persons and their unending quest to survive in precarity and precariousness generated and sustained through neoliberalism. Moreover, "categories, including class, race, gender, sexuality, nationality, ability, etc., make some of us more or less vulnerable than others" (Ertorer 3). Precarity, thus, extends beyond labour economics to encompass the existential realm of life characterized by vulnerable experiences (see Allison; Lorey; Mole´; Neilson and Rossiter; Ertorer). Such notions of precarity have inspired scholars to study the dangers hovering over the lives of forced migrants in the host countries (or regions) from across the world (Scott; Baban et al.; Tastsoglou et al.). Scholars have also studied the nexus of precarity and gender in the lives of refugees and asylum seekers (Eroter; Matteo and Scaramuzzino; Berg; Sundar et al.).

Based on the readings of the available literature, it is revealed that there is a lack of significant research conducted on the Rohingya refugees in the camp with specific attention to the needs of women and the role and challenges of agentic survivors like Romida and Hafsa in delivering care. The study fundamentally relies on visual portrayal of their precarious life which is authentic and is further authenticated by research articles, reports and surveys. The use of a webcomic in subjecting the forcibly displaced, especially women, gives a novel expression to the specific case of Rohingya refugees residing in the camps. The paper employs the "moral boundaries" (Tronto 1) and "care ethics" (Tronto 10) developed by Joan Tronto to advocate for attending to their problems and assigning more responsibilities to these women such as in the governance in the camps to provide a better care mechanism for their health, safety, and overall well-being.

I Am a Leader of My House

This paper focuses on a 'refugee webcomic', entitled *I am a Leader of My House*, which was produced by PositiveNegatives in partnership with The New Humanitarian in 2021. It "is an interactive webcomic that tells the stories of two Rohingya women in their fight for equity, the challenges they face as women living in refugee camps, their longing for home and their aspirations for the future" (PositiveNegatives, "I Am the Leader of My House", n.d.), as described on the website of PositiveNegatives. Romida and Hafsa, the titular leader(s) of the story are advocating for transformation within the camps assuming leadership roles, much to the ire of culturally conservative Rohingya society, in taking specific care of women and children. While Romida is an elected community leader in the camp who wants to ensure safety and sanitation for the refugee women she represents, Hafsa is one among very few refugees who could make it to the university level for higher education and aspires to ensure that every Rohingya child has access to opportunities for higher education.

Illustrations in the webcomic are drawn by Washington-based Pulitzer and Golden kite winning illustrator, graphic designer, and storyteller Fahmida Azim who is known for her work in the field of graphic journalism. Her drawings in the webcomic, like all other webcomics of the organization, are based on photographs taken during field research where possible. Notably, areas with challenging or unfeasible photographic documentation, such as those encountered during their journey or a boat crossing the Bay of Bengal, are imaginatively reconstructed based on the accounts provided by refugees. Wherever feasible, preliminary versions of the comics are given back to refugees before the final inking stage to confirm the accurate portrayal of their narratives (PositiveNegatives, "Methodology"). The organization is "upfront about their methodology, which involves the adaptation of refugee narratives from firsthand interviews with refugees themselves" (Davies 125) which is true in the case of the select webcomic as

Azim herself took to Instagram to share that the project is "based on interviews with two amazing Rohingya women who are leaders in their community" (Azim). The project team "centred on the voices and lives of Hafsa and Romida by working with direct quotations from [their] interviews with them to lead the story" (PositiveNegatives and Azim).

In the counter-geographies visualized in *I Am a Leader of My House*, we analyze the challenges Rohingya refugee women face in accessing adequate healthcare, education, and emotional support. The analysis is limited to images depicting the current situation of the refugee women in the camps and avoids those portraying the past experiences of their uprooting and journey through the sea. The comic provides a unique opportunity to understand the lived experiences of these women, shedding light on the structural barriers and systematic inequalities that impede their ability to receive care and to emerge as caregivers.

Precarious Lives of Rohingya Refugee Women: Challenges for Romida and Hafsa as *Leaders* Who Care

The webcomic opens with a single panel strip covering the entire screen displaying the two protagonists, Hafsa and Romida on the right and left respectively with a small house seeming to be made of materials such as corrugated tin, bamboo, wood, and tarpaulin as shown in Figure:1. The figure shows clothes drawn in shades of black hanging to be dried on a rope tied to the two trees right behind the pictures of the two titular leaders indicating a visual metaphor wherein the clothes represent the lives of Rohingya refugees hanging in darkness and uncertainty in their new settlements following their deterritorialization from Rakhine in Myanmar while the trees, rooted in the camp's soil, symbolize the nurturing and support in the form of "agentic survivors" (Kreft & Schulz 1) like Romida and Hafsa "who are pushing for a change in the Rohingya refugee camps – while holding on to the hope of returning home" (The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives), and as emerging leaders who 'care for' from

'within' the camp, unlike any external aid, living under the same conditions of deprivation and dangers. The image stands in perfect harmony with the text displaying the title, *I am a Leader of My House* in quotation marks, indicating the words to have been directly spoken by the two 'leaders' (PositiveNegatives and Azim). The words reflect their ambitions and aspirations for the welfare of the Rohingya women and children in the camp's hardships and the social progress of the Rohingya society in general. The "change" they "are pushing for" isn't confined to life in the camps but at the cultural level by uplifting the women through educating them and ensuring their reproductive health. The "I" speaks not only of Romida or Hafsa but of every woman in the refugee camp who is acting as an "agentic survivor" (Kreft & Schulz 1) to transform the refugee lives by emerging as leaders in their 'House' symbolizing every individual household and hence, the whole camp. This is the power of visual storytelling, especially in the case of refugees, that it draws viewers in and helps more people easily and truly empathize with their cause through the drawn images about personal narratives of central characters like Romida and Hafsa instead of telling or reporting stories of the millions. The accessibility and affordability of these illustrative narratives through their online production have amplified this power to make us empathize and to also make fellow refugees, especially the agentic survivors, feel that they are not alone in their experiences (Ogier).
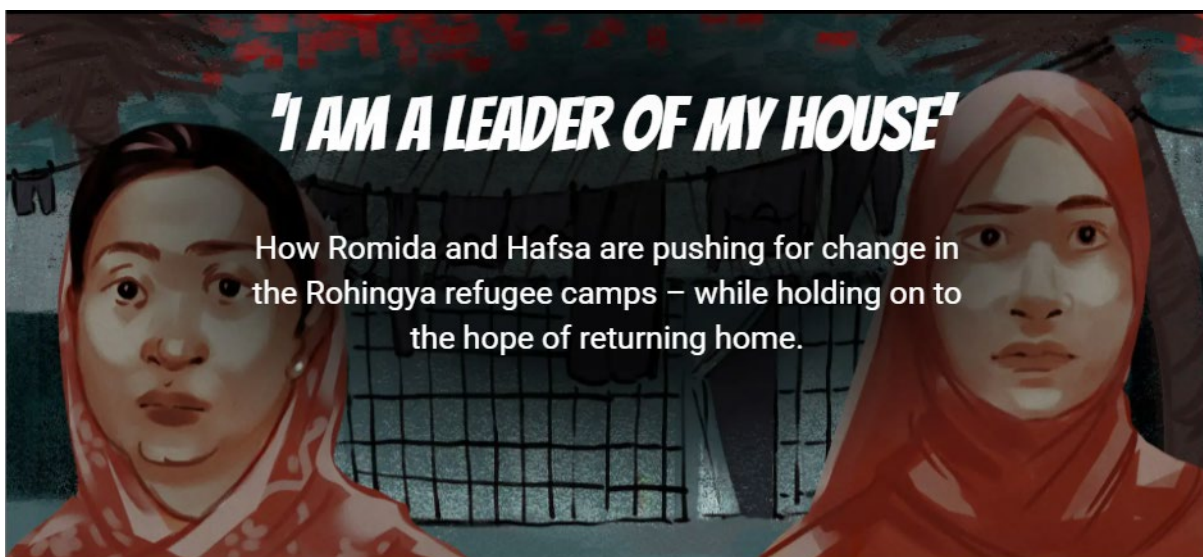
Fig. 1

The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives. The first image of *I am the Leader of My House*. 2021. *The New Humanitarian*. https://interactive.thenewhumanitarian.org/stories/2021/12/21/bangladesh-rohinyga-camp-women-illustration/.

While there is ambition, effort, and hope, there are also potential dangers and threats that these women can see and are seen in their eyes, which are drawn so, and are also represented by the color of the clothes they are draped in throughout the webcomic except in one frame (see fig. 2) which shows Hafsa wearing clothes, drawn white, walking through what seems to be a market in Myanmar where she is shown in peace with the life and "women used to live with dignity" (The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives). Hafsa compares this with the camp where "they are always worried about their safety. Women don't feel safe anymore – even at home" (The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives). This spatial and temporal shift between past and present in the visual narrative demonstrates the first reference to the precarious lives (Butler, *Precarious Life*) of these Rohingya women in their new environment. She then moves on to detail the precarious conditions of this new setting where "Women and girls live with daily struggles most men don't have to think about: domestic violence, family restrictions, pressure or even threats from men who don't think women should work outside the home …" (The

New

Fig. 2

The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives. The second image of *I am the Leader of My House*. 2021. *The New Humanitarian*. https://interactive.thenewhumanitarian.org/stories/2021/12/21/bangladesh-rohinyga-camp-women-illustration/.

Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives). The sentence is broken and the other piece which reads

". . . or simply the dangers of using a toilet at night" (The New Humanitarian and

PositiveNegatives). The sentence is written following a small gap. This halts the reader for a

moment to make him realize the gravity of how vulnerable it is for these women to access even

the most basic of facilities like a toilet during night hours. This danger is visually demonstrated

through the image (see fig. 3) where Hafsa is shown walking scared, carrying an earthen lamp

being watched by unknown men represented through the various eyes visible through the dark

and staring at her in the way that makes any woman uncomfortable and feel unsafe. Both the

panels stand in sharp contrast with each other and the broken text in the gap between the two

manipulates the scale reader agency and at the same time allows the reader to control the pacing

(Aggleton 402). This all together allows the webcomic to exist in space wherein the reader

infers the temporal relationship within and between each panel (Chute; Morton). Karin and

others observe how women and girls face different types of risks in the camp from sexual and gender-based violence, physical harassment, sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian workers to domestic violence by husbands, fathers, and other males (Karin et al. 10-11). They also encounter "risks of fire, landslides, monsoon, and cyclone where lack of knowledge on human rights . . . sexual and gender-based violence, and lack of services also increase the[ir] vulnerability" (Karin et al. 10). Women, thus, become unrecognizable, according to what Butler refers to as "frames of recognition", and their lives ungrievable and unprotected (Butler, *Frames of War*). Romida further reveals:

> We have one toilet for 10 or 20 houses. It's difficult for unmarried women to go far from their homes to use the toilet. They need to pass groups of men on the way, which is pretty uncomfortable. We fear being attacked when it's dark. There are many problems, especially for women. Domestic violence is a big one, and the fact that there are no jobs for the men – or women – is a huge cause of this. (The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives)

The eyes of men gazing at Romida in fig. 3 are notable for their different sizes and looks which indicates how different types of men look upon these women, who are differentially exposed to risks of injury, violence (gender-based and sexual) and death (Butler, *Frames of War* 25), differently to be exploited in different ways. These men include Rohingya males, militants within the community, local Bengali men living near the camps and even the Bangladeshi workers and officials employed for the care and management of refugee

populations.   Ena   Tripura

Fig. 3

The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives. The third image of *I am the Leader of My House*. 2021. *The New Humanitarian*. https://interactive.thenewhumanitarian.org/stories/2021/12/21/bangladesh-rohinyga-camp-women-illustration/.

analyzes "the violence against women in three layers the violence carried out by the humanitarian regime, by Rohingya men as spaces to express their anger and frustrations, and by local Bangladeshi men as sites to demonstrate their superiority over the Rohingya intruders into the national space" (1). The potential of the Rohingya women to progress is impacted by the violence and suppression by the families and community, and being at the bottom of the priority list within the frames of recognition this violence goes uncontested or is not properly opposed by the Bangladeshi government and other humanitarian actors, despite their moral and legal duty to provide equitable care for every life entrusted to their care (Tripura 6). Romida and Hafsa aspire to relieve women and girls of these precarious conditions and are making subtle efforts. Romida, an elected community leader who represents some 16000 people in one part of the huge camp, wants "to keep the women . . . safe" (The New Humanitarian and

PositiveNegatives) but being at the helm of the suffering under a culturally conservative society amidst neoliberal hypocrisy, it is not at all easy to even think for the agency of women to emerge in leadership roles and bring changes that challenge the cultural position of the men's authority. In fig. 4, the panel depicts women happily sharing their problems with Romida as a "lady leader" (The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives). These problems can vary from regular hygiene and healthcare of their families and children to sanitary needs and reproductive health of women which women feel shy to talk about because of social taboos.

The image also shows three men, probably the males of the family or neighbor to which the women belong. The looks and expressions on their face reveal that they are not at ease with Romida's activities and interference in the affairs of their house and locality. In patriarchal societies such as Rohingyas, men are socially entitled and responsible for controlling women's behavior in the name of protection and maintenance of a distinct cultural identity and talking to outsiders is considered an offense with the women being punished, often physically abused, for breaking these cultural norms formulated by men (Sengupta 117). The religious leaders also consider it against the religion if a woman meets strangers and outsiders (Tripura 6) further consolidating these norms and thus restricting these women from meeting even the humanitarian actors who need to engage with the refugee women for the gender project activities (Olivius 57). Romida points out how *Majhis*, unelected Rohingya representatives installed by the Bangladesh army, are particularly irked by her assuming leadership roles while she is undeterred in her efforts "to ensure every woman's safety" (The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives). As leaders, almost all men, Majhis are appointed by humanitarian organizations and the Bangladesh government to manage the camp and govern them, especially during the hours when the humanitarian workers are absent. According to a UN report in 2018, several women shared how "their daughters, sisters-in-law had disappeared, and they had reported the issue to the male Majis (Rohingya community leaders), with no action taken"

(United Nations,). Young girls were being taken from the tents at night often to provide sexual services for the influential people for whom most of these Majhis work and make rules (Parveen Kumar et al. 43). Thus, these women's lives are characterized by "a politically induced condition of maximum precariousness" (Butler, *Frames of War* 26). Here the very leaders to whom they can appeal for protection are precisely those from whom they require protection. So, to rely on them for protection from violence is precisely to exchange one potential violence for another (Butler, *Frames of War* 26). Hafsa too dreams of becoming a social activist. She is determined to provide services in the field of education "to ensure graduation for every Rohingya child out there" (The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives). She worries about the precarious future of these Rohingya children who form more than half of the total population in the camps (United Nations International Children

Fig. 4

The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives. The fifth image of *I am the Leader of My House*. 2021. *The New Humanitarian*. https://interactive.thenewhumanitarian.org/stories/2021/12/21/bangladesh-rohinyga-camp-women-illustration/

Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2018) way beyond the global average of thirty percent. In camps, the gender gap becomes significant among those enrolled as a large number of Rohingya

refugee girls drop out once they reach puberty (UNICEF). Rahman and others analyze the structural barriers to providing basic education such as no recognition of camp education in Myanmar, lack of teaching quality, teacher training, time allocation, insufficient international funding, and other logistical support (Rahman et al.).

As already discussed in the beginning and over the course of the analysis, Rohingya women in camps become much more vulnerable to sexual violence and other crimes during the night hours and one of the main reasons for this is the lack of electricity in the crowded space of the camps. Romida explains:

The biggest problem living inside the camps is our living space. It's very small for us, 5-12 people are sharing a house. The houses are made of bamboo wrapped with plastic. We get only 60 bamboo pieces and one piece of plastic per family to build a house. In summer, it gets very hot. In winter, due to fog, the plastic portion catches water and our beds get wet. We don't have electricity at our camp houses. NGOs provided us with rechargeable lights, but they don't last through the night. People who have enough money and jobs can buy solar panels and batteries. (The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives)

Fig. 5 (a)

The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives. The sixteenth image (day) of *I am the Leader of My House*. 2021. *The New Humanitarian*.

https://interactive.thenewhumanitarian.org/stories/2021/12/21/bangladesh-rohinyga-camp-women-illustration/

Rafa and others analyze the energy requirements of the Rohingya refugees while calling for research on forming policies considering "the synergies between energy poverty and socioeconomic, environmental, and political dimensions" (Rafa et al.). This problem has been highlighted in the most vivid manner with the use of animation as shown in fig. 5 (a) and (b) which are extracted from the same panel from the canvas of the webcomic. The panel portrays a day in the densely populated camp with people, drawn in white, around temporary shelters with bamboo, tarpaulin plastics, tin, and other such materials, having entrances mostly covered using a piece of cloth. The same panel transforms as the reader scrolls down only to find the same shelters in the dark with people inside as the night falls with the setting becoming more precarious, especially for women. One can also see light coming from very few houses indicating how the refugees are deprived of electricity while some people can afford solar panels and batteries which underscores the social inequality within the community. Webcomics with animations can potentially harm the reading flow and break the attention (Smith and Kosslyn 139-143) making it difficult for the reader to maintain interest. But the subtle use of animation in the select webcomic guides the reader's eyes between, and within, frames without causing any confusion (Larsson 7) giving more expression to the medium and enhancing the reader's interest.

The illustrator of the webcomic also explains: "With these panels I wanted to convey just how starkly the environment changes from day to night and what new fears and challenges

come with it. I found it heartbreaking how relatable and overlooked Hafsa and Romida's concerns are, because what woman hasn't been warned about walking alone at night? It's a familiar fear, which for them is amplified manyfold just by the lack of electrical infrastructure alone. I tried my best to convey that by invoking the inky atmosphere of a horror story – one where you have to guard yourself against malevolent forces every time you have to use the toilet after sundown" (PositiveNegatives and Azim).

Fig. 5 (b)
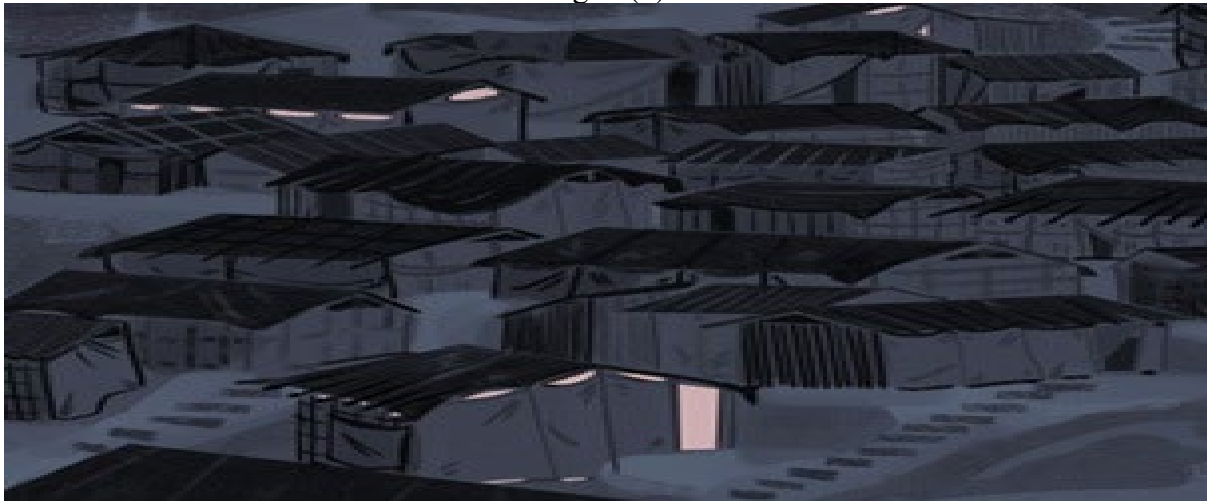
The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives. The sixteenth image (night) of *I am the Leader of My House*. 2021. *The New Humanitarian*. https://interactive.thenewhumanitarian.org/stories/2021/12/21/bangladesh-rohinyga-camp-women-illustration/

Besides this, the scarcity of food, clean water, and medical treatment is also visualized in the single panel, see fig. 6. One can see the people standing in long queues in front of a medical center and a fruit shop. The image displays the pathetic state of these services containing some people collecting water from the polluted lake while the medical center, painted in red, is another precarious place as Romida herself tells how most of the patients are often given only paracetamol for their sickness and only those with money have the option for better treatment outside the camp (The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives). Women

become severely vulnerable to certain health issues in the absence of even basic health services which are highlighted in the results of the study conducted by Rawal and others:

> The common health problems among the women were pregnancy and childbirth-related complications and violence against women. Among the children, fever, diarrhoea, common cold and malaria were frequently observed health problems. Poor general health, HIV/AIDS, insecurity, discrimination, and lack of employment opportunity were common problems for men. Further, 61.2% women received two or more antenatal care (ANC) visits during their last pregnancy, while 28.9% did not receive any ANC visit. The majority of the last births took place at home (85.2%) assisted by traditional birth attendants (78.9%), a third (29.3%) of whom suffered pregnancy- and childbirth-related complications. (Rawal et al. 1).

Fig. 6

The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives. The fifteenth image of *I am the Leader of My House*. 2021. *The New Humanitarian*. https://interactive.thenewhumanitarian.org/stories/2021/12/21/bangladesh-rohinyga-camp-women-illustration/

In such terrible conditions, it becomes difficult for women to live a free and quality life while emerging as leaders and caregivers is a distant dream for almost all of them. Among these women who somehow manage to lead and care are susceptible to threats from within society only as "conservative groups in the community are pressuring women not to work or volunteer" (The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives). While Hafsa is confident in her endeavors to ensure education for the refugee children, Romida has decided not to contest in the next elections for she is fearful of becoming a potential target as an outspoken leader. As an unmarried Rohingya Muslim woman living as a refugee in the Cox's Bazaar camp and leading others as an unofficially elected leader by the women of the camp against the Majhis, the officially appointed male leaders by government and organizations, Romida misfits any frame through which she can be recognized and included with dignity and safety. Thus, the nexus of the camp and society, neoliberal and the cultural, men and military creates a distinct frame of physical and moral boundaries (Tronto) depriving women of the care they require more than ever in times of aggravated vulnerability.

Joan Tronto's care ethics emphasizes the importance of caring relationships and ethical responsibility we have towards one another while recognizing the moral dimensions of care (Tronto). Hafsa aspires to become "a social activist who will work for her community" (The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives) whereas Romida is already a one and elected to be the one. In the counter-geographic space, they create through their endeavors in caregiving for the women and children of the community, the turbulence so generated in the male-dominated space of their society and of the neoliberal institutions at play have invited the antagonism of the appointed male leaders and influential men in the Rohingya society, Bangladeshi officials and local men, and the Rohingya militants who want to ensure the "caring labour" (Tronto 112) that is continually "gendered, raced and classed" (Tronto 112) with women allowed for caring work only within the households. Hafsa's pursuit of higher education and her advocacy for the

education of Rohingya children align with care ethics as education is a form of care that equips individuals with knowledge and skills necessary for their well-being and personal development. Hafsa's observation that not everyone, especially young girls, is allowed to access NGO-run schools highlights a moral boundary that restricts educational opportunities. Tronto's framework prompts researchers to question the ethical implications of excluding certain individuals from educational and other resources based on their refugee status and gender. The denial of education to lakhs of children, especially girls, creates a moral boundary that needs to be critically examined as education is a key factor in empowering individuals, particularly women and girls, within any community, and Hafsa's aspirations reflect her commitment to caring for her community by addressing systematic issues that hinder educational access.

In the case of Rohingya refugee women, they face specific challenges in accessing to education, food, clean water, and medical treatment due to their refugee status, gender and other intersecting factors. As women surviving in a rigorous society with no sex education, it is highly difficult to address their sanitary needs and reproductive healthcare. In this scenario, emerging leaders like Romida actively involved in caregiving activities act as gamechanger who are trusted, since they are elected by women despite the lack of any official procedure to do so unlike the Majhis, mostly male, appointed by the deep nexus of neoliberal, cultural and the influential who will never be able to feel and understand the pains and sufferings of these women. Tronto's intersectionality of care advocates the recognition of these specific challenges which paves the way to expose and dismantle this neoliberal structure that is 'uncaring'. It is undeniable that the international community and human rights organizations have approached the problem of Rohingya refugees and have launched numerous campaigns, programs, schemes, and services to provide resources and care but, as Romida repeatedly states over the course of the graphic narrative, it is "not enough" (The New Humanitarian). It is evident that

the needs of the camp have hugely outnumbered the resources provided and to provide them properly will involve huge financial expenses. But it is equally unethical, of even the least care that these institutions offer in the name of humanity, to 'appoint' leaders with a huge gender gap and that a very few women who are courageous enough to defy their cultural norms get 'elected' by women who are fed up of this uncaring system.

"We need women in leadership roles to demand this change that we need" (The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives), asserts Hafsa and it is the duty and not a favor by these institutions to encourage women to become leaders either through appointment or through elections that are officially conducted. Tronto's ethics of care extends beyond individual actions to collective responsibility and Romida and Hafsa's advocacy for universal access to food, water, healthcare and education among Rohingyas, especially women, demonstrates a collective responsibility for the well-being of the community and emphasizes the need for societal structures, including NGOs and educational institutions in Bangladesh, to actively contribute to the care of refugees. The style and functioning of these structures need to be untraditional and more than just aimed at producing positive representations of themselves through different media. Acts such as UNICEF "working with the community to mobilize female Rohingya chaperones to accompany girls to and from the learning centres" (UNICEF) is appreciable but at the same time too small in their scale. The impact of such humanitarian efforts to care could be enhanced by paying attention to women like Romida, officially recognizing and securitizing them to boost their dying urge to continue leading amidst threats received from conservative groups and Rohingya militants. The affective qualities of 'attentiveness, sensitivity, and responding to needs' (Held 39) are invoked by the value of interhuman relationality and dependency which is crucial to the ethics of care in Romida's case who desperately needs the physical as well as emotional and sensible support of the system to

continue doing what she does without fear and hopelessness in her precarious position.

Fig. 7

The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives. The nineteenth image of *I am the Leader of My House*. 2021. *The New Humanitarian*. https://interactive.thenewhumanitarian.org/stories/2021/12/21/bangladesh-rohinyga-camp-women-illustration/

The image in Figure. 7 is one of the most powerful visual metaphors drawn to complement

Hafsa's words about female leadership: "Because of my education, I see myself as a leader in

my community. I believe a woman is a born leader. I see my mother managing a house, which

is similar to governmental work: It's like managing a country. I am a leader of my house, even

if society doesn't accept me as a leader" (The New Humanitarian and PositiveNegatives).

The team wanted to showcase this powerful quote and with Fahmida's suggestion of

"Lady Justice" (PositiveNegatives and Azim), this striking image was born where a woman is

shown balancing the household work and caring selflessly to ensure a better future for the

whole family. The image of Lady Justice is a well-known and widely recognized symbol that

represents the concept of justice in various legal systems around the world. The woman is depicted as blindfolded symbolizing the impartiality and objectivity of justice suggesting that justice should be administered without bias, prejudice, or favoritism, treating everyone equally before the law. She also holds a balanced scale symbolizing that justice should be fair and measured, with decisions based on careful consideration of the facts and merits of a case, and a sword representing the enforcement of justice and the idea that such decisions can be coercive and final. In Fahmida's image, the woman in the figure is a Rohingya refugee holding a broom in place of a sword, and various household duties that these women had to perform are depicted to be in perfect balance on both scales. The image reinvigorates the central motive of the paper to involve more women from the camp to act as caregivers under a secure and dignified mechanism as increased representation of women will bring drastic improvements to their precarious life conditions with more equitable, fair, lawful, universal and just decision-making structure and management in the camp.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the visual metaphors drawn throughout the analysis show how the webcomic has excellently portrayed the everyday existence of women in the refugee camps marked by uncertainty, insecurity, and the constant threats from their patriarchal society and institutions, reflecting the broader geopolitical context that perpetuates their precarity. The paper also highlights the multifaceted dimensions of vulnerability, agency and relational care within their lived experiences especially when refugee women try to emerge as leaders in providing care to other women in the camps. Romida's continuous caregiving efforts and her election as a leader by the women in the camps despite the resistance and threats from *Majhis* signifies the criticality of the significant changes that women as agentic survivors can bring. This is not only in terms of accessibility of care but also in making them able to make their own choices as far

as their leadership is concerned well against their family, society and the system that is undeniably ignorant of their plight.

Through the convergence of Butler's precarity lens and Tronto's care ethics, the webcomic sheds light on the complex interplay between vulnerability and care, highlighting the agency and strength of Rohingya refugee women in the face of adversity. By amplifying their voices and experiences, the webcomic challenges dominant narratives of victimhood and passivity, emphasizing instead the agency, leadership, and humanity of Rohingya women in shaping their destinies and advocating for justice and dignity in their communities. Thus, the visual storytelling of *I Am a Leader of My House* serves as a poignant reminder of the urgent need to center the voices and experiences of marginalized communities in narratives of displacement, oppression, and resilience. The paper is crucial for its contribution to the studies based on a webcomic surrounding southeast Asian refugees. By critically engaging with theories of precarity and care ethics and looking at the witness spaces created by the webcomic, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex realities of Rohingya women's lives and the imperative for solidarity, empathy, and social transformation in addressing the intersecting forms of injustice that shape their existence.

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