

Broadcasting Hope: Exploring the Role of Radio in Rohingya Education

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Abstract

This study explores the potential of radio as an educational tool for Rohingya refugees living in the refugee camps of Bangladesh, who face limited access to formal schooling due to overcrowded area, limited aid, illiteracy, lack of electricity and/or digital connectivity. Drawing on several fieldwork, in-depth interviews, author's engagement with radio stations and community insights, the study examines how Rohingya-language relating radio programs can promote informal learning, literacy, and awareness on education, health and social issues. Findings reveal that culturally grounded, community-driven radio programs can bridge educational gaps and foster participation among the refugees. The study concludes that integrating radio into refugee education strategies offers a sustainable approach to reducing educational exclusion among displaced Rohingya communities.

Keywords: Rohingya, education, radio, CCA

Research Questions

1. How can radio be harnessed as an effective medium for providing educational opportunities to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh?
2. What challenges and opportunities emerge in implementing community-driven radio programs to address the educational needs of the Rohingya?

Research methodology

This study adopts the Dutta's (2008, 2018) **Culture-Centred Approach (CCA)** to explore the role of radio in education for Rohingya refugees. The CCA emphasises the voices of marginalised communities in shaping communication solutions by locating them at the centre of inquiry. Instead of imposing top-down models, the approach engages with the cultural contexts, everyday experiences, and aspirations of the community to co-construct knowledge and theory. The CCA reposes on three tenets: **culture, structure, and agency**. *Culture* refers to the everyday meanings, values, and practices that shape the community's understanding of education. *Structure* highlights the systemic barriers—such as lack of schooling, resources, and formal recognition—that restrict educational access in refugee camps. *Agency*

emphasises the ways in which any community like Rohingya refugees articulate their aspirations, negotiate constraints, and co-create solutions. The first author brings expertise in CCA, having completed his PhD research on Rohingya health using this framework, further strengthening the study's methodological grounding.

Rohingya context

The Rohingya crisis is the result of decades-long systematic discrimination, statelessness, and recurring violence against the Rohingya (primarily Muslim) minority in Myanmar's Rakhine State (Habib, 2021; Howlader et al., 2025). The most significant displacement towards Bangladesh occurred following the military crackdown against Rohingya at Rakhine state in August 2017, when more than 750,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh within a few months, joining earlier waves of them (Mahmud, 2021; Rahman, 2023). Today, more than 1.6 million Rohingya live in Bangladesh, the vast majority—approximately one million—residing in 33 officially recognised refugee camps in the Cox's Bazar district (Marsh, 2023; Rahman, 2024). These Rohingya refugee camps were rapidly established through a combination of pre-existing formal and/or informal settlements and newly developed sites, most notably the Kutupalong–Balukhali expansion of Cox's Bazar, now the largest refugee settlement in the world (Mitra et al., 2025; MSF, 2018). From December 2020 onward, approximately 35,000 Rohingya refugees were relocated to Bhasan Char, a remote island of Bay of Bengal (JRP, 2024). However, this study focuses exclusively on Rohingya refugees residing in various camps of Cox's Bazar.

Current conditions in the camps of Cox's Bazar are shaped by extreme population density—reaching up to 60,000 persons per square kilometre—temporary shelters made up of bamboo and tarpaulin, and limited access to formal education (Neef et al., 2023; Raval, 2025). Rohingya do not have any formal source of income, as they are not permitted to leave the camps for employment opportunities (Filipski et al., 2021; Thura, 2025). Politically, the Rohingya remain stateless, with no recognised citizenship rights either in Myanmar or in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2024). In Bangladesh, they are not even recognised as refugees rather labelled as FDMN (Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals) (Shapna et al., 2023). Though they are not officially recognised as refugees in Bangladesh, in this article the Rohingya are referred to as refugees, as they fulfil all the criteria and meanings of refugee status.

Literature Review

Among the Rohingya living in Bangladesh, over 50% are children and adolescents who face significant barriers to education (Guglielmi et al., 2020; Hossain, 2023). Restrictions on formal schooling, language barriers, and high illiteracy rates have produced a “lost generation” with limited opportunities for structured learning (Olney et al., 2019; Rahman & Mohajan, 2019). In this constrained context, alternative approaches to education are urgently needed. Radio, as a low-cost, accessible, and culturally appropriate medium, has emerged as an important tool for delivering education in crisis settings (Okeke et al., 2020). By broadcasting primarily in the Rohingya language and aligning with cultural norms, radio provides an inclusive platform for learning, raises awareness on critical issues, and ensures continuity of education in an environment where conventional educational infrastructure is severely constrained (UNICEF, 2020).

Radio in Humanitarian and Emergency Contexts

Radio has historically been used in emergencies to reach marginalised populations with both information and education (Heywood & Yaméogo, 2022; Hugelius et al., 2016; Okeke et al., 2020). In African and Middle Eastern refugee contexts, radio-based distance education has supported literacy, health education,

and civic awareness (Burns, 2023; UNESCO, 2024). In Bangladesh's Rohingya refugee camps, where internet use is heavily restricted and electricity is scarce, radio offers a feasible and culturally sensitive medium for learning (Dodul et al., 2020; Ergül, 2025). Seruwagi and co-authors (2024) noted that radio is widely recognised in humanitarian contexts as a far-reaching and impactful medium, serving both preventive and responsive roles in health, education, and other critical sectors. Baú and Owiso (2025) observed that in emergency settings, particularly in camp contexts, radio operates as a critical platform for disseminating information, facilitating education, and providing entertainment.

Radio for Language, Literacy, and Oral Traditions

A critical barrier to Rohingya education lies in language restrictions, as instruction in the Rohingya language or Bengali is prohibited within the camps of Bangladesh. Rohingya children have historically been excluded from Myanmar's formal education system, leaving them with low literacy in both Burmese and their own mother tongue (Karim, 2020; Rahman, 2024). In Bangladesh, the government prohibits formal instruction in Bangla, fearing integration, and restricts the use of the Myanmar curriculum beyond limited pilot programs (Hossain, 2023; HRW, 2022). In this setting, radio's oral nature is particularly valuable. Radio broadcasts of educational content particularly in the Rohingya dialect help bridge language barriers and engage a community deeply rooted in oral storytelling customs (UNICEF, 2022). Songs, drama, and narratives woven into radio programming resonate with cultural practices, making learning more meaningful and accessible (Darder, 2011).

Radio for Health and Life-Skills Education

Education in humanitarian settings extends beyond literacy and numeracy; it encompasses health and life skills that are essential for survival. Radio programs in Rohingya camps frequently integrate health messages, such as maternal health, vaccination, sanitation practices, nutrition, disease prevention and psychosocial wellbeing (UNICEF, 2020). Such knowledge equips the Rohingya audiences to adopt healthier practices in daily life and enhances their ability to respond to emergencies such as disease outbreaks or natural disasters. Radio programs, often designed in the Rohingya dialect, are interactive and participatory, enabling listeners to ask questions, share experiences, and engage with experts, thereby fostering trust and community ownership (Ergül, 2025). Interactive formats of Radio—such as mini dramas, live Phone-Ins, success storytelling, script based educational programs—help build awareness and encourage behaviour change.

Radio stations working for Rohingya education

Several radio and audio initiatives serve Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, delivering life-saving information, education and trusted news. **Bangladesh Betar, Cox's Bazar (110.8 FM and 693 KHz AM)**, the national broadcaster, airs public service messages and humanitarian updates in local dialects that both refugees and host communities can understand (BBC Media Action, 2019; UNICEF, 2020). **Radio Naf (99.2 FM)**, a community radio station in Teknaf, produces programs in a Rohingya-friendly dialect (Chittagonian dialect) (ACLAB, 2020; RFI, 2018; Walsh & Rietdorf, 2019). Both Bangladesh Betar and Radio Naf run listener clubs inside camps, where Rohingya groups hear broadcasts and discuss topics such as women's rights, health and schooling opportunities for children (Ergül, 2025; Jean, 2020). **Voice of America's "Rohingya Lifeline"** broadcast five days a week in the Rohingya language, provide guidance on health and disease prevention and information about informal learning centres and adult-education options (Bennett, 2019; VoA, 2019). **BBC Media Action**, working with UNICEF and WHO, creates Rohingya-language audio programs by itself (BBC Media Action, 2019; UNICEF, 2020). Roy (2018) noted that *Beggunor Lai* (For Everyone)—a radio program produced by Bangladesh Betar delivers vital,

life-saving information to Rohingya refugees. Marshall (2021) and Rietdorf (2020) highlighted that DW (Deutsche Welle) Akademie's Radio Naf program *Palonger Hota* (Voice of Palong) delivers crucial information to Rohingya refugees on health, nutrition, and key human rights concerns such as human trafficking, domestic violence, and child marriage.

A Culture-Centred Approach (CCA) Perspective for Radio's role:

The Culture-Centred Approach (CCA) highlights that meaningful health, education, or development interventions must emerge from the voices and life experiences of the communities. CCA emphasises that meaningful communication and development initiatives must be grounded in the **culture**, respond to the **structural** conditions of marginalised communities, nurturing their **agency** (Dutta, 2008). In data collection, CCA moves beyond conventional researcher-driven methods and instead builds knowledge *with* communities rather than *about* them. CCA data collection begins by creating safe and trusting spaces where community members can articulate their own experiences and needs (Sasthy et al., 2021). In this approach, researchers work in partnership with local stakeholders—elders, community leaders, and grassroots groups—to identify key issues and co-design the research process. Methods such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, storytelling, and participatory workshops are commonly used in CCA, allowing participants to guide both the topics explored and the interpretation of findings (Dutta, 2014; Dutta et al., 2022).

Data collection

From Fieldwork Participants

The first author conducted extensive, multi-phase fieldwork in Rohingya refugee camps across his three visits in 2018, 2020, and 2021–22. His initial contact occurred in July 2018, when he joined the entourage of UN Secretary-General António Guterres, gaining an early, close understanding of the humanitarian crisis and daily camp life of Rohingya. In 2020, during the pilot PhD study, he reverted to conduct interviews with 12 Rohingya participants, which helped refine his research design. His most intensive fieldwork took place between December 2021 and January 2022, when he spent 22 days in Cox's Bazar Rohingya camps and carried out 41 in-depth interviews across five camps. In total, 53 interviews were conducted, producing rich qualitative data on lived experiences, media use, health concerns, and everyday challenges.

Across these visits, the first author examined radio ownership, access to information, and the role of media in daily life. Guided by the Culture-Centred Approach (CCA), the research prioritised participants' perspectives. Informed consent was obtained during in-depth interviews, and a trained Rohingya interpreter facilitated accurate communication. The interviews were transcribed and systematically analysed to identify recurring themes, offering a nuanced, contextually grounded understanding of communication practices within the Rohingya community.

From Co-authors

The second and third authors played an active role in producing and broadcasting radio programs for Rohingya communities between 2017 and 2021 while working at Bangladesh Betar in Cox's Bazar. Their direct involvement in content design, program delivery, and audience engagement—along with frequent visits to the camps—provided valuable practical insights into how radio performed as a tool for information sharing, education, and community support. These experiences were integrated into the study to complement and contextualise the fieldwork findings.

The fourth and fifth authors contributed in the study in broader perspectives. The fourth author, through policy-level work at the Ministry of Education, offered insights into strategic planning, regulatory frameworks, and initiatives related to refugee education and information dissemination. This helped situate the research within wider structural and policy contexts. Meanwhile, the fifth author's ongoing work in producing radio content for vulnerable communities added current, practice-based understanding of content creation, audience engagement, and operational challenges.

By combining field experiences, professional practice, and policy expertise, the study presents a comprehensive analysis of radio's role in Rohingya camps. This multidisciplinary approach strengthens the findings and highlights the complex relationship between community needs, media practices, and policy environment for education of Rohingya.

Data analysis

The first author analysed the interview data using Charmaz's (2000) co-constructivist grounded theory approach, involving iterative, line-by-line examination of transcripts and continuous refinement of interpretations. Analytical rigour was ensured through reflective memo writing, detailed field notes, and systematic cross-checking. Contextual insights from the second and third authors were integrated, alongside the fifth author's practical perspectives and the fourth author's policy contributions. Through this collaborative process, initial codes were developed, compared, and grouped to identify patterns and relationships, which were ultimately synthesised into five overarching themes.

1. Radio-based information is perceived as authentic and essential.
2. Radio serves as a crucial communication tool during emergencies (Covid-19 pandemic).
3. Elderly community members express a strong preference for listening to the radio.
4. Ownership of radio sets among the Rohingya population is limited.
5. Shortages in power supply hinder consistent radio access and listening.

Findings

Radio-based information is perceived as authentic and essential.

Interviews with 53 participants revealed that radio is widely seen as a trusted and essential source of information. Listeners expressed strong confidence in broadcasts—especially on health, safety, education and community issues—and valued the respectful, empathetic tone of presenters, which strengthened their trust and connection. As one 42-year-old Rohingya woman stated, “*We rely on radio information as it always speaks the truth based on facts and findings.*” Similarly, a 66-year-old Rohingya man remarked, “*We live in a sea of misinformation as we are cut off from mainstream sources of information, but radio gives us authentic updates on health and disasters.*” These perceptions of credibility reinforced radio's role as a vital and trusted source of accurate information, especially where other reliable sources were limited. The second and third authors' work with the Rohingya community during COVID-19 further confirms radio as a crucial lifeline amid uncertainty and isolation.

Radio serves as a crucial communication tool during emergencies (Covid-19 pandemic)

During the first author's field visit to the Rohingya camps between December 2021 and January 2022—shortly after the Covid-19 outbreak in Bangladesh camps—it became evident that radio played a crucial role as a lifeline of communication during emergencies. With limited or no access to the internet, television, or other forms of media—particularly during lockdown periods—radio emerged as the most dependable and accessible channel for disseminating life-saving information. A 66-year-old Rohingya

man shared, “During Covid, we could not go outside, so we relied on radio for health updates.” Similarly, a 36-year-old woman noted, “We usually have no entertainment in the camps, but during Covid, we listened to dramas on the radio to pass the time.”

The second and third author, who were working at Bangladesh Betar Cox’s Bazar during the pandemic, contributed to produce *Beggunor Lai* (For Everyone)—a radio program promoting Covid-19 awareness among Rohingya listeners. They also engaged in courtyard meetings, *Betar Songlaps* (radio dialogues), Radio Listeners’ Club activities and quiz programs held in the camps during and after the pandemic. Rohingya participants noted these efforts reduced fear and misinformation through clear, culturally grounded communication (WHO, 2021).

Elderly community members express a strong preference for listening to the radio

Drawing on 53 interviews from the first author’s field visits and the experiences of the second and third authors at Bangladesh Betar, Cox’s Bazar, it becomes evident that elderly community members maintain a deep emotional connection to radio listening. Elderly respondents often described the radio as a “voice of connection” that keeps them updated on health, social, and religious matters while offering comfort and a sense of belonging. While working in the Rohingya camps, the second and third authors observed that elderly Rohingya listeners actively participated in *Betar Songlaps* (radio dialogues) and courtyard meetings, to share experiences and raise community concerns. Overall, radio continues to play an indispensable role in fostering inclusion, trust, and resilience among elderly Rohingya refugees.

Ownership of radio sets among the Rohingya population is limited.

Based on the first author’s three field visits to the Rohingya camps and the second and third authors’ extensive engagement with the community through Bangladesh Betar, Cox’s Bazar, it is evident that radio ownership among the Rohingya population remains extremely limited. Out of 53 Rohingya participants interviewed by the first author, only seven reported owning a personal radio set, underscoring the restricted access to this medium. Many participants reported relying on small, battery-powered radios, as stable electricity is unavailable in most areas. Some radios were distributed by organisations like UNICEF and local broadcasters during emergencies. Fourth and fifth authors continuous engagement with marginalised Rohingya populations also revealed that the ownership of radios among the Rohingyas is very low. Despite low ownership, shared listening fosters discussion and support, allowing radio to remain a vital source of connection and information.

Shortages in power supply hinder consistent radio access and listening.

Findings from field visits and community engagement show that the lack of electricity in Rohingya camps severely limits regular radio access. With no formal power infrastructure, residents rely on solar energy or disposable batteries, both of which are insufficient for sustained use (Hasan et al., 2023). As 23-year-old female Rohingya explained, “There is no electricity in the camp area. We use the solar light system to light our shelter or to listen to the radio. Each shelter is given one solar charger light, but it lasts only about 30 minutes to an hour. As a result, at night we have to go to bed early.” Consequently, most households rely on small, battery-powered radios and conserve battery life by switching them on only during essential broadcasts—such as news bulletins, health updates, or religious programs—making radio listening a highly selective and time-bound activity.

During interviews conducted by the authors, many Rohingya refugees expressed that the high cost and limited availability of batteries, coupled with weak or inconsistent solar charging, made regular radio use extremely challenging. Several participants voiced frustration about missing crucial updates or

entertainment programs due to power shortages. Despite these constraints, interest in radio listening remains strong.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the indispensable role of radio as a culturally grounded communication medium among Rohingya refugees residing in Cox's Bazar camps, Bangladesh. Analysis of 53 interviews and the authors' engagement with Bangladesh Betar shows that radio goes beyond information dissemination, fostering trust, knowledge, and social cohesion. Using the **Culture-Centred Approach (CCA)**, the Rohingya community's engagement with radio is seen as a culturally meaningful practice that navigates structural constraints while promoting empowerment, awareness, and resilience.

Culturally, the Rohingya's attachment to radio is rooted in oral traditions, communal knowledge sharing, and past experiences in Myanmar, where radio was a primary source of news and education (Internews, 2014; UNICEF, 2018). Rohingya elderly community members, describe radio as a "voice of connection" that maintains cultural identity and social networks. Radio programs such as *Beggunor Lai* (For Everyone), produced by Bangladesh Betar, and VoA's *Rohingya Lifeline* exemplify the CCA principle of anchoring communication in the lived realities of the community. By delivering messages in the Rohingya language and addressing topics relevant to daily life, radio fosters inclusion, empowerment, and culturally legitimate health and social interventions.

Participants consistently perceived radio as authentic and essential, contrasting it with rumours and unverified information circulating in the camps. The credibility of radio broadcasts is reinforced by the empathetic tone of presenters, alignment with lived experiences, and participatory programming. A 62-year-old man noted, "Radio is a trusted and reliable medium for delivering accurate and truthful information in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh," while a 42-year-old woman remarked, "We rely on radio messages because we can participate in programs produced in the Rohingya language." These accounts underscore the Culture-Centred Approach's emphasis on amplifying marginalised voices, demonstrating that trust arises not only from accuracy but also from cultural resonance.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, radio's importance became particularly evident in the camp area. Lockdowns and mobility restrictions limited access to healthcare and social services, making radio the primary channel for life-saving information on hygiene, vaccination, and preventive health measures. As one Rohingya participant (57 years old female) explained, "When we could not go outside and had no doctors nearby, the radio told us how to stay safe and protect our children." Beyond conveying health information, radio programs offered entertainment, emotional comfort, and a sense of normalcy. This dual role—informational and psychosocial—demonstrates that radio functions both as a practical tool and a culturally embedded source of reassurance, reflecting the CCA principle that communication must address material and cultural realities.

Structural constraints—poverty, lack of electricity, and restrictions on electronics—limit radio access, with only seven of 53 participants owning personal radio sets. To cope, community members use collective listening practices, such as Radio Listeners Clubs, sharing radios to ensure wider access while fostering social interaction, support, and solidarity. These practices reflect Culture-Centred Approach (CCA) principles, showing how communities exercise agency to transform constraints into collective empowerment. However, Government of Bangladesh policies prevent individual radio ownership, further restricting independent media access and reinforcing reliance on communal arrangements for information and engagement.

Overall, the findings show that radio functions as a culturally grounded, participatory, and trusted medium for the Rohingya refugee community. Guided by the Culture-Centred Approach (CCA), this discussion highlights how radio mediates structural constraints, cultural practices, and individual and collective agency. Despite challenges such as limited ownership, energy scarcity, and economic hardship, the Rohingya community has adapted through shared listening, battery conservation, and culturally resonant programming. Radio not only delivers essential information but also strengthens social connectedness, cultural continuity, and empowerment.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that radio serves as a culturally grounded, trusted, and participatory medium for Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Despite structural constraints such as limited ownership, electricity shortages, and economic hardship, the community actively engages with radio through shared listening, culturally relevant programming, and collective adaptation. Radio not only delivers essential health, safety, and educational information but also fosters social cohesion, intergenerational learning, and emotional resilience. Guided by the Culture-Centred Approach, these findings highlight the importance of culturally attuned, community-informed, and structurally supported communication strategies, positioning radio as both a lifeline and a tool for empowerment.

AI Disclosure Statement

This article is an original work created by the authors of this article. All reviews, data collection, analysis, and conclusions presented are our own thoughts.

We acknowledge that we used AI tools in a limited and supportive capacity, specifically for minor grammatical corrections and to refine or brainstorm certain discussion points. These tools did not generate the core content or shape the primary ideas of the article.

We take full responsibility for the integrity, accuracy, and originality of the work.

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