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What Can the World's Largest Refugee Camp Teach Us About the Meaning of Work?

by Danielle Kost

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Almost 1 million Rohingya refugees are sinking deeper into despair while sitting idle in a camp they can't easily leave. But the opportunity to work might provide a resource more scarce than cash: hope. Research by **Reshmaan N. Hussam**.



Two years have passed since more than 700,000 Rohingya people fled a bloody ethnic cleansing campaign in Myanmar and created the world's largest refugee camp in Bangladesh. But not much has changed since then.

At the Kutupalong camp, feelings of relief have long given way to a quieter distress—the kind that comes from years spent sitting in a plastic-and-bamboo shelter with no end in sight. Each day is the same, giving these migrants too much time to ruminate about the horrific violence they survived, family they lost, and where they will go next.

A refugee camp might seem like an unlikely place to study the misery of joblessness and the value of work, but not to Reshmaan N. Hussam, assistant professor of business administration at Harvard Business School. After reading about the atrocities, she visited the camp in December 2017 to see the situation firsthand, four months after the ethnic cleansing campaign began.

“The first thing that hits you is that the gruesome stories you read in the newspapers are real,” says Hussam, who has returned to the refugee camps three more times. “I thought, ‘There’s so much suffering. What can I do? How can I be useful, if at all?’”

When she posed those questions to refugees, many said they simply wanted something to do with their hands.

While aid organizations provide food and some basic supplies, the Rohingya lack permits to work outside the camps. Educational opportunities have also been scarce, lest they integrate with Bangladeshi residents and stay permanently.



With limited hope of resettlement on the horizon, many Rohingya have sunk deeper into despair.

“You’re dealing with the trauma you experienced, with no distractions, no coping mechanism,” she says. “You have nothing to give you purpose or direction during the day.”

Testing the unique benefits of work

By all accounts, overcrowding, extreme poverty, and the experience of forced displacement inside the camps has taken a profound toll. Doctors Without Borders has provided almost 1.4 million outpatient medical consultations and 32,000 mental health consultations to Rohingya refugees since the violence in Myanmar erupted in August 2017. The organization considers the refugees’ mental health needs “acute.”

"THE GLOBAL FLOW OF GOODS AND CAPITAL TIES TOGETHER ALL OF HUMAN INTERACTION."

Relief agencies have tried to set up social outlets to lift the Rohingya’s spirits and break the monotony of life at a refugee camp. But, Hussam wondered if small work opportunities could help refugees reclaim their roles as providers, bring meaning to their days, and ease some of their psychological pain.

“There’s a lot of literature that suggests that work means much more than just an income,” says Hussam, who teaches the course Business, Government and the International Economy to MBA students. “It gives you a sense of identity, of purpose, of a larger goal. It gives you an opportunity to build a social life.”

Hussam—along with Erin Kelley, an economist at the World Bank; Gregory Lane, an assistant professor at American University; and Fatima Zahra, a research fellow from the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health—seek to take the research a step further. They will study whether intensely traumatic experiences and deep uncertainty about one’s future erode or elevate the psychosocial benefits of work.

Starting this winter, the team will compare how 1,000 Rohingya households at the Kutupalong camp react to one of three scenarios:

- Receiving \$25 each month without working
- Working 12 days a month to receive \$25
- Volunteering for 12 days and receiving \$25 without prior notice



Hussam at the Jamtoli refugee camp in Bangladesh.

Refugees will survey members of their community about how they spend their days. To test whether reducing near-term uncertainty improves well-being, some participants will know their work schedules in advance, while others will receive a call the day their efforts are needed.

Hussam's team piloted the study with 300 households last spring, and the preliminary findings were promising. Refugees who worked had significantly lower rates of depression and illness and more positive social interactions. Working also increased their sense of control, especially among those who lost a family member to violence in Myanmar.

"We're hopeful that with the larger-scale experiment, we're going to be able to really dive into the mechanisms," says Hussam, who examined the Rohingya's suffering in a forthcoming case, *The Rohingya Refugee: Past, Genocide, Future*.

Preparing for refugees of climate change

The study's results might inform new ways to help the more than 70 million people who have been displaced globally by conflict and natural disasters as of the end of 2018, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Some forecasters expect the number of forcibly displaced migrants to climb to 1 billion as climate change makes more parts of the world uninhabitable.

"They will affect you. They will affect me. They may be you and me, as well," says Hussam, whose research often explores the intersection of economics and social behavior in developing countries.

Rather than wait for government policymakers to decide how to accommodate and assist refugees, executives should consider how they can help them integrate through employment, she says. It's not about philanthropy; businesses stand to gain as much as refugees.

That approach might be less expensive than funding refugee camps indefinitely. The United Nations said in February that it needed \$920 million to support the 900,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and the 330,000 vulnerable residents who live near camps.

Whether they acknowledge it or not, business leaders play a role in preventing and addressing humanitarian crises, like the Rohingya's plight, Hussam says.

"In the world that we live in, the global flow of goods and capital ties together all of human interaction," she says. "It determines whether we live or die, and whether we value one another as human beings."

About the Author

Danielle Kost is the senior editor of Harvard Business School Working Knowledge. HBS Digital Media Producer *Amelia Kunhardt* produced the video interview.

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