

KNOW THY NEIGHBOUR: HOW STRENGTHENING THE HOST-REFUGEE RELATIONSHIP CAN AID REFUGEE PROTECTION

In the midst of the pandemic, Delhi's Kalindi Kunj locals lent their furniture and carpets to a Rohingya family. These were used in the arrangements of a couple's wedding at a time when the media had declared Rohingyas "spreaders of disease", "a burden on the country", "illegal migrants", and even "terrorists" [1]. Several similar accounts of locals aiding refugees during tumultuous times show how this amity may have sustained many asylum-seekers through the pandemic years and beyond. Such stories implore a better understanding of host-refugee relationships and if they can function as a protective measure for the refugees when strengthened.

All discussions on the protection and welfare of refugees grind to a halt against the twin obstacles of India, one, not having a national refugee policy, and two, not being a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention. While such policy and diplomatic dialogues would be undeniably transformative in protecting refugees, they remain a distant hope.

Furthermore, despite 89% of refugees reporting [2] they sought international aid organisations (such as UNHCR and its partners) during times of crisis, civil society resources have been dwindling or redirected over the years. With both avenues of national legislation and international aid closing, refugees are left at the mercy of the third one — the host community.

The discretionary power of local NGOs, local authorities, and local residents aided the refugees in gaining access to basic amenities such as food, water, accommodation, health care, and education. Especially during the pandemic, medical resources like vaccines, medicines, counselling, and so forth were often made available by locals. In several instances, locals worked as human rights lawyers, activists, and journalists to protect refugees, even stopping deportations in some cases [3].

Outside of a circumstance of assistance, the host community regularly interacts with refugees in the capacity of landlords, employers, customers, teachers, government officials, and so forth. To then nourish this relationship would not only ensure asylum-seekers in times of need but also in daily interactions in their host state. This is to suggest that the protection of refugees is not merely a top-down approach but also a bottom-up one.

To substantiate this context, the paper will qualitatively study host and refugee community relations, particularly their promotion. The investigative research approaches will be furnished with both primary data, through interviews from both the refugees and locals and secondary data, such as global literature and comparative studies on host-refugee relationships and their impacts.

Through the case of the Rohingya community in New Delhi, this work will explore the current perspectives of the host community on Rohingya refugees, the perspectives of refugees on the host community, and the factors that continually shape this dynamic. Determinants such as the role of media, the "dangerous refugee" archetype, and whether it can be offset in the public imagination by centring the neutral or positive impact of refugees on the host community can aid the relationship, will be investigated. The research aims to suggest recommendations for improving the host-refugee relationship to chart a way forward in its conclusion.

The study's findings – albeit representative and not exhaustive – may be imported to other host countries. The import of the study has growing relevance in the context of increasing numbers of global displacement and lack of national refugee laws.

With 60% of Rohingya refugees reportedly having "cordial and sympathetic" relations with the locals [4], there may be an appropriate window of opportunity to explore the promotion of host-refugee amity. Until a national policy framework is implemented, improving relations is a sound means to ensure refugee well-being at a grassroots level.

ENDNOTES

[1]

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/explained-what-is-indias-policy-on-the-rohingya/article65791140.ece>

[2]

<https://www.rohingya.org/work/research-report-on-the-impacts-of-covid-19-on-the-rohingya-refugees-in-india.html>

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.