Can You Still Have Hope When Life Seems Hopeless?
By Ashley Westerman
2017

The Myanmar (also known as Berma) military has been accused of human rights violations with their increasingly violent persecution of Rohingya Muslims, an ethnic and religious minority in the nation. The violence in Myanmar has displaced the Rohingya and forced them to seek safety in neighboring countries. In this text, published in April 2017, Ashley Westerman speaks with Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh about their hopes for the future. Ask students to discuss how Rohingya refugees describe hope and how this compares to the author’s views on hope.

[1] Can all hope be lost?

I used to think not.

I used to think that no matter how tough life gets for people, they always have hope to cling to — to get them through it.

Then I met some Rohingya refugees on a trip to Bangladesh last month. Reporter Michael Sullivan and I were there to report on the latest wave of the Muslim minority group to flee over the border from Buddhist-majority Myanmar.

[5] We spoke with Rohingya living both inside and outside of the refugee camps that have taken root in southern Bangladesh. Working through interpreters, they told us the stories of how they’d fled from their homeland late last year during the latest Myanmar military crackdown against them. How their villages had been sacked and their homes burnt to the ground. How they’d faced a brutal military campaign of torture and mass rape. Tens of thousands of them had been displaced.

After hearing these distressing accounts, I wanted to know: Given all that they had been through, what were their hopes for the future?

A Puzzling Question

We asked about a dozen refugees. And I was shaken by their answers.

I asked one woman, Shajada — a name she chose for herself to protect her identity and her family back in Myanmar — what she hoped for her future. She responded via the interpreter: “Do you mean in terms of food?”

1. plundered or destroyed
I tried to clarify and re-clarify the question through the interpreter. Shajada, who had suffered an injury to her legs and hips while fleeing the Myanmar army that's left her almost immobile, finally did answer: “I don't hope anything for me. I don't hope for me because I cannot even move from one place to another because if I move, I fall down.”

Another young woman, Roshida — also not her real name — flat-out didn't comprehend the question at first.

“We do not understand,” Roshida responded, speaking for herself and her cousins. After we asked the question a couple of different ways, Roshida did finally say that if she could eat and Myanmar was peaceful, she would go home and try to get married.

That's an extraordinary hope for the future given what she'd been through. When the Myanmar military came to her village, Roshida was raped by four soldiers. In that part of the world having been raped can ruin a woman's prospects of finding a husband.

We thought perhaps the question of hope was getting lost in translation, so Michael tried asking: “How do you still go on?”

A woman who called herself Zubaida — again to protect her identity — answered by listing the things she needs to do to survive in the camp: sell rice, find a job, learn to speak Bangla (the Bangladeshi language).

What Is Hope?

These conversations made me wonder: What exactly is hope?

“Hope is what we want to happen,” says neuroscientist Dr. Tali Sharot, who directs the Affective Brain Lab at University College London and does research on optimism, emotion and decision making.

Hope — and optimism — does not come from any particular part of the brain, she says. Instead, a person's ability to hope and be optimistic is part genetics and part experience.

“So you can be born with a certain way of processing information that makes you more likely to be optimistic and you do learn from things that happen to you, you do learn from the world around you,” says Sharot.

In other words: a person's outlook on life comes from both their genetic predisposition2 and life experiences. If a person has many negative experiences, they may come to believe that negative things are always going to happen, she says. And that would be a reason for someone to just not feel positive anymore — to lose hope.

2. likelihood to act a certain way or be affected by a particular condition based on someone's genes
This could explain why the Rohingya refugees we interviewed had difficulty talking about their future. For decades, the Rohingya have been terrorized and persecuted by the Myanmar military simply for being an ethnic and religious minority — something the military mostly denies. Hundreds of thousands have fled their homes in waves. It is estimated that some 500,000 Rohingya refugees live in Bangladesh alone.

“I know that for many, many refugee populations like the Rohingya who've been living for years in situations of great uncertainty there's an erosion of hope,” says Pindie Stephen, who works with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to help refugees move out of camps.

Stephen, who worked with refugees for 12 years in Kenya, says it’s hard for people to think about the future when they're concerned about immediate needs — identity papers, school for their children and safe housing.

“So I think a question like, ‘What are your hopes?’ takes them off guard,” says Stephen. “A lot of our refugee population lives in this limbo for such a long time that I think they no longer even have the luxury of being able to hope.”

## Traumatized and Trapped

A recent trauma can also have an effect on a person's ability to hope, says Peter Ventevogel, a psychiatrist with the United Nations Refugee Agency.

“We often see at the beginning very high stress levels and levels of uncertainty,” he says. “They [newly arrived refugees] don't know what are their options, they don't have enough information to make decisions about what they want.”

Ventevogel is part of a team that conducted interviews with Rohingya in the two government registered refugee camps in Bangladesh. The team's forthcoming article, expected to be printed next month in the journal *Transcultural Psychiatry*, details findings of high levels of mental health concerns, such as PTSD and depression, among the 148 Rohingya interviewed. With those feelings comes a feeling of being trapped, he says.

Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are truly trapped. They are stateless. Their home country of Myanmar does not want them, nor does Bangladesh — or any other country they flee to. In Bangladesh the Rohingya are not allowed to leave their camps, get a passport in order go to another country or even legally work because they aren't citizens. They have no good options.

“They had to leave their country because of the troubles they were in and [move] into an environment that they don't perceive as welcoming and they can't get out,” Ventevogel says. “And that's not good for your mental health. That creates demoralization and loss of hope.”

But Ventevogel says in his experience talking to refugees who have been displaced for many years — whose shock and trauma is not fresh — he's found they have a lot of hope for the future.

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3. **Erosion (noun):** the gradual loss or destruction of something
4. **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**
5. **Demoralize (verb):** to deprive a person of spirit or courage
“Often it is framed in indirect ways,” he says. “People hope their children can get a good education or they can get a resettlement [to another country] and build a new life, to get back to the country they came from,” he says.

Ventevogel believes the humanitarian community can help the hopeless find hope again. It starts, he says, with helping refugees regain control of their lives. Then they're more likely to see prospects for the future.

“Sometimes it's very simple, it's just giving people a piece of land and materials to build their own house again because people can recreate something that's their own,” he says, pointing to refugees in Uganda and Tanzania who are allowed to farm.

**One Man’s Hope**

Near the end of our time in Bangladesh we spoke with a Rohingya who backs up Ventevogel's claim that refugees who have been displaced for a longer time are better able to think about their future.

Twenty-five-year-old Mohammad Nur, a name he chose to protect his identity, has been a refugee his whole life. He was born in a government-run refugee camp. When we asked if he had any future in Bangladesh, he replied: “I think not. Not at all.”

He said he knew if he didn't leave, his brain would die.

“I will not die, my body will not die but... I will be like a disabled guy,” he says. And so in this hopeless situation, he has one clear hope for the future: “I must leave.”
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. **PART A**: Which of the following statements identifies the central idea of the text?
   
   A. Rohingya refugees spend their time focusing on their current situation and how they will survive, rather than thinking about the future.
   B. The camp in Bangladesh will eventually be shut down, which discourages Rohingya refugees from being hopeful for changes in the camp.
   C. Rohingya refugees' traumatic experiences in Myanmar and unstable living conditions in Bangladesh make it difficult for them to hope for a better future.
   D. The hope that Rohingya refugees continue to possess is astounding after all of the violence and persecution they have suffered.

2. **PART B**: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
   
   A. “I don't hope anything for me. I don't hope for me because I cannot even move from one place to another because if I move, I fall down.” (Paragraph 9)
   B. “A woman who called herself Zubaida — again to protect her identity — answered by listing the things she needs to do to survive in the camp: sell rice, find a job, learn to speak Bangla” (Paragraph 14)
   C. “Hundreds of thousands have fled their homes in waves. It is estimated that some 500,000 Rohingya refugees live in Bangladesh alone.” (Paragraph 20)
   D. “People hope their children can get a good education or they can get a resettlement [to another country] and build a new life, to get back to the country they came from” (Paragraph 30)

3. **PART A**: According to the text, how does time affect Rohingya refugees’ of hope?
   
   A. Rohingya refugees come to Bangladesh with hope but slowly lose it because they are indefinitely displaced in Bangladesh.
   B. Rohingya refugees become more hopeful with time because they grow to accept and trust the help of Bangladesh workers.
   C. Rohingya refugees lose the hope they once had over time because they see war continuing to rage indefinitely in Myanmar.
   D. Rohingya refugees become increasingly capable of hope as the more time passes since their experiences in Myanmar.

4. **PART B**: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
   
   A. “I know that for many, many refugee populations like the Rohingya who’ve been living for years in situations of great uncertainty there’s an erosion of hope” (Paragraph 21)
   B. “Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are truly trapped. They are stateless. Their home country of Myanmar does not want them, nor does Bangladesh” (Paragraph 27)
   C. “But Ventevogel says in his experience talking to refugees who have been displaced for many years — whose shock and trauma is not fresh — he’s found they have a lot of hope for the future.” (Paragraph 29)
   D. “It starts, he says, with helping refugees regain control of their lives. Then they’re more likely to see prospects for the future.” (Paragraph 31)
5. What evidence does the author use to support the idea that Rohingya refugees' relationships with hope have been affected by their experiences?
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the context of the article, what are the effects of prejudice? Why are the Rohingya people facing prejudice within Bangladesh? How are refugees subjected to similar forms of prejudice in other host nations around the world?

2. In the context of the article, how are we changed by war? How does conflict affect the Rohingya refugees and the people with whom they interact? How has the conflict in Myanmar impacted Rohingya refugees’ understanding of hope?

3. When have you felt hopeless or powerless in a situation? How did you move past or overcome this feeling?