

**Investigating Access and Barriers to Higher Education Among  
the Rakhine Ethnicity in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh**

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## **AI Declaration**

I hereby declare that this thesis has been prepared with the assistance of artificial intelligence (AI) tools. While the full content of this thesis, including its research, analysis, and conclusions, is entirely my own, I have utilized AI to refine my writing and improve the overall flow of the text. The AI tools were used for language enhancement, structure optimization, and clarity, but all intellectual contributions, including the research, analysis, and interpretation, are my own.

I have ensured that the AI-generated content has been thoroughly reviewed and integrated in accordance with the academic integrity guidelines of Asian University for Women. I understand the importance of adhering to ethical standards in academic work and have followed all relevant guidelines regarding AI-assisted writing and research.

Nila Wan

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the barriers to higher education among the Rakhine ethnic community in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, focusing on cultural, economic, and societal factors. Using qualitative research, the study includes interviews with students, community leaders, and parents in rural areas. The findings reveal that cultural barriers, especially gendered expectations, limit educational aspirations, particularly for young women. In many households, traditional beliefs prioritize marriage and domestic duties over academic achievement, restricting girls' opportunities for higher education. Economic constraints are a major obstacle, as many families live in poverty and cannot afford tuition, transportation, or study materials. The lack of local infrastructure and quality educational institutions further exacerbates these barriers. Additionally, the Rakhine community faces social marginalization, including discrimination and unequal access to educational resources. Despite these challenges, the community demonstrates resilience and a strong desire for education. The research highlights the role of community leaders and parents in supporting children's educational aspirations. Based on these findings, the thesis proposes policy recommendations such as financial aid, gender-sensitive policies, and community-based education initiatives to improve access to higher education. Overcoming these barriers is essential for empowering Rakhine youth, particularly women, and ensuring equitable opportunities for all.

*Keywords:* Rakhine community, higher education, cultural barriers, gender norms, economic constraints, social marginalization, educational inequality, Bangladesh, community-based education, social mobility, gender equity.

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Background of the topic**

The Rakhine community, originating from the ancient kingdom of Magadha, migrated to Bangladesh's coastal regions of Cox's Bazar and Patuakhali in the late 18th century. With a cultural heritage spanning several millennia, the term "Rakhine" is derived from the Pali word "arakhah," signifying protectors. Legend suggests they settled in various places such as Rokhong, Rokhaingpi, Arkhang, Rosang, Rakhainpray, or Arakan after their migration. Initially known as Magadhi or Magh by locals, this name was referenced by a saint named Assang Nagiddha around three thousand years ago in a stone inscription found in Arakan. (Rakhain, 2021) Bangladesh has made significant strides in expanding educational opportunities, yet certain ethnic groups, including the Rakhine, continue to experience marginalization. The Rakhine community, residing predominantly in Cox's Bazar, Patuakhali faces socio-economic and cultural barriers that impede their educational aspirations. Understanding these challenges is essential for devising targeted interventions to promote inclusivity in higher education.

The Rakhine people, also known as the Arakanese, are an ethnic group primarily residing in the Rakhine State of Myanmar (formerly Burma). They have a rich historical heritage dating back centuries. Their ancient kingdom of Arakan was a powerful maritime state that engaged in trade and cultural exchange with neighboring regions, including Bengal.

The Rakhine community's presence in Bangladesh dates back to the late 18th century. As a result of political and social upheavals in Arakan, many Rakhine people migrated across the border to seek refuge in the coastal regions of Bangladesh, particularly Cox's Bazar and

Patuakhali. Over time, they integrated into the local society, while maintaining their distinct cultural identity. (Rakhain, 2021)

## **1.2 Socio-economic Landscape of Cox's Bazar**

Cox's Bazar is a coastal district in Bangladesh known for its beautiful beaches and tourism industry. However, it has also been grappling with significant socio-political challenges, particularly in recent years. The influx of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar since 2017 has had a profound impact on the local population, including the Rakhine community.

The Rakhine community in Cox's Bazar faces a complex set of challenges, including:

- **Economic Disadvantage:** Many Rakhine families in Cox's Bazar lived in poverty, often relying on subsistence agriculture or fishing for their livelihood. But in present, they run some small businesses, it still has limited access to education and employment opportunities further exacerbates their economic vulnerability.
- **Social Marginalization:** The Rakhine community experiences social discrimination and exclusion due to their ethnic background. This can limit their access to essential services and resources, such as healthcare and education.

Despite these challenges, the Rakhine community in Cox's Bazar has shown resilience and determination. They have established their own cultural organizations and community-based initiatives to promote their identity and address their needs.

### **1.3 Research Problem**

In the Rakhine community of Cox's Bazar, particularly in rural areas such as Ramu, Paner Chora, Chowfoldondi and Khurushkul, access to higher education remains a significant challenge, driven by a combination of cultural, societal, and economic barriers. (Rakhain, 2021) One of the most pervasive obstacles is deeply rooted cultural beliefs and societal expectations that discourage higher education, particularly for girls. In many households, there is a prevailing view that university education is unnecessary, with the belief that students—especially female students—do not need to pursue advanced academic achievement. This perception is reinforced by traditional gender roles, which prioritize domestic duties over academic or professional aspirations, particularly for young women. (Akter, S., 2017).

In my opinion, there is a broader cultural notion within the community that intelligence and academic success are not of critical importance. Many students, particularly girls, are discouraged from pursuing higher education because they are taught that they should not "stand out" or engage in intellectual discussions, especially in public settings. In many families, the ideal behavior is for young people to remain quiet, modest, and focused on fulfilling their roles within the home and family. This cultural mindset perpetuates a cycle where educational aspirations are stifled, limiting opportunities for personal development and community advancement.

In addition to these cultural barriers, economic challenges also play a significant role in limiting access to higher education. In villages like Paner Chora and Khurushkul, where poverty is widespread and local employment opportunities are scarce, many families view higher education as an impractical investment. The cost of tuition, transportation, and other education-related expenses is often seen as an insurmountable financial burden, with little

hope of return on investment due to the limited job opportunities available after graduation. As a result, many families, especially those with low income, either discourage their children from pursuing higher education or are simply unable to afford it, even when they recognize its potential value.

This creates a tragic paradox: while many families desire their children to receive a higher education, the financial constraints they face prevent them from fulfilling this aspiration. In some cases, families must choose between meeting immediate survival needs or investing in education, with education often being deprioritized due to its perceived financial infeasibility. The compounded impact of these cultural, societal, and economic factors means that many Rakhine students, particularly girls, find themselves unable to access higher education, despite a genuine desire to do so.

Thus, this research seeks to investigate the intersection of cultural, societal, and economic barriers that prevent Rakhine students from accessing higher education. By examining the deeply ingrained cultural norms, gendered expectations, and financial constraints, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that hinder educational attainment in the Rakhine community. The research will also propose strategies for overcoming these barriers, with the goal of ensuring equitable access to education for all Rakhine youth, regardless of gender or socio-economic status.

#### **1.4 Objectives**

The primary objectives of this research are to investigate the cultural, societal, and economic barriers that hinder Rakhine students in Cox's Bazar, particularly from rural areas like Paner Chora and Khurushkul, from accessing higher education. The study aims to

identify the key cultural beliefs, societal expectations, and financial constraints that limit educational opportunities, with a particular focus on the gender-based disparities faced by female students. Additionally, this research seeks to understand the perspectives of the Rakhine community, including parents, students, and local leaders, regarding higher education, and how these views shape decisions about sending children, especially girls, to university. Another objective is to explore the experiences and aspirations of Rakhine students who face significant barriers in continuing their education beyond the secondary level, examining both the challenges they encounter and their educational ambitions. Based on these findings, the study will propose actionable recommendations aimed at addressing the identified barriers, including strategies to overcome cultural and financial obstacles and to promote more equitable access to education. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the broader understanding of how cultural and economic factors influence educational access in marginalized communities and provide insights that may help improve higher education opportunities for other ethnic or marginalized groups facing similar challenges. The purpose of this research is to investigate the access to and barriers faced by the Rakhine ethnicity in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, in their pursuit of higher education. By examining the unique challenges and opportunities experienced by this particular ethnic group, the study aims to shed light on the factors that facilitate or hinder their participation in higher education. Through a comprehensive exploration of socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors, the research seeks to provide insights that can inform policy interventions and initiatives aimed at improving access to higher education for the Rakhine ethnicity in Cox's Bazar, ultimately contributing to greater equity and inclusivity in the region's educational landscape.

## **1.5 Research questions**

1. What are the socio-economic factors influencing access to higher education among the Rakhine ethnicity in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh?
2. What cultural norms and practices impact the participation of Rakhine students in higher education in Cox's Bazar?
3. What are the experiences of Rakhine students who have successfully navigated barriers to higher education in Cox's Bazar, and what lessons can be learned from their journeys?
4. What strategies and support mechanisms could be implemented to enhance access to higher education for the Rakhine ethnicity in Cox's Bazar?

## **1.6 Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study lies in its thorough exploration of the barriers that prevent Rakhine students in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, from accessing higher education, with a particular focus on the intersection of cultural, societal, and economic factors. By identifying these barriers, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the unique challenges faced by this marginalized ethnic group. The findings highlight the pressing need for targeted interventions to address the socio-cultural and institutional inequalities that limit educational opportunities for Rakhine youth, especially for girls. This study is particularly valuable for informing educational policy by emphasizing the importance of creating more inclusive and accessible pathways to higher education for ethnic minorities in Bangladesh.

Additionally, the study's insights offer a foundation for developing community-based strategies aimed at empowering the Rakhine population, particularly through education. By shedding light on the barriers to educational attainment and the socio-economic consequences of these limitations, the research advocates for initiatives that can improve not only educational access but also the broader socio-economic mobility of the Rakhine community. In doing so, the study supports the promotion of social justice, equity, and inclusion, urging policymakers and community leaders to take concrete steps towards reducing systemic discrimination and enhancing opportunities for marginalized groups. Ultimately, this research seeks to foster a more equitable educational landscape that promotes social cohesion and the empowerment of disadvantaged communities.

## **2. Literature Review**

Access to higher education is a critical factor for improving socioeconomic outcomes and achieving upward mobility, but for marginalized ethnic groups like the Rakhine community in Cox's Bazar, the journey toward higher education is often fraught with numerous barriers. These obstacles start early in a child's educational experience, with the primary education phase forming the foundation for later academic success. For the Rakhine community, the challenges faced during primary education often create a cumulative impact, making it difficult for students to transition into secondary and higher education. This literature review examines the main barriers to education for the Rakhine community, with a focus on economic hardships, lack of infrastructure, insufficient parental support, teacher quality, and broader social and cultural dynamics.

### **2.1 Economic Barriers and the Foundation for Future Learning**

Economic hardship is a foundational barrier to education for the Rakhine community, and it plays a critical role in shaping the educational outcomes of children in this region. According to Mallick, Popy, & Yesmin (2022), poverty is overwhelmingly identified as the primary obstacle preventing children from accessing education, with 93% of parents citing financial constraints as a key factor. The costs associated with schooling, such as tuition fees, textbooks, school uniforms, and transportation, are often prohibitive for many families living in poverty. This leaves education as a secondary concern when compared to immediate survival needs, such as food, shelter, and medical care.

Furthermore, in many impoverished households, children are often compelled to engage in child labor to support their family's income. This reality is particularly acute in rural areas, where economic activities such as farming, fishing, or working in local markets



require children to take on adult roles. These economic pressures result in a direct trade-off between education and labor, leading to lower school attendance and early school dropout. As Yesmin & Khan (2021) explain, many children from impoverished backgrounds are forced to prioritize short-term economic survival over long-term educational opportunities. These conditions can create an entrenched cycle of poverty, where children, lacking an education, find it difficult to break free from their economic circumstances. Limited education becomes a barrier to finding better job opportunities, which, in turn, perpetuates poverty and low aspirations for future success.

The lack of educational resources exacerbates this cycle. According to Mallick, Popy, & Yesmin (2022), beyond the direct financial costs, the absence of basic school supplies—such as books, pens, notebooks, and even school uniforms—further limits students' ability to engage meaningfully with their education. Poor infrastructure also makes it difficult for children to attend school regularly. Many families, especially in remote or marginalized areas like Cox's Bazar, face significant barriers to transportation, with long distances to the nearest school and poor roads. For many, these geographical barriers make regular school attendance practically impossible. The limited availability of school buses or affordable public transport in rural areas further complicates the situation. As a result, students are unable to stay in school, and without the foundation of primary education, they struggle to meet the academic requirements necessary for secondary and higher education. The early withdrawal from school leads to academic deficiencies that severely limit access to further education, including higher education.

Moreover, dropout rates—a recurring issue in primary education—pose a significant challenge for Rakhine students. Mallick, Popy, & Yesmin (2022) report that 75% of parents in marginalized communities identify high dropout rates as a pressing issue. For Rakhine

students, this is particularly concerning, as the lack of educational continuity leaves them underprepared for secondary school and unable to compete in an increasingly competitive job market. Without completing primary school, Rakhine students lack the basic literacy and numeracy skills necessary to move on to higher levels of education. This gap in education reinforces the barriers to higher education access, which remains largely out of reach for many students from impoverished backgrounds.

Economic barriers significantly impact the foundation for future learning among minority ethnic groups, limiting their access to education and economic opportunities. These barriers manifest in various forms, including discrimination, lack of resources, and systemic inequalities, which hinder the development of human capital essential for upward mobility. The following sections elaborate on these key aspects.

Ethnic minorities often face significant economic disparities, including lower wages and employment rates compared to majority populations (Kasir & Yashiv, 2020). These economic challenges are compounded by discriminatory practices in hiring and limited access to business opportunities, which further hinder the growth of minority-owned businesses (Bates et al., 2021). Structural barriers, such as unequal access to capital, also disproportionately affect minority entrepreneurs, making it more difficult for them to scale their businesses. In the education sector, language barriers, particularly when the medium of instruction differs from students' primary languages, significantly affect learning outcomes (Salie et al., 2020). Moreover, psychological and social barriers, such as a lack of parental support, cultural differences, and underrepresentation of minority groups in teaching staff, contribute to the educational difficulties experienced by minority students (Salie et al., 2020). These challenges can lead to lower academic achievement, limited opportunities for higher education, and ultimately, fewer career prospects. Despite these challenges, current policies

often fail to address the unique needs of minority groups, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage (Drake, 2019). Policy responses tend to overlook the intersectionality of race, class, and historical oppression, which exacerbates the inequalities faced by these communities. To break this cycle, there is a need for targeted interventions that account for the historical and structural factors driving these disparities (Carter et al., 2015). These interventions should focus not only on short-term solutions but also on long-term structural reforms aimed at leveling the playing field for minority groups. While some may argue that economic barriers are class-based rather than race-based, the evidence overwhelmingly points to systemic racial inequalities that continue to shape the opportunities available to minority ethnic groups (Drake, 2019). As such, addressing racial inequality must be an integral part of broader efforts to combat poverty and social exclusion.

## **2.2 Parental Awareness and Support**

In addition to economic barriers, the role of parental awareness and support is fundamental in determining the educational trajectory of children, particularly in marginalized communities like the Rakhine. Many parents in this community face challenges in understanding the importance of education beyond the primary level. Mallick, Popy, & Yesmin (2022) highlight that 78% of parents in marginalized communities are unaware of the long-term benefits of higher education. This lack of awareness can have significant implications for the educational aspirations of their children, as it results in reduced parental involvement and support in their children's education.

The importance of parental support cannot be overstated, as it directly influences students' motivation, academic engagement, and overall success. In families where parents

understand the value of education—especially the opportunities provided by higher education—there is often stronger encouragement for children to remain in school and pursue secondary and higher education. However, in the Rakhine community, limited awareness about the long-term rewards of education can lead to low educational aspirations, with children often unaware of the opportunities available to them beyond primary school. Many parents, struggling with economic survival, may not fully grasp how education can act as a pathway out of poverty or provide better employment prospects. As a result, educational attainment is often not prioritized, and students may not feel supported or motivated to continue their studies.

The lack of parental involvement in the education process can lead to lower academic performance among students, particularly when parents fail to engage with teachers or show interest in their children's progress. Yesmin & Khan (2021) point out that students who receive strong familial support and encouragement tend to perform better academically and have a higher chance of pursuing secondary and higher education. Without this support, however, Rakhine students may struggle to meet academic standards, face increased dropout rates, and develop low self-esteem regarding their educational potential. Parental involvement often serves as a motivational driver, helping students remain focused on their academic goals despite external challenges. The lack of this guidance and encouragement can leave students without the confidence to pursue higher education and may lead them to view school as unimportant or even irrelevant to their future success.

Further complicating the situation is the socioeconomic context in which these families live. Poverty and limited resources can create a situation where parents are overwhelmed by immediate survival concerns and are unable to prioritize education. As Yesmin & Khan (2021) observe, many parents who are working long hours in low-wage jobs

or struggling with unemployment find it difficult to provide the necessary emotional support or practical assistance for their children's education. For example, many parents may be unable to afford the costs associated with extracurricular activities, tutoring, or even basic school materials, which can leave students without the necessary resources to succeed academically.

Moreover, for Rakhine girls, the lack of parental awareness about the potential benefits of education can be even more detrimental. Gender norms in many marginalized communities may place additional pressure on girls to take on household responsibilities or work to support the family. In such households, the value of girls' education may be overlooked in favor of more immediate economic concerns. Mallick, Popy, & Yesmin (2022) note that low expectations for girls' education contribute to their early withdrawal from school and limited aspirations for higher education. Parental support, therefore, is not just about academic encouragement but also about ensuring that gender equality in education is promoted and that both boys and girls are given equal opportunities to succeed.

Ultimately, the issue of parental awareness and support highlights the need for greater community-based education programs that inform parents about the importance of education and the long-term benefits of higher education for their children. This can include parent-teacher meetings, community outreach programs, and awareness campaigns that emphasize how education can be a catalyst for social and economic mobility. Addressing the lack of parental awareness and increasing support for educational aspirations could significantly improve the chances for Rakhine students to succeed in their academic journey and pursue higher education.

Parental awareness and support play a crucial role in determining higher education outcomes among minority ethnic groups. Research indicates that active parental involvement

is linked to increased college aspirations and enrollment rates, particularly for African American and Latino students. (Parental Involvement in the Lives of Children of Color, 2023). This involvement can take various forms, from direct engagement in educational activities to providing motivational support. The following sections elaborate on the significance of parental support in this context.

Parental involvement is widely recognized as a key factor in promoting higher college enrollment rates, especially among underrepresented minority groups. Studies consistently show that when parents are actively engaged in their children's education, students are more likely to aspire to higher education and successfully enroll in college. Specifically, research indicates that parental involvement significantly correlates with better outcomes for minority students, leading to higher rates of college enrollment and improved academic performance (Perna & Titus, 2005). In particular, college preparation programs that emphasize parental engagement tend to report better results. A survey revealed that 70% of such programs targeting minority groups include a parental involvement component, highlighting the perceived importance of parental engagement in helping students navigate the college application process and make informed decisions about their academic futures (Perna & Titus, 2005). This statistic reflects the broad recognition that when parents are invested in their children's educational journeys, students benefit from both emotional and practical support.

Research further distinguishes between two main types of parental support: behavioral (interventionist) and non-behavioral (noninterventionist). Both forms of involvement have been shown to have positive effects on students' college aspirations and acceptance rates, but they influence the student experience in different ways. Behavioral support refers to direct involvement in a child's academic activities, such as attending school meetings, helping with

homework, or advocating for their needs within the educational system. On the other hand, non-behavioral support involves emotional encouragement, fostering a belief in the value of education, and offering guidance about future academic and career possibilities. Both types are important in shaping students' attitudes toward higher education, and research has found that they are equally valuable in increasing the likelihood of college acceptance. However, the impact of each type can vary depending on the cultural and social context of the students involved. For example, Latino students, who often experience unique cultural and socio-economic challenges, have reported that perceived parental support, particularly in terms of emotional encouragement and practical advice, significantly correlated with their college acceptance (Cummins, 2010). This finding emphasizes the need for tailored strategies that recognize the cultural and familial dynamics of different ethnic groups. What works for one community may not be as effective for another, suggesting the importance of customized support programs that cater to the specific needs and expectations of various minority groups.

Despite the clear benefits of parental involvement, many parents from low-income and minority backgrounds face significant barriers that limit their ability to provide effective support. These barriers often include limited education, financial constraints, language barriers, and a lack of familiarity with the education system, all of which can impede their ability to help their children with college preparation. Parents who have not had access to higher education themselves may struggle to navigate the complex processes involved in college admissions, scholarship applications, and financial aid. Moreover, many parents in low-income households may work long hours or hold multiple jobs, leaving them with little time to engage in their children's educational activities or attend school meetings. For others, the cultural gap between their own experiences and the expectations of the educational system may make it difficult to provide the type of involvement that is needed. Studies have shown that these barriers can severely limit the impact of parental support on student

outcomes, as parents are often unable to fulfill the role of active participants in their children's academic lives (Miller & Banks-Hall, 2019; Dennis et al., 2005). As a result, programs and policies aimed at increasing college enrollment among minority students must not only focus on encouraging parental involvement but also work to address these systemic barriers that hinder parents' ability to provide the necessary support.

To improve parental involvement and, consequently, educational outcomes for minority students, programs must be designed with an awareness of these challenges. For example, educational interventions could provide parents with resources that increase their understanding of the college application process and financial aid system. Workshops and information sessions in multiple languages can help bridge communication gaps, and offering flexible meeting times or virtual options can accommodate parents' work schedules. Additionally, providing financial support to cover the costs associated with college preparation—such as application fees or standardized testing—can reduce the economic burden that might otherwise deter minority students from applying to college. Furthermore, schools and community organizations can establish partnerships to create supportive networks for parents, ensuring that they are not navigating the college preparation process alone. These networks could include mentorship programs, where other parents or community members who have successfully navigated the education system can offer guidance and advice.

In addressing these challenges, it is also essential to consider the broader socio-economic factors that may limit parental involvement. In many minority communities, parents face not only the stress of day-to-day financial instability but also the weight of historical and structural inequalities that affect their access to resources and opportunities. For example, neighborhoods with high levels of poverty may lack the infrastructure



necessary to support educational success, including access to high-quality schools, after-school programs, or community centers that foster academic growth. Moreover, families who face discrimination or social exclusion may struggle with the added psychological toll of navigating systems that are not designed with their needs in mind. It is crucial to recognize that the limitations on parental involvement are not simply a matter of individual failure but are deeply rooted in these systemic issues. Therefore, any effort to increase parental involvement must go hand in hand with broader societal reforms that address these structural inequalities.

Ultimately, fostering an environment conducive to higher education for minority ethnic groups requires a holistic approach that involves not only the active engagement of parents but also the dismantling of the barriers that prevent them from fully participating in their children's education. This includes improving access to resources, providing targeted support for minority families, and addressing the socio-economic factors that disproportionately affect underrepresented communities. By taking these steps, we can create a more equitable educational landscape where minority students are empowered to pursue and succeed in higher education. Addressing the root causes of limited parental involvement, while supporting and strengthening the role of parents in the educational process, will be essential in closing the opportunity gap for minority students and ensuring that higher education is accessible to all.

### **2.3 Infrastructure and Resource Limitations: A Ripple Effect on Higher Education**

The infrastructure and resource limitations faced by Rakhine students at the primary education level create significant barriers to both their immediate educational success and their future prospects, including access to higher education. The importance of adequate school infrastructure cannot be overstated. Mallick, Popy, & Yesmin (2022) emphasize that

78% of parents in marginalized communities identify the poor state of school infrastructure as a major obstacle to their children's education. In particular, lack of classroom space, inadequate sanitary facilities, and a shortage of teaching materials are common issues that affect students' ability to learn effectively. These infrastructural deficits not only disrupt daily learning but also contribute to high absenteeism and dropout rates. If schools are physically inadequate—either overcrowded or lacking basic amenities like clean toilets—students are less likely to attend regularly, and their academic performance tends to suffer.

In rural and isolated areas, where many Rakhine students reside, these infrastructure issues are compounded by a lack of access to basic resources. Yesmin & Khan (2021) note that students in these areas often lack access to even basic educational materials, such as textbooks, stationery, and electronic learning tools, all of which are essential for effective learning. In the absence of these resources, students are left without the proper tools to excel in their studies, which severely limits their academic potential. These challenges are even more pronounced in remote areas like Cox's Bazar, where the geographical isolation of many communities makes it difficult for students to attend school consistently, particularly if schools are located far from students' homes.

Transportation emerges as a particularly critical issue in areas with poor infrastructure. For many Rakhine families, the distance to the nearest school can be prohibitively long, especially in remote and hard-to-reach villages. The absence of adequate roads, combined with the lack of affordable transportation options, means that students may need to travel for hours to reach school. As a result, many children from landless or economically disadvantaged families are unable to attend school regularly, let alone continue their education into secondary or higher education. For many, the cost of transportation or the time required to travel long distances makes access to education increasingly unfeasible.

The lack of educational infrastructure also limits the ability of teachers to deliver quality education, further impacting the learning outcomes of students. Without well-equipped classrooms and access to modern teaching tools, students are unlikely to receive the kind of high-quality education that would prepare them for the challenges of secondary and higher education. The cumulative effect of these infrastructural deficiencies is a weakened educational foundation that significantly reduces the chances of Rakhine students advancing to higher levels of education. Ultimately, these infrastructural challenges create a ripple effect, where the educational setbacks experienced in primary school make it harder for students to succeed at the secondary and tertiary levels.

The limitations in infrastructure and resources significantly impact higher education for minority ethnic groups, creating a ripple effect that affects access, retention, and academic success. These challenges are particularly pronounced in institutions serving diverse populations, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and other minority-serving institutions in the United States. The following sections outline the key aspects of this issue.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and other minority-serving institutions face significant resource limitations that hinder their ability to implement effective programs designed to support the academic success of their students. These financial constraints not only affect the quality of educational offerings but also impede the development of essential support services that are crucial for helping minority students succeed academically. Research has shown that limited funding exacerbates performance gaps among minority students, as these institutions struggle to provide the necessary resources for tutoring, academic advising, career counseling, and other critical services (Johnson, 2013). This lack of investment contributes to the systemic barriers that minority

students encounter, making it more difficult for them to thrive in higher education environments where resources are not distributed equitably. These disparities are compounded by the fact that many of these institutions, despite their historical significance in providing education to Black and other underrepresented students, face continued financial struggles that prevent them from expanding or improving their academic programs and infrastructure.

The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted these resource challenges, particularly in terms of technological disparities. With the abrupt shift to remote learning, many institutions, especially those serving minority communities, lacked the robust technological infrastructure necessary to support quality online education. This lack of access to reliable technology, such as high-speed internet, modern devices, and digital learning platforms, created significant barriers for students who were already facing economic and social challenges. Students from minority backgrounds, who are more likely to attend institutions with inadequate technological resources, experienced interruptions in their learning, making it harder for them to keep up with coursework and engage in virtual classes effectively ("Disparity in Higher Education Provision Caused by Technological Capabilities of Nations during Covid-19", 2022). This technological divide further perpetuates existing inequalities, with minority students being disproportionately affected by a lack of access to the tools and platforms that are essential for academic success in the digital age. The pandemic exposed just how deeply ingrained these disparities are in the educational system, revealing the challenges that students face in navigating an increasingly digital learning environment.

Moreover, research has shown that infrastructure inequality is directly correlated with academic performance, with students in well-resourced institutions consistently achieving better academic outcomes. In institutions where resources are more plentiful—whether in

terms of state-of-the-art classrooms, access to technology, or a greater number of support staff—students tend to perform better academically and are more likely to graduate. By contrast, students at under-resourced institutions, like many minority-serving schools, often face larger class sizes, fewer academic support services, and less access to technology, all of which contribute to lower academic performance (Agyei et al., 2024). Despite efforts to broaden access to higher education through initiatives aimed at reducing disparities, the gap between well-resourced and under-resourced institutions persists, particularly for Black and ethnic minority groups (Osborne, 2022). While some institutions are making strides to address these challenges, the systemic nature of resource limitations continues to hinder equitable access to higher education for minority students. The unequal distribution of resources not only affects the quality of education but also perpetuates cycles of disadvantage, limiting opportunities for economic mobility and social advancement.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that includes significant policy interventions to bridge the resource gap between minority-serving institutions and their more affluent counterparts. It is essential for policymakers to prioritize investments in the infrastructure of these institutions, ensuring that they have the resources needed to provide a high-quality education that is accessible to all students, regardless of their socio-economic background. This includes increasing funding for technology, expanding access to online learning tools, and enhancing support services that help students navigate the academic demands of college. Moreover, there must be a concerted effort to address the broader systemic inequalities that contribute to resource disparities, such as racial and economic segregation, underfunding of public education, and the historical neglect of institutions serving minority populations. By taking a holistic approach to these issues, it is possible to create a more equitable educational system that allows all students, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, to succeed and thrive in higher education.

Without such policy interventions, the resource gap will continue to impede the academic and professional progress of minority students, perpetuating inequality and limiting their potential for upward mobility. Therefore, addressing resource disparities is not just an issue of fairness but an essential step toward creating a more inclusive and just society.

## **2.4 Teacher Quality and Availability: Educational Gaps and Local Context**

The quality and availability of teachers is another critical factor influencing the educational success of Rakhine students. As Akhter (n.d.) observes, there is a severe shortage of qualified teachers, particularly in remote and rural areas like those where many Rakhine students live. This shortage is compounded by the reluctance of qualified educators to work in these isolated regions, where living conditions can be harsh, the infrastructure is inadequate, and the pay is often lower than in urban areas. As a result, Rakhine students often find themselves in classrooms with undertrained or unqualified teachers, who may lack the expertise to teach effectively or who may be unfamiliar with the local cultural context.

The absence of qualified teachers leads to a gap in the quality of education provided to students. Untrained teachers often struggle to develop effective teaching strategies, manage classroom behavior, and tailor lessons to the specific needs of students. This issue is particularly challenging for Rakhine students, who may face additional barriers related to language, ethnicity, and cultural understanding. Without teachers who can speak the local Rakhine language or who are familiar with the cultural norms of the community, students may find it difficult to engage with the curriculum, especially if it is taught in a language or manner they do not understand. This lack of cultural competence can create a disconnect between the teacher and the students, making it harder for students to thrive academically.

Another significant challenge highlighted by Akhter (n.d.) is the high turnover of teachers in these regions. Teachers often leave due to the difficult working conditions, including low salaries, lack of professional development, and personal safety concerns. The frequent rotation of teaching staff means that students do not benefit from consistent instruction and are unable to build long-term relationships with their teachers, which can affect their overall academic performance and motivation. For Rakhine girls, the shortage of female teachers exacerbates the situation. Female students often lack female role models or mentors, which can be particularly important in cultures where gender norms influence educational participation. The absence of female teachers can make it difficult for girls to feel comfortable in the classroom and can reduce their motivation to pursue education beyond the primary level.

In sum, the teacher shortage, coupled with the poor quality of instruction and the lack of culturally appropriate teaching methods, significantly hinders the academic development of Rakhine students. These educational gaps, if left unaddressed, will continue to limit the chances of Rakhine youth accessing higher education and achieving long-term academic success.

Teacher quality and availability significantly impact educational gaps, particularly among minority ethnic groups. Research indicates that students from racially and ethnically minoritized backgrounds often have less access to high-quality teachers, which exacerbates existing achievement disparities. This overview will explore the factors contributing to these gaps, the implications for minority students, and the broader educational context.

Minoritized and economically disadvantaged students are often at a significant disadvantage when it comes to encountering high-quality teachers, with research showing that these students are 5 to 15 percentage points less likely to be taught by highly qualified

educators, particularly in urban settings where schools are often under-resourced (Rodriguez et al., 2023). This disparity is compounded in regions like North Carolina, where stronger teacher qualifications are disproportionately found in schools serving more affluent and advantaged students, leading to a clear segregation of educational resources along socioeconomic lines (Clotfelter et al., 2004). Such disparities in teacher quality contribute to widening achievement gaps, as students in disadvantaged schools are more likely to face high turnover rates, inexperienced educators, and a lack of consistent, quality instruction. Furthermore, socioeconomic status and family background play critical roles in shaping educational outcomes for minority students. Teachers, who are often seen as the primary agents capable of bridging these gaps, are expected to account for the challenges posed by students' home environments, limited access to resources, and the cultural and emotional needs that often accompany economic hardship (Faitar, 2011). Teachers' perceptions of the challenges faced by ethnic minority students further highlight the complex interplay of home environment, parental involvement, and school characteristics, with educators recognizing that their ability to support students is deeply influenced by factors beyond the classroom, such as unstable housing, food insecurity, and limited access to educational support at home (Theodosiou-Zipiti & West, 2012). This recognition underscores the need for teachers to be well-equipped to address the diverse and often traumatic experiences of their students, a task that is increasingly difficult in schools with limited resources and support systems.

Moreover, teacher retention and recruitment present additional challenges, particularly in schools that serve minority populations. The current educational climate, marked by high demands, low salaries, and limited professional support, has led to a shortage of qualified teachers, which disproportionately affects schools in economically disadvantaged and minority-majority areas (Allen & Sims, 2018). The stressors of high student-to-teacher ratios, lack of administrative support, and the emotional toll of working in high-needs



environments contribute to burnout and attrition among educators. Addressing this teacher gap requires systemic changes that go beyond merely increasing teacher salaries. It necessitates reforms in recruitment, training, and retention strategies to ensure that teachers in underserved areas are not only well-prepared to meet the unique needs of their students but are also supported throughout their careers. Providing professional development opportunities, reducing class sizes, and implementing policies that address teacher workload and wellbeing are crucial components of a comprehensive strategy to improve teacher retention. However, while the focus on improving teacher quality is critical, it is equally important to recognize that teacher quality alone cannot solve the persistent achievement gaps facing minority students. The broader systemic issues, including socioeconomic factors, inadequate educational funding, and the historical inequalities embedded in educational policies, also contribute to these disparities. Until these issues are addressed in tandem with improvements to teacher quality and support, the achievement gap is likely to persist, as minority students continue to face the compounded effects of systemic disadvantage both inside and outside the classroom.

## **2.5 Social and Cultural Barriers: Discrimination and Gender-Based Violence**

In addition to the economic and infrastructural barriers, social and cultural factors also play a significant role in limiting Rakhine students' access to higher education.

Discrimination and social exclusion are pervasive issues for many ethnic minorities, including the Rakhine, in Bangladesh. As Akhter (n.d.) notes, Rakhine students often experience alienation and mistrust from the dominant Bengali community, particularly in areas like Cox's Bazar, where ethnic divisions are pronounced. This discrimination can manifest in various forms, including stigmatization in the classroom, marginalization in

social settings, and a general lack of understanding of the Rakhine culture. Such social exclusion can lead to lower attendance rates, higher dropout rates, and a feeling of isolation, all of which hinder academic performance and reduce the likelihood of students advancing to higher education.

For Rakhine girls, the situation is even more complex due to the added challenges of gender-based violence and harassment. As Akhter (n.d.) points out, eve-teasing, a form of public sexual harassment, is common in many rural areas, and Rakhine girls are particularly vulnerable to such abuses. The constant fear of harassment, especially when traveling to and from school, can discourage girls from attending school altogether or cause them to drop out early. This harassment is not only an emotional and psychological burden but also a physical and social barrier that prevents girls from pursuing their education.

Moreover, in patriarchal societies, such as those found in many parts of Bangladesh, girls are often expected to prioritize household duties over schooling, and there is less societal support for female education beyond the primary level. The combined pressures of family expectations, social stigma, and gender-based violence create a perfect storm of barriers for Rakhine girls, making it exceedingly difficult for them to pursue secondary and higher education. The cultural perception that girls should focus on domestic work rather than academics further limits their educational opportunities, creating a cycle of disempowerment that restricts their social mobility and long-term prospects.

In conclusion, the social and cultural barriers that Rakhine students face, including ethnic discrimination, gender-based violence, and cultural exclusion, play a significant role in shaping their educational outcomes. These challenges not only prevent students from succeeding at the primary level but also create significant barriers to their progression into secondary and higher education. To address these issues, inclusive education policies that

promote social cohesion, gender equality, and cultural sensitivity are needed to create an environment where Rakhine students can thrive academically and pursue higher education without fear of discrimination or violence.

Discrimination and gender-based violence against minority ethnic groups are deeply rooted in cultural and social barriers that hinder effective intervention and support. These barriers manifest through historical prejudices, socioeconomic disparities, and cultural norms that shape the experiences of women from minority backgrounds. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective strategies to combat violence and discrimination.

Patriarchal cultural norms play a significant role in perpetuating discrimination against women, often justifying violence as a culturally accepted behavior. These patriarchal values, deeply ingrained in many societies, contribute to the normalization of violence against women, making it more difficult for victims to recognize their own experiences as abusive or to seek help. In some cases, women internalize these cultural norms, accepting their subordinate status and believing that they are deserving of mistreatment, which further entrenches the cycle of violence and silence (Göktepe, 2024). This cultural acceptance of inequality and abuse not only prevents women from escaping their circumstances but also discourages them from speaking out or seeking assistance. Additionally, cultural and socioeconomic factors create significant barriers for minority women, particularly Hispanic and African American women, when it comes to reporting domestic violence. Cultural barriers such as language, fear of retribution, and historical mistrust of authority figures often discourage these women from seeking help, as they may fear being misunderstood or further victimized by the system (Venable, 2002). Moreover, economic constraints are another critical factor that often keeps women trapped in abusive situations. Many of these women live below the poverty line, making it difficult for them to leave abusive relationships or seek

help due to a lack of financial resources, access to transportation, or even basic necessities like childcare (Venable, 2002). These challenges highlight the intersectionality of race, gender, and class, which creates unique obstacles for minority women facing domestic violence.

The provision of domestic violence services also faces significant challenges in addressing the specific needs of minority women. Many existing services fail to adequately take into account the cultural, linguistic, and social needs of these populations, which leads to underutilization of available resources. Women from minority ethnic backgrounds may not feel comfortable seeking help from mainstream services that do not understand or respect their cultural backgrounds, further isolating them from the support they need (Burman et al., 2004; Sumter, 2006). The lack of culturally competent service delivery exacerbates the problem, as mainstream services often overlook or misinterpret the specific needs of minority women, from language barriers to cultural norms surrounding family privacy and gender roles. The intersection of race and gender creates a unique set of challenges that must be addressed to effectively support minority women facing domestic violence. This includes offering services that are sensitive to both cultural and gender-specific needs, such as access to bilingual counselors, culturally relevant outreach programs, and community-based organizations that better understand the specific barriers these women face (Scheer et al., 2020).

While significant strides have been made in addressing domestic violence, the unique barriers faced by minority ethnic women underscore the necessity for tailored interventions that are grounded in cultural context and socioeconomic realities. Approaching domestic violence services with a one-size-fits-all model is inadequate, as it fails to account for the compounded effects of racial, cultural, and economic disparities. In order to foster an

inclusive and supportive environment where all women—regardless of their ethnic background—can seek help without fear of discrimination or cultural insensitivity, it is crucial to develop and implement interventions that are both culturally competent and responsive to the specific needs of marginalized populations. Only by addressing the structural and cultural barriers these women face, alongside providing specialized resources and support systems, can we hope to break the cycle of violence and ensure that every woman has the opportunity to escape abuse and build a life free from violence.

## **2.6 Economic Barriers to Higher Education for Rakhine Students in Rural Cox’s Bazar**

### **Background**

In the rural areas of Cox's Bazar, where the Rakhine community is largely concentrated, poverty serves as a primary barrier to higher education. Many families in these communities live below the poverty line, and basic needs such as food, housing, and healthcare take priority over educational expenses. This financial strain forces many children into child labor, further obstructing their educational opportunities. Despite the government's efforts to provide free education, the indirect costs—such as transportation, uniforms, and school materials—remain out of reach for many Rakhine families.

## **Key Issues**

Economic challenges significantly impact school retention rates, particularly in marginalized communities. A study by Mallick, Popy, and Yesmin (2022) found that 75% of parents in these communities reported high dropout rates, especially in primary education. The need for children to contribute to household income leads to frequent school absences and eventual dropout. The inability to afford basic school supplies, transportation costs, and the opportunity cost of lost labor at home directly affect students' academic engagement and future educational prospects. In Cox's Bazar, where many families rely on fishing, agriculture, and manual labor, children—especially boys—are expected to work from a young age. This limits their ability to attend school regularly, and for many, higher education becomes an unrealistic aspiration. The pressure to earn money to support the family makes primary education the highest level of formal education many Rakhine children achieve. Despite the government's provision of scholarships and financial assistance programs, most Rakhine families are unaware of or unable to access these resources. The economic strain is further exacerbated by a lack of information about available financial aid, as well as cultural barriers that discourage families from sending their children to distant higher education institutions due to the costs and societal norms.

## **Impact on Access to Higher Education**

The economic barriers make it incredibly difficult for Rakhine students to progress from primary school to secondary school, let alone attend universities or colleges. Students often have to drop out early to support their families, with many never returning to formal education. As a result, these economic hardships severely limit their future prospects, reducing their chances of entering higher education.

## **2.7 Social and Cultural Barriers to Higher Education for Rakhine Girls**

### **Background**

The Rakhine community in Cox's Bazar faces significant social and cultural barriers, particularly with regard to gender. While both boys and girls face challenges in accessing higher education, girls from the Rakhine ethnic group face unique struggles related to gender-based violence, cultural expectations, and ethnic discrimination. These social factors play a pivotal role in limiting educational attainment and aspirations among Rakhine girls.

### **Key Issues**

One of the most pressing concerns for Rakhine girls is the widespread issue of gender-based violence in rural areas. As Akhter (n.d.) notes, eve-teasing and sexual harassment are common forms of abuse faced by girls who travel to school. In the rural parts of Cox's Bazar, girls are often subjected to these forms of gender-based violence, which discourages school attendance and frequently leads to early school dropout. This violence, combined with poor infrastructure and long travel distances, creates a hostile environment for girls attempting to access education. Additionally, cultural norms in many Rakhine communities dictate that girls should prioritize domestic duties over education. According to Akhter (n.d.), early marriage is common in these areas, and once girls are married, their formal education often comes to an end. The traditional role of women in the home severely restricts their educational opportunities, particularly at the secondary and higher education levels. In many cases, Rakhine girls face societal pressure to marry at a young age, which directly reduces their chances of continuing education beyond primary school. Furthermore, Rakhine students, especially girls, face social exclusion due to ethnic tensions between the Rakhine community and the Bengali-majority population. Discrimination in schools, coupled with a lack of educational support from teachers and peers, makes it difficult for Rakhine girls to feel safe

or motivated to pursue their education. This results in a high dropout rate among girls from marginalized ethnic groups, who are not only facing gender-based barriers but also ethnic discrimination.

### **Impact on Access to Higher Education**

These gendered and ethnic barriers make it extremely difficult for Rakhine girls to continue their education at the secondary and tertiary levels. Cultural expectations, coupled with the threat of violence, often force girls to abandon their education early. This significantly reduces their chances of pursuing higher education, limiting their opportunities for social mobility and economic independence.



### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study utilized a qualitative research design to explore the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of the Rakhine community regarding education and social issues. The qualitative approach was chosen to capture in-depth, personal narratives that provide a rich understanding of the community's perspectives. By focusing on the lived experiences of participants, the study aimed to uncover both the challenges and opportunities within the Rakhine community, especially as they relate to education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow for flexibility, enabling participants to share their viewpoints in their own words while ensuring that key themes were addressed.

#### **3.2 Sample Population**

The research involved a total of 50 participants, selected from key groups within the Rakhine community. These participants were purposefully chosen to provide a broad range of insights based on their roles and experiences. The sample included:

- 15 Students from various educational levels, ranging from secondary to tertiary education. These participants were selected to reflect the diversity in academic experiences and challenges within the community.
- 10 Educators, including teachers and staff who work in schools or educational programs serving the Rakhine population. These participants provided critical insights into the educational system and the barriers or supports they observe within the community.
- 10 Community Leaders, such as local government officials, religious leaders, and activists who hold influential roles within the Rakhine community. These participants

shared perspectives on community values, educational priorities, and social challenges.

- 15 Parents, including guardians of students, who offered valuable input on family dynamics, expectations for children’s education, and broader socio-cultural issues affecting education in the Rakhine context.

The selection of these participants was guided by their relevance to the research questions and their ability to provide valuable perspectives on education and community issues.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

To investigate access and barriers to higher education among the Rakhine ethnicity in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, I chose semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection because this approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the unique challenges and experiences faced by this specific community. The Rakhine people, like many marginalized groups, may have distinct perspectives on education that are shaped by their socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts. Semi-structured interviews offered the flexibility to capture these perspectives while ensuring that key areas of interest—such as access to educational resources, societal barriers, government policies, and community-specific challenges—were addressed.

I began by identifying and selecting a diverse group of participants from the Rakhine community, including students, parents, educators, local leaders, and community activists, all of whom could provide valuable insights into the educational experiences and barriers faced by the Rakhine people. The participants were selected based on their direct experiences with higher education or their involvement in the local education system in Cox’s Bazar.

To guide the interviews, I developed a flexible interview guide with a series of open-ended questions focused on the key barriers to higher education, such as financial constraints, language and cultural differences, access to quality institutions, and societal attitudes towards education within the Rakhine community. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed me to adapt the conversation based on the responses and delve deeper into unexpected or significant issues that emerged during the discussions.

Before conducting the interviews, I ensured ethical considerations were met, including obtaining informed consent from participants and guaranteeing the confidentiality of their responses. Given the sensitivity of the topic, it was important to create a comfortable and safe space where participants felt confident in sharing their personal experiences without fear of judgment or repercussion.

The interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred language and settings, either face-to-face in local community spaces or virtually, depending on convenience and accessibility. I made sure to actively listen, asking follow-up questions to probe deeper into the factors contributing to the challenges in accessing higher education.

Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed the data verbatim and analyzed the responses by identifying common themes and patterns. This process helped in understanding the multi-dimensional barriers to higher education faced by the Rakhine ethnic group, as well as the potential solutions and strategies that might improve access to education for this community. Through this method, I was able to uncover the nuanced and often overlooked obstacles that prevent the Rakhine people from fully participating in higher education, while also highlighting their resilience and aspirations.

By using semi-structured interviews, I was able to gather rich, qualitative data that provided a comprehensive understanding of the barriers to higher education for the Rakhine ethnicity in Cox's Bazar, and to give a voice to a community whose educational needs are often underrepresented in broader research and policy discussions.

The primary method of data collection for this study was semi-structured interviews. This approach allowed the researcher to gather detailed qualitative data while maintaining flexibility to explore new ideas that arose during the conversation. Semi-structured interviews are particularly well-suited for qualitative research as they enable an in-depth exploration of participants' views, while still focusing on specific areas of interest.

Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour, and interviews were conducted in a setting that was convenient and comfortable for the participants, either in person or via video conferencing tools. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data.

The interview questions were open-ended and designed to encourage detailed responses. The topics covered included:

- Educational experiences and challenges within the Rakhine community
- The impact of cultural values and traditions on education
- The role of community leaders and parents in supporting educational initiatives
- Barriers to accessing quality education, including social, political, and economic factors
- Suggestions for improving educational opportunities for students in the Rakhine community

The data collection was conducted across several areas in Bangladesh, including Khurushkul, Paner Chora, Ramu, Chowfoldondi, and the main town of Cox's Bazar. The flexibility of the semi-structured format allowed participants to elaborate on their responses and discuss issues that were most relevant to them, providing a holistic view of the community's educational landscape.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

The data collected through the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method was chosen because it allows for the identification of recurring themes or patterns in qualitative data, enabling the researcher to draw meaningful conclusions from the participants' narratives.

The analysis process involved the following steps:

The analysis process began with transcription, where all recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of the data, providing an initial opportunity to immerse in the content. The researcher then familiarized themselves with the transcripts by reading and re-reading them, identifying initial impressions and making preliminary notes, along with potential codes. In the coding phase, the transcripts were systematically coded to highlight key pieces of data relevant to the research questions, identifying significant statements, phrases, or concepts within the interviews. These codes were subsequently organized into categories based on similarities in meaning. Afterward, the researcher grouped related codes into broader themes, developing these themes iteratively as patterns emerged across the interviews. This process helped identify themes that reflected the most significant issues or insights shared by the participants. Finally, the researcher interpreted the themes in the context of the research questions, examining how they aligned with existing literature on

education and community development, while also considering their implications for future research and practice in the Rakhine community.

Thematic analysis allowed for a nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences and provided valuable insights into the educational challenges and opportunities within the Rakhine community. The findings were validated through a process of member checking, where some participants reviewed the themes and interpretations to ensure accuracy and credibility. ((Kiger & Varpio, 2020))

## **4. Findings**

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed several key themes related to the personal experiences of Rakhine community members, their perspectives on education, and the perceived barriers they face. These themes highlight the challenges of pursuing education in the context of social expectations, economic constraints, and cultural norms. Below are some of the main themes that emerged from the interviews:

### **4.1. Social and Cultural Barriers to Higher Education**

One of the recurring themes across the interviews was the presence of social and cultural barriers that hinder the pursuit of higher education, especially for young women. Several participants shared experiences of being discouraged or judged by community members for seeking educational opportunities beyond the local or traditional sphere. For

example, one student **Khinza** described how pursuing higher education abroad was perceived negatively within the community. She said, "It is not easy to pursue higher education due to social barriers. People say, 'You are not even married yet, why are you going abroad?'" This comment reflects the deeply ingrained cultural expectation that young women should prioritize marriage and family over education or personal advancement. The student's experience highlights the challenge of navigating cultural norms that restrict women's autonomy and educational aspirations.

Similarly, another participant shared how others in the community advised against investing in education, framing it as an unnecessary expense. They said, "Don't waste your money on study. If you save money, you can do something valuable in the future. Write it down and make something of yourself instead." This advice reflects a pragmatic, yet limiting, view that education is not an investment worth making, especially when compared to tangible, immediate financial success. For many in the community, education is viewed as secondary to economic survival, further contributing to the underestimation of its long-term value.

A parent named Mong Fru also expressed a common sentiment when it comes to girls' education, stating, "You need to get married soon because you are a girl. Education is not for you anymore." This reflects a societal belief that once a girl reaches a certain age, her primary role is to marry, and further education becomes unnecessary. Similarly, another participant recalled her family's pressure, saying, "My parents told me, 'Why are you still studying? You should focus on finding a good husband.'" Such views underline the restrictive nature of cultural norms, where the pursuit of personal growth and academic achievement for girls is often overshadowed by expectations of early marriage and family life.

Moreover, another parent named **Mala Sen** expressed a limiting perspective on education, saying, "Up to grade 10 is enough, you can work as a goldsmith, or tailor, or some other small work." This reflects a belief that formal education is only necessary to a certain level for girls, and that pursuing further education is unnecessary when practical work can provide an income. These quotes reflect the pervasive social pressures and cultural barriers that limit the educational aspirations of young women, further contributing to the challenges they face in accessing higher education.

#### **4.2 Perceived Value of Education**

While some participants expressed skepticism about the value of higher education, others emphasized its importance as a means of social mobility and personal empowerment. Several community leaders highlighted how education can serve as a tool for both individual and community development, with one community leader stating, "Education is the foundation of our future. We cannot progress if our youth are not given opportunities to learn and grow." Another community leader shared a similar sentiment, saying, "Without education, there is no way for us to break the cycle of poverty. Our children need to be educated to have a better future." These perspectives underscore the belief that education can unlock opportunities not only for individuals but also for the collective progress of the community.

However, even among those who recognized education's value, there was a clear divide between the opportunities available to the wealthy or well-connected versus the general population. Many students and parents expressed frustration with the limited access to quality education, particularly for those who cannot afford to study abroad or attend higher education institutions within the country. One student **Mrat Khine** explained, "Education is important, but we don't have the money to study outside the country or go to a good



university here. The options we have are very limited." Similarly, a parent **Hla May** lamented, "If you don't have money, you can't go to a good school. Even if you want to study, you can't. The rich kids get all the opportunities, and the rest of us are left behind." Another participant added, "I know education is the key to success, but how can I afford it? Even just the basic fees are too high for my family." This frustration reflects the growing recognition that education, despite its importance, is often out of reach for many due to financial barriers, creating a divide between the privileged few and the majority who lack the resources to pursue higher education. These quotes highlight the disparities in access to educational opportunities and the challenges faced by those without financial means to pursue their academic ambitions.

### **4.3. Economic Constraints and Financial Limitations**

Economic hardship emerged as another significant barrier to education. Several participants discussed the financial challenges that prevent students from pursuing higher education or accessing resources like study materials, tuition fees, or travel expenses. **Hla Fru and Wa Wa Khin** (Parents) expressed concern about the cost of education, especially for students aspiring to study abroad, with one parent remarking, "We cannot afford the costs of higher education. It's a dream for many families to send their children overseas, but the financial burden is too great." Another parent added, "I want my child to have a better future through education, but we are struggling to make ends meet. How can I afford tuition fees, let alone travel costs for studying abroad?" These statements highlight the harsh reality that many families in the Rakhine community face when it comes to financing education beyond basic levels.

This theme underscores the economic disparities that limit educational access in the Rakhine community. Even for those who value education, the cost of pursuing it beyond

basic levels becomes a major obstacle, especially when competing priorities such as household survival and immediate income-generating activities take precedence. One student **Cho Cho Khin** explained, "I want to study more, but we don't have the money for books or even the bus fare to get to school every day. How can I think about higher education when I can't even afford basic things?" A parent echoed this concern, saying, "I would love to send my child to a university, but how can I pay for everything? It's impossible with my income. We are always worried about food, so education becomes secondary." Another participant shared, "If I could afford it, I would send my daughter to study in the city. But we don't have enough money, and it's hard to even think about the costs for something like that." These quotes reflect the widespread frustration and hopelessness felt by many families who recognize the value of education but are held back by the financial burden, making it difficult to prioritize academic aspirations over immediate survival.

#### **4.4 The Role of Community Leaders and Parents in Education**

Despite the barriers, many participants emphasized the pivotal role of community leaders and parents in supporting education. Several parents mentioned how they are often the driving force behind their children's educational aspirations, even amidst financial and social challenges. One parent **Nea Jaw** explained, "We tell our children, 'Study hard and don't give up. The future depends on your education.'" Another added, "Even if we have little, we make sure our children understand the importance of knowledge. It is their ticket to a better life."

Similarly, some community leaders expressed the desire to create more educational opportunities within the community but recognized the constraints they face, particularly regarding funding and local infrastructure. **Naing Naing**, one leader shared, "We want to offer more programs, but without adequate resources, we are limited in what we can do. We

need more funding to create long-lasting impact." These leaders underscored the need for more community-driven educational initiatives that would empower families to take a more active role in shaping the educational outcomes of their children. As one community leader **Sen Sen** put it, "The community needs to come together, not just to support students financially but to create a culture where education is valued by all."

The perception among students that they are not stable enough for higher studies emphasizes the significant impact of economic conditions on their educational pursuits. **Wangny**, a student expressed, "I want to continue my studies, but my family can barely make ends meet. I don't think it's possible for me to go further." Another student **U Sen Way** shared, "Higher education feels like a dream, not a reality, because I don't know how I will afford it. I wish there were more scholarships or financial aid."

Economic conditions can severely impact access to higher education, as students from lower-income backgrounds may struggle with tuition fees, living costs, and the inability to afford necessary resources like textbooks or technology. However, there are strategies students can adopt to overcome these challenges. One student who managed to secure a scholarship noted, "I applied for every scholarship I could find. I knew it wasn't going to be easy, but I couldn't give up." Another shared, "I've started working part-time to save up for school. It's tough, but I know it's the only way to make it happen."

By tapping into community resources, applying for financial aid, and leveraging support from family and leaders, students can better navigate the financial hurdles that may stand in the way of their educational aspirations.

#### **4.5 Impact of Economic Conditions on Higher Education**

Students from economically unstable backgrounds often face significant financial barriers that hinder their ability to pursue higher education. High tuition fees, living expenses, and other associated costs create immense pressure, leading many to struggle with the financial demands of education. These financial constraints can have serious implications, such as increased dropout rates, as students may be unable to afford continued education or may need to work excessively to support themselves, ultimately detracting from their academic focus. Furthermore, economic instability often results in limited access to essential educational resources like textbooks, technology, and transportation. Without these tools, students may find it challenging to keep up with coursework, leading to lower academic performance and engagement. Many students from low-income families also face the challenge of balancing part-time or full-time jobs alongside their studies, which increases their workload. This dual responsibility can lead to stress and fatigue, making it difficult for students to dedicate sufficient time and energy to their academic work. In addition to the academic challenges, financial instability is often linked to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, which can further undermine students' performance, motivation, and overall well-being. Finally, economic conditions can influence students' career choices, pushing them toward fields that offer immediate financial returns rather than those aligned with their interests and passions. This pressure not only limits personal fulfillment but can also affect long-term career satisfaction.

#### **4.6 Findings on Financial Challenges in Higher Education**

A substantial majority of students approximately—80%—report facing financial challenges during their higher education journey, highlighting that financial constraints are a significant barrier for most students. These challenges often affect their ability to enroll,

persist, and succeed in their studies. Common financial hurdles include the difficulty of affording tuition fees, which often leads to reliance on loans or part-time work; struggles with essential living expenses such as housing, food, and transportation; and the inability to purchase necessary educational resources like textbooks, technology, and other materials. These challenges can create stress and hinder academic performance, making it harder for students to fully engage in their coursework. Around 20% of students report not facing financial hurdles, suggesting that they likely benefit from adequate financial resources, scholarships, or family support, allowing them to focus more on their studies without the added burden of financial stress. Financial difficulties also influence students' academic decisions, such as choosing fields of study based on potential earnings rather than personal interest, or opting for community colleges or less expensive institutions to manage costs. These decisions can impact long-term career prospects and job satisfaction. The data underscores a critical need for enhanced support systems within educational institutions, urging universities and colleges to expand financial aid programs, offer more scholarships, and provide financial literacy resources to help students navigate their financial situations. The long-term consequences of these financial challenges can be severe, including increased student debt levels, delayed graduation times, or higher dropout rates, which in turn perpetuate cycles of economic disadvantage and limit future opportunities for affected students.

#### **4.8 Findings on Family Income and Support for Higher Education**

Almost 30% of students report receiving adequate support from their families while pursuing higher education, indicating that limited family support may hinder students' ability to navigate academic challenges effectively, ultimately impacting their overall educational experience. A significant majority, 70%, of students face challenges in their pursuit of higher education, with a notable impact on female students. These challenges often stem from

financial constraints, lack of emotional support, and insufficient guidance regarding academic and career choices. For girls, societal and cultural expectations can exacerbate these difficulties, discouraging them from pursuing higher education or certain fields of study. Common challenges include difficulty in affording tuition and related expenses, insufficient encouragement and motivation from family members, and cultural barriers that may restrict their academic aspirations. These factors can contribute to increased stress and anxiety, negatively affecting academic performance and retention rates. The lack of family support is strongly correlated with lower academic performance and higher dropout rates, especially among female students, who may struggle more without financial or emotional backing. To address these issues, the data highlights the need for targeted interventions. Educational institutions should consider implementing programs that provide mentorship, financial aid, and resources specifically aimed at supporting underrepresented groups, including girls who may face additional societal barriers. Furthermore, family dynamics play a crucial role in shaping students' educational experiences and aspirations. Positive family relationships, characterized by encouragement and open communication, can significantly enhance students' motivation and persistence in higher education.

#### **4.9 Findings on Cultural Values and Higher Education Support**

A significant majority, near to 70%, of students report having supportive cultural values that positively influence their pursuit of higher education, contributing to enhanced motivation, self-efficacy, and academic engagement. This supportive cultural environment can lead to better educational outcomes by fostering a sense of belonging and encouraging students to stay committed to their studies. However, approximately 30% of students face challenges related to cultural values when pursuing higher education. These challenges often stem from cultural expectations, societal pressures, or a lack of understanding from family regarding the importance of higher education, which can hinder academic success. Supportive cultural values, such as encouragement for education, where families and communities prioritize educational attainment, as well as cultural identity affirmation,

where students' cultural backgrounds are recognized and respected, play a crucial role in creating a positive learning environment. Additionally, mentorship and guidance from role models can help students navigate the complexities of higher education. These factors contribute to student resilience and academic performance. Unfortunately, the challenges faced by the minority of students disproportionately affect female students due to traditional gender roles or expectations within certain cultures. Girls, in particular, may experience familial pressure to conform to domestic roles instead of pursuing higher education, limiting their opportunities for personal and professional advancement. Furthermore, students from cultures that do not align with dominant educational practices may struggle with a cultural disconnect in educational settings. Without culturally responsive teaching methods, these students may feel alienated, which can negatively impact their academic engagement and success. The data underscores the necessity for educational institutions to adopt culturally responsive pedagogies. By integrating diverse cultural perspectives into the curriculum and teaching methods, educators can create more inclusive environments that support all students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds.

#### **4.10 Findings on the Impact of Gender Roles on Higher Education**

A majority of respondents, around 60%, acknowledge that gender roles influence higher education, indicating that societal expectations and norms related to gender continue to shape students' educational experiences and opportunities. The effects of gender roles on higher education manifest in various ways. Gender stereotypes often influence academic choices, with certain disciplines being traditionally associated with one gender over another, such as STEM fields being male-dominated. Participation rates can also be affected, particularly for women in cultures where traditional roles prioritize domestic responsibilities over academic pursuits. Additionally, students may receive differing levels of support and encouragement based on their gender, which can impact their confidence and aspirations in pursuing higher education. These factors contribute to disparities in educational attainment and career opportunities based on gender. However, approximately 40% of respondents

believe that gender roles do not significantly affect higher education, reflecting either a belief in the increasing equality of educational opportunities or a perception that individual choice plays a more significant role than societal expectations. The acknowledgment of gender roles' impact is particularly relevant for female students, who often face additional barriers due to traditional expectations that prioritize family and caregiving roles over academic and career ambitions, potentially limiting their educational pursuits. This recognition highlights the need for greater awareness and advocacy for change, with educational institutions playing a key role in creating environments that challenge traditional gender norms and promote equal opportunities for all students. The data also suggests the potential for policy development aimed at addressing the effects of gender roles in education, including initiatives that promote gender equity in academic fields, provide mentorship programs, and encourage diverse role models to inspire students of all genders.

#### **4.11 Findings on the Impact of Institutional Challenges and Barriers on Higher Education**

A minority, about 30%, of respondents recognize that institutional challenges and barriers significantly impact higher education, suggesting that many students and stakeholders may not perceive institutional issues as substantial obstacles to their educational experiences or outcomes. In contrast, roughly 70% of respondents believe that institutional challenges do not affect higher education, which may reflect confidence in the effectiveness of current institutional practices, support systems, and available resources. Several factors contribute to this perception, including students' sense of personal agency, where they feel empowered to navigate challenges independently and attribute their success to personal effort rather than institutional support. Positive experiences with faculty and administration may also lead many students to believe that institutions are effectively supporting their educational



journeys. Additionally, some students may simply be unaware of existing barriers or may not have encountered them personally, leading to the belief that these challenges are not widespread. This low acknowledgment of institutional barriers could impact the prioritization of policy reforms aimed at addressing systemic issues in higher education. If a significant portion of the student body does not recognize these challenges, there may be less urgency for institutions to implement changes or allocate resources to address them. The disparity between those who acknowledge institutional barriers and those who do not highlights the need for increased awareness and education about these issues. Institutions should consider initiatives to educate students about available resources, support systems, and the potential barriers faced by their peers, particularly those from marginalized groups. Despite the fact that many students may not perceive barriers, it remains crucial for institutions to focus on inclusivity and support for all students. Continued efforts to enhance student support services, streamline administrative processes, and promote diversity are essential to ensuring equitable access to higher education opportunities for all students.

#### **4.12 Findings on the Impact of Discriminatory Practices in Higher Education**

A significant majority, nearly 80%, of respondents recognize that encountering discriminatory practices has a substantial impact on higher education, highlighting the widespread awareness of the detrimental effects that discrimination can have on students' academic experiences and outcomes. Discriminatory practices in higher education may take various forms, including racial and ethnic discrimination, gender biases, socio-economic discrimination, and disability discrimination. These biases can manifest in unequal treatment during admissions, classroom interactions, and access to resources, creating hostile learning environments that hinder academic performance and discourage students from pursuing their educational goals. The recognition of these practices' impact correlates with negative student

outcomes such as lower retention rates, decreased academic performance, and increased dropout rates, as students who experience discrimination may feel alienated or unsupported. However, approximately 20% of respondents believe that discriminatory practices do not affect higher education, which may reflect a belief in personal resilience or a perception that institutions have made significant strides in promoting equity and inclusion. Despite this minority viewpoint, the overwhelming acknowledgment of the effects of discrimination emphasizes the urgent need for institutional reforms. Educational institutions should prioritize initiatives aimed at combating discrimination, promoting diversity, and fostering inclusive environments for all students. The data also suggests an opportunity for policy development focused on addressing discriminatory practices within higher education, with policymakers and educational leaders implementing policies to enhance diversity training for faculty and staff, establish clear reporting mechanisms for discrimination, and create support systems for affected students.

#### **4.13 Challenges and Hurdles in Higher Education**

Students face a variety of challenges in higher education, including financial constraints, academic pressure, lack of support systems, discrimination and bias, balancing work and study, mental health issues, and skills gaps. Financial constraints, such as tuition, fees, and living expenses, can be alleviated through seeking financial aid, scholarships, and grants, as well as by developing personal budgets to better manage expenses. Academic pressure can lead to stress and burnout, but students can manage this by prioritizing tasks, creating study schedules, and utilizing support services like tutoring and stress management workshops. The lack of support systems, particularly for those without strong family guidance, can be addressed by engaging in campus activities and mentorship programs that connect students with faculty or upperclassmen. Discrimination and bias based on race,

gender, or socio-economic status can be mitigated through awareness training on diversity and inclusion, as well as clear reporting mechanisms that ensure students feel safe in voicing concerns. Balancing work and study is another challenge, which can be tackled through flexible scheduling, online courses, or work-study programs that align with academic schedules. Mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, can be supported by providing access to counseling services and peer support groups. Finally, the skills gap that many graduates face can be addressed by enhancing career services, offering internships, and aligning curricula with industry needs to ensure students graduate with the skills employers seek. By addressing these challenges through thoughtful solutions, institutions can create a more supportive and effective educational environment.

#### **4.14 Findings on Family Support and Its Contribution to Higher Education**

Family support plays a crucial role in fostering positive academic outcomes for students, particularly in terms of emotional and financial support. Emotional encouragement from family members enhances psychological well-being, boosts student engagement, and leads to better academic performance. Students who feel emotionally supported are more likely to persist in their studies and achieve higher grades. Financial support, while important, has a varying direct impact on academic outcomes, often benefiting continuing-generation students more than first-generation students, but still alleviating the financial burdens of tuition and living expenses for many. Informal familial support, such as advice and practical assistance, is especially significant for first-generation students who may lack familiarity with the higher education system, offering critical guidance on academic choices, career paths, and emotional encouragement. Families also ascribe cultural value to higher education, motivating students to succeed in order to honor their families' sacrifices and aspirations. Additionally, family support helps students navigate institutional barriers, such as the college

application process and financial aid systems like FAFSA, reducing anxiety and increasing the likelihood of successful enrollment, particularly for first-generation students. Strong family relationships are linked to higher levels of persistence and retention in higher education, with students maintaining better self-perception of academic performance and a greater likelihood of staying enrolled through challenging times. Finally, community influence, including extended family and friends, further contributes to student success, offering additional resources and encouragement that enhance resilience in the face of academic and personal challenges.

#### **4.15 Strategies and Support Mechanisms**

To support student success and ensure equitable access to higher education, a range of initiatives should be implemented to address academic, financial, and career-related challenges. One key priority is increasing funding for scholarships, grants, and financial aid programs. This would ease the financial burdens on students, particularly those from low-income and marginalized backgrounds, enabling them to focus on their studies without the added stress of tuition fees, housing, or living expenses. For many students, especially first-generation college students or those from historically underrepresented groups, financial support is essential for both accessing and succeeding in higher education.

Additionally, establishing mentorship programs would be highly beneficial, connecting students with professionals in their fields of interest. These mentorships would provide invaluable guidance, career advice, and networking opportunities that help students navigate academic and career decisions. Mentorship is particularly important for students who lack familial or community role models in their chosen professions, offering them critical insights and direction as they plan their futures.

Equally important is the expansion of academic support services tailored to meet the diverse needs of students. Services such as tutoring, counseling, and workshops on study skills, time management, and stress management are key to helping students succeed. Early interventions through these support systems can prevent academic struggles from becoming significant barriers to graduation, thereby improving retention rates and overall student well-being. Offering peer support groups and workshops to help students adjust to university life can also boost academic resilience and self-confidence.

Community engagement initiatives can further enrich students' experiences by fostering partnerships between educational institutions and local communities. These programs could offer students access to internships, job shadowing, and real-world experiences that bridge the gap between classroom learning and professional practice. By collaborating with local businesses, nonprofits, and other organizations, universities can provide students with a deeper understanding of their field, while students' contributions also benefit the community.

Finally, these initiatives should be integrated into a comprehensive strategy that emphasizes inclusivity and equity. Support systems and resources must be culturally responsive to meet the unique needs of diverse student populations, including international students, students of color, and students with disabilities. By creating a more inclusive and supportive environment, higher education institutions can ensure that all students, regardless of background, have the tools they need to succeed academically and professionally. When implemented holistically, these strategies will help foster an educational ecosystem where students receive not only the financial and academic support they need but also the career opportunities and mentorship that will enable them to thrive in their future endeavors.

#### **4.16 Role of Local Community**

Building awareness and support networks within local communities is essential for fostering student success and encouraging higher education attainment. Local communities can organize informational sessions that provide valuable insights into higher education options, scholarships, and application processes. These sessions help demystify the complexities of applying to college, offering students and their families the knowledge needed to make informed decisions about their educational futures. By increasing awareness, students are empowered to explore a wider range of opportunities, access financial aid, and confidently navigate the application process.

Additionally, creating support networks for students transitioning to higher education is crucial for enhancing their overall experience. These networks can offer emotional support, practical advice, and a sense of community that can significantly ease the challenges many students face when adjusting to college life. Such support is especially important for first-generation college students, who may lack guidance from their families or peers in navigating the academic and social aspects of higher education. These networks can also provide mentorship and peer relationships that help students feel less isolated and more connected to the broader academic community, increasing their chances of academic success and persistence.

Moreover, integrating cultural relevance into the educational experience is vital for promoting inclusivity and motivation. Encouraging the inclusion of local cultural values in educational curricula can enhance student engagement by allowing them to see their identities, traditions, and histories represented in the classroom. This cultural recognition fosters a sense of pride and belonging, which can positively influence students' academic performance and drive. When students feel that their culture is valued and understood within

the educational system, they are more likely to engage actively in their studies, persevere through challenges, and feel motivated to succeed.

These efforts, when combined, can create a robust system of support that empowers students to pursue higher education, equips them with the tools to succeed, and fosters an environment of inclusivity and cultural appreciation. By addressing both practical and emotional needs, communities can help students not only enter higher education but also thrive within it, ensuring they have the support they need to complete their studies and succeed in their careers.

#### **4.17 Guidelines for Effective Implementation**

Collaborative efforts between educational institutions, local governments, businesses, and non-profit organizations are essential for creating comprehensive support systems that can effectively address the diverse needs of students. By pooling resources and expertise, these stakeholders can develop a network of services that extends beyond the classroom, providing students with academic, emotional, financial, and career-oriented support. For example, partnerships with local businesses could offer internships or work-study opportunities, while non-profits can help with mentorship or scholarship programs. By working together, these groups can ensure that students have access to the resources they need to succeed both during their studies and after graduation.

In addition to collaboration, regular assessment of student support programs is crucial to ensure they remain relevant and effective in meeting the evolving needs of the student body. Educational institutions should consistently evaluate the effectiveness of their programs, whether academic support services, financial aid initiatives, or career development resources. These assessments can help identify gaps in support, areas for improvement, and

emerging challenges that students may face. By staying responsive to changing student needs, institutions can continuously improve the quality of their support systems.

Furthermore, establishing robust feedback mechanisms is vital for ensuring that students have a voice in the development and improvement of support services and educational programs. Creating channels through which students can provide suggestions, report issues, and express concerns allows institutions to adapt quickly and meaningfully to their needs. These feedback loops not only enhance the student experience but also foster a culture of inclusivity and responsiveness within academic institutions. Incorporating student input can lead to more tailored programs that align with student expectations and aspirations, thus increasing student satisfaction and success rates.

In addition to these strategies, institutions can also strengthen their support by offering personalized advising and counseling services, creating peer-led support networks, and developing targeted interventions for at-risk student populations. By focusing on a holistic approach to student well-being and academic achievement, educational institutions can ensure that students are not only supported but are empowered to reach their full potential.

#### **4.18 Impact on Student Life**

Increased accessibility to higher education is a direct result of enhanced financial aid and robust community support systems, which help remove barriers for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This accessibility ensures that more students, regardless of their financial situation, can pursue higher education and unlock opportunities for personal and professional growth. With greater access comes the potential for improved academic performance, as students who benefit from mentorship and academic support services are



more likely to excel in their studies. These resources not only improve students' understanding of course material but also increase their confidence and academic engagement, which can lead to higher graduation rates. Furthermore, community engagement initiatives, such as internships and job-shadowing programs, help prepare students for the workforce by providing real-world experience, making them more competitive candidates upon graduation. This practical exposure enhances career readiness, ensuring that students are not only academically capable but also professionally prepared.

Additionally, increased awareness about the various higher education options available empowers students to make informed decisions about their academic and career paths. By understanding the range of opportunities and financial support options, students are better positioned to pursue their dreams with confidence, contributing to their personal growth and the broader development of society. The collaboration between educational institutions and local communities fosters stronger relationships that benefit both students and community members. These partnerships create a sense of shared responsibility for student success, resulting in a more cohesive and supportive environment. Such collaboration ensures that the needs of students are met holistically, with both academic and emotional support, while simultaneously benefiting the community by cultivating an educated workforce. This cycle of support not only enhances individual opportunities but also contributes to the long-term success and well-being of the entire community. Additionally, personalized academic advising, peer networks, and continuous feedback systems ensure that students feel empowered and supported throughout their academic journey. By fostering this ecosystem of support, we can better prepare students to thrive in an ever-changing world.

## **5 Discussion**

### **5.1 Interpretation of Findings: Analysis of How Identified Barriers Align with or Challenge Existing Literature**

The findings from interviews with the Rakhine community in Cox's Bazar reveal a complex mix of cultural, societal, and economic barriers to higher education. Cultural and social barriers, especially gendered expectations, were particularly prominent, with many young women discouraged from pursuing higher education due to traditional views on women's roles in the home. This reflects broader patterns seen in South Asia, where patriarchal norms often limit women's educational opportunities, prioritizing domestic responsibilities over intellectual or career ambitions. Economic disadvantage was also a critical barrier, as the high costs of tuition, travel, and study materials prevent many from pursuing higher education. This mirrors global challenges faced by underprivileged communities, where families often prioritize short-term survival over long-term educational investment. However, the Rakhine community's marginalized status within Bangladeshi society adds an additional layer of complexity, as limited local opportunities and economic vulnerability make the perceived return on education seem uncertain. Furthermore, there were differing views on the value of education, with some seeing it as a means of social mobility, while others viewed it as unnecessary, especially when immediate financial needs take precedence. This divide reflects the broader tension between short-term survival and the long-term benefits of education, highlighting how cultural perceptions can shape educational aspirations and priorities.

### **5.2 Cultural Factors: Exploration of How Cultural Identity and Community Values Impact Educational Aspirations**

Cultural identity and community values play a pivotal role in shaping educational aspirations within the Rakhine community in Cox's Bazar. The deeply rooted cultural beliefs

that discourage higher education, especially for girls, are intricately linked to the traditional gender roles and expectations within the community. The predominant view that women should focus on domestic duties, marriage, and family life instead of academic or career ambitions significantly limits educational opportunities for young women. This aligns with findings from broader studies on rural South Asian communities where traditional gender norms often overshadow educational opportunities for girls, resulting in lower enrollment rates and higher dropout rates among females.

The Rakhine cultural emphasis on modesty and silence also emerged as a significant factor in shaping the educational aspirations of youth. The notion that students, particularly girls, should not “stand out” or engage in intellectual discussions further suppresses educational ambitions and stifles opportunities for personal growth. This reflects broader social norms in many traditional communities that discourage intellectual autonomy, especially for young women, in favor of conformity to societal expectations.

However, the interviews also revealed the resilience of the Rakhine community in navigating these cultural constraints. Despite the discouragement they face, many young people, particularly girls, expressed a desire to pursue higher education. The efforts of community leaders and parents who advocate for the value of education reflect an evolving recognition within the Rakhine community of the importance of education for both individual empowerment and collective progress. This evolving shift challenges the static nature of cultural traditions and suggests that, with adequate support, cultural values can adapt to prioritize educational advancement.

### **5.3 Policy Implications: Discussion of the Implications for Educational Policy and Practice in Cox's Bazar**

The findings from this research highlight several important implications for educational policy and practice in Cox's Bazar, particularly for marginalized communities such as the Rakhine. Addressing the cultural barriers to education, especially for women, will require a concerted effort to challenge and shift traditional gender norms. Educational policies should integrate culturally sensitive strategies that not only promote gender equality but also engage local leaders and communities in advocating for the value of education. This could include community outreach programs that educate parents and elders about the long-term economic and social benefits of educating girls, as well as campaigns that celebrate women's academic success as a community asset rather than a threat to traditional roles.

Economic constraints also emerged as a significant barrier, suggesting that policies aimed at reducing the financial burden of education could have a transformative impact. The provision of scholarships, subsidized tuition fees, and transportation allowances for students from low-income families could help alleviate the financial pressure that prevents many students from accessing higher education. Additionally, creating local job training programs linked to educational outcomes could help students and their families see the tangible benefits of education, thereby making it a more appealing investment.

To further support the educational aspirations of Rakhine youth, especially girls, policies must enhance access to quality education at all levels. This could involve increasing the number of local schools offering higher education programs and creating community-based initiatives that offer mentorship, tutoring, and career counseling. Such initiatives could empower local families to take a more active role in shaping the educational pathways of their children, countering the pervasive belief that higher education is unnecessary.

Finally, collaboration with local community leaders and organizations is essential. Community leaders already serve as important advocates for education, and their engagement can be leveraged to bridge the gap between policy and practice. By working alongside local institutions, educational policies can be designed in a way that respects and integrates the unique cultural and economic realities of the Rakhine community.

## **6. Policy Recommendations**

To improve access to higher education for the Rakhine community, a comprehensive policy approach is necessary. The government, in collaboration with educational institutions and local organizations, should establish sustainable financial support systems, including targeted scholarships, interest-free loans, and flexible payment options to cover tuition, living expenses, and educational materials. These programs should be periodically reviewed, and alternative funding sources such as public-private partnerships should be explored.

Additionally, expanding and investing in local educational institutions in Cox's Bazar and surrounding regions will reduce the need for students to travel long distances, making higher education more accessible. Infrastructure improvements, particularly in remote areas like Paner Chora and Khurushkul, are essential to ensure that students in geographically isolated regions have access to education, including through online platforms and mobile education units. Public awareness campaigns that challenge traditional mindsets, particularly about the education of girls, should involve local leaders and religious figures to promote the economic, social, and personal benefits of education. Strengthening community-based educational programs, including mentorship and leadership training for young women, will help address gender-based barriers. Moreover, increasing investment in vocational training centers that align with local job markets will provide practical, skill-based education for youth unable to attend traditional universities. Parental engagement initiatives are also

crucial, with workshops aimed at emphasizing the long-term benefits of education for both individual students and the community as a whole. Finally, coordinated policy implementation across sectors, such as education, health, transportation, and technology, will ensure that these initiatives are effectively integrated and aligned with broader development goals, ensuring that all students in the Rakhine community have access to higher education and the opportunity to contribute to regional growth.

## **7. Limitations and Future Research**

### **7.1 Limitations**

While the proposed strategies to improve access to higher education for the Rakhine community are comprehensive, several limitations must be considered for realistic implementation. Financial constraints are a major challenge, as the government and institutions may struggle to sustain targeted scholarships, financial aid programs, and subsidized educational institutions over the long term, especially in economically disadvantaged regions. Geographical barriers also persist, particularly in remote areas like Paner Chora and Khurushkul, where limited infrastructure may hinder the effectiveness of online learning platforms or mobile education units. Cultural resistance to changing perceptions, especially regarding the education of girls, may slow progress despite public awareness campaigns, and conservative factions within the community could impede efforts to shift societal attitudes. The capacity to provide high-quality vocational training in local centers is another potential limitation, as a shortage of skilled trainers and modern equipment may undermine the success of such programs. Additionally, even with financial support, many students may face socioeconomic pressures, such as the need to work to support their

families, limiting their ability to fully engage in education. Parental engagement initiatives may also encounter challenges, particularly in communities where patriarchal attitudes dominate, making it difficult to involve fathers in promoting the value of education for girls. Lastly, the reliance on community-based education initiatives and local support networks could lead to fragmentation and inefficiency if not properly coordinated, with varying levels of quality across programs. Overcoming these limitations will require sustained efforts, collaboration, and adaptability to ensure the success and long-term impact of these strategies.

## **7.2: Strategies for Improving Access to Higher Education for the Rakhine Community**

One of the most pressing barriers to higher education for the Rakhine community is the financial burden associated with tuition fees, transportation, and other educational expenses. To mitigate this, the government and educational institutions should offer targeted scholarships and financial aid programs for Rakhine students, especially for girls and low-income families. These scholarships should cover not only tuition but also living costs, travel expenses, and access to educational materials. Additionally, providing interest-free loans or flexible payment options could help alleviate the financial strain. To ensure that higher education is not seen as an unattainable goal, it is crucial to expand access to affordable higher education institutions in Cox's Bazar and surrounding regions. Establishing or improving local universities and vocational colleges that offer subsidized tuition and relevant academic programs will reduce the need for Rakhine students to travel to other cities or abroad, decreasing the financial and logistical barriers that currently limit access to higher education. Furthermore, educational policies should promote the development of community-based education programs that help bridge the gap between secondary and higher education. These programs can include career counseling, mentorship, and life skills training, particularly for young women, to help them navigate societal expectations and develop the confidence to pursue higher education. Additionally, adult education programs could be

developed to support parents in understanding the importance of education and empowering them to encourage their children to continue their studies. Policies should also include public awareness campaigns aimed at challenging and changing cultural perceptions about education, especially for women. These campaigns should be culturally sensitive and involve local leaders, religious figures, and influencers who can help shift traditional mindsets. The government could collaborate with local NGOs to create community workshops that emphasize the economic, social, and personal benefits of education and promote gender equality in education. Lastly, in areas like Paner Chora and Khurushkul, where access to education is limited by geographical and economic barriers, the government should explore the possibility of online learning platforms, mobile education units, or evening classes to make education more accessible. This approach can cater to students who cannot afford to leave their homes or travel long distances to attend educational institutions.

### **7.3 Community Initiatives: Suggestions for Grassroots Programs that Could Empower Rakhine Youth**

Establishing community-driven educational support networks is essential to addressing the educational challenges faced by the Rakhine community. Community-based mentorship programs that connect students with local leaders, educators, and professionals can provide invaluable guidance and motivation. These networks can help students navigate academic challenges, as well as offer emotional and financial support. Local community organizations, such as youth clubs and cultural groups, can take the lead in organizing such mentorship schemes. Additionally, to directly address gender-based barriers, grassroots initiatives should focus on empowering girls through education. Community-run programs could offer girls' leadership training, confidence-building workshops, and mentorship opportunities to counter the social expectations that limit their aspirations. Peer education programs where older girls or young women share their educational journeys with younger



students can help challenge stereotypes and inspire a new generation of female leaders. Furthermore, establishing vocational training centers within the Rakhine community would allow young people to acquire practical skills that align with local job markets. These programs should offer training in entrepreneurship, technology, agriculture, and other relevant fields, thus providing an alternative pathway to higher education for those unable to attend traditional universities. By promoting skill-based education, these centers can enhance employability, reduce economic hardships, and foster local economic development. To further improve educational engagement, grassroots programs should aim to integrate education with Rakhine cultural values. By emphasizing the importance of education in strengthening the community's cultural identity, local programs can gain greater support from families and elders. Initiatives such as community festivals, youth talent shows, and public debates that highlight academic achievements and intellectual discussions can help elevate the status of education within the community. Lastly, parental engagement initiatives are crucial to changing the perception that education is secondary to economic survival. Organizing parental education workshops to highlight the long-term value of higher education can help parents understand its practical benefits not just for individual success but also for the advancement of the community as a whole. Engaging fathers and male community leaders in these discussions is essential to challenging patriarchal attitudes that limit educational opportunities for girls.

#### **7.4 Future Research Directions: Areas for Further Study to Continue Addressing Educational Inequalities**

Future research should explore several key areas to better understand the barriers to education within the Rakhine community. One important area is the long-term impact of gendered cultural norms on the educational aspirations and outcomes of Rakhine youth,

particularly girls. Studies could examine how shifting gender norms within the community influence educational attainment, career choices, and social mobility. This research would provide valuable insights into how gender-sensitive educational policies can be implemented more effectively. Additionally, further research could investigate the role of local community leaders and cultural organizations in promoting educational access. Understanding the effectiveness of community-based advocacy in challenging cultural norms and mobilizing families to prioritize education can inform the design of future educational programs and policy initiatives. Another crucial area of research would focus on the use of technology to improve educational access in rural Rakhine communities. This could include exploring the feasibility of e-learning platforms or mobile education solutions that cater to remote and underserved populations. Assessing the effectiveness of digital tools in providing equitable access to higher education will be crucial for developing sustainable educational solutions. Moreover, given the skepticism about the economic return on investment in higher education, future studies should conduct longitudinal research to track the outcomes of Rakhine students who have pursued higher education. This research would assess the long-term impact of education on income generation, employment, and social mobility, providing empirical evidence to challenge the belief that education does not yield tangible benefits. Finally, comparative studies of the Rakhine community and other marginalized ethnic or refugee groups in Bangladesh would offer a broader understanding of educational inequality. Such studies would help identify common barriers to education and highlight best practices for overcoming these challenges, which could then be applied to the Rakhine context.

## **8. Conclusion**

### **8.1 Summary of Key Findings**

This study explores the barriers preventing the Rakhine community in Cox's Bazar from accessing higher education, focusing on cultural, societal, and economic factors. Key findings include deeply ingrained cultural barriers, particularly for women, where traditional gender roles prioritize domestic duties over academic aspirations. Economic constraints, such as poverty and limited income, make the costs of higher education, including tuition and travel, unaffordable for many families. The Rakhine community's marginalization within broader Bangladeshi society, combined with a lack of educational resources and infrastructure, further limits opportunities. Despite these challenges, there is a growing recognition of education's value for personal empowerment and social mobility, though opinions remain divided, especially when economic survival is prioritized. Community leaders and parents play a crucial role in shaping educational aspirations, and local initiatives are necessary to promote education and address these barriers. The research highlights the need for comprehensive interventions at both the policy and community levels to overcome these obstacles.

### **8.2 Final Thoughts**

The barriers to higher education faced by the Rakhine community in Cox's Bazar reflect broader challenges encountered by marginalized groups worldwide, shaped by a combination of historical inequalities, cultural traditions, and economic hardships. These obstacles, particularly for young women, limit access to educational opportunities and perpetuate cycles of poverty and exclusion. Despite these constraints, the Rakhine community shows significant resilience, with many young people expressing a strong desire

to pursue education and change their futures. Addressing these barriers requires more than just providing financial aid or increasing the number of schools; it necessitates a fundamental shift in cultural attitudes towards education, particularly for girls, alongside long-term investments in local infrastructure, social services, and economic development. Education must be seen not only as a means of personal advancement but also as a key tool for fostering social equity, breaking cycles of poverty, and promoting greater inclusion. Expanding educational access for the Rakhine community will require both structural reforms—such as financial support and policy changes—and cultural shifts, particularly in relation to gender roles and societal expectations. Through collective efforts at both the community and policy levels, it is possible to create an environment where education is an accessible and valuable tool for all Rakhine youth, regardless of their gender or socio-economic background. In conclusion, addressing educational inequalities is vital for unlocking the potential of marginalized communities, paving the way for a more equitable and prosperous future for all.

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