

REPORT

Navigating spatial exclusion: Lived experiences of settlement and housing among Rohingya refugees in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study examines the housing experiences of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, focusing on housing types, rental affordability, and settlement patterns. Using a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 Rohingya refugee families in the Klang Valley, Penang, Kedah, and Johor to explore the socio-spatial dynamics of refugee settlement. The findings reveal that refugee housing is characterized by informality, overcrowding, and legal insecurity. Urban refugees often live in deteriorating squatter settlements or low-cost flats, while those in suburban or rural areas sometimes have access to better-quality housing at lower rents. Housing conditions are shaped by legal exclusion, informal labor markets, and spatial marginalization, which expose refugees to exploitation and health risks. Despite these challenges, refugees develop coping strategies through community networks, shared rentals, and informal support systems. The study highlights the need for inclusive housing policies that enhance rental security, establish minimum housing standards, and foster collaboration among government, civil society, and the private sector. Addressing refugee housing precarity is essential not only for humanitarian protection but also for sustainable urban governance.

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1. Introduction

The plight of the Rohingya, a minority ethnic group primarily from Rakhine State in Myanmar, represents one of the most protracted humanitarian crises of the twenty-first century. Systematic discrimination, statelessness, and violent persecution have forced hundreds of thousands to flee their homeland in search of safety and livelihood opportunities. Although Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, it has nonetheless emerged as a primary destination for Rohingya refugees in Southeast Asia. As a relatively prosperous Muslim-majority

nation, Malaysia has long attracted displaced Rohingya populations seeking both protection and economic opportunities (UNHCR, 2023). At the same time, their presence raises complex challenges related to legal status, socio-economic integration, and the broader limits of national refugee governance (Mohd Ramlan & Mohd Naeim, 2023).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023), more than 100,000 Rohingya refugees are registered in Malaysia, making them the largest refugee group in the country. Despite this significant presence, Malaysia lacks a comprehensive legal framework governing refugees and asylum seekers. Consequently, refugees are generally classified as irregular migrants under immigration law and remain vulnerable to arrest, detention, and deportation. While the government permits the UNHCR to conduct registration and protection activities, the lack of a formal refugee policy has led to fragmented governance and inconsistent practices.

This lack of legal recognition profoundly shapes the everyday lives of Rohingya refugees. Excluded from formal employment, public education, and state-subsidized healthcare, many are pushed into informal labor markets characterized by low wages, exploitation, and unsafe working conditions (Nah, 2018). Educational access is similarly constrained, with children relying largely on under-resourced community-run learning centers. These structural barriers contribute to persistent socio-economic marginalization and reinforce cycles of poverty within refugee communities.

Beyond institutional exclusion, Rohingya refugees also face growing social stigma and discrimination. Public perceptions are often shaped by politicized narratives and media representations, which have increasingly fueled xenophobic sentiments—particularly during periods of economic uncertainty. This shift contrasts with Malaysia's earlier expressions of solidarity with the Rohingya cause in international forums and further limits refugees' ability to secure stable livelihoods and integrate socially (Nazri *et al.*, 2025; Wahab, 2018).

Within this broader context of exclusion, housing emerges as a critical yet underexamined dimension of refugee experience. Housing is not merely a basic necessity; it is central to dignity, security, health, and social inclusion. Adequate housing can enhance well-being, reduce vulnerability, and enable access to essential services (Sohaimi *et al.*, 2025). However, in Malaysia, the absence of legal recognition means that refugees receive no formal housing assistance. This stands in contrast to many Western countries that provide temporary accommodation to asylum seekers before facilitating access to longer-term housing (Strang *et al.*, 2018).

As a result, housing conditions among Rohingya refugees often reflect broader patterns of exclusion. Many reside in overcrowded, poorly maintained, and unsafe dwellings located in marginalized urban areas, frequently far from employment opportunities and essential services (Wake & Cheung, 2016). Their inability to legally rent property or access public housing further exacerbates these challenges.

The absence of regulation has also led to an informal, frequently exploitative housing market. Landlords often charge inflated rents for substandard accommodations, typically without formal contracts or tenant protections. With limited bargaining power and no legal recourse, refugees are compelled to accept insecure living arrangements in densely populated areas marked by poor sanitation, fire hazards, and constant risk of eviction (Nah, 2018). In this way, legal exclusion translates directly into spatial marginalization within urban environments.

These vulnerabilities were further exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdowns, economic disruptions, and heightened anti-migrant sentiment intensified enforcement actions, including raids and evictions in refugee-populated areas. Overcrowded living conditions made physical distancing nearly impossible, increasing public health risks and revealing structural shortcomings in urban housing systems. The pandemic thus underscored the intersection of housing precarity with public health, governance, and social justice concerns.

Despite these challenges, Rohingya communities have continued to demonstrate notable resilience. Informal support networks, community savings groups, and mosque-based assistance systems have played a crucial role in securing accommodation and negotiating rental arrangements (Nah, 2018; Rahman & Dutta, 2023; Samuri *et al.*, 2020). These grassroots efforts highlight both the agency of refugee communities and the gaps in institutional responses.

Nevertheless, housing remains one of the least examined aspects of the Rohingya refugee experience in Malaysia. Existing research has primarily focused on statelessness, employment, and education, leaving the spatial dimensions of refugee settlement comparatively underexplored (Letchamanan, 2013; Nah, 2018). As a result, the mechanisms through which legal exclusion shapes housing access and urban marginalization remain insufficiently understood.

To address this gap, this study examines how Rohingya refugees access housing, navigate informal rental markets, and adapt to spatial marginalization in Malaysian cities. Drawing on a qualitative, community-centered approach,

the study is informed by the theoretical perspectives of urban informality and the “right to the city,” which challenge state-centric definitions of legality and citizenship in determining access to urban space (Roy, 2005). From this perspective, housing is not merely a technical issue but a political one, reflecting broader power relations that govern access to urban resources. In contexts of exclusion, refugees assert their presence through informal practices, social networks, and adaptive strategies (Butler, 2009).

Specifically, this study addresses three research questions: (i) What types of housing do Rohingya refugees occupy in Malaysia? (ii) How do location and socio-economic factors shape housing affordability and quality? and (iii) What strategies do refugees employ to cope with housing insecurity? By answering these questions, the study contributes to the emerging literature on refugee urbanism by highlighting the intersection of legal exclusion, spatial marginalization, and housing precarity.

1.1. Review of literature on refugee settlement

Research on migrant housing has long emphasized issues such as housing quality, affordability, environmental conditions, and sustainability in destination contexts (Flatau *et al.*, 2015; Netto, 2011; Purcell, 2002; Robinson *et al.*, 2007; Tasleem *et al.*, 2020; Teariki, 2017; Teixeira, 2017; Thompson, 2016). A recurring finding is that migrants often face high rental costs, particularly in urban areas where employment opportunities are concentrated. As a result, many accept substandard or overcrowded housing in exchange for proximity to work. Housing quality is therefore closely linked to migrants’ financial capacity and constrained choices (Bierre, 2013; Robinson *et al.*, 2007; Tasleem *et al.*, 2020; Thompson, 2016).

Beyond material conditions, housing also plays a crucial role in shaping social integration. Discrimination in rental markets often restricts migrants’ residential mobility, concentrating them in lower-cost neighborhoods with poorer living conditions. These patterns have prompted calls for housing policies that address price discrimination and promote equitable access to accommodation (Baker *et al.*, 2013; Flatau *et al.*, 2015; Gurran & Phibbs, 2015; Howden-Chapman *et al.*, 2013; Teariki, 2017).

More recently, research on refugee housing has expanded beyond humanitarian concerns to incorporate insights from urban studies and critical theory. This shift recognizes housing as a socio-political issue shaped by legal status, citizenship, and rights. In this study, three interrelated frameworks—urban informality, precarity, and the right to the city—provide an analytical foundation.

The concept of urban informality challenges the

conventional dichotomy between formal and informal urban systems. Roy (2005) argues that informality is not merely a residual or illegal condition but a mode of governance produced through selective state regulation. In Malaysia, this perspective helps explain how Rohingya refugees, excluded from formal legal systems, nonetheless remain embedded in urban economies through informal housing arrangements (Wake & Cheung, 2016). These arrangements typically lack formal tenancy agreements, regulatory oversight, and basic protections.

Such conditions exemplify what Roy (2005) describes as the “un-mapping” of urban space, whereby marginalized populations are excluded from formal recognition yet incorporated through informal practices. Importantly, these spaces are not solely sites of deprivation; they also serve as arenas of negotiation, community formation, and everyday survival.

Closely related is the concept of precarity. Butler (2009) defines precarity as a condition of life characterized by insecurity and the absence of stable institutional protection. For Rohingya refugees, housing precarity manifests in insecure tenancy, risk of eviction, and exposure to exploitation (Nah, 2018). These housing vulnerabilities intersect with broader aspects of life, including health risks, educational access, and employment stability (Wake & Cheung, 2016). In Malaysia, such precarity is reinforced by legal frameworks—particularly the Immigration Act 1959/63—which criminalize undocumented migrants and heighten their vulnerability (Amnesty International, 2020).

A complementary perspective is Lefebvre’s (1996) concept of the “right to the city,” which frames urban belonging as a collective right rather than a privilege tied to legal citizenship. From this perspective, access to housing and urban resources should be extended to all inhabitants. For Rohingya refugees, this framework captures the tension between legal exclusion and lived participation in urban life. Despite their marginal status, they have established communities, engaged in local economies, and maintained social and cultural networks. As Shahpur and Wardani (2022) note, the notion of “home” extends beyond physical shelter to encompass identity, belonging, and emotional security.

Together, these frameworks illuminate how legal exclusion produces spatial marginalization. Refugees are often concentrated in overcrowded and peripheral neighborhoods with limited access to services and infrastructure (Wake & Cheung, 2016). In Malaysia, such settlement patterns are shaped less by choice than by necessity, as refugees seek affordable housing while avoiding detection (Amnesty International, 2020).

Living in these environments exposes refugees to multiple risks, including poor sanitation, overcrowding, and heightened health hazards. These vulnerabilities became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when movement restrictions disrupted livelihoods and overcrowded housing increased infection risks. At the same time, fear of arrest and stigmatization intensified psychological stress (Michael, 2024; Rahman & Dutta, 2023).

Despite these constraints, refugee communities continue to rely on informal support systems. Community leaders, religious institutions, and refugee-led organizations play key roles in facilitating access to housing and mediating disputes (Muniandy, 2021). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also contributed by establishing temporary shelters and safe spaces for vulnerable groups (Samuri *et al.*, 2020). While these efforts are vital, they cannot substitute for comprehensive policy responses.

Accordingly, scholars increasingly advocate for inclusive urban policies that address spatial exclusion and promote secure housing for refugees (Haque *et al.*, 2023; Muniandy, 2021; Sampson & Gifford, 2010). Such approaches emphasize legal recognition, rights-based frameworks, and multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Although prior research has examined refugee livelihoods, education, and legal status in Malaysia, housing and spatial settlement patterns remain relatively underexplored. In particular, there is limited empirical evidence on how legal exclusion shapes housing access across different urban contexts. This study addresses this gap by examining housing types, spatial dynamics, and coping strategies among Rohingya refugees in Malaysia.

2. Data and methods

2.1. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the settlement experiences of Rohingya refugees living in informal housing in Malaysia. Qualitative methods are particularly well-suited for examining complex and context-dependent issues such as housing insecurity, spatial exclusion, and everyday survival strategies among marginalized populations (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used as the primary method of data collection because they allow participants to describe their experiences in their own words while providing flexibility for probing deeper into emerging themes. This approach is especially appropriate when studying vulnerable communities

whose perspectives are often underrepresented in policy and academic discourse (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). The objective is to generate rich narrative data that captures the socio-spatial challenges and coping strategies of Rohingya refugees navigating Malaysia's urban environment without formal legal protection.

2.2. Sampling strategy

This study employed purposive sampling to recruit participants who met the following criteria: (i) self-identification as Rohingya; (ii) residence in Malaysia for at least one year; (iii) current residence in informal or non-legal housing arrangements, such as squatter settlements or rented accommodations without formal contracts; and (iv) age 18 years or older. The aim was not statistical representativeness but to obtain in-depth insights from individuals directly experiencing housing precarity. Efforts were made to ensure diversity in gender, age, household structure, and settlement patterns. Participants were recruited through local NGOs, community-based organizations, UNHCR-affiliated learning centers, and informal refugee networks.

The sample size was guided by the principle of theoretical saturation, where no substantially new themes emerged from additional interviews. Saturation was reached after approximately twenty interviews, with several additional interviews conducted to confirm emerging patterns.

2.3. Data collection

Data were collected between February and June 2024 across several key Rohingya settlement areas, including the Klang Valley, Penang, Kedah, and Johor. These locations were selected because they represent major refugee settlement regions with varying urban and economic characteristics. While the Klang Valley functions as Malaysia's primary economic center, attracting informal labor, Penang and Johor represent major urban-industrial zones, and Kedah reflects smaller urban and semi-rural settlement patterns.

Interviews were conducted in Rohingya, Malay, or English, depending on participants' preferences. When necessary, trained translators proficient in Rohingya and Malay assisted in the interviews to ensure accuracy and clarity. Interviews were conducted in safe, private settings, including participants' homes, NGO offices, and community centers, and typically lasted 45–60 min. A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was used to elicit participants' experiences related to housing conditions, affordability, tenancy arrangements, and coping strategies. Field notes were maintained during data collection in the Rohingya settlement to document housing conditions, spatial arrangements, and residents'

daily living environments, including observations and informal interactions that supported data analysis.

2.4. Ethical considerations

Given the vulnerability of the refugee population, the study adhered to strict ethical standards to ensure participants' safety, dignity, and confidentiality. Participants were provided with an information sheet explaining the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained either verbally or in writing, depending on literacy levels and cultural appropriateness.

To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were used, and all identifying details were removed from transcripts. Data were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team. Interview locations were carefully selected to minimize risks of unwanted attention from landlords, neighbors, or immigration authorities. Interviewers were trained in trauma-informed practices to avoid re-traumatization when discussing sensitive experiences such as eviction, detention, or violence, and participants were provided with referrals to support services when necessary (Mackenzie *et al.*, 2007).

2.5. Data analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. First, transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. Second, initial codes were generated to identify recurring patterns related to housing types, rental affordability, tenancy arrangements, and coping strategies. Third, the codes were grouped into broader themes that reflect structural housing challenges and refugees' adaptive responses. The themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure internal consistency and conceptual clarity before being interpreted in relation to the study's theoretical framework of urban informality, precarity, and the right to the city. To strengthen analytical credibility, the findings were triangulated with field notes and secondary sources, including NGO reports and UNHCR data.

3. Results

A total of 25 Rohingya households or household representatives participated in the study, many of whom were household breadwinners. The findings of this study focused on housing type, location, and the comparison of rental rates paid by respondents.

3.1. Housing types and conditions

This study reveals that Rohingya refugees in Malaysia

reside in a wide range of housing types that vary according to location and economic capacity. In urban areas, common housing types include squatter or village-type houses, shop houses, low-cost flats, apartments, and condominiums. In suburban and rural areas, Rohingya households are more likely to live in one- or two-story terrace houses and in village-type houses constructed from wooden boards with zinc or nipah roofs.

A significant proportion of Rohingya families, particularly in suburban areas, rent terrace houses with two to four rooms. These houses are usually located in residential neighborhoods shared with local residents and provide relatively adequate facilities such as piped water, electricity, indoor toilets, kitchens, and living areas. Households living in such housing typically have relatively stable sources of income, working as laborers, traders, contractors, or small business operators.

However, many Rohingya refugees reside in village-type squatter houses due to relatively low rental costs. These dwellings often have poor living conditions, especially in urban areas, where houses are typically overcrowded, poorly maintained, and lack essential facilities such as running water, electricity, and private toilets. Residents in these settlements usually rely on unstable, low-paying informal jobs such as daily labor, waste collection, and street-based activities.

For example, one informant, Ramlah, lives alone in a small 10 × 12-foot squatter house in Bagan Dalam, Penang, rented for RM70 per month. The dwelling has no separate rooms, electricity, or running water, and the toilet is shared with nearby residents. The structure is made of damaged wooden boards with a zinc roof and a deteriorated cement floor, reflecting severe housing deprivation.

Village-type houses in suburban and rural areas tend to offer relatively better living conditions than those in urban centers. These houses are generally larger, have several rooms, and often include basic utilities such as water supply, electricity, indoor toilets, and outdoor spaces. Residents in these areas commonly work as general laborers, farmers, or rubber tappers.

Another form of accommodation is shared shop houses in urban areas. These spaces are often rented collectively by single male workers and partitioned into small sleeping areas. Residents share cooking facilities, bathrooms, and other utilities. For instance, 15 single Rohingya men working as construction laborers in Butterworth share a rented shop house space costing RM1,500 per month, dividing expenses and preparing meals collectively.

Low-cost flats represent another major housing option for Rohingya refugees, particularly in cities such as Kuala

Lumpur, Selangor, and Penang. These units typically measure around 600–700 square feet and contain two or three rooms with basic amenities. Despite the availability of more formal housing options, overcrowding is common. For example, one informant, Muhammad Hassan, lives with his wife and three daughters in a two-room low-cost flat in Seberang Perai, rented for RM300 per month. On weekends, the unit may host up to 18 relatives and friends who temporarily stay there after returning from construction work sites.

A smaller proportion of Rohingya refugees with relatively stable employment reside in apartments or condominiums in urban areas. These households usually consist of small families with more stable occupations, such as cooks, grocery shop workers, or small traders. These housing units offer better facilities and security compared to other forms of accommodation. Some Rohingya refugees also reside in temporary government-built longhouses originally intended for displaced squatters. These structures typically contain minimal facilities, including a single room, basic water and electricity supply, and a small kitchen and toilet.

Finally, a number of Rohingya workers live in employer-provided housing, commonly referred to as shared houses (*rumah kongsi*). These arrangements are particularly common in sectors such as construction, restaurants, and cleaning services. Housing provided in the construction sector is often makeshift and poorly maintained, typically constructed from reused wooden boards with zinc roofing and shared sanitation facilities. In contrast, accommodation in the service sector tends to be more formal, often involving rented terrace houses or shop houses, where workers live collectively and use the space primarily for sleeping.

3.2. Rental costs and location

The findings indicate that rental rates among Rohingya refugees are primarily shaped by location and housing type, with significant disparities between urban, peri-urban, sub-urban, and rural areas. Major urban areas in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Selangor recorded the highest rental costs, often exceeding RM1,500 per month. Johor also shows relatively high rates (approximately RM500–RM700), while smaller towns and rural areas typically range between RM300 and RM500. However, peri-urban areas bordering major cities (e.g., Kulai near Johor Bahru) may also exhibit elevated rental prices.

A key pattern emerging from the data is the urban–suburban trade-off. Refugees in suburban or rural areas are often able to rent larger, more structurally adequate

houses at lower prices than those in cities. For instance, a respondent in Bukit Pinang, Kedah, rents a single-story terrace house for RM250 per month, with three bedrooms and full basic facilities, despite earning only RM60 per day. In contrast, some refugees in urban areas pay higher rents for poorer-quality housing. One respondent in Farlim, Penang, pays RM400 per month for a small village-type (squatter) house with limited space and basic amenities. The dwelling had a small living room and no dining room. It is made of boards, has a zinc roof, and a cement floor.

These examples illustrate that housing quality does not necessarily correspond to rental price, particularly in urban settings where demand is high. Overall, nearly 90% of Rohingya refugees rely on rental housing, with village-type houses typically costing between RM250 and RM400, although rates may exceed RM1,000 in certain urban areas, especially when properties (including land) are used for business purposes.

Rental rates for terrace houses generally range from RM350 to RM700 in suburban areas, but can reach RM900–RM1,000 in urban areas. Apartments and condominiums, usually occupied by refugees with relatively stable incomes, are rented for approximately RM500–RM600 per month, which is considered affordable in urban housing markets. Low-cost flats remain a common option, typically rented for below RM500, though prices vary by location and condition.

To cope with high rental costs, many refugees adopt cost-sharing strategies, particularly by subletting rooms. Some households rent larger units and sublet rooms to relatives or friends to reduce financial burdens. For example, a respondent in Relau, Penang, rents an apartment for RM450 and sublets rooms at RM150 each, inclusive of utilities. Others use subletting as a source of supplementary income, such as a household in Klang renting out multiple rooms for RM200 each.

Room rental rates are substantially lower in suburban and rural areas. In Kuala Nerang, Kedah, rooms are rented for as little as RM70 per month, with utilities shared among occupants. In such settings, shared living arrangements often extend beyond housing to include collective spending on food and daily necessities.

4. Discussion

The evidence indicates that Rohingya refugee housing experiences in Malaysia are shaped by the intersection of urban informality, legal exclusion, and community-based coping strategies. Rather than temporary or random arrangements, the observed housing patterns

reflect structural constraints embedded within Malaysia's migration governance and urban housing systems. Rohingya refugees occupy a wide range of housing types—including squatter settlements, shop houses, low-cost flats, shared accommodation, and employer-provided housing—demonstrating how displaced populations navigate urban space through informal and often precarious housing arrangements.

4.1. Urban informality and refugee housing

The study shows that Rohingya refugees rely heavily on informal housing markets to secure accommodation. Housing arrangements such as squatter houses, shared shop houses, and overcrowded rental units are often negotiated through personal networks or employer arrangements rather than formal tenancy agreements. These patterns reflect broader dynamics of urban informality, where access to housing occurs outside formal regulatory systems.

The case of Ramlah living in a dilapidated squatter house in Penang illustrates the extreme conditions that can exist in such informal environments, including the absence of electricity, piped water, and proper sanitation. While these conditions are not unique to refugees, they are typical of marginalized populations operating outside formal housing markets. Nevertheless, informal housing also functions as a critical survival mechanism for refugees excluded from formal housing systems. Similar patterns of refugee settlement linked to employment opportunities have been documented in countries such as Germany, Canada, and the United States (Adam *et al.*, 2019; Murdie, 2002; Poppe, 2013; Sherell *et al.*, 2007). More recent research also shows an increase in refugee placements in rural areas due to government distribution policies (Weidinger & Kordel, 2023).

4.2. Legal exclusion and housing precarity

The dependence on informal housing markets is closely tied to the legal exclusion of refugees in Malaysia. As Malaysia has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, refugees lack formal legal recognition and are treated as undocumented migrants. This status limits their access to formal employment and regulated housing markets.

Without legal documentation or stable income, many refugees are unable to sign formal rental agreements, leading landlords to rent properties informally, often under insecure conditions or at higher prices. The absence of legal protection exposes refugees to eviction, exploitation, and sudden rent increases. These dynamics illustrate how legal exclusion translates into spatial marginalization within urban housing systems, confining refugees to lower-quality housing environments.

4.3. Spatial differences in urban and suburban housing

The study also highlights spatial variations in refugee housing conditions between urban and suburban areas. In major urban centers such as Kuala Lumpur and George Town, high rents often force refugees to share small and overcrowded housing units. In contrast, refugees living in suburban or rural areas, such as parts of Kedah, may rent larger houses at lower prices, though these locations often offer fewer employment opportunities.

This pattern reflects the trade-off refugees face between housing affordability and access to livelihoods. While cities provide greater employment opportunities and social networks, refugees often remain concentrated in marginalized neighborhoods with poor infrastructure and heightened risks of exploitation (Betts & Collier, 2017; UNHCR, 2022). Urban dispersion also complicates humanitarian outreach and service provision (Landau, 2014).

4.4. Refugee adaptive strategies and community resilience

Despite structural constraints, Rohingya refugees demonstrate significant adaptive capacity in navigating housing challenges. Common coping strategies include shared housing, room subletting, and reliance on community networks. Overcrowded housing arrangements are frequently used to reduce rental costs, as illustrated by cases where extended family members or friends temporarily share small flats. Although such arrangements reduce privacy and increase density, they allow households to distribute living expenses across broader social networks.

Room subletting and shared accommodation also create informal housing opportunities for newly arrived refugees who may struggle to secure independent accommodation. Similar strategies have been observed among other migrant communities, where group-hosting arrangements and shared housing help reduce costs and strengthen mutual support networks (Jordan, 2024; Lok & Zhuang, 2025).

However, these coping strategies often come with social and health consequences. Research consistently shows that overcrowded and substandard housing conditions are associated with increased risks of psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and trauma-related symptoms among refugees (Dudek *et al.*, 2022; Netto, 2011; Thompson, 2016; Ziersch *et al.*, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these vulnerabilities, as movement restrictions disrupted informal employment, increased eviction risks, and made social distancing in overcrowded housing nearly impossible.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that while Rohingya refugees face significant structural barriers to accessing secure housing, community networks and adaptive strategies play a critical role in helping them navigate Malaysia's informal urban housing landscape.

4.5. Limitations of the study

This study has several limitations. First, the qualitative sample is relatively small and focuses primarily on selected locations in Malaysia, potentially missing the full diversity of Rohingya settlement experiences nationwide. Second, the findings rely on self-reported narratives, which may reflect individual perceptions and experiences rather than generalizable patterns. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the socio-spatial realities of refugee housing. Future research could increase the sample size, conduct comparative studies across refugee communities, and examine the long-term impacts of housing precarity on refugee integration, health outcomes, and urban development.

4.6. Policy recommendation on refugee settlement

The findings of this study suggest several policy directions that could improve refugee housing conditions in Malaysia. First, the Malaysian government could introduce limited regulatory mechanisms that allow refugees to enter into formal rental agreements without requiring full legal refugee status. Such measures could reduce landlord exploitation and improve housing security. Second, local authorities could collaborate with non-governmental organizations and community groups to establish regulated, affordable housing initiatives for vulnerable refugee households. These partnerships could focus on ensuring minimum housing standards, including sanitation, electricity, and safety conditions. Third, the private sector, particularly property developers and landlords, could be encouraged to participate in social rental schemes or community housing programs supported by NGOs and international organizations. These initiatives could provide safe housing while addressing labor shortages in sectors employing refugee workers. Finally, the insights from this study contribute to broader international discussions on urban refugee governance. As displacement increasingly occurs in cities rather than camps, policies must move beyond temporary humanitarian assistance and instead incorporate refugees into urban planning frameworks that prioritize safe housing, public health, and social stability.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Rohingya refugee housing in Malaysia is defined by informality, insecurity, and spatial inequality shaped by legal exclusion. Refugees rely almost entirely

on the private and informal rental market, where housing quality, safety, and affordability vary sharply by location and income. Urban areas offer access to employment but often involve overcrowded, substandard housing, while suburban and rural areas can provide better housing at lower cost but with weaker connectivity to opportunities.

Housing precarity among Rohingya refugees is systemic and multidimensional, intersecting with employment insecurity, health risks, and social marginalization. Informal tenancy arrangements expose refugees to exploitation and eviction while denying them stability and legal recourse. These patterns validate theoretical perspectives on urban informality and precarity: exclusion from legal recognition translates directly into exclusion from safe, regulated urban space. Despite these constraints, Rohingya communities demonstrate strong resilience through shared rentals, internal support networks, and community-led coping mechanisms. These adaptive practices show agency and social solidarity but cannot replace formal housing protections or inclusive urban policy.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Universiti Utara Malaysia. All procedures involving human participants in this study were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all informants prior to their participation. However, some consent-taking with certain informants did not proceed due to communication and security concerns.

Consent for publication

Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants prior to their inclusion in the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. No identifying information is disclosed in this manuscript, and all data have been anonymized to protect participants' confidentiality and privacy.

Availability of data

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality considerations involving vulnerable refugee populations. Data may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to approval by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Utara Malaysia.

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