

## The Rohingyas: Contextualizing Identity, Gendering Violence, and Redefining the Role of Women in Conflict

### *Introduction:*

“Asia’s New Palestinians”<sup>1</sup>, “Boat People in South Asia”<sup>2</sup>, and “most persecuted people” are some of the names by which the Rohingyas have been referred to in recent decades. The term “Rohingya” does not date back to the colonial or pre-colonial periods, or neither to the intricate historical legacy the community draws its identity from. It began to be widely used in the 1950s. President Shwe Thaik, Prime Minister Nu and senior military officer Aung Gyi used this term in their respective speeches. Moving onto the 1960s, the Burmese official Broadcasting Service played a “Rohingya language” program, three times a week, which was a part of its minority language programming. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the ‘Rangoon University Rohingya Students Association’ was officially registered.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the universal usage of this term is not only very contemporary, but the community itself identifying themselves with the aid of this term commenced not very long ago. But why and how did they start self-identifying themselves as the Rohingyas?

While we come across this term in the news or media, it calls to our mind a homogenous group of Muslim ethnic minorities who lay claim to the Rakhine state of Myanmar as their ancestral land, which the government of Myanmar unquestionably denies. Despite keeping the cohesive and organic ties of this community as it stands today intact, it will be intriguing to note that this ethnic community itself has been subjected, over the passage of various epochs, to a degree of heterogeneity, continually integrating newcomers into their society. What led to a conscious self-adoption of this term is the brutal government violence inflicted on the Muslims of the Rakhine state, degrading them to illegal immigrants, and exposing them to all kinds of ruthless attacks as was possible. *“Before the violence our Rohingya name was not something we thought about every day. Since the violence, everything has been stolen from us – now all we have left is our Rohingya identity. All of us are united on this.”*<sup>4</sup> Viewed from this perspective, this term certainly has political connotations in the drive of asserting rights and claiming citizenship.

However, the scenario is not a simple case of a disenfranchised and depoliticized minority ethnic group seeking their rightful status from the government. The plight of the Rohingyas must be problematized in the light of their much contested identity and lineage, and also the status of the minority within the minority – Rohingya women. The infliction and distribution of violence within this ethnic minority community is undeniably lopsided. It is this minority

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<sup>1</sup> Sahana Basavapatna, et al., Rohingyas: The Emergence of a Stateless Community, ed. Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury and Ranabir Samaddar (Kolkata: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2015) 7.

<sup>2</sup> Sucharita Sengupta, “‘Maritime Ping-Pong’: The Rohingyas at sea”, Rohingyas: The Emergence of a Stateless Community, ed. Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury and Ranabir Samaddar (Kolkata: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2015) 18.

<sup>3</sup> “Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State”, International Crisis Group Asia Report N°261 22 October 2014: 22

<sup>4</sup> “Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State”, International Crisis Group Asia Report N°261 22 October 2014: 23

who is actually rendered voiceless, yet when reconceptualized, forms the novel soldiers of a decentralized battlefield of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thus, this paper has three primary goals. First, it attempts to contextualize the identity – cultural, political, ethnic, religious, linguistic – of the Rohingya Muslims in the current Burmese demographic fabric, placing it vis-à-vis the “ethnic cleansing” operation of Myanmar in the state of Rakhine. Second, this paper argues that Rohingya women face multiple levels of oppression, as their sources of vulnerability are manifold. The geographical contours of this paper is limited to Myanmar, the site of conflict and “war”, Bangladesh, which is both an immediate location to seek asylum and a transit, and India – the state of West Bengal precisely – a place conceptualized as a transit by the migrant Rohingyas but which sometimes, entraps them in a state of void. Thirdly, drawing from the personal narrative of a young Rohingya girl – interactions with whom has been of vital significance in the shaping of this study – this paper also argues that Rohingya women are waging a struggle of resistance within their meagre capacities. Their efforts and bravery need to be recognized, so as to emancipate them from their sense of vulnerability and victimhood. The paper consists of two main parts: the first, which traces the Muslim heritage from the ancient Arakan kingdom to the modern Rakhine state, and second, which illustrates how violence inflicted on women is used as an unofficial weapon by the Burmese state to destroy and wipe out the earlier mentioned Muslim or Rohingya historical legacy.

### ***Part I: The Rohingyas – From Independence to Colonialism***

Back in 2013, the United Nations had described the Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar as “the most persecuted minority in the world”. Since then, almost every news article or report refer to the Rohingyas in the same vein – most persecuted, most unwanted, and so on. The United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) has estimated that since 2012, around more than 110,000 (mostly) Rohingyas have left Myanmar in boats and travelled to Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines. According to a report published by *The Guardian*, on 10<sup>th</sup> January 2017, approximately 65,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh, “since the army launched a crackdown in the north of Rakhine state.” The steady outflow of the Rohingyas from Myanmar is not a recent phenomenon, although it has escalated steeply over the past few years. Currently Bangladesh has around 500,000 Rohingya refugees, India around 14,000, Thailand around 5,000, Malaysia around 150,000, and around a million Rohingyas reside in Myanmar itself. But why do they need to flee?

The Rohingya Muslims are an ethnic minority community in the Rakhine state of Myanmar. They claim it to be their ancestral land, where they have resided in for centuries. The etymological roots of the term, however, remain disputed. One version mentions that the word ‘Rohingya’ comes from the Arabic word ‘*Rahm*’ which means ‘mercy’. According to this version, an Arab ship was once wrecked off the Burmese coast and the Arabs who could survive asked for *rahm* of the local king. This tale is not too far-fetched considering the version stated in certain reports on the Rohingyas that the Muslims arrived in the independent

kingdom of Arakan around the 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> They came as “seafarers” and “traders” from the Middle East to the ancient Arakan kingdom, which is now called the Rakhine state of Myanmar. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, many Bengali Muslims were captured by the “marauding Arakanese”<sup>6</sup> and then made to serve in the Arakanese king’s army, sold as slaves, or were forced to settle in the lands of the Arakan. The most widely accepted view about the etymological roots of the Rohingya community is that the term ‘Rohang’ is a derivative of the term ‘Arakan’ in the dialect of the Rohingyas. The terms ‘ga’ or ‘gya’ means ‘from’.<sup>7</sup>

According to the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO), “*Muslim Arakanese or Rohingya are indigenous to Arakan. Having genealogical linkup with the people of Wesali or Vesali kingdom of Arakan, the Rohingya of today are a perfect example of its ancient inhabitants. The early people in Arakan were descended from Aryans. They were Indians resembling the people of Bengal.*”<sup>8</sup> ARNO further goes on to mention that the North Arakan region was the seat of Hindu dynasties several years before the 8<sup>th</sup> century. In 788 A.D. the Chandras founded a dynasty in the city of Wesali, which soon became a noteworthy trading port in those days attracting thousands of ships annually. Wesali was thus, a Hindu kingdom in the east of Bengal, incorporating Chittagong, and followed the Mahayana sect of Buddhism. The lucrative trading port of Wesali created a ripe situation for attracting travelers on the sea, and the earliest messages received by the Arakanese from the Arabs were of their ship-wrecks. Repeated ship-wrecks and the continuous flow of Arab traders to the Arakan coast gradually made up the “*nucleus of Muslim society in Arakan*”.<sup>9</sup>

As a result, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam were all practiced in the Arakan kingdom. The Arab influence spread progressively and Islam began to take deep roots in the Arakan society. Subsequently, after the beginning of the Muslim rule in Bengal in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, there was a rise in the Muslim population of the Arakan kingdom. Their numbers reached significant proportions under the Mrauk-U dynasty, and the years from 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a lot of conversions into Islam. The “new golden age” for the Muslim heritage in the Arakan region was brought about during the 15<sup>th</sup> century. A large number of Bengali Muslims – or Muslims from Bengal – were invited by the Arakan court into their kingdom, such as the poets Daulat Qazi and Syed Alaol. The “cosmopolitan” Arakanese court began to patronize Bengali and Arakanese literature, engendering a hybrid Islam-Buddhist culture and tradition. Mrauk-U kings also adopted Muslim titles, took inspiration from the dresses of the Persian rulers especially the conical hats, minted coins and medallions which had *kalmia* inscribed (signifying a declaration of Islamic faith), and communicated in several languages.

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<sup>5</sup> Khaled Ahmed, “Who are the Rohingya?” [The Express Tribune](#) July 31, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> “The most persecuted people on Earth?” [The Economist](#) June 13, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Eleanor Albert, “The Rohingya Migrant Crisis”, [CFR Backgrounders](#) January 12, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> “Muslim influence in the kingdom of Arakan”, [Arakan Rohingya National Organisation \(ARNO\) Arakan, Burma](#) 13 January 2012.

<sup>9</sup> “Muslim influence in the kingdom of Arakan”, [Arakan Rohingya National Organisation \(ARNO\) Arakan, Burma](#) 13 January 2012.

It is believed that from 1430 to 1645, the Arakanese rulers adopted Muslim titles such as that of ‘Sultan’ and these Muslim names were also minted into the coins of their kingdom. In 1531, the kingdom of Mrauk-U at Arakan became independent from the Bengal Sultanate capitalizing on the Mughal invasion of Bengal. The independent rulers of Mrauk-U established their authority over east Bengal, up to Chittagong. Therefore, Chittagong remained a part of the Arakan kingdom throughout the Chandra and the Mrauk-U dynasties. However, the Arakan rulers of Mrauk-U still retained their Muslim titles and many positions of influence in the regnant administration were given to the Muslims. The head of officials in the Arakanese court were called *Qazi*, some of them were Daulat Qazi, Sala Qazi, Gawa Qazi, Shuza Qazi, Abdul Jabbar, Mohammed Yousuf, and Abdul Karim.<sup>10</sup>

Over the next two centuries, the power of Mrauk-U kingdom rose and fell as its borders kept reshifting. The European and Arab traders coming to the prosperous port of Mrauk-U, along with the Rakhine sailors, conducted frequent raids on Bengal. As a result of such activities, a lot of captives were brought back to the Arakan kingdom and Mrauk-U rulers deployed them as slaves, which in turn boosted the Muslim population. Then in 1660, the Mrauk-U king gave asylum to the fleeing Mughal Prince Shah Shuja and his band of soldiers. This led to further migration of Bengali Muslims to Mrauk-U. When Shah Shuja was assassinated by the same who had given him shelter, his soldiers were incorporated into the “*elite palace guard as a special unit of archers*”, who were called “*Kaman*”, which is the Persian word for “bow”. Over time, the Kamans were reinforced with Afghan mercenaries, and soon became the “*key power broker in the palace*”.<sup>11</sup> However, their powers overreached and in 1710, most of the Kamans were exiled to Ramree (Yanbye) island, which is south of Sittwe.

The fall of the Mrauk-U was brought in by a conflict within its nobility, and an aspirant to the throne requested the Burmese king Bodawpaya to invade. Thus, in 1784-85, Mrauk-U faced a sudden attack by the Burmese forces, which ended the Mrauk-U dynasty and led to the annexation of the Arakan region to Burma. Interestingly, there was a Muslim presence in the Burmese king Bodawpaya’s army unit as well. This unit was called “Myedu”, which was posted in Sandoway (Thandwe). The name of this unit was derived from a village named Myedu, in the Shwebo district, where there was a Muslim settlement. The Muslims in the Myedu village had originally been captives of the Burmese and Mrauk-U kings during their raids over the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many of the Muslims residing currently in the Thandwe district claim this lineage.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, what we see is a presence of the Muslims throughout the history of the Arakan region, in whichever dynasty that ruled. Starting from prominent royal officials to captured slaves, the existence of the Muslim population in this region cannot be overlooked, disregarded, or marginalized. The Arakan Muslim community was believed to be a diverse ethnic mix of primarily the Bengalis, the Mughals, the Pathans, the Arabs, the Turks, and the Persians – although the Bengali Muslim population was the greatest in numbers. Even though

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<sup>10</sup> “Muslim influence in the kingdom of Arakan”, [Arakan Rohingya National Organisation \(ARNO\) Arakan, Burma](#) 13 January 2012.

<sup>11</sup> “Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State”, [International Crisis Group Asia Report N°261](#) 22 October 2014: 2.

<sup>12</sup> “Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State”, [International Crisis Group Asia Report N°261](#) 22 October 2014: 3.

the influx of Muslims and their subsequent permanent settlement has been a recurring feature in the Arakan history, it was nevertheless a constant element which has in its own way given shape to the unique and characteristic development of the Arakan culture and heritage. Therefore, the prolific Muslim influence in this region cannot be by any means subordinated to the mainstream Arakan discourse of court politics, literature, culture or religion.

### ***From Colonialism to Independence***

Bodawpaya did not reign long over the Arakan region. The Arakan region was occupied by the British after the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26). This was a turning point in this region for the continuance of the successful co-existing mode of life between the Buddhists and Muslims in the Arakan. The Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, followed by a second Anglo-Burmese war in 1853, and the result of both these wars led to the assimilation of the Arakan into the larger British Empire.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Arakan, or what we today call the Rakhine state, had never been fully incorporated into the larger Burmese kingdom. Before Badowpaya's rule, it was an independent kingdom, autonomous under the Bengal Sultanate, and soon independent once again. This status of freedom was taken away by Badowpaya's forces for a short while and soon after, by the British colonizers.

Therefore, when Burma became a province of British India, the borders between Arakan of Burma and Chittagong and Bengal of India merged, giving way to a sense of continuity and became porous in nature. This porosity of borders between Bengal and Arakan "*facilitated a variety of cross-border contacts.*"<sup>14</sup> A large proportion of Bengali Muslims, including Chittagongians, migrated to northern Arakan, as such immigration was encouraged and sometimes forced by the colonial masters, and soon with time they were absorbed into the Rohingya community. This large-scale influx of Bengali Muslims into Arakan and the resultant demographic alterations left the Buddhists, residing in central and southern Arakan, uneasy and tense. Even prior to this influx, the Muslim community already residing in the Arakan was by no means homogenous. There were the Kamans, the Arabs, the Bengali Muslims, and the captives from various lands brought in by rulers. The identity, thus, of the Muslim populace in the Arakan was one, varied and two, non-static. It integrated within itself, over time, any willing Muslim settler in that particular geographical location. A similar situation arose with the British colonial regime and its operations.

The British encouraged the migration in such huge amounts to work on the colonial plantations and consequently, the imperial economy flourished owing to the large supply of labourers from Chittagong and Bengal. By 1941, around one third of the population in Akyab, now called Sittwe, were from Chittagong and Bengal. These massive numbers of economic migrants entering Arakan were mostly Bengali Muslims, and began to mingle with the Muslim populace in that region who have resided there for centuries. The incoming

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<sup>13</sup> Sahana Basavapatna, et al., [Rohingyas: The Emergence of a Stateless Community](#), ed. Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury and Ranabir Samaddar (Kolkata: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2015) 4.

<sup>14</sup> Sahana Basavapatna, et al., [Rohingyas: The Emergence of a Stateless Community](#), ed. Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury and Ranabir Samaddar (Kolkata: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2015) 4.

Bengali Muslims started developing ties with and gradually got integrated into the Rohingya community which had formed over the several dynasties in the Arakan kingdom. Thus, a sort of genealogical reconfiguration of the Rohingya Muslims took place during the colonial years, with the simultaneous escalation of resentment of the Arakan Buddhist community (Rakhines) towards their Muslim co-habitants. The Arakan Buddhists despised the fact that who they referred to as illegal Bengali immigrants were getting more jobs and lands in their own lands under the British colonial regime. They felt a sense of entitlement to certain resources in their native land which they saw were being given away to the new Muslim settlers in the Arakan.

Matters became worse during the Japanese occupation of Burma (1942-45), as Japan armed the Buddhist Arakanese to fight against the British and the latter countered with a Muslim force. Most of the Muslims in this region were pro-British, and the Buddhists supported the Japanese “*as part of the broader Burmese independence movement*”.<sup>15</sup> Armed units were formed by both the Buddhists and the Muslims and massive attacks were carried out against one another during 1942-43. Subsequently, the Muslims fled to the North and Buddhists (or Rakhines) to the South of the Arakan region, which further created a deep rift between both these communities. Moreover, there was an occurrence of a Muslim *mujahideen* rebellion after the Second World War, when Burma as a country gained independence. The rebels demanded for an autonomous area for the Muslims, north of the Rakhine state, with full citizenship, to put an end to the discrimination they claimed to face from the Buddhist officials who now held power replacing the erstwhile colonial rulers.<sup>16</sup> Looking back at the recent political history of Myanmar, this outburst of violence between the two communities can perhaps be considered as cementing their hatred and bitterness against one another, the seeds of which were planted in the British colonial context. The post-colonial scenario did not see a return to the ancient ways of peaceful living and mutual tolerance; the equation between the Buddhists and Muslims since the independence of Myanmar slipped into a violent, ruthless, and brutal landslide.

In reaction to the *mujahideen* rebellion, the immigration authorities of Myanmar imposed restrictions on the movements of the Muslims in northern Rakhine. However, this was not the sole insurgency which the Burmese government had to deal with. Ethnic insurgencies surfaced all over the country – for instance, the “Red Flag” and the “White Flag” communist insurgencies, (Marxist) Arakan People’s Liberation Party, and so on. The *mujahideen* rebellion was ultimately defeated, and in 1961, a Mayu Frontier Administration was established by the Burmese government in northern Rakhine which comprised of army officers instead of Rakhine officials.<sup>17</sup> It was at this time when the populace where this administration was appointed began referring to themselves as the ‘Rohingyas’ – intended to assert their ethnic and political distinctiveness. This frontier administration was dissolved after the military coup of Burma in 1962, after which political activity of any kind was

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<sup>15</sup> “Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State”, [International Crisis Group Asia Report N°261](#) 22 October 2014: 3.

<sup>16</sup> “Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State”, [International Crisis Group Asia Report N°261](#) 22 October 2014: 4.

<sup>17</sup> “Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State”, [International Crisis Group Asia Report N°261](#) 22 October 2014: 4.

banned for the Muslims and a fresh set of harsh policies were formulated against the minorities.

During the 1960s, Muslim representatives of northern Rakhine proposed a separate Muslim state, or at least an autonomous area; such demands were encouraged by the then Prime Minister Nu in order to have the Muslim vote in his favour.<sup>18</sup> Eventually Rakhine was made one of the seven ethnic states under the 1974 constitution of Myanmar. Since Myanmar turned into a one-party-state which was rather fearful of any opposition, the Muslims were looked upon with a suspicious eye. Especially given the history of their earlier demands of an independent or at least autonomous Muslim state, to separate from the union, made them all the more vulnerable to the authoritarian Burmese government.

### ***Fabrication of Exclusion in Post-colonial Independence***

Operation *nagamin* or “dragon king” – codenamed ‘Ye The Ha’ – was launched by the Burmese government in 1978, to tackle with the issue of illegal immigration and checked for documents of identification in the border regions for the first time. This operation, masked in the form a census, unleashed a surge of raw violence upon the Muslim community in northern Rakhine, and generated “*widespread reports of army brutality, including rape, murder and the destruction of mosques. As a result, about 200,000 Muslims took refuge elsewhere in fear of their lives. The state-controlled media of Burma blamed the ‘armed bands of Bengalis’ or ‘Muslim extremists’ for attacking indigenous Buddhist villages.*”<sup>19</sup> Further arguments were made by the government that the Muslims who fled during this operation were actually illegal inhabitants of the Rakhine state and had entered Burma with the intention of expanding the Bengali population at large. The 1982 Citizenship Act passed by the Ne Win government laid the political foundation of the exclusion of the Rohingyas. It did not include the Rohingyas in their list of 135 national ethnic groups. This Act also created three categories of citizenship – national, associate and naturalized. Full citizenship was only granted to those who could prove their ancestry in Burma before the first Anglo-Burmese war. For instance, the Burmans, Rakhines, and Mons were given full citizenship. But since the entire community of what we call Rohingya has always been in a state of flux, expanding integrating and reshaping, they could not prove their native ancestry and thus, on this context, were discriminated against. The Muslims who had applied for citizenship under the 1948 Citizenship Law were rendered as ‘associate’ citizens. The remaining Muslims were forced to apply for the ‘naturalized’ citizenship under the 1982 Law.<sup>20</sup>

In 1989, the government issued the colour-coded Citizens Scrutiny Cards (CRCs) for the three categories of citizenship which the 1982 Citizenship Law gave birth to. Pink cards were issued for full citizens, blue cards for associate citizens, and green cards for naturalized

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<sup>18</sup> “Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State”, [International Crisis Group Asia Report N°261](#) 22 October 2014: 5.

<sup>19</sup> Sahana Basavapatna, et al., [Rohingyas: The Emergence of a Stateless Community](#), ed. Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury and Ranabir Samaddar (Kolkata: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2015) 7.

<sup>20</sup> Sahana Basavapatna, et al., [Rohingyas: The Emergence of a Stateless Community](#), ed. Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury and Ranabir Samaddar (Kolkata: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2015) 7.

citizens. Even under this scheme the Rohingyas were excluded and not issued any cards. In response to the UNHCR's pressures and efforts, in 1995, the Rohingyas were issued a white card called a Temporary Registration Card (TRC). However, the TRC does not mention the place of birth and cannot be used as a citizenship card. There's a family list which every family in Burma possesses, but it only documents family members and their date of births. Chris Lewa, founder of The Arakan Project, writes that the "*Rohingya are recognised neither as citizens nor as foreigners. The Burmese government also objects to them being described as stateless persons but appears to have created a special category: 'Myanmar residents', which is not a legal status.*"<sup>21</sup> This political discrimination and exclusion became the basis for the repeated brutal attacks on the Rohingyas, the incessant rape of Rohingya women, and merciless killings of Rohingya children.

## ***Part II: Gendered Violence as Weapon – Systematic rape and sexual assault as tools***

Thus, it is clear from the previous sections that the history of the Rohingya community is as much rooted in the history of Myanmar as that of any other ethnic group. The clear lineage, political influence, cultural legacy, social and literary impact is being deliberately overlooked by the Burmese government in their informal drive of completely wiping off the Muslim populace from Myanmar. According to an Al Jazeera report, dated 25<sup>th</sup> November 2016, a United Nations official has reported about the ongoing "ethnic cleansing" in Myanmar. Around 30,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled to Bangladesh, "*as stories of gang rape, torture and murder emerge*"<sup>22</sup> from the fleers. This term was also used by the Human Rights Watch in 2013 when it accused Myanmar of carrying out a campaign of "ethnic cleansing". In the same report, Mohammad Ayaz recounts how his seven months pregnant wife of 25 years of age - Jannatun Naim – was shot dead by the Burmese troops.<sup>23</sup> Going by the reports and narratives documented by researchers of the Rohingyas, systematic rape is the most widely used tool by the Burmese government in carrying out its ethnic cleansing drive in the Rakhine state.

Priyanka Motaparthy, a senior researcher in the Emergencies division of the Human Rights Watch, mentions in a report of the Human Rights Watch dated 6<sup>th</sup> February, 2017 "*These horrific attacks on Rohingya women and girls by security forces add a new and brutal chapter to the Burmese military's long and sickening history of sexual violence against women.*"<sup>24</sup> The same report captures the first-hand narratives of nine Rohingya women, interviewed by Human Rights Watch researchers in Bangladesh, who reported that they had been raped or gang raped during the attacks on their villages in the Rakhine state. The report uses pseudonyms for these women to protect them from further harm. For instance – Fatima, a Rohingya woman in her 20s, in Kyet Yoe Pyin village<sup>25</sup>, says:

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<sup>21</sup> Chris Lewa, "North Arakan: an open prison for the Rohingya in Burma", [FMR32](#), pp – 11-12.

<sup>22</sup> "Rohingya face Myanmar 'ethnic cleansing': UN official", [Al Jazeera](#) 25 November 2016.

<sup>23</sup> "Rohingya face Myanmar 'ethnic cleansing': UN official", [Al Jazeera](#) 25 November 2016.

<sup>24</sup> "Burma: Security Forces Raped Rohingya Women, Girls", [Human Rights Watch](#) February 6, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> "Burma: Security Forces Raped Rohingya Women, Girls", [Human Rights Watch](#) February 6, 2017.



*“Four soldiers attacked and suddenly entered the house. One grabbed the children, two of them grabbed each of my arms... They were armed with rifles, pistols, small and long knives, and some were wearing ammunition belts.*

*My eldest [5-year-old] daughter screamed and said, “Please leave us,”... So they killed her... with a machete. They slaughtered her in front of me.*

*When they killed her, I became very upset. [The soldiers] said many things to me that I could not understand and put a gun to my head... They kicked me in my hip and back, and beat me on the head with a wooden stick.*

*[Then] one of the soldiers tore off my clothes. Two soldiers raped me, one by one. They were about 30 to 35 years old. They touched too many places in a very painful way – they touched my chest, they touched my vaginal area. They did it quickly, they only opened their zippers – they didn’t take their pants off. When another soldier tried to rape me, I resisted. Then they burned my leg with plastic, they put it out on my leg.”*

Another Rohingya woman, Noor, in her 40s<sup>26</sup>, narrates:

*“Two of them held my arms righty. I couldn’t move. They took me in the yard of the home. Another two put a rifle to my head, tore off my clothes, and raped me... While they held me, my husband was also held. They slaughtered him in front of me with a machete. Then three more men raped me. I began bleeding severely. After some time, I didn’t know what was happening, I fell unconscious... I regained consciousness the next morning. I took my gold jewelry, went to the nearby ghat [stairs leading to the river], and gave it to the boatman [so that I could cross to Bangladesh]. I walked there very slowly, as I was in pain. I had severe pain in my lower abdomen and pain in my whole body.”*

Ayesha, yet another Rohingya woman in her 20s from Pyaung Pyit village<sup>27</sup>, narrates:

*“They gathered all the women and started beating us with bamboo sticks and kicking us with their boots. In total they beat about 100 to 150 women, young boys, and girls. After beating us, the military took me and 15 women about my age and separated us [from the group].*

*They took us to a nearby school, kept us in the burning sun, standing in the field in front. They made us turn to face the sun. Then three soldiers took me to a nearby pond.*

*When they prepared to rape me, they opened their pants. All I could notice was their underwear. When one finished raping me, I resisted with my leg, and one of them punched me in the eye... One of them kicked my knee and I got hurt. They also bit my face and scratched me with their nails.*

*I started bleeding. When I started severely bleeding from my genital area and leg, they left me. I became senseless. When I came to, I found my clothes torn around me. I found my skirt and wrapped my body in that.”*

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<sup>26</sup> “Burma: Security Forces Raped Rohingya Women, Girls”, [Human Rights Watch](#) February 6, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> “Burma: Security Forces Raped Rohingya Women, Girls”, [Human Rights Watch](#) February 6, 2017.

Amina, a Rohingya woman in her 20s from Hpar Wut Chaung village<sup>28</sup> narrates:

*“When they entered [our house], our brothers were sleeping on the veranda, and we [five sisters] were in the bed. They shot and killed my [brothers] and held the girls so they couldn’t move.*

*They instantly shot my younger sister in the head. While [another sister was] running away, they shot [her too].*

*They took my other [13-year-old] sister to another room and raped her there. We heard [her screaming]. She screamed, “Someone save me! He’s trying to take my clothes off!” What I saw from outside is that 10 more people entered that room with my sister.”*

These first hand narratives of women who have experienced brutal violence or witnessed the same – most often both – bring to the forefront perhaps the darkest chapter of the country’s operation to wipe clean the Muslim population from the Rakhine state. As can be clearly seen, the Burmese government is using systematic rape as a tool in the massacre of the Rohingyas – preying on women to be the easy target, and thereby making the Rohingya crisis a grave gender concern. Penny Green, professor at the International State Crime Initiative (ISCI), describes the ethnic cleansing of 2012 as a “process of genocide”.<sup>29</sup> Researchers at the ISCI argue that this massacre was at least in some part organized. Some of the Rakhine men they have interacted with told them that they were encouraged to and given incentive for attacking the Muslims: *“they were bussed into Sittwe to attack Muslims, and were encouraged to bring knives. They were given free food for a day’s work.”*<sup>30</sup>

Beyond the nation’s deliberate and organized rapes and attacks on women, their violation and oppression does not come to a full stop once they flee from Myanmar. Rohingya women, the survivors of the horrific violent tales mentioned above, who flee to Bangladesh face a fresh set of systemic violence which is also systematic. In an article by Shamima Akhter (gender specialist at the Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC), Dhaka) and Kyoko Kusakabe (associate Professor at Gender and Development Studies, School of Environment, Resources and Development, Asian Institute of Technology, Thailand), the various factors of oppression and subjugation of the Rohingya women refugees in the Bangladeshi camps are elaborated. They adopt the definition given by Benjamin and Fancy of gender-based violence: *“violence targeted to a person because of their gender, or that affects them because of their special roles or responsibilities in society.”*<sup>31</sup> The occurrence of physical violence is common to both males and females in a conflict situation, however, quite evidently, the factors of infliction, methods of infliction, and the resultant experience of, is distinct. Even then, the brunt of the violence in most cases is seen to be channelized towards one end of the gender spectrum – in this case, the Rohingya women. *“Most of the women reported that*

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<sup>28</sup> “Burma: Security Forces Raped Rohingya Women, Girls”, [Human Rights Watch](#) February 6, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> “The most persecuted people on Earth?” [The Economist](#) June 13, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> “The most persecuted people on Earth?” [The Economist](#) June 13, 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Shamima Akhter and Kyoko Kusakabe, “Gender-based Violence among Documented Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh”, [Indian Journal of Gender Studies](#) 2014, pp – 228.

*men's frustrations and experiences of violence directly affect women through domestic violence,*"<sup>32</sup> writes Akhter and Kusakabe.

Akhter and Kusakabe conducted their interviews in the Kutupalong camp in Cox's Bazaar District in Bangladesh – interviewees being documented Rohingya refugees from Myanmar – over November-December, 2010 and February, 2012. Through these interviews, one can see that there is violence in store for women even beyond systematic and organized rape and sexual assault. It would be interesting to note that, within the Rohingya tradition itself, women are relegated to the sedentary private sphere. Being a housewife, or unemployed, is regarded as a something which is prestigious for a woman in the Rohingya society. While refugee women must engage in decision-making and be employed (if provided), the Rohingya refugee woman must also step out of the confines of her domestic space to make a living, which is seen as a loss of status and social prestige. Especially in the backdrop of the Bangladeshi society, where local Bangladeshi women too take pride in being a housewife. Gendered norms have deep roots in the Rohingya culture, where men are expected to be breadwinners and women, housekeepers. Therefore, despite their agency and empowerment vis-à-vis sedentary confinement, their independence creates a pressure on them psychologically as well as physically.

Dilara, a 26 year old interviewee in Akhter and Kusakabe study who is employed as a domestic worker<sup>33</sup>, narrates:

*"My husband has a tough life; he used to regularly complain about getting abused by the local Bangladeshi community, his employer and also the local police. Once the police caught him working outside the camp and put him in jail. After his release, he stopped working. He stays home all day. He has nothing to do. He is very frustrated with life and society. Even though he was a very nice man before, society has changed him. He is not nice anymore. He passes his time by drinking. If I tell him to stop drinking, he starts to physically and verbally abuse me. I cry a lot. I know he is a very nice man, he does not want to beat me, but frustration is destroying his life."*

Her 38 year old husband, Siraj, is unemployed. This is the tale of one Rohingya refugee woman in Bangladesh, which echoes the general frustration of the Rohingya refugee males who sense a loss of power and control over the household. Since survival does not differentiate between women and men, it is the women who mostly earn the income for a living, and in turn get subjected to domestic violence from their husbands. Furthermore, men's activities and mobility is restricted due to fear of a police arrest, whereas women mostly work indoors, and thus, it becomes more convenient for them to work even if they earn lesser than their male counterparts.

Mohammad Rafique, age 48 years old interviewee who works as rickshaw puller<sup>34</sup>, explains his predicament:

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<sup>32</sup> Shamima Akhter and Kyoko Kusakabe, "Gender-based Violence among Documented Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh", *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 2014, pp – 238.

<sup>33</sup> Shamima Akhter and Kyoko Kusakabe, "Gender-based Violence among Documented Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh", *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 2014, pp – 238.

*“I cannot go outside for work every day. It is shameful for me as a man. I do some household work for my children when my wife is not at home. But due to work outside home, my wife also sometimes treats me wrong. She is earning, but I’m the head of the household. She should listen to me always because she is my wife. She does not want to listen to me as she did earlier, and I do not like that.”*

His wife, Tohura of 38 years, is a domestic worker<sup>35</sup>. This is her side of the story:

*“My husband cannot tolerate it if household chores are not finished before he comes home. It is very difficult for me to manage all the activities. My husband sometimes cannot go outside for work, those days his temper is worse. I don’t want to give him the money I earn from hard labour because I know that sometimes he uses that money to drink alcohol with a group of men from the refugee camp. I cannot stop my husband because if I try to stop him, he threatens me that he will get another woman. So, I remain silent.”*

Thus, on one hand these women face a sense of loss of prestige and identity, and on the other, domestic abuse. They themselves believe that a woman should not work, should be a housekeeper, and income generation is solely the male’s forte. This creates a stress and pain on their psyche as they keep breaking their cultural norms, without feeling independent or empowered, but from a sense of loss of normality. *“They feel their status is further degraded by the fact that the local women do not engage in income-generating work, especially as back home in Myanmar they too were once housewives.”*<sup>36</sup> The second aspect strain from employed women comes from their frustrated unemployed husbands. Therefore, this clearly shows that violence on men may seem like it is limited to them on the surface; but quite on the contrary, it has a substantial trickle-down effect without any regulating valve on women. Women, eventually, experience violence from myriad avenues.

In addition to their strain over altered socio-cultural norms, the Rohingya refugee women get paid a much lesser wage than that compared to males. Due to this meagre wage amount some of the Rohingya women have decided to resort to sex work. Engaging in sex work hampers their relations with all the members of their family and they are once again, looked down upon by the society at large. These wage and employment discrepancies are further exacerbated with their want of effective channels of communication. The Rohingya women, owing to their deep gendered perceptions of culture, *“respond to their negative experiences with silence and submission.”*<sup>37</sup> It is a common practice in Myanmar to not talk about fear as it is not seen as meritorious. Especially with regard to women, the refugee camp structure in Bangladesh by default disallows them to candidly speak about their experiences.

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<sup>34</sup> Shamima Akhter and Kyoko Kusakabe, “Gender-based Violence among Documented Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh”, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 2014, pp – 239.

<sup>35</sup> Shamima Akhter and Kyoko Kusakabe, “Gender-based Violence among Documented Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh”, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 2014, pp – 239.

<sup>36</sup> Shamima Akhter and Kyoko Kusakabe, “Gender-based Violence among Documented Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh”, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 2014, pp – 239-240.

<sup>37</sup> Shamima Akhter and Kyoko Kusakabe, “Gender-based Violence among Documented Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh”, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 2014, pp – 242.

The Mahjee, or the leader of the refugee camp, plays a very influential role in the lives of the refugees residing in the Bangladeshi camps.<sup>38</sup> They are the mediator between the camp management officials or any authority trying to reach the refugees and the camp refugees themselves. It has been noted that these Mahjees do not always alleviate the position, or at least attempt to mitigate the harms inflicted on women, rather they themselves further endorse the traditional gender roles of the Rohingya community. Moreover, they often participate in the exploitation of women. The refugees cannot take up any income generating activities without consulting or the permission of the Mahjee. When this is applied to women, the Mahjee at times asks for sexual favours from women to keep him pleased, or to get permission to work outside the camp. Women who earn from sex work are more vulnerable to be taken advantage of by the Mahjee. The latter is aware of their business and in the name of protecting their source of income, he often threatens them of taking away their livelihood, sending them back to Myanmar, if not granted sexual services.

The female refugee sex workers are also harassed by the local policemen. They must please the local policemen along with the Mahjee, and give up to the latter a certain percentage of their minimal income to maintain their registered status at the camp. In the occasion of domestic abuse or any other kind of violation, women cannot approach the camp authorities directly. She must approach the Mahjee and provide proof of the crime committed against her. Therefore, the Mahjee exercises totalitarian control over the refugee camps, and moreover, on the lives and bodies of the Rohingya refugee women residing in those camps. As a result, what is commonly regarded as the conventional tools of empowerment for women operates in the exact opposite manner in case of these Rohingya women refugees in the Bangladesh camps. It is widely accepted that women in conflict zones are doubly oppressed: one, due to the perils of the conflict situation and two, because of the embedded patriarchy in traditional gender relations. In the case of the afore mentioned narratives, we see that it is not merely double oppression that the women face and bear. The migrant status of a refugee woman falls within a paradigm which endorses and engenders multiple levels of violence experienced by them. For instance, sexual violence and rape is experienced by women almost exclusively, extortion of money faced by both men and women, harassment by policemen and local authorities faced by both, low-wage employment and difficulties in securing employment is borne by both men and women. However, when each of these factors is encountered by women, the tone and nature of violence intensifies. The paradigm of violence experienced by women is more complex, multi-layered, and contains a great many more factors.

Till now we have considered and examined the violence and oppression the Rohingya women face under systematic rape and sexual assault in Myanmar, and within the refugee camps in Bangladesh. But, what transpires after they leave their ancestral homes in Myanmar and before they reach the camps in Bangladesh? This journey too, offers a fresh set of hazards and perils, for both women and men, but as argued earlier, it functions on a larger scale when it comes to women. When it comes to women migrating from a particular conflict zone,

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<sup>38</sup> Shamima Akhter and Kyoko Kusakabe, "Gender-based Violence among Documented Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh", *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 2014, pp – 242-243.

falling prey to traffickers and eventually trafficking is an indisputable reality. “*The Rohingyas who seek to escape persecution often go to Bangladesh first with the aid of smugglers and traffickers. A single woman being smuggled to Bangladesh is subject to harassment by the men she encounters during the passage,*” writes Dr. Paula Banerjee.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, it is not just a one-way single trip they have to make; sometimes they have to travel to and fro due to government (in)decisions and apparent remedial measures. For instance, after 2009, the Bangladeshi government disallowed Rohingyas to enter the country’s borders any further.

Consequently, the Bangladeshi government commenced a repatriation programme in collaboration with the UNHCR and deported many Rohingyas back to Myanmar. Out of the women who could stay back in the legal refugee camps and illegal refugee camps called *ledas*, most of them were single as they had been separated from their male partners back in Myanmar. Given this predicament, these Rohingya refugee women opt for marrying Bangladeshi men, to deal with the problems of legal identity and nationality. However, the government still did not grant them the right to stay on in the country and forced them to resettle and repatriate. Displacement thus, is a continuous factor wherever the fleeing Rohingya woman goes. In this process of continuous geographical fluctuation, women, owing to lack of any other option, often have to resort to traffickers for passage or transport. This makes them an easy target for trafficking, vulnerable to sexual abuse from traffickers, and complicates and prolongs their perpetual state of flux and displacement.

Pakistan is sometimes seen as a safe haven, writes Dr. Banerjee, as it is a Muslim country. But even there, the question of trafficking of Rohingya women remain altogether ignored. Due to their lack of papers, or *sans papier* status, women become “*victims of slavery through debt bondage.*”<sup>40</sup> Since they fall outside the legal purview, their vulnerability intensifies as even regimes of political recognition or safeguarding their rights do not exist in their case. They end up being criminalized, as their circumstances compel them to frequently cross borders, and cross-border activities are seen by the state as a threat to the nation’s security, especially with the dangers of terrorism that is prevalent today. As a result, their state of vulnerability is deepened and caught in a complex web of factors which reinforce one another against the plea of the migrant women.

### ***Invisible and intangible violence – Safi Akhter***

Safi’s tale in India too begins with a cross-border activity. Safi<sup>41</sup> is originally from a village in Myanmar, which she calls Harifara, and used to live there with her *nani* (grandmother), uncle, and the uncle’s daughter, Zayida. Safi, her *nani*, and Zayida braved the mortal boat expedition to Bangladesh, in order to escape the war-like situation which prevailed in

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<sup>39</sup> Paula Banerjee, “Criminalising the Trafficked: Blaming the Victim”, Economic & Political Weekly November 5, 2016, pp – 66.

<sup>40</sup> Paula Banerjee, “Criminalising the Trafficked: Blaming the Victim”, Economic & Political Weekly November 5, 2016, pp – 66.

<sup>41</sup> Safi’s narrative was taken through interviews documented by the author of this paper

Myanmar. She made another cross-border journey, into the state of West Bengal in India, wherein my research and her plight crossed paths. I was fortunate to be able to meet her thrice, in the Narendrapur home of the NGO Sanlaap, and during her interview and our conversations I could draw from her perspective on this issue, along with her personal narrative.

The 14-year-old's main concern, which was loud and clear on any attempt of mine at initiating a conversation, is to go home. It is not because she is not kept well at her temporary home, or not looked after. Her desperation stems from a keen desire and longing to be with her own kind, her family. The separation was abrupt and sudden, and on grounds which 14-year-old Safi even if explained to, could not internalize or comprehend. Safi and her father were caught crossing the border from Benapole, Bangladesh, into West Bengal, India. They were immediately taken to the police station, her father put behind bars, and she taken to another room and kept under the supervision of police women for a night. Thereafter, she was presented at the Juvenile Justice Board (JJB), from where she was further sent to the NGO Sanlaap. She narrated most of her 14 years to me on the first day, yet maintaining a certain reserve.

The boat journey, Safi says, had cost 8000 Burmese kyat per person, and fortunately their boat was medium-sized, in which the passengers were comfortable. After reaching Bangladesh, and staying for four days at her aunt's home where she was reunited with her father, Safi and her father left in a bus from Cox's bazaar to Dhaka. In Dhaka, her father had organized for their passage through the border with a middleman, or *dalal*, and the father and daughter duo was joined by two other men as well. They took their chance at 5 am, nonetheless, they were spotted and stopped by the police patrolling the border areas. Safi assures that no bodily harm was done, but by their tone she could understand that they were angry, slightly aggressive, clearly disapproving of their arrival. Safi did not speak the common tongue during that time, so she could not follow what passed between her father and the policemen. She only spoke her mother tongue, which she refers to as the "*our Burmese language*", the language that most from her community speak. "*I felt very depressed when they took my father away*", she managed to say with great difficulty, trying to conceal her pain while giving away her reserve.

Since then she has been staying at the Narendrapur shelter home of Sanlaap. "*Ek bochor ek maash hoye geche ekhane. Aar koto thakte hobe? Ami bari jabo!*" ("It has already been one year and one month now. How much longer do I need to stay here? I want to go home!"). Her father and she were heading to Hyderabad, where her mother and siblings live in the refugee settlement camp. Under the permission of the Principal Magistrate of the JJB, Safi was allowed to communicate with her mother over phone calls. Her parents shifted from Harifara to India when she was 4-5 years old, and has little memories with her parents. Her mother, currently residing in the Hyderabad refugee camp, has yet not picked up any Indian languages. Going by Safi's own account and the assessment of the Sanlaap staff, Safi's mother is not in the least savvy in travelling on her own, even within the city of Hyderabad, leave alone coming to Kolkata. The JJB has stated if her mother comes to take her, they shall release Safi. Thus on this context, Safi and her mother have exchanged many painful

conversations over the phone; whereas Safi is trying to explain to her mother how to make the journey to Kolkata, and her mother conveying in tears why she won't be able to come to rescue Safi. This continuous trial-and-failure cycle has left Safi emotionally depressed and weary. She understands why her mother cannot come, but she cannot accept that it is the only way that she can go home.

Safi is not a single child, she has four siblings - one elder brother, Inamul Hasan, one younger brother, Mahmud Junaid, and two younger sisters, Rujina Akhter and Sumaiya Akhter. The three younger siblings need to be taken care of, says Safi's mother which she understands. *"Ma ki kore ashbe? Choto choto bacha ache, tader ke dekha'r keu nei okhane."* ("How can my mother come to me? She has little kids to look after; no one else is there to look after them"). When I met her, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April, she mentioned that she had gone to court on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and they stuck to their mandate. Although advised by the Sanlaap staff dealing with Safi's case not to talk about her mother, Safi herself vented out her renewed sorrows soon after we had begun conversing. After a lengthy conversation regarding Safi's case report and progress with Mamata Chakraborty, superintendent of the Sneha home of the Narendrapur centre, it seemed like they too feel fatigued being hit by a dead-end each time. According to her home superintendent, *"We have tried everything, done everything for Safi. We even tried to contact two separate NGOs who work in collaboration with us, who might take responsibility and ensure a safe travel of Safi to her mother in Hyderabad. However, no effort of ours is fetching a positive result, or making Safi happy."*

In a shelter home of hundreds of girls, Ms. Chakraborty says Safi has been fortunate enough to be able to communicate with her mother multiple times, so as to ameliorate her situation, and sometimes mood. *"But we can't always give her a preference. Other girls will start complaining of partiality, which has happened on one or two occasions already."* Safi's father was deported to Bangladesh sometime in the month of January, says Sutapa, another staff employed at the Narendrapur centre. It is most likely that Safi isn't aware of this, which is in tandem with her never mentioning this piece of information in our most formal or informal talks. Therefore, the question of her going home – a plea with which she started, conducted, and ended our conversations – seems to be exceedingly uncertain, if not altogether impossible. There has been no reported information of her mother, despite the various hindrances, even attempting to make the journey with any of the arrangement which she might have gathered over the several years that she has spent in Hyderabad.

What I gathered from my interactions with the 14-year-old is that, she too was enduring and battling a certain kind of violence which perhaps may not feature in the majority of the reports on the Rohingyas, but it is violence nevertheless. She understands the feeling of belongingness, of family, and of being at home. She has spent most of her growing up years up until now without her parents, and finally when her father came to Bangladesh to take her to her mother and siblings, suddenly was separated from all that she can associate with home.

*"I don't want to stay here any longer. I will become mad. There are other girls who stay here who don't remember since when they have been living here. I asked a girl once, how long she was here. She said 7 months, but I am here for more than a year and she was already living*



*here before I came. I do not want to become like that... Everyone is nice to me here. But how can this replace home?"*

Safi's resolution to be reunited with her family became more firm with each passing day, or at least with each of the days that I had interacted with her. With great resolve and determination, Safi still hopes and aspires to go her mother and rest of the family. She did not give in to the easy route of beginning to regard the NGO as her permanent location of domicile, although she is engaged in a quite a few productive activities. Her productive pursuits include periodic block printing sessions on cloth material, and regularly attending ukulele classes. After interviewing her on the last day, I had the opportunity of conversing with her ukulele teacher, Miss Laurie. After exchanging a couple of sentences and noticing my keen interest in Safi's case, she immediately asked Safi to play for me (this happened outside the scheduled ukulele class hours). I was pleasantly amused to see her play both Twinkle Twinkle Little Star and Ludwig van Beethoven's Für Elise with equal ease and confidence.

*"Safi plays really well!"* I exclaimed to Miss Laurie.

*"Yes, she does. What is more is that she will be able to keep a ukulele or take one home with her one when she goes. Not every student gets a ukulele. You have to attend a certain number of classes regularly and achieve a certain level of proficiency."* She informed me.

Other staffs at Sanlaap refer to Safi as a bright and sharp girl. However, it is evident that the psychological violence she is undergoing and has been undergoing for the past more than a year, has certainly kept her emotionally unhappy. Safi hasn't been a victim of brutal violence of any kind. She says none of her family members have faced it either. Although she said she has seen the war. Her *nani's* house was within their land which had a little pond and an area where bright white flowers grew along with some vegetables. She had once stood at the main gate of their boundary, and seen at a distance that war between the Muslims and Buddhists were going on.

*"They were cutting Muslims, burning houses, and killing little children,"* she said.

*"Your family was unharmed?"* I asked.

*"Yes. Nothing happened to us. No one harmed us."*

*"That is very fortunate. But why do you think they did not? You mentioned you fled because of this ongoing religious war."* I further asked her.

*"I don't know, Allah saved us. When I saw the killings from our main gate, my nani pulled me inside and began praying to Allah to keep us safe."* She replied.

Rohingya women are known to be conservative, as elaborated earlier in the paper pertaining to the Rohingya female refugees in the Bangladesh camps. A Sanlaap staff, who was part of our interview, mentioned that since the women in their community are very protected and always kept within their homes, young girls are the first among the women to be safeguarded in the

face of danger. Sometimes, to save their honour and dignity, they hide their experiences. However, it did not seem likely that Safi hid anything that was asked to her.

Safi's personal narrative of separation, and in turn psychological violence, recalls that aspect of violence which John W. Burton and Johan Galtung have propounded with respect to conflict zones. While dealing with the source of conflicts, Burton asks a question: is conflict due to inherent aggressiveness of human behaviour, "*especially male aggressiveness*", or does it owe its origin to the "*inappropriate social institutions and norms*" which can be altered by human beings? Although he treats these two proposed sources of origin of conflict as mutually exclusive, I would argue that the former is the product of the latter. What is in reality the actual behaviour of human beings, is in most situations obscured by the social norms, conventions, teachings, and expected patterns of conduct. Therefore, the "male aggressiveness", has little to do with males and much more to do with a broad ideology that sanctions and legitimizes this brand of aggressiveness to be directly linked with conflict scenarios. This "male aggressiveness" is embedded within the "inappropriate social institutions and norms", is a product of it, and is maintained and perpetuated by it. Keeping this in mind, Burton has aptly diagnosed the source of the problem to the prevailing social structures, norms, and institutions.

He further argues that there are certain social needs that are inherent to all human beings, and they would "*seem to be even more fundamental than food and shelter.*" For instance, needs such as identity and personal recognition which form the basis of a person's individual development in any society. Denial of these basic human needs could by all means lead to ethnic wars, domestic violence, or any such similar alternative behaviour which is regarded as socially unacceptable. "*If conflict resolution is to be taken seriously, if it is to be more than just introducing altered perceptions and good will into some specific situations, it has to be assumed that societies must adjust to the needs of people, and not the other way around... ethnic minorities must be given an autonomous status if violence is to be avoided, decision-making systems must be non-adversarial if leadership roles are to (be) collaborative.*"<sup>42</sup> He further argues that even if conflict is over non-material human values and needs, it has a tendency to be defined in physical, aggressive, and territorial terms. He criticizes Hans Morgenthau's dictum that "man is aggressive" as there lacks the human quotient. He distinguishes between a 'dispute' and a 'conflict' – the former is over "physical resources" while the latter, over "human needs and aspirations". He concludes by tracing the prime source of conflict to be lying in the struggle to satisfy these basic non-material human needs. Within the established context of Burton's argument, 14-year-old Safi is fighting a silent battle every day of her stay at the shelter home to retain her former identity, her sense of self and recognition. Her struggle is invisible to the naked eye, because she does not have injuries and bruises as evidence. Her conflict is internal, which is undoubtedly a result of the inappropriate social structures and legal mechanisms to which she has been subjected.

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<sup>42</sup> John W. Burton, "Conflict Resolution: The Human Dimension", [The International Journal of Peace Studies](http://www.gmu.edu/programs/icar/ijps/vol3_1/burton.htm)  
[http://www.gmu.edu/programs/icar/ijps/vol3\\_1/burton.htm](http://www.gmu.edu/programs/icar/ijps/vol3_1/burton.htm)

While defining violence, Johan Galtung expands the narrow confines of the term, seen merely as the absence of peace, and puts forth: “*violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations.*”<sup>43</sup> He further mentions that this definition of violence entails six vital distinctions, and it can be argued that Safi’s narrative and the broader Rohingya issue of state-sponsored genocide effortlessly fall under these distinctions. The first one is between ‘physical’ and ‘psychological’ violence. The former can be further classified into ‘biological’ and ‘physical’ violence. ‘Biological’ violence implies the reduction of “somatic capabilities” below the individual’s potential and ‘physical’ violence refers to the “constraint on human movements”. The Rohingyas are subjected to the first kind of physical violence whereby repeated beatings, sexual assault, rape, inaccessibility to the required healthcare, leave the community members tangibly and biologically violated and injured. With regard to restrictions on movements, they aren’t allowed to visit even neighbouring villages without a special pass, which they must pay for. They are confined to their villages, even Sittwe is out of bounds for them. Such limitations hamper their livelihood opportunities, basic healthcare facilities, and access to education. For those who can afford the travel pass, if they surpass the time limit permitted by the pass, they are not allowed to return to their villages. Their names are cut out from the family list, and they are forced to leave Myanmar.<sup>44</sup> Considering Bangladesh’s new plan on the horizon of shifting their camps to the island of Thengar Char, or the Indian Centre’s decision of arrest and deportation of the Rohingyas in Jammu back to Myanmar, their movements are further coerced. If the concept of ‘restricted movement’ is broadened to view it as a type of forceful locomotive behaviour imposed on the politically disenfranchised, the movements of the Rohingyas have certainly been progressively forced, moving towards hazardous directions against their volition.

The ‘psychological’ violence is “violence that works on the soul”, which one can relate to Safi. The violence on the soul of the other fleeing Rohingya women gets highlighted or brought to the forefront owing to the crude and raw manifest somatic violence they have encountered. This leads us to Galtung’s sixth distinction, between latent and manifest violence. While the narratives mentioned before Safi’s, the women who have been documented by the Human Rights Watch and the ones under the exploitative *Mahjee* in Bangladeshi camps, have all both experienced witnessed the ravage of manifest violence. Thus, we could find a direct correlation to the workings of this violence on their soul and psyche. Manifest violence is visible on the structural as well as personal levels. If using the state-sanctioned tool of systematic rape and organized periodic sexual assault form the structural pillars of violence, individual narratives of women add the personal dimension. Depending on their individualistic internalization and coping techniques, the shades of the structural violence multiplies. Latent violence is “*a situation of unstable equilibrium, where the level of actual realization is not sufficiently protected against deterioration by upholding*

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<sup>43</sup> Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research”, Sage Publications 1969: 168  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/422690>

<sup>44</sup> Chris Lewa, “North Arakan: an open prison for the Rohingyas in Burma”, FMR32, pp – 12.

*mechanisms.*”<sup>45</sup> It is this “unstable equilibrium” in which currently the Rohingya women seem to live in. May it be political instability, social instability, identity-seeking instability, security instability, or psychological instability.

It is necessary here to once again mention and outline the Burmese stance on the Rohingyas. The interactions, mentioned earlier in the paper, of the ISCI researchers with some of the Rakhine men revealed that they had been given incentives to conduct violence on the Muslims, is in tune with the ‘positive approach’ to influence, which is Galtung’s second distinction. There need not be a punishment for disobedience, but a reward for the desired outcome. Going by his third distinction, whether or not there is an object which is hurt – the Rohingyas present a variety of material and non-material objects which are being hurt. Their houses burnt, their children slaughtered into two, adults shot dead with a gun, lands snatched away, denial of citizenship, and of course, the resultant psychological impact intensifying their conflict and struggle. The fourth distinction calls our attention to the presence or absence of a perpetrator of violence, a subject who acts.<sup>46</sup> The Burmese governmental authorities need not themselves visit the Rakhine state to conduct the violence, they only have to create a structure which has violence inbuilt, and which regenerates and reproduces violent outcomes. Deprivation of citizenship rights, categorizing the Rohingyas as “Myanmar residents” and carrying out discrimination by not issuing them the CRCs – work together as perpetrators of the violence inflicted on the Rohingyas. With regard to intended and unintended violence, the fifth distinction, the violence certainly intended as pointed out by international bodies, like the UNHCR.

### **Conclusion:**

Aung San Suu Kyi, the First and incumbent State Counsellor of Myanmar and leader of the National League for Democracy, in a recent interview with BBC declined any claims that were made relating to a drive of ethnic cleansing. Instead, she believes, “*What I think I have done best is to take forward the peace movement, the peace process... I think there has been success there particularly because the people have become involved in it.*” When the issue of her dealing with the Rohingya Muslims was mentioned and how the international community has condemned it, she asks, “*What exactly is it that they are condemning?*”<sup>47</sup> She is of the firm belief, or maintains her political stance, that there is no ethnic or religious war taking place in the Rakhine state. The Rakhine state is one with limited resources, which creates the problem, and she also mentioned that Muslims are killing other Muslims. She further mentions that it is about different people on opposing sides of a divide, which they are trying to mend as soon as possible. However, the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate has been criticized from every faction of the international community, including her fellow Nobel laureates as well. An open letter was sent to the UN Security Council, which was signed by 23 peace laureates, leaders and activists condemning Suu Kyi’s inaction and lack of clarity as to how

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<sup>45</sup> Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research”, Sage Publications 1969: 172

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/422690>

<sup>46</sup> Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research”, Sage Publications 1969: 168-172

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/422690>

<sup>47</sup> “Aung San Suu Kyi: No ethnic cleansing of Myanmar Muslim minority”, BBC News 6 April 2017.

does she plan to carry out her peace process. After highlighting the perils of the Rohingya issue, the letter also warned that another Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur or Kosovo should not be repeated.<sup>48</sup> An independent fact-finding mission has still not been allowed into the Rakhine, and international NGOs like the Médecins Sans Frontières face erratic permits to function appropriately and actually make a difference. In the same interview, she says that returning Rohingyas would be welcome into Myanmar.

However, most of the reports on the Rohingyas who have fled from Myanmar document accounts of people who never want to return to Myanmar, no matter how repressively they are treated in the receiving countries. With their meagre means of income, social exclusion, refugee status and sometimes not even that, improper living conditions – the horrors they have seen in Burma have made them determined to never return. The only exception to this almost thumb rule is Safi's narrative. She wants to go back to her garden with bright white flowers in Harifara, where she went to a Madrasa regularly and learnt Arabic. Evidently, she hasn't been a victim of manifest violence. Yet, she is not exempt from the struggles her community faces. This brings me to my next argument, rather a reflection, that all the narratives of the women mentioned in this paper – all of them are survivors and fighters in their own right. But they are seen as victims, weak and powerless.

It is unquestionably true, that women are the most vulnerable in conflict situation, although violence is experienced by both men and women, due to their gender and the factors causing violence in the conflict situation. Moreover, women themselves form a minority within a minority group which is being discriminated against. Especially in the case of the Rohingyas, where conventional gender norms are so embedded that even provided with the empowering tools and chances for autonomy, the Rohingya women see it as a shame, loss of dignity and status, burden, and experience feelings of reduced identity. The housewife status of a married Rohingya woman is much prized, so engaging in employment generating activities is also seen as a blow to their feminine role. Safi says that her mother never leaves the house without wearing a burqa. Muslim women in Burma are supposed to wear burqas right after they reach puberty. Faced with systematic rape, assault, migration journeys, income generating activities, and taking important decisions, these women feel a departure from their traditional sense of self and identity.

Whatever may be the challenges of a Rohingya woman, which is in fact innumerable, in the pursuit of highlighting their vulnerability and victimhood, their struggles and successes are often missed. Whether it is Fatima, Noor, Ayesha, or Amina in Priyanka Motaparthi's report, or Dilara or Tohura in Akhter and Kusakabe's study, the women are fighting. They are experiencing crude violence, yet they are resisting. Being depoliticized, disenfranchised, stateless, and powerless, their means of resisting violence does not entail adopting heroic mechanisms or tools. But just by their sheer determination of not succumbing to their war-like situations, fleeing and against all odds, surviving on their own, they are within their own possible capabilities withstanding and resisting the atrocities committed on them. May it be

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<sup>48</sup> May Bulman, "Nobel laureates criticise peace prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi over 'ethnic cleansing' of Burma's Rohingya Muslims", *Independent* 30 December 2016.

Noor who, wounded and assaulted, made an immediate escape with the means of her gold jewellery, or Ayesha, who injured and senseless, regained consciousness, improvised and catered to herself – they all lived to recount their stories. The decisions they made were without the supervision of any man from their family, in the face of the state atrocities.

While the official stance of the Burmese government flatly denies any claim to ethnic cleansing, the phenomenon of statelessness that Rohingyas are facing today, since the 1982 Citizenship Law, is a real issue and therefore, it is a settled factor leading to vulnerability beyond debate. Political exclusion and deprivation is the root cause of this conflict which has escalated to unbelievable degree, any attempt at remedial measures must give priority to reforming the existing citizenship law to ensure legal inclusion and political recognition. A briefing by the Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK, in December 2014 and published in London, lists the main fallacies of this citizenship law as well as proposes certain solutions in order to reform the existing law.<sup>49</sup> Apart from depriving the Rohingyas citizenship in Myanmar, the 1982 Citizenship Law has the following grey areas among several others:

1. It is against Myanmar’s international obligations, such as compliance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the UN General Assembly Resolution on the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination
  - a. Leads to escalated levels of stateless peoples over generations, as it does not respect the *jus soli* or *jus sanguinis* principles with respect to the Rohingyas
2. This law serves as the “linchpin for a whole set of laws, policies and practices that discriminate against Rohingyas” and makes them vulnerable and easy targets for human rights abuses and other violations by governmental as well as non-governmental actors
3. It attacks and challenges the very foundations of the Rohingya identity and their claims to the Northern Rakhine as their homeland, as they are excluded from the law’s list of “national races”.

To these, the Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK puts forth the following remedies<sup>50</sup>:

1. The Citizenship Law needs to be revised. The international community must find means to exert pressure on the Burmese government in order to facilitate this, so that the destruction of the Rohingyas may be terminated
2. The Law should not include race as a criterion for granting citizenship
3. The Law should ensure that children born out of the wedlock of stateless people in Myanmar must be granted Burmese nationality, which will also tackle the issue of ever-increasing stateless people

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<sup>49</sup> “Myanmar’s 1982 Citizenship Law and Rohingya”, [A Briefing by Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK](http://burmacampaign.org.uk/media/Myanmar%E2%80%99s-1982-Citizenship-Law-and-Rohingya.pdf) December 2014. <http://burmacampaign.org.uk/media/Myanmar%E2%80%99s-1982-Citizenship-Law-and-Rohingya.pdf>

<sup>50</sup> “Myanmar’s 1982 Citizenship Law and Rohingya”, [A Briefing by Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK](http://burmacampaign.org.uk/media/Myanmar%E2%80%99s-1982-Citizenship-Law-and-Rohingya.pdf) December 2014. <http://burmacampaign.org.uk/media/Myanmar%E2%80%99s-1982-Citizenship-Law-and-Rohingya.pdf>

4. The Citizenship Law must also include mechanisms of naturalization which are “fair” and “reasonable”
5. Burmese laws should be implemented without any discrimination or arbitration
6. The Citizenship Law must not give birth to categories which create a hierarchy in citizenship status, like those created by the issuance of the CRCs
7. Even for non-citizens, within the Burmese territory, adequate policy frameworks must exist within the Burmese law to ensure and protect the human rights of all people
8. The 1982 Citizenship Law and the exclusion of the Rohingyas from the list of national races or ethnic groups must be contextualized with the ethnic cleansing drive and the attempted measures to destroy the Rohingya identity and culture.

In addition, the international community must find means to exert pressure on the Burmese government to mitigate the crisis situation faced by the Rohingyas, as statelessness is a global concern and not merely a product of domestic laws of a sovereign. The construction of Myanmar’s laws and policies and its resultant impact has had a spillover effect in Bangladesh, India, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines. It is not only imperative for international organizations like the UN, UNHCR, and IOM to exert pressure on the Burmese state, but it is also necessary for the regional countries to urge Myanmar to have inclusive laws and impartial policies. Regional international organizations like SAARC and ASEAN – Myanmar being a member of ASEAN – could cooperate, pool in their strategies and almost immediately urge Myanmar to take measures to cease a problem affecting thousands of people transnationally. Instead, Bangladesh is contemplating resettling the refugee camps around Cox’s bazaar to the island of Thengar Char which is no less than a death chamber; the weather and topographical conditions forbid, beyond controversy, sustaining any form of habitation. India’s recent stance to deport Rohingyas settled in Jammu back to Myanmar is another example of not dealing with the problem at its very root. Catering to the consequences of the issue, which is the large number of floating stateless people, is to ensure in a way a yet larger number in the future. Therefore, the international governing bodies, fellow nation-states and other organizations must appeal to the Burmese government for impartially and inclusively carrying out remedial measures.

Thus, we can conclude that although the term ‘Rohingya’ emerged only in the 1950s and acquired political connotations, the existence of a Muslim group and its strong influence has been present since the 8<sup>th</sup> century in the land of Arakan, the now Rakhine state. The genealogy and lineage has been subjected to flux over generations, but common language, religion, and culture has shaped a common identity and community feeling. They are as much as native to Burma as any other ethnic group residing there for ages. To deny them their rights, use state-sponsored rape as a military tool to ethnically cleanse the state of Rakhine, and to politically disenfranchise the whole community has so far been the progress of Myanmar vis-à-vis the Rohingyas. Whether Aung San Suu Kyi in actuality intends to carry forth her self-claimed “peace process”, or how holistic is her “peace movement”, and “peace” for whom, are certain questions which the entire globe is looking forward to be answered.