



Intersectionality, Displacement, and Justice: A Qualitative Study of Rohingya Women's Post-Genocidal Realities

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Abstract

This article explores the gendered consequences of genocides, focusing specifically on the 2017 Rohingya genocide in Myanmar. It examines the systematic violence faced by Rohingya women, including sexual violence, forced displacement, and the social stigma that continues to affect them in refugee camps. Employing a qualitative case study approach grounded in an intersectional framework, the study utilises narrative inquiry to analyse secondary data from United Nations reports, international legal documents, academic literature, and verified survivor testimonies. The findings demonstrate that Rohingya women faced profound and enduring consequences, including physical harm, psychological trauma, social stigmatisation, and economic marginalisation within refugee contexts. The study also reveals critical gaps in access to healthcare, protection, and justice mechanisms, particularly in addressing gender-specific harms. International organisations' support is not adequate, and in many cases they did not receive any kind of help to improve their situation in the Rohingya camp. The post-genocide situation of those women is very fragile. Many women have lost their homes, children, husbands, and are already bearing the pain of the consequences of physical and mental violence; birthing children as a result of that violence, and their upbringing in the Rohingya camp is like diving in a sea without the hope of finding any land to float. The social status of those women is also a concern. Many women still could not cope with the situation, overcoming their physical and psychological trauma. The restoration of their lives and the places they belong to is another argument in this post-atrocity crisis, which also seemed impossible to them. What they are pursuing from the outside world in this situation is not enough to survive, or at least not for the women. Despite these adversities, elements of resilience and coping strategies are evident among survivors. The article argues that current international legal responses remain inadequate and emphasises the need for gender-sensitive justice frameworks, comprehensive reparations, and the inclusion of women in post-conflict recovery processes.

Keywords: Genocide, Rohingya, Sexual Violence, Women, Justice.

1. Introduction

The word “genocide” was first mentioned by Polish lawyer Raphaël Lemkin in 1944 in his book named “Axis Rule in Occupied Europe”. “It consists of two syllables, the Greek prefix *genos*, meaning race or tribe, and the Latin suffix *cide*, meaning killing. Lemkin advanced the term partly in response to the Nazi policies of systematic murder of Jewish people during the Holocaust, but also in response to previous instances in history of targeted actions aimed at the destruction of particular groups of people. Later on, Raphaël Lemkin led the campaign to have genocide recognised and codified as an international crime.” (United Nations) Genocide was first recognised as a crime under international law in 1946 by the United Nations General Assembly ([A/RES/96-I](#)). It was codified as an independent crime in the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. (United Nations). Article II of the Geneva Conventions explains that genocide is any act committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, one element of which includes causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group. (United Nations) (Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 09 December 1948)

If we look through history, attacks upon women have been common during any armed conflict. Often military forces have used sexual violence and other gender-based violence as an element of war, a punishment to defeat and demoralize populations, or as the social deviance of miscreant soldiers. When a military force's conduct involves systematic and widespread sexual violence and gendered based violence as an arsenal of war against a particular group, in both aim and effect, it fulfills all the conditions of the Geneva Convention for genocide (United Nations, 1951) (Rachel A. Sitkin, May–June 2019).

Myanmar is a Southeast Asian nation that achieved its independence from British rule on 4 January 1948. Now more than 135 unique ethnic communities are living in this country. (Ibrahim, 2016). The Rohingya are an ethno-religious community who are Muslims living in Myanmar’s Rakhine State, previously known as Arakan State (Albert, 2020).

The international community has seen systematic military operations by Myanmar's armed forces (Tatmadaw) since 2016, which culminated in 2017 and resulted in horrific rapes, mass murders, torture, and the forcible relocation of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya from Rakhine State as a result of genocide. The Rohingya genocide, which escalated in 2017, provides a tragic example of the compounded violence faced by women in genocidal contexts (Ullah, 2022).

The systematic extermination of the Rohingya people by Myanmar’s military has led to mass killings, widespread displacement, and untold suffering. However, among the most grievous violations faced by the Rohingya population are the sexual and gender-based atrocities inflicted upon women (Santoso, 2024). This research article will examine the specific ways in which women are impacted by genocides, using the Rohingya case as a focal point for a broader discussion on justice, gender, and human rights.

2. Objectives

This study aims to explore the experiences of women during and after the Rohingya genocide, with particular attention to gendered based violence, displacement resulting from the genocide, and its physical and psychological impact on women. It also seeks to identify the psychological and social impacts on women survivors, as well as how they cope with trauma and work to rebuild their lives in refugee settings in the Rohingya Camp in Bangladesh. Additionally, the study will evaluate the effectiveness of international justice mechanisms in addressing the specific needs of female survivors of genocide. Through this, the research will provide a deeper understanding of the challenges women face in the aftermath of such atrocities and their strategies for recovery and resilience.

3. Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative case study design grounded in an intersectional framework to explore the gendered impacts of the Rohingya genocide and the subsequent international pursuit of

accountability. By utilising narrative inquiry, the research centres the lived experiences of Rohingya women, analysing how systematic gender-based violence (GBV) was deployed as a primary tool of ethnic cleansing. Data collection is achieved through triangulation of secondary sources (sources, location, and time), including UN Fact-Finding Mission reports, legal filings from the International Court of Justice, and verified survivor testimonies, to boost credibility and validity and overcome bias. These qualitative data points are processed via latent thematic analysis, moving through stages of open and axial coding to identify deep-seated patterns of socio-cultural trauma and legal advocacy. Throughout the process, the study adheres to a trauma-informed ethical protocol, prioritizing the "do no harm" principle by utilizing de-identified archival data to prevent the re-traumatization of survivors while amplifying their call for global justice. This includes academic publications, human rights reports, international media, UN findings, and other reliable sources to establish both the historical context, and the current accounts as described by refugees and those on the ground in Bangladesh's refugee camps. The rationale for using this approach is that it allows for a deep understanding of how genocide survivors, particularly women, experience and interpret their trauma, displacement, and resilience.

4. Literature review

Genocides are disastrous events that affect whole populations, but the effects on women are always gendered, presenting unique challenges that go beyond the physical and mental violence experienced by men. Women in genocidal settings are frequently subjected to sexual violence, deportation, and the destruction of their social roles, leading to long-term mental and social consequences. The 2017 Rohingya genocide in Myanmar serves as a recent and stark case of how genocidal violence disproportionately influence women. This literature review will examine scholarly works that explore the broader influence of genocides on women, particularly emphasizing on sexual violence, displacement, and social marginalization, using the Rohingya incident as a focal point. A significant body of literature explores the gendered nature of violence during genocides, with a focus on sexual violence as a primary element of both terror and ethnic cleansing. The ethnic minority bears severe human rights abuses, with systematic rape being perpetrated against Rohingya women. (Lombardi, 2021). About 400,000 Rohingya people fled from Northern Rakhine area in less than a month to Bangladesh and other countries near the border area (Das, September 13, 2017). UNCHR confirms that about 723,000 refugees fled between 2017-18 (Melanie O'Brien, 16 November 2020). Human Rights Watch's emergencies women's rights researcher, [Skye Wheeler](#), tells [Stephanie Hancock](#) how she was able to investigate these disturbing facts, in her words, "Rape is not a new tactic for the Burmese army. They documented it during another brutal campaign against the Rohingya last year that forced tens of thousands to flee. Rohingya women were targeted from the beginning of this genocide by sexual and other gender-based violence, including every other method of violence, such as killing, forced displacement, and torture (Discrimination to Destruction: A Legal Analysis of Gender Crimes Against the Rohingya, 17 September 2018). This time, the rapes often followed many weeks and months of sexual harassment, sometimes by military forces stationed in or near Rohingya villages, sometimes by Rakhine Buddhist villagers who had been harassing Rohingya. But when the mass rapes by soldiers happened, it was sudden and it was terrifying." (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Beginning on August 25, 2017, the security forces in Burma have perpetrated extensive incidents of sexual violence against women and girls, constituting a systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing directed at the Rohingya Muslim population in Rakhine State. (Human Rights Watch, 2017). A significant percentage of the refugees from Rakhine are children, according to UNICEF. In actuality, many of the refugees are unaccompanied, and up to 60% of them are children. Among the refugees, women are up to 67%. A significant percentage of Rohingya women and girls who arrive in Bangladesh are pregnant, which might be a sign of an increase in sexual assault and abuse associated with the conflict. (Bala, October, 2018). Investigators and healthcare providers documented widespread and systematic patterns of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), including mass rape, gang rape, and sexual slavery, observing the 2017 "clearance operations" by the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) (Green, 2022). Interviews were conducted by Green with twenty-six medical

experts from various countries, specialties, and disciplines. Every healthcare professional surveyed noted some of the psychological and physical effects of such crimes against the Rohingya. Healthcare professionals were informed that their patients were made to watch violent crimes, including sexual assault, committed against family members. During the attacks, women and men were kept apart, and respondents reported that the women were raped after witnessing the men's deaths. Survivors revealed that after these horrific attacks, they fled Myanmar for Bangladesh. (Lindsey Green, 2022). Although numerous studies have examined the Rohingya genocide and documented the widespread atrocities and displacement of the Rohingya population, limited scholarly attention has been given to the long-term aftermath experienced by survivors, particularly women and children who suffered sexual and gender-based violence. There is a notable gap in systematic research on the enduring physical and psychological trauma faced by these women, the ways in which they cope with and recover from such experiences in refugee camps, and the extent to which they have been able to access justice or accountability for the crimes committed against them. Addressing this gap is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of the lasting impacts of the genocide, rebuilding their lives, navigating the social and cultural challenges that follow such experiences, and the pursuit of justice for survivors.

This study aims to address this gap by examining the long-term physical and psychological impacts of sexual and gender-based violence on Rohingya women, their coping and resilience in refugee settings, and the current status of justice and accountability for these crimes.

5. Historical Context: The Rohingya Genocide

In 1982, Myanmar enacted the Burma Citizenship Law, which effectively denied citizenship to all but a small portion of the Rohingya people. (Fortify Rights, 2014). Because they have been denied citizenship in Myanmar, the Rohingya people have been denied many rights and privileges that would be associated with that citizenship. The Rohingya people have ancestral roots in the land of Myanmar dating back to the 1430s when they first began to settle in the Arakan kingdom. Upon gaining its independence from Great Britain in 1948, Myanmar refused to acknowledge the Rohingya people and began its efforts to expel them from the country. (Blakemore, February 8, 2019) The Burmese government has continuously refused to even use the term "Rohingya," thereby denying the ethnicity and name of the Rohingya people and adamantly referring to them as "Bengali" instead to signal they are foreigners from Bangladesh. Rohingya people are not eligible for employment in civil service positions such as teaching, health care, or local government. The local authorities in Myanmar have actually forced the Rohingya people, even children as young as seven years old, to perform unpaid labor by physically threatening them if they refuse. (Fortify Rights, 2014) Under British colonization, the Muslim population in Myanmar grew substantially as a result of migrant workers moving to the country. (Burma/Bangladesh Burmese Refugees in Bangladesh:, 2000). The Rohingya are an ethnic Muslim minority group in Myanmar, who have faced decades of discrimination, exclusion, and violence. In 2017, Myanmar's military launched a brutal crackdown on the Rohingya, labeled "Operation Clean and Beautiful Nation." The operation, which was triggered by an insurgent attack on a police post, led to the mass slaughter of the Rohingya population, with reports of over 25,000 individuals killed. Approximately 700,000 Rohingya were forced to flee to neighboring Bangladesh, where they remain in overcrowded refugee camps. (Myanmar: No Justice, No Freedom for Rohingya 5 Years On, August 24, 2022). In addition to mass killings and forced displacement, the Rohingya genocide involved widespread sexual violence, targeting women and girls specifically. Women were subjected to rape, sexual slavery, and other forms of gender-based violence, often as a means of terrorizing the population and undermining their cultural identity. Human Rights Watch has been interviewing hundreds of Rohingya in Bangladesh since August 2017 who fled the atrocities committed by the Myanmar military. They related instances where soldiers routinely murdered and sexually assaulted people before setting their houses on fire. (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Reports from survivors and human rights organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch document cases of sexual violence being used as a tool of ethnic cleansing. (International, 2017)

6. Sexual Violence

Women in genocidal contexts are often targeted for sexual violence in a systematic manner, with the aim of destroying their communities by inflicting trauma on their most vulnerable members. In the case of the Rohingya, sexual violence was not only perpetrated by military forces but also by armed groups aligned with the Myanmar government. One of the main characteristics of the attack on this community has been the systematic use of gender-based and sexual violence, mostly against women and girls. Resulted in genital injuries, unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. (The Women's Refugee Commission, April 30, 2018). Survivors have reported being gang-raped, mutilated, and left for dead. Many women were raped in front of their families, and young girls, some as young as 8 years old, were also victims of sexual violence. The use of sexual and gender-based violence as a weapon for ethnic cleansing has had severe impacts on the state of sexual and reproductive health within the Rohingya community. There is currently an inadequate availability of comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care, which places women and girls at increased risk of morbidity and mortality (Mohammad Mainul Islam, 2018). In the refugee camps, 54% of the Rohingya are below the age of 18; 52% are women, with 23% of them between the ages of 18 and 59 years (Stoken, 2020 Dec 19). Among 91,556 adolescent girls and women, 54,633 are pregnant or lactating mothers (The Women's Refugee Commission, April 30, 2018). Lactating mothers (9.2% of total refugees) and pregnant women (4.9% of the total population) have been identified as the two most vulnerable groups within the Rohingya Refugees (Mohammad Mainul Islam, 2018). The lack of preparedness in addressing the sequelae of sexual and gender-based violence amongst the Rohingya is likely secondary to the complexity of the trauma experienced by survivors, resource limitations, and existing stigmas within the community (Parveen K Parmar, 2019). Nearly all of the women in the Bangladesh refugee camp told a United Nations Special Representative about "rape, gang rape, forced nudity, and abduction for the purpose of sexual slavery" (United Nations S. C., Women and peace and security: report of the Secretary-General, 9 October 2019). Of the rapes that have been reported to Human Rights Watch, all except one were gang rapes, meaning they were committed by two or more people. (United Nations S. C., Women and peace and security: report of the Secretary-General). Bangladeshi survivors have described how they were among the several Rohingya women who suffered maltreatment during mass rapes, in which the military would strip the women and herd them into a house like "cattle" before brutally attacking them. (United Nations S. C.) Her husband and two-month-old infant were killed when the military attacked her house, tortured her, and set her house on fire, leaving her to perish within the flaming structure. (United Nations S. C.) Another survivor told a journalist her story, showing the dark, red scars on her neck from the troops' attempt to kill her. She and four other women were forced into a house by the soldiers, their babies ripped from their arms and killed right before their eyes. 6 Of the women locked in the house, this woman was the only survivor as she regained consciousness from feeling herself burning and managed to escape the home. (Thaslima Begum, December 9, 2019). Even worse, there are numerous reports of little girls, some as young as seven or eight, being abused by soldiers. An eight-year-old girl in the Bangladesh refugee camp described how soldiers in Myanmar attacked her. She describes the anguish of the event and the tears she sheds while her mother is by her side. (United Nations S. C., Women and peace and security: report of the Secretary-General) A fifteen-year-old girl, another young survivor, described how the troops came to get her and how she found out she was pregnant a few weeks later. She had the option to have a safe and legal abortion because she was just a few weeks along in her pregnancy, and she took advantage of the opportunity without hesitation. She clarified that she had no choice because, as a young, single girl, she would have never gotten a husband (Julie Zaugg, August 24, 2018). The psychological impact of sexual violence on women survivors is profound. Beyond physical injury, women often experience long-term trauma, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety. The stigma attached to sexual violence in conservative societies can prevent women from seeking help, compounding the harm they experience. Survivors are often left with a shattered sense of identity and fear of social exclusion.

7. Displacement and Vulnerability

The forced displacement of the Rohingya people has created one of the largest refugee crises in recent history. Women, particularly pregnant women, new mothers, and elderly women, are among the most vulnerable groups in refugee camps. In Bangladesh, where the majority of Rohingya refugees have

sought asylum, women face overcrowded conditions, limited access to healthcare, and a lack of protection from further violence. In the conservative Rohingya-Muslim community, there is a strong stigma associated with rape victims, and many survivors are chastised and held accountable for their rapes and failure to prevent them. When their husbands learn of the rape, Rohingya rape survivors frequently experience their husbands leaving them. Since the settlements may be risky for women without husbands to protect them, these women are more vulnerable to gender-based violence. In Bangladesh, a large number of Rohingya refugees use "abortifacient potions" made by locals that are harmful to both the mother and the fetus. Some women choose to keep their pregnancies a secret for fear of social rejection or embarrassment from their relatives. Some of these women will take the risk of giving birth by themselves and then leaving the newborns behind. (Helen Nianias, June 28, 2018).

Patients in the Rohingya refugee camps have limited access to voluntary contraception since there aren't many health institutions that are able to offer a variety of contraceptive alternatives. Furthermore, essential sexual, reproductive, and post-rape care (including safe abortions and emergency contraception) is lacking in nearly 50% of refugee settlement sites. In the refugee camps, women are often left without male protectors, which makes them targets for exploitation and trafficking. The lack of privacy and safety in the camps further exacerbates their vulnerability. Women in these camps report being victims of physical and sexual abuse, including domestic violence. The lack of basic sanitation and healthcare in the camps also leads to higher rates of maternal mortality and complications.

8. Loss of Social Structures and Economic Marginalization

The genocide and subsequent displacement of the Rohingya have led to the destruction of social and familial structures, leaving many women without male relatives or support networks. This breakdown in the traditional family unit increases women's economic vulnerability. In refugee camps, many women are unable to access formal employment, and their economic opportunities are limited to informal and low-paying work. The Rohingya people married their women off to older men at an early age, often as young as twelve, in an effort to shield them from these rapes and assaults. They hoped that if young women were pregnant, the army would target them less when looking for women to rape. (Hannah Beech, December 23, 2017). Aid agencies report rumors in the Bangladesh camps that unwanted babies are being sold to traffickers. The agencies have tried to set up a foster family system where babies will remain within the Rohingya community, but "there have been cases of stolen babies sent over the border to West Bengal and sold to Indian or foreign couples wanting to adopt (Ahmed, April 16, 2018). This marginalization contributes to their impoverishment and reinforces gender inequality. Furthermore, women often bear the responsibility of caring for children and elderly relatives in these precarious conditions. The lack of educational opportunities and legal protection also limits their potential for future economic empowerment.

9. International Legal Frameworks

International criminal law has increasingly recognized the importance of addressing gender-based violence in conflict settings. The International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) have set important precedents in prosecuting sexual violence as part of genocide. However, the case of the Rohingya genocide highlights gaps in the enforcement of international laws and the need for more robust action in cases of gender-based violence. The Fourth Geneva Convention, relating to the protection of civilian persons during times of war, explicitly prohibits sexual crimes under Article 27. However, it does not include these crimes under the "grave breaches" provisions listed under Article 147, which give rise to universal jurisdiction. (David S. Mitchell, 2005). Article 27 calls for protection of women against sexual violence, including rape and enforced prostitution, in terms of an attack on a woman's honor (Convention, 1949). The Rome Statute, which entered into force on 1 July 2002, is the first international treaty to recognize a wide range of violent sexual crimes among the most serious international offenses (David S. Mitchell, 2005).

However, progress has been slow, and Myanmar remains outside the jurisdiction of the ICC, which complicates efforts to hold perpetrators accountable. International legal frameworks must be strengthened to ensure that perpetrators of sexual violence are prosecuted in a manner that fully addresses the scale and nature of these crimes.

The Rohingya people have been suffering in Myanmar for decades, and the international community has not done enough to bring them justice. The international response to the Rohingya genocide has been widely criticized for its inadequacy in addressing the gendered nature of the violence. While international bodies have condemned the violence and called for accountability, there has been little direct action to ensure that the specific needs of women survivors are met. The International Criminal Court ("ICC") ought to have classified the Myanmar situation as a genocide, enabling the required international intervention into the appalling living conditions caused by the Burmese military and government for the Rohingya people. Individual offenders may be held accountable for their crimes if the ICC determines that the Burmese military and administration have committed genocide.

10. Conclusion

The genocide of the Rohingya people has inflicted profound and lasting harm on women, who have faced sexual violence, displacement, loss of social structures, and economic marginalization. The international community must take concrete steps to address these gendered impacts, including stronger legal frameworks, comprehensive reparations, and empowering women as agents of change. Providing reparations to survivors of genocide, particularly women, is a critical aspect of justice. These reparations should not only focus on financial compensation but also include access to healthcare, mental health services, education, and social integration programs. The lack of adequate healthcare for survivors of sexual violence, including trauma counseling and reproductive health services, underscores the need for comprehensive support systems. The case of the Rohingya genocide serves as a global call for justice, emphasizing the need for a more gender-sensitive approach to genocide prevention, accountability, and recovery. Only through such an approach can we hope to address the needs of women survivors and prevent similar atrocities in the future. The international community must advocate for legal reform in Myanmar and support transitional justice mechanisms that prioritize the needs of women.

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