

# GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE ROHINGYA CRISIS: A POSTMODERN ANALYSIS

Md. Riaz Uddin\*  
Pradipto Vaskar Rakshit\*\*  
Hasan Mahmud\*\*\*  
Shabrin Jahan\*\*\*\*

## Abstract

*Women are usually the most vulnerable group before, during, and after a conflict. In the history of mankind, the 'better half' of men have always faced the worse tragedy. This paper assesses the experience of the Rohingya women based on a framework compiled from the conceptual understanding of gender-based violence. The assessment finds that the atrocities conducted by the Armed Forces of Myanmar against the Rohingya women were systematic and fully compatible with at least the direct violence component of the broader gender-based violence framework. Moreover, the postmodern feminist view of patriarchy as the root cause of violence against women is pertinent to the context, events, and outcomes of the Rohingya crisis. The Rohingya women who were fortunate enough to escape the carnage in Myanmar still face violence in their post-conflict lifestyle because of their sex. Keeping in mind the harsh reality of resource scarcity and structural impediments in Bangladesh, this paper proposes a number of policy recommendations in its concluding remarks in order to ensure a better, safer environment for the Rohingya women.*

## INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of time, there have been numerous conflicts in the history of mankind. From the hunter-gatherer society to the modern era of globalization, perpetual peace has always remained a chimera. Back in the tribal eras, tribes used to get engaged in warfare to ensure self-survival and to become more powerful. As time progressed, mankind witnessed lots of bloody conflicts based on ethnicity, religion, ideology, etc. In almost any kind of conflict, women are the most vulnerable before, during, and after the phenomenon. Their vulnerability emerges mainly from two distinctive characteristics: (1)

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\* **Md. Riaz Uddin**, Intern, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS), Dhaka, Bangladesh.

\*\* **Pradipto Vaskar Rakshit**, M.S.S. Student, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka.

\*\*\* **Hasan Mahmud**, M.S.S. Student, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka.

\*\*\*\* **Shabrin Jahan**, M.S.S. Student, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka.

traditionally women are regarded as the gateway to the next generation due to motherhood, (2) since the age of renaissance, women are portrayed as the symbol of beauty, purity, and honour. Violence like rape or forced pregnancy against women are perceived as a defaming loss in the traditional societies. Against this backdrop, the experience which women acquire through conflict is holistically different and more violent than men.

Gender-based violence (GBV), which is the core concept of this study, is broadly divided into direct and indirect violence. This research is focused specifically on the direct violence component of GBV in the Rohingya crisis. The objective of this paper is to study the alleged presence of the GBV in the experience of the Rohingya women both in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Hence, the central question this paper aims to answer is *to what extent the Rohingya women have been subjected to the direct violence component of GBV in Myanmar and Bangladesh?* As the question indicates, the indirect violence component of GBV will not be analysed in details in this paper. Only the factual data that can link direct violence to the Rohingya crisis will, therefore, be evaluated. In order to answer the research question, the qualitative research method is applied in this study which involves both primary and secondary data analysis. Expert opinions account for the primary data while newspaper articles, reports, books, and journal papers account for the secondary data. Interpretative documented analysis combined with content analysis is the core approach adopted in this work. This paper sheds light on the postmodern feminist stance and tries to analyse the Rohingya crisis through this lens. The way this study can add new insight to the existing knowledge domain is that it analyses the existence of GBV in a post-conflict scenario where the patriarchal hierarchy dominates the mode of social relations.

The discussion of the paper is divided broadly into seven sections. The section on the ethnicity, culture, and external influences in Myanmar explores a number of variables present in the Rohingya crisis. The next section discusses the feminist stance on GBV which shapes the theoretical perspective of this study. The status of women in Myanmar is analysed afterword to understand the patriarchal hierarchy in its social relations. The following segment on literature review focuses on the women and the violence in the Rohingya crisis. The conceptual framework then outlines the mode of progression, which is followed by an assessment of the four components of direct violence. Finally, the concluding remarks propose a number of recommendations based on the findings of this study.

## **ETHNICITY, CULTURE, AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES IN MYANMAR**

There are many ethnic groups in Myanmar among which five are dominant: Myanma (Burmese), Tayok (Chinese), Shan, Mon, and Kala.<sup>1</sup> Myanma, Shan, and Mon are comprised of people who lived in the Irrawaddy valley. Tayok are the Han Chinese people. All these four categories are seen as the insiders.<sup>2</sup> The fifth category, kala, are the “overseas person” – somebody from South Asia, West Asia, Europe, or beyond. The most distinctive thing is that the first three categories of people hate the Kala people. Rohingyas belong to the fifth category and their Muslim identity is also viewed as a threat to the Buddhist predominance. However, there are ethnic, religious, and cultural animosities amongst all of the groups, and the bitterness between the groups has implications in the economic and power distribution of the society as a whole.

The United Nations described the military invective in the Rakhine State that provoked the exodus of the Rohingya people as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing.”<sup>3</sup> Most of the Rohingya Muslims reside in the Rakhine State. They have their own culture and language, and they claim themselves as the descendants of Arab traders and other groups who have been in the region for generations. The government of Myanmar has excluded them from the 2014 census and denied their right of citizenship. According to the government of Myanmar, they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

In 1960s, General Ne Win introduced a Burmese nationalism that united disparate ethnic groups, including the Karen, Mon, Shan, and Chin. This very Burmese nationalism acted as the main driver behind the exclusion of the Rohingya Muslims from the right of citizenship. Since the 1970s, thousands of Rohingya have made perilous journeys out of Myanmar to escape communal violence. Myanmar passed a citizenship law in 1982 and established a social hierarchy of citizens.<sup>4</sup> The 1982 Citizenship Law recognized those people as citizens who “belong to one of the national races or whose ancestors settled in the country before 1823, the beginning of British occupation of Arakan State.”<sup>5</sup> There is a fear among Myanmar’s Buddhist nationalists of losing their unique Burmese culture. They are afraid to envision Myanmar being changed

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Smith, Annie Allsebrook, and Anne-Marie Sharman, *Ethnic Groups in Burma: Development, Democracy and Human Rights*, London: Anti-Slavery International, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Michael Safi, “Myanmar Treatment of Rohingya Looks like ‘Textbook Ethnic Cleansing’, Says UN,” *The Guardian*, London, 11 September 2017.

<sup>4</sup> “Burma/Bangladesh: Burmese Refugees in Bangladesh - Discrimination in Arakan,” available at: <<https://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/burma/burm005-02.htm>> (accessed on 3 January 2019).

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*