



## Gendered and Racialised Vulnerabilities and Violence Against the Rohingya in Myanmar

**Abstract** This chapter presents gender differentiated forms of direct, structural, cultural and symbolic violence experienced by the Rohingya while they were in Myanmar. The documented atrocities, committed mainly by the Myanmar military, have placed the Rohingya in a state of ongoing discrimination and oppression. Within Myanmar, Rohingya women face a dual burden: enduring physical violence and mental anguish from military and societal forces, compounded by the patriarchal structure within their own community. Structural violence, such as educational discrimination, pervasive poverty, and lack of access to social and community life have affected Rohingya women, men, and children differently. A gendered narrative of threat portrays Rohingya women as ugly and reproductive dangers to Buddhism, while Rohingya men are framed as threats to nationalism and Buddhism. These religious and cultural narratives have served to justify ‘othering’ and various forms of violence by the Myanmar military.

**Keywords** Everyday racism • Gendered rumours • Othering • Sexual violence • Gendered mobility • Inter marriage • Motherhood

## INTRODUCTION

Rohingya women, men, and children in Myanmar endured various forms of violence, encompassing direct, structural, and cultural dimensions, as well as confronting multidimensional vulnerabilities both prior to and during the mass exodus in 2017. A comprehensive understanding of the Rohingya crisis necessitates an exploration of the underlying gendered nature and narratives inherent in the violence, considering its intersectional dimensions. This chapter explores the intersectional dimensions of the crisis in the Rakhine State and next chapter will delve into the experiences of the Rohingya refugees upon reaching what is ostensibly considered a safe destination, Bangladesh. This discussion explicates why the Rohingya people in general, and men in particular, have been relegated to the status of a ‘monstrous other’ that threatens the existence of Buddhism and Burmeseness. It also examines how cultural logic serves to justify the claim of Burmese superiority over the Rohingya, characterising them as the ‘ignorant Bengali *Kala*’. Additionally, the discussion includes an analysis of gendered rumours, instances of sexual violence directed at both Rohingya men and women, the dynamics and politics of intermarriage, reproduction, and motherhood and the interplay of ultra-Buddhist nationalism and Buddhist women in Myanmar.

‘MONSTROUS OTHER’, ROHINGYA MEN,  
AND THE EXISTENTIAL THREAT TO BUDDHISM

Before their mass exodus, the Rohingya people in general, and men in particular, were portrayed as the ‘monstrous other’ on various social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, as well as in public sermons. This construction of the ‘threat image’ of the Rohingya is gendered in nature. Rohingya femininity, reproductive capacity, and motherhood became associated with the ‘dangerous breeder’ of the Muslim population and consequent threats to Buddhism. Men, on the other hand, came to be portrayed as potential kidnappers, perpetrators of forced marriage and forced conversion of Buddhist women to Islam, and the ultimate threat to Buddhism and Burmese nationalism. The main perpetrators of these portrayals were the Buddhist monks, the military, and their allies. Although creating the Rohingya as an ‘other’ was in the making for a long time, with the rise and increased use of social media—and in particular with the uninterrupted flow of mis/disinformation—the Rohingya became a ‘radical

other' or a 'monstrous other', a source of horror and terror (Croft, 2012). Since Myanmar's transition to democracy, there has been a rapid proliferation of Facebook usage. Internet access in Myanmar has largely been synonymous with Facebook. On Facebook and offline, ultranationalists have framed Muslims as posing both a personal threat and a threat to the Buddhist majority nation. As Fink (2018) argues, 'Facebook posts and messages have played a key part in spreading fear and inciting anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar' (Fink, 2018, p. 49).

The nature of such social media posts demonises the Muslim Rohingya, calling them 'violent extremists' and 'terrorists' who practise 'violent Islam'. The statements made by different actors including government officials, politicians, religious authorities, and military commanders, alongside those of the direct perpetrators, unveiled a vision founded on exclusionary principles, manifesting through the deployment of linguistic expression and corresponding actions. An illustration of this can be observed in the utilisation of phrases such as 'go away', 'you do not belong here', 'you are Bengali', and 'we will kill you all' by the perpetrators, directed towards the Rohingya Muslim population, which serves to reinforce the aforementioned assertion (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019). According to Democracy Reporting International (DRI),<sup>1</sup> one of the Buddhist Facebook groups called 'Platform for Ma Ba Tha Supporters' posted approximately 14,720 posts from June 2016 to November 2017, which received 1,922,891 likes, 193,195 comments, and 470,820 shares. Before Facebook removed his account, Ashin Wirathu,<sup>2</sup> a Buddhist monk, had 4916 Friends and 37,862 Followers (BBC, 2018). Wirathu was already widely known for waging anti-Muslim propaganda, dissemination of hate speech, and instigation of riots. He led the ultranationalist organisation known as Ma Ba Tha (the Organisation for the Protection of Race and Religion). Wirathu posted anti-Muslim statements regularly on Facebook, such as 'You can be full of kindness and love, but you cannot sleep next to a mad dog [the Muslim] ... I call them troublemakers because they are troublemakers ... If we are weak, our land will become Muslim'. He proudly claimed in his sermon, 'I am proud to be called a radical Buddhist' (Fuller, 2013, para 3). Facebook was also used extensively by military and state personnel. For example, Zaw Htay, a spokesman for the country's de facto leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, has shared dozens of posts on his Facebook page and Twitter account that include images said to show Rohingya burning their own homes. On August 18, 2018, Facebook

removed 425 Facebook Pages, 17 Facebook Groups, 135 Facebook accounts and 15 Instagram accounts in Myanmar for engaging in coordinated inauthentic behavior on Facebook ... Approximately 2.5 million people followed at least one of these Facebook Pages. Approximately 6400 people belonged to at least one of these Facebook Groups. Approximately 1300 people followed at least one of these Instagram accounts. (Meta, 2018, para 1)

Although Wirathu was eventually banned from Facebook, his different sermons remained available on YouTube, DVDs, booklets, as well as to thousands of students via their Sunday school. Filled with hate for Muslims, they portrayed Muslim Rohingya as dangerous and poisonous. For example, in one of his sermons, Wirathu says, ‘They [Rohingya] target women every day and rape them’. However, during three phases of interviews with the Rohingya, only two respondents said they knew someone who married a Buddhist woman, and all the respondents opposed the Buddhist claim regarding the forced conversion and marrying of Buddhist women. In the words of one interviewee,

I haven’t heard of anyone forcefully marrying any Buddhist girl. However, I came to know about a few Rohingya boys who used to study together with the Buddhist girls from their neighbourhood, and they fell in love with each other. Then, they wanted to marry each other. However, it was not legal in Myanmar, and if you do so, you will be in jail ... Then, these two lovers either flee to Bangladesh or hide in the quiet mountains and marry each other. (Interview: 2022MRF3)

In another of his sermons, Wirathu said, ‘Starting from today, do we need to protect our religion or not? People attending his sermon replied, ‘Yes, your Reverence’. He then said, ‘Snakes are poisonous wherever they are. You can’t underestimate a snake just because there’s only one. It’s dangerous wherever it is. Muslims are just like that’. He justified his statement by adding, ‘They will ask for an Islamic state and I worry they will set up a Muslim country. That with their population they will apply pressure by intermarrying our women’ (SBS, 2013). In yet another sermons, Wirathu called for a boycott of all Muslim-owned businesses in order to weaken Muslims economically, arguing:

If you buy a good from a Muslim shop, your money just does not stop there ... money will eventually be used against you to destroy your race and religion. That money will be used to get a Buddhist-Burmese woman and she will very soon be coerced or even forced to convert to Islam ... once

[Muslims] become overly populous, they will overwhelm us and take over our country and make it an evil Islamic nation. (Bookbinder, 2013)

However, it was mainly the ultra-Buddhist monks and the military who waged a hate speech war against the Rohingya. All of my respondents told me that their relationship with the majority Buddhist Rakhine in Rakhine State was ‘normal’ until 2012. For example, one respondent told me,

In Rakhine, we were the majority of Rohingyas and Magh [Arakan Buddhist]. We knew each other and had regular communication with each other. When we went to the shops or markets, the Maghs and Rohingyas went to the same shop together. We felt like we were relatives. However, since 2012, the picture has changed! Until 2012, during the *Eid Qurban* [the second largest religious festival for Muslims], many Maghs – adults and children both – used to visit us and enjoy and then leave. We used to do the same. We used to go to their houses on various occasions, we used to attend their *dawat* [invitation]. We used to mix with them and play *Pani Khela* [Water Festival]. I used to do many such things with them. (Interview: 2022MRM3)

It is also important to mention that the social media representations, rumours, and propaganda perpetuated by Wirathu and other ultranationalists have a gender dimension. There are claims to the ‘collective ownership’ of their (Buddhist) women and that the men must take on the role of ‘protector’ of the nation-state and the women (McCarthy & Menager, 2017). They were to protect their women from the Bengali *kala*.

#### BENGALI *KALA*: FROM EVERYDAY RACISM TO POLITICAL RHETORIC IN MYANMAR

*Kala* or *Kula* is a derogatory term used by the Burmese against the Rohingya. Use of this term dates back to historical Indian communities living in Myanmar. Today’s understanding of ‘*Kala*’ or ‘*Kula*’ is far more restrictive and derogatory than its eighteenth century meaning and serves as a source of structural violence. In the Burmese language, *Kala* or *Kula* applies to any ‘foreigner’ coming to Myanmar from outside. Here, etymologically, ‘*Ku-la*’ comprises ‘*ku*’, which refers to crossing a maritime space (mainly the Bay of Bengal), and ‘*la*’, meaning ‘to come’. *Kala*, in Bengali, Hindi, and other languages derived from Sanskrit, means ‘black’ and thus

refers to the dark-skinned (mainly Indian) non-Buddhists living in Myanmar. However, in ancient Pali, *kala* meant ‘noble’. Since the nineteenth century mass mobilisation of Indian communities by the British Empire in Burma, the current derogatory connotation of *kala* has become increasingly prevalent in popular Burmese culture. Over time, anti-*kala* rhetoric has been used for Indophobic political ends by the Burmese. Finally, ‘*kala*’ has become a symbol of Islamophobia, mainly against Indian Muslims and, more exclusively, against the Rohingya (Egreteau, 2011).

All the Rohingya respondents told me that they had been labelled ‘Bengali *Kala*’ by their Rakhine counterparts, including neighbours, schoolteachers, monks, and the military. I then asked my respondents what people mean when they call a Rohingya person a ‘Bengali *Kala*’. According to one respondent, it meant ‘illiterate’. Another respondent mentioned that it is now used exclusively towards Muslim Rohingya. For him, it is an expression of Islamophobia; he told me,

They used to abuse us by calling us *kala* and torture us just because we are Muslims. We do not follow Buddhism, Christianity or Hinduism. We had some Hindu boys with us in our class who did not follow Islam, so they were not tortured or abused as *kala*. It is clearly used to separate the Muslim as ignorant and different (*forok*) from the whole society. (Interview: 2022MRM1)

This statement resonates with the claim by Egreteau (2011, p. 50) that, ‘Burmese Indian communities of Hindu, Sikh and Christian background are today facing far less violent and open hostility from the rest of the Burmese society, compared to years and decades ago’. This can even be traced back to the 1930s, as Bowser (2021, p. 1140) argued: ‘Hindu nationalists were successful in convincing Burmese fascists that they were brethren in their mutual struggle against Islam and its supposed attempts to divide communities’.

Calling the Rohingya ‘Bengali *kala*’ has a traumatic impact on them. One of my respondents told me how she feels and what *kala* truly means to her:

They used to call us *kala*, which basically meant they hated us. *Kala* is equivalent to having no education, being Bengali, and having no knowledge (*elom nai*). Those who do not understand what is good and what is bad are *kala*. We are beasts, meaning the original meaning of the word *kala* is beast. Just as beasts do not know the difference between good and bad, they call

us *kala* as they thought we were the beasts ... We had no value to them. They could do whatever they wanted ... in Bangladesh when there is a program (for example, an annual school function or any public social event), there is no caste judgment in the program, everyone can go, whoever wants to attend. However, we who were Muslims could not attend the school program which was an annual event in Burma. We could not go. Our friend who studied in the same class could attend the program, but we never got that kind of opportunity in our life. If we compare our childhood and school life with the way we were able to live in Bangladesh, we feel very insignificant. Why are we such an insignificant nation (*niso koum/zati*) in the world? Always this question comes to my mind! (Interview: 2022MRF4)

### GENDERED RUMOURS, ROHINGYA WOMEN, THE MILITARY, AND THE ULTRA-BUDDHIST NATIONALISTS

In an earlier study addressing the gendered dimension of rumour in riots in the US, Marilyn Johnson explains how gendered ideologies sparked the riot. In the rumour narratives during the US riots, women appeared either as victims of rape or as tortured mothers. Men appeared either as lusty rapists or as noble protectors. As gender and racial ideologies are intimately linked, the deployment of the above images helped forge a defensive collective identity. This, in turn, facilitated the outbreak of violence (Johnson, 1998).

Analysing different media sources and listening to the Rohingya respondents in Bangladesh, I found the same gendered rumour narratives and logic that sparked, sustained, and justified the cultural violence against the Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar. Both the 2012 riot in Rakhine State and the 2014 riot between the Muslim Rohingya and the Buddhist Burmese in Mandalay started with a rumour of a Buddhist woman being raped by Muslim men. As soon as the news of this rape was broadcast in state media, it went viral via different social media platforms. Viral images of the victims helped to ignite the riot.

In regions characterised by political instability and conflict, rumours have served to instigate and intensify various forms of violence, such as riots, ethnic conflicts, and genocide. This phenomenon, which has been observed across diverse historical contexts and geographical locations worldwide, also exhibits a gendered nature. For instance, Gallimore (2008) demonstrates that, in the case of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, gendered linguistic and historical norms were rewritten and perpetuated

as crucial tropes supporting the genocide and the widespread perpetration of sexual violence that targeted Tutsi women (Gallimore, 2008). An extremist magazine called *Kangura* promoted the ‘Hutu Ten Commandments’, which outlined guidelines for ethnic segregation and prohibited mixed marriages between Hutu men and Tutsi women. Anyone who violated these guidelines by marrying, befriending, or employing a Tutsi woman was labelled a traitor (Okech, 2021).

However, in the era of social media, the proliferation of fake news and disinformation has become pervasive. One consequence has been numerous instances of gendered rumours and associated violence. Farkhunda Malikzada’s case stands as an example. On March 19, 2015, she was publicly lynched by a mob in Kabul, Afghanistan, amidst rumours claiming that she had burned the Quran. Following her murder, multiple versions of rumours spread throughout the country, each presenting differing explanations for her alleged actions. These rumours attained their intended effects by generating meaning as both a sense-making tool and a deliberate framing strategy employed by political groups and state officials (Ibrahimi, 2022).

In the Burmese narratives, Muslim men and the Rohingya are constructed as a ‘threat’, a ‘poisonous snake’, and a ‘rapist’. In their social media propaganda, Buddhist monks have successfully created an image of Rohingya Muslims as ‘fearsome others’. Rumours of rape and the forced conversion of Buddhist women to Islam have instigated Buddhist men, and the monks in particular, to assume the role of the ‘protector’ of Buddhist women (McCarthy & Menager, 2017). This is in line with what Veena Das calls ‘gendered belonging to the nation-state’, which explains how the nation-state normalises violence against the ‘dangerous aliens’ (Das, 2008). Using a metaphor of ‘sex, death and reproduction’, Das explains how and why the nation-state constructs man as a protector who ‘should be ready to bear arms for the nation and be ready to die for it’. Women’s reproduction is seen as rightly belonging to the state and the women’s role is to ‘bear “legitimate” children who will be, in turn, ready to die for the nation’ (Das, 2008, p. 285). Contrary to the prevailing image of Buddhist women by the nation and the state, Rohingya women have been constructed as an ugly creature and thus prove an intimate link between race and gender. This is evident in the statements by the Myanmar military. For example, when asked about the soldier’s role in sexual violence, Colonel Phone Tint, a minister for border security in the country’s northern districts, replied, ‘Look at those women [Rohingya] who are



making these claims—would anyone want to rape them?’ (Head, 2017, para 17). However, it has been widely claimed by different media and news sources, as well as the women I interviewed, that many women and girls were raped by the Magh (a term for Rakhine Buddhists in general). As one of my respondents reacted to the abovementioned claim,

No ... no ... no ... it is totally wrong. I saw with my own eyes. During the year I was sitting for the matric exam [the school final exam], that time there was a girl named Rabiya in my neighbourhood. That girl was very beautiful, and she was 14 years old. The girl’s house was next to the military base. During the day, the soldiers saw the girl, then at night they went to the girl’s house. The soldiers tied girl’s parents’ mouths and tied them inside the house. They were six to seven people. They bit her throughout the whole body and raped her. Afterwards, they left the girl in a nearby canal. Looking at the girl’s body, it appeared to be many dogs had bitten the girl. I know about another girl’s incident. The girl was very beautiful, too. I don’t agree Rohingya girls are not beautiful. What is most important to mention is that even old women were not spared from soldiers’ hands, not to mention young girls. If they were girls, they started the torture. There are many such cases of inhumane torture, rape and killing. (Interview: 2022MRF5)

### ROHINGYA WOMEN, VULNERABILITIES, AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence and rape have been used as weapons of war and genocide. Some of the women I interviewed were the victims, or knew a family member and/or friends who were victims, of sexual violence by the Myanmar military. During my interviews with the Rohingya refugees in the Kutopalong camp, all the respondents claimed that they were physically and/or mentally tortured by the Magh, forcing them to flee to Bangladesh. One of them said,

I had a cousin. She got married in our neighbouring village. One day, the whole village was set on fire by the military. Many people were killed. In addition, my sister who was married in that village, the day she came out of the village after the fire, she, her husband, and their children were attacked. Luckily, her husband managed to survive by hiding in the water. However, his wife and children were killed! My sister was raped by the military in the street before being killed!’ (Interview: 2022MRM3)

Although it was difficult to find any respondents who claimed to be rape victims, I met young girls and women who were victims of groping during body searches. For example, one of the respondents told me,

A *Tamasud* [a military base/police check post] was set up next to our house. When I took classes, I saw many girls being molested while passing in front of this base. Girls could not walk in the streets. The military always made sure what was inside their clothes, what was not there. Rohingya women had to take off their clothes to show them [the military]! ... it was a very horrible thing for us! It is very shameful for us to fix and wear clothes in front of men. When a girl used to go to the market in front of this base, it happened that the military would touch different parts of our body in the name of a clothes or body search. Many others and I have been such victims. It's better to die than have this shame (*beizzot*). (Interview: 2022MRF4)

Buddhists claim that Muslims are waging a 'reproductive jihad'. Citing an academic, Beech (2019, para 47) noted, 'There is this idea of a hyper-fertile Muslim man with his many wives', populating the whole country and eventually taking over the power of the country. Therefore, the ultra-nationalist Buddhist monks have popularised the idea that Rohingya are a dangerously fertile species and will breed many children, thus increasing the Muslim population in the country. This will ultimately threaten Buddhism in Myanmar. As I observed in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, the Rohingya family size is larger than the average Bengali family (four/five members in one household). Many families I interviewed consisted of more than eight members. However, during my interviews with Rohingya in the camps, they told me that it was difficult to have more children and multiple wives, as these were strictly controlled by the military; for example, the military even counted how many offspring a goat or cow had. As one of the respondents explained,

Every year, the military made a list of every family, and according to that, they came to check again later. If a cow gave birth, we had to inform them; we had to get permission and pay money. They always checked us according to the list to see how many members there are in the family. They used to keep a list of the assets and property in our family, so we did not have the right to increase or decrease anything against their will. They controlled everything. (Interview: 2022MRF10)

During their time in Myanmar, reproduction and motherhood was controlled and dependent upon the will of the military authorities who govern the lives of the Rohingya. As one of my respondents explained it,

From time to time, the military would visit our village, issuing warnings to women not to bear more than two boys. Should a woman exceed this limit, the military would go as far as threatening to harm or kill the additional boys. Furthermore, they advised women against being too intimate [having intercourse] with their husbands, asserting that men should focus solely on working hard to earn a living—nothing beyond that. (Interview: 2022MRM1)

Therefore, Myanmar's gendered social structure constructs men as strong and the protectors of women's livelihood while women's main job is reproduction and easily regulated subject and their bodies can be violated.

Nevertheless, Ma Ba Tha managed to successfully propagate idea that the 'Buddhist women were held up as the symbols of the nation who were in danger of rape by Muslim men' (Beech, 2019, para 47). In fact, Myanmar's armed forces have used rape as a weapon of war in their battles against various ethnic insurgencies. The United Nations has blamed the Myanmar military for 'sexual atrocities reportedly committed in cold blood out of a lethal hatred for the Rohingya' (Beech, 2019, para 48). Ma Ba Tha monks have rejected such findings and have continued their hate-mongering, even though the group was technically outlawed in 2017. All the interviews I conducted with the Rohingya refugees claimed that rape and physical torture were common weapons of atrocity against them. This stands in contradiction to sentiments like that of the Ma Ba Tha monk, U Rarza, who claimed, 'I don't think anyone would rape Bengali [Rohingya] women because they are ugly and disgusting' (Beech, 2019, para 49). However, in every war and forced displacement, sexual violence has played an integral part, serving as a source of vulnerability to women and men. Numerous studies have demonstrated the detrimental impact of sexual violence on individuals who have experienced it, encompassing adverse effects on their physical and mental well-being, social connections, and economic circumstances (Skjelsbæk, 2001; Freedman, 2016; Féron, 2017; Mack & Na'puti, 2019; Phillimore et al., 2022). Recently, research on sexual violence against men in war and forced displacement has also gained prominence. Some recent research shows that, in selected conflict-affected territories of the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, approximately 23.6 percent of

surveyed men experienced sexual violence; in Liberia, it increased to one-third (32.6 percent) of surveyed men. Sexual violence was also prevalent during the war in the former Yugoslavia (Alexandre et al., 2022). Although sexual violence has predominantly been committed against Rohingya women, it has not been limited to women and girls only; some Burmese, and the military in particular, have also committed sexual violence against men and boys (Women's Refugee Commission, 2018).

### SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST ROHINGYA MEN AND BOYS

Although the focus on sexual violence in conflict and war has been predominantly female-oriented, men and boys have also been victims of such atrocities. During my interviews with male respondents, I found it difficult to get respondents to engage in discussions of sexual violence against men. Some of them felt ashamed of talking about sexual violence against men while they easily talked about rape against Rohingya women. This is, as I argue, connected with the representation of men as powerful, as saviours of female chastity. This is also connected with the social stigma that possibly undermines the image of a man as a protector in the community. However, one of my respondents, who knows at least two men who were sexually assaulted by the military, told me,

One day, some men were called off to clean the military barracks near our village. After cleaning, the military ordered two young men to stay in the barracks. Accordingly, they had to stay there. In addition, there they became the victims of forced anal sex. They did not tell anyone. As I was very close to them, they just told me. (Interview: 2018MRM7)

During my interviews, many of my respondents agreed that they knew about instances of rape against women where the military tied up their fathers or husbands and then raped the women in front of them. This forced witnessing of performative rape is a devastating form of sexual violence. One of the respondents claimed that witnessing it was worse than being raped. However, during my fieldwork, it was difficult to find any males willing to admit to being sexual victims. Other researchers have pointed out the same issue, claiming that there is a very limited presence of narratives directly articulated by male survivors of sexual violence themselves. Therefore, 'male survivors of sexual violence are pushed away in the limbo of the post-conflict era, as obscene and embarrassing byproducts of

war that do not qualify for entering the realm of the political and politicized' (Féron, 2017, p. 63).

In the context of sexual violence against Rohingya males, the Women's Refugee Commission titled their report, "'It's Happening to Our Men as Well": Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys', quoting one of their respondents as saying, 'the same thing that is happening to our women, it's happening to our men as well. It is too shameful to talk about' (Women's Refugee Commission, 2018, p. 10). Sexual violence committed against Rohingya men and boys has included 'forced witnessing of sexual violence against women and girls, genital violence—specifically mutilation, burning, castration, and penis amputation—and anal rape' (Women's Refugee Commission, 2018, p. 9). According to the Women's Refugee Commission (2018), of the total 185 refugee men surveyed in 2017, 10.1 percent reported experiencing rape; 20 percent reported other types of sexual violence, humiliation and sexual abuse; and 8 percent reported witnessing physical or sexual violence.

### *Why Sexual Violence?*

I asked my interviewees why the military committed rape and other forms of sexual violence against them. One of my respondents told me, 'The military sexually assaulted and raped our boys and girls so that we could not even protest against them due to the taboos attached to sexual violence. Therefore, sexual atrocity was an easy tool for the military to force us to leave the country' (Interview: 2022MRM3). Thus, forced witnessing of performative rape by the military and Burmese civilians served as an ethnic cleansing mechanism by inflicting 'terror, humiliation, and anguish on both the female victims and the male observers, and to damage familial bonds, destroy the social fabric, and subjugate communities as whole' (Women's Refugee Commission, 2018, p. 29). However, in recent research, Alam and Wood (2022, p. 1) explored whether sexual violence against the Rohingya was a 'policy (ordered or authorized by commanders) or a practice (driven from below and tolerated by commanders)'. They argued,

[A]t least some elements of the repertoire of sexual violence against the Rohingya were authorized as policy: (1) the regime's long-standing ideological exclusion of the Rohingya from citizenship and its record of demographic engineering to limit their reproduction, (2) the military's policy of ethnic cleansing and commanders' effective control of forces, (3) evi-

dence that the military engages in a distinct pattern of violence against the Rohingya (compared to that against other ethnic minorities, including within northern Rakhine State), particularly the destruction of reproductive capacity and public and performative rape during massacres and forced displacement, and (4) the record of long-standing impunity for and ongoing tolerance of [conflict-related sexual violence]. (Alam & Wood, 2022, p. 15–6)

In a report, Sultana (2018, p. 43) claimed that the Myanmar military raped and committed sexual violence against the Rohingya, where ‘army commanders systematically planned and used rape as a weapon against the Rohingya population’.

### GENDERED MOBILITY, DISCRIMINATION, AND JUSTICE

When Rohingya Muslim women were living in Rakhine State, they had limited mobility. They needed permission from the authorities (i.e., local chairpersons) to go to neighbouring areas or townships. They also had almost no access to education and health facilities. Some of the men I interviewed told me they (Rohingya men and women) were able to complete a primary education but were not allowed to go to any higher level than this. However, I found that some Rohingya men had completed higher secondary education, and a few even went to a university in Myanmar.

This form of structural violence against Rohingya women happens on a continuum. Even in the refugee camps, their gender identity restricts their mobility, although they enjoy more freedom in the camps than in Myanmar. This restricted mobility inside the camps grew out of the feeling of insecurity. The refugee women’s vulnerability has been revealed when they tried to practice their traditional cultural and Islamic religious practices, such as maintaining ‘*forda*’ (seclusion). They do not want to meet with the males who are not relatives, but maintaining seclusion in the camps is difficult. The women also lack sufficient clothing to maintain ‘*forda*’. All the women I met/saw in the camps wore a burqa<sup>3</sup> (a form of veil worn by women in many Muslim societies). However, one of my respondents told me she has to borrow a burqa from her neighbour when she needs to go to collect food aid. I observed that whenever I asked why they have so many children, one of them said, ‘If Allah wants, what we can do? As Allah gave us the children, He will feed them’ (Interview: 2022MRF7). Many of them do not know about contraception and depend on their husband for

reproductive choices. Several studies have examined the issue of contraception and birth control among the Rohingya refugees living in the camps in Bangladesh (Islam et al., 2021a, 2021b; Khan et al., 2021; Islam & Habib, 2024). Of note, Islam and Habib (2024, p. 2) found that

contraceptive use among Rohingya refugees was constrained by various socio-cultural and religious beliefs. The desire for a larger number of children to ensure the continuity of the lineage and to be able to contribute to the growth of the Islamic population serves as a major barrier. Lack of decision making power regarding reproductive life not only stops participation but also makes women vulnerable to IPV [intimate partner violence] and marriage dissolution within the camps. Moreover, the fear of side effects, such as a particular method would cause infertility, discourages women from using contraception. Many of these fears stem from myths, misconceptions, and mistrust in the existing medical system.

During my camp visits, I observed several children playing with condoms as a toy, indicating an inappropriate use of contraception by the refugees.

Women who become victims of gender-based violence inside the camps do not receive formal justice, as the Rohingya lack formal refugee status in Bangladesh. They rely on the *Majhi* and Rohingya community elders, as well as some refugee-led organisations (RLOs), for dispute resolution, mostly on a small scale. Rohingya women said that the injustice was worse in Rakhine State as they have never received any justice for what the Magh did to them, be it sexual violence or other types of violence. The state of Myanmar extends justice only to citizens. As the Rohingya are not considered citizens, they are denied such services. The military (Tatmadaw)—the largest perpetrator of sexual violence—is exempt from the justice system. For example, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2019, p. 53) explains,

In Myanmar, there are limited accountability mechanisms in place for addressing sexual and gender-based violations. There is legislative impunity for sexual assault and other violations perpetrated by the Tatmadaw: soldiers are protected under article 381 of the Constitution, which suspends the right to justice in times of emergency. The Ministry of Defence is not subject to civilian control, meaning that the military operates with very little civilian oversight or accountability. Survivors of sexual and gender-based violence have no recourse to justice.

## INTERMARRIAGE, WOMEN, AND THE MONKS

Ultrationalist leaders and followers of Ma Ba Tha have claimed that Muslim men are forcibly marrying Buddhist women, which will result in the decline of the Buddhist population, ultimately threatening Buddhist nationhood. All of my Rohingya interviewees denied the accusation that Rohingya men have been forcibly marrying and forcibly converting any Buddhist women to Islam. Some of them knew of Rohingya boys who married Buddhist girls, but they were not forced. When I asked about forced marriage, my respondents told me, ‘No, no, no ... , it is not happening that Rohingyas are forcibly marrying a Buddhist girl. However, there are many cases where they are marrying willingly, meaning two people are marrying by consent. However, there are also examples of Magh forcibly marrying Muslim girls’ (Interview: 2022MRM1). Another respondent told me that intermarriage is not easy:

When two people become friends or fall in love with each other, then if both of them want to get married, then there are some cases of marriage between Rohingya boys and Buddhist girls. However, it is not easy. Because it is not legal in Myanmar, if you want to do this kind of marriage in Myanmar, you must go to jail, and the Myanmar government never allows it. Even if you want to have such a marriage there, no permission is given whether a Rohingya boy or a Buddhist girl desired so. (Interview: 2022MRM3)

When asked how intermarriage is still occurring, he replied,

In that case, it can be seen that in some cases, the boy might be fleeing to Bangladesh with the girl, or else he would go to the hilly area and live in such a way that no one knows them or shows suspicion about them or can inform about them. (Interview: 2022MRM3)

Thus, it can be said that intermarriage, though not forceful, is occurring among Rohingya men and Buddhist women. This has had implications for marriage regulation acts by the state of Myanmar. Ultrationalist Buddhists, and especially Ma Ba Tha—which considered intermarriage a threat to Buddhism, were important actors in the passing of restrictive laws. ‘The Buddhist Women’s Special Marriage Law’, part of a package of four so-called Race and Religion Protection Laws, was passed by the Myanmar parliament in 2015. This new law made it hard for Buddhist women to marry outside their religion (Beech, 2019). Moreover, ‘all four



bills raise serious human rights concerns. The Population Control Law ... empowers authorities to limit the number of children members of any designated group can have, opening the possibility of discriminatory actions against religious or ethnic minorities' (Human Rights Watch, 2015, para 10). As part of Ma Ba Tha's move against intermarriage, it collected 2.5 million signatures in favour of its march against interreligious marriage (Walton & Hayward, 2014). Consequently, Ma Ba Tha proposed a draft marriage bill to the government in 2013 and the government released a slightly modified version of the bill in late 2014 (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Because many Buddhist women also supported these ultranationalist laws, it is important to know why.

### BUDDHIST WOMEN IN THE ULTRANATIONALIST MOVEMENT

As some authors argued, ultranationalist movements such as Ma Ba Tha have popularity not only among educated Buddhists but also at the grassroots level. When a vacuum was created by the end of military rule in Myanmar, organisations such as Ma Ba Tha came forward to fill it, as no others were able to do. Ma Ba Tha gained popularity among the grassroots Buddhists due to its activities for the 'promotion and protection of Buddhism' (International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 20). Some of the activities include promoting shared Buddhist cultural values, providing a social safety net (taking care of the poor, sick and elderly; providing food and health care; etc.), disaster relief, education for underprivileged and rural youth through their Dhamma School, dispute resolution, 'women's rights', and legal aid. These activities are similar to those of many other faith-based (or militant) organisations (Salehin, 2016). Although they see the protection of women as a religious duty, Ma Ba Tha has been criticised for their activities against Muslims and women from other religious backgrounds. As mentioned earlier, Ma Ba Tha's role in enacting the Marriage Regulation Act curtailed the rights of women from other religions. However, Ma Ba Tha has numerous supporters amongst Buddhist women and, as one estimate shows, anywhere between 20,000 to 80,000 women in Yangon have become members and the central Mandalay area has approximately 3000 female members. The number of informal followers and participants is likely much higher (Marler & Aguilar, 2018).

The puzzling question is: why do Buddhist women support this patriarchal, violent, and ultranationalist group? One way to address this issue is to focus on the social structure and the status of women in Myanmar. A

famous Buddhist feminist nun argues that ‘Burma has a male-dominated, patriarchal society, which means religious life is also dominated by men. The patriarchy is deep-rooted here’ (Rigby, 2017, para 2). In such a patriarchal context, where women are often marginalised, Ma Ba Tha provides ‘opportunities’ that women do not always find elsewhere. Those who join Ma Ba Tha contribute to a variety of roles in the organisation, including managing administration (e.g., managing donations, communications, or keeping historical records), teaching in Dhamma School (including Sunday school), and other community outreach programmes (Marler & Aguilar, 2018). This gives many women an opportunity to enhance their agency in the public sphere. It is not only the underprivileged and rural women who have become members of the organisation but also nuns, female religious scholars, lawyers, educators, medical professionals, and other tertiary-level students. Based on interviews with female members, the International Crisis Group (ICG) suggested that the rise of feminism in Myanmar is a reason for joining Ma Ba Tha. As mentioned earlier, Ma Ba Tha claims to protect women as part of its religious duty (International Crisis Group, 2017) and ‘the support of female nationalists stems primarily from a commitment to outlaw polygamy and strongly felt concerns over forced conversion, which they see as the likely (if not inevitable) byproduct of Muslim-Buddhist marriages’ (International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 13). It is, therefore, clear that Ma Ba Tha’s mass mobilisation to pass a set of rules concerning marriage and the protection of religion serves to ‘empower’ and ‘protect’ Buddhist women while dehumanising Rohingya Muslim women.

### OTHER FORMS OF VIOLENCE

Alongside physical violence and the burning down the Rohingya property, the military has also committed religious violence. One of the respondents (Interview: 2022MRM3) said:

They [Magh] do not allow us to go to the Mosque, *waaj* [Islamic preaching]; they don’t allow us to pray. If we do want to perform these, Magh starts violence against us. They don’t even allow us to offer Eid prayer and funeral prayer. ... when they come into our house, if they don’t find any male member of the family, they torture the women and particularly the young women. They physically torture them and rape them. When they leave our house, they also take our cattle with them.

All of my respondents claimed that the military could take any Rohingya person from their home and could do anything with/to them, including forced labour, physical and mental torture, and rape. One of my respondents told me,

When we were in Rakhine State, boys were tortured and girls were tortured. Boys were taken to various military stations or police stations to work. One hundred people were taken every day from our village to the police barracks. They were forced to clean their gardens, cut grass, and water gardens. We used to be treated like slaves. If anyone did not want to go, they were beaten, and sometimes the military would come and take whoever they found on the way to cut grass for their pet cows and goats. They did not care whether the Rohingya person they were taking was educated, uneducated, or qualified to do these things. Moreover, sometimes the military would get drunk, beat up the person on the way, then enter the neighbourhood and take away the beautiful girls from their homes, keeping them for two to three days. Even if anyone won't listen to them, these people have been tortured and killed. (Interview: 2022MRM1)

## CONCLUSION

It is now well documented that Myanmar has committed various atrocities against the Rohingya minority, including murder and sexual violence. In everyday life, the Rohingya have been systematically discriminated against, with women being treated the worst. Rohingya women have faced a double burden in Myanmar: physical violence, mental torture, and other forms of oppression by the military, monks, and ordinary Maghs, on the one hand, and the patriarchal Rohingya social structure, on the other. Therefore, structural violence in the forms of discrimination (e.g., in education) and pervasive poverty have affected women, men, and children in different ways. A gendered 'threat' narrative has been systematically disseminated among the ordinary populace in Rakhine State and Myanmar through diverse social media, including Facebook, and tangible media, such as newspapers, CDs, and DVDs. These narratives have been constructed and perpetuated by various actors, prominently including Buddhist monks. They delineate female Rohingyas as dangerously reproductive entities who pose a demographic threat to Buddhism through the potential proliferation of the Muslim population. Therefore, Rohingya motherhood, reproduction, and sexuality were threatened and controlled by the military. Conversely, the image of Rohingya men has been

constructed as a ‘threat’ to nationalism, identity, and religion (through forced marriage and conversion of Buddhist women). These factors have led to the justification of different forms of violence against the Rohingya, including sexual violence. Targeted efforts aimed specifically at undermining Rohingya girls and women’s reproductive capacities, as well as instances of the public and performative raping of Rohingya women, attest to an enduring culture of abuse and impunity perpetuated by the Myanmar military. Sexual violence, wielded as a weapon, serves the strategic purpose of disrupting the essential facets of Rohingya femininity, motherhood, and reproductive capabilities. It precipitates trauma and stigma within the community, thereby eroding its societal fabric. Consequently, the Rohingya have been forced into displacement, seeking refuge in camps within Bangladesh where they continue to be victims of different forms of direct, structural, cultural, and symbolic violence. The ensuing chapter undertakes an exploration of the gendered vulnerabilities intrinsic to the context of the Cox’s Bazar refugee camps in Bangladesh.

## NOTES

1. See for detail, <https://democracy-reporting.org/buddhist-nationalists-used-facebook-to-fuel-hate-speech-in-myanmar/>
2. In 2013, the US *Time* magazine featured Ashin Wirathu on their front cover, displaying a photograph of him and captioning it with the title ‘The face of Buddhist terror’, and calling him ‘Buddhist Bin Laden’. See the *Time* magazine vol. 182, no.1 that made a front-cover page entitled ‘The Face of Buddhist Terror’, July 1, 2013.
3. There are some misconceptions regarding the use of the burqa as an Islamic tradition among scholars in Islam. Quranic verses talk about modesty and covering the body parts. For example, in Al-Qur’an, surah An-Nur, verse 31 clearly states, ‘And tell the believing women to subdue their eyes, and maintain their chastity. They shall not reveal any parts of their bodies, except that which is apparent. They shall cover their chests with their “khimar”. The use of the burqa is rather socially constructed. It is a choice, a style by Muslims in some countries. “Islam is not concerned with the style as long as it fulfills the basic requirement of niqab”’, Chowdhury, N., Bakar, H. and Elmetwally, A. (2017). ‘Misconception of Islamic Apparel, Niqab: A Phenomenological Approach.’ *Malaysian Journal of Communication* 33(4): 204–217.

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