



# The Impact of Islamophobia on the Persecution of Myanmar's Rohingya: A Human Rights Perspective

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## Abstract

The concept of Islamophobia and the persecution of the Rohingya minority—these two phenomena are highly significant in the world context. These factors have affected systematic violence and statelessness for many years by the Myanmar Buddhist majority and the Myanmar government itself. The Rohingya community has a significant connection with several factors, including political, economic, national, and religious relations. This paper is dependent on a qualitative research methodology using secondary data was used. Myanmar is a non-secular, Buddhist-dominated country where the Buddhist majority holds a perception of Islam to justify their violence towards this community and to ensure Buddhist domination. This paper will shed some light on the argument, and discusses the extent to which Islamophobia is significant behind violations of human rights in the Rohingya community.

**Keywords** Islamophobia · Persecution · Buddhist extremism · Citizenship · Rohingya · Human rights

## Introduction

The Rohingya community is one of the most persecuted and unfortunate minority groups on the world map, carrying the burden of heinous mistreatment for an extended period of time. Persecution of ethnic minorities stands out as a significant issue in the twenty-first century (Uddin, 2020). Islamophobia adds another layer to this issue, as demonstrated in the persecution of the Rohingya people. The Rohingya minority is an ethnic minority in Myanmar that is the subject of severe human rights violations by the Myanmar Buddhist majority and the Burmese government. Their recognition as citizens is snatched and turns them into the subject of systematic violence and statelessness (Osman, 2017). A confluence of various factors have exacerbated the Rohingya minority's persecution that violate their human rights. These include complex citizenship issues, the propagation of extremist Buddhist ideologies, and economic, political,

and social dimensions. The military's stranglehold on politics and governance in Myanmar is a significant factor contributing to the crisis, and has enabled the government to pursue its interests in resource-rich regions like Rakhine State at the expense of innocent lives. This power dynamic has led to widespread bloodshed and egregious violations of Rohingya individuals' basic fundamental rights. Numerous factors, such as citizenship concerns, Buddhist extremist ideas, and economic, political, and social, accelerate human rights violations. Islamophobia intensifies the effects of these factors in Myanmar. The Buddhist majority of Myanmar is highly derived from Islamophobia, which has become more prevalent with the government's discriminatory policies toward Rohingya Muslims (Atif et al., 2020). This exaggerated version of Islamophobia becomes the fueling factor for the violation of human rights by the Rohingya Muslim minority and has brought this issue to a position where it has become one of the most significant cases of ethnic minority persecution in the twenty-first century (Zahed, 2021). This significant issue is portrayed in this paper from a justifiable background and examination. In completing this study, the main objective of this paper is to understand the significance of Islamophobia in the case of Myanmar's Rohingya community persecution in the twenty-first century.

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## Significance of the Study

The Rohingya face appalling human rights abuses within Myanmar. It is crucial to delve deeper into this issue and understand its complexities, especially in relation to the rise in Islamophobia and subsequent violent acts perpetrated against them. By examining the connection between these two phenomena, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of why such violations persist. The plight of the Rohingya serves as an urgent reminder that recognizing their struggle goes beyond mere acknowledgment; it necessitates delving into factors like prejudice and discrimination that contribute to their persecution (Osman, 2017). Even though a number of causes play a role in this violence, it is clear that Islamophobia is of the utmost importance. Although the idea of Islamophobia is explored in current literature in this context, it falls short of accurately acknowledging the density of its impact as a significant driver behind the violation of Rohingya Muslims' human rights in Myanmar. Thus, a thorough investigation becomes necessary, highlighting the urgent necessity to address this situation.

## Rationality

Persecution is one of the most significant global issues facing this twenty-first-century ethnic minority. Among these, Rohingya persecution is one of the most discussed cases because of the severity of its vulnerability. A range of factors is liable for this persecution, but among all of those, Islamophobia is highly significant, making the Rohingya people the subject of accusations as terrorists and portraying them as people who do not belong to the state. The definition of human rights, regardless of race, gender, and religion, is said to ensure that the flow of Islamophobia is accelerating human rights violations in Myanmar, making the Rohingya minority the prime subject of those violations. This significance portrays the logic of studying this topic and turns it into a worthy one to be researched.

## Research Question

To analyze Islamophobia as a significant factor behind human rights violation and persecution of the Rohingya community, the following research question will be answered throughout this paper:

1. To what extent Islamophobia can be considered a significant factor in Myanmar's Rohingya community persecution in twenty-first century?

## Literature Review

### The Portrayal of Islamophobia

Osman (2017) portrays a broad scenario of rising Islamophobia in Asia, and he identifies the case of Myanmar as one of the most heinous ones. Whereas Buddhism is known as the religion of peace and non-violence, the Buddhist majority in Myanmar pursues severe violence against Rohingya Muslims. This anti-Muslim attitude has prevailed in Myanmar for a long period of time. In the case of growing Islamophobia, the exclusion of citizenship rights and the wave of Buddhist nationalism play a triggering role. In 1982, when the citizenship rights of the Rohingya Muslims were snatched, the fear of outsiders was exaggerated more significantly among the majority of Buddhists. As citizens' legitimization was snatched, fear and hatred against them accelerated significantly. The author also claimed that the government needed the support of the Buddhist majority, which is another reason for fueling Islamophobia in Myanmar. This also accelerates movements, like the 969 movement, promoting the protection of Buddhism and preserving the Buddhist identity in Myanmar. Extreme Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu formed the 969 movement, a social movement aimed at preserving Buddhist cultural traditions in certain Buddhist countries (Mohajan, 2018). The persecution of Muslims from the Rohingya community has been mostly caused by the movement, which has led to widespread discrimination and violence against them (Mohajan, 2018; Walton, & Hayward, 2014). Wirathu's perceptions of the Rohingya people are expanding rapidly and posing a threat to surrounding Buddhist populations due to their high reproduction rates and quick development (Sohel, 2017; Mohajan, 2018).

The majority of Buddhists are accelerating Islamophobia and hatred towards Muslims among the young generation in Myanmar. The Buddhist majority thought that Rohingya Muslims would spread Islam and eradicate Buddhism by converting Buddhist women into Muslims through marriage. The historical legacy of Rohingya Muslims standing up for their own identity is also increasing Islamophobia (Osman, 2017). In Bhattacharjee's (2014) writing, the rise of Islamophobia is the most important triggering factor in the case of Rohingya persecution in Myanmar. The author pointed out some important factors behind Islamophobia and violations of human rights and brought out the issue of the 969 movements, which she claimed to be the rising factor of Islamophobia in Myanmar. She highlighted the issue that the 9/11 attack, which was a series of coordinated terrorist attacks coordinated by the extremist group Al-Qaeda in the USA on September 11, 2001, also raised concerns among the Buddhist people of Myanmar and accelerated

Islamophobia among them. The author mentioned that the 1982 citizenship law and the 2011 withdrawal of media censorship by the quasi-civilian government fueled hatred against the Rohingya Muslim minority. The author tried to link anti-Muslim sentiment with anti-Rohingya sentiment and points out that it is the prime point of human rights violations in Myanmar.

### The Bleak Realities of Myanmar

In an article by Yusuf (2018), Myanmar was recognized as a non-secular and Buddhist-majority country. He stated that the Burmese Rohingya crisis was a clash between two nationalists. He claimed that the clash between two nationalist groups, Buddhists and Muslims, ultimately gave birth to Islamophobia. They try to protect their national ethnicity under the veil of religious identity. The narrative of Islamophobia fulfills this tendency. As Islamophobia grew, so did the violation of the human rights of the Rohingya community. In that way, Yusuf demonstrates a different perspective of Islamophobia in Myanmar. Zahed (2021) elaborated on the reasons behind the Rohingya minority's persecution in Myanmar. He not only points out the issue of Islamophobia but also discusses many other reasons behind this persecution, such as geopolitical, state policy, and economic. Zahed shows that the majority of Buddhists with extremist sentiments hold anti-Muslim positions. His analysis demonstrates how other issues are also linked to this persecution, but behind those factors, Islamophobia plays a significant fueling role.

Another study by Kyaw (2016) provides an image of the 969 Buddhist movements in Myanmar. This writing is not limited to the discussion of the Rohingya persecution since 2012; rather, it attempts to bring out a conceptual discussion from the time of the colonial period. The author here shows that anti-religious propaganda has been a very common scenario in Myanmar from the very beginning, and it is claimed here that anti-Muslim sentiment is one of the parts of this tendency. Fink (2018) claimed that Myanmar's semi-democratic rule is fueling the flow of hatred towards the Rohingya Muslim community. Islamophobia is being perpetuated through Facebook, and violence towards the Rohingya is becoming more drastic. Mansor (2019) portrays the de facto leader of Myanmar, Aung Sun Suu Kyi. According to Mansor, Suu Kyi declared Islam to be an extremist religion and denied them their right to full citizenship. She tried to justify the Rohingya killings by saying that they were creating internal chaos. She also termed sexual violence against the Rohingya Muslims by the military a claim of fake rape. In this way, Islamophobia is intensified. Rather than taking steps against the propaganda of Islamophobia, Suu Kyi is accelerating it and increasing human rights violations.

### Rohingya Struggle in Myanmar

Sayyid (2017) examined the issue of Rohingya Muslims being counted as the other in their own country. The author claims that the context of the Rohingya issue proves that Islamophobia is ultimately accelerating a world of cruelty. Islamophobia is constructing the image of the Rohingya Muslims as another, even in their own country. It is proving repeatedly that in this era of Islamophobia, the Muslim people belong nowhere. Through the lens of Islamophobia, ethnic cleansing and human rights violations have been justified throughout Myanmar. By creating a metaphor and a horrifying image of the Muslim minority, the Burmese government is trying to justify its human rights violations against the Rohingya people. By pointing out this questionable issue, the author tries to make an argument from a very neutral position and to clarify the position that Islamophobia significantly triggers anti-Rohingya sentiment in the twenty-first century, which not only points towards the persecution of a specific group but also portrays an image of cruelty on the basis of a metaphor. Bilay (2022) shows how the Religious-Nationalist Association MaBaTha accelerates anti-Muslim sentiment throughout Myanmar. He shows that Buddhist monks stand in an extremely anti-Muslim position. By mentioning their activities, the author tries to bring out the root of this human rights violation and shows how this sentiment accelerated human rights violations in the past and how that violation was brought up in the twenty-first century.

### Theoretical Framework

As the severity of Islamophobia in Myanmar increases, the world becomes more aware of the Rohingya persecution. The concept of human rights introduces respect regardless of race, gender, or religion. In contrast, Islamophobia accelerates the violation of human rights to the Rohingya community in Myanmar. This paper places the persecution of the Rohingya in a constructivist perspective of international relations.

### The Idea of Constructivism

Constructivism is one of the major theories in the arena of international relations. The theory of constructivism focuses on the social construction and normative aspects of international relations. According to the ideology of constructivism, the structure and other factors of international relations are based on social norms, values, and idea constructions. Whereas the realist and liberal ideologies claim that the interest is fixed there, the constructivist theory claims that shared ideas shape the interest. Rather than focusing on the

material factors, this theory focuses on the conceptual ones (Jung, 2019; Theys, 2018). Constructivism believes that all aspects of international relations, like state identity and interests, are socially constructed. This theory assumes that threat perception worldwide is socially constructed based on ideology. According to this theory, international relations are based on a specific ideology or belief. As a whole, this theory claims that the behavior of the state or actors in this world structure depends on the social constructions of the ideas, norms, and beliefs that ultimately gave birth to the ideas of allies, enemies, threats, and so on (Uddin, 2020).

### **Analyzing Islamophobia as a Significant Factor of Violation of Human Rights of Rohingya Minority Through the Lens of Constructivism**

Rohingya minorities have been the subject of substantial systematic violence and statelessness for many years and have had to flee from their country, which means Myanmar. The issue of minority persecution is not a new phenomenon in Myanmar, where political, national, cultural, religious, and many other factors work. Among all these factors, one of the most significant factors in Rohingya persecution is the flow of Islamophobia in Myanmar. Myanmar is a country where there are inhabitants of different religions, but it is a non-secular and Buddhist-majority country. Among this Buddhist majority population, an exaggerated Islamophobia works (Sayyid, 2017).

The ongoing Islamophobia, rooted in Myanmar's history, is significantly a result of the idea construction. From the beginning of the colonial period, anti-Muslim sentiment was constructed among them. For a long time, they considered the Muslim Rohingya a threat to their Buddhist community. From the majority Buddhist perspective, they are highly influenced by the idea of Theravada Buddhism, which holds that Muslims threaten the Buddhist community. Later in the 969 movements, MaBaTha associated all of these works as the torchbearers of Islamophobia. In the context of the government, it is thought that the majority of Buddhist support is needed, and to win that, they are also accelerating the flow of Islamophobia (Kyaw, 2016). The increasing rate of Muslims in Rakhine also constructs the idea that Muslims will become a dominant community. This idea construction leads them to conduct violent activities against Rohingya Muslims. Besides this, because of this idea construction, they accused the Muslims of having a connection with terrorism (Uddin, 2020). The metaphor created against the Muslim minority in Myanmar is significantly fueling human rights violations. The main reason for the human rights violations in Myanmar is triggered by identity construction and the construction of the ideology of Islamophobia, which gave birth to anti-Rohingya sentiment and violent extremism against them (Osman, 2017).

From the discussion of this theoretical portion, it becomes clear that the constructivist approach to international relations holds a very significant position in describing the wave of Islamophobia in Myanmar, and also that the concept of idea construction in constructivism points out the fact that the wave of Islamophobia is accelerating the human rights violations against the Rohingya community in Myanmar in the twenty-first century.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Throughout this paper, different concepts are used in the context of the clarification of the desired research issue. Among those concepts and terminologies, the idea of Islamophobia is one of the prime concepts of this paper, clarified in this part of this paper.

### **Concept of Islamophobia**

The concept of Islamophobia is not actually a very recent phenomenon; throughout time, this concept has come into focus from different perspectives. To understand the concept of Islamophobia, the concepts of Islam and phobia need to be clarified, as both of these concepts are incorporated into the idea of Islamophobia. The concept of Islam is defined as the religious faith of the Muslims, which actually includes the belief that only Allah is the sole deity and also believes in Muhammad as Allah's prophet (Ahmad & Owoyemi, 2012). On the other hand, in the case of defining phobia, phobia refers to an illogical and uncontrollable fear of specific activities, circumstances, or objects (Garcia, 2017). With the incorporation of these two concepts, Islamophobia basically came into focus (Koo, 2018). The term Islamophobia was initially used in 1922 but came into the arena of academic learning in the 1990s. In 1997, the Runnymede Report increased the significance of the term Islamophobia through the discussion of this issue (Runnymede Trust, 2016). It is also claimed that the Islamist organization Muslim Brotherhood popularized Islamophobia more dramatically (Pieters, 2020).

In defining Islamophobia, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) mentions that Islamophobia is a mixture of hatred and fear towards Islam, which ultimately turns into a hostile gesture or sentiment. They also mention that it creates intolerant and racist behavior, discriminating against Muslims. It is also noted that Islamophobia includes insults toward Islamic symbols and figures and triggers a violent attitude toward people wearing Islamic attire (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), 2022). According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2020), the term Islamophobia refers to the fear and irrational hostility towards Islam and Muslims. It is also mentioned in the UN definition that this hostility resulted in discrimination and unequal treatment towards Muslims, including their

exclusion from the mainstream social and political agenda (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2020).

In short, hatred against the religion of Islam or the Muslim community is known as Islamophobia. This ultimately results in growing discrimination and violence toward the Muslim community. It influences the exclusion of the Muslim community from mainstream society. The wave of Islamophobia is seen worldwide in the current timeframe. The western world is highly affected by the flow of Islamophobia. After the 9/11 attack, the wave of Islamophobia spread more explosively across the globe (Considine, 2017). In Myanmar, the flourishing of Islamophobia is visible and is a significant factor behind the Rohingya persecution. Though there are many ethnic groups in Myanmar, the Buddhists are the majority, and an exaggerated sentiment of Islamophobia works among them. They try to justify ethnic cleansing based on their religious basis (Zahed, 2021).

## Methodology

The process of organizing this paper is dependent on the qualitative research methodology. The required data is collected from secondary sources.

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Secondary Data

The secondary sources of data were collected from newspapers, websites, and government reports to complement and check the reliability of the primary data. In this study, the researchers used secondary sources of data to triangulate the interpretative approach for verification and reliability for comparable results in a broad setting. In terms of theme, pattern, and perspective, the researchers analyzed the secondary data. The data was compared and contrasted using these themes and patterns, which were linked to relevant literature. For original studies related to Islamophobia and the Muslim Rohingya community, the researchers searched published studies and literature in Google Scholar, PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science. Using a combination of the following terms: “Islamophobia,” OR “persecution,” OR “Buddhist extremism,” OR “citizenship,” OR “Rohingya,” OR “Muslim Rohingya,” the initial search has been executed. The studies included in the quantitative and qualitative analyses, review articles, and reports highlighting various relevant incidents of Islamophobia were published until December 2022. In order to minimize the incidence of missing articles relevant to this study, the researchers did not filter by year during the search.

### Data Analysis

After the initial search using the specified keywords in Google Scholar, PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science,

the researchers obtained a total of 200 articles. These articles were then subjected to a screening process based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify the most relevant studies for further analysis. The researchers first screened the retrieved articles based on their titles and abstracts. Articles that did not align with the research focus on Islamophobia and the Muslim Rohingya community were excluded. The inclusion criteria involved articles that presented original studies, literature reviews, and reports highlighting incidents of Islamophobia. The exclusion criteria included conference proceedings, non-English publications, and studies that could not be accessed in their entirety. After the initial screening, the full texts of the 26 articles were thoroughly reviewed to ensure they met the research objectives and provided substantial insights into the topic of interest. The researchers conducted a thematic analysis of the selected articles to identify recurring themes related to Islamophobia and its impact on the Muslim Rohingya community. Themes were identified through an iterative process where the researchers familiarized themselves with the data, generated initial codes, and then organized these codes into broader themes based on similarities and patterns in the data. The analysis of secondary data led to the main theme of human rights violations and historical and political factors affecting Islamophobia. It also led to subthemes like using Islamophobia to justify violence, legal and citizenship issues, international response and human rights advocacy, Buddhist extremism, and the effects on the Rohingya community. These themes were then compared and contrasted with previous research about Islamophobia and the Muslim Rohingya. The triangulation process aimed to validate the findings and enhance the reliability of the interpretations. The researchers employed a consensus-based approach to arriving at the final set of themes and subthemes and engaged in discussions and peer-review sessions to ensure the credibility and robustness of the identified themes and subthemes. The paper provides a clearer understanding of how the data was analyzed and how the themes and subthemes were derived from the secondary sources. This transparency is crucial for readers to evaluate the rigor and validity of the research findings.

## Findings

### Factors Behind Rohingya Persecution

Throughout the world, persecution and violations of the human rights of minorities are one of the most discussed issues. The Rohingya crisis or violation of the human rights of Myanmar’s Rohingya minority is one of the most significant of those cases. The Rohingya refugee crisis,

claimed to be one of the most significant crises in recent history, was triggered by a significant range of factors. Several factors fuel this human rights violation in Myanmar, and to understand this heinous case of human rights violation, analyzing all these factors is necessary (Ahsan Ullah, 2016; Alam, 2018; Faye, 2021; Jannat et al., 2022; Sudheer & Banerjee, 2021).

In newly independent Myanmar, there was the promise of the resettlement of the Rohingya people. Through the military coup of 1962 led by General Ne Win, the policies toward the Rohingya people faced a drastic change. General Ne Win adopted the citizenship law in 1982, which ultimately was the beginning phase of the identity crisis of the Rohingya people (Uddin, 2020). The Rohingya minority was not included in any newly adopted citizenship law criteria. This law ultimately snatched the citizenship rights of the Rohingya people and made them stateless. After the citizen-verification program was enacted in 1989, the Rohingya people were pressured to accept the national verification card (NVC), which ultimately overthrew their Rohingya identity (Osman, 2017). In 2016, the citizenship verification process was brought under the framework of the Citizenship Law of 1982. Throughout this time, many laws were taken to dehumanize the Rohingya community. The Rohingya Muslims were excluded in 2012, 2015, and 2017 through the different ventures of the military government. This enactment of the citizenship law and the statelessness status of the Rohingya people are essential factors behind the Rohingya persecution in Myanmar (Zahed, 2021).

In Myanmar, the dominance of the Buddhist religion has been visible from the beginning. The plight of Buddhism is one of the most significant reasons for the Rohingya persecution in Myanmar (Bhattacharjee, 2014). Another illustration is the 969 Buddhist movement that the Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu led. The main fear of the Buddhist extremists is that the minority Muslims, through their influence, will become the majority in Myanmar, which will only hamper the Buddhist dominance in the land of Myanmar. Buddhist extremism is a dominant factor in Myanmar's Rohingya persecution (Kyaw, 2016).

Islamist extremism is not a dominant factor like Buddhist extremism but according to the Myanmar government and the Buddhist extremists in Myanmar, the Muslim community's extremist behavior is giving birth to the anti-Muslim sentiment in Myanmar. The involvement of the Muslim minority in the activities of terrorism and jihadist activities and also after the 9/11 attack, like in other parts of the world, the fear of extremism also spread in Myanmar. This also works as a factor behind the Rohingya persecution (Moghul, 2015). The fear fuels Islamophobia in Myanmar among the Buddhist majority about turning the Muslim Rohingya minority into a majority. Though Myanmar consists of people of different religions, the dominance of the Buddhist

religion has been visible from the beginning. The government of Myanmar is also significantly supporting the Buddhist majority (Osman, 2017). Through different state policies and propaganda, Islamophobia is also spreading from the government side. The Buddhist majority justified the ethnic cleansing on their religious basis. Also, it accused the Muslims of having a connection with terrorism by mentioning the name of the Myanmar Muslim Army, which has no existence. This Islamophobia also contains some historical legacy throughout time, fueled by the sovereignty claim of the Rohingya community. The 9/11 attack added another layer in this context of Islamophobia, which exaggerated the violence towards the Rohingya minority more significantly. This exaggerated version of Islamophobia becomes one of the fueling factors for the human rights violations of the Rohingya minority (Bhattacharjee, 2014; Elmas, 2021).

While mentioning Islamophobia, a significant factor that comes to the forefront is that the concept of others is highly imposed on Muslims throughout the world. This flow is significantly seen in the case of Myanmar as well. The non-Myanmar or non-Buddhist people are considered the other in Myanmar's context. The Buddhist extremist group, the people of Myanmar, and the Myanmar government consider the Muslim Rohingya people as the other and used to separate them from the majority of people (Wade, 2012). Not only in the present context but also in 1982, the citizenship law of the Ne Win government also accelerates the thought that the Rohingya Muslims are not part of Myanmar. Instead, they are also Bengali immigrants, and we addressed them as illegal. This concept of otherization also fueled the Rohingya persecution in the context of Myanmar (Akins, 2018; Bhattacharjee, 2014).

Besides all these issues, economic tension is another burning concern. Rakhine is economically significant in connecting Myanmar with Africa, the Middle East, and India. The region is also enriched with natural resources like oil. Holding the grab over this economically significant area, the Myanmar government is always significantly conscious. There is tension between the Rohingya local people and the Myanmar government regarding the right to the land (Atif et al., 2020). Besides that, China constructs a deep seaport in Rakhine, which has direct access to the Indian Ocean. A joint fishing agreement between China and Myanmar was signed with Thailand and Japan to build cold storage in Rakhine. India also developed a seaport in Rakhine and, besides that, also signed a deal regarding the export of natural gas and oil in Rakhine state. Investment from China, India, Japan, and Vietnam is in these Rakhine states. The natural resources of this region also bring it under the attraction of different multinational companies. This economic significance of the Rakhine region significantly works as a triggering factor behind the Rohingya persecution in Myanmar (Zahed, 2021).

These are some of the key factors behind the Rohingya persecution and the violation of the human rights of Myanmar's Rohingya community. Among all these factors, the significance of Islamophobia will be discussed throughout this paper. The reason behind signifying Islamophobia in this context will be examined in the latter parts.

### **Examining Islamophobia as a Significant Factor Behind the Violation of Human Rights of Rohingya Minority**

A range of factors is seen behind the Rohingya persecution and the violation of human rights by the Rohingya Muslim minority. Among all those factors, Islamophobia is a very significant one. Some reasons can be pointed out through which it can be proven that Islamophobia can be justified as one of the most significant factors behind this heinous case of human rights violations. The violence against the Rohingya minority and to what extent they are connected with the context of Islamophobia have been shown here in several aspects.

Section 505(a) of the constitution points out the criminalization of any false news or criticism of government actions. The Criminal Procedure Code also includes a new provision that allows searches, arrests, or any interruption without any previous warrant. The shutdown of the telecommunications and internet systems is also seen as ultimately creating a pathway for the military forces to conduct their human rights violations against the Rohingya Muslim people. Many independent publications and media outlets' licenses are seized, along with the arrest of the journalists. This type of restriction on freedom of expression is becoming a significant issue mainly because of Islamophobia, which fuels human rights violations (Zahed, 2021).

Besides the violation of freedom of expression, the Rohingya Muslim people of the Rakhine state faced severe restrictions on freedom of movement from the beginning. With the increasing flow of Islamophobia since 2012, the restriction has crossed the severity level. Most of them live in the northern part of Rakhine, so they had to move to the township, but this restriction is harassing them through law enforcement officials (Uddin, 2020). The curfew is based on Section 144 (1), which gives unlimited power to the authorities. Violating freedom of movement is not only hampering their political rights but also affecting their religious life by interrupting religious gatherings. This violates the human rights of the Muslim people, which are significantly triggered by Islamophobia (Ernawati, 2013; Zahed, 2021). The Rohingya Muslim community in Myanmar is also severely tortured and ill-treated by the military forces and through government policies. The torture of the people is not only limited to the aged person. Instead, the children are also victims of this physical torture. The physical torture and

ill-treatment are more extreme among Rohingya Muslim women (Etmanski, 2018; Sayyid, 2017).

The armed groups in Myanmar, like the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, are taking abusive action against the Muslim minority. The military forces also launched air strikes and attacks on the ethnic states of the Rohingya people. Children and women are also subject to these inhuman attacks. There is also the allegation of rape, gang rape, and sexual violence by armed groups (King, 2022). They are highly motivated by the flow of Islamophobia and are significantly conducting these human rights-violated activities (Jones, 2017). Sexual violence against Rohingya women by security forces is prevalent in Myanmar. The case of rape and other sexual violence is severely seen among Rohingya women. The Rohingya women arrested are also not free from sexual violence by the military forces. The Rohingya women are taken for forced labor, and there, they become the victims of rape, gang rape, and so on (Atif et al., 2020). They are also afraid of expressing violence against them, as it will also become the reason for their exclusion from their community. Women are not the only subjects of this gender-based sexual violence. Instead, the men and the boys are also the subjects (Jones, 2017). The Rohingya men and boys are also subject to rape, sexual torture, and genital mutilation, which sometimes lead them to death. Transgender persons are not excluded from this violence; instead, they face torture, firstly for being a Rohingya Muslim and secondly for being a transgender person. Through the lens of Islamophobia, Rohingya minorities are becoming subject to sexual violence. This shows extreme human rights violations (Celia, 2019).

The increasing Islamophobia is also affecting the humanitarian access of the Rohingya community in Rakhine. The military authority restricts it. The ambulance and food services are destroyed, and many requirements are imposed on the humanitarian organizations in the case of delivering aid and support, increasing their vulnerability and clearly committing a human rights violation (Atif et al., 2020; Liere, 2014). The restriction on freedom of movement also affects those in need of a life-saving emergency. The Myanmar government put many restrictions on their health facilities. This situation has become more visible in the aftermath of COVID-19. There was a lack of protective equipment and oxygen supply in the states where the Rohingya were the majority in number (Khan et al., 2020). The Muslim Rohingya women are most vulnerable in this case. The wave of Islamophobia is accelerating the government's abusive action in these cases (Zahed, 2021). They also significantly impact the education facilities of the Rohingya children. They have the lowest rate of literacy. They are also excluded from the liberal professional study sectors like economics, medicine, and engineering. The Rohingya children are also not

getting their educational rights and are subject to abusive action in educational institutions. They mainly depend on the education provided by the human rights organization, where there is a severe lack. Co-education restrictions in Rakhine State also create discrimination in accessing education facilities. The violation of the fundamental rights of education of the Rohingya minority is highly fueled by the flow of Islamophobia (Jones, 2017; Shah et al., 2019).

The political rights of the Rohingya people have also been denied from a very early period. By introducing the new identity and nationality verification rule in 2015, the previous temporary identity certificate (TIC) holders used to lose their political rights. Prior to that, in 2014, the recruitment imposed on the government of the necessity of becoming a full or naturalized citizen to participate in political parties was also imposed to curtail the political rights of the Rohingya minorities (MacLean, 2018). Besides this, the flow of Islamophobia is increasing the blame of terrorism on the Rohingya people, and this blame is also severely affecting their political rights (Coclanis, 2013). The death penalty is imposed severely on Rohingya Muslims without any justification. The military court imposed the death penalty on the Rohingya Muslims with an unfair trial. In this case, the children and women are also subject to unfair trials and death sentences (Gisel, 2021). Rohingya Muslim minority people are forced to work on sentry duty and other. It severely impacted their physical and mental health. They cannot even deny forced labor for fear of punishment or torture. In many cases, this forced labor turns into sexual violence, as in the case of Rohingya women and girls. Thus, the flow of forced labor increased with Islamophobia to take them under dominance (Jones, 2017).

These images of the violence against the Rohingya community portray that, with the flow of Islamophobia, the violence against the Rohingya community is taking place in a devastating way. Though it cannot be said that Islamophobia is the only reason behind these human rights violations, it is seen that Islamophobia has a close connection with the other triggering factors and is ultimately triggering this violence significantly.

### Factors Behind Growing Islamophobia in Myanmar

In the timeframe when Islamophobia was spreading devastatingly throughout the world, some factors also triggered the flow of Islamophobia in Myanmar. A significant number of factors are accelerating the growth of Islamophobia in the land of Myanmar. As Islamophobia is claimed to be one of the significant factors in the violation of human rights by Myanmar's Rohingya community, the factors behind this growing Islamophobia in Myanmar are discussed for a better understanding and clarification of the issue.

The historical context of Myanmar gives a legacy of the growing Islamophobia in Myanmar. During the Second World War, the Arakanese were in support of the British, and the Burmese were in support of Japan. Historically, these two communities were in opposite positions from each other. After the Second World War, as a Muslim-majority region, Rakhine wanted to join East Pakistan (Anwary, 2018). Though the proposal was ignored and rejected from the beginning of the creation of Myanmar, it is seen that from the very beginning, the Rohingya Muslim community tended to gain their own identity. The Arakanese also claimed autonomy through the Mujahedeen Movement, which was also counted as disrespecting the country's integrity. The claim of sovereignty and the claim of own land gave birth to fear among the Buddhist majority people of Myanmar from the very early period (Foxeus, 2022).

The growing Islamophobia in Myanmar is significantly rooted in the claim to sovereignty of the Rohingya people from the very beginning of the history of Myanmar. In 1947, Rohingya Muslim leader Jafar Hussain Kawal formed his armed Mujahedeen group and demanded a free state for the Muslims under the Burmese government (Faria, 2022). They also took control of North Arakan. After that, the Burmese government carried out Operation Monsoon in 1954, and at last, Ne Win used to end the aspiration of the Rohingya Muslims for self-determination. From the beginning, this tendency gave birth to anti-Muslim sentiment, resulting in severe Islamophobia (Smith, 2019).

In 2011, the quasi-civilian government of Myanmar withdrew the media censorship, which ultimately devastated the Muslim minority community of Myanmar. Through the uncensored media, hatred and hate speech spread throughout Myanmar against the Muslim minority. It extended the flow of the abuses of dependency on social media. For example, the story used to be made up by the Buddhist media regarding the molestation of a Buddhist girl by Muslim people. This fabricated and uncensored news is used to spread the flow of Islamophobia throughout Myanmar (Bhattacharjee, 2014; Ghoshal, 2013).

In 2012, 969 movements were formed under the Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu (Bhattacharjee, 2014). According to this movement, the Muslim minority group of Myanmar, which was 4% of the total population of Myanmar, will become nothing but a massive threat to the Buddhist majority of Myanmar. This tendency and assumption through these 969 movements were significant factors behind the rise of Islamophobia in Myanmar (Kyaw, 2016). Myanmar was also impacted by the fear of the 9/11 attack (Bakali, 2021). The Arakan Rohingya Union (ARU) accelerated this fear of terrorism throughout Myanmar, and the demands of these militant groups fueled the fear among Myanmar's dominant Buddhist community (Bhattacharjee, 2014; Druce, 2020).



Islam has started to be seen as a threat to Buddhism in Myanmar. Here is the Buddhist communalism and the anti-Muslim sentiment fueled by the Myanmar government and Buddhist institutions. The Buddhist monk holds a significant position against the Muslims and their ideologies. The increasing Buddhist nationalism also fueled the discrimination against Rohingya Muslims (Driss, 2016). Racism against the Muslim Rohingya people became very vibrant throughout Myanmar. There are substantial differences between the Rohingya community and the other people of Myanmar. This thing excluded them from mainstream society (Osman, 2017). Myanmar's government intentionally supports the Buddhist community and shows discrimination against Rohingya Muslims (Wade, 2012).

Buddhist Islamophobia also flourished with the idea that the Muslim Rohingya people are trying to spread their Islamization process through reproduction. In that context, it is portrayed that if a Buddhist girl marries a Muslim Rohingya man, she is considered to be losing all her freedom, and her door to show worship of Buddhism will also be closed. Through inter-religious marriage between Muslim Rohingya and Buddhist Burmese, the birth of Muslim children is increasing in Myanmar. The Buddhist community considers it a process of Islamization. This conception also gives birth to Islamophobia in Myanmar (Frydenlund, 2021).

As a whole, these are some of the key factors triggering the growth of Islamophobia in Myanmar. These factors have caused Islamophobia to spread throughout Myanmar, which has led to serious human rights violations against the Rohingya minority by the Buddhist majority and the Myanmar government.

## Responses Throughout the World

The Rohingya community has been persecuted for brutal human rights violations for the last five years in Myanmar. Still, even after five years, no effective response is seen in the local, regional, or global context. The flow of Islamophobia is also accelerating drastically. Though not that many effective solutions have been observed till now, some response is seen from the global arena in cases of human rights violations and also regarding Islamophobia (Moghul, 2015).

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), in its 48th session, discussed the increasing flow of Islamophobia in recent times. While discussing the increasing Islamophobia throughout the world in the Asian context, OIC brought up the growing Islamophobia among Buddhist monks and also mentioned the devastating situation of the Rohingya minority due to that. The OIC claimed that the government is using the flow of Islamophobia as its policy. The OIC declared that they have cordial support for the Rohingya community and encouraged the international community to support the Rohingya community.

By recognizing the increasing plight of Islamophobia in Myanmar, the OIC indicates their support for the Rohingya minority (OIC, 2022).

The response from the Muslim world is not yet that effective. Still, Myanmar is coming under increasing pressure from the Muslim world. Leaders of nations with a mainly Muslim population, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, have taken the lead to pressure the Myanmar government. Indonesia shows significant concern towards this issue. It took humanitarian diplomacy to provide humanitarian assistance to the Rohingya in 2017 (Mallick, 2020). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Indonesia presently provides comprehensive care and assistance to more than 7000 refugees in Indonesia, including housing, healthcare, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), education, and basic needs (IOM, 2023).

As part of the Muslim protests, thousands of Indonesian Muslims led by the Islamist group took part in the violence against Rohingya (Westcott & Wright, 2017). For the last 5 years, the Bangladesh government has been showing respect for international principles towards the refugees, though some restrictions have taken place in recent times. The talks over the repatriation are continuing, though the previous attempts failed. The Afghan Taliban also said that this oppression of the Muslim minority should not be forgotten (Chaudet, 2018).

On the other hand, Western politicians have seemed hesitant to take a strong stance on this matter. For a long period, western countries have been holding on to Islamophobia and going through an anti-Islamic approach to strengthening their survival. In the case of Rohingya Muslim oppression, they are also in a hesitant position (Westcott & Wright, 2017). The Joint Response Plan (JRP) 2022 also got only a quarter of its funding from the UK, the USA, and the European Union. Though the UN shows concern regarding this crisis, it still does not have a very effective stance. Human Rights Watch is concerned that Rohingya security should be ensured, and the funding countries should be more active (UN News, 2022).

## Discussion

The Rohingya crisis is one of the most prolonged crises in world history. Since the very beginning of the independence of Myanmar, the crisis regarding the Rohingya minority has been ongoing. For 72 years, they have been fighting for their recognition, and for the last 42 years since 1978, they have been the subject of tremendous human rights violations. They were the subject of huge systematic violence and statelessness for many years and had to flee from their country in 1978, 1991, and 2016.

Since 2017, many of them have taken shelter in Bangladesh after facing violent extremism (Niti, 2020). According to the last update of 2022, around nine lakh Rohingya fled from Myanmar and took shelter mostly in Bangladesh (UN News, 2022). The issue of minority persecution is not a new phenomenon in Myanmar, where political, national, cultural, religious, and many other factors work. Among all these factors, one of the most significant factors in Rohingya persecution is the flow of Islamophobia in Myanmar (Osman, 2017). This paper already found that several factors are linked to Rohingya persecution and human rights violations in Myanmar. After recognizing those factors, it is also significantly seen that the flow of Islamophobia is highly significant among all these factors in the case of Rohingya persecution and human rights violations in Myanmar. The key focus of this paper on the signifying Islamophobia behind this human rights violation will be analyzed from the two broad spectrums.

### **Analyzing the Factors Behind the Human Rights Violation of the Rohingya Minority**

Several factors from different perspectives play a role in the case of the Rohingya community's persecution and the human rights violations against them. The root factor of this crisis was the citizenship status crisis. In newly independent Myanmar, there was the promise of the resettlement of the Rohingya people. General Ne Win adopted the citizenship law in 1982, which excluded the Rohingya minority from the full and naturalized citizenship range and ultimately blew up the identity crisis. In 1989, the national verification card was operated, which made the Rohingya people fundamentally stateless (Cheesman, 2017).

Most of the Buddhist people of Myanmar are followers of Theravada Buddhism, for which the image of Muslims is like an enemy to them (Walton, 2020). The 969 Buddhist movement led by the Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu is also an example of the hatred towards Muslims, which wanted to curtail Muslim expansion in Myanmar. The Nationalist Monks Association, MaBaTha, also tried to fuel hatred towards the Muslim community. The Muslim influence will occupy Myanmar and is the main fear of the Buddhist extremists (Bilay, 2022).

The fear of terrorism also accelerated violence toward Muslims. Besides the flow of 9/11, the demand of the Arakan Rohingya Union has blown up this fear. To use this fear, the Buddhist majority starts to propagandize the involvement of the Muslim minority in the activities of terrorism and jihad. They started to portray the presence of the Myanmar Muslim Army, which does not even have a clear existence (Bhattacharjee, 2014; Racine, 2019). Muslims are mostly considered the others worldwide, but this flow is

also significantly seen in Myanmar. The non-Myanmar or non-Buddhist people are considered the other by the Buddhist majority in Myanmar. The Buddhist extremist group, the people of Myanmar, and also the government of Myanmar consider the Muslim Rohingya people to be trying very cruelly to separate this Rohingya Muslim minority from the majority people (Driss, 2016).

The economic significance of the Rakhine state is another point that makes the Myanmar government and the Rohingya local people very conscious of holding a grab over this. The connection with Africa, the Middle East, and India and the enrichment of the natural resources make this land a subject of serious concern (Adhikari, 2021). Islamophobia in the land of Myanmar is visible in many contexts. After being a land of people of different religions, the dominance of the Buddhist religion has been visible here from the beginning. As a reason for the human rights violations, Islamophobia here is fueled by the fear among the Buddhist majority about turning the Muslim Rohingya minority into a majority. The government of Myanmar has significant support for the Buddhist majority's interests. Through different state policies and spreading propaganda, they incorporate the Buddhist majority (Osman, 2017).

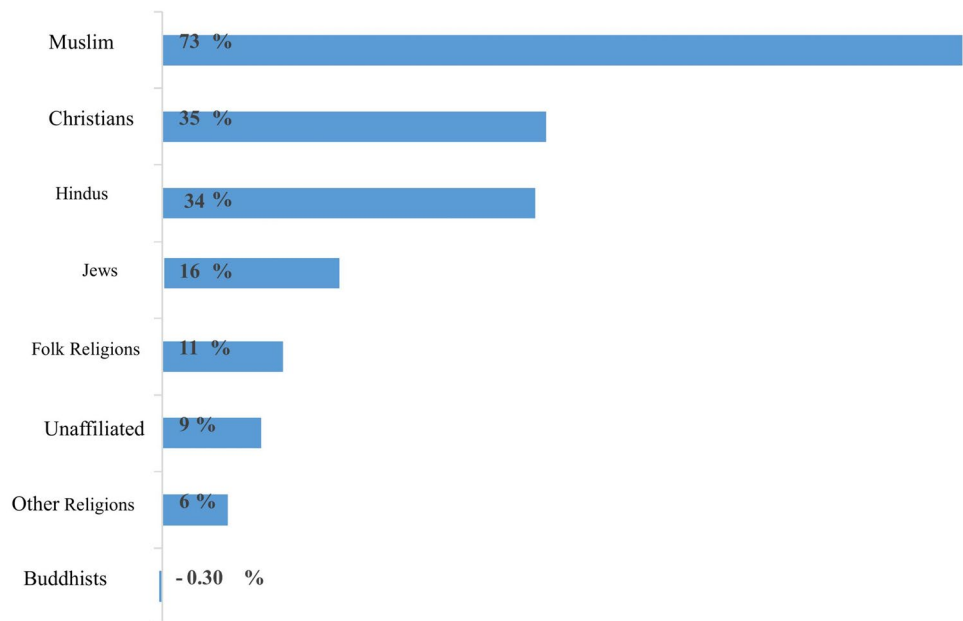
In this context, it is seen that there are several factors behind the Rohingya persecution and the human rights violations in Myanmar. Among all these factors, Islamophobia can be identified. The reason behind that is explained here.

### **Analyzing Islamophobia as a Significant Factor Behind the Human Rights Violation of Rohingya Minority**

It has already been discussed that there are significant factors behind the human rights violations of the Rohingya minority. Among all those factors, Islamophobia is one of the most significant. Most of the factors discussed in the previous section are linked to the context of Islamophobia. Starting from supporting the British during the Second World War to the willingness to join East Pakistan after the war, the Rohingya Muslim community tended to gain their own identity (Sejan, 2022). This type of tendency to acquire their sovereignty fueled Islamophobia among the Buddhist majority people of Myanmar from the very early period.

The government's discriminatory steps are also increasing the flow of Islamophobia in Myanmar and causing human rights violations. From the discriminatory measures of Ne Win to now, it is visible. In 2011, the withdrawal of media censorship by the quasi-civilian government of Myanmar triggered hatred and hate speech throughout Myanmar against the Muslim minority (Thang, 2022). Myanmar's foreign minister, Aung San Suu Kyi, was declared the 2017 International Islamophobe of the Year because of her heinous targeting of the Rohingya Muslim minority (Mansor, 2019). Through this flow of

**Fig. 1** Predicted change in world population size, 2010–2050 (source: Pew Research Center, 2015)



Islamophobia, the government of Myanmar is ultimately crossing the line of human rights violations.

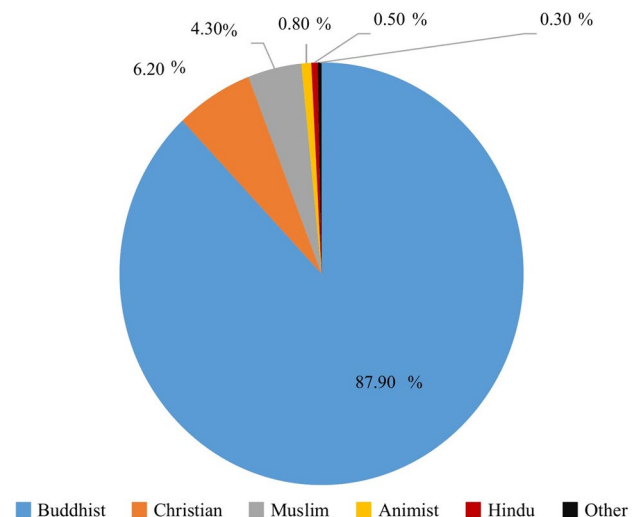
According to the research of the PEW research center in Fig. 1, it is estimated that by 2050, Muslims will be the fastest-growing population throughout the world, and this will be approximately 73% growth. This estimation ultimately gave birth to the flow of Islamophobia throughout the world, and Myanmar, as a Buddhist majority country, is also threatened by this, which accelerated the Islamophobia with the government and Buddhist majority.

In the case of the increasing Islamophobia in Myanmar, the launching of the 969 movements under the Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu, the influence of Theravada Buddhism, and the influence of MaBaTha, all of these were triggered by the flow of Islamophobia so that the Muslim minority group of Myanmar, which was 4% of the total population of Myanmar (Bilay, 2022). This is a huge threat to the survival of Myanmar's Buddhist majority. Buddhist Islamophobia also flourished with the idea that the Muslim Rohingya people are trying to spread their Islamization process through reproduction (Frydenlund, 2021). Through Buddhist extremist religious justification under this veil, they conduct human rights violations toward the Rohingya Muslims.

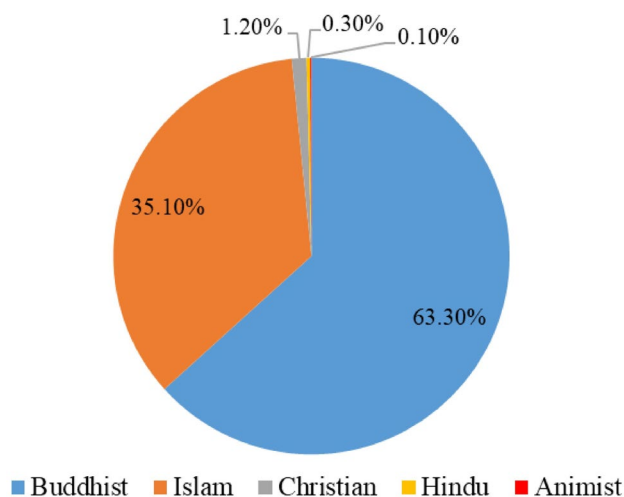
According to the 2014 census (Fig. 2), there are 87.9% of Buddhist people in Myanmar, whereas the number of Muslim minorities is 4.3%. In that case, it became the concern of the Myanmar government and the Buddhist majority that this number could be extended. From there, they spread Islamophobia, ultimately fueling the Rohingya Muslims' human rights violations and irradiation.

It is seen in Fig. 3 that in Rakhine, there are 63.3% Buddhist people and 35.1% Muslim people. Here, Muslims are the second largest population, which gave birth to increasing Islamophobia among the Buddhist majority and the Myanmar government. This fear significantly triggered the exclusion of the Rohingya Muslim community from Rakhine and human rights violations against them.

All these fears of Islamophobia are ultimately fueling the extremist behavior of the Myanmar government and the Buddhist majority of Myanmar and accelerating the human rights violations against the Rohingya minority in Myanmar. Because of this growing Islamophobia, the freedom of expression and the movement are violated by the Rohingya people, and with



**Fig. 2** Religious affiliation in Myanmar, 2014 (source: Department of Population, 2016)



**Fig. 3** Religion-wise population in Rakhine, 2014 (source: UNFPA, 2014)

the increasing flow of Islamophobia since 2012, the restriction has crossed the severity level. Section 505(a) legalizes the criminalization of any criticism of government actions (Zahed, 2021).

The Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar is severely tortured and ill-treated by the military forces and discriminatory government policies. The spread of Islamophobia is working as a fueling factor behind this torture and ill-treatment. The armed groups of Myanmar like the Ta'ang National Liberation Army are taking abusive action against the Muslim minority. They are highly motivated by the flow of Islamophobia. The increasing Islamophobia is also affecting the humanitarian access and health facilities of the Rohingya community in Rakhine because of the restriction of the military authority (Alam & Wood, 2022).

The political rights of the Rohingya people are also significantly denied, and through the new identity and nationality verification rule in 2015, the previous TIC holders used to lose their political rights. They are also not getting their educational rights and are also subject to abusive action in the educational institution. The military court imposed the death penalty on the Rohingya Muslim during the unfair trial (MacLean, 2018). The sexual violence committed against Rohingya women by the security forces is a very common scenario in Myanmar. The case of rape and other sexual violence is severely seen not only by Rohingya women, but also by Rohingya men and transgender people. The Rohingya minority is facing sexual violence first because of their gender and secondly because of their identity as Muslim Rohingya people (Jones, 2017).

This overall discussion ultimately points out the issue that, though several factors are behind the human rights violations of the Rohingya minority, it cannot be said that Islamophobia is the only factor behind this violation. Still, it is proven that

Islamophobia is one of the significant factors and other factors are also fueling the flow of Islamophobia. To a severe extent, Islamophobia is working as one of the most significant factors behind the violation of human rights in Myanmar's Rohingya community. Social work perspectives play a crucial role in addressing and combating the multifaceted human rights violations faced by Myanmar's Rohingya community, particularly concerning Islamophobia. Social workers, through their commitment to social justice and human rights, can contribute significantly to the promotion and defense of the rights of the Rohingya population (Sudheer & Banerjee, 2021; Zakaria, 2019). From a social work standpoint, it is imperative to engage in comprehensive community-based interventions that not only address the immediate consequences of Islamophobia but also work towards dismantling the root causes that fuel this prejudice. This involves delving deeply into historical inequities, socio-political dynamics, and cultural attitudes that perpetuate discrimination against the Rohingyas. It requires an understanding of power structures at both local and global levels as well as acknowledging intersecting forms of oppression experienced by this marginalized group. Furthermore, social workers need to actively collaborate with diverse stakeholders, such as government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working on minority rights advocacy, religious leaders from various faith backgrounds, and international bodies involved in human rights protection. This involves the thoughtful implementation of culturally sensitive and context-specific strategies designed to deepen understanding and tolerance among diverse religious and ethnic groups within Myanmar. Additionally, social workers can profoundly impact positive change by advocating for policy reforms that actively break down systemic discrimination while collaborating closely with local communities and international organizations. Embracing a human rights perspective enables social workers to empower the Rohingya community, amplify their agency, and cultivate a society that embraces inclusivity while honoring the dignity and rights of every individual, regardless of their religious or ethnic identities.

## Conclusion

The Rohingya Muslim community is the subject of targeted persecution and human rights violations. Being a country of diverse people from different ethnicities and religions, Myanmar significantly holds its image as a non-secular and Buddhist majority country (Osman, 2017). Discriminatory state policies towards the Rohingya Muslim minority, from the time of the military coup of 1962 until now in the Suu Kyi regime, are visible and are violating the fundamental human rights of this community. The Buddhist majority, with their extremist ideology, is hardly driven by the flow

of Islamophobia, where they simply consider the Rohingya Muslim minority to be a significant threat to holding their dominant position (Mohajon & Uddin, 2022). The government of Myanmar is also supporting this extremist ideology, where they are influenced by the flow of Islamophobia, and by counting the Rohingya Muslims as a threat, they are eradicating them from the soil of Myanmar. A religious and political base of justification behind violating these human rights is created where the image of the Rohingya Muslim minority is portrayed as a significant threat (Osman, 2017). The Rohingya minority, who have been seeking their identity for the last 72 years and facing horrifying persecution for the last 42 years, is the subject of severe human rights violations for many factors (Zahed, 2021). While there are several variables that contribute to the Rohingya minority being persecuted, a substantial amount of these problems is related to Islamophobia. In the end, this contributes significantly to the violation of this community's human rights.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** The authors have no conflicts of interest associated with this publication.

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