

Human Rights Violation on Rohingya Women: Experience from a Refugee Camp in Bangladesh

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Abstract: The Rohingya issue is not only evolving on identity crisis which leads to persecution and discrimination but also to the deprivation of fundamental human rights. Rohingya are the worst victim of state-sponsored oppression and discrimination in the modern world. This article will reflect the violation of fundamental human rights concerning Rohingya women and girls as they are the worst victim of state-sponsored oppression in Myanmar. At the same time, the study will proceed by considering the exclusionary policies of military government made the Rohingyas leave their homeland and fled to neighboring country Bangladesh, then consider the multiple challenges in shelter camp of different which are undocumented. Next will be an analysis of international human rights violations both in Rakhine state of Myanmar and shelter camp in Bangladesh and lastly the dimensions of humanitarian crisis from the human rights perspectives. The article is mainly qualitative research, and the primary sources are used for in-depth analysis. The study shows that identity crisis made Rohingya women vulnerable and they became an easy victim of gender-based violence. Violence against women is used as a powerful weapon of ethnic cleansing in Myanmar.

Key Words: Human Rights, Rohingya Women, Refugee, Myanmar conflict.

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I. INTRODUCTION

“Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion or political views that place must- at that moment- become the center of universe.”- Elie Wiesel

The Rohingya, the Muslim minority in the Rakhine state of Myanmar, is one of the most persecuted ethnic community in the world and this is one of the severe human rights crises in contemporary world politics. Rohingya people are always perpetrated by both the Myanmar army and Rakhaine local. The crisis disproportionately affects especially women and girls, and they are the worst victims and helpless of this situation. Further, both women and girls have experienced sexual and gender-based violence which is the most horrific weapon of war or instruments of terror. Almost all the women and girls in different camps of Bangladesh-Myanmar border are the survivor of or witness to sexual violence, murder or burning alive of a family member or neighbor and they are still traumatized and living with inadequate food, shelter, water, sanitation, and health service. Further, the sufferings of pregnant women and mothers with the newborn are in life-threatening condition. Then, the worst situation is the risk of becoming victims of human trafficking, forced prostitution, and sexual abuse. This research attempts to find out the human rights crisis in Myanmar and the plight of Rohingya women in the shelter camp of Bangladesh. The study will also identify the factors affecting human rights on Rohingya women and girls.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The article observes three significant issues and comprehending these three problems are pivotal to see and possess the thorough understanding of the human rights violation on Rohingya women and girl. The first question covers the factors which are affecting human rights violation of Rohingya women and girls in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Secondly, it focuses on the different patterns of abuses related to the human rights in Myanmar. And, the last objective is to identify the crisis in Rohingya camp of Bangladesh.

III. METHODOLOGY

Description of the Research Area:

As the research area for this study, a temporary Rohingya camp in the village named Kutupalong union Razapalong under Ukhia upazilla of Cox's Bazar district has been selected. Around fifteen thousand Rohingya inhabitants are currently living at this camp. Kutupalong has other transient camps other than registered camps where different NGOs are putting their best efforts to help living of the people out there. As the village roads are unusable and wrecked, the communication system with other places is still underdeveloped. People are living in an impoverished environment with inadequate sanitation and water facilities. Temporary shelters are made of discarded plastic and bamboo slats. Rohingya people are running temporary small grocery shops under the surveillance of Bangladesh Army to meet their daily essentials. Further, the medical facilities are very poor and most of the pregnant women, mother and newborn babies do not receive proper care when it is needed though some NGOs are providing health service which is not sufficient to meet the crisis. The school for refugee children "Child Friendly Space" is functioning with the assistance of Relief International and UNHCR. Bangladesh Army is putting an eye on everything on a regular basis. The movement of Rohingya and Bangladeshi people is strictly controlled. Moreover, the biometric fingerprints is used for identifying the Rohingya inhabitants.

Sample:

Total 32 Rohingya refugees from different age group randomly selected for the interview and there were seventeen (17) women and girls, and fifteen (15) were male. The sample was drawn from one of the temporary Rohingya camps of Kutupalong village. The interview mainly captured the factors affecting human rights violation in the Rakhine state of Myanmar, patterns of human rights abuse on Rohingya women and girls, their life in the refugee camp and how their male members treat the distressed women and girls. Based on fieldwork from mid-December 2017 to end of December 2017, the research for the paper derived from semi-structured interview and observation of interviewee. The conducted place of the interview is in shelter homes at the refugee camp of Bangladesh. The open structure of qualitative interviewing allows for unexpected issues to emerge. Local 'Chittagonian dialect' used for the interviews with Rohingyas.

Table n.1: Profile of the Female respondents

Age Group	Female	Percent (%)
15-25	5	29.4
26-35	6	35.2
36-45	2	11.8
46-55	2	11.8
56-65	2	11.8
	17	100

(Source: Field Data 2017)

Table no 2: Profile of the Male Respondents

Age Group	Male	Percent (%)
18-25	4	26.7
26-35	3	20
36-45	3	20
46-55	3	20
56-65	2	13.3
	15	100

(Source: Field Data 2017)

IV. UNDERSTANDING HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS OF REFUGEES

According to Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights". From the historical point of view, Myanmar has a long history of human rights violation against Rohingya Muslims. The Burmese government regards Rohingya Muslims as undocumented migrants from Bangladesh and denies their full citizenship. The form of discrimination and the policies of expulsion that were applied to the Muslim Rohingyas by the Burmese military regime made it difficult for the Muslim groups to improve themselves socially and economically. The Rohingyas suffer from human rights abuse and the abuse range from denial of citizenship, restriction on freedom of movement, obstacles to family system development, forced labour, land confiscation, arbitrary taxation, forced eviction, house destruction,

deprivation of right to education, arbitrary arrest, rape, molestation, dishonor of women and so on.¹ Buddhist fundamentalism and anti-Muslim sentiment was also intensified in Burmese society. In Myanmar they are regarded as illegal migrants from Bangladesh and for Bangladesh they are “non- Bangladeshi national” or “refugee” from Myanmar. Mass human rights abuses, internal strife, communal violence, forced relocation lead to the creation of Rohingya refugees. While Myanmar government is responsible for the protection of the basic human rights of their nationals, Rohingya Muslims find themselves without the protection of a national government. According to Article 1(a) (2) of the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees 1951 (hereinafter referred to as Refugee Convention) the term ‘refugee’ shall apply to “any persons who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country”.² The basic human rights of refugees depend upon six factors³, such as (a) Right to protection against refoulement (b) Right to seek asylum (c) Right to equality and non-discrimination (d) Right to life and personal security (e) Right to return (f) Right to remain. This study investigates the human rights violation of Rohingya women by Burmese authority and the condition of human rights in refugee camp.

V. ROHINGYA: THE NAME OF UNWANTED PEOPLE

The Rohingyas are one of the most vulnerable population in the world by any reckoning⁴. Their plight generally goes unnoticed by the world at large, even though some rights activists say their persecution amounts to ethnic cleansing⁵. Due to the deliberate isolation, they have been socially, financially and politically excluded from being citizens of Myanmar. Professor William Schabas described Rohingya in his report as the “prime facie victims of the crime against humanity and persecution for decades” that included “the deprivation of fundamental human rights and forced displacement using expulsion and other coercive means.”⁶

Muslim Rohingyas are the product of legal and political process of the Myanmar government that does not consider them as a part of its native population. The question is why the Myanmar government and majority of Rakhine people regard the Rohingyas as unwanted in Myanmar? They are unwanted in the land they were born and they are no longer welcomed in the places they took refuge.⁷ In Myanmar the government tells them they have no right and no place. In Bangladesh, the government says they don’t belong here. They are like out of the frying pan into the fire.

The historical interpretations of early and modern Arakan is contested. The claim of indigenesness by the Muslim people are questionable and controversial because most citizens of Myanmar do not acknowledge the term Rohingya and they claim that these people are illegal migrants from Bangladesh.⁸ However, these Muslim inhabitants who settled in Arakan recognize themselves as Rohingya or natives of Arakan for centuries.⁹ In ancient times, Arakan was regarded as the extension of northern India and the territory was invaded by the Tibeto-Burman tribes in the 10th century which is pointed as “newcomers mixed with the original inhabitants and formed the Kingdom of Arakan.”¹⁰ The Arakan king Naramithla was in exile after the invasion of Kingdom of Ava from the northern Burma in 1404; however, he returned to Arakan in 1430 to establish Arakan capital Mrauk-U and he was influenced by the hybrid Buddhist -Islamic traditions from Persia and India.¹¹ The diplomatic relations between Mughal and Arakan was active and the Arakan territory was ruled by the British till the Myanmar’s independence in 1948. As a result, the Muslim population of Arakan state grew from approximately 58,000 in 1871 to 179,000 in 1911 and it is claimed by the Burmese people that the Rohingya muslim people are direct descendants of migrants from Bengal during British colonial period.¹² The claim is even supported by the fact that most of the Rohingya populations speak Bengali with a strong “Chittagonian dialect”.¹³

After the independence from the British in 1948, the country was unstable with post-colonial reformation and ethnic conflict and then the military introduced the army rule for 60 years since 1962. During the military rule, the Arakan people especially Rohingya people have undergone a critical time and they are tortured, killed, forced labour and other abuses by Burmese army. Discrimination and unequal treatment are central to the human rights violations suffered by this population group.¹⁴ The 1982 Citizenship Law is considered to be the source of the statelessness of Rohingya. They are not recognized as ‘citizens’ of Myanmar rather considered as resident foreigners. There are other examples of refugees in the world those may have lost or left their home but not have been stripped off their citizenship. However, the status of stateless make them vulnerable population on earth and they become subject to abuses, including restrictions on their freedom of movement, assembly and association, discriminatory on access to education, forced labor and arbitrary confiscation of property.¹⁵

During the pre-colonial period religion had been the most dominant one in Burmese society. Buddhist monks had wielded sufficient political power and had significantly contributed to shaping the religious landscape of Myanmar.

After independence in 1948, the military leaders implies the state's pro-Buddhist stance as a way of lending legitimacy to the military rule of Myanmar. Burmese society possesses heterogeneity but in order to build a mono-religious nation Burmese authority preferred to use 'nation-building' which emphasizes the concept "one religion, one language and one ethnicity." This concept vividly shows the effort of homogenizing the plural society of Myanmar. During 1960-1962 in order to unify the country against the threat of communist rebels, U-Nu made Buddhism as the state religion, which of course led to even more ethnic or religious based rebellions.¹⁶

Factors that affect the rise of Buddhist fundamentalism in Myanmar is negative image of Muslim community after 9/11. Indeed, the destruction of Bamiyan Buddhist statue in Afghanistan in 2001 considerably amplified the hatred of Buddhist Burmese toward their fellow Muslims. Hate speech another factor condemned by the international community as ethnic cleansing. The UN human rights experts have blamed social media especially Facebook for playing a "determining role" in spreading hate speech against the persecuted minorities in Myanmar. Around 700,000 Rohingya people were forced to leave their homes in the Rakhine state into Bangladesh since insurgent attacks sparked as security crackdown August 2017.¹⁷

VI. DIMENSIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE: EXPERIENCE FROM A REFUGEE CAMP

Only a women can realize how it feels when a child is snatched away from the arms of a mother and slaughtered, a man is murdered before the eyes of his wife, or a girl is brutally raped. That is exactly what happened to countless Rohingya women back in Rakhine state of Myanmar. Every single men, women and girls we met in the refugee camp of Cox's Bazar described such harrowing tales of tortured women, children and girls. Even in refugee camp, women and girls are not safe. Girls are being trafficked into prostitution in refugee camp. The status of statelessness make them vulnerable to a wide range of sexual and gender-based violence.¹⁸

Since August 25, 2017, Burmese security force have committed widespread rape against women and girls as part of a campaign of ethnic cleansing against Muslims in Rakhine state. Killings, looting cattle and crops, rapes, mass arson of homes by Burmese security forces and Rakhine people, locally known as Burmese Mug in hundreds of predominantly Rohingya villages have forced more than 700000 Rohingya to flee to neighboring Bangladesh.¹⁹ This study carried out interview of 17 Rohingya women and girls who had fled to Bangladesh, including 3 rape survivors and 15 Rohingya men from 18 to 65 age group, who described horrific torture on women and girls and how they reached from Rakhine state to refugee camp. When we asked them about their nationality, all of them replied they are Burmese and out of 17 women and girl most of them do not want to go back to Myanmar, they are looking forward to Bangladesh government decision and rely on Allah. They are much better in refugee camp though there is shortage of water and food. Most of them are illiterate. Rape is a powerful tool of ethnic cleansing: it not only drives terrified victims from their homes but also makes them afraid to return²⁰

Seventeen year old Yasmin Ara said that soldiers gathered Rohingya women and girls into groups and then gang raped or raped them. Three to four people were attempt to rape one women and without any resistance they did it. When women were being raped most of the male members were fled to save their lives. Both male and female respondents described to us the rapists were uniformed members of Burmese security forces and also involved in looting. "I was held down by 10/12 uniformed members and raped by 3/4 of them. All of them were armed. They were threatening to shoot me." Another story came from a 22-year-old, rape victim, who told that she was at home with her family. Soldiers dragged her out of home and raped in front of her parents. Her whole body was full of pain and lying down as a dead. Even 13 to 16 years old girls who are very young and can be considered to be merely children are also not spared at the hands of the soldiers and are also reportedly raped by the soldiers. The soldiers as saying, "we are going to rape and kill you because you are Muslim". This is a major breach of the fundamental human rights which dictates that nobody should be oppressed due to their religion or gender. Women continued to suffer even after reaching Bangladesh. None of the rape survivors we interviewed received post rape care in Burma and overcrowded refugee camps together with stigma and shame has prevented many women from obtaining post-rape care.

Both male and female respondents witnessed the killing of their children, parents, brothers and sisters by the soldiers. Some rape victims were being killed and burnt. Indiscriminate killing, hacking to death with machetes, burning alive, mutilating bodies after gang rape, slitting throats, throwing children into rivers, torching villages and burying landmine on the path of fleeing people fall into the category of genocide. Security forces beat women and girls with fists or guns, slapped them, or kicked them with boots. For those able to flee in desperate condition - hungry, exhausted and sometimes with rape, bullet or burn injuries. Rape survivors walked with bleeding, torn genitals and infections through jungle to Bangladesh. Women in late stages of pregnancy described walking up and down steep hills slippery from monsoon rains, through rivers and dense vegetation, often with little to eat and on sore hips and swollen legs. Two women told us about giving birth

during their journey without basic medical supplies or skilled health assistance. Bangladesh and international donors have acted quickly to provide relief for the refugees, and are expanding assistance for rape survivors.

Even in refugee camp women are not always safe. Particularly when a women or girl is alone or not accompanied by her family. Sixteen years old Shofika khatun shared her bitter experience in refugee camp. She is alone because all of her family members are killed by Myanmar military. She was relocated from Balukhali camp to Kutupalong camp. As she is relocated into new place, she is not aware of that camp and as well as the neighboring. After one week later, a few of Rohingya boys are come into her shelter at mid night and insist her to do unethical things. But she refused them. After sometimes later those boys raped her which was so brutal that she couldn't even shouted. But the situation was not in her favor. Then the next day she told all of these incident into the camp authority and camp authority referred this issue into the UNHCR protection.

International Organization for Migration states that around 1.2 million Rohingya people who are recently arrived in Bangladesh from Myanmar need health assistance. Further, the World Health Organization claims this is a level 3 emergency crisis (Relief web, 2017). The main challenges of healthcare facilities are the inadequate health complexes and primary health care units, which are not capable enough to control overcrowding refugees. One female responded in Kutupalong Camp said that almost all the newborn babies are facing malnutrition and most vulnerable and they are not getting proper health care services in camp because the provided facilities are very limited to treat these children. The field research found that around two thirds of pregnant women have no access to gynecological and obstetrical services, and the new mothers are facing problems to breastfeed their babies because there is no privacy and poor nutrition. In an interview, another female participant said the women who are pregnant and fled away from Myanmar are still traumatized by the violence and some of them are injured with gunshots, fire and shrapnel. The research found that the mental and psychological health service is inadequate and it is creating huge effect on new mother and their newborn babies' mental health. In response to sanitation, one male responds, "this camp is becoming like hell. It is full of houses and toilets are far away from houses. So, our female members of the family wait for dark or night. There is no privacy. They do not feel safe to go to toilet alone. Most of the time young male members accompany them." The field visit found that the drainage system is unthinkable worse with open water drains and insect larvae. Further, it is also found that people are drinking that water.

In the camp, most of the female refugees are widowed and alone and during the interview time, they said they want to start a new and fresh life. Almost all of them are scared to talk about forced prostitution and trafficking. 20 years old Halima, who seems brave, said, "everyone knows what is going on here and who are involved with this trafficking. Though the security is very good, the brokers always try to lure the young and adult girls to earn money outside the camp. These girls are not educated and they accompany the traffickers hoping to have better future." Romida is a 15 years old girl. She lives with her parents in refugee camp. In her family there are seven members including her brother & sister. She is the youngest one. As a big family they are faced many difficulties into the camp. Such as food, economical, shelters and so on things. So, one day a stranger came to the camp and observed her families condition. Due to the difficulties this stranger proposed Romida's father to give him her youngest child Romida for working as a cleaner in his house. And her father also accepted his proposal. Finally the stranger took his 15 years girl in exchange of money and also promised to her father that Romida would back again frequently in a month once. But the situation is changed over the time. After one month Romida couldn't come into the camp. Her father tried to contact with that stranger but he failed. In many cases the Rohingya child trafficking has happened in many ways. That is one example of the way of trafficking.

International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported that these female refugees are soft targets of traffickers as most of the girls lost everything in Rakhine state and now they want to do jobs in bigger cities or get married.²¹ Another refugee from the Kutupalong camp, Arif, 31, stated that the condition of camp is better and no one disturbs the adolescents' girls. Though the young girls of camp are safe but those who are living outside camp and congested tent near border are at highest risk of trafficking and forced prostitution. The movement of Rohingya inhabitants is strictly controlled and the biometric fingerprints is used for identifying the Rohingya. The government has completed the biometric registration of Rohingyas who have entered Bangladesh facing atrocities unleashed by the Myanmar forces in Rakhine and gave them identity cards so that they could be identified easily and the Myanmar government could take them back. Bangladesh Government has imposed a ban on marriage between Bangladeshis and Rohingyas as they are "non-Bangladeshi nationals."²²

VII. CONCLUSION

From the experience of a Rohingya camp in Bangladesh, it can be concluded that displaced Rohingya women and girls are the biggest example of human rights violation in recent time. The humanitarian crisis has been embedded in the absence of their citizenship, statelessness and as a migrant refugee. With the absence of citizenship, the Rohingya women and girls are not only denied to have access to human rights but also oftentimes vulnerable to a wide range of sexual and gender-based violence. As a refugee they are living

inhumanly in human world. Burmese security forces have committed “mass rape,” which can be considered as ‘ethnically and religion motivated Rape’. The soldiers gathered Rohingya women and girls into groups and then gang raped or raped them. The most alarming thing is that the Myanmar government denies several reports of human rights abuses. Bangladesh government especially Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has earned the reputation of the mother of humanity and star of the east for her humanitarian attitude towards Rohingya refugees from the neighboring Myanmar. She also draws the attention of world community to put pressure on Myanmar military Junta and demands that Myanmar military junta has to take back their own people own citizen.

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