# Effects of Conflict-related Sexual Violence on Kinship Networks

## Case of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh

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**Abstract**

With the outset in feminist theory on wartime rape (Brownmiller, 1975) this paper illuminates how kinship networks are affected by conflict-related sexual violence. Following feminist scholars, we argue that conflict-related sexual violence is intended to damage communities by destroying their cohesion. An analysis of kinship relations of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh indicates that members of the community post refuge struggle to protect the conjugal order (MacKenzie, 2010) and social norms related to family and marriage. Attempting to avoid the shame and stigmatisation of sexual violence, kinship networks are being reevaluated to protect the family's honour. This is done for example by shunning survivors or making use of corrective measures like child marriage and restrictions on women's movement. Thus, when a community is subjected to conflict-related sexual violence, women are victimized twice: first through the experience of sexual violence during conflict, then by stigmatisation and restrictions post-conflict.

**Keywords:** kin networks; conflict-related sexual violence; kinship; conjugal order; Rohingya refugee

## Introduction

Although the focus on wartime rape might have increased during the 20th century, the phenomenon is as old as war itself (Gottschall, 2004). Feminist scholars (see Brownmiller, 1975; Stiglmayer, 1994; Sajor, 1998) were the first to investigate and hypothesise wartime rape with a theoretical approach. They addressed the phenomenon, not as a crime motivated by sexual passion, but rather as an instrument of social power. As in the times of peace conflict-related sexual violence comes from the unequal gender relations and the desire of a male perpetrator to exert dominance over his (female) victim which is exacerbated by military culture and war (Enloe, 1998; Kelly 2000; Gottschall, 2004). Most of the contemporary scholars adopt one of the two perspectives based on the first feminist research of wartime rape: opportunistic or weapon of war. Supporters of sexual violence as a crime of opportunity during war believe that it happens because of the perpetrators' desires or due to mythologist masculine group identity, hence sexual violence happens because the perpetrator is a man and/or a soldier (Kirby, 2012; Megar, 2016).

In the second understanding, conflict-related sexual violence is seen as strategic due to the devastating effects it has on an affected society: the spreading of terror and the humiliation of the enemy (Anderson, 2010; Bastick, Grimm & Kunz, 2007; Leatherman, 2011). Conflict-related sexual violence becomes a strategic tool of warfare (Allen, 1996; Kamal, 1998; Littlewood, 1997), like bombs, bullets or propaganda, and is an effective tool of genocide because it can affect the afflicted culture in its possibilities to reproduce and remain coherent. Women who have been subjected to conflict-related sexual violence can face many challenges: they suffer from physical or psychological injuries, they can be abandoned or disowned by their families and husbands, or in some cases, they die during the assault or following injuries afflicted during the assault - all of these scenarios lower a community's ability to grow through reproduction (Allen, 1996).

In this paper, we are not going to investigate the motives or intent behind (see Allen, 1996; Brownmiller, 1975), nor forms of (see Cohen, 2013; Wood, 2009) conflict-related sexual violence, which has already been explored by many researchers. Instead, we are going to focus on one of its long-lasting effects. That is a community and family degradation suffered by the survivors. To do this, we will examine the concept of conjugal order (MacKenzie, 2010), as well as anthropological understandings of kinship (Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2004; Yanagisako and

Collier, 1987), and contest it with the survival statements of Rohingya women and girls, as well as other members of the Rohingya community from the camps of Bangladesh.

Here we would like to acknowledge the popular criticism of conceptualising rape as a weapon of war, especially regarding the intention behind conflict-related sexual violence. Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern (2013) in their critical review of the concept note, that "One problematic aspect of the discourse of Rape as a Weapon of War is that it somehow assumes the existence of a uniform universal military strategy that is shared by all military/armed groups in all contexts, in which rape is construed as (somewhat) inherently and objectively strategic" (p. 65). Many researchers have pointed out that there can be many reasons for conflict-related sexual violence which are not part of the "rational war machine" which the discourse within strategic rape implies (p. 85). As Jonathan Gottschall (2004) argues, it is important not to confuse the consequences of conflict-related sexual violence with its intentions, even if the results may be welcomed by the perpetrators either way. We have no way of determining the reasons behind the conflict-related sexual violence during the genocide against the Rohingya, but the consequences are many. It could be argued that the Myanmarese army succeeds in its attempt at genocide, not in the traditional, direct sense, but indirectly, as a type of second-degree genocide, where the whole society is left traumatised and unable to continue living as they used to.

**Methodology and theoretical framework**

For decades, the Rohingya, Muslim minority from Myanmar, have been persecuted and marginalised by the authorities and civilians (Zarni & Cowley, 2014). With the destruction of hundreds of Rohingya villages, which started in August 2017, the conflict escalated and led to a mass exodus of the Rohingya to neighbouring Bangladesh (Ware & Laoutides, 2019). Many reports (see Amnesty International, 2018; MSF, 2017; MSF, 2018; OHCHR, 2018) document allegations of genocide, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. In September 2019, Human Rights Council (OHCHR) published a report on sexual and gender-based violence in Myanmar, which stated that the use of rape during the 2017 "clearance operations" (p. 19) against Rohingya was "methodical and systematic" (p. 19) with "genocidal intent to destroy the Rohingya people" (p. 23). Hence, this article considers the atrocities, which happened to women in Myanmar in 2017 and 2018, as part of the tools of war, and the use of rape by the Myanmarese army as a weapon of war.

This allows an understanding of conflict-related sexual violence not only as an experience in survivors' lives but also as an occurrence with an intent to affect kinship networks and whole communities. Furthermore, this approach emphasises the exploitation of cultural and normative gender beliefs of the whole community (Meger, 2016). Therefore, we set our research question as follows: *if the goal of wartime sexual violence is to destroy the coherence of the survivors' community, how does it achieve that?* Furthermore, *what are the effects of it on the kinship networks and survivor's family?*

This paper is based on a group project written in 2018 for which secondary data of Rohingya women's experiences of conflict-related sexual violence,[2] as well as gender-based violence in the refugee camps in Bangladesh were collected. Data was then systematically analysed, with the presumed understanding of the interconnectedness between the pre and post refuge violence, and five different themes connected to and enabling gender-based violence emerged: 'Women's physical trauma'; 'Women's mental trauma'; 'Women's social trauma'; 'Camp structure and humanitarian aid', and 'Gender dynamics.' In this article, we will focus on social trauma and gender dynamics, and use the following theoretical concepts to understand the dynamics which are created post-conflict. The theoretical analysis will be supported with quotes from the Rohingya community.

**Conjugal order**

In her research Megan MacKenzie (2010) explores post-conflict reintegration for victims of conflict-related sexual violence in Sierra Leone. She creates a new framework from which to consider why rape is so often used as a tool of war or conflict. MacKenzie (2010) argues that the disorder that conflict brings reveals the intense effort necessary to protect what she calls "the conjugal order" (p. 205). Conjugal order is not only the institution of marriage but also the broader social norms associated with marriage and the family. This includes the privilege of heterosexual sex and the assumption that sex within marriage is always consensual. What the disruption of the conjugal order in conflict times underlines is the conjugal order's general importance in society in areas such as stability, security and family life post-conflict. This process occurs for example when Myanmarese soldiers rape Rohingya women and thereby violate

[2] Additionally authors want to note that even though this article in concerned with sexual violence perpetrated against women and girls, it must be acknowledged that men and boys are also victims of sexual violence (for the information concerning Rohingya see WRC, 2018).

patriarchal norms that define women as the property of men, sex within marriage as sacred, and the control of women as a marker of masculine power and identity.

Following MacKenzie (2010), the concept of the conjugal order will be used to better understand the difficulties survivors and their families experience post-conflict. It is important to understand these impacts in the context of the conjugal order because conflict-related sexual violence can be understood as an assault on the entire family unit, as well as a tool of disruption of family ties. To broaden this context and deepen our understanding of the impact of conflict-related sexual violence on family relations understandings of kinship will be added to our analysis.

**Kinship**

Kinship is a study concerning human connections and disconnections (Tsing & Yanagisako, 1983). As the feminist anthropologist Tine Tjørnhøj-Thomsen (2004), explains: "kinship is not an isolated institution" (p. 152) as it is connected to other comprehensive socialites and social processes. Family dynamics are unfolded and regulated in public spaces and reflect on the sociality of their families. Kinship, thus, establishes connections to community life and the formation of social norms (Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2004). For anthropologists Sylvia Junko Yanagisako and Jane Fishburn Collier (1987), kinship is part of a social system of inequality organising social behaviour. They present social systems as constituted of dynamic processes where systems and actors influence each other. In asking what social processes are at play in creating the social systems, we can uncover the dynamics realising cultural meanings and social consequences of actions. Therefore, the study of kinship would help in understanding the actions of the Rohingya community as a whole: "Instead of asking how rights and obligations are mapped onto kinship bonds, thus assuming the genealogical grid, we need to ask how specific societies recognise claims and allocate responsibilities" (Yanagisako and Collier, 1987, p. 35).

**Analysis**

The Rohingya culture is highly influenced by religious beliefs and traditional practices. Gender segregation is common among Rohingya, mainly due to the importance of upholding purdah, which is based on a belief that women should not be seen by strangers, and if they need to leave the home they are usually required to wear a burka. Marriage is crucial for women as it is how they can achieve social and economic security, as they are discouraged from working. Girls are considered ready to marry a couple of years after their menstruation starts. Once they are

married, they become the responsibility of the husband and his family. In Myanmar marriage used to be a family decision, however, in the camps families were separated and the extended family lost their central role in decision making. Women generally have little influence on main household or life decisions, and are mainly responsible for daily chores, while the husbands have to provide for the family (ISCG, 2017; Leigh, et al, 2020).

As previously mentioned, conflict-related sexual violence is used to create disorder in the relationships that are traditionally formed by marriage and paternity laws, which is part of the tactical advantage for conflict-related sexual violence as a strategy of war. Mackenzie (2011), following Brownmiller, argues that conflict-related sexual violence is an expression of "institutionalized power hierarchies as well as a signifier of embedded social norms related to masculinity and femininity" (p. 207), which makes it an effective tool in war and conflict to create disorder to kinship relations. In patriarchal societies like the Rohingya, a woman's virtue does not only reflect her dignity and morality but also their family's and the larger kin networks (Huong, 2012). Rohingya men fear stigmatisation because women have been raped, as a female family member recounts: "This is a very horrible moment for us. Men are very angry, very angry. They always say, 'We are not able to save our girls. And this is our fault.' They always blame themselves" (as cited in WRC, 2018). The message included in conflict-related sexual violence is that the women who have been raped are impure, stripped of their femininity and that the men are stripped of their masculinity for not being able to protect them (MacKenzie, 2011).

This comes from a constant search for the true and authentic - an ideology of authenticity, where kin members strive to become "the right wife", "the right husband" and "the right family" (Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2004, pp. 144-5). At the same time kinship serves as a moral system of expectations and obligations, which the individuals may find hard to live up to. As a result, the strive for an unachievable, yet expected, ideal leads to paradoxes and conflicts in the conjugal relationship (Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2004). Thus, in the ideal conjugal relationship of the Rohingya, the wife is perceived as ideal, has she only had sex with her husband, and the husband is perceived as ideal, so long he has an "undamaged" wife. Hence, to fully realise the effects of conflict-related sexual violence, it is important to start by examining marriage patterns among Rohingya in the camps of Bangladesh.

**Marriage as a corrective measure**

It is hard to reliably estimate the prevalence of child marriage among Rohingya pre-displacement, however, reports indicate that they were uncommon due to the local authorities strictly enforcing national marriage laws, which forbade marriage under the age of 18 and polygamy. To get married in Myanmar Rohingya had to acquire a marriage license, which was a costly and long process, while for the initial 18 months of their stay in Bangladesh new coming Rohingya were not aware of the marriage laws in the country (Leigh, et al, 2020). Child, early and forced marriage as well as polygamy is not a new phenomenon among Rohingya, and the latter has increased in Bangladesh. However, polygamy and child marriage are not only a cultural incitement, but instead an adaptation to poverty, partly brought on by long-term state persecution (ISCG, 2017). The experience of exile pushed it to the extreme and became a means of survival, as a Rohingya father explains:

> "Of course if I'd stayed in Rakhine I would wait to marry [away] my daughter. I was a farmer with three acres of land. I [would have fed her] with what I have in my house or extended family and neighbours would help. Here we can't do that" (as cited in MacGregor & Ratcliffe, 2017).

Added value to marrying off your daughters young is protection from the accusation of inappropriate behaviour or being a survivor of rape, thus, this could be a possible explanation for the increase of prevalence of child marriage in the camps in Bangladesh in comparison to Myanmar (ACAPS, 2019; Leigh, et al, 2020). Child marriage has become a form of corrective measure, meaning an action that can be done to realise a common ideal (Yanagisako & Collier, 1987), to prevent an "impurification" of what is considered to be "real Rohingya", thus, this corrective measure become a new norm. Considering that even in the relative safety of the camp girls and women are still subjected to sexual and gender-based violence as well as are at risk of trafficking, parents increasingly see child marriage as a form of protection from damaging their daughter's and in extend family's reputation (ACAPS, 2019; Guglielmi et al., 2020; Leigh, et al, 2020). A Rohingya girl explains reasons for not waiting longer to get married: "They will call me a useless, bad woman. And the community will think I'm sleeping with other men" (as cited in Rashid & Caller, 2019). A child bride becomes an ideal solution for the despair of trying to save the family's dignity.

Before the genocide, women generally experienced barriers to freedom of movement and access to and control over resources (Toma, et al., 2018). In the camps, women's movement is restricted due to a variety of factors, including camp structures, traditional practices and increased social control. A high number of women in the camp are still upholding the traditional practices of purdah. Women's restricted mobility is also linked with concerns about gender-based violence and women's feelings of lack of safety. These fears are materialized both from social concepts and perceptions of women's vulnerability as well as from actual danger based on their previous experiences of gender-based violence both in their homes in Myanmar and during the genocide (Toma et al., 2018; Sang, 2018).

All the measures, which are taken to protect women, are keeping them away from male non-kin members. That implies that men, if not seen in the context of kinship, are understood to be a threat to the idea of women's "purity." Corrective measures in the case of Rohingya, mostly in the form of restrictions, are mainly placed on women to avoid rape, rather than on men to avoid inflicting rape:

> "The men feel very scared about this happening again [family members subjected to rape]. The impact is very bad. They feel it can happen at any time again. Most of the men do not allow women to go outside because of this reason, to go to the bathroom or the market. Even using the washroom, the men dig a hole inside, a washroom inside [of the shelter]" (Rohingya women as cited in WRC, 2018, p. 30)

When talking about their society's cultural values, the Rohingyas account for the social processes and corrective measures: Women can keep or be kept safe from "damage," through marriage, through restrictions on women's interactions with non-kin men, through limiting women's movement inside the camp and limiting their movement outside the refugee camp. Through all the corrective measures, the ideal wife and the ideal future wife are thus restricted to the small-spaced area of her home. Without the safety of a familiar community, this also implies that the only men with whom the women can "safely" interact in the camp are kin members.

In this logic, it is not surprising that women strive to get married, as a Rohingya woman explained: "Marriage is what is expected of women. (...) It is tied up with honour; not being married brings shame" (as cited in Williams, 2018). So long a woman is unmarried, she is exposed

to the threat of “impurifying” non-kin men. As a “real” wife is understood to be a “pure” wife, a married woman is perceived as “pure” and is thus “safe from damage” in the eyes of the judging society members, unless they are informed otherwise, like in the case of women raped in Myanmar. The idea of men as rapists generates corrective measures, which do not restrict men from inflicting rape, but rather generate a societal idea that any man can rape any woman, so long they are not close relatives. By ignoring the existence of domestic violence and marital rape girls are being put further in danger since married adolescent girls in the camp in Bangladesh are statistically more in danger of becoming a victim of gender-based violence than unmarried girls (Guglielmi et al., 2020). This further confirms and strengthens conjugal order: heterosexual sex is once again granted to men by the institution of marriage (MacKenzie, 2010). However, in some cases, family members cannot deny conflict-related sexual violence, and the society members have to adapt.

**Disruption of kin network**

Knowledge of survivors' experiences in the community can cause tears in kinship relations, for example when husbands physically distance themselves from their wives, as well as from their expectations for and their obligations to their wives. A pregnant woman raped in Myanmar described her husband’s reaction: “My husband said he will abandon me. ‘A non-Muslim raped you’ he said and threatened to leave me” (as cited in Associated Press, 2017, 2:02). In Myanmar, Rohingya could only remarry after a formal divorce or the death of their spouse. Divorce was highly regulated, however, in Bangladesh divorce laws are perceived as laxer by Rohingya and divorces are more common (Leigh, et al, 2020), thus, the husband has the power to end the conjugal connection, should he find it necessary.

The focus on the fact that it not only was another man, but also a non-Muslim who had raped his wife, implies that the concern of “impurification” does not have to revolve a disruption of a biological decent-line by strange genes, but could be a concern of the symbolic character of the rape. The idea of what rape entails makes him reconstruct his relatedness to his conjugal partner, and this can justify cutting kinship ties. If a husband disconnects his marital ties, the woman has lost her protection from the dangerous society, leaving her with the option of following the oppressive constraints, as the only way of feeling safe and of protecting her “purity.” As the constraints limit her freedom of movement outside the home and limit her communication with men, the woman quickly becomes isolated from society.

According to Yanagisako and Collier (1987) societies are created out of social relationships and shared values, where values indicate that people either live up to the values of society and are rewarded, or fail to live up to them and are punished. A good illustration can be found in the following statement from Rohingya women:

> "Many assume that my husband was killed by the Myanmar army while I was pregnant (...), but those who know me shun me, which causes me so much grief. My eldest daughter is married and lives in another camp, and her husband forbade her from visiting me. I haven't seen her for almost a year" (as cited in Alsaafin, 2018).

This is in line with MacKenzie's (2011) argument that victims of conflict-related sexual violence experience trauma twice; first the conflict-related sexual violence itself and then the stigmatisation. Research conducted by Nicole Fox (2011) among Rwandans also shows, that concerning kinship ties, there were two primary consequences for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. The first is isolation from the family and strained relationships with family members and the second is the inability to discuss the trauma of conflict-related sexual violence. We see here how the social organisation in the form of ideals and the actions realising those social ideals determines how people define and practice relatedness (Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2004).

Exclusion from kinship ties not only entails missing kin-relations, but also an exclusion from the community, which is observable in the case of Rohingya kin-systems. Kinship, according to Tjørnhøj-Thomsen (2004), is vital for feelings of identity and for organising exchanges of care, support and knowledge. Tjørnhøj-Thomsen (2004) emphasises that people are not first and foremost individuals who then do relations, but that people become individuals through the relations they have with others. This well addresses the conditions of the life of the Rohingya women: Being cut out of relationships, excludes the women from being identified as members of the Rohingya community as they lose rights to family and community support. This makes safe navigation of the camp life for women almost impossible, as the harsh conditions of life in the camp both put the woman at risk of not living up to either ideal of purity or a woman's place in the community, exclusion from membership of the "real" Rohingya is very likely.

**Knowledge and taboo**

Rohingya women after the experiences of conflict in Myanmar want to get married and be part of the society in the camp, however, the consequences of the sanctions of exclusion are

something the Rohingya women are well aware of. For unmarried women with children, these societal norms are especially hard to fulfil, because their reputation is already considered damaged, as the rape puts a strain on their whole future: “I want to get married. I can’t do that if I have a baby” (as cited in Beech, 2018), says one of the survivors, who was left with a child. To protect families from shame, Rohingya girls and women, who survived sexual violence, are often forced to marry their attackers. However, survivors from Myanmar, especially pregnant ones, cannot do that, thus, they are considered damaged, and unless their family pays someone else to marry them, they are unmarriageable (Leigh, et al, 2020). A Rohingya community leader in one of the camps explains that the Rohingya view survivors of conflict-related sexual violence as a disgrace. This means that survivors are often forced to spend their days inside their tents to hide their stories and to prevent the social stigma (Alsaafin, 2018).

To protect themselves from the exclusion from the community women withhold information about their experiences if they can, as one Rohingya woman explains:

> “We don’t know what happens to those that manage to survive [rape] because they are ashamed and afraid. Maybe some of the girls are here [in the camp] too but they don’t talk about it. They don’t want to share their stories because if they get into an argument, people will use the rape to shame them, to use it against them. They are unmarried and poor and it is difficult to get married after you are raped” (as cited in MSF, 2018).

However, though the taboo saves the women from consequences of exclusion, withholding this knowledge has its consequences too; As the physical and psychological harm of the rape is still very real, the women do not receive the support they need, as they many times do not wish to reveal what they have endured.

It has become evident that knowledge of rape, whether or not one share it and with whom, has an important impact on the women’s kinship relations, as well as on the continuance of gender-based violence. As Nguyen Thu Huong (2012) explains:

> “Through exposure to such sanctions and – more commonly – the threat thereof, women and girls (...) are constantly reminded of their ‘proper’ behaviour. Women (...) know the rules all too well and more often than not actively contribute to upholding these gendered social and sexual norms” (p. 48-9).

This can lead to numerous associated consequences, among others, economic issues and concentration problems in school, which further limits options for education (Fox, 2011).

**Conclusion**

In many cases, survivors of conflict-related sexual violence are being stigmatised openly by the community and their family members (Fox, 2011; MacKenzie, 2010). In the case of Rohingya, conflict-related sexual violence highlighted the idea of purity of "undamaged" women and girls, as opposed to females who have been raped or have had premarital sex. As cultural values apply to all members of society, both men and women think it is an ideal that the woman is "undamaged." The community alienates the women while they need the support the most. As a consequence, Rohingya women are exposed both to physical and mental trauma through their experiences in Myanmar, but also to the exclusion from their families and community while living in the hostile camp environment. Moreover, they have to live under restrictive socio-cultural norms where being raped is seen as a shame. Similar notions of purity and damage have been previously noticed in the case of surviving women in Sierra Leone where one consequence for conflict-related sexual violence survivors is that girls from specific areas are assumed to have been attacked, and are therefore generally known to be "spoiled" (MacKenzie, 2010).

Even though the literature on conflict-related sexual violence is growing there are still big gaps in the research into its long-lasting effects. Though in many cases the kinship ties in the form of obligations and expectations were cut due to conflict-related sexual violence, there are examples of how kin members try to reconstruct the relatedness to one another against the restrictive socio-cultural norms. For example, a Rohingya girl, who was abandoned by her family after getting pregnant as a consequence of the events in Myanmar, recounts how her brother contacts her despite their parents' prohibition: "I don't want him to get in trouble because of me (...) He knows I like snacks, so he brought them. I think he still loves me even though he is ashamed of me" (as cited in Beech, 2018). Hence, future research into how kinship networks are rebuilt after experiences of conflict-related sexual violence would be beneficial.

While many Rohingya people hope to one day go back to Myanmar, reassurance that they will be kept safe has not been given. So far, the attempts at repatriating the Rohingya have gone nowhere, and the recent fall of Aung San Suu Kyi after the military coup in February 2021 does not offer much hope for the Rohingya. When Aung San Suu Kyi came to power in 2015, the hope was that she could finally give the Rohingya rights like other citizens in Myanmar, but

instead, the military carried out violent attacks under her watch, which she later defended before the International Courts of Justice in The Hague. However, the man now in charge of Myanmar, General Min Aung Hlaing, is the commander who led the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in 2017 (Ellis-Petersen & Rahman, 2021). While the new leader of Myanmar insists that the re-patriation of Rohingya from Bangladesh can continue as planned and promises change (Dhaka Tribune, 2021), the suffering of the Rohingya people is still ongoing. That is why now more than ever it is important to talk about the effects of violence on survivors and their families lives and ask ourselves a question: How can we understand the consequences of the violence and turn it into better support for survivors.

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