



Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in the Rohingya Genocide: A Feminist Situational Analysis

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Abstract

This dissertation is driven by the research question: ‘How far does patriarchal oppression explain the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war?’ focusing on the recent genocide in Myanmar (2017) against Rohingya Muslims by the Tatmadaw (armed forces). Specifically, the violence on the 25th of August 2017 and the following weeks in northern Rakhine state, as the site of mass killing, is examined. The role of patriarchal oppression is explored, but also social psychological factors, including dehumanisation, obedience, and conformity, in the post-colonial context. The use of sexual violence as a genocidal tool is found to be embedded in patriarchal domination, working through numerous psychological mechanisms. Sexual violence is not always at the forefront of the study of genocide and extreme violence, and this research chooses to make front and centre the experience of women and girls as survivors, with the aim of understanding this phenomenon. Qualitative, case study research is conducted to this end, drawing upon an interdisciplinary blend of theory combining feminist theory, political theory, and psychology, as well as NGO reports and interview data.

On the 25th of August 2017, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked 30 police posts in northern Rakhine state, Myanmar, killing 12 personnel (Messner et al. 2019, p. 2). The Myanmar security forces (military and border guard police) responded the same day with a 'clearance operation' across northern Rakhine state of Maungdaw, Buthidaung, and Rathedaung townships. These attacks were coordinated, according to the following pattern: the attacks began at night with the sound of gunfire or dogs barking in a neighbouring village, then the arrival of military trucks or men on foot, which led to villagers fleeing their houses. Gunfire was heard intermittently throughout the night and at sunrise, security forces returned to the hamlet and started burning each of the houses. During these attacks, civilians were targeted for physical violence and women and girls were subjected to sexual violence, humiliation, and mutilation in front of their family/community (Anwary, 2021, pp. 11-12) (see Appendix A for prevalence of trauma events amongst Rohingya refugees). An estimated 7800 Rohingya people were killed and 723,000 fled to Bangladesh (Messner et al. 2019, p. 2). This was not the first time the Rohingya (a distinct ethnic, religious and linguistic group) have faced persecution and sexual violence in Myanmar but rather the most devastating incident (Di Lellio & Kraja, 2021, p 162).

The sexual violence that occurred during these attacks is the focus of this research, investigating the research question: 'How far does patriarchal oppression explain the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war?' It is argued that sexual violence (SV) was used as a weapon of war by the Myanmar security forces against women of the Rohingya community, and that the use of that particular type of violence targeted at that specific group is rooted in gender inequality, compounded by political, economic and ethnic inequalities. The use of SV did not occur in a vacuum, but was a gradual process, with a historical-political context of dehumanisation and othering, tracing back to British colonial rule. A comprehensive understanding of conflict-related SV can only be achieved through analysing unequal gendered power relations along with social psychological factors, such as conformity, obedience and deindividuation. Chapter one will focus on the role of patriarchal oppression, with a gender causal analysis of the Rohingya genocide, and chapter two will feature a situational analysis of the underlying, powerful psychological processes in the use of SV against Rohingya women and girls.

Methodology

An interdisciplinary blend of theory was drawn upon: secondary literature in the fields of gender studies, political theory, and social psychology, along with human rights reports, legal documents, gendered indicator data and interview data (generated by other researchers). It was not possible to collect my own data due to ethical and practical issues — travel bans due to the Covid-19 pandemic and, most importantly, the sensitive nature of the subject, including the possibility of re-traumatising survivors. Gender causal analysis of the SV in the Rohingya genocide was conducted, and a Foucauldian theoretical perspective will be applied to these sources throughout. This was integrated by examining the SV against Rohingya women and girls as a regime of practices with its own logic, questioning the self-evidence of SV in armed conflict as a regrettable, primordial by-product of conflict, and by analysing the conditions and historical processes connected to the SV (Foucault, 1981, p. 5). A few words on positionality: I am an academic and an outsider; I am not a member of the Rohingya community or from Myanmar, but I have ensured to deeply engage with the context of the SV and with survivors' testimonies.

Definitions

The question of which term to use to refer to sexual violence in armed conflict, particularly the Rohingya genocide, is complex. The definition of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in international criminal law will be used, which includes the range of war crimes and crimes

against humanity comprising rape and sexual slavery amongst others: International Criminal Court Art. 7 (1) (g); 8 (2) (b) (XXII) and 8 (2) (e) (VI). Other terms will be used, particularly sexual violence (SV), sexual assault, and sexual violation, referring to this definition. Patriarchal oppression is defined as a structure of domination which systematically reproduces gender inequality, and privileges men as a group; male control over social, political, cultural and economic institutions, backed up with force (Einspahr, 2010, p. 12). The term patriarchal oppression will be used interchangeably with variations of gender inequality, discrimination, unequal power relations, and so forth.

Sexual Violence Committed Against Rohingya Women and Girls and the Role of Patriarchal Oppression

Historical Sexual Violence — the Gradual Process of SV

The widespread SV against Rohingya women and girls of August 2017 was the most devastating incident, but not the first. Against a backdrop of historical human rights violations (see Appendix B), in the 1980s there was sporadic SV committed by the police against the Rohingya. There was an increase in SV after the Nasaka was established in 1992: the Border Security Headquarters, constituting immigration, customs, police, and intelligence personnel, mostly Rakhine people (Anwary, 2021, p. 3). Atrocities against the Rohingya forced 250,000 people to flee to Bangladesh in the same year. Amnesty International reported severe human rights violations and rape by the military in both 1992 and 1997. Mass rape also occurred from 2014 to 2017, after the 2014 census (which deprived the Rohingya of indigenous status; there was no option of Rohingya on the census, only Bengali) and the following episode of mass killing. Sexual violence against Rohingya women and girls in the 2017 genocide did not occur in a vacuum, but rather was a gradual process starting in fact, with SGBV connected to forced evictions, sexual humiliation, restriction of movement, and policies to control Rohingya women's reproduction (Anwary, 2021, pp. 8-14).

The rates of sexual violence significantly increased in 2016, in the lead up to the genocide of 2017 (Anwary, 2021, pp. 8-14). In 2016, security forces subjected Rohingya women and girls to sexual humiliation, specifically forcing them to remove their burqas and clothes. The security forces forced them to march, laughed at them, made obscene comments, urinated on them, and masturbated in front of them. No one was raped or killed, however, a teenager committed suicide (after she was menstruating and had been forced to strip). Additionally, in the months leading up to the August 2017 attacks, the Myanmar armed forces held compulsory meetings for Rohingya men (Messner, et al., 2019, p. 5). There were two recurring threats made: to accept the National Verification Card (declare themselves Bengali and deny their citizenship) and to identify people in the community that were members of the ARSA. There were also threats to burn down Rohingya villages, kill the men and rape the women if they did not leave.

Sexual Violence in the 25th of August 2017 Attacks

In August 2017, the sexual violence committed by the Tatmadaw (Myanmar armed forces) against Rohingya women and girls in Rakhine state was widespread, systematic, and brutal (Report on Myanmar, UN Human Rights Council, 2018, p. 15) (See Appendix C for qualitative accounts of SV in survivors' own words, at the reader's discretion as the content is disturbing). The following strategies, practices and processes of SV were committed: mutilating the reproductive organs of Rohingya women, public rape, mass rape, and gang rape (Anwary, 2021, pp. 8-14). Rohingya children, siblings, spouses, and elderly parents were sexually assaulted and killed in front of their families who were forced to watch. Pregnant and breast-feeding women were singled out for mutilation: their breasts were slashed, stomachs slit, kicked or beaten, then they were shot and thrown into burning buildings, also in front of community/family members. Women and girls were taken to nearby buildings and gang raped, released in the morning, then another group were taken (Messner, et al., 2019, p. 7). Amongst

survivors, there were reports of cervical lacerations resulting from the insertion of guns and vaginal tearing secondary to nail insertion (Stoken, 2020, p. 2). However, these women were not passive victims of violence but developed their agency, in the most dangerous situation of genocide, to get themselves and their children to safety with extraordinary strength and resilience (Anwary, 2021, p. 13).

To provide an approximate figure of how many women and girls were affected by sexual assault, data on the number of pregnant Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh after the August attacks can give an indication (Hutchinson, 2018, p. 2). Between the 25th of August and 28th September 2017, the UN estimated 501,000 Rohingya refugees fled to Bangladesh, 335,670 of which were female, and 70,000 pregnant (20.8%), compared to the expected 4.7%-6.9%. Therefore, approximately 65,170-66,710 Rohingya women may have been pregnant as a result of rape. It must also be noted that men and boys were subjected to SV by the Myanmar armed forces as well (Riley et al. 2020, p. 7), with sexually defined groups of men such as gay men especially at risk (MacKinnon, 2006, p. 225). However, there is a lack of significant data on the extent of male victimisation, allowing only speculation. These statistics have been drawn upon to give an indication of the widespread nature of SV, but there are numerous limitations to this data. There will be rape victims who did not get pregnant after rape who are not represented in these figures, not to mention all of the women and girls who were killed after being sexually violated, which Bouckaert estimates was the majority of those raped (Ekin, 2017).

Gender Causal Analysis

The SV perpetrated in the Rohingya genocide has been contextualised, detailed, and quantified, and this section will now explore the role of patriarchal oppression through conducting a gender causal analysis of the conflict-related SV. Davies and True (2015) proposed three research questions to investigate in order to conduct a gender causal analysis of SV in armed conflict. These questions are as follows: (1) How and when do unequal gendered structural conditions within a society lead to the intentional use of SGBV to achieve political ends? (2) How do situations of endemic gender discrimination affect our knowledge of where SGBV is taking place, and who the perpetrators and targets of it are? (3) What is the relevance of conflict to the use of SGBV and in what ways does it exacerbate gendered political violence? (Davies & True, 2015, p. 496). These questions will be taken in turn in the following three sections.

Structural Gender Inequality and the Strategic Use of SGBV

Gendered indicators are used to analyse the relationship between the use of SV in the Rohingya genocide and patriarchal oppression (Davies & True, 2015, p. 502). The OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) is used as a measure of discrimination against women and girls in social institutions (formal and informal law, social norms, practices, and attitudes) (OECD, 2021). The four subindexes are: (a) discrimination in the family, for example child marriage (b) restricted physical integrity, for instance violence against women (c) restricted access to productive and financial resources, such as unequal land and property rights, as well as (d) restricted civil liberties, including access to justice. The SIGI is a dynamic, gender-disaggregated indicator, as opposed to the combination of fertility rates and a general human rights index for assessing gender inequality in a country. Using indicators to quantify power relations is reductionist, however, it is important to be able to measure increases in gender inequality and make cross-country comparisons. Furthermore, the reductionism will be mitigated with contextual analysis.

Myanmar has a high SIGI value for 2014 (0.29): there is much higher than average discrimination against women in Myanmar than in those developing countries in which there is not widespread, systematic SV (OECD, 2014). Across the subindexes, discriminatory family code, restricted physical integrity, and restricted resources and assets were all measured to be in the high category, with restricted civil liberties scored as very high (son bias was found

to be very low). These findings substantiate the relationship between patriarchal oppression and the use of SV in armed conflict and suggest certain dimensions of discrimination are more relevant to the occurrence of conflict-related SV. Gender inequalities exist in all armed conflicts but the higher than average structural gender inequality in Myanmar calls for further analysis of unequal gendered power relations as part of the complex causal explanation of SGBV in the Rohingya genocide.

There are statistically significant relationships between the lack of a law against domestic violence, greater acceptance of domestic violence in public opinion, and the use of SV as a weapon of war in Myanmar (Davies & True, 2015, p. 505). There has been draft legislation against domestic violence since 2013 — the Prevention (and Protection) of Violence Against Women (PoVAW) Law (Faxon, et al. 2015, p. 468), however, it still has not been passed, and it has been deemed inadequate, with reference to international legal obligations (Global Justice Center, 2020). This is a failure of the state to protect against SGBV and fulfil its responsibilities under CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women) of which it is a signatory, suggesting that the Myanmar state is complicit in the use of SV against the Rohingya in Rakhine state. Domestic abuse is traditionally regarded as a private matter in Myanmar (Faxon, et al. 2015, p. 466). For instance, one survey found that three quarters of Palaung women in Shan state believed domestic violence was ‘a purely domestic affair which should be solved within the home’ (OECD, 2014, p. 4). This may be related to the normalisation of SV against women to the point that it is a logical tool of war.

Women’s access to productive and economic resources in Myanmar is highly restricted, with a large gender disparity in men and women’s formal ownership of property titles, and men’s de facto decision-making power and ownership of property in a marriage (OECD, 2014, p. 7). The Myanmar government reports technical equal access for men and women to financial services, for example, to bank loans. However, considering the extent to which Rohingya people’s freedom of movement is restricted, equal access to apply for loans and such translates as non-existent access for the Rohingya. Land confiscations and forced evictions are also relevant here with 88% of a sample of Rohingya refugees having experienced the confiscation or looting of their land (Riley et al. 2020, p. 6). Although this impacts both men and women, as previously mentioned, SV against Rohingya women was connected to land confiscations by the Nasaka. The threat of SV, including the threat of underage girls being gang-raped, was used by the Nasaka to incite terror in Rohingya families so that they would flee and abandon their land or property, and then mass SV was committed when Rohingya families returned (Anwary, 2021, p. 16)

Civil liberties are quite restricted generally in Myanmar, however, women’s freedom of movement and access to public space is severely restricted, especially for Rohingya women (OECD, 2014, p. 8). Sexual harassment in public spaces is common, and the threat of violence, particularly at the hands of the military, means women’s access to public space is, in effect, restricted. Davies and True (2015) found a strong association between this restriction of women’s access to public space and the occurrence of widespread, systematic SV (Davies & True, 2015, p. 505). The restriction of Rohingya women’s freedom of movement and access to public spaces was part of the dynamic of the conflict. In many societies, including Myanmar, women’s bodies have been symbolically constructed as representing the national/ethnic group (Seifert, 1996, p. 39). This is the case for Rohingya women and girls, making them more vulnerable to sexual assault, as a physical and personal attack on the ethnic group; a symbolic rape of the group. The symbolic construction of the female body is compounded by the social construction of the feminine which includes a vulnerability to assault that the construction of masculinity does not contain.

Taking limited political representation and discrimination in the family together, within the government, 25% of seats in the legislature and important ministerial positions are reserved for military personnel in Myanmar under the constitution, thereby excluding women as they are excluded from the military. Women only held 6% of parliamentary seats in 2014,

with no quotas at the national or local level. In addition to this, Myanmar was ranked in the high category for discriminatory family code in 2014, referring to women's limited decision-making power and undervalued status (OECD, 2014, p. 2). There are strict gender roles in Myanmar: the father is the head of the household and the provider, whereas the mother is primarily responsible for all of the care work. Additionally, inheritance practices are discriminatory: if a husband dies, their property goes to their son or male relatives; their wife or daughter is excluded. There are a host of other cultural practices and restricted freedoms such as dowry, polygamy, and parcel practice, as well as the treatment of women's rights defenders and women's movements, which cannot be dealt with in detail due to space constraints. These restricted civil and political rights as well as discrimination in the family constitute civilian patriarchal structures and cultural practices which foster and legitimate sexual violence against women and then often silence and blame the victim (Farr, 2009, p. 5). Military policymakers will be more likely to include SGBV in their military operation if they hold specific beliefs about the proper gender division of labour within a society (Enloe, 2000, p. 134). These beliefs are as follows: that women provide the backbone of the enemy's culture, women are defined chiefly as breeders, as men's property and the symbols of men's honour, and finally, if it is imagined that residential communities rely on women's work. They correspond to the aforementioned discriminatory family code in Myanmar, highlighting the role of patriarchal beliefs in the use of SV against Rohingya women and girls.

How patriarchal oppression leads to the use of SGBV in armed conflict has been explored, and the final part of this section examines when SGBV becomes a strategy in a military operation, specifically in the Rohingya genocide. Enloe's analysis of three types of conflict-related SV is useful for this purpose (Enloe, 2000, p. 110). She distinguishes between 'recreational rape', 'national security rape', and 'systematic mass rape'. The SGBV in the Rohingya genocide fits with the national security rape category, according to which a state uses systematic SGBV and the threat of assault against 'national security threats', an all-encompassing term which can include political opposition. The SGBV against the Rohingya can be framed in this way considering that the Myanmar government labelled the ARSA as terrorists, the military organised meetings in the lead up to the August attacks to ostensibly locate these ARSA insurgents, and then described the genocide as a 'clearance operation'. The use of SGBV for national security purposes is not inevitable, but rather eight conditions make its use more likely: (1) when a state is preoccupied with national security, (2) the majority of citizens see national security as a the responsibility of the military, (3) national security policymakers are a masculinised elite group, (4) the police and military are male dominated, (5) the cultures of the military and police provide the definitions of loyalty, honour and treason, (6) these institutional cultures are misogynous, (7) men who are 'security threats' are seen as most vulnerable in their role as fathers and husbands and finally, (8) when local women are well organised and publicly visible in opposition to the government (Enloe, 2000, p. 124). These conditions highlight the complex interplay between male dominance, militarized masculinity, and misogyny, in combination with other important factors to make the use of SV in a conflict more likely.

Patriarchal Domination and the Knowledge of SGBV

Patriarchal domination affects our knowledge of the SGBV in the Rohingya genocide by impacting reporting. Human Rights Watch reported that approximately two thirds of Rohingya survivors that they interviewed had not reported the crimes that they suffered to the authorities or humanitarian organisations (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Survivors are stigmatised by their community, face victim-blaming and rejection by their husbands and families (Anwary, 2021, pp. 13-15). Moreover, statements of security forces indicate that Rohingya women and girls were killed after being sexually violated or did not survive the assault (Di Lellio & Kraja, 2021, p. 162). Deep shame and guilt prevent reporting amongst survivors, as well as the fear of being stigmatised and rejected by one's community. There are other factors that impact reporting, such as a lack of faith in the criminal justice system and the concern that medical

fees will have to be paid (Human Rights Watch, 2017). The stigma and blame that survivors are subjected to both reflect and perpetuate male domination by silencing women and girls. There are other factors at play in under-reporting, such as the concern about medical fees, however, reporting is highly politicised (Davies & True, 2017), and these other factors, for example, a lack of confidence in the system, also reflect structural gender inequality.

SGBV as an Act of Genocide and its Origins in Patriarchal Oppression

Widespread, systematic SV does not only occur in armed conflict — the United Nations Secretary-General's most recent report on conflict-related SV also includes other situations of concern in Nigeria and previously Burundi, rather than just featuring conflict or post-conflict settings (Conflict-related SV report, UN Secretary-General, 2021, p. 39). SGBV in genocide exists as part of a continuum of political violence (Davies & True, 2015, p. 501). As MacKinnon puts it when examining the SV in the genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia:

The rapes in the Serbian war of aggression against Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia are to everyday rape what the Holocaust was to everyday anti-Semitism: both like it and not like it at all, both continuous with it and a whole new departure, a unique atrocity yet also a pinnacle moment in something that goes on all the time (MacKinnon, 2006, p. 161).

Notwithstanding these connections between 'everyday' and 'extraordinary' SV, it is highly relevant that the SV committed by Myanmar security forces against Rohingya women and girls occurred in the context of genocide; as an act of genocide. The SGBV had a strategic function: to destroy the Rohingya as a group, including their culture (MacKinnon, 2006, p. 210; Seifert, 1996, p. 39). SV in genocide often works in a similar way and with similar effects to SV in armed conflict generally, but with the intention to destroy, in whole or in part, a religious, ethnic, or national group (MacKinnon, 2006, p. 223). Conflict-related SV constitutes psychological warfare and a means of communication. It is a way of terrorising a target group, degrading thereby demoralising, preventing reproduction, humiliating the male members by demonstrating that they cannot 'protect their women', as well as rewarding and avenging soldiers. Women's bodies are used by male soldiers as a means of communicating to the target group messages of inferiority and domination. SV against women also aims to destroy the culture of a group (Seifert, 1996, p. 39). In addition to the aforementioned symbolic level, since women hold families and communities together in times of conflict, their physical and psychological destruction impacts social and cultural cohesion. Women who have been subjected to SV disidentify with the group, which was the basis on which they were sexually assaulted (MacKinnon, 2006, p. 230). The group becomes associated with SV; being sexually violated becomes part of what it means to be a member of the group. In all of these ways, the culture and community of the group, and ultimately the group itself, is devalued and dissolved.

The role of patriarchal oppression in this genocidal strategy is in the underlying motive, mechanisms and outcome. SV as an act of genocide works the same way as SV in male dominance (MacKinnon, 2006, p. 228) through which the sexual torture of female bodies is translated into male power, committed when that power is unstable (Seifert, 1996, p. 41). As with torture, the pain inflicted with SV is converted into a display of power for the perpetrator. In the context of the Rohingya genocide, the pain of Rohingya women and girls is translated into male power, as well as power of the Tatmadaw and the regime they represent, on a symbolic level. The social meaning of sexuality is intimacy, and so SV is experienced as especially violating (MacKinnon, 2006, p. 227). Sexuality is a core part of self-identity, and when this is violated, there is often the sense of being stolen, ruined, spoiled. These are some of the ways SV destroys one's identity and place in the community, in a way that cannot be removed or forgotten, described as worse than death by some survivors (MacKinnon, 2006, p. 227; Anwar, 2021, p. 13). Systematically committing SV against women of a specific group, while randomly selecting women for assault within the group, destroys the group as well as

the individual, by terrorising, controlling, and subordinating. SV in genocide works the same way as SV in the patriarchy: it produces male dominance over the target group by attacking dignity, self-determination and security, leaving a degraded identity, self-revulsion and fear. SV is used as a genocidal tool as it has been historically effective in destroying women under patriarchal oppression in the sense of dominating and subordinating women as a group. As MacKinnon puts it, 'Pioneered and practiced on women as such with stunning effectiveness on a daily basis, rape can just as effectively destroy peoples as such...' (MacKinnon, 2006, p. 226). MacKinnon also describes SV as a well-travelled route to the destruction of women, illuminating why sexual violence in particular was used against women in the Rohingya genocide.

Genocidal purposes and patriarchy combined once again in the Myanmar armed forces mutilation of Rohingya women's reproductive organs. This specific sexual atrocity is an attempt to symbolically and physically destroy the life-giving power of the Rohingya community to prevent the continuance of the group (Anwary, 2021, p. 11). However, misogyny and hostility in gender relations are also central to the occurrence of this particular form of SV (Seifert, 1994). Mutilation of reproductive organs centres on the femininity of the body, and only a hatred of the feminine, in addition to genocidal intent, can fully explain the use of this type of SV. However, it would be reductionist to attribute conflict-related SV solely to misogyny; to explain SV in armed conflict in this way would implicate male biology or anthropology, precluding preventative action and obscuring the objectives of military strategists (Enloe, 2000, p. 134). The intersection of hatred of the feminine with racist hatred is very relevant and is examined in the following section, along with the connected role of dehumanisation (Ekin, 2017).

Social Psychological Processes and the Use of SV as a Weapon of War

The collective dimensions of SV in armed conflict have been examined, particularly the unequal gendered structural conditions, and in this section the individual dimensions is investigated, specifically situational social influences on individual behaviour (Henry, 2016, p. 45). Why SGBV is used as a logical weapon of war, and the multiplicity of connections between gender inequality and its use has been laid out, and in this section how one person can commit this particular form of violence against another will be illuminated. A range of psychological research that demonstrates the power of situational forces on individual behaviour will be examined, focusing on dehumanisation, moral disengagement, obedience, deindividuation, and conformity (Zimbardo, 2007) in furthering our understanding of the use of SV in the Rohingya genocide. A situational analysis does not excuse these crimes or deem them morally acceptable, but rather constitutes an effort to understand how and why these acts are committed, in order to inform preventative frameworks.

'Terrifyingly Normal'

A social psychological approach rejects the dispositional view that the act of committing conflict-related SV must be due to an aspect of the perpetrator's disposition, a personality trait, a mental disorder, and so on (Zimbardo, 2007). To implicate individuals' dispositional tendencies would obscure the systematic nature of SV in this particular armed conflict, as well as setting up the perpetrator as the 'Other'. I will argue that the construction of Rohingya Muslims as the enemy 'Other' contributed to the use of SV against the Rohingya community, thus this othering must be avoided. It is of particular importance to avoid the Us-Them dichotomy considering my positionality as a white person at a European institution, analysing a conflict in Southeast Asia. A social psychological approach, focusing on powerful situational factors in dynamic interaction with the individual, also has a strong support base in Arendt (1963) and Brownings' (1998) analysis of the profiles of Nazi high officials and police units respectively. Brownings' study of Reserve Battalion 101, responsible for killing at least 38,000 Jewish people and sending 45,000 more to concentration camps in a period of four months, found that these men were not specially selected, nor self-selected or driven by self-interest.

Rather, they were ordinary men, in a novel situation, given permission and encouragement to commit violence against the enemy Other. Arendt's analysis of the trial of Eichmann, one of the major organisers of the 'Final Solution', highlights that Eichmann was deemed normal by half a dozen psychiatrists; that the most terrifying thing about Eichmann was how normal he was (Arendt, 1963, p. 276). Arendt was the first scholar to deny the dispositional perspective, instead implicating social forces on normal people in the perpetration of atrocities (Zimbardo, 2007). It is on this basis that an explanatory foundation of psychological processes will be propounded in the SGBV against the Rohingya.

Dehumanisation, Othering, and Moral Disengagement

Dehumanisation is one component of the complex psychological process underlying the use of SV in armed conflict (Zimbardo, 2007). Processes of dehumanisation constituted the Rohingya community as the Other, making Rohingya women and girls more vulnerable to SGBV by placing them outside the sphere of moral concern (Di Lellio & Kraja, 2020, p. 150). Myanmar became an independent republic from British colonial rule in 1948, and the military took power in 1962 (Wade, 2017, p. 32). From 1966 to the 1980s, the Rohingya were denied citizenship (Anwary, 2021, p. 3). The 1982 citizenship law allowed them to apply for citizenship, however, they were not recognised as an indigenous ethnic group and their language was not included as an official language (Di Lellio & Kraja, 2020, p. 162). The application required proof of citizenship before 1948, evidence of which was not provided under British colonial rule and thus, the Rohingya were made effectively stateless, considered illegal Bangladeshi. British colonialists had also created a taxonomy of ethnic groups and in doing so created hard lines between communities which were previously more integrated, preparing the ground for later conflict (Wade, 2017, p. 32). The idea that the Rohingya are not indigenous to Myanmar became a foundational myth and discursive identity that can be traced back to the post-colonial state in the 1960s, following which the Rohingya were subjected to periodic, violent, mass expulsions (Di Lellio & Kraja, 2020, p. 162).

In addition to the denial of citizenship, the Rohingya have been the object of other dehumanising ethno-nationalist policies and public discourse. Following violence between Buddhist and Muslim communities in Rakhine State in 2012, four laws known as 'Laws for Protection of Race and Religion' were proposed by the Buddhist nationalist organisation MaBaTha and passed in 2015: Population Control Law No. 28; the Conversion Law No. 48; the Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Law No. 50 and the Monogamy Law No. 54 (McCarthy & Menager, 2017, p. 396). This package of laws has parallels with colonial era laws and debates, for example, the 1939 Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Bill which also required a Buddhist woman and non-Buddhist man to register in order to marry. This state regulation of the private issues of religious conversion and sexuality, with its origins in colonial policies, was based on the public perception of Muslim men as threats to Buddhist women and thus the Myanmar nation in general. This public perception of the Muslim perpetrator was fuelled through gendered rumours about physical, often sexual, attacks on Buddhist women by Muslim men, and coercion into marriage (with bribes and contracts, for example). Racism often includes fantasies of injury to the female members of the in-group by men of the out-group, and the inverse is also true: the other can be excluded through SV against the women of the out-group (Seifert, 1996, p. 40). Through these gendered rumours, Muslim men became the scapegoat for economic grievances, and this was cemented and institutionalised in the 2015 package of laws (McCarthy & Menager, 2017, p. 397). Rohingya Muslims were excluded through the construction of the Muslim perpetrator, and in a connected way, through SV against 'their' women (Seifer, 1996, p. 40).

Processes of dehumanisation and othering can be seen in the derogatory language perpetrators used towards Rohingya women and girls. The term 'Bengali whore' featured in numerous survivors' reports of the SGBV in 2017, in the August attacks and prior incidents committed by the police (Anwary, 2021, p. 13). Historically, the Rohingya have been stigmatised as being too 'dirty' for soldiers to rape, underlying the killing of women and girls

after SGBV (Ekin, 2017). The pejorative term ‘Bengali’ also featured in perpetrators’ threats against the Rohingya, such as: ‘This is not your country. If you stay we will rape your women, burn you, leave, Bengali!’ (PILPG, 2018, p. 32). Additionally, state officials have long labelled the Rohingya as ‘terrorists’ (Ekin, 2017) and the gendered rumours of Muslim men as rapists were linked to larger narratives associating Islam with violent extremism and the oppression of women (McCarthy & Menager, 2017, p. 402). The Rohingya were constituted as the other through the dehumanising language of ‘illegal immigrant’, ‘terrorist’ and ‘whore’. This sexist language was both a feature of the sexual assaults on Rohingya women and girls, and made them more vulnerable to SGBV.

Moral disengagement theory illuminates and substantiates the link between dehumanising language and increased aggression (Bandura, 2002). Bandura conducted controlled experimental research to investigate the psychological processes implicated in real-world violence. Out of three conditions, the group that did not hear any comment about the other group shocked that group at an average level 5, the group that heard the others described as ‘nice guys’ shocked at a lower level, around level 3, and the group that overheard the others being termed ‘like animals’ shocked at a much higher level 8. This research demonstrates the power of dehumanising language, even a single term, to increase aggression towards an individual. Dehumanising language changes the mental construction of the other which in turn influences behaviour through disengaging morality.

Obedience to a Powerful Authority

In the historical-political context of dehumanisation and othering of the Rohingya, the use of SGBV in the August 2017 attacks was well coordinated and controlled from the top; part of a carefully planned military operation (Di Lellio & Kraja, 2020, p. 162). The instructions soldiers received from their military commanders are revealed in the threats soldiers made to Rohingya communities at the meetings preceding the attacks. Anwary’s (2021) participants reported:

A young soldier told the men that the Myanmar authority told them to confiscate the property of the Rohingya villagers. An older soldier told them that the government asked the soldiers to kill the men and rape (julum) the Rohingya women unless they abandoned their homes and leave Myanmar” (Anwary, 2021, p. 10).

The process of using SV as a genocidal tool begins with dehumanising stereotypes of the enemy Other, and as public fear is heightened, with the ‘threat’ imminent, independent people act with mindless obedience (Zimbardo, 2007). Milgram (1974) investigated blind obedience to authority in a classic laboratory experiment, with many subsequent variations and replications across cultures. It was found that the majority of participants continued to shock the ‘learner’ repeatedly after his pleas for them to stop, and 65% of participants shocked the learner at the maximum level of 450 volts. In the following 19 variations of this obedience paradigm, Milgram observed that compliance in administering the maximum 450 volt shock could be over 90% of participants or less than 10% of participants, by changing one variable. Maximum compliance was found when the teacher was part of a teacher team with another responsible for pulling the lever that administered the shocks, and lowest when there was a peer model who rebelled.

A number of the procedures — the compliance strategies — used in this experiment to test mindless obedience, explain why members of the public obeyed the researcher (Zimbardo, 2007), and help explain why soldiers obeyed their commanders to commit atrocities against Rohingya women and girls. By having an employment contract, with high exit costs, including punishment for ‘deserters’, an individual’s behaviour is controlled in a pseudolegal fashion. Moreover, every conscript and officer are required to take an oath of loyalty, which are commonly interpreted as requiring unquestioning obedience to all ‘lawful’ commands (Pries, 2012/2013, p. 31). Additionally, this role is attached to positive values around patriotism, serving one’s country, and performing one’s duty. Furthermore, the SGBV

in the 2017 genocide was a gradual process: in 2015, there was an increase in sexual assault when the military arrived in Rakhine state, and in 2016 the military sexually humiliated Rohingya women and girls, before the widespread SGBV in August 2017 including mass rape and gang rape (Anwary, 2021). This gradual nature meant that the path to the crimes against humanity began with a comparatively small step and the steps that followed were not noticeably different to prior acts from the perspective of the individual (Zimbardo, 2007).

In addition, the diffusion of responsibility from the participant to the researcher, which meant the participant would not be liable for the harm caused to the 'learner', is highly relevant to the use of SGBV in the Rohingya genocide. The Women's League of Burma has been calling for an end to the culture of impunity for SV committed by the armed forces in Myanmar against ethnic minority women for nearly two decades (WLB, 2014, p. 1). As has been previously mentioned, Myanmar is a signatory of CEDAW and rape is prohibited under the penal code, as well as by relevant customary international law, however, these are not effectively enforced. Moreover, under Myanmar's constitution, there is a court-martial responsible for adjudicating all crimes perpetrated by military personnel, which has an unrestricted mandate and sweeping powers. This military court is not an independent, impartial judiciary. Additionally, there is no anonymous reporting system for sexual offences so the perpetrator knows who reported them, and with the high risk of revictimization, there is under-reporting of SV (Anwary, 2021, p. 8). This historical system of impunity means soldiers are not held responsible for their actions and there is no punishment for committing SGBV, which encourages obedience to the military authority (Zimbardo, 2007). However, the culture of impunity for SGBV perpetrated by the armed forces is a product of structural gender inequality (Davies & True, 2015, p. 501). The WLB recognises this when it recommends not only greater enforcement of an improved legal framework, but also the political representation of women in the peace process, to end the sexual abuse of ethnic minority women (WLB, 2014, p. 2).

Finally, and most importantly, an ideology or a 'big lie' justifies the use of any means necessary to reach the desirable, essential end goal (Zimbardo, 2007). Most nations employ the big lie of 'threats to national security' (to quash political opposition or before engaging in conflict) the fear of which induces compliance. When discussing the forms of totalitarian organisation, Arendt excavates this obedience on the basis of a big lie:

"[The forms of totalitarian organisation] are designed to translate the propaganda lies of the movement, woven around a central fiction... into a functioning reality, to build up, even under nontotalitarian circumstances, a society whose members act and react according to the rules of a fictitious world" (Arendt, 1951, p. 364).

The central fiction, the big lie, concerning the Rohingya community, which justified SGBV in order to expel them from Myanmar, was that the Rohingya were illegal Bangladeshi immigrants who had no right to own property and had stolen land from the Buddhist population (Anwary, 2021, 10); the Rohingya were the scapegoat for economic grievances (McCarthy & Menager, 2017, p. 396). The Rohingya community was perceived as a threat to the national security of Myanmar through the stereotyping of Rohingya people as Islamic terrorists and rapists and thus a threat to Buddhist women. The Rohingya were believed to be a threat through creating a 'demographic bomb' (De Lellio & Kraja, 2020, p. 162): with high levels of procreation within the Rohingya community, the Buddhist nation would be taken over. All of these Islamophobic, racist big lies, which can be traced back decades, constituted the Rohingya as a threat to Myanmar as a Buddhist nation, and a personal threat, necessitating any effective method to destroy the group, and as has been detailed, SGBV is a tried and tested tool of destruction.

Deindividuation

In an environment that diffuses personal responsibility, and conveys anonymity, such as the case for the Tatmadaw: uniformed soldiers with limitless impunity, the process of

deindividuation occurs (Zimbardo, 2007, p. 305). Deindividuation refers to the state of anonymity (through a disguise, mask, or uniform) or feeling of anonymity (conveyed when an individual is not seen as unique; just a cog in the machine, or their existence is ignored) — a lack of personal identifiability. The deindividuated psychological state has been linked to increased interpersonal aggression. Zimbardo's (1969) seminal studies investigating the effects of deindividuation vs individuation on aggression found that participants in the deindividuation condition (anonymous through lab coats, hoods and with a number rather than a name-tag) administered twice as much shock to the confederates as the comparison condition (Zimbardo, 1969, p. 263). Furthermore, the deindividuated participants gave increasingly longer shocks to both confederates, the (previously rated) pleasant and the unpleasant confederates. Conversely, the individuated participants shocked the pleasant confederate less as the trials went on, as well as administering half as much electric shock overall. These findings cannot be attributed to sadism but rather increasing emotional arousal leading to stronger and less controlled reactions, linked to the feeling of domination and control. The combination of anonymity and a connected decreased sense of personal responsibility, with permission from an authority to commit violence, creates the potential for atrocities to occur. The Myanmar military's 'license to rape' (SWAN, 2002), combined with a lack of personal responsibility, partly due to anonymity and partly the culture of impunity for SV, are part of the complex causal explanation for the SGBV against Rohingya women and girls in the 2017 genocide.

Conformity to Group Norms

'...One soldier was forced to rape me by other soldiers. He was standing quietly while the others made sarcastic comments. They said, 'Are you a man? Is this Bengali whore your mother?' He hit me first while others cheered him. Then he raped me...' (Anwary, 2021, p. 13).

In contrast to the direct, explicit nature of authority influence, groups influence their members indirectly, through modelling normative behaviour (Zimbardo, 2007, p. 260). Classic laboratory experiments investigating conformity to group norms highlight the power of extreme group pressure in influencing individuals to conform to the group's perception of social reality, even in the case that this perception is false. Asch's (1955) classic series of studies involved a 'visual perception' task of making a judgement about the length of a line, as part of a group (of confederates), who were instructed to make unanimous incorrect judgements on a number of trials (Asch, 1955, p. 32). Asch found that approximately 70% of participants conformed to the group on a number of critical trials; they answered in accordance with the group consensus, even though it was clearly incorrect. 30% conformed on the majority of trials, and only 25% did not yield at all to social pressures to conform. This research tests conformity to group norms in a very different setting to the conformity exhibited within the Myanmar battalions. However, this controlled experimental research demonstrates the power of social pressure to influence an individual to conform to the group even when it goes against an individual's perception and beliefs (Zimbardo, 2007, p. 259). The underlying mechanism involved is normative needs: the basic need to be part of the in-group, to be accepted, drives conformity as agreeing with the group is more likely to garner acceptance, and avoid the terrifying prospect of rejection. It must be emphasised that soldiers conformed to gendered norms (Davies & True, 2015, p. 507) and such norms encouraging the use of SV against women are only possible in unequal gendered contexts where there are unequal power relations between men and women and when violence against women is already normalised. Emotional factors such as shame and fear, the role of which has been touched upon, are also relevant in the use of SV in armed conflict, however, space constraints mean that these cannot be dealt with in detail here.

Conclusion

This dissertation has investigated the research question: ‘How far does patriarchal oppression explain the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war?’ with reference to the case study of the Rohingya genocide (2017). The specific state-led/ethnic-targeted type of sexual and gender-based violence seen in Myanmar was analysed, with recognition of the variation in conflict-related SGBV across different contexts. It has been argued that patriarchal domination is a fundamental part of the complex causal explanation for the use of SGBV as a genocidal tool: it is the root, the precondition, the context, in which this particular form of violence is inflicted on women and girls. However, a comprehensive understanding requires gender causal analysis in combination with a situational analysis (examining the foundation of dehumanisation, moral disengagement, conformity, obedience, and deindividuation). The wider implications of these findings include the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to causal analysis of SGBV in armed conflict, support for Davies and True’s (2015) gendered indicator method, as well as for the inclusion of gender analysis in scholarship on conflict-related SGBV going forward.

In advancing this thesis, the research is situated within the weapon of war side of the debate over causal explanations for conflict-related SV, while at the same time conducting a deeper analysis than conceptualising SV as a solely rational tactic. This involved a gender causal analysis, utilising gendered indicators, and connecting this data to feminist theory. Following this, Zimbardo’s framework for understanding atrocities was applied to the Rohingya genocide, linking the historical-political context of the Rohingya community in Myanmar, combined with social psychological factors, to the use of conflict-related SV, while continuing to highlight the role of unequal power relations within these processes.

A variety of secondary literature was utilised: gendered indicator data, human rights reports, legal documents, and theory from a complementary multitude of disciplines. I was unable to conduct interviews with Rohingya survivors of SGBV in Bangladesh due to travel restrictions in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and ethical concerns over retraumatizing survivors. However, I engaged with professionals working in the refugee camps in Bangladesh who have extensive experience working with Rohingya survivors, and with a comprehensive range of qualitative accounts available. Finally, regarding an area for further research, it is important to share the lived experiences of survivors in their own words, but it is also important to examine perpetrators’ discourses concerning their actions (Baaz & Stern, 2009). The Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (*The Gambia v. Myanmar*) (ICJ, 2020) could provide data for these purposes as it progresses. Greater focus on SGBV in armed conflict is of vital importance, particularly gender causal analysis, so that our understanding of this issue is deepened, and survivors’ experiences are not ignored.

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