

# Bodies as battlegrounds

## The systematic rape of Rohingya women in Myanmar



SHAGUFE HOSSAIN

**The goal in genocidal rape is not simply to hurt people or to have sex. The goal is Group Destruction. Sexual violence is not simply an auxiliary tool employed to advance this goal, but given the nature of rape and sexual torture, it is the ultimate weapon.**

**B**ODIES are battlegrounds. Bodies are physical spaces where ideologies are imprinted; one takes precedence over the other. The other loses. And

when war breaks out in physical territories outside of our bodies, our bodies become territories that must also be fought over, surrendered, conquered.

In Bangladesh, between 200,000 and 400,000 Bangladeshi women and girls were raped during nine months of war and genocide in 1971. In Rwanda, between 100,000 and 250,000 women were raped during the three months of genocide in 1994. More than 60,000 women were raped during the civil war in Sierra Leone (1991-2002). Over 40,000 in Liberia (1989-2003). Up to 60,000 in the former Yugoslavia (1992-1995). And at least 200,000 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo since 1998.

Rape and sexual violence have been committed against women and girls since the beginning of time. History bears testament to this as do religion and biblical accounts. Even in literature, the notion that women are prizes—objects—to be claimed as reward for conquests has subsisted, and still exists today. So it is accepted, that when territories are being claimed, so must bodies be. By force, by violent measures, by inflicting pain and trauma that will outlive the period of conflict.

So, men often rape in violent conflict. But, not all violent conflict is war and not all war is genocide. There is a difference between sexual violence during war and sexual violence during genocide. Although civilians may be killed in war because of who they are,

what makes a war a genocide is when the intent is to destroy a particular racial, ethnic or religious group.

Sexual violence is particularly fitting to genocide.

Aung San Suu Kyi, prior to becoming Myanmar's State Counsellor, said in a video message during a conference on sexual violence in conflict in 2011, "It is used as a weapon by armed forces to intimidate the ethnic nationalities and to divide our country, this is how I see it."

I am glad she sees it that way. Recent reports say medics working with the Rohingya fleeing persecution in Myanmar, are reporting disturbing signs of sexual violence. According to *The Daily Star* report published on September 25, doctors at a clinic run by the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM) at the Leda makeshift refugee say they treated hundreds of women with injuries they said were from violent sexual assaults during the army operation in October and November.

*The Huffington Post* interviewed Ilona Alexander, Human Rights Officer at the UN, who reported, the "area clearance operations" conducted by the militia in the northern Rakhine State followed the following pattern: Large numbers of armed men (often from both the Myanmar armed forces and the police, sometimes accompanied by Rakhine villagers) would arrive in the village. They would destroy houses, mosques, schools and shops. They would separate the women from the men. Women would be rounded up, and either told to stay inside a school or a building or outside in the burning sun. Then, they would be raped or subjected to other forms of sexual violence, often during strip searches, either during roundups or in homes.

The accounts are strikingly similar to those of rape survivors of the Bosnian

war; and the survivors of the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

In her book *Are Women Human?* Catherine MacKinnon identifies four characteristics that make genocidal rape distinct. Firstly, in order to be genocidal the aggressors must have the aim of physically destroying the group. This does not mean that all members of the group must be killed. The aggressors can inflict on the victim group bodily or mental harm or conditions of life calculated to bring about the group's destruction.

their rapists are on. In genocide, the identity of the perpetrator is essential. The woman (and by extension, her group) must know not simply that the atrocity occurred, but who was responsible.

And lastly, in war, rape has mostly an out-of-control quality. It is what an armed group of men can do if there is nothing to stop them. However, in genocide, rape is under control. It is a calculated act, a tool. In genocide, men rape in groups because they are ordered to or because they are systematically



**Mass sexual violence against Rohingya women is being used as a tool of terror by Myanmar's security forces.**

PHOTO: REUTERS

Secondly, genocide is relentlessly one-sided. While, in war, combatants (whether military or non-military) advance and retreat, seeking to gain control (generally over territory or political power), genocide targets civil society—a people, not combatants. Also, even if atrocities are committed on both sides of a conflict, we witness a radical disproportion of sexual violence by one group (usually state actors and militia) against the civilians of the other group.

Thirdly, in war, some women who are raped do not even know which side

permitted to do so. The men rape not as individual men, but as members of their race, ethnicity, religion or nationality. They sexually assault women (and sometimes other men) of a particular group.

Banar News, a Radio Free Asia-affiliated online news service, interviewed 54 Rohingya women who had arrived in Cox's Bazar in October 2016, one in three of whom had been raped. Seventeen of them said they had been raped before fleeing to Bangladesh. All identified their rapists

as military personnel.

Genocidal rape is the term used to describe the actions of a group who have carried out acts of mass rape during wartime against their perceived enemy as part of a genocidal campaign. In genocidal rape, the woman is a stand-in for her entire group, as is the rapist. The goal in genocidal rape is not simply to hurt people or to have sex. The goal is Group Destruction. Sexual violence is not simply an auxiliary tool employed to advance this goal, but given the nature of rape and sexual torture, it is the ultimate weapon. In war, the vicious effects of rape are largely beside the point. In genocide, the destruction is the point. During the Bangladesh Liberation War, the Yugoslav Wars, and the Rwandan genocide, where mass rapes had been an integral part of the conflicts, the destruction was the point.

*The Daily Star* report previously mentioned stated that there have been fewer rapes reported among the influx of refugees since August. I wondered why that was until I read an account from a friend conducting a survey before providing relief at the Balukhali camp: "Most girls in the villages that were attacked were publicly raped, and only a few survived. The ones who died didn't die of rape related wounds. They were buried alive, in front of family members."

But, the Rohingya "aren't a national ethnic group". "This is not genocide." "Ethnic cleansing is too strong a word." "And much needs to be investigated before we can reach a conclusion about what 'this' is." Let's wait to decide.

And while we wait to decide exactly what "this" is, bodies will continue to be battlegrounds and humanity will continue to be defeated.

Shagufa Hossain is the founder of Leaping Boundaries and a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

## PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

# A test for Europe's German anchor



DANIELA SCHWARZER

**T**HE outcome of Germany's federal election holds a crucial lesson for the European Union: even the country that has been the EU's bedrock of stability amid crisis is not immune to political fragmentation and polarisation. Although Chancellor Angela Merkel will almost certainly gain a fourth term, her new government is likely to be considerably weaker than the three that preceded it.

The Bundestag now counts six factions, compared to four in the previous electoral term. Merkel's centre-right Christian Democratic Union took 33 percent of the vote, its worst result since 1949, though still enough to give the CDU the most seats in parliament. The centre-left Social Democrats (SPD)—Germany's second-largest political party, and a part of Merkel's last governing coalition—also hit a post-war low, receiving just 20 percent of the vote.

Meanwhile, the populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) won 12 percent, making this anti-euro, pro-Russia, and staunchly xenophobic party the first far-right party to enter the Bundestag in almost 60 years. And the SPD has thrown in the towel, vowing to spend the coming electoral term in opposition.

In this context, Germany is likely to be ruled by a so-called Jamaica coalition, named for the colours of the parties—the CDU, the Greens, and the Free Democrats (FDP)—that would comprise it. But such a coalition will be unruly, owing to the parties' heterogeneous foreign-policy positions.

Similarly, the SPD-led opposition will be beset by deep divisions. Indeed, it is unlikely to cooperate on any issue at all with its fellow opposition party, the AfD. The SPD shares almost no values with the AfD, which has already declared that its main goal will be to



**German Chancellor Angela Merkel attends the opening ceremony of the G20 Summit in Hangzhou, China, September 4, 2016.**

PHOTO: REUTERS/NICOLAS ASFOURI/POOL

hound the other parties with populist and nationalist bombast. As a result, decades-old parliamentary norms of decorum and courtesy are in jeopardy.

Given the Bundestag's central role in shaping Germany's EU policy, this could weaken the capacity of Merkel's government to provide the kind of leadership Europe now needs.

To be sure, there is some good news. The victory of Merkel's CDU, however weak, implies elements of continuity on which to build. Merkel's prompt decision to take responsibility for forming a viable coalition government means that her commitment to preserving the EU and her staunch defense of democracy and Western values will continue to guide German policymaking. Moderation, stability, and international openness will remain Germany's watchwords, no matter how much ugly rhetoric the AfD spews.

But, in terms of action on international

challenges, Germany's partners will have to be patient. In particular, though Merkel is expected to cooperate closely with France's pro-European president, Emmanuel Macron, to forge a new model of EU integration for the post-Brexit age, she is unlikely to do so right away.

The formation of a coalition alone—in particular, a conservative-liberal-green coalition—will likely take months. Next month's state election in Lower Saxony, where the AfD secured significant support, adds another element of uncertainty to the mix.

Even after that election, compromise may not come easily. The Bavaria-based Christian Social Union (CSU)—the CDU's sister party—will face a state election next autumn. Feeling the hot breath of the AfD on its neck, the CSU has already sharpened its criticism of Merkel's immigration policy, and is likely to try to push the chancellor further to the right in the coming year.

Perhaps the stickiest issue for the coalition parties will be the eurozone. The stances of the FDP and the Greens are opposed on this front, particularly when it comes to joint crisis management, mutual insurance mechanisms, and fiscal tools. But this struggle to find common ground may prove useful for the wider EU, as its leaders attempt to strike a balance between the responsibility of member governments and the eurozone-wide institutions that the monetary union needs to function effectively.

It may turn out to be easier for Germany's coalition parties—not to mention the French and German governments—to forge a new framework for bilateral and European security cooperation. Polls show that concerns about terrorism and internal security outweigh fears over immigration. If those pressing issues are addressed at the

European level, as Merkel suggested in her victory statement, support for Europe could end up winning back the discontented voters who cast their ballots for the AfD.

Whatever government emerges in Germany in the weeks ahead, its leaders will need to devote more effort to explaining their policy choices to citizens and international partners alike. With the AfD in the Bundestag, the German public will be exposed to more radical positions on foreign affairs—from EU leadership to relations with Russia—than have been heard in over a generation. While Germany's centre has held, its consensus is about to be tested.

Daniela Schwarzer is Director of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP).  
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**Age:** Ideally 25 – 32 years.

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### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

#### ACROSS

- 1 Homes
- 7 Baby's place
- 11 Folder type
- 12 Doughnut feature
- 13 Like some diseases
- 15 Require defrosting
- 16 Gasp for air
- 18 Headed out
- 21 Carry on, as war
- 22 Flour merchant
- 24 Pitcher's stat
- 25 Beanie or beret
- 26 Music's Yoko
- 27 Bill collector at a coffee shop
- 29 Tag info
- 30 Spotted
- 31 Quite uncommon
- 32 Game piece
- 34 Fit to go out in public
- 40 Cork's country
- 41 Predestine
- 42 Cruise stop
- 43 Enjoyed the lake
- 45 Band blaster
- 47 Hotel feature
- 49 Count starter
- 51 Heavenly
- 53 Put in office
- 55 Reasonable
- 57 Wedding site
- 59 Hold up
- 61 Under the weather
- 63 Enjoyed the lake
- 65 Louvre setting
- 67 Visibly shocked
- 69 Carpet's place
- 71 Past or future
- 73 Dripping
- 75 Kayak's cousin
- 77 Wealthy travelers
- 79 Calgary's country
- 81 Fashionably dated
- 83 Door feature
- 85 Vitality
- 87 2016 Olympics site
- 89 Make mistakes
- 91 Flying mammal
- 93 Tell tales
- 95 Last part

#### YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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