

A year ago, the answer to that would have been that this kind of storytelling is important to document the experiences of women fleeing the Myanmar military. Women of all ages were raped and gang-raped by the military, and as they narrated what happened to them, it was an act of dissent. Here on free land, their stories sought justice, and perhaps for the first time in their life, the survivors had come in contact with people who listened to them.

A year on, the answer is a lot more blurred.

The women's stories have by now been used as evidence that, yes, rape was systematically carried out during the Rohingya genocide. It has

Except the process of documentation is riddled with a power dynamic between the interviewer, community, aid-giver, and survivor, where the survivor is at the bottom of the rung.

The story of Samira's mother

Take Samira's mother for example. Baby Samira was brought to this world by the violent act of rape perpetrated by the Myanmar armed forces. We were led to the baby's mother by her husband last month. Except, when we got to her home, the mother was visibly distraught and refused to come out of the inner room, appearing only fleetingly to hand over baby Samira to her husband.



Mahmudul's impoverished mother can barely sustain her unexpected child

PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

taken several years of Rohingya women narrating stories of rape for the United Nations Secretary General to finally include the Myanmar Armed Forces (Tatmadaw) in its list of organisations that use sexual violence as a weapon of war. The list is made annually. As another August 25 passes by, the yearly update is that many of these women have now given birth to babies as a result of their rape. Their testimonies are important as we chart the post-conflict lives of these women.

"She is just a little annoyed because a few foreign journalists came to meet her before you did," her husband Selim* said, trying to diffuse the situation. It became clear that the husband wanted the wife to talk to journalists but the wife had no such wish. We quickly told Selim that Samira's mother does not need to come out front if she does not want to. "She says that she feels like she is selling her body," he said.

That feeling must have been amplified ten-fold



War-babies will continue to fascinate the general public in the years to come—but will their needs ever be addressed?

PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

When we asked Selim why he wanted the story to be told, he replied, "So that babies like Samira get the help they need. But the help does not seem to arrive, so my wife is tired of talking." When asked to describe what sort of help he wanted, he did not have a clear answer.

That Selim is his wife's spokesperson is further complicated by the fact that he married her while she was already pregnant with her war baby. In traditional Rohingya society, men hold a higher place in the hierarchy of the household—and Samira's mother being a pregnant rape survivor further compromises her position of power in relation to Selim.

"I married her because I felt sorry for her," he said, when asked why he did something most men around him would not. His wife is 22 years old, while he is middle-aged.

When we asked Selim why he wanted the story to be told, he replied, "So that babies like Samira get the help they need. But the help does not seem to arrive, so my wife is tired of talking." When asked to describe what sort of help he wanted, he did not have a clear answer but chose to reply with an example: "The baby gets sick very often and the hospitals are not treating her properly. The people at the hospital do not listen to what we are saying."

A few days later, Selim had a more definitive answer. Speaking over the phone, he said, "Samira has pneumonia. The Eid holidays are going on. We cannot treat her, because the hospitals are all closed. I need money to treat her at a hospital outside the camps." Even his wife, who had previously refused to talk, took the phone to reiterate the same thing, "Samira gets sick every three days. I don't know what to do."

by the fact that as Selim entertained journalists in his tiny front room, a crowd of curious onlookers had gathered outside the door. Even when they were dispersed, they stood at a distance, listening in. The huts are so congested that it is difficult to do anything without alerting everyone.

Samira was born in the secrecy of her home, delivered by the woman next door. "That old mother," said Selim pointing to a woman in the distance, "she is the one that delivered the baby."