

# Beyond martyrs and victims: Who is worthy of human rights?



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Israeli military strikes in the Gaza Strip have killed an estimated 17,000, including more than 6,000 children. One haunting image—among many of the US-backed genocidal war—is of a Palestinian woman, Inas Abu Maamar, 36, embracing the body of her five-year-old niece Saly, killed at Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis on October 17. Squatting on the bare floor, her back to a grey tiled wall, her covered head cast downward, the woman clutches her niece—shrouded in the white kafan (burial cloth)—on her lap. Her right arm tightly cradles the back of the child's wrapped head and her left palm rests on what would be her niece's face, covering it from the photographer's lens. Neither face is visible.

An image, global and hauntingly familiar: woman mourning a dead child. Yet this particular photo—a covered Muslim Palestinian woman mourning a dead Palestinian child—disrupts a narrative with the woman's refusal to allow voyeuristic access to her intimate grief. The Palestinian female body has come to symbolise the project of settler colonial occupation and humanitarian industry to the extent that it serves as a metaphor for women's vulnerability. This photograph stands, in part, as a methodical reproduction of the “worthy victim” reified through iconic mother and child imagery while simultaneously unsettling that framing.

What are the terms through which subjects can become visible as victims of violence and colonial occupation? Both male and female Palestinians are relegated to disposability—their lives stripped of use or meaning to the Israeli state, bolstered by European colonialist legacy and US imperialist support. Violence is the precondition for the existence and survival of the Zionist state. Gender roles undergird the violence. This current war is a racialised and sexualised annihilation of Palestinian personhood. The photograph expresses historical oppression and its subject's refusal “flips the discourse” of victimisation, showing how violence is core—not occasional or exceptional—to the Israeli state's occupation and imperial force as well as Palestinian gendered refusal to allow cooptation by, or give access only to a narrative of suffering to viewing eyes. The image expresses the refusal as a human(e) response so frequently denied colonised bodies.

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According to Unicef, via Reuters, an average of 20 children a day have been killed or maimed in wars around the world in the 21st century. In that context, what we see in this image is both heartrending and universal. Indeed, it resonates with the “woman and children” trope that has long served to humanise war's violence, whether in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Sudan, or Palestine. Emotions are fundamental to humanitarian narrative construction, arousing sympathy, guilt, and shame to move people to action. Yet a hierarchy of suffering exists whereby loss of Palestinian lives cannot be mourned because, as Palestinian scholar Devin G Atallah points out, they were never allowed the “livingness while alive.”

“Genres of the human,” part of decolonial feminist scholar Sylvia Wynter's alternative humanist philosophy, alludes to what decolonial psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon has termed “sociogenic,” or socially-produced categories, modes, or



Inas Abu Maamar, 36, embraces the body of her 5-year-old niece Saly, who was killed in an Israeli strike, at Nasser hospital in the southern Gaza Strip on October 17.

models of humanity that create the conditions of being and nonbeing. Palestinian scholars maintain that Palestinians—like Black people in the US—exist outside the human order of being, which is to say that they agree with and extend to Palestinians the argument made by African American scholars that only all those who do not qualify as “Black”—whether White, racialised, or colonised—exist within the human order. The Zionist and White supremacist projects share this racialised hierarchy of what constitutes the human. The brutal killings by the Israeli state that we are witnessing in Gaza, with no meaningful intervention by the powers that be, is an ongoing manifestation of that selective humanity.

In a recent talk, Palestinian organiser, journalist, and poet Mohammed El-Kurd unpacked the false binaries in entrenched media narratives that continue to shape much of the global discourse around Palestinian rights to self-determination, subjecthood, and resistance. He suggested that since October 7, emphasis on the deaths of women and children, while horrifying and heartbreaking, also flattens the discourse of Palestinian oppression and resistance to that of victim/martyr versus terrorist. El-Kurd posits that this rendering reflects a “historic failure.” Not only does it obscure the violation of Palestinian male bodies by Israel's ongoing onslaught in Gaza, in refugee camps, among imprisoned populations, where gendered/sexualised/racialised violence is routinised, but it also restricts expression of a continuum of human feelings to Palestinians, disdain and rage, but also optimism and joy. To be outraged, to express rage at oppression, is a human reaction that is denied Palestinians, who are only relegated to the categories of “animal” or “terrorist” and “inherently violent” and always already suffering. It is an act of erasure where Palestinian violence is emphasised over the ongoing violation of Palestinian humanity.

Speaking to the international outpouring of sympathy following the 2022 killing of Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh by an Israeli soldier, El-Kurd reminds the viewers that her American citizenship, journalist profession, owning a dog, and

Christian identity were all characteristics that made her a “worthy victim” to, in this case, expose Israeli violence. In 2014, Mohammed Abu Khdeir, a 16-year-old Palestinian boy, was burnt to death by Israeli settlers and made the news because of, as El-Kurd points out, his status as a child. These are, he says, the “Western prerequisites for sympathy.” Mainstream narratives alienate and racialise Palestinians instead of allowing them full humanity: Palestinian men are

seen as misogynist brutes, women and children as their victims. In other words, they are victims of exceptional patriarchy, which obscures the reality that patriarchal violence is a global problem and certainly not unique to Palestine; it is obvious that Israeli occupation and US imperialism are also forces of patriarchal violence. It begs the critical question: Who is the human in human rights discourse, and do human beings have to be held up to a moral/ethical test to be worthy of sympathy and be spared genocide?

We might ask what constitutes violence—material, symbolic, semantic—in this context of occupation and imperialist war. Does the fact that people in Gaza have been enduring a brutal 16-year siege on their daily freedoms count as violence? What are the implications of the siege on the psychological, social, political, economic conditions of life in Gaza? That Gaza is likened to the world's largest open-air prison? This war is an extension of the siege, part of a 75-year-old ongoing project of ethnic cleansing. As El-Kurd asks: “What is it like for Palestinians to live near and smell the sea yet not be allowed to visit it?”

When we raise awareness of gender-based violence, can we also talk about the dual side of colonial violence enacted on Palestinian men and women? About the ways that rendering them as only violent perpetrators or innocent victims aid the US/Israeli hollow “civilising” war discourse and constrict Palestinians from owning a full range of humanity? Can we also grapple with the notion that Palestinians' resistance to oppression is a human reaction that transcends gender? American feminist theorist Cynthia Enloe recently argued, “Feminist lessons of war do not feature goddesses, griever, or super-heroines. Feminist lessons of war are drawn from paying serious attention to the wartime experiences of diverse...thinking, acting women.” One might add, as stated powerfully by the Palestinian Feminist Collective, we also need to pay attention to the ongoing condition of settler colonialism, apartheid, and genocide which are inextricably linked with patriarchy, global White supremacy, and colonialism.

## STOCKTAKING FOR COP28

# Bangladesh's energy transition journey so far

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Worldwide, there is increasing focus on the energy transition, which entails achieving complete decarbonisation of the global energy system by 2050. Situated in the Global South, Bangladesh encounters substantial challenges as it grapples with the consequences of climate change. Despite contributing significantly less to carbon emissions than developed nations, the country remains highly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. Bangladesh's trajectory towards energy transition has been challenging but also provides valuable opportunities for other countries to learn from it.

Even though Bangladesh contributes only 0.56 percent to global greenhouse gas emissions, it ranks as the seventh most vulnerable nation to the impacts of climate change. According to the Climate Risk Index 2021, Bangladesh experienced the loss of 11,450 lives and incurred economic losses amounting to \$3.72 billion. It witnessed 185 extreme weather events between 2000-19, all attributed to the effects of climate change. Looking ahead to 2050, the country faces the alarming prospect of losing one-third of its agricultural GDP due to climate variability and extreme events. This is particularly concerning given that the agriculture sector constitutes roughly half of the country's employment.

The World Bank reports that Bangladesh has invested approximately \$10 billion in climate-resilient infrastructure since 1972. This investment has proven effective, leading to a reduction of annual economic losses from natural disasters by around one percent of the GDP. Notably, the country boasts over 14,000 cyclone shelters with a combined capacity to accommodate 2.4 million people. Over the past 25 years, this infrastructure has contributed to a 75 percent reduction in fatalities during cyclones. To further address climate-related risks, Bangladesh allocates a substantial budget of about \$3 billion annually for adaptation and disaster management, further demonstrating its commitment to resilience. Despite these efforts, approximately two percent of the GDP is consistently lost due to the impact of natural calamities and environmental degradation.

Bangladesh has set ambitious goals to reduce carbon emissions by 21.8 percent by 2030, focusing on increased use of renewable energy and energy efficiency, as outlined in its 2021 nationally determined

solar power takes the lead, contributing approximately 80 percent, including off-grid and on-grid systems.

Despite the intentions outlined in Bangladesh's 2008 renewable energy policy, which aimed for 10 percent of electricity to be sourced from renewables, the country has achieved a modest three percent from renewable sources. Despite initial targets of generating five percent of its electricity from renewables by 2015 and 10 percent by 2020, as of June 2023, Bangladesh has fallen well short of these goals. The government has now established new objectives, aiming to achieve 15 percent of electricity from renewables by 2030, 40 percent by 2041, and 100 percent by 2050.

In alignment with its commitment to a low-carbon development path, Bangladesh is increasingly focusing on renewable energy and energy efficiency. The country has installed 541.7 MW capacity solar power plants, with an additional 911.8 MW in progress, alongside a 149 MW wind power plant. Moreover, over 6 million solar home systems have been installed in off-grid areas, and 4.5 million improved cook stoves have been distributed in rural regions across the country.

Bangladesh has emerged as a trailblazer in adopting nature-based solutions (NbS) to supplement the impact of energy transition and address the challenges of climate change, exemplified by initiatives like mangrove restoration, floating agriculture, and community-based forest management. By incorporating NbS into energy transition strategies, there is an opportunity to create a more holistic and sustainable approach that considers both environmental conservation and the shift toward cleaner energy sources. The country's innovative approach serves as a model, offering valuable lessons for neighbouring South Asian nations on integrating climate resilience into national development programmes and establishing a sophisticated financial framework. Development partners can draw insights from Bangladesh's experience and replicate successful strategies in other countries.

Setting a precedent, Bangladesh was the first developing country to formulate a coordinated action plan in 2009 known as the Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan. Additionally, it established a Climate Change Trust Fund with an allocation of \$300 million from domestic resources spanning 2009 to 2012. Bangladesh's proactive and comprehensive approach to tackling climate change and advancing sustainable development offers a compelling blueprint for other nations, especially those encountering similar issues in the Global South. Despite contributing minimally to global greenhouse gas emissions, Bangladesh has displayed a pronounced vulnerability to the impacts of climate change, underscoring



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contributions (NDCs). As a Climate and Clean Air Coalition partner, Bangladesh is committed to substantial reductions, aiming to decrease black carbon emissions by 72 percent and methane by 37 percent by 2040. Approximately six to seven percent of the annual budget is allocated to enhance climate resilience through adaptation initiatives, with 75 percent of funding sourced domestically. The Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCTF) finances over 800 projects dedicated to effective climate adaptation and mitigation.

Bangladesh currently incorporates 2.93 percent of renewable energy, amounting to 650.14 MW, within its overall energy mix, while the total installed power capacity stands at 22,215 MW. A substantial portion (48 percent or 10,678 MW) of the total power generation relies on natural gas. The primary renewable resources in Bangladesh, including solar, wind, hydro, and biomass, are determined based on the country's geographical location. As of June 2023, these resources collectively hold an installed capacity of 1,183 MW, constituting 4.5 percent of the total installed capacity. Here,

the pressing need for adaptive measures.

The nation's investments in climate-resilient infrastructure, nature-based solutions, and renewable energy reflect a holistic commitment to mitigating environmental risks and promoting sustainable practices. In order to address the financing gap to implement this holistic approach, Bangladesh uses innovative financial mechanisms, such as the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund and the allocation of a substantial portion of the annual budget to climate-related endeavours. The BCCTF can be made more sustainable if each development project contributes to it through an eco-compensation cess, thus reducing the dependence of the fund on budgetary support. The experiences of Bangladesh can serve as a valuable repository of insights for other countries on the crucial integration of climate resilience into national development plans and the effective utilisation of domestic resources for impactful climate initiatives. Bangladesh's journey towards energy transition is likely to remain challenging, but there is light at the end of the tunnel.