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# Defying Genocide in Myanmar: Everyday Resistance Narratives of Rohingyas

Patrícia Nabuco Martuscelli <sup>a</sup>, Bayes Ahmed <sup>b</sup> and Peter Sammonds <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK; <sup>b</sup>Institute for Risk and Disaster Reduction (IRDR), University College London (UCL), London, UK

## ABSTRACT

Rohingyas are the most persecuted minority in the world. They have been facing systematic discrimination and serious human rights violations since the 1970s when they stopped being recognized as citizens by the Burmese government. Acts committed against this predominantly Muslim minority in the Rakhine State can be classified as ethnic cleansing with the intent of genocide. Myanmar is also facing a case in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) due to violations of the Convention Against Genocide (1948). This paper employs the framework of everyday resistance to highlight Rohingyas' acts and practices to resist genocidal acts in Myanmar. We analyzed 62, 56, and 145 micronarratives of forcibly displaced adult Rohingyas currently living in India, Malaysia, and Bangladesh, collected between March 2019 and April 2020. We conclude that the Rohingyas adopted various everyday resistance practices involving non-compliance, such as refusing to follow orders, giving money or going to forced labour; and avoiding staying at home and secrecy, including praying, using mobile phones, moving to other areas, studying, and marrying secretly. In addition, everyday resistance strategies connected to gender-focused protection against sexual violence were linked to staying at home, hiding girls and maintaining women pregnant. Finally, Rohingyas adopted resistance strategies to survive the 2017 attacks, including fleeing to Bangladesh in groups and supporting each other. This discussion dialogues with previous work on genocide studies that highlight the agency and resistance of Holocaust and other genocide survivors. It contributes to understanding the everyday resistance of a stateless minority, recognizing its agency against its genocidal state.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Rohingya; everyday resistance; Myanmar; genocide; Bangladesh; Malaysia

## Introduction

Rohingyas, a predominantly Muslim minority living in the northern Rakhine State (former *Arakan*) of Myanmar (former Burma), were victims of serious crimes against humanity and genocide.<sup>1</sup> They are a stateless population that are not recognized as citizens by the

**CONTACT** Bayes Ahmed  bayes.ahmed@ucl.ac.uk  Institute for Risk and Disaster Reduction (IRDR), University College London (UCL), Gower Street, London, WC1E 6BT, UK

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Myanmar government.<sup>2</sup> They have been facing discrimination and human rights violations, including denial of their rights to citizenship, political participation, education, healthcare, work, and free movement<sup>3</sup>, which made the Human Rights Council classify the Rohingyas as “the most persecuted minority in the world.”<sup>4</sup> In 1948, states defined “genocide [as] any acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group,”<sup>5</sup> including

(a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; [and] (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.<sup>6</sup>

In March 2017, the UN Human Rights Council created the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar to investigate “the facts and circumstances of the alleged human rights violations by military and security forces, and abuses, in Myanmar.”<sup>7</sup> In its August 2018 Report, the Mission concluded that

The crimes in Rakhine State, and the manner in which they were perpetrated, are similar in nature, gravity and scope to those that have allowed genocidal intent to be established in other contexts.<sup>8</sup>

On 11 November 2019, The Gambia started a case in the International Court of Justice (ICJ), accusing Myanmar of violating the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.<sup>9</sup> Genocidal acts like mass killing, burning of villages, torture and sexual abuse and violence forced Rohingyas to escape to other countries, mainly Bangladesh.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Maung Zarni and Alice Cowley, “The Slow-Burning Genocide of Myanmar’s Rohingya,” *Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal* 23 (2014): 683–754.

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive discussion on how Rohingyas lost their citizenship see among others Nyi Nyi Kyaw, “Unpacking the Presumed Statelessness of Rohingyas,” *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 15, no. 3 (2017): 269–86.

<sup>3</sup> Institute for Risk and Disaster Reduction, University College London (UCL), UK and Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh, *The Rohingya Exodus 2017: Issues and Implications for Stability, Security and Peace in South Asia* (London: June 2019). [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/risk-disaster-reduction/sites/risk-disaster-reduction/files/final\\_report\\_ba.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/risk-disaster-reduction/sites/risk-disaster-reduction/files/final_report_ba.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Council, “Human Rights Council Opens Special Session on the Situation of Human Rights of the Rohingya and Other Minorities in Rakhine State in Myanmar,” 5 December 2017, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22491&LangID=E> (accessed 30 March 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Article II. United Nations, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*. Approved by General Assembly resolution 260 A (III) of 9 December 1948, Entry into force: 12 January 1951, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crimeofgenocide.aspx> (accessed 30 March 2021).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* In this paper we adopt the perspective of Alexander K.A. Greenawalt, “Rethinking Genocidal Intent: The Case for a Knowledge-Based Interpretation,” *Columbia Law Review* (1999): 2259–94. Greenawalt explains that the 1948 Convention brings the definition of genocide and examples of genocidal acts. He also defends that a person can commit genocidal acts even without a genocidal intent.

<sup>7</sup> Further reports of the Mission continue to conclude that there was a genocide of Rohingyas including through acts of sexual and gender-based violence. O’Brien and Hoffstaedter highlight that the destruction of the Rohingya culture also configures an important aspect in the genocidal process of this population. See Melanie O’Brien and Gerhard Hoffstaedter, “‘There We are Nothing, Here We Are Nothing!’—The Enduring Effects of the Rohingya Genocide,” *Social Sciences* 9, no. 11 (2020): 209.

<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Council, “Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar,” 12 September 2018, 16, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/274/54/PDF/G1827454.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed 30 March 2021).

<sup>9</sup> The International Criminal Court (ICC) is also investigating crimes against humanity (including deportations and persecutions) involving Rohingyas that happened in the state of Myanmar. For further information see ICC, Bangladesh/Myanmar, Situation in the People’s Republic of Bangladesh/Republic of the Union of Myanmar (ICC-01/19), <https://www.icc-cpi.int/bangladesh-myanmar> (accessed 25 February 2022).

<sup>10</sup> There are many reports documenting the violence, international crimes and human rights violations against the Rohingyas. See for example Amnesty International, *Briefing: Myanmar Forces Starve, Abduct and Rob Rohingya, as*

As a result, more than one million Rohingyas were forcibly displaced in different influxes, especially in 1978, 1991–1992, 2012, and 2017.<sup>11</sup> According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 770,000 Rohingyas have fled to Bangladesh since 25 August 2017, the last time the violence against Rohingyas broke out in Myanmar. Until February 2022, the UNHCR supported over 923,000 Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar district in Bangladesh (Figure 1).<sup>12</sup>

Historically, Rohingyas have also fled to other countries in the region, including Malaysia<sup>13</sup> and India<sup>14</sup> and to the Middle East. Although Rohingyas faced the Burmese state's asymmetric power, they were not passive victims waiting for their extermination. On the contrary, ordinary Rohingyas, even if they were unaware of that, adopted everyday resistance acts and practices (patterns of acts) to survive the daily human rights violations, discrimination and genocidal violence perpetrated by the state of Myanmar through its armed forces and the extremist Buddhist local communities.

This paper employs the concept of everyday resistance as discussed by Vinthagen and Johansson<sup>15</sup> to examine the micronarratives of 62, 56, and 145 forcibly displaced adult Rohingyas living in India, Malaysia, and Bangladesh, respectively. These micronarratives allow us to understand how Rohingyas from different backgrounds (sex, age, and villages) lived the genocide in their origin country and adopted ordinary everyday actions to resist an asymmetric power. It is also essential to understand how Rohingyas living in Myanmar, including those constrained in internal forced displacement camps, continue to defy genocidal acts.<sup>16</sup>

Previous works identified Rohingyas' narratives to understand their everyday strategies to survive in receiving countries, especially Bangladesh.<sup>17</sup> Farzana discusses how Rohingyas' music, art and songs/poems (called *taranas*) are an unconventional resistance to keep their identity and survive.<sup>18</sup> Uddin explains that Rohingya families marry girls with Bangladeshi nationals to guarantee security and citizenship in the future.<sup>19</sup> Rahman explores the importance of *taleem* (a Muslim women's prayer space) for the concepts of identity, home and belonging of Rohingya women living in the camps.<sup>20</sup> Other

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*Ethnic Cleansing Continues* (London: Amnesty International, 2018); Human Rights Council, *Report of the Detailed Findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar* (Geneva: Human Rights Council, 2018); Human Rights Watch, *"An Open Prison without End" Myanmar's Mass Detention of Rohingya in Rakhine State* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> UNHCR, "Rohingya Emergency," <https://www.unhcr.org/rohingya-emergency.html> (accessed 29 March 2022).

<sup>12</sup> UNHCR, "Operational Data Portal. Rohingya Response in Bangladesh," [https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/myanmar\\_refugees](https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/myanmar_refugees) (accessed 29 March 2022).

<sup>13</sup> In January 2021, there were 101,000 Rohingyas registered with UNHCR in Malaysia. For further information see UNHCR, "The Displaced and Stateless of Myanmar in the Asia-Pacific Region," January 2021, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/The%20Displaced%20and%20Stateless%20of%20Myanmar%20in%20the%20Asia-Pacific%20Region%20-%20January%202021.pdf> (accessed 25 February 2022).

<sup>14</sup> In January 2021, there were 18,000 Rohingyas registered with UNHCR in India. However, the organization calculates the number of 40,000 Rohingyas in the country since many are undocumented. See UNHCR, "The Displaced and Stateless."

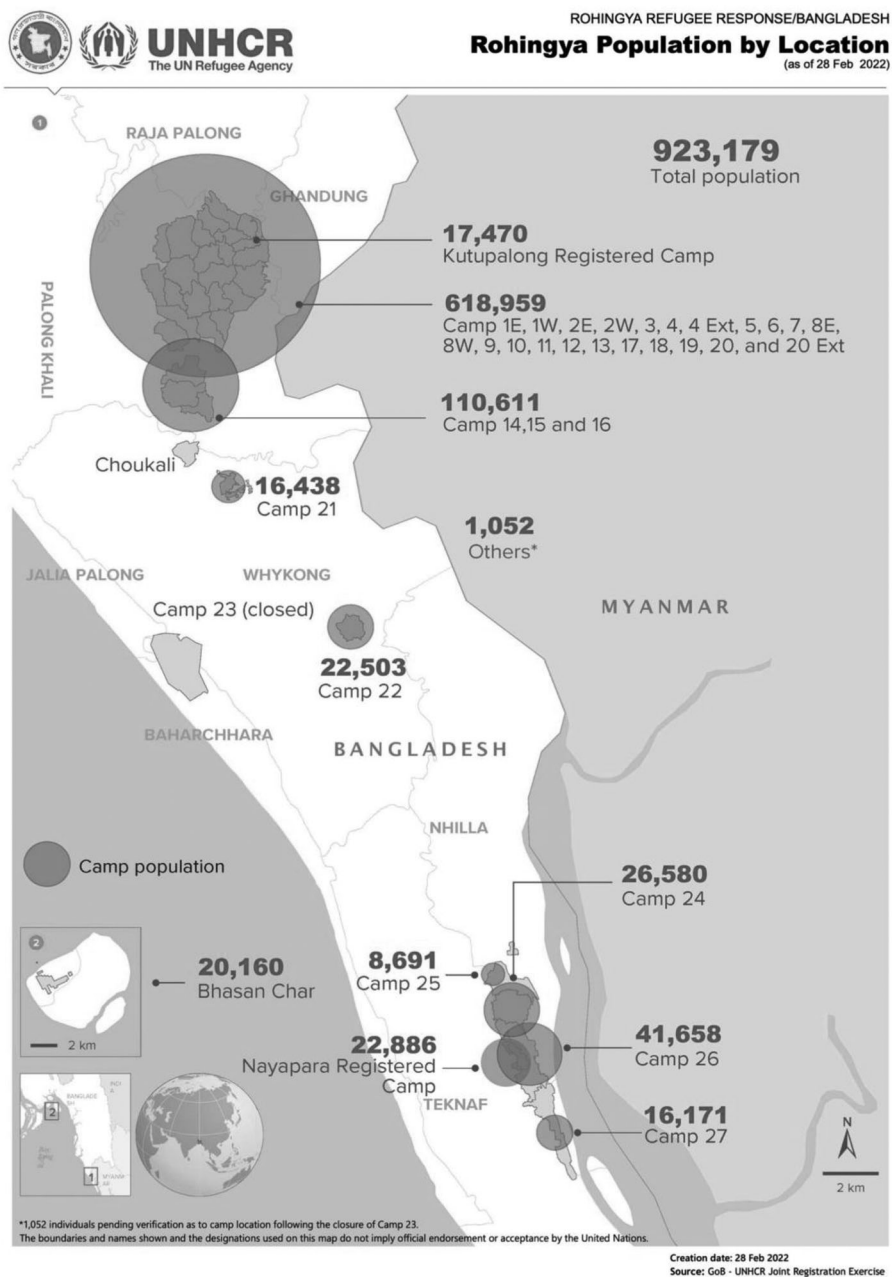
<sup>15</sup> Stellan Vinthagen and Anna Johansson, "Everyday Resistance: Exploration of a Concept and Its Theories," *Resistance studies magazine* 1, no. 1 (2013): 1–46.

<sup>16</sup> In January 2021, UNHCR estimated that there were 458,000 Rohingyas living in Myanmar and other 142,000 living in internal displacement camps. The number of Rohingyas in diaspora is larger than the number of Rohingyas still in Myanmar. See UNHCR, "The Displaced and Stateless."

<sup>17</sup> Nasir Uddin, *The Rohingya: An Ethnography of 'subhuman' Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Kazi Fahmida Farzana, "Music and Artistic Artefacts: Symbols of Rohingya Identity and Everyday Resistance in Borderlands," *ASEAS-Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 4, no. 2 (2011): 218.

<sup>19</sup> M. Ala Uddin, "The Meaning of Marriage to the Rohingya Refugees, and Their Survival in Bangladesh," *Journal of Refugee Studies* feaa054 (2021), doi:10.1093/jrs/feaa054.



**Figure 1.** The location of Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

Source: UNHCR, 2022 [13].

works consider Rohingyas' everyday strategies to survive in Malaysia, like assimilation and being invisible<sup>21</sup> and "practices of resistance-governance" to access education, housing, and healthcare.<sup>22</sup> However, none of these studies investigates the everyday practices and acts adopted by Rohingyas to resist the genocidal rules and acts in Myanmar. The article fulfils this gap by contributing to the literature on genocide studies and resistance that recognizes how ordinary people engage in actions to survive the genocide.

The following section explains the theoretical framework of everyday resistance to study the case of Rohingyas in Myanmar. It adopts the definition of Vinthagen and Johansson<sup>23</sup> that have built on Scott<sup>24</sup> and de Certeau's works.<sup>25</sup>

## Unintentional Everyday Resistance

James Scott<sup>26</sup> established the concept of everyday resistance to understand daily acts of opposition and self-help of peasants against domination when open defiance was not possible (due to fear of repression or mortal risk, for example) during colonial times. Scott recognizes that hidden individual or collective acts of subaltern groups (including "foot-dragging, false compliance, poaching, arson, sabotage, surreptitious assault and murder, anonymous threats"<sup>27</sup> and others) are a form of resistance that is disguised, relatively safe, autonomous and does not require formal organization.<sup>28</sup> Scott also called this the "infra-politics of the powerless."<sup>29</sup> Michel de Certeau<sup>30</sup> contributed to Scott's idea by calling attention to creative practices of everyday life that "depend on time" and the use of the system to resist. Many other works theoretically discussed everyday resistance<sup>31</sup> and employed this concept to analyse persistent, disguised and invisible acts that are not commonly considered resistance.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Farhana Rahman, "'I Find Comfort Here': Rohingya Women and Taleems in Bangladesh's Refugee Camps," *Journal of Refugee Studies* fez054 (2019), doi:10.1093/jrs/fez054.

<sup>21</sup> O'Brien and Hoffstaedter, "There We Are Nothing."

<sup>22</sup> Cecilia Truffer, "The Rohingyas Beyond Domination and Resistance," *Global Migration Research Papers* no. 20 (2018), <https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/library/publications-institute/rohingyas-beyond-domination-and-resistance-case-study-refugees> (accessed 30 March 2021), 54.

<sup>23</sup> Vinthagen and Johansson, "Everyday Resistance."

<sup>24</sup> James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>25</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>26</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*; Scott, *Domination and the Arts*.

<sup>27</sup> James Scott, "Everyday Forms of Resistance," *Copenhagen Papers* 4 (1989): 34.

<sup>28</sup> Many works presented critics to Scott's ideas. See for example Matthew C. Gutmann, "Rituals of Resistance: A Critique of the Theory of Everyday Forms of Resistance," *Latin American Perspectives* 20, no. 2 (1993): 74–92.

<sup>29</sup> James Scott, "The Infrapolitics of Subordinate Groups," in *The Post-Development Reader*, ed. M. Rahnema and V. Bawtree (London: Zed Books, 1997), 311.

<sup>30</sup> de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*.

<sup>31</sup> See among others J.A. Hollander and R.L. Einwohner, "Conceptualizing Resistance," *Sociological Forum* 19, no. 4 (2004): 533–54. doi:10.1007/s11206-004-0694-5; Carol Daniel Kasbari and Stellan Vinthagen, "The Visible Effects of 'Invisible Politics': 'Everyday Forms of Resistance' and Possible Outcomes," *Journal of Political Power* (2020): 1–21; Anna Johansson and Stellan, Vinthagen, *Conceptualizing "Everyday Resistance": A Transdisciplinary Approach* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>32</sup> See among others Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Susan Thomson, "Whispering Truth to Power: The Everyday Resistance of Rwandan Peasants to Post-Genocide Reconciliation," *African Affairs* 110, no. 440 (2011): 439–56; A. Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2013); Rowan El-Bialy and Shree Mulay, "Microaggression and Everyday Resistance in Narratives of Refugee Resettlement," *Migration Studies* 8, no. 3 (2020): 356–81.

We employed the concept of everyday resistance as discussed by Vinthagen and Johansson<sup>33</sup> that builds on Scott<sup>34</sup> and de Certeau's<sup>35</sup> work. Differently from Scott<sup>36</sup>, Vinthagen and Johansson argue that there is no need for resisters to have an intention to resist the dominant power or to achieve success in ending/changing the domination.<sup>37</sup> Like de Certeau,<sup>38</sup> they focus on the art of resistance – that is, “how people are acting” and not their intention nor the recognition of the dominant power that this is resistance.<sup>39</sup> In this case, the Rohingyas do not employ the word resistance to describe their actions. Rohingyas' daily activities are not necessarily perceived as resistance by the Myanmar military junta or other actors oppressing the Rohingyas. Farzana's work also concluded that her Rohingya participants did not see their songs and drawings as resistance acts.<sup>40</sup> They had no consciousness or intention to resist the government. The everyday resistance concept is helpful to understand those hidden, invisible routines, acts and practices that are not open acts of resistance like protests and rebellions.

We understand that “everyday resistance is a matter of scattered and regular resistance with a potential to undermine power without being understood as resistance (or without the actors being detected)”<sup>41</sup> – that is, “how people act in their everyday lives in ways that might undermine power.”<sup>42</sup> Everyday resistance has two main elements: (a) acts are part of everyday life (they are integrated into social life and are part of normality), and (b) they are a quiet, hidden and invisible expression of resistance to power.<sup>43</sup> In this logic, everyday activities of power re-creation, avoidance, escape of power relations, social and material survival, cultural elements, and mental and physical coping techniques under domination can be considered everyday resistance.<sup>44</sup>

Vinthagen and Johansson explain that everyday resistance is always situated in a social space, historical tradition, time and power relations.<sup>45</sup> The power structures shape the possibility of resistance (how to resist and to what). However, power may adapt to everyday resistance.<sup>46</sup> Maung Thawngmung highlighted the coping strategies of ordinary people in Myanmar to survive challenging economic situations, and some of them may accommodate and support the political regime.<sup>47</sup> Everyday resistance of Rohingyas may also be a way to accommodate that will support and not change a regime that oppresses them. Despite having some limitations, we understand that the analytical

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<sup>33</sup> Vinthagen, and Johansson, “Everyday Resistance.”

<sup>34</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*; Scott, *Domination and the Arts*.

<sup>35</sup> de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*.

<sup>36</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*; Scott, *Domination and the Arts*.

<sup>37</sup> Vinthagen, and Johansson, “Everyday Resistance.”

<sup>38</sup> de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*.

<sup>39</sup> Vinthagen, and Johansson, “Everyday Resistance,” 21.

<sup>40</sup> Farzana explains that “I found that the refugees were not doing these drawing intentionally or with the purpose of sending them on to the authorities as coded messages, as the Rohingyas did not socially construct this as resistance.” Farzana, “Music and Artistic Artefacts,” 226.

<sup>41</sup> Vinthagen, and Johansson, “Everyday Resistance,” 37.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 24–6.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>47</sup> Adeth Maung Thawngmung, *Everyday Economic Survival in Myanmar* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2019).



framework of everyday resistance developed by Johansson and Vinthagen<sup>48</sup> is helpful to study the case of Rohingyas resisting genocide in Myanmar.

Our analysis of the Rohingya resistance asked the questions, “who is carrying out the [everyday resistance] practice, concerning whom, where and when, and how?”.<sup>49</sup> It also considered the range of power relations involved in everyday resistance, including race/ethnicity, gender and age. Following the micronarratives methodology<sup>50</sup>, we draw from a diversity of Rohingyas’ narratives to understand their everyday resistance patterns and strategies in Myanmar. We recognize that the Rohingya community is not homogenous, which affects their different possibilities of everyday resistance. For example, the Rohingya community is patriarchal, which limits the possibility of resistance for women.

In this paper, we considered Rohingyas’ everyday resistance as a daily response to a genocidal state discriminating against and violating their rights for many decades because of their ethnicity and religion. For example, Rohingyas are the agents of everyday resistance that can defy in different ways, considering their age and gender. Their resistance is situated in a specific place (their villages, houses, or workplaces) and at a specific time (before and during the decision to flee to other countries to survive). Their everyday resistance acts respond to different actors like the police, the army, the border security forces, and the majority groups/local Buddhists (also known as *Maghs/ Mogs* or *Rakhines*). The lack of legal protection legitimates these different actors’ actions toward the Rohingyas to this group and the genocidal acts perpetrated by the Myanmar state. We can argue that due to this situation of historical discrimination and abuse, Rohingyas lacked other possibilities of endurance, which would make everyday resistance the only available alternative. The Rohingyas were trying to survive and continue with their lives with no direct intention to change the regime in Myanmar. Survival in the case of genocide is the primary everyday resistance act. Our theoretical lens based on Vinthagen and Johansson<sup>51</sup> allows us to see Rohingya’s everyday resistance in Myanmar as a practice with no need for consciousness, intention, recognition or successful outcome. Therefore, this approach to the concept of everyday resistance is helpful in the Rohingya case.

## Resistance and Genocide

Many studies consider the role of ordinary people not directly targeted by genocide in providing support to those targeted. These people, known as rescuers, through “ordinary everyday gestures,” create “protective acts” that show resistance by “saving lives that the enemy would like to see disappear” in the genocides.<sup>52</sup> Rescuers adopted different acts to shelter and help persecuted people, such as hiding them in their own houses, faking documents, sending them to other countries and offering “safe haven, material assistance

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<sup>48</sup> Anna Johansson and Stellan Vinthagen, “Dimensions of Everyday Resistance: An Analytical Framework,” *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 3 (2016): 417–35.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 419.

<sup>50</sup> Imtiaz Ahmed, *The Method Matters: An Introduction to Micro-Narratives* (Dhaka: Centre for Genocide Studies, University of Dhaka, 2019).

<sup>51</sup> Vinthagen and Johansson, “Everyday Resistance,” 39.

<sup>52</sup> Jacques, Claire Andrieu and Sarah Gensburger, *Resisting Genocide: The Multiple Forms of Rescue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 2.

and emotional comfort.”<sup>53</sup> These studies focus on the strategies adopted by rescuers to protect people from genocide and their motivations.<sup>54</sup> While this research is critical, it does not consider how survivors of genocide tried to resist adopting other types of non-violent actions daily.

In this section, we briefly discuss how the literature has recognized different strategies that people adopted to survive different cases of genocide. We recognize that these genocides are not comparable in genocidal designs or practices. We should not normalize a situation where people have to adopt daily strategies to survive. Nevertheless, we can perceive “everyday resistance” in all the cases, as discussed in the previous section. People adopt daily, hidden actions to survive and continue with their lives in different places and contexts. In most cases, as in the Rohingya situation, they had no intention to defy the genocidal acts directly.

Many studies have analysed how the Jews resisted the Holocaust in their everyday lives.<sup>55</sup> Morrus explains that the Jews were facing a powerful state willing to eliminate them, limiting their open and armed resistance.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, Jews’ everyday acts of resistance involved secretly organizing themselves, informing other Jews about the deportations to death camps, keeping the Jewish life, religion (rituals and prayers) and values in the ghetto and the concentration camps.<sup>57</sup> Another resistance act in the concentration camps involved maintaining the spirit to live by keeping an active mentality and consciousness that allowed people to cooperate (pass letters to other camps and try to reunite families), steal or smuggle food and offer to receive help.<sup>58</sup> This everyday resistance could be unintentional since the Jews were trying to survive and not directly change the Nazi regime. Jews performed many acts in secret to avoid the prohibition of the Nazis. For example, a group of kosher slaughterers continued to perform their work secretly to guarantee the supply of kosher chicken to Jews.<sup>59</sup> Some Jews refused to adapt to the Nazi system and employed different strategies like suicide, hiding and escape.<sup>60</sup> Jews also organized networks to help each other and continue their lives.<sup>61</sup> One example was creating of an underground medical school by doctors in the Warsaw ghetto.<sup>62</sup>

The continuation of the daily religious life through the work of many rabbis providing religion-based responses to life-for-life dilemmas created by the Holocaust was also an

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<sup>53</sup> Daniel Rothbart and Jessica Cooley, “Hutus Aiding Tutsis During the Rwandan Genocide: Motives, Meanings and Morals,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 10, no. 2 (2016): 77.

<sup>54</sup> Ernest Mutwarasibo, “Remembering the Humanity: Accounting for Resisting Genocide in Rwanda in 1994,” Aegis Working Paper (2017), <http://www.genocideresearchhub.org.rw/document/remembering-the-humanity-accounting-for-resisting-genocide-in-rwanda-in-1994/> (accessed 30 March 2021); Rothbart and Cooley, “Hutus Aiding Tutsis.”

<sup>55</sup> Meir Dworzecki, “The Day to Day Stand of the Jews,” in *Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vasehm, 1971); Bob Moore, *Survivors: Jewish Self-Help and Rescue in Nazi-Occupied Western Europe* (Oxford and New York City: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>56</sup> M.R. Morrus, “Jewish Resistance to the Holocaust,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 30, no. 1 (1995): 83–110.

<sup>57</sup> Saul Esh, “The Dignity of the Destroyed: Towards a Definition of the Period of the Holocaust,” *Judaism* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1962): 106–7.

<sup>58</sup> Roger S. Gottlieb, “The Concept of Resistance: Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust,” *Social Theory and Practice* 9, no. 1 (1983): 31–49.

<sup>59</sup> Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 21–23.

<sup>60</sup> Morrus, “Jewish Resistance.”

<sup>61</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *They Chose Life: Jewish Resistance in the Holocaust* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1973).

<sup>62</sup> Morrus, “Jewish Resistance.”

example of everyday Jewish resistance.<sup>63</sup> Everyday religious resistance also appeared in other contexts. For example, in Cambodia, the Cham Muslim women maintained their faith and religious identity by praying and practicing religious rituals in secret and sharing their language and religious knowledge with their children.<sup>64</sup> Women also resisted the Armenian genocide (and other genocides<sup>65</sup>) by protecting their families, doing domestic activities to keep a “normal” life, and rescuing and caring for male members of their families. They also gave their children away to Turkish families to guarantee their survival and committed suicide with their children to avoid deportation, abduction or sexual violence.<sup>66</sup>

## Methodology

Everyday resistance “is not easily recognised like public and collective resistance – such as rebellions or demonstrations”<sup>67</sup> because it tends to be informal, disguised, individual, and not politically articulated. Everyday resistance acts “rely on contextual tactics, opportunities, individual choices, and temporality.”<sup>68</sup> They may happen in private or apolitical spaces.<sup>69</sup> Besides that, there is “no established measurement for these acts,”<sup>70</sup> and data collection tends to be difficult because of these practices’ elusive nature and their actors’ aim to avoid identification. However, our research design provided us with rich micronarratives of Rohingyas where they reflected on their lived experiences and described their and others’ everyday resistance practices and acts.

This paper is part of the project “Rohingya Journeys of Violence and Resilience in Bangladesh and its Neighbours”<sup>71</sup> that involved diverse researchers based in the UK (UCL-IRDR), India, Malaysia, and Bangladesh. The entire project involved distinctive data collection methodologies, including field visits, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and the collection of micronarratives. As the study involved human participation, institutional ethical approval (UCL project ID: 15843/001, and data protection ID: Z6364106/2019/05/20) and risk assessment procedures were in place before the start of the face-to-face interviews and collection of micronarratives. We maintained all data anonymously, following data protection guidelines. In this article, we analysed the micronarratives (through the oral histories of participants collected with the use of themes to guide their memories) of 62, 145, and 56 adult Rohingyas living in India, Bangladesh, and Malaysia, respectively. These micronarratives were orally collected between March 2019 and April 2020 in the camps (e.g. in Bangladesh) and the participants’ houses or other places they suggested (in India and Malaysia). Most participants fled Myanmar

<sup>63</sup> Michael A. Grodin et al., “Rabbinic Responsa and Spiritual Resistance During the Holocaust: The Life-for-Life Problem,” *Modern Judaism-A Journal of Jewish Ideas and Experience* 39, no. 3 (2019): 296–325.

<sup>64</sup> Rachel Killean, “Religion, Resistance and Responding to Genocide: The Cham in Cambodia,” in *Routledge Handbook on Religion and Genocide*, ed. Stephen Smith and Sara E. Brown (forthcoming).

<sup>65</sup> JoAnn DiGeorgio-Lutz and Donna Gosbee, *Women and Genocide: Gendered Experiences of Violence, Survival, and Resistance* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 2016).

<sup>66</sup> Nikki Marczak, “The Early Days: Illuminating Armenian Women’s Experiences,” in *Genocide Perspectives V: A Global Crime, Australian Voices*, ed. N. Marczak and K. Shields (Sidney: UTS ePRESS, 2017), 113–30.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>69</sup> Baaz et al., “Defining and Analyzing “Resistance.”

<sup>70</sup> Kasbari and Vinthagen, “Visible Effects of ‘Invisible Politics,’” 5.

<sup>71</sup> Further information about the project is available at <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/risk-disaster-reduction/research-projects/2019/jun/rohingya-journeys-violence-and-resilience-bangladesh-and-its-neighbours> (accessed 30 March 2022).

after the Tatmadaw massacres of 2012 and 2017. Few of them were forcibly displaced before that.

Narratives are a sound research methodology to study everyday resistance. They allow researchers to access information about the participants' lives in times and places that are not commonly accessible to the public<sup>72</sup>, including their homes and other private spaces. Additionally, narratives "provide a site to examine the meanings people, individually or collectively, ascribe to lived experience."<sup>73</sup> Through storytelling, Rohingyas can make sense of disruptive experiences like violence, genocide, and forced displacement. The current situation of Rohingyas is distinctive in each of the host countries. For example, they live in camps in Bangladesh, informal settlements in rural and urban areas of India, and cities in Malaysia. However, all Rohingyas reflected on their experiences in their home countries, telling stories about their private lives and daily acts to survive in Myanmar. Rohingyas were invited to freely tell their stories and not to talk about resistance to the genocide. Therefore, these micronarratives are rich and detailed material to understand the everyday resistance of Rohingyas in their country. This methodology allowed us "to uncover and analyse unrecognised assumptions, power dynamics, discursive structures"<sup>74</sup> of hidden and individual resistance acts performed by Rohingyas.

The participants' recruitment method involved purposive and snowballing sampling to ensure age, sex, and social background diversity.<sup>75</sup> Most participants were male (70 per cent in Bangladesh, 57 per cent in India and 64 per cent in Malaysia) because many women did not feel comfortable talking to female story collectors due to cultural and religious traditions. The final micronarrative is a product of the participant's oral history obtained through the active listening of the story-collector.<sup>76</sup> In all countries, research leaders trained research assistants from the local communities, both male and female, to collect the narratives. The data collection process was under the supervision of research leaders in the field who provided feedback to the enumerators on how to capture the Rohingyas' micronarratives better. Female enumerators interviewed female participants.

The micronarratives were collected in Rohingya dialect (Malaysia), Hindi (India), and local Chattogram dialect close to Arakanese language and Bengali (Bangladesh). Most Rohingyas felt comfortable telling their stories in the host country's language (in Bangladesh and India). In cases where this was difficult, other Rohingyas from the community acted as volunteer translators in India and Bangladesh. Rohingyas freely decided in which language they wanted to tell their stories. The language was not a barrier preventing Rohingyas from telling their stories since we could identify everyday resistance narratives in participants from all research sites. All the micronarratives were professionally transcribed and translated to English by the researchers. The micronarratives were coded using descriptive coding<sup>77</sup>, process coding<sup>78</sup> and narrative

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<sup>72</sup> Marita Eastmond, "Stories as Lived Experience: Narratives in Forced Migration Research," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20, no. 2 (2007): 248–64.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>74</sup> Vinthagen and Johansson, "Everyday Resistance," 38.

<sup>75</sup> Ahmed, *The Method Matters*.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> "Descriptive Coding assigns labels to data to summarize in a word or short phrase – most often as a noun – the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data." See Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2009), 262.

<sup>78</sup> "Process Coding uses gerunds ('-ing' words) exclusively to connote observable and conceptual action in the data." *Ibid.*, 266.

coding<sup>79</sup> in the first cycle coding and pattern coding<sup>80</sup> in the second cycle coding using NVivo 12 software.<sup>81</sup> The Rohingyas granted their informed consent orally to be part of this research after the researchers explained the project and the consequences/risks of their participation because most of this population could not read or write. When researching refugees, oral informed consent is also the best practice to avoid confidentiality and privacy breaches.<sup>82</sup>

Rohingyas are agents of their narratives that daily resisted the genocide in Myanmar. While they do not conceptualize their acts as resistances (it lacked the element of intention), they recognize and explain that they were violating prohibitions (i.e. praying in secret), transgressing orders (i.e. refusing to pay abusive taxes) or adopting actions to protect themselves (i.e. male Rohingyas not staying at home during the night). We recognize that analysing these hidden everyday practices is necessary for Rohingya resistance. However, we avoid the risk of romanticizing their resistance.<sup>83</sup> We do not expect these everyday actions to change the discrimination or stop the ongoing genocide. They only allowed Rohingyas to survive.

### Why Can Rohingyas Not Protest?

When Myanmar became independent in 1948, Rohingyas were recognized as citizens. However, since the end of 1978, the Myanmar government has conducted operations to deny their citizenship, describing them as illegal Bangladeshi nationals. The 1982 Citizenship Law has categorically excluded Rohingyas as citizens of Myanmar. Consequently, they lost access to official documentation and protection from the Myanmar state.<sup>84</sup> The Rohingyas have no access to the rights of education, free movement, work and healthcare in Myanmar.<sup>85</sup> Different Myanmar authorities and the local population systematically oppressed and committed violence against the Rohingya population. The Rohingya micronarratives showed that they faced violence (including physical, psychological and sexual abuse and killing), discrimination (unfair taxes and practices), and rights violations. The atrocities include denying the rights to education, free movement, citizenship, religion, political participation, property, and healthcare. The perpetrators were the government, armed forces, including the military junta, police, Nasaka (i.e. border security forces) and the Buddhist majority communities in Rakhine.

Open resistance was difficult for the Rohingyas because they were facing a higher power (the government, the army, insurgents, and unlawfully armed people) that could harm them, torture them and their families and even kill them. We observed this in

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<sup>79</sup> "Narrative Coding applies the conventions of (primarily) literary elements and analysis to qualitative texts most often in the form of stories." *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>80</sup> "Pattern Coding: A category label ('meta-code') that identifies similarly coded data. Organizes the corpus into sets, themes, or constructs and attributes meaning to that organization." *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>81</sup> See <https://www.timberlake.co.uk/software/nvivo.html>.

<sup>82</sup> IASFM, "IASFM Code of Ethics: Critical Reflections on Research Ethics in Situations of Forced Migration," *Forced Migration Review* 61 (2019): 13–14; Lea Müller-Funk, "Research With Refugees in Fragile Political Contexts: How Ethical Reflections Impact Methodological Choices," *Journal of Refugee Studies* (2020), feaa013, doi:10.1093/jrs/feaa013.

<sup>83</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (1990): 41–55.

<sup>84</sup> Nyi Nyi, "Unpacking the Presumed Statelessness of Rohingyas."

<sup>85</sup> B. Ahmed et al., 'Sustainable Rohingya Repatriation in Myanmar: Some Criteria to Follow,' in *The Rohingya Crisis: Human Rights Issues, Policy Concerns and Burden Sharing*, ed. N. Uddin (London: Sage, 2021), 301–33.

Rohingyas' narratives: "When the authorities and military came to our village, we could not do anything because we are oppressed people. The authorities had weapons and tortured us if we reacted"<sup>86</sup>; "We did not even dare to protest. They came with heavy arms and planted fear among us."<sup>87</sup> Rohingya defined themselves as an "oppressed people"; hence, open resistance was impossible. The persistent brutalities pushed Rohingyas to adopt daily strategies to survive violence, discrimination and abuse. Everyday resistance is hidden, which decreases the possibility of being perceived by the oppressor as resistance and would guarantee the Rohingyas' security.

Rohingyas also felt that they had nobody to complain about the situation because the authorities supported the discrimination against them. Additionally, the authorities were the same people torturing them. The Rohingyas reflected on: "What can you say if you have no one beside you? The government is with the Buddhist, Army, police, and *Nasaka*. No one, absolutely no one is beside us. So how can we react to these atrocities?"<sup>88</sup>; "To whom did we complain? To those whom we should complain, they themselves were torturing upon us"<sup>89</sup>; "They used to humiliate us, but we could not seek justice for it as there was no one to listen to our problems."<sup>90</sup> Everyday resistance can also be perceived as an answer to this common feeling of not having an authority/ State to protect them. Since Rohingyas had no one that would help them in Myanmar, they had to adopt daily actions and coping strategies that would allow them to survive and continue with their lives.

Open resistance has a higher risk than everyday resistance performed in private spaces. For example, Rohingyas feared protesting and reacting to unjust acts like stealing their animals or grocery shops or preventing assaults on women because:

- (1) They could be beaten: "We got severe threats if we tried to resist them. Even we were beaten mercilessly when we attempted to complain against them."<sup>91</sup>
- (2) They could be arrested: "Because if anyone protested, then they would be either put into jails or be killed by slaughter."<sup>92</sup>
- (3) They could be accused of being criminals: "If we tried to stop them, they would falsely accuse us of different crimes and submit complaints to the military."<sup>93</sup>
- (4) They could be killed: "there was no point protesting, as they would have killed us, so we did not protest."<sup>94</sup>
- (5) Their families could suffer: "If someone reacted, the whole family would be killed. That is why we could do anything."<sup>95</sup>
- (6) They would suffer more torture: "If we raised any voice, they would even torture us more."<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, unknown age, 21 September 2019, Malaysia.

<sup>87</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 60, 10 July 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>88</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 69, 2019, Malaysia.

<sup>89</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 58, 15 December 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>90</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 20, 13 January 2020, Bangladesh.

<sup>91</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 35, 9 January 2020, Bangladesh.

<sup>92</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 55, 14 November 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>93</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 33, March 2020, Bangladesh.

<sup>94</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 41, 4 August 2019, India.

<sup>95</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 32, 20 July 2019, Malaysia.

<sup>96</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 30, 2019, Bangladesh.

- (7) They would have to pay fines: “According to the authorities, if anyone disobeyed, he would have to pay a fine; otherwise, he would have been beaten.”<sup>97</sup>

Everyday resistance is also a response to avoid further violence against themselves and their families, especially when Rohingyas knew that previous attempts to avert non-hidden resistance (individually or collectively) were heavily punished by Myanmar authorities. When the participants, their relatives or other people tried to present open resistance like protesting, talking to the perpetrators, complaining, or stopping the violence, they were beaten, arrested, threatened, killed and tortured. Rohingyas also understood that they could suffer retaliation if they collectively decided to protest: “In 2012, they killed a Rohingya. Then Muslims waged a voice for justice. Then they started killing our people with swords, guns and other weapons.”<sup>98</sup> That was also the impression of this Rohingya man currently living in Bangladesh:

Once, my village people decided to protest against their oppression. But, they could not muster the courage to do the protest after hearing about the repressive incidents in nearby villages. There was a village called *Pindapa* beside ours. In that village, nearly 200 people were beaten and taken away by the Army because they protested with sticks. I heard that they never came back.<sup>99</sup>

This situation of harsh repression against any act of open resistance, lack of authorities to complain and life threats made Rohingyas feel powerless to resist the situation, as we could see in these narratives: “what we can do in such situation, we cannot do anything, they are killing our people, and we are helpless”<sup>100</sup>; “It was extremely dangerous and difficult to react. So, unfortunately, we could not do much”<sup>101</sup>; “We had no options besides tolerating everything.”<sup>102</sup> In general, Rohingyas lacked the courage to react because they feared reprisal and further persecution: “No one could gather the courage to protest”<sup>103</sup>; “Actually, no one reacted because everyone was scared of them.”<sup>104</sup>

These micronarratives showed that Rohingyas recognized that they could not openly defy their oppressors, and they described themselves as helpless and terrified. It means they would have considered open resistance if they could do it. However, in the context of genocide, when the main objective is to exterminate a population, everyday resistance that would allow their survival was the only possibility of actively confronting the Myanmar Army/Tatmadaw.

Nevertheless, we should not understand Rohingyas as passive victims of genocide in Myanmar.<sup>105</sup> Some Rohingyas reflected on organized collective experiences to physically protect their villages: “We defended as much as we could, but authorities cooperated with

<sup>97</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 25, 2 January 2020, Bangladesh.

<sup>98</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 41, 9 December 2019, India.

<sup>99</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, unknown age, 6 November 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>100</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 38, 9 December 2019, India.

<sup>101</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 26, 2019, Malaysia.

<sup>102</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 35, 9 January 2020, Bangladesh.

<sup>103</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 20, 3 February 2020, Bangladesh.

<sup>104</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 28, 15 May 2019, Malaysia.

<sup>105</sup> Three Rohingyas mentioned armed resistance as a response to the violence in Myanmar. Although the topic of Rohingya's open resistance is very important, this is not the main focus of this article. For further discussions on Rohingyas' open resistance see for example Ronan Lee, “Myanmar's Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA),” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 6 (2021): 61–75.

them. It was hard for us to save the whole village. However, we could save some parts of the village”<sup>106</sup>; “Our villagers protected our village as much as possible. That is why, the village still remains.”<sup>107</sup>

A stronger and unequal power-constrained the possibilities of Rohingyas’ open resistance to the genocidal state. As a result, most Rohingyas lacked courage and were afraid to protest because they and their families could face vengeance. They also had stories of people that resisted and were killed. This repressive situation constrained Rohingyas to resist their everyday adopting hidden practices and acts without risking their lives. Overall, Rohingyas’ stories show that they have considered resisting the cruelties they were facing. However, presenting open resistance had a higher risk that most Rohingyas were unwilling to pay, mainly because they could be killed since genocidal intent was perceived in the Myanmar military’s actions against them. Therefore, everyday resistance acts and strategies were the best response to confront genocidal acts in Myanmar.

### **Everyday Resistance Practices of Rohingyas**

In the context of genocide, adopting actions to survive and being alive is a significant everyday resistance against the genocidal state even if Rohingyas performing these actions do not recognize them as resistance. The following subsections describe Rohingyas’ everyday resistance practices considering their daily lives, acts connected to gender and resistance acts that allowed the participants to survive during the massacres in 2017 and the journey to flee Myanmar.

#### ***Secrecy, Non-Compliance and Avoidance as Daily Resistance to Genocide***

Many Rohingyas resisted the discrimination and genocide in Myanmar with explicit non-compliance act, refusing to follow prejudiced rules and orders. Another strategy was to reject to go to forced labour: “Once I did not go for the sentry duty. So, authorities came to my house and looked for me. I fled from my village and stayed in another village.”<sup>108</sup> When Rohingyas could not avoid forced labour, they would take turns to have some sleep during the night while guarding the villages: “Two of us used to sleep while another two people were providing guard. In this way, by switching our positions, we used to guard the localities.”<sup>109</sup> Some people refused to give bribes to the armed forces or part of their crops to the authorities: “They demanded bribe from my husband what he refused to pay. Then they arrested my husband.”<sup>110</sup> These narratives show a clear strategy to challenge discriminatory orders against the Rohingyas.

Other Rohingyas resisted violence and abuse by avoidance. Side-stepping the contact with the oppressor is one strategy recognized by the everyday resistance approach. By not being physically present, Rohingyas got protection from harassment and abuse. In this case, their main objective was to survive. The most cited strategy was for the men not to stay at home during the night to avoid being harassed or summoned for forced

<sup>106</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, unknown age, 30 July 2019, Malaysia.

<sup>107</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 31, 7 September 2019, Malaysia.

<sup>108</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 26, 28 September 2019, Malaysia.

<sup>109</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 33, 18 December 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>110</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 40, 3 December 2019, Bangladesh.



labour. Many Rohingyas described this resistance act: “Any male person was taken away, so the male members of the house did not stay at home at night. Instead, they hid in the forests.”<sup>111</sup> Another avoidance of everyday resistance involved sending persecuted people, especially women at risk of suffering sexual violence abroad: “To avoid this type of persecution my father sent my brothers abroad”<sup>112</sup>; “They later came back to find my sister (cousin). But before that, we sent our sister (cousin) with her husband to Bangladesh. For this reason, they could not find her anymore.”<sup>113</sup> This Rohingya explained an avoidance strategy when armed forces entered the village:

Actually, when the military enters a village, there will be no one outside. Everyone will enter the house and sometimes the male will escape to the jungle or under the water. Because if they find someone, they can do anything like beat him, send him to jail, give him forced work or even kill him.<sup>114</sup>

However, Rohingyas’ most common everyday resistance practice was to do things in secret without letting the authorities know. For example, many of them would visit another village without permission: “One day I went to another village to visit my relatives. I did not get permission from my village’s army camp [...]. I thought I would go there and come back secretly”<sup>115</sup>; or moving people in need of health treatment to other localities: “they did not grant permission. Then, my father decided to take my mother secretly to a different place for treatment.”<sup>116</sup> After 2012, many Rohingyas explained that they were not allowed to follow their religion (pray in the mosques, conduct their rituals, and call for prayers). Therefore, they started to do them in secret: “some people used to stay in guards while some people were praying together at home. They were being beaten while praying if they were found praying together”<sup>117</sup>; “we could not say our prayers by calling for it loudly. We had to call for prayers secretly”<sup>118</sup>; “In Burma, we were not allowed to celebrate our events, we had to hide that we are giving *Qurbani* [offering a sacrifice of animals] and celebrating our rituals.”<sup>119</sup> Rohingyas used to do many other things in secret in Myanmar:

- (1) Burying people without the authorities’ permission: “We did not speak about it to anyone and secretly buried her. Because, if we told anybody, we would have to pay the fine”<sup>120</sup>;
- (2) Fishing in secret: “we would catch fish secretly. Because if the Mogs [local Buddhist people] learnt about that, they would grab our fishes”<sup>121</sup>;
- (3) Going to the market secretly: “We were not allowed to go from one locality to another. If needed, we used to go to the market secretly”<sup>122</sup>;

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<sup>111</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 37, 2 March 2020, Bangladesh.

<sup>112</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 40, 3 December 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>113</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 27, 19 November 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>114</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 26, 2019, Malaysia.

<sup>115</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 24, 2019, Malaysia.

<sup>116</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 30, 12 November 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>117</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 48, 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>118</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 45, 15 November 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>119</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 27, 6 August 2019, India.

<sup>120</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 50, 5 December 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>121</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 20, 3 December 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>122</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 77, 2019, Bangladesh.

- (4) Slaughtering animals without the permission of the authorities to avoid paying fines: “We often slaughtered cows in secret without informing them. But if anyone got caught, they would have been jailed”<sup>123</sup>;
- (5) Practising medicine: “Then he started medicine secretly. So that the government could not know. Many others like him used to practice medicine in such a way”<sup>124</sup>;
- (6) Receiving money for family members abroad: “We could not opt for the other ways as we had to keep secrecy about my brother’s money. Other Rohingyas also went through the same hardships while transacting money from abroad”<sup>125</sup>;
- (7) Having a cell phone: “it is prohibited to use any mobile for Rohingya Muslims. We bought the mobile and SIM from Bangladesh [...]. But if they find us with mobile, they would certainly torture us”<sup>126</sup>;
- (8) Filming atrocities committed by the authorities: “All the Rohingya *hukumats* [local governors] of the village secretly videoed all the tortures of the *Maghs/Mogs* and sent them to foreigners.”<sup>127</sup>

Two other everyday resistance strategies adopted by the Rohingyas connected to this idea of secrecy that need further discussion are education and marriage. The Myanmar government did not allow Rohingyas to study. However, some Rohingyas, including women (“But she secretly continued her school without her father’s acknowledgement”<sup>128</sup>), adopted different strategies to continue their studies, such as going abroad to have education (“two [siblings] went to Bangladesh, and one went to somewhere else for study. I came to Malaysia for an opportunity to higher study”<sup>129</sup>). Nevertheless, studying abroad is hard for Rohingyas because they are stateless with no legal identity documents and most asylum countries limit their study opportunities. The other strategy was studying in secret: “it was challenging at that time, so my father hired a teacher who used to give classes at home”<sup>130</sup>; “we secretly continued to study. In this way, I finished studying in the 12th class.”<sup>131</sup> Many teachers (especially religious educators) used to teach people in secret: “The Mogs stopped my husband from teaching at home. Despite that, he continued it secretly.”<sup>132</sup>

Getting marriage was also a type of everyday resistance. Rohingyas had to pay discriminatory taxes to receive permission from the authorities to marry. Many people in a difficult economic situation could not pay for that. In that cases, some people would get married in secret without paying the taxes and facing the risk of being arrested: “My husband was too poor to give the money. So he married me without taking permission from the *Nasaka*. [...] Mogs learnt about the marriage somehow and arrested him two days after our marriage.”<sup>133</sup> Some people would flee to another country to get

<sup>123</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, unknown age, 2 January 2020, Bangladesh.

<sup>124</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, unknown age, 2 January 2020, Bangladesh.

<sup>125</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 24, 15 January 2020, Bangladesh.

<sup>126</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 29, 2019, Malaysia.

<sup>127</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 50, 14 December 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>128</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 49, 17 November 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>129</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 26, 2019, Malaysia.

<sup>130</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 25, 5 December 2019, India.

<sup>131</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 27, 19 November 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>132</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 30, 26 December 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>133</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 22, 1 December 2019, Bangladesh.

married there: "I came to India for marriage; my wife and I left Burma for marriage only because marrying is very difficult there."<sup>134</sup>

Doing things in secret was a way Rohingyas found to continue their normal lives. Rohingyas knew they were "violating" the authorities' determination when they performed these secret actions. Nevertheless, they perceived that doing these hidden practices would be less risky than presenting open resistance to have their rights.

Rohingyas also engaged in other daily life activities that, in a normal context, would not be considered everyday resistance. However, since they were a target, these everyday life activities became everyday resistance acts that allowed them to survive. They kept identification documents of their relatives (parents and grandparents) as a strategy to prove that they were citizens of Myanmar: "Both my paternal and maternal grandfathers had identity documents. I still have those documents."<sup>135</sup> Rohingyas used dogs to be alert ("The place we live in Burma has many dogs nearby. Dogs use to bark and alert us when any alien person would try to enter our area. So, we would be alerted"<sup>136</sup>); stayed together and guarded their villages at night ("And our brothers and fathers used to guard us all night"<sup>137</sup>) and repaired the mosque even without permission ("My father and the people of our area began to repair the mosque without any permission"<sup>138</sup>).

### **Gender and Rohingya Everyday Resistance**

Gender discrimination puts women at higher risk of gender and sexual violence in Myanmar. Women and girls were particularly at risk of sexual-based-gender violence in Myanmar, with sexual abuse being perpetrated as retaliation to other relatives too. At the same time, cultural and religious practices constrained Rohingya women and girls' actions. Rohingya's culture is patriarchal and privileges men over women<sup>139</sup>, which may limit women's and girls' possibilities of everyday resistance. However, women and men adopted everyday resistance strategies to protect themselves and their female relatives from sexual violence. Women and girls could be raped and abducted, which prevented them from studying or going outside. This Rohingya man in India reflected that "If a girl starts going to school and [she] reaches the age of 11–12, Buddhist people used to abduct or rape our girls, so we did not allow our girls to go out after 12 years."<sup>140</sup>

Unlike the men who stayed outside the house to avoid forced labour, girls stayed inside the house as a resistance strategy to have protection from harm. Many Rohingya women explained staying at home as an everyday resistance activity premeditated for their protection: "They used to torture and oppress girls if they spotted them outside. For this reason, we never go out of the home."<sup>141</sup> "If we went outside, we would be stopped by the police or army, and I will be abused. Thus, I stayed at home for my

<sup>134</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 30, 29 January 2020, India.

<sup>135</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 20, 3 December 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>136</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 28, 7 December 2019, India.

<sup>137</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, unknown age, 24 November 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>138</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 75, 30 November 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>139</sup> Shadrack Bentil and Edmund Poku Adu, "Polymorphous Discrimination: Rohingya Women in the Goggles of Intersectionality," Available at SSRN 3542688 (2020), [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Shadrack-Bentil/publication/340364893\\_Polymorphous\\_Discrimination\\_Rohingya\\_Women\\_in\\_the\\_Goggles\\_of\\_Intersectionality/links/5ef104e9a6fdcc73be94ec09/Polymorphous-Discrimination-Rohingya-Women-in-the-Goggles-of-Intersectionality.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Shadrack-Bentil/publication/340364893_Polymorphous_Discrimination_Rohingya_Women_in_the_Goggles_of_Intersectionality/links/5ef104e9a6fdcc73be94ec09/Polymorphous-Discrimination-Rohingya-Women-in-the-Goggles-of-Intersectionality.pdf).

<sup>140</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 50, 3 August 2019, India.

<sup>141</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 30, 26 December 2019, Bangladesh.

safety.”<sup>142</sup> Rohingyas would also hide their daughters if the military entered their houses. That was the situation of this Rohingya woman currently living in Bangladesh: “My daughter was charming. I used to dress her in my mother’s clothes. I used to stand at a corner whenever the militaries entered our house.”<sup>143</sup>

The strategy of marrying girls at a young age is also connected to the fear of sexual abuse. Rohingya girls who suffered sexual abuse faced difficulties getting married, which could harm girls and their families’ future. These Rohingya women explained why they married at a young age: “the family members of a Rohingya family did not leave the girls unmarried for a long time since the Mogs used to come over and torture the unmarried girls. They even tortured the beautiful married women but rarely”<sup>144</sup>; “it is good that young girls should not be married, this is the requirement even there, but we still get them married early to give them security. Otherwise, they [the Mogs] rape [them] even in front of parents”<sup>145</sup>; “we would be married off at a very young age. Because, if we had been subject to physical abuse by military forces or the Rakhines, then no male would want to marry us.”<sup>146</sup> Some families would arrange their girls’ marriage with people abroad to avoid paying the marriage taxes in Myanmar. This strategy appeared in many narratives of Rohingya women in Malaysia: “Buddhists and authorities abuse the women, and it is difficult to get marriage permission there. That is why my parents sent me to Malaysia.”<sup>147</sup>

Pregnancy was also an everyday resistance strategy to avoid sexual abuse in Myanmar, as explained by these Rohingyas women “If the Myanmar army members found a housewife of the family not pregnant, they would torture her after being taken away. Therefore, everyone tried to keep their wives pregnant”<sup>148</sup>; “The girls had to be pregnant all the time because they did not abuse pregnant women.”<sup>149</sup>

Women adopted other everyday resistance actions like staying together during the night (“In fear, all the women of the area started to stay together at night. We would return home when they left our houses”<sup>150</sup>), resisting abuse (“I got a twig from a tree and hit the police with it. Then I escaped with my son. I did not tell anyone about this incident”<sup>151</sup>) and escaping from abduction (“The military tried to rape her as well but she, with much difficulty, managed to escape from their hands”<sup>152</sup>).

Finally, other examples of everyday resistance of women that appeared in the narratives were living a secret romance (“I started to share a romantic interest with a boy residing next to our house. Their family was poor; therefore, I met him secretly. We continued to meet each other secretly for two years”<sup>153</sup>) and being brave and continuing their lives even after surviving a sexual abuse:

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<sup>142</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 24, 26 July 2019, Malaysia.

<sup>143</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 40, 3 December 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>144</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 20, 27 December 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>145</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 23, 3 August 2019, India.

<sup>146</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, unknown age, 24 November 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>147</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 25, 30 August 2019, Malaysia.

<sup>148</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, unknown age, 12 November 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>149</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, unknown age, 29 November 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>150</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 40, 3 December 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>151</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 40, 24 November 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>152</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 57, 14 December 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>153</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 22, 1 December 2019, Bangladesh.

My mother told me, “you are my eldest daughter. You do not break down. If you break down, there will be unrest in my family. If you want to survive in this life, you have to fight and live, and to be very brave.”<sup>154</sup>

The different micronarratives of women show how they perceive their everyday actions to survive and not suffer violence. While we can argue that their everyday resistance is based on their patriarchal context, it is also important to recognize women as agents that perform everyday resistance by hiding, getting pregnant or married, living secret romances and continuing with their lives even after violent experiences.

### ***Rohingya Resistance During the Genocidal Attacks***

Besides all the everyday resistance strategies discussed in the previous sections, this part presents hidden actions adopted by Rohingyas to survive the genocide. Being alive is considered a type of everyday resistance from the direct attacks they suffered, especially in 2012 and 2017, because they frustrated the coercive power’s core objective of exterminating them. This section is based on micronarratives from Rohingyas in Bangladesh because most Rohingyas in Malaysia and India fled before the 2017 attacks.

Many Rohingyas survived the genocidal attacks because they hid in different places when the 2017 attacks started in their villages: “My mother managed to escape by hiding herself in the cowshed”<sup>155</sup>; “My husband instructed us with his gestures to go and hide in the jungle. We hid ourselves according to his instructions”<sup>156</sup>; “Some of us hid behind the hill while some jumped into the river”<sup>157</sup>; Some people pretended they were dead in order to survive: “Finding no way, I laid on the char (sand bed in a lake) to protect myself. I pretended to be a dead body.”<sup>158</sup>

Other disguised resistance acts involved untying and freeing people (“When they were setting the houses of our village in fire, [...] We saved six women from an enclosed room by breaking the lock”<sup>159</sup>); burying people killed during the attacks (“Many people died due to their gunshots. We left them buried in the ground”<sup>160</sup>); extinguishing fire from the houses (“When the military set fire to everything, we tried to extinguish the blaze with water and sand”<sup>161</sup>) and saving their holy book (the Quran) from burning (“I took some Qurans from the mosques with me. Some Rakhines saw and kicked me onto the land. I held the Quran and left them inside the tree”<sup>162</sup>).

During the journey to Bangladesh, the Rohingyas’ resistance strategy was to flee in groups to avoid being harassed by the armed forces. Many refugees explained that they fled in groups to Bangladesh: “We were thousands of people together they did not dare to move towards us. They did not harm us in our way anymore”<sup>163</sup>; “They robbed us if we remained in small groups. Therefore, we made a big group and walked

<sup>154</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 52, 30 November 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>155</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 33, 11 December 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>156</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 30, 26 December 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>157</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 50, 9 December 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>158</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 60, 29 November 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>159</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 19, 19 November 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>160</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 45, 15 November 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>161</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 20, 3 December 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>162</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 49, 17 November 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>163</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 58, 15 December 2019, Bangladesh.

together.”<sup>164</sup> Rohingyas also used to help each other escape the attacks and survive during the journey to Bangladesh. We see this support for each other in many Rohingyas’ narratives: “We were many people together. We shared our foods”<sup>165</sup>; “In the way to escape, I helped many people. Apart from my family, I did my best to help others.”<sup>166</sup> Finally, Rohingyas left their houses, lands, villages, and country to survive the genocide: “To save our own lives, we then left for Bangladesh.”<sup>167</sup> All Rohingyas that told us their stories are alive. Having the courage and the resistance to leave Myanmar and stay in another country, waiting for the possibility of coming back, is also an act of resistance. Although these actions did not happen daily, they represent everyday resistance because they were hidden and disguised.

## Discussion

Our analytical lens allowed us to see Rohingyas as everyday resistance agents even when they did not explicitly intend to undermine the brutal power. In their micronarratives, Rohingyas did not define their daily actions as resistance. However, they were aware that they were violating rules and were adopting strategies to survive in a situation of violence, discrimination, and abuse. Therefore, Rohingyas are agents, even if they do not call what they are doing everyday resistance. They are agents performing everyday resistance when they adopt daily actions that allow them to continue their lives and survive genocide in Myanmar.

While surviving different genocidal contexts, Rohingyas, Jews during the Holocaust, Tutsis in Rwanda, Armenians and other victims of genocide performed daily actions that can be interpreted as everyday resistance. They were adopting strategies to survive and continue with their lives. They had no explicit intention to change the regime that was persecuting them, but they were frustrating the main aim of the genocidal authorities. The limitation of the everyday resistance approach is that since these are unintentional hidden acts, they have no direct objective of changing the regime or ending the genocide. This would be a limitation; Rohingyas did not discuss an explicit intention to change things. However, we highlight that managing to survive a genocide is the main everyday resistance act.

These genocide survivors, including Rohingyas, had to resist a ruthless regime with everyday resistance. We perceive this same defiance pattern that pushes resistance to people’s daily lives and not open resistance (i.e. protests or civil war) that could put agents and their families at risk. Rohingyas employed the same strategies as other groups discussed in the literature. Like Jews during the Holocaust, Rohingyas continued with their lives, hid, escaped to other countries and did many things in secret. One crucial aspect was to keep their religion even after prohibitions; Jews, Rohingyas and Cham Muslim women in Cambodia practised their religion in secret as an everyday resistance strategy to survive the genocide. Two everyday resistance narratives that are particularly strong in the Rohingya narratives and did not appear in the literature are education and marriage in secret as everyday resistance practices against the genocidal government.

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<sup>164</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 58, 5 December 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>165</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya woman, age: 25, female, 25 December 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>166</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 22, 20 December 2019, Bangladesh.

<sup>167</sup> Micronarrative of Rohingya man, age: 20, 13 January 2020, Bangladesh.

Our findings show the importance to recognize everyday resistance practices of women and girls. The literature also discussed women's role in resisting genocide in Armenia, Cambodia, and the Holocaust. Women have the role of trying to keep the "normal" life of the family. At the same time, their everyday resistance strategies are also embedded in their patriarchal contexts and gender relations. We also saw Rohingya women's narratives that could be interpreted as a defiance of other power structures, like women having secret romances and being brave after surviving rape. Most Rohingyas' micronarratives emphasize the protection of women and girls from sexual abuse. Those everyday resistance strategies connected to gender (particularly fear of sexual violence) contribute to these discussions of women daily resisting genocide. Only female participants mentioned being pregnant and marrying the girls as everyday resistance, while male Rohingyas focused on making staying at home the primary everyday resistance connected to gender.

Overall, we saw that Rohingyas in Bangladesh expressed more diverse everyday resistance narratives than people in India and Myanmar. For example, no people in India expressed any everyday resistance act connected to the 2017 attacks. Most Rohingyas in Bangladesh left the country after 2017, while all participants in India and Malaysia left before that. The Rohingyas reflected that the discrimination and violence against them were worst after the 2012 attacks. Rohingyas that stayed in the country after 2012 had to develop more coping strategies than the ones that left before. Rohingyas in Bangladesh would have more experiences of everyday resistance than their peers in Malaysia and India. This difference in the intensity and diversity of everyday resistance discourses is more connected to the time of the displacement than the asylum country, gender and age.

## Conclusion

Rohingyas living in Bangladesh, Malaysia, and India reflected on their lived experiences surviving the genocide in Myanmar. International organizations have recognized that the different acts performed by the Myanmar government had genocidal intent; that is, they aimed to eliminate Rohingyas from the Rakhine State. While Myanmar authority was a ruthless power that constrained the possibilities of open resistance, many Rohingyas adopted different everyday resistance practices to survive in Myanmar and flee the atrocities alive, even if they did not explicitly recognize that as resistance. The everyday resistance framework helps to understand hidden, secret, individual and disguised actions from Rohingyas that could not be easily captured as resistance like open resistance but that allowed them to survive against the will of the genocidal perpetrator.

Their micronarratives provided rich material to understand the everyday resistance practices in their normal lives and private spaces like their homes. We examined Rohingyas as agents of their stories that defied the genocide in Myanmar through everyday resistance that allowed them to survive. However, we avoided exaggerating their resistance. Most Rohingyas lacked the courage to openly resist due to fear of retaliation against them and their families. Only a few participants mentioned examples of collective open resistance. We recognize that Rohingyas are a stateless minority with limited possibilities to openly resist genocide, war crimes, and human rights violations. That is why the framework of everyday resistance is even more helpful in our analysis.

In this paper, we focused on the art of resistance without considering the intention, consciousness, or success of the actions. We discussed Rohingyas' everyday resistance practices that involved non-compliance, such as refusing to follow orders, giving money or going to forced labour, and avoiding staying at home and secrecy, including praying, using mobile phones, moving to other areas, and studying and marrying secretly. Two other interesting everyday resistance strategies of Rohingyas were continuing their studies even against the Myanmar authorities' desire and getting married abroad to avoid discriminatory taxes. We also showed how the risk of sexual violence and abuse forced Rohingya men and women to adopt everyday resistance practices to protect themselves and other female relatives. These practices also depend on their cultural and religious traditions. They involve keeping the girls pregnant, hiding women and girls, keeping them inside the house, and marrying girls at an early age. Rohingya women also narrated other everyday resistance strategies like staying together during the night, escaping abductions, resisting abuse, being brave and continuing with their lives after the abuse and marrying for love.

Finally, Rohingyas adopted different resistance strategies to survive during the 2017 attacks, like hiding in different places, burying people killed, freeing people who were tortured, helping each other, and fleeing in groups. Being alive is the primary resistance strategy during a genocide where a government uses the state's capacity to eliminate an ethnic minority. All Rohingyas that we interviewed survived, hence, resisted the genocide every day. This article adds to the literature on genocide studies and resistance that recognizes the agency of Holocaust and genocide survivors. It also contributes to demystifying the idea that Rohingyas were lambs going to the slaughter by highlighting their everyday resistance to the genocide in Myanmar.

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## Notes on contributors

*Patricia Nabuco Martuscelli* is currently a Lecturer in International Relations at the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Sheffield. Previously, she worked as a Social Science Research Fellow in Conflict and Migration at the Institute for Risk and Disaster Reduction, University College London (UCL). She has an MA in International Relations (University of Brasília- UnB) and a PhD in Political Science (University of São Paulo- USP).



**Bayes Ahmed** is a Lecturer in Risk and Disaster Science at the UCL Institute for Risk and Disaster Reduction. His research expertise ranges from the physical characterisation of natural hazards to human and institutional vulnerability in our societies. He works at the intersection between conflict and disaster with a vision to help to improve the living standards of displaced people and the stateless population. Bayes is passionate about working with grass-root people to understand their disaster vulnerabilities and producing practical policy recommendations to address their problems.

**Peter Sammonds** is a Professor of Geophysics and the founding director of the Institute for Risk and Disaster Reduction at UCL. Peter's research interests span from the dynamics of the Earth's crust in relation to natural hazards and the cryosphere in relation to climate change, to disaster risks and humanitarian crises. He works at the intersection of the physical and social sciences. Peter is currently researching hazards risks for marginalized and migrant communities in the Himalayas, Caribbean, and Bangladesh. Peter is the Gender and Intersectionality Ambassador for the UKRI GRRIPP Network – Gender Responsive Resilience and Intersectionality in Policy and Practice.

## ORCID

*Patrícia Nabuco Martuscelli*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2611-2513>

*Bayes Ahmed*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5092-5528>

*Peter Sammonds*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3355-6761>