CHAPTER 10

From Mutual Aid to Charity

Violence and Women's Changing Interethnic Relationships in Rakhine State

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Myanmar's post-war transition is generally conceptualized as the period after 2011, when a nominally civilian government tilted away from authoritarian military rule towards the twin promises of democratization and development. Yet for non-Burman, minority women throughout the country, the transition was accompanied by entrenched – and especially gendered – violence that stripped women of resources, extended the working day, and led to greater insecurity (Faxon 2017; Frydenlund 2020a; Hedström 2016, 2021; Hedström and Olivius 2020). For Rohingya and Rakhine Buddhist women from Arakan (Rakhine) state, the year 2011 yielded few material benefits. Soon after, life was sharply cleaved into two parts: before and after 2012. In October of that year, racially motivated pogroms targeted Muslim community members, their homes and their businesses. Eight years later, over 120,000 Muslim people, mostly Rohingyas, remain imprisoned in inhumane camps outside the regional capital of Sittwe. Rohingyas have, it must be noted, been subjected to state-sanctioned violence since the 1970s, but the 2012 pogroms uniquely reorganized both interpersonal relationships between Rohingya and Rakhine Buddhist women and women's embodied positioning vis-à-vis the state. Beyond the loss of mobility and livelihoods, Rohingya women also lost relationships with Rakhine friends and community members. These changes in intimate life have, we argue, far-reaching and heretofore overlooked class consequences.

The gendered political and economic implications of anti-Muslim racism and violence are well-known, as women disproportionately bear the costs of forced displacement, denial of citizenship rights, and exclusion from formal labour markets (Chaudhury 2021; Farzana 2011, 2017; Frydenlund 2020a,

2020b; Rahman 2019). The impacts of violence on communal relations between Muslims and Buddhists are likewise well documented (McCarthy and Menager 2017; Moe Thuzar and Darren Cheong 2019; Prasse-Freeman and Mausert 2020; Schissler, Walton and Phyu Phyu Thi 2017; Thawnghmung 2016) Yet the broader effects of changing interpersonal relationships between Muslim and Buddhist women are not well understood.

Shifting the scale of inquiry from the national to the intimate spaces of everyday life, we approach interethnic personal relationships and cultural practices as politically and economically significant activities. These practices are simultaneously impacted by and productive of broader hegemonic processes. Specifically, we examine the ways in which Rohingya and Rakhine women's reconfigured friendships are relationally linked to the reproduction of Burman hegemony as a racial, gender and class project that benefits elites in Myanmar at the expense of lower-class women.

This chapter is organized into five sections, beginning with a brief discussion of critical literature situating Burman hegemony and communal violence within structures of ethnic, racial, gender and class oppression (and opportunity). We then discuss feminist political economy analyses of gendered dispossession and embodied exclusion. The third section discusses our feminist methodology and the use of feminist–materialist methods of interview and oral history. The next sections provide ethnographic accounts of Rohingya and Rakhine women's memories of inter-ethnic friendships, shared cultural practices and contemporary experiences of embodied securitization. These stories simultaneously reflect and shape women's explanations of the uneven distribution of material benefits and harms that have accompanied social, political and economic reform in Myanmar. We conclude with a discussion of the significance of Rohingya and Rakhine women's memories, experiences and views in building an understanding of the relationship between gendered relations of mutual care and changing class relations in Myanmar and post-war contexts more broadly.

Communal Violence and Burman Hegemony

By now it is well established that racialized ethnic categories, or ethnic identities imbued with assumed biological characteristics (Frydenlund 2017, 2018; Peake and Schein 2000), have become more, not less, salient in Myanmar since a nominally civilian government took power (Walton 2013;

Walton and Hayward 2014; Prasse-Freeman 2013). In particular, historical analyses of postwar politics and democratic transition in Myanmar foreground Burmanization as a political project aimed at resurrecting Burmese national unity through Burman Buddhist ethnic and cultural belonging (Tharaphi Than 2013a, 2013b; Charney 2009). Other scholars have used the Gramscian concept of hegemony, or the cultural and ideological control exerted by ruling classes, to theorize ethnic power relations in Myanmar (Campbell and Prasse-Freeman 2021, Cheesman 2017) As a chauvinist project, Burman hegemony is readily apparent as a baked-in feature of legal reforms to citizenship (Cheesman 2017) and the 'race and religion laws', rendering ethnic minorities, especially Muslims, racialized non-citizens who are deviant and dangerous to the Burmese Buddhist nation (Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2016).

In tandem with racialized oppression, Burman hegemony is also an expression of patriarchal power. This is demonstrated, for example, in Tharaphi Than's (2013a) and Chie Ikeya's (2011) pathbreaking histories of women in Burma, which locate the cultural politics of women's bodily practices within the struggle to articulate a cohesive Burmese tradition and national identity in contrast to foreign modernity. As early as the 1930s, Burman women in interracial marriages were shamed for corrupting an imagined 'Burman bloodline' (Tharaphi Than 2013a: 125), while the present-day 'race and religion' laws represent Muslim men as uniquely threatening to the wellbeing of a Burman Buddhist citizenry. Muslim women are represented as oppressed by a patriarchal culture and Buddhist women come to stand for the vulnerable body of the Bamar Buddhist nation (McCarthy and Menager 2017; Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2016). In Rakhine state, the violent pogroms of 2012 exemplified this relationship between Burman hegemony, racial violence and patriarchy in Myanmar. The rape and murder of Ma Thida Htwe, and the subsequent scapegoating of Muslim men for the crime, ignited mass violence against mostly Rohingya community members, who were accused of violating Buddhism and the Burmese nation itself.

Where various international media analyses and academic writing (see, for example Ware and Laoutides 2018) explained the 2012 pogroms as the result of longstanding ethnic group enmity and religious tension, Indian feminist scholars long ago dispelled this myth through studies of far-right Hindutva communalism and anti-Muslim violence in India. Indeed, Gyanedra Pandey (2006), Charu Gupta ([ed.] 2012), Urvashi Butalia (1994,

2015 [ed.]) and Veena Das (2006) show that communalism and communal violence pivot on racialized othering and the exploitation of subjugated groups rather than on outmoded ideas about ethnic enmity. Given these key interventions, analyses of Myanmar's fraught transition must account for the fact that communal violence is ineluctable from race, gender, and *class* oppression in wider Myanmar.

Extending Stephen Campbell and Elliott Prasse-Freeman's reading of Gramsci and W.E.B Du Bois, we approach Burman hegemony as a *class* project. They argue that a singular focus on the ethno-racial dimensions of Burman hegemony precludes the essential role of class politics in shaping Burman-ness itself. Mapping liberal white privilege theory onto Myanmar likewise fails to consider how Burman hegemonic social relations reproduce racial capitalism – understood as capitalism's systemic dependence on racialized inequality (Robinson 2020; Melamed 2015). Rather, Burman privilege operates to divide an ethnically diverse proletariat. Taken alongside Indian and Burmese feminist analyses, this argument provides an instructive framework for exploring the class implications of racial and gendered violence for minority women in Arakan. We define Burman hegemony as the forms of social-cultural control that promote the class domination of proletarians by elites in Burma. These forms of control include segregation, exclusion from education and employment, racial discrimination and, we argue, the restructuring of intimate personal relationships.

This chapter considers how Burman hegemony is re/produced through the reorganization of women's friendships and mutual relations of care. In the next section we draw on feminist political economy frameworks to consider how Burman hegemony becomes visible in the replacement of women's mutual relations of care with dependence, the securitization of women's bodies, and the formation of new gendered and racialized divisions of labour that benefit Rakhines and elites in Arakan.

Gendered Dispossession in Myanmar

A feminist political economy approach illuminates linkages between state-led economic reform and gendered dispossession (Faxon 2017; Hedström and Olivius 2020; Frydenlund 2020b). This approach has been used to show that as state-led violence continues to ravage Myanmar's northern uplands, women face increased precarity as they become sole household providers

and are pushed into dangerous, low-wage work (Hedström and Olivius 2020). Similarly, Hilary Faxon (2017, 2020) demonstrates how post-2011 state land reforms pivot on patriarchal Burman discourses of nonexistent gendered inequality that subjectivizes an imagined female farmer, obscuring women's proletarian identities as rural workers and consolidating power among elite rural women.

Feminist ethnographic scholarship and feminist political economy scholarship have also mapped the contours of anti-Muslim violence and Burman hegemony through both Rohingya women's experiences of exclusion and dispossession *and* their practices of making dignified lives in displacement (Rahman 2019; Farzana 2011, 2017; Frydenlund 2020a). Specifically, Burmanized spaces such as schools, police offices and formal workplaces forcibly exclude Muslim women who wear *pa'wa*, or headscarves. Reflecting Chie Ikeya's (2011) research on gender and modernity in postwar Myanmar, Muslim women's bodily practices hold a broader political significance. While Ikeya's focus on embodied struggle reveals a crisis of masculinity and competing visions of modernity in a changing nation, recent studies of Muslim women's experiences of embodied exclusion and dispossession illuminate broader linkages between racialized ethnic hierarchies, patriarchy and class oppression in transitional Myanmar (Farzana 2017; Frydenlund and Shunn Lei 2021). Here, Burman hegemonic spaces not only racialize *hijabi* women as deviant Others, but also silo Muslim women in low-paid, insecure and flexibilized work. Meanwhile, confinement to rural IDP and refugee camps expands Rohingya women's care work burdens and limits women's ability to reproduce each other through social solidarity, mutual aid and spiritual connection.

In her striking study of *taleem*, or women-only religious spaces, Farhana Rahman (2019) reveals the inefficacy of international 'women-friendly spaces' in the camps. Instead, Rohingya women prefer faith-based spaces, which provide women with friendship, comfort and joy amid daily struggle. In particular, women can justify leaving the safety of their own shelters to participate in religious activities with other women. For Rohingya women confined to villages and camps in Rakhine state, state-sanctioned immobility curtails women's ability to participate in both faith-based group activities and interethnic women-only social activities deemed appropriate by relatives. As the following sections will show, this loss has interconnected gender, racial and class consequences.

More broadly, feminist political economy literature brings the gendered social, political and economic effects of violence and displacement into clear relief; however, women's everyday practices at the scale of the home are also *constitutive* of politics and economic processes (Fluri 2009; Hedström 2018; Massaro and Williams 2013). We therefore draw attention to the ways in which interethnic cultural ties and friendships – and the absence of these social relations – instantiate the social reproduction of communities, the reproduction of agricultural labour and the reproduction of Burman hegemonic social relations.

Methodology

Our collaboration, through which the legal expertise and embodied experiences of Rohingya legal scholar Wai Wai Nu meets Shae Frydenlund's Marxist-feminist approach to labour geography, is built on the authors' friendship and mutual desire to improve the material lives of marginalized women in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Our project shares firsthand history of interethnic communal relations in Arakan as remembered and explained by a small sample of both Rohingya and Rakhine women from across the region. We draw on the foundational insights of postcolonial feminism (Faria and Mollett 2016; Hiemstra and Billo 2017; Moss, Al-Hindi and Kawabata 2002; Nagar 2013) and Third World feminism (Herr 2014; Mohanty 2003; Mohanty, Russo and Torres 1991). The analytical strength of Third World feminism lies in approaching poor, rural and minoritized women – those positioned as Third World women – as bearers of knowledge and an epistemic advantage located in their grounded, geographically specific experiences. Looking to Rohingya and Rakhine women's experiences illuminates new ways of viewing inter-ethnic relationships, ethnic and political identities, and economic lives lived in Arakan.

A Postcolonial and Third World feminist methodology also helped us approach the diversity of women's experiences and narratives with reflexivity about how our own subjectivity shapes the interviews, oral histories and focus groups – and the information and omissions therein – as a result of the authors' educational status, race and affiliation with elite international feminist organizations. Our methods of feminist interview and oral history are grounded in geographically specific knowledge to generate a broad understanding of the history of interdependence and of the mutual relations

of care that link Rohingyas and Rakhines. Moreover, building on the theoretical contributions of Saba Mahmood (2006), we emphasize the fact that Rohingya women's frequent embrace of Islamic practices that subordinate women, such as the requirement to submit to a husband's authority, are not the product of ignorance or false consciousness. Rohingya women are not a monolith, and they have multiple ways of engaging with (or modifying) deeply held religious and cultural values that inflect their lives with meaning and satisfaction.

The research team conducted fieldwork for a total of eight weeks between October 2017 and January 2018 in two Rohingya villages near Sittwe and in the three largest refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. Research activities included 30 semi-structured interviews with Rohingya and Rakhine Buddhist women; 10 oral histories (five Rohingya and five Rakhine); three focus groups with Rohingya women in Myanmar and Bangladesh; and one focus group with Rakhine Buddhist women in Myanmar. Interviews explored subjects' memories of life before 2012, relationships with Rakhine or Rohingya neighbours, community members and officials, and opinions about the causes and conditions of the contemporary crisis in Rakhine. Interviewers provided (or arranged for) a private space for informants to share their personal views and memories, which subjects might not have felt comfortable sharing in a group setting. This also allowed the researcher to ask specific questions about experiences, memories, and opinions. Oral histories complemented interviews by providing space for subjects to structure their own narratives and to share their life stories with minimal researcher involvement.

Feminist oral history shifts the focus from current events and traumas, which are the focus of most journalistic accounts of the Rohingya tragedy and Rakhine conflict, to a richer and more complex past life. This opens possibilities for understanding the historical context of contemporary Arakan from the perspective of the everyday lives and relationships that colour people's memories of life there. Focus groups provide the opportunity to observe the synthesis and diversity of views held by subjects, which may support or contradict findings from interviews and oral histories. Focus groups also create space for women who have suffered trauma to connect, share stories, make friends and benefit from the support of other women. There are certainly limitations and downsides to this approach: for example, power dynamics between co-ethnic women who are unevenly positioned according to class or family status can come into play, with the voices of more educated

and confident women drowning out those of other women. We observed this to a certain extent in our focus groups. We therefore acknowledge the limited generalizability of the findings from our small sample, and we would like to highlight the importance of triangulating between multiple methods.

Before We were Refugees: Rohingya Women's Memories of 'Pre-Transition' Life

On a cold January morning in 2018, the authors visited a small Rohingya settlement near Kutupalong-Balukhali camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The camp was constructed in the early 1990s. We crossed a busy road and entered lush wet-rice paddies, walking on the packed dirt partitions and hopping over irrigation ditches until we reached a long row of bamboo houses constructed on flat, elevated ground. The houses were small, only two rooms, and each row of 15 or so homes was separated by a narrow path. Arriving at Shafika's home, we were met with the sweet, smoky smell of roasting chicken and the sound of many women's voices. Although she left Myanmar with her family nearly 25 years ago as military-led violence, forced labour, and extra-judicial arrests and killings spurred an exodus of some 250,000 Rohingyas into Bangladesh, Shafika still wore the *thamein* – a marker of her Burmese identity. As Shafika cooked, a group of five Rohingya women between the ages of 18 and 50 sat on the doorstep and sewed decorations made from tiny iridescent squares of ramen packaging, brightly coloured cotton buds and precisely cut soda cans, for an upcoming wedding. 'It will be beautiful', one of the women remarked, adding that she loved the Rohingya wedding traditions of her Burmese homeland. Though weddings in the Bangladesh refugee settlements and camps often take on a local aesthetic, the women were emphatic in making a distinction between a 'real' Rohingya wedding in Myanmar and the colourful, hybrid weddings of Cox's Bazar, which are more likely to feature Bengali and Hindi pop than Rohingya folk songs.

When asked to tell the stories of their lives lived thus far, the women reflected on what they missed most: their land and animals, their security and their friendships. Many of their most cherished relationships were with Rakhine Buddhist schoolgirls and neighbours. Shafika, who attended school until fleeing Myanmar at age 14, told us about her life growing up in a small town near Maungdaw: 'I even miss the soil. I miss the air. I miss my young life. I miss my friends.' She had two close Rakhine friends as a young girl

– she recalled their names without hesitation: Chyo Ma Win and Hla Hla Min – 'We played together, we went to each other's homes, we helped each other, we ate each other's food. I was happy.'[1]

It is worth noting that those who could attend school were significantly more likely to have Buddhist friends. This highlights the role of education not only in improving girls' life chance, but also as a space that fosters mutual relations of care in wider society. Many women from more rural areas did not have access to nearby schools and were significantly more likely to say that they did not have Rakhine friends, mostly because they did not speak Burmese. Since 2012, Rohingya women's access to education has been dramatically curtailed, leading to greater isolation, earlier marriages, and greater insecurity (Fortify Rights 2019). Most Rohingya girls are not kept out of school as a result of 'conservative' or 'fundamentalist' Islamic values; rather, it is fear of sexual assault incurred on long walks to school, assault or unwanted marriage proposals from boys at a co-ed state school, sexual assault from Tatmadaw soldiers, or military mobility restrictions.[2] Women's experiences of immobility demonstrate one of the key facets of Myanmar's post-war transition, where securitization produces new vulnerabilities for Rohingya women, who lack access to education, socialization and the material benefits of inter-ethnic friendships. We also argue that a lack of access to inter-ethnic friendships is also accompanied by reduced access to material and emotional support, further entrenching gendered disparities in life chances and weakening women's position relative to men, employers and landlords.

Aisha, 42, came from a modest farming family in Bauthidaung. Growing up, her best friend was Rakhine Buddhist. This friend was also the daughter of a Na Sa Ka border police officer. The Na Sa Ka was, and is, infamous for its brutality. Aisha and her friend visited each other's houses and often had picnics together with their families – she recalled what they would eat and her joy in preparing food for the gatherings: 'We would get together and cook whole chickens at my family's house for our picnic parties. I would visit her house and we would play together.'[3] For Rohingyas, sharing a cooked whole chicken is different from sharing a chicken curry. This dish marks important Rohingya gatherings such as weddings and the welcoming of honoured

1 Shafika, Cox's Bazar, 8 January 2018.

2 Military mobility restrictions have affected Rohingya villages since the 1970s, though have accelerated significantly in scope and effect since 2012.

3 Aisha, Cox's Bazar, 8 January 2018.

guests. A whole chicken fried and surrounded by golden-fried boiled eggs also Islamic values of communal sharing and respect for neighbours. Aisha's memory of her friendship is significant because it enhances our understanding of the diverse ways that Rohingya and Rakhine families supported each others' livelihoods and wellbeing through mutual relations of care. These relations included cultural rituals and sharing before communal relations deteriorated and Rohingyas were dispossessed (see also Green, McManus and de la Cour Venning 2015). It also underscores the fact that Rohingyas and Rakhine Buddhists once shared a similar class status, as rural people for whom inter-ethnic picnic parties and culturally-significant celebratory foods were a part of everyday life.

Reflecting on Aisha's memory also offers some insight into a figure who embodies Burman supremacy and performs the military-state but is too often oversimplified: the Tatmadaw soldier. Though the Na Sa Ka border police officer who was the father of Aisha's friend undoubtedly knew of, and likely even participated in, acts of discrimination and violence that targeted Rohingyas in the 1990s, this soldier and his family shared picnic parties with Rohingya neighbours. Of course, many of the perpetrators of unspeakable violence have, throughout history, also shared intimacies of varying kinds with members of the groups they have persecuted. These relationships do not change the structurally violent relations of domination that subjugate Rohingyas and disproportionately disenfranchise Rohingya women in Myanmar. However, this memory does present a more complex picture of intimate everyday relationships between people who were positioned drastically differently vis-à-vis military-state power in Myanmar in the tumultuous 1990s, and suggests mutual relations of care and social reproduction activities linking Rohingyas and Rakhines.

In contrast with childhood memories of peaceful life lived alongside Rakhine friends and neighbours, Rohingya women's stories of their life in the present in Arakan located their anxiety, unhappiness, poverty and insecurity in relation to new imperatives to participate in wage work for family survival. Maria Begum, 36, joined her husband to work outside the home after bans on travel after 2012 left them unable to procure necessary farming equipment, seeds, and fertilizer and prevented workers and relatives from coming to their small farm to plant and harvest.

> I was educated to the fifth grade, and I can read and write the Qur'an. Before 2012 my husband and I were living happily together. When I

> learned to sew, he wouldn't let me work. I was happy with this – he provided everything and I could stay at home with the children. When he couldn't farm or work here after 2012, he went to Malaysia for work. I haven't seen him since. Some people say he was arrested and detained, some people say he has died. Now I have to work but it's not enough to survive anymore. When the Myittar Resource Foundation was here in the village, I worked as a tailor and got 160,000 per month. But then they left, and other villagers aren't buying or tailoring clothes. Now I can only get 1000 per month, and I have to depend on my parents to survive. If my children are sick, I need money for medicine. I used to have a best friend, Phyu Phyu Thein. She was Rakhine, and when I needed money when my children were sick, she would help me, and when I could I would help her. Now we can't leave the village and I don't know where she lives. It makes me sad. I often feel alone and anxious. I have to go out to work and make sure my children are happy, so they don't cry because they miss their father. The international community and the Rakhine community should know that we just want to live together in peace like we did before 2012. That is all we want.[4]

When asked if she currently has any friendships with Rakhine women, Maria said no. Then she thought for a moment and added: 'The brickfield owners are Mog [Rakhine Buddhist]. When I am facing hardship, the owner gives me money, she gives me clothing. That is our relationship.' Maria's experience is significant because it draws attention to a reversal in intimate and communal relations between Rohingyas and Rakhines in the region, as well as to the ways in which women's inter-ethnic friendships and communal relations are sutured to their labour activities, their class status and to the wider economic landscape within the region. When Maria had a similar class status to her Rakhine friend, they were able to fill gaps in household income and, to a degree, support each other's livelihoods *and* the regional agricultural economy. As the class positioning of the Rohingyas erodes relative to that of the Rakhines, women's mutual relations of care are upended and replaced by conditions of dependence and vulnerability.

This repositioning not only reflects a broader shift toward Burman hegemonic social relations that shore up the livelihoods of more privileged citizens, but also reproduces these hegemonic relations on a daily basis through intimate interactions at the scale of the community and of the

4 Maria Begum, Cox's Bazar, 9 January 2018.

individual body. As the class status of rural Rakhine women improves and is guaranteed through police and state practices that favour those who share class status with Bamar Buddhist elites, such as wealthy Muslim capitalists, Rohingya women's status worsens as they work in low-wage jobs to make up shortfalls in household income and take on additional care work burdens to ensure the family's survival.

Moreover, as a Rohingya reserve army of labour grows in relation to dispossession – including the loss of fishing licenses (Saw Eh Htoo 2016), the loss of land and the ability to farm, and pillaged businesses – those with increased access to the means of production accelerate the devaluation of Rohingya work and induce conditions of hyper-exploitation as once-narrow gaps in class status widen (Frydenlund 2020a, 2020b; Wolpe 1976, cited in Campbell 2018). Put another way, Rohingya and Rakhine women's intimate social relations are both shaped by and constitutive of structural shifts in the political economy of the region and Myanmar writ large, in which Buddhists and elites are more likely than ever to own the means of production and benefit from the debts and poverty of the poor.

'We Lived Peacefully Together': Rakhine Women's Experiences

Hla Hla Win, 25, is from a farming family in Bauthidaung. She began work for a Sittwe nonprofit after finishing her university degree, though her parents disapprove of her work and encourage her to take a more stable, permanent job with the government. She joined a group of four other young women, most of whom held high school or university diplomas, at an office in downtown Sittwe for a focus group discussion. The women grew up at a later time than most of the Rohingya women interviewed in Bangladesh and elsewhere in Sittwe, as most were born after 1990, but their memories also echoed the Rohingya stories about experiences of peaceful interethnic relations before 2012:

> I had many Muslim friends growing up, especially my friend Rafik. We knew each other from school and would go to festivals together. [Rakhines and Rohingyas] lived peacefully together for generations. We now hear a lot about killings, so now the communities are afraid of each other. Before the conflict, if there were religious festivals, we would go

> together. Especially for Eid. Eid was so much fun. We would visit each other. It was really peaceful.[5]

Like Shafika's memories of cooking chickens, picnicking and sharing meals with Rakhine neighbours and friends before she fled to Bangladesh, Hla Hla Win's experiences also reflect a certain fluidity of ethnic boundaries, which characterized multi-ethnic communities in the recent past. As historically interlinked and interdependent peoples from Arakan, Rohingyas and Rakhines are, as Prasse-Freeman and Mausert argue, 'two sides of the same Arakanese coin' (2020: 1), with ethnic identities marked by shared politics, economies and cultural traditions. Rakhine memories of peace and friendship and of participation in Muslim religious and cultural activities such as Eid emphasize the permeability of supposedly fixed, irreconcilable ethnic differences. Hla Hla Win's life course contrasts sharply with the Rohingya women with respect to material wellbeing and security. Though some grew up in agricultural families in the Bauthidaung area, the Rakhine women accessed higher education and have freedom of mobility and economic security. For them, the disappearance of community relations and interethnic friendships is not a material loss and does not affect their ability to support themselves or their communities. Rather, we argue that Rakhine women's repositioning as more privileged citizens and occasional providers of charity to Rohingyas – albeit at the cost of social sanctions, as in the case of the Rakhine woman who was publicly beaten when her husband delivered aid to Rohingyas in displacement camps (Beech 2017) – reflects the role of intimate inter-ethnic relationships at the scale of the body, the home and the community as a site where Bamar hegemonic social relations and politics are produced and reproduced.

The Rakhine women were eager to share their views of the reasons why relations between Muslims and Buddhists are no longer peaceable. Phyu Phyu Tin, 21, explained that 'in my village [in central Arakan], relations between Muslims and Buddhists were very good – there were never any problems – but now, after 2012, Buddhists and Muslims are afraid of each other'. Moe Chit, 19, added that media and rapid communication played a large role in destroying trust between the two groups, stoking fear, misunderstanding and resentment: 'Because of the development of technology, news can spread very easily. Pictures and videos make it easy for people to

5 Hla Hla Win, Sittwe 15 October 2017

believe things are true. Fake news is a problem.' The women make a good point. Social media, especially Facebook, was instrumental in instigating communal violence that targeted Rohingyas and other Muslims. Reflecting findings from research conducted by the International State Crime Initiative, the women emphasized that it was not just internet denizens, but political and community leaders and elites who were to blame for spreading false information (Green, McManus and de la Cour Venning 2015: 59).

Ma Ein Myo is 28, and recently finished an internship in Myitkyina. She reflected on life before 2012 and emphasized the role of communication and spatial proximity between members of different ethnic groups in creating peaceful communal relations:

> There are both Rakhines and Muslims in my village, but I don't remember any conflict with Muslims before 2012. Now they are afraid of each other. The main problem is that [Buddhists and Muslims] don't speak. They have become closed. Rakhine students are afraid when they see Muslims with beards or women with veils. The Muslims are also living only with Muslims. In Myitkyina, there is a lot of diversity – Kachin, Chinese, Pao, Bamar – they are together all the time![6]

There were, of course, conflicts between the military and Rohingyas before 2012, but Rakhine villages far from the northwest were unlikely to have been affected in the same way as those closer to Rohingya-majority communities. Ma Ein Myo believes that Rohingyas, Myanmar Muslims and Buddhists have become strangers, and that distance has led to fear and violence. However, her perspective is also indicative of a broader erasure of the role of communal and military violence in separating Rohingya and Rakhine groups in the region. Distrust between the two communities is inseparable from the dispossession of the Rohingyas and from the ongoing consequences of military-led mobility restrictions and internal imprisonment.

It is noteworthy that Rakhine women understand fear and mistrust as the root cause of shifting communal relations and the disappearance of friendships between Rakhines and Muslims. This framing occludes the devastating impacts of both military and communal violence and overlooks the material links between mutual relations of care and the chasmic class inequalities that have opened between themselves and their Muslim former neighbours. When the women talk about coming together and living alongside people

6 Ma Ein Myo, Sittwe, 16 October 2017.

from different ethnic groups as beneficial in the struggle against discrimination and racially-motivated violence, they also index a liberal understanding of the causes and conditions of such discrimination and violence, in which misrecognition and ignorance, rather than racial hierarchies and violent political economies, converge to produce subjugation. As critical feminist and anti-racist scholars have argued, diversity and multiculturalism alone is not the antivenom to race, class and gender-based hierarchies (Coulthard 2014). Rather, the racial and gendered hierarchies that form the scaffolding of racial capitalism must be attacked, for equity and peaceful communal relations to thrive.

Rakhine women's experiences also underscore the racialized and gendered securitization of Muslim women's bodies in Arakan. While sharing the story of her life after moving out of her parents' house and meeting her boyfriend – Zinn Zinn recalled her repeated experiences of harassment in the street after being mistakenly identified as a Muslim woman:

> Here in Sittwe if I wear a scarf to protect my face from the sun, men yell '*kalar ma*!' [a gendered racial slur used to refer to women with South Asian physiogymy]. This has happened three times. Once at the market, and twice in the street. It was scary. My boyfriend tells me I shouldn't wear a scarf at all here because it's dangerous for Muslim women.[7]

Zinn Zinn and the other young Rakhine women talked at length about the structural forms of sexism that shaped their lives and limited their opportunities, including the preference for male children and the discriminatory state practice of increasing the test score required to enter medical school for women. Yet Zinn Zinn also recognized that being perceived as Buddhist or Muslim affected her ability to safely move through public space – Muslim women's confinement to villages and displacement camps notwithstanding – and points to the interlocking forms of oppression that Muslim women face in contemporary Myanmar. Her momentary experience as an out-of-place Muslim woman made embodied securitization visible as a spatial expression of Burman hegemony, where bodies are marked as 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' for specific places based on gendered and racialized spatial imaginaries. As Mona Domosh (2017) argues of Black experiences of spatial containment in Jim Crow America, white spatial imaginaries that kept Black people in place were bound up with racial divisions of labour that

7 Zinn Zinn, Sittwe, 16 October 2017.

generated profit for white cotton capitalists. Considered alongside the new positioning of Rohingya women as precarious workers who are kept in place, the isolation of these women from Rakhine women and their loss of access to mutual relations of care posit future class-attuned analyses of the Burman spatial imaginaries that justify the subjugation of Muslims.

Conclusion

Data from oral histories, focus groups and interviews with Rohingya and Rakhine women from Arakan shed light on the ways in which Rohingya and Rakhine women have been repositioned not only in relation to each other, but in relation to local labour markets, the national economy, and the military-state. The material lives of Rohingya and Rakhine women are unevenly impacted by state practices and policies that entrench racial, gender and class inequality. While Rakhine women respondents from agricultural backgrounds gained access to higher education, Rohingya women are barred from university and Rohingya work is devalued. Yet these structural changes have also been accompanied by the disappearance of shared cultural practices, lost inter-ethnic friendships, and the securitization of the gendered and racialized bodies of Muslims. Shifting the scale and the site of inquiry from state spaces and places of employment to the body, home and community makes interethnic friendships and relations of mutual care between women visible, as crucial sites where Burman hegemony is actively reproduced.

In addition to recentring intimate relations as important sites productive of post-conflict politics and political economies, a class-attuned analysis of the views of Rohingya and Rakhine women has the added benefit of unsettling dominant discourses about Arakan history. Specifically, their experiences of shared cultural practices, relations of mutual care and peace challenge the argument that conflict between Muslims and Buddhists is a defining feature of Arakanese history. Recalling Shafika's fond memories of the air, soil, animals and friendships that characterized her life before displacement, the violent and segregated landscape of Arakan becomes peculiar rather than a historical status quo. Women's memories of interethnic friendship, home and community offer additional empirical evidence in support of the argument that conflict and communal violence between Rohingyas and Rakhine Buddhists is not the product of long-simmering tensions that have existed since time immemorial – they emerged at specific historical

conjunctures where political, state and military interests articulated with Rakhine nationalist political interests, broadly construed, to marginalize and dispossess Rohingyas and reaffirm elite livelihoods in Arakan and Myanmar writ large. In particular, Myanmar's transition to semi-civilian rule and a market economy was embedded within a broader Burman hegemonic project that marginalized the poor and non-Buddhist minorities and prioritized the livelihoods of elites, Bamars and culturally Burmese minorities at the expense of those targeted as anti-Burmese (Campbell and Prasse-Freeman 2022). The violent pogroms of 2012 reflect an alignment between neoliberalization and Burman chauvinism. Paying attention to Rohingya and Rakhine women's memories of life before mass displacement and violence, their changing or unchanging relationships with people from different ethnic and class backgrounds, and their everyday, material experiences illuminates not only the complexity of relations between Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine – even a Na Sa Ka officer once picnicked with Rohingyas – but also undermines the popular, though debunked narrative that communal violence is the result of longstanding ethnic group enmity rather than state and military violence (see also Green, McManus and de la Cour Venning 2015: 31).

Set against a background of entrenched gendered, ethno-racial and class inequality at the national scale, Rakhine and Rohingya women's memories and explanations of inter-ethnic peace and conflict draw attention to the relationship between cultural and social ties and women's economic lives in contemporary Myanmar and in post-war contexts more broadly. Once positioned as both givers and recipients of aid and loans, Rohingya women are now positioned as recipients of charity in relation to Rakhine women. We argue that this rearrangement of ethnic and cultural relations is not only the result of national-scale political economic changes and ethnic politics, in which Buddhists and elites become more wealthy and secure as minoritized groups are dispossessed, but also of changes in intimate relationships at the scale of the everyday. Rohingya women's experiences of shifting relationships, cultural landscapes and labour market positioning also reveal that Burman hegemony is advanced not just through national-scale politics, but through everyday interpersonal relationships. Inter-ethnic friendships alone are not sufficient to repair a violent political economy, but solidarities built on mutual relations of care and resource-sharing are powerful salves for countering poverty and marginality. Without them, marginalized women become more marginal and those in closer proximity to elites gain access to improved livelihoods.

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