

# Enduring Trauma: Human Rights Violations and Atrocities Against Rohingya Women

Application for the 2024-2025 Graduate Research and Creative Activity (GRACA) Grant

Master's Student: Md Robiul Alam Roni

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Mark Celinscak, Professor, History

University of Nebraska at Omaha; Department of History

## Abstract

I am requesting support for my master's degree portfolio project in the Department of History titled "Enduring Trauma: Human Rights Violations and Atrocities Against Rohingya Women." This project examines the trauma and systemic violence faced by Rohingya women, traced through archival research, oral histories, and secondary sources. It will also highlight the intersection of gendered violence, human rights violations, and cultural trauma during the Rohingya genocide. Incorporating unpublished testimonies and records, this study will contribute to genocide studies, cultural history, and human rights. With support from UNO's Graduate Research and Creative Activity grant, I hope to complete an article-length research piece, aiming to influence academic discourse on refugee rights and gender-based violence.

The Rohingya genocide is rooted in a complex history of ethnic and religious tensions in Myanmar, previously known as Burma. The Rohingya, a Muslim minority group primarily residing in Myanmar's Rakhine State<sup>1</sup>, have long faced systemic discrimination in the predominantly Buddhist nation of Burma. Despite their centuries-old presence, the Myanmar government has refused to recognize the Rohingya as one of the country's 135 official ethnic groups, rendering them stateless under the 1982 Citizenship Law. This denial of citizenship has left them vulnerable to severe human rights abuses, including restrictions on movement, education, healthcare, and the right to marry (Sarver, Radhakrishnan, and Seckon 2023, 198). Historically, tensions between the Buddhist Rakhine<sup>2</sup> and Muslim Rohingya have been exacerbated by colonial legacies. British rule from 1824 to 1948 contributed to the migration of laborers, including Muslims, from what is now Bangladesh, creating ethnic tensions (Turner 2014, 20).

After the independence of Myanmar in 1948, the military junta further oppressed ethnic minorities, and the rise of Buddhist nationalism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries framed the Rohingya as outsiders despite their deep roots in the region. These tensions flared into violent episodes, with significant crackdowns occurring in 1978, and 1991-1992, before the 2017 genocide. The 1978 crackdown, known as *Operation Nagamin* ("Operation Dragon King"), marked the first large-scale campaign of state-led persecution against the Rohingya in Myanmar. The Myanmar military<sup>3</sup>, under the pretense of identifying illegal immigrants, conducted widespread operations in the Rakhine State. This campaign involved brutal methods of atrocity, including mass arrests, sexual violence, forced displacement, and the confiscation of land and property. As a result, an estimated 200,000 to 250,000 Rohingya fled across the border to Bangladesh to escape violence, with many reporting torture, forced labor, and killings by military forces (Human Rights Watch 1996, 2). The government asserted that the crackdown aimed to verify citizenship and address national security concerns. The 1991 crackdown on the Rohingya in Myanmar, known as *Operation Pyi Thaya* ("Operation Clean and Beautiful Nation"), involved systematic persecution of the Rohingya Muslim minority by the Myanmar military. This campaign targeted the Rohingya in Rakhine State under the pretext of rooting out insurgents but led to widespread human rights abuses. The military displaced entire communities, forcing over 250,000 Rohingya to flee to neighboring Bangladesh (International Crisis Group 2014, 5).

In August 2017, the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) launched a brutal crackdown in response to attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on security posts. This operation led to widespread atrocities, including mass killings, sexual violence, and the burning of Rohingya villages (Tun Khin 2017, 43). Amnesty International and the United Nations reported that these actions were premeditated and part of a "clearance operation" targeting

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the state, "Rakhine," was derived from an ethnic group in Myanmar; this ethnic group also lives in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

<sup>2</sup> Rakhine is an ethnic group of Myanmar, who claim themselves as the legal resident of Rakhine state.

<sup>3</sup> The Myanmar Military took power in Myanmar in 1962.

the Rohingya. Within weeks, over 700,000 Rohingya fled to neighboring Bangladesh, joining hundreds of thousands who had previously fled during earlier waves of violence. Refugees reported horrific experiences, including mass rapes, burning of entire villages, and summary executions (Tun Khin 2017, 44). The UN described the military's actions as having "genocidal intent," and the International Criminal Court (ICC) has since opened an investigation into the crimes committed.

## **Rationale**

The Rohingya genocide represents one of the most horrific violations of human rights in recent history, yet the experiences and enduring trauma of Rohingya women remain underrepresented in historical scholarship. Women's narratives, often marked by sexual violence, displacement, and social marginalization, are important to understanding the wider implications of genocidal violence. These experiences demonstrate the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and power within genocidal structures, challenging dominant narratives that focus primarily on state actions or ethnic conflict.

Existing literature often emphasizes geopolitical factors or the historical context of the Rohingya's statelessness, neglecting the deep personal and communal impacts of atrocities. By centering the experiences of Rohingya women, this research seeks to merge a critical gap in the historiography of genocide studies and human rights violations. This focus is particularly urgent given the ongoing repercussions of the genocide, which continue to form the lives of survivors in refugee camps and diaspora communities worldwide. Moreover, highlighting these narratives contributes to a more significant interpretation of how genocidal violence impacts marginalized groups differently, promoting greater accountability and informing international policy responses.

## **Purpose**

This research aims to investigate the specific experiences of Rohingya women during the waves of violence between 1978 and 2017, focusing on the physical, psychological, and socio-cultural consequences of genocidal atrocities. The project seeks to:

- Document and analyze the personal testimonies of Rohingya women to uncover patterns of gender-based violence, displacement, and survival strategies.
- Review these experiences within the historical and political framework of the Rohingya genocide.
- Contribute to the historiography of genocide studies by identifying the voices of women, emphasizing their agency and resilience in the face of systemic oppression.
- Offer insights into how these women's experiences inform ongoing efforts for justice and repatriation in addressing the aftermath of genocide.

## **Method**

I will perform a qualitative analysis of archival documents and other published materials from the 1970s to recent times. I will utilize government documents, reports from international organizations (e.g., UN, Human Rights Watch), and media coverage to trace the historical progression of genocidal campaigns and their impact on Rohingya communities. This research will comprehensively examine newspaper coverage, encompassing both regional newspapers such as *The Daily Ittefaq*, *The Daily Star*, and *The Times of India*, as well as renowned international newspapers like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Guardian*.

I will also use oral interviews I conducted in the summer of 2024 with Rohingya women living in refugee camps, Cox's Bazar<sup>4</sup>, Bangladesh, who survived the genocide perpetrated by Myanmar's military from 1978-2017. These interviews will prioritize ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity.

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<sup>4</sup> Cox's Bazar is a district located in the South-Eastern part of Bangladesh, it shares the international border with Rakhine state, Myanmar. Since 1978 Rohingya people have been living in this area as refuge, after 2017 crackdown more than 1 million Rohingya took shelter in the refugee camps at Cox's Bazar.

The goal is to capture firsthand accounts of their experiences during the waves of violence during Rohingya Genocide and their ongoing struggles.

### Project Timeline

Month	Planned Schedule of Research Activities
May 2025	Review of Secondary Literature and Drawing Conceptual Framework
June 2025	Collection, Translation, and Analysis of Primary Documents
July 2025	Draft and Review Article
August 2025	Present paper at UNO's Annual Student Research and Creative Activity Fair; Portfolio Defense in Department of History; Submit article to Journal of Genocide Research

Table 1: Project Timeline

### Student/Faculty Mentor Roles Student Role

Md Robiul Alam Roni, Department of History, will focus on the following research activities: Viewing the existing literature, collecting, and analyzing archival data according to the designed framework, and writing results into conference paper format with assistance from the Faculty Mentor.

Faculty Role: Dr. Mark Celinscak, Professor of History, will oversee the collection and analysis of data, review frameworks, approach, and methodology, and provide general supervision.

### Previous internal funding

I have received no previous internal funding for this project.

### Budget Justification

I intend to dedicate my upcoming summer to this research project, opting not to pursue alternative employment or self-funding. The total budget for this project is \$5000 which will be used as my stipend. This stipend will facilitate my full commitment to the research, eliminating the need to balance research and a separate part-time job. Since the primary data has already been collected no additional funding is required for travel or data collection. The budget details are given in Table 2.

Budget Item	Justification	Amount
Stipend for Graduate Student: Md Robiul Alam Roni (May 2025- Aug 2025)	Approx 375 hours dedicated to the project	\$5000
Total	-	\$5000

Table 2: Budget Justification

## References

1. Habiburrahman. *First, They Erased Our Name: A Rohingya Speaks*. Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2019.
2. Haynes, Dina Francesca, Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, and Naomi Cahn. *Gendering the International Legal Framework on Genocide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.
3. Human Rights Watch. *The Rohingya Muslims: Ending a Cycle of Exodus?* Vol. 8, no. 9 (C). September 1, 1996.
4. Ibrahim, Azeem. *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Genocide*. London: Hurst Publishers, 2018.
5. International Crisis Group. *Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State*. Asia Report N°261. Brussels, Belgium: October 22, 2014.
6. Lee, Ronan. *Myanmar's Rohingya Genocide: Identity, History and Hate Speech*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2021.
7. Sarver, Elena, Akila Radhakrishnan, and Leang Seckon. "Genocide of the Rohingya." In *Book of the Disappeared: The Quest for Transnational Justice*, 197–213. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023.
8. Tun Khin. "Rohingya: A Preventable Genocide Allowed to Happen." *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 43.
9. Turner, Alicia. *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014.
10. Wade, Francis. *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other"*. London: Zed Books, 2017.
11. Ware, Anthony, and Costas Laoutides. *Myanmar's "Rohingya" Conflict: Identity, History and Policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
12. Zarni, Maung, and Natalie Brinham. "Essays on Myanmar's Genocide of the Rohingyas." *Genocide Studies International* 11, no. 1 (2017): 45-84.



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DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY, COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

January 3, 2025

Office of Research and Creative Activity  
203 Eppley Administrative Building  
University of Nebraska at Omaha, 6001 Dodge Street  
Omaha, Nebraska, 68182-0213

Dear Members of the GRACA Grant Committee,

I support Mr. Md Robiul Alam Roni for a Graduate Research and Creative Activity grant. He will examine the experiences of Rohingya women in Myanmar during the waves of violence between 1978 and 2017. While there is a growing body of research that focuses on the gendered aspect of violence against Rohingya women, Roni will explore the physical, psychological, and socio-cultural consequences of genocidal atrocities against them, which remains understudied. In the past, scholars have understandably focused on the Rohingya genocide starting in 2016, but rarely historically contextualize the violence from the 1970s. Accordingly, the long history of the persecution of Rohingya women has largely been left unexplored. Roni aims to survey how the experiences of Rohingya women inform their ongoing efforts for justice and reparations in the aftermath of genocide. To what extent, as a historically persecuted group, are Rohingya women organized to seek restitution? What might their narratives tell us about their history of persecution? How do their testimonies challenge dominant narratives about the genocide? In what ways do the narratives of Rohingya women force us to revise the historiography, not only of this genocide, but that concerning gender-based violence? These questions and more will be explored in this project.

There are enough firsthand accounts about examine the experiences of Rohingya women in Myanmar during the waves of violence. Roni is proficient in multiple languages, and this will allow him to access these primary sources. In addition, there is a large body of scholarship available about the Rohingya genocide. His background knowledge in Southeast Asian history, war, genocide, and mass atrocity have prepared him to engage with this subject matter. His approach involves engaging with firsthand accounts, mostly firsthand accounts from female survivors, and assessing how they understood their experiences. I am a scholar of war and genocide and have published extensively in the field. I also teach the subject regularly. In Fall 2024, Roni was enrolled in my *Comparative Genocide* course, and he is current schedule to take my Spring 2025 class on *The Holocaust*. In short, he is prepared to take on such a project, and I am pleased to oversee his research and writing.

In closing, let me reiterate that I think Mr. Md Robiul Alam Roni is well deserving of a Graduate Research and Creative Activity grant. I recommend him for this award without reservation. If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

**Dr. Mark Celinscak, FRHistS**

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