
“As husband I must be violent”.

Continuum of violence in forced migration and militarized policies. Ethnography among Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia.

by

*Elodie Voisin**

Abstract: From a research made on gender-based violence in forced migration, this paper describes the system of constraints against Rohingya women and the masculinities of Rohingya men refugees in Malaysia. Findings show how a Myanmar hegemonic model, based on a masculine protector, “guardian of the nation” and a feminine vulnerable “mother of the nation” is the object of both re-appropriation and distancing by the refugees. Migration to Malaysia plays a major role in the reconfiguration of gendered relations. Racial discrimination, economic inequalities and the changes in the gender order due to migration create more tensions between men and women, and result in the emergence of domestic violence and in the intensification of pre-existing domestic violence. This article will shed lights on institutions framing the refugee protection in Malaysia, which largely contribute to gender related issues explaining directly the emergence and intensification of domestic violence among the Rohingya refugee population. In the second place, I will describe the dynamics between masculinities and domestic violence. Through an ethnography carried out in 2016 and 2020 in Klang Valley, Malaysia among humanitarian actors, women and men Rohingya refugees¹, I aimed to answer two questions: how the studies on forced migration and militarization may help in understanding domestic violence? What is the role of domestic violence on the complex, processual construction of refugee masculinities? This study on domestic violence highlights militarized, racialized and gendered dynamics behind protectionist and nationalist rhetoric.

* Elodie Voisin has completed her PhD in Sociology, with the Research Centre for Sociological and Political Studies of Paris at the University of Paris VIII. Her previous and current research include gender-based violence in forced migration and humanitarian setting, among Rohingya refugees living in urban areas in Malaysia and in Cox's Bazar refugee camps in Bangladesh. Her research methods include ethnography and qualitative. Elodie has worked more than ten years as a Researcher and Humanitarian Worker in Bangladesh, Comoros, Malaysia, Mali and France. More recently, she has been appointed as Médecins du Monde Board Delegate for the Bangladesh mission and works as Protection, Gender and Inclusion Advisor for the French Red Cross.

¹ Before the COVID 19 outbreak.

The Rohingya population was declared stateless by the Myanmar government in 1982, when a law redefined citizenship; 1.3 million individuals then had a separate status, as “resident foreigner”, deprived of Myanmar nationality, denied their basic rights and placed outside the national scope. Since then, the Rohingya have regularly been the subject of military operations and restrictive laws against them (birth control, prohibition of interfaith marriages, movement restriction, and work ban) have been voted. Arakanese space (Arakan State west of Myanmar, sharing a common border with Chittagong State in Bangladesh) was a war field during the struggles for independence and during the Second World War.

The destruction of a population does not stop at the borders. Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, and therefore does not formally recognize refugees or their rights. Rohingya refugee organizations based in Klang Valley, such as Rohingya Society of Malaysia and Ethnic Rohingya Committee of Arakan, estimate that those who have obtained protection from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) count for almost a third of the total refugee population. In fact, 101,530 Rohingya refugees were registered by UNHCR at the end of August 2020, leaving the rest of the population undocumented, then considered under the Malaysian law as “illegal immigrants” and without status. The majority of this refugee population lives in the capital, Kuala Lumpur, and in its urban suburb called Klang Valley.

They generally carry out tasks requiring few qualifications, very poorly paid and designated under the generic term of “3D” meaning dirty, difficult, dangerous in the construction sector, large urban infrastructure works, in palm oil and rubber plantations. They are often targets of arrests, detentions, extortion of money by the authorities called *duit kopi* (coffee money) by the police, non-payment of wages by employers, non-access to hospitals in the event of a work accident or pregnancy.

In 2015, the UNHCR-documented Rohingya refugee population in Malaysia was made up of 12,400 women, including 6,900 adults, out of a total population of 47,500. As of the end June 2019, there are some 95,110 Rohingya refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR in Malaysia. Between 2012 and 2015, the documented female Rohingya population in Malaysia doubled (5,920 in June 2012) (Kassim 2015: 185), the female population represents about 38 of the UNHCR-documented refugee population in Malaysia, approximately 19,000 Rohingya women (excluding girls below the age of 18). The number of undocumented population is unknown, but estimated to be equal to the documented population, and is possibly even higher.

However, there is a critical lack of study on refugees in Malaysia. Even fewer exist about the Rohingya refugee women and girls. One research, undertaken by Azizah Kassim, Malaysian sociologist, focus on the matrimonial trajectories of the Rohingya population in Malaysia. I describe somewhere else the marriage structure among the Rohingya population in Myanmar, Bangladesh and Malaysia (Voisin 2018, 2019).

Differentiated method to collect data on domestic violence according to respondents' gender

Let us recall first what characterizes the reality of domestic violence from the words of refugee women and from the work on violence against women (Ann Oakley 1984, Hanmer and Maynard 1987). The work of Ann Oakley and Jalna Hanmer has documented and analyzed structural violence including the division between private and public spheres creating economic dependency of women on their partner, social and emotional isolation, domination and control of the spouse towards his partner. So forth, I use in this article the term “domestic violence” to refer to violence taking place in the domestic sphere, which places the perspective on sexual division of labor, structural gender inequalities, and systemic domestic violence fueling power-based relationships, gendered norms, representations within intimate relationships. It also replaces the stereotype of the “battered woman”, for a more complex of “woman in situation of domestic violence” as result of all the conditions constraining women’s mobility, behavior, economic, political, emotional, sexual and reproductive autonomy. It is not about defining upstream a typology of forms of violence, identifying them, quantifying them and then addressing them separately. It is crucial here to understand domestic violence as cumulative forms of violence and not separating them. Often definitions summarize domestic violence as interpersonal or even “private” acts. Thus depoliticized, it makes it impossible to understand the problem as a social and political issue or to put in place appropriate programs.

I tried different methods, first, similar interview grids for men and women, then I created a tool I called “violence scale” to bring up the issue of violence suffered or/and acted, and finally a series of questions differentiated by gender. I sought to capture ordinary, insidious, hidden, invisible violence, and document the reality of violence experienced in the context of forced migration in Malaysia and above all examine the formation of subjectivities in relation to violence. Violence is a sensitive subject. In general, during interviews, the violence is often concealed, hidden by those who experience situation of violence. Due most often to the feeling of shame, guilt or even for some due to fear generated by the violence, but also the feeling of “mistrust” towards the study, afraid to reveal personal details of their lives and to be identified as “deviant”, violent. Mistrust, dissimulation and secrets are therefore highly likely. The validity and reliability of this study is therefore based on skills to access to respondents, to help storytelling, to revive respondents, limit oversights, and transcribe the field study with honesty. The long duration of the interviews, sometimes several interviews, is an ally in this field study with the aim of creating an environment of trust, which is crucial when it comes to sensitive subjects. I conducted several interviews with men using violence in their intimate relationships with their wife. It was only halfway through the interview, or even at the end of the interview through the “scale” exercise, that violence, based on a series of specific questions, was discussed. The “scale” exercise turned out to be very useful in interviews with men, to collect data about the political and social condi-

tions leading to normalized violence, unthinkable forms of highly repressed ones. All respondents, except one, mentioned at mid-interview or at the end of the interview, the recent deterioration of their relationship, and the emergence of domestic violence, or its intensification. On the other hand, sexual humiliation and rape against refugee men were raised during informal discussions about their life story. The feeling of shame is very strong among these men. It is by adopting an ethnographic method, of regular informal time spent with them, at home, meeting their friends, their family that they shared their experience of rape, sexual humiliation and physical assault in detention, perpetrated by national detainees or/and Malaysian authorities.

It was more difficult for the women respondents to speak about the deterioration of their relationship. I was more confronted with what other researchers on sensitive subjects have called the “spiral of silence” (Hennequin 2012). The first reason is linked to the common perception around violence, leaving reckless all forms of “normal” violence in everyday life, constraining their mobility, their behavior, their economic, political, emotional, sexual and reproductive autonomy, assigning them to a function. Domestic violence is not perceived as such, except in cases of “very serious” physical violence, which means to all women and men respondents, wife beaten, every day by the husband until she dies. The second is linked to the method, they bounce back to tell their life story in detail, pulling me away from the tool. So I adapted the method to document life stories. I followed their thread and delved into certain moments of their life, certain facts of particular interest, and grasped the construction of their subjectivity when they are caught in forms of subjugation. To this, I met and followed up four respondents over several weeks. This collection method is undoubtedly very rich but it requires a lot of time. A study on violence from larger-scale life stories cannot sample a population of women while gaining any depth in understanding particular situations.

In 2013, the first demographic survey on violence called KANITA was conducted in Malaysia (Shuib 2013). Respondents had to be citizens or have a residence permit, aged 18 to 50, excluding women without a residence permit and those aged over 50, and under 18. One of the results of KANITA survey shows that 9% of women who had a partner at the time of the survey, (all forms of union included) or who had a partner in the past have experienced domestic violence during their life, amounting to more than 8,000 women who have experienced or experienced abuse in this sphere. Other research on domestic violence in Malaysia highlights important criticisms of the 1994 Domestic Violence Act and the Penal Code categorizing offenses through a whole series of family laws that distinguish Muslim residents from non-Muslim women. The main gap in the research on violence in Malaysia is the refugee population. The only figures mentioning refugees are those collected by Women's Aid Organization (WAO 2015) in Kuala Lumpur from women in situation of domestic violence seeking immediate protection (shelter), referred by International Commission Catholic for Migration (ICMC) or by the High Commissioner for Refugees. They represent 14.6% of women assisted by the non-governmental organization. These women hold the refugee card, or are waiting to obtain it. For the year 2015, 22 refugee women were sheltered because of domestic violence out of 47,920 refugee women registered with UNHCR (2015). It

should be noted here the very significant under-representation of this population. The first reason is undoubtedly due to the exclusive nature of the assistance reserved for women registered or in the process of registration with the Agency. The second reason is linked to the fear of women to report their situation to the authorities. In the event that refugee women lodge a complaint without the presence of a social worker from a national or international organization, these women are told by the police officer to forget and to go home or even the officer calls their husbands directly to pick her up from the police station without investigation². Refugee women say they are too afraid of being arrested by the authorities if they show up at the police station to file a complaint. The violence against refugee women is then kept invisible. More recently, one study has been conducted on intimate partner abuse (IPA) against Rohingya refugee women living in Klang Valley (Welton-Mitchell 2019). Courtney Welton-Mitchell, a North-American psychologist, studied factors perceived as contributing to IPA³. The study briefly mentions a series of social norms-related (normalization of violence, perceived disobedience of wife...) and environmental stressors such as financial problems, employment problems, UNHCR process, registration issues and security issues. What is missing and crucial are the social conditions producing and maintaining structural inequalities leading to violence in intimate relationships. For example, how to explain the connection between the UNHCR registration process and the emergence and/or intensification of violence in the domestic sphere and in the most comprehensive way? What are the processes in place maintaining control of women's bodies by men and preventing women's autonomy?

System of constraints against Rohingya refugee women and UNHCR's vulnerability policy

Hélène Thomas (2010: 14) defines "government of the vulnerable and others" as a device consisting in "defining and developing thresholds, categories and qualitative indicators of vulnerabilities and its reverse side of capabilities / resilience by level and form of risk". The "others" or "vulnerable" are described by an alleged fragility or risk of, embodied by pregnant women, young children or even aging or sick adults. It is about defining, classifying and treating the vulnerable, the poor and the fragile, reifying them into abstract typologies. The term vulnerability is associated with the idea of risk, measuring risk objectively, according to criteria and categories. Risks or vulnerabilities are defined upstream, "from above", and are imposed to the populations.

The new arrivals of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, coupled with the drop in resettlement quotas, have upset UNHCR's order of priorities in Malaysia, and thus its registration and relocation policies. Therefore, UNHCR readjusted its "piori-

² Interview with social worker from Women's Aid Organisation, May 2016.

³ The author uses Center for Disease Control's definition of intimate partner abuse as physical, sexual or psychological harm by a partner and as one of the most common forms of gender-based violence (GBV) worldwide

ties” in 2015. The refugee group who became eligible for registration became the Rohingya over everyone else. But fearing to be overwhelmed by these new arrivals adding to the number of Rohingya refugees already in the country for decades, while not having the capacity to register new requests, UNHCR closed its doors. Despite UNHCR refugee status determination standards (UNHCR 2010, 2020), Rohingya refugees no longer have direct access to UN offices. Instead, they are encouraged to send a fax or a letter with their personal details (full name, date and place of birth, ethnicity). The Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees has restructured the entire system of access to registration, developed priority categories and thresholds to enable access to UNHCR protection. Changing from the principle “first come first served” to “those with higher priorities will be seen as first and those with a lower priority level will be seen later”⁴. Concretely, it means that the “less vulnerable” do not have access to registration procedures, facing high risks of arrest, detention, assault and extortion during years of waiting while the “more vulnerable” can quickly obtain the UNHCR card within a few weeks. Seven “categories of protection and vulnerability” are thus pre-established corresponding to entire groups of population: “children and adolescents at risk”, “women and girls at risk”, “survivors of violence and / or torture”, “in need of legal and / or physical protection”, “sick and / or disabled people”, “family reunification”, “elderly people at risk” (UNHCR 2015). The document clarifies what the Agency means by these categories. The group “women and girls at risk” is defined as: “[in general] women and girls are the most vulnerable, [placed] in displacement situations they are at ‘increased risk’”. They are the women and girls who face protection issues specific to their gender, and a lack of effective protection. They can be single heads of families, unaccompanied women and girls, or together with their male (or female) family member. Through family reunification, the first UNHCR cardholder of the family gives access to dependent members of the family (spouse and children under 18) to asylum. Consequently, there is a category of non-vulnerability: foreign men / single refugees (not sick, non-disabled) changing category once imprisoned, or once married with children. For single refugee men and married men without children, marriage and reproduction represent a strategy for survival to change category from statelessness to asylum status and access to services.

The lack of refugee / asylum seeker card is an obstacle to access to health care, employment and housing in Malaysia. Pregnancy reconfigures social relations. If to become a political subject you have to become a mother, then I question here the unequal recognition and access to a “legal”⁵ status through childbirth for Rohingya women. This access is anchored in gender, race and class norms, which frame its conditions and define the access criteria. In Malaysia, we are witnessing a phenomenon of assigning women to motherhood, which leaves these women little choice to decide for their own body. The birth rate then becomes a border area, which de-

⁴ Interview with the director of Asylum Access, June 2016.

⁵ I use the term “legal” even though refugee / asylum seeker status does not legally exist in Malaysia. But it is named so by the refugees / asylum seekers which provide some sort of guarantees of protection and security.

termines access to refugee status for the Rohingya population. By becoming pregnant, Rohingya refugee women hold the power to access UNHCR and grant access to their families through family reunification.

Becoming a political subject through pregnancy

The idea seems clear that from categories and indicators it is a question of identifying to which vulnerable group the individual belongs, determining their type of vulnerability and the degree of emergency. The theme of reproduction, more specifically fertility, is here associated with women, who are used to access asylum procedures, by their husbands but also by UNHCR. Following the increase in medical costs for foreigners announced by the Malaysian government in 2013, justifying this price increase by the high birth rate of migrants, UNHCR negotiated with the Malaysian government a 50% discount on hospital bills for UNHCR card holders. The UN Agency sometimes registers pregnant women before delivery so they can benefit from the 50% reduction. A priori “understandable”, this device of power nevertheless involves a series of questions. The vulnerability policy has built the “pregnant women” group as a priority because they are at risk of giving birth in dramatic sanitary and hygienic conditions, outside the hospital because of its cost. This phenomenon refers to a specific form of “biolegitimacy” described by Didier Fassin (2005) in the French case, where the introduction of a public health issue makes it possible to legitimize the presence of a public, which, otherwise, is stigmatized in society. Indeed, giving birth makes it possible to move from statelessness, from illegality to a status with documents and tolerance in the country. This strategy to access asylum rights, often after months or even years of trying and waiting, is widely used by women trying to approach the UNHCR office to no avail. Absent from UNHCR documentation, this practice is informal and arbitrary.

While pregnancy weakens the already very precarious living conditions of undocumented refugee women in Malaysia, childbirth allows these women to access status, services and recognition as subjects. The main process of subjectification of Rohingya refugee women is conditioned by being pregnant and becoming a mother. In the Malaysian case, birth for Rohingya women has a considerable impact on their recognition as a political subject. In this context, undocumented refugee women can go from “precarious subjects” not recognized by the system (Butler 2006), to subjects of rights thanks to their pregnancy in Malaysia. I will focus on one of the aspects of this racial division that is not well documented: legal status. Being recognized as an asylum seeker or refugee or not in Malaysia is the issue of childbirth for undocumented Rohingya refugee married women or for undocumented Rohingya refugee single men, women and girls.

In a context of restriction of asylum right, one of the possibilities of obtaining a refugee or asylum seeker card for these women is through marriage and then childbirth. If the father of the unborn child is already registered and recognizes the child, the refugee woman can apply under the family reunification process. If the husband-father is not documented, it is very common to hear “take another pregnan-

cy”⁶ from husbands approaching wives for status, after arranging a marriage or the traveling of the brides. Sometimes access through childbirth is excluded, due to the arbitrariness of the apprehension of asylum applications like Ahisha, who has tried everything to register herself and her family with a fifth pregnancy:

My husband called me over. He arranged everything for me. A few months ago, we went to the UN. UN⁷ said ‘if you give birth to a new baby you can get the card’. Then we tried to have this new baby. Right after, we went to the UN with the baby. The problem is the increase in the number of children. My husband does not give me money when I am sick. He scolds me all the time. He is more and more sleeping outside, leaving me alone in this terrible situation. After delivery, I went to UN office four times. I prepared birth certificate, marriage certificate. We sent the documents, we brought them but they never gave it to us [status]. If I have UN card, it is not difficult to survive. One day, I was waiting at the gate [outside UN], one Rohingya woman told me ‘you have a lot of children, go to the police. You will stay six months in detention camp and then you will get UN card’⁸.

Afraid to go to the police, she preferred the option of a fifth childbirth. Arrived in Malaysia in 2014 with her four children, she gave birth a year later, a month and a half before our interview. She explains that one of the reasons for her traveling to Malaysia was to provide access to registration to her husband and family through childbirth and subsequent family reunification. Families in dire need of protection and to get on with their lives run the risk of not being registered in time, that is, before delivery. In fact, families go into debt to pay hospital fees. Women give birth in hospital in order to obtain a birth certificate required by UNHCR. Thus, families grow, forced or even forced to “produce a child” (Gautier 2012). Ahisha explains very well the tensions and violence that this situation generates in the couple and in the family. Arlette Gautier recalls the fact of disposing of own body, choosing to give birth or not, to space pregnancies is a matter of women’s freedom. To this, these families are added financial problems (post-natal follow-up, diapers, baby milk, etc.). Faced with over-indebtedness, these women neglect post-natal follow-up⁹. The fact that the political recognition of Rohingya women depends on their “maternal” identity or their reproductive capacity reinforces gender and racist inequalities. The asylum as it is thus constructed and conceived becomes an instrument of structural and political sexism and racism. Indeed, to become a refugee in Malaysia, you have to become a mother, so to what extent do Rohingya women, like other Malaysian women, have the choice and right to decide for their own body?

Far from an emancipatory vision of the subject, the Foucauldian theory of the “fabric of the subject” highlights that the subject is subjugated and objectified by devices of power (Fassin 2005). For Giorgio Agamben, the Italian philosopher,

⁶ “Take another pregnancy” is a strong social injunction faced by married Rohingya refugee women in Malaysia given by husbands in order to access the UN card. Indeed, four focus groups with 25 Rohingya men (aged from 18 to 45, living in different part of Klang Valley) on sexual and reproductive health conducted in March 2020 confirmed that this practice is still commonly used.

⁷ For all the respondents, anyone working in UN compound are called “UN staff” and represent the Agency (including sellers, guards, translators and officers).

⁸ Interview with Ahisha on May 2016.

⁹ Focus groups conducted with Rohingya refugee women, March 2020.

concept of life that has been exposed to what he terms the structure of exception “that whose exclusion founds the city of men” constitutes contemporary biopower (Agamben 1998: 12). The term originates in Agamben’s observation that the Ancient Greeks had two different words for what in contemporary European languages is simply referred to as “life”: *bios* (the form or manner in which life is lived) and *zoè* (the biological fact of life). His argument is that the loss of this distinction obscures the fact that in a political context, the word ‘life’ refers more or less exclusively to the biological dimension or *zoè* and implies no guarantees about the quality of the life lived. “Bare life” refers then to a conception of life in which the sheer biological fact of life is given priority over the way a life is lived, by which Agamben means its possibilities and potentialities. This policy based on biopower defining “biological” categories or “vulnerable groups” to access to services and rights, internationally deployed within the humanitarian sector, is a perfect example of what Agamben means by bare life. It reduces the prospects of the life of a particular woman to their biology and takes no interest in or account of the actual circumstances of their life. These devices are particularly felt on the lives of women, seen as responsible for children. They are on the front line to endure child-birth assignments, the negative effects of an insufficient family budget, to manage sick children, etc. All these elements exacerbate the violence of a spouse or intimate partner facing “inability” to meet financial expenses, his personal needs, family needs and feels unable to protect the family.

Nooru is 22 years old and has been married for a month. He angrily recalls the strategies to access asylum that he is forced to conceive, get married, have a child and even go to prison:

I want her to get pregnant, to enter in the UN as family (he smiles without conviction, tense, looks up at the ceiling, then lowers his head, looks down to the ground, puts his knee against his chest). First, I tried everything with my parents, my brothers are all registered except me. They [UNHCR] did not want, later they will think. If she gets pregnant, I will send her to UN, with birth certificate and all documents, all we have. Everything, pictures, certificates, bills, I will send to UN (he gets angry, speaks loudly, tone up).

Researcher (I wait a bit to calm things down before to continue): Is it the UN responsibility?

Yes. How can I do? We are hopeless. I will not even be able to pay the taxi [to go to UN office]. It is my next plan. If I do not get the card before the pregnancy, I will send her to UN. She will not come back without it, I told her. I have another plan but I don’t want to tell you (he lowers and nods his head from left to right)¹⁰.

Of course, the UN has recognized gender equality in the 1946 Charter of Human Rights, or the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). It should be noted that the CEDAW hardly specifies reproductive rights (Gautier 2012: 66). In practice, the UNHCR remains silent on the autonomy of women in procreation (lack of advocacy, partnerships with catholic organizations refusing to ensure safe abortion or to provide post abortion care). Instead, UN Agency criticizes the husband’s duty of obedience by linking it to customary, religious, or traditional practices. Yet its registration proce-

¹⁰ Interview with Nooru, May 2016.

dures and access to asylum and services reinforce this power. Associating women with fertility in protection policies can be described as patriarchal, in that it naturalizes the instrumentalization of women and directly contributes to the production and maintaining of “one of the symbolic structures of male domination” (Gautier 2012). Arlette Gautier demonstrates that the possibility – here the possibility is given by UNHCR to refugee men – of imposing a pregnancy can be the expression of a “sexage¹¹” because it does refer to a social relationship marked by the appropriation of the body of women by men (Guillaumin 1992). Here I would like to recall the urgent need, as humanitarian organizations and researchers, to address the political and social conditions which maintain control over women's bodies such as lack of access to contraception, compulsory heterosexuality, multiple and unwanted pregnancies, lack of access to safe abortion, which constitute forms of institutionalized violence, and having great consequences on violence in the domestic sphere. In the following part, I will describe the dynamics between patriarchal policies, masculinities of refugee men and the use of violence against wives.

Building a masculine self within militarized context

Cynthia Cockburn develops the approach of continuum, tracing links between gender-based violence in everyday life, the structural violence of economic systems that maintain inequalities and the repressive policies of dictatorial regimes, to armed conflicts. According to her, this “continuum of violence” transcends the simple diplomatic dichotomy of war and peace (Cockburn 2004). Adding that this continuum would resist any division between the so-called public and private spheres. The ambition of this demonstration is to make visible how domestic violence can be militarized, in a context of forced migration, opening new horizons towards a broader understanding of domestic violence. In this vein, the war and peace zones are defined as two sites of violence, linked with porous borders.

Michel Wieviorka (2004: 286) defines processes of subjectivation, as “the possibilities of constituting oneself as a principle of sense, posing oneself as a free being and of producing its own trajectory”. According to Paola Rebughini (2016), violence could bring “a direct possibility of emancipation”, in the context of annihilation of subjects, as is the case in Myanmar against the Rohingya, but also in the lack of legal refugee status in Malaysia. The challenge may be to constitute oneself from “non-subject” to “subject” (Wieviorka 2004). Self-construction is closely linked to a complex set of socializing experiences, necessarily gendered and racialized. Thus, I will try to describe from empirical material how the challenge for the Rohingya men I met can be to constitute oneself from “non-man” to “man” through violence. I will analyze from real situations the complexity of the relationship between subjectivity and violence. More specifically, the aim will be to shed new

¹¹ For the researcher, Colette Guillaumin, the ideological production according to which individuals are positioned in social relations on biological traits (when the “idea of nature” would be precisely a production of the relation of domination) is at the basis of sexage and slavery. She names “sexage” to denote ownership of both women's work and women's bodies.

light on the connections between masculinity and violence, which are in constant dialogue at multiple levels. First of all, it seems crucial here to recall the importance to not reduce the understanding of gender-based violence to individual or collective behaviors of a specific group of men, thus taking the risk of throwing suspicion on all migrant men, as many research and reports on male, gender and gender-based violence still tend to believe. To reflect on these links, this article draws on Raewyn Connell's definition of violence as "a privileged space for the construction of masculinities" (Connell 2014: 83). She explains that violence can be "a means of asserting one's masculinity or of claiming it in struggles between groups". The ambition here is to problematize the tensions resulting from the entanglement of self-construction as a Rohingya refugee man and the system of subjugation in which they are caught up in Malaysia.

The Rohingya represent for the Malaysians an "other kind of Asian Muslim" (Azis 2014), because they do not match with the "racial and economic attributes of the predefined ideal of the Malaysian citizen". In the Malaysian case, otherness is based on race / ethnicity (Hoffstaedter 2011: 20). The figure of the foreigner is crystallized in the image of the Bangladeshi. The Rohingya are associated with the Bangladeshis, because of their close physical appearance. The Rohingya do not appreciate this confusion for two reasons, firstly because Bangladeshi people have a negative image in Malaysia and are often described as "criminal" and a threat to national sovereignty. The second reason is that Myanmar government bases precisely the exclusion of the Rohingya from Myanmar citizenship on this argument. The inferiority of Rohingya refugee men by Malaysian nationals maintains the institutional oppression and physical terror that surround the fabric of refugee masculinities. Arrests, detention and deportation of migrants are organized throughout the year, through public crackdowns and through regular activities by law enforcement officials. During media appearances, migrants are described as breaking the law, posing a threat to "national security". They are seen as the enemies of Malaysia. Undocumented migrants are then reminded that they are not welcome and that they will be severely punished if arrested. Heads of government and law enforcement respond to hyper masculine representations (Enloe 2015). Protecting a nation, waging terror, winning a war, gaining information, controlling individuals requires a certain number of qualities perceived as exclusively masculine: physical strength, control, domination, heroic risk-taking, being ready to fight and to sacrifice themselves. They have to prove the non-vulnerability, even the inviolability of the state and its borders. Malaysian government leaders equip their state with powerful means such as police and military repression inside the country and control of land and sea borders to protect people from external threats. These heads of state and the authorities display nothing more or less than a virilism targeting the migrants considered threatening.

In this context of dehumanization of the Rohingya taking place in all spheres of social life (restless control, lack of legal protection, inequalities of access to economic resources, sexual and non-sexual violence), two forms of masculinity of protests can be observed in Malaysia: hyper masculinity (idealization of violence, belief in hierarchy and misogyny) and a "community masculinity" (immersion in God and in the idea of a community). The two advocate for violence through the

call of male protection, while regulating it. The first mobilizes the military to legitimize the use of violence in the protection of people and the nation. The second invests the theme of the “sacred” to allow violence in intimate and intra familial relationships if it concerns the regulation of the strict sexual division of labor called “living in the hijab” by the Rohingya.

Hyper masculinity

The most valued form of masculinity among the Rohingya refugee population in Malaysia associates aggression and violence (by extension misogyny) with the masculine, and defines what constitutes “being a man”, a “real man”. When asked about their perception of themselves, the primary role of men would be to protect the people through the protection of women and children and claim that they are ready to sacrifice themselves to do so. Fifteen of the twenty-four interviewees say they stage versions of such hyper masculinity. Aziz and Aqram declare they are ready to go, fight and sacrifice themselves to protect their nation, the Rohingya women and children. Aziz was 34 years old at the time of the field study. He is married, has a child and has lived in exile since 1998:

They rape women, burn children, our homes, everything. We will fight back. Maybe I would go. This is our land and our country. We have to protect them. If they kill my family, loved ones and our nation, why to live?¹²

This is also the case for Aqram, 38, married, a child. He has lived in Malaysia for nine years. He legitimizes war by the male “call for protection” of “women-and-children”¹³:

Women, children, sisters must be fed, they must be protected. If my sister wants to go out, I have to go with her. She cannot speak to others. In Myanmar, many people fight to protect. In seeking to protect, we fight, we die. Violence is [for our] protection. It is very important to protect them. With violence, we have to protect the sister, the woman. I would die to protect. I would fight, a lot. The Rohingya thinks that way¹⁴.

Aziz and Aqram stage a masculinity including the ideas of sacrifice and virility. They describe their ability to use the violence, power and courage associated with force. They somehow embody the figure of the Protector. They position themselves as soldiers able to go into a battle to protect their people and their women.

This figure of the Protector can also seem less violent, and can even blur the distinctions between patriarchal masculinities, while reifying male supremacy. As Arafat puts it very clearly: “Allah said, ‘Men are created as guardians of women, men are created to protect women’. What our religious leaders have translated, as ‘men are superior to women’. But they do not understand the Koran”.

This protectionist argument must be contextualized and historicized in the policy of masculinity of the Myanmar nationalist army, presenting military men as “guardians of the nation” and “legitimate protectors”. According to Ann Tickner

¹² Informal discussion with Aziz, July 2016.

¹³ Expression developed by Cynthia Enloe.

¹⁴ Interview with Aqram, June 2016.

(2001: 49), the “protection myth” is built on military stereotypes and a discourse of state security based on “a brave and courageous male warrior protecting the vulnerable and beautiful female”. According to her, this myth based on these naturalized traits serves to legitimize armed conflicts. The researcher defines war as a “cultural construction” based on the myth of protection. Cynthia Enloe (2015: 108) points to the idea that it would reside in this myth perceived as necessary, the assertion that ~~in~~ there exists “an allegedly natural relationship between a protected person and his protector”. In Myanmar, this myth is based on ideas about masculinity and femininity since colonial Burma reinforced by the Myanmar nationalist army called the Tatmadaw, when they took power in 1962.

Gender in colonial Myanmar and anticolonial discourse

An anti-colonial discourse has emerged concerning the ideal wife defined as the “wife and mother of the nation” through the figure of the amyothami, “mother of the nation”, taken up by the Myanmar army thirty years later (Ikeya 2011: 79). An important place is given to the devotion of women towards their amyothami and their taing pyi (lineage / race and country). The ideal wife educates her children about national identity, traditions, morals, and religion (sasana) (Ikeya 2011). This figure of the amyothami woman, associated with the image of the military “guardian of the nation”, was used by the Tatmadaw to justify its coup in 1962 and the war for 54 years in the country (Jones 2014). According to Jenny Hedström, “The use of women as symbols of the nation is a recurring theme in the history of Burma [...] Both in the country and in exile, the dominant vision of women's participation is based on the notion of traditional domestic confinement, and more importantly, on returning to it once the conflict is over” (Hedström 2016: 69). The past sixty years have been marked in Myanmar by male governance aligned with military traits such as strength, discipline and bravery. Gender norms dictated what was possible and appropriate for women, with heavy emphasis on domesticity and obedience (Ria Westergaard Pedersen 2016).

This patriarchal vision consists in thinking that the head of the family must decide on the necessary measures for the security of the home and its property. Thus, he gives orders and subordinate family members must follow, especially women. Fear plays a specific role in this configuration of power. Fear is said to be used by men to gain the “respect” they are supposed to claim in return. In reality, it reveals a norm governing relations between intimate partners more broadly, sometimes becoming disturbingly synonymous with the word “respect”. As previously said, the ideal female type valued among Rohingya refugee women place women in domesticity and obedience. By distancing themselves from the dominant gender ideology, Rohingya refugee women in Myanmar reconfigure these themes in piety, even in virtue (Voisin 2018). Thus, fear is positive in the thinking system of most of our respondents (both men and women), who use these two terms interchangeably. During the interviews, I systematically ask the question of fear within the couple by the question “Is your wife afraid of you?”

Nooru, 22, who had been married for a month at the time of the interview, describes his “entry” into the violence against the wife:

Yes (affirmative tone, raise his shoulders, bomb his chest). She is afraid, yes. Very afraid. She is afraid I beat her. I do not beat her because the police would come. Sometimes, I beat her, a little, not too long. Before that, she was not afraid. I beat her to give her the fear, not to hurt her. If she is afraid, it is good for me. If we live in peace, it is better for us. When I bring some money and it is not enough, she grumbles, shouts, she puts pressure on me, so I beat her after that she keeps silent. We get married a month ago. It is worst and worst [...] Even rich, my wife must be afraid of me. For me, fear is respect. She must obey because I am the husband. She must obey. I am the husband. She must¹⁵.

Nooru expresses what he saw as an obligation, a husband must be violent. Violence and fear are used to achieve these ideal characteristics of masculinity described above. He legitimizes violence against “his” wife, both because she is “his”, but also because she is Rohingya. In this extract, Nooru also hints specific conditions explaining his use of violence, the taking of action, the intensification of tensions. What situation requires a powerful and effective response, with immediate effect, when violence seems to be the adapted response?

Let us turn now to the second so-called masculine role: “provider”. These refugee men try to fit the myth which is impossible to provide for all their family members despite reality and high personal costs. Researchers have shown that gendered norms of behavior and social demands tend to remain relatively firm, or even tense up during and after conflict, when opportunities to live, live up to and meet these expectations are limited (El-Bushra and Ibrahim 2005). Jane Freedman, taking the example of sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, shows that the inability to live up to perceived expectations of masculinity would be compensated by an exaggeration of other forms of behavior perceived as masculine, such as the aggression or violence (Freedman 2012: 11). In the author's development, sexual violence plays a crucial role in building a certain form of masculinity in the face of failure or the mere suspicion of failure of being able to fulfill a role perceived as masculine. She understands the gap between “ideal masculinity” and “lived masculinity” (Freedman 2012), a gap which in turn can fuel violence against women as a means of strengthening male identities. When we take a closer look at the conditions of domestic violence, all respondents declaring to use it, describe very specific situations. The conditions of the emergence of violence always seem to be linked to the impossibility of realizing these social demands. Nooru's story clarifies this point. He feels that he has been defeated and that he has not succeeded in fulfilling his role, that is to say providing for himself and his family, despite his efforts.

This is also the case for Amir, 33. He lives the exile in Malaysia as a food survival. He and his family can go days without food. He describes his difficulties in working and feeding as an unprecedented experience of tensions in the couple, while in Myanmar he has always been able to count on other members of his family:

¹⁵ Interview with Nooru, May 2016.

Yesterday, it was very difficult for my family. I could not go and buy milk for the baby (he lowers head, tears rise). I cannot buy milk. I cannot feed them. It became the violence [at home]. I cannot work. I do not have money. My wife is really upset against me. She told me ‘it is better to die in Myanmar than here. Here is too hard. In Rakhine, we have family. Here, nothing. We have nothing. Better to die there. There is no one to help us here’ I was sad to hear that. I get angry. Because she blames me, she talks too much, because I cannot buy milk for the child. I wanted to borrow RM100 to a friend, but he could not give me because he does not have. So it happened (he doesn’t finish his sentence)¹⁶.

Quite rare research, notably in Canada, attempts to demonstrate the connections between gender-based violence and depression in men, by examining the “gender role conflict rates” among men who are depressed or in psychological distress (Tremblay, Morin, Desbiens, and Bouchard 2007). In this study, it is shown that men adhering to the traditional norms of hegemonic masculinity in Canada (having a recognized job for which the man receives a good remuneration, being in a couple and having children, ensuring the role of provider and protector for his family) are more at risk of depression and psychological distress. Because these men do not question the requirements of hegemonic masculinity and try to comply with it as best they can. On the contrary, those who adhere less to these standards find themselves less cantilevered with a preconceived ideal type. These results support Jane Freedman’s point. Some men, in face of failure to comply with roles perceived as traditional, exaggerate other so-called masculine traits such as violence, in order to compensate for the gap between “ideal masculinity” and “lived masculinity”. In the context studied here, hyper masculinity seems to be configured in these tensions. The interviews used show to what extent and in what type of situation the respondents consider the use of violence. It is a real strategy to recover masculinity quickly and powerfully. A second visible strategy of self-construction negotiates masculinity in a different way, taking refuge in the idea of a “Muslim people” serving the rule of “living in the hijab”. Nevertheless, a co-presence of hyper masculinity and the “community masculinity” is observed among the respondents. These two models are intertwined and are used interchangeably depending on the situation.

Community masculinity

Religious texts, prayer and the “people / community” are present for twenty respondents. However, these characteristics become more of an opportunity to exercise their masculinity than to practice religion. In the accounts of the respondents, there is a real feeling or desire to belong to a “community” based on social relations between individuals of Muslim faith. The common characteristic would be to be part of a minority persecuted because of their religion, but especially the will to be associated with the dominant group, Malays and Muslim. When discussing their identity, the importance of Islam is an aspect widely shared by the respondents. On the one hand, religion is the main difference between the Rohingya and the Myanmar. On the other hand, Islam acts as an engine of integration for the Rohingya in

¹⁶ Interview with Amir, June 2016.

Malaysia. The challenge is to get closer to the characteristics of the Malaysian hegemonic model represented by Malaysian Islamic elite, holder of the country's political and economic power. Respondents are unanimous about the Mullahs' injunction to marry to become men and good Muslims. What Aqram expresses and experiences as a masculinity of obligation: "It is the role of men, to be a good Muslim. This is our culture; this is how it is to be Rohingya. My role is to have a wife". Hussein, 24, also describes marriage as an obligation. Despite his difficult living conditions, he married against his will. It was linked to an old promise of marriage between families. Hussein got married to "follow" the model of the "good Muslim":

We must get married. 'Solock' means 'duty to marry'. 'Solock' is what the Prophet did. So we have to do it. The Mullah always says 'we must get married, Muslims must get married'. At the mosque, in the suras, we must follow. I did not know she was coming. No one in the village called me. She comes from a poor family and fled the violence. Once in Thailand, she called me 'I'm in Thailand'. The traffickers demanded a ransom. I paid 6,000 RM [€ 1,246]. I am not happy I spent so much money on getting married. Because she said she was already in Thailand, I had no choice. I didn't want to get married, but when she came to Thailand, I had to get married.

Refugee men insist on the symbol of marriage as an authentic and virtuous way of following Islam. This marriage not only brings them closer to the Prophet, but also defines authentic men as "good Muslims". Despite the context of survival from the conflict and living conditions in Malaysia, Hussein, Aqram and the others insist on a separate moral note where marriage is a key element of belonging to the "community". According to them, marriage is what binds their "community" together and protects them from other Myanmar, Indian and Bangladeshi men. The respondents are unanimous, all violence is prohibited: "haram". This constructed masculinity would be an alternative to violence. However, in some cases, when it comes to maintaining the strict sexual division of labor, violence is positive, if not necessary. The "community masculinity" provides powerful, "sacred" arguments for the legitimization of patriarchy in fine domestic violence. In order for the Rohingya male group as "protector" to exercise its superiority, the women of their group are constructed as "[to be] protected" group. The construction of protection passes above all through the sexual division of labor within couples and families, taking the form of "culturalist" rhetoric. Indeed, because they belong to the Rohingya people, the women must respect gender assignments. The interviewees describe marriage through the strong division between the spheres of life (public / private) and strict gender assignments in opposition. Hussein, Nooru, Amir and others locate the women in what they call "living in the hijab". This expression refers to the fact of dressing in a certain way (full veil, gloves and socks), the hand gesture used by the male interviewees towards the ground, placing women in the domestic sphere, that is to stay at home and do household work, especially taking care of the husband and the children. Let us take a closer look with Hussein's story:

In Rakhine, women don't work. My mother does not work, she stays at home. In Malaysia, for the Rohingya men married to Indonesian women, and if the husband does not work, Indonesian spouse work, Malay women also because they need, for food. With Rohingya women, no. My wife takes care of the child. It is what did our Prophet, they stay in the hijab. It means that no one can see them. Our wives must live that way. I prefer those who live in the hijab.

The role of women is to take care of the house, of the husband. It is what Mullahs and mosque say. It is to protect from bad things like talking to other people, it is a sin¹⁷.

Hussein legitimizes violence against “his” wife, because she is “his” and because she is Rohingya. The idea of culture as it is used here as a process of differentiation between groups, which has the effect of devaluing female members; it legitimizes the violence against them. In other words, the violence of Rohingya men against women is based on “culturalist” rhetoric. Without criticizing the Malays, Hussein claims strong beliefs, governing the body and mobility of women. When I ask him if such severity in the distinction of roles between men and women is compulsory, he answers without hesitation as if the “culture” of the Rohingya people depended on it, as if the woman was the mother and guarantor of the Rohingya people and the man his “guardian”:

If she doesn't respect her role, if she doesn't take care of me, I will divorce her. I work hard to feed her and everything, but if she does not respect me, if she does not wash my clothes, does not take care of me, I will not be satisfied. I do not want her to work outside. I do not like that. I am jealous. If my wife speaks to other people, I will be upset. It comes from our old culture, it is what our Prophet did and so became. We must protect the women from the men. Because the women are everything. The role of men is to keep the women in the hijab, at home. Otherwise, she will get punished and will not go to paradise¹⁸.

Other respondents reiterate Hussein's criticism of Malaysian, Myanmar, and Bangladeshi men who fail to respect the distinctive roles of men and women. They distance themselves from other men by insisting on marriage and the prohibition of women in the public sphere as a symbol of their authentic Rohingya masculinity. This strict sexual division between the so-called private and public spheres not only brings them closer to God, but also defines authentic masculinity according to them. The community masculinity provides arguments to legitimize the use of domestic violence. Mobilizing the religious theme, a strong figure of authority, violence is allowed and regulated. Violence would be legitimate, if on the one hand it is carried out in the service of patriarchy (maintaining the strict division of labor and subordination of women), if on the other hand it does not kill, that is to say, in regulating the intensity by allocated means (using an old bamboo) and regulating the frequency (occasionally). For example, Hussein clearly illustrates the circumstances allowing domestic violence: “If the husband has reasons, he can beat sometimes, not all the time, and not too hard. The reasons are water, food, prayer and good character. There, and only for that, in [this interpretation of] Islam, the man has the right to beat his wife, with the help of an old bamboo, so that at the first blow he will break”. We know very well that in reality, the violence does not end there, and even if it does, it would cause no less injury and numerous effects on the victims.

¹⁷ Interview with Hussein, May 2016.

¹⁸ Interview with Hussein, May 2016.

Conclusion

When the structural violence of the Malaysian state (absence of protective status, arrest, racial discrimination, etc.), and ongoing genocide in Myanmar, leaves no other choice but to protest and emancipate oneself through violence, the masculinities of protest created by men Rohingya refugees take two forms: one that celebrates violence in the name of protection of the people, and one that tries to regulate it or even avoid it, while legitimizing it, in particular against Rohingya women. Behind the rhetoric of male protection of women and children is hiding nationalist and patriarchal logic that legitimizes the use of violence, making it even virtuous. The protectionist argument is powerful and finds its legitimacy in the military as well as in culturalist and religious rhetoric. These stories illustrate the idea that masculinities are constantly in reconfiguration and must position themselves in relation to violence. Deconstructing the militarization of ideas, behaviors and societies and adopting a deconstructivist approach to gender seem to constitute a crucial issue for research on this theme, but also for humanitarian organizations willing to take actions against gendered violence, at least to not reinforce or create further gender inequalities and discriminations.

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