

PERSPECTIVE

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Trafficking, Cybergangs, and Paedophiles: Genuine Threats or a Fuzzy Narrative Surrounding the Displaced Rohingya?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- There have been recent claims that Rohingya women and children are at risk of being trafficked for labour and sexual exploitation during their flight and from refugee camps in Bangladesh.
- This has had an impact on public opinion and international policy. The latest U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons report downgraded Myanmar to Tier 3 for failing to protect Rohingya refugees from being trafficked for sexual exploitation. Bangladesh was kept in the Tier 2 Watch, partly for the trafficking of Rohingya women from the refugee camps for sexual purposes.
- However, on examining 34 media reports and documents, besides nine stories presented by reporters, no data for the scope of trafficking and its operations were provided.
- Moreover, the narrative is simplistic in its classification of actors as “savages”, “victims” and “saviours” and its framing of the issue as one of good against evil.
- Such narratives magnify the emotional content of their subject, and should not be used in place of reliable data, for designing interventions, or for making policy.

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INTRODUCTION

The forced migration of the Rohingya (referred to as Bengali in Myanmar) has received much attention since communal violence erupted in Myanmar in 2012. Most of the coverage has focused on the reasons for the flight and the conditions needed for repatriation, particularly since the latest outflow in August 2017. In addition, the international media began linking the plight of the Rohingya to human trafficking when mass graves with the remains of Rohingya were discovered in Thailand in 2015. Recently, a new narrative has emerged describing how criminal gangs and traffickers are taking advantage of the chaos and poverty during flight and in refugee camps in Bangladesh to traffic Rohingya women and children for sexual and labour exploitation.

In this article, we identify the attributes of this latest narrative, its origins, and its implications for public and international policy. In conducting our analysis, we ask the following questions. What is the nature of the threat that trafficking poses to displaced Rohingya? How many cases of trafficking have occurred and what are the circumstances surrounding these cases? Should we be concerned about the scale of this phenomenon?

These questions are important given the interventions that are being designed by governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), particularly in light of the Trafficking in Persons report released by the U.S. State Department at the end of June. In it, Myanmar was downgraded to the department's lowest ranking of Tier 3 – which may result in economic sanctions from the U.S. government – for failing to protect displaced Rohingya who are subjected to “exploitation – or transported to other countries for the purpose of sex trafficking...”¹ Bangladesh remains in the Tier 2 Watch, partly because “Rohingya women and girls are reportedly recruited from refugee camps for domestic work in private homes, guest houses, or hotels and are instead subjected to sex trafficking.”²

Concerned about the impact of this on public opinion and policy, we provide below a critical analysis of the coverage of the trafficking of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh in order to bring some clarity to what is at best an emotionally charged topic.

THE SEX TRAFFICKING NARRATIVE AND ITS ORIGINS

The bare bones of the narrative are that Rohingya women and children are at risk of being trafficked by criminal gangs for sexual and labour exploitation during the process of fleeing from Myanmar and while residing in refugee camps in Bangladesh.

We traced the emergence of this narrative in international media through an analysis of 27 media reports, three NGO reports, two UN press releases and two Country Sections of the 2018 U.S. Trafficking in Persons Report, all published between September 2017 and July 2018. This narrative seems to have derived from multiple sources, with the UN, the International Organization for Migration Bangladesh and the BBC appearing as key players in its construction.

The first instance of a complete narrative appeared in an article titled “Sexual predators, human traffickers target Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh”, published on 17 October 2017. In

it, the United Nations coordinator in Bangladesh set the tone, stating that “rape, human trafficking, and survival sex have been reported among the existing perils for women and girls during flight.”³ This fear was then echoed by representatives from NGOs including Save the Children in Bangladesh and CARE,⁴ and from UNICEF in the following weeks.⁵ The second iteration of the narrative was provided in a press release by the IOM on 14 November 2017, emphasizing that “desperate men, women and children are being recruited with false offers of paid work in various industries including fishing, small commerce, begging and, in the case of girls, domestic work.” Additionally, it reported that many Rohingya are confined and exploited, and in some cases, forced into marriage and prostitution.⁶

This message then spread rapidly through media outlets including Asia One,⁷ provoking further anxiety about the plight of the displaced Rohingya by mid-November 2017. In the months that followed, IOM Bangladesh reiterated that “a lot of girls are coming who have been separated from families. Many people say to them that they will help them but then these girls disappear”.⁸

The third significant addition to the narrative – the involvement of cybergangs and paedophiles – was published by the BBC on 20 March 2018. The journalist described the plight of two trafficked 14-year-old girls: Anwara who was abducted and raped, and Masuda who was raped by the Burmese military, forced to leave Myanmar, separated from her family, lured with a false job offer by a Rohingya trafficker who exploited her sexually, and eventually saved by a local charity. The reporter suggested that Rohingya women and children are trafficked to Chittagong and Dhaka in Bangladesh, Kathmandu in Nepal and Kolkata in India where cybergangs offer the women’s sexual services to local and foreign men, including paedophiles.⁹ The content of this report was then widely disseminated by aid and human rights organizations¹⁰ and media outlets stressing the “even darker side to the already dire humanitarian crisis unfolding in Bangladesh”,¹¹ in particular the fact that crime syndicates “are supplying underage girls to foreigners for sex”.¹² In a separate investigation, two PBS journalists reinforced this notion when they reported that “foreigners, white men, Americans, Europeans” are acting as sexual predators.¹³

This culminated in the downgrading of Myanmar to Tier 3 by the U.S. State Department in its annual Trafficking in Persons report, the lowest possible rank with possible ramifications in the form of economic sanctions. The reason given was that Myanmar is failing to protect Rohingya refugees who are subjected to labour and sexual exploitation.¹⁴ Bangladesh remains in the Tier 2 Watch, partly for the trafficking of Rohingya women from the refugee camps for sexual purposes.

DECONSTRUCTING THE ROHINGYA SEX TRAFFICKING NARRATIVE

The Rohingya sex trafficking narrative alerts us to real risks faced by a vulnerable group. However, the rapid emergence, dissemination and incorporation into global policy of the trafficking narrative raise troubling questions. Exactly how many cases of trafficking have occurred and what are the details surrounding these cases?

From the material examined, the threat of sex trafficking appears amorphous and obscure. We found nine stories that briefly depict different trajectories and scenarios leading to abduction,

forced marriage, sexual abuse and forced or voluntary prostitution, but there are no figures to indicate the scale of trafficking, the number of women who work as forced or voluntary sex workers in and outside the camps and no evidence of the structure and modus operandi of criminal networks. When IOM suggested that trafficking was rife in Cox's Bazar, they provided no data to sustain their claims about trafficking rings and sexual assault.¹⁵ Instead, aid experts and reporters used adverbs as in “[t]he investigation found that young Rohingya girls living in refugee camps in Bangladesh are being targeted *en-masse* by sex traffickers who try to force them into lives of prostitution”,¹⁶ or the conditional tense as in “children and youths *could* fall prey to traffickers and people looking to exploit and manipulate them” (emphasis added in both quotations).¹⁷

Moreover, we are provided with generalizations based on personalized and emotionally charged stories of trafficked victims such as that of Masuda in the BBC report. Masuda's story is a tragedy, but the empirical biases and narrative tropes leave the reader unable to assess the severity and magnitude of the trafficking threat. Are traffickers, sex clients and paedophiles really connected? Are tens, hundreds or thousands of Rohingya women and children being trafficked? In other words, are we dealing with anecdotal cases or systemic issues?

Moreover, the Rohingya sex trafficking narrative stages three key players – the “savage,” the “victim” and the “saviour”¹⁸ – who fight for power, life and human rights, in a theatre of chaos following a humanitarian crisis. According to relief experts and reporters, this setting produces trauma and desperation, and in turn exploitation by unscrupulous traffickers.¹⁹

Three main groups have been identified as the savage: the Burmese military, “accused of using rape and sexual abuse as weapons in its violent campaign against the Rohingya Muslim minority”;²⁰ opportunistic traffickers who “know exactly who to target. From the most desperate, they hunt the most vulnerable”;²¹ and local and foreign sex predators who exploit desperate women and children²² and are organized in “networks, online and offline [that] are dedicated to specifically targeting refugee minors for prostitution”.²³

Research calls into question the existence of well-structured criminal groups in charge of complex trafficking operations. Instead, an array of recruiters, brokers, carriers, moneylenders, document forgers and employers provide different services to migrants. Some offer free services for altruistic reasons, some charge reasonable amounts for their services, and others abuse their power to gain substantial profit and control.²⁴

The victim is the Rohingya women and children living in the refugee camps. According to the reports, having faced sexual and physical violence, dispossession and forced dislocation after the destruction of their homes, they become traumatized, desperate and vulnerable, and are therefore easy prey for traffickers. While some young women are lured and abused, others trade sex as a means of survival, particularly the latest arrivals “who are more desperate and have nothing.”²⁵ No distinction is made between trafficking for sexual exploitation which, by definition, involves deception, transportation and exploitation, and sex work, which is a legitimate form of labour in which women (and men) choose to engage under more or less constraining circumstances.²⁶ Here, forced trafficking and voluntary sex work are conflated.

Moreover, this narrative reduces Rohingya women and children to naïve, helpless, traumatised and passive pawns in need of rescue and assistance. In the sex trafficking narrative, the voices

of the women who were trafficked are replaced by that of the reporter. They appear as archetypes of the powerless victim, deprived of agency. However, the reality of sex providers, either presented as sexual slaves or sex workers, is often a mix of coercion and consent, and of ambiguous pathways leading simultaneously to exploitation and agency.²⁷

The saviour is the representative of organizations such as the IOM and the UNHCR, and NGOs like CARE and Save the Children. These organizations provide assistance to refugees, develop preventive and protective initiatives to limit trafficking and create “an opportunity for women to rebuild their lives...”.²⁸ Other saviours include the Rapid Action Battalion – a top police unit in Bangladesh – that cracks down on traffickers and saves victims,²⁹ the journalists who risk their lives to conduct an undercover investigation, an artist who listens to “the displaced Rohingya’s stories of trauma and resilience”,³⁰ and the Prime Minister of Denmark who visits the Rohingya camps to witness their situation first-hand.³¹ These saviours play different roles in the Rohingya sex trafficking narrative but all share a human rights agenda and face numerous challenges in eliminating trafficking.

This perspective positions globally privileged individuals and institutions as “‘defending’ and ‘civilizing’ ‘lower,’ ‘unfortunate,’ and ‘inferior’ peoples.”³² In reality, these actors are part of a structure of wider international political organizations that enforce policies, distribute funds for programmes and apply certain human rights and economic frameworks partly based on an economy of emotions distilled by the media. Their intentions are laudable but the narrative places them in a position of power and expertise because of their access to resources and political influence. Their knowledge about the issue of trafficking is privileged over that of the Rohingya whose voices are withheld.

CONCLUSION

At an everyday level, we are surrounded by a myriad of narratives that help us make sense of reality. Narratives are storytelling devices that simplify the complex and contradictory forces of our world and, in this case, magnify the emotional content of their subject. They are selective in their representations, and their power is in the way they frame reality. They may be spun from anecdotes but it is not their duty to provide detailed facts, substantiated data and structural analyses. Thus, narratives may be useful for selling newspapers, and raising awareness and funds, but they are unreliable for expanding and deepening our knowledge of a subject or for designing intervention programmes and policies.

This is why we have undertaken a brief analysis of the narrative that has been constructed around the trafficking of Rohingya women and children during flight and from camps in Bangladesh. The trafficking of Rohingya for labour and sexual exploitation has become an issue of serious concern for civil society and the U.S. State Department. However, it appears that narratives rather than data have shaped programme design and international policy.

This has real implications for the people who have been (or who may be) trafficked), and for both Myanmar and Bangladesh. Thus, we argue that the interests of displaced Rohingya are best served by the collection and analysis of hard evidence and in-depth analysis rather than hearsay and anecdotes.

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- ³¹ The Daily Star. *Rohingya Children at Risk*, 21 October 2017.
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