

The Lasting Results of Terror: How Sexual Violence Impacts Families 53 Years After the Bangladesh Genocide

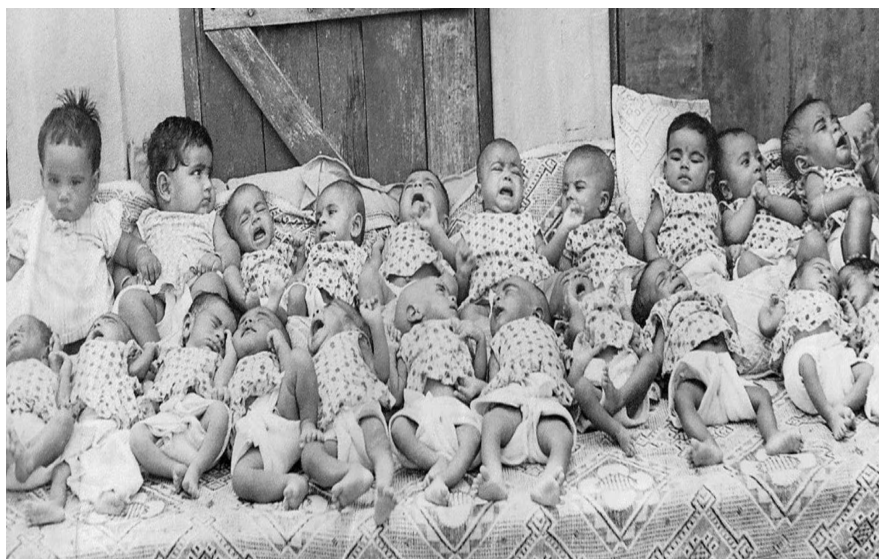
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November 14th, 2024



©: Women activists hold placards, one of which reads, "Take up arms, mother and sisters, and liberate Bangladesh." via Muktijuddha Smriti Trust At: <https://www.thedailystar.net/1971-the-battles-women-fought/news/history-and-herstory-1674088>



Some of the war babies who were left with the Missionaries of Charity-run Shishu Bhavan in Dhaka in late July of 1972. From the book 'Ekatturer Juddhoshishu: Obidito Itihash' © Mustafa Chowdhury/DhakaTribune



A Birangona woman photographed during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. Source: © Naib Uddin Ahmed/ABP

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ABSTRACT

The 1971 Bangladesh Genocide, which remains unrecognised internationally, stands as a deeply tragic event, marked by the widespread use of rape as a strategic weapon of war, with an estimated 200,000 to 400,000 women enduring systematic sexual violence perpetrated by the Pakistani military and its allies (Rafiq, 2020). The scale and nature of these assaults—targeted, deliberate, and militarised—constitute what scholars and international law refer to as genocidal rape. Sexual violence was used as a tool aimed at changing the core of Bengali identity by instilling fear, eroding morale, and disintegrating the population demographics. The violence was beyond religious barriers, it concentrated on changing the national and ethnic identity of the Bengali people (Jahan, 2012). The post-independence nation acknowledged rape victims as *Birangonas* (war heroines), even though many were abandoned by their families and lived in silence due to societal stigma (Mookherjee, 2021). Decades later, survivors still face social stigmas, emphasising the growing need for recognition, reparations, and trauma-informed interventions by the present Bangladeshi government. This report will address the historical context, and long-term consequences of the wartime crimes that have impacted Bangladesh's family dynamics, social norms, and gender relations.¹ Furthermore, it will examine the international legal framework, particularly human rights laws, and how it has evolved to recognise rape as a war crime, including remedies and support systems for sexual violence survivors in Bangladesh (EFSAS, 2021).

Key Keywords: Sexual Violence, Bangladesh Genocide, Survivors, War Babies, International Law, Human Rights, Bengali Identity

¹ The author acknowledges that sex and gender are not binary. However, due to the lack of literature discussing sex in the context of systemic violence in broader terms for the Bangladesh Genocide, the author will continue to use "gender" to describe the violence against women.

1. INTRODUCTION

“When rape is employed instead of a bullet, the weapon continues to wield its power beyond the primary victim, while the battlefield may be the body, but the target is civil society.”- 2008, Clifford

The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 was a revolution and armed conflict sparked by the independence movement from the Awami League in former East Pakistan, finally resulting in the independence of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh. However, the birth of the new country is overshadowed by a gruesome history and story of how this independence came about, with many families still in pain and trauma of what the independence cost them.

The duration of the Liberation War, lasting eight months, resulted in the systematic rape of about 2,50,000 women. Today, they are referred to as “*Birangonas*”, or war heroines. The lack of awareness or recognition from the international community, paired with, for a majority, the unsuccessful story of convicting the perpetrators, continues to leave a big impact on the survivors, their families, and the entire nation.

1.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE 1971 GENOCIDE

After decades of colonial rule, the British Empire ceased its rule over India in 1947. This event led to a geopolitical restructuring of the region, of which East Bengal was renamed East Pakistan and became a province of West Pakistan (today known as Pakistan). From the beginning of this new era, East Pakistanis were faced with severe discrimination from West Pakistan. An accumulation of factors, including the non-acceptance of Bengali as an official language, the domination of bureaucracy by non-Bengalis, and the appropriation of provincial functions and revenue by the central government led to an increase in resentment from East Pakistan towards West Pakistan. Combined with the continuous discrimination, economic disparity, and political deprivation, the Awami League, a political party in East Pakistan, started calling for a more autonomous province. Under its leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Awami League won 167 out of 169 seats allocated to East Pakistan in the national assembly. The Awami League became a majority, leading to a sentiment of perceived threat in West Pakistan.

Shortly after these events, Operation Searchlight took place. On March 25th, 1971 the West Pakistani army launched the start of what would result in the deaths of countless Bengalis. The goal of the attack was to crush the surging nationalist sentiment. To achieve this goal, the main targets were intellectuals, people of government, police, and military. Thousands and thousands of innocent lives were lost along the way. Many believe it was General Tikka Khan, the Pakistan’s military commander, who executed a direct policy to install a campaign of mass rape, intending to impregnate as many women as possible with “blood from the West”. A quote from a Pakistani soldier also stated, “We are going, but we are leaving our seed behind” (Malik; Sharlach, 2000). Consequently, at least 25,000 Bengali women and young girls have been reported to have been impregnated as a result of the rapes.

2. SYSTEMATIC RAPE DURING THE 1971 LIBERATION WAR

Testimonials published by The Guardian described how a fourteen-year-old girl was taken, along with her younger sister, to military barracks. There, together with 20 to 30 other women, lying together in one room, they were raped for months. Her testimony is not an exception, as experts have found there to be military-style rape camps across the entirety of today's Bangladesh. The women were not just raped. They were tortured, deprived of food, and had to dig graves for their fellow captives. Pornographic movies were played to the soldiers to “work them up”. In other instances, young girls and women would be strapped to banana leaves and repeatedly get gang-raped. Official estimates claim that some 2,00,000 to 4,00,000 were raped in times of Pakistani terror. However, as stigmatisation within Bangladesh remains high, experts believe the number lies higher.

The use of sexual violence during the Liberation War, just like its implementation in other global conflicts, serves as a strategic use to dominate women, wielding power over them, humiliating them, and through the abuse of women, affecting and destroying an entire society. The enabling environment of its use is the lasting result of cultural attitudes centred on gender stereotypes and deep-rooted misogyny and patriarchy. Within these cultures, a woman is no longer accepted into the family after she has been raped, and she will be ostracised from society. This rejection by both their community and the outside world left many women with no place to go, resulting in a significant number of victims committing suicide (Lamb, 2020).

3. WEAPONISING RELIGION AND GENDERED ASSAULT ON BENGALI IDENTITY

Bengali women were deliberately targeted by Pakistani soldiers and their allies (*razakars*) to “convert” East Pakistan into an area that reflected “true” Islamic principles. This hostility towards Bengali identity resulted from the perception that Bengali society was too feminine and shaped by Hinduism, which stood in stark contrast to the Pakistani military's hyper-masculine values (Hobbs & Brownmiller, 1978, p. 45). This strategy, which employs rape as a means of infiltration, seemed to reflect an effort to reshape the identity of Bengali society. Although this strategy is not new—rape has always been used as a weapon of control and conflict, according to Brownmiller (2000)—the religious justification in Bangladesh gives the violence an especially alarming element.

Religious leaders in Pakistan issued *fatwas* that called the women of Bengal freedom fighters (*muktijhoddhas*) for independence ‘war booty’ (*gonimoter maal*) and described them as Hindus. This narrative, which implied that “true” Muslims would not revolt against their own, justified acts of sexual violence as a way to raise a generation of Pakistani allegiance. The population of pre-conflict predominantly consisted of Bengali Muslims, which has led to a significant number of Muslim women—approximately eighty percent—being among the victims. However, it is important to acknowledge that individuals from Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian communities also endured these tragic events. Noteworthy figures, such as General

Niazi, unfortunately, endorsed this violence, encouraging soldiers to pursue their objectives aimed at “altering the demographic makeup of the Bengalis.” This further fostered an environment of impunity (Nahar, 2022; Sandhu, 2014).

The survivors and their families continue to feel the effects of the deep scars left by the use of sexual violence as a strategic tool during the 1971 war. These atrocities not only serve as a reminder of the war's profound impact on the nation's identity, but they have left a lasting imprint that is woven into the collective memory of Bangladesh.

4. CULTURAL SUPPRESSION AND THE SEEDS OF RESISTANCE IN EAST BENGAL

It is critical to take into account the sociopolitical factors that led to these atrocities to comprehend the effects of sexual violence during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. “Let me make it very clear to you that the State language of Pakistan is going to be Urdu and no other language”, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan, speaks in Dhaka, 1948, one year after Pakistan was established (D’Costa 2002, p. 89). This declaration warned millions of Bengali speakers that their demand to recognise Bengali as part of the newly formed government would be dismissed. By denying their linguistic identity, the oppressors reframed their struggle as an act of rebellion (Rashid, 2018).

An early example of this suppression was the imposition of Urdu over Bengali, hinting at the oppressive measures that would intensify over time. Spivak (2014) argues that the oppression of the language plays an important role in the exertion and control of the State as it divides the public and private. During the 1960s, the constant divide and sanctions of the Bengali identity, which was shared by many communities regardless of their religion, were being attacked by the Pakistani regime. This brewed resistance to the Language Movement in the 1960s, which eventually played an important role in the growing resistance.

The Language Movement not only encouraged a national movement but also became more gender-inclusive. Many of the cultural activists who opposed the central government’s policies were women, such as Ashalata Sen, Amena Begum, Motia Chowdhury, Sajeda Chowdhury, Begum Sufia Kamal, Sanjeeda Khatun, and Nilima Ibrahim (D’Costa, 2012). At the same time, the Pakistani regime sought to advance a conservative interpretation of Islam to capitalise on a common Islamic background, ignoring the recognition of East Pakistan’s (present-day Bangladesh) religious and cultural diversity. This was evident in their further efforts to disparage the traditional attire and cultural expressions of Bengali women, such as music and dance, labelling them as non-Islamic (Rashid, 2018).

These policies especially targeted women. Bengali women were prohibited from wearing *sari* and *teep*, which were seen as symbols of Hindu influence and their use was viewed as a threat to the Islamic “purity” of the Bengali identity. The regime aimed to lessen the unique markers of the Bengali people by erasing the Bengali language and cultural heritage. Despite these efforts, however, Bengali Muslims continued to be viewed as a distinct identity, separate from other Muslim communities in Pakistan.

In response, the nationalist movement in East Pakistan responded by emphasising a secular Bengali identity that united Bengali Muslims, Hindus, and other minorities as they shared linguistic and cultural history. By emphasising ideals like motherhood and land, this secular nationalism created a gendered but secular identity that challenged the Pakistani regime's ideological control (D'Costa, 2012). This growing resistance, which combined political and cultural demands, led to the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation. Sparked by years of linguistic marginalisation, cultural suppression, and a widening political and economic divide, the war became a fight to protect and reclaim Bangladesh's national and cultural sovereignty.

5. HONOUR, STIGMA, AND THE COMPLEXITY OF BIRANGONAS

"We lost everything, our reputation, children, husbands, and homes. We did not want them to get away with it. There was hatred in our hearts, we were determined to kill the Khans and save the country. We fought with the Himayat Bahini. But nobody remembers us. Where is our name in history? Which list? Nobody wants to thank us. Instead, we got humiliation, insults, hatred, and ostracism."

- Laily Begum, *Birangona*

Women serve a double purpose in the construction of nationalism. They are used as icons of the nation, like the word '*Bangamata*' (Mother of Bengal), which is attributed to women in Bangladesh. However, they are also the first to be silenced concerning what they endured. Their narratives are rendered subordinate to nationalist discourses where their agency is obscured and they become the emblems of nationalism (Rashid, 2018). The struggle between victimhood in the form of passivity and violence, however, is well understood through the example of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War.

The liberation came with its costs, and for many Bengali women, pain was the price of independence. They made a substantial contribution to the war by providing intelligence, shelter, medical care, and, in some instances, even fighting for the land that was theirs. D'Costa (2012) speaks of bravery and effort but writes that genocidal rape, which became a widespread weapon, could not be prevented, even by the active participation of women. These complexities refer to the coexistence of strength and fragility belonging to those women who went through war. The societal stigma that remains within survivors of sexual violence is created by an environment where fear and shame often demoralise them from coming forward with their testimonies. The threat of retaliation weighs heavily, particularly in contexts where perpetrators remain unaccountable. These barriers operate at the levels of family, society, and institutions of law and order. Such silence and stigma demonstrate further how war crimes affect survivors. They fail to cope with personal trauma and with the collective memory (D'Costa 2012).

'*Birangona*' is a term in Bengali that stands for 'brave woman' or 'war heroine' and has a multitude of meanings, including symbolic and social context within it. It is both an accolade and a stigma for these women. At first, the term was used as early as 1972 by the then Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to pay respect to women who had been

subjected to extreme torture, namely rape, during the 1971 Liberation War (Mookherjee, 2015, p. 133). This particular problem was heightened in the government and, through media's coverage, it was attempted to repurpose the anguish of rape as a form of a nation's gift to the cause of its independence. Mookherjee (2015), along with feminist scholars like Spivak (2014), and D'Costa (2012), criticises the contradictions in the State's approach to honouring the *Birangonas*. These scholars argue that the more the State attempted to highlight the experiences of these women, the more they unintentionally subjected them to social marginalisation.

Indira Gandhi's encouragement to Sheikh Mujibur to employ the phrase '*Birangonas*' was to commend the rape survivors' endurance, accept them as an honour to the nation, and help them integrate into society (Huq, 2023). However, the context seems to have changed. D'Costa (2012) and others argue *Birangona* became a de facto term used to describe women who had been raped almost exclusively, which has transformed the meaning of the term from 'war heroine' to something that depicts a person who has endured pain and losses. For many survivors, [to be regarded as one of the 'heroines'](#) may be inviting misinterpretation and more marginalisation. Thus, the uniqueness of this recognition is twofold; it highlights the extreme importance of sexual violence during warfare and raises the awareness of such violence but, as a consequence, explains their "dishonourable" position in connection with Bangladesh, where sexual violence was a strong taboo. The title *Birangona* thus produced both sensitivity and alienation and turned what was supposed to be a celebratory title into the marginalisation of all rape survivors.

Furthermore, the contributions of the term itself substantiate another layer of complexity. In the view of Spivak (2014), to call these rape victims *Birangonas* engraves rape as an obligatory and sacrificial violence for obtaining national sovereignty, thereby imposing a sacrificial meaning upon their suffering. This idea draws an implicit comparison with the Hindu concept of sacrifice, particularly in the Bengali context, and reverberates the patriarchal systems in which women's bodies are often embedded into the struggle for ideals. When construing these women as representatives of a national sacrifice, the term does not only glorify them but also humiliate them at the same time, thereby turning the individual pain into collective and symbolic pain. For some, including the activist Ayesha Khan, such a label ignores the "real" hurt and social alienation the survivors went through. Khan advocates instead for a title like *muktijoddha* (a freedom fighter) that is more encompassing and less gender-orientated in its definition of courage in war (Mookherjee 2015).

Additionally, the word *Birangona* bears an unsettling resemblance to the word *barangana*, which in Bengali slang means "prostitute" or "loose woman." D'Costa (2012) and Mookherjee (2015) point out that rape victims were ridiculed because of the phonetic similarity, with disparaging remarks even changing the word to suggest profanity. These obscenities were occasionally hurled by people who lived close to rehabilitation facilities for survivors in Dhaka, undermining the State's planned valorisation and substituting it with misogynistic dismissal. Out of fear of social stigma (the extreme marginalisation and rejection that may ensue once a woman was known to have survived wartime rape) many

women completely abandoned the term *Birangona* because it was tarnished by this unpleasant misconception.

Modifying terminology by itself was insufficient to change public perception, Sultana Zaman, a social worker working in a rehabilitation program, argues that, in a society where rape victims were already stigmatised, the notion of renaming these victims would win them respect would be a fallacious one. Without addressing the underlying social prejudices, the State's well-meaning - rehabilitation centres merely served to increase their distinction as victims of sexual violence and turn their suffering into a spectacle. In Zaman's opinion, the name *Birangona*—which was meant to be a metaphor for war heroine—in the end served to emphasise rather than lessen the societal stigma associated with "dishonoured" women (Mookherjee 2015).

Though the war has ended, its effects have remained with the children of those who were particularly affected by the war's impact and who still suffer from the trauma passed down to them. What became of the *Birangonas* after the war? Were there any initiatives taken to assist them in going back to society? Mookherjee (2015) study indicates that while there were attempts at the government level to help victims integrate into society, these plans were constrained by social and political factors. There remains the fact that Bangladesh, new to independence and facing innumerable struggles, could not in its nascent statehood attend to so many complications.

5.1. POST-WAR MARGINALISATION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR INTEGRATION

The Bangladeshi government expressed commitment to supporting *Birangonas*, yet the political environment of the new nation left several obstacles for them to integrate and rehabilitate. Their requirements were often overlooked in favour of more pressing needs of political matters, such as prosecuting war criminals and *razakars* and the establishment of Bangladesh's sovereignty. As a result, *Birangonas* were left economically, psychologically, and socially challenged, despite the new government's promises to foster an inclusive national identity. The newly politically charged environment fostered symbolic national objectives rather than addressing the complex social realities faced by these survivors (D'Costa, 2011).

The emphasis on political stability came at the price of rehabilitation and trauma centres, which should have been prioritised for the survivors. The identification of *Birangonas* as war heroines carried symbolic importance, but it left an unintended effect of further isolating them. The other challenges arose from social and cultural factors ingrained in Bangladeshi society. Although they were iconically honoured for their "sacrifice" to the State, the broader societal context in Bangladesh posed difficulties for the integration of these survivors (Asaad & Hasanat, 2022).

The prevalent societal stigma that surrounded rape in Bangladeshi society was ignored in the broader context of their social recognition. The trauma of sexual violence often brings both personal and familial shame to the community, as a woman's honour and purity are closely linked to the honour of the family. As a result, families and communities found it difficult to integrate these survivors inside the established social hierarchy, and *Birangonas* were shunned (D'Costa, 2012). They were seen as "tainted" and therefore did not fit into the womanly perception of community togetherness. The Bengali society's ideas of morality and respectability posed a wider challenge that further ostracised *Birangonas* due to cultural shame attached to rape.

Furthermore, the state and survivors were under pressure from society to maintain a culture of silence regarding rape during the period of war. While the government was presenting a strong and unified image of the new nation fought by Bengal, Bengali communities, on the other hand, resorted to collective silence as a means of coping, which affected the very members of their society. The atmosphere of denial was perpetuated by the reluctance to publicly address the widespread sexual violence experienced during the war, further creating challenges for *Birangonas* in expressing their suffering and seeking social justice or healing (Assad & Hasanat, 2022).

Other challenges consisted of economic and financial assistance. The brutal war between East and West Pakistan left the economy of the independent nation in a complete standstill. With limited funding, destruction of infrastructure that paralysed transportation, communication issues, and severe cases of poverty, the independent nation was left with challenges beyond economic stability that needed to be addressed by the government (D'Costa, 2011). While there are no financial figures to discuss the details of the government initiatives for *Birangonas*, there were initiatives proposed by the government, such as providing financial incentives to men who agreed to marry *Birangonas* and offering them traditional jobs like paddy husking, sowing, and other domestic services. Unfortunately, the "marry them off" campaign did not work, given that the society still considered women's worth in relation to chastity. There were men who agreed to marry, but they made it obvious they expected the government to provide them with worthy dowries (Hobbs & Brownmiller, 1978, p. 83). Even when some men accepted the dowry of BDT 10,000 provided by the government (US\$ 200), they would often fail to actually marry the women (D'Costa, 2012, p. 132).

Consequently, with the instability of power struggles, coups, and a shifting political landscape, *Birangonas* were left with the difficulty of rebuilding their lives under a lack of planning, healthcare, counselling, education, and limited economic opportunities. The government's initiatives left them in a cycle of complex social, economic, and political challenges (D'Costa, 2011). Additionally, the rehabilitation centres tended to focus on immediate relief rather than sustainable healing. Due to economic pressures and limited budgets, it led to avoiding the deeper trauma of wartime rape. Rather than being completely reintegrated, the word "war heroine" labelled them as victims for life, placing them in a story of pain that fuelled social insecurity and insensitivity (Asaad & Hasanat, 2022).

The complex interplay of societal silence, cultural stigma, post-conflict national priorities, and the government's initiatives made it extremely challenging for *Birangonas* to overcome the obstacles on their own. The psychological scars they bore deeply reflected the depth of their suffering. The trauma and the marginalisation of their community left long-term consequences of isolation and stigma. Many suffered from severe psychological issues, including PTSD, anxiety, depression, and others. These were further intensified by the experiences of forced pregnancy, which added layers of complexity and trauma to their recovery. The lack of access to mental health services, particularly in rural areas, where resources were scarce and the stigma surrounding their condition discouraged them from seeking any help, left them carrying the burden of wartime violence in isolation (Mookherjee, 2015, p. 125). This has forced survivors and their children into vulnerable positions of isolation, marginalisation, and exploitation.

5.2. NATIONAL AMNESIA AND ERASURE OF FUTURE GENERATION: THE CASE FOR WAR BABIES

The effects of sexual violence on the survivors extend beyond the immediate trauma of the assault, the trauma affects the survivors' future, their social life, and the reproductive fabric of their community. As a weapon of war, forced impregnation violates social harmony and reproductive autonomy, infringing upon the continuity of a community. In her work, Fisher (1996, p. 93), writes how forced pregnancies are utilised to destroy a group's social and reproductive structures. Firstly, they can cause long-lasting psychological trauma that prevents the community from having meaningful relationships or having children in the future. Secondly, women who bear the children of the enemy experience social exclusion because their "occupied" wombs keep them from supporting the generational continuity of their society.

Bangladesh saw war babies as a painful reminder of their past. As such, many of their new policies addressing the forced pregnancies were patriarchal and nationalistic. The then-prime minister Mujibur Rahman's demand that the children be "sent away" was a reflection of the collective fear in the society that these children would pose a threat to the newly formed nation (D'Costa, 2011, p.277). The government adopted a two-approach strategy, working with international organisations like the International Planned Parenthood Federation to facilitate abortions and encourage overseas adoptions. The ambiguous portrayal of abortions as "emergency procedures" highlights how Bangladesh's national image is socially and politically prioritised over women's autonomy over their pregnancies (D'Costa 2011).

The newly formed government built abortion clinics, but those women who either could not or did not want to avail themselves of such services faced a lot of social stigma. Most of these women were shunned by their families and ostracised from society, developing a complex trauma that further extended to the children born from this violence. Following the war, in the efforts of nation-building, many of the war babies were adopted internationally by families in Canada through the help of important figures like Mother Teresa facilitating the

adoption. Although children raised overseas may have had access to a privileged environment, they nonetheless struggle with the complex legacy of their birth. Rashid (2018) discusses the long-lasting effects of forced impregnation by interviewing some of these adoptees, who are now adults, and finding that even after more than 50 years, they still find it difficult to come to terms with the horrific circumstances of their birth. This demonstrates how trauma may be passed down through generations, even when a child is separated geographically from the place of their parents' pain.

Rashid (2018) documents Shama Hartt's ongoing struggle with losing her connection to her heritage after being adopted by a Canadian family. Hartt noted that instead of a birth certificate, she has adoption papers. Like Hartt, for many people the lack of such records makes it extremely difficult to trace their roots. Hartt's attempts to establish a connection with her biological roots were further complicated by bureaucratic silence when she tried to obtain information from the agency in charge of her adoption.

The experiences of war babies who remained in Bangladesh shed light on the significant challenges posed by stigma and social exclusion. One example is the story of Beauty, who was raised by her mother, Nur Begum, a *Birangona*. This narrative of social ostracisation is thoughtfully detailed by Saikia (2020). She narrates how Nur Begum made up a story to shield Beauty from shame, claiming that Beauty was the daughter of her late husband, who lost his life fighting in the war, instead of recognising her as a victim of forced pregnancy. Upon urging the truth from her mother, Beauty's husband discovered her background, divorced her, took her children, and sold Beauty to a brothel. This further exploited her, she experienced poverty and abandonment as a result of her mother's denial of her true lineage. This story illustrates the intergenerational trauma inflicted by war. The trauma does not cease when the fighting ends, it reverberates through families and generations in deeply impactful ways.

The body of a rape survivor was less perceived to be an individual violation but a violation of Bangladeshi national identity as constructed within the nationalist discourse. Moreover, referring to Menon and Bhasin's (1998) analysis of violence during the Partition of India, this postulation of the partition violence also had a new idea of "purity", which was to reconstruct a pure Bengali nationalist State. The State of Bangladesh tried to cleanse the "Pakistani blood" via adoption and abortion policies. Transcending women's needs therefore became the order of the day, where the State assumed custodianship over the women's bodies in the pursuit of national identity. To preserve this notion of national identity, the State used its control over the bodies of the affected women, making their needs less important. This further resulted in the victimisation of women through policies that disregarded their bodily autonomy (D'Costa, 2011).

Research also highlights that discussing intricate narratives of the past experiences of war babies encourages remembrance, reconciliation, and even recognition of the injustices they have endured, which strengthens the collective memory and identity and also individual healing. Revisiting these experiences fosters an inclusive future that respects and honours the

histories of all Bangladeshis, thereby it is essential to address the trauma experienced by the children and their mothers to heal intergenerational trauma and national unity.

5.3. BENGALI MASCULINITY AND THE POLITICS OF SILENCE

The sexual violence of Bengali men during the Bangladesh Liberation War has often been overlooked in both historical narratives and the development of the nation's identity. While some stories hint at the complexity of male victimisation within the broader framework, many reports focus largely on the violence against women and girls. These insights into the horrors endured by Bengali men highlight the complex interplay between gender, sexuality, and religious identity during the war. They also highlight the social silence and cultural taboos surrounding male sexual victimisation.

Mookherjee (2015) recounts the dehumanising practices of Pakistani soldiers on Bengali men during the war, including forced circumcision checks. These invasive practices, which were motivated by religious bias, were intended to verify Bengali men's religious identity through physical examination. Pakistani soldiers frequently interpreted the uncircumcised penis as a sign of Indian/Hindu identity, which, in certain cases, led to brutal violence or execution. Such acts were not isolated; they were part of a larger psychological campaign to humiliate Bengali men by exploiting religious and cultural stereotypes and painting them as "effeminate" or "Hinduised" and therefore inferior. This reinforces the power imbalance between the occupying forces and the Bengali population.

According to Colombini (2002), male survivors also tend to be reluctant while talking about their experiences directly, often only revealing them more indirectly during interviews. The cultural norms set by the society surrounding masculinity in Bangladesh, where male victimisation—especially sexual violence victims—is stigmatised and frequently seen as going against conventional notions of masculinity, may have contributed to this silence. This emphasises the shame and discomfort connected to the acceptance of male victimhood, which is made worse by cultural norms that demand men to be stoic and indestructible (Mookherjee, 2015).

Sivakumaran (2007) reflects on the lack of attention given to male rape survivors in documentaries, which is notably different from the focus on female rape survivors. The societal trend that tends to overlook the experiences of male victims is very significant in public and national discussions, especially in the case of armed conflict. Therefore, the limited first-hand accounts of male violence are often incomplete, underlining the difficulties in addressing and documenting such cases in a context that traditionally prioritises female victimhood as representative of wartime crimes.

Mookherjee (2015) suggests that while female victimhood was already a challenging subject for the government to overcome, opening discussions on male sexual violence faced during the war was even more delicate, as it undermined the image of Bengali men, who were the powerful defenders of the nation. The omission of male victimisation from the national narrative was to preserve a portrayal of men as resilient protectors in the Liberation War, and

the violence they might have faced during the war would associate them with male victimhood, which conflicted with the national narrative. Acknowledging such wartime crimes would challenge the prevailing ideas of masculinity and heterosexuality and would disrupt the national memory by diverging the dominant portrayal of their fight against the enemy forces. For the newly established nation, it was politically and culturally advantageous to leave any accounts of male sexual violence from the public narrative, allowing Bengali men to remain empowered figures, untouched by victimisation.

Furthermore, the focus on female rape victims within the national narrative portrays two distinct motivations. Women are framed as victims in need of protection, therefore encouraging men to take on the role of defenders who will fight for the honour of the nation. This binary role of men and women in society tends to reinforce traditional gender roles, with men as the protectors and women as the victims, whose experiences highlight the necessity of national resistance. This limits space for acknowledging male suffering, especially when it relates to different forms of sexual violence that challenge the conventional norm of masculinity (Meger, 2016).

Many international legal frameworks that address sexual violence in armed conflict often utilise binary language, which portrays girls and women as exclusive victims. Inevitably, this results in a lack of visibility of male victims of rape and other forms of gender-based violence during armed conflict and a range of human rights instruments that do not adequately represent the experiences of male victims (Meger, 2016). Therefore, overlooking the experiences of male victims in conflicts highlights the challenges of alienating societal and cultural expectations of gender, sexuality, and national identity.

6. BANGLADESH'S RESPONSE TO LIBERATION WAR SURVIVORS

The abrupt ending of the Liberation War in December 1971 made room to aid the victims of sexual violence. In the direct aftermath of the events, the newly established Bangladeshi government went on with the establishment of safe houses where rape victims could be transferred to and taken care of. Aside from the safehouses, a rehabilitation programme was also set up. Furthermore, the government made immediate efforts to ensure accountability. The Bangladesh Collaborators Order was therefore set up by presidential decree, providing for the prosecution of collaborators before a special tribunal. As a result, between 1972 and 1974, around 37,400 people were arrested and investigated for the criminalisation of murder, rape, arson, and genocide. Many of those suspects went into exile and were eventually never charged, as their relocation meant it was no longer within Bangladesh's jurisdiction. In 1973, the Bangladeshi parliament passed the International Crimes (Tribunals) Act (referred to as ICTA). Its main purpose was "to provide for the detention, prosecution, and punishment of persons for genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and other crimes under international law." The Act was draughted with the help of prominent international lawyers and drew heavily from the International Military Tribunal (IMT) Charter used at Nuremberg.

In 2008, the Awami League came to power with the promise to prosecute crimes that were not yet brought to justice after the events of 1971. As a result, the International Crimes Tribunal of Bangladesh (ICT-BD) was set up in 2009. The ICT-BD was established as a domestic tribunal, therefore subjecting the Tribunal to the Bangladeshi judicial system based on domestic law. The decision to make it a domestic tribunal has severe consequences for the tribunal's jurisdiction in prosecuting non-Bangladeshi nationals. However, a positive aspect of creating a domestic tribunal is that it can be more meaningful to the Bangladeshi population as national experts become more aware and committed to their country.

The establishment of the ICT-BD, under the supervision of now-ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina, has domestic jurisdiction over any individual, group of individuals, or organisation, or any member of any armed, defence, or auxiliary forces, irrespective of nationality. According to Article 3(2) of the ICT Act, the ICT has jurisdiction over genocide, crimes against humanity, crimes against peace, war crimes, violations of any humanitarian rules applicable in armed conflicts laid down in the Geneva Conventions of 1949, and any other crimes under international law. The establishment of the Tribunal was further pushed to be brought about after continuous activism from civil society movements in Bangladesh, with the main pressure for prosecutions stemming from victims and veteran groups that long have been advocating for justice, demanding accountability for the crimes that were committed during the 1971 Liberation War. The mandate of the ICT-BD to prosecute Bangladeshi collaborators involved in the 1971 atrocities provides an opportunity for justice for the victims who underwent the crimes committed against them in the Liberation War, including victims of sexual violence.

To this day, there have been 55 verdicts, with 149 people being convicted. Of the 149 convicted people, 106 people are facing death row. When it comes to convictions of crimes committed during the Liberation War, there have not been any specific cases based purely on the crime of sexual violence, but is usually mentioned under a series of crimes committed. For example, on July 17th, 2018 the court sentenced four men to death for war crimes committed in 1971, and one of the war crimes included the rape of six Hindu women. Many people on trial die while appeals against their convictions are pending, as was the case for Ghulam Azam, a man in his 90s, who had denied all charges against him. He was alleged to have created and led pro-Pakistan militias who had carried out numerous murders and rapes during the nine-month war. Other people, such as the former leader of Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh's largest Islamist party, were sentenced to 90 years in jail for crimes against humanity on July 15th, 2013.

Despite amendments made in 2009 to the 1973 ICTA with the provision that "the Tribunal shall be independent in the exercise of its judicial functions and shall ensure a fair trial". The tribunal continues to face criticism from global rights groups and concerns that the justice does not meet international standards. It is said that the court does not follow fair trial standards, raising questions about the independence of the process and the limits on the rights inflicted on those on trial. There are continuing concerns about the capacity of the Bangladeshi system to cope with complex trials of those who were accused of international

crimes, due to the weakness of the domestic judicial system and the limited experience in investigations and prosecutions. The availability of the death penalty, which 106 people face, further raises concern among domestic and international actors. These concerns about the legitimate use of the ICT-BD and the cases it persecutes undermine the attention that should be given to the affected survivors.

6.1. COMPARISON OF ICT - BD WITH OTHER INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNALS

International bodies can prosecute rape and sexual violence as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and acts of genocide. This was codified by the statutes of both the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), where sexual violence as a weapon of war was first recognised. The statutes explicitly state that rape, when committed as part of a widespread attack against the civilian population, constitutes a crime against humanity.

The ICTY and ICTR were established by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and they received strong international backing. This, together with the pioneering position of the Tribunals, allowed for more impact and recognition. On the contrary, the ICT-BD is a domestic court with little international backing, which severely affects its ability to prosecute sexual violence crimes concerning international standards.

A different aspect distinguishing the ICT-BD from the ICTY and ICTR is the role of victim participation. Both the ICTY and the ICTR set up robust mechanisms for victim protection and participation, an important point the ICT-BD has been criticised for, as it fails to provide adequate victim protection and participant mechanisms for sexual violence survivors. As the ICT-BD was established almost 40 years after the facts, it made the whole process of prosecution and international recognition significantly harder in comparison to the ICTY and ICTR, which were established relatively quickly after the facts.

A big reason for the continuous use of rape as a weapon of war is the aspect of impunity. Despite recognition in international law of rape and sexual violence as a weapon of war, as stated in the International Tribunal of Rwanda and Yugoslavia, too many perpetrators are left with the notion of being untouchable, as a byproduct of the chaos and unclarity that war brings about.

6.2. LACK OF INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

“In no other area is our collective failure to ensure effective protection for civilians more apparent... than in terms of the masses of women and girls, but also boys and men, whose lives are destroyed each year by sexual violence perpetrated in conflict.” -United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, 2007

Despite substantial evidence, the United Nations has not yet recognised the atrocities that took place in the 1971 Bangladesh genocide, therefore not fully recognising the suffering

that so many Bengali women experienced. This is partly due to the political climate post-1971, in times of the Cold War, with many key players of the United Nations, including the United States and China, who were close allies with Pakistan, as well as for the strategic value of Pakistan in the War on Terror. As a result, it is possible these countries used their influence to prevent the international recognition of the events in Bangladesh.

The lack of international recognition brings about severe consequences for the victims and survivors of the violence. Thus, there have been limited opportunities for gathering international support for justice and reparations for the survivors. Furthermore, the lack of international recognition allows for a culture where social stigma surrounding sexual violence persists, making it increasingly difficult for survivors to seek justice and support. The lack of recognition by the United Nations hinders global awareness. Furthermore, it challenges the attempts of Bangladesh to seek reparations from Pakistan. This sets a precedent on the global scale on how the failure to recognise the atrocities during the Bangladesh Genocide can lead to not recognising other incidents on the global scale.

7. MOVING FORWARD: MECHANISMS AND PROTECTION FOR VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS OF 1971

In the context of transitional justice, the needs of victims and survivors of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War are addressed as an area of importance. For example, efforts to strengthen legal mechanisms and protection rights for survivors who faced gender-based violence during the war must be adjusted with international human rights standards and be responsive to Bangladesh's special socio-political landscape. This section covers some suggestions made by different scholars and activists.

7.1. PARTICIPATION OF VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS

Improving the participation of *Birangonas* in the judicial process is crucial for achieving justice and reconciliation. Creating a gender-based violence-sensitive forum will give victims the platform to share their experiences as well as create a safe space to express their perspectives of the war. This should be overseen by an advisory board that is well-trained in victims' hearing proceedings and will directly inform the judicial proceedings that their voices are heard in the decision-making process (D'Costa, 2012).

Additionally, there should be government initiatives alongside the help of grassroots organisations to provide psychological support and legal aid to empower victims to participate without intimidation (Mookherjee, 2023). Connecting with local communities through outreach programmes can create awareness regarding victim participation, which fosters local support for their involvement in the judicial process (D'Costa, 2012).

It will also be crucial to provide legal professionals with trauma-informed practice training, as this can foster a respectful and safe atmosphere for victims. Furthermore, working with international organisations can provide these efforts with the legitimacy and resources they need to succeed. By putting these tactics into practice, legal systems can address

historical injustices experienced by *Birangonas* while simultaneously defending the rights of victims and enhancing the overall effectiveness and integrity of the legal system (D’Costa, 2012).

7.2. JUDICIAL REFORM

In a Tribunal that functions for witnesses and survivors, there should be strict measures and complete transparency in the matter of judicial appointments, and the selection process should be fair and free of any political affiliations. A protective framework, for example, a witness protection unit within the ICT, should be implemented as there have been several documented reports of intimidation and harassment of individuals while providing testimony (Odhikar, 2021). These frameworks should be supported by international standards, as it may be reduced, and participants’ safety during the legal process will be protected.

Finally, establishing accountability mechanisms, such as independent review boards, would ensure that judges’ actions are scrutinised, fostering a culture of responsibility and integrity within the legal system (Islam, 2019). These reforms help to develop a judiciary that is not only independent but also trusted by the people it serves (International Commission of Jurists, 2013). For state actors, there is a need to move beyond the discussion of victimhood and finally recognise the need for the victims’ agency, resilience, and accountability.

7.3. ACCOUNTABILITY

Due to the complex nature of the 1971 Liberation War, accountability requires the cooperative efforts of multiple actors, including the Bangladeshi government and particularly neighbouring countries, Pakistan and India. Access to historical archives, witness accounts, and gathering of other evidence from all involved is necessary. The 1971 Tripartite Agreement, between Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, addressed the reparation for prisoners of war, but Pakistan was yet to formally apologise and take accountability for those who endured sexual violence and their families. Collaborating with scholars and international human rights organisations that focus on transitional justice can also help to share resources for the ICT and offer insights into effective practices.

CONCLUSION

This report discussed the strategic use of rape as a tool on the Bengali identity, which left a profound, multi-generational trauma and other consequences for survivors and their families. The *Birangonas*, or “war heroines” are women whose experiences show both their personal resilience and the collective suffering of the Bangladeshi society. Not only did they face cultural erasure and social stigma, but they also sustained long-lasting effects of psychological trauma due to sociocultural marginalisation. This was a deliberate attack by the Pakistani regime to infiltrate the community and national memory.

Addressing these impacts requires a multidimensional approach that extends beyond judicial responses. As scholars such as D’Costa (2012) and Mookherjee (2015) argue, recognising and validating the voices of these survivors within a gender-sensitive justice framework is essential for trauma healing and social restoration. However, state-led initiatives, though initially well-intentioned, have often failed to fully rehabilitate *birangonas* due to inadequate financial resources and political pressures that prioritised national image over individual healing (D’Costa, 2011). Furthermore, the cultural stigmatisation of wartime sexual violence has inhibited survivors’ reintegration, limiting their roles within family and society and perpetuating cycles of trauma across generations (Rashid, 2018).

The current understanding of these impacts is enriched by insights into the children of *birangonas*, who frequently inherit the social and psychological burdens of their mothers’ experiences. Research by Rashid (2018) highlights how these “war babies” navigate complex identities, often marked by social exclusion and loss of cultural heritage, further underlining the need for comprehensive, trauma-informed policies that support survivor families.

To address the long-lasting legacies of the Bangladesh Genocide, a comprehensive justice framework should be imposed. To build a collective memory that acknowledges and integrates the experiences of all affected communities, it is important to establish survivor-centred approaches, accountability, and memorialisation. Only through these inclusive efforts can the social wounds inflicted by the 1971 genocide be addressed, ensuring that the legacy of the *birangonas* and their families is honoured within Bangladesh’s national memory.

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