

# **“We used to have picnics together”**

**Memories of friendship and peace among Rohingya and Rakhine women in Rakhine state, Myanmar**



**WOMEN'S PEACE NETWORK  
2019**

# WOMEN'S PEACE NETWORK

Women's Peace Network (WPN) is a non-governmental organization based in Myanmar. WPN empowers women and youth and promotes inclusion, trust, and peace between different communities in the Rakhine state and in Myanmar. WPN runs various social justice programs at the local, state, and national level.

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# INTRODUCTION



The violent rioting, mob attacks, and murders that displaced over one million people in Rakhine state are seen by both Rohingya and Rakhine communities as a watershed moment in which lives and livelihoods in the region were shattered. According to the UN Human Rights Council's 2018 independent international fact finding mission in Myanmar, systematic oppression and human rights violations have led to forcible displacement of over one million Rohingya, both internally displaced in Rakhine State and externally as refugees in Bangladesh (UN Human Rights Council, 2018).

Social media in Myanmar has erupted with divisive accounts but missing in broad narratives of Rakhine history and ethnic belonging are everyday memories and experiences of coexistence between Rohingyas and Rakhine people. Rather than treating conflict between Rohingyas and Rakhines as a historical fact, this report aims to highlight the ways that Rohingyas and Rakhines have made lives alongside each other for centuries, and argue that instances of violence among Rohingyas and Rakhines are more complex than what is often opaquely described as "communal tensions."



The aim of this report is to provide a firsthand, on-the-ground account of history and memory among both Rohingyas and Rakhines from Myanmar in order to disrupt popular narratives that represent conflict between Rohingyas and Rakhines as both prior and inevitable, while simultaneously creating space to imagine a peaceful future. While divisions and distrust exist between Rohingyas and Rakhines, they exist as a result of longterm divisive policies and perpetual propaganda fueling prejudice and hate.

In what follows, this report highlights these memories of peace to challenge narratives that sever the links between the contemporary military-state and so-called “communal” violence between Rohingyas and Rakhines.



# METHODS & METHODOLOGY

This project uses a feminist conceptual framework to examine Rohingya and Rakhine women's memories of relations between a diverse array of Buddhist and Muslim communities in Rakhine state, Myanmar. A feminist framework highlights the importance of everyday life, identity, memory, and personal experience in generating broader understandings about the social history of interdependence and peace that link Rohingyas and Rakhines. The research team conducted fieldwork for a total of 8 weeks between October 2017 and January 2018. Research activities included 20 semi-structured interviews with Rohingya and Rakhine Buddhist women, as well as four oral histories; two Rohingya histories and two Rakhine histories, and three focus groups with Rohingya women in Myanmar and Bangladesh and one focus group with Rakhine Buddhist women in Myanmar. Interviews explored subjects' memories of life before 2012 and 2017, relationships with Rakhines or Rohingya neighbors, community members, and officials, and opinions of the causes and conditions of contemporary crises in Rakhine. Interviews provide a private space for sharing personal views and memories that subjects may not have felt comfortable sharing in a group setting, and allowed the researcher to ask specific questions about experiences, memories, and opinions.



## **METHODS & METHODOLOGY**

Oral histories complemented interviews by providing space for subjects to structure their own narratives, and to share their life stories with minimal researcher involvement. Moreover, the oral history framework's widened scope, which aims to span the subject's entire life, shifts the focus from current events and traumas to the past opens possibilities for understanding the historical context of contemporary Rakhine state from the perspective of the everyday lives and relationships that color people's memories of life there. Focus groups provide the opportunity to observe the synthesis and diversity of views from subjects, which may support or contradict findings from interviews and oral histories. Following from feminist methodology, focus groups also create space for women who have suffered trauma to connect, share stories, make friends, and benefit from the support of other women.

# BEFORE WE WERE REFUGEES: ROHINGYA WOMEN'S MEMORIES OF LIFE IN MYANMAR

The camps that make up Kutupalong-Balukhali have surpassed Kenya's Dadaab camp as the largest in the world with a population of nearly one million. In all, more than a million people were displaced from Rakhine state in a brutal series of "clearance" operations conducted by the Myanmar military and border police beginning on August 25, 2017. Refugees continued to flee in large numbers from Rakhine on deadly boats into Bangladesh through February of 2018, though new refugees still arrive daily in Cox's Bazaar. The recent "influx," as it is called among locals and international aid workers in Cox's Bazaar, is the largest and deadliest displacement of Rohingyas from Myanmar, though not the first.

Rohingyas have been displaced from Burma on at least three occasions: in 1978, the Operation Dragon King, known officially as Operation Nagamin, when the Burmese military launched counterinsurgency attacks aiming to root out the remaining members of Rohingya Solidarity Organization; in 1991, when economic development projects in Rakhine state prompted mass evictions, and in 2012, when an alleged rape of a Buddhist woman by Rohingya men sparked mass violence and led to the displacement of 125,000 Rohingyas, the majority of whom remained confined to displacement camps in Sittwe in April of 2017. Then, on Oct. 9, 2016, militants murdered a group of Burmese soldiers by, resulting in by military and paramilitary crackdowns aimed at rooting out "Muslim extremists." The events of 2012 and 2016 are also cited to bolster claims of a growing "Muslim invasion," which are the primary justification of military counterinsurgency "operations" in Rakhine following attacks on border police and military outposts on August 25, 2017. It is important to note that each instance of violence and displacement is historically and geographically specific, and accounts that represent Rohingyas as solely victims to an eternal and historically prior Buddhist-Muslim conflict risk reinforcing Buddhists' anger surrounding one-sided international perspectives on Rohingyas (Schissler et al., 2017).



## VISITING SHAFIKA

On a cold January morning in 2018, WPN-A researchers visited a small Rohingya settlement that was constructed near what is today Kutupalong-Balukhali in the early 1990s. They crossed a busy road and entered lush wet-rice paddies, walking on the packed dirt partitions and hopping over irrigation ditches until they reached a long row of bamboo constructed on flat, elevated ground. The houses were small, only two rooms, and each row of 15 or so homes is separated by a narrow path. Arriving at Shafika's home, they are met with the sweet, smoky smell of roasting chicken and the sound of many women's voices. Although she left Myanmar with her family nearly 25 years ago as military-led violence, forced labor, and extrajudicial arrests and killings spurred an exodus of some 250,000 Rohingyas into Bangladesh, Shafika still wears the Burmese thamein – a marker of identity that is not lost on the visitors.

As Shafika cooks, a group of five Rohingya women between the ages of 18 and 50 sit in the doorstep and sew decorations made from tiny iridescent squares of Ramen packaging, brightly colored cotton buds, and precisely cut soda cans for an upcoming wedding. It will be beautiful, one woman remarks – adding that she loves the Rohingya wedding traditions of her homeland. Though weddings in the Bangladesh refugee settlements and camps often take on a local aesthetic, the women are emphatic in their distinctions between a “real” Rohingya wedding in Rakhine and the colorful hybrid weddings of Cox's Bazaar, which are more likely to feature Bengali and Hindi pop than Rohingya folk songs.

# MEMORIES OF RAKHINE

Shafika, who attended school until fleeing Myanmar at age 14, tells us about her life growing up in a small town near Maungdaw: “I miss even the soil. I miss the air. I miss my young life. I miss my friends.” She had two close Rakhine friends as a young girl – she recalls their names without hesitation: Chyo Ma Win and Hla Hla Min –

“we played together, we went to each other’s homes, we ate each other’s food. I was happy.”

Notably, those who could attend school were significantly more likely to have Buddhist friends, which highlights the importance of education not only for women and girls’ life chances, but also for the (re)production of peace in wider society.



“We would get together and cook chickens –for our picnic parties. I would visit her house, there were never any conflicts or problems.”

Shafika's best friend was the daughter of a Na Sa Ka border police officer. The Na Sa Ka was, and is, infamous for its brutality. Shafika and her friend visited each other's houses and often had picnics together with their families.

For Rakhines and Rohingyas alike, picnic culture is a vital part of everyday life in Rakhine, and points to a shared culture and tradition held by both communities, even as contemporary narratives paint the two groups as irreconcilably different. Shafika repeatedly mentions picnics, recalling what they would eat and her joy in preparing food for the gatherings:

“we would get together and cook chickens –for our picnic parties. I would visit her house, there were never any conflicts or problems.”

There are two important themes to expand from Shafika's story: first, the food served at picnics is significant because sharing a cooked chicken – different from chicken curry, marks important Rohingya gatherings such as weddings and the welcoming of honored guests. A whole Chicken, fried and surrounded by golden-fried boiled eggs, called duros kura, signifies strongly held Rohingya tradition of communal sharing and respect for neighbors. Sharing the ritual of cooking and eating chicken is therefore a source of valuable insight about the material, cultural nature of relationships between Rohingya and Rakhine Buddhists living in the same, or nearby, communities.





## REFLECTING ON SHAFIKA'S STORY

In reflecting upon Shafika's personal memories, we see not only a narrative that differs from those of historically prior conflict, indomitable cultural divides, and communities characterized by violent opposition. We also catch a glimpse of another complex character who is too often oversimplified: the Tatmadaw soldier.

Though he knew of, or perhaps participated in, acts of discrimination and violence that targeted Rohingyas in the 1990s, Shafika's friend's father nonetheless welcomed a little Rohingya girl into his family's home and shared picnic parties with Rohingya neighbors. Of course, many of history's perpetrators of unspeakable violence have also shared intimacies of varying kinds with members of the groups they have persecuted, these relationships do not change the structurally violent relations of domination between said groups. However, this memory does complicate narratives that represent Tatmadaw soldiers as always having hated Rohingyas on the basis of their foreignness, otherness, and non-belonging in Rakhine.

Rather, we see a more complex picture of personal relationships between people who were positioned drastically differently vis-à-vis military-state power in Myanmar in the tumultuous 1990s, leaving space for a more careful and critical understanding of how Rohingyas came to be so thoroughly accepted as a threat to the Myanmar nation in the years since and how peace may return as a status quo.

# Rohingya women's stories from Sittwe's IDP Camps



Displaced Rohingyas living in Cox's Bazaar face immense hardships and obstacles, which not limited to severe mobility restrictions, lack of access to education, medical care, clothing, meat, and wage work; however, as one young Rohingya man living in a Sittwe IDP camp remarked: "at least they have food from UNHCR rations, they aren't starving like people outside the camps [in Sittwe]."

Though over a hundred thousand Rohingyas and other Muslims lost their homes in 2012, none expected the loss to result in permanent displacement. Yet, instead of returning home in two weeks, as local officials promised, they remain confined to camps and Muslim-designated rural hinterlands after nearly 7 years have passed.



For those whose homes were spared by mobs, a different form of imprisonment has materialized. In a village near Sittwe, Myanmar, a group of four Rohingya women, aged 38 to 50, gathered in a small schoolhouse to talk.

They were painfully thin: “there is no food,” explained Ma Than, 38. Since police enacted mobility restrictions in 2012, relatives and hired help are unable to travel to participate in the harvest, so most villagers’ fields now lie fallow and most struggle to earn wages through fishing work, brickmaking, or leather tanning.

Not only did the women grieve for their families’ health and happiness, they grieved for their religious freedoms and ability to live dignified, meaningful lives as Muslim women.

Rohingya women hold diverse views of “going out” and participation in work alongside men, with differences often falling along rural or town/urban upbringings, though women’s preferences for remaining in the home and engaging in reproductive or distributive labor do not mean that they don’t want their daughters to have the opportunity to be educated. Crucially, it is fear of violence that leads many mothers to keep daughters at home.



Alongside women's stories detailed the struggles of everyday life and survival after 2012, their memories also revealed important insight about broader material, social, and economic relationships that linked, and continue to link, Rohingyas and Rakhine Buddhists in Rakhine state.

### **Maria Begum's Story**

For example, Maria Begum, 36, joined her husband to work at the brick fields after 2012 left them unable to support their family with farming work. Maria misses being in the home with her children, emphasizing that she “only had to do this work after the violence.” When she was asked whether she had any relationships with non-Muslims, she thought about the question for a moment, and responded:

**“actually, the brickfield owners are Mog [Rakhine Buddhist]. When I am facing hardship she gives me money, she gives me clothing. This is our relationship.”**

Maria's relationship with her employer disrupts the widely circulated narrative of Rakhine Buddhist fear and hatred of Rohingyas, echoing social and economic interconnections and interdependencies that have the region since the early days of human settlement (Prasse-Freeman and Mausert, 2019).

# "We would have starved without the Rakhines"

With respect to economic linkages, local descriptions of Sittwe's IDP camp economy revealed an undeniable dependence on Rakhine middle men willing to do business with Rohingyas. As a viral video of a Rakhine woman's public beating for helping a Rohingya neighbor revealed, maintaining relationships with Rohingyas risks rejection or violent retaliation from extremist Rakhines.

This threat of violence hasn't stopped many merchants from continuing to do business with Rohingya neighbors, a point that doesn't go unnoticed by Sittwe IDP camp residents.

Speaking with a member of the research team on August 27, one Rohingya NGO worker living in a Sittwe camp explained,

"we would have starved without the Rakhines - [after August 25] the only food must be purchased from Rakhine merchants. There is very little food because many Rakhines don't want to sell food to Rohingyas in the camps. But there are good Rakhines who sell food here. They are good people."

Of course, price gouging and profiteering characterizes many exchanges between Rakhines and Rohingyas with few other options, though many Rohingya informants also recounted stories of compassion, kindness, and sharing from Rakhine neighbors.

The above stories highlight the flow of resources from Rakhines to Rohingyas; however, the relationship between Rakhines and Rohingyas should be understood not in terms of compassion or charity, but of mutual aid.

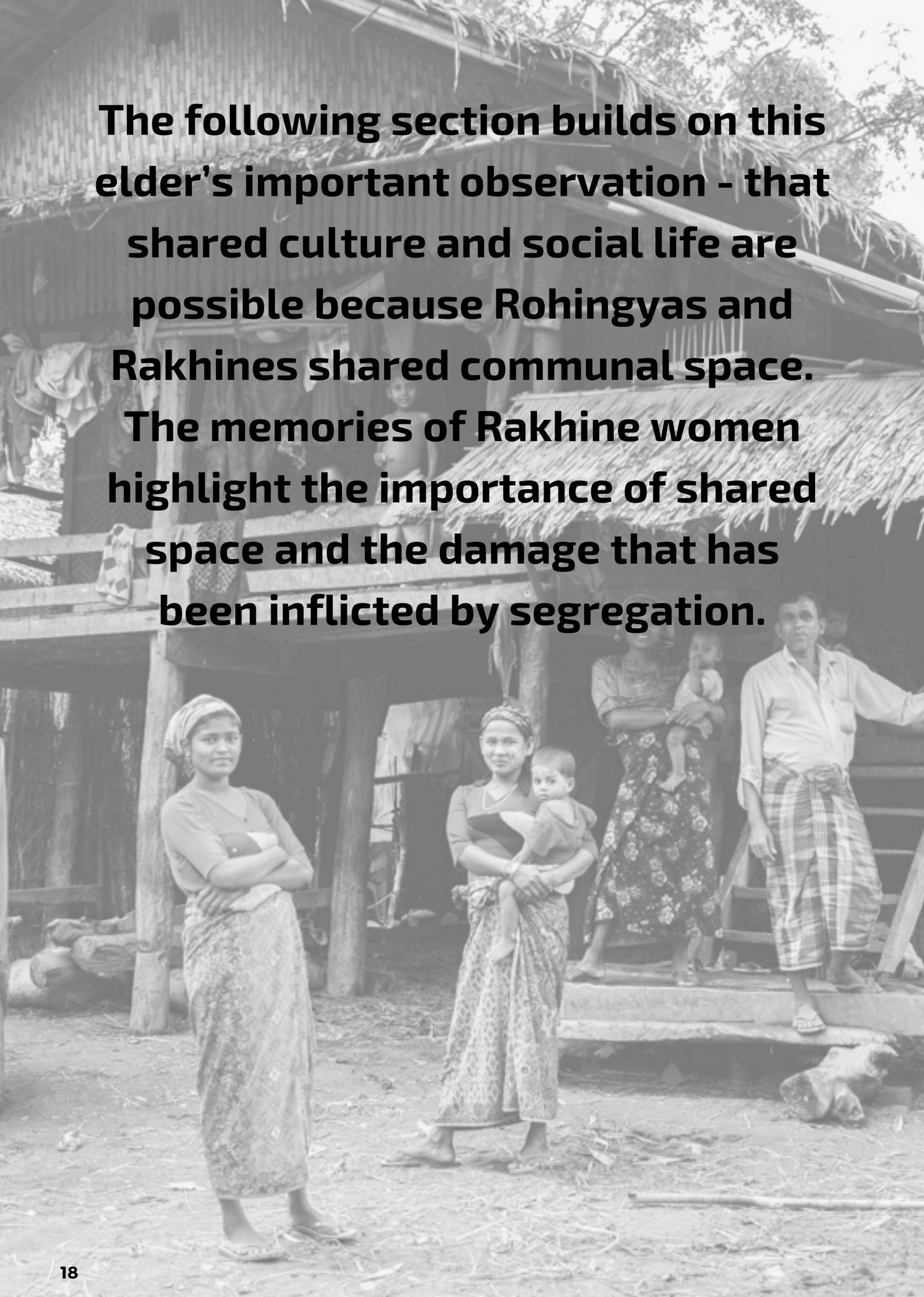


## Than Da's Story

Before 2012, Than Da (30), a Rohingya woman from a rural village outside Sittwe, was close friends with a Rakhine woman named Minh Lay, who lived nearby. When her friend fell upon hard times, Than Da lent her money, and conversely, when she was in need, Minh Lay helped her. Since 2012, she has lost touch with Minh Lay: "I don't know where she is now, and it makes me sad," Than Da says. Notably, Than Da was only able to attend school until the age of 5, and had some Islamic education – as noted above, many Rohingya women who lacked access to education also lacked the opportunity to meet and build relationships with non-Muslims – though she was not formally educated in Burmese or Rakhine language,

Than Da nonetheless exemplifies the ways that relationships form and persevere despite structural barriers. As Kyaw Thet, an elder in Yangon, explained to researchers, years ago many Rohingyas in rural areas spoke Rakhine or Burmese, and Rakhines spoke Rohingya because the communities were so close-knit in terms of culture and geography.

**The following section builds on this elder's important observation - that shared culture and social life are possible because Rohingyas and Rakhines shared communal space. The memories of Rakhine women highlight the importance of shared space and the damage that has been inflicted by segregation.**





# “WE LIVED IN PEACEFULLY TOGETHER”: RAKHINE WOMEN’S MEMORIES

Academics have argued that Rohingyas are getting more than their share of attention while Rakhines also suffer in poverty and displacement. The research team’s engagement with Rakhine women’s views, aims to foster greater diversity and inclusion in the production of knowledge about people in Rakhine state. This section draws from interviews, oral histories, and one focus group of 5 women, providing excerpts from the women’s stories about life in Rakhine state.



## Hla Hla Win's Story

Hla Hla Win, 25, is from Bauthidaung, and began work for a Sittwe nonprofit after finishing her university degree, though her parents disprove of her work and encourage her to work a more stable, permanent job with the government. She joined a group of four other young women, most of whom held high school or university diplomas, at an office in downtown Sittwe for the focus group discussion. Notably, the women were growing up at a later time than most of the Rohingya women interviewed in Bangladesh and elsewhere in Sittwe, as most were born after 1990, though their stories are characterized by familiar details of friendship, neighborly relations, and shared cultural experiences.

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

Echoing Shafika's memories of cooking chickens, picnicking, and sharing meals with Rakhine neighbors and friends before she fled to Bangladesh, Hla Hla Win's experiences reflect a certain fluidity of ethnic boundaries that characterized multiethnic communities in the recent past.

It is important to remember that the Naf region that divides what is today Bangladesh and Myanmar has been a dynamic region of migration, exchange, and mobility for far longer than it has been a neatly marked border. Keeping in mind the geography of the region, one can understand the relationship between Rohingya and Rakhine communities as interconnected and interdependent.

In addition to reflecting on childhoods alongside Muslim friends and neighbors, Rakhine women were eager to share their views about the reasons that relations between Muslims and Buddhists are no longer easy or peaceful.

Phyu Phyu Tin, 21, explained that

“in my village [in central Rakhine state], relations between Muslims and Buddhists were very good – there were never any problems – but now, after 2012, Buddhists and Muslims are afraid of each other.”

Moe Chit, 19, added that media and rapid communication played a large role in destroying trust between the two groups, instead stoking fear, misunderstanding, and resentment: “because of technology development, news can spread very easily. Pictures and videos make it easy for people to believe things are true. Fake news is a problem.”





The women agreed that media, especially Facebook, had significantly influenced the social and political climate in Rakhine state, especially with respect to cultivating fear among Buddhists. Moreover, the women emphasized that it was not just net denizens, but political and community leaders who were to blame for spreading false information.

While the young women in the focus group are more educated than the average Rakhine, especially in poorer rural areas, their memories provide a window into life in places like Bauthidaung and Sittwe before 2012, and corroborate Rohingya women's memories of the region.



Ma Ein Myo is 28, and recently finished an internship in Myitkyina. She didn't know any Muslims growing up in a rural village outside Rathedaung, as there were none living nearby. She goes on:

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

It is important to note that there were, of course, conflicts between the military and Rohingyas before 2012, yet Rakhine villages far from the northwest were unlikely to have been affected in the same way as those closer to Rohingya-majority communities.

Ma Ein Myo emphasized that Rohingyas, Myanmar Muslims, and Buddhists have become strangers, and that distance has led to fear and violence. Her observations and explanations of deteriorated ethnic relations also draw our attention to the material, violent, and long-lasting consequences of military-led mobility restrictions and internal imprisonment, in which communities who once knew each other become estranged and fearful.



While fear and distrust are most apparent to the Rakhine women, they did not directly mention the military as a source of fear, conflict, violence, or misinformation. This is an important departure from Muslim, and especially Rohingya, experiences of the military, the police, and other state actors.

Though one must keep in mind that simply resettling Rohingyas and Rakhines in the same neighborhood again will not solve all the problems between the two communities, women's perceptions and memories of sharing communal space point to the lasting damage inflicted by segregation. Rakhine women's memories of coexistence also show us the value of addressing not only discrimination and bias in the mind, but in physical space.

# CONCLUSION



Today, the memories, stories, and everyday experiences of Rohingya and Rakhine women reflect the historical interconnections and similarities between the two ethnic groups more than they reflect differences or distance between them. Practices of mutual aid, play, shared food and picnic culture, and, most importantly, peace, offer new tools for questioning dominant knowledge about “Buddhists” and “Muslims” in Rakhine state, as well as new understandings of the structures naturalize the subjugation of Muslim women in Myanmar as well as the exclusion of Rohingyas more broadly. Paying attention to Rohingya and Rakhine women’s memories of life before violence, their changing or unchanging relationships with people from different backgrounds, and their everyday, material experiences illuminates not only the complexity of relations between Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine – even a Na Sa Ka officer once picnicked with a little Rohingya girl- but also calls into question the narrative that Rohingyas and Rakhines are defined by eternal conflict and cultural incompatibility. Rohingyas and Rakhine Buddhists both belong in the Rakhine region, which is itself characterized by the hybridity, fluidity, and mobility of people, ideas, and practices.



The findings from this report highlight the importance of centering the experiences and memories of diverse women in Rakhine when designing peacebuilding solutions for the region and Myanmar more broadly. Without specific and place-based considerations of real people's views and cultural history in Rakhine state, policymakers and nonprofit actors risk imposing solutions that do not match the historical context of communities or the needs and desires of communities themselves. By taking women's memories and experiences seriously as a point of departure for policy recommendations, a status quo of cultural divides, bitterness, and violence becomes unusual, and a future in which peace is the status quo again becomes imaginable.

This report further highlights the need of participation of effective communities in peace processes. Memories of community and understanding demonstrate potential for renewed peace in Rakhine State. Through stories of both Rohingya and Rakhine women, it is also evident that women participation is necessary to bring about peaceful and effective change in Rakhine State.

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