

Silenced Anniversaries, Stateless Memories: Rohingya Women's Oral Histories as Counter-Commemoration

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Abstract

Anniversaries are powerful instruments of nation-building, political legitimacy and collective memory. Yet for stateless peoples like the Rohingya – systematically stripped of citizenship in Myanmar and forcibly displaced into refugee camps in Bangladesh – commemorative recognition remains structurally foreclosed. This article argues that the absence of formal recognition surrounding Rohingya suffering constitutes what I term an ‘invisible anniversary’: a politically produced silence that renders violence ongoing, ungrievable and internationally manageable. Drawing on twenty-four in-depth oral history interviews conducted across three phases (January–May 2025) and six narrative case studies, the article demonstrates that these women’s narratives function as counter-commemorative praxis – embodied acts of remembrance that resist temporal erasure and assert political claims to memory, justice and future-making. Theoretically, the article brings memory studies into dialogue with anticolonial feminist scholarship and International Relations, challenging state-centric approaches to commemoration by foregrounding stateless, gendered memory as a site of international political intervention. The analysis contributes to scholarship on memory politics, displacement and transnational justice by centring refugee

women's oral histories not as supplementary testimony but as epistemologically generative counter-archives.

Keywords: *invisible anniversary, counter-commemoration, Rohingya, oral history, statelessness, gendered memory, anticolonial feminism, international relations*

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Introduction

Anniversaries are not merely temporal markers. They are political acts – moments through which states, institutions and communities declare which pasts matter, which suffering deserves mourning and which histories are entitled to recognition. In International Relations (IR), commemorative practices have been extensively examined as instruments of nation-building, diplomatic signalling and post-conflict reconciliation (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Mälksoo 2009; Subotić 2019). Yet these analyses almost universally presume the existence of a sovereign subject capable of authorising memory: a state that selects, ritualises and institutionalises the past. What happens, then, when the subjects of violence are stateless, excluded from national commemorative time, and denied political recognition altogether?

The Rohingya – a Muslim minority community whose documented presence in Arakan (present-day Rakhine State, Myanmar) spans centuries (Ibrahim 2018; Lee 2021) – reveal a profound and largely unexamined gap in the politics of anniversaries. Stripped of citizenship under Burma's 1982 Citizenship Law and subjected to multiple waves of state-sponsored persecution culminating in the military 'clearance operations' of August 2017, which the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission (2018) characterised as carrying genocidal intent, more than one million Rohingya now live in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh – the world's largest refugee settlement – unrecognised as refugees and registered instead as 'Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals'. Despite widespread documentation of atrocities, ongoing proceedings at the International Court of Justice, and the largest single-country humanitarian operation in the world, Rohingya suffering remains uncommemorated within official national and international memory regimes. There is no recognised anniversary of their expulsion, no institutionalised ritual of mourning, no political closure marking an end to violence.

Drawing on twenty-four in-depth oral history interviews conducted across three phases and six narrative case studies with Rohingya refugee women in Cox's Bazar (January–May 2025), this article conceptualises this condition as an 'invisible anniversary': the systematic absence of commemorative recognition that does not merely reflect oversight but actively serves political interests – those of

the Myanmar state, of a humanitarian governance apparatus organised around emergency rather than accountability, and of an international order that struggles to extend recognition beyond sovereign subjects.

The article advances two interrelated arguments. First, the absence of commemoration is not merely symbolic but deeply political, shaping how violence is temporally organised and internationally governed. For Rohingya women, displacement is experienced not as a past event but as a continuous present – a condition of ongoingness produced by statelessness, encampment and the daily denial of rights. Second, Rohingya women's oral histories function as a form of counter-commemoration. Through embodied narratives of violence, displacement and survival, women produce alternative memory practices that contest erasure and articulate claims to justice, belonging and future-making beyond the state.

The article is structured as follows. The next (second) section develops the theoretical framework, situating the invisible anniversary within debates on memory politics, statelessness and anticolonial feminist oral history in IR. The third section details the anticolonial feminist methodology, including the three-phase fieldwork design, sampling, ethical protocols, the role of the female Rohingya interpreter-interlocutor, analytical approach and the researcher's positionality. The fourth section presents the empirical analysis as a continuous analytical narrative drawn from all twenty-four interviews and six case studies, moving across four interconnected dimensions: temporal refusal, embodied memory, suspended futurity and counter-commemorative narration. The fifth section draws together the transnational implications of these findings before concluding.

Memory politics, statelessness and anticolonial feminist oral history

This article is situated at the intersection of memory studies, International Relations and anticolonial feminist scholarship. Rather than treating anniversaries as neutral temporal markers, it approaches them as political practices through which authority, belonging and historical legitimacy are produced and, crucially, withheld. Three bodies of scholarship inform the theoretical framework developed here.

In memory studies, anniversaries have been theorised as key instruments through which political communities construct collective identity and stabilise narratives of the past. Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities highlights how commemorative rituals bind populations to shared histories, producing a sense of simultaneity and national belonging. Hobsbawm & Ranger's (1983) work on invented traditions reveals how such rituals are manufactured rather than organic, serving the interests of particular political formations. Maria Mälksoo's (2009) concept of mnemonic security extends this analysis into IR, showing how states manage memory to sustain ontological stability and project

historical legitimacy in international politics. Jelena Subotić (2019) examines how official memory can be instrumentalised in post-conflict settings to consolidate national narratives while suppressing inconvenient alternatives, revealing the deep entanglement of historical narrative with political power. Duncan Bell's (2003) account of mythscapes further illuminates how national memory operates through narrative coherence rather than historical accuracy, serving present political needs. Jenny Edkins's (2003) work on trauma and political memory, and Emma Hutchison's (2016) attention to affective communities in world politics, extend these insights to questions of how states respond – and fail to respond – to collective suffering.

These frameworks, however, share a fundamental limitation: they presume that memory circulates primarily through state institutions and that the subjects of commemoration are recognised members of national communities. As a result, experiences of violence that fall outside sovereign recognition – those of stateless refugees – are rendered structurally marginal or invisible. The invisible anniversary as theorised here is precisely this condition: the political production of absence, in which the non-commemoration of suffering is not accidental but functions to sustain existing power arrangements.

Statelessness is not only a legal condition but a temporal one. The denial of citizenship disrupts access to political futures and forecloses the possibility of historical closure. For stateless populations, violence is rarely framed as post-conflict, displacement is rarely understood as temporary, and time is experienced as suspended, repetitive and uncertain. This article conceptualises this condition as ongoingness – a temporal structure in which harm persists without recognition or resolution, destabilising anniversary politics by denying the capacity to designate historical beginnings and endings.

The Rohingya case makes this structural temporal exclusion unusually legible. The 1982 Burma Citizenship Law stripped the Rohingya of citizenship by requiring ancestral proof predating colonial Myanmar, legally erasing a community whose documented presence in Arakan stretches back centuries (Ibrahim 2018; Lee 2021). This legal erasure was not a single act but the codification of a longer project: Thawngmung (2016) and Wade (2017) have traced how decades of Burman ethnic nationalist ideology constructed the Rohingya as threatening 'Bengali' interlopers rather than indigenous inhabitants of Arakan, mobilising the apparatus of the post-colonial state – army, police, judiciary, citizenship law – against them. Major military operations expelled Rohingya in 1978 and 1991–92 before the largest expulsion of August 2017, which saw villages systematically burned, men executed and women subjected to mass sexual violence, with over 700,000 Rohingya crossing into Bangladesh within months (UN FFM 2018; Human Rights Watch 2017). Today, more than one million Rohingya in Cox's Bazar are registered not as refugees – Bangladesh is not a signatory to the 1951

Refugee Convention – but as ‘Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals’ (FDMN), a bureaucratic designation that further circumscribes their access to rights, formal employment, higher education and freedom of movement. For Rohingya women, the question ‘when did the violence begin?’ cannot be answered with 2017 alone. Their testimonies consistently situate recent events within a longer continuum of dispossession – one that stretches across generations and continues, in transformed forms, within the camps.

To analyse how stateless memory operates under conditions of ongoingness, the article draws on anticolonial feminist approaches to oral history. Feminist scholars have long argued that women’s narratives – particularly those of refugee women – are excluded from official archives and treated as supplementary to ‘authoritative’ accounts of conflict (Sayigh 1994; Abdo 2014). Anticolonial feminism further critiques how colonial and postcolonial power structures shape whose voices are deemed credible, legible or politically relevant (Abdo 2014; Lugones 2007). In this framework, oral history is not a method of extracting testimony but a relational and political practice. Women’s narratives are understood as epistemologically generative: they do not merely recount events but actively produce meaning about violence, survival and belonging. Rosemary Sayigh’s (1994, 2007) foundational work with Palestinian refugee women, and Nahla Abdo’s (2014) engagement with imprisoned Palestinian women, demonstrate how oral histories function as living archives – preserving collective memory where written records are absent or politically suppressed, and challenging masculinist, state-centric accounts of war that privilege strategic events over everyday lived harm.

Building on these insights, the article advances the concept of counter-commemoration to describe how marginalised subjects remember violence in the absence of official recognition. Counter-commemoration does not rely on sanctioned anniversaries or institutional rituals. It emerges instead through storytelling, testimony and collective narration that refuse erasure and insist on historical presence. For Rohingya women, oral history functions as a form of counter-commemorative praxis: by narrating violence as ongoing and structurally produced, women contest dominant memory regimes that fragment suffering into discrete events or depoliticised humanitarian crises. Crucially, this article does not romanticise oral history as inherently emancipatory. Counter-commemorative praxis emerges precisely because institutional recognition is absent. Women remember because no anniversary exists – not because oral history replaces the need for justice, acknowledgment or reparative practices. The concept names the political work that narration performs under conditions of statelessness; it does not celebrate it as sufficient.

Methodology: Anticolonial feminist oral history in the field

This article is grounded in anticolonial feminist oral history methodology, which I approach not merely as a research technique but as a counter-commemorative

praxis in itself. The choice of method is inseparable from the theoretical commitments outlined above: if Rohingya women's narratives are to be treated as epistemologically generative rather than supplementary, the research design must reflect that commitment at every level – from sampling and recruitment to the dynamics of the interview encounter and the ethics of translation.

Research design and phased fieldwork

Fieldwork was conducted in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, between January and May 2025, across three iterative phases totalling twenty-four oral history interviews and six additional narrative case studies – thirty participants in total. The phased design was deliberate: it enabled the interview instrument and approach to be refined between phases in response to emerging themes, participant comfort levels, and the emotional and ethical texture of prior encounters.

Phase 1 (January 2025) was a pilot phase involving six women across Camps 1W and 1E, designed to test the oral history guide, calibrate the emotional intensity of questions concerning sexual violence and family loss, and establish working relationships with Women-Friendly Space (WFS) staff and community networks. Phase 2 (February 2025) involved six additional women across Camps 3 and 8W, with a modified guide that deepened attention to temporal narration – how women situated their experiences in relation to both the longer history of persecution and their imagined futures. Phase 3 (March–May 2025) involved twelve women across Camps 4, 6, 8W, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 18, 19 and 20, deploying a matured instrument capable of sustaining extended, reflexive narrative conversations. The six case studies were collected separately at WFS sites in Camps 8W and 8E, using an open-ended, note-based format that allowed for life-history depth on particularly layered individual trajectories. All thirty participants are identified by pseudonym throughout. Participants ranged in age from nineteen to sixty years, came from multiple townships across Rakhine State (principally Buthidaung and Maungdaw), and included widows, married women, divorced women and single women across varied educational backgrounds, family structures and durations of displacement – from 2015 to as recently as 2024.

Sampling, recruitment and inclusion criteria

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, guided by an anticolonial feminist commitment to centring the diversity of lived experience among Rohingya refugee women rather than seeking statistical representativeness. Recruitment was conducted through established relationships with Women-Friendly Spaces, local NGO networks and informal community channels within the camps, in accordance with the ethical requirement to avoid recruitment pathways that could create coercion or compromise participant safety. Snowball referrals from

initial participants supplemented NGO-facilitated recruitment, consistent with established feminist oral history practice (Sayigh 1994; Gluck & Patai 1991).

Inclusion criteria were designed to ensure experiential diversity: current residence in designated camps (minimum six months); age eighteen to eighty; diverse marital status, education level, family composition and occupational background; and voluntary informed consent. Particular attention was given to ensuring participation of women who had survived gender-based violence, recognising both the centrality of this experience to the research questions and the ethical imperative to engage such participation with extraordinary care rather than to treat survivors as data sources.

The interpreter-interlocutor and the ethics of translation

A defining methodological dimension of this research was the sustained collaboration with a female Rohingya interpreter across all three phases of fieldwork. The interpreter was not a linguistic conduit: she was a cultural interlocutor, trust-builder and emotional co-presence whose role fundamentally shaped the interview encounter. Her presence enabled participants to speak with greater confidence – knowing their words would be carried not merely across languages but with fidelity to their cultural weight and emotional register. She also provided an anchor of safety that the researcher, as a non-Rohingya outsider, could not provide alone: a Rohingya woman among Rohingya women, whose own presence signalled that the encounter was not simply extractive.

The interpreter participated in pre-interview community sensitisation sessions and was trained on the research aims, ethical protocols and trauma-informed interviewing principles. Interviews were preceded, wherever possible, by informal visits to participants' homes or community spaces, allowing relationships to develop before formal recording began. Refreshments were provided and conversations were allowed to begin and end on participants' terms. Where participants showed signs of distress, interviews were paused or stopped. This was not a process of 'allowing women to tell their stories'; it was a sustained ethical and relational commitment to creating conditions in which narration was voluntary, supported and genuinely non-extractive – even as the researcher acknowledges that the asymmetries of the encounter can never be fully resolved.

Working with an interpreter also introduced irreducible methodological challenges. Subtle nuances of tone, metaphor, affect and embodied expression cannot fully survive translation. These limitations were addressed through collaborative transcription – with the researcher and interpreter reviewing recordings together and discussing questions of meaning, tone and cultural context – and through careful attention during interviews to non-verbal registers: trembling voices, pauses, tears, the gestures and silences that accompanied the most difficult testimonies. Wherever possible, these affective and embodied dimensions are docu-

mented alongside verbal content in the analysis below, following the feminist oral history insight that what is expressed through the body often carries more analytical weight than what is said in words (Allan 2018).

Ethical protocols

Research ethics clearance was granted by Carleton University's Research Ethics Board (CUREB) in June 2024, under the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2). Permission to conduct research within the camps was additionally obtained from Bangladesh's Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) and the Camp-in-Charge (CiC) of each relevant camp, as required by Bangladesh government regulations for research involving the registered Rohingya population. This dual ethics approval process – spanning the Canadian institutional level and the Bangladesh governmental regulatory level – reflects the specific complexity of conducting ethical research with stateless populations in a host-country regulatory environment.

Informed consent was obtained verbally and in writing prior to each interview, in Bangla and in the Rohingya dialect, with the consent form read aloud to accommodate varying literacy levels. For participants who could not or chose not to sign the form, oral consent was documented in the presence of an impartial witness, in keeping with REB-approved protocols for research with vulnerable populations. Participants were reminded at multiple points during longer interviews of their right to withdraw at any time, skip any question or stop the interview entirely without consequence. Compensation of BDT 500 per participant and refreshments were provided in recognition of participants' time.

The mental health risks inherent in this research were taken with the utmost seriousness. Many participants had survived sexual violence, witnessed the killing of family members, and experienced multiple displacements. Interviews were structured to begin with biographical and community questions before approaching experiences of violence, following trauma-informed sequencing. Participants were informed of available psychosocial support services – principally through Women-Friendly Spaces – at the outset of each interview, and referrals were facilitated where requested or where distress was evident. All transcripts were anonymised using pseudonyms, with identifying geographic details masked where necessary.

Data analysis

Data analysis proceeded through manual thematic coding, a choice consistent with the epistemological commitments of anticolonial feminist oral history methodology, which privileges immersive, relational engagement with narrative material over mechanised or software-assisted approaches. All twenty-four interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed collab-

oratively between the researcher and the interpreter, with iterative checking to ensure accuracy of meaning across Rohingya, Bangla and English. Translation was understood throughout as an interpretive act rather than a neutral transfer, and the researcher and interpreter regularly discussed nuances of cultural meaning and affective register before finalising transcriptions. The six case studies, collected as detailed field notes rather than audio recordings, were written up immediately following each encounter. Initial codes were generated inductively from close reading of the full dataset and refined through successive cycles of reading across all twenty-four interviews and six case studies. Codes were subsequently organised into the analytical themes that structure Section 4 – temporal refusal, embodied memory, suspended futurity and counter-commemorative narration – and tested across the full dataset for consistency and divergence.

Positionality

As a Bangladeshi-born feminist researcher, I occupied a position simultaneously inside and outside the research context – a positionality that shaped both the possibilities and the limits of the encounter. My Bangladeshi identity and fluency in Bangla provided practical advantages: familiarity with the broader social and political context of Cox's Bazar, ease of communication with camp administration and NGO personnel, and a degree of cultural proximity that contributed to rapport. My decade of prior NGO fieldwork with vulnerable women's communities in Bangladesh – including prior engagement with Rohingya people in Bangladesh – offered field familiarity and relationship-building capacity that were practically indispensable. My doctoral training in sociology and anthropology at Carleton University, under the supervision of Professor Nahla Abdo, shaped my theoretical commitments and my understanding of what it means to conduct research that is ethically accountable rather than merely ethically compliant.

At the same time, my positionality carried limitations and obligations that I take seriously. As a non-Rohingya researcher, I do not share the experience of statelessness, genocide or encampment. My capacity to leave the camps, to hold Canadian university affiliation, and to publish in international journals reflects precisely the asymmetries of recognition and access that this article examines. These asymmetries cannot be resolved; they can only be acknowledged openly, reflected upon continuously and accounted for in analytical practice. I maintained a reflexive field diary throughout all three phases of fieldwork, documenting not only observations but ethical dilemmas, emotional responses and evolving analytical insights. This diary informed the analysis and serves as an audit trail of reflexive accountability.

Invisible anniversaries: Rohingya women's testimonies as counter-commemorative praxis

The empirical analysis that follows builds an analytical narrative from the full dataset of twenty-four interviews and six case studies. Rather than treating individual testimonies as illustrations of pre-established theoretical claims, it allows the data to accumulate – moving across four analytically interconnected dimensions – to demonstrate how the condition of the invisible anniversary is lived, embodied and contested by Rohingya women in Cox's Bazar. The women whose voices anchor this analysis are not representational samples; they are witnesses whose narrations constitute, in themselves, the counter-commemorative practice that this article theorises.

The most consistent feature across all twenty-four interviews is a temporal refusal: a systematic rejection of the event-based chronology that structures official accounts of the Rohingya crisis. International humanitarian and governmental narratives tend to treat August 2017 as the originary moment – a discrete crisis that can be marked, responded to and, in principle, resolved. Women's testimonies refuse this framing with remarkable consistency, across participants from very different camps, townships and generations. For Rahima, a fifty-one-year-old widow in Camp rW who has lived in the camps for nearly eight years, the violence of 2017 was not a beginning: 'They took our nationality long before . . . and then everything followed.' She locates the roots of displacement not in a military operation but in the decades-long legal erasure that the 1982 Citizenship Law initiated, and in the everyday restriction of movement, education and religious practice that preceded mass expulsion. The clearance operation of 2017 is, in her account, not a crisis but an intensification – the most brutal episode in a pattern of persecution that has never formally ended.

This longitudinal framing is shared by participants across different arrival cohorts, underscoring that the invisible anniversary is not primarily about 2017 but about a structure of persecution that predates and outlasts any single date of international attention. Purnima, a sixty-year-old woman who arrived in 2015 – two years before the major 2017 influx – describes conditions in Myanmar that expose the inadequacy of a 2017 origin point: military battalions stationed inside Rohingya village schools for days at a time, requiring communities to feed and provision them on pain of violence, with children excluded from education entirely. 'The military lived in the schools, in every village's school . . . our children could not go to school.' Momota, a fifty-three-year-old camp volunteer who arrived in 2017, frames the escalation as beginning in 2015 with systematic livestock theft, arbitrary arrests and sexual harassment that intensified over two years before the August operations. And Papri, who arrived as recently as 2024 after renewed violence by both the Myanmar Junta and the Arakan Army, embodies the continuation of the crisis into the present: her testimony is a living refutation

of the assumption that 2017 marked any kind of closure. The Arakan Army – the Rakhine Buddhist militant force that now controls significant territory in Rakhine State – perpetrated the same patterns of sexual violence, house burning and mass displacement against which earlier participants fled, demonstrating what Thawnghmung (2016) and Wade (2017) analyse as the structural persistence of anti-Rohingya ethnic nationalism regardless of which actor controls the territory.

The administrative category under which Rohingya live in Bangladesh is itself a mechanism of the invisible anniversary. When Rahima observes that ‘in Myanmar, they denied our identity as Rohingya. Here, we are called FDMN, and still we face many challenges’, she articulates with precision how bureaucratic naming performs temporal erasure. The designation ‘Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals’ severs displacement from the political history of persecution, reframing a consequence of state-sponsored genocide as a logistical status. Without refugee recognition, and without citizenship on either side of the border, Rohingya women inhabit a permanent administrative present: neither past nor resolved, neither historicised nor politically legible. The invisible anniversary is thus not simply the absence of a commemorative date. It is the structural denial of historical continuity – the political organisation of violence into perpetual ungrievability.

Against this structure of erasure, women’s bodies carry the history that institutions refuse to commemorate. What feminist oral historians call embodied memory (Allan 2018) – memory inscribed in the body rather than organised through linear chronology – is not a metaphor in this dataset. It is a physical and ongoing reality. Across the twenty-four interviews, all participants disclosed direct or proximate experiences of sexual violence perpetrated by Myanmar military personnel and Rakhine Mogh (now organising as the Arakan Army). The consistency and pattern of these accounts speak not to individual incidents but to the systematic, organised mass rape that the UN Fact-Finding Mission (2018) documented across Rakhine State and characterised as carrying genocidal intent. Reading these testimonies together – as the analysis requires – produces an account of sexual violence that no single institutional report has captured from the inside.

Mahjabeen, a forty-three-year-old woman from Buthidaung Township, describes what happened at 8 AM on a morning in 2017 at her home. Four military personnel and five Rakhine Mogh arrived at her compound. Her mother-in-law attempted to intervene when they took Mahjabeen; the military shot and killed her mother-in-law in front of her. Her husband ran from the hill above their house to help; he was beaten so severely that his mobility has been permanently impaired. Mahjabeen was raped by two soldiers for more than twenty minutes while her hands were bound. ‘I almost died because I was not able to breathe’, she states. ‘I almost died from the heavy bleeding caused by the rape. I am still suffering greatly from it.’ The ongoing pain she carries – the limitation on what her

body can carry and do, the chronic physical consequences of gang rape – is not background context. It is central evidence of the invisible anniversary's reality: a body that cannot forget what no official calendar marks.

Mollika, forty-five years old, from Tulatuli village in northern Maungdaw Township – one of the sites most extensively documented in Human Rights Watch (2017) and UN FFM (2018) reports on the 2017 massacres – narrates a scale of violence against which the language of crisis is wholly inadequate. Of her family of nineteen, seventeen were killed: her husband, her two young sons aged three and five, her parents, her parents-in-law, three brothers-in-law and four sisters-in-law with their children. She was raped by two military personnel in a paddy field, losing consciousness from the assault. She later discovered she had become pregnant from the rape; the pregnancy ended in miscarriage during medical treatment in Chattogram hospital. Eight years later, she says: 'When I cough, I feel pain in my abdomen even now. Because of their rape, I still have pain between my legs. I cannot even carry a water pot.' This statement names with biological precision the way that genocidal violence persists in the body long after the event, making the body itself a kind of living archive that refuses the narrative closure of 'post-conflict'. Her body is where the invisible anniversary is held.

Mohona, thirty-two years old and six months pregnant at the time of her assault, was taken by soldiers to a police station after they beat her and her husband at their home while searching for a named suspect. After hours of interrogation and deprivation of food and water, a soldier raped her at night, pressing his knee into her pregnant abdomen throughout the assault. She lost consciousness and woke not knowing where she was or how much time had passed. She describes the physical aftermath – the inability to walk or speak, the blood, the starvation of two days – in careful detail. But the analytical dimension of her testimony that the data demand attention to is what happened after: her husband, throughout their subsequent years in the camp, blamed her for the assault. 'When he beat me, he called me a bad girl, scolding me with the name of the violence. Sometimes he shamed me in front of others.' The state violence did not end with the assault. It was reproduced – by the husband, by the community – in ways that transferred shame from perpetrator to survivor, ultimately ending her marriage. This is how embodied memory becomes ongoing social harm: violence inscribed in the body produces social stigma that compounds the original injury.

This pattern of spousal rejection, social stigma and community exclusion following rape appears with striking regularity across the dataset. Bipasha, a nineteen-year-old woman who survived gang rape while being trafficked toward Malaysia, describes how her neighbours discuss her assault openly and how this community commentary has blocked marriage proposals: 'They see me as a "survivor of gang rape"; that is why they have reduced their communication with me, and even with my whole family.' Mohona was divorced by her husband because

she had been raped, then told she was a 'bad girl' for having been assaulted: 'He hates me because the military raped me in Myanmar.' Morjina notes that she knows of two women whose husbands divorced them specifically because they had survived rape. Fortify Rights (2018) has documented how the stigmatisation of rape survivors constitutes a secondary form of gender-based violence in Rohingya communities – one that extends the genocidal project of destroying community cohesion through the bodies of women into the domestic sphere and interpersonal relationships. The invisible anniversary operates not only at the level of international memory regimes but within the most intimate dimensions of survivors' lives.

The case studies from Women-Friendly Spaces in Camps 8W and 8E concentrate these dynamics in particularly layered individual trajectories. Yasmin arrived at Camp 8W five months prior to the case study encounter. Her husband had been killed, her home burned, and she had been raped by soldiers during the same operation. She arrived in Bangladesh having crossed through her brother-in-law's network, discovered she was pregnant from the assault, sought a medical abortion at five months (with severe complications), and spent months in a state of suicidal crisis before being referred to the WFS. She had no ration card – she was not officially registered in the camp – meaning she depended on her cousin's family for food while recovering from medical complications. Her case illustrates with painful concreteness how the biological consequences of genocidal rape continue to unfold long after the immediate violence, requiring a continuum of medical, psychosocial and material support that camp infrastructure cannot reliably provide. Salma's case documents a different but connected dimension of ongoing violence: a thirty-five-year-old woman who, after sending her disabled son to safety to protect him from armed group conscription, was gang-raped on multiple occasions by criminal networks operating within the camp. The structural vulnerability that statelessness produces – no legal status, no economic options, no protection mechanisms – created conditions in which violence against her was not merely possible but systematically predictable. These case studies are not exceptional; they are the concentrated expression of structural conditions that all thirty women in this study navigate.

The suspension of futurity is the third dimension through which the invisible anniversary is lived and contested. Across all twenty-four interviews, camp life is narrated as a condition of temporal stagnation – of time that does not move toward resolution or recovery, but simply accumulates. Rahima's description of daily life captures this with stark economy: 'There are no better days for us; every day is filled with hardship and uncertainty.' Salma, a thirty-two-year-old widowed mother of four who travels eight to nine kilometres daily to work in potato and chili fields outside the camp, describes the same reality from a position of relentless physical labour: 'We are surviving by enduring, as we have no other option.'

The verb 'enduring' recurs across testimonies – not adapting, not recovering, not building, but enduring. It names precisely the temporal condition of ongoingness: not a past that has been processed but a present that has simply continued.

Education emerges across the dataset as the most concentrated site where this suspension of futurity is felt. Women repeatedly connect the inadequacy of camp education to the long-term foreclosure of their children's possibilities. Rahima articulates the aspiration with painful clarity: 'Our children have access to learning centres, but the quality is very poor . . . I want education where they can have hope and dreams.' Mahjabeen, whose two daughters attend the camp Learning Centre, expresses a mother's hope with an awareness of its fragility:

I have a dream that my daughters will be good lawyers in the future, and then they can both advocate and work for our people and our motherland, Arakan. I am trying to provide them with education, but I cannot provide it properly, as everything for us in the camp is limited. I do not know how I will make my dream come true.

The economic dimensions of this suspension are equally significant. Most participants subsist entirely on WFP rations, which are widely described as insufficient. Papia, a thirty-year-old mother of six whose fifteen-year-old son works as a tea-shop assistant in a nearby market to help support the family, describes the impossible arithmetic of camp survival: 'We are both always struggling to educate them, even if it means we do not eat good food.' Purnima, a sixty-year-old widow who sells vegetables door-to-door in her block to fund her son's private tutoring, describes going to relatives to beg for tuition money: 'I even went to Teknaf to beg.' The figure of a sixty-year-old woman begging across towns to keep her son in school carries within it the entire weight of what statelessness means: no employment rights, no formal economic participation, no institutional safety net beyond rations. These are not stories of passive victimhood. They are accounts of women who understand, with precision, that education is the mechanism through which their children might eventually be able to make claims on a future – and who are working, with whatever minimal resources they have, to keep that possibility alive.

The camp's physical environment compounds this temporal stagnation. The shelters – bamboo and tarpaulin structures – are overcrowded, fire-prone and vulnerable to landslides. Women describe camps in which one hundred families share two toilets; in which collecting water after dark is the only option because daytime collection is unsafe; in which kidnapping by armed groups is a daily fear for both children and adults. Madina, a twenty-nine-year-old WFS volunteer, describes the impossibility of allowing her children outside: 'Our shelter is at the top of the hill. If our children go outside, they may slip during the rainy season . . . there are many kidnappers roaming in the camp.' These conditions are nar-

rated not as exceptional crises but as the ordinary structure of camp life – which is precisely the point. Humanitarian temporality frames the camps as spaces of temporary protection awaiting future resolution. Women's narratives refuse this framing. They describe camps as permanently insecure environments in which 'emergency' has become the baseline condition of existence. This is ongoingness at its most material: violence that has been spatially relocated but not ended.

Against these conditions of temporal stagnation and embodied harm, the counter-commemorative dimensions of narration emerge with analytical clarity – the fourth dimension of this analysis. Women narrate not only to recount the past but to assert its political significance and to resist its erasure. Rahima's formulation, 'Our violence is not forgetting', is the most grammatically precise statement of counter-commemorative intent in the dataset. It is not 'we have not forgotten our violence' (retrospective recall), nor is it 'we will never forget' (future commitment). It is a present continuous construction: violence that is, in this moment, not-forgetting – actively persisting, refusing the closure that the invisible anniversary would impose. Memory here is not an archive consulted but a lived condition, and narrating it is one of the ways in which that condition is sustained, transmitted and made politically legible.

Many women frame their testimonies explicitly as obligations to future generations. Mahjabeen's hope that her daughters will become lawyers who can 'advocate and work for our people and our motherland, Arakan' positions the narrative of violence she shares with the researcher as a form of political transmission – a counter-archive being built for future use. Momota, who volunteers with a camp disaster management unit, articulates this forward orientation directly:

I want to educate my children so that they can understand what is good and what is bad for them, and so they can survive easily after our return to our motherland – so they can raise their voices against the injustice.

The temporal structure of these statements is significant: the testimonies being given now are oriented toward a future in which Rohingya will have returned to Myanmar with their rights, and in which today's daughters and sons will be equipped to make claims on that future. This intergenerational dimension of counter-commemoration is its most politically significant feature: it positions oral testimony not as the end of a process of bearing witness but as the beginning of one.

The invocation of international legal instruments represents this counter-commemorative orientation at its most politically developed. Multiple women in the dataset referenced the ICJ proceedings explicitly and with precision. Rahima states: 'We complained to the ICJ. We will return to Myanmar after the cases are resolved. We will return with our rights.' This statement does several things

simultaneously. It situates her oral testimony within a legal framework in which narrating violence has formal juridical consequences and can accumulate into evidence. It refuses the framing of displacement as an indefinite humanitarian condition. And it insists on a future of return organised not around humanitarian mercy but around rights – citizenship, dignity, legal recognition. This is counter-commemoration in its most politically developed form: not merely remembering violence but directing that memory toward a specific, institutionally legible claim on justice. Within the camps, counter-commemoration also operates through the everyday infrastructures of community life and, in some cases, through direct institutional engagement. Madina, who used the legal channels available within the camp to obtain a divorce from an abusive husband – filing her complaint with the Camp-in-Charge and navigating the BLAST (Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust) office – demonstrates how narration translates into legal action: her narration of abuse was not background to a legal process; it was the legal process. In this micro-example, oral testimony functioned as what this article theorises it to be: a political intervention, not merely a record.

Taken together across these four dimensions – the temporal refusal of event-based chronology, the embodied inscription of genocidal violence, the suspension of futurity in camp life, and the counter-commemorative orientation of narration itself – the twenty-four interviews and six case studies demonstrate that Rohingya women in Cox's Bazar are active political subjects performing commemorative labour that no institution performs on their behalf. Their oral histories do not seek inclusion within existing commemorative frameworks. They unsettle the foundations of anniversary politics by refusing closure, foregrounding ongoingness, and insisting on recognition as a matter of justice rather than ritual. The invisible anniversary names the structure they are contesting. Counter-commemoration names what they are doing about it.

Implications and conclusion: Towards a politics of stateless memory in International Relations

The analysis above carries implications that extend beyond the Rohingya case, demanding a reorientation of how International Relations conceptualises commemoration, memory and the politics of historical recognition. Three areas of implication deserve attention.

First, the case compels IR to take seriously the transnational dimensions of counter-commemorative practice. The oral histories analysed here do not remain within the camps. They circulate – through legal proceedings, humanitarian documentation, diaspora networks and global advocacy. The Gambia's 2019 case against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice, alleging violations of the Genocide Convention, represents one of the few institutional mechanisms through which Rohingya suffering has been formally named at an international

level. Rohingya women's awareness of and engagement with these proceedings – expressed consistently across the dataset, not as general sentiment but as specific knowledge of the proceedings and their significance – demonstrates that counter-commemorative narration is already transnational in orientation before it reaches any international forum. International law functions here not only as an accountability mechanism but as a transnational memory regime: one that records, names and may eventually adjudicate violence that the perpetrating state seeks to deny. Yet feminist and postcolonial scholars have rightly cautioned that such translation is never neutral: international courts can amplify marginalised voices while simultaneously narrowing complex experiences of violence into juridical categories that privilege certain forms of harm over others (Abdo 2014). The gap between what women narrated in interviews and what is cognisable within ICJ proceedings is a gap this article cannot close – but it must name.

Second, the case exposes the political temporality of humanitarian governance. International funding for Cox's Bazar is organised around annual donor cycles, crisis narratives and the logic of short-term emergency response rather than long-term historical responsibility. As WFP rations have been cut repeatedly in recent years due to funding shortfalls, women in the camps experience the material consequences of this humanitarian temporality directly in their bodies – in insufficient food, in children sent to work, in the impossible calculations of a sixty-year-old widow begging across towns to fund a tuition fee. This humanitarian temporality reinforces the invisible anniversary: violence is managed but not formally remembered; survival is provisionally ensured but political recognition is deferred. Women's narratives repeatedly contest this framing – by articulating displacement as ongoing and historically rooted, by connecting present suffering to past and continuing state violence that humanitarian governance obscures, and by demanding accountability rather than assistance. Rohingya women's counter-commemorative testimonies are, in this sense, a critique of the humanitarian order not from outside it but from within its administrative boundaries.

Third, and most broadly, the Rohingya case calls for a fundamental rethinking of anniversary politics in IR. The field's dominant frameworks presume a sovereign subject capable of authorising memory: a state that selects which pasts to mark, mourn or celebrate. Rohingya women's oral histories – produced by subjects who are recognised by no state, commemorated in no national calendar, and governed by an international system that manages rather than remembers their suffering – expose the profound exclusions embedded in this assumption. Diaspora communities, including the significant Rohingya diaspora in Canada, the United States and Europe, function as transnational memory carriers, linking localised experiences of violence to international norms, institutions and publics, and ensuring that the invisible anniversary does not simply disappear into humanitarian management. Counter-commemoration, as demonstrated across

the preceding analysis, is not a supplement to institutional memory-making. For stateless populations, it is its only available form. Recognising it as a legitimate and politically consequential mode of international memory practice requires IR to move beyond state-centred frameworks toward what might be called a politics of stateless memory – one that takes seriously the commemorative labour performed by those who fall outside the sovereign structures through which historical recognition is normally organised.

This article has argued that the absence of commemorative recognition for Rohingya suffering constitutes an invisible anniversary: a political condition through which violence is rendered ongoing, ungrievable and administratively manageable within international memory regimes. Drawing on twenty-four oral history interviews conducted across three phases and six case studies with Rohingya refugee women in Cox's Bazar – women who carry in their bodies, their testimonies and their everyday acts of narration the accumulated weight of genocide, statelessness, displacement and continued insecurity – the analysis has demonstrated how stateless, gendered memories disrupt state-centred temporalities that rely on closure, resolution and post-conflict narratives.

The concept of the invisible anniversary advances memory studies and International Relations in several ways. It names the political production of absence rather than treating non-commemoration as oversight. It centres statelessness as a temporal condition – not merely a legal one – that forecloses the very possibility of historical closure. And it repositions oral history not as a method for accessing subaltern voices but as a counter-commemorative praxis through which marginalised subjects perform the commemorative labour that institutions refuse to perform on their behalf.

For Rohingya women, speaking is not a supplement to justice – it is the practice of justice under conditions in which no other form is available. Rahima speaks because no anniversary exists. Mollika bears witness to the loss of seventeen family members because no institutional memory regime has yet named them. Mahjabeen articulates her dream of daughters who will become lawyers because she understands that the future of her community depends on its capacity to claim recognition – legally, politically, historically – in the present. These are not passive testimonies. They are political interventions: counter-anniversaries that recur relationally, through conversation, care and the transmission of memory across generations, insisting on historical presence in a global order that otherwise renders their suffering invisible.

Attending to such invisible anniversaries compels International Relations to rethink how memory, violence and belonging are produced and withheld beyond the boundaries of sovereignty and official time. It also compels those of us who conduct and publish research with stateless populations to reflect seriously on what it means to receive such testimonies – what obligations that

reception creates, and what our scholarly act of commemoration owes to the counter-commemorative labour of the women who made it possible. As Rahima reminded me during our interview: 'Our violence is not forgetting.' Ensuring that it is not forgotten in scholarly and political spheres is the minimum that counter-commemorative research can offer in return.



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