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BIRANGONA

TOWARDS ETHICAL TESTIMONIES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE DURING CONFLICT

NAYANIKA MOOKHERJEE
AND
NAJMUN NAHAR KEYA
This graphic novel and guideline is based on the research findings in Nayanika Mookherjee’s book [The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War of 1971. Durham: Duke University Press (2015); Delhi: Zubaan Books (2016)]. What was and is still unprecedented about Bangladesh is that there was no silence about wartime rape of the 1971 war unlike other instances of sexual violence during wars. Instead, there was a public memory of wartime rape as evidenced in the government declaration in 1971 of women raped to be referred to as birangonas (meaning brave women). Nayanika’s research ethnographically examines the testimonies of survivors, state officials, human rights activists as well as archival sources, visual and literary representations. Most of the research in this area focuses on highlighting the testimonies of violence only.

Interviews with survivors show that with the focus on documentation of the experiences of wartime rape:
(i) inadequate attention is paid to the conditions under which such testimonies are recorded.
(ii) As a result, ethical practices of documentation can be flouted by journalists, human rights activists, government officials, NGO personnel, researchers in their pursuit of recording wartime rape.
(iii) Hence, survivors can experience a double set of transgression in the very process of testifying to their violent experiences during wars.
(iv) Hence, there can emerge a critical disconnect between survivors needs and transitional justice processes.


For further information about this project and for printed copies of the graphic novel, please contact Nayanika Mookherjee (ethical.testimonies.svc@durham.ac.uk).

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Grandmother had another nightmare

thud   thud
thud   thud

Knock Knock Knock

I will give my life but not my honour

THUD THUD THUD THUD

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK
Labony's School Project

"Nanu, are you sleeping?"

What's up Nanu? Why are you sweating so much?

Nothing. I am not feeling very well and feeling a bit sad.

I remembered lots of horrific things and many of my friends.

I have nightmares of our friends. Maybe by telling you the story of your friends' may be you might feel a bit better.

I wanted to talk to you about my school project. All the 12-year-old children in my school has been asked to write about the memory of the Bangladesh War of 1971 that exists in the family. Why don't you tell me the story of your friends? Maybe by telling me you might feel a bit better?

Why were you calling me, Labony dearest?

\* A maternal grandmother is referred to as Nani or affectionately Nanu among Muslim families in Bangladesh. It is also used among Hindu and Muslim families in some other parts of South Asia.
We also had a huge loss in the war of 1971.

Maybe. I am 72 years old now and we are all slowly passing away. Just a few days ago Maleka Begum died before that in early 2018 Ferdousy Priyobhashini died.

Whenever I get this news I feel really bad.

Loss? What do you mean by loss?

We also had a huge loss in the war of 1971.
It has been 47 years. Bangladesh honoured women who were raped during the war of 1971 and tried to rehabilitate them.

Yes, it is 16th December 1971.

I have read about our liberation struggle and the war of 1971 in the school history books.

It is a long story from 47 years ago. Then we were East Pakistan.

After a nine month war with West Pakistan, East Pakistan became Bangladesh.

Do you know the date?

Yes, it is 16th December 1971.

You might not have read in school history books that on 23rd December 1971 (7 days after the war ended), the government made an announcement. The Home Minister, Jonab Kamruzzaman declared that all women and girls who were raped by the West Pakistan army and local East Pakistani collaborators will be referred to as birangonas (brave women).

When Bangobondhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh) was released from his imprisonment in Pakistan in January 1972, he returned to Bangladesh and said birangonas are my mothers and sisters.

* Bangladesh War of 1971/Liberation War
Bangladesh is the only country which has till date honoured women raped during the war of 1971

Has any other country in the world honoured women who were raped during conflicts?

Sad! In most wars, women have been raped. In some wars, men too have been raped.

But Bangladesh is the only country which has till date honoured women raped during the war of 1971.

That’s amazing!

We ourselves don’t know about this in Bangladesh. What happened to the birangonas after the war?

After the war, many of the birangonas got help from the government rehabilitation centres. Many were pregnant and underwent abortion. Children were put up for international adoption by the government. Other birangonas were married off; given government jobs, vocational training.

Most of the women didn’t want to marry; they wanted to work first. Many of them were working in these government jobs and have only taken retirement recently.

Yes, my darling. This photograph was taken in the rehabilitation centre in 1972. Here the Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is with birangonas along with the poet Sufia Kamal and the MP Boqruressa Ahmad.

Photograph by Roshid Talukdar
After the war we get to know about the birangonas in stories, novels, films, plays and photographs.

HOW DO WE GET TO KNOW ABOUT BIRANGonas?
THEY ARE THERE IN HISTORY BOOKS AS A MERE MENTION: "THAT THE HONOUR OF 200,000 MOTHERS AND SISTERS HAVE BEEN LOST."

FOR THE LAST 47 YEARS WE HAVE LEARNT ABOUT BIRANGonas IN STORIES, NOVELS, FILMS, RESEARCH DOCUMENTS,*

PHOTOGRAPhS TAKEN BY JOURNALISTS AND NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHERS.

*See full references of cited work and films on Page 40.
Hena was part of an Oral History Project which was collecting testimonies of Birangonas. They are all slowly passing away.

*Ammu*  
Meaning Mother.

Amma,
Labony sorry I got late coming back from Dhaka University.

I got some tea and snacks.

Ahh good!  
I forgot about tea as I and Labony were deep in conversation.

What were you chatting about?

Nanu had nightmares during her afternoon nap.

I got some tea and snacks.

Were you talking about your...  
I mean Birangonas?

I was telling her about my Birangona friends.

Yes,
Ferdousy Priyobhashini just died in early 2018.

Ferdousy Priyobhashini was a famous sculptor right?

Not just her.  
Rajubala De, Chandao Marma, Maleka Begum, everyone is dying.
The common assumption about the lives of birangonas in the post-conflict context

How were their lives after the war Nanu?

What has happened to her? Who has done this?

Who are the Invader Army?

Many of them were physically and psychologically affected by what happened to them during the war. Most of the time society did not accept them. I have heard many of their husbands left them, their families did not support them.

They became mute because of their shame.

Yes, one day I overheard a group of 12-13 year old children talking among themselves in front of this photograph in the museum.

What has happened to her? Who has done this?

Pakistani Military

The Invader Army

Mute like that photograph of the birangona with the hair covering her face? Which is there in the Liberation War Museum?

Photographical Ref. by Nabuddin Ahmed
Many of the Birangonas are with their family

Yes, Ammu. But all of them were not ostracised by their families and society. Many live with their families till today.

They have husbands, extended family, in-laws. They have been through a turbulent time after they were raped during the war. But not all of them have been socially ostracised.

Many of them today have their names in the government’s official gazette and receive monthly pensions since 2015.

Why don’t you tell us some of their stories, Ammu?

Labony, you know about the well known sculptor Ferdousy Priyobhashini?
I will give my life but not my honour.

MOYNA KARIM (ANNONYMISED): A LANDLESS RURAL WOMAN
During the war she was raped by the Pakistani army in the courtyard of her own home. She was cutting fish when she was captured. Holding on to the wooden pole of her house she thought, “I would give my life but not my honour.” After the war her husband took on the responsibility of cutting fish and after her son got married this job was passed onto her daughter-in-law. Moyna hasn’t cut fish since the war. Holding onto the wooden pole of her house she says that the pole is the witness to her event. Whenever she sees this pole she clearly sees the events of that day. In 1992 Moyna gave witness against the war criminals at the People’s Court. Today she is appealing to the government to give jobs to her sons and daughters.

CHAYA RANI DUTTA (ANNONYMISED): A SEX WORKER
During the war Chaya’s mother died and Chaya became alone and vulnerable. Taking advantage of this vulnerability, local collaborators in her village gang raped her. Chaya feels sad when thinking of her mother as she feels her mother would have protected her and she wouldn’t have been raped. She was good in mathematics and hence after the war she started a business of supplying potatoes to restaurants. Sometime later she decided to take up sex work herself. She follows both Hindu and Muslim religions. As a result of the rapes she had a girl, a war baby who is today 46 years old.

SHIREEN AHMED (ANNONYMISED): HAD A GOVERNMENT JOB
During the war, she witnessed her husband being killed by the Pakistani army. She was also pregnant. The military raped her and she lost her baby. After the war she married a cousin but she always loves her first husband and can’t keep his photograph at home. Her second husband does not like it and is jealous of her love for her childhood sweetheart – her deceased first husband. Hence, she kept the photograph of her first husband in her cupboard at work. A few years ago she retired from her job.

FERDOUSY PRIYOBHASHINI: SCULPTOR
During the war of 1971, Pakistani military and her colleagues at work raped her for many months. She had to go to work as she was responsible for the sustenance of her widowed mother and young siblings. After the war she was mistakenly referred to as a collaborator by her neighbours. As a result, she and her husband (who was a liberation fighter) had to constantly change their home and cities to escape these rumours. Only in 1999 she told her daughter about 1971. She used to say, “If the end of your finger is touched without your consent, the finger would burn. Imagine how it would feel if it is the rest/whole of your body.” Her story and sculptures inspired many in Bangladesh, particularly the younger generation. She died in March 2018.

During the war Morjina’s brother was going away to fight. He had recently married.

Look after my wife, elder sister.

When the Pakistani military came to their house, Morjina hid her sister-in-law and another beautiful cousin and put herself forward.

Where are the women in the house? Set into the jeep outside. I am here, you can take me.

For four months, every night a military jeep came to pick her up to be raped and dropped her back in the morning.

After the war neighbours referred to her as a collaborator and so she left for Dhaka to find work.

The military took me by force but they got nothing from me.

She married, had children, later got separated from her husband and today her children have government jobs. She worked as a cleaner in a government hospital and has recently retired.

Don’t go Morjina. I have to go or they will find the other women.

Send Morjina.

When I heard we were called birangonas I did not tell anyone but I glowed with pride.

How to carry out interviews with birangonas?

I am feeling very sad after hearing these stories.

The consequence of wartime sexual violence is varied in everyone’s life.

How did you find them after 47 years?

How did the government add their names to the gazette so that they get their pensions.

Since the 1990s oral history projects were set up to collect their testimonies. Many of us conducted these interviews.

Ammu’s experiences during the war also inspired me to carry out these interviews.

Who took their photographs, recorded their testimonies and in due course that has become part of the government gazette.

Don’t be sad darling. The sexual violence during the war did not stop their flow of life.

Think about this.
To work on such sensitive issues, a clear set of ethical guidelines is needed.

How did you researchers as well as those working on behalf of the government collect these testimonies, carry out these interviews?

This is a very difficult task.

A mistake on the part of the researchers could be disastrous for the birangonas.

I also want to know about this.

This is a very sensitive matter...

Actually we needed to take more time with our preparation. That way we could have avoided many unfortunate situations.

To work on such sensitive issues a clear set of ethical guidelines is absolutely needed.

Let me then tell what I think is needed for an ethical guideline.

In the future I also want to work on these themes.

The guideline you are referring to - what should they include? What should we do and what should we not do to gather testimonies of birangonas?
Before the Testimonial Process

GUIDELINE 1: Have you prepared adequately for these testimonies?
There needs to be intensive preparation before one starts gathering testimonies among survivors of wartime sexual violence. For this, what is indispensable is a background training, reflection on the need for/purpose of testimonies, a study of other secondary sources and avoidance of research fatigue among survivors.

GUIDELINE 2: Whose testimonies are being focused on?
It is ethically important to focus on those survivors who voluntarily come forward to give testimonies. The objective of the testimonies, how they would be used, who they would be read/heard by, what are the possible consequences of giving testimonies—these should be discussed with survivors.
GUIDELINE 3: Have you thought of how the positions of the researcher (gender, age, class, experience) affect the interviews? The questions one asks should be thought through.

Women researchers working on this sensitive topic can work with both men and women.
During the Testimonial Process

GUIDELINE 4: Have you done a risk assessment before interviewing survivors?
Instead of relying on gatekeepers, intermediaries, interpreters and translators, survivors should be asked whether they would be willing to speak.

We need to ask the survivors whether they would be willing to speak.

Once I made a big mistake.

My mother is a birangona. She will give an interview to you.

I will not say anything. If I do, then they would put me on a stage and ask me to talk about my event of 1971. And then my younger son would not give me rice.

That means her younger son has a livelihood and looks after her and her elder son did not so her younger son’s opinion was more important for her than to be honoured as a birangona.

Then how do we undertake risk assessment?

We need to ask the survivors whether they would be willing to speak.

Can we speak to you?
GUIDELINE 5: Do you have enough time for these testimonies?
Interviews need to be conducted with adequate time so that survivors can give their testimonies (if they wish to) in accordance with the time and place that suits them. Their context is the priority.

I am in a rush and need to catch a bus. Tell me quickly what happened in 1971.

With such little time, we cannot develop a relationship with survivors. How would it be possible to do these interviews?

Absolutely, also remember it is not easy to talk about, recall these horrific accounts.

Interviews need to be conducted with adequate time and not be rushed.

Once I sat through a cold winter’s night in a barn and talked with a brangona survivor. We went to sleep at 4 AM.

I can speak to you now in peace. There are too many people during the day. Can’t speak about the words in my heart, about my incident then.

To understand the socio-economic contexts of survivors we need to talk to their family members and wider community, if possible.

It is necessary to establish relationships of trust and empathy with survivors.
Trust is generated through warm, everyday relationships with survivors.

You don’t know how to eat sugar cane.
Let me teach you.

Since you have learnt how to hold a goat, let me take your photo in the mustard fields by the river.

Are you enjoying this?
Yes, I am loving it.

That day I hid in this pond.
Oh! Are you feeling OK?

We worry about you travelling alone to do this work.
You need to put some oil in your hair to cool it.
We need to examine various secondary documents to understand historical/political/economic contexts in the area and across time.

**GUIDELINE 5: Do you have enough time for these testimonies?**
Understand the local politico-economic contexts and establish a relationship of trust before interviews. Interview other survivors in the area. This makes the birangonas less conspicuous and could mitigate jealousies from others towards them.

**To do the interviews you don’t need to stay in the village and you won’t need more than one week.**
Stay in a town accommodation and go to the village and do interviews.

**Why did the Pakistani army come to this area and commit the rapes during the war?**
Many refugees and liberation fighters were here because of the river. The Pakistani army were after them and hence came here.

**After the war, the land of the Hindus and the poor were taken over by the rich and powerful in the area. So they lost out during the war because of rape and after the war because of deception by the powerful.**

**How would one understand the situation of the birangonas without staying in the area?**

**Not only that if you don’t stay in the area...**

We will not get to know about the local political and economic contexts. So alongside the birangonas it is important to interview other survivors and liberation fighters of the war in the area. This makes the birangonas less conspicuous and also avoids others getting jealous of all the attention on the survivors of sexual violence.

**Oh look! It shows in the land documents that after the war most of the land in the village is owned by the rich, powerful family.**

Before the testimonial Process
During and After the Testimonial Process

GUIDELINE 6: Have you secured meaningful informed consent at every instance?
During the process of collecting testimonies with survivors, ethical decision-making has to be undertaken repeatedly.

Avoid entering personal spaces without permission for the purpose of interviews. Avoid making any assurances and false promises to survivors of sexual violence.

Any invitation to ceremonies honouring birangonas should prioritise the perspectives of survivors of sexual violence.

The search for testimonies and interviews should not harm the survivors, not put them at risk. If they are taken to ceremonies meant to be honouring them, their narratives and images videoed, photographed and published in newspapers – all without their consent – then their current situation becomes even more risky. Our search for testimonies should not blind us to the possible social and economic harms to survivors as a result of their testimonies being recorded without their consent.
During and After the Testimonial Process

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During and After the Testimonial Process

The objective of the testimonies, who they would be heard by, for what purpose, the possible consequences of giving testimonies – these should be discussed with the survivors. Constant informed consent is needed before recording their narratives, taking their photographs, including them in publications. The published work should be shared with the survivors.
During and After the Testimonial Process

GUIDELINE 7: Have you listened to the post-conflict and contemporary conditions of survivors? That is very significant.

Avoid sensationalising testimonies

Many times these testimonies have been sensationalized so as to make it horrific for the readers.

The Brangonas are speaking rubbish about their post-conflict situations.

I cannot get all the details of their rapes during wars.

For instance once activists said that the husband has abandoned a birangona, but in the oral history testimonies we find the husband looked after her when she was bedridden for a year after the sexual violence. Today it is her husband’s first wife who scorns her on a daily basis about her rape.
During and After the Testimonial Process

The first wife says:

**YOU ARE TOUCHED BY THE MILITARY, YOUR MOTHER HAD TO PLEAD WITH OUR HUSBAND TO TAKE YOU BACK. DON'T SPEAK TOO MUCH.**

When we ask researchers why this testimony is sensationalized, they say:

**LET'S SWITCH OFF THE LIGHTS AND THAT WOULD MAKE YOU SEEM LIKE A REAL BRANGONA.**

Yes, Ferdousy once told me that, a woman journalist told her that, your room is so nicely decorated.

The next generation needs to know a horrific birangona story or they would think they have a happily ever after story.

Caution must be taken that the researchers’ viewpoints do not influence the process of collecting testimonies.

Caution must be taken to avoid making the testimonials disrespectful and horrific for commercial, voyeuristic purposes.

Do I have to lie down on the floor, sit with my hands on my forehead to be a real birangona?

Seems like you want to hear a pornographic story.

Tell your detailed story of rape.

I don't want to do this interview.
During and After the Testimonial Process

Even when they came to interview me, they wanted an emotional story.

They asked me such a question that they ended up making me cry.

Amma... Your interview? What about?

I will tell you later, my darling.

Even when they came to interview me, they wanted an emotional story.

They asked me such a question that they ended up making me cry.

Amma... Your interview? What about?

I will tell you later, my darling.

Testimonies should avoid linear accounts and present their stories the way the survivors want to narrate their experience:

as fragments, emotional gestures or narratives.

This body has gone through a big storm.

That day, I was in a cyclone like this.

This wooden pole is a witness to my event. When I see it everyday, I am reminded of that day.

There are birangonas among us. Are they only to be known by their rape?

They have families, lives which has not stopped in the war of 1971.
Have you reflected on how we use languages with/about survivors during the testimony and when representing their life-stories? And what are the consequences of such language use? Survivor blame should be avoided in all instances.

GUIDELINE 8: Have you reflected on how we use images of survivors during the testimony and when representing their life-stories?
And what are the consequences of such image use? Survivor blame should be avoided in all instances.

WHERE HAVE THEY BROUGHT US?
WE WERE TO MEET THE PRIME MINISTER, THEY DID NOT ASK US BUT TOOK SO MANY VIDEOS AND PHOTOGRAPHS, WE DID NOT SPEAK, WERE MUTE FROM SHAME AND WE FELT THE GROUND UNDER OUR FEET WAS SPLITTING.

SHE IS DOING BUSINESS BY SELLING THE STORY OF THE LOSS OF HER HONOUR IN NEWSPAPERS.

IF YOU SPEAK ABOUT THIS I WILL THROW MYSELF IN THE RIVER.

THEY DON’T GIVE ME JOBS AS THEY SAY I AM GOING ABROAD BECAUSE OF MY BRANGONA MOTHER’S EVENT.

HE SAYS THEY HAVE BECOME GOODS, WHOSE PRICE HAS BEEN RISED, BUT THEY ARE NOT GETTING RESPECT. THEY SIT ON CHARS (MEANT FOR RESPECTFUL PEOPLE) IN DHAKA BUT THAT IS NOT SO IN THEIR SOCIETIES.

TODAY THE BRANGONAS DON’T WANT TO GO TO ANY CEREMONIES, THEY SAY WE DON’T NEED TO EAT CHICKEN POLAO AND WILL CONTINUE TO HAVE RICE AND GREEN LEAVES.

WHY?

MEANING?
THEIR DAILY LIVES ARE LIKE EATING RICE AND GREEN LEAVES, WHILE THESE CEREMONIES ARE LIKE HAVING POLAO?

YES, THEY FEEL THEY HAVE BECOME GOODS, WHOSE PRICE HAS BEEN RISED, BUT THEY ARE NOT GETTING RESPECT. THEY SIT ON CHARS (MEANT FOR RESPECTFUL PEOPLE) IN DHAKA BUT THAT IS NOT SO IN THEIR SOCIETIES.

IS HONOUR, MODesty FOUND IN OUR BODIES THAT THEY WOULD BE LOST? WHEN WE ARE PHYSICALLY ATTACKED WE DON’T CALL IT A LOSS OF HONOUR. SEX IS A CONSENSUAL ACT. RAPEs ARE VIOLENT, NONCONSENSUAL CRIMES. SHAME AND BLAME SHOULD BE ON THE PERPETRATOR OF THESE CRIMES, NOT THE SURVIVORS AND VICTIMS OF THESE CRIMES.

IMMU,
WE SEE ON TELEVISION, IN FILMS, NOVELS THAT RAPE OF WOMEN IS OFTEN REFERRED TO AS THE LOSS OF HONOUR AND MODesty. YOU NEVER USE THE TERM SEX OR THESE PHRASES. YOU REFER TO IT AS RAPE. WHY?

WHERE HAVE THEY BROUGHT US?
WE WERE TO MEET THE PRIME MINISTER, THEY DID NOT ASK US BUT TOOK SO MANY VIDEOS AND PHOTOGRAPHS, WE DID NOT SPEAK, WERE MUTE FROM SHAME AND WE FELT THE GROUND UNDER OUR FEET WAS SPLITTING.

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GUIDELINE 9: Have you thought through the complexities of the rights to confidentiality and anonymity?
Survivors should have the right to remain anonymous and to have their rights to privacy and confidentiality respected. The need to identify oneself depends on the survivors and their concerns.

Do the survivors use their own or anonymised names in their testimonies? Ethically, their names should be anonymised.

In instances where their testimonies have been secured by deceit, the survivors don't want their names to be made public.

At the same instance they also want their names and life-stories to be widely circulated as that would also enable them to receive government pensions.

Yes, it has no easy set answer. What the survivors want - that should be the priority. The consequences of using real and anonymized names should also be discussed with the survivors.

Then this is a very complex matter.
GUIDELINE 10: Have you kept in touch with survivors after recording their testimonies?
If the survivors agree, warm relationships should be maintained in the post-testimonial phase.

After the Testimonial Process

How are you? I was calling up to see how things are?

We are good and it is lovely to hear your voice. Have you heard the good news? Khokon has had a little baby girl called Asiya.

Come, my dear. Let us take you somewhere tomorrow.

Also remember, Burmese are have a right to not speak, be silent about their experiences. It is not at all easy to talk about this.
Journey to the Meherpur War memorial

Labonno’s father and Hena’s husband Tanveer is driving the car.

Labonno: What is there in Meherpur Nanu?

Tanveer: For the first time in Bangladesh, they have built a memorial for us, I mean for birangonas.

Labonno: What do you mean for us? Nani, you are... are you a birangona?

Tanveer: Yes, Labony, we wanted to tell you at the right time.
I returned to my family in Pabna town after the war. To avoid questions to myself and my family as to where I was during the war, I came to Dhaka's Rehabilitation centre and stayed in the Women's Hostel in New Eskaton. The government had advertised that Bangladeshi men should marry birangonas but we did not want to marry. We wanted jobs. So, the advertisement was withdrawn. Soon I got a job in a government department. I retired only a few years ago.

Yes, my dear. But I am not only a birangona. I am your nanu. I worked for many years in my government job, brought up my daughter Hena, your mother.

What I told you about birangonas, some of it is my life story too. I was visiting my uncle's house in a village in Pabna during the war and got captured by the Pakistani army. I was in a camp for three months and got raped by the army. We became free after a group of liberation fighters set us free near the end of the war. I have erased the memories of those three months as I don't feel well when I remember them. A liberation fighter wanted to marry me after the war but I did not want to marry.

Nani, you have gone through so much pain. We got this country because of you.
A year later I met your grandfather and we got married. He was away in Kolkata during the war and cried on hearing my story. He would say: ‘Rehana, would my love make you forget those horrible days?’ But your grandfather’s family scorned me and so we left it. So we did not get a share of your great grandfather’s property. Remember Hena said all forms of stigma have an economic reason. After your grandfather’s sudden death after the war I was heartbroken. But my government job gave me a lot of strength and I could bring up Hena alone.

Yes, in 1992 when the three women from Kushtia were testifying at Gono Adalat, I was there with Hena. I was scared and thrilled and wanted to say aloud that I am a birangona, but kept quiet. I was nearly fainting there and Tanveer helped us.
These ethical guidelines should be implemented

You, me, we are the same, our pain is the same.

* Apa is a term of respect for a woman in Bangladesh.
** During World War 2 Japan kept mostly Asian women as sexual slaves and referred to them as ‘comfort women’.

The birangonas who testified in 1992 suffered a lot as the testimonial process was another violation for them. In August 2018, they launched an ethical guideline meant for all those who are working with birangonas.
Labony, your generation has to bring out the stories of losses of men, women, birangonas and war babies which is not known. You have to make space for them to either speak (if they wish to) or keep quiet. Survivors need that space of safety, trust and empathy. Your generation has to implement these guidelines and ethically record testimonies of sexual violence when needed.

This is not only the nation’s history but this is our family history.

I will tell everyone in school - my friends and teachers - about these guidelines. I am so proud to have you as my Nanu, Ammu and Abbu.
Guidelines Towards Ethical Testimonies of Sexual Violence during Conflict

Professor Nayanika Mookherjee
Department of Anthropology, Durham University, UK
Context: This guideline is based on the findings of Professor Nayanika Mookherjee’s book The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War of 1971 (2015; 2016). Bangladesh is the only country which honoured women raped during the war of 1971 as birangonas (brave women). There exists a public memory (not silence) of wartime sexual violence in Bangladesh and this is hardly known beyond the country. Spectral Wound ethnographically examines this public memory among survivors, state officials, human rights activists as well as archival sources, visual and literary representations. Most of the research on sexual violence in conflict focuses on highlighting the testimonies of violence only. Interviews with survivors show that with the focus on documentation of the experiences of wartime rape, (i) inadequate attention is paid to the conditions under which such testimonies are recorded. (ii) As a result, ethical practices of documentation can be flouted by those who record testimonies of wartime rape (researchers, human rights activists, feminists, lawyers, filmmakers, photographers, journalists, writers) in their pursuit of these narratives. (iii) Hence, survivors can experience a double set of transgression in the very process of testifying to their violent experiences during wars. (iv) There can emerge a critical disconnect between survivors needs and transitional justice processes.

Keeping these sensitive and ethical concerns in mind, Professor Mookherjee has co-produced with Research Initiatives Bangladesh (in consultation with the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs of the Government of Bangladesh and various stakeholders in UK and Bangladesh) an ethical guidelines and a graphic novel – both should be ideally read with the Spectral Wound. This can be used by school children (from 12 years age) as well as professionals working among survivors.

In August 2018, a group of survivors of wartime sexual violence and the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs of the Bangladesh government launched these guidelines in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, survivors of wartime sexual violence are referred to as liberation fighters and have been receiving government pensions. These guidelines are thereby essential for the state to record testimonies and include survivors on the government pension register. These guidelines would also enable war babies to seek recognition - and could be used in other contemporary instances of sexual violence in conflict like that of the Rohingyas. Further, these guidelines might be relevant for those attempting to collect testimonies of sexual violence in an everyday context. In November 2018, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s PSVI (Prevent Sexual Violence Initiative) team has proposed the Murad Code - the development of international standards for those working in this field. These guidelines would feed into that consultation process.

A few points are worth noting:

• These guidelines have been created by survivors and these prescriptions are based on their experiences of violations.

• These guidelines should complement local ethical reviews and supersede institutional ethics.

• These guidelines should also help us remember to check if there is a co-ordination body. Importantly, it is crucial to reflect whether there is further need for recording of testimonies and if there are adequate secondary sources to provide that insight.

• Testimonies for juridical purposes might be more limited in its remit and this guideline focuses on ethical testimonies.

• While a longer time is advisable for those recording testimonies, those with less time should be able to provide a nuanced survivor perspective about the: reasons for sexual violence, the varied contexts of testimonies, the use of language, euphemisms and gestures by survivors to uphold their narrative.
The following are the proposed guidelines:

**Before the Testimonial Process:**

1. **Have you prepared adequately for these testimonies?** There needs to be intensive preparation before one starts gathering testimonies among survivors of wartime sexual violence. For this what is indispensable is a background training, reflection on the need for/purpose of testimonies, a study of secondary sources and avoidance of research fatigue among survivors.

2. **Whose testimonies are being focussed on?** It is ethically important to focus on those survivors who voluntarily come forward to give testimonies. It is important to provide informants with a written information sheet explaining the need for testimonies and the uses of any data that it might generate. The objective of the testimonies, how they would be used, who they would be read/heard by, what are the possible consequences of giving testimonies—these should be discussed with survivors.

3. **Have you thought of how the positions (gender, age, class, experience etc.) of the researcher affects the interview?** The questions one asks should be thought through.

**During the Testimonial Process:**

4. **Have you done a risk assessment before interviewing survivors?**
   - It is absolutely essential to comprehensively assess the economic, physical, psychological safety of survivors across space and time. We need to safeguard the interest of survivors and provide support.
   - It is important to discuss the various kinds of possible problems (including socio-economic manifestations of ‘stigma’) they might face if they are identifying themselves as survivors of sexual violence.
   - Instead of relying on gatekeepers, intermediaries, interpreters and translators, survivors should be asked whether they would be willing to speak.

5. **Do you have enough time for these testimonies?** Interviews need to be conducted with adequate time so that survivors can give their testimonies (if they wish to) in accordance with the time and place that suits them. Their context is the priority.
   - If possible, it is important to know about the historical/political context of the area before undertaking interviews.
   - Alongside the survivors of sexual violence it is important to interview other survivors of the war in the area. This makes the survivors less conspicuous and and could mitigate jealousies from others towards them.
   - To understand the socio-economic contexts of survivors, it would be important to talk to their family members and wider community, if possible.
   - It is important to examine various secondary sources to understand the historical/political/economic contexts in the area across time.
   - It is necessary to establish relationships of trust and empathy with survivors.
During and After the Testimonial Process:

6. **Have you secured meaningful informed consent at every instance?** During the process of collecting testimonies with survivors, ethical decision-making has to be undertaken repeatedly.
   - It is important to ensure that those giving testimonies know and understand their rights and the services available to them which could in turn inform consent.
   - Constant informed consent is needed from survivors before recording their narratives, taking their photographs, including them in publications. The published work should be shared with the survivors and it should be agreed how one follows up survivors in the post-testimonial phase. Consent should also be time-bound if so decided by the survivors.
   - Avoid entering personal spaces without permission for the purpose of interviews.
   - Avoid making any assurances and particularly false promises to survivors of sexual violence.
   - Any invitation to ceremonies honouring survivors should prioritise the perspectives of survivors of sexual violence.
   - The search for testimonies and interviews should not harm the survivors and put them at risk.

7. **Have you listened to the post-conflict and contemporary conditions of survivors?** Also:
   - We need to avoid sensationalizing these testimonies.
   - Caution must be taken that the researchers' opinion does not influence the process of collecting testimonies.
   - Caution must be taken to avoid making the testimonials disrespectful and horrific for commercial, voyeuristic purposes.
   - Testimonies should avoid linear accounts and present the stories the way survivors want to narrate their experience: as narratives, emotional, non-verbal gestures or fragments.

After the Testimonial Process:

8. **Have you reflected on how we use images of and languages about survivors during the testimony and when representing their life-stories? And what are the consequences of such image and language use?** Survivor blame should be avoided in all instances.

9. **Have you thought through the complexities of the rights to confidentiality and anonymity?** Survivors should have the right to remain anonymous and to have their rights to privacy and confidentiality respected. The need to identify oneself depends on the survivors and their concerns.

10. **Have you kept in touch with survivors after recording their testimonies?**
    If the survivors agree, warm relationships should be maintained in the post-testimonial phase.

    **These guidelines need urgent implementation.**
Acknowledgements

The guidelines and graphic novel draw from research findings [Mookherjee, Nayanika The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War of 1971 (2015; 2016)]. These guidelines and graphic novel have been co-produced through five workshops (two in LSE’s Women, Peace and Security in October 2016, December 2018 and three with Research Initiatives Bangladesh in November 2016, August 2017 and August 2018) in collaboration with various stakeholders (like academics, researchers, government officials, policy makers, NGO representatives, feminists and human rights activists, journalists, filmmakers and photographers). All participants emphasized the need for these guidelines and the graphic novel. These guidelines were launched in August 2018 by the Honourable Minister Jonab A. K. M Mozammel Hoque. Since November 2016 the government of Bangladesh’s Liberation War Ministry has been involved with these guidelines in a participatory and supportive capacity.

For assistance with translation and transliteration I am thankful to Suraiya Begum, Rashida Akhtar, Babul Chandra Sutradhar, Professors Mirza Taslima Sultana, Sayeed Ferdous and Dr, Zobaida Nasreen. The warm support for these guidelines by Dr. Meghna Guhathakurta, the Executive Director of RIB and Dr. Marsha Henry, the Director of WPS has been invaluable. I am also grateful to all the staff and colleagues at RIB and LSE’s Women, Peace and Security whose support has made the workshops a fruitful process. Above all, warmest gratitude needs to be attributed to the birangonas, the survivors of sexual violence during the Bangladesh war of 1971 whose experiences are foundational to these guidelines. My thank you goes out to all the participants of the workshops. We also gratefully acknowledge the use of some of the wording from the ethics codes of The Association of Social Anthropologists of UK and the Commonwealth and the American Anthropological Association.
**SELF ASSESSMENT FORM**

(This could be a written and/or verbal summary for participants/survivors and/or gatekeepers as well as serve as a reminder for those recording testimonies)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
<th>Explain with reasons: how you have/have not followed each of these guidelines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1a. Have you prepared adequately for these testimonies?</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| 1b. Have you considered the implications of your testimonial intervention on the survivors?  
Have you considered the following: reflection on the need for/purpose of testimonies, a study of other secondary sources and avoidance of research fatigue among survivors? |   |    |                                                                                 |
| 2a. Have you thought about whose testimonies are being focused on? |   |    |                                                                                 |
| 2b. Will you provide informants with a written information sheet explaining the need for testimonies and the uses of their testimonies?  
The objective of the testimonies, how these testimonies would be used, who they would be read/heard by, for what purpose, what are the possible consequences of giving testimonies—these should be discussed with survivors. |   |    |                                                                                 |
<p>| 3. Have you thought of how the positions (gender, age, class, experience etc.) of the researcher affects the interview? |   |    |                                                                                 |
| 4. Have you done a risk assessment before interviewing survivors? |   |    |                                                                                 |
| 5. Do you have enough time for recording these testimonies? |   |    |                                                                                 |
| 6a. Have you secured meaningful informed consent at every instance? Please explain how you will deal with the issue of informed consent, as appropriate to your testimony. |   |    |                                                                                 |
| 6b. Will recording devices be used only with the permission of survivors? |   |    |                                                                                 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
<th>Explain with reasons: how you have/have not followed each of these guidelines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6c.</td>
<td>Will the survivors be provided with a copy of their testimonies before and after publications? Constant informed consent is needed before recording their narratives, taking their photographs, including them in publications. The published work should be shared with the survivors and there needs to be an agreement as to how one follows up survivors in the post-testimonial phase. Consent should also be time-bound if so decided by the survivors.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Have you listened to the post-conflict and contemporary conditions of survivors?</td>
<td></td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>Have you reflected on how we use images of and languages about survivors during the testimony and when representing their life-stories?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Have you thought through the complexities of the rights to confidentiality and anonymity? Will you explicitly give all survivors the right to remain anonymous?</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Have you kept in touch with survivors after recording their testimonies?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Are there any other ethical issues arising from the testimonial process?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further details – Please specify details with reference to above Question Numbers.
* References cited on Pg 6

Non-Fiction

Fiction

Films
Ora Egaro Jon (They are Eleven) (1972) Chashi Nazrul Islam.
*Orunodoyer Ognisakhi* (Pledge to a New Dawn) (1972) Subhash Dutta.

Plays

QUESTIONS

1. When did the Bangladesh government announce the term Birangona for women raped during the Bangladesh war of 1971?
2. How many other countries in the world has honoured women raped during national conflicts?
3. What is the Bangladeshi government’s official number of birangonas?
4. Where can you see Naibuddin Ahmed’s photograph of a birangona?
5. How many life stories of birangonas are there in this graphic novel?
6. Where is the memorial for birangonas in Bangladesh?
7. How many guidelines are there in this graphic novel and guideline? Please tell us if you can think of others we might have missed. Email us at ethical.testimonies.svc@durham.ac.uk

ANSWERS:

1. 23rd December 1971
2. None other than Bangladesh
3. 200,000
4. Liberation War Museum, Dhaka, Bangladesh
5. 6
6. Meherpur
7. 10
Acknowledgements: The guidelines and graphic novel draw from research findings [Mookherjee, Nayanika The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War of 1971 (2015; 2016)]. These guidelines and graphic novel have been co-produced through five workshops (two in LSE’s Women, Peace and Security in October 2016, December 2018 and three with Research Initiatives Bangladesh in November 2016, August 2017 and August 2018) in collaboration with various stake holders (like academics, researchers, government officials, policy makers, NGO representatives, feminists and human rights activists, journalists, film makers and photographers). All participants emphasized the need for these guidelines and the graphic novel. These guidelines were launched in August 2018 by the Honourable Minister Jonab A. K. M Mozammel Hoque. Since November 2016 the government of Bangladesh’s Liberation War Ministry has been involved with these guidelines in a participatory and supportive capacity.

For valuable advice, comments and assistance with translation and trans literation of the graphic novel and guideline I am thankful to Dr. Meghna Guhathakurta, Catherine Masud, Dina Hossain, Dr. Mark Lacy, Suraia Begum, Rashida Akhtar, Babul Chandra Sutradhar, Professors Mirza Taslima Sultana, Sayeed Ferdous, Dr. Zobaida Nasreen, Dr. Raihana Firdous and Anita Datta. The warm support for these projects by Dr. Meghna Guhathakurta, the Executive Director of RIB and Dr. Marsha Henry, the Director of WPS has been invaluable. I am also grateful to all the staff and colleagues at Durham University, RIB and LSE’s Women, Peace and Security whose support has made the workshops a fruitful process. Above all, warmest gratitude needs to be attributed to the birangonas, the survivors of sexual violence during the Bangladesh war of 1971 whose experiences are foundational to these resources. My thank you goes out to all the participants of the workshops. We also gratefully acknowledge the use of some of the wording from the ethics codes of The Association of Social Anthropologists of UK and the Commonwealth and the American Anthropological Association.

ABOUT US

Nayanika Mookherjee is a Professor in the Anthropology department in Durham University and has worked for over two decades on the public memories of sexual violence of the Bangladesh War of 1971. She has published extensively on violence, aesthetics, ethics and is working on war babies.

Najmunna Har Keya is a freelance artist based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. She completed her MFA from the Tokyo University of Arts and the Faculty of Fine Art in the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. She is the recipient of various awards and fellowships.

Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB’s) approach is based on Participatory Action Research. Through this it has reached many marginalised communities and has been promoting processes of collective self-enquiry, self-determination and capacity building. Its Executive Director is Dr. Meghna Guhathakurta.

NOKTA / noktaarts.com is a publisher based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Specialising in publishing various books of visual art.
Labonno needs to do a school project on family memories of 1971, the Bangladesh War. When coming to ask her grandmother, she wakes the latter from one of her frequent nightmares. What follows is her grandmother’s narration of the history of ‘birangona’ (brave women), the term given by the Bangladesh government in 1971 to honour the women who had been raped during the war. Her mother, Hena, also tells her of the Oral History Project through which they tried to collect testimonies. She talks about the ethical dilemmas they underwent and the mistakes they committed when trying to collect testimonies of birangonas. This leads them to talk about the various points that need to be covered for an ethical guidance to record testimonies of sexual violence during conflict (svc). But hidden in these discussions of the guidelines Labonno discovers an intricate secret family history. What could that secret be? What would Labonno feel when she hears of that secret? What will Labonno do in the future about her family and the nation’s history?

Based on research findings [in Mookherjee, Nayanika. The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War of 1971. Durham: Duke University Press (2015); Delhi: Zubaan Books (2016)] we have co-produced a guideline and a graphic novel in collaboration with Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB). These can be used by those who record testimonies of sexual violence in conflict (researchers, human rights activists, feminists, lawyers, filmmakers, photographers, journalists, writers). The guideline was launched in August 2018 by the Ministry of Liberation War of the Government of Bangladesh. The Project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council’s Impact Acceleration Account and Durham University’s Research Impact Fund.

Guideline and Graphic Novel will be freely downloadable in Bangla and English from: www.ethical-testimonies-svc.org.uk

For further queries, comments and for printed copies of the graphic novel, write to Professor Nayanika Mookherjee, Department of Anthropology, Durham University, UK

ethical.testimonies.svc@durham.ac.uk

Please let us know if you/ your organisation makes use of these guidelines and graphic novel.