

To the Judges:

A story about rape is often an ethical minefield. This was very much the case with Associated Press writer Kristen Gelineau's story about how the Myanmar armed forces are using rape in a sweeping and systematic way against Rohingya Muslim women. Gelineau meticulously documented the rapes of 29 women and girls to show that the army's denials were simply not credible.

Gelineau was very aware of the concerns of activists and mental health workers that interviewing survivors of sexual violence can re-traumatize them. During each interview in B refugee camp in Bangladesh, she had to balance the desire to protect the women from further pain with the journalistic need to probe into the most painful details to determine if there were patterns to the attacks. In some cases, she would simply pause at particularly difficult points in the interview to give the women a chance to collect their thoughts and just breathe.

Gelineau made sure the women knew that they did not need to talk to her at all, because she did not want to push them. At the same time, she explained why she thought it was important that the world learn what had happened to them. In every interview, she made it very clear to the women that Associated Press stories are seen and read by people across the world, so their accounts would be widely shared. In the end, all of them decided they wanted to speak to her. This was the first opportunity many of them had been given to tell anyone what they had endured, and many were eager to be heard.

Her concerns were heightened with minors. In the case of the 13-year-old and 15-year-old girls she interviewed, she first ensured their mothers were comfortable with her talking to the daughters, and she had the mothers sit in on the interviews. She went through the details of their assaults even more slowly and cautiously than with the older women, and took breaks when needed. The 13-year-old girl was too embarrassed to talk about certain aspects of the rape in front of her mother, so her mother left the tent to give her some privacy for that portion of the interview.

Another ethical issue Gelineau and her editors wrangled with was informed consent. The general rule at The Associated Press is not to identify survivors of sexual assault unless they ask to be identified. But Gelineau worried that even if the Rohingya women asked to be named, they might not fully understand the ramifications. The Rohingya have lived an extremely isolated existence; they don't know what The Associated Press is, and have very little experience with the outside world. She knew that if they were identified and ever returned to Myanmar, they or their families faced the possibility of being killed in retaliation. At the same time, she wondered if it was unethical or patronizing of her to make the choice not to name them, no matter what they requested. In the end, she felt that the most important thing was not to further endanger the lives of the women. So even before going to Bangladesh, she and her editors decided to identify the women by their first initial only, with their permission.

She faced the same issue with photos and video of the women — she needed to find a way to protect their identities. So she and photographer Wong Maye-E had their fixer ask them if they would be comfortable being photographed in their headscarves. Most of them were. The idea turned a journalistic hurdle into a creative asset, with the haunting images of the eyes of one woman after another staring out of headscarves.

Gelineau also faced a constant internal battle between journalistic objectivity and humanity. She struggled against an intense desire to physically help each of the women, who lived in absolute squalor, were often sick and starving, and desperately needed food and clean water. She knew that giving them money would violate the AP's journalistic principles, yet she often felt sick to her stomach at their circumstances. She had to remind herself after each interview that the best way to help these women was to tell their story. Still, she was riddled with guilt, which even now keeps her awake many nights.

Finally, there are always ethical concerns around how many intimate details of the assaults themselves to include in stories. Does publishing particularly graphic details serve as a secondary violation of the women? Ultimately, Gelineau believed that journalists who sanitize stories of sexual assault do a disservice to both the survivors and the public. She felt strongly that society has failed to grasp the horrific ramifications of rape, partly because we are not forced to confront the horrible details. Most importantly, these women wanted their stories to be documented accurately. They wanted the world to know the pain they had endured, and they wanted their truth to be told. As one woman said, “I have nothing left. All I have left are my words.”

For bearing witness to the suffering of raped Rohingya women in a sensitive, acutely compassionate way, I am proud to nominate Kristen Gelineau for the Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mary Rajkumar". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "M" and "R".

Mary Rajkumar
International Enterprise Editor
The Associated Press
Editor of the Rohingya Exodus series

“AP Investigation: Rape of Rohingya sweeping, methodical” [main story]
<https://www.dailyherald.com/article/20171211/news/312119961>

“21 Rohingya women recount rape by Myanmar armed forces”
<https://www.apnews.com/card/afs:Card:1643740278/Their-Stories>

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