



A word from us...

Welcome to Rohingya Stories Volume 1! UNHCR has estimated that in 2022, 100 million people (one percent of the global population) were forcibly displaced from their homes. Continued conflict and climate change in coming years will cause this number to rise. Yet, the world over, refugees live in isolated camps, with poor access to health, livelihoods and more. World Bank suggests that this displaced demographic can become an economic resource for host countries. But before that happens, these often unwilling hosts need to see their guests as resilient, creative and dynamic actors, not faceless, nameless victims. That's where we come in.

Our inaugural issue starts with a salute to Rohingya women, and not just because Women's Day is round the corner on March 8. They are mired in poverty, insecurity and patriarchy – incredibly, some have risen above it all. Entrepreneur **Salma Begum**, had a traditional Burmese *dhenki*, manual mill, made here so that she can pound rice flour, a Burmese staple, and give customers a taste of their lost homeland. **Amina Khatoon**, sold her last gold bangle to send relief supplies for earthquake affected families in Turkey and Syria. Others, like **Hafsa Begum** and **Noor Begum**, are implementing micro solutions to improve women's access to healthcare. **Tasmida**, the first Rohingya woman to graduate in India, is inspiring younger girls to study. And some, like **Minara Begum**, are elected leaders of their camps, devising ways to manage their own security. These women are more than leaders pushing for new freedoms for Rohingya women -- they represent their collective potential to enrich their host country, as entrepreneurs, humanitarians and role models.

Rohingya Stories is a monthly newsletter from the Rohingya Human Rights Initiative. It aims to showcase our people's resilience, and great potential to become economically, socially and culturally productive members of our host country, India. Rohingya Stories will humanize the Rohingya to a world that has seen them as nameless victims for too long.

YOU CAN HELP!!

Friends in the media, please help us amplify these inspirational faces, voices and stories. We can help you **access** the camps, **interview** respondents and share our **photos** too!

Contact us
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Salma Begum and her *dhenki*, pix courtesy R4R Stories

Selling the taste of a lost homeland

Deep inside the dusty Rohingya camp in Shaheen Bagh Delhi, the rhythmic clack clacking of **Salma Begum's** rice mill represents the sounds, and taste, of home.

“Some years ago when my husband became incapable of going out to work, the task of looking after my family fell on me. I thought of setting up a traditional rice mill, locally called a *Dhenki*, because people here, including us, craved our traditional foods made from rice flour,” she says. Although rice flour is easily bought in India, it is not hand-pounded and does not taste the same..

Salma and her husband found a fabricator in Delhi who made this simple machine – a heavy hardwood plank with a fulcrum, supporting a weight that mills grain. Today, she charges Rs 20 (a quarter of a dollar) per kilo to mill fine rice powder. “It's hard work, but I manage to sell about 12 kilos a day,” she says.

Her enterprise has become not just a source of income and brought joy to many a Rohingya kitchen – it also points to the advantages of developing entrepreneurs to market local products in refugee camps to help them adjust better to their new lives.

REFUGEES MEAN BUSINESS!

When refugees settle in a host country, they all aspire to self-sufficient lives and contribute to their communities. The World Bank's Private Sector for Refugees (PS4R) initiative has identified mutually beneficial ways in which the business community can connect with refugees.

*JOBS: When US sports and outerwear company Jerash Holdings started hiring Syrian women refugees at its factories near Amman, the women got much needed employment and the company, productive workers.

*NEW MARKET SEGMENT: Refugees are a potential customer segment – particularly when products and services are developed that are geared specifically to their needs.

*BUSINESS SUPPORT: Colombia's Chamber of Commerce started the Productive Migration program that

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Amina Begum, pix courtesy: Tasmida

Humanitarian aid saved her -- now she wants to give back...

“As a Rohingya, I know what it means to have lost everything, I know what it means to be helpless,” says 56 year old Amina Khatoon. She had fled with her family from Myanmar, first to Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh in 2005, and then to New Delhi in 2012.

After much scrimping and saving, she had bought a pair of gold bangles for herself in 2021. “I used the first bangle to pay for my gallbladder surgery. Now I’ve sold the second bangle to buy relief supplies for my brothers and sisters in Turkey,” she says.

Her act has encouraged other Rohingya women to come forward to mobilize resources for survivors in Turkey and Syria. “Some of them can barely spare Rs 1000 (12 USD) but still want to contribute,” Sabber Kyaw Min, founder of Rohingya Human Rights Initiative says. “As refugees, our lives have been saved by humanitarian action – now we understand its importance, and want to do what we can to give back...”

REFUGEES MEAN BUSINESS (contd)!

trains and supports Venezuelan refugee entrepreneurs. Since 2019, it has supported over 160 micro and small enterprises, of which 69% increased their sales, 10% maintained them and 73% accessed the financial system to improve their business.

*ACCESS TO CAPITAL: Kiva, the social crowdfunding platform for social investments, launched the Kiva Refugee Investment Fund, which lends capital to refugees across the Middle East, East Africa and Latin America. It closed at \$32.5m in April 2021, showing that loans to refugees can be commercially viable.

Did you know?

There are 1.4 million Rohingya refugees in the world, the largest refugee community across the globe!

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Minara Begum , pix courtesy R4R Stories

Neighbourhood watch to the rescue

Insecurity plagues most refugee camps and the 53-family Rohingya camp in Kalindi Kunj is no exception. It has been regularly devastated by fire, and after the one in 2018, had to be relocated to a cramped, 800 sq yard plot owned by a charitable foundation. With corridors barely shoulder-width and homes made of canvas, plastic and bamboo, all highly inflammable, fire remains a constant risk.

Minara Begum, 30, lost more than most in the 2018 fire, which gutted her house, savings and grocery shop. Her husband died soon after, leaving her with four children to provide for. “I didn't have the luxury of mourning my losses,” she says. “but when I was elected one of the three leaders of the camp in 2023, I was determined to prevent such fires from happening again.” They realised the police could help only after a crime took place. “We had to help ourselves,” she says.

With the other two community leaders, Minara now runs a neighbourhood watch scheme. Four camp residents patrol the camp every night, keeping a sharp lookout for fire and intruders, enabling the residents to sleep easy.

Rohingya Camp, Kalindi Kunj, Delhi

Area: 800 sq yards

Households: 53

Type of construction: temporary, mostly tented, double storey built with bamboo scaffolds

Piped water: No (100 percent dependent on tankers)

Toilets: No (100 percent open defecation)

“It took us a long time to recover from the aftermath of the fire in 2018. We rebuilt our houses with hardly any resources, started saving money all over again -- but not a day passes when I don't worry that another fire might destroy everything I've built...”

Mohammad Salimullah, Kalindi Kunj camp

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Health solutions from within

Wearing a maroon burqa and veil that covers every inch of her body except her expressive eyes, Hafsa Begum is an unlikely hero. But this 22 year old, married at 16 and mother of three daughters, is much more. “When I was married, I’d only studied till class 7...” she says, adding that this spurred her to try and ensure other girls got more chances in life.

As a social health worker with UNHCR, she spends her day talking to women in the camp about their health, and ensuring they follow the immunization schedule for their children. She accompanies female patients to government hospitals and translates their problems to the doctors. “I’ve come to realize that their problem is not necessarily linguistic; it is that they don't feel comfortable talking to strangers about their intimate health issues.”

About 40 miles away, midwife Noor Begum says the same thing. Among the Rohingya, most women do not feel comfortable with male doctors, she says. Neither can many of them afford private health care. Training women like Hafsa and Noor Begum and connecting them with the nearest government hospitals, could probably be the most effective way of ensuring reproductive health care access for camp inmates. Meanwhile, Noor Begum goes about her work, happy that she is able to contribute.

“I was taught by my parents that helping deliver a child is a good deed. It is a good thing when children come into the world...” she says.

The WHO Global Action Plan promotes

- *the continuity and quality of health care
- *mainstreaming refugee health into global, regional and country agendas
- *gender equality and empowerment of refugee women
- *achieving all health SDGs
- *evidence-based health communication to counter myths about refugee health.

“I’ve come to realize that their problem is not necessarily linguistic; it is that they don't feel comfortable talking to strangers about their intimate health issues,” Hafsa Begum, Shaheen Bagh Camp, Delhi

“Rohingya women feel shy of male doctors, that's why they prefer not to go to the government hospital ,” Noor Begum, Chandeni Camp, Haryana

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Amina Begum, pix courtesy: Tasmida

The first Rohingya girl to graduate in India

“I should feel proud, but sometimes it makes me feel so sad when people say I am the first Rohingya girl to graduate in India,” says Tasmida Johar. This bright young woman who has completed a bachelor’s degree in Political Science from Delhi University, is probably unaware that she is one of those rare refugees in university – not just in India but anywhere in the world! According to a new report by UNHCR on refugees’ access to education, merely 3 percent of young refugees globally are enrolled in higher education courses. Tasmida’s educational journey has not been easy. She had to learn three languages from scratch as her family fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh and then to India. Her all important class ten marksheet, used in India as proof of student identity, was burnt in a fire in the refugee camp they were living in. The attitudes of the Rohingya community towards girls stepping out of their houses to study or work, did not help. Having the backing of her family has helped.

Like her, all Rohingya girls have to struggle against all odds to study. Tasmida inspires them to aspire to more. “Looking at Tasmida, about 15-20 girls in our camp have now gone into senior school,” says community leader Mohammad Salimullah from the Rohingya camp in Kalindi Kunj. “In fact, not just in our camp in Kalindi Kunj, even in other camps, she has inspired so many girls to study.”

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Did you know?

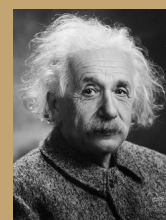
According to the UN, 49 percent of Rohingya refugees and asylum seekers are children, and 25 percent, women.

They were refugees too!



*Prague born **Madeleine Albright**, the first female U.S. Secretary of State, moved to the US after WW II, fearing Nazi persecution*

*German born **Albert Einstein** was forced to flee his homeland due to the rise of Nazism. He settled in the US went on to win the Nobel Prize for Physics.*



*Seven time Grammy winner **Gloria Estefan** fled Cuba with her family when Fidel Castro came to power.*



LIKE THESE STORIES? HERE'S WHAT YOU CAN DO...

Pitch them to your editors! We know refugee stories are often hard to research as their camps are not easily accessed, but we've got you covered with contact details of respondents, a lovely photo bank (free to use with attributions) and even a list of subject matter experts. Contact us on r4rstories@gmail.com for details...

Write and tell us what you'd like to know more about the Rohingya. We'd love for this to be a conversation!

Check out our bank of story ideas from Rohingya camps in India. **Join** our media broadcast group on Whatsapp if you're not already on it, and recommend it to your journo friends. Email us with your number and we'll add you.

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And definitely follow **Solutions Journalism Network**, the amazing independent non-profit that advocates a more nuanced, evidence-based mode of reporting on the responses to social problems. This newsletter has been made possible because of their generous LEDE FELLOWSHIP 2023!