

Scenes from Cox's Bazar, pix courtesy Rohimullah,

A word from us...

Hi and welcome to Rohingya Stories Volume 5! This issue is about refugees and agencies trying to change how the largest and probably the most persecuted stateless community in the world is perceived by others – and more importantly, by its own members. We've spoken to many refugees in Bangladesh and India, and their stories are compelling.

In Balukhali Bazar, Bangladesh, the **Rohingya Cultural Memory Centre** preserves poignant remnants of a lost past – in the hope that they will receive a new lease of life here. In Malaysia, Mohd Noor runs **Rohingya Vision TV**, the world's first Rohingya news channel. He has also started the **Rohingya Genocide Archive**, an authenticated video record of genocidal crimes against the Rohingya that run the risk of being taken down from social media because of their graphic content. Both these projects highlight the importance of refugee-led media projects and the pressing need to listen, and really listen, to authentic refugee voices.

As the camps celebrated the spirit of sacrifice on **Eid Ul Adha** (June 29, 2023) we asked several women changemakers in the camps in and around Delhi. What had adversity taught them? Their answers give reason for hope: displacement, violence, insecurity and dependence on aid has taught them to value education, raise their voices against oppression and most of all, aspire to raise independent, empowered daughters...

Finally, we celebrated a big milestone in June -- **the number of media reports catalysed by Rohingya Stories crossed 25!** It tells us that there is an appetite for solutions-focussed stories about refugees and the Rohingya. So thanks dear readers, for reading, sharing and reacting to our newsletter!

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
r4rstories@gmail.com



Rohingya Cultural Memory Centre, pix courtesy Usman, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

The museum of memories

When one walks in to the **Rohingya Cultural Memory Centre** in Balukhali Bazar, Bangladesh, it is as if the Rohingya way of life -- their culture, craft, heritage and tradition -- has come to life. Conceived by the International Organisation for Migration, the Rohingya community, and architect Rizvi Hassan, it has become a vibrant hub for refugees in one of the largest Rohingya camps in Bangladesh. "We had almost forgotten our old life, the old things that gave us joy and kept us together," says Usman, a Rohingya refugee who lives nearby. "This centre has revived those memories. Yes, they are sad, sometimes painful... but it is important to remember."

The library contains books, manuscripts, and other resources on Rohingya history, culture, and language. The exhibition hall showcases a collection of Rohingya artifacts, including traditional clothing, jewelry, and household items. The workshop provides space for Rohingya artisans to practice their traditional crafts.

And the amphitheater is used for cultural performances, workshops, and other events. Carefully researched and curated by Rohingya refugee artists, artisans and cultural practitioners living in the camps of Cox's Bazar, the collection of artefacts and artworks encapsulate the spirit of the community.

"These objects are our identity," Usman says. "Our children may never see their homeland, but at least they can see their culture here."

Indeed, the centre, which opened in 2021, has already

Visitors Speak

"We felt so happy to see our cultural objects. We remembered our land."

"We felt so happy to see our cultural things. Thanks, IOM, for preserving our culture."

become an education hub for Rohingya, especially children to learn and remember their heritage, even in the midst of displacement and conflict. It serves as a reminder of their Rohingya identity.

Why is this important?

The **loss of cultural identity** is a significant cause of diminished well-being for refugees. The trauma of the genocidal violence they have faced and stress of displacement to unfamiliar and sometimes unfriendly host countries, leaves many with no bandwidth to preserve cultural artefacts and heritage. Such museums of memories in refugee camps could help...

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Miksalmina, Tasmida and Taslima, pix courtesy r4rstories

What I've learnt from adversity...

Rohingya Stories talked to Rohingya women in different camps in and around Delhi, each of whom is inspirational in her own right. Common to them all, is the theme that the adversities they have faced, have taught them a good deal about life...

"My daughters will be free..."

23 year old **Tasmida Begum** lives in the Rohingya waste pickers' camp in rural Faridabad, Haryana. Her experiences have shown her the urgent need to educate Rohingya girls, and the perils of underage marriage.

"I was married at 16 and forced to drop out after completing class four. Soon after my first child was born, I was forced to seek divorce, as my husband was very abusive. Without any qualifications, I was so insecure and underconfident! How would I support my child and myself as a single parent?"

Tasmida has since remarried, has two more girls and is committed to empowering them. *"I'll not only ensure they study, and get married only after they turn 18,"* she says.

"I want to become a human rights lawyer..."

Miksalmina Begum, 22, goes to a bridge school every day in the Rohingya camp in Haryana, with her books, pen and... believe it or not, 4-month-old baby Pakeeza!

"I came to India in 2012, and had only completed class seven when I was married and when our three children arrived in quick succession, studies took a back seat. But I have dreams too! I want to not only complete my schooling but become a human rights lawyer to work for my community! And I'll make sure that my three little daughters get the education -- and the freedom to follow their dreams -- that they deserve!"

Miksalmina's favourite subject is Maths, and she's inspiring many other young women in her camp to resume their studies.

"I dream of my daughter leading our Rohingya community!"

Many in the Rohingya Camp in Kalindi Kunj, Delhi, ask **Taslima Begum** why she has not had her 19-year-old daughter Mizan married yet. Her answer is amazing!

"Mizan is studying and is a social worker. I dream of her becoming a community leader. I too have seen violence and worse in Burma. But instead of wanting to protect Mizan, I want her to study, become strong -- and change our community's outdated ways of thinking about women!"



Hafsa, Sabera and Amina Khatun, pix courtesy r4rstories

"We have to fight for our rights..."

Sabera Khatun, 28, filed a plea in Delhi High Court that the facilities in the government-run Rohingya detention centres are inadequate.

"My sister was detained in 2020, though she had a UNHCR card, infant son and no criminal record! When I manage to meet her, she complains they don't get basic amenities like winter clothes, blankets and even proper medical care!"

On the basis of her plea, in February 2023, the High Court directed that all detention centres in Delhi be inspected. *"I've learnt it is important to fight for our rights..." she says.*

"Rohingya girls should get more chances in life!"

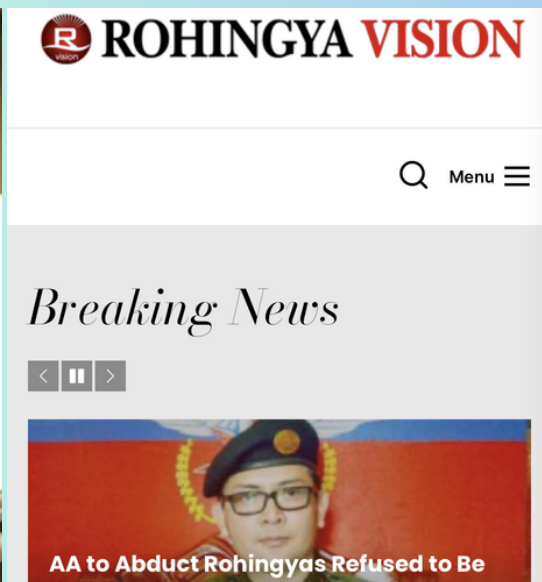
Hafsa Begum (22) was studying in class seven when her studies came to a halt and she was married at 16. She has three children today, and is a busy social health worker with UNHCR.

"I monitor the health of women and children in my camp in Shaheen Bagh (Delhi) and when needed, translates their medical issues to external doctors. More than a language issue, I feel that Rohingya women don't feel comfortable talking to strangers about their intimate health issues. I feel that I'm able to at least ensure they have access to proper medicines and support. I want to do what I can to ensure other girls get more chances in life that I did!"

"Our lives were saved by humanitarian action, now we want to give back..."

56 year old **Amina Khatun** fled to India via Bangladesh in 2012 with her family. With great difficulty, her husband and she educated their children and she even saved enough money to buy two gold bangles. A gall bladder surgery forced her to sell one bangle. When an earthquake rocked Turkey and Syria in February 2023, something stirred within her.

"As a Rohingya, I know what it means to lose everything, to be helpless. When I heard about the earthquake victims, I decided to sell my remaining bangle to send them aid. As refugees, our lives have been saved by humanitarian action – now I want to do what we can to give back..."



Rohingya Cultural Memory Centre, pix courtesy Aung Mynt (Usman), Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

A new Rohingya vision

Rohingya Vision TV is the world's first Rohingya satellite TV channel -- a watchdog, translator and amplifier of the voices of the largest stateless and displaced community in the world. "In the past 35 years, we have gone from a people with a sense of belonging and security in our homeland, to a people who are now called 'the world's most persecuted minority'," says Malaysia-based **Muhammad Noor**, co-founder of Rohingya Vision TV and **Rohingya Project**, which uses technology to work on financial and social inclusion of the community.

The Rohingya Project is digitizing rare pre-genocide Rohingya documents – IDs, passports, photographs and more, which refugees found hard to preserve in their camps. They are also preserving the community's most painful memories in the **Rohingya Genocide Archive**. To this end, they are authenticating and compiling visual media evidence of genocidal crimes – villages being burned, dead bodies, and people leaving their homes – perpetrated against the Rohingya. These run the risk of being taken down from social media because of their graphic content. "This way," says Noor, "we can ensure that these are not lost, removed or simply rendered unfindable."

Noor's work highlights the importance of refugee-led media projects and the humanitarian need to

Check out their work on
<https://rohingyavision.com/> and
<https://rohingyaproject.com/>

listen, and give credence to, authentic refugee voices. "My people have been driven out of Burma, they speak the language of their host country, and our culture, our very social fabric, is getting lost," he says. Determined to change this, Noor and his colleagues spent almost six years digitising the Hanifi Rohingya alphabet and in 2018, the **Rohingya Unicode** was finally released and adopted by Google, Android, and Apple. This has made it possible for the script to be learned all over the world – in classrooms and even on Whatsapp groups and Zoom.



Monsoon 2023 in Cox's Bazar, pix courtesy Rohimullah

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 the back issues of ROHINGYA STORIES here:
<https://www.linkedin.com/company/rohingya-stories/>

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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!