



A word from us...

Hi and welcome to Rohingya Stories Vol 2! It is the month of Ramadan; many in the camps are spending their time in fasting and reflection. Spring in India also brings the dreaded annual exams and we catch up with **Mizan**, 21, who is currently preparing for her class ten examinations. She wants to graduate, and then work for her own community. “Why shouldn’t refugees be their own leaders?” she asks, and we couldn't agree more.

However, to do that, they have to articulate their ambitions, desires and needs. To this end, Delhi-based non-profit **World Comics** has trained young Rohingya boys and girls in the capital’s refugee camps to tell their own stories in the graphic form. The result? A new definition of superheroes – people trying to make the most of being in a host country which does not really accept them; people who dream of a better future, better living conditions and better opportunities; and people who want their individual voices to be heard, instead of being clubbed together as faceless victims.

April 6 is the International Day of Sport for Development and Peace. On this occasion, we present **Rohingya FC**, which has helped young players like Noor Hafiz and Mohd Salim deal with the trauma of displacement. **Chinlone**, Myanmar's national sport, is also very popular. It reminds them of their lost homeland, where it is traditionally, and obsessively played. In fact, talk to any Rohingya, and you’ll get the sense of how desperately they are clinging to the vestiges of their cultural identity. Maulvi Ismail, who is one of the few Rohingya in India who can write in the newly developed **Rohingya script**, and is teaching it to the children in his camp. If the UNHCR were to have one Rohingya teacher in every camp, he advocates, it would greatly enhance Rohingya pride...

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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Pix courtesy R4R Stories

Why shouldn't refugees be their own leaders?

During the pandemic and lockdown, 19 year old Mizan was a familiar sight in the Rohingya Camp in Kalindi Kunj. Then a student in class seven, she would call all the children in the camp to her shanty to study. "I helped them access their online classes, taught them whatever I knew and tried to create an atmosphere of studies in our otherwise noisy and crowded camp," she says. "I did this in the hope that other children would continue their studies, just like I've done..."

Today, in addition to studying in open school, she works with the UNHCR to reach out to everyone in her camp in Kalindi Kunj, to tell them about the importance of securing birth certificates and other documents for their children. "For us refugees, ID papers are everything," she explains. "I help others in my camp access them, and explain to them the importance of educating their children. "

When Mizan came to India in 2014, she was one of 10 Rohingya girls in school. "Now I'm the only one among my peers who is unmarried at 19!" she laughs. In a culture where women rarely study or step out of their homes alone, Mizan is an oddity. "I'm able to do all this because my mother Taslima Begum supports me fully," she says.

Mizan wants to graduate with a degree in social science and become a social worker. "All my life I have seen humanitarian projects in refugee camps that are very good, but have mostly been thought of

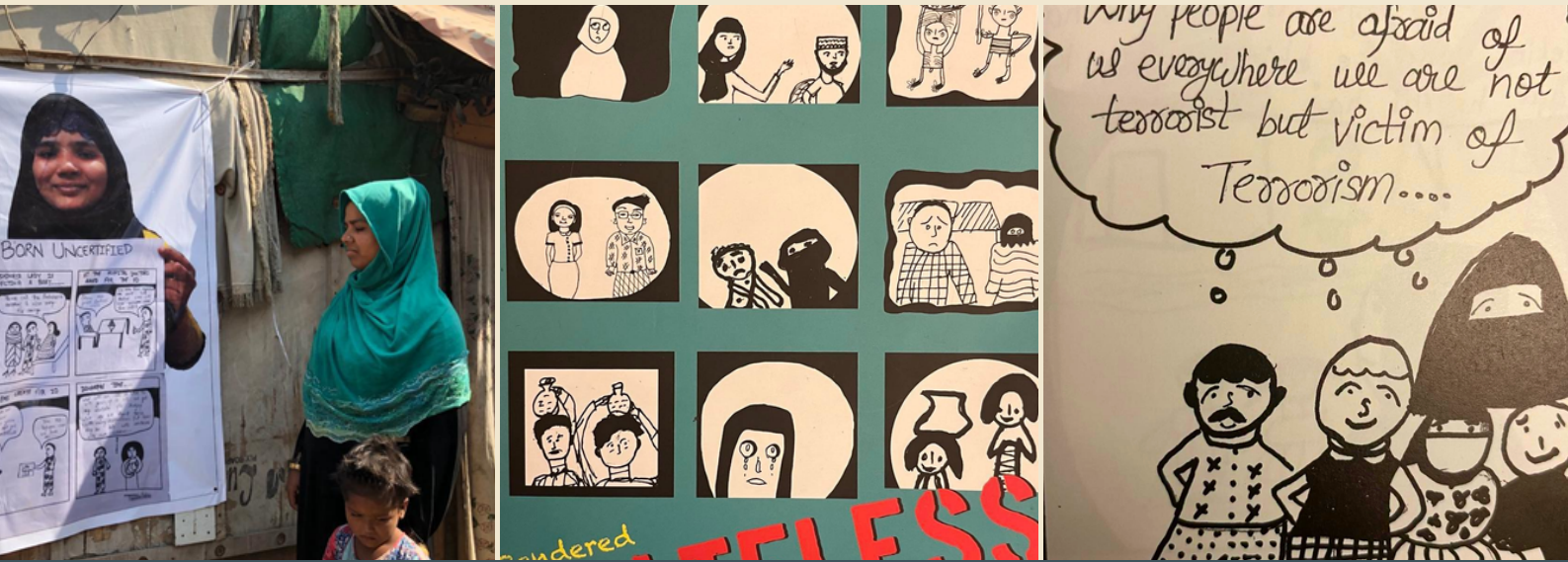
'You can't feel the pain of a shoe that you are not wearing...'

Refugee leaders can

- *Best identify their community's specific pain points
- *Act as effective bridges between humanitarian agencies and their communities
- *Develop effective, culturally appropriate solutions to the issues their community faces
- *Tell their own stories in their own words
- *Advocate for their communities in global forums
- *Ensure the decolonisation of humanitarian aid

and executed by outsiders. Most of them don't succeed," this articulate young woman says. "This has made me wonder, who can understand refugee problems better than the refugees themselves? Why shouldn't refugees be their own leaders?"

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Pix from the cartooning workshop, courtesy: Tasmida

Their lives, in cartoons

“Born alien...”

“What language should we speak?”

“I wish they understood my pain...”

“Where shall I study?”

When Delhi-based cartoonist Sharad Sharma trained some young Rohingya boys and girls in the capital’s refugee camps to tell their stories in the graphic form, these were just some of the titles his trainees came up with. Labeled as illegal immigrants, the Rohingya in India live in makeshift slums, rarely manage to go to school or college, and have poor access to healthcare, clean water, sanitation and jobs. Yet, the stories that emerged were about superheroes of another kind – people struggling to survive, even thrive, living in a country which is not a party to the UN’s Refugee Convention.

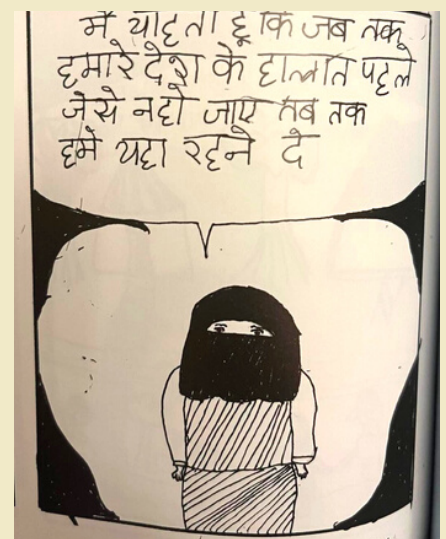
The comics revealed a generation that dreamed of a better future, did what they could to make their camps more livable (one story details how a camp which did not have a single tap/hand pump, developed its own water infrastructure) and most of all, aspired to tell their own stories to the world...

Sharma’s non-profit, World Comics has been teaching the voiceless to express themselves through the non-threatening medium of comics. “It has proved to be a powerful alternative medium of communication,” he says. “These grassroots comics are creations of common people having no such artistic ambition but a burning desire to express their own self or share their point of view. The simplicity of the grassroots comics approach lies in the fact that it just requires a pen, paper and something to say...”

How ‘letting it all out’ helps

Creative expression can

- *Improve feelings of inclusion, confidence, agency, and empowerment
- *Be a coping mechanism for refugees who have faced cultural bereavement and trauma associated with displacement
- *Improve confidence and communications skills
- *Serve as a connection to one’s heritage and maintain a sense of identity
- *Provide a safe, non-threatening bridge between refugees and host populations





Chinlone, Kalindi Kunj, Delhi pix courtesy: R4R Stories

Games refugees play!

As the sun dips towards the horizon, boys and men in the Kalindi Kunj Rohingya camp restlessly check for new messages. Finally their phones ping, the game is on! They walk past the ravaged field where their camp once stood before it burnt down in 2018. Then they cross the growing mounds of rubbish from their camp. Beyond this is the area which the entire camp uses as a open air toilet, as there are none in the camp. Finally, they reach the clearing where a net is stretched across two poles, and their worries melt away. It's time for some **Chinlone**, cane ball, the national sport of Myanmar.

The game looks deceptively simple: three players to a side are tasked with keeping a cane ball mid-air by using only their feet and foreheads. At the same time, they have to try and aim the ball to fall down in the opposite court. Minutes into the game, camp resident Zahid Hussain executes a delicately choreographed scissor kick. A daily wage construction worker, he says he likes to play as often as he can. "I feel normal when I play," he says. Player Mohd Salimullah, one of the elected leaders of the camp, says, "this is the best way to spend our evenings here... I wish we could play every day!"

Refugee soccer stars!

***Alphonso Davies** was born in a refugee camp in Ghana after his parents escaped the civil war in Liberia. They immigrated to Canada where 16-year-old Davies became the youngest player ever to play for the national team. Now, he plays for Bayern Munich and is a UNHCR ambassador.

***Luka Modrić's** family fled erstwhile Yugoslavia to Croatia. In the 2018 World Cup, he was awarded the Ballon d'Or for player of the year – the first in a decade, after Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, to claim the award.

*At 17, **Eduardo Camavinga** is France's youngest goalscorer in over a century. He was born in a refugee camp in Angola. Now 20, he is hoping to help France win its second World Cup in a row.

Other refugee soccer stars include **Awer Mabil** (Australia) and **Victor Moses** (Chelsea) and many more.

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Pix courtesy R4R Stories

All they want is a level playing field!

In a Rohingya camp in Mewat, Haryana, women cook on open hearth stoves, listening to the men talk in hushed tones about detentions, deportations and unemployment. Not far away, a motley group of boys and men kick a football around. Noor Hafiz, 22, is one of them. He arrived in India in 2008 but still does not have the national ID, the Aadhar Card. He is finishing school this year, but fears that without papers, he may not get to go to college. “I dream of becoming a doctor, but how?” he says. “Playing in a team where everyone has had experiences and stresses similar to mine, makes me feel better...” About 1000 miles away, in a similar camp in Hyderabad (Telangana), Muzaffar*, 28, another Rohingya footballer tells a similar story: “few of us are confident enough to talk to strangers, many take up daily wage manual labor as working in the formal sector requires official ID documents. But on the football field, I can briefly forget it all and at least for some time, feel normal.”

Members of the Rohingya FC, these young men are dispelling stereotypes of Rohingya refugees. “Most people, when they read about the Rohingya in newspapers, see faceless victims fleeing genocide in Myanmar – but we’re just like them, obsessed with football, huge fans of Cristiano Ronaldo and happy to play whenever we get the chance,” says Sabber Kyaw Min who started the Rohingya FC with fellow refugee

Refugee sports across the globe

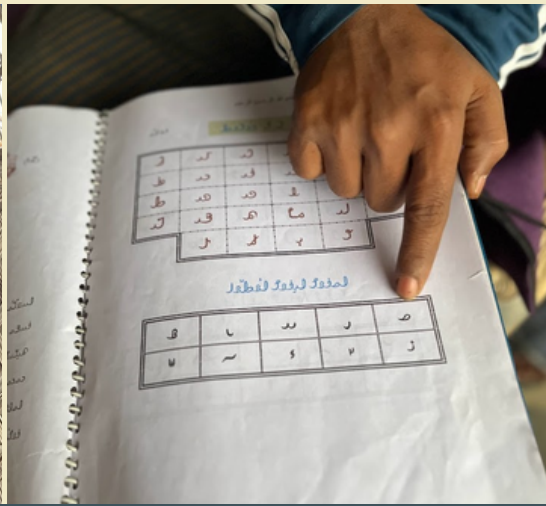
*The IOC Refugee Olympic Team and Olympic Refugee Foundation won the Princess of Asturias Foundation’s 2022 Award for fielding refugee teams in every Olympics since 2016. They are preparing refugee teams for Paris 2024 and Dakar 2026.

*In April 2022, premier and local football clubs organized matches and related events to welcome refugees in the UK

*In 2015, the German Football League started the Welcome to Football initiative, which involves young refugees in weekly football training, free meals and German lessons. 24 professional clubs in the country have similar schemes now.

Ali Johar. They have developed eight teams among Rohingya youth aged 15 to 23 in Delhi, Hyderabad, Haryana and Jammu and Kashmir, so that the beautiful game helps young Rohingya to adjust to their displaced life, and to their host country.

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Scripting communal pride

The Rohingya language is spoken and understood by about ten lakh people in Myanmar (Rakhine State) and by two lakh people in Bangladesh. Although accompanied by a rich literary tradition, the language had no definite script until Islamic scholar Mohammad Hanif developed a standardized script in the eighties. Now known as the Rohingya Hanifi language system, it has become a crucial symbol of the identity and culture of the persecuted minority which has long been denied recognition in Myanmar. However, few Rohingya can actually read and write in their language today.

Maulvi Ismail wants to change this. In a ramshackle camp in Faridabad, Haryana, he teaches Rohingya language to all the resident children. From a book that he has had printed from a PDF, its pages withered with use, Ismail recites poetry to them and teaches them the alphabet. He also texts in Rohingya, ever since Google introduced a keypad in the Rohingya script.

“Our script had been forcibly destroyed over the years in Burma, I feel proud to use it,” he says. “Some say that the Rohingya script is useless; that their children will be better off learning English. To them, I ask how can we forget where we've come from? This script is our culture... I believe that every camp should have a Rohingya language class so that we can all stay true to our roots even though we have been displaced from our homeland...”

Did you know?

- Google developed a **virtual keyboard** for the Rohingya language in 2019, which allows users to type in the Rohingya script.
- The United Nations has declared that the period 2022–2032 will mark the **International Decade of Indigenous Languages**.

A Rohingya Song

*"We are the Rohingya, from Arakan
For 1000s of years, we've lived here
Now no more..."*

*Our hills were full of jungles and trees
We cleared it, built our homes, our lives
Now we've been torn from it forcibly
Now it lives only in our hearts...*

*The soil of Arakan is beautiful like gold
I think about it, pine for it everyday
Oh how I love my land
All I want is to rest my body on it...*

*So many of our loved ones and friends
Have on Arakan's soil, met their ends
We remember them, we mourn them
As we remember our soil and our
home..."*



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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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