

MAY 2021



More than three years has passed since Rohingya refugees fled from Myanmar to neighbouring Bangladesh. Since then, the life-saving emergency response has stabilized yet the mental health of refugees remains a matter of significant concern. The Rohingya community is at specific risk of mental health issues due to a number of factors, including prior history of systematic dehumanization, persecution and bearing witness to or directly experiencing extreme violence. The circumstances which led to their flight are compounded by the daily stressors associated with living in Bangladesh in extremely congested camps, complete uncertainty about future, loss of cultural identity and statelessness. IOM has been engaged in Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) activities since the beginning of the influx. However, one of the key challenges has been to provide a multi-layered intervention that goes beyond pure clinical services and into preventive community-based approaches.

In 2018, IOM conducted a “Rapid Mental Health and Psychosocial Needs” assessment with Rohingya refugees which revealed that 45% of respondents had been living with distress symptoms, such as nightmares, a sense of loneliness, panic attacks, somatic complaints, or suicidal thoughts. Furthermore, 50% identified an “identity crisis” as a common problem, while 40% mentioned feelings of anxiety, stress and fear when thinking about the uncertainty of their future and not being recognized as citizens of their own country. Further assessments revealed that 73% of respondents identified a loss of cultural identity following their forced exodus from Myanmar in 2017 as one of the main factors of distress.

Experts around the world have often mentioned that one's cultural and ethnic identity is central to a person's identity, how they see themselves, and how they relate to the world. The Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero used the expression *cultura animi* to emphasize the role of culture as an important asset in taking care of the soul. This is especially true for the Rohingya as their identity has historically been questioned by the Myanmar authorities. Their traditional practices are also now under threat due to their prolonged stay in Bangladesh, the local culture's influence and their dependence on international assistance.

In MHPSS programmes worldwide, IOM considers cultural and traditional components as essential for the mental health and psychosocial well-being of crisis-affected populations. As stated in IOM's Guidelines on Community Based MHPSS, these socio-cultural activities can harness tradition to change and transform what individuals and communities face post crisis, helping them to maintain a sense of identity. Considering the model of MHPSS programming, these activities respond to the suffering of individuals and groups, focusing on enhancing resilience factors and activities that traditionally mitigate distress, while supporting skills development, creativity and reflection. Culture significantly contributes to one's well-being because, in all its forms, it strengthens the social fabric through a shared sense of belonging and group support.

It is imperative for Rohingya refugees of all ages to uphold their cultural identity during displacement and as an advocacy tool for the discussion on repatriation to their homeland. In light of the findings in Cox's Bazar, IOM envisioned the concept of a Rohingya Cultural Memory Centre (RCMC). One of the main objectives of the RCMC project is to provide the Rohingya refugees in the camps of Cox's Bazar with a creative and safe space to share their knowledge, preserve their cultural heritage and reconnect with their individual and collective memory, as a community and as an ethnic group from Myanmar.

Through these efforts, IOM is working towards addressing the loss of identity endured by the Rohingya, counteracting the limitations they have faced, and the impact of monotony and isolation a result of their displacement and dependence on humanitarian assistance. Through the collection, production and exhibition of traditional arts and crafts, the RCMC offers a participatory platform for refugees to improve their collective sense of being. These practices are aimed at promoting opportunities for the Rohingya to strengthen their cultural heritage and ensure its continuity for younger generations, but also at advocating the urgent and necessary repatriation to Myanmar when circumstances are conducive.

In order to produce the cultural content and spatial design for the centre, IOM initiated a research journey with the help of a team of dedicated Rohingya cultural liaisons who conducted hundreds of inter-generational community consultations and organized dozens of production workshops with Rohingya artisans. This research led to the identification of the key areas of Rohingya cultural practices and produced a vast collection of tangible and intangible Rohingya cultural artefacts, known today as the RCMC collection and available under the “Treasure/Kimoti” section of the RCMC website.

A potential site for the centre has been identified right in the heart of the camps. The proposed facility will be a hilltop complex integrating several facilities, such as an artisan’s workshop space, office and shop; and the main exhibition hall displaying the Rohingya Experience through a series of walk-through narratives available for both beneficiaries and potential visitors. The walk-through exhibition will provide visitors with an interactive experience, navigating through different areas of tangible and intangible culture. Developed in close consultation with the Rohingya community, the exhibition will range from the inner to the outer circles of Rohingya culture and life; from traditional to more contemporary forms of artistic expression; from Rohingya vernacular architectural models to the geography and landmarks of Arakan; domestic pottery and basketry items; farming artefacts used throughout the rice cycle; intricate bamboo woven techniques; rattan and wooden furniture; fishing tools and techniques as well as boatmaking; papercrafts and embroidery; visual arts, food culture and other intangible forms of wisdom and storytelling.

All these will form the structure which the community has labelled as the “Rosomor Bidya Gor” (“School of Culture”). Through the artists-in-residence programme, the displaced population will have access to temporary workshops that will help them strengthen their own creative pursuits and cope with daily stressors. A team of dedicated Rohingya will be trained on the maintenance and management of the RCMC, while traditional festivals, games and performative arts will be regularly organized to maintain the centre as an interactive and organic facility.

The RCMC has been developed as a community-based intervention of the MHPSS response, i.e., integrated within the multi-layered pyramid of psychosocial interventions, under the scope of alleviating the Rohingya refugee’s suffering through collective coping strategies (problem solving and emotional regulation), emphasizing strength and resilience rather than pain. Through these interventions, the goal is for the Rohingya to emerge in the space between their own experience as people and the experience of reconciliation.

### The RCMC allows this distressed population to:

Share symbolic resources related to their identity as an ethnic group and as a community in order to help them cope with their collective experience of displacement; and

Incorporate new experiences into their identity, namely after their arrival in Bangladesh, in order to equip them with the tools needed to face the future.

## ACHIVEMENTS

 <p>Established a core team of 12 staff members to prepare the project launch</p>	 <p>Trained a research team of 17 Rohingya “Cultural Agents”</p>	 <p>Identified and engaged 150 skilled Rohingya artisans and artists</p>	 <p>Inventoried nearly 1,000 artefacts, practices, beliefs or persons representing the Rohingya cultural heritage</p>	 <p>Conducted workshops and consultations with individual skilled Rohingya artisans twice a week</p>
 <p>Collaborated with IOM’s Protection and GBV teams to conduct weekly workshops with two groups of 21 women embroidery artists</p>	 <p>Developed a schedule of weekly skill-sharing workshops for Rohingya Cultural Agents</p>	 <p>Completed the architectural design for the integrated multi-service RCMC community compound</p>	 <p>Completed the design of interactive walk-through “Rohingya Experience” exhibition</p>	 <p>RCMC Cultural Agents began conducting informal children’s and adolescent storytelling sessions</p>
 <p>Created over 100+ publications on Rohingya cultural heritage</p>	 <p>Launched the RCMC YouTube channel in November 2020</p>	 <p>Developed the RCMC website</p>	 <p>Constructed an MHPSS strategy of RCMC project activities and methods</p>	 <p>Enhanced MHPSS services into CMC’s workshop and consultation activities</p>

IOM has already conducted impact assessments qualitatively through interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FDGs) with the project’s longstanding participants (artisans and cultural agents). All of the participants reported improved well-being, security and sense of belonging through their participation. In addition, the close bonds and mentorship formed between RCMC project staff and Rohingya refugee participants help mitigate fear and anxiety and contribute to creating meaningful experiences. Overall, RCMC activities and staff work together to secure and restore the Rohingya collective memory and heritage, thus fulfilling the project’s MHPSS objectives. Social connections and the population’s well-being are fostered, cultural heritage is strengthened, its continuity secured for future generations, and cross-cultural and inter-generational understanding is facilitated.