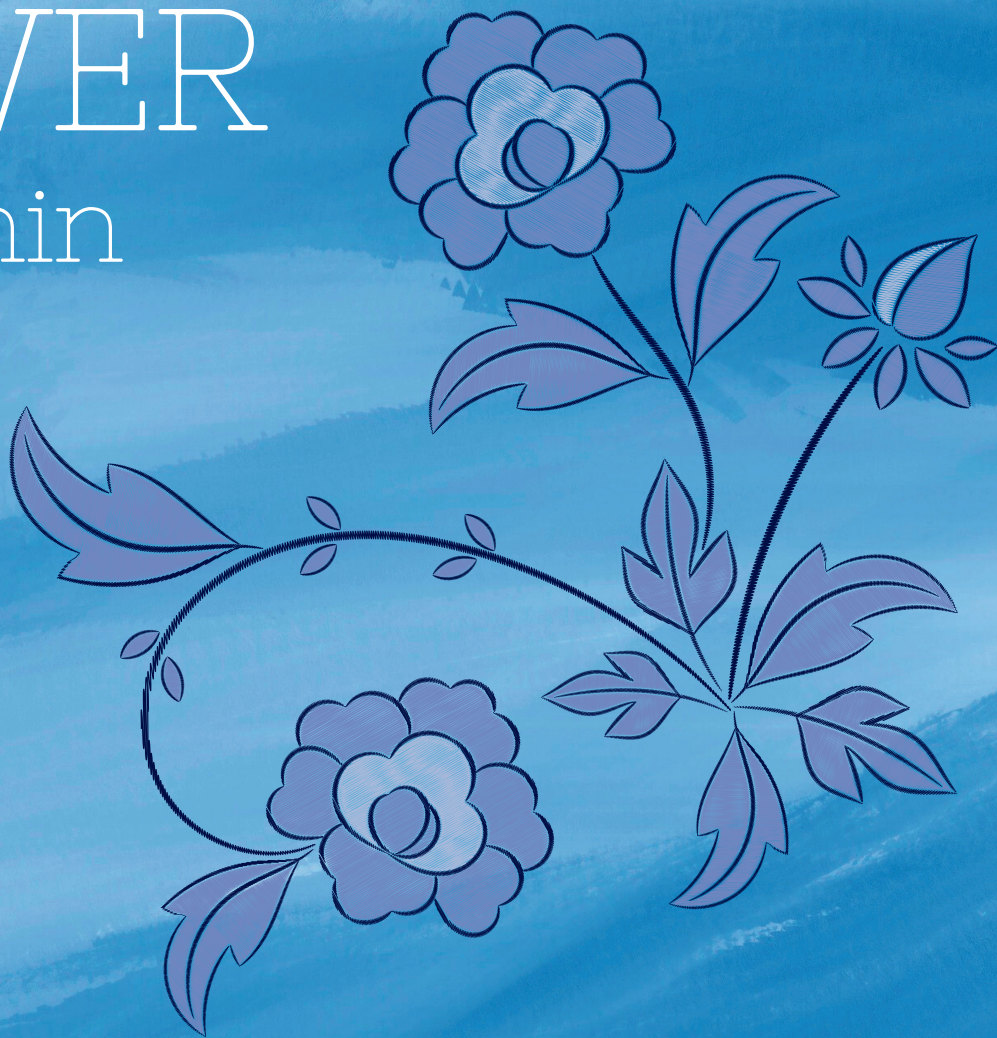


The
POWER
Within



act:onaid

Acknowledgement

This is a publication by ActionAid Bangladesh. ActionAid is a global movement of people working together to further human rights for all and defeat poverty. We believe everyone has the power within them to create change for themselves, their families and communities. ActionAid is a catalyst for that change.

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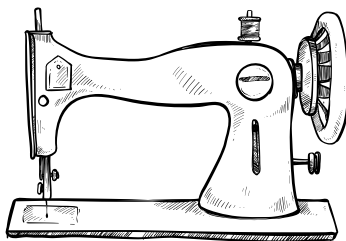
Introduction

Since its establishment in 1983, ActionAid Bangladesh (AAB) has been at the forefront of disaster response and climate change adaptation efforts in Bangladesh. We prioritise gender-sensitive approaches, empowering women as leaders during emergencies.

In partnership with UN Women, we are dedicated to empowering Rohingya women and girls in the refugee camp. Our project centred around Multi-purpose Women's Centres (MPWC), aiming to address the diverse needs of this vulnerable population, recognising the critical role of women in building stronger communities.

Our goal is clear: to empower Rohingya women and girls. Through MPWCs, we offer tailored services like psychosocial support, healthcare, leadership training, and livelihood skill development. We equip women with tools to assert their rights, build confidence, and drive change in their communities.

This storybook captures the empowering journey of Rohingya women and girls in the world's largest refugee camp. May these stories inspire hope, courage, and meaningful conversations. We must create a world where every woman is valued, respected, and empowered to thrive.



Beyond Borders

Nur Bahar, a 39-year-old woman, was married off early and raised seven children. Her family was well-settled in Myanmar. Unfortunately, when the Rohingya people became victims of a military-led genocide, she and her family fled to Bangladesh seeking refuge.

During their journey to Bangladesh, Nur's husband was killed by the Myanmar military. Not only did she have to witness that, but she also saw numerous other atrocities, including murders and sexual assaults. In these circumstances, protecting herself and her children became an incredibly challenging task. But she maintained her sanity and eventually reached Bangladesh.

Upon arriving in Bangladesh, Nur and her family received assistance for their basic needs. However, due to limited resources, they were living in a tiny poly-shade room, accommodating her seven children and her mother. Nur Bahar faced immense difficulties in providing for her large family, as financial constraints prevented them from meeting their basic needs. Moreover, her children suffered from malnutrition. Life could not get much harder.

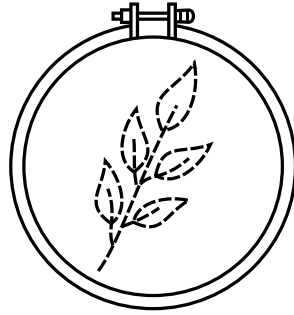
During a household visit, ActionAid Bangladesh volunteers recommended that Nur explore opportunities at the MPWC by enrolling in livelihood training programmes. Following their advice, she visited the MPWC with her children, where she found a supportive environment. There, she consulted a doctor and spoke to a psychologist, who helped her manage her trauma.

Nur also participated in a tailoring training programme offered by the MPWC. This programme not only presented her with the opportunity to acquire skills but also held the promise of contributing to her livelihood.

‘After completing the tailoring training programme, I received support, including a sewing machine and other necessary materials from ActionAid Bangladesh. Utilising these resources, I started sewing clothes for my neighbours. In addition to my individual efforts, I became a proud member of a production group that regularly receives orders from the MPWC. This collaborative venture helping me to maintain financial stability. With my income, I can now afford to buy fruit and meat for my seven children. They are now going to school. I even manage to cover fees for private coaching within the camp’.

‘Furthermore, my journey towards self-sufficiency extends to my role as a team leader in a vermicompost plantation group, where I work alongside four other women. Together, we collect vermicompost twice a month and sell it to various NGOs and community members. The profits earned are invested in purchasing raw materials like cow dung, and we equally distribute the earnings among our group members. This collective effort gives me a sense of pride and empowerment.’

Nur’s journey reflects the resilience and determination of Rohingya women in the face of immense adversity. From the tragic loss of her husband to the challenging conditions in the refugee camp, she demonstrated incredible strength. Her story highlights the power of empowerment initiatives, showcasing how individuals, even amid hardship, can build a path toward self-sufficiency, pride, and empowerment within their community.



Stitching Resilience

At 27, I had to leave my ancestral home in Myanmar for Bangladesh. I settled in a refugee camp with my father and two sons. This camp, located in a hilly area known for risks like robbery, became our new home.

Life in any refugee camp comes with its struggles. Adding to that, my husband was unemployed. He struggled to provide for us and care for my ailing father. His frustration led to violence against me, and after a year of abuse, he left, marrying another woman. I started to work as a day labourer whenever I could to provide for my sons and to afford medicine for my father.

One day, a group of volunteers from ActionAid Bangladesh's MPWC visited our block. They informed me about the range of services offered at the centre and the opportunities available for women. Then, I decided to join the quilting class offered at the centre. For the next three months, I learnt and practised quilting. I participated in awareness sessions and even learnt to read and write my name. The centre became a place of growth and learning for me.

These days, I work from home, and it has become my workshop. I have a sewing machine now, and I cater to a wide range of clients. I am earning money for my family.

My craftsmanship earned me a reputation in our community. My pillow covers, adorned with flower designs, have become a source of income and pride. I recently received orders for embroidery and shawls from ActionAid Bangladesh.

My journey wasn't just about earning money; it was about finding my voice and independence. Women of my block are coming to me to learn embroidery. They also want to change their circumstances around them. I am happy that my journey inspires them to do more for their independence.



Surviving Shadows

Hamida was 12 years old when she moved to Bangladesh from Myanmar, settling with her uncle in Chittagong. At the age of 15, she entered a marriage with a citizen of Myanmar. However, her marriage turned out to be short-lived because of her husband's abusive behaviour, and she sought refuge with her uncle again, finding herself in a situation that mirrored the life of a refugee within her family.

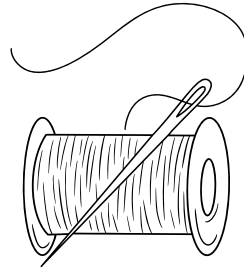
Her aunt and uncle started verbally abusing her as they didn't want her to live with them anymore. Determined to escape her circumstances, she made the decision to leave the country once again. She ended up in India. It was there that she wanted to settle permanently, marrying an individual from Myanmar. Over the course of 11 years, they shared their lives together and became parents to three children. Their life was tough as they faced challenges living in a foreign land.

Unfortunately, Hamida's husband died, leaving her to face further challenges alone. Then, in 2017, news of the Rohingya crisis unfolded, and she learnt of the events. With the uncertainties of life weighing heavily upon her in India, she made the decision to return to Bangladesh, considering the possibility of seeking shelter in the camps. Upon reaching Bangladesh, Hamida felt insecure, mentally unstable, and had to adjust to living in a crowded area while seeking acceptance in her new surroundings.

During field visits from MPWC's Psycho-Social Support volunteer, she learnt about the services provided at the centre. She showed interest in visiting the centre and joining and expressed interest in visiting the centre, participating in case management programmes. Her own life experience motivated her to do more for other people's well-being. She became a valued member of the community-based women's group. She found comfort and healing by actively participating, and moving past her previous struggles. Currently, she is working as a volunteer in an INGO's Psycho-Social Support programme, her primary goal is to prevent others from enduring the harm and oppression she once experienced.

Her participation in projects led by ActionAid has brought remarkable transformations in her life. Now she stands firmly on her own. With a comprehensive understanding of the services available in the camp, she actively engages others in problem-solving activities. Whenever there is a need, she willingly goes where she is directed, setting herself apart from the crowd. She has found a sense of mental peace.

Hamida expresses that if she had received such awareness lessons from her early childhood, she would not have suffered as she did. Her experience participating in various gender-based violence initiatives provided her with more clarity and confidence to stand against any injustice.



Journey to Empowerment

Shofika, a resident of the Buchidong region in Myanmar, lived with her four children and sister. Following the onset of the genocide, they sought refuge in Bangladesh.

Upon reaching Bangladesh, Shofika's husband found himself unemployed and struggling to provide for his family of six. The monthly rations were insufficient, and with no source of income, the family encountered numerous difficulties. To survive they started selling their rations. Additionally, his husband was diagnosed with Jaundice. Financial problems made it hard for them to pay for needed medical care, which stressed them out mentally.

One day, a group of volunteers from Psychosocial Support visited her neighbourhood, introducing her to the services provided by ActionAid Bangladesh's MPWC for women and girls in the community. Hopeful, she decided to enrol in the sewing programme, where she gained valuable skills under the guidance of dedicated trainers. After three months of training, she received a sewing machine, expanding her expertise to include embroidery and needlework.

The vocational skills she acquired opened doors to market opportunities, empowering her to generate income independently. No longer dependent on her husband for financial support, she started receiving numerous orders from local shops. The earnings she made enabled her to send her children to a madrasa, support her household, and even aid others in her community.

During the challenging period of the COVID-19 pandemic, Shofika's sewing skills became invaluable. She earned a substantial income by fulfilling mask-sewing orders from the MPWC-1 centre. Additionally, she seized the opportunity to learn literacy skills that had been previously inaccessible to her. In addition to her newfound vocational skills, she also learnt literacy skills that had been previously inaccessible to her, enriching her life further.

Shofika's journey from vulnerability and dependence to self-sufficiency was greatly influenced by the support and opportunities provided by ActionAid Bangladesh. Her story exemplifies the positive impact that organisations dedicated to improving the lives of marginalised individuals can have.



Breaking Chains

I am Mahmuda. I was only 15 when my parents told me that they were marrying me off in a few days' time. I was married to a much older man. This marriage exposed me to early pregnancy, abuse, and violence. By the time I reached 20, I had become a mother to two children. My husband turned our marriage into a nightmare with his violent treatment. Violence left its trail on me with deep scars, both visible and hidden.

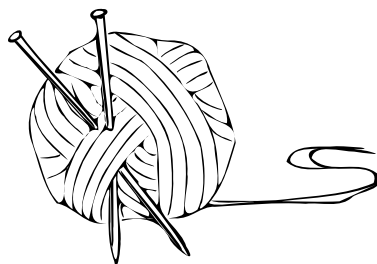
I was desperately looking for help and came to know about the MPWC from other women in my community. I was not given many life-changing options, so when I learnt about this centre, I decided, 'Why not give it a try?' At the MPWC, I was fortunate to meet a compassionate Case Management Officer who provided the much-needed psychosocial support. This support became a lifeline, helping me navigate the emotional trauma I was experiencing. Recognising the gravity of my situation, the MPWC referred me to their legal services.

Through the Community Legal Services initiative, I received guidance from legal professionals. They played a crucial role in advocating for my rights and taking the necessary legal actions to protect me from the ongoing violence. The Complaints and Information Cell (CIC) also played a vital part in addressing the issue of gender-based violence. They took proactive measures to prevent further harm from my husband. It was through the comprehensive approach of combining psychosocial support, legal assistance, and the intervention of the CIC that I was able to break free from the cycle of violence.

MPWC also has a livelihood programme and soon I started to engage in tailoring and dressmaking. It took me almost three months to learn these skills. I even got a sewing machine after completing the training. Now I get orders from my neighbours and earn 200 to 250 taka every day.

I have also engaged in awareness-raising sessions to learn more about gender-based violence (GBV) and its profound impact on individuals and communities. I want to be a support system for others facing GBV and support them in finding their way out from violence.

My path towards healing continues, and I am determined to create a safe and nurturing environment for both myself and my children.



Fabric of Freedom

Mohammad Alom is an exceptionally talented young designer and entrepreneur. Alom is also a transgender and has an inspiring story for us.

Alom lives in a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar. They have eleven siblings. They had a very difficult childhood; rather, it can be said that they had no childhood at all. Because of their gender identity, they faced mistreatment from everywhere. Though Alom's family tolerated them, the family also faced social rejection.

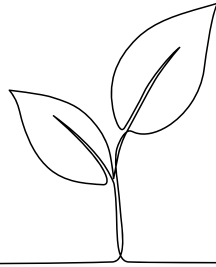
Alom's life took a positive turn when their family came to know about the MPWC. They enrolled in the sewing and tailoring programme, hoping to acquire skills that would bring change in their circumstances.

Throughout the training programme, Alom discovered their talent for designing clothes and passion for creating beautiful garments. The trainers of the centre guided Alom to refine their craft, Alom's learning time at the centre, helped to build their confidence in their abilities.

Successfully completing the training, Alom established a small clothing business, specialising in custom-made garments. Their attention to detail and unique design aesthetic set them apart, earning recognition and praise from customers.

Word of Alom's exceptional talent spread, reaching wider circles. Alom's creations became popular, leading to partnerships with boutique stores and local fashion events. Their dedication paid off, bringing financial stability, recognition, and the respect of the community.

Alom is now well-accepted in their community. They have been invited to different social events, including weddings and cultural events, breaking free from prejudices. Mohammed Alom's journey from neglect and discrimination to a successful entrepreneur is not just a personal victory but also a source of inspiration for others. Alom stands tall, symbolising resilience, creativity, and self-belief, inspiring countless others to embrace their potential and strive for a brighter future.



Nurturing Dreams

In Camp 4, where the whispers of birds echo through the air, resides Rohima Khatun. She had past experiences in nursery work from her time in Myanmar. As a single mother, she was left to navigate the complexities of life alone in the refugee camp. Rohima was eager to work and learn new skills.

A group was formed, by ActionAid Bangladesh at the MPWC Centre with Jorina Khatun, Halima Khatun, Shamima Khatun, and Noor Banu, who embarked on a new journey. They learnt gardening skills at the women's centre, like preparing soil and growing plants.

The training sessions were like reading a book, teaching them how to prepare soil, plant seeds, care for young plants, and make organic fertiliser. As they practised in the soil, they became skilled at growing crops with care and precision.

The centre became their safe place, filled with papaya, banana, jackfruit, pepper, eggplant, and okra plants. They didn't just grow crops there; it also gave them confidence and independence. When their harvest grew, they sold the fruits and equally divided the money among themselves. The remaining fruits were divided evenly among them as well. It was not just a financial transaction; it was a celebration of shared prosperity.

With this endeavour, Rohima and her companions unlocked the doors of possibilities. No longer confined by the limitations of their circumstances, they were able to purchase medicine, clothes, and food according to their needs and desires. They were happy, and gratitude became the melody of their hearts.

In the refugee camp, Rohima Khatun and her companions continue to cultivate not just crops but also dreams. Their story is a testament to the power of collective effort and the nurturing touch of organisations like ActionAid and UN Women. With knowledge, they planted the seeds of their dreams and heard the promise of a better, more independent future.



Threads of Empowerment

Fatema's life was marked by poverty from the very beginning. She started working from her teenage years. She worked various jobs, including farming, cutting wood in the hills, and doing labour work. Driven by the belief that marriage would offer an escape from poverty, she married early.

But life had different plans for her. She was abused mentally and physically by her husband but in-laws. When she gave birth to their child, her husband remarried. She went back home and started living with her parents. She would cry in the arms of her father, overwhelmed by the need to care for herself and her daughter.

She began sewing for a living and was making between fifty and one hundred taka. Moreover, she was doing chores for neighbouring households, barely making ends meet. At times, her husband would take her back, only to subject her to new forms of torment. Eventually, she returned to her home with her two daughters.

Life would still be okay but in 2017, amidst the atrocities by the Myanmar military, she sought refuge in Bangladesh, a foreign land. With her two daughters, she entered a new environment, beginning a new chapter in her life. Anxiety, restlessness, and extreme vulnerability plagued her.

Unfamiliar with the services or activities available in the camp, Fatema sought support from the community, hoping to find a sense of belonging and assistance in her journey. Upon learning about the MPWC, she thought it would be a good fit for her at this point in life. By participating in sessions focused on awareness, she became a member of MPWC-2 and started learning about women's rights and empowerment.

Upon closer examination about the services provided by ActionAid Bangladesh, she realised that there were two things she truly needed: education and skills for employment. Needlework had been a constant presence in Fatema's life since childhood. She started to start from there. To test her skills, she was given a small piece of fabric to sew, and she succeeded.

For the past three years, Fatema has been selling clothes, earning a decent wage every month. Sewing, now lies firmly in Fatema's capable hands. Today, Fatema stands as an independent woman, actively striving towards her goals. She has cultivated a sense of self-worth within her family. She has become a symbol of a hardworking woman in her community, demonstrating the power of economic freedom in one's life.

Fatema's greatest aspiration is to educate and empower her daughters, hoping to shape their lives differently from her own experiences.



From Surviving to Thriving

Rama Khatun lived a comfortable life with her husband and children in Myanmar. The Rohingya genocide pushed her family to seek refuge in Bangladesh. She and her family made the journey to Bangladesh in the pursuit of safety and a hopeful future.

Rama was 26 years old when she started living in the camp. Her family received limited ration which was insufficient to meet their needs. Moreover, her husband rather than shouldering his share of responsibilities for his family, decided to take the easy way out. He left Rama and remarried. Now Rama became the only responsible person to look after the family.

Around that trialling time, she came to know about the MPWC through one of her neighbours who worked there. Intrigued, she decided to visit the centre the following day. Upon arriving at the centre, she discovered a range of activities designed to assist Rohingya women like herself. During her visit, she participated in an awareness-raising session on gender-based violence and it gave her more clear insights on her rights.

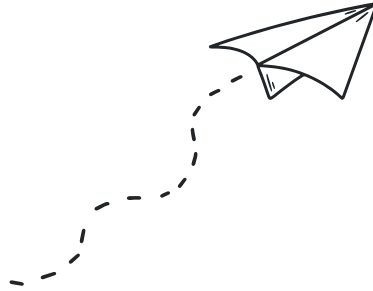
Her time in the centre gave her much-needed confidence to address her marital status. She was not officially separated from her husband. Moreover, he was not taking any responsibility for their children. Rama wanted a divorce and discussed her situation with a Case Management Officer. The officer referred her to BLAST for

legal assistance after providing her with essential psychological support. Rama divorced her husband, ensuring not only her own well-being but also securing financial contributions from her husband for the welfare of their children.

At the MPWC centre, she also engaged in livelihood training, providing her opportunities to generate income. She showed her interest in jute work, and to her delight, a staff member informed her about a new jute work training batch starting in a month, inviting her to join. Excited, Rama visited the centre every day in anticipation. Eventually, she enrolled in the jute work training. Rama successfully completed the programme, marking the beginning of a new chapter where she could earn a sustainable income.

Following the completion of her training, she skilfully produced one mat per day. Beyond this, Rama showcased her expertise in Nakshi Kantha, creating exquisite, embroidered pieces that earned her 500 taka per item. This success significantly boosted her monthly income, reaching an impressive 5000-7000 taka.

Rama's joy continued as ActionAid Bangladesh placed their trust in her once again, granting her another opportunity to contribute her valuable skills to the organisation. Rama stood strong to get justice for her and her children. Her resilience is a story worth sharing with others. She worked hard to achieve financial stability. Now, she ensures nutritious food, proper medical care, and most importantly, the well-being of her family.



Finding Voice

Rafia Begum is a mother of four, living with her husband and children in the refugee camp in Cox's Bazar. She got married in Myanmar at only 14, and her life changed forever as she began to experience domestic violence. Although Rafia and her family moved to Bangladesh for safety, Rafia was not safe from abuse in her own house.

She grew up in a culture that did not support women speaking up against such violence, so she continued to suffer quietly. Rafia recalls, "I suffered silently, never complaining about my husband's abuse. Neither did I ever work outside to keep peace in our family as the community I come from always frowned upon women working outside of their homes. Even when my oldest daughter turned 12, they pressured her to marry early. Deep inside I was longing for another escape".

Rafia's wishes came true when she got to know about the MPWC in her camp. She was inspired by the dedicated volunteers and the role they were playing in the community. There she participated in an external awareness session on gender-based violence (GBV), women's and child rights, trafficking, and child marriage, understanding how little she knew about these topics. It was a turning point for her as now she knew she did not need to suffer silently.

Rafia is now a proud entrepreneur, running a shop selling clothes in the camp. The community still does not approve of her choice to work, but she is not confined by

their perceptions anymore. Her earnings have become a pillar of strength for her family to manage the daily family expenses. Her husband is also now more aware about the consequences of GBV, as ActionAid Bangladesh, organised a male engagement session in their block, addressing the pressing issues of GBV and women's rights.

Rafia proudly says, "Now I am a women's community leader, conducting sessions to inspire other women in my community to speak up." Rafia's story is giving hope to others facing similar challenges.

Photo Stories



Observing 'International Day of the Girl Child': Celebrating the strength, resilience, and boundless potential of girls everywhere!



Products made by Rohingya women in the Multi-Purpose Women's Centre.



Observing the 16 Days of Activism event, as we stand united against gender-based violence and advocate for a world of equality and respect.



Rohingya women engage in vermicompost activities at the Multi-Purpose Women's Centre.



UN Women, UNICEF, and ActionAid colleagues engage in a coordination meeting to drive positive change at MPWC.



Girls at the Multi-Purpose Women's Centre having fun during a leisurely activity.



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