

'I ALWAYS DREAM OF MY HOUSE WHEN I SLEEP' ROHINGYA MEMORIES OF HOME

Salema (22), Shomsida (25), Shomima (28), Rokeya Begum (22), Umme Habiba (16), Morijan (16), Zaheda Begum (22), Hla Hla Begum (20), Fatema Begum (25) and Yasmin (25)

The Rohingya people cannot forget the houses of their homeland. They loom large in Rohingya memory and color their dreams. Some wealthier families lived in *totta ghor*, elegant two-story wooden buildings, perched on stilts, with long open verandas and many elaborately carved windows to allow the cool air to circulate. Woven bamboo panels formed beautifully textured walls that created a feeling of airiness. Others lived in mud houses with thatched roofs in small peaceful villages where life was centralized around the community pond.

Nature was close by, sometimes literally underneath the house where livestock could be berthed. Women and girls picked wild henna leaves to grind into *mohdi* paste to apply during festivals. Children stole fruit from their neighbors' trees and hunted for small birds in the forest. Wives and mothers cooked vegetables from the garden in the kitchen attached at the back of the house. Families were large and multi-generational. On hot summer days, they would gather on the verandas to rest in the breeze.

We commissioned a group of ten Rohingya women to express collective and individual memory through *fultola*, a heritage craft. Most drew their childhood homes. One drew her current shelter in camp; another captured her married home; and another imagined the 'dream building' where she imagines herself living one day in downtown Buthidaung, Rakhine state. After sketching, the artists selected skeins of colorful silk thread, and stitched textures, patterns and shapes in vibrant, jewel tones to bring these memories to life.



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Called *fultola*, or flower-drawing, embroidery is a traditional decorative art for Rohingya women and girls. Flowers were the standard motif, and embroidered pieces were imbued with contextual and symbolic meaning. Through utilizing their traditional craft to express cultural memory and identity, these Rohingya artists promote community healing, preserve their heritage, and imaginatively represent ideas of *Rohingyaness* in the face of exile.

