



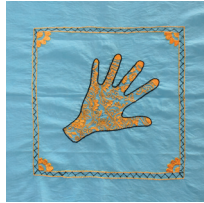
HENNA MAKES THE HAND BEAUTIFUL

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)

Mohdi, or henna, is a colorful expression of both celebration and faith. The bright vermilion natural dye, made from the smashed leaves of the henna plant, adorns the hands of Rohingya women and girls on their most special days, particularly weddings and the twice-yearly Islamic festivals known as Eid. On *modhi* night (on the eve of a Rohingya wedding), the bride's friends and relatives gather at her home to beautify her hands and feet with *modhi*. It is a night of great fun and sisterhood. Similarly, Rohingya women and girls celebrate the sighting of the new Eid moon by gathering to apply *modhi*. They say that, without the beloved *modhi* ritual, these celebrations would not be complete.

Traditionally, the Rohingya women prepare the *modhi* paste home, as the plants are found growing in wild in gardens throughout Arakan. After the leaves are plucked, they are ground with water and a few drops of lemon juice (to enhance color) into a thick green paste, using a mortar and pestle. In the refugee camps, henna plants are scarce, so *modhi* must be purchased in tube form at the market —though the pre-made, packaged henna is less potent and the color does not last as long— so it is less preferred. The paste is applied on hands and feet, including fingers, toes and nails, in bold and intricate patterns. Flowers and vines are popular. The paste is washed off in a few hours, after the color sets. It lasts three to four weeks.

In this project, a group of Rohingya women were asked to explore their favourite henna tattoo designs —but instead of using the regular henna paste— to employ their skills in traditional *ful-tola* (flower-making embroidery). The results were astonishingly beautiful.



'I never liked processed tube henna because it disappears so fast. I always preferred natural henna. On my wedding, my sisters-in-law drew the henna beautifully. I still remember that. Henna makes the hand beautiful. Without it, I feel the hand is empty.'—
Salema, 22 years old



'My mother use to paint my hands before Eid day. Making these henna hands makes me think of my mother's love.'—Shomsida, 25 years old

