



# The language lesson:

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED ABOUT  
COMMUNICATING WITH ROHINGYA REFUGEES

*November 2018*



**TRANSLATORS**  
WITHOUT BORDERS

# Acknowledgments

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Mahrukh Maya Hasan conducted the research and authored the report. Eric DeLuca, Irene Scott, and AK Rahim contributed to the research and analysis.

Translators without Borders (TWB) envisions a world where knowledge knows no language barriers. The US-based non-profit provides people access to vital knowledge in their language by connecting non-profit organizations with a community of language professionals, building local language translation capacity, and raising awareness of language barriers. Originally founded in 1993 in France (as Traducteurs sans Frontières), TWB translates millions of words of life-saving and life-changing information every year. In 2013, TWB created the first-ever crisis relief translation service, Words of Relief, which has responded to crises every year since.

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# Table of Contents

1. Rohingya refugees need information in a language they understand.....	4
2. Methods .....	6
3. Usage.....	6
4. Interview sites map .....	7
5. Who participated in the study?.....	8
6. Access to information.....	9
7. Spoken communication.....	10
8. Written communication.....	18
9. Visual communication .....	23
10. Communicating information .....	24
11. Recommendations .....	29
12. Annex.....	32

# Rohingya refugees need information in a language they understand.

Refugees have a right to information and two-way communication in their own language, in a format they understand, and through channels they prefer and trust.

In the past year, access to information has improved in the Rohingya refugee response as a result of an increased humanitarian focus on communicating with communities. Yet language barriers and low access to media still leave many Rohingya refugees without the critical and life-saving information they need to claim their rights, get the support they need, and make informed choices for themselves and their families.

In August 2018, Translators without Borders (TWB) surveyed a representative sample of refugees in the Kutupalong-Balukhali camp to better understand their language and information needs.



*Enumerators set out for the day to deliver the comprehension survey. TWB*

**“When I speak my own language, I am **free**. When I hear someone else speaking Rohingya, I feel like I am **home**.”**

- Female Rohingya refugee



## Here is what we found.



**Rohingya is the only spoken language that all refugees understand and prefer. Thirty-six percent struggled to understand a basic sentence in Chittagonian.** Organizations hiring Chittagonian speakers should test their Rohingya language skills and provide them with support and training in terminology and interpreting. Given cultural constraints facing Rohingya women, organizations should hire female staff with the right language skills to communicate with them.



**Verbal communication is critical.** Sixty-six percent of refugees said that they cannot read or write in any language, and comprehension testing broadly confirmed this. Their stated preference is to receive information face to face, over loudspeaker, and by phone call. Radio, film and theater could also supplement face-to-face discussions. So too could engaging with trusted community figures such as imams and women's leaders to support dissemination of key information. Using formats people have access to is key to ensuring information reaches everyone, especially the most vulnerable groups.



**Simple visual messaging is effective.** After spoken Rohingya, visual messaging was the most widely understood medium. Humanitarian communication efforts could incorporate visual elements, such as illustration, animation, and video created with the community to ensure they are appropriate and understood.

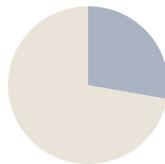


**Two-thirds would prefer written communication in Rohingya. However, the language lacks a universally accepted script.**

A number of writing systems exist but more information is needed about how widely understood and accepted they are in the camps. Further research and consultation with the refugee population could potentially identify a way forward.



**After Rohingya, Burmese is the preferred language for written communication.** Around 32 percent could read simple messages in Burmese, Bangla or English. To reach the widest possible audience, humanitarians should therefore provide any written information in all three languages. If resources are limited, Burmese should take precedence. This enables refugees to read, or have someone read to them, in a language that they are comfortable with. Refugees also preferred written information to be given in leaflet form, so that it is portable and can be kept for later reading.



**28 percent of refugees do not have enough information.** Language barriers and low access to media still leave many Rohingya refugees without the information they need to claim their rights, get the support they need, and make decisions for themselves and their families.

# Methods

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of information in different languages and formats among Rohingya refugees living in the Kutupalong-Balukhali camp (or the megacamp). According to [UNHCR](#), over 700,000 Rohingya refugees live in the area. The target population did not include camps in nearby Teknaf or refugees living in neighboring host communities.

We interviewed 407 adults in the camp. This sample size provides a 95 percent confidence level and a 5 percent margin of error. This study aims to be representative of the entire adult refugee population living in the Kutupalong-Balukhali camp, with the exception of Kutupalong registered camp, which was off-limits at the time of data collection due to adverse security conditions.

Respondents were given simple spoken, written and visual messages and asked to explain the key messages of each. All testing materials were common messages used in health or WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) interventions.

Data collection took place August 8-12, 2018. We aggregated most of the data collected. Where relevant, we have disaggregated it by gender, age, or level of education.

The survey was transliterated into the Rohingya language using Bengali script. This ensured that each question was asked exactly the same way each time, and removed the chance of survey questions being misinterpreted. Enumerators were trained to read the transliterations of questions and responses to ensure accurate data collection.

A detailed methods section including limitations is provided as Annex 1 to this report. The questionnaire and cleaned dataset are in Annex 2.



# Usage

The term “refugees” is used throughout this report to refer to the Rohingya refugee population that resides in the megacamp, approximately 80 percent of the total number currently in Bangladesh.

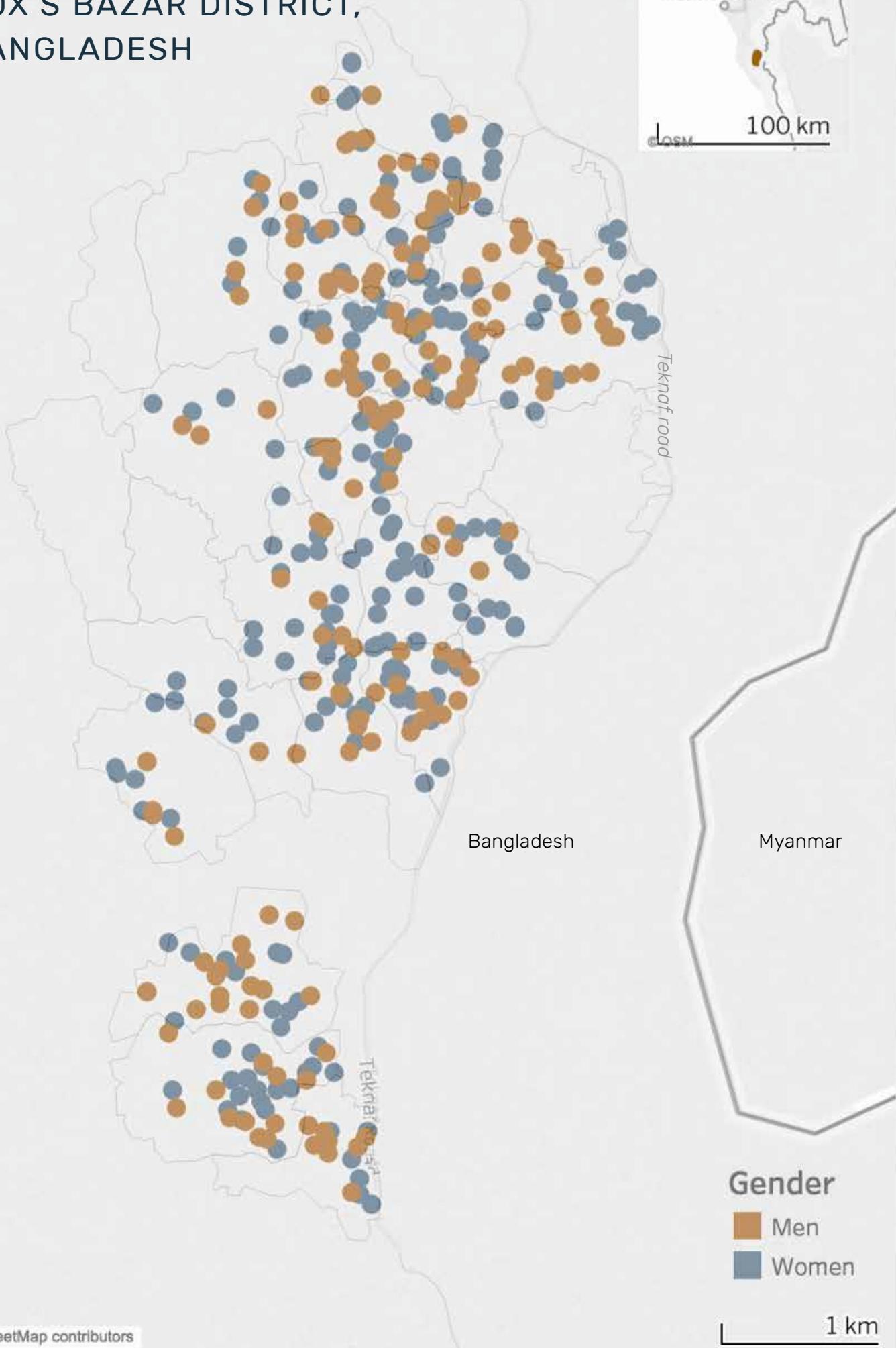
We use the term ‘Bangla’ to refer to the official language of Bangladesh; it is also commonly called Bengali.

Chittagonian, an official dialect of Bangla, is referred to as a language in this report for simplicity.

*Woman listens to an audio recording of a message to test her understanding in Bangla, Burmese, English and Chittagonian. TWB*

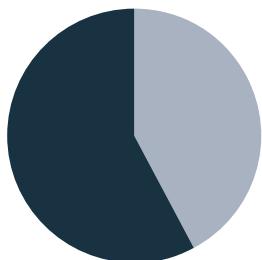
# Interview sites:

COX'S BAZAR DISTRICT,  
BANGLADESH



# Who participated in the study?

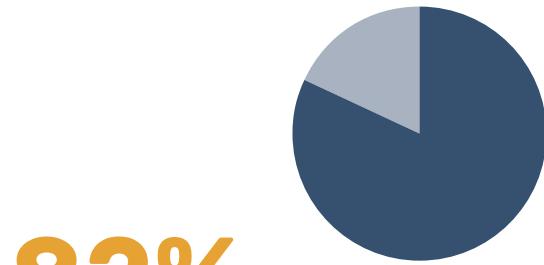
**407** respondents from within the Kutupalong-Balukhali expansion site.



**58%** WOMEN      **42%** MEN

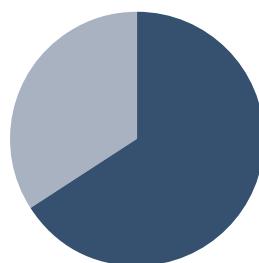
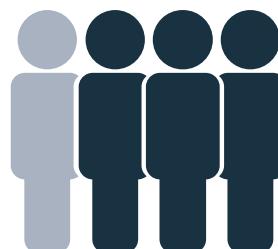


**2** in **3** have no formal education.



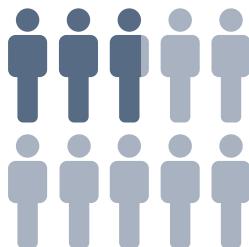
**82%** ARE NEW ARRIVALS.  
Most of the population reached the camps between August and October 2017.

**3** in **4** are 18 to 44 years old.



**66%** REPORTED THAT THEY CANNOT READ OR WRITE.

# Access to information

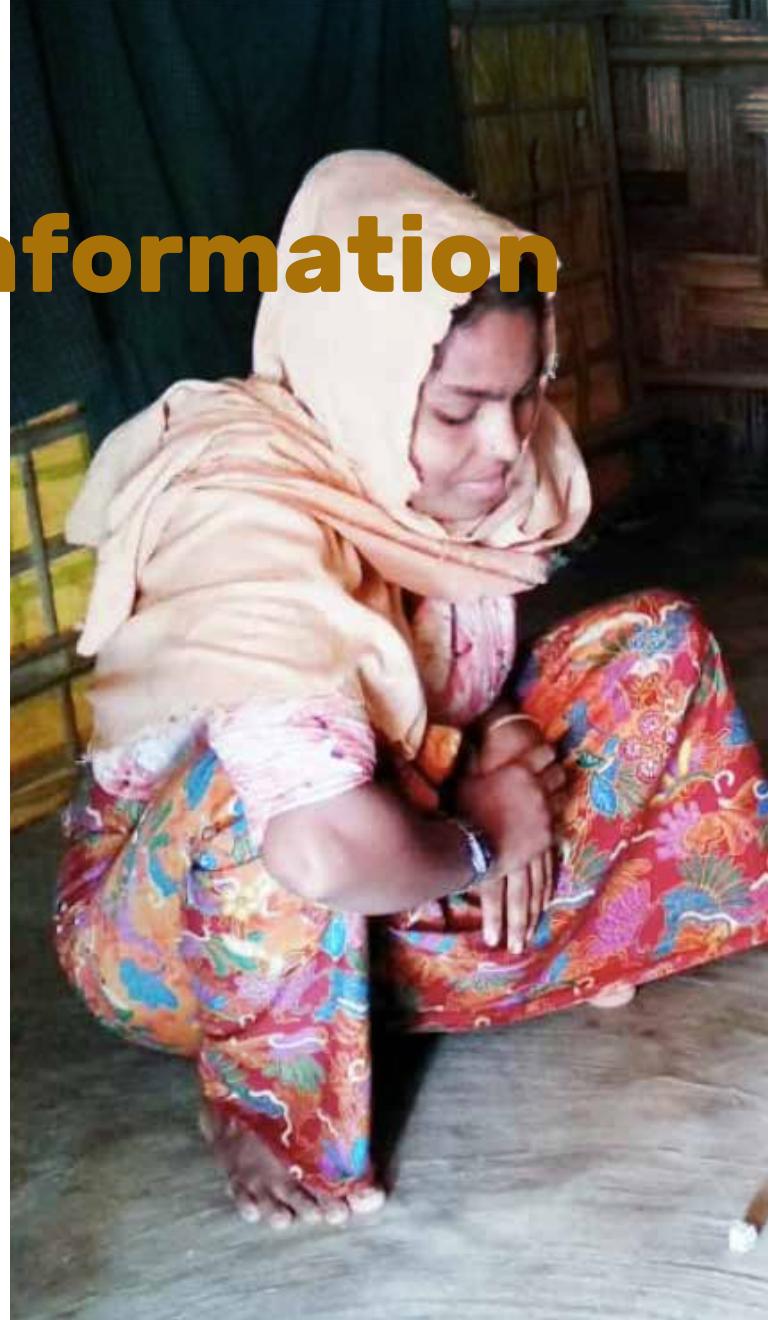


**28%**

OF REFUGEES DO  
NOT HAVE ENOUGH  
INFORMATION TO  
MAKE DECISIONS.

This suggests that access to information has improved in the past year, from a November 2017 [assessment](#) which found 79 percent of Rohingya refugees said they did not have enough information to make decisions. Extrapolated to the population of the 'megacamp', however, this would mean some 200,000 people feel they lack the basis to make properly informed decisions.

At the same time, feedback during the survey process suggests there was ambiguity in this question. Information is a broad category, and it is generally difficult to judge if you have "enough information". We chose this question as it is regularly used in information and communication needs assessments in humanitarian response. As such it enables comparison against a baseline to measure changes in access to information. In future research, however, we will consider asking more focused questions about specific types of information need, for instance on nutrition, food, maternal health, or safety.



*A Rohingya woman rolls dice to determine who in her household will take the survey. TWB*



# Spoken communication

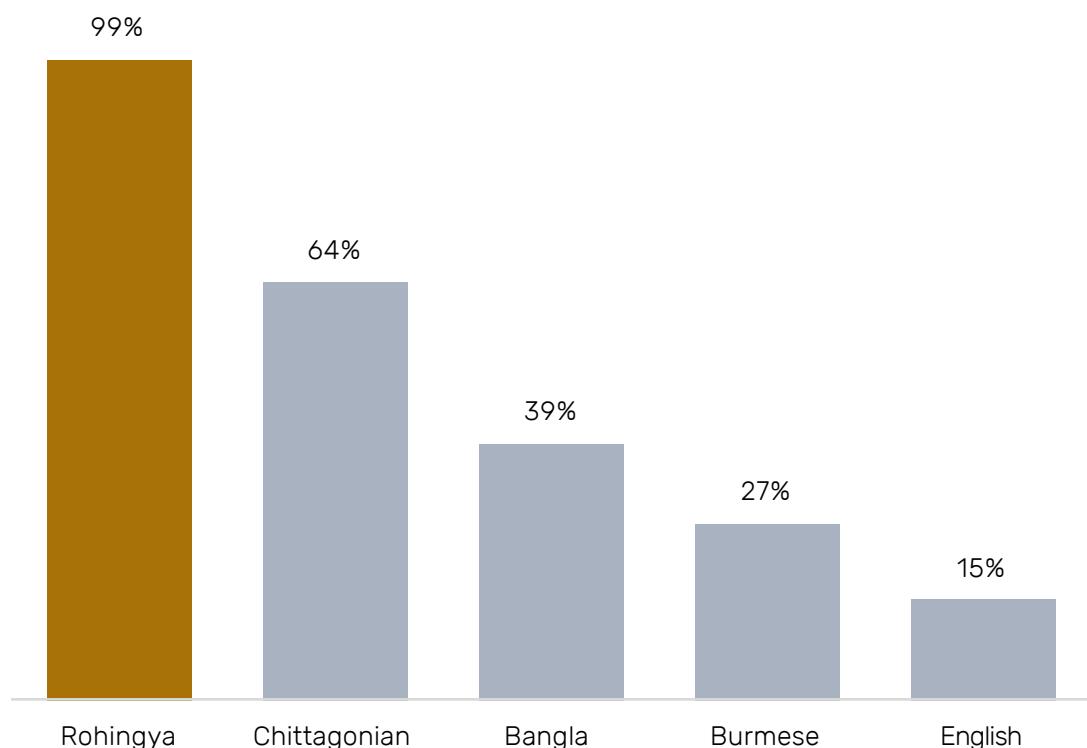
**All refugees said they speak Rohingya, with 99 percent of them saying it is their primary language at home.**

This was borne out by testing listening comprehension (see Figure 1). While not surprising, this finding confirms existing evidence and supports the fact that effective communication with refugees hinges on program staff being able to communicate in Rohingya. Training for field workers and interpreters in the Rohingya language is therefore critical.

The spoken messages selected for this comprehension study were inspired by key messages used by humanitarian agencies to explain health and WASH-related concepts in the Rohingya camps. We crafted three statements of five to 10 seconds in each commonly used spoken language (Rohingya, Bangla, Burmese, Chittagonian, and English). Each statement was simple, conceptually clear, and spoken at a steady pace.

**Rohingya is the only spoken language that all refugees understand & prefer.**

**Figure 1.** Listening comprehension rates by language





**Rohingya is the preferred language for receiving spoken information from humanitarians.** Respondents selected up to three languages in order of preference to receive spoken information. Spoken Burmese ranked third after Rohingya and Chittagonian (see Figure 2). Bangla and English ranked fourth and fifth respectively. Whenever possible, refugees' language preferences should be catered to.

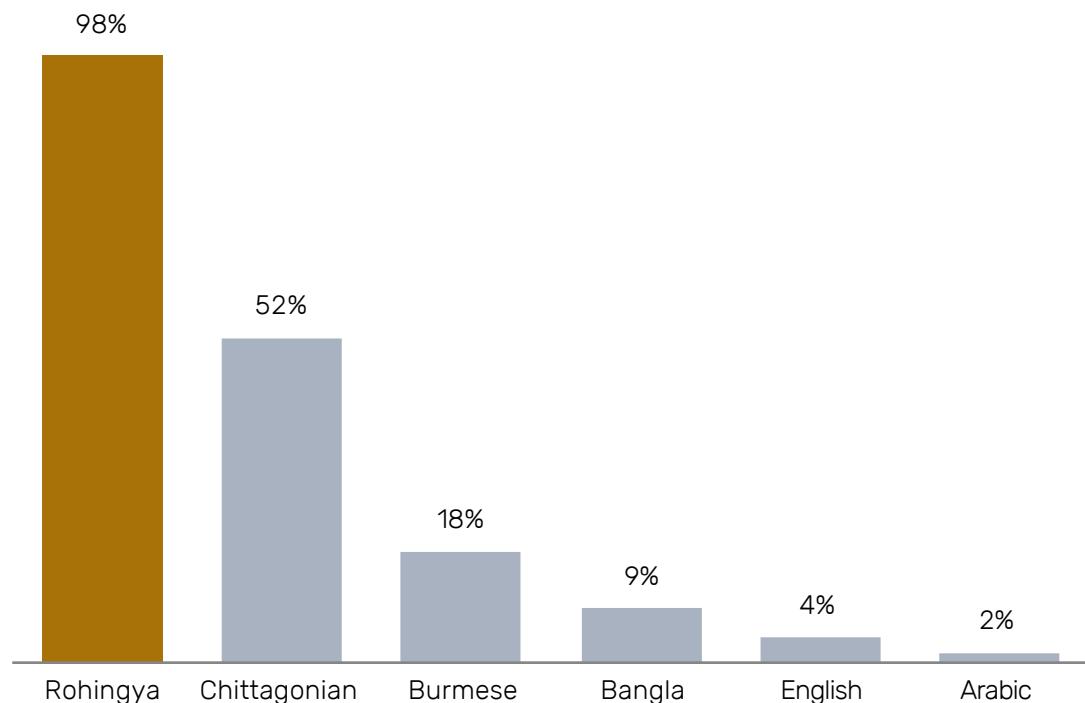
#### Examples of the messages used for oral comprehension testing

*A disease called Hepatitis E can be especially harmful to pregnant women. Most women can recover from Hepatitis E by immediately getting proper treatment.*

*Snakes are more common after flooding and may be more likely to bite people.*

*Don't drink flood water.  
It is dirty water. If you drink it, you will get sick.*

**Figure 2.** Information preference by spoken language





## 36 percent of refugees struggle to understand spoken Chittagonian.

While a majority understood a spoken message in simple Chittagonian when tested, 36 percent did not (see Figure 1). Native Chittagonian speakers, frequently hired by agencies as interpreters for the Rohingya response, should, therefore, be tested for language competency in Rohingya and given support and training in interpreting skills. Chittagonian speaking field workers should be given support and tools to assist them in using Rohingya terms to effectively communicate with the Rohingya community.

It has been one year since the majority of refugees arrived in Bangladesh, so their listening comprehension may have improved, and may continue to improve over time. Chittagonian is also refugees' second choice of spoken language to receive humanitarian information.



*A man listens to an audio recording of a message to test his understanding in Bangla, Burmese, English and Chittagonian. TWB*

## So, what's the difference between Rohingya and Chittagonian anyway?

The Rohingya language is an oral language without a standardized and universally recognized written script. It is closely related to the Chittagonian dialect of Bangla, which is also an oral language. Chittagonian is the primary dialect spoken by the host population around Cox's Bazar.

Linguistic borders do not always follow political borders. Rohingya, Chittagonian, and Bangla are all eastern Indo-Aryan languages and have similarities. For example, all three lack grammatical gender and share a core vocabulary and syntax derived from Sanskrit.

Furthermore, all three languages gradually change over a continuum. This means that small differences between neighboring dialects become amplified over distance. Chittagonian speakers from the north of Chittagong district might find it difficult to understand a Rohingya speaker from southern Rakhine state. However, the Chittagonian spoken in Teknaf is very similar to the Rohingya spoken across the river (and border) in Maungdaw.

While their similarities are clear, their differences can be stark. The main difference between Chittagonian and Rohingya is the source of their recent loanwords, or the words they borrow from other languages. Chittagonian borrows from standard Bangla, whereas Rohingya more commonly borrows from Burmese, Rakhine, and Urdu.

You will also find other dialects within the Rohingya language. Recent arrivals may use more Burmese and Urdu terms, but Rohingya refugees who have lived in Bangladesh for 30 years have adopted more Chittagonian and Bangla terms and their dialect is generally more understandable by Chittagonian speakers.

For example, while the word for cyclone is pronounced similarly in Rohingya and Chittagonian (*tuan* and *tu-en* respectively), the words for danger (*mosibot* / *bifod-afod*), rescue (*bason* / *uddar*) and safe (*hefazot* / *nirafot*) are noticeably different. Emergency warnings broadcast in Chittagonian could therefore be misinterpreted, with potentially fatal consequences.

# Spoken Bangla is understood at higher rates than spoken Burmese and spoken English.

**After Rohingya and Chittagonian, Rohingya refugees were more likely to understand a sentence spoken in Bangla (39 percent), than Burmese (27 percent) or English (15 percent).**

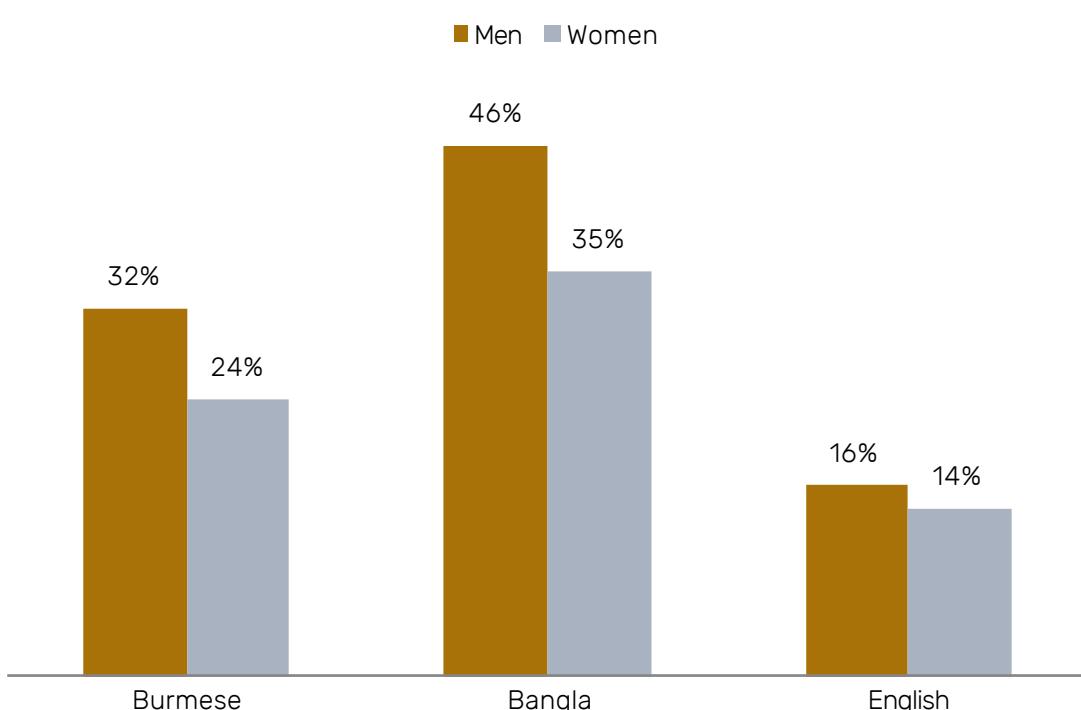
This may be because most refugees have now been in Bangladesh for at least a year. They may have picked up some of the language from living in close proximity to their Bangladeshi neighbors and through frequent interaction with aid workers. Another factor to consider is that the spoken Burmese message used

for testing used a standard translation and accent. This may not be as familiar to Rohingya who have been more exposed to the Rakhine dialect and pronunciations. Rakhine, also known as Arakanese, has notable vocabulary and pronunciation differences with standard Burmese.

## **Women are less likely than men to understand spoken Bangla and Burmese.**

The difference for Bangla is especially marked (see Figure 3). There may be several reasons for that. Many Rohingya women practice *purdah*, seclusion of the sexes common within certain South Asian communities. When a woman practices *purdah* in the camps, she will generally stay in the home and behind a curtain to avoid being seen by any unrelated men. Rohingya women may, therefore, be less exposed to hearing spoken Bangla. Accordingly, humanitarians should make extra efforts to communicate with women in Rohingya.

**Figure 3.** Listening comprehension rates by gender



# Listening comprehension in Bangla, Burmese, and English is much better than self-assessments.

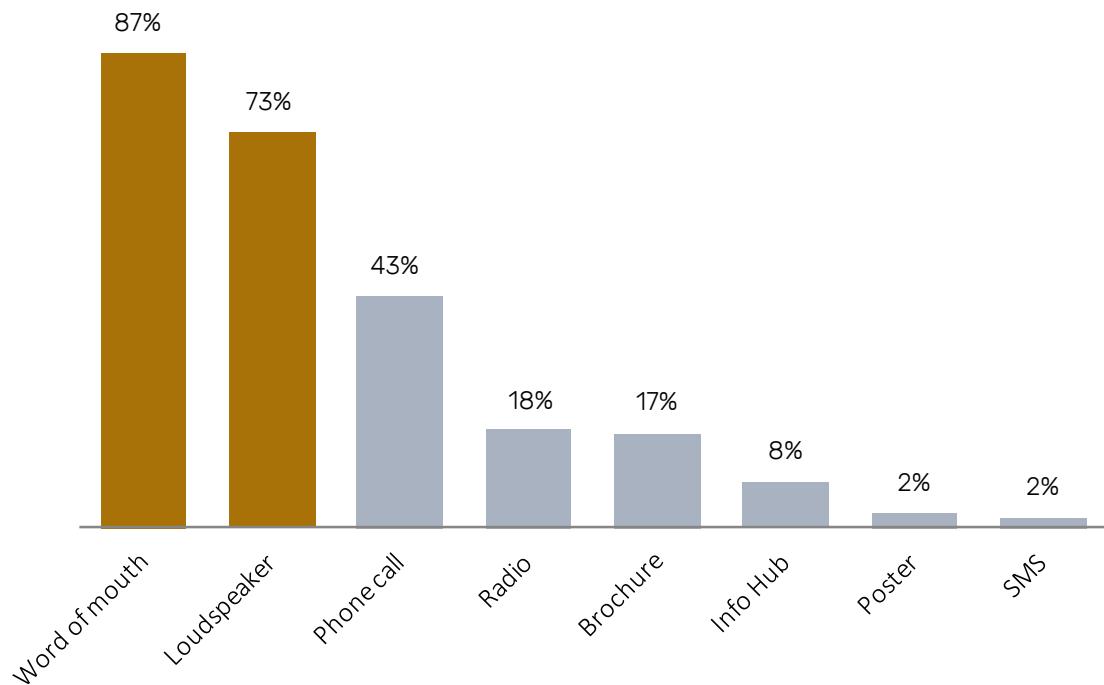
Measured comprehension rates indicate that refugees under-report their understanding of spoken Bangla, Burmese, and English. Just 5 percent self-identified as speaking or understanding spoken Bangla, but 39 percent understood a spoken message in simple Bangla. Twelve percent said they speak or understand Burmese, but 27 percent understood a simple Burmese message. Only two percent said they understood English, but 15 percent understood a spoken message in simple English.

There may be several reasons for this difference, including exposure to other languages since arrival in Bangladesh, and possible prior knowledge of the subject matter.

**“The younger people can understand some Bangla because they have been in Bangladesh for one year and they have learnt it in this time.”**

- Male enumerator

**Figure 4.** Preferred communication channel for receiving information





*A woman rolls the dice to determine who in her household will take the survey.*

TWB

**Word-of-mouth  
and loudspeaker  
are the preferred  
formats to  
receive spoken  
humanitarian  
information.**

Respondents were asked to rank up to three communication channels in order of preference. The response options included word-of-mouth, loudspeaker, phone call, brochure or pamphlet, poster or banner, information hubs, radio, TV, and SMS.

**Refugees prefer to receive spoken information.** The most preferred channel is word-of-mouth, followed by loudspeaker then phone call (see Figure 4).

This preference for spoken information again highlights the importance of field workers and interpreters being able to communicate in the Rohingya language.

While spoken communication is refugees' preferred communication channel, other channels can still be effective.

For example, anecdotal evidence suggests that almost every household in the camps has direct or indirect access to a mobile phone. In November 2017, Internews reported that 64 percent of refugees said they were using a mobile phone. However, it is doubtful that women have the same level of access as men within the household.

"[The refugees] trust phone calls because no one will call just for the sake of it."  
– Male enumerator

### **Radio was ranked relatively low among spoken communication channels.**

18 percent of respondents prefer to receive humanitarian information by radio. This is consistent with a [recent survey](#) by BBC Media Action, Internews, and TWB, which reports that only 13 percent of refugee households are regular radio listeners. An earlier assessment pointed to reasons for low listenership including difficulty accessing a radio set and no access to electricity.

A distribution of 60,000 radio sets is under way to increase radio listenership, but cultivating a regular radio audience will take time. Similar to phone use, women's radio use will not necessarily increase without targeted efforts to increase levels of access. The radio signal coverage in the camps is patchy and large parts of the camps have no signal at all. However, humanitarian agencies plan to support the extension of signal coverage of local radio stations in the coming months.

### **The versatile loudspeaker**

When asking respondents about their preferred communication channels, 'loudspeaker' was translated as *mic* in Rohingya (derived from the English word 'microphone'). This word can refer to a megaphone, a speaker or an amplifier with a microphone attached, or the speaker used to broadcast the call to prayer or religious sermons at a mosque.

In Cox's Bazar, it is common to see tom toms, or auto rickshaws, with megaphones on the roof. A passenger preaches religious sermons, relays political campaign messages, or plays music. Occasionally, private businesses such as telecoms companies advertise in a similar fashion, playing music and audio advertisements from speakers on large trucks covered in brightly colored posters. Humanitarians also take advantage of this method of communication, using megaphones to broadcast emergency cyclone preparedness messages, creating programs that play from speakers in crowded tea shops, and organizing listening groups to discuss pre-recorded content played on speakers.

# Written communication

**Burmese** is the preferred written language after **Rohingya**.

**Written Burmese is preferred by more than twice the number of refugees than written English**

**and written Bangla.** Burmese is preferred over English and Bangla for written communication (see Figure 5), despite a similar rate of tested reading comprehension in all three languages. This may indicate a desire to retain a connection to Burmese as the official language of Myanmar, tied to hopes for return and a claim to national identity.

## Examples of the messages used for written comprehension testing

*Water is safe if you treat it in your house with Aquatabs or if you boil it before drinking.*

*Everyone can recover from acute diarrhea / cholera but this disease spreads very easily.*

*Keep your drinking water in a clean container that is covered.*

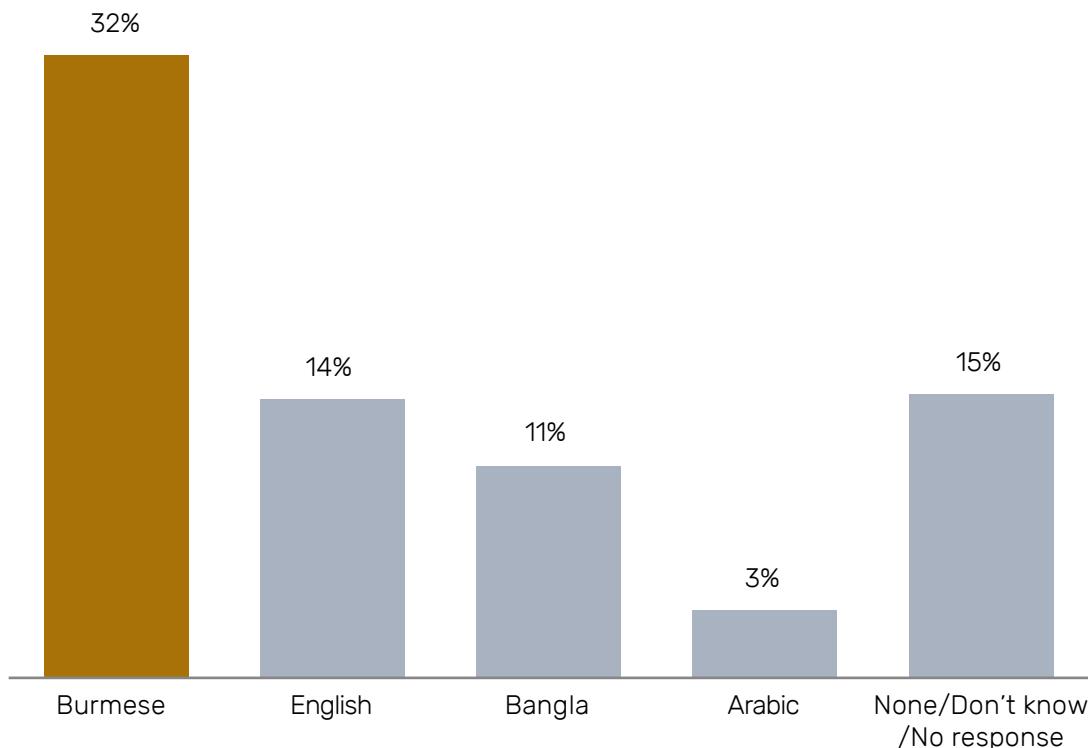


*Kutupalong makeshift camp, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Photo: Eric DeLuca, TWB*

When humanitarian agencies communicate with refugees in writing, they usually use Bangla, Burmese, and/or English. They use signs, posters, banners, brochures and leaflets. These are often supplemented by spoken and/or visual formats such as film or animation with subtitles, or illustrations with explanatory text.

The written statements selected for this comprehension study were based on key messages used by humanitarian agencies to explain health and WASH-related concepts in the Rohingya camps. We crafted three simple and conceptually clear sentences in each written language (Bangla, Burmese, and English).

**Figure 5.** Information preference by written language



Though a majority of respondents actually said they preferred written Rohingya and written Chittagonian for receiving humanitarian information, these languages are not included in the analysis because neither has a standardized script.

**A majority of refugees prefer receiving information in written Rohingya, but there is no universally accepted script**

Sixty-eight percent of refugees said they preferred to receive written humanitarian information in Rohingya.

The problem is that there is no official Rohingya script. Instead there are two quite well established writing systems, known as Hanifi and Rohingyalish, and others are used informally among the refugee population.

This was an open question, so respondents were able to answer freely. However, the survey was not designed to gauge current levels of awareness or familiarity with the various scripts. Further investigation could help establish how best to respond to this strong stated preference.

**Rates of overall reading comprehension were much higher for those with at least some education.**

In general, if a refugee had completed some schooling they were much more likely than someone with no schooling to understand written Burmese (68 percent compared to 27 percent), written Bangla (50 percent compared to 27 percent), or written English (49 percent compared to 24 percent).

**When tested for reading comprehension, Burmese is understood at a similar rate to Bangla and English. Interestingly, this was the same for both men and women.**

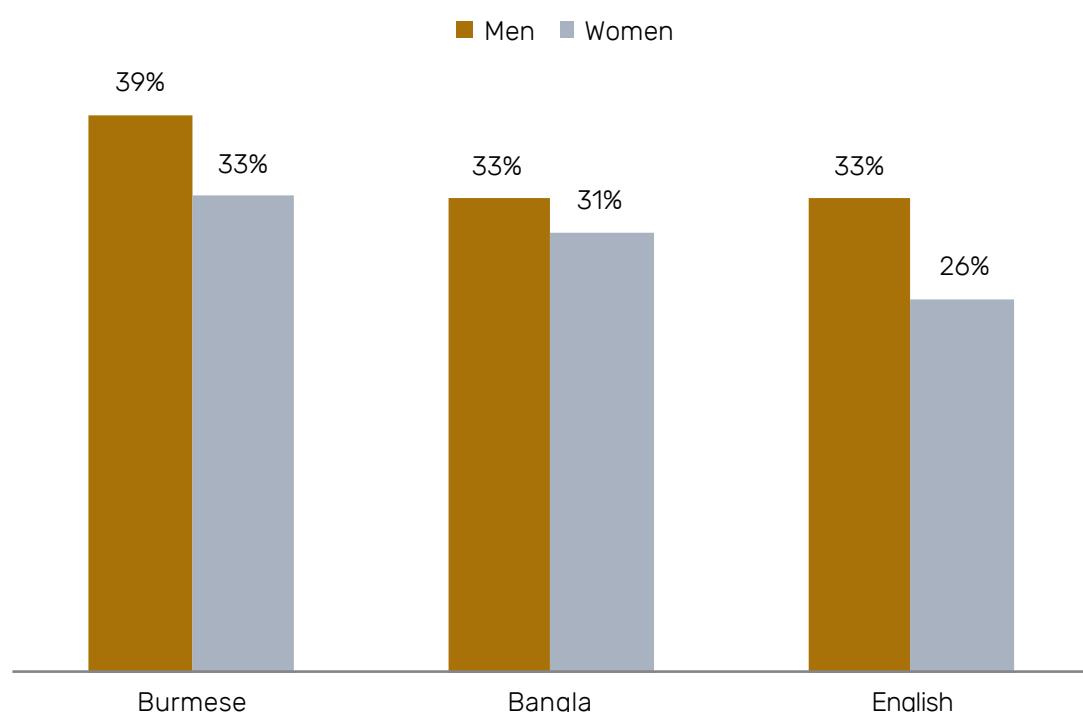
About 32 percent of refugees understood simple written messages in Burmese (36 percent), Bangla (32 percent), and English (29 percent) when tested for reading comprehension. This may be because we

intentionally selected simple statements on health and WASH-related topics. These would be familiar to refugees exposed to humanitarian information campaigns in the camp setting. In addition, most refugees have had at least some exposure to all three languages in Myanmar or in Bangladesh.

**Of the 21 percent of refugees who have completed some education, Burmese was the most commonly reported language of instruction (84 percent).**

As a proxy indicator for reading comprehension levels, this may also explain why Burmese is the most preferred written language. Only a few respondents reported receiving instruction in other languages, including Arabic (seven percent), Bangla (four percent), and English (three percent).

**Figure 6.** Reading comprehension rates by gender

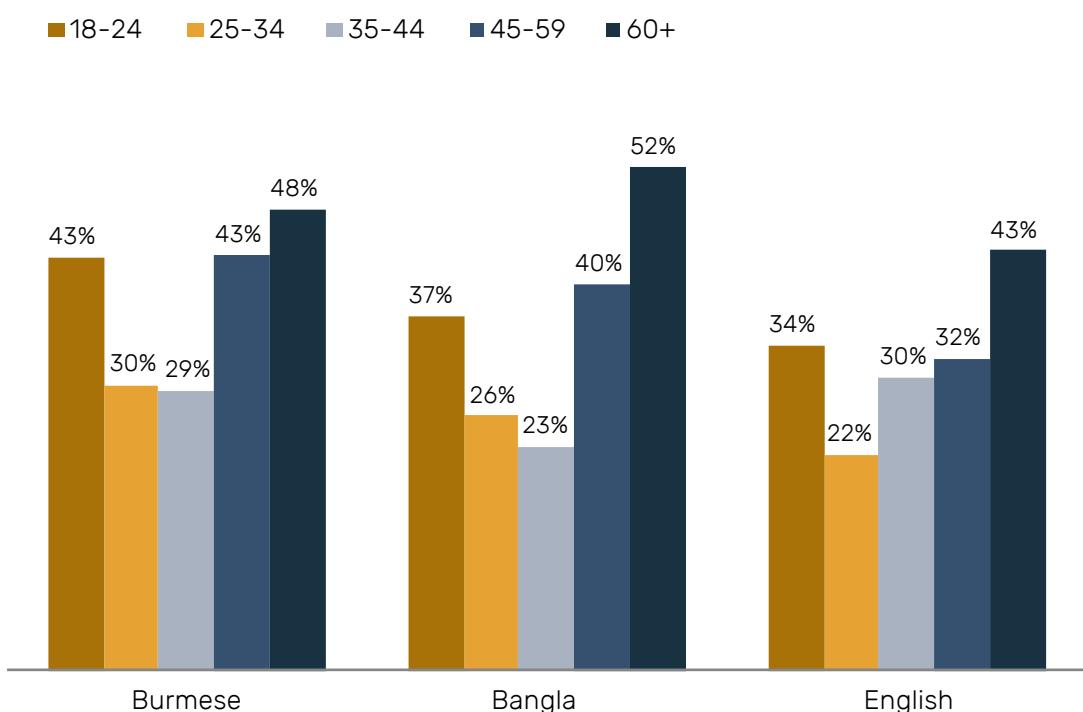


# 25- to 44-year-olds have lower comprehension than younger or older age groups.

Testing found differences in both listening and reading comprehension rates between age groups (see Figure 7). The middle two age groups (25-34 and 35-44 years) consistently showed lower comprehension rates than the other three groups (18-24 years and 45-60 and over 60 years).

The findings point to a specific subgroup which may need further attention in terms of targeted outreach and education campaigns.

**Figure 7.** Reading comprehension rates by age



## Reading comprehension in Bangla, Burmese, and English is much better than self-assessments.

Fourteen percent of respondents said they can read or write Burmese, but 36 percent correctly understood a simple written statement in Burmese. Four percent said they could read English, but 29 percent understood a written statement in simple English. Two percent said they could read Bangla, but 32 percent understood a written statement in simple Bangla. Women were more likely than men to underestimate their literacy in all three languages.

Sixty-six percent of refugees said that they cannot read or write in any language.

# Brochures and leaflets are preferred strongly over other text-based materials.

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*Kutupalong makeshift camp, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Photo: Eric DeLuca, TWB*

One reason for preferring brochures (18 percent) over posters and banners (2 percent) as a format may be that less literate people can ask a trusted person to help them read the material. The finding that one in three refugees can read in Bangla, Burmese, or English supports this.

In general, posters and banners are located outside the home and in a static place, unlike brochures, which can be taken home and read in private and at leisure. Brochures can also be shared with others or stored for safekeeping. This might be especially useful for health information materials such as prescription or dosage information that is too complicated to memorize.



# Visual communication

Visual communication is a common alternative to written or spoken communication formats in humanitarian settings, especially in low literacy environments. It includes diagrams, photographs, graphic illustrations, and maps. More dynamic formats include animation, film, and community theater.

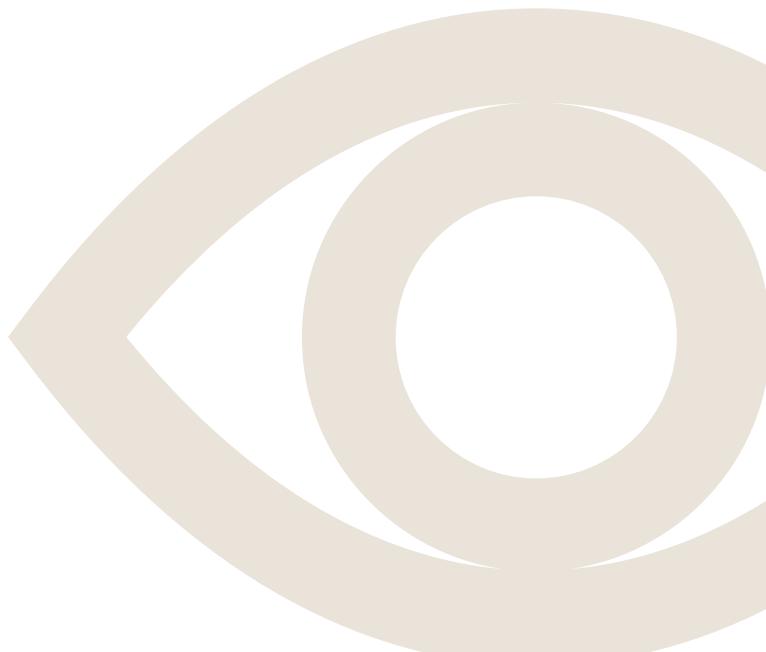
The illustrations selected for this comprehension study were taken from flashcard kits used by humanitarian field workers to explain health and WASH-related concepts in the Rohingya camps. We selected illustrations that were simple and conceptually clear. The illustrations did not have accompanying text or verbal explanations. Therefore, the same findings would not necessarily hold for less simple or clear materials.

**Pictorial messages are the most widely understood format after spoken Rohingya.**

All refugees, irrespective of gender, age, or levels of education understood the illustrations at a similar rate.



An enumerator tests a Rohingya woman's understanding of an image. TWB



# Communicating information

Humanitarians distribute information to refugees via various direct and indirect sources. Respondents were asked to rank different sources of information by levels of trust (a lot, a little, not at all). When the respondent answered "I trust them a lot" or "I trust them a little," these responses were aggregated to account for overall trust.

A ranking was asked for each of the following sources of information: family, friends, neighbors, imams, *majhees*, community leaders (not *majhees*), humanitarian aid workers, doctors, and medical staff, traditional healers, radio, TV, and internet/social media. Army representatives, camp committees and village elders were not asked about in this study.

**Imams are the most trusted sources of information.**

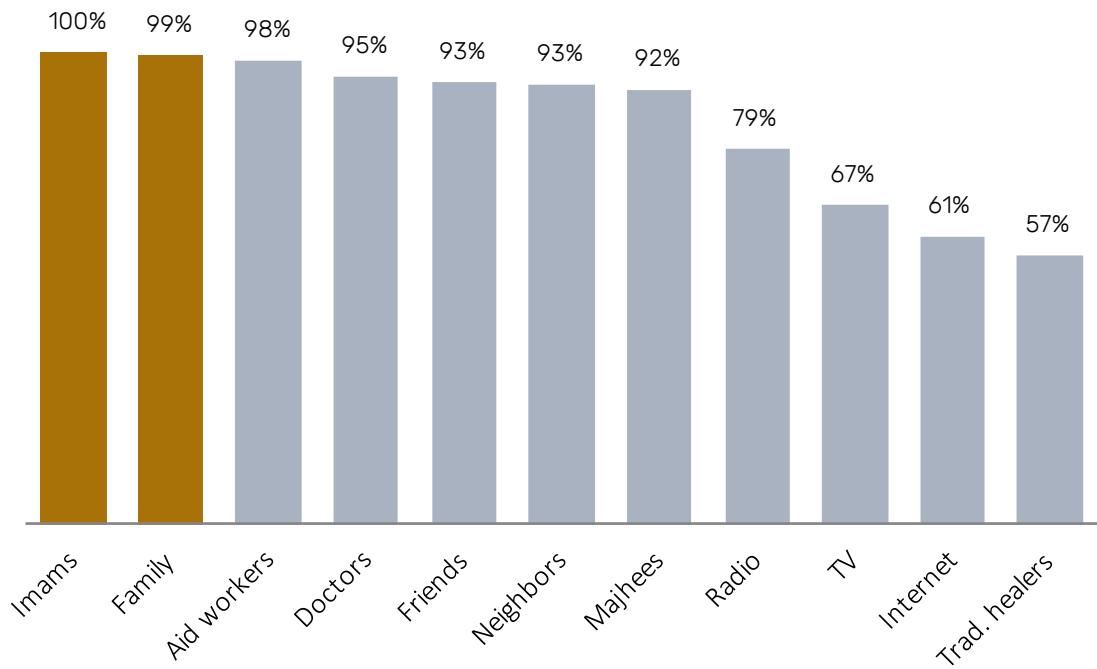
## **Nearly all refugees trust imams.**

Anecdotal evidence suggests that beyond typical duties of leading communal prayers, imams hold significant influence in the community. People turn to them for advice on social issues of all kinds. It is therefore not surprising that 100 percent of respondents reported that they trust information coming from imams (see Figure 8). 97 percent said they trust imams a lot.



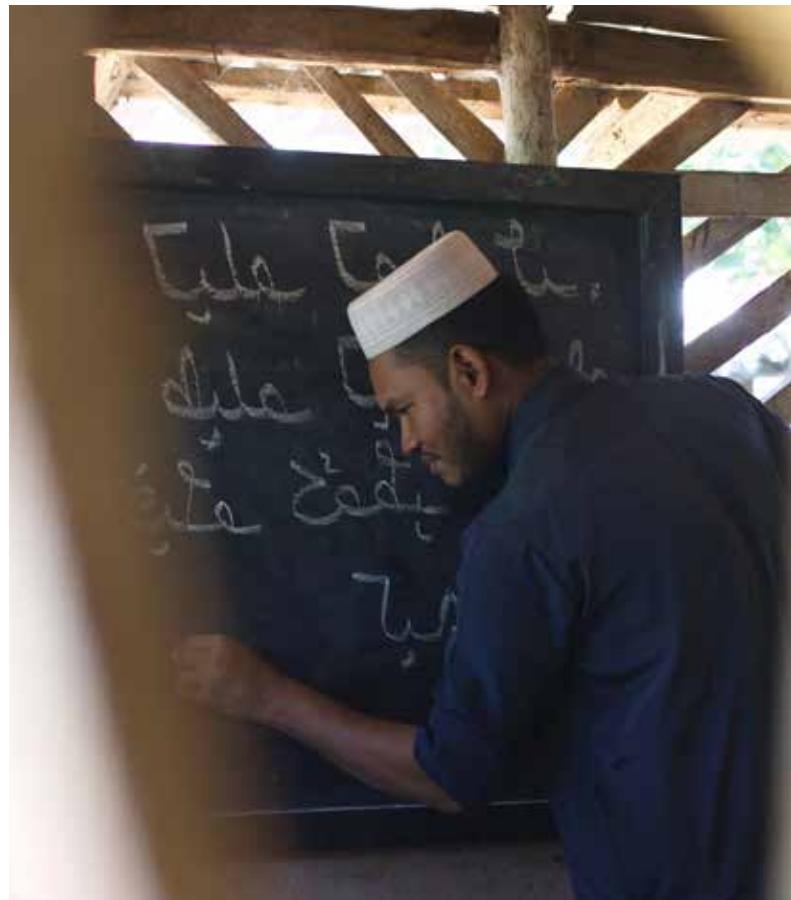
*A Rohingya woman and children, Kutupalong megacamp. Photo: Eric Deluca, TWB*

**Figure 8.** Sources of information by overall trust  
("I trust... a lot / a little.")



**Religious education is extremely common regardless of gender.**

Religious institutions beyond the mosque and imam play a central role in Rohingya community life and socialization. Eighty-seven percent of refugees reported having been educated at a *moktab* (primary Islamic education) or *madrassa* (secondary Islamic education). Men and women have completed at least some religious education at similar rates. This contrasts with rates of secular education, completed at much lower rates (21 percent). This highlights the potential role of teachers in these religious institutions as both sources and gatekeepers of information.



Teacher writing sentences in Rohingya Zuban (Hanifi Script). Kutupalong Refugee Camp near Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Photo: Eric DeLuca, TWB

### **The mosque is central to life in the camps, but women are left out**

The Rohingya are a deeply religious people with Islamic practice and beliefs playing a central role in their daily life. Men regularly attend Friday communal prayers led by an imam and congregate outside the mosque afterwards. Some men go to the mosque several times a day or week to participate in communal prayers. Imams deliver sermons on Fridays.

Male elders, who are considered cultural community leaders, also meet with the imam regularly. "Whatever the imam says [to the elders] is then conveyed to the community," said one male enumerator.

Mosques' loudspeakers are also used for important announcements. Another enumerator said: "If a child gets lost or found, [the refugees] use the mosque's loudspeakers to make the announcement about the child."

Despite the mosque being primarily used by men, women equally respect the institution of the mosque and the imam. Our study found no difference between men's and women's trust in the information provided by imams. Due to cultural prohibitions, women do not have direct access to imams. Male relatives relay information from imams to female family members, acting as information gatekeepers.

"The husbands share what the imam says in the mosques with their wives. The wives trust the imam." – Male enumerator

These circumstances can exclude women from receiving information and communicating their needs and views directly, resulting in potentially critical information loss. Humanitarians should design communications strategies that also target women-friendly spaces and women leaders.

# Family, humanitarian aid workers, doctors, and *majhees* are also highly trusted.

In addition to imams, refugees trust family, aid and medical professionals, and *majhees*<sup>1</sup> as sources of information more than neighbors, friends, and all types of media (see Figure 8).

Humanitarian agencies have been using the *majhee* system to disseminate information for the last year. This and the fact that they speak the same language as the community, may contribute to the high levels of trust.

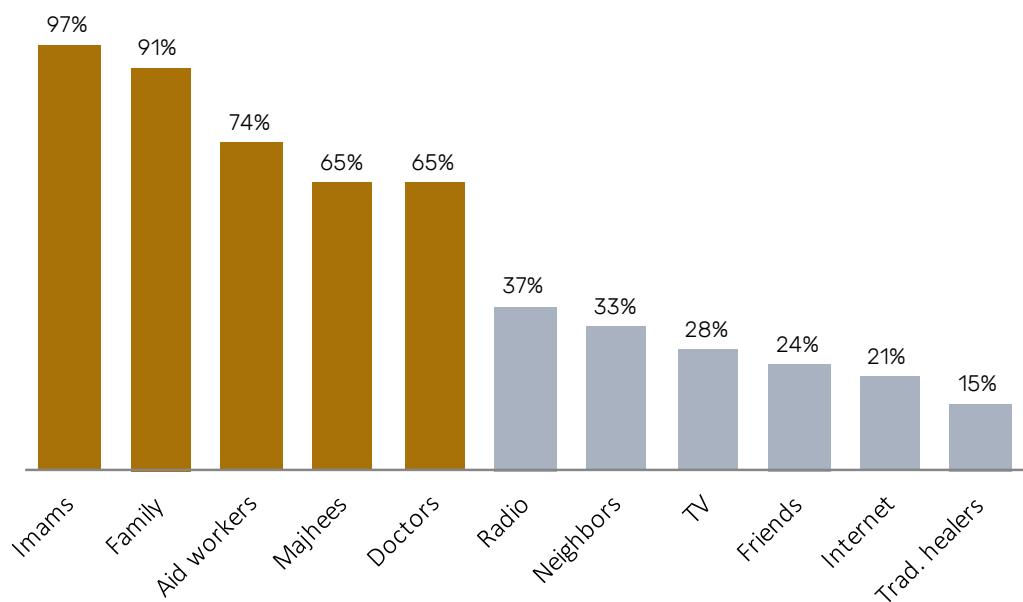
For neighbors, there may be weakened social bonds due to repeated displacement. First they were displaced from

Myanmar. Then humanitarians relocated many families from shelter to shelter in Bangladesh to avoid flooding and landslide risks.

**Compared to all other sources of information, traditional healers were viewed the most skeptically as a group but were still trusted by half of all refugees.**

Over half (57 percent) of refugees trust traditional healers; however, only 15 percent say they trust traditional healers a lot (see Figure 9). In the Rohingya community, there are three main types of traditional healers or people that offer prayers and/or herbal medicinal remedies for healing. A *boidhdho*, or shaman, draws on cultural remedies, an imam draws on Islamic remedies, and a *hakemi* or *fāishada doktor* draws on a combination of cultural and religious remedies. In this assessment, TWB asked about the latter – *hakemi doktors*. Humanitarians should note that half the refugee population still trusts information coming from traditional healers. This is especially relevant when humanitarians are designing community health and WASH engagement strategies.

**Figure 9.** Sources of information by high trust ("I trust... a lot")



<sup>1</sup> *Majhees* are members of the Rohingya refugee community selected by UNHCR and the Bangladesh government to represent refugees in a geographic area. *Majhees* liaise between government officials, humanitarian actors and the community. A number of camps are now replacing the *majhee* system with elected committees and community leaders.

# New and traditional media formats are generally trusted, but less familiar to women.

## SIM cards as a means of internet access

Before fleeing to Bangladesh, the Rohingya community's exposure to the internet in Myanmar was limited due to prohibitive pricing for SIM cards during military rule pre-2012. At one point, the cost of a SIM card was as high as \$3,000. Further, Myanmar previously had one of the lowest mobile penetration rates in the world. The fact that Rohingya communities have lived in very remote locations with limited signal coverage also contributed to access challenges.

In Bangladesh the sale of SIM cards is now banned to Rohingya refugees, but anecdotal evidence suggests that many families still have access to mobile phones. Mobile phones are generally held by men. Even for those who have phones and SIM cards, lack of disposable income makes it difficult to purchase data packages. It is therefore not surprising that rates of internet use remain low.

## Refugees trust radio, TV, the internet and social media as sources of information, but less than all other sources, except traditional healers.

As indicated in Figures 8 and 9, refugees have a relatively low level of trust in the radio, TV, the internet and social media (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, IMO). Only 21 percent of refugees trust the Internet a lot.

**Half as many women as men could determine if they trusted information on TV and the internet.** This suggests women may be less familiar with these media. For example, while it is common for men to watch television in tea shops as a way to pass the time, women do not generally visit such shops and so do not have access to that information. It is therefore important for humanitarians to make information and communication available through channels and spaces women have access to.

In line with this finding, a previous [Internews study](#) showed that internet use was very low (19 percent) with only 11 percent of women stating that they use it. According to the same research, 86 percent said they accessed the internet via mobile phones.

*Kutupalong makeshift camp near Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Photo: Eric Deluca, TWB*



# Recommendations

## 1. Use Rohingya as the spoken language of communication with refugees.

Since Rohingya is the only language that all refugees understand, it is critical that humanitarian agencies prioritize communication in this language. Agencies must ensure that Rohingya speakers are hired and tested for language competency to support face-to-face interactions. Any communication materials should be checked for accuracy before sharing with the community. Given cultural constraints facing Rohingya women, agencies should hire female staff with the right language skills to communicate with them.

## 2. Invest in formal training for field workers and interpreters in the Rohingya language and interpretation.

Contrary to existing perceptions, the findings show that the Chittagonian language spoken in the host community is only partially understood by Rohingya refugees. Native Chittagonian speakers are frequently hired as fieldworkers or interpreters for the Rohingya response, but their actual skills in Rohingya may vary. Given the importance of face-to-face communication, Rohingya language skills should be assessed during recruitment. Rohingya volunteers should also be engaged for community interactions. Training and support programs can build interpreters' capacities, including in complex terminology such as health interpreters may require. This can



*A Rohingya woman visiting an information hub in the megacamp, Kutapalong, TWB*

draw on tools such as [multilingual glossaries](#) of humanitarian terms developed by TWB. Aid organizations could maximize the development of cross-cultural communication skills by encouraging collaboration between Rohingya volunteers and Chittagonian staff, and raising their awareness of these differences.

### **3. Use a mix of formats and channels of communication.**

Our research shows that there are varied communication needs within the community. Using multiple formats and channels, and consulting with the community on those choices, can ensure that everyone has access to information in a format they can understand, through a channel they trust. Consider a mixed approach appropriate to the information being communicated: loudspeakers and *majhees* may work well for delivering lifesaving information about basic access to services. More complex issues, such as repatriation, could be better addressed through face-to-face discussions, community meetings, or long-form radio programming. Key considerations on format and channel include:

- Make audio formats central to communication strategies.**

In addition to face-to-face communication, agencies should use loudspeakers and radio to relay spoken messages. Using accessible formats and media is key to ensure information reaches the most vulnerable and less literate groups.

- Use visual formats to further aid comprehension.**

Visual content should be simple, culturally relevant, and developed and pre-tested with Rohingya refugees to confirm that the intended messages are easily understood. Dynamic visual formats such as animation, film, and community theater should also be explored. Narration or subtitles can further expand comprehension.

- Develop illustrated brochures and leaflets as more permanent records.**

Refugees express a clear preference for leaflets over other written materials like posters and banners. Leaflets can be taken home and less literate refugees can ask friends or family members to help them understand the information. Given both access and privacy concerns, women in particular may benefit from this approach, which can complement mass communication materials such as posters.

- Work with others to get the right message out.**

Where possible, build partnerships with social influencers such as imams and women leaders to relay and promote key messages. Use the support and resources of the Communicating With Communities (CWC) Working Group to ensure content is field-tested, appropriate, and addresses key community concerns.

### **4. Use Burmese script when sharing written information with refugees.**

While this study confirms [previous evidence](#) of low literacy levels, refugees have clearly said that they prefer to receive written information in Burmese over English or Bangla. This preference should be respected and catered for until literacy levels are improved. Ideally, all written materials meant for refugees should be provided in Burmese, English, and Bangla, to reach the widest possible literate audience. If it is only possible to provide written information in one language, it should be Burmese.

## **5. Develop a better understanding of communication issues affecting the Rohingya refugee community.**

Language and culture are integral to communication, community engagement, and the accountability of humanitarian efforts. This study points up a number of areas where more nuanced understanding could support effective communication and adapting interventions to the dynamic local context. These include:

- **Communicating with women.**  
Given cultural constraints, women are a particularly vulnerable and inaccessible group within the Rohingya refugee community. Findings point to marginally lower levels of comprehension of, exposure to, and familiarity with media formats. Separate qualitative research also highlights differences in vocabulary used by women and men. Women's language differences and access to communication channels warrant further attention, including the effectiveness for communication purposes of women's meeting places (for example, women-friendly spaces) and women community leaders (*murabbi*, or village elders, and *majhees*).
- **Children's literacy and comprehension.**  
This research did not assess literacy and comprehension among children aged 5-17. Anecdotal evidence suggests higher levels of Bangla language comprehension and knowledge of Hindi, Urdu or both among younger age groups. This is probably due to increased exposure to both sets of languages in Bangladesh

and via traditional (such as Bollywood) and new media formats (such as WhatsApp/Imo/Facebook). Further research is needed to better understand the communication preferences and habits of this group, which make up one third of the Rohingya refugee population.

- **Rohingya script awareness and use.**

The strong demand from refugees for humanitarian information in written Rohingya could mean that there is widespread use, awareness, or interest in learning or using existing Rohingya script for communication. This finding could pave the way for increased community engagement and the opening of two-way communication between refugees and the humanitarian community. Alternatively, refugees' lack of awareness, interest or use of variations of Rohingya script might suggest humanitarians reorient their language efforts.

- **Visual communication.**

Refugees generally prefer spoken communication channels, but understand visual cues at high rates. This can make video, pictorial, and community theater effective media. But images and icons do not carry universal meaning. Pictorial communication tools should be designed with and tested by the community to ensure effectiveness. Products and performances should be in the Rohingya language and tested for cultural relevance. Varied styles of visual communication with or without accompanying text should also be tested for effectiveness among subgroups.

# **Annex**

## **Annex 1 - Detailed methods**

For an explanation of the methods and limitations of this study, visit the following link:

<https://tinyurl.com/y8uq2b86>



## **Annex 2 - Dataset and questionnaire**

To access the cleaned dataset and questionnaire, visit the following link:

<https://tinyurl.com/y7dyjbkk>



For more information about this research or to find out how Translators without Borders is supporting the Rohingya refugee response, visit our [website](#) or contact: [bangladesh@translatorswithoutborders.org](mailto:bangladesh@translatorswithoutborders.org)

This study is part of the Common Service for Community Engagement and Accountability. The work is being delivered in partnership with IOM, the UN migration agency, and is funded by EU humanitarian aid and the UK Department for International Development. The views expressed in this report should not be taken, in any way, to reflect the official opinion of the European Union, nor do the views expressed necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies. The UK government and the European Commission are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained in this report.