

# ROHINGYA LANGUAGE GUIDANCE



## BUILDING A BETTER DIALOGUE AROUND GENDER ISSUES

These Rohingya language guidelines provide sociocultural background and linguistic context for humanitarian program managers, field workers, and/or interpreters.

This document accompanies the TWB Glossary for Bangladesh, which contains more than 200 gender-related terms, as well as over 500 terms from other sectors. It is available in five languages online and via smartphone app in written and audio format.

[glossaries.translatorswithoutborders.org/bangladesh](https://glossaries.translatorswithoutborders.org/bangladesh)

Data was collected through focus group discussions, delineated by gender and language (Chittagonian or Rohingya), as well as complementary field and desk research.



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**Understanding subtle differences in gender terminology** allows humanitarian workers to better promote women's rights in the Rohingya camps. The Rohingya community adheres to many conservative values regarding women and their place in society. Religion plays a strong role in determining what it means to be a Rohingya woman. Furthermore, illiteracy is extremely high amongst Rohingya women, as they were traditionally barred from accessing education and professions.

In the camps, the combination of religious conservatism, illiteracy and the oppression they experienced in Myanmar leads to Rohingya women facing many social constraints and segregation. Rohingya women have responded to these sociocultural factors by developing a sociolect, or social dialect of their own. Certain words or euphemisms, within this sociolect, particularly sensitive terms relating to the female body and sexuality, are not easily understood by the men of Rohingya society.

## Euphemistic words

Given the conservative nature of the culture, and the traumas faced by the community, the Rohingya people use many euphemisms when discussing topics that are perceived to be sensitive or taboo. A euphemism is a relatively mild term used as a substitute for an embarrassing or sensitive word. **They are used when conversing in more social situations – like in a mosque or in a meeting with a majhee – and when conversing with women.** Communication with the Rohingya community will be more effective and sustained if field workers understand and use the preferred euphemisms.

Though there may be direct translations, particular words may be perceived to be negative or embarrassing. For example, there is an academic word for menstruation – **haiz** – which Rohingya borrowed from Arabic. However, many young women do not like to say this word. **They prefer to use the euphemism, gusol, which literally means 'to shower'.** With that said, certain topics, like investigating whether someone was sexually harassed or raped, may be hard to pinpoint given the generalized, euphemistic expressions used to describe these actions.



## Gender versus sex

The distinction between 'gender' and 'sex' is still new to many languages. These two terms may not translate well into languages with different social and cultural backgrounds. Even in Bangla, one of the more standardized South Asian languages, the words for 'gender' (*lingo*) and 'sex' (*jaunota*) were developed relatively recently (and interestingly, *lingo* means 'male genital' and *jouni* means 'female genital'). These newly-coined terms and their differences have not yet been widely adopted. Field workers should avoid implying that there is a difference, as this will lead to confusion.

Though separate terms for the concepts of 'sex' or 'gender' may not exist in many languages, words for 'male' and 'female' do exist. Chittagonian and Rohingya have similar words for male and female. In Rohingya, there is one word for male: *morot-fua*. Surprisingly, there are three words for female: *maya-fua*, *mela-fua*, and *zer-fua*. In all of these words, the suffix *-fua* literally means 'son', but it is also used to denote 'child' or 'offspring'. Without the addition of *-fua*, many Rohingya do not understand the terms for male and female.

Though both Chittagonian and Rohingya have words for adult man (*beḍa*) and adult woman (*beḍi*), neither linguistic

community likes to use these words in polite company. This makes it difficult to differentiate age ranges. For example, *maya-fua* can mean both a young girl and an adult female. Chittagonians, particularly the youth, are adopting standard Bangla terms for adult man and woman (*purush* and *mohila*, respectively). However these words are not yet understood by the newly arrived Rohingya refugees. *Beḍa* and *beḍi* are also used to mean husband and wife, respectively, in the Rohingya language, though they considered very informal terms. There are several formal words to mean husband (*hoshom / shuwami / zamai*) and wife (*bou / bibi*).

Historically, South Asian societies, including the Rohingya, had a community called the hijra (*hizara in Rohingya*). Though often called the 'third gender', the hijras actually constitute a spectrum of unconventional identities – transgender, transsexuals, transvestites, hermaphrodites, and eunuchs. In both Chittagonian and Rohingya, the word 'hizara' is also used derogatorily for men perceived to act in a feminine way (*the word maiyelli is also used*). Similarly, women perceived to act in a masculine way are called *modda beḍi* ('masculine women').

# EVERYONE DOES IT

The Rohingya language does not have a neutral word for the act of sex. In practice, the words used for this depend on whether it is deemed 'religiously permissible' (*jaiz*) or 'impermissible' (*na-jaiz*). Only sex between a husband and wife is seen as permissible, and the words for it are *mil-milap* or *milon*, both of which loosely mean 'to meet' or 'to bring together'. In religious circles, particularly amongst elderly men, the term *subat* is used. There are many words for impermissible sex (many of which are slang), but in polite company, the words *zena* (from Arabic, meaning 'adultery'), *bura haam* (meaning 'bad deed'), and *kala haam* (meaning 'black deed') are used.

Homosexuality as an identity is an alien concept to the larger Rohingya community, but homosexual acts are understood. Though many people would group it together with *bura haam*, or 'bad deeds', a more direct – albeit pejorative – term would be *bodoilla maron*, which means to 'use as substitute'. This word makes sense in the Rohingya community (and other conservative societies), where sexual acts are not necessarily a reflection of a person's sexual orientation but rather circumstantial acts.

# BEHIND THE VEIL

The concepts of privacy and confidentiality are difficult to differentiate in Rohingya, even more than in English. Generally speaking, privacy is often physical protection or seclusion. Confidentiality is protection of information. The Rohingya use *gufoniyo*, which literally means 'hidden', to express privacy. However, if we are talking about physical privacy in terms of gender – as in separate latrines for women or a women-friendly space – then the word *forda* is more suitable. *Forda* is derived from the Persian *purdah*, meaning 'curtain' or 'veil', and is widely used in South Asian Muslim society to distinguish between male and female spaces. The Rohingya use *amanot'ot rakon* to mean 'confidentiality', which literally means to 'entrust'.

## PUBERTY AND GROWING UP

Until adolescence, both male and female children are treated very similarly in Rohingya society. It's common in the camps to see shirtless young girls and boys running around and playing outside. However, as soon they reach puberty, clearly demarcated gender norms are assigned. The general term for reaching puberty and adolescence is *zuwan on*, which means 'to become a youth'. It is used for both girls and boys. However, given the religious requirement for gender segregation, and the social stigma associated with menstruation and its onset (*haiz shuru'on*), several other terms are used for pubescent girls. *Dōr oiye*, which literally means 'became big' is often heard. Another term, *gor-golle*, means 'entered the house'. It refers to the fact that adolescent girls are no longer allowed to play freely with boys, and are from now on more restricted to the house.

## Nuances of sexual abuse

The conservative nature of the Rohingya culture, and the unstandardized nature of the language, make it difficult to discuss the nuances of sexual abuse. Relevant words such as 'sex' and 'sexual' are difficult to translate. In Western academic understanding, sexual abuse can range from harassment, through assault, to rape. However, these variances are not easy to express in the Rohingya language because of the stigma attached to anything sexual. A range of euphemistic terms is used to describe sexual abuse, like *bodmashi goron* ('being villainous'), *bezzot goron* ('being dishonored'), *daag* ('stain'), *bolazuri zulum* ('forced oppression'). Though they all have elements of 'abuse' and 'force' in them, none express a sexual element. As these words are used to refer to any type of abuse or force, it is difficult for interpreters and health workers to determine the exact nature of the sexual abuse without other information or context. However, due to their interactions with humanitarian agencies since the community arrived in the camps, the Rohingya language has adopted the word 'rape' (pronounced rep) to mean sexual abuse through forced penetration. However, it is advisable to first use euphemistic terms (*particularly bolazuri zulum for 'rape'*) when approaching this subject due to the sensitivity and stigma around it.

The need to use euphemisms also applies to child abuse, especially when it is sexual in nature. Pedophilia is difficult to explain because it is common for young girls (some as soon as they reach puberty) to be married off to much older men (*a tradition called bailla biya*). Therefore, age difference is not viewed as such a taboo. If sexual acts or abuse were committed outside of a marriage, then there would be repercussions due to the violation of religious rules, not because they were considered pedophilia.

## Marriage: a religious duty

The concept of marital rape led to many confused faces in focus group discussions with both men and women. The Rohingya community sees it as applying two contradictory terms (milon or 'permissible sex' and bura haam or 'bad deed') to a single concept.

As in many Islamic societies, marriage (*biya-shaadi*) is a central institution for the Rohingya, who see it as a religious duty (*foroz*). In common with most Islamic cultures, the power balance within a Rohingya marriage is skewed towards the husband (*hoshom*). Sexual and physical abuse within marriage is an extension of this power imbalance. Abuse is not only permissible, it is sometimes deemed 'necessary' to keep a wife 'in line'. There are no clearly defined terms for such abuse, as the community itself does not recognize it as a definable issue. Coping (*bordashi*) with these injustices is seen as a part of being a woman.

Emotional abuse (*dilor zulum*) comes in various forms within marriage. The inability to meet the demands of a dowry (*zoutuk*) can lead to an abusive relationship, where the woman is often threatened with divorce (*sara-sari*) and physical abuse or beating (*gaar zulum*). Women generally have a negative view of polygamy (*beshi-biya*); men validate it by saying it is religiously permissible.

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