

# IMAMS SHARE INFORMATION IN THE ROHINGYA REFUGEE CAMPS

They need reliable sources and a way to cross-check information

## Imams are a common and trusted source of information for refugees

In the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar, imams play a central role in the community. While leading prayers and passing on religious teachings are part of their role, they are also respected community leaders who are a key source of information for refugees. They share information on various topics outside of religious teachings, such as COVID-19 and repatriation, and are regularly approached by community members seeking information and advice. TWB research from 2018 found that imams are the most trusted source of information among camp residents, with 100% of men and women respondents saying they trust information provided by imams<sup>1</sup>. The respect and trust they enjoy makes imams an

important channel for getting information to the refugee community.

To explore imams' role as sharers of information, TWB interviewed a small group of imams working in the camps. Imams receive information from a variety of sources, most commonly government officials in charge of each camp, known as CiCs (Camp in Charges). But they also rely on NGOs, *majhis* (male community leaders), and online sources. CiCs and NGOs are the imams' most trusted sources of information, but they also want to be able to easily and quickly request and cross-check information.

## Who we spoke to

In March, 2020, TWB conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with eight imams aged 18-42 years working at mosques in camps 1E, 1W, 3, 4, 5, 8W, and 18. Most began working as imams after arriving in Bangladesh in 2017.

<sup>1</sup>  
[https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/TWB\\_Bangladesh\\_Comprehensive\\_Study\\_Nov2018.pdf](https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/TWB_Bangladesh_Comprehensive_Study_Nov2018.pdf)

## **All imams are fluent in Rohingya but have limited local language skills**

All imams interviewed self-report being fluent in spoken Rohingya, while none report fluency in Chittagonian. Half of the imams surveyed report intermediate spoken Chittagonian and the other half minimal. Additionally, six imams report speaking fluent Urdu, with most of them conducting madrasa classes in Urdu. Three of the Urdu-speaking imams also speak Arabic.

Six report minimal or no reading ability in English and Myanmar (Burmese), two report intermediate English reading ability, and two report fluent Myanmar reading ability. None can read Bangla.

However, Chittagonian is the language in which imams most commonly receive information from humanitarian organizations and the camp authorities.. Given that none of the imams interviewed are fluent in Chittagonian, there is a strong risk of misunderstanding. The previously mentioned TWB study from 2018 found that 36% of Rohingya refugees did not understand even a simple spoken message in Chittagonian. More complex or technical information is still less likely to be fully understood.

## **Imams' primary sources of information are CiCs, *majhis* and NGOs**

Five of the imams have smartphones with internet access, but poor internet connectivity is a common issue. Despite this, those with internet access regularly use the internet to get information. Most get information through WhatsApp, particularly WhatsApp groups, as well as Rohingya-language channels on YouTube. The information they get from the internet is often news about what's happening in Myanmar and in the camps, as well as general news. While the internet is one source of information, it is not the most common

source. The main sources of information for the imams interviewed are *majhis*, CiCs, and NGOs.

## **Imams share information on a variety of topics at the mosque, over loudspeaker, and at meetings**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, imams across Bangladesh, including in the refugee camps, have been sharing important public health messages in their sermons and over mosque loudspeakers.

Most imams interviewed said they can share any information they wish in the mosques. Two said they can only share religious content in the mosque but can share other information outside of the mosque. All but one of the imams interviewed say they regularly share non-religious information with the community. They pass on information they receive from the various sources, providing information and advice on topics including COVID-19 and returning to Myanmar. One imam reports sharing information he receives from YouTube and WhatsApp groups, but most primarily share information received from CiCs, *majhis* and NGOs.

They share this information through a number of verbal channels, the most popular of which is mosque loudspeakers. The loudspeakers are particularly used to share urgent information. Information is also shared in sermons, on the mosque grounds after prayers with members of the congregation, at community meetings, and with individual community members. Most of the imams participate in or lead community meetings in which they share information with the community.

## **Community members come to imams for information**

All imams report that community members come to them for information and advice. In

addition to religious queries, they are asked about a variety of other topics, including COVID-19, repatriation, international news and issues, and corruption and conflict resolution in the camps. Some imams say members of the community also consult them for advice about the accuracy of information they've heard elsewhere,

### **Imams' views are mixed on women's real access to information**

As highlighted in recent TWB research<sup>2</sup>, due to cultural and security concerns, most women in the camps have limited mobility, generally staying inside or near their homes. They rely heavily on male family members to share information, including from the mosques. Yet three of the imams interviewed take the view that women have the same level of access to information as men, despite only men generally attending the mosque. One said they have the same level of access because men will go home and share it with them, one said they can get the information over loudspeaker, and one said they can simply get the information separately from female NGO workers.

*"I think women receive the same information as men because the male heads of the families go home and share the information with them." - Imam, camp 4*

While all of the interviewees report telling worshippers to pass on the information to their families and friends, including women, this does not ensure that women actually receive the information. As noted by some of the interviewees, not all men share information they receive at the mosque with women in their families. One imam expressed a desire to invest time in convincing men to

share information with their wives.

*"Not every man is the same; some men share the information they receive with their wives and some do not." - Imam, camp 1E*

*"I think we need to convince their husbands to share the information with their wives as much as possible." - Imam, camp 18*

### **Imams want to receive information from CiCs and NGOs in audio formats**

The most trusted source of information among interviewees is CiCs, with *majhis* and NGOs also considered trustworthy. In terms of sources and formats for receiving information, the imams interviewed express clear preferences. They want to receive information from CiCs and NGOs, and they prefer that this information is in Rohingya and delivered through loudspeakers or miking (megaphones). Some also want information in audio or audiovisual formats.

*"I consider the CiCs to be the most trustworthy source of information because they are the focal points in the camps." - Imam, camp 1E*

*"I believe information from NGOs and the government (CiCs). Both NGOs and the government are working for us so they always give us the real information." - Imam, camp 1W*

### **Imams want a reliable and accessible means of receiving and cross-checking information**

Whilst trust levels of CiCs and NGOs are high, a number of interviewees noted that it is not always possible for them to visit CiC and NGO offices to gather or confirm information. Those interviewees reported that the contacts they have in these offices are often not available to speak with them in person or over the phone. In light of these challenges, most imams say

<sup>2</sup>

[https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Getting-Information-to-Rohingya-a-Women-in-the-Camps-of-Coxs-Bazar\\_EN.pdf](https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Getting-Information-to-Rohingya-a-Women-in-the-Camps-of-Coxs-Bazar_EN.pdf)

they would like to regularly receive updates and information from either CiCs or NGOs through loudspeakers or miking.

Three imams report checking information with *majhis* if they are unsure about its accuracy, while others verify information with friends. This is despite most considering friends and fellow community members to be one of the least reliable sources of information. Given their challenges in verifying information, six imams said that it would be helpful to have a designated person—namely CiCs or NGOs—or phone number they can call to verify information.

### **Recommendations**

Imams are well positioned to provide information to the community. They are respected and trusted by community members and, due to the nature of their role, they have regular opportunities and platforms to both receive and share information.

TWB recommends that CiCs and NGOs:

- Provide regular information and updates to imams in Rohingya and in audio formats (loudspeaker, miking, audiovisual materials)
- Work with imams to improve information sharing between men and women in their household
- Set up a telephone service for imams to request and cross-check information
- Increase regularity and accessibility of information sharing.

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## About Translators without Borders

TWB is a nonprofit organization offering language and translation support for humanitarian and development agencies and other nonprofit organizations on a global scale. TWB Bangladesh has supported the Rohingya refugee response since 2017, providing language and translation support to response partners and conducting research and training to meet the language and communication needs of the Rohingya and host communities.

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