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# LANGUAGE CHARACTERISTICS AND PERSPECTIVES OF LONG-TERM ROHINGYA REFUGEES

Registered refugees need verbal, audio or signed communication in both Rohingya and Chittagonian

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## Not all Rohingya speak Rohingya

The Kutupalong and Nayapara registered refugee camps in Cox's Bazar are home to over 30,000 registered Rohingya refugees. Many have lived in these camps since the early 1990s, were born there, or arrived well before the 2017 influx. Although those interviewed generally prefer to identify as Rohingya rather than Bangladeshi, most have developed strong social ties with the local Bangladeshi community and feel at home in Bangladesh. After decades in Bangladesh, the language characteristics of these Rohingya refugees have changed. Unlike recently arrived refugees, the majority of interviewees speak Chittagonian at home and outside and not all are fluent in Rohingya. Understanding these changes is important for determining how service providers can best meet their needs. It can also provide insights into the possible future needs of recently arrived refugees.

### Who we spoke to

In November, 2020, TWB conducted telephone

interviews with 22 residents of the registered camps: 14 from Kutupalong and eight from Nayapara. Eleven women and eleven men, ranging in age from 19 to 58 years, participated in the semi-structured interviews. Seventeen of the interviewees were born in Myanmar and five were born in Bangladesh. Seven of the men are employed – in activities including teaching, day labor, and shopkeeping – while three are unemployed and one is a high school student. Eight of the women interviewed work in the home, two work for NGOs and one is a day laborer.

### The importance of speaking local languages

Just two of the interviewees say that they face language challenges in their daily lives, although many say that they and their parents faced language difficulties in the past. All respondents said it was important (21 said it was "very important", 1 "important") to speak Chittagonian. Despite limited Bangla-speaking skills among the group, all interviewees also



said that it was important (20 said it was “very important”, 2 “important”) to speak Bangla. Regardless of language abilities, all interviewees are aware of the importance of speaking the languages of the community in which they live.

### **Most people feel at home in Bangladesh but still identify as Rohingya**

Most (18) of the 22 interviewees think of themselves as Rohingya, while the remainder see themselves as Bangladeshi. However, the majority (17) say that they feel at home in Bangladesh. This is despite eight respondents feeling that they are treated differently by Bangladeshis because they are Rohingya. The most common reasons stated for feeling at home in Bangladesh were the length of time living in the country and being born there. Several respondents also note that they can live in peace in Bangladesh, unlike in Myanmar, and spoke of their gratitude for the care and opportunities afforded to them by Bangladesh and its people.

The five interviewees who said they do not feel at home in Bangladesh spoke of cramped living conditions in the camps, missing home (Myanmar), restrictions on movements for those living in the camps, and not having the same rights and opportunities as Bangladeshis.

### **Registered refugees have built strong social ties with the host community**

Despite complex perspectives on where they fit in the Bangladeshi community, 20 of the 22 interviewees say they have a good relationship with the Bangladeshi host community, with the same 20 also reporting that they socialize with both Rohingya and Bangladeshi community members. The two respondents who do not feel that they have a good relationship with the host community both say they only socialize with Rohingya people in the

community in which they live. The registered Rohingya refugees have built strong social ties with the host community. The majority of the respondents (16) feel that they are accepted by the local host community, speaking fondly of Bangladesh and their Bangladeshi neighbors and friends, who have been caring and helpful toward them.

### **Literacy rates are low, particularly among women**

Of the eleven women interviewed, five finished only primary education, while the others either completed some primary education or had no education at all. Of the men, four completed some high school (two at grade 8, two at grade 10), two completed primary education, two completed some primary education and three have no education at all.

Most women interviewed cannot read any language, with just two reporting intermediate reading skills in Bangla and two reporting intermediate reading skills in Myanmar (Burmese). The remainder report no or minimal literacy in Bangla, Burmese, and English. However, the men interviewed report slightly higher literacy, with four reporting fluency in reading Bangla and English and two reporting intermediate reading skills in those languages. All reported no or minimal reading ability in Myanmar (Burmese).

### **Women are more likely to be fluent in Rohingya than men**

Having spent all or most of their lives in Bangladesh, the language characteristics of residents in the registered camps differ from the Rohingya refugees who arrived from 2017 onwards; those who arrived more recently generally speak only Rohingya in their daily lives. In this interview sample, there are notable differences between women and men in terms of self-reported Rohingya- and Chittagonian-speaking ability. All eleven men

report being fluent in spoken Chittagonian but just five consider themselves to be fluent in Rohingya (4 intermediate, 2 minimal). Conversely, the eleven women interviewed all consider themselves to be fluent in spoken Rohingya, while seven report being fluent in spoken Chittagonian (3 intermediate, 1 minimal). Four of the men and two of the women rate themselves as fluent in spoken Bangla.

### **The main languages spoken inside the home are also the main languages spoken outside the home**

Among the 22 interviewees, Chittagonian is the most common language spoken at home. Of the twelve respondents who report Chittagonian as the main language spoken in their home, eleven say that it is also the language they use the most when outside of the home (1 reported Rohingya). Likewise, of the nine who report Rohingya as the main language spoken at home, eight say that the main language they use when outside of the home is Rohingya (1 reported Chittagonian). The one man who reported speaking mostly Bangla at home reports using both Chittagonian and Bangla outside the home. Given the dominance of the Chittagonian language in the host community, it is not surprising that most Rohingya in the registered camps speak Chittagonian. Further investigation is needed to understand how the Rohingya spoken by residents in these camps differs from the Rohingya spoken by the refugees who arrived more recently, particularly how much local Chittagonian terminology has entered the Rohingya vernacular over the decades.

### **Conclusions**

The information provided by registered refugees point to ways in which service providers can best support effective two-way communication with this group:

- Given low rates of literacy, especially among women, as is the case in the non-registered camps, verbal communication (potentially including sign language) is the most effective way of exchanging information with the community. TWB and other organizations' research over the past few years has confirmed that loudspeakers and miking are effective ways of increasing the reach of information in the non-registered camps and will likely be similarly effective in the registered camps.
- Information-sharing initiatives will have the largest reach if information is shared in audio format or in person (orally or signed) in both Rohingya and Chittagonian. To avoid excluding deaf and hearing-impaired community members, efforts should be made to mobilize or recruit volunteers to exchange information using the appropriate sign language.
- Service providers in these camps should not assume that information shared or services delivered in one language – Rohingya or Chittagonian – will be appropriate for all camp residents. Communication and community engagement strategies should be based on evidence regarding the most appropriate languages, formats, and channels for the target community.



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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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