
ROHINGYA REFUGEES' EXPERIENCES DURING THE PANDEMIC

Rohingya refugees' stories and perspectives on COVID-19

COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of language in crises

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the lives of people and communities, including those already dealing with crises – like the Rohingya refugee community in Bangladesh. COVID-19 brought immense additional anxiety, with the potential to disrupt communities. Understanding how people respond to these challenges, and recording their voices and experiences, is integral to ensuring that humanitarians understand how refugees adapt and the role and importance of language in this process. This report shows the importance of language as part of Rohingya identity; as a bridge both to their culture and that of the host community. It highlights COVID-19 information needs and gaps, as well as illustrating the strength and resilience of the community during this difficult time. (Early findings from this study were shared in Issue 44 of the What Matters? bulletin¹).

Methodology

TWB conducted regular interviews with a small group of Rohingya community members between late April and the end of June, 2020. The eight participants (see profiles below) were a mix of men and women from a range of age groups and backgrounds. The interviews explored interviewees' experiences of life during the pandemic, their perspectives on language, and how these varied over time.² Semi-structured interviews, along with the continuity of discussions, allowed for a conversational feel to the data collection and findings, which were often deep and of a rather personal nature.

Key Findings

- Rohingya speakers generally choose to refer to COVID-19 as “coronavirus” or simply “virus.” The term “COVID-19” is not widely understood or used,

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<https://app.box.com/s/jjdsx66mvseanv3pi7k03uyevefk7ey4>

² To preserve the anonymity of the participants, we have not used their names.



although it is common among humanitarians.

- At the beginning of the crisis, interviewees were most concerned about their access to essentials, such as food and gas distributions, cyclone preparedness materials, and the severe reduction in employment opportunities.
- The huge reduction in the number of NGO staff in the camps caused participants to be concerned about potential increases in crime and access to healthcare.
- Throughout the COVID-19 response, Rohingya women appear to have had less access than men to appropriate information, despite the humanitarian community's efforts to provide equal access.
- The pandemic reduced women's already restricted movement in the camps. Men continue to leave their homes for work and essential shopping. Women increasingly rely on male family members for essential errands and information.
- Loudspeakers represent the most accessible form of information, particularly for women. Male members of households continue to source information from local bazaars and mosques.

Importance of Rohingya language: identity, culture, and surviving in Bangladesh

For Rohingya people, their language is much more than a means of communication; it helps define who they are. Participants spoke passionately of their language, describing it as an integral and inseparable part of their individual and collective identities; the language connects them with each other. Embedded within the Rohingya language is a collective history and identity which is

reinforced through people's interactions with one another.

Although the Rohingya language was universally seen as something that helped unite the community, it was also viewed as something separating them from other groups, particularly the majority community in Myanmar. Rohingya and Chittagonian differ, however there are enough similarities to allow speakers of the two languages to communicate. Especially in times of crisis, this ability to communicate with members of the host community is incredibly important.

Speaking Rohingya is about much more than communication. With it come opportunities, including for employment in the camps, but perhaps more importantly, for survival and getting by in the Bangladeshi community.

"I think language is very important for everyone to have recognition in society. I speak Bangla in a tone which is used by local host communities. That's why they think I am part of their community. I am sure this is the same for the Rohingya community as well."
P8

Before the virus arrived: concerns about insecurity, family, and older people

TWB spoke with the participants before the first COVID-19 cases in the camps were confirmed in mid-May, 2020, when the participants already understood that the virus might very soon reach their communities. There was uncertainty and anxiety about what was to come. Actions taken by the authorities and humanitarian agencies to reduce the spread of the virus (reduction in staff and activity in the camps, curtailing employment opportunities, and restrictions on movement) added to this anxiety.

Rohingya people are family-oriented. Concerns for the welfare of family members are at the forefront of most discussions. Life in

the camps is challenging, even in normal circumstances. COVID-19 compounds these issues, interrupting the systems and routines which, although far from perfect, are familiar and generally understood. A few days before the first confirmed COVID-19 cases, participants expressed concerns about the virus reaching their homes and families.

Their fears of the virus spreading increased when some neighbors and fellow community members dismissed the seriousness and contagiousness of COVID-19, whether through genuine disbelief or a lack of knowledge and access to information. In particular, there were concerns that male members of households would contract the virus and infect their families, as they were more likely to leave their home to shop, work, or pray.

"I am not safe. I am the one from my family who is going out every day. I am scared of bringing the virus back to my home." P4, 11 May, 2020

By early May, 2020, participants were well aware of the vulnerability of particular groups to the virus. Participants expressed most concern for older members of the camp community, particularly their parents. The most senior of the interviewees, a 55-year-old man, was also acutely aware of his own vulnerability to the virus.

Throughout the two months of regular conversations, all eight interviewees consistently reported feelings of fear, insecurity, and worry. At no point did any of them report feeling safe at the time of being interviewed. Leading up to the confirmation that COVID-19 had arrived in the camps in mid-May, 2020, they reported persistent, general fears about what the presence of the virus in the camps would mean for them, their families, and the community.

After the arrival of the virus in the camps

On 14 May, 2020, there was confirmation of the first cases of COVID-19 in the refugee camps. Three days later, TWB again interviewed the eight community members. The arrival of the virus, although predicted by most, caused a spike in fear and anxiety. Despite all the challenges faced by the community in their day-to-day lives, such as extreme weather and fires, COVID-19 represented a challenge which many were unsure they could overcome or even survive.

Although news of positive cases in the camps had reached the community, participants noted that many family and community members were not following health advice from the authorities, because they did not believe the virus existed or because they believed it would not affect them. The arrival of the virus in the camps also coincided with a number of other troubling and stressful events. On 12 May, 2020, around 360 homes (including that of one of the participants) and 60 shops in the camps were destroyed by fire. Another 30 or more structures, including mosques, were burned to ashes five days later. Three days after that, on May 20, 2020, Cyclone Amphan made landfall in Bangladesh, damaging shelters and triggering landslides and flooding in the camps.

"I lost my house last week (in the fire). How can I feel safe? I do not have any stamina left to rebuild everything." P7, 17 May, 2020

COVID-19 concerns over time

Interviewees endured immediate, drastic restrictions on movement after COVID-19 cases were confirmed in Cox's Bazar in late March, before the virus reached the camps. Restrictions prevented them traveling for work and reduced the availability of humanitarian staff and services in the camps.

In early May, 2020, interviewees were most concerned about their access to essentials such as food and gas distributions, and the severe reduction in employment opportunities. Worry about not being able to feed their families was a major concern for most. Some participants also noted that in previous years, they would already have received materials from NGOs to prepare their houses for the rainy season, but these had not yet arrived. The overall reduction in the number of NGO staff in the camps was a major source of worry for everyone. Participants also raised concerns about increases in crime and access to healthcare.

"I am feeling mostly numb these days. As refugees, we were always deprived and worried about our livelihood and wellbeing. But now, things have gotten worse. Sometimes, we cannot even think what the future will be like, or whether we will survive or not. Even if we do, how many friends and family members will we lose from this virus?" P5, 31 May, 2020

By late May, the reality was hitting that people could no longer safely do normal things like work, study, or attend the funerals of loved ones. Meeting the basic needs of families was becoming a challenge, and people were feeling the strain.

By mid-June, interviewees reported that social distancing and other COVID-19 mitigation strategies were not being followed, including at distribution centers and in local bazaars, while male family members in particular, including teenagers, were going out in search of work to support the family. Worryingly, many community members with COVID-19 symptoms, including one of the interviewees, were not getting tested out of fear of what would happen if they tested positive. One participant with symptoms sought medical care and wished that more community members would do the same.

By the end of June, 2020, there was a shift in perspectives among many interviewees. While they were still worried about the virus, they were coming to terms with the situation. They also reported improvements in the broader community's knowledge, acceptance, and uptake of mitigation strategies.

"Nothing has changed, except the way I used to panic about this virus has decreased a bit. I have read a lot of articles about this virus and now I know more information, which has helped me a lot in releasing stress about this virus." P3, 30 June, 2020

Women are getting less information than men during the pandemic

Throughout the response, Rohingya women appear to have had less access than men to information about COVID-19. This is despite the humanitarian community's efforts to provide equal access. The women say their male counterparts have acted as gatekeepers of this important information, limiting their access to it.

Even before the onset of COVID-19, cultural beliefs and safety concerns influenced restrictions on the movements of Rohingya women and girls in the camps. But the pandemic further reduced women's movement in the camps, in turn cutting their access to information about the virus. Men continue to leave their homes for work and essential shopping. As a result, women increasingly rely on male family members for essential errands and information.

"I usually ask my husband, brother-in-law and father-in-law several times. But they do not have answers to my questions every time. We need to have a good solution to check the rumors." P6, 3 May, 2020

Loudspeakers have become a consistent and valuable source of information for women.

Male members of households receive information from outside the home, particularly at local bazaars and mosques, but Rohingya women must rely on loudspeaker announcements from vehicles that circulate in the camps. Audio messages represent the most accessible information channel for women, who generally have less opportunity and ability to leave their homes. As women represent just over half of the camp population and play key roles in managing households, it is hard for them to receive the information needed to protect them and their families from COVID-19 without either dedicated engagement plans that involve women, or systems like miking/loudspeakers that reach everybody equally.

Sources of joy, and hopes and plans for the future

Despite the challenging times, participants still find happiness in their lives, particularly through their families. Like communities across the globe, members of the Rohingya refugee community have been spending much more time at home as a result of COVID-19. Interviewees reported that, despite the challenges of restrictions related to COVID-19, there were positive by-products of the situation.

Participants reported getting significant joy from spending more time with their families, particularly their children, as well as taking time to enjoy hobbies such as cooking and sewing. And, despite well-founded fears for

what the future may bring, all participants have dreams and plans for the future.

Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically altered the lives of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. It has limited their movements, impacting the provision of essential services and goods in the camps, reducing income sources, and creating anxiety and fear for their and their families' welfare.

- Agencies should use Rohingya volunteers and the Rohingya language as a main means of clearly communicating and discussing essential issues around COVID 19.
- Agencies should prioritize the use of loudspeakers and miking to reach women and girls who, due to restricted movement, continue to have limited access to information.
- Agencies should further develop methods of engagement with women, where social and physical distancing allow.

Participant Biographies

Participant 1 (P1)

P1 is 18 years old and was born in Bangladesh. He is part of the registered Rohingya refugee community. In 1990, his parents fled to Bangladesh and settled in Kutapalong registered camp. He is currently in the 12th grade and is about to sit for his higher secondary school certificate exam at a local government college.

Participant 2 (P2)

P2 is a 55-year-old man living in Camp 1E and works in various camps. Before coming to Bangladesh in 2017, he worked for NGOs in Myanmar. He is a respected member of the refugee community.

Participant 3 (P3)

P3 is a 28-year-old man living in Camp 1W. Before coming to Bangladesh, he was working in Myanmar in the field and helping his father in grocery stores. He had limited schooling in Myanmar. He came to Bangladesh with his family in 2017 during the main influx.

Participant 4 (P4)

P4 is a 36-year-old man living in Kutapalong registered camp. He has been in Bangladesh for the past 30 years. He is one of the registered refugees. In the camp where he lives, he has worked as a teacher and for various local and international organizations.

Participant 5 (P5)

P5 is a 25-year-old woman living in Kutapalong registered camp. She was born in Bangladesh and is married to a Bangladeshi man. She has worked for various NGOs. She received education up to 8th grade.

Participant 6 (P6)

P6 is a 27-year-old woman, living in Camp 1W. She has two children. She fled to Bangladesh with her family in August 2017. Back in Myanmar, she had 5th grade education. As her husband had more education, he trained her at home. She was a housewife before coming to Bangladesh.

Participant 7 (P7)

P7 is a 22-year-old woman living in Camp 1W. She completed 8th grade in Myanmar. She did not work before coming to Bangladesh. As she had lost her father before the violence began, she fled on foot to Bangladesh with her mother and two younger brothers in August, 2017.

Participant 8 (P8)

P8 is a 20-year-old woman who lives in Camp 1E. She was born in Bangladesh. Her mother, who is Rohingya, fled to Bangladesh in 1990 and married a Bangladeshi man (P8's father) who later left the family to marry another woman. She studied till 9th grade and has worked for different NGOs in the camps.



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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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