

Why do women stay silent about violence?

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Use the right language to help promote women's rights

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Community attitudes to rape survivors

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## Intimate partner violence: Women keep silent and cope

*Source:* Quantitative data collected from 6811 respondents by IOM community mobilisers from February to August 2018; qualitative research by BBC Media Action, in partnership with Norwegian Church Aid, into attitudes towards intimate partner violence in August 2018; and gender analysis carried out by Action Against Hunger, Save the Children and Oxfam in August 2018.

Analysis of community feedback data shows that concerns related to gender-based violence (GBV) or intimate partner violence (IPV) are very rarely raised through existing feedback systems. In camp 10, for example, less than 1% of the feedback shared by women was regarding protection issues.

But other sources suggest that problems related to GBV and IPV are very real. Recent local newspaper articles reported that around 5-10 rape survivors visit camp hospitals for treatment every day. Coverage in the press has noted the difficulties faced by survivors, who do not want to disclose the issue to the on-duty doctors and other medical staff and also

mentioned that, in many cases, the perpetrator is a male relative, which makes it even more difficult for survivors to lodge a complaint. So why are these types of issues not being raised through the existing feedback channels and mechanisms within the response?

Qualitative research suggests that IPV is common among the Rohingya community. IPV is not considered as 'violence' as such: rather, most Rohingya people believe that a husband has the right to beat his wife "with or without any reason".

IPV can start from the very beginning of a Rohingya woman's married life. If her family fails to provide the dowry that was promised at the time of the wedding, she can face continuous, verbal and sometimes physical abuse from her husband and in-laws. But the woman is unlikely to protest as the violence is seen as a consequence of her parents' failure to keep their promise. Rohingya women can also become victims of IPV if they fail to carry out household duties properly or if they are felt to not be adequately taking care of their in-laws or satisfying their husband.

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Besides mental and physical abuse, Rohingya women can also be forced to have sex by their husbands. Some young women who were married at an early age said that their husbands often wanted intercourse multiple times within a short period and described how this was a difficult and painful experience for them. Women said that they had no way to refuse their husbands' demands and also described how they were forced to have sex during their menstrual cycle, in the later stages of pregnancy and just a few days after childbirth.

Despite experiencing emotional, mental or sexual abuse, Rohingya women are very unlikely to complain about their husband and generally do not take any action (either directly or with help from their parents) except in extreme circumstances, such as if physical violence has caused bleeding or serious injury. Feedback from women suggests several reasons for their silence. They are afraid that their husband will take a second marriage and, given that remarriage for women is impossible in Rohingya society, are worried that they would have no access to money and no way to earn a livelihood in that situation. Additionally, if a woman speaks up or complains about her husband, she is perceived to be a *beadob* (ill-mannered person) in society. A *beadob* wife is ostracised by the community and is something that no Rohingya woman wants to be.

“ If husband returns from work and finds that food is not ready yet, he might misbehave with his wife and in some cases can physically abuse her as cooking is her responsibility as well as taking care of the husband”

– Female, 25, Teknaf

“ For a married woman, the most important duty is to take care of her husband. She is bound to carry out all the orders her husband gives. Any order at any time needs to be performed properly. If a wife is not obedient to her husband, there will be fights. The husband will call her bad names and beat the wife to make her obey him.”

– Community leader, Ukhiya

“ A wife can't argue with her husband even if he beats her near to death. Our religion says that a wife can't disrespect her husband. I have seen in drama (in Bangladesh) that many girls used to beat their husbands. But they are disobedient *beadob*. Despite not being her fault, if a husband beats his wife badly, she can either stay with him or can go her parents' house, but she can't disobey him.”

– Married woman, 25, Teknaf

## Words of women:

# Discussing gender with the Rohingya community

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.

## 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 formal situations – like in a mosque or in a meeting with a mahji – and when speaking to women.

Communication with the Rohingya community will be more effective and respectful 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 generalised, euphemistic expressions used to describe these actions.

## 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 among 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'), *burā haam* (meaning 'bad deed'), and *kala haam* (meaning 'black deed') are used.

## Nuances of sexual abuse

The conservative nature of the Rohingya culture, and the non-standardised nature of the Rohingya 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 or 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'), *beizzot goron* ('being dishonored'), *daag* ('stain') and *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 contextual information. However, due to their interactions with various 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.

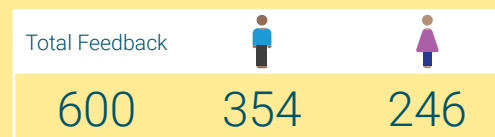


## Rohingya community feedback: Rape survivors and their children

*Source:* Feedback collected between August 20 and September 23 by 17 Internews community correspondents using Kobo Collect app in camps 1E/W, 2E/W, 3 and 4. In total, 600 interactions have been analysed to present the significant concerns and questions of the Rohingya community. The feedback is collected in Rohingya using English and Bangla script.

### Internews

📅 August 20 – September 23, 2018



## Rape survivors: married & unmarried

"We can neither hate nor accept them. And then we ask ourselves, what is their fault?" says a 43-year-old woman from camp 1E while talking about rape survivors and their newborn babies from the sexual assaults which took place last year in Rakhine State.

It's now more than a year since thousands of Rohingya people fled to Bangladesh and many of the women who experienced sexual violence such as rape have now given birth. There is reluctance to discuss this issue, but as some of those babies have been born, people have been more open to sharing their concerns and have raised questions of identity, social acceptance and anxiety for the future of those survivors and their babies.

“ We are worried about the marriage of the young women who were raped back in Myanmar. We don't know how we will marry them off and who will marry them.”

– Female, 33, camp 1W

“ Our sisters and daughters have been raped. We are very worried about their future. Who will marry them? Some rape victims are married and their husbands left them. Who will take care of them? We don't hate the babies who are born after rape. But they are not Muslim. What will happen to them if their mother wants to marry? In the future, what will we write in the place of the father's name? We want them to live a respectful life in the community.”

– Male, 58, camp 1W

This feedback reflects the community's concern for the future of rape survivors. They have categorised the survivors into two groups according to their marital status: married and unmarried. It appears that the majority of the community members feel that it is very challenging to find a match for those rape survivors who are unmarried. They believe that nobody would marry a rape survivor. The situation seems much worse in the case of married women who were raped. Many of them were abandoned by their husbands and are now suffering because there is no-one to take care of them.

People have also said that, according to their social and cultural context, not all the rape survivors are comfortable in sharing the suffering they had, as they think the community might hate them and not accept them. Community members made it clear that they are willing to help these rape survivors and that they do not blame them for what happened. They also think that, if everyone in the community is aware of the support which is available for those survivors and their children, it will be easier to help them. Now, the majority of people are not aware of the support that rape survivors can get.

“ We know the babies who were born because of the rape that happened last year are our proof of the violence against the women of our community. But how can we ensure a better and normal environment for those babies and mothers, so that they can live their lives like everyone else in the community? These are Buddhist soldiers' babies. They remind us of the terrifying massacre.”

– Male, 38, camp 2W

There is a lot of concern about the babies who were born as a result of rape. These babies are reminders of that violence to rape survivors and community members and are considered as evidence of the brutality that the community suffered. The community are concerned about the identity and social acceptance of these babies. Some have raised questions such as:

- Which religion will these babies follow, since they are the children of Burmese soldiers?
- What will be written on official documents which require the father's name?
- What will happen to the children and who will take care of them if their mother wants to get married and move on?
- What support can survivors obtain from different humanitarian organisations?
- How willingly will the community accept a Mogh's child in Muslim society?

Community members seem more concerned about the identity and future challenges that these rape survivors and their children might face. They made it clear that they don't have hatred for those children. However, they think if they have clear answers to the questions listed above, they could at least ensure a better and safe environment for the rape survivors and their children in the camp.



BBC Media Action, Internews, and Translators without Borders are working together to collect and collate feedback from communities affected by the Rohingya crisis. This summary aims to provide a snapshot of feedback received from Rohingya and host communities, to assist sectors to better plan and implement relief activities with communities' needs and preferences in mind.

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.

If you have any comments, questions or suggestions regarding *What Matters?*, you are welcome to get in touch with the team by emailing [info@cxbfeedback.org](mailto:info@cxbfeedback.org)