
IMAMS' ROLE IN SHARING INFORMATION IN THE CAMPS

MORE SUPPORT IS NEEDED IF IMAMS ARE TO BE A SOURCE OF INFORMATION FOR WOMEN, OLDER PEOPLE AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

In the Rohingya community, imams are trusted religious and community leaders. The camp community often turns to imams for guidance and support. Imams are much more than religious leaders; they are also trusted sources of information on topics including health, COVID-19, humanitarian services, and camp security. Given the high levels of trust the community have for imams and the wide reaching platform they hold, they are well positioned to pass on information to the community that will be listened to and trusted.

To better understand the role that imams play in sharing information in the camps, TWB interviewed camp residents about their experiences and perspectives regarding receiving information from imams. We also

interviewed imams about their experiences of sharing information with the community.

We found that imams are an important and trusted information source on a range of topics, but their reach is limited among women, older people, and people with disabilities. Some have found ways to reach those groups, which others might need support to emulate.

This report outlines findings from the interviews and provides recommendations to the humanitarian community on supporting imams to share information.

Who we spoke to

In November 2021, TWB conducted

semi-structured interviews with 55 members of the Rohingya community, 30 men and 25 women aged 18 to 60 years old living in camps 1E, 1W, 2E, 2W, 3, 4, 5, 9, 13, 18, 26, and Kutapalong and Nayapara registered camps. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 11 imams working in camps 1W, 2E, 2W, 10, 12, 13, 18, 26, and Nayapara registered camp.

Imams' information sharing mostly happens at the mosque, and mostly with men

Imams mainly communicate with male community members, as it is mainly men who attend the mosque. Twenty-six of the 30 men interviewed say they visit the mosque more than once a day, 2 at least 5 times a week, and 2 attend 2-3 times per week. In contrast, 23 of the 25 women interviewed never visit a mosque. The other 2 visit once or twice a month but only to take their children for religious teaching.

Of the 55 people interviewed, 24 people- 23 men and 1 woman- say they had received information directly from imams in the previous 12 months, all face-to-face, with the exception of the woman who received information through a loudspeaker. Thirteen others had information from imams passed on to them from other sources and 11 (all women) received no information from imams.

Six of the imams say that people regularly approach them for information, with up to 30 people, mostly men, approaching them each

day. People mainly ask them about religious rulings, prayers and guidance, but also about safety, security and emergency situations in the camps, repatriation, and humanitarian services.

Levels of trust are high, especially but not only among men. As some respondents highlighted, this is linked to the imams' religious authority: people trust imams to guide them on spiritual matters, and this trust extends to information they share on other topics.

Forty-two respondents say they trust information shared by imams. Eight of the 25 women are unsure whether to trust it, since they do not receive the information directly. Of the remaining respondents, 1 man believes imams are only working to earn money and 1 says they are too busy sharing religious teachings to discuss other topics.

"We all believe the imams as they are religious leaders." - Rohingya man, 19 years old

Imams pass on a range of information verbally through different channels

Outside of religious teachings, most imams interviewed report sharing information on a range of topics. These include hygiene and sanitation, community harmony, security and safety, child marriage, humanitarian activities, and COVID-19.

Imams share information with the community at the mosque five times during prayers but

particularly before the Friday prayer when large numbers of people are gathered before and after the morning prayers. If there's any emergency information to be disseminated to the wider community, then loudspeakers or mics are used. Information is also shared going door to door, block to block, through mobile calls, verbally in public gatherings at shops and madrasas, and arranging meetings for males and females separately.

Most imams recognize women's information access challenges and some make efforts to reach them

Nine of the 11 imams interviewed feel that women do not have the same level of access to information as men. They linked this to the fact that women often don't leave the home and rely on their husbands, other male family members, neighbors and home visits from volunteers to get information. Some imams also mentioned the particular information challenges faced by widows and women living in women-only households.

“Women only receive information when their family members share it with them.”

- Imam, 26 years old

Most imams interviewed believe that women do not approach them for information due to religious and cultural restrictions on interacting with men outside their immediate family. Community members interviewed confirmed this: most women interviewed said they do not feel comfortable approaching imams for information. Two imams said that

women do sometimes approach them for information, but these are mostly family members.

Four imams have specific strategies for getting information to women. These include engaging their wives, sisters and daughters of imams to share information with other women, and organizing events where both women and men can be present. Some described holding Islamic teaching sessions on Fridays with curtains separating women and men. Others hold meetings in people's homes, with the women sitting in separate rooms from them while they talk so the women and men can't see each other. One imam says he specifically requests men to share the information with the women in the community and they make a promise to him that they will share the information. This imam said he believes women also have the right to access information.

Not all imams recognize the information access challenges of older people and people with disabilities

Most imams recognize that older people and people with disabilities face added challenges accessing information in general. Among those challenges the imams mentioned mobility issues, and lower rates of mobile phone use among older people in particular. However, this awareness is not shared by all the imams interviewed, so some are less likely to make an effort to reach these groups. Three imams believe that information is readily

accessible to everyone.

Eight imams feel that people with disabilities have less access to information than other community members. But 3 say that is not the case, as the imams get information to people with disabilities through home visits or through family and community members passing it on.

Seven imams believe that older people have less access to information than younger people, because they only get information from the mosque when they come for prayer. But the other 4 believe that older people have as much access to information as younger people, or even more, especially because younger people are busy working, while older people have more time to get information at the mosque, tea stalls, and elsewhere. In regard to their own experiences of sharing information, 5 imams say they face challenges reaching older people, women, people with disabilities, and people who work in distant areas.

Imams receive information from *majhis*, CiCs and NGOs, but feel they need more

Imams mostly receive information to share with the community from meetings they attend with NGOs, CiCs and *majhis*. *Majhis* in particular are a key source of information for imams: 10 of the 11 imams interviewed said *majhis* directly share information with them so that they can pass it on to the community. This information sharing goes both ways, with imams also sometimes sharing information

directly with *majhis*.

“I discuss with majhis about how we can more effectively share information with the community so that everyone has equal and easy access to the information.” - Imam, 30 years old

Other sources of information for imams include Rohingya volunteers, meetings with police, social media and radio. The imams interviewed generally receive information face-to-face and through loudspeakers or miking.

Imams want more information to share, and have ideas on how

Ten of the imams interviewed want to receive more information to share it with the community. Topics they want information about include repatriation, safety and security, environmental issues, hygiene and sanitation, world news, disease prevention, fire safety, domestic violence, pregnancy and childbirth, and caring for older people.

Imams prefer to receive information from NGOs and from CiCs or the government. They want to receive information in Rohingya verbally, in audio and video formats, while 3 would also like to receive information in writing in Urdu, and 1 each in Arabic and the Rohingya scripts Rohingyaish and Hanafi.

Imams have various suggestions for how to improve their ability to share information with community, including more invitations to CiC and NGO meetings, reliable WhatsApp groups

to receive information (including one specifically for imams and *majhis*), arranging incentives for imams to visit people in the camps, increased access to information about repatriation, more loudspeakers beyond the mosque, and making spaces available outside of the mosque for discussing and sharing information.

Some imams feel that they are not heard and do not feel like they are included in discussions and meetings in the same way as *majhis*, NGOs and CiCs. They feel NGOs and CiCs prioritize *majhis* over imams. Issues of low pay, no healthcare services, and limited support from NGOs were also raised.

Recommendations for humanitarians

Based on the perspectives and experiences shared by community members and imams, we recommend that humanitarians:

- Encourage and support imams to create more opportunities for women to receive information from them, including through arrangements for women to visit mosques with culturally approved measures in place, and encouraging more imams to educate men about sharing information with female family members
- Facilitate further and more structured conversations and sharing between imams, *majhis* and CiCs to increase imams' access to current and accurate information
- Involve imams, where possible and relevant, in meetings and other information sharing opportunities
- Provide training and support to imams regarding sharing information with the community
- Educate and support imams on sharing information with older people, people with disabilities, widows and members of women-only households



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