

# ROHINGYA LANGUAGE GUIDELINES

Building a better dialogue around water,  
sanitation & hygiene (WASH) issues

These Rohingya language guidelines provide sociocultural background and linguistic context for WASH program managers, field workers, and interpreters. Data was collected through focus group discussions, delineated by gender and language (Chittagonian or Rohingya), as well as complementary field and desk research. This document accompanies a glossary of more than 180 WASH and health terms. It is available in five languages online and via smartphone app in written and audio format. <https://glossaries.translatorswb.org/bangladesh/>

Language is a key challenge in the Rohingya refugee response in Bangladesh. Humanitarians are working with a population who have had little access to education and have very low literacy levels. Rohingya is an oral language without a commonly agreed written script. This complicates communication and information sharing in the camps. The issue is further complicated by language differences between the host community in Bangladesh and the Rohingya refugees. Though local Chittagonian speakers and interpreters have been important in bridging these communication gaps, concerns remain around comprehension of life-saving information.

A common misconception, especially among Chittagonian speakers, is that Rohingya and Chittagonian languages are identical. Though up to 80% of the words are similar, the remaining difference can create confusion over important concepts.

One main source of difference between Chittagonian and Rohingya comes from the Burmese and Rakhine words used by Rohingyas, particularly among the refugees who have arrived since August 2017. Interpreters and other frontline workers can avoid this by asking for clarification and more context when coming across these words



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Read the Rohingya Zuban story map for more information. <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/rohingya-zuban/>  
Contact [bangladesh@translatorswithoutborders.org](mailto:bangladesh@translatorswithoutborders.org) for language needs in Bangladesh, or [info@translatorswithoutborders.org](mailto:info@translatorswithoutborders.org) to discuss overall language services and resources for communicating with communities in need.

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## Relating to new concepts

Some key words do not translate easily between English, Bangla, Chittagonian and Rohingya. For example, the Bangla word for 'information' (**tothyo**) is not understood by many Chittagonian and most Rohingya speakers, who instead use **hobor**, the same word for 'news'.

The technical terminology often used in the humanitarian sector further complicates communication with Rohingya speakers. For example in English the word 'accessibility' can refer to physical access (ramps and paths), or access to rights. When translating from those varying contexts into Rohingya or Chittagonian, the word for accessibility could be quite different. For example, when talking about access in terms of finding something (for example, 'I need to access the women friendly space') you would use **tuai fara**, while barriers to access in terms of physical (disability) or gender would be **bandha don**.

Certain words cannot be translated because of their uniqueness. Chlorine tablets and Aquatabs are specific products that may not be familiar to recently arrived refugees. You could say **fani saaf goredhe bori** which translates as 'water cleaning tablet'. Field workers should try to explain the purpose of these products using familiar local examples. In this case, potassium alum (**fitkiri**) was traditionally used to clarify water in South Asia. While this product is different, mentioning *fitkiri* when explaining Aquatabs gives a reference point for explaining the meaning of Aquatabs and other water purifying products.

Information (oral, written, or pictographic) should be developed in collaboration with the community. Involving Rohingya men and women in this process ensures the use of words and concepts that are culturally appropriate and understandable.

## Religious sensitivities

The Rohingya community is very religious. Sacred spaces such as mosques and graveyards are off limits to women at all times. Menstruation and childbirth are seen as 'impure' (**naafak**), so avoid having discussions about these topics, or about sanitation, near a mosque. It is important to be aware of these religious sensitivities when approaching religious leaders and spaces, and deciding where to hold public health promotion activities.

## Level of formality

Like most other South Asian languages, Rohingya has three levels of formality: **avné** (very formal), **tūi** (formal), and **tui** (very informal). When approaching elders and community leaders, use the *avné*. When speaking to the majority of the population *tūi* is appropriate. Only use the *tui* if speaking to young children. Chittagonian speakers use the same set of words to describe these formality levels.

\* The tilde **ū** denotes nasalisation.



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## Gender divide

Among the Rohingya, men and women often live in different social spheres. For interpreters and other field workers, it is advisable to speak to people outside of their shelter if they are of the opposite gender, unless invited inside.

Certain gender and reproductive health-related words are not always similar in the three languages. For example, in Bangla, the word for 'pregnant' is **gorbhobothi**; in Chittagonian, it is **fuathi**; and in Rohingya, it is **hamil**. The word for 'menstruation' is markedly different between Rohingya (**haiz**) and Bangla / Chittagonian (**maashik**). Knowing the terms that people use and understand can help you make the right choice of word when discussing reproductive health issues.



## Defining diarrhea

Most community members use 'diarrhea' to describe a number of related conditions. While Chittagonians use the English word 'diarrhea', Rohingyas use the word **gaa-lamani**. When translated literally from Rohingya to Chittagonian, *gaa-lamani* means 'body coming down', which can lead to confused conversations and/or misdiagnosis. Though Rohingya and Chittagonian communities refer to 'cholera' using the English term, **aba biaram** is also used in some Rohingya communities.



## Dream medicine

Rohingyas, particularly women and the elderly, sometimes use indigenous herbal remedies that they call **hwaabor/shopnor dabai** ('dream medicine'). As they may substitute unknown plants from hills around the camps for those they would normally use at home, these remedies may be dangerous. Discussing which illnesses they use dream medicine for may help in identifying approaches to mitigate the spread of waterborne diseases and other WASH-related health concerns.



## Seasonal illnesses

Certain diseases are associated with specific seasons in the region. Diarrhea and other stomach illnesses are associated with the hot season, whereas many respiratory issues occur in the dry winter season. Knowing Rohingya terms for seasons and the months of the year is helpful for engaging refugees in a conversation about health and disease prevention.

More information on Rohingya words for seasons is in the first issue of the *What Matters?* newsletter. <https://goo.gl/F8iAfd>

