



# The language lesson:

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED ABOUT  
COMMUNICATING WITH ROHINGYA REFUGEES  
**RESEARCH BRIEF**

*November 2018*



**TRANSLATORS**  
WITHOUT BORDERS



## WHO

Translators without Borders (TWB) as part of the Common Service Project for Community Engagement and Accountability, with the support of the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) through the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and of European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (ECHO)



## WHAT

A language needs and comprehension assessment with a representative sample of refugees in the Kutupalong-Balukhali camp



## WHEN

Fieldwork was conducted August 8-12, 2018



## WHY

To better understand the relative effectiveness of humanitarian communication with refugees in different languages and formats



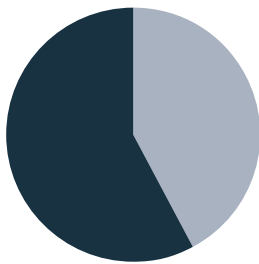
*Enumerators set out for the day to deliver the comprehension survey. TWB*

“When I speak my own language, I am **free**. When I hear someone else speaking Rohingya, I feel like I am **home**.”

- Rohingya refugee

# Who participated?

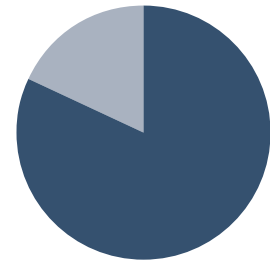
**407**  
respondents  
from within the  
**Kutupalong-  
Balukhali**  
expansion site.



**58%** **42%**  
WOMEN MEN

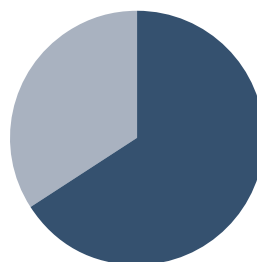
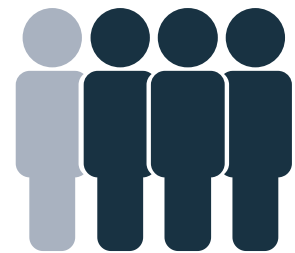


**2** in **3** have no  
formal education.



**82%**  
ARE NEW ARRIVALS.  
Most of the population reached the camps  
between August and October 2017.

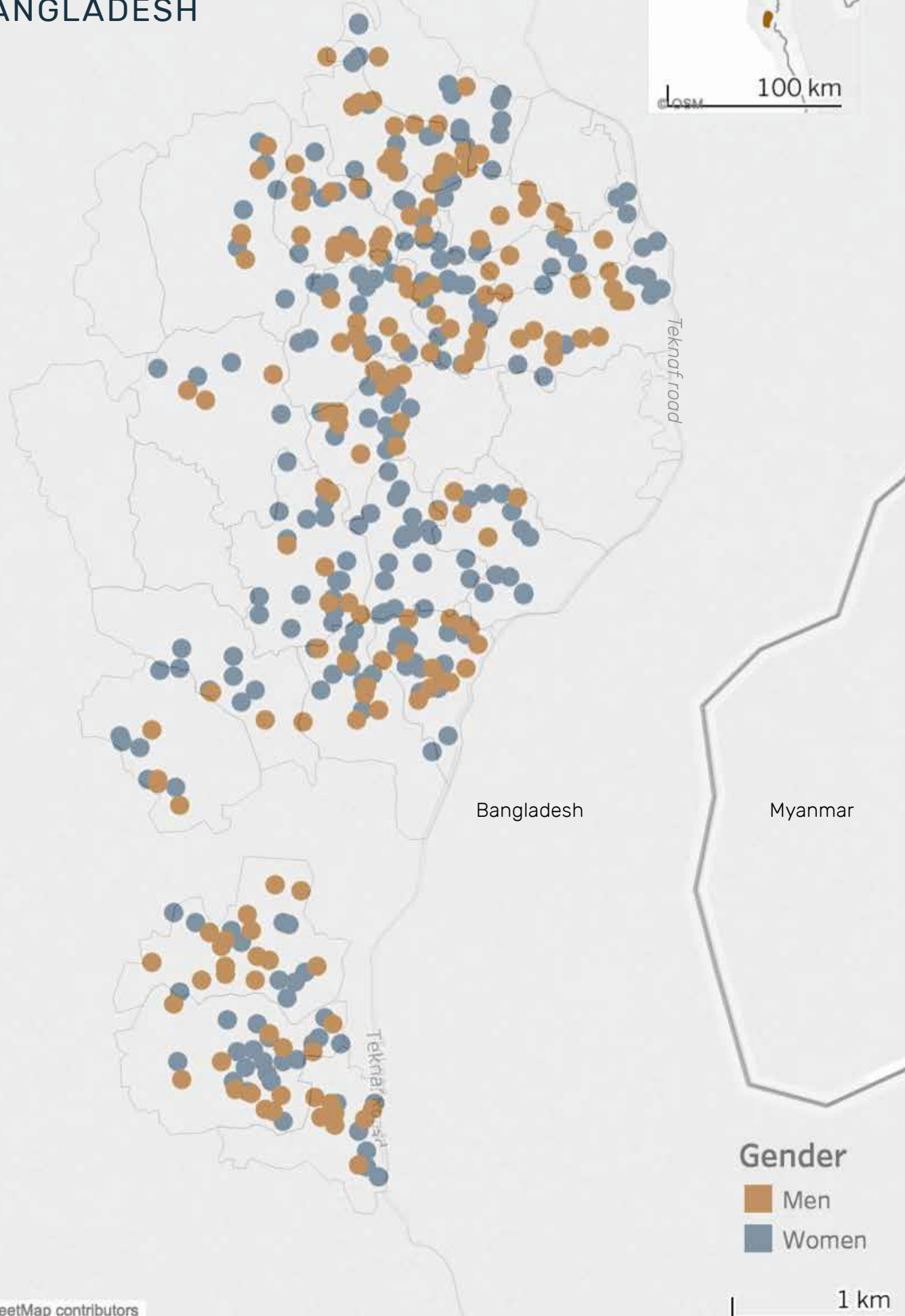
**3** in **4** are 18  
to 44 years old.



**66%**  
REPORTED THAT  
THEY CANNOT READ  
OR WRITE.

# Interview sites:

COX'S BAZAR DISTRICT,  
BANGLADESH





# Key findings

Here is what we found, and what it means for humanitarian communication strategies.



**Rohingya is the only spoken language that all refugees understand and prefer. Thirty-six percent struggled to understand a basic sentence in Chittagonian.** Men and women did not understand a simple sentence in Chittagonian at similar rates (34 percent and 37 percent respectively). After Rohingya and Chittagonian, spoken Bangla is understood at higher rates than spoken Burmese and English. Women are less likely than men to understand spoken Bangla or Burmese.



**Verbal communication is critical.** Sixty-six percent of refugees said that they cannot read or write in any language, and comprehension testing broadly confirmed this. Their stated preference is to receive information face to face, over loudspeaker, and by phone call. This tallies with very strong trust levels in imams, family, aid and medical professionals, and *majhees* as sources of information.



**Simple visual messaging is effective.** After spoken Rohingya, visual messaging is the most widely understood format. All refugees, irrespective of gender, age, or levels of education understood the illustrations at a similar rate.

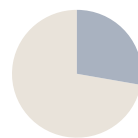


**Two-thirds would prefer written communication in Rohingya. However, the language lacks a universally accepted script.**

A number of writing systems exist, but more information is needed about how widely understood and accepted they are in the camps.



**After Rohingya, Burmese is the preferred language for written communication.** Around 32 percent can read simple messages in Burmese, Bangla or English. Reading comprehension in Bangla, Burmese, and English is much better than self-assessments, especially among women. Refugees also express clear preference for brochures (18 percent) over other written formats like posters and banners (2 percent).



**28 percent of refugees do not have enough information.** This suggests that access to information has improved in the past year. However, language barriers and low access to media still leave many refugees without the information they need. This reduces their ability to claim their rights, get the support they need, and make decisions for themselves and their families.

# Recommendations

The results of this assessment make it clear that there are varied language needs within the Rohingya community. Different people understand, prefer, and trust different formats of communication and sources of information. Nonetheless, solutions for effective humanitarian communication exist. TWB therefore recommends donor governments, the United Nations, and other humanitarian aid organizations involved in the response to take the following practical action:

**1. Use Rohingya as the spoken language of communication with refugees.**

Since Rohingya is the only language that all refugees understand, it is critical that humanitarian agencies prioritize communication in this language. Agencies should also check communication materials for accuracy before sharing with the community.

**2. Invest in formal training for field workers and interpreters in the Rohingya language and interpretation.**

Agencies frequently hire native Chittagonian speakers as fieldworkers or interpreters for the Rohingya response, but their Rohingya skills may vary. Given the importance of face-to-face communication in Rohingya, agencies should assess Rohingya language skills during recruitment. Hiring female staff with the right language skills is key to communicating with Rohingya women. Agencies should also engage Rohingya volunteers for



*A Rohingya woman visiting an information hub in the megacamp, Kutapalong. TWB*

community interactions. Training and support programs should build interpreters' capacities, including in complex terminology such as health interpreters may require. This can draw on tools such as TWB's [multilingual glossaries](#) of humanitarian terms. Aid organizations should encourage collaboration between Rohingya volunteers and Chittagonian staff. This maximizes the development of cross-cultural communication skills, and raises awareness of differences between the two languages.

### 3. Use a mix of formats and channels of communication.

Use multiple formats and channels, and consult with the community on those choices. This ensures that everyone has access to information in a format they can understand, through a channel they trust. Develop a mixed approach appropriate to the information being communicated: loudspeakers and *majhees* may work well for delivering lifesaving information about basic access to services. More complex issues, such as repatriation, are better addressed through face-to-face discussions, community meetings, or long-form radio programming. Key considerations on format and channel include:

- **Make audio formats central to communication strategies.**  
In addition to face-to-face communication, agencies should use loudspeakers and radio to relay spoken messages.
- **Use visual formats to further aid comprehension.**  
Visual content should be simple and culturally relevant. Develop and pre-test it with Rohingya refugees to confirm that they understand the intended messages. Explore dynamic visual formats such as animation, film, and community theater. Narration or subtitles further expand comprehension.
- **Develop illustrated brochures and leaflets as more permanent records.**  
Provide information in formats that refugees can take home for information retention and later reference. This also allows literate refugees to ask friends or family members to help them understand the information. Given both access and privacy concerns,

women in particular may benefit from this approach, which can complement mass communication materials such as posters.

- **Work with others to get the right message out.**  
Build partnerships with trusted community figures such as imams and women leaders to relay and promote key messages. Use the support and resources of the Communicating With Communities (CWC) Working Group to ensure content is coordinated, appropriate, and addresses key community concerns.

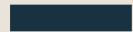
### 4. Use Burmese script when sharing written information with refugees.

Respect refugees' preference to receive written information in Burmese over English or Bangla, and cater to that choice until literacy levels improve. To reach the widest possible literate audience, provide all written materials meant for refugees in Burmese, English, and Bangla. If resources are limited, Burmese should take precedence.

### 5. Develop a better understanding of communication issues affecting the Rohingya refugee community.

Recognize that language and culture are integral to communication, community engagement, and the accountability of humanitarian efforts. Develop a more nuanced understanding of how language and culture can support effective communication. Adapt interventions to the dynamic local context. Areas to consider include: communicating with women; children's literacy and comprehension; Rohingya script awareness and use; and visual communication.





This study was made possible by the support of the United Kingdom's Department of International Development (DFID) through the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and of European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (ECHO).

This study is part of the Common Service for Community Engagement and Accountability. 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. The views expressed in this document should not be taken, in any way, to reflect the official opinion of the European Union, nor do the views expressed necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies. The UK government and the European Commission are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained in this document.

