

FIRST THEY TARGETED OUR CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

**Threats to Rohingya Language, Culture,
and Identity in Myanmar and Bangladesh**



Rohingya Language Preservation Project

FIRST THEY TARGETED OUR CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

**Threats to Rohingya Language, Culture,
and Identity in Myanmar and Bangladesh**

ABOUT ROHINGYA LANGUAGE PRESERVATION PROJECT

The Rohingya Language Preservation Project is a Rohingya youth-led research initiative based in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. We seek to preserve Rohingya language and culture in the refugee camps and beyond. We believe in creating grassroots change through community-led projects that strengthen the capacity and leadership skills of Rohingya youth in the community. We collaborate and engage with leaders, individuals and groups within Rohingya society that rebuild and empower the community.

Cover Photo: @Dil Kayas: During the Eid prayer inside a mosque in refugee camp, Cox's Bazar, Rohingya men are pleading to Allah for a safe and dignified repatriation to their homeland in Myanmar.

Table of Contents

Timeline of the Myanmar Government's Efforts to Marginalise Rohingya Culture and Language.....	5
Executive Summary.....	8
Maps of Bangladesh.....	10
Map of Myanmar.....	11
Team Statement: The Importance of Rohingya-led Initiatives.....	12
Cultural Genocide.....	15
Background.....	16
Discrimination and Violence in Myanmar.....	16
History of Cultural Destruction.....	16
Substandard Living Conditions in Bangladesh.....	18
Mistreatment by Authorities in Bangladesh.....	19
Background of Rohingya Language.....	19
Recent Efforts to Preserve Rohingya language.....	20
Rohingya Language in Exile.....	21
Methodology.....	26
Team Selection and Training.....	26
Participants.....	26
Questionnaire.....	27
Questionnaire Piloting.....	28
Data Collection.....	28
Data Analysis.....	29
Key Findings.....	32
Demographics.....	32
Language Assessment Results.....	35
Community Opinions.....	36
Community Presentations.....	41
Conclusions.....	44
Threat to Rohingya Identity.....	44
Community Mandate to Preserve Rohingya Language.....	44
Preservation Without Marginalisation.....	44
Long-term Intervention Strategies.....	45
Recommendations	47
Acknowledgements.....	49
Annex A: Survey Questionnaire.....	51
Annex B: Language Assessment List of Non-Rohingya Terms.....	53

Timeline of the Myanmar Government's Efforts to Marginalise Rohingya Culture and Language

In 2016 and 2017 the former Myanmar government and military launched 'clearance operations' against Rohingya people in Northern Rakhine State; a campaign of violence that forced more than 700,000 Rohingya into neighbouring Bangladesh. Following these operations, they bulldozed hundreds of Rohingya villages and mosques, erasing centuries of Rohingya history and culture.

2017

The former Myanmar government began evicting Rohingya families and appropriating their land throughout Rakhine State to make way for "model villages." These villages were constructed for Rakhine and Burmese settlers with the purpose of transforming the cultural and demographic landscape of northern Rakhine State by increasing the Buddhist population and diluting Rohingya culture and influence in the region.

1993

The former Myanmar government established Nasaka, an inter-agency force of immigration, police, intelligence and customs officials. Nasaka's operations enforced regional policies and imposed severe restrictions against the Rohingya population including restrictions on freedom of practising Rohingya cultural and religious festivals and events in Rakhine State.

1992

The ruling military junta introduced the process of "Burmanisation" across the country, including in Rakhine state, and changed the names of villages, cities and other historical landmarks in the State from their original Rohingya names to distinct Burmese names.

1989

The Myanmar military government enacted the 1982 Citizenship Law, which effectively denied citizenship to Rohingya people by excluding them from the list of recognised ethnic groups in the country. This also had the effect of officially invalidating their ethnic identity as "Rohingya."

1982

The military dictator U Ne Win excluded the Rohingya language from Burmese Broadcasting Service (BBS). This Rohingya language program had previously been broadcasted as part of the BBS' indigenous program twice per week.

1964



▲ Photo @RLPP, A young Rohingya girl holding a book of Rohingya Hanifi script while she is returning home from madrasah inside a refugee camp, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.



▲ Photo @RLPP, A female member of Rohingya Research Team is explaining the findings of the research to a group of Rohingya women inside a tarpaulin shelter in a refugee camp, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

“Language enriches wisdom of the community. We can express our feelings, opinion, concerns, needs and rights properly only through our own language. In this part, there are already gaps in the Rohingya community.

Working for this project means preserving our language and culture that are at high risk of oblivion in the refugee camps and beyond.”

Sama Akther, 37 years

A member of Rohingya research team,
Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, June, 2022

Executive Summary

A people are defined by and remain “a people” because of and through their language and culture. If their language and culture are erased, that reality also contributes to and reinforces the various physical acts of violence that seek to “destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group” which are enumerated in the definition of genocide in the Genocide Convention. The killings and other horrific violence go hand in hand with the cultural and linguistic repression, and together they aim to “destroy” a people, leaving nothing and no one behind.

In recent years, the majority of the attention dedicated to the Rohingya crisis has understandably focused on physical violence and destruction, including killings, rape and the burning of villages in Myanmar. However, very little consideration has been given to the violence that has been employed against Rohingya culture. For decades, the former Myanmar governments and the current junta have suppressed Rohingya cultural expression with the intention of eroding Rohingya cultural identity. Even now, five years on from the genocidal attacks conducted by Myanmar’s military, 900,000 Rohingya continue to experience the attrition of their language and culture, as they live in exile in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. The restrictions imposed on Rohingya refugees by the Government of Bangladesh exacerbate the damage to Rohingya culture and identity that was initiated in Myanmar. It is within this context that this participatory research was conducted, in hopes of understanding Rohingya perceptions on the state of their language and the intersection of language, culture, identity, and rights.

This report presents results from mixed methods research. Data was collected through 285 individual interviews with randomly selected Rohingya respondents in the refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar and on Bhasan Char Island. This Rohingya-led, participatory research was conceptualised, planned and executed by a team of 23 Rohingya researchers.

This report provides new and important findings, including the following:

- Rohingya language plays a critical and central role in Rohingya cultural identity
- Rohingya language is currently changing as Rohingya assimilate to the Bangladesh context
- Rohingya language—and therefore Rohingya identity—is at-risk for the Rohingya population in Bangladesh, as our language continues to disappear
- Maintaining a distinct Rohingya identity is seen as important to increase legitimacy and rights upon return to Myanmar
- Preservation of Rohingya language and identity among Rohingya communities in the camps is extremely important both for existential reasons and to increase the likelihood of a return to Myanmar with legitimacy and rights

The findings in this report provide important information that should be utilised by 1) our Rohingya community as we work for language, cultural and identity preservation. Additionally,

Executive Summary

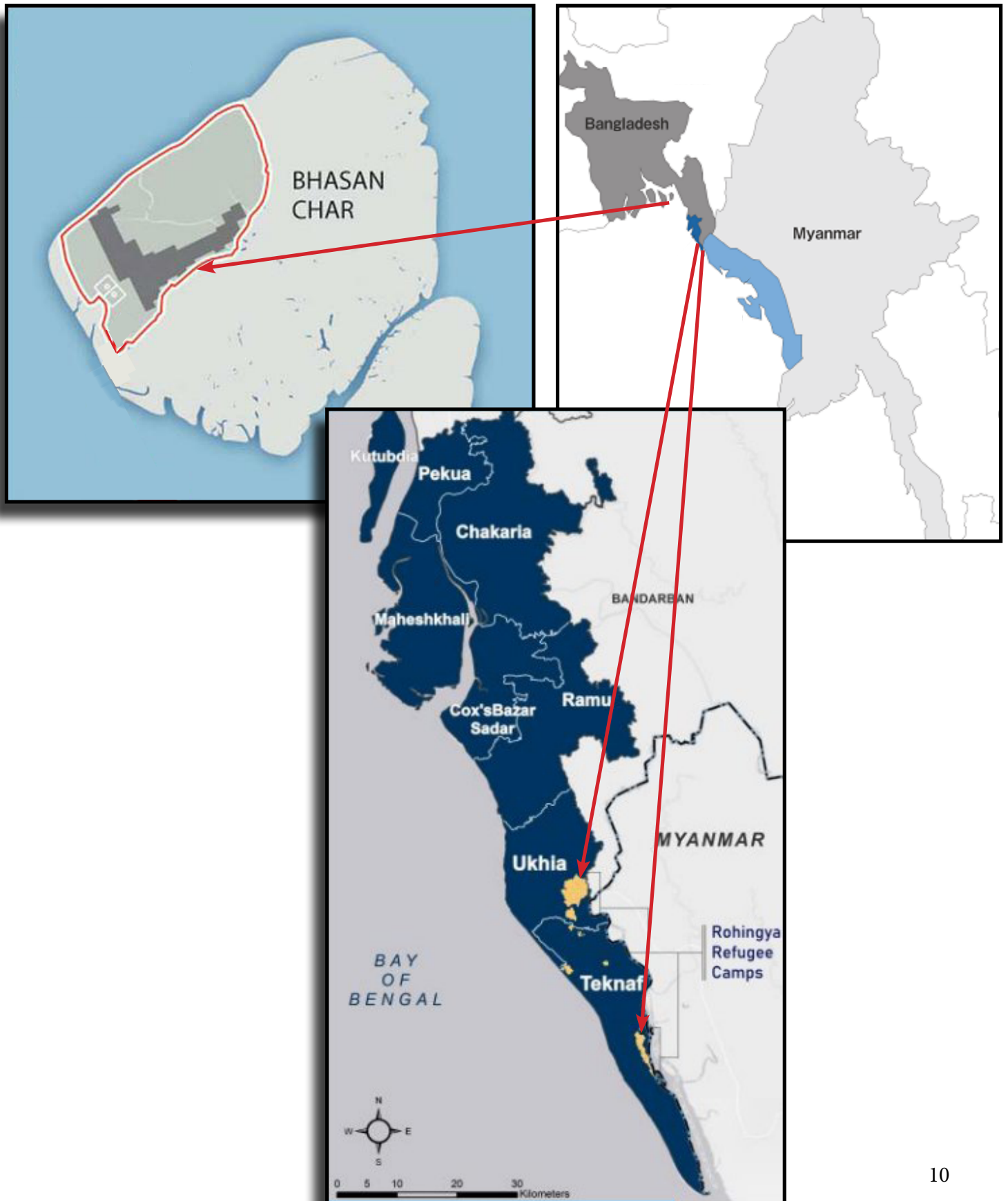
these findings have implications for 2) humanitarian organisations, who should position Rohingya-speaking staff in roles that interface with the refugee community and ensure the use of Rohingya language—not Chittagonian—in all programs. 3) The National Unity Government (NUG) now resisting the junta who took over in the February 1, 2021 coup, must urgently recognise the Rohingya ethnicity and remove practices and policies aimed at Rohingya cultural destruction. 4) The Government of Bangladesh must remove restrictions on Rohingya cultural events, freedom of movement, and the ability to work in the camps. 5) Lastly, the international community must exert pressure on both the current junta and the Government of Bangladesh to remove extreme restrictions that contribute to the repression and destruction of Rohingya culture.

Our hope is that these findings will demonstrate the great importance that the Rohingya community places on preserving Rohingya language, culture and identity. Additionally, we hope that our community living in the refugee camps will respond to these findings by placing a greater emphasis on using Rohingya language within the community and in conversations with family and friends. Working together with our international partners and allies, we hope to preserve the Rohingya language as we await a dignified return to Myanmar's Rakhine State in the future.



▲ Photo @RLPP, A team member of the Rohingya Language Preservation Project is conducting a session on community awareness with a group of Rohingya Refugee Men inside a refugee camp, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

Map of Bangladesh



Map of Myanmar



Team Statement on the Importance of Rohingya-led Initiatives

Humanitarian decision-making processes in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh have typically excluded the perspectives of the Rohingya community. Rohingya are generally barred from leadership and management positions in organisations, and there is a lack of value and respect for the voice and perspectives of Rohingya community members living in the refugee camps. Humanitarian actors often cite a lack of capacity and low education levels as justifications for this lack of engagement and involvement. We hope that this project and other similar projects begin to challenge these ideas.

This project was conceptualised, planned, led, and implemented by a team of Rohingya researchers. It demonstrates that our community is clearly capable of producing high quality work and also gives voice to the perspective of our broader community in a humanitarian environment that has not adequately engaged with Rohingya perspectives.

The Rohingya-led approach employed in this research has several benefits. Because we are experts in our own culture, community dynamics, and most pressing needs, Rohingya-led projects reflect (and are based on) the community's priorities. Additionally, Rohingya-led projects can be carried out in a manner that is both respectful of Rohingya culture, and in a way that will have maximum impact within the community. For example, in this research the Rohingya community was the primary audience for the research findings, and the results were presented to thousands of Rohingya refugees in the camp. The resources dedicated to this project will continue to benefit the community over time, because the knowledge and skills generated will remain within the refugee community. This approach is in contrast with current norms that result in resources being devoted to training and equipping non-Rohingya staff who have high turnover rates, may not speak Rohingya language, are unfamiliar with our cultural and historical context, and may not have a personal interest in ensuring that projects truly benefit the Rohingya community over time.

Another benefit of a Rohingya-led approach is the manner in which we are able to operate in the camp environment. Because the refugee camps are our home of refuge, we can navigate movement restrictions and reach inaccessible communities in the camps by recruiting and training localised team members who can conduct interviews within the camp they live in. In this project, we collected data from every refugee camp, including the inaccessible refugee community on Bhasan Char Island. This localised approach also helps to mitigate specific security issues and build trust, which in turn allows respondents to approach the team if they need follow-up support at a later time.

We approached this project with the perspective that the voices of each of our community members is valuable. Because of this, we received support from Rohingya community leaders, aid workers, teachers, imams, civil society organisations (CSOs), activists, students and youth who were enthusiastic about supporting an important Rohingya-led initiative.

We believe the benefits of this Rohingya-led approach are broadly applicable, and we recommend that donors and humanitarian agencies look for further opportunities to empower the Rohingya community in this way.



▲ Photo @RLPP, Two young Rohingya kids are demonstrating the barrier against speaking Rohingya mother tongue freely in the refugee camps, Bangladesh.



▲ Photo @RLPP, A Rohingya woman is taking her sick child to the clinic inside a refugee camp. Rohingya refugees receive basic healthcare in clinics of MSF and other medical organizations in the refugee camps, but the Bangladeshi authorities don't allow them to go to the hospital out of the refugee camps for specific treatment.

Cultural Genocide

Eradicating culture, banning religious practices and institutions, suppressing language, forbidding traditional ceremonies and destroying cultural buildings are very often part of genocide. These tactics were used during the Holocaust in the 1940s, when the Nazis destroyed hallmarks of Jewish cultural heritage including by destroying Jewish synagogues and looting and defacing funeral houses and tombstones.¹ Similarly, during the Bosnian genocide in the 1990s, the Serbian army dismantled Bosnian Muslim cultural heritage by destroying Muslim mosques and libraries.² This pattern of cultural destruction as an element of genocide continues in Myanmar. To facilitate genocide against the Rohingya people, the former Myanmar governments and the current junta have—and is—targeting Rohingya culture, language and identity.

▼ Photo @RLPP, A team member is explaining the results of the research to Rohingya refugee participants inside a mosque in the refugee camp, Cox's Bazar.



“In my grandparent’s time, Myanmar government eliminated Rohingya culture and language. In my parents’ time, they deprived Rohingya’s citizenship and political rights. In my time, they started killing and exiling us from our homeland. This is the process of Myanmar’s genocide against Rohingya population.”

Mohammed Alom, 41 years
A member of Rohingya research team,
Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, June, 2022

1. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. [Synagogues](#). 2022.

2. Journal of Islamic Studies. [Destruction of the Bosnian Architectural Heritage: An Interim Report](#). 1994.

Background

Discrimination and Violence in Myanmar

The Rohingya are a Muslim ethnic minority from Myanmar. There are an estimated 2.5 million Rohingya worldwide. Approximately 600,000 of them reside in Rakhine State, about one million of them are living as refugees in Bangladesh and others make up the global diaspora.³ For decades, the Buddhist-majority Myanmar Government and military have committed grave human rights violations against Rohingya and imposed severe restrictions against them. Including restrictions on healthcare, education, marriage, childbirth, freedom of movement and political participation (including restrictions on voting) in Myanmar.^{4,5}

Significant waves of violent attacks were orchestrated by the former Myanmar governments and the military in 1978, 1991-1992, 2012, 2016 and 2017.⁶ The latest wave of violence, committed by security forces in August of 2017, was the most severe experienced by the Rohingya population to date. Following the violence in 2017, more than 720,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh.⁷ These refugees had experienced and witnessed horrific violence, including mass killings, mass graves, gang rapes, burning homes and murdered children. This outflow of Rohingya, was the fastest exodus of refugees since the Rwandan Genocide in 1994.⁸ The United Nations has stated that it bore all the “hallmarks of genocide”.⁹ According to a survey conducted by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), at least 9,000 Rohingya are estimated to have been killed in Myanmar’s Rakhine State, between 25 August and 24 September, 2017.¹⁰

History of Cultural Destruction

Arakan, today’s Rakhine State, was an independent kingdom for centuries. In 1784, the Burmese Konbaung Dynasty conquered Arakan, and destroyed many mosques and other historical landmarks of the Rohingya people in Arakan, especially in the capital city.¹¹

In 1962, not long after Myanmar secured its independence from British colonisation, a Myanmar military junta led by U Ne Win seized power through a military coup, and his government targeted the Rohingya population in Rakhine State.¹² To begin dismantling the community, they first targeted Rohingya culture and language. In 1964, the government removed the Rohingya language from the Burmese Broadcasting Service (BBS).¹³ Before that, a Rohingya language program had been broadcasted

3. Fortify Rights. [The Torture in My Mind](#). 2020.

4. Amnesty International. [Myanmar’s apartheid against the Rohingya](#). 2017.

5. Fortify Rights. [Policies of Persecution](#). 2014.

6. United Nation’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. [Rohingya refugee crisis](#). 2018.

7. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. [Population Factsheet](#). 2018

8. The Economist. [The Rohingya refugee crisis is the worst in decades](#). 2017.

9. AP News. [UN official says Rohingya crisis has ‘hallmarks of genocide’](#) 2018.

10. Médecins Sans Frontières. Bangladesh: [MSF surveys estimate that at least 6,700 Rohingya were killed during attacks in Myanmar](#). 2017.

11. JSTOR. [Evolution of the Arakan ‘problem’ in Burma](#). 2015.

12. Foreign Policy. [The U.S. Has Recognized Myanmar’s Genocide. But Is That Enough?](#). 2022.

13. International Journal of Communication. [Extreme Speech in Myanmar: The Role of State Media in the Rohingya](#)

Background

as an indigenous program twice weekly. In 1982, the Myanmar military government enacted a new Citizenship Law, which effectively denied the Rohingya people citizenship and excluded them from the list of recognized ethnic groups in the country.¹⁴ In 1989, the ruling military junta introduced the process of “Burmanisation” across the country including in Rakhine state, and changed the names of villages, cities and other historical landmarks in Rakhine State from their original Rohingya names to distinct Burmese names.¹⁵ For example, “Arakan” was renamed to “Rakhine State (ရခိုင်ပြည်နယ်),” “Akyab” was changed to “Sittwe (စစ်တွေ)” and “Khosoppa Nodi” to “Kaladan River (ကုလားတန်မြစ်)”.

In 1992, the former Myanmar Government established Nasaka, an inter-agency force of immigration, police, intelligence and customs officials. Nasaka’s operations enforced regional policies and imposed severe restrictions against the Rohingya population including restrictions on freedom of worship as well as restricting the practice of Rohingya cultural, traditional and religious festivals and events in Rakhine State.^{16,17}

In addition to extreme restrictive policies and periodic waves of violence, the former Myanmar Government has been explicitly seeking to dilute Rohingya culture and influence in Rakhine State. In the early 1990s the government began implementing the “Development of Border Areas and National Races” law, better known by its Myanmar acronym “NaTaLa.” Under this law, the Myanmar Government began evicting Rohingya and appropriating their land throughout Rakhine State, to make way for “model villages.” These villages were constructed for Rakhine and Burmese settlers with the purpose of transforming the cultural and demographic landscape of northern Rakhine State, by increasing the Buddhist population and diluting Rohingya culture and influence in the region. Many of these settlers were urban poor or resettled prisoners from central Myanmar or even ethnic Rakhine that had previously been living in Bangladesh.¹⁸

More recently, following the latest deadly crackdown against the Rohingya population in August, 2017, the former Myanmar governments and the current junta bulldozed hundreds of Rohingya villages and mosques, erasing the birthplaces and origins of thousands of Rohingya people in Rakhine State.¹⁹

As part of their genocidal agenda, the former Myanmar governments and current junta have denied the centuries-long existence of the Rohingya ethnicity. The Myanmar junta today labels the Rohingya as ‘Bengalis,’ branding them as illegal immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh. They insist Rohingya migrated illegally from Bangladesh during the British colonial era and that the language, religion and lifestyle of Rohingya are the same as those of the Bengali people in Bangladesh. The majority of Myanmar people have historically adopted this xenophobic viewpoint, which has been used to justify discrimination, human rights violations, and genocide against the Rohingya.

[Forced Migration Crisis](#) 2019.

14. Human Rights Watch. [Burmese refugees in Bangladesh](#). 2000.

15. The Sentinel Project. [Burma’s authoritarian rule and depopulation of Rohingya](#). 2013.

16. Fortify Rights. [Persecution of the Rohingya Muslims](#). 2013.

17. International Crisis Group. [Myanmar’s “Nasaka”: Disbanding an Abusive Agency](#). 2013.

18. Amnesty International. [Remaking Rakhine State](#). 2017.

19. Human Rights Watch. [Burma: Scores of Rohingya villages bulldozed](#). 2018

Because of the oppression and constant threat of violence over the last several decades, Rohingya have been forced to focus on mere survival and have begun to lose touch with their culture, traditions, and language. For Rohingya, this slow undoing of our culture is a calculated destruction, one meant to damage our heritage, roots, and identity.

Substandard Living Conditions in Bangladesh

The hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees who escaped persecution in Myanmar now inhabit refugee camps in the Cox's Bazar District in South-eastern Bangladesh. The largest of these camp complexes is the largest refugee camp in the world.²⁰ To this day, the current Myanmar junta still refuses to offer any guarantees of safety or citizenship rights to the Rohingya. The recent Myanmar military coup in February of 2021 has removed any semblance of democracy from the country and has increased the uncertainty about any future return to Rakhine State for Rohingya in Bangladesh.²¹ Many Rohingya worry that they will not be able to safely return to their homeland for years or decades. The Rohingya refugee families have no choice; they are forced to remain in the substandard conditions of the Bangladesh refugee camps.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) there are more than 920,000 Rohingya refugees living in the camps in Cox's Bazar District. The majority of the refugee population are children (51%), and there are slightly more women living in the camps (52%) than men (48%).

The area where the Rohingya refugees live is divided into 34 camps.²² In turn, camps are divided into dozens of blocks and sub-blocks, and each block has a Rohingya leader called a majhi. The majhis are appointed by the Bangladesh army and police forces based in the camps.²³ Most Rohingya families live in cramped tarpaulin shelters. These families rely on humanitarian aid to survive. They receive food rations and other necessities from the World Food Program (WFP) and other humanitarian organisations.

There is no electricity in the refugee camps, and in some parts of the camps, safe water is unavailable. During the monsoon season, there is a high risk of landslides and flooding in the camps, and each year during monsoon season, Rohingya shelters are destroyed. During the hot season, it is difficult to bear the sweltering heat inside the shelters due to a lack of proper air circulation. Additionally, frequent fires in the camps have destroyed thousands of shelters in the past two years. Vulnerable Rohingya—particularly women and children—have been abducted by human traffickers and the youth in the camps are easy prey for gangs and extremists.²⁴

20. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. [Rohingya Refugee Crisis Explained](#). 2022.

21. The Washington Post. [Rohingya refugees worry that Myanmar's coup will only prolong their plight](#). 2021.

22. The Humanitarian Data Exchange. [Bangladesh - Outline of camps of Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar](#). 2022.

23. Protection Sector Working Group Cox's Bazar. [Protection Considerations on the 'Majhi System'](#). 2018.

24. UN News. [UN warns of trafficking, sexual abuse in shadow of Rohingya refugee crisis displaced Rohingya?](#) 2017.

Background

Mistreatment by Authorities in Bangladesh

The Bangladesh authorities have also played a role in exacerbating the suffering of Rohingya. Since a rally marking the second Genocide Remembrance Day on August 25, 2019, Bangladeshi authorities have restricted any social gatherings as well as cultural and religious celebrations of the Rohingya refugee community. Some community-based social organisations have also been forced to stop their activities. The Bangladeshi authorities also closed more than 30 Rohingya schools—the only options for Rohingya students seeking formal education—where Rohingya teachers were teaching Myanmar school curriculum to thousands of Rohingya children in the refugee camps.²⁵ Additionally, authorities have imposed severe restrictions on freedom of movement in the refugee camps, including by surrounding the camps with barbed wire fences. The authorities have created a network of police checkpoints both inside and outside the camps to prevent Rohingya from moving freely.²⁶ Rohingya refugees are stopped at checkpoints and are often searched by the Bangladeshi security forces. A report by Fortify Rights in May of 2022, documented beatings and abuse of Rohingya refugees by the Armed Police Battalion (APBn), a specialised unit of the Bangladeshi police operational in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar.²⁷ In addition to these restrictions, the camp-based Bangladeshi authorities have been coercing and at times forcing Rohingya refugee families to relocate to the controversial facilities on Bhasan Char Island. As of February 2022, they have relocated approximately 23,000 Rohingya refugees to the island.^{28, 29}

Background of Rohingya Language

There is an ongoing global crisis related to the disappearance of language and culture. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, between 1950 and 2010, 230 languages became extinct. Today, a third of the world's languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers left. Every two weeks, a language dies with its last speaker, and 50 to 90 percent of languages are predicted to disappear in the next century.³⁰ In this global context of culture and language loss, the Rohingya people are also beginning to lose their culture and language.

The Rohingya people are native to the nation of Myanmar. They have been living in Arakan, today's Rakhine State, for centuries. They have their own culture and traditions and a distinct language. Rohingya language is an eastern Indo-Aryan language. It is spoken not only by Rohingya Muslims, but also by Hindu and Buddhist ethnic groups such as the Maramagi and Diangnet peoples. Rohingya language is undeniably one of the major languages spoken by people in Rakhine State. It is believed to have historical roots in Arakan. Anandachandra, the earliest stone inscription discovered in Arakan and dating back to the 8th century contains terms that are similar to what Rohingya speak today.³¹

Due to a lack of formal written script, Rohingya people historically remembered important events such as wars and natural disasters through a rich oral history. Using Rohingya language, they composed

25. The New York Times. [Bangladesh shuts dozens of schools set up by Rohingya in camps](#). 2022.

26. Human Rights Watch. [Bangladesh: New Restrictions on Rohingya Camps](#). 2022.

27. Fortify Rights. [Bangladesh: Investigate refugee-beatings by police, lift restrictions on movement](#). 2022.

28. The Business Standard. [1,655 more Rohingya refugees go to Bhasan Char](#). 2022

29. Human Rights Watch. [“An island jail in the middle of the sea”](#). 2021.

30. National Geographic. [The race to save the world's disappearing languages](#). 2018.

31. Aung Aung Sittwe. [Irrefutable Rohingya](#). 2016.

Background

folktales and folk songs, often containing important morals and lessons, to be passed on to future generations.³² Through this oral tradition, Rohingya culture, history, and values have been passed down from generation to generation. Because of this historical reliance on oral history and spoken language, it is hard to understate the value of Rohingya spoken language for Rohingya people; it is the key to Rohingya culture and history.

Recent Efforts to Preserve Rohingya Language and Culture

Currently there are two modern Rohingya scripts, Hanifi Rohingya and Rohingyalish. Hanifi Rohingya is a unified script created by the Rohingya Islamic scholar Mohammad Hanif in the 1980s.³³ The script is based on Arabic letters and includes a set of decimal numbers, and there are online Rohingya dictionaries in the Hanifi script. In the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar and other places in the Rohingya diaspora, there are schools and madrassas where Hanifi Rohingya is taught to Rohingya children. Several books, curricula and documents have been developed and printed in the script, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Hanifi Rohingya Characters

					
ا	ب	ج	د	ه	و
ز	ح	ط	ق	ك	ل
م	ن	ي	ر	س	ش
ص	ض	ع	ف	ج	چ
	ځ	ځ	ځ	ځ	ځ

Photo: Omniglot

In 1999, E. M. Siddique Basu created Rohingyalish, an intuitive writing system using Latin script.³⁴ This script is relatively easy to learn and has the advantage of being readily available on keyboards, smartphones and other devices. Some full books have been published in Rohingyalish, and online dictionaries are also available. Modern Rohingya often use this script when interacting online.

32. Cultural Survival. [A language in crisis: Rohingya](#). 2021.

33. Omniglot. [Rohingya](#). 2022.

34. Arakan Rohingya Democratic Organisation. [History of Rohingya Language](#). 2010.

Rohingyalish Characters

A a	B b	C c	Ç ç	D d	E e	F f
G g	H h	I i	J j	K k	L l	M m
N n	Ñ ñ	O o	P p	Q q	R r	S s
T t	U u	V v	W w	X x	Y y	Z z

Photo: Rohingya Language Foundation

Other efforts are ongoing to revive and maintain Rohingya culture. The Art Garden Rohingya is a community art website founded by Mayyu Ali and his colleagues on March 21, 2019 in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar.³⁵ It brings together hundreds of budding Rohingya poets, writers and artists and provides a platform for them to share their work. The Art Garden is also documenting and preserving ancient Rohingya folktales, folk songs, proverbs, riddles and other art-forms. These are published in Rohingya, Burmese and English.

In May of 2021, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) launched the Rohingya Cultural Memorial Centre with the goal of preserving Rohingya knowledge, artefacts, and artwork. The centre is located in the camps and has drawn on the knowledge of hundreds of Rohingya musicians, artists and other cultural agents during the process of building their collection.

Rohingya Language in Exile

The exile of the majority of the Rohingya population from Rakhine State has uprooted the Rohingya from our traditional lands, villages, occupations, family structures, and lifestyles. The separation from these cultural anchors has weakened the links that we have to our culture. As the links to our history and culture have been severed, the spoken Rohingya language, that connects our people to a rich oral history, has become one of the last mainstays of our Rohingya identity. But, as the Rohingya population adapts to the language and culture of the host community in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, Rohingya language is also at risk of fading away.

In the refugee camps, Rohingya aid-workers, teachers, religious leaders, majhis, CSO workers, and many others in the camp population need to use the local Chittagonian and Bangla languages in the workplace and other settings. The use of these local languages has rapidly influenced Rohingya language amongst the broader refugee community, and many Rohingya now observe the integration and adaptation of Rohingya language with Chittagonian and Bangla.³⁶

The informal education provided in the refugee camps is also impacting Rohingya language. There are more than 3,400 learning centres for children in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, of which 2,800

35. Frontier Myanmar. [In Bangladesh refugee camps, Rohingya youth speak out](#). 2019.

36. The Financial Express. [Rohingya refugees losing originality of their dialect](#). 2021.

Background

are supported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).³⁷ The organisations administering these centres often recruit Bangladeshi national staff to teach Rohingya children in Bangla or the local Chittagonian language. As such, Rohingya children gradually learn Bangla or Chittagonian in their classrooms and they speak Rohingya at home.

Many Bangladeshi nationals who work for the humanitarian agencies in Cox's Bazar believe that Chittagonian and Rohingya languages are similar and interchangeable, and the humanitarian organisations have largely echoed these assumptions. This underestimates the language barriers in workplaces and other settings. According to a report by Translators without Borders, 36 percent of Rohingya refugees could not understand a simple message in Chittagonian when tested.³⁸ These language barriers leave many Rohingya refugees without the critical and potentially life-saving information they need as they navigate life in the refugee camps.

For example, in the medical clinics run by MSF and other humanitarian organisations in Cox's Bazar, Rohingya refugees face language-related challenges and barriers because most of the medical staff are Bangladeshi nationals who speak with the Rohingya patients in Chittagonian and Bangla.³⁹ This linguistic disconnect can cause a range of negative outcomes from harmless confusion to life-threatening misunderstandings, particularly when it comes to understanding important information on critical topics such as healthcare, human trafficking, gender-based violence and natural disaster preparedness.

Additionally, the humanitarian organisations and the Bangladeshi authorities based in Cox's Bazar often create projects or campaigns with Chittagonian or Bangla titles or slogans. For example, in June of 2022, the Bangladeshi camp-based authorities organized thousands of Rohingya refugees to participate in the "Let's Go Home" campaign entitled "Bari Cholo" in Bangla language.⁴⁰ In August of 2022, Rohingya Artolution presented an art exhibition "The Renaissance of the Rohingya Culture" which was mistakenly translated using a mix of languages as "Rohingya Rosomor Chola - Fera," whereas in Rohingya it should be translated as "Rohingyár Rosomór Fittí-duor."

Many other educational and awareness raising sessions conducted by humanitarian agencies and the Bangladeshi authorities in the camps are conducted using a mix of Rohingya, Bangla, and Chittagonian languages. Even organisations that are attempting to preserve Rohingya culture often fall short. For example, the Rohingya Cultural Memorial Centre supported by the IOM released an illustrated Rohingya story titled "Zei Jailla Honodin Masch Naw Dhawrey (The Fisherman who Never Caught a Fish)" on their Youtube Channel.⁴¹ The characters in the Rohingya story use several Chittagonian and Bangla terms mixed with Rohingya. Several of their other videos and resources feature a mix of languages as opposed to using only Rohingya.

Because of the long-term adaptation of Rohingya culture and language in Bangladesh, there are divides between refugees who have arrived more recently since 2017 and those who have been living in the

37. Global Development Commons. [Education milestones for Rohingya refugee children in Cox's Bazar](#). 2022.

38. Translators without Borders. [The language lesson: What we've learned about communicating with Rohingya refugees](#). 2020.

39. The New Humanitarian. [Lost in translation: Language barriers and the Rohingya response](#). 2020.

40. Aljazeera. [It's hell: Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh rally to 'go home'](#). 2022.

41. Rohingya Cultural Memorial Centre. [Zei jailla honodin masch naw dhawrey](#). 2020.

Background

camps since the 1990's. The long-term refugees have more or less assimilated to local Bangla language and customs, which has been a point of misunderstanding and contention with refugees who have recently arrived. Within Rohingya communities this assimilation has also created tension for those who return to Rakhine State; Rohingya families who have returned to Rakhine State after being displaced to Bangladesh, have been labelled by the local Rohingya communities as “Anikka,” meaning ‘comers from the west.’ This outsider label is partially related to the assimilation of these returning Rohingya to the customs and language in Bangladesh.

Speaking a new language is a beneficial skill that can be seen as a positive adaptation for Rohingya refugees. But this adaptation may also come at a cost. Rohingya culture is based on a strong oral tradition that is dependent on the preservation of the Rohingya language. The adaptation of the Rohingya language potentially means a gradual loss of the language and a subsequent loss of the connection with Rohingya history and culture. This in turn leads to a loss of the unique identity of being Rohingya. It is against this backdrop that Rohingya Language Preservation Project initiated this research; to examine to what extent the assimilation of Rohingya language also equates to a loss of Rohingya language and culture, and to gather the views of the broader refugee community about their language and culture and the importance of preservation efforts.



▲ Photo @RLPP, A female team member is explaining about the finding of our research to a group of Rohingya refugee woman inside a shelter in Kutupalong refugee camp, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.



▲ Photo @RLPP, A young Rohingya boy is walking through a lane inside a refugee camp, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.



▲ Photo @RLPP, A female team member is conducting a session with a group of Rohingya refugee women in Noyapara registered refugee camp, Cox's Bazar.

“Speaking Rohingya language is not important to me because I was born in Bangladesh (refugee camp) and I learnt the local Bangla language. I will never go to Myanmar. They (Myanmar government) killed my grandparents. Why do I need to speak Rohingya? It is Burmese language. It is not important for me.”

*Rumi Akther, a young woman participant
Noyapara Refugee Camp
Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh*

Methodology

Team Selection and Training

Team members were selected based on their research skills and experience, their ability to navigate and work in the refugee camps and their knowledge of Rohingya culture and language. The team was made up of 23 Rohingya staff, including 11 female field researchers, 11 male field researchers, and a project coordinator, Mayyu Ali. The team included members who had arrived in the refugee camps following the violence in 2017, as well as registered refugees who have been living in the refugee camps for decades. Two of the team members live on Bhasan Char Island, where close to 23,000 Rohingya refugees have recently been relocated by the Bangladeshi government. Andrew Riley, an international advisor, with experience conducting research in refugee settings, served as a pro bono technical advisor throughout the project.

The research team members that participated in this project have a wealth of experience working for various international NGOs and agencies, including with Rohingya communities in Maungdaw and Buthidaung in Myanmar and also in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. Members of the team have been involved in several research projects amongst the Rohingya refugee community in the camps in Cox's Bazar. In 2018, the core members of this team conducted a study focused on human rights violations, violence, and mental health; the study was supported by Fortify Rights.¹ During that research, the team surveyed approximately 500 Rohingya refugees in most of the 34 refugee camps in Cox's Bazar.

To facilitate ease of access to the larger Rohingya population for this language study, the team was assembled—in part—based on the areas of the camp where team members lived. This was done in order to carry out the project in a community-based manner. To determine where localised staff were needed, we divided the 33 refugee camps into six zones. A team consisting of two females and two male researchers worked to collect data in each zone. With the team locally organised in this way we were able to conduct the research safely despite government restrictions on travel and social gatherings in the refugee camps.

Prior to the beginning of the data collection, teams were trained in basic research methods, do no harm approaches, interviewing, data entry, and data analysis. Training was conducted by the project coordinator and the international technical advisor; who both have several years of experience conducting research studies, surveys, data analysis, and operating in the refugee camps.

Participants

Data was collected between July and December of 2021. During this time period the team conducted 285 individual interviews with Rohingya refugees, 148 females and 137 males. These interviews included participants from every refugee camp and also included Rohingya Hindus and Christians.

44. Fortify Rights. [The Torture in My Mind](#). 2020.

Methodology

In each of the 33 refugee camps that existed at the time of study in Cox's Bazar District, the team randomly selected 2 blocks. In each block, 4 households were randomly selected, and in each household either a male or female participant was randomly selected. On Bhasan Char Island, the team randomly selected 20 clusters of the 30 that existed at the time of the study. In those 20 clusters, 21 households were randomly selected, and in each household either a male or female respondent was randomly selected. All random selections were done using a random number generator that was installed on Rohingya researchers' smartphones. Only adults between the ages of 18-60 were included in the study. Rohingya researchers ensured that participants were mentally sound before beginning the informed consent procedure. If participants of randomly selected households were not home or did not want to participate, field researchers continued to the adjacent home to request participation from nearby residents.

Questionnaire

The survey questionnaire was originally developed by Rohingya research team members through consultation with individuals in the Rohingya community. The original survey draft was written in English, and was later translated into Rohingyalish, a modern Rohingya script. From the Rohingya translation, the survey was then back translated into English to ensure the accuracy of the translation. Ultimately, the questionnaire was presented to participants in Rohingya language.

The final questionnaire contained 32 questions, and was designed to capture both qualitative and quantitative data related to Rohingya perspectives on language and culture. The questionnaire was divided into three main sections, 1) demographics, 2) language assessment, and 3) community opinions.

1. Demographics: The demographics section included 12 questions about participants' basic personal information and background. Including questions about participants' age, gender, religion, education, and date of arrival in Bangladesh.

2. Language Assessment: The primary objective of the language assessment was to identify Chittagonian and Bangla terms that Rohingya in the camps use routinely. In this section, researchers asked the participants to explain in detail how they spend a day in the refugee camps. Participants were instructed to start from the time they wake up in the morning to the time they go to sleep at night and were given some examples of things they might include as they talked about their day. These descriptions of daily tasks were audio recorded. During the analysis, the team listened to these audio recordings, and the Chittagonian and Bangla terms that were used were identified and documented. In their interactions with participants in this section, researchers were careful not to provide any information that would bias participants against using Chittagonian and Bangla terms.

3. Community Opinions: The community opinions section included 19 questions related to Rohingya culture and language. The purpose was to understand community perceptions related to 1) current concerns in the refugee camps, 2) the importance they place on Rohingya culture and language, and 3) perspectives and feedback on language and cultural preservation methods.

Methodology

Questionnaire Piloting

To ensure that the questionnaire was clear and the data collection protocol effective, the questionnaire was piloted with 24 Rohingya refugee respondents (12 women and 12 men) in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar and on Bhasan Char Island. Based on the results of the testing and participants' feedback, we made adjustments to the research approach and the survey questionnaire.

Data Collection

We conducted individual household interviews to collect the data for this study. The team approached respondents in a manner that respected Rohingya cultural views and values. For example, before beginning interviews with Rohingya women, at times, the team felt it was appropriate to first meet her spouse or parents-in-law to request permission.

If participants gave initial approval to participate, researchers worked with them to find a secure and comfortable space inside their shelter in which to conduct the interviews. Despite the cramped conditions inside the shelters, we were able to maintain the confidentiality of the interviews by ensuring there was sufficient distance from other family members inside the home. Occasionally we had to request other family members to move to another location, to give us enough space during the interview.

Researchers received verbal informed consent from every participant prior to the beginning of the interview. As part of the informed consent process, researchers introduced the participants to Rohingya Language Preservation Project, the purpose of the research, why and how their information was being collected, and information about steps being taken to protect the confidentiality of respondents. After explaining the process, researchers asked participants to confirm their comprehension by asking them to explain their understanding of the information that had been provided about informed consent. The researchers continued with the interview only after participants gave a satisfactory response that demonstrated their understanding and their informed agreement to contribute to the research as participants.

After consent was provided, the team proceeded to conduct individual interviews with participants; these interviews generally lasted between 1-1.5 hours. Female researchers conducted interviews with female participants, and likewise male researchers conducted interviews with male participants.

The data was collected on smart phones using an offline secure application in which researchers could type, edit and save the data. At the end of the day, each researcher uploaded the data and audio recordings to an online database controlled by the research coordinator. As soon as the data was securely uploaded, the researchers deleted the data from their smartphones to ensure the safety of both researchers and participants. The application used for data collection was also password protected to protect confidentiality in case phones were lost, stolen, or confiscated by Bangladeshi officials.

Throughout the project we carefully followed guidelines related to the prevention of COVID-19. At the time of data collection there were no formal restrictions in the camp, but for the safety of the staff and participants, field researchers used masks and maintained social distance when conducting interviews.

Methodology

Data Analysis

Following the data collection, research team leaders listened to the audio recordings of the language assessment portion of each interview, and documented every Bangla and Chittagonian word used by Rohingya respondents during their interviews. This was done to identify the most frequently used non-Rohingya terms, and to determine how often they were used. These terms were compiled and entered into a Microsoft Excel database along with the demographic data and the community opinions data. The project coordinator used Microsoft Excel to conduct basic quantitative analysis of the demographic data, the language assessment, and community opinions. The international adviser also assisted by running advanced analysis using SPSS. The team created graphs and charts to illustrate the findings.



▲ Photo @RLPP, A team leader is training the team members on do-no-harm and research principles inside a shelter in a refugee camp, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.



▲ Photo @RLPP, Rohingya children are learning the holy Quran inside a madrasah in a refugee camp, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. In the refugee camps, there are more than 400,000 school-aged Rohingya children who are deprived of formal education.



▲ Photo @RLPP, A team member is distributing copies of the non-Rohingya terms documented to the participants inside a shelter in the refugee camp, Cox's Bazar

“My family and I have been living in the refugee camps since last five years. This is the first time someone has been doing work related to our culture and language. Preserving our culture and language is more important than having foods and rations in the refugee camps.”

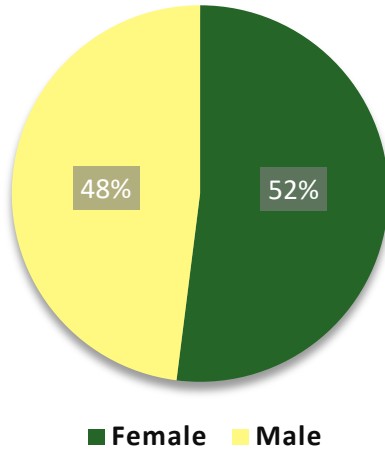
Amir Hussain
*A Rohingya elderly man participant
Balukhali Refugee Camp
Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh*

Key Findings

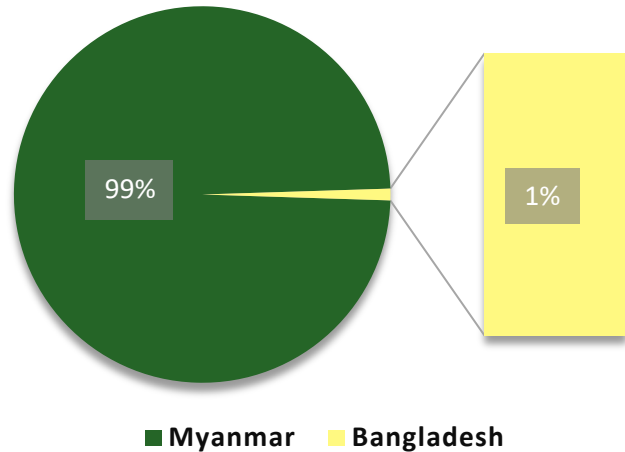
Demographics

The research team interviewed a total of 285 Rohingya refugees for this study, including 148 (52%) women and 137 (48%) men, which is roughly equivalent to the gender ratio of Rohingya refugees living in the camps in Cox's Bazar. Ninety-nine percent of the respondents were born in Myanmar, and 1% were born to Rohingya families living in the refugee camps. The vast majority of respondents (87%) arrived in Bangladesh after the violence in 2017, while 8% arrived between 1990 to 2017, and 5% arrived before the 1990s.

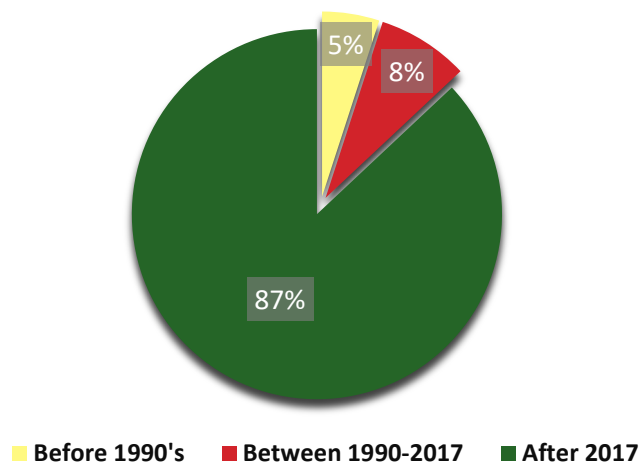
Gender of Respondents



Country of Birth



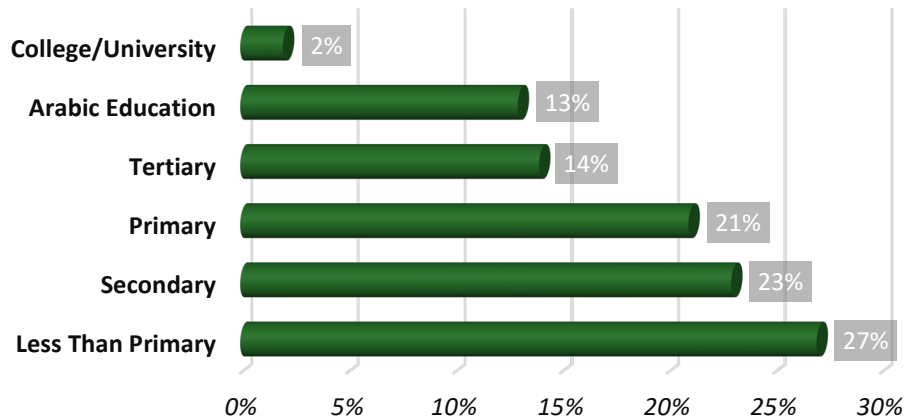
Arrival in Bangladesh



Key Findings

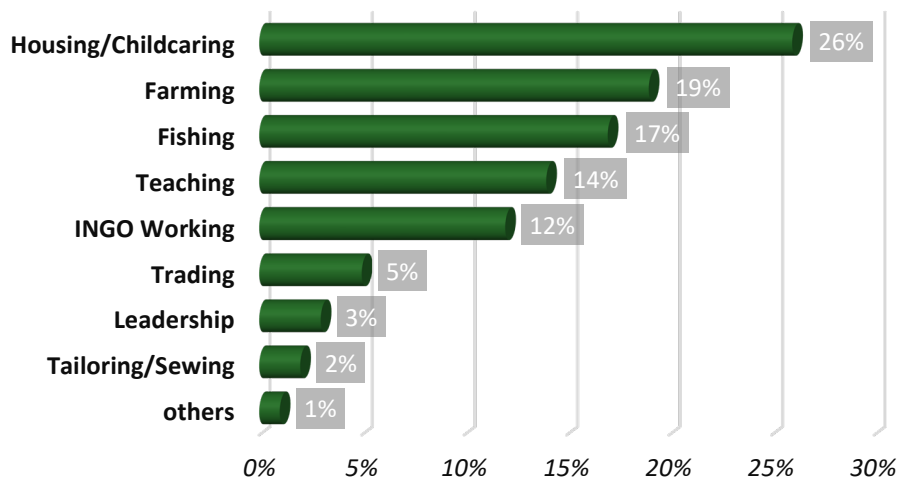
Respondents reported varying levels of education. 27% of the respondents had not finished primary school, 21% had completed primary school, 23% had completed secondary school, 14% had completed tertiary level education, 2% were college/university graduates, and 13% had finished Arabic education such as the Quran and Hadith.

Education Level



In terms of occupation, 26% of the respondents had skills related to housekeeping and taking care of children, while 19% were skilled in farming, 17% in fishing, 14% teaching school or Arabic education at mosques and madrassas, 12% of respondents were aid workers, 5% owned shops or traded goods, 3% were camp leaders or community leaders, 2% were tailors, and 1% had other occupations.

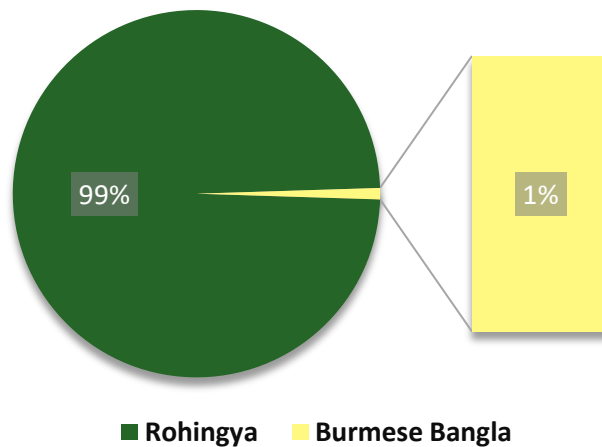
Work Skills



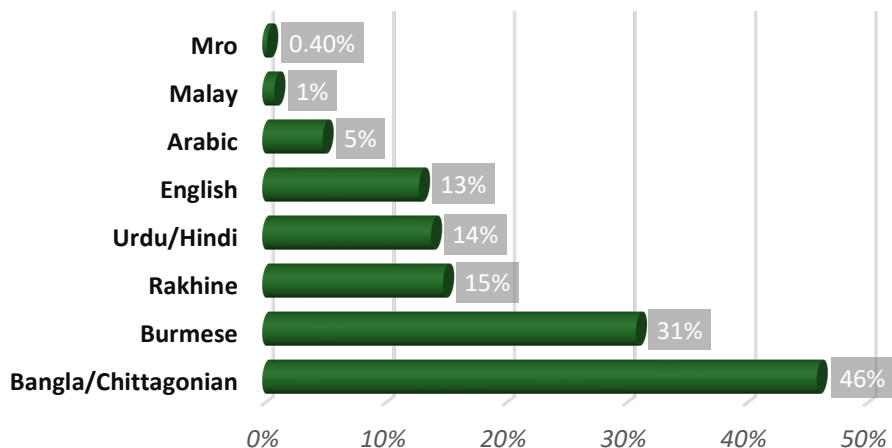
Key Findings

We asked participants a series of questions about the languages that they speak. 99% of the respondents reported that Rohingya is their native language, and 1% of the respondents reported that “Burmese Bangla” was their native language.⁴⁵ We asked respondents which other languages they speak, and a minority of respondents could speak a number of second languages including, Bangla or Chittagonian (46%), Burmese (31%), Rakhine (15%), Urdu/Hindi (14%), English (13%), Arabic (5%), Malay (1%), and Mro (a Myanmar ethnic minority) (0.4%).

Mother Tongue



Other Languages Spoken By Rohingya

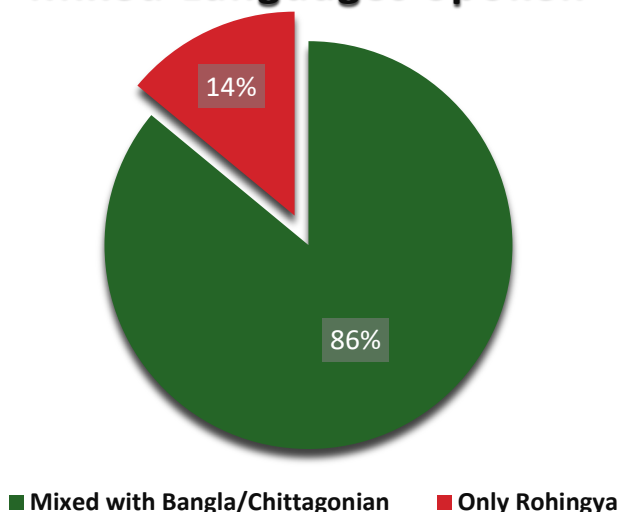


45. Only Hindus that were included in the study reported their native language as Burmese Bangla. These Hindu refugees fled to Bangladesh during the latest crackdown in August, 2017. Functionally, the language that these Hindu refugees speak is the same as the Rohingya language. However, the Hindu refugees in Cox's Bazar preferred to refer to their language as Burmese Bangla. Even though it is the same language, we have preserved their preferred name for it in this report as a matter of freedom of expression.

Language Assessment Results

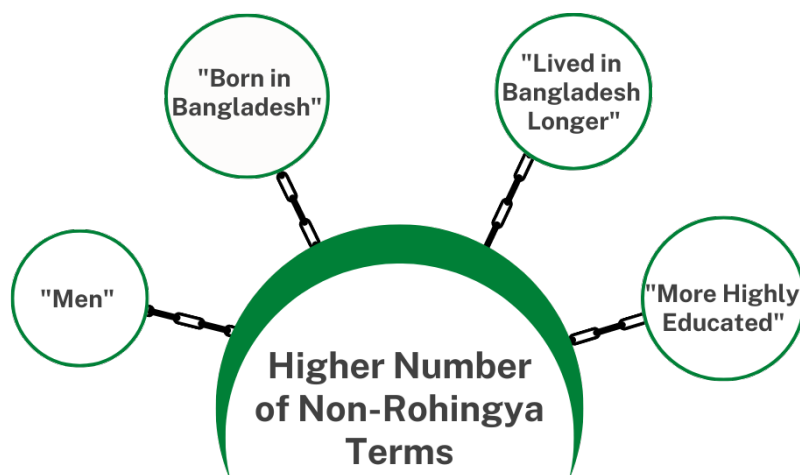
The findings from the language assessment are an integral part of this research. After analysing the accounts of daily life provided by participants, we found that most respondents (86%) used Rohingya mixed with Bangla and Chittagonian, while only 14% speak only Rohingya language in their daily life in the refugee camps.

Mixed Languages Spoken



As part of the language assessment portion of the survey, we documented all non-Rohingya terms used by participants. Some examples of frequently used Bangla terms were 'apa' (sister), which in Rohingya is 'bóin/bubu,' and 'dim' (egg), which in Rohingya is 'anda.' These, and more than 125 other non-Rohingya terms, were compiled in a comprehensive list that can be found in Annex B.

As part of the analysis, the team also looked at what factors were related to using a higher number of non-Rohingya terms. This was done by examining significant correlations between the number of non-Rohingya terms used by participants and other demographic factors. We found that the respondents more likely to use non-Rohingya terms were **men** $r(283)=.18, p < .01$, those **born in Bangladesh** $r(283)=.22, p < .001$, those who had **lived in Bangladesh longer** $r(283)=.29, p < .001$, and those who were **more highly educated** $r(283)=.14, p < .05$.

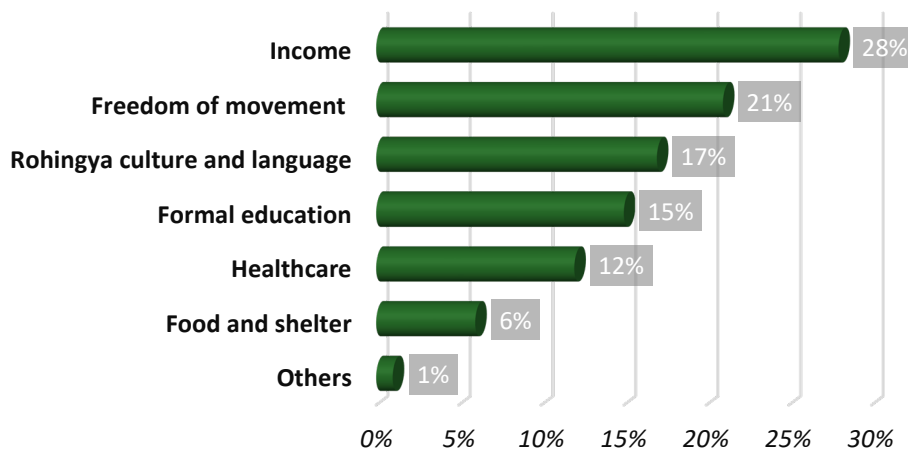


Key Findings

Community Opinions

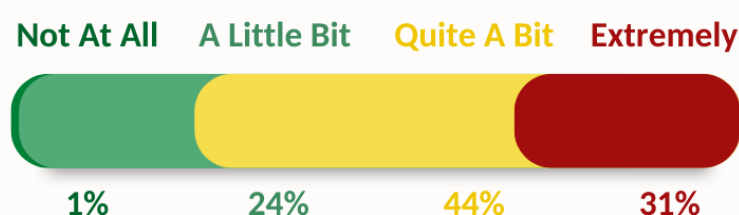
Most serious concerns in the refugee camps: We asked respondents what their most serious current concerns are in the refugee camps. Respondents were given a list of six different concerns from which to choose from, or, if desired, to specify a concern that was not on the list. Income was the most frequently expressed concern (28%) followed by freedom of movement (21%), preservation of Rohingya culture and language (17%), formal education (15%), proper healthcare (12%), food and shelter (6%). Other concerns such as water, repatriation, and safety were identified as the most serious concern by less than 1% of respondents.

Current Gravest Concerns

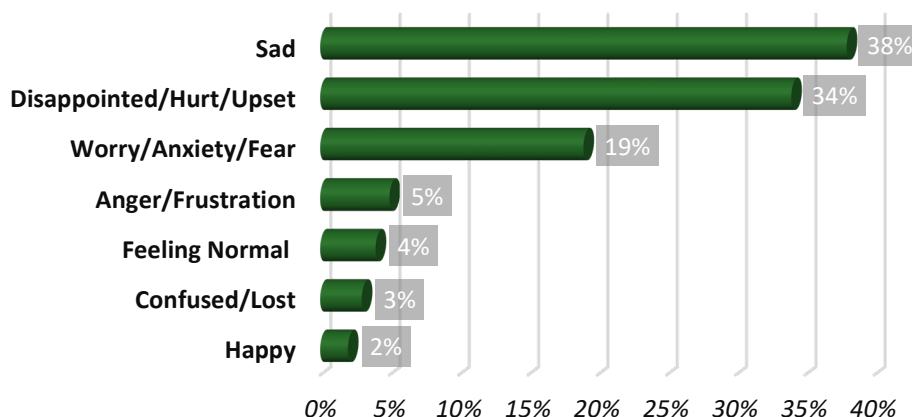


Shifting of Rohingya language in the camps: The team asked respondents about their opinions regarding a number of different issues related to Rohingya language and culture. For many of these questions, the team gave respondents the following response options: “not at all,” “a little bit,” “quite a bit,” and “extremely.” When respondents were asked if they thought Rohingya language was “shifting to (mixing with) Bangla language,” 31% of them thought that it was doing so “extremely,” while 44% reported “quite a bit,” 24% “a little bit,” and 1% “not at all.” The team also asked an open-ended follow-up question about how the shift in Rohingya language made participants feel. 38% expressed feeling sad, while 34% expressed being disappointed, hurt, or upset, 19% reported worry, anxiety and fear, 5% anger and frustration, 4% reported feeling normal, 3% confused or lost, and 2% happy or good.

Rohingya Language Shifting to Bangla/Chittagonian

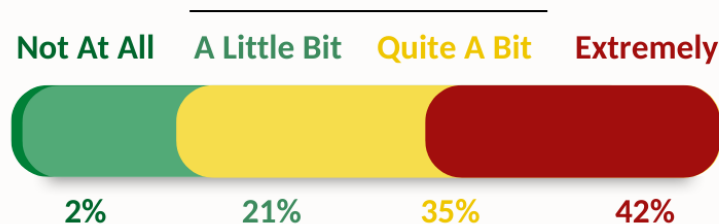


Feeling About Rohingya Language Shifting



Loss of Rohingya language: When the team asked respondents if they felt they were “losing [their] language in the refugee camps,” 42% of the respondents reported “extremely,” while 35% reported “quite a bit,” 21% “a little bit,” and 2% reported “not at all”.

Feeling of Losing Rohingya Language



These findings related to the slow assimilation of Rohingya language were not particularly surprising to the research team. The camps are controlled by the Bangladeshi army and police forces and other government officials. These officials generally communicate with Rohingya refugees in Bangla or Chittagonian. In addition, INGO-run clinics, learning centres and other facilities employ Bangladeshi national staff who speak to Rohingya beneficiaries in Bangla or Chittagonian.² Thus, Rohingya beneficiaries, the camp leaders and aid workers quickly learn to speak Bangla and Chittagonian in order to communicate with the authorities and others in the camps. As we have seen in the results from the language assessment above, this has impacted the daily language spoken by almost all (86%) of Rohingya respondents.

This assimilation process can be seen at its fullest extent in the Kutupalong and Nayapara registered refugee camps. These camps are home to Rohingya who have lived in the camps since the late 1990s, and

46. Current government regulations restrict Rohingya from holding staff positions at these INGOs; if they were able to serve their community in these positions, they could do so in their own language.

Key Findings

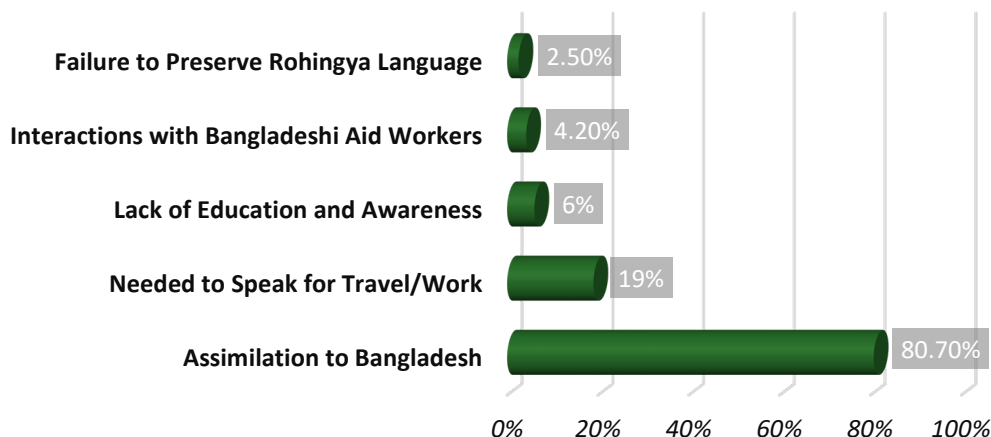
their language and culture have almost completely adapted to mirror the local culture of Bangladesh. Overall, this long-term assimilation leads to a loss of particular aspects that make Rohingya culture and language unique. Our findings demonstrate that this same assimilation is beginning to occur among Rohingya who have arrived more recently.

It is important to note that the aim of the project is not to disparage or in any way criticise Rohingya people who speak Bangla or Chittagonian in the refugee camps. The aim is to demonstrate the impact that protracted displacement is having on Rohingya language and culture. 98% of respondents reported that they felt they were losing their language in the camps, and protracted displacement is clearly having a large-scale impact on Rohingya culture.

The impacts of the loss of Rohingya language: For respondents who felt like they were losing their language, the team asked a series of open-ended follow-up questions related to the reasons for and impacts of the loss of Rohingya language.

Respondents gave several reasons that they believe are contributing to the loss of the Rohingya language. The majority felt that assimilation to Bangladesh was a key reason (80.7%), while 19% said it was because they needed to speak another language to travel, work, or otherwise function in Bangladesh. Six percent of respondents said that the reason for the loss is a lack of education, awareness, or resources related to Rohingya language, 4.2% said that their interactions with aid workers (including Bangla-speaking teachers in the education centres) played a role in the loss, and 2.5% said that the loss was due to a failure to preserve the language.

Reasons for Losing Rohingya Language

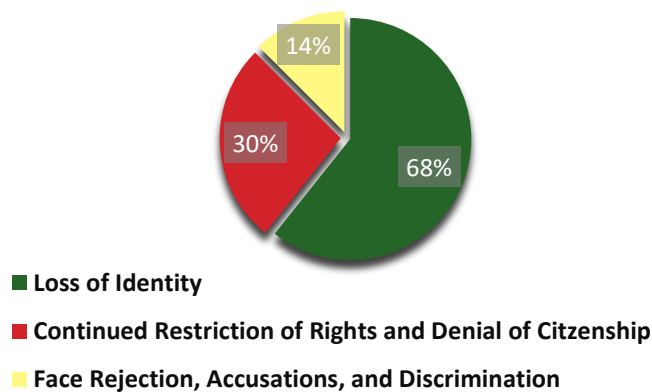


We asked respondents about the impacts of losing Rohingya language. 68% thought that they would face a loss of Rohingya identity, while 30% thought that continued restriction of rights and denial of citizenship in Myanmar could be a consequence, and 14% of thought that they would face rejection, accusations, and discrimination upon return to Myanmar because of a loss of language. Related to this, we asked respondents an open-ended question about what they thought would happen if they returned

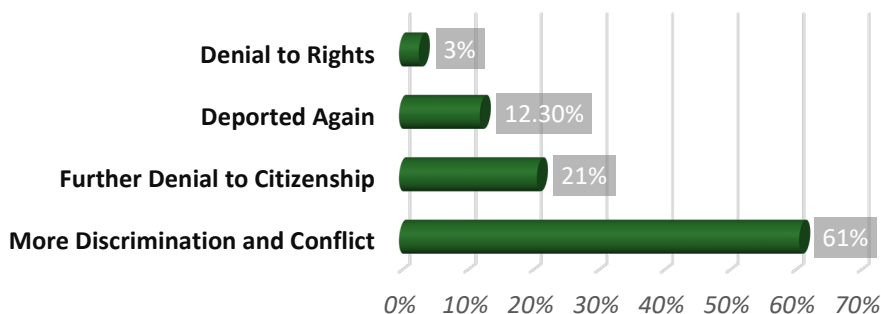
Key Findings

to Myanmar with a language and culture that had been changed due to assimilation with Bangladesh's language and culture: 61% thought that they would face more discrimination and conflict in Myanmar, 21% thought this could be used to further deny Rohingya citizenship, 12.3% thought they would be deported again by the Myanmar government, and 3% said that it would be used as a basis to remove their rights in Myanmar.

Impacts of Losing Rohingya Language



Problems if Returning to Myanmar with Mixed Cultures and Languages



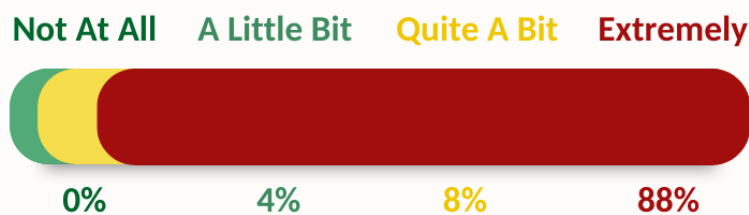
The Myanmar government often marginalises Rohingya by equating their culture and language with Bangla culture and language, and has used these claims to advance the false narrative that Rohingya are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh to Myanmar. Respondents shared the perspective that upon a future return to Myanmar, discrimination could increase because distinct aspects of Rohingya language and culture have been lost through assimilation. Respondents shared the perspective that the false claims of illegal immigration by authorities in Myanmar will appear more valid if Rohingya people assimilate to Bangla culture and language.

Key Findings

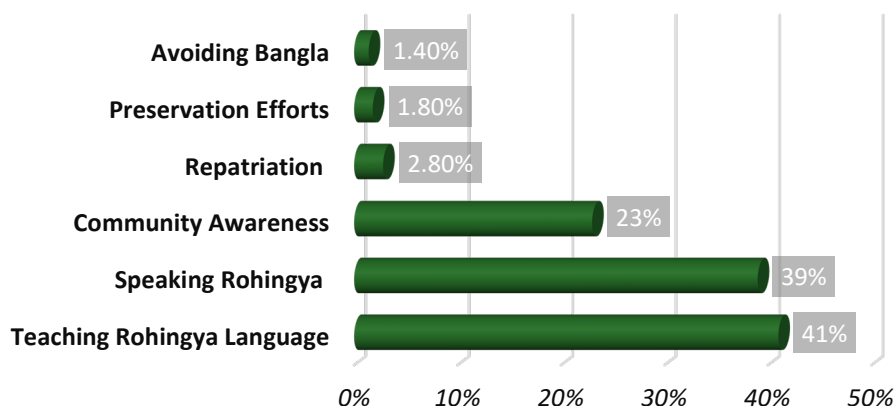
We can also see that for the majority of Rohingya (63%), the loss of the rich and unique elements of Rohingya language also means losing part of their Rohingya identity. This is amplified in the face of having lost many other elements of Rohingya culture, including loss of traditional lands, villages, and many cultural practices.

Considering the above, it is not surprising that, when the team asked participants how important it was to preserve Rohingya language, 88% of the respondents indicated that preserving Rohingya was “extremely” important, while 8% said that it was “quite a bit” important, and 4% thought that it was “a little bit” important. None of the respondents thought that preserving the Rohingya language was “not at all” important. The researchers asked respondents an open-ended question about their ideas for how to preserve the Rohingya language. Respondents prioritised the idea of formal education that included teaching Rohingya language to children (41%). Participants also thought it was important to speak Rohingya language when/where possible (39%), and to provide community awareness about Rohingya language and preservation (23%). Others thought it was important to be repatriated as soon as possible (2.8%), to initiate other formal language preservation efforts (1.8%), and to avoid Bengali influence (1.4%).

Importance of Preserving Rohingya Language



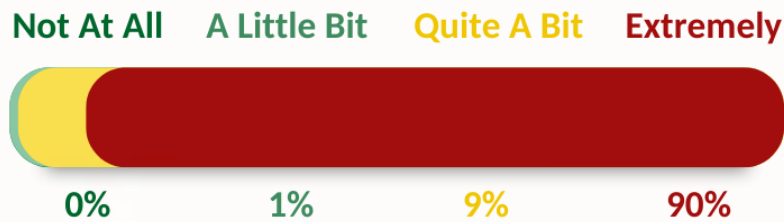
Strategies to Preserve Rohingya Language



Key Findings

The team asked respondents if they thought it was important to have a permanent Rohingya culture and language preservation centre. 90% of the respondents said that they thought this idea was “extremely” important, while 9% thought that it was “quite a bit” important, and only 1% thought that it was “a little bit” important. None of the respondents thought that this idea was “not at all” important.

Importance of Preservation Centre



Community Presentations

With the results of the study, the team prepared awareness sessions for the Rohingya refugee community. The team conducted presentations between January and April of 2022. In total, 288 sessions were conducted with 2,238 Rohingya refugee women and men in 33 refugee camps, including 135 Rohingya women and men on Bhasan Char Island.

It was important for our team to prioritise the Rohingya community as the first audience for this research. In presentation sessions, we emphasised the concerns of respondents related to the loss of Rohingya culture and language, and the opinions and strategies offered by the community that were aimed at preserving their endangered culture and language. Because of limited financial support, severe government restrictions, and frequent raids by the Bangladesh security forces inside the camps, it was not possible to reach the wider community of the more than 1,000,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh with these presentations. Bearing this in mind, we decided to target the following groups of people in the Rohingya refugee community:

- Camp leaders (majhis)
- Aid workers (men and women)
- Teachers and educators (men and women)
- Imams and other religious leaders
- Traditional Birth Attendants (TBA) and other traditional healers
- Civil society organisation workers
- Shopkeepers and traders
- Individuals who have previously served as chairmen and other influential leadership roles

These groups of people were chosen due to their influential role in Rohingya society and their accessibility to the research team. The presentation sessions lasted for one and a half hours, and consisted of background knowledge of the Rohingya language, the findings of the study, the factors related to losing Rohingya language, and strategies to preserve it. The team used charts and figures to

Key Findings

assist in explaining the research findings to the community. The presentation sessions were conducted in a participatory manner. We involved the participants in the presentations by seeking their opinions prior to explaining the findings. Unsurprisingly, the feedback from participants was very similar to the data collected from participants during the study itself.

As a resource for the community, we distributed printed copies of Bangla and Chittagonian terms that had been used most frequently by study participants during the language assessment portion of the study. Female trainers conducted these sessions with female participants and male trainers conducted them with male participants. We used a training of trainers model (ToT) during these sessions by providing participants with materials and resources to train their friends, colleagues and family members in the community. Using this methodology, participants have subsequently spread the findings to the wider Rohingya community in the refugee camps.



Photo @RLPP, A wide mega refugee camp in Cox's Bazar. A Rohingya refugee family of 4-6 member reside in a small tarpaulin shaft in the refugee camps, Cox's Bazar.

Conclusions

Threat to Rohingya Identity

Rohingya people have demonstrated resilience by surviving enormous loss due to genocide and cultural destruction in Myanmar, as well as continuing to endure severe restrictions on their rights during displacement in Bangladesh. It is clear from the results of this study that it is not only Rohingya lives that are at risk, but also Rohingya identity. The continuing erosion of Rohingya language, culture, and identity in Bangladesh is an existential threat, and represents the final chapter in the destruction of Rohingya identity that the dictator U Ne Win began in Myanmar in 1964. In terms of identity, the Rohingya have lost almost everything. They have lost their citizenship, their homeland and their culture. Their language is one of the few pieces of their identity that they hold on to.

Community Mandate to Preserve Rohingya Language

Participants in this study have made it clear that the Rohingya language is something that we should fight to preserve, with 90% reporting that this is ‘extremely’ important to do so. Several respondents expressed their support for the project and preservation efforts moving forward.

“My family and I have been living in the refugee camps for the last five years,” said Amir Hussain, a 60-year-old Rohingya man. “This is the first time someone has been doing work related to our culture and language. Preserving our culture and language is more important than having food and rations in the refugee camps.”

Hasfa Begum, a 22-year-old female participant in the awareness sessions, shared how her perspective had shifted after seeing the results of the study. *“Your session opened my eyes. I practise Bangla language with my family at home and also with students in class. From today, I will be very careful when I speak. I am going to ask my family and students to speak only Rohingya.”*

Rumi Akther is a young Rohingya woman born to Rohingya parents in Nayapara refugee camp. *“Speaking Rohingya language is not important to me because I was born in Bangladesh (refugee camp) and I learnt the local Bangla language. I will never go to Myanmar. They [Myanmar government] killed my grandparents. Why do I need to speak Rohingya? It is Burmese language. It is not important for me,”* she said during a community awareness session.

Preservation without Marginalisation

It is important to emphasise that while we believe the results of this study support the importance of preserving Rohingya language and culture, that does not mean that Rohingya in the camp who used Bangla and Chittagonian in their daily lives should be marginalised. Nor does it mean that Rohingya who have fully assimilated to Bangladesh cultures and languages should be marginalised.

Rather, our hope is that these findings will reveal the importance of preserving Rohingya language, culture and identity, and that informally, Rohingya in the camps will respond to these findings by

Conclusions

placing a greater emphasis on using Rohingya language in their communities, with their families, and friends. More formally, it is our hope that Rohingya CSOs in the camps, as well as INGOs and donors, will respond by ensuring the integration of Rohingya language within their projects, as well as supporting language preservation projects within the community. Working together, we can preserve the Rohingya language, culture and identity in exile with the expectation of returning to Myanmar's Rakhine State in the future.

Long-term Intervention Strategies

The research team will continue its work, including by documenting ancient Rohingya oral traditions such as folktales, folk songs, riddles, proverbs and other art-forms. We will be opening “elderly spaces” in the refugee camps where the Rohingya community can gather to exchange their knowledge, wisdom and memories of their culture, traditions and other aspects central to Rohingya identity. We will be publishing a number of books on cultural education in the Rohingya language and teaching Rohingya children and youth in the refugee camps and beyond. We will continue devoting our efforts and expertise to the revitalisation of Rohingya culture and language.



▲ Photo @RLPP, A female team member is conducting a session of awareness on preservation of Rohingya language and culture to a group of women inside a shelter in the refugee camp, Cox's Bazar.



Photo @RLPP, A Rohingya genocide survivor is showing his wounded hand where he was hit bullet by Myanmar military during the violence in August, 2017.

Recommendations

To the Rohingya Community in Bangladesh and Beyond:

- SPEAK Rohingya language when you talk to your friends, relatives and other members in the community.
- PRACTICE Rohingya when you talk to your children and other family members at home.
- DISCUSS the importance of Rohingya language preservation with others in your community.
- TEACH Rohingya to your children at mosques, madrassas and other learning centres.
- ENCOURAGE your friends and colleagues to speak Rohingya in the refugee camps and beyond.
- PARTICIPATE in projects that preserve Rohingya language and culture as a means of protecting Rohingya identity.

To the Humanitarian Organisations in Bangladesh:

- HALT the practice of using Bangla and Chittagonian terms in education campaigns, awareness sessions, and publications that target the Rohingya refugee community.
- RECRUIT qualified Rohingya individuals when verbal or written translation is needed.
- PERFORM reviews of existing materials to ensure the full use of Rohingya language.
- REQUIRE that education for Rohingya youth in learning centres around the camp is conducted in Rohingya language.
- SUPPORT the Rohingya community and Rohingya CSOs in preserving Rohingya language and culture.
- ENSURE that considerations for the preservation/protection of Rohingya language and identity are integrated into all programming in the refugee camps.

To the Myanmar National Unity Government (NUG):

- RESTORE Rohingya citizenship immediately, and recognize “Rohingya” as an official ethnicity.
- REPEAL formal and informal policies of persecution and discrimination against the Rohingya population at local, state, and national levels in Myanmar.
- HALT the current junta’s ongoing practices and policies of destruction of Rohingya villages, mosques, madrassas and other historical and cultural landmarks in Rakhine State.
- CREATE safe and secure environment for Rohingya ethnic inside Myanmar where they can freely perform cultural, traditional and other religious events in Myanmar.
- CHANGE the official government names of ancient Rohingya villages and other historical landmarks back to their original Rohingya names.
- CONSTRUCT AND SUPPORT a Rohingya National Museum for permanent preservation of Rohingya culture and language in Myanmar.
- SECURE a voluntary, safe and dignified repatriation of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh’s refugee camps to their villages of origin in Rakhine State as soon as possible.

Recommendations

To the Government of Bangladesh:

- END the ongoing dominance of Bangla culture and language in the refugee camps, Cox's Bazar and on Bhasan Char Island, including by refraining from speaking Bangla when dealing with the Rohingya refugee community.
- RECRUIT qualified Rohingya interpreters for the camp in charge (CIC) offices and units of the Bangladeshi armed security forces stationed in the refugee camps.
- REMOVE all restrictions on the Rohingya refugee community so that they can freely perform their cultural traditions and religious festivals and events across the refugee camps, including removing restrictions on freedom of movement and restrictions related to holding such events.
- ISSUE a statement with the purpose of ensuring the Bangladeshi authorities, armed security forces and the humanitarian organisations based in the refugee camps respect the culture, language, identity and dignity of the Rohingya refugee community.

To the International Community:

- ACTIVELY SUPPORT all efforts to hold the former Myanmar governments, current junta and individuals within the government accountable for the destruction of Rohingya culture, language and identity in Rakhine State, including through proceedings at the International Court of Justice, the International Criminal Court and national level prosecutions on the basis of universal jurisdiction on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity committed against the Rohingya people.
- EXERT PRESSURE on the current Myanmar junta, including through comprehensive use of targeted sanctions, to end the ongoing destruction of Rohingya villages, mosques, madrassas and other historical landmarks in Rakhine State, and ensure all members of the Rohingya community are able to speak their language and participate in their cultural and religious traditions freely inside the country.
- EXERT PRESSURE on the Bangladesh government to end restrictions on cultural events, freedom of movement, education, and employment in Bangladesh.
- DEVELOP binding international legal standards to protect culture and languages in conflict-affected zones and within displaced communities globally.

Acknowledgements

This report is based on a participatory action research study conducted by a Rohingya research team that consists of Mohammad Taher, Mohammad Hussein, Humaira Begom, Yasmin Ara, Mohammad Khan, Soheena Formin, Saima Akther, Aziz Khan, Mohammad Zowsim, Mohammad Ayan, Reema Begom, Nasima Akther, Lalu Miah, Sama Akther, Montaz Bibi, Chit Lwin, Jasim Arakani, Shahina Akther, Mohammad Amin, Minara Bibi, Shomima Bibi, Abu Alom and Mayyu Ali. Most of the team members prefer to use pseudonyms for security purposes. Mayyu Ali was the principal author of this report. The team is grateful to Andrew Riley for all of his effort, energy and voluntary contributions to all stages of this project, as well as in editing this report. We would like to offer our sincere thanks to Karen Ames for her wonderful layout and design of the report. Our heartfelt gratitude goes to Alex Neve for providing additional edits and legal advice in this report.

The Rohingya Language Preservation Project extends a special thanks to the Rohingya participants, refugee camp leaders, imams, humanitarian aid workers and all others in the refugee camps, Cox's Bazar and on Bhasan Char Island who supported our work and generously shared their time, experience and expertise. Our special thanks go to the generous donors who make this work possible and have joined us in preserving Rohingya culture and identity, and uplifting the spirit of the Rohingya community in the refugee camps and beyond.



▲ Photo @RLPP, A team member is explaining to a group of Rohingya men about the result of the research on the threats of Rohingya language and culture in the refugee camps, Bangladesh.



Photo @RLPP, A young Rohingya boy is sitting down in front of a tarpaulin shelter in a refugee camp, Cox's Bazar. He went to school when he was in Myanmar. In the refugee camps, there are no formal education schools for Rohingya children to learn Myanmar's school curriculum.

Annex A: Survey Questionnaire

Q1. DEMOGRAPHICS (12 Items)

Q1.1 Age (in years only, not the date of birth):

Q1.2 Sex: 1) Female 2) Male 3) Other

Q1.3 Occupation: 1) Teacher 2) INGO worker 3) Other _____

Q1.4 Country of Birth: 1) Myanmar 2) Bangladesh 3) Other _____

Q1.5 What is your mother tongue?

Q1.6 How many languages can you speak? What are they?

Q1.7 Which language do you use most in your everyday life?

Q1.8 Who are you in the following? 1) Registered refugee since 1993 repatriation 2) Arrival after the violence in June, 2012 3) New arrival after the violence in August, 2017

Q1.9 Township of Origin in Myanmar: 1) Maungdaw 2) Buthidaung 3) Rathedaung 4) If other, please specify _____

Q1.10 Village of Origin in Myanmar

Q1.11 Education Level: (Level of education completed) 1) Less than primary 2) Primary (class 1-4) 3) Secondary (class 5-8) 4) Tertiary (class 9-10) 5) University 6) Other, religious education, etc. Specify: _____

Q1.12 Religion: 1) Islam 2) Christianity 3) Hinduism 4) Other _____

Q2. LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT (1 Items)

Q2. Can you please explain to me in detail how you spend a day in the refugee camps? Starting from the time you wake up in the morning to the time you go to sleep at night. For example, prayers, breakfast, shower, lunch, places you go, people you talk to, dinner, army/police, check posts, fences, please tell me everything you do in your daily life.

(For researchers: this part is just to record. Please make sure to record what respondent says)

Q3. OPINION (19 Items)

Q3.1 What is your current gravest concern in the refugee camps? 1) Food 2) Shelter 3) Income 4) Freedom of movement 5) Healthcare 6) Rohingya culture and language 7) Other _____

Q3.2 Do you think Rohingya oral language is different from Bangla language (e.g., what the Bangla INGO workers and security forces (police and army) say? 1) Not at all 2) A little 3) Quite a bit 4) Extremely

Annex A: Survey Questionnaire

Q3.3 What language do you use most when you talk with your children and family members at home?

1) Bangla/Chittagonian 2) Rohingya English

Q3.4 Which language do you use most when you talk with the Bangladeshi host community (garami)?

1) Bangla/Chittagonian 2) Rohingya 3) English 4) Other _____

Q3.5 If the previous answer is not “Rohingya”, what are the reasons behind using that language?

Q3.6 Which language do you use when you talk with Bangladeshi officials (such as police, army, CIC, etc.) and Bangladeshi INGO workers? 1) Bangla/Chittagonian 2) Rohingya 3) English 4) Other

Q3.7 If the previous answer is not “Rohingya”, what are the reasons behind using that language?

Q3.8 Do you think that the Rohingya language is shifting to Bangla language? 1) Not at all 2) A little 3) Quite a bit 4) Extremely

Q3.9 If so, how do you feel about the Rohingya and Bangla languages shifting?

Q3.10 Do you have a feeling of losing your language in the refugee camps? 1) Not at all 2) A little 3) Quite a bit 4) Extremely

Q3.11 If so, in your opinion, what is the reason for losing the Rohingya language?

Q3.12 If so, what could be the impacts if you lose your own language?

Q3.13 What could be the problems if we go back to Myanmar with this mixed language and culture?

Q3.14 Is there any organization in the refugee camps that works to preserve the Rohingya language? 1) Yes 2) No If Yes, specify: _____

Q3.15 How important is it to you to preserve the Rohingya language? 1) Not at all 2) A little 3) Quite a bit 4) Extremely

Q3.16 What could be the best way to preserve the Rohingya language?

Q3.17 Who could be the best actor to preserve your language?

Q3.18 What can you do yourself to preserve your language?

Q3.19 Do you think it is important to have a permanent Rohingya Culture and Language Preservation Centre? 1) Not at all 2) A little 3) Quite a bit 4) Extremely

Annex B: Language Assessment Findings

Non-Rohingya Terms Documented

Bangla or Chittagonian terms that Rohingya refugees practice in daily life, Cox's Bazar -2021

	Bangla/Chittagonian	Rohingya		Bangla/Chittagonian	Rohingya		Bangla/Chittagonian	Rohingya
1	apa	bubu	26	bikri	beson	51	ek ta, dui ta	Ek-guá, du-wá
2	abba	baaf	27	bikale	biyalai	52	ebong	Baa-de/arr
3	amar	añr	28	vule	forái	53	ektu	túraa
4	aghun	oion	29	beton	tolof	54	ekdom	ek-fúrá dów
5	ammu	maa	30	bolte	maa ní	55	evabe	en dilla
6	afatoto	toitta	31	besto	duwadi	56	porishkaar	Saaf-sutará
7	ekon	ehón	32	baire	bar kúlé	57	purush	Jawan-fuwa
8	amader	añrá	33	boshen	Boi yaw	58	pusti	Sújl/gezaa
9	achar	hórow	34	Bach-cha	Fuwain	59	prothi-bondi	lañg mazur
10	ajke	ajja	35	Boro bhai	Doñr baí	60	paltai den	Far-garai de
11	attiyo	aegana	36	batash	boyaar	61	Pak ghor	wolaa
12	alap	Mocara	37	shikka	elóm	62	Pak gojji	Rian dí
13	oshohai	besáhará	38	cesta	kucicc	63	Polythene	kís-hoilla
14	opekka	Soññ goron	39	chakri	soñri	64	golpo	gofon
15	erimma	E kisimmá	40	shami	zamai	65	ghumai	gúm zai
16	alochona	biyasana	41	shomman	izzat	66	kaj	haam
17	olpo	túraa	42	shobai	beggúlún	67	khatha	Hícaafor-boi
18	basha	ghor	43	Shobshomoi	hámichá	68	kosto	tokolip
19	bondu	fúñwajjá	44	donnobaad	cúkúria	69	haiddo	kúraaf
20	bebsha	shodori	45	dim	andaa	70	Amar jonno	Añr lá
21	betha	bich	46	dukai	goñlon	71	karon	waja
22	bebosta	entizaam	47	gram	gañng	72	korce	gojjé
23	bibinno	Nanamkisímá	48	daitto	zimma	73	kolpona	kíyaal
24	Bondo goro	Bon goró	49	dupur	duññjá	74	law	hoñdú
25	bish	Kuri (20)	50	porai den	finaí dow	75	mone-gore	Monot la ger

	Bangla/Chittagonian	Rohingya		Bangla/Chittagonian	Rohingya		Bangla/Chittagonian	Rohingya
76	meye	Mayafuwain	101	shamne	muntún	126	lobon	nun
77	misti-kumra	hoñrí	102	shaak	haak	127	muhila	beriyain
78	murgi	kurá	103	shobzi	totorkhari	128	pri	bicichaa
79	manshow	gustaw	104	onumoti	ijazat	129		
80	maiddo me	torfottú	105	shotti	sóyi	130		
81	maze-modde	mazé-mazé	106	shaele	morot-fuwa	131		
82	notun	noya	107	shondow goron	cubaagoron	132		
83	nirafot	héfázot	108	shuto	chorow	133		
84	noshtow	borbaad	109	shuza	uzu uzu	134		
85	oshut	dabai	110	shamadan	notiza	135		
86	ofosoi goron	Luksangoron	111	shosha	fól	136		
87	oshustow	biyaram	112	Tupi	tikka	137		
88	ogula	uín	113	Talafiya-maas	japani-maas	138		
89	onek	bicí	114	Tika maron	fúk márón	139		
90	pritibi	duniyai	115	Tadonto goron	bisaron	140		
91	prodan	foíllá	116	oboshow	hámakhá	141		
92	porijon	sinnow	117	ubbaish	adot	142		
93	rushon	roan	118	zebon	zindagi	143		
94	shillar	kiskisar	119	zukhazuk	talukat	144		
95	shomasha	ochída	120	zattri	suari	145		
96	sha-shuri	wóri	121	roktow	lou	146		
97	shokale	binná	122	muri	úrúm	147		
98	shujuk	moka	123	balubasha	ador	148		
99	shomoi	októw	124	bottoman	ehon ehon	149		
100	shesh ko ren	fúraí féla	125	moila	hoñsara	150		

Terms highlighted in red are Bangla or Chittagonian and those highlighted in black are original Rohingya

This report presents results from mixed methods research. Data was collected through 285 individual interviews with randomly selected Rohingya respondents in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar and on Bhasan Char Island. This Rohingya-led, participatory research was conceptualised, planned and executed by a team of 23 Rohingya researchers.

This report provides new and important findings, including the following:

- Rohingya language plays a critical and central role in Rohingya cultural identity
- Rohingya language is currently changing as Rohingya assimilate to the Bangladesh context
- Rohingya language—and therefore Rohingya identity—is at-risk for the Rohingya population in Bangladesh, as our language continues to disappear
- Maintaining a distinct Rohingya identity is seen as important to increase legitimacy and rights upon return to Myanmar
- Preservation of Rohingya language and identity among Rohingya communities in the camps is extremely important both for existential reasons and to increase the likelihood of a return to Myanmar with legitimacy and rights

ROHINGYA LANGUAGE PRESERVATION PROJECT

Photo @RLPP, The wide mega Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

