

LIFESAVING MESSAGES CHALLENGE THE CAMP RUMOUR MILL

Balukhali camp: In the narrow paths and alleyways that thread past the homes of nearly one million Rohingya refugees, there's nothing that spreads quite as quickly as rumours. With little or no access to television, radio, or other media, the refugees have to rely largely on word of mouth to keep informed not just about what is happening in the camp, but about issues critical to their health, nutrition and even survival.

Immunisation – something few Rohingya experienced back home – is one topic that has caused fevered and sometimes ill-informed discussion. One story had it that measles injections would make girls sterile. Another claimed a vaccination would convert a child into a Christian.

It is to help tackle such dangerous misconceptions, and to make the refugees more aware of the positive value of the services set up for them, that “model mothers” such as Nur Begum have been recruited.

This charismatic 50-year-old mother and grandmother – herself a Rohingya – is among some 240 volunteers (hired by UNICEF partner Pulse) whose job is to go house-to-house around the camp, engaging women and girls on a range of sometimes sensitive issues.

Young expectant mothers are among Nur's prime interlocutors. “I tell them that they must call a midwife when they are about to give birth, because she will help them if they have difficulties,” she says. “Likewise I tell young mothers that breastfeeding helps to keep a baby healthy.”

Personal cleanliness is another topic that she vigorously promotes. “Most people living here are unaware of basic hygiene. I tell them that a clean house is a house free of the possibility of infections and diseases,” she declares.



Nur Begum speaking to other Rohingya community volunteers at Balukhali camp.