

Bangladesh: Using audio drama to tackle mental health in the Rohingya camps

BBC Media Action Bangladesh conducted research to understand the impact of audio drama *Aa'rar Kissä* (Our Story) on the knowledge and attitudes of the Rohingya community to issues around mental health. The findings showed that members of the listening groups learned symptoms of mental health issues and where to seek help in the camps. They also showed signs of attitudinal change towards people with mental health issues.

Context

As the Rohingya refugee crisis goes into its seventh year, mental health issues among the Rohingya community are prevalent due to trauma, lack of livelihood opportunities and social and economic insecurity. Research conducted by BBC Media Action prior to the start of *Aa'rar Kissä* showed there is significant widespread stigma associated with mental health. It also showed that mental health is a new concept for the Rohingya refugees. The Rohingya language does not have a word to refer to mental health and the community uses various terms and phrases to refer to signs that affect a person's wellbeing and how they think and act in private and public.

The project

Against this backdrop, BBC Media Action focused season three and four of its *Aa'rar Kissä* audio drama on mental health. It aimed to

increase the Rohingya community's knowledge and understanding of mental health, for instance through identifying a person struggling with mental health issues and the services available in the camps, including counselling. It also highlighted the importance of discussion and showcasing how talking and verbalising emotions with a trusted person have a positive impact on mental health.

Aa'rar Kissä was the first audio drama series produced by BBC Media Action for the Rohingya community living in Ukhia and Teknaf camps in Cox's Bazar. The drama was designed for use in listening groups.

Research methodology

BBC Media Action conducted a longitudinal qualitative study with members of the Rohingya community to enable the researchers to observe change, if any, in the participants' knowledge and attitude throughout season three and four of the drama. Two male and two female listening groups were selected, with a total of 70 listeners who attended the groups between February and June 2023.

In February 2023, a pre-assessment was conducted to understand the participants' knowledge, attitudes and discussion levels around mental health issues before listening to the drama. Between March and May of the same year, observation and feedback monitoring sessions were carried out with the same groups. In June 2023, almost a month after they attended their last listening group, post-assessment was conducted where participants were asked the same questions as in the pre-assessment to evaluate changes in their knowledge and attitudes towards mental health issues.

Key findings

Engagement

Participants found the characters and the storylines relatable and mirrored their culture and life in the camps. They appreciated how the drama portrayed the Rohingya community's cultural richness and deep-rooted values, for example, the characters were shown to be hospitable to guests and caring for the elderly, just as listeners would be to the elderly members of their family, friends and neighbours. Participants had a vibrant discussion during the listening groups and afterwards, with their family and friends. Both male and female participants said that family, friends and others in the community asked them about their experience taking part in the listening group, which presents an opportunity for them to share their learning from *Aa'rar Kiss*a, as well as talk about the characters and storylines they liked.

Knowledge

What is mental health and what symptoms suggest one's mental health is affected: Participants said that, as a result of listening to the drama, they learned the term *dil demager byeram* to refer to mental health issues. They also learned that that the signs can vary depending on each person's circumstances, and can affect thoughts, emotions and behaviour.

How to improve one's mental health and well-being: Participants emphasised that after listening to *Aa'rar Kiss*a, they now understand the importance of looking after their own mental health and that of those close to them. They also understood that talking with someone close to them would be a good first step to take to help improve a person's mental health.

Where to seek support for mental health: Participants said they understood that when negative feelings get worse or go on for a long time and affect one's daily life, professional help may be needed in the form of counselling, which they learned through the drama can help someone get back to a more positive mental health through conversations and advice. However, at the end of the drama, some were

still identifying a counsellor as someone who also uses a stethoscope, runs tests and prescribes medication, which suggests some confusion remained around the role of a counsellor.

Attitude

A more understanding attitude towards people with mental health issues was noticed among participants. Over time, conversations with the participants in the listening groups showed that they were becoming more positive and compassionate towards the characters with mental health issues, increasingly attributing their behaviour to their deteriorating mental health.

"Before listening to the drama, we used to call a person [who has mental health issues] 'mad, possessed, or lost his/her head or brain.' But now, I understand that this person has mental health issues and needs to be taken to shantikhana or to a mental health doctor for treatment." Rohingya woman, post-assessment

Key implications

Similar programming in the future could continue to convey mental health related information through emotional and entertaining stories. *Aa'rar Kiss*a engaged participants through various journeys; carrying them from joy to, sorrow, apprehension, and even anger. Future programming should also look to further clarify what counselling sessions entail, who they are offered to and how to access them. Finally, following the journey of some characters through mental health issues resulted in clearer understanding to participants than other examples. This highlights the importance of accompanying the characters through their whole journey as they deal with a mental health issue, to build the listeners' empathy, understanding of how to manage living through times when they experience mental health issues, and how to access support.

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