

UNFPA in Bangladesh

Improving the Health and Well Being of Young People

Bangladesh's population is young: Over 40 per cent are under the age of 24, while about one-quarter are adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19. Three quarters of all adolescent girls are married by the age of 18 and about one-quarter have their first child before they turn 19. Though the contraceptive prevalence rate is increasing in Bangladesh – 56 per cent of all married women now practice some form of family planning – only 30 per cent of married adolescent girls use contraception. Though the HIV/AIDS prevalence rate is very low in Bangladesh, young people are especially vulnerable.

Youth are not only the future they are the present also. In cooperation with UNFPA, the Government has launched an integrated programme to provide married young people with youth-friendly reproductive health and family planning services in pilot areas. Through the Department of Youth Development (part of the Ministry of Youth and Sports), adolescents and young people also receive skills development and livelihood training. By combining income generation and education with reproductive health services tailored to the needs and concerns of youth, the Government and its partner organizations are laying the foundation for economic growth and building a better future.

Catalytic Role for Youth Clubs

UNFPA is working with selected Youth Clubs throughout the country, providing training and education on a wide variety of reproductive health issues, including family planning, gender concerns, domestic violence, early marriage, and the prevention of STIs and HIV/AIDS. At the same time, the Fund is working closely with the Government to establish "youth corners" in a number of govt. Maternal and Child Welfare Centers and other health clinics run by NGOs in order to provide both information and services catering specifically to the needs of young people.

"..... I know a lot more about reproductive health and my own options," she says with a broad smile. "I can take decisions for myself. I have no plans to marry before the age of 25, even though I have

Baby Naznin Mita has her own business making batik and selling her products throughout the southwestern city of Khulna. What makes this accomplishment significant is her age: Baby is just turned 19 and has run her own business for two years. She now trains 30 other girls in Batik making at her local youth club, known as the Women's Social Welfare Organization. Buried deep inside one of Khulna's slums, this youth club is the only hope for its 50 members, all of whom come from poor families.

A charming, enthusiastic girl, Baby learned how to start and run a business as a member of a youth club. She got a loan of 25,000 Taka (about \$380) from the Department of Youth Development to start up her business. Baby also benefited from the UNFPA supported

project that provided all members of the club with education about reproductive health and family planning, including the dangers of early marriage.

Her parents support her decision to postpone marriage and have encouraged her to expand her business. "I don't need to get married to get a shelter, I can stand on my own feet," she says with finality. "This project has changed my life completely."

Not far from Baby's youth club, is the Poor Women's Landless Association. This women's club consists entirely of adolescents and women from impoverished families. Most were married at early ages and had no chance to finish secondary school.

Jahanara Hossain, President of the club for the past eight years, has seen it expand from just 9 members in the beginning to 175 today. "More than 60 of our members have taken out micro-loans from our revolving fund to start their own businesses," points out Jahanara proudly. "Our repayment rate is 100 per cent, because we support each other."

Her members have all learned much about reproductive health and family planning as a result of the UNFPA project. "All of our members know about the benefits of good reproductive health and many are practicing family planning," observes Jahanara.

Energizing Communities

At a nearby secondary school, a community theatre troupe, known as "Rupantor" (Change) performs a skit on the theme: equality between boys and girls. They play to a packed audience of both students and parents. The headmaster of the school, Md. Ejahar Ali Moral, has seen major changes in the attitudes of his students and the community because of the UNFPA project. Ironically, most of his students are girls, not boys who drop out to earn money. "Two out of three pupils here are girls," points out Moral. "And 95 per cent of my students finish school."

The large number of educated girls has energized the community in ways never imagined. "Because they are educated and know about reproductive health, they have more social standing than in other communities," says Moral. "Most importantly, the percentage of girls under 18 getting married has dropped significantly, thanks to the UNFPA project."

Initiative for Youth

Another UNFPA supported initiative for youth is the Reproductive Health Initiative for Youth in Asia (RHIYA), funded by a grant from the European Union (EU). Bangladesh is one of seven countries participating in this regional initiative. Five NGOs help implement the project: Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS); Concerned Women for Family Development (CWFD); Family Planning Association of Bangladesh (FPAB); Marie Stopes Clinic Society (MSCS); and Save the Children-UK. RHIYA in Bangladesh is primarily focused on improving the sexual and reproductive health and overall wellbeing of vulnerable and underserved adolescents and youth in urban and peri-urban areas.

Rokeya Sultana, the programme coordinator for the RHIYA project from CWFD, is proud of its accomplishments in Khulna. "In total we have reached a large proportion of young people in Khulna city and its suburbs," she says. "Between January 2004 and July 2005,

nearly 12,000 adolescents visited our youth-friendly health clinics, nearly 8,000 of them are girls. Most come for counseling, but a significant number also come in for clinical services." She added, "We concentrate on providing Life skills education for changing risky behavior, ensure a 'friendly' environment in our centers, and our options for livelihoods programme empowers them to take their own decisions and improve their lives".

In a breezy second story room in the youth center, located in the middle of the city, a counselor explains physical changes and the services available to 17 year-old Bely Nishi Nazren. "I didn't know much about my body before coming here," she says shyly. "But now I know a lot and am confident about my future. I don't intend to marry before 25." With much more excitement she shared, "Now we do have the 'space' where we could gather to get the right information." She is referring to the resource center, which was created as one of the component activities of the RHIYA project, and is equipped with books for reading, games, and a TV corner with VCR for reviewing educational videos.

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In the nearby community of Gobor Chaka (part of Khulna city), a 10th grade class in the co-education National High School listens attentively to a community mobilization worker talking about adolescent reproductive and sexual health. It is a lively discussion with many questions and comments by the students.

"Although we were reluctant at first to allow the community workers to come in and hold these educational sessions," states Headmistress, Zakia Sultana, "I am glad we allowed them. These students need to know about these important health issues. I am grateful to UNFPA for having the foresight to launch this comprehensive programme in our city."

