

UNFPA in Bangladesh

Religious Leaders Promote Reproductive Health and Family Planning

“If not for UNFPA I would still be ignorant of these important reproductive health and family planning concerns,” comments Imam Nazrul from a poor area of Khulna, a city in southwestern Bangladesh. “This project has improved my knowledge of reproductive health and gender related issues. Things don’t change overnight,” he continues, “but we are trying to shape better behaviour in our communities. Mothers need careful care. They give us life; we must safeguard their health and the health of their children. These matters need serious attention by all of us in the religious community.” Mr. Nazrul is one of the 500,000 imams who lead prayers in about 250,000 mosques in the country. Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim Country and 90% of its total population (140 Million) practice a moderate form of Islam (there are few fanatics).

Others Imams rise to make similar statements. “We should follow the reproductive health guidelines for safer births,” states Imam Nurul Huda. Coming from a poor village just outside Khulna, Huda is adamant about changing behaviour. “We need to be a beacon of change in our own communities,” he says unequivocally. “We have the opportunity, thanks to this project, to improve the health and welfare of women, men and children. We must not squander this opportunity.”

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The project the Imams are referring to is a nationwide UNFPA-sponsored initiative called, “Involvement of Religious Leaders in Human Resource Development”. It is being implemented by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, in collaboration with the Imam Training Academy, part of the Islamic Foundation of Bangladesh. This follow-up training session is taking place in the local branch of the Islamic Foundation – a sprawling, breezy complex of meeting halls, offices, temporary residences and training facilities located in a quiet section of Khulna. In attendance are 130 religious leaders from communities in and around the city. The half-day advocacy session is followed by lively group discussions on various reproductive health, gender and family welfare topics.

The UNFPA project, initiated in 1999, is now in its second phase, which began in January 2003. It has four main objectives:

- To involve religious leaders as advocates in facilitating behaviour change in their communities in order to create a supportive environment for improving reproductive health, family welfare and gender related concerns.
- To train at least 16,000 Imams on reproductive health, family welfare, HIV/AIDS prevention and gender issues in the light of Islam.
- To increase the accessibility and utilization of reproductive health services, especially for vulnerable and hard-to-reach communities.
- To train 2850 Hindu religious leaders and 420 Buddhist leaders on the same set of issues, in the context of their respective religions.

“One of the fundamental outcomes of this project is that we need to help ensure that women have safe births and healthy lives,” points out Mohammed Abbas Uddin, a former Imam, currently Deputy Director of the Family Planning Association of Bangladesh, an IPPF affiliate. “We need to give proper care to mothers and children if they are to have healthy, productive futures.”

A passionate advocate for better reproductive health and family planning, Mr. Abbas is one of the trainers involved in the project. He is also a serious student of Islam. “I have no problem wearing two hats,” he says with a grin. “With my knowledge of the Quran and my work with the Family Planning Association, I am in a unique position to promote these important issues within the religious community of Bangladesh.”

Since the end of 2002, the project has exceeded its targets, training over 25,000 religious leaders throughout Bangladesh, covering each of the country’s 64 districts. These religious leaders have been educated and sensitized on a wide variety of health and social issues, including reproductive health and family planning, domestic violence, gender concerns, and the prevention of STIs and HIV/AIDS in the light of Islam. The initiative has fostered nothing less than a quiet revolution in Bangladesh.

“This large core of Imams are now promoting better reproductive health and family planning in their communities,” Mr. Abbas points out, “and we are training more of them every year.”

Initially there was opposition to the programme. “In the beginning, many Imams did not understand what we were trying to accomplish with this initiative,” recalls Chowdhury Md Ziaul Haque, Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. “They had a very conservative interpretation of the Quran and did not grasp the importance of good maternal and child health and how they could influence their communities.”

Gradually, through advocacy with the Islamic leadership and with local Imams, attitudes and perceptions changed. “Much progress has been made over the past five years,” observes Mr. Haque. “The attitudes of many religious leaders have changed dramatically, and they, in turn, have changed perceptions in their communities.”

The project has three main on-going activities: 1) Training of senior Imams as regional trainers; so far 128 religious leaders have attended special training courses enabling them to assist in the training of local Imams; 2) training of Imams in each of the country’s 64 districts; and 3) advocacy meetings and follow-up training.

There is no disagreement on the need to educate and inform their communities about the benefits of good reproductive health and how family planning can help build stronger, healthier families. “Most Imams have already had several training sessions,” points out A. Z. M. Shamsal Alam, Director General of the Islamic Foundation of Bangladesh. “They have put their knowledge to work and now know what a difference they can make in the communities they serve.”

At the training session in Khulna, Dr. Nurul Islam, a physician and specialist in HIV/AIDS, is convinced that religious leaders can make a tremendous difference by raising awareness of the threat of HIV infection and how to prevent it. “As a medical doctor I can treat illnesses, but as religious leaders through education and information you can influence the communities to safeguard themselves (communities) from these life threatening diseases,”

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he tells the assembled Imams. “There is no doubt in my mind which action has more impact in saving lives.”

According to Shamsal Alam, Director General, Islamic Foundation, the Quran refers to the advent of a disease with no cure. “This, I think, refers to the AIDS pandemic,” he says. “Our Imams are playing critically preventive roles in their communities by informing people about the dangers of this epidemic and how to prevent it.”

The project has had a lasting impact on the large rural communities throughout the country. The UNFPA initiative has been credited with successful involvement of Imams in:

- Raising awareness of the reproductive health and family planning services available.
- Informing people of the health risks to adolescent girls of early marriage and pregnancy.
- Increasing awareness of the threat of HIV/AIDS and STIs and how to prevent infections.
- Enhancing women’s economic and social role in their families and communities.
- Encouraging responsible behaviour on the part of young people.

At his office in Dhaka, Alam is effusive about the UNFPA project. “This initiative has elevated the status of many Imams,” he observes. “Now people come to them not just for prayers and blessings, but for advice on safe motherhood and a variety of health issues.” This has had very important results in communities. It has contributed to a decline in both the maternal and child mortality rates and improvement in the health of mothers and children. “We have crossed an important threshold and helped to launch a revolution in understanding of these important issues,” he concludes. “We must continue to go forward to ensure a healthy future for our women and children.”

