



Bangladesh 2021
TRANSFORMING
LIVES

Stories from the
Ground

REPRESENTATIVE'S GREETING FOR TRANSFORMING LIVES 2021

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It is my pleasure to share with you this collection of inspiring stories that demonstrate the resilience of the women, adolescent girls, and boys whom UNFPA has had the honor of supporting in 2021.

The past year was undoubtedly another very challenging year for the world with the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 and this was not an exception for UNFPA in Bangladesh. Not only did we continue to combat the COVID-19 pandemic for the second year in a row, but the Rohingya refugee crisis also entered its fifth year in Cox's Bazar, and climate change-induced natural disasters continued to wreak havoc on vulnerable communities across the country.

Despite these challenges, we successfully completed our 9th Country Programme and continued our work in Bangladesh, aiming for a society with zero preventable maternal deaths, zero unmet need for family planning, and zero gender-based violence and harmful practices.

None of these achievements could have been possible without the unwavering support we received from our donors as well as the Government and our other partners, including the civil society and other sister UN agencies, who make all these efforts a reality on the ground.

Because of them, we can remain determined to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals outlined in the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development in Bangladesh.

I hope the stories of the ten brave people introduced in this booklet will leave you with a sense of optimism, opportunities despite challenges, and hope. UNFPA is committed to continue supporting people in Bangladesh to live in a society where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled.

Against all odds, our efforts continue to transform lives.



“With the soaps we received, my children and I were able to wash ourselves whenever we wanted.”

- Mongli, Dignity Kit recipient, Kurigram District

“It’s hard to list all the struggles we face during floods. Even going to the toilet becomes difficult. If the water level is low, my kids and I take turns to go to a temporary toilet once a day. If the water level is high, we have no other option but to somehow do it in the water in our house.

Last year before the flood hit our village, UNFPA gave us some useful items that helped us with these challenges. With the soaps we received, my children and I were able to wash ourselves whenever we wanted. With the torchlight, I was able to move safely after dark!

However, the menstrual cloth was definitely the best thing we received. Previously during floods, we would have to rip our old clothes or other fabrics in the house and use them as menstrual clothes. I am so happy that I did not have to do it this time.”

Since 2020, UNFPA has distributed 6,000 of its signature Dignity Kits to vulnerable families in Kurigram, Gaibandha, and Jamalpur District to support them in preparing for floods anticipated to hit their villages. The kits have been distributed through the CERF Anticipatory Action Pilot Project funded by UN OCHA and Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The initiative marks the first time ever that anticipatory disaster relief has been provided to disaster-prone communities in Bangladesh.

In 2021, the project established a Common Beneficiary Database on 100,000 households most vulnerable to natural disasters in Jamalpur, Kurigram, Gaibandha, Bogura and Sirajgonj Districts. The database will ensure that whenever a disaster strikes in these districts, UNFPA will be able to coordinate actions with other humanitarian actors like WFP, Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS), UNICEF and FAO to provide immediate assistance to the affected families.



“We have to be aware of our rights so our parents will not be able to marry us off at a young age”

- Tahiya, 18, Jamalpur District

“When I came to school one day, I found my best friend Shila crying in the corner of the classroom. When I asked her what was wrong, she told me that her parents had arranged her marriage and she could not study anymore.

I had learned about the negative consequences of child marriage after attending UNFPA's education sessions at an adolescents' center near my house. I knew I had to do something to stop the marriage.

I told my school's headmaster about what was happening. She immediately went to Shila's home with some other teachers and a local ward counselor to meet her family. Luckily, they were able to convince her parents that the marriage was not a good idea.

I am so happy that I was able to stop the marriage of my best friend. As young girls, we have to be aware of our rights so our parents will not be able to marry us before we turn 18. If we girls support each other more, I know we can reduce the rate of child marriage in our communities.”

Through its "Global Programme to End Child Marriage" with UNICEF, UNFPA supports a network of Kishori Resource Centers in communities across Bangladesh. The Kishori Resource Centers empower adolescent girls by engaging them in a gender-transformative education programme focusing on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The centers provide a safe and non-judgmental environment for adolescent girls to learn about taboo subjects, such as bodily autonomy, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and gender-based violence. By building their confidence, agency and bodily autonomy, the initiative aims to lower the risk of adolescent girls being married off during childhood.



“We can all be agents of change for a world free from gender-based violence”

- Mohammed Zubair, Community Activist Against Gender-Based Violence in the Rohingya Camps

"When I was attending one of the SASA! Together sessions, I realized how often I had misbehaved towards my wife, children, and in-laws in the past. After working on my own flaws first, I decided to become a community activist against gender-based violence and help other men change their harmful behaviors and attitudes.

During the sessions we host, people learn how to build a respectful and caring relationship between a man and a woman. Treating others as you would like to be treated yourself, appreciating your partner for who she is and consistently showing her kindness and compassion are some of the qualities that we want the participants to embrace from our sessions.

I believe that if we use our power positively, we can all be agents of change for a world free from gender-based violence!"

As part of its 'SASA! Together' social mobilization effort in the Rohingya camps and surrounding host communities, UNFPA has trained over 950 male community activists and 630 male community and religious leaders to become activists against gender-based violence in their communities.

SASA! stands for 'START', 'AWARENESS', 'SUPPORT' and 'ACTION' and it is a holistic community mobilization approach for preventing violence against women and girls, as well as transforming power imbalances between women and men through critical discussions and positive action.

By organizing trainings and knowledge-sharing sessions in their communities, the activists inspire men and boys to give up on attitudes and patterns of behaviour that make the world a dangerous place for women and girls.



“ Whenever I tell a mother who has just delivered that she and her baby are safe, my heart leaps with joy ”

- Arafin Mim, Midwifery Student

“The only question in my mind was: “What are they going to do about our studies?” I was mentally depressed. I immediately called my teacher and friends to see what we could do.”

This is how a midwifery student Arafin Mim described her feelings during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Government of Bangladesh was forced to close down all educational institutions, including midwifery institutes, in the country.

In the unprecedented situation, UNFPA and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare were determined to find a solution that would enable the midwifery students to continue their studies. As many students had unreliable access to the internet, it was not possible for them to attend online classes at specific times.

In response to this challenge, a ‘flipped classroom’ was devised for the students, where learning materials were introduced to them before class with classroom time used to deepen students’ understanding through interactive discussions with peers.

After studying the materials, the teachers assessed how well the students had understood the material by giving them online assignments through a new dashboard system established during the pandemic. Additional support was then given to students struggling with the assignments.

“It was convenient and offered us flexibility. I could form a study group with my fellow students whenever we were able to do so. Considering the extreme pressure we were under, this was the best solution we could have come up with,” tells Arafin.

After studying remotely for almost a year, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare finally allowed Arafin and her classmates to return to clinical training in early 2021.

“I cannot express the feeling I had in words. Never have I ever had such motivation to perform my duties. Whenever I reassure a mother who has just delivered that she and her baby are safe, my heart leaps with joy.”



“ The Women-Led Community Center gives us the opportunity to invest our time into an activity that is beneficial for women in our community ”

**- Junaida, Rohingya Refugee
in Cox's Bazar**

"Coming to the Women-Led Community Center gives us Rohingya women the opportunity to invest our time and energy into an activity that is beneficial for women in our community.

By producing reusable menstrual pads in the Women-Led Community Center, I am helping my sisters in the camps and reminding the world that our periods do not stop despite the crises we are living through.

For those of us who live in tiny places in the camps, being able to reuse and wash the pads saves time and makes us feel more comfortable. Addressing our periods is no longer a tedious task we need to undertake to care for our bodies every month."

In 2021, the UNFPA-supported Women-Led Community Centers in the Rohingya camps began training Rohingya women to produce their own reusable sanitary pads. The inspiration for the initiative came from a focus group discussion with Rohingya women who highlighted how the disposable sanitary pads they occasionally received ran out too quickly and how they often lacked the means to buy new ones.

Through the innovative initiative, UNFPA wants to support Rohingya women in managing their menstrual hygiene in a sustainable manner, as well as give them the opportunity to cope with the stress caused by the ongoing crisis by engaging in activities beneficial for their community.



“ I am sharing my story to encourage other girls to report any kind of violence that they may face ”

- Maisha, 18, Mymensingh District

“One night at 11 PM, my younger brother rushed home and gave me a note he had found in our family toilet. The note said: “We have recorded many videos of you through the toilet window. Call this number and send us 10,000 TAKA (approximately 120\$) or we will make these videos go viral on Facebook!”

I was so worried and nervous when I saw the message. First I started blaming myself, but then I thought why? I had done nothing wrong!

I then shared the story with my family. My father took the issue very seriously and wanted to find out the culprit.

My relatives in Dhaka called 999, where they advised us to go a Women, Children, Elderly, and Persons with Disability Service Desk in our nearby police station. The next day, my father and I went there and recounted the whole story to them. The police took serious action to catch the culprits by following the calls made by the number left on the note.

Very soon, a gang of three boys had been arrested. It was quickly confirmed that they had not filmed any videos and were only blackmailing my family for money.

I am sharing my story to encourage other girls to report any kind of violence that they may face. If we are afraid, they will harass us even more”.

Since 2014, UNFPA has supported the Bangladesh Police in strengthening services for survivors of gender-based violence by helping it establish 33 Women Help Desks in police stations across the country. The desks were renamed “Women, Children, Elderly and Persons with Disability Service Desks” in 2020, when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina called for the service to be mainstreamed to all 659 police stations in the country.

In 2021, UNFPA supported the Bangladesh Police in expanding the initiative by developing Standard Operating Procedures for the officers working at the service desks and organizing trainings on using referral mechanisms and providing legal and psychosocial support for them.



“ My counseling is always respectful, confidential and non-judgmental ”

- Jannatul, Midwife, Cox's Bazar District

“What I find the most rewarding about my job is providing reliable information to the women and adolescent girls who visit me here in the midwifery room of the newly opened Women Friendly Space in the host community near the Rohingya camps.

Each day, I serve about a dozen women and girls who come to me for family planning counseling, as well as general advice on maintaining their physical health.

While family planning services are the most requested, I also give advice on preventing and treating sexually transmitted infections.

I am happy that the women trust me with such issues. It is because my counseling is always respectful, confidential and non-judgmental. They feel respected when they come to me.”

UNFPA supports a network of 32 Women Friendly Spaces in the Rohingya camps and surrounding host communities, where women and girls can come to interact, engage in recreational activities and attend awareness-raising sessions on sensitive topics

In addition, each of the Women Friendly Spaces has a midwifery room, where women can come and discuss their sexual and reproductive health with a professional midwife. The midwives provide the women reliable information on sexual and reproductive health and rights, including sexually transmitted infections, menstruation, family planning, and what to do in case of gender-based violence.



“ While women used to be unaware of the support they should receive if they faced violence, now they understand where to go for help ”

- Muntaha Fatema, 28, GBV Case Worker in Dhalghata Union, Cox's Bazar District

“I have seen lots of violence against women here. What often happens is that a girl and a boy get intimate and a girl gets pregnant. If the boy's family accepts the girl after the child is born, they claim a high dowry for which women are often brutally beaten in this area. Sometimes I feel that girls here are born to be survivors of gender-based violence.

A change in the people's mindset is happening, but very slowly. While women used to be unaware of the support they should receive if they faced violence, now they at least understand where to go for help. They clearly want safety and security.

The women in these villages need our services to live a better life. They want to study. They want to earn money and contribute to their households. It is our duty to help them.

With funding provided by the Government of Canada, UNFPA is tackling gender-based violence in 18 unions across Cox's Bazar District through its 'Strengthening Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Gender-Based Violence Prevention Services in Host Communities in Cox's Bazar' project.

28-year old Muntaha Fatema is one of the 18 caseworkers that the project has deployed to Union Health and Family Welfare Centers and Community Clinics around the district to provide support to survivors of gender-based violence.

By frequently organizing events, trainings, and court-yard sessions, she is raising awareness of the harms of gender-based violence among the local communities and giving local women and girls the courage to seek justice if they face abuse.



“ My message is always about ensuring the happiness of young couples ”

- Imam Nur Kolil, Religious Leader in the Rohingya Camps

“My role as an Imam in the camps is to guide young couples on achieving a healthy and fulfilling marital union. For this, I strongly encourage them to visit health facilities so they can receive more information on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

My message is always about the happiness of young couples. I want to make sure they have the ability to ensure health, education, and food for their children. For them to achieve this, managing the size of the family is crucial.”

Since the influx of Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar back in 2017, UNFPA has been active in ensuring that family planning services are available to all women and girls in the camps.

As part of the UNFPA-led Sexual and Reproductive Health Working Group, almost 40 partners are currently collaborating to provide family planning information and services through 193 health facilities in the camps and surrounding host communities.

To ensure that family planning information also reaches communities at the grassroots level, UNFPA actively collaborates with religious leaders in its awareness-raising efforts. The imams play a key role in UNFPA's efforts to ensure that information on family planning and women's rights reaches men and boys in the camps who have traditionally carried more decision-making power within the Rohingya families.



“ From the radio episodes, I learned the dos and don'ts of menstruation ”

- Maimuna, 18, Adolescent girl from the Rohingya Camps

“From the radio episodes, I learned the dos and don'ts of menstruation. The information on healthy foods that are good for our body during our periods was completely new to me.

I actually played the session for my mother, as she never had the opportunity to learn about these things when she was young. I also shared what I learned with my neighbors and friends, so even they have benefited from the episodes.”

Approximately 22% of the Rohingya population in Cox's Bazar are between the ages of 15 and 24. Going through the psychological and physical changes of puberty is exceptionally difficult in the challenging conditions of the camps.

To support Rohingya adolescents in making a smooth transition from childhood to adulthood, UNFPA has been providing gender-responsive sexual and reproductive health and rights education in the camps since 2018. As organizing in-person education was not possible during the COVID-19 pandemic over the past 2 years, UNFPA has launched novel initiatives to ensure that the youth population can continue to cultivate their knowledge and skillsets remotely.

With funding provided by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, psychosocial support kits containing a radio and a memory card full of educational radio episodes were distributed to over 2,010 adolescents in the camps in 2021. The radio episodes covered topics such as gender identity, prevention, and response to gender-based violence, domestic violence, peaceful conflict resolution, menstrual health and hygiene, and nutrition and were meant to not only educate the youth but also keep them engaged amidst the mobility restrictions imposed during the pandemic.

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Delivering a world where
every pregnancy is wanted,
every childbirth is safe and
every young person's potential is fulfilled.

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