

# MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Promoting Sexual and Reproductive Health  
and Rights in Bangladesh



Pictured on the cover page is Pinki Rani Das,  
a midwife from Sunamganj.

# MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Promoting Sexual and Reproductive Health  
and Rights in Bangladesh





# Table of Contents

Delivering care to expectant mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic	4
Midwives battling superstitions in Cox's Bazar	7
Empowering Santal women through midwifery in Gaibandha district	10
Supporting GBV survivors through counselling and care	13
Building community confidence to successfully deliver SRHR services	16
Meet the men who deliver innovative services in remote Bangladesh	18
Family welfare assistance during COVID-19 in Sunamganj	21
Offering comprehensive family planning to local communities	24
Akalmani's struggle with obstetric fistula	27
Azida finds renewed meaning in community	30
Shiuli finds belonging with Bandhu Social Welfare Society	33
Overcoming obstacles in the battle against cervical cancer	36
66-year old Ezabunnesa beats cervical cancer	39
Conquering women's health prejudice in the tea gardens	42
Komlaful Pharmacy is now a symbol of hope for families	45
Golam's quick decision saved the life of a patient suffering from eclampsia	48
Safe birth thanks to regular checkups and the Ma Jaan app	51

## Midwifery-led care



## Delivering care to expectant mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic

Growing up in busy Dhaka, Dola Akter had always dreamed of making a difference in the lives of others and decided to pursue a profession as a midwife. Upon graduating from Satkhira College of Nursing and Midwifery in 2015, she found employment as a midwife at Doha Upazila Health Complex. With its recently constructed, modern labour rooms, this UNFPA

supported health complex fulfilled an important function in preventing maternal and child mortality when the COVID-19 pandemic hit Bangladesh in 2019.

During these trying times, Dola and her colleagues faced unprecedented challenges as the country experienced growing uncertainty and women were afraid to physically come to the health complex. Thinking innovatively, Dola and her colleagues were able to utilise a telemedicine app to regularly provide vital services to expectant mothers in their community during COVID-19 pandemic.

In mid-March 2020, just before the lockdown measures took effect, a distressed mother arrived at the health complex, writhing in intense labour pain. Dola was the only midwife on duty at that

***The opportunity to touch the lives of countless mothers, providing them with the care they deserve, serves as my ultimate inspiration.***



moment, and she kicked into action despite the anxiety surrounding the pandemic and unknown risk of contagion. She quickly gathered the mother's medical history, and it became apparent that the mother was in fact COVID-19 positive and had been turned away by two hospitals prior to arriving at the health complex.

Despite the risks involved, Dola understood that the woman needed her care, and she was able to successfully deliver the child and provide expert care to the mother. One year later, Dola's effort in providing care under

very trying circumstances was recognized by the Bangladesh government. In honour of her firm dedication to providing quality care, she as the sole midwife and 9 other nurses were recognized for their exceptional service and commitment to maternal care.

"While the award brought me joy and pride, it is the unique experiences I encounter every day that truly fuels my passion. The opportunity to touch the lives of countless mothers, providing them with the care they deserve, serves as my ultimate inspiration."





## Midwifery-led care



## Midwives battling superstitions in Cox's Bazar

In Maheshkhali upazila, Cox's Bazar district, midwife Jannatul Ferdous is rarely surprised by the superstitions she hears when working to ensure the health of expectant mothers. She has experience from remote regions of Bangladesh, and she is well versed in the challenges faced by midwives in marginalised communities.

“Women are routinely prevented from seeking healthcare due to superstition. A typical misconception surrounds antenatal medicine, which locals believe can lead to excessive weight gain in babies and necessitate caesarean deliveries” Jannatul said. Jannatul and her colleagues offer accurate information to would-be mothers and

their families, calming their fears and emphasizing the importance of proper healthcare for the well-being of both mother and child when they meet the mothers at the counselling sessions.

In addition to her focus on sharing good healthcare and advice, Jannatul is dedicated to the mental health of mothers in



recognition of the emotional toll that expectant mothers endure. Many pregnant women worry about the movement of their babies in the womb, yet societal pressures often force them into heavy physical labour. In such instances, Jannatul steps in with compassion and guidance, ensuring that expectant mothers do not suffer from undue mental stress and are offered the care and rest they need.

With these dedicated health service providers, like Jannatul, the health complex also offers services in response to gender-based violence. Guided by strict protocols, Jannatul advocates for the rights and well-being of vulnerable individuals in her community. Despite the hardships that come with working in underprivileged communities, with every expectant mother she helps, every misconception she dispels, and every survivor of gender-based violence she supports, Jannatul and her colleagues carry on with unyielding determination. Through their steadfast commitment and the support of organisations like UNFPA, maternal health in underprivileged communities is improving, one birth at a time.

***“Women are routinely prevented from seeking healthcare due to superstition. A typical misconception surrounds antenatal medicine, which locals believe can lead to excessive weight gain in babies and necessitate caesarean deliveries”  
Jannat said.***



## Empowering Santal women through midwifery in Gaibandha district

The Santal people are the biggest ethnic minority in Northern Bangladesh, in Gaibandha district. Here, UNFPA with the support of the UK Government, is undertaking a transformative project called the 'Santal Health Project'. At the Sapmara Union Health and Family Welfare

Center, midwives Minoti Murmu and Sylvia Mardi are hard at work offering maternal health services and building the awareness of the local community about how deep-rooted traditional practices are hindering access to and adoption of quality maternity healthcare. Due to financial constraints in the local community, home deliveries are also a common practice for many mothers, who are largely unaware of the risks involved.

Sylvia is the daughter of a traditional birth attendant, and Minoti is herself a Santal woman. This not only allowed them to deeply connect with the community, but with other traditional birth attendants as well. Sylvia and Minoti went door-to-door in the Santal community, and through dedicated outreach and trust building with pregnant women, new mothers, and their families, they successfully educated them about the benefits and safety of seeking maternal health services at the Sapmara Union Health and Family Welfare Center. These interactions not only addressed the prevailing misconceptions but also created awareness about the comprehensive services available, including prenatal care, safe deliveries, and postpartum support.

By emphasising the importance of professional care, the midwives saw a resulting increase in the number of

***“Returning to my community to serve the mothers, newborn babies, and pregnant women has been one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life.”***



pregnant women attending the Family Welfare Centre for antenatal care and deliveries. Additionally, the centre provides counselling on sexual and reproductive health to adolescents and offers various family planning methods, further empowering the community.

As Minoti witnessed the positive impact of their work, she reflected, "Returning to my community to serve the mothers, newborn babies, and pregnant women has been one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life."





## Supporting GBV survivors through counselling and care

In Bangladesh, a significant number of women lack knowledge about the significance of seeking healthcare services during pregnancy, leading to limited access to quality care and higher rates of maternal and child mortality. Kanika Dewan, a senior paramedic at Panchari

Midway Waiting Home in Khagrachari district, has firsthand experience with the importance of counselling in maternal health support.

In 2016, Kanika joined the 'Strengthening Maternity and Child Health Services Delivery' project as a senior paramedic, offering

services to pregnant women, children and adolescents. While delivering these services, Kanika encountered challenges related to the offer of care. Many pregnant women lacked family support. Fathers-in-law, mothers-in-law, or husbands would prevent them from consuming calcium or iron-rich





foods or undergoing proper checkups. To address this issue, UNFPA's implementing partner organised camps, yard meetings, and mother gatherings, where Kanika provided pregnant women and their families with information and support.

Apart from her work with pregnant mothers, Kanika Dewan also extends assistance to women who have experienced violence. Many pregnant women become victims of physical abuse at the hands of their husbands. In one instance, Kanika provided first aid to a woman who bore visible signs of abuse. The woman confided in Kanika, revealing that her husband would come home drunk and subject her to physical abuse. Kanika, through regular counselling sessions, managed to convince the woman's husband to seek counselling as well.

Kanika's commitment to empowering women through counselling and compassionate care is promoting the importance of maternal health support.

***Kanika's  
commitment  
to empowering  
women through  
counselling and  
compassionate  
care is promoting  
the importance  
of maternal  
health support.***



## Building community confidence to successfully deliver SRHR services

In remote Matiranga upazila of Khagrachhari district, senior paramedic Pritimoy Chakma has been bridging the gap between medical science and traditional beliefs to deliver care to the local community for many years. He is employed at a midway waiting home managed

by a local organisation supported by UNFPA as part of the 'Strengthening Maternity and Child Health Services Delivery' project. The home provides a wide range of services, including pregnancy-related care, adolescent counselling, treatment for sexually transmitted infections, and referral services.

In early 2022, UNFPA launched a visual inspection of the cervix with acetic acid (VIA) test programme to increase the early detection of cervical cancer in the community. At the outset, response to and use of the test was slow. Women showed a preference for consulting with traditional healers.

However, Pritimoy has been active in Matiranga upazila for 30 years and has a long history of trust and confidence with the local community. He was able to encourage 26 women to participate in the VIA test programme. The test programme was a success. Among the participating women, three tested positive for VIA and Pritimoy was glad to ensure that they received the necessary treatment and care to fully recover.





## Meet the men who deliver innovative services in remote Bangladesh

Sunamganj's haor landscape is known for its perennial submergence, which poses significant challenges to communication and transportation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the already fragile health systems in Sunamganj were further disrupted. Thankfully Mohammad Shamsul Alam, a local family planning facilitator with a knack for innovative thinking, knew what to do. With support from the Family Planning Field Services Delivery unit, managed by the Directorate General of Family Planning in collaboration with UNFPA, he initiated the use of web-based means of communication to enable real-time coordination and collaboration

with his service providers and managers, even in the remotest areas of Sunamganj. He further encouraged his field workers to leave information cards at people's doorsteps to connect them with family planning services. The initiative gained popularity in the community, and proved instrumental in ensuring the uninterrupted provision of family planning services.

Another significant challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic was the lack of transportation infrastructure. At a certain point, Sunamganj Sadar, the district's main town, could only access hospital

services via boat. Realising the dire need for transportation assistance, a family planning officer proposed the idea of a boat ambulance, which was met with immediate action. A boat ambulance named 'Matri toree' was equipped with a delivery bed and an oxygen cylinder, and soon launched. With coordination support from Shamsul Alam, the successful initiative inspired two more upazilas to adopt similar boat ambulance services.

Meet another man from Bandarban, Asaduzzaman Sarkar, who works as a family planning facilitator dedicated to ensuring



access to vital reproductive health services in rural and marginalised communities. Asaduzzaman was deployed to this hard-to-reach district to provide guidance and support to local managers and service providers. Their focus is on strengthening the planning, implementation, and monitoring of family planning services, as well as ensuring a steady supply of contraceptives.

In the remote district of Bandarban, Asaduzzaman's responsibilities include overseeing the operations of Matrimangal, a mother and child welfare centre. This centre is a part of the government's initiative to establish such facilities in every district with a certain population threshold. In addition to Matrimangal centre being technologically advanced, with the Directorate General of Family Planning has outfitted the staff with tablets that are being used to validate registration data for eligible couples, ensuring accuracy and transparency, it is also home to a Youth-friendly corner.

Together, the Government and UNFPA have established Youth-friendly corners in health facilities across Bangladesh. In Bandarban district alone, 11 Union Health and Family Welfare Centers have Youth-friendly corners, providing counselling and support for adolescents. These corners also form the basis for outreach activities by staff, such as Asaduzzaman and his colleagues, who conduct regular awareness sessions

at schools, addressing topics relevant to adolescent health and well-being. In this work, Asaduzzaman is passionate about preventing child marriage, which often stems from a lack of security for young girls. Through regular sessions with parents and guardians, he raises awareness about the harmful consequences of child marriage and emphasizes the importance of education and empowerment for girls.

Engaging men and boys and securing their support to ensure the health of women and girls, along with preventing girl child marriage, has the potential to significantly contribute to the empowerment of women and girls, especially in marginalized communities. Men like Mohammad Shamsul Alam and Asaduzzaman can serve as role models for gender equality.

***Engaging men and boys and securing their support to ensure the health of women and girls, along with preventing girl child marriage, has the potential to significantly contribute to the empowerment of women and girls, especially in marginalized communities.***



## Family welfare assistance during COVID-19 in Sunamganj

In Gourarang union, Sunamganj, Fariha Begum works as a family welfare assistant, providing essential family planning services to women and families in her rural village. She began her career in 2012, when she joined the Directorate General of Family Planning in Bangladesh.

Guided by the training and support provided by UNFPA, Fariha got started on her mission to bring accessible family planning and welfare services to her fellow villagers. Her own experiences as a wife and mother further fueled her commitment to ensuring that women had the power to make informed

decisions about their reproductive health.

Gourarang union, like many rural areas in Bangladesh, faces significant challenges when it comes to accessing modern family planning methods. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, bringing with it lockdowns and restrictions, Fariha faced new obstacles





in her mission. However, following the job descriptions and instructions from the Sunamganj district family planning department, Fariha and her colleagues resumed their activities by visiting homes and leaving their visiting cards with phone numbers for contact. Fariha provided support remotely over phone, offering advice on family planning, maternal care during the pandemic, and newborn health. She became a lifeline for many individuals seeking guidance and reassurance in uncertain times.

The community quickly recognized Fariha's expertise and dedication. As thanks for her dedicated effort during the pandemic, Farhia was recognised as the Best Worker at both the union and upazila levels. She continues to do home visits, sharing with families the importance of family planning, promoting the significance of maternal and adolescent sexual and reproductive health care, and advocating for couple registration and proper prenatal care for expecting mothers.

***The community quickly recognized Fariha's expertise and dedication. As thanks for her dedicated effort during the pandemic, Farhia was recognised as the Best Worker at both the union and upazila levels.***

# Family Planning



## Offering comprehensive family planning to local communities

In July 2021, Jhumur Akter joined as a Family Planning Counselor under the Directorate General of Family Planning, with the invaluable support of UNFPA. Her task was to provide comprehensive counselling services to pregnant mothers, guiding them through the various stages of antenatal care, delivery, and postnatal care. Jhumur understood that family planning

is not just a matter for the mothers alone but also involves the active participation and support of their husbands and elderly family members.

In a region where resistance to family planning methods is common, Jhumur has taken it upon herself to dispel misconceptions, fostering an environment

of understanding and acceptance. To enhance her skills and knowledge, Jhumur regularly attends training sessions organised by UNFPA and the Directorate General of Family Planning. These trainings evaluate her progress and equip her with specialised knowledge, such as the postpartum and post-abortion intrauterine contraceptive



***Recognizing the vital role of family planning counselling, the Directorate General of Family Planning took proactive measures to formally acknowledge and integrate counselling interventions into their official framework.***

device. Jhumur's commitment to continuous learning has empowered her to overcome challenges and provide the highest level of care to her patients.

The efforts of Jhumur and her colleagues are appreciated by the community. In early 2021, only a handful of mothers visited the hospital seeking family planning services. However, as word spread about Jhumur's expertise and compassionate approach, the number of monthly visits increased to 60-65 mothers by the end of 2022. Recognizing the vital role of family planning counselling, the Directorate General of Family Planning took proactive measures to formally acknowledge and integrate counselling interventions into their official framework. Jhumur's success and the positive impact she had on the lives of countless families served as a shining example of the transformative power of family planning counselling.



## Akalmani's struggle with obstetric fistula

In the heart of Rajghat tea garden in Srimangal upazila, Moulvibazar district, Akalmani Nayek is employed in the tea gardens. Her story is one of long term suffering from obstetric fistula and the transformative power of access to proper healthcare and support.



Akalmani was a child bride, married at age 14. Within the span of six years, she suffered two heartbreaking stillbirths. When she became pregnant for the third time, her labour was tough and her husband and mother-in-law eventually rushed her to MAG Osmani Medical College in Sylhet. Tragically, the long journey there resulted in the loss of her unborn child. The doctor acted swiftly and performed a necessary procedure to save Akalmani's life, which led to the unfortunate development of an obstetric fistula.

Due to financial constraints and a lack of awareness, Akalmani was taken home without the necessary medical procedures to repair her injury. For the next 11 years, Akalmani endured unimaginable pain and misery. "During this long period, I did not participate in any social events and did not even meet my relatives. Although my husband did not abandon me, I was deprived of his affection and love."

In 2018, Akalmani met one of the dedicated volunteers of the End Fistula Program 2030, a collaborative effort between the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and UNFPA, aimed at eradicating obstetric fistula

in the Sylhet Division. The volunteer took Akalmani to the Srimangal Upazila Health Complex for a test, which confirmed her condition. Subsequently, Akalmani was referred to Dhaka for specialised treatment.

Initially, Akalmani was hesitant because of the financial burden. However, the volunteer reassured her that all expenses related to transportation and treatment would be covered by the project and she went to Dhaka for treatment at MAMM's Institute of Fistula and Women's Health Hospital in Dhaka. After 21 days of treatment and recovery, Akalmani was able to return home with her health restored.

***"During this long period, I did not participate in any social events and did not even meet my relatives. Although my husband did not abandon me, I was deprived of his affection and love."***



## Azida finds renewed meaning in community

In the Rohingya refugee camps, Aziz Ullah also known by her chosen name, Azida, has found meaning in community volunteerism. As a transgender woman and a Rohingya refugee, she has faced discrimination, rejection, and the weight of societal expectations. However,



through her own journey of self-discovery, she has found purpose and begun making a positive impact in the lives of others like her. Azida's story traces back to her early years, where she always felt different from those around her. In a world that forced gender norms upon her, she found solace in the company of girls and struggled to conform to

the expectations placed on boys. It was not until her family was displaced from Myanmar and sought refuge in a camp in Bangladesh that her gender identity became apparent. Within her own community and even within her own family, Azida faced rejection and harassment. She yearned to be accepted for who she truly was, but the road to self-



***Through this connection, Azida found a supportive community of individuals who were also striving for positive change in their lives.***

acceptance was far from easy. Settled in the camp, she endured ongoing discrimination and societal pressure, leading her to marry despite her true identity. While her wife accepted her for who she was, Azida still battled with shame and embarked on a journey seeking validation and love within the transgender community.

It was during this turbulent time that Azida crossed paths with Bipasha, a volunteer of a UNFPA-supported local NGO. Through this connection, Azida found a supportive community of individuals who were also striving for positive change in their lives. Azida immersed herself in various service activities and eventually became a volunteer for the UNFPA-supported project, 'Addressing SRHR needs of men, boys, and transgender individuals in the Rohingya Community in Ukhiya and Cox's Bazar.' In her role, she facilitates access to health services for transgender individuals, provides counselling, and works tirelessly to raise awareness in her community about the available support and services.



## Shiuli finds belonging with Bandhu Social Welfare Society

From an early age, 48-year-old Mohammed Ayub, known as Shiuli, recognized her feminine identity, but faced prejudice and ignorance from her family and society. To make ends meet, Shiuli performs on stage and asks for money at the local markets. As a transgender woman,

she also lives with a high risk of sexually transmitted disease, prevalent among the transgender community in Bangladesh. For years, she lacked access to proper healthcare, leaving her vulnerable to these health risks and without the necessary treatment.

In 2019, Shiuli's life took a turn when she crossed paths with Mehdi, a volunteer for Bandhu Social Welfare Society. Opening up about her life and struggles as a transgender woman, she found solace and support

within the organisation. Bandhu focuses on providing healthcare and safeguarding the human rights of sexual minority populations, and their effort became a lifeline for Shiuli.

At Bandhu, Shiuli was able to access testing and received a difficult diagnosis. Fortunately, the project provided her with immediate treatment, covering all her medical expenses. She quickly embraced the opportunity to become a volunteer field worker with Bandhu. Her role involves educating her



fellow community members about the risks of sexually transmitted diseases and encouraging them to use risk reduction strategies and seek proper treatment.

For Shiuli, this initiative represents more than just healthcare — it is an acknowledgment and acceptance of her true self. The project has given her a sense of belonging and community that she had longed for throughout her life. Today, Shiuli continues her work to create a safer and more inclusive society for transgender persons.

***For Shiuli, this initiative represents more than just healthcare — it is an acknowledgment and acceptance of her true self.***



Changing social norms is not possible without dedicated individuals such as Mohammed Jasim Uddin, the Service Center Manager at Bandhu Social Welfare Society. With the support of UNFPA, Jasim is leading a groundbreaking project titled 'Addressing the SRHR needs of men, boys, and transgender among the Rohingya Community in Ukhiya and Cox's Bazar.'

Bangladesh struggles to address the sexual and reproductive health and rights needs of marginalised individuals, especially in the transgender community. Jasim's project aims to provide much-needed healthcare services to gender-diverse groups, with a particular focus on Rohingya refugees.

Bandhu Social Welfare Society's primary objective is to safeguard the human rights of minorities and ensure their access to essential healthcare services, including HIV and STI testing and mental health counselling are offered. The determination of Jasim, and others like him, are propelling Bangladesh toward a more inclusive and equitable future.



## Overcoming obstacles in the battle against cervical cancer

Cervical cancer remains a pressing public health issue in Bangladesh, particularly for women in rural areas who face limited access to screening, diagnosis, and treatment services. Farida Begum, a 47-year-old mother of five from Shikdarpara, Maheshkhali upazila, represents the

countless women silently battling this deadly disease. Her story sheds light on the challenges faced by women like her and emphasises the importance of comprehensive screening initiatives and awareness campaigns.

In 2008, Farida started experiencing excruciating abdominal pain. As a busy mother of five, the pain was debilitating and got in the way of her household chores, affecting her daily life. Despite visiting a doctor, she received no solution, leaving her with unanswered questions and persistent pain. Financial constraints prevented her from seeking advanced medical treatment.

In 2018, a neighbour informed Farida about a camp organised by UNFPA and the Directorate General of Health Services with support from the UK FCDO in Matarbari, near to her home, to raise awareness about cervical cancer prevention and provide essential services. Intrigued by the prospect of finding answers to her ongoing pain, Farida attended the camp and shared her struggles with the health professionals present. This interaction provided her with much-needed counselling and guidance, urging her to visit the Maheshkhali Upazila Health Complex.



***Countless women in Bangladesh suffer from cervical cancer, often without realising it. There is an urgent need for increased screening initiatives and awareness campaigns to ensure early detection and effective treatment.***



Despite being advised to seek further medical attention at Cox's Bazar Sadar Hospital, various circumstances prevented Farida from following through with the recommendation. Financial constraints proved to be a major barrier, as she lacked the funds necessary for travel and medical expenses. In December 2022, Farida missed yet another opportunity to pursue her treatment due to these limitations. A dedicated field worker was assigned to support and assist women in Maheshkhali. Upon learning about Farida's challenges, the field worker went to Farida's home to provide counselling and emotional support. With UNFPA's assistance, Farida received the necessary medication, easing her pain and offering hope in her fight against cervical cancer.

Countless women in Bangladesh suffer from cervical cancer, often without realising it. There is an urgent need for increased screening initiatives and awareness campaigns to ensure early detection and effective treatment.





## 66-year old Ezabunnesa beats cervical cancer

In Bangladesh, cervical cancer remains a silent killer, claiming the lives of around 6,500 women annually. It is a harsh reality that many cancer patients are unable to undergo treatment due to the associated financial cost. One possible solution to alleviate this problem is to ensure

that the cancer is identified at an early stage. Early detection through visual inspection with acetic acid (VIA) can be a lifesaver, and gives healthcare professionals a chance to stop this disease in its tracks.

One day, 66-year-old Ezabunnesa suddenly felt weak and noticed an unusual vaginal discharge and bleeding. Concerned for her health, her daughter-in-law took her to Kurigram Sadar Hospital, where they were introduced to a dedicated community health worker employed by an NGO employed by UNFPA. This organisation works together with the Directorate General of Health Services

and UNFPA to implement cervical cancer screening, pre-cancer treatment, and cancer referral services in the Kurigram district, with funds by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office. The primary goal of this initiative is to detect and prevent cervical cancer, especially in rural communities.

At the health centre, Ezabunnesa and her daughter-in-law received information about cervical cancer and the VIA test. After the VIA test and a subsequent colposcopy at Kurigram Sadar Hospital with positive results, she was referred to Rangpur Sadar Hospital for a biopsy to confirm the cancer diagnosis.



***UNFPA works closely with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and partners in the fight against cervical cancer and to save as many lives as possible through early detection, diagnosis, and management of the disease.***

The biopsy confirmed the cancer, and Ezabunnesa was subsequently referred for treatment at the National Institute of Cancer Research Hospital in Dhaka.

In Bangladesh, accessing affordable and timely cancer treatment in public hospitals can be challenging, as showcased by the number of referrals Ezabunnesa had to deal with. She was provided with a steadying hand throughout the process, and she successfully received three sessions of chemotherapy and radiotherapy within two months, leading to a complete cure for her cancer. Currently, Ezabunnesa enjoys a healthy life and regularly visits her doctor for check-ups. The programme covered all expenses related to her treatment and travel.

This story is a testament to the importance of timely diagnosis and treatment for cervical cancer. It is noteworthy that globally and in Bangladesh, the regular cervical cancer screening program typically targets women between the ages of 30 and 60. However, many women, like Ezabunnesa, could miss out on the opportunity for screening during their lack of eligibility status.

UNFPA works closely with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and partners in the fight against cervical cancer and to save as many lives as possible through early detection, diagnosis, and management of the disease. The goal is to ensure that cervical cancer becomes a preventable and treatable condition for all women in Bangladesh.



## Conquering women's health prejudice in the tea gardens

For the past two centuries, the tea industry has relied on the hard work and dedication of women labourers. Unfortunately, a significant portion of these women lack access to information about prenatal, delivery, and postnatal care and services. As a result, maternal

mortality remains high in the tea gardens. UNFPA, together with ILO, UN Women, and UNICEF are implementing a Joint SDG Fund project called 'Bagan Maer Jonne' to improve access to maternal health care services for women working in the tea gardens, with the aim of reducing maternal mortality.

Rokeya Khatun Rekha works as a volunteer on this project in the Rajghat tea garden in Srimangal upazila, in Moulvibazar district. One of her responsibilities is to motivate pregnant women and women of reproductive age of the tea garden to go to the health centre to access health care services and to have their babies delivered institutionally.

Initially, Rekha faced many challenges related to misconceptions that were prevalent in the tea garden community. As an example, many families believe that it is inauspicious to reveal a pregnancy before six months, as they think it could harm the unborn child. Locals also believe that blurred vision during pregnancy is due to an ancestor's reincarnation, and during pregnancy, cultural restrictions will prevent women from seeking care for possible pregnancy-related complications. However, Rekha is committed to changing this



***many families believe that it is inauspicious to reveal a pregnancy before six months, as they think it could harm the unborn child.***

by providing counselling and support through information-sharing and encouragement.

Despite the challenges posed by the families of pregnant women, she keeps track of their progress and shows up to support whenever necessary. When notified of a pregnant woman in labour pain, she promptly visits her home and counsels her guardians and relatives. She then accompanies the woman to the facility to ensure a safe delivery. Although she has encountered resistance from some families, Rekha has successfully helped deliver many pregnant women to the hospital to be attended by a skilled birth attendant. Volunteers like Rekha are instrumental in supporting the most unprivileged women in the country and ensuring that no one is left behind.



## Komliful Pharmacy is now a symbol of hope for families

The presence of a proficient pharmacist in each and every pharmacy is of utmost importance when it comes to delivering high-quality services and referrals. Such services include acquiring quality drugs, storing them in the appropriate manner, dispensing medicines accurately according to prescriptions and over-the-counter policy, and providing tailored counselling to individuals. Nevertheless, there is a great unmet need for trained pharmacists in the numerous pharmacies throughout Bangladesh.

After completing her education at Medical Assistant Training School in Dhaka in 2011, Deepa Chowdhury started her career as a medical assistant. She returned to her home district of Bogura in 2013 and opened a pharmacy. In 2021, Deepa underwent training under the project 'Introduction of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Information and Services in Pharmacies located in Urban Areas,' also known as 'Komlaful Pharmacy,' organised by Centre for Injury Prevention and Research, Bangladesh, in collaboration with UNFPA.

As Deepa hung the banner of Komlaful Pharmacy in her store, a man approached her with questions about the services provided. She kindly gave him a brief overview of the pharmacy's offerings. The following day, the man returned with his wife, Shimu, who at first seemed hesitant to discuss their concerns with her. However, Deepa's reassuring and professional demeanour put Shimu at ease, and she felt comfortable opening up about their sexual and reproductive health issues.







***Deepa's reassuring and professional demeanour put Shimu at ease, and she felt comfortable opening up about their sexual and reproductive health issues***

Deepa listened with care, provided the couple with helpful advice and referred her to the District Hospital for further treatment.

A few months later, the couple returned to the pharmacy to share the happy news that Shimu was pregnant. Deepa was overjoyed for them and provided further guidance on what to do during the pregnancy. In Bogura, Shimu is not the only pregnant woman receiving maternity counselling from Deepa. As a responsible, sincere, and experienced pharmacist, Deepa has gained popularity in her area. Pregnant women and other local women trust her for their health-related issues.



## Golam's quick decision saved the life of a patient suffering from eclampsia

Access to health and medical care is a fundamental human right that remains unfulfilled in Bangladesh. A significant number of people rely on local pharmacies for their primary care, and the absence of adequately trained pharmacists in most of these pharmacies deprives them of proper advice and treatment.

Chandana, a 30-year-old woman from Betgari, Bagura, was expecting her second child. One day, during her eighth month of pregnancy, she suddenly experienced severe headaches and blurry vision. Her hands and feet also started to swell. Feeling unsettled, she went with her husband to Rabbani Pharmacy in Shibganj upazila, Bogra District. Golam Rabbani, the pharmacist and owner of the pharmacy, immediately recognised the signs of eclampsia and referred her to

Ziaur Rahman Medical College and Hospital with a referral slip from Komlaful Pharmacy. The couple was informed that the treatment would be free of charge. They arrived at the hospital, presented the referral slip to the emergency department, and received treatment from a gynaecologist before returning home. Thanks to the attentive care of Golam who recognised the seriousness of her condition and his subsequent quick referral, Chandana delivered a healthy baby



girl through a caesarean section in her 36th week of pregnancy.

Golam has been working as a pharmacist since 2007. In 2021, he participated in a workshop organised by Centre for Injury Prevention and Research, Bangladesh and UNFPA to introduce sexual and reproductive health and rights information and services in urban pharmacies. This project is known as Komlaful Pharmacy. After receiving training, Golam became more knowledgeable about selling medicines and providing professional health services and referral as a pharmacist. Prior to the training, he often sold medications without prescriptions and lacked an understanding of sexual and reproductive health, maternal care, and the health needs of pregnant women. By utilising Komlaful Pharmacy's referral system and app, he ensures that pregnant women receive appropriate and secure maternal care. He says, "It is important for all pharmacists across the country to receive training from Komlaful Pharmacy to ensure that people are provided with better services at their local pharmacies."

***By utilising Komlaful Pharmacy's referral system and app, he ensures that pregnant women receive appropriate and secure maternal care. He says, "It is important for all pharmacists across the country to receive training from Komlaful Pharmacy to ensure that people are provided with better services at their local pharmacies."***





### Safe birth thanks to regular checkups and the Ma Jaan app

Providing institutional delivery services is crucial for ensuring the safety and health of pregnant women. This can greatly reduce the risks and complications associated with pregnancy and delivery.

Mosammat Maria Akhtar, a 25-year-old housewife and mother of three, has been living in Karail slum for 17 years. She began regular contact with Mahmuda, a health worker working in Karail, three months after the birth of her last child in 2021. Mahmuda is a health worker at a maternity centre where the project, 'Solving referral challenges for urban poor to access emergency obstetric

and new-born care,' is under implementation by BRAC with support from UNFPA.

During Maria's pregnancy, she received comprehensive prenatal care at the maternity centre. This included six checkups, where healthcare professionals at the centre thoroughly examined Maria and her growing baby to monitor their health and



development. The checkups also included routine testing to identify any potential complications or risks, including blood tests, urine tests, and ultrasounds. She also received iron supplements at a nominal cost, to help prevent iron-deficiency anaemia during her pregnancy.

In delivering these services to Maria, the centre is making use of the Ma Jaan app. This innovative app stores information about expectant mothers such as Maria, who are then able to see their lists of prescribed medicines and regimens, next appointment dates, and so on the app. When the time came and Maria's water broke on her due date, she did not go into labour as expected, she was referred to a nearby hospital contracted by the project through the app.

Maria immediately rushed off to the hospital using a rickshaw obtained through the Ma Jaan app. The hospital authorities were informed in advance through the app about her imminent arrival, and as a result, Maria admittance was smooth. She subsequently delivered her healthy baby through a caesarean, and both mother and child were discharged in good condition after three days. Apps such as Ma Jaan can go a long way in ensuring quality prenatal healthcare for expectant mothers, as well as safe delivery and referral using innovative methods at low cost.

***Apps such as Ma Jaan can go a long way in ensuring quality prenatal healthcare for expectant mothers, as well as safe delivery and referral using innovative methods at low cost.***

# Making a Difference

Promoting Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Bangladesh

Published by



The United Nations Sexual and Reproductive Health Agency

Concept & Design







Canada

  
Foreign, Commonwealth  
& Development Office

