

“We know about reproductive health from our physical education textbook that contains a couple of chapters about it. However, our teachers advise us to read it on our own at home and these chapters are never taught in the classroom,” says Abdur Rahman, a student of class ten studying in a prominent school of Rangpur district. Learning about sexuality and reproductive health is often considered taboo in Bangladesh's conservative society.

However, in this era of internet, this taboo cannot prevent young men and women from learning about sexuality in the wrong way from undesired sources. “We don't have internet connection in our house but we can browse the internet in the cyber cafes at the cost of only 20 tk per hour,” says Md Shujon a friend of Abdur Rahman. And, due to accessibility to the red light areas of World Wide Web, these inquisitive adolescents are susceptible to acquire dangerous misconception about opposite gender and sexuality which can gravely affect their sound psychological and social development.

An initiative called Campus Hero Café has been promoting solutions to this serious problem. This initiative has been running in four districts of Bangladesh to reach these young adolescents with the correct concepts of sexual and reproductive health rights to make these youngsters conscious and respectful about the rights of the women and girls. Dr Sayed Saikh Intiaz's organisation, Centre for Men and Masculinities Studies (CMMS) has been implementing this important initiative at schools, colleges and universities in Dhaka, Pabna, Cox's Bazaar and Rangpur. Dhaka University's Department of Women and Gender Studies and Promunda US and Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) are also supporting this effort. This change making initiative was inaugurated on 4th December by a conference of the researchers and activists chaired by Professor Nasreen Ahmad, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, University of Dhaka where Mohammad Nasim, MP, Minister of health and family welfare was the chief guest.

After conducting thorough introductory surveys and assessments, the activists and experts of CMMS established counselling centres called Campus Hero Cafés in different educational institutions of those districts where young men and women can freely share their experiences and problems regarding sexual and reproductive health. The experts solve their problems by providing effective psychosocial counselling in a very friendly manner. Also, on-campus counselling services, with selected students from different institutions, the cafes also organise a wide range of social activities to make other students and the community conscious about sexual and reproductive health rights of men and women.

“Our experts at the cafes are already overwhelmed with a lot of curious questions from the adolescents. They are asking about the problems they have been encountering, they are asking about their rights and responsibilities and they have been asking for suggestions regarding what they should do and what they should not do in this vulnerable period of

CAMPUS HERO CAFÉ: ELIMINATING STIGMA TOWARDS SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

PHOTO: COURTESY



life”, says Afsana Begum, programme officer of CMMS working for this initiative.

To reach these students 24/7, a mobile app called “Challenger Mamu” has been launched where anyone can ask their queries regarding sexual and reproductive health rights and get instant answers from the experts through live chat and by dialling the hotline number. Also, the app presents a lot of resourceful contents for the young men and women to reduce misconception and superstitions on this taboo issue.

“This initiative is aimed at finding out the correlation between violence against women and the existing practices of masculinity prevalent among young men in Bangladesh. Because, in our society, men are perceived as the perpetrators of committing violence against women, whereas, men can also be the instrument to prevent gender discrimination in our society,” says Dr Sayed Saikh Intiaz, Executive Director of CMMS and chairperson of Dhaka University's Department of Women and Gender

Studies. “By teaching young men and women about sexual and reproductive health rights through a wide range of activities, my goal is to develop a young generation who will be sensitive and respectful about women's and girl's rights,” he adds.

In recent years, the increasing violence against women and girls in Bangladesh have magnetised the attention of the civil society. Education based pragmatic initiatives can contribute effectively to solve this crucial social problem. ■



Screenshots of Challenger Mamu app shows how adolescents are interacting with the experts of Campus Hero Café to solve their queries regarding sexual and reproductive health.

INITIATIVE

OPINION

Youth leadership programmes have been an 'in' thing to do for some time now. Passionate young people, or 'leaders' who volunteer and work for different social causes, believe in bringing change and working for the betterment of their country, are pooled to take part in youth leadership programmes to learn more about leadership, and become agents of change. They do not only participate in different programmes in their own country, but travel continents, thanks to the very generous funding opportunities by different embassies now. Fellowships, internships, exchange programs—you name it!

As much as leadership programmes provide opportunities for young people to grow and learn, it is also important to raise few important questions related to the leadership culture. Healthy scepticism in tandem with critical thinking can actually encourage us to become better versions of ourselves.

Having had participated in leadership programmes myself, it often seems like the programmes are geared towards making leaders feel good about themselves. There is nothing wrong with that. We all need a pat on the back from time to time for the work we do. However, when it is turned into a mantra, that's when things seem a bit odd. It plays into this individualistic notion of standing out, being unique. It also ties in with this idea of feeling very important about oneself, and having followers on social media, and making sure others know that you have followers, doesn't matter if you have anything substantial to say or not.

Leadership programmes create platforms for leaders to feel like superheroes, as opposed to deconstructing the figure of superhero. 'You all are superheroes; you all are leaders!' gets chanted. However, who gets to be a superhero? Whose voices are we blocking out to ensure that we are being heard? Leadership programmes can be more effective if it brings in critical lens of positionality—reflecting upon our own position in society, and how does that affect others around us, before we jump into drumming about how we 'help' others. Also, why should we be critical of the superhero figure? Because most superheroes are male, white, straight, able-bodied, and American. We should ask ourselves what alternative representations will emerge as we dissociate from the superhero figure, and acknowledge for one minute that we are not the 'best of the bests' all the time?

It is great to have leadership skills, however is it mandatory though? In today's professional and educational settings, leadership is a requirement, because really, the most important question they ask you is 'What leadership skills do you have?' One is left wondering what drives a leader to be a leader—certificates and awards from the Queen of England or personal motivations? To feel important and exclusive, or to bring structural changes in society? I ran into an interesting insight in a friend's status who had quoted her father saying 'everyone wants to feel important, and no one wants to be useful'. It often feels like leadership culture

YOUTH LEADERSHIP CULTURE AND WHAT'S WRONG WITH IT

SAAD KHAN

PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO



feeds into the contemporary narcissistic, individualistic culture, woven with this idea of creating an exceptional brand of oneself. You are what others are not. Young people now know how to build their resumes on credentials that will shine through and through.

It's great to be different! However, when 'being different' becomes exclusive, commoditised, certified, even glamorous and turned into a trend, that's when we should sit up and worry, because we are not necessarily talking about and respecting diversity in beings and

thoughts, but rather a competition and proving oneself to be different. Let us also remember that it is perfectly alright to not be different as well.

Great leadership is also about critiquing your own position in society. It is about generosity and being behind the scene as well. It can be about cooking and writing short stories for everyone. It is also about finding the best in others, and including everyone, as opposed to proving one's worth all the time, and feeling special. It is about listening more than talking. ■

NUMBERS

200



PHOTO: INTERNET

Is the number of military personnels who are deployed to Syria to help the campaign to drive the Islamic State militant group from Raqqa, U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter said on Saturday. Speaking in Bahrain at the Manama Dialogue conference on Middle East security, Carter said the 200, including special forces trainers, advisers and explosive ordnance disposal teams, would join 300 U.S. special force troops already in Syria. "These uniquely skilled operators will join the 300 U.S. special operations forces already in Syria, to continue organizing, training, equipping, and otherwise enabling capable, motivated, local forces to take the fight to ISIL," he said in a speech, referring to Islamic State.

Source: Reuters