

# Safe Spaces for Youth

UNFPA-The Daily Star roundtable urges for more investment in making spaces safe for youth.



their behaviours and attitudes because they now understand how girls actually feel when they are harassed. The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA), with the support of UNFPA, UNICEF, BRAC and other agencies, has commenced the process of scaling up their adolescent clubs. Participants thanked the MoWCA for allocating a separate budget for adolescent clubs around the country. They requested the government to pay further attention to make these clubs safe for adolescents and youth.

### Public Spaces

and universities by implementing the High Court directive on preventing sexual harassment in the workplace and educational institutions. Speakers emphasised the importance of including sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education in educational/training institutes. They also highlighted that girls need to be encouraged to remain in education/training and to be provided with life skills. Implementation of affirmative action programmes for marginalised youth was also urged by the discussants.

Health facilities are another key

would generate high economic returns, especially in low-income countries. "According to this study, which analysed data from 75 low- and middle-income countries, improving physical, mental and sexual health of adolescents, aged between 10-19 years (at a cost of USD 4.60 per person annually), could bring tenfold economic benefits. This investment would avert 12 million adolescent deaths and prevent more than 30 million unwanted pregnancies in adolescents," she added.

Speakers stressed on the impor-

people, particularly female youth. These facilities should also be made easily accessible for all, including those with disabilities. In addition to accessibility, the health services for youth should be non-judgmental, respectful and confidential so that the youth feel safe while discussing issues related to their sexual and reproductive health. Jeroen Steeghs, Deputy Head of Mission, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, emphasised that youth have the right to appropriate services and information with which they can make the

Workplaces also come under the category of public spaces. Workplaces with little or no safety concerns are where many adolescents and youth work. Syed Niaz, Team Leader, Better Work Bangladesh, International Labour Organization (ILO) Bangladesh Office, urged for establishing a legal framework which would not only provide these workers with the right conditions to work in but also empower them to voice their opinions.

Pointing to the fact that South Asia, as a region, is currently ranked third in terms of death of children in road accidents, Sheema Sen Gupta, Deputy Representative of UNICEF, Bangladesh urged for more initiatives from both the government and private sector to effectively address the issue of road safety.

### Digital Spaces

With the development of digital technologies, we are seeing a robust engagement of young people in digital spaces. It helps youth interact virtually across borders with everyone. The speakers stressed on the need to ensure that young people can interact in digital spaces safely.

Fatema Tuz Johoora, Partnership and Knowledge Management Consultant of Swisscontact, shared an anecdote of a girl who shared her experience of harassment in social media which was removed by concerned authorities. "Such incidents do not give the youth a sense of justice and instead make them feel discriminated," said Ms. Johoora. The discussants shared the view that the freedom to express opinions via digital spaces, if done responsibly, must not be hindered. Ejaj Ahmad, Founder and President of Bangladesh Youth Leadership Centre (BYLC), emphasised the importance of instilling values of shared responsibility among young people and educating them on how to use digital media responsibly.

Besides the lack of safe spaces, child marriage, unemployment, lack of skills and low youth representation were identified by speakers as major concerns that seriously affect young people's ability to contribute to the overall development of the country and to have their voices heard. To overcome these challenges and fully benefit from the demographic window of opportunity, a period when the ratio of working-age population to both young and old dependents is high, the government needs to invest heavily in adolescents and youth. These investments will result in a more educated, healthy and productive population, an increase in per capita income and living standards, and the availability of resources for more productive investments, opined the discussants. They claimed that if the government makes the necessary investments, the country will be able to achieve most of the SDGs by 2030.

All participants expressed their gratitude to the organisers, UNFPA and The Daily Star, and urged for increased participation of youth in all policymaking forums.

### KEY INVESTMENT AREAS

- Providing quality education and skills development, including Comprehensive Sexuality Education, based on current interventions;
- Making available comprehensive health care including SRH information/services;
- Giving youth opportunities to participate in policymaking and implementation;
- Improving employment and earning opportunities for young people;
- Preventing and addressing sexual and gender-based violence, including harmful practices like child marriage;
- Encouraging savings and investments via reform of financial institutions.

Eshani Ruwanpura, Adolescents and Youth Programme Specialist of UNFPA, defined safe spaces as a place or environment in which a person or category of people can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment, or any other emotional or physical harm. "Safe spaces which accept the diversity of people can contribute to ending gender-based violence, ensuring gender equality, dignity and safety, youth leadership and overall well-being of young people," she added.

Notably, the importance of safe spaces for youth is also highlighted in the United Nations Youth Strategy under its priority on peace and resilience building. The UN Youth Strategy identifies five priority issues to be addressed and achieved by 2030: new channels for youth to voice their opinions and participate in promoting a peaceful and sustainable world; better access to education and health services by young people; economic empowerment through decent work and training opportunities for youth; guarantee of civic rights and political engagement for youth; and support to young people as catalysts for peace, security and humanitarian action.

### Physical Spaces

Safe physical spaces help accommodate the needs of diverse youth, especially those who are marginalised. Speakers suggested that establishing community centres and adolescent and youth clubs and making these centres and clubs safe could be an important investment for the youth of Bangladesh. These community centres with special hours for youth should provide recreational and training opportunities to young people and also create an environment where youth can engage in constructive dialogue.

Similarly, adolescent and youth clubs can provide adolescents and youth with life skills which have a gender and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) focus. The outreach programmes conducted by these clubs should be led by youth, suggested the discussants. Under the Generation Breakthrough project, funded by the Kingdom of the Netherlands, UNFPA has established adolescent clubs where adolescents and youth, particularly those from vulnerable and marginalised communities, are encouraged to join.

Nafisa Mehreen, a member of the adolescent corner in Holy Cross Girls' High School, said, "Here (adolescent corner) we can ask questions anonymously, and have them answered. We also learn a lot about both genders and their emotions, from the sessions conducted through the Generation Breakthrough project." She added that these programmes help boys change

## SPEAKERS



Asa Torkelsson, UNFPA Representative in Bangladesh



Jeroen Steeghs, Deputy Head of Mission, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands



Eshani Ruwanpura, Programme Specialist, Adolescents and Youth, UNFPA



Sheema Sen Gupta, Deputy Representative, UNICEF



Ejaj Ahmad, Founder and President, Bangladesh Youth Leadership Centre (BYLC)



Syed Niaz, Team Leader, Better Work Bangladesh International Labour Organisation (ILO) Bangladesh Office



Fatema Tuz Johoora, Partnership and Knowledge Management Consultant, Swisscontact



Nafisa Mehreen, Member, Adolescent Corner, Holy Cross Girls' High School, Dhaka

Safe public spaces afford youth the opportunity to participate in education, sports and other leisure activities in the community.

A suggestion was made to ensure a non-harassing environment in schools

public space that requires more attention from policymakers. Asa Torkelsson, UNFPA Representative in Bangladesh, referred to a 2017 study which showed that investment in adolescents' health and well-being

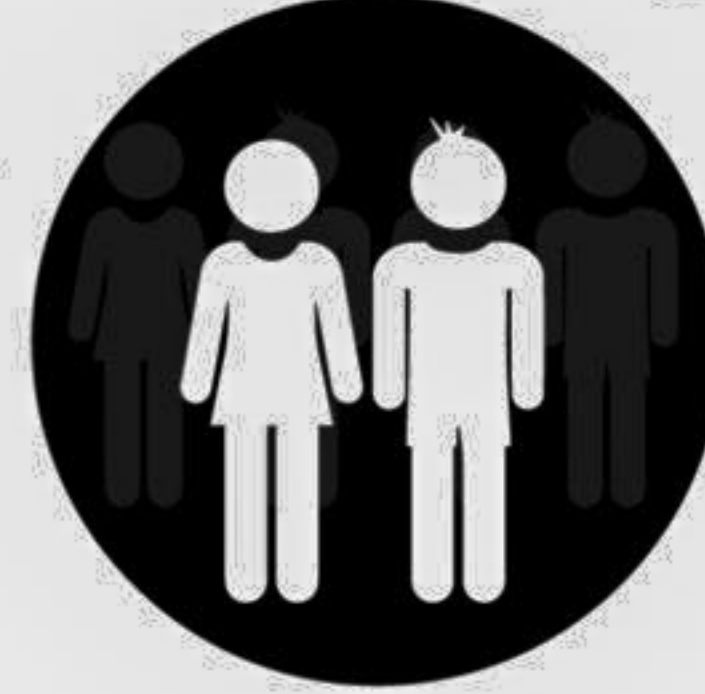
tance of ensuring young people's access to quality health services, including sexual and reproductive health. They urged that health clinics should not only cater to married couples but also to unmarried young

right decisions and exercise control over their bodies. He shared an example from the Netherlands, a country which has been successful in keeping teenage pregnancy rates fairly low as a result of providing SRH information to boys and girls at an early age. Other speakers agreed with him on the need to educate young people about sexual and reproductive health issues in schools so that they have sufficient knowledge and understanding about their needs and rights.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARLIAMENTARIANS AND POLICYMAKERS

- Use the platform of the Standing Committee on the Ministry of Youth and Sports to ensure the National Youth Policy and Action Plan are effectively implemented;
- Use the platform of the Standing Committee on the Ministry of Education to advocate for making schools safe and mainstreaming Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in curriculum;
- Ensure budgetary allocation to address youth-related issues, especially the provision of quality sexual and reproductive health services to all youth, regardless of marital status;
- Engage the private sector to invest in youth development.

## Youth in Bangladesh



### EDUCATION

- High literacy rates for both female and male youth (BBS 2011)
- Low enrolment and completion rate at secondary school level: the completion and drop-out rates are 60 percent and 40 percent (BANBEIS 2016)
- University graduates among the country's population is relatively low at 4.1% (BANBEIS 2016)

### EMPLOYMENT

- Labour force participation rate among youth, aged 15-29 years, is 31.6% (Labour Force Survey 2016-2017)
- Unemployment rate for youth, aged 15-24 years, is 12.3% (Labour Force Survey 2016-2017)
- Youth, aged 15-29 years, not in employment, education or training (NEET) is 29.8% (Labour Force Survey 2016-2017)

### YOUTH REPRESENTATION

- Low youth representation among Parliamentarians
- Limited platforms for youth to raise their voices

### CHILD MARRIAGE AND GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

- Among female youth, aged 20-24 years, 59% are married by age 18 (BDHS 2014)
- The fertility rate for adolescents aged 15-19 years and women aged 20-24 years is 113 and 143 live births per 1000 women, respectively (BDHS 2014)
- Non-partner physical violence and non-partner sexual violence, in the past 12 months, among girls aged 15-19 years was 11.2% and 3.1% respectively (BBS 2015)

### SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

- Contraceptive prevalence rate among married girls, aged 15-19 years, is 51% compared with 62% at the national level (BDHS 2014)
- The unmet need for family planning is highest among married girls, aged 15-19 years, at 17% compared with 12% at the national level (BDHS 2014)