

Study shows how integrated interventions can promote sexual and reproductive health knowledge and reduce violence against young women and girls in urban slums

New research has demonstrated that combining sensitisation of females and males regarding legal rights and remedies, community campaigns and activism and provision of legal and health services on the ground can reduce violence against young women and girls in urban slums.

Considerable improvements in knowledge of sexual and reproductive health and rights, and decreases in gender violence experienced by young women and girls, have been attributed to an innovative action research project recently undertaken in several Dhaka slums. Surveys of 12,000 people taken before and after a 20-month intervention in 19 slums further showed that contraceptive use increased, and a greater proportion of survivors of violence sought help from informal sources of support.

The preliminary findings of an impact evaluation of the ‘Growing Up Healthy and Safe’ (SAFE) study, was disseminated at a seminar at icddr,b today. The project was the first intervention to integrate group awareness-raising sessions, community campaigns and activism of community members with easy access to effective legal and health services. It is also the first of its kind in the developing world to demonstrate positive changes in the community-at-large, and not just the members of SAFE groups.

A consortium of researchers, service providers and activists worked together to develop and implement this pioneering project. Led by icddr,b, the consortium included the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), Marie Stopes Bangladesh, Nari Maitree, the Population Council and the We Can Campaign.

Dhaka has experienced one of the highest growth rates of any city on earth, and its population is expected to exceed 20 million by 2015. As urbanisation continues to increase globally, innovative projects to address health issues prevalent in urban slums are critical. Girls and young women are especially at risk. Compared to women and girls in rural and non-slum urban areas, they experience higher rates of violence, and poorer sexual and reproductive health.

Speaking at today’s seminar, the Honourable Secretary, Ministry of Women & Children Affairs Mr. Tariq-ul-Islam said: “The SAFE project offers important insights into what works in addressing sexual and reproductive health and violence against women and girls in urban slums. It offers a powerful model for how we can make a difference in these settings. These findings would help policies and programmes in these areas.”

At the dissemination event Dr. Ruchira Tabassum Naved, icddr,b senior scientist and principal investigator of the SAFE project commented, “SAFE is the first programme in the developing world to demonstrate a reduction in spousal violence against women and girls in the community.” She added, “We were especially pleased to see that SAFE benefitted adolescent girls most, given they are more vulnerable to violence.”

“It’s not just telling you that you have a right not to be beaten, but where to go if this happens, what you can do, who will help you, and having committed and competent people on hand to provide that help” said BLAST’s Honorary Executive Director, Barrister Sara Hossain.

The consortium behind the SAFE project hopes the work can continue: “There is still much to be done,” said Dr. Sajeda Amin, Senior Associate at the Population Council. “We need to scale the project up. And it would be ideal to come back in a few years to evaluate the lasting community impact of this programme.”

The SAFE project was funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherland, and Ms Ella de Voogd, First Secretary, Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands was present at today’s seminar as special guest.

Additional support to the Population Council came from the MacArthur Foundation and the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA).

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Notes to the Editor:

About icddr,b

icddr,b (International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh) is a not-for-profit international health research institution located in Dhaka. Dedicated to saving lives through research and treatment, icddr,b addresses some of the most critical health concerns facing the world today, ranging from improving neonatal survival to HIV/AIDS. In collaboration with academic and research institutions throughout the world, icddr,b conducts research, training and extension activities, as well as programme-based activities, to develop and share knowledge for global lifesaving solutions.

About BLAST

BLAST is the largest dedicated NGO providing legal services in Bangladesh. It uniquely provides access to legal aid across the spectrum, from the village courts, up to the Supreme Court, through legal education, alternative dispute resolution, individual advice, and casework as well as public interest litigation. It works through community legal aid clinics, a specialised legal staff and a pro bono network of lawyers. Established in 1993 by a resolution of the Bangladesh Bar Council, its mission is to ensure access to justice for those living in poverty or facing discrimination.

About Population Council

The Population Council confronts critical health and development issues—from stopping the spread of HIV to improving reproductive health and ensuring that young people lead full and productive lives. Through biomedical, social science, and public health research in 50 countries, we work with our partners to deliver solutions that lead to more effective policies, programs, and technologies

that improve lives around the world. Established in 1952 and headquartered in New York, the Council is a nongovernmental, nonprofit organization governed by an international board of trustees..

About WE CAN Bangladesh (WE CAN)

We Can Alliance is a collective platform of civil society, organizations, individuals, institutions and others aim of ending domestic violence against women. The initiative was launched in late 2004.

About Nari Maitree

Nari Maitree (NM) Women's Solidarity is a non-governmental and non-profitable voluntary organization was founded in 1983 with a mission to empower the disadvantaged poor and vulnerable women, adolescents,youth and children characterized by slum dwellers and pavement dwellers, Street, Hotel and Brothel based sex workers and their children, child labour, including ethnic minority groups for establishing their rights in the family and as well as in the society.

About Marie Stopes Bangladesh

Marie Stopes was established in 1988 in Chittagong following a survey by Marie Stopes International (MSI) which highlighted the need for a high quality family planning service in the region with a vision to providing the improved sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and well being of women, men and adolescents in Bangladesh.