

For her, with her

Asia and the Pacific

12 Stories of Hope and Resilience



Moving forward with and for women and girls

Message from Pio Smith, UNFPA Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific

In the vast and diverse context of Asia-Pacific, the role of women and girls in shaping better societies cannot be overstated.

From responding to the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh to providing critical maternal health services in the remote Pacific Islands, UNFPA is addressing the unique challenges women and girls face in the region. We work tirelessly to increase access to sexual and reproductive health services, even in the most isolated and underserved areas. We have made significant strides in advocating for gender equality, and responding to gender-based violence in a region marked by vast socio-economic disparities and a number of humanitarian crises.

In the face of these realities, we are more resolute in delivering our mandate. In Afghanistan, I witnessed the courage of women giving birth in the most challenging conditions. Our frontline heroes, UNFPA staff and partners, provide lifesaving health services, including much needed psychosocial support. Our efforts from Tanna Island in Vanuatu to the Sidenreng Rappang community in Indonesia speak volumes of the depth and breadth of our work towards upholding the health, safety, and dignity of all, especially the most vulnerable women and girls.

You will meet some of our everyday heroes like Florence in Papua New Guinea, weaving 'bilums' – a traditional string bag used to carry babies – to be much more than just a bag, but a symbolic vessel for sharing important messages on puberty, motherhood, and women's daily challenges.

Or Sita, the head of a village in Rajasthan, India, defying social norms in a primarily male-dominated local governance structure. Or Zhang, an 80-year-old icon in China being a living example of how any woman, regardless of age, can fulfill her potential and continue to contribute meaningfully to society.

We have hundreds of stories like these – reinforcing how one resilient woman's actions can have a positive rippling impact across communities and countries, touching lives across the region and beyond. With 60 percent of the world's population in Asia and the Pacific, it is indeed a world of endless possibilities when women and girls have the equal opportunity to actively engage, inspire, and contribute, changing the trajectory of billions of lives.

Our work is a testament to hope in action. It is testament to staying true to the promise made thirty years ago at the International Conference of Population and Development to place women's reproductive health and rights at the heart of national and global development efforts.

This collection of twelve stories – from bustling cities to remote villages – showcases how UNFPA takes forward the ICPD promise, for women and girls, and with women and girls. Through their indomitable spirit, we are called to action, to further recognize and support the contributions of all women and girls in building a more equitable and sustainable future across Asia-Pacific and beyond.

Pio Smith



Afghanistan

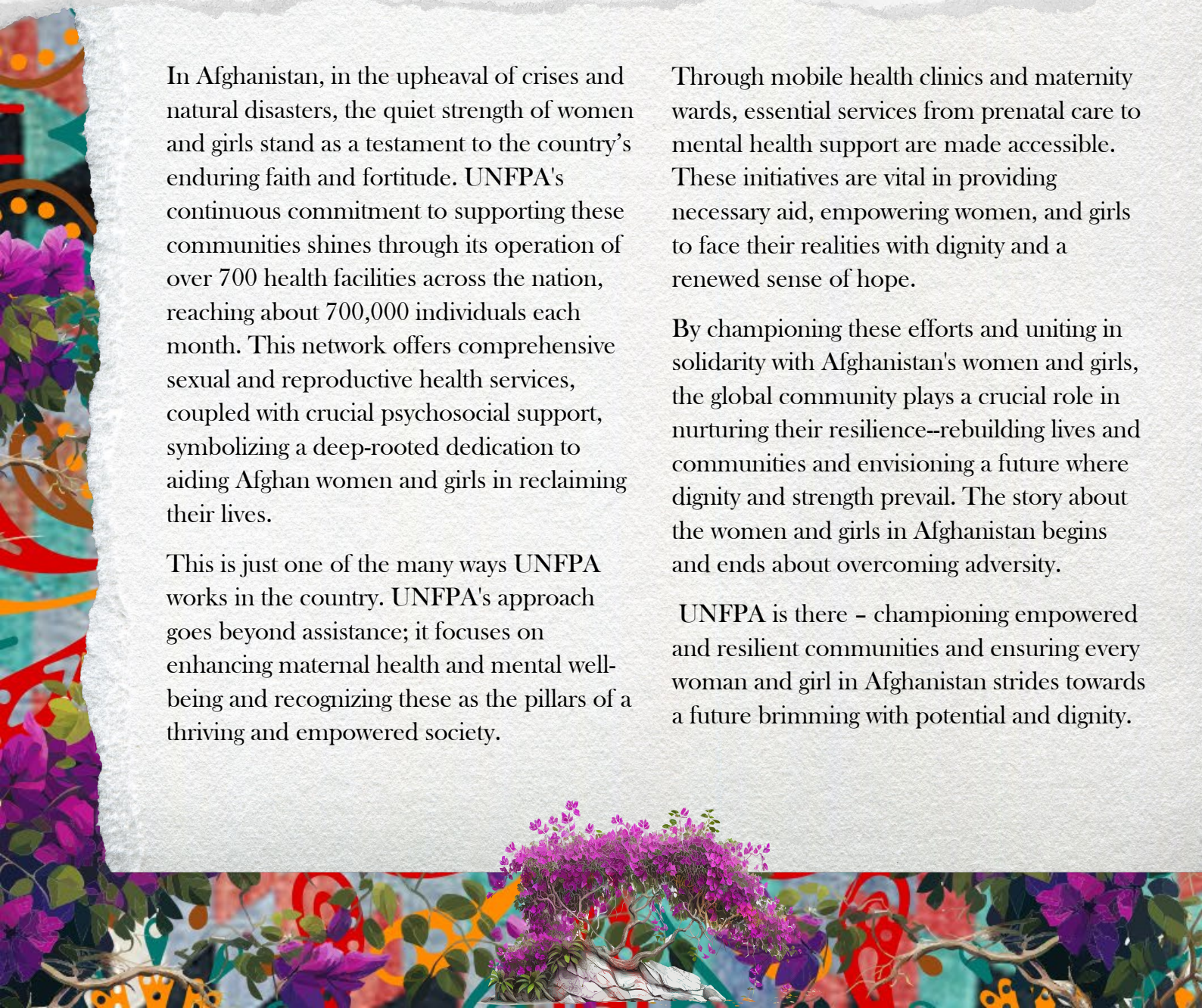
In Afghanistan, in the upheaval of crises and natural disasters, the quiet strength of women and girls stand as a testament to the country's enduring faith and fortitude. UNFPA's continuous commitment to supporting these communities shines through its operation of over 700 health facilities across the nation, reaching about 700,000 individuals each month. This network offers comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, coupled with crucial psychosocial support, symbolizing a deep-rooted dedication to aiding Afghan women and girls in reclaiming their lives.

This is just one of the many ways UNFPA works in the country. UNFPA's approach goes beyond assistance; it focuses on enhancing maternal health and mental well-being and recognizing these as the pillars of a thriving and empowered society.

Through mobile health clinics and maternity wards, essential services from prenatal care to mental health support are made accessible. These initiatives are vital in providing necessary aid, empowering women, and girls to face their realities with dignity and a renewed sense of hope.

By championing these efforts and uniting in solidarity with Afghanistan's women and girls, the global community plays a crucial role in nurturing their resilience--rebuilding lives and communities and envisioning a future where dignity and strength prevail. The story about the women and girls in Afghanistan begins and ends about overcoming adversity.

UNFPA is there - championing empowered and resilient communities and ensuring every woman and girl in Afghanistan strides towards a future brimming with potential and dignity.





India

In the heart of India's sun-drenched landscapes in Rajasthan, where tradition can clash with progress, Sita Saini stands as a beacon of change. At 51, she defies the rigid gender norms entrenched in the local governance structures as the head of the village. In a realm predominantly ruled by men, Sita's leadership in her community embodies resilience and determination.

Her mission goes beyond mere symbolism. "I am dedicated to the empowerment and development of girls, especially their education," she proclaims, her voice echoing through the corridors of patriarchal resistance. For Sita, leadership isn't about power; it's a platform to champion the cause of girls' rights and opportunities.

UNFPA advocates for women across the Asia-Pacific region to take on more leadership roles. Providing resources and training, UNFPA enables women like Sita to challenge societal norms and actively contribute to social development.

Sita's journey exemplifies the transformative power of such interventions, where grassroots

leadership becomes a catalyst for societal change.

Sita's vision extends far beyond the confines of her village. With unwavering resolve, she strives to safeguard the health, protection, dignity, and agency of girls, recognizing them as the architects of a brighter future. In a society where gender disparity still looms large, Sita's leadership is an inspiration to countless girls to break free from harmful social norms and realise their full potential.

As she navigates the intricate web of community dynamics, Sita paves the way for more women to assume leadership positions, fostering inclusivity and driving sustainable development beyond her village in Rajasthan.

Sita's unwavering commitment is a testament to the transformative power of women's leadership. With organizations such as UNFPA championing their cause, women across the region are empowered to rewrite the narrative, turning the tide of history towards a future where gender equality is a tangible reality.



Papua New Guinea

In Papua New Guinea, the bilum stands as a cherished emblem of pride, a versatile fabric embodying women's lives and stories in each weave. More than a mere accessory, these bilums, which double as baby carriers and fashion pieces, are rich with narratives of joy, sorrow, change, and the ongoing struggle for gender equality.

Enmeshed in these woven stories, UNFPA plays a crucial role in addressing challenges in access to sexual reproductive and health information, products and services, including menstrual hygiene management. The scarcity of sanitary products and inadequate sanitation facilities has led UNFPA to provide dignity kits, ensuring women and girls in crisis have access to essential menstrual hygiene products.

Bilum weaving, as highlighted by **Florence Jaukae Kamel**, is an example of women's strength embodied in their creativity.

Alongside preserving this cultural heritage, UNFPA is deeply involved in promoting family planning awareness, advocating for safe sexual practices, and understanding the reproductive health needs of communities. This effort is part of a larger global commitment by UNFPA to combat child marriage, providing prevention and protection services to girls worldwide, and upholding their rights and well-being.

UNFPA's initiatives in Papua New Guinea intertwine cultural preservation with essential health services, symbolizing a commitment to the empowerment and dignity of women and girls.

Through these efforts, UNFPA not only addresses immediate health needs but also fosters a culture of understanding, respect, and equality, contributing to the broader narrative of progress in the country.





Fiji

In the aftermath of Tropical Cyclones Yasa and Ana, the northern region of Fiji's Vanua Levu bore witness to a devastation that reshaped lives and landscapes. Even years later, the scars remain visible, with over 55 families in Nabavatu Village still dwelling in temporary tents, a stark reminder of the cyclones' impact. These shelters, while offering bare minimum protection are beset with challenges: flooding wooden floors during rains and unbearable heat during the day.

In response to the protracted impact of the cyclones, UNFPA provides crucial aid. UNFPA's response include distribution of dignity kits to women and girls and the establishment of 12 Women Friendly Spaces in the cyclone-hit areas. These spaces, managed by retired midwives in collaboration with various health and community teams, are havens for the community.

Prishika Nandan, a Humanitarian Coordinator with Fiji's National Disaster Management Office, champions a shift from reactive to proactive disaster response. Her efforts, particularly following Cyclone Yasa, have highlighted the critical impact of preparedness. As a female humanitarian leader, **Prishika** integrates gender and disability perspectives into policy decisions, ensuring a more inclusive and empathetic approach to disaster management.

The enduring tenacity of Fiji's communities, supported by dedicated organizations and individuals like **Prishika**, is a silver lining in a country often under the dark clouds of ominous storms. The collective efforts are not just about rebuilding what was lost, but about forging stronger, more inclusive futures.





China

There is a Chinese proverb that says, "Time does not stand still; the seasons flow like water." This touches on the flow of life and ageing with grace and acceptance.

At 80 years old, **Zhang Jingdi**, an iconic Chinese dancer, continues to epitomize grace and perseverance. With an enduring career spanning over six decades, **Zhang** is celebrated for her roles, including the White Crane Fairy in "Journey to the West" and her performances in "Silk Road."

Zhang's influence extends far beyond the dance stage, igniting inspiration in all ages. Her dedication to dance and her belief in transcending age barriers align perfectly with UNFPA's perspectives on ageing, and the valuable contributions of the elderly.

Embracing her 80s with the same elegance

that she brings to her art, **Zhang's** life is a vibrant narrative of vitality and continuous pursuit of excellence. Her connection to dance, especially her Dunhuang performances, demonstrate that ageing can be a journey of continuous growth, artistic exploration, and societal contribution. **Zhang's** story resonates with UNFPA's advocacy for an environment where every individual, regardless of age, can reach their full potential and continue to make meaningful contributions.

Her passion to dance is a metaphor to the concept of active and dignified ageing, reminding us that true passion is ageless. **Zhang Jingdi's** remarkable life is an inspiration for everyone, reaffirming that the pursuit of one's passions and dreams is limitless, transcending the boundaries of age.





Vanuatu

Lily Iawantak, from Tanna Island in Vanuatu, is a powerful figure challenging societal norms that often prioritize men's careers and choices over women's. At 34, she is not only a professional athlete, but also a staunch advocate for family planning in her community. Her efforts are crucial in an environment where access to education, services, and informed parenthood methods is key to promoting gender equality, reducing poverty, and enhancing maternal health. In places like Vanuatu, myths and misconceptions about family planning persist, resulting in a significant unmet need. Nonetheless, Lily, empowered by quality sexual and reproductive health information and services, has made informed decisions for her family's welfare, with support from her partner, Kasi.

Vanuatu's participation in the UNFPA Transformative Agenda programme highlights its work on eliminating unmet family planning needs and ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health services.

Lily's story is a powerful testament to the impact of informed choices. Her commitment to advocating for birth planning rights and improving family life not only benefits her own family but also sets a progressive standard in her community. Her journey exemplifies the positive effects that access to family planning can have on individuals, their families, and the wider community, paving the way for a future marked by enhanced health and increased equality. Her story is an inspiration, demonstrating how individual actions can influence broader societal change and contribute to the collective well-being.





Nepal

Poverty and desperation often lead families to resort to the harmful practice of child marriage, a plight that affects millions of girls worldwide despite legal efforts to end it. The situation is exacerbated by natural disasters and the lingering effects of COVID-19, which threaten to undo the progress made in eradicating this harmful societal norm. In rural communities, challenges push families towards these drastic decisions. Despite these adversities, inspiring stories shine through.

One such story is that of 17-year-old **Bipana** from Nepal, who successfully stopped her own arranged marriage. Through an empowerment training program, she gained vital negotiation skills and knowledge about gender-based violence and sexual reproductive health, which she used not just to change her own destiny but also to help other girls in her community.

The Global Programme to End Child Marriage, a collaborative effort between UNFPA and UNICEF, is instrumental in fostering such action for change. By focusing on promoting adolescent rights, engaging communities, and strengthening service delivery systems, the programme transforms the lives of young girls worldwide. **Bipana's** story is just one of the many stories of the programme's success, illustrating how education and empowerment can interrupt the cycle of child marriage and pave the way for girls to lead more autonomous and fulfilled lives. Her courage and the programme's support have created a ripple effect, inspiring and preventing further child marriages in her district, thus contributing to the broader mission of ensuring a brighter, more equitable future for girls across Nepal.





Maldives

In the heart of the Maldives, **Yooly's** story unfolds, reflecting the collective rise of youth empowerment across the the Asia-Pacific region. With the ocean's waves fueling her passion for sports, she revels in the adrenaline of swimming, the competitiveness of basketball, and the team spirit of volleyball. Her love for science parallels her athletic dedication, her eyes set on the stars, dreaming of a future as a scientist.

Navigating the complex currents of adolescence, she is not alone; the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) stands steady delivering life skills-based reproductive health education — giving **Yooly** and her peers with crucial knowledge and skills, empowering them to make confident choices about their sexual and reproductive health.

These choices are not mere crossroads; UNFPA's commitment transcends individual destinies, bringing together a broader narrative of cohesive upliftment. Every decision **Yooly** makes sends ripples of change, fostering a culture of wellness and dignity for girls everywhere. Her story is a tale of inspiration, embodying an inspirational blend of informed freedom and the boldness to chase dreams.

Yooly's tale is more than her own; it is a narrative of change and transformation. A story where every young person is bestowed with the tools to carve their destiny, shaping not only their future but also enriching their communities. It's a testament to a world where every youth's potential is recognized, nurtured, and celebrated, paving the way for a brighter, more empowered tomorrow.



Myanmar

Disability is often met with stigma and discrimination, and in Myanmar, UNFPA is committed to fostering an inclusive society where everyone, regardless of their physical abilities, has equal access to opportunities and services. At the forefront of this effort is **Htoo Thinzar**, a 19-year-old youth volunteer, who is challenging societal perceptions and barriers faced by people with disabilities.

Htoo Thinzar, herself experiencing physical disability, poignantly states, “The true obstacle for us is not our disabilities, but the discrimination we face within our communities.” Her words describes the struggles of many in Myanmar who are determined to change the narrative around disability.

As an advocate, she tirelessly works to promote the rights and dignity of young people with disabilities, ensuring their access to sexual and reproductive health information.

Htoo Thinzar is a living proof to the belief that one's abilities, not disabilities, define a person.

UNFPA's work in Myanmar focuses on breaking down barriers and prejudices, advocating for the rights of all, including those with disabilities. This involves not only providing access to essential health services but also empowering individuals like **Htoo Thinzar** to be agents of change in their communities. By supporting initiatives and individuals committed to promoting equality, UNFPA plays a crucial role in ensuring that no one is left behind. Efforts are more than just an intervention; they are part of a broader movement towards creating a society where diversity is celebrated, and every individual, regardless of their physical condition, can live with dignity.





Indonesia

In the village of Sidenreng Rappang, South Sulawesi, Nur Hidayah, fondly known as **Bidan Aya**, stands as a frontline hero. As a village midwife for over a decade, her dedication to providing sexual and reproductive health services has remained unshaken, even in the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Adapting with perseverance and innovation, she participated in UNFPA's Leaving No One Behind programme, enhancing her skills in personal protective equipment usage and infection management. Her commitment to her community's well-being led her to initiate 'Paman Maco,' a public announcement board focused on COVID-19 prevention and vaccination, and 'Kurindu Bumil,' a WhatsApp group that connects pregnant women with healthcare professionals, ensuring continuous care and support.

The training not only equipped **Bidan Aya** with practical skills but also deepened her understanding of respectful midwifery care, prompting her to refine her patient interactions and prioritize self-care.

Furthermore, the programme provided her with critical insights into combatting harmful practices prevalent in her community, such as female genital mutilation and child marriage. By integrating this new knowledge into her practice, **Bidan Aya** continues to demonstrate her dedication to improving the lives of women and girls in her village, ensuring they receive the care, respect, and support they deserve. Her story is a testament to the power of dedicated healthcare professionals in transforming communities and the crucial role of ongoing education and training in enhancing the quality of care.



Philippines

In Southern Leyte, Mariel, seven months pregnant, braved Super Typhoon Rai's onslaught. The festive season was overshadowed by the storm's fury, leaving her home and community in ruins. In the middle of the chaos, two lights cut across the dark, a medical van — hope on wheels — the Mobile Women's Health on Wheels (WHoW). This initiative provides critical mobile maternal and reproductive health services to women in remote and disaster-affected areas. Supported by UNFPA, the basic facility offered Mariel and other women crucial emergency maternal care in the aftermath of the storm.

This UNFPA-supported initiative stood as a solid symbol of support, a white truck bringing life-saving services to the heart of the disaster zone. It symbolized resilience and stability, reaching out to the vulnerable with open doors.

On Valentine's Day, in the storm's aftermath, Mariel gave birth to Heart Eunne Fae. Her daughter's name, a poignant tribute to love and faith, was a tribute to UNFPA's role in her story. Her newborn's arrival marked a new chapter, an affirmation that even in the darkest times, life finds a way to celebrate new beginnings, resilience, and the enduring strength of the human spirit.





Bangladesh

In the sprawling Rohingya refugee camps at the heart of Cox's Bazar, cheerful voices of young people ring in the air. Eight purpose-built Adolescent and Youth Centers are filled to the brim, and have since hosted the transformation of over 16,215 lives.

Built by UNFPA with the generous support of the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), these centers are more than just physical spaces. They are platforms to elevate crucial life topics like Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), Gender-Based Violence (GBV), and Menstrual Health Management.

Jahura, a 13-year-old girl from the camps, encapsulates her experience. "This is where we grow, learn, and speak," she says, reflecting on the centers' impact on young lives.

Spaces like these create a nurturing

environment for young minds to thrive. The 'Girl Shine' programme offers a safe haven for adolescent girls to learn about sexual health and reproductive rights, bolstering their confidence and resilience. Moreover, the 'Champions of Change' programme engages boys and young men, including caregivers, in fostering positive social norms and respect for women and girls. This initiative not only educates but reshapes mindsets, sowing the seeds of equality and understanding.

The approach extends beyond classrooms, embracing holistic engagements through community activities, sports, theater, and mental health support. These centers become more than just learning hubs; they are vibrant, youth-driven spaces echoing with the voices and dreams of the Rohingya girls and boy. They symbolize a place of safety, belonging, and active participation in shaping their destiny.

