



**'Nothing about us  
without us'**

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UNFPA Asia and the Pacific Regional Office

**Stories of youth-led  
transformations from  
across Asia and the Pacific**

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# Introduction

“Nothing about us without us.” These simple words convey a profound message that no decisions on policies or interventions impacting young people should be made without their full engagement.

UNFPA is committed to strengthening national and regional youth-led networks and pioneering models for youth leadership and participation. We see young people at the heart of our programmes: not as beneficiaries only, but as strong partners and allies. We also recognize that young people are a heterogeneous group, with wide-ranging challenges and needs. Their diverse challenges and needs cannot be addressed without partnering with them.

Young people are already contributing to the resilience of their communities, introducing innovative approaches, inspiring social progress, and driving political change. This is on display in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic where many young people mobilized immediately to respond to the crisis by working as health workers, advocates, volunteers, scientists, social entrepreneurs, and innovators. Access to sexual and reproductive health are only possible when young people have full access to comprehensive sexuality education. It's essential that young people are at the centre of this work.

This collection of stories and portraits from across the Asia-Pacific region celebrates young people and the activists working to empower youth by giving them a voice.

# 60%

**of the world's young people are in the Asia and Pacific region; that is nearly 1 billion people between the ages of 10-24**

# 34 million

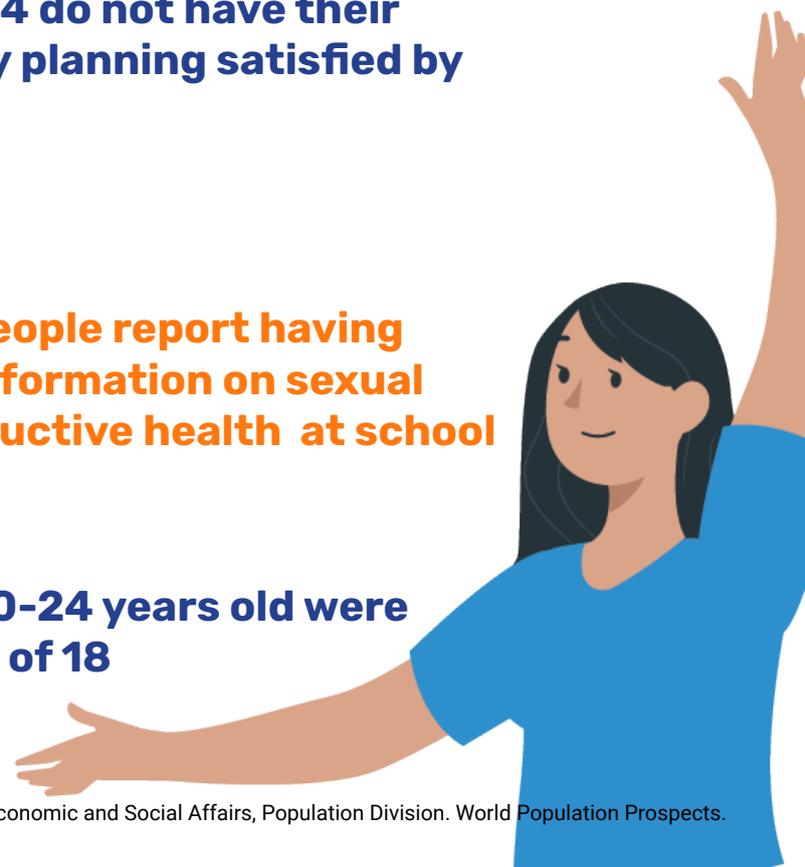
**women aged 15-24 do not have their demand for family planning satisfied by modern methods**

# 35%

**of young people report having received information on sexual and reproductive health at school**

# 27 million

**women between 20-24 years old were married by the age of 18**



## Maldives

**“There is power in numbers –  
band together to do bigger things”**

### **Gender-based violence**

©Sara Naseem

**Sara Naseem is a women’s rights and social justice advocate from the Maldives. She stands up for abuse of power and calls for justice and accountability in an increasingly conservative environment. In 2015, she co-founded Nufoshey, an anti-street harassment movement that raises awareness and demands access to safe spaces for all. Since its inception, Nufoshey has conducted the first baseline survey on street harassment in the Maldives, trained over 120 girls in basic self-defense and conducted training for male allies on being better bystanders and supporters for the cause of women’s equity.**

“It was through conversations I had with friends about how just being a woman in public spaces in this country is difficult, especially as a young woman,” Sara says.

She wanted to do something that would help bring about change: “With a couple of friends, I started an online space where women could come and talk about their experiences of street harassment.”

Sara says that this simple gathering place became transformative. “It was the first time that women had been able to talk about these issues,” she explains. “In the Maldives, like in a lot of other places, we have this idea that a lot of the harassment and abuse women face is just the cost of being a woman.”

Sara says that the reality of being a woman in the Maldives is attracting unwanted attention from men. She believes men feel entitled to use unsolicited sexual language and make advances to any woman they want. “I think Nufoshey really helped a lot of women to be able to say, ‘No, this is not OK and it shouldn’t be happening to me!’”

According to Sara, there are several reasons for this epidemic of harassment in the Maldives. “It is an unquestioned cultural attitude,” she says. “People use excuses like ‘cultural values’, as if it’s something that’s ‘in our culture.’”

She points to growing extremism in the Maldives and a 50-year decline in women in public roles to demonstrate that the oppression of women is not inherently cultural and that, rather, assault and harassment are encouraged by retrograde conservative beliefs. She says, “For me, street harassment is also symbolic of a lot of root causes in our society – the power imbalance, the denial of bodily autonomy and the normalization of abuse against women, especially in public spaces – which allow so much worse to happen behind closed doors.”

Sara says that gaps in the education system play a role in harassment. “We have an education system that has ingrained the stereotypes that we associate with men and women,” she explains. “Children are taught to answer questions by rote and they aren’t taught about themselves or their bodies. There’s no sexual and reproductive health curriculum.”

**“Street harassment is symbolic of a lot of root causes in our society – the power imbalance, the denial of bodily autonomy and the normalization of abuse against women, especially in public spaces.”**

Sara Naseem

She says that these normative gender stereotypes encourage predatory behaviour in boys and reinforce notions that girls are docile. “Huge changes need to happen in how we educate children,” she argues. “They need to know about who they are themselves, they need to know about consent. These gender identities need to change for people to start respecting each other more.”

Nufoshey started out by creating spaces where women were able to tell their stories, and this would start conversations. The initiative moved on to campaigns where the focus was on bystanders. The idea was to share ways in which people could intervene in abusive conversations and what they could do to help women facing harassment in the streets.

“We started creating spaces where men could talk about these issues,” Sara says. “The ideas that they have about harassment, how they felt when they were in a group of friends who were doing it and how they weren’t able to take a stand because sometimes they just didn’t know what to say.”

The responses from young men who also wanted to shift the culture of harassment gave Sara hope. “A lot of it is about giving people the language to talk about these issues,” she says. “I think sometimes when you’re brought up in a community where some of these issues aren’t even identified as issues, you lack the language to talk about it.”

While she is inspired by more young people speaking out against violence, Sara points out that odious beliefs still dominate politics in her country. “A member of the parliament in one of his speeches said, ‘Women’s rights activists are like termites and they should be eradicated,’” she says. “This language is pervasive in every aspect of society, even in parliament. It’s not just online.”

Despite veiled threats of violence from political leaders, Sara is hopeful about the progress she's seen in just five years. "Things have really changed," she reports. "This shift has given me the space to work with other women's rights groups. We connect on this issue of harassment that women face and then join them on campaigns where we protest and work together."

Sara says that the first step is building a shared understanding that harassment is not OK: "By raising awareness that harassment is something that happens and that it is wrong, we were able to start a lot of other conversations that equip people with the language to respond to it."

Nufoshey is working to create conversations and to engage men and other allies. It is part of an ongoing campaign called Fund Our Safety, demanding that the state adequately fund women's services such as clinics and shelters.

Sara's advice to other activists? "There is power in numbers – band together to do bigger things."



©Sara Naseem

## Learn more & take action

[My Body is My Body, My Life is My Life: Sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people in Asia and the Pacific](#)

[My Body is My Own: Claiming the right to autonomy and self-determination - State of World Population Report 2021](#)

[International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education \(ITGSE\).](#)

[Nufoshey](#)

[UNFPA Maldives](#)

India

**“Young people  
have their own  
digital space now”**

**Comprehensive  
sexuality education**

©Arti Shukla

**Vithika Yadav is an activist and educator devoted to making “pleasure positive” comprehensive sexuality education driven by youth. She started Love Matters India which empowers young people with the digital skills to be better informed on issues of bodily autonomy and sexual health and rights.**

Vithika says giving young people a voice with media skills is central to her work for social change. “We train young people to become responsible content creators and how to use their mobile phones for social impact,” she says. “It’s a tool not only to connect with people, collect information but also to research, take interviews, collect stories and present news from the ground. It’s a public interest journalism programme focused on twenty-first century skills and the issues young people care about. We call it Mobikaar!”

Through workshops, both online and in person, she connects with young people across the world. The training empowers students to unpack and understand sexual reproductive health and rights, identify issues in their own lives and in their communities, select and collate information, understand storytelling and then build an ecosystem where the narratives are from young people themselves.

“A lot of young people are aspiring content creators,” she says. “They want to use digital platforms, but there is a serious problem when we look at online content and the kind of content that is out there or is being consumed.”

Love Matters asks how young people can be more responsible in creating and consuming content. Vithika did a five-part series called Traffic, which was broadcast on MTV India. The programme looked at how perceptions around challenging topics like modern day slavery could be influenced. “How do you package information on issues that everybody should care about, which is not just for non-profit officials?” she says. “We need to talk about these issues so that they become more mainstream.”

**“The idea was to keep the audience at the centre of everything. We took a sex-positive based approach to comprehensive sexuality education in India.”**

Vithika Yadav

Vithika invites young people to look at social inequalities and question cultural norms that shape how we are made to feel about ourselves and our bodies.

She says the goal is to use digital media as a space to explore complex issues and this evolves into youth-driven sexuality education. She says it is about opening conversations on tough subjects like how society thinks about female pleasure, intimate partner violence, consent, sexual abuse and the culture of shame and silence about sexuality.

Vithika says doing work on sexual health and rights of young people immediately resonated with her. She was interested in the landscape of comprehensive sexuality education and was keen on exploring the unmet needs of young people in this context. She says the process was not easy and “pleasure” was controversial terminology.

“Love Matters was edgy and at the same time facts-based, science-based, youth friendly and non-judgmental,” she says. “In our research with young people, we found that there was a disconnect between how young people wanted sex ed, their questions about sex and how traditional sex ed programmes were addressing topics.”

Vithika says young people wanted information on love, sex and relationships but there was a problem with how organizations were approaching developing sexuality education materials.

“The idea was to keep the audience at the centre of everything,” she says. “The programme responded to their questions and their needs. We took a sex-positive based approach to comprehensive sexuality education in India.” She says simple, conversational and non-judgmental as well as youth-centred content is essential.

“We need to be able to look at it from the perspective of what young people understand,” she says. “What are their challenges? What are their questions? How do we present that information to them?”

For Vithika, Love Matters is a long-term initiative working for social change that challenges and questions harmful social norms and this will not happen overnight. “It will take years, even decades, but we are happy that we are making good progress,” she says. When COVID-19 hit in 2020, the project was already showing positive signs in shifting perceptions on sexuality education. Vithika says digital empowerment played a key role.

“Young people have their own digital space now,” she says. “They are more vocal about it. They’re talking about it, they understand it and they feel supported. They don’t feel alone in this journey.”

## **The Pandemic**

With a dynamic network of young people connecting, learning and sharing, Vithika knew the community could play a positive role in the COVID-19 response. “The need for information, the need to be connected was clear,” she says. “Our web traffic went up over the period, the experiences were being shared. Young people needed content about how to cope during these uncertain times.”

Love Matters pivoted to responding to an urgent need for information for young people across its platforms.

“We talked about intimate partner violence,” she says. “Mental and emotional health and how people find themselves in a different space in relationships during lockdown; people talked about everything.”

Love Matters was quick to respond to needs through online conversations. As they learned and shared stories, Vithika says the narratives really resonated with other people.

“Our Discussion Board is a place where people felt they could share and could talk to others and they were not alone,” she says. “We knew that we were fulfilling a need. It was a trusted space before the crisis and traffic picked up when people needed a community to feel supported.”

Vithika says one key to Love Matters’ success was making sure that people responded to the needs and connected young people with support. Through a feature called the “Final Clinic”, the site connected people with youth friendly sexual and reproductive health and rights services. The feature also follows up to see how young people are struggling to access services because they are confined to their homes.

Vithika is concerned that the isolation of lockdown has had a major impact on young people because it has cut them off from their friends and support network. “Social life is a big part of young people’s lives,” she says. “It was non-existent during lockdowns.”

For Love Matters the challenge was to tackle the issues young people were facing and the services or essentials they were missing. “There were lots of challenges and we responded to those challenges the best way we could; we talked about them and supported people through distribution drives of condoms and sanitary napkins.”

In addition to the online engagement, Vithika launched TeenBook – the first online resource hub on life skills education in India during the pandemic. It is a safe space for adolescents, teenagers, parents and educators to learn and share. Through the content and online discussions the site hosts positive engagement on complex topics.

Vithika and her team also recently delivered a successful campaign engaging young people on vaccine hesitancy and shared health advice on how to stay safe from the coronavirus.

The public health dimension of her lockdown experience combined with her long-term view of movement-building has Vithika looking beyond the pandemic. She is hoping to channel the digitally mobilized young people to continue progress on gender equality and a more open discussion about sexuality education.

“Changing social norms does not happen overnight or even in a couple of years, it is a process,” she says. “The fact that these conversations are happening is success, because these conversations were just not happening before.”

**“The fact that these conversations are happening is success, because these conversations were just not happening before.”**

Vithika Yadav

Vithika says the conversations on these public forums are an open space for young people to question harmful norms and better understand their rights.

“Most men feel uncomfortable discussing sex and sexuality because it is about questioning; it is about questioning the power that they hold in a relationship.”

She says these conversations begin to unravel the logic of patriarchal oppression. “The discussion is about millions of things that society has been supporting for years,” she says. “These things give them the power to treat their partners in a certain way, to decide what happens in a relationship.”

Vithika says it not easy to engage men in these discussions about love, sex and relationships. She also says it is critical to long-term change and shifts in power dynamics. “We have to talk to men as equal partners who are responsible, who are accountable,” she says. “When we talk about women and their position in society, everyone needs to be a part of the discussion. When the men are included, they also become advocates.”

## **Learn more & take action**

[Sexual and Reproductive Health In A Digital Age](#)

[Love Matters India](#)

[Teen Book India](#)

[Vithika Yadav uses design thinking to bust taboos about sex in India](#)

**“Disability is just a different lifestyle and I’m very proud of my disability”**

**People living with disabilities**

©Abia Akram

**Abia Akram is a Pakistani disability rights activist. She is the founder of the National Forum of Women with Disabilities in Pakistan, and a leading figure in the disability rights movement in the country as well as in Asia and the Pacific. She advocates for the rights of persons with disabilities, lobbying with policymakers in the public, private and development sectors for inclusion of persons with disabilities in their processes. She conducts consultations for the empowerment of persons with disabilities by creating an accessible environment and promotes accessible information for persons with disabilities from services of health, education and livelihoods.**

“It’s a shift from the medical perspective to the right-based approach,” Abia says. “They can talk about the rights of persons with disabilities and change that mindset from the charity model.”

Abia works to normalize disability in Pakistan. “Disability is just a different lifestyle and I’m very proud of my disability. We can give that same understanding to other persons with disabilities.”

Laws in Pakistan make it clear that every municipality needs to be inclusive of the rights of persons with disability. She says the goal was to build the inner core of services to stop gender-based violence for women and girls with disabilities. “We conducted counseling sessions by women with disabilities for women with disabilities so they can have someone to discuss their concerns with,” Abia says. “More services are required for gender-based violence survivors.”

In a recent study by the Special Talent Exchange Program (STEP) in Pakistan developed with peer-to-peer interviews with more than 500 women with disabilities, one of the findings was that women with disabilities are not learning about their bodies or sexuality education. “Their family members do not discuss sexuality in front of them so they are not aware of their rights.”

She says people living with disabilities experience sexual harassment, but they are not aware. “If they know, then they are not able to talk about it because their families have overlooked it.”

Abia says it's a challenge to develop support systems when accurate disability data is lacking. "Some of the families don't want to identify that they have a daughter with a disability in case they might face stigma or discrimination."

The latest survey from Special Talent Exchange Program (STEP) in Pakistan found that 70% of women experienced some kind of challenges during the pandemic response. The survey found that 90% of the time, service providers were not physically accessible or trained to communicate with key populations like people living with disabilities. "When service providers are not aware about the rights of women and girls with disabilities, they don't have the services to assist them.:

**"When service providers are not aware about the rights of women and girls with disabilities, they don't have the services to assist them."**

Abia Akram

Abia shares a story of a woman in an earthquake affected area. "She had an intellectual disability and got pregnant three times," she says. "Her mother had to leave the house to get to her job as a domestic worker. She could not afford to stay at home with her daughter with an intellectual disability."

Abia says when the daughter became pregnant for the third time by an anonymous abuser in the neighborhood, the girl was sterilized with the consent of her mother.

Cases like this highlight the need to talk about the rights of those women and girls with disabilities. "If a deaf woman goes to the police station, the police don't know how to do sign language."

Abia says more resources are needed to develop training manuals for the public workers and all stakeholders. "They can change their perspectives of women and girls with disabilities. We need to look at how we can provide better support mechanisms."

A key priority is widening psychosocial support. "This is the first time we got women with disabilities training on how to deliver some psychosocial support."

"There is no need to learn about rights unless we are providing them with immediate support mechanisms and referral systems. We raise awareness, so if they do experience sexual harassment they know who to call and where they can go."

## **Learn more & take action**

[Standing up for the rights and choices of people with disabilities](#)

[We Decide: Including and empowering persons with disabilities](#)

[Women and Young Persons with Disabilities: Guidelines for Providing Rights-Based and Gender-Responsive Services to Address Gender-Based Violence and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights for Women and Young Persons with Disabilities](#)

[National Forum of Women with Disabilities in Pakistan](#)



**“Women and girls can understand my pain, as they face the same thing”**

## Menstrual health

©UNFPA Bangladesh/Fahima Tajrin

**Khotija is a youth mentor of the Girl Shine programme in the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar. She learned about menstrual health from awareness raising sessions hosted by UNFPA-supported Women Friendly Spaces and now inspires girls to speak openly about their unique needs.**

Khotija lives in the world’s largest refugee camp in Cox’s Bazar. She and her family have been living in a makeshift house since 2017, when they fled Myanmar. She says that her mother is her ally in managing her reusable sanitary pads and cloths.

“During menstruation I feel afraid that my father or brother may see the menstrual cloths, as our house is small,” Khotija says. “So I dry my menstrual cloths by covering them with another cloth after cleaning them with hot water, so no one can see them.”

“I would be ashamed if my father or brother saw them,” Khotija explains. “My mother can see them, no problem. She can support me.”

Since the beginning of the Rohingya crisis in 2017, UNFPA has helped set up a network of 35 Women Friendly Spaces in the Rohingya camps and surrounding host communities. These centres have become a focal point for girls to get together, share experiences and learn from each other. “In the woman-friendly spaces there are apas (caseworkers),” Khotija says. “They listen to us and talk about menstrual health, and how to manage it.” There are also midwives who provide information on sexual reproductive health including menstrual health challenges to inform adolescents attending women-friendly spaces, through health promotion, about the availability of these services within the Women Friendly Spaces.

Khotija points out that cultural barriers and the chaos of displacement prevented her from speaking about these issues sooner. “In Myanmar, they did not talk about menstruation and menstrual health,” she remembers. “But here we have apas and they teach us how to manage it. Now, we learn and we can clean ourselves properly.”

Khotija went frequently to a centre and began to have discussions with her friends about what she had learned. “When I go back home I talk about this issue with my friends and young girls who have no idea about menstrual health,” she says. “They learn this topic and my mum sometimes listens to our discussions. She can learn about this as well.” Khotija has conversations with girls who are too timid or who are not permitted to attend the sessions. She explains, “I teach my neighbourhood girls, who don’t come to women-friendly spaces.”

Khotija says that she uses either cloths or reusable pads that she got from the centre. “I usually don’t buy pads because they are expensive,” she says. “When I am at home, I use cloths and wash them properly and dry them in full sunlight for reuse. A couple of times I received pads and I use them if I’m going far from home.”

**“When I go back home I talk about this issue with my friends and young girls who have no idea about menstrual health.”**

Khotija

Khotija works as a youth mentor of the Girl Shine programme at the centre and engages directly with girls who are curious about menstrual health. “I work with adolescent girls aged 10–19,” she says. “We discuss the menstruation cycle, bodily changes during adolescence, decision-making, confidence and what will happen if they get married before the age of 18.” Khotija is grateful that she can share her knowledge to empower girls in her community. “I really like that I can support others,” she says. “I didn’t get a chance to learn these topics back in Myanmar, but here I got the opportunity to learn and I can teach others.”

Despite the progress in speaking with girls about menstruation, she feels that she still cannot raise the issue at home. “It’s not possible to talk about this issue with my father or brother,” she says.

Khotija says that the issue is culturally sensitive and that women need their own space to talk about the challenges of menstrual health. “How would a man understand women’s pain?” she says. “They don’t have this kind of pain. Women and girls can understand my pain, as they face the same thing.”

## **Learn more & take action**

[Menstruation and human rights - Frequently asked questions](#)

[Religion, Menstruation, and Refugee Realities: Insights from Rohingya Girls and Women](#)

[Girl Shine](#)



# “Peer-to-peer education is the best way to reduce HIV infections”

**Myanmar Youth Stars is a network that provides information for young key populations at high risk of HIV in Myanmar, including young men who have sex with men, transgender people, young people selling sex, people who inject drugs and people living with HIV. The network works with more than 1,500 people in 18 townships across Myanmar, advocating for the rights of these key populations on issues related to HIV and sexual and reproductive health. Myanmar Youth Stars also focuses on networking, capacity strengthening and evidence-based assessments of key populations within the community.**

Myanmar Youth Stars is driven by an adaptable platform of resources that can meet the needs of these vulnerable populations. “We provide education to invisible populations” says Min Thet Phyo San, one of the project leaders.

Myanmar Youth Stars began community-led programmes in 2012. During the COVID-19 pandemic they moved to an online approach, and are facing even more challenges like insecurity and movement restrictions since the military coup in February 2021.

In this context, Myanmar Youth Stars works with peer-to-peer networks to reach at-risk populations. “Our goal is to raise awareness to reduce HIV infection,” says Aung Phyu Htut, who also works with Myanmar Youth Stars. “Peer-to-peer education is the best way to reduce HIV infections and increase awareness and uptake of HIV and STI [sexually transmitted infection] testing.”

Aung says the chaos of the current unrest in Myanmar is especially hard for people living with HIV. “The health services and assistance mechanisms for people with HIV are not working because of the insecurity. We cannot neglect key populations because in Myanmar, we have a lot of young people living with HIV.”

With the ongoing uncertainty, government hospitals are closed, and people cannot get tested or seek treatment for HIV. “Many people have contracted opportunistic infections and are dying at home,” Min says. “Our essential health services are simply not functional.”

Aung says security is affecting all HIV responses and services in Myanmar, “Even if you take a patient to a government hospital, they do not admit or treat HIV-positive patients.”

Key populations can only access limited sexual and reproductive health services, such as family planning, from local and international NGOs. The Myanmar Youth Stars network has an in-depth understanding of the local contexts and languages where they deliver their sessions. The workshops resonate with local communities because they are delivered in accessible, culturally adapted formats and are designed to prompt dialogue about complex issues.

The programme allows peers to focus on the areas where clients need more information. “If it’s gender-based violence, HIV testing, HIV treatment or mental health services, our peer educators get them information and even help them ring the appropriate social services number,” Aung says.

Despite frequent Internet and power outages, he says young people are able to go online, so the project designed the platform to support groups with online tools. The project is maintaining access to services for high-risk populations, but also increasing skills within the community by providing continuous mentoring to the members on how to engage their peers and empower them. Project materials are designed to help transfer critical information to their community members.

Even before the current pandemic, the idea was to deliver comprehensive sexuality education, with Myanmar Youth Stars sharing information to cover gaps in practical skills and knowledge.

Now with the deepening political crisis, where HIV prevention and care, sexual and reproductive health, and legal assistance have been disrupted, Min says the peer network has become even more important. Members of Myanmar Youth Stars are respected leaders in their communities and through media training they learn digital and communication skills to increase their overall effectiveness as advocates and allies.



One of the biggest challenges of restricted movement is reaching people who inject drugs with just online outreach. Min says, “They have a lot of problems because some do not understand how to join online education sessions through social media platforms and teleconferencing applications, and some do not have a smartphone.”

**“The stigma and discrimination in communities and even in families make vulnerable groups marginalized and even more at-risk to gender-based violence or sexually-transmitted infections.”**

Aung Phyu Htut

Aung says people who inject drugs struggle with limited access to needles, especially in remote areas during the curfew period, where shops close before 7 p.m. This limited access can lead to risky behavior. Aung reports cases of people who inject drugs using needles distributed from NGOs and then re-sell the needles to their peers. “People took the needles, used them and sold them on to other people who then were injecting with them. This increased transmission of HIV and other blood-borne viruses, like hepatitis C virus. We need to inform people on how to protect themselves from this kind of risk.”

Since the start of 2021, he reports a rise in suicides in the key population and increasing rates of HIV infections based on available figures, which he admits are incomplete. “The stigma and discrimination in communities and even in families marginalize vulnerable groups and put them even more at risk of gender-based violence or sexually transmitted infections.”

Myanmar Youth Stars materials include the phone number of the mental health service hotline in Myanmar and members of the network are given training in basic psychosocial counselling to help identify and refer cases of concern.

## Learn more & take action

[UNFPA: Implementing comprehensive HIV/STI programmes with sex workers: Practical approaches from collaborative interventions](#)

[WHO: Implementing comprehensive HIV/STI programmes with sex workers: practical approaches from collaborative interventions](#)



Iran

**“Violence comes from the idea that the only way to win is to compete”**

**Peacebuilding**

©Emanuela Gitto

**Shadi Rouhshahbaz is an independent trainer and consultant on Youth, Peace and Security. She started PeaceMentors as a way to connect young people to mentors and positive experiences, especially marginalized groups in Iran like the children of Afghan refugee families.**

“Young people need their own safe spaces,” Shadi says. “We started our own collective and because registering an NGO takes a lot of time, energy, money and effort, we tried to keep it unregistered, we formed a very informal collective.”

This collective was the seed of what evolved into PeaceMentors, an initiative committed to expanding nonviolent communication for young people in Iran. While they started as an informal collective, she found that to start really engaging young people they needed a recognizable brand. “We organized an event at the university. The university didn’t know us as PeaceMentors, but the group itself had an identity. They knew us as a group of motivated students who were willing to organize this conference.”

While working as intern at the United Nations Information Centre in Iran, Shadi pitched the idea of holding a multi-stakeholder symposium on Nelson Mandela International Day that was preceded by a training of trainers on non-formal education, youth peacebuilding and social cohesion. Once she was given the space for leading this workshop, she realized she was one step closer to highlighting the importance and value of youth peacebuilding in Iran.

“We highlighted the importance of youth, the role of young people in building a more peaceful world,” she recalls. “We went on to civil society organizations. One of them was an NGO that worked with people who have physical disabilities, the other one was the collective that worked with victims of child labor in Iran with an Afghan background.”

Until the mid-2010s, legal barriers in Iran meant that young Afghans had no right to education or other services. Shadi says this created a legacy of young people who were disillusioned. She saw this as an opportunity to share some of what she had learned through interactive workshops.

**“We highlighted the importance of youth, the role of young people in building a more peaceful world.”**

Shadi Rouhshahbaz

“They crossed the border because of the conflicts that are going on in Afghanistan,” she says. “They were living with a shadow legal status. We call them ‘irregular immigrants’ because their documents don’t identify the status of a refugee.”

Shadi says that without legal status in Iran, Afghan youth had limited options. “Without papers, you can’t buy a SIM card, you can’t open a bank account and you can’t register your children at school.”

On top of these considerable obstacles, Shadi says that many Afghan youths were also impacted by their family’s challenges and a legacy of trauma. “All sorts of things have happened for these families,” she says. “These injustices go down all the way to the lives of the children of these migrant populations.”

Shadi recalls that when she was in school, her principal allowed an Afghan girl to attend classes informally, without credits. She says this kind of rule bending was rare because of prejudices. “Partly it is a cultural issue,” she says. “Many school principals did not register these children because of xenophobia or racist views.”

Shadi looks back with admiration at the courage of her principal. “She was an open-minded and compassionate woman,” she says. “She was breaking the rules by letting this girl sit in class the whole year although she could not attend the final examinations.”

This first-hand experience of injustice and double standards in her youth inspired Shadi’s commitment to justice, peace and inclusion. She saw that without education, Afghan children were condemned to a life in the shadows and manual labor.

Even though policies have changed and Afghan students can attend school, Shadi says they continue to struggle without the necessary support at home.

“Families still need to buy food, they still need to buy pencils, pens, notebooks and pay for transportation to and from school” she says. “This doesn’t make sense for a family that’s already in a precarious situation, especially when these days in a crippling economy going to school does not guarantee an income in the future.”

Shadi says her connection with Afghan families gave her unique insights into the challenges they are facing. Even though they could legally go to school, she says local NGOs were not attuned to the complex dynamics young people were facing at home.

“NGOs are trying to promote the importance of education and literacy,” she says. “But they don’t know that sometimes families may actually discourage children from going to school because school means more expenditures and the parents don’t see any sense in it.”

Shadi says some Afghan families facing the realities of survival in a new country are sceptical about the value of education. “They feel education given to their children, whether it is at school or with NGOs, is not transformational,” she says. “It’s not going to help them in their future. Basically, it’s not bringing in money or generating income. They ask, ‘Why should we spend the resources sending our children to school?’”

## **“PeaceMentors creates a space where children experience mentorship.”**

Shadi Rouhshahbaz

From listening to families, Shadi knew that PeaceMentors needed to develop a new approach to get young people involved, especially young people from the Afghan community. “PeaceMentors creates a space where children experience mentorship,” she says. “Through those crucial relationships they can see the value of education. It’s about getting them the support that they have been missing.”

Shadi says part of the work is helping young people see the value of collaboration. “One of the most important things that we try to highlight is that violence comes from this idea that the only way to win is to compete.”

Through a series of games and exercises, PeaceMentors helps young people find different ways of winning. “The only option that they thought of immediately was competing,” she says. “There is a matrix that includes competing but there’s also compromising, there’s accommodating and of course there’s collaborating.”

Through engaging exercises, PeaceMentors teaches young people important lessons about gender equality and the value of inclusion when it comes to people with disabilities. Shadi and her team help young people better understand the concept of peace and intercultural dialogue.

She says communication is a critical tool in helping young people find a more peaceful way to be. “You have to understand how to communicate non-violently,” Shadi says. “We realized that the majority of people who work in this sector with these children do not know nonviolent communication. Young people do not know how to communicate non-violently with others, even in their own family. How can you communicate non-violently when you have been exposed to violence all your life?”

Shadi says that this blind spot in the language of peace fuels a cycle of competition and violence in their lives. PeaceMentor workshops bring young people together with games, theatre methodologies and non-formal education. She says social change will happen through small changes in the language people use to solve their problems.

“We work on individual growth,” she says. “Nonviolent communication is a way for people to fully understand what’s happening around them. It helps them step out of the boxes or stereotypes. It also helps us understand why others become violent especially when we can’t control their behaviour towards us.”

She says that many young Afghans in Iran have a lifetime of negative programming that they need to overcome. “They’ve been labelled all their lives,” she says. “They hear things like: ‘You’re a victim, you’re weak, you’re a burden to your family, you’re not good for anything, you’re just spending our money, we’re paying to send you to school.’”

**“We work on individual growth. Nonviolent communication is a way for people to fully understand what’s happening around them.”**

**Shadi Rouhshahbaz**

Shadi says the workshops help shift young people’s perceptions and defuse these toxic labels. “We ask young people to consider themselves as leaders,” she says. “No matter what your story is, what your background is, to start working from there forward with what you can do individually.”

She admits that the scale is small and the pace of individual transformations is slow, but she says this is the only way to build real change. “We’re doing this because it is a drop in the ocean,” she says. “We have a saying in Farsi which says: do good so that good things will come to you.”

Shadi believes that by teaching young people the tools of nonviolent communication, Iranian society will be enriched by a generation that transcends the ancient feuds and parochial beliefs.

She says PeaceMentors’ mandate is peacebuilding through leadership and mentorship and reaching out to bring about social cohesion. She says “You could have the worst government and you could have the best government, but you still need to do these things. A huge part of peacebuilding is to be undertaken by resilient young individuals such as members of my team.”

NOTE: The workshops Shadi speaks about in this article took place in 2019, pre-pandemic and before the Taliban took power in Afghanistan in 2021. The context PeaceMentors operates in has significantly been affected by both factors.

## **Learn more & take action**

[Youth, Peace and Security: A Programming Handbook](#)

[The missing peace: independent progress study on youth and peace and security](#)

[From the backyard to the United Nations](#)

[United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and Generations For Peace train Young Peacebuilders from 12 countries across Middle East and North Africa](#)



**“I can leave a question mark with them. They should question things”**

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**Yusra Hussain is the founder of Agahee Pakistan, a grassroots organization she started with her sister that shares comprehensive sexuality education with young people in schools. She is dedicated to empowering women and raising awareness about sexual and reproductive health and rights and the importance of a movement to end gender-based violence.**

“It has been an interesting journey for me,” Yusra says.

She got married in 2015 after finishing her university studies, but quickly realized she was in an abusive relationship. “Within a week of being in my relationship,” she says, “there were things happening that I could see were not right.”

Yusra made excuses for her husband and gave him the benefit of the doubt again and again, hoping the cycle of violence would end. “Violence is not always physical,” she explains. “I was traumatized emotionally and abused verbally and financially. It wore me down, and it took years for me to come out of the trauma.”

Yusra says that domestic violence is normalized in Pakistan and needs to be addressed. When she was suffering abuse, finding help was not easy. “I was looking out for support,” she recalls. “I wanted to reach out to people who could help me or hear me out or just give me, you know, suggestions on what to do next because nothing made sense to me at that time.”

Not only was she living with violence in her home, but the wider culture in Pakistan made it difficult to report the situation. “There were many organizations worldwide dealing with domestic violence,” she says. “Whenever I texted or emailed them they told me that they couldn’t help me because they were not in Pakistan, and so I should try and reach out to a local organization.” Despite her search for help, Yusra was not able to find protection services in her community.

“I was not happy and the abuse kept on happening,” she remembers. “I was found unconscious in my office one day. My ex’s family had forbidden me to eat anything the day before, so I was functioning on no food. The constant abuse resulted in a minor mental breakdown.”

In the end, Yusra returned to her father’s home and never saw her husband again. She began a new life, one devoted to ending violence against women in Pakistan. “There’s a social stigma about violence,” she says. “We were all seeing it, but nobody was doing anything about it. And then it happened to me.”

Yusra realized that she could be part of opening up a conversation about violence and help to build a network of support for women and girls who were experiencing abuse: “I’d been thinking about doing something and then it clicked. I realized I should start an organization where I could do something for women.”

**“There’s a social stigma about violence. We were all seeing it, but nobody was doing anything about it. And then it happened to me.”**

Yusra Hussain

She put together a proposal on how to conduct a training session to raise awareness about abuse and harassment, and how to get out of these situations. Yusra says that her approach was inclusive, as it was aimed at both girls and boys. “Boys need to know how to actually dismantle the patriarchal society and how it is going to benefit them,” she explains.

She went on to set up an organization called Agahee, which means “awareness” in Urdu and is an acronym for “Aware Girls about Abuse, Harassment and Equal Empowerment”.

Yusra prepared sessions and made plans with her former high school to begin work as an advocate for the rights of girls. However, she did not receive a warm welcome from everyone, despite the lessons being scheduled in advance; she says that the principal tried to brush her off, and then limited her time to just 30 minutes to talk with the students.

“When I was sitting with the girls and when I started talking I could see the yearning in their eyes,” Yusra says. “They wanted to know more.” Yusra gave the girls information about how to get help and find people to talk to. “They wanted to talk more about street harassment,” she explains. “They wanted to talk more about harassment in their communities and all the things that they go through in their own houses.”

Yusra says that the girls were relieved that someone was speaking to them about social issues instead of purely academic subjects. “I knew that I would have more opportunities, because when I looked at those girls I could just tell. And by the time I got home there were dozens of messages on my Instagram account.”

Since then, Yusra and her sister have teamed up to make Agahee a catalyst for girls in Pakistan to talk openly about what they are going through and how to change it. “When I go to a school or a university, or anywhere in the community, I talk to young girls and then they go back to their homes and question things after the training. This should happen, because this is how we’ll make change.”

But Yusra points out that progress is not always a straight line, and she knows that girls do not often get the responses they hope for when they raise the issue of gender-based violence at home. “They received responses like, ‘What are they teaching you in this school? What sort of questions are you asking me? I’ll talk to the headmistress in your school. I’ll talk to a teacher! What are they doing to our girls?’”

Yusra has found that this rigid resistance to new ideas is deeply ingrained in the older generation. Therefore, she says, “I am targeting young people because I can mould their minds.”

Yusra juggles dozens of conversations and cases through her online chats. She is chatting with a girl whose family keeps her in a room after school and just wants to marry her off. Yusra says that the family does not care if she enters into an abusive or violent marriage. “This is what patriarchy looks like in our society and it is shameful.”

Yusra explains that, in each session, Agahee is planting seeds that will take time to reach fruition. “I know it’s not going to be a very quick process,” she says. “It’s going to take years and years, and I may not even live to see the change.” Yusra is motivated by the idea that she leaves the girls to begin their own journey of asking questions: “At least there should be a question. In some I can leave a question mark with them. They should question things.”

Yusra and her sister started running more awareness-raising sessions with students and started getting the message out there. They host “open mics” where people can share monologues about their experiences as survivors, allies and advocates. “We create a safe space for them where they can talk,” she says. “Nobody judges anyone and we will just talk. There are housewives who are going through stuff. They can’t talk to their immediate family.”



After years of listening and sharing, Yusra has distilled some of her learning into structured lesson plans on gender-based violence that can be integrated into the national education curriculum. She says that the project is proceeding but that getting approval takes time.

In the meantime, she tries to keep the sessions small, for groups of 10 to 16 people, so that the girls feel comfortable. At this rate, progress is slow: “It’s very challenging every time, because there are so many schools. There are so many people who still need to know more about the issues.”

As Yusra continues to advocate for change, she sometimes experiences strong resistance and even threats: “I have received a call from someone I know who said, ‘I know this person and he wants you to stop doing what you are doing.’” She now takes these threats in her stride and views them as part of being an activist pushing against a hostile patriarchal power structure. “How is it going to stop me?” she asks. “I cannot stop doing what has become the ambition of my life.”

While Yusra sees progress in the communities where she engages with young people, there is much more to do in rural areas. “In small villages, nobody speaks up,” Yusra reports. “Women and girls get raped and even their mothers say, ‘Just keep quiet. It’s fine – just go out, and don’t tell anybody that you got raped.’ There are so many things that are still not reported.”

Yusra has had to suspend the in-person sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic, but this has allowed her to focus on refinancing, new materials and maintaining her exchanges with hundreds of women across the country.

“I have received messages from women saying that my story has inspired them to make a decision for themselves. And now they have taken steps to get out of an abusive relationship,” she says. “Sometimes it makes me happy that I made the decision to share my story with the world because I know it has helped many people to make their decision,” she adds. “And it really keeps me going, the fact that in a span of just four or five years I have seen people in Pakistan talking about sexual and reproductive health. I have seen women in Peshawar and Karachi and in the most remote areas coming out to the streets and chanting and protesting about their rights.”

## **Learn more & take action**

[My Body is My Body, My Life is My Life: Sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people in Asia and the Pacific](#)

[International Technical and Programmatic Guidance on Out-of-School Comprehensive Sexuality Education \(CSE\)](#)

[Agahee Pakistan](#)



**“We train young people to fill the gap between health services and the community”**

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**HIV is a continuing health crisis in the Philippines. Rising infection rates in young men who have sex with other men signify a deeper challenge of vulnerable groups being marginalized within Philippines society. UNFPA reaches out to support these vulnerable communities using a peer-to-peer approach. It has provided a seed grant and technical assistance to GentleMen Bicol, a youth organization that delivers sexual and reproductive health information and services on the remote island province of Catanduanes. GentleMen Bicol is a Y-PEER youth network affiliate that provides HIV screening to help members of the LGBTIQ+ community access essential health services and protect their rights.**

The island province of Catanduanes is one of the most geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas in the Philippines. On remote islands, such as Catanduanes, health services are inadequate, leaving critical gaps for members of the LGBTIQ+ community.

“We train young people to fill in the gaps between health services and the community,” says Christian Mamansag from GentleMen Bicol. “We can reach the grass roots because we are using peer-to-peer education.”

He says members of LGBTIQ+ communities are hesitant to access community-based screening at their rural provincial health facilities because, as the island is small, there is the risk that they might be talked about. “There is a stigma in terms of testing and a barrier between service providers and members of LGBTIQ+ communities.”

GentleMen Bicol conducts learning sessions in partnership with local government and provincial health offices to dispel the stigma surrounding HIV. Christian talks about the struggle that members of the community have faced: “When people see a member of the LGBTIQ+ community at the health centre, people sometimes assume they are HIV-positive.”

**“Transgender women may be discriminated against in service facilities.”**

Ger Evan

Ger Evan from GentleMen Bicol says gender identities are an issue in the conservative communities where they work. “Transgender women may be discriminated against in service facilities. That is still a major problem.”

GentleMen Bicol provides discreet HIV screening and schedules clients of different ages and demographic profiles at staggered times. “Clients can come without fear of their confidentiality or their identity being breached.”

Ger says health workers sometimes lack knowledge on key population groups like LGBTIQ+ and young people in Catanduanes. “There are many things to work out in HIV and AIDS awareness. When we do awareness seminars, we integrate sexual orientation, gender identity and expression.”

“We are not the type of island that is liberated or open-minded: we are still in the box of religion,” he says. “That is why we keep raising awareness.”

With no treatment facility on the island, it is challenging for people living with HIV to refill their antiretroviral (ARV) medication. The connection with GentleMen Bicol is an essential lifeline.

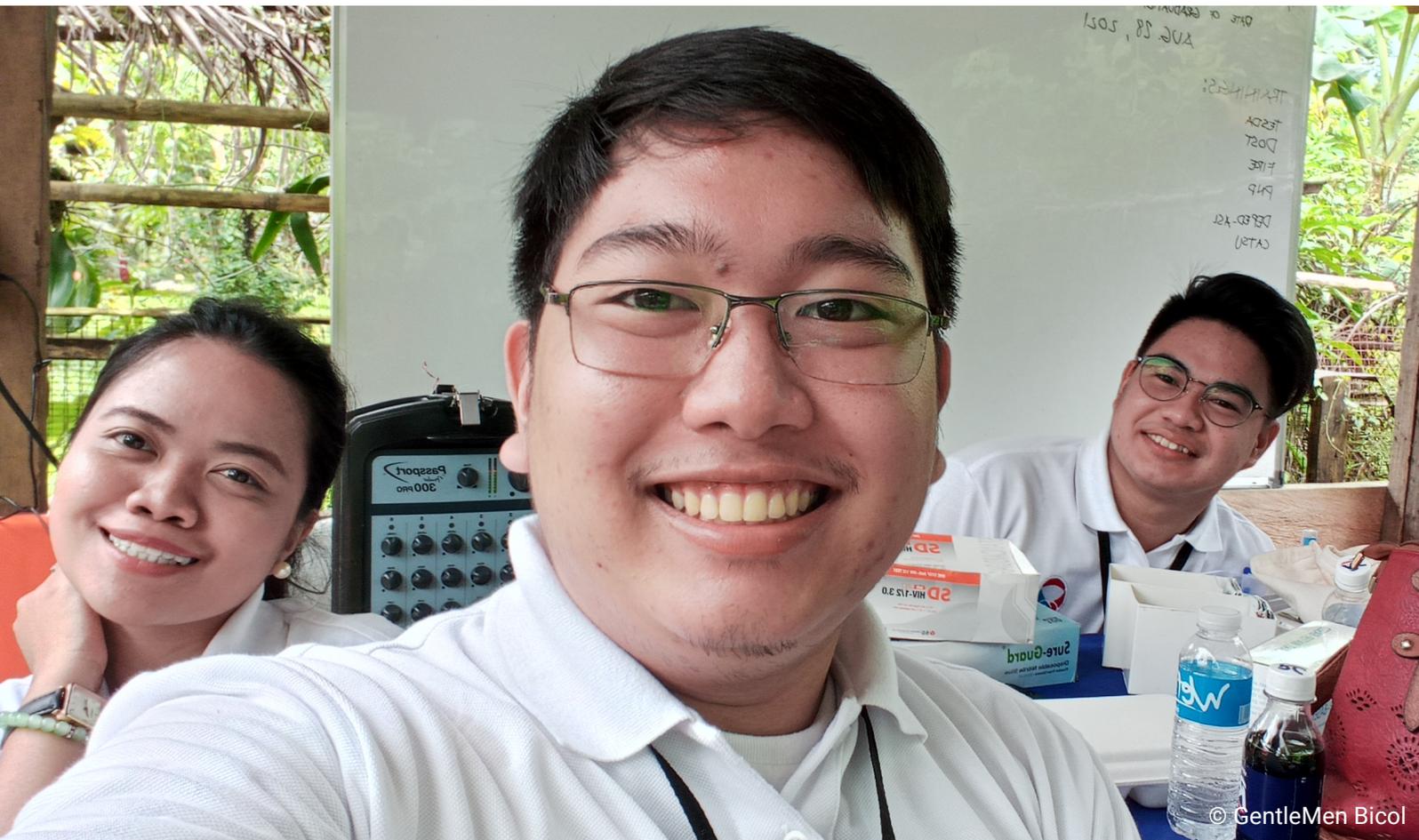
GentleMen Bicol members are trained to provide HIV counselling and they support peers with mental health concerns. At the start of the pandemic, all their outreach and consultations moved from face-to-face activities to online services. “We were able to make the transition from traditional to virtual services,” Christian says. “It actually increased the number of people who could access the information.”

GentleMen Bicol uses dating apps to reach members of LGBTIQ+ communities. “We use several dating apps and we give information about services and then plan to meet up as restrictions are eased. We connect and talk on the dating apps.”

Ger says many sexually active young people are having sex without knowledge of the possible consequences. They are more likely to engage in unprotected sex without knowing that they might contract HIV or other sexually transmitted infections. “Younger people want sexual and reproductive health services but are unable to access them because of negative community attitudes about young people’s sexual behaviour.”

GentleMen Bicol has supported these key populations by delivering supplies and health information that is adapted to their needs. The communities are often so insular that even buying condoms is stigmatized. "Clients appreciate free condoms because there is no need to go to the store to buy condoms," says Christian. "They are afraid of being talked about."

GentleMen Bicol works closely with the regional office of the Philippine Department of Health. Early in 2021, they coordinated community-based screening and transported shipments of ARV medicine from the main island of Luzon to the local health authority. "People living with HIV can now get refills in the provincial health office," says Ger. "They do not have to go to the main island and that is a major step forward."



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## Learn more & take action

[UNFPA on HIV & AIDS](#)

[Y-PEER Pilipinas](#)

[GentleMen Bicol](#)





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Follow-up: Kamma Blair, Programme Specialist. For more information on the work of UNFPA in Asia and the Pacific, please visit our website at: <http://asiapacific.unfpa.org>

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