

Teenage girls shy away from reproductive health clinics

Study finds

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

As sexual and reproductive health is considered a taboo in the society, teenage girls, especially unmarried ones, feel discomfort and embarrassment in seeking medical services for these issues at Adolescent-friendly Health Corners (AFHC).

Many teenagers told researchers that the instance of an adolescent or teenage girl going to an AFHC is perceived as the girl being pregnant or having complications in her reproductive system.

"Even if the health service providers go to their houses, people ask them about the reasons," said the study, quoting a 17-year-old girl as saying.

Population Council conducted the study titled "Adolescent-friendly Health Corners (AFHCs) in Selected Government Health Facilities in Bangladesh: An early Qualitative Assessment". The study was conducted to measure performance and effectiveness of the AFHCs for the wellbeing

of unmarried adolescent girls.

The outcome of the study -- supported by UNFPA, conducted on 10 AFHCs in Moulvibazar, Thakurgaon, Sirajganj, Patuakhali, and Cox's Bazar between August and October 2016 -- was revealed at a program at Spectra Convention Centre in the city yesterday.

So far, the Directorate General of Family Planning (DGFP), in partnership with development partners, has set up a total of 127 AFHCs at Maternal and Child Health Centres (MCHC) and Union Health and Family Welfare Centres (UHFWC).

The DGFP has plans to expand the facilities in all the unions across the country in five years.

The initiative to provide reproductive and sexual health services to teenagers was undertaken against the backdrop of nearly 59 percent girls in Bangladesh getting married before they reach 18 years of age.

More than 4.5 crore or 31 percent of the

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country's population, around 16.10 crore, are adolescents and youths (between 10 and 24 years). Of them, teenage girls are more susceptible to deprivation of education and healthcare.

However, the study findings indicate that social taboo about sexual and health services discourages adolescents and their families seek medical treatment.

"Many people think MCWC and UHFWCs are family planning clinics and that's why they feel uncomfortable sending their unmarried adolescent girls to these facilities," said Iqbal Ehsan of Population Council while presenting the study.

Most adolescent girls expressed satisfaction over services they had received at the AFHCs, he said, adding that however, the service providers assigned at the AFHCs face difficulty in treating the girls at outdoor service points of hospital.

Adding to the problem, as many of the adolescent health corners don't have separate rooms for the girls, they feel embarrassed to speak freely about their private health issues, Iqbal added.

Among other major challenges faced by the AFHCs, the research found shortages of medicine and lack of privacy for adolescents at the facilities.

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