

The Daily Star

12:00 AM, November 05, 2017 / LAST MODIFIED: 03:56 AM, November 05, 2017

CHANGE MAKER

Taking on taboos

Moulvibazar woman gets int'l accolade for efforts on sex education, mental health

Mintu Deshwara and Andrew Eagle

Topics like sex education and mental health are still considered taboo in many parts of the country. But twenty-four-year-old Ishrat Naher Erina from Sreemangal in Moulvibazar has taken up the challenge of fostering open dialogue on the matters. She's been researching the link between sex education and mental health. Her research has attracted international recognition.

“As a student I worked in the development sector. I visited schools, colleges and villages,” Erina explains. “I saw that while many people thought much about issues like career, they rarely consider mental health. In addition, in Bangladesh many aspects of upbringing are unreflective of science. For example, we are taught to be shy of discussing natural uncertainties felt during pubescence.”

In July 2016 Erina, who graduated with a pharmacy degree from BRAC University and has completed an internship with Beximco pharmaceuticals, embarked upon her own pilot project, Prescription Bangladesh. “I've visited schools, colleges, madrasas and slums,” she says. “I surveyed around 3,000 individuals, interacting with many more online.”

Her research efforts have recently been recognised by the Bill and Melinda Gates Institute of Population and Reproductive Health, with her name included on a list of the 120 'next generation' family planning leaders worldwide.

Erina's seminars on issues like reproductive health have been, for many participants, eye-opening. “I didn't know infertility isn't a weakness but solely a medical condition,” says Taslima Akter, 23, a cook from Sreemangal. “When I couldn't conceive, I was tortured at home and ultimately had to divorce. If I'd known more, I would've asked my husband to undergo medical tests; the doctors said I had no fertility problem.”

“When I was in class six our teacher used to skip over topics like menstruation,” says Nowshin Jannat, now in class eight. “We were informed about menstrual hygiene but nobody explained that menstruation is about being physically ready to give birth. After attending a session I know better. We shouldn't feel shy. I ensure friends are well-informed, especially those who would bully others.”

“I used to feel uneasy to talk about my body, the reproductive organs and changes like new hair growth,” says fourteen-year-old madrasa student Akbar Alom. “I used to retreat and ignore people because of the changes I was going through. At a session on reproductive health, I came to understand these are natural changes. Knowledge can help us understand ourselves.”

Sylhet housewife Sabina Baksh meanwhile says she found it difficult to answer her son's questions. “Once he asked about sanitary pads and I told him it wasn't his cup of tea,” she says. “Another day he asked about condoms and I slapped him. After reading Prescription Bangladesh's scientific resources, I've started talking to him properly. I can't mention every detail directly but I try to make it normal to discuss. I want him to appreciate this is a natural part of life.”

“From an education and mental health standpoint,” notes Erina, “it makes sense for adolescents to be informed. Traditionally young people don't speak openly about pubescence with families, teachers or friends. It's not a tendency restricted to rural areas. Sex education can challenge unhelpful taboos.”

“Erina's project has value,” remarks BRAC University microbiology professor Dr M Mahboob Hossain. “All parents should take imparting sex education to sons and daughters seriously. Adolescent lives can easily derail without proper knowledge.”

On a personal note, Erina says that despite the very real challenges of being raised as a girl in a country like Bangladesh, these shouldn't be an excuse not to “work outside the box.”

“In my case I am blessed by one superman,” she says. “Along with other family members, my father has unconditionally supported me.”

“I didn't raise my daughter to be a traditional girl,” says Erina's father, trader Sahid Hossain Iqbal. “I hoped she could be a human being who can reach the peak of success as much as any boy. I'm so proud of her. To work on such sensitive issues is really courageous.”

Erina's mother is likewise impressed. “She'll always be my baby girl,” says Rawsan Iqbal. “Even after her graduation I made her tiffin meals. Sometimes I'm still struck with wonder to see her in the media. But I'm really happy she can represent our country. I hope she can bring lots of success to Bangladesh. My contribution is really paying off.”

Alongside her personal project, Erina has been working with an international research firm; and recently she left for Germany to pursue a Master's degree. “I hope to return to Bangladesh and dedicate myself to health science,” she says.