

## In pursuit of happiness

- [Saudia Afrin](#)
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Photo: Rajib Dhar

‘Gender and Sexual and Reproductive Health Conference 2018 For Young Adults,’ organized by BRAC JPG School of Public Health’s Centre for Gender and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), focused on various dimensions and streams connected with emotional and mental avenues and well-being of individuals in the modern world, particularly in the context of Bangladesh.

Monika, a resident of Dhaka, suffers from cerebral palsy and has to think hundreds of times every time she gets out of her house. Kamal is a university student who believes cyber bullying is a serious problem and has

lots of questions about it – but wonders who to ask. 12-year-old Shefali thinks it's too early for her to get married. Different people living in various parts of the country have been dealing with different challenges for a while. So, what should they do about it?

Well-being, or wellness is a general term for the condition of an individual or group. And when it comes to young people, the concept of well-being is closely related to their psychology. These people face continuous emotional and mental challenges regarding their personal well-being – be it a man or a woman.

People around the world have incorporated the internet into their daily lives – using it to find information, communicate with friends and family, and pass the time. But, how does it affect our well-being?

In the modern age, technology assists people to get access to information. Whether it's personal well-being, access to information or sexual and reproductive health, everything is inter-related. Gender and personal well-being is closely associated with sexual and reproductive health.

Young people are suffering from disabilities, going through an emotional phase, facing a dilemma regarding their peer and romantic relationships, their sexual orientation and desires; others are dealing with depression and anxiety, a dysfunctional relationship, using drugs, alcohol or even pornography. The challenge is the continued silence around these topics with little conversations about their problems, as there is stigma and shame attached to many of these issues. The reality is that young people are navigating their lives in rapidly changing urban and rural spaces and their emotional, mental, spiritual and physical health is very important in relation to SRHR.

On January 30 and 31, BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health organized the 'Gender and Sexual and Reproductive Health Conference 2018 For Young Adults' at the Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel, Dhaka in order to discuss these pressing issues.

Funded by NUFFIC, and in partnership with the National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT) and Reproductive Health Services Training and Education Program (RHSTEP), the two-day long conference offered a rare chance for 750 university students from three public and private universities and several organizations, including development organizations, aid agencies, government organizations, researchers and academics to listen to experts from eight countries – Bangladesh, India, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

## **Young people are navigating their lives in rapidly changing urban and rural spaces**

Dr Annie Vestjens, First Secretary, Gender and SRHR, Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Bangladesh attended as special guest on the first day of the conference. Jeroen Steeghs, Head of Development Cooperation, Charge d' Affaires, Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands, Bangladesh gave the opening remarks on the second day of the conference. The panelists included Sara Hossain, Supreme Court Lawyer and Honorary ED of Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, Dr Mustafa Sarwar, Additional Secretary and Director General of the Directorate of Family Planning, Government of Bangladesh, Rownaq Jahan, Additional Secretary and Director General of NIPORT, Government of Bangladesh, Sathyanarayanan Doraiswamy, Chief of Health, UNFPA, Farzana Brownia, CEO of Shornokishoree Foundation, Qazi Suraiya Sultana, Executive Director, RHSTEP, Dr Jhuma Basak, Associate Professor, NHSM Institute of Media and Design, West Bengal, Anita Ghai, Professor, Ambedkar University and many other renowned faces.

The conference focused on many important issues in the modern world, including the various aspects related to the sexual and reproductive health of young adults.

Interactive panel discussions included topics such as the importance of emotional and mental well-being for modern young adults given the myriad challenges they encounter, as well as social constructs, gender stereotypes, masculinity and the burden of such stereo types on young people's well-being. Panels also touched upon issues of technology and modern-day relationships; the session explored how relentless exposure to digital technology and social media is re-configuring peer and romantic relationships.

One of the sessions titled 'The emotional life and well-being of young adults,' Dr Jhuma Basak enlightened the audience with her speech about having a positive attitude towards life, while Onaiza Owals, a psychology graduate from Durham University shared her personal experience. Wangda Dorji from Bhutan who has been diagnosed with HIV also talked about his struggles, challenges and cogitation.

Furthermore, Shohini Ghosh, Sajjad Zaheer Professor of Media, AJK Mass Communication Research Center, gave an insightful talk on reading media text and how it differs for person to person.

Model Azra Mahmood also came forward to share her own struggles, talking about the age-old, yet persisting perception on complexion and the true meaning of beauty.

## **Teachers, parents and communities are reluctant to teach about SRHR because of their own cultural and social biases**

Adding a different perspective to the entire conference, Anita Ghai, Professor, Ambedkar University provided her critical reflection on disability and the sexual challenges a disabled person faces. Sharing the agony of the disabled, she said, "We are not broken, don't fix us." She encouraged people to make education holistic for people with disabilities.

The title of the conference, itself conferred its prime objective about making young adults aware about Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), so that they can become healthy and productive citizens.

The second day of the conference focused primarily on SRHR intervention and had an audience of 350 practitioners, researchers, activists and development partners to discuss the priorities and challenges surrounding young peoples' SRHR needs.

The sessions talked about the risky sexual behavior of adolescent men in slums of Dhaka, the sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescent girls and child marriage. Sara Hossain, Supreme Court Lawyer and Honorary ED of Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, talked about the laws regarding such issues. The panelists gave great attention to the experience of young adults regarding sexuality and relationships, the need for developing life-skills among adolescents, censorship in SRHR education, and understanding of informed consent and choice.

Emphasizing on comprehensive sexuality education, Dr Sabina Rashid, Dean and Professor of BRAC JGSPH School, said, "I don't think we can call it comprehensive. Through our research, we have found that there are many areas that are not mentioned in the sexuality education curriculum, such as mental and emotional needs related to SRHR, and sexuality needs move beyond the hetero normative framework and be inclusive of all

groups and communities. Teachers, parents and communities are reluctant to teach about SRHR because of their own cultural and social biases.”

Interactive sessions allowed the students and other participants to ask questions to the panelists. The two-day conference revolved around unfolding the critical avenues of digital technology, such as the platform of social media, its impact on relationships, cyber bullying and pornography available on the internet or shown in movies. Listening to people from other regions of the world talk about their experiences and discussing these issues in the context of Bangladesh proved to be a useful platform for the students scrutinizing social construct, gender stereotypes, gender roles and sexuality, existing social norms and other related issues with more in-depth and practical knowledge.

**About BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health (JPGSPH), BRAC University**

Founded in 2004, BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health is dedicated to work with unmet public health challenges particular to Asia, Africa and South America. The School’s institutional partners are BRAC, the world’s largest NGO, and icddr, a leading international health research institute. The School is at BRAC University, a premier higher education and development research institution. The Center of Excellence for Gender, Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (CGSRHR) at JPGSPH has evolved into a Center of Excellence dedicated more broadly to research, policy, advocacy and training activities in the arena of reproductive health rights in Bangladesh and in the region. A team of 15 dedicated colleagues who undertake a wide range of research, advocacy and programming towards expansion of knowledge, promotion of dialogue and exchange, network and partnership building, dissemination of information, advocacy for change, and capacity building.

(Source: JPGSPH)