

Youth Engagement Spotlight



Improving Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Dhaka



SERAC-Bangladesh
(A youth focused rights and development organization)



Empowering Youth for Improved Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Dhaka

Background

While Bangladesh has achieved significant progress in maternal and child health, there are ongoing challenges to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). The Improving SRHR in Dhaka project (2021–2026) is addressing persistent SRHR challenges, including unintended pregnancies, unmet need for contraception, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), unsafe abortion, as well as the social norms and stigma that continue to hinder access to SRHR.

This project is a collaboration between HealthBridge Foundation of Canada and implementing partners Ipas Bangladesh, Bangladesh Association for Prevention of Septic Abortion (BAPSA), Obstetrical and Gynecological Society of Bangladesh (OGSB), Reproductive Health Services Training and Education Program (RHSTEP), and SERAC-Bangladesh. Funded by Global Affairs Canada, the five-year project works with diverse stakeholders, including General Practitioners (GPs), the ready-made garment industry, various government agencies, and a network of youth volunteers to expand access to quality SRHR services across underserved areas in Dhaka, Narayanganj, and Gazipur.



Women visiting a project supported General Practitioner (GP) chamber.

Community Engagement: A Cornerstone of the Improving SRHR in Dhaka Project

Community awareness and supportive attitudes are key for improving SRHR in urban underserved areas. Contraception and menstrual regulation (MR) services are still associated with shame or social disapproval. Adolescents often lack comprehensive knowledge of their reproductive rights and bodily autonomy, while myths and misconceptions about contraception, menstruation, and post-abortion care remain widespread.



General Practitioner and Volunteer Linkage Model

General Practitioners (GPs)

Community-based GPs are often accessible and trusted in underserved urban areas, where barriers exist to obtaining services at larger health facilities. In each project ward, 3–4 GPs (100 in total) were identified, trained, and equipped to deliver high-quality SRHR services, including family planning (FP), MR, post-abortion care (PAC), and SGBV counselling and referrals.



Youth Volunteers



Youth volunteers aged 16–24 years from low-income urban areas were recruited through a participatory process led by SERAC-Bangladesh, with support from community leaders, schools, and youth clubs. Gender balance and diversity were prioritized. Volunteers receive training on SRHR, communication, and facilitation skills.



Each GP's catchment area is supported by 10 youth volunteers, organized into Community Action Groups (CAGs). In total, 1,000 youth volunteers work across the project sites, conducting outreach, promoting SRHR services, and linking women and adolescents to trusted GPs and health facilities.

Mobilizing Volunteers for Community Change

Youth as Peer Educators, Advocates, and Leaders

Youth volunteers are at the heart of community outreach delivering messages on FP, MR, PAC, menstrual hygiene, and GBV prevention through peer sessions, community meetings, and school events. In advocacy events and public dialogues, youth have become visible champions for gender equality and SRHR rights.



Expanding Community Reach Through Youth Leadership

Through consistent engagement, the trained volunteers – known locally as “Projonon Shastho Bondhu” (প্রজনন স্বাস্থ্যবন্ধু) – have reached thousands of community members, helping normalize conversations around sensitive SRHR topics. Adolescents now recognize these volunteers as credible sources of information, while parents and community elders increasingly invite them to local gatherings.

Youth leadership has strengthened linkages between communities and GPs, resulting in higher service uptake and more open discussions on reproductive health and gender equality. This has also resulted in the rising number of service referrals, greater community engagement in awareness activities, and more positive attitudes within families.

Mobilizing Volunteers for Community Change



Developing a Youth Engagement Strategy

The project has established a comprehensive Youth Engagement Strategy and supporting guidelines to strengthen youth-led SRHR initiatives and Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) interventions. Central resources include a youth volunteer selection guide, a capacity-building manual, a leadership selection framework, and a community meeting facilitation guide; tools designed to empower young leaders and amplify their role in advancing SRHR.



Engaging Youth Through Social Media

To extend its reach, the project launched a social media page “Projonon Shastho Bondhu” (প্রজনন স্বাস্থ্যবন্ধু). Youth volunteers co-create and share SRHR-related content, strengthening community connections and promoting accurate information. The project has also developed a Social Media Strategy and Guidelines to ensure responsible and impactful online engagement. Nearly 40,000 people follow “Projonon Shastho Bondhu” on social media.

Mobilizing Volunteers for Community Change

Empowering Youth Voices through PhotoVoice

PhotoVoice empowers communities to drive positive social change through photography and narrative storytelling. The PhotoVoice initiative provided a platform for youth to share stories from their communities, draw attention to local SRHR challenges, and foster collective action. By harnessing visual storytelling, the initiative aimed to empower marginalized groups in low-income areas of Dhaka and influence decision-making through dialogue and advocacy on SRHR issues.

Selected youth volunteers were trained in PhotoVoice methodology, including photography, visual storytelling, and SRHR concepts. They also received guidance on ethical considerations, consent, and privacy while documenting sensitive issues.

Stories covered topics such as contraceptive use, menstrual regulation, post-abortion care, reproductive coercion, gender-based violence, and violations of women's and adolescents' rights. Regular group sessions allowed participants to review and discuss their photos collectively, analyzing connections and identifying the most impactful stories.



The PhotoVoice stories were presented in a series of public exhibitions that fostered community dialogue to address attitudes and practices surrounding SRHR and served as an advocacy tool to encourage policymakers to take action to improve SRHR.

Bangladesh Urban Youth Conference 2025 and The Dhaka Declaration



In August 2025, the project convened the Bangladesh Urban Youth Conference, creating a vibrant platform for youth to share experiences, showcase best practices, and co-create sustainable solutions for a youth-friendly urban health system. The conference brought together 600 youth volunteers and distinguished guests from government, academia, civil society, and the media.

Youth volunteers were involved with the planning of the conference and were instrumental to its success. In preparation, these youth conducted consultations with over 160 community members to identify their healthcare needs, expectations, and priorities for policymakers. These consultations informed the development of policy recommendations, which culminated in the Dhaka Declaration 2025.

The Dhaka Declaration 2025 calls for collective action to advance the SRHR and well-being of all urban youth. It emphasizes investing in youth leadership, strengthening community-service linkages through meaningful youth engagement, and ensuring that every individual, regardless of gender or socio-economic background, has access to accurate information, quality SRHR services, and the ability to exercise their reproductive rights.

For more information about the project, please scan;



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