



...And Beyond





Since 1974

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UNFPA At A Glance



UNFPA is the United Nations' sexual and reproductive health agency. UNFPA's mission is to deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled. UNFPA calls for the realisation of reproductive rights for all and supports access to a wide range of sexual and reproductive health services, including voluntary family planning, quality maternal health care and comprehensive sexuality education.

Operating in India since 1974, UNFPA focuses on empowering young people with critical life skills and invests in adolescent health and well-being; ensuring universal access to high quality sexual and reproductive health and rights and services; addressing gender discrimination and harmful practices such as gender-biased sex selection and child marriage, and using population data to maximise the demographic dividend. UNFPA has state offices and concerted on-ground programme implementation in the four Indian states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Odisha. UNFPA's support includes policy advocacy, technical support for systems strengthening and programme implementation, and knowledge management.

UNFPA aims to achieve three transformative results that promise to change the world for every woman, man, and young person by 2030:



UNFPA's work is guided by the principles of a human rights-based approach established by the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), gender empowerment and equality, and the imperative that no one is left behind.





INTRODUCTION



ANDREA M. WOJNAR
Representative, UNFPA India,
and Country Director, Bhutan

It is my honour to share this special edition Storybook commemorating UNFPA's journey in India. We spotlight six stories from our programmes that connect India and global megatrends: harnessing the demographic and gender dividend by empowering young people and focusing on reproductive health and bodily autonomy; bridging the gender digital divide; promoting positive masculinity as a new social norm; addressing demographic megatrends related to ageing; and tackling the effects of climate change. Additionally, we have included thought-provoking pieces, opinions, and insights from the past.

We hope the real-life stories in this book will inspire others. Life stories of Mamata Patidar, who stood up to her mother and refused to marry young, stating bluntly that girls are “not a burden to families,” or that of Sanu, who boldly says, “contraception is no longer a topic to be skirted around; it is a choice that young individuals are learning to make for themselves,” remind us that our work is not just about addressing immediate needs but about creating opportunities that can reshape entire communities and societies for the better.

India's past achievements inspire confidence in its future. The Constitution of India serves as the foundation, ensuring equality for all women, prohibiting discrimination by the State, guaranteeing equality of opportunity, and mandating equal pay for equal work. It also allows for special provisions to be made in favour of women and children, denounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women, and provides for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief.

India has come a long way. In the 1970s, maternal mortality was a grave issue, with over 800 women dying per 100,000 live births. Today, that number has dropped to 97, as recorded in 2018–2020, and India is well on its way to achieving the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target of reducing maternal mortality to 70 by 2030. We remain committed to reaching the ultimate goal of zero preventable maternal deaths. The progress India has made in saving the lives of thousands of women is truly commendable.

As the world's most populous country with a significant youth bulge, India's focus is on reaping the demographic dividend. In stark contrast, when UNFPA launched its first country programme in 1974, India recorded its highest annual population growth rate of 2.36%. The total national fertility rate was 5.2 in 1971, which has reached the replacement level of 2.0 in 2020, and the unmet need for family planning is down to 9.4% in 2020 from 19.5% in 1992. Yet fertility rates still vary across states, from 1.0 to 3.0, presenting unique demographic challenges


and opportunities. This diversity calls for reimagining of family planning services, alongside addressing issues of ageing, migration, and urbanisation across the country.

As we celebrate 50 years of our partnership with India, we look forward to an India where the potential of its youth is boundless, where men and women stand as equals, where the elderly age with dignity, where bodily autonomy is respected, where climate action is championed by resilient girls and women, and where technology drives gender equality.

As an organisation working in 150 countries and as a member of the global UN system, we rededicate ourselves to closely partnering with India. We strive to meet the country's needs and aspirations by bringing the best global insights, contextual analysis, innovations, and perspectives. Our mission remains steadfast: to ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, every preventable maternal death is averted, and every young person's potential is fulfilled.

We express our deepest gratitude to the Government of India, state governments, sister UN agencies, esteemed donors, think tanks, academia, the private sector, civil society, and the communities with whom we work. Your support has been instrumental in our journey so far, and we look forward to continuing this strong and fruitful partnership.

India's leadership, both on the global stage and within, has been instrumental in this progress. From averting maternal deaths to curbing child marriage, its innovative models of service delivery are a beacon to the world. Yet, as we chart the course for an India beaming with possibilities, our task is incomplete. Launched 18 months ago, our ambitious Tenth Country Programme aims to support India to further reduce maternal mortality, child marriage, and gender inequality, while expanding access to family planning.

Join us in these pages as we explore India's journey—a journey where possibilities are boundless. 

FOREWORD

UNFPA India: 50 and Beyond is a rich collection of stories inspired by UNFPA's impact in India over the past five decades. It is a celebration of UNFPA's strong partnerships – with the Government of India and others – and of our collective efforts to advance the rights and choices of all people, especially women and girls.

With a diverse, talented and vibrant population of 1.4 billion, India is a country with limitless possibilities. It has made significant development strides and is a wellspring of ideas and innovation. Women and young people are at the heart of this potential, blazing a path towards a better future. When provided with the knowledge and skills they need to claim their rights and seize opportunities, they and their communities are more likely to thrive.

UNFPA is proud of the role it has played in supporting India's impressive progress in reproductive health and the



DR. NATALIA KANEM
Executive Director, UNFPA

empowerment of women. Over the past 50 years, India has seen a significant reduction in maternal mortality, child marriage, and unmet need for family planning – saving countless lives and creating a more equitable society, with improved health outcomes and opportunities for women and girls.

These achievements in India did not happen on their own. They required leadership, investments and vision. Through partnerships – with government, civil society, development institutions, and others – UNFPA has helped to strengthen health systems, collect more and better population data, and challenge harmful gender norms.

UNFPA India has transformed the lives of women and young people by giving them the power to realise their full potential. The stories in this book illuminate how far we have come and the important work that remains unfinished. Together with our partners and those we serve, we will continue to strive towards a future of rights and choices – a future where everyone counts.



C O N T



YOUTH POWER UNLEASHED



8

INDIA CAN RISE AND SHINE ON ITS YOUTH BULGE

India's largest ever population of adolescents and youth of 257 million people calls for an enabling ecosystem to capitalise on the demographic dividend



Interview **Shireen Jejeebhoy**
UNFPA's approach has led to changes in family planning practices

10



Bibek Debroy **Aditya Sinha**

11 How India can capitalise on its demographic dividend



TECH EMPOWERS WOMEN



12

FROM CHILD BRIDES TO DIGITAL CHANGE-MAKERS

In Rajasthan, UNFPA has allied with two grassroots organisations to equip young women with digital skills



Interview **Sujatha Rao**
UNFPA has transformed our understanding of reproductive rights

14



Nidhi Bhasin

15 Take to tech to empower women



REDEFINING MASCULINITY



16

POSITIVE MASCULINITY HERALDS GENDER EQUALITY

A bubbling discourse on masculinity is combatting perceptions of men's roles in rural Rajasthan



Interview **A.R. Nanda**
The current large population size is due to inequality

18



Ravi K. Verma

19 Towards gender equality as a public good

E N T S



MY BODY, MY MIND #MY RIGHT



20

ENABLING WOMEN'S CHOICES

An array of contraceptive options, social interventions, software-driven tracking and delivery system transform reproductive health



Interview **Gita Sen**
Moving from family planning targets to health and rights

22



Dr. Biswanath Ghosh Dastidar

23 Time for fertility care; holistic prescription needed



Dr. Neeta Singh



HEALTHY AGEING



24

SENIOR CITIZENS SET A NEW TUNE

With an active mind and even more active lifestyle, India's so-called elders are inspiring the young with their irrepressible zest for life



Interview **Jayant K. Banthia**
UNFPA must prioritise the elderly as ageing will be a future issue

26



Nilanjan Ghosh

27 Pathways to healthy ageing in India



FEMINISING CLIMATE SOLUTIONS



28

REIMAGINING WOMAN POWER FOR DISASTER MITIGATION

OSDMA and UNFPA mobilised women and trained them in disaster management, besides strengthening their key skills of critical thinking, creativity, communication



Interview **Poonam Muttreja**
Data-driven approach focuses on reaching the most marginalised

30



Dia Mirza

31 Youth call for change and empowerment



YOUTH POWER UNLEASHED

THEMATIC OVERVIEW

CAPITALISING ON THE YOUTH BULGE

INDIA HAS ITS LARGEST EVER

youth bulge, or the availability of a large, youthful workforce. With 257 million young people between 15 and 24 years of age, India's 'youth bulge' makes up more than one fourth of the country's total working-age population (15-59 years), which is expected to rise from 936 million in 2024 to 1027 million by 2036.

With the right investments, the country could transform this demographic dividend into a powerful force for driving its economic engine. This is due to the creativity, energy, and unique perspectives of young people propelling innovation and progress. In recent years, there has been wider recognition of the unique challenges to well-being confronting adolescents, and of the need to address these in development agendas, but more targeted action is needed.

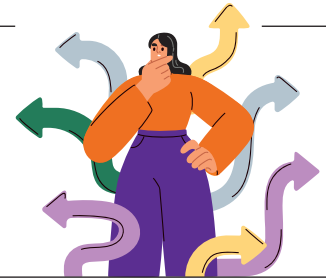
Globally, the staggering cost of inaction is estimated at \$110 trillion over 27 years (2024-50). It amounts to 7.7 percent of the total GDP of those countries included in the models, which themselves include around 80 percent of

the world's population.

The economic and social returns from a wide range of investments to address adolescent well-being are significant. The investment should cover five domains of adolescent well-being: health, connectedness, safety, learning and employability, agency and resilience, and the linkages between them.

Additionally, transformative investment in three key platforms or systems is necessary: universal health coverage (UHC), including primary health care (PHC); enhanced school education so that there is focus on learning, health, nutrition, and student well-being; and support systems based in local communities.

As India stands at the precipice of a demographic revolution, the choices made today will reverberate in the future. Harnessing the demographic and gender dividend is not just an economic goal but a clarion call for a more inclusive, prosperous, and sustainable future. The potential of India's vast populace is both its greatest strength and its most daunting challenge.



→ HUMAN-INTEREST STORY

INDIA CAN RISE AND SHINE ON ITS YOUTH BULGE

India's largest ever population of adolescents and youth—257 million (ages 15-24)—is creating a 'youth bulge', which calls for creating an enabling ecosystem to capitalise on the demographic dividend

- After her father's sudden death, Mamata Patidar's biggest concern was being married off. But the Indore girl refused to let societal norms dictate her future. She stood up to her mother, challenging the old beliefs: "I don't want to marry young. Girls are not a 'burden' to their families."
- In another corner of Madhya Pradesh, 16-year-old Divya Chaudhry aspires to have a career in science and a financially independent life. Despite the traditional gender norms that prevail in her small, conservative town, she has no plans to marry anytime soon.

● In Bihar, 22-year-old Sanu and his friends are the architects of a new movement that believes in the power of conversation to dismantle long-standing taboos. Through open dialogues and community engagement, they are tackling issues that have been whispered about for generations. Menstruation, sexuality, and contraception are no longer confined to the shadows; they are stepping into the light of day.

These young people are a new generation of Indians, with empathy and leadership. Their life skills are honed, and they are progressive in their outlook. What is also common to all of these young leaders is that they have, at some point in time, come into contact with the Umang Life Skills Programme, which has helped shape their personalities, health, and well-being.

Mamata credits her ability to take a stand to the Umang Life Skills Education Programme, which aims to enhance the well-being of students in Madhya Pradesh by integrating life skills-based health and wellness education into the school system, creating a holistic approach to student development. The programme was developed by

Facts are replacing the whispered myths around menstruation, and the shrouds of secrecy around youth sexuality are parting to reveal conversations of consent

the Government of Madhya Pradesh in partnership with UNFPA India.

Guided by a dedicated teacher and inspired by Umang’s insightful pedagogy, Mamata embraced a profound truth—that work doesn’t belong to a specific gender. In the process, Mamata became a voice against gender discrimination, understanding that healthy relationships can blossom between individuals, regardless of gender.

She not only persuaded her mother to enrol her in a reputed college after completing school but also

emphasised the importance of higher education for securing a well-paying job, thereby contributing to her family’s prosperity.

In another instance, Divya, who is in her final year of school, holds a leadership role in a youth health project. She was shortlisted to represent her district in monthly meetings to educate young people by sharing correct information on a range of health issues with other adolescents from the village. The 16-year-old daughter of an ASHA worker of Tikuri town aspires to have a career in science and a financially independent life. Despite the traditional gender norms that prevail in her small, conservative town, she has no plans to marry anytime soon.

Divya says, “I am passionate about health and have an in-depth understanding of family planning and sexual and reproductive health because of the teaching and sensitisation on these issues by my mother, an ASHA worker.” She adds, “These are not topics that one should be coy about addressing or discussing.

It is an important aspect of a person’s health.”

For Sanu and his peers, this is not just a mission; it is personal. With each step they take, they are shattering stereotypes. Facts are replacing the whispered myths around menstruation, and the shrouds of secrecy around youth sexuality are parting to reveal conversations of consent and understanding. As for contraception, it’s no longer a topic to be skirted around; it is a choice that young individuals are learning to make for themselves.

Sanu beams with pride as he recounts stories of young girls in his community embracing conversations that were once considered off-limits. He speaks of young boys who are now allies in the journey, promoting respect and gender equality. □

▼ Divya with sister Saniya, mother Miradevi Ahirwal and father Ram Swaroop



Written by Bijoy Patro, a freelance journalist



→ INTERVIEW – **SHIREEN JEJEEBHOY**, Director, Aksha Centre for Equity and Wellbeing

UNFPA'S APPROACH HAS RESULTED IN CHANGES IN FAMILY PLANNING PRACTICES



SHIREEN JEJEEBHOY is the Director at the Aksha Centre for Equity and Wellbeing and distinguished visiting faculty at the International Institute for Population Sciences. She has worked closely with UNFPA over the years. In this conversation with **Naina Gautam**, she talks about the stellar contributions of UNFPA in driving action in the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights



How did your partnership with UNFPA begin, and how has it evolved?

After I began my stint with UNFPA in the 1990s, I worked with both UNFPA in India and New York. I went to a conference in Laos as a resource person. So, I have done a lot of different things, including evaluating a country programme and working extensively on child marriage. Recently, I worked on norms and gender norms and how they affect sexual and reproductive health and rights.

In one evaluation in Rajasthan and Odisha, I evaluated an adolescent programme. At one point in their strategy development years, a group of us from India was selected to write parts of their report. Since I work a great deal with adolescents and young people, I had the opportunity to look at how the Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram programme, designed to empower adolescents, was being delivered at the ground

level. Most recently, I attended the International Conference on Population and Development [ICPD] 30 Dialogue in Dhaka.

What are the areas where you witnessed UNFPA making a tangible difference in people's lives?

UNFPA has done a remarkable job of raising awareness and highlighting issues that needed attention. It has exposed several unreported violations concerning sexual and reproductive health, getting these issues far more attention in the country than before, which has led to action. Laws have been formed. Attitudes are changing.

Similarly, when it comes to contraception, female sterilisation was the rule. UNFPA's approach, centred on women and girls, has resulted in numerous changes in family planning practices, including giving women the ultimate right to decide.


UNFPA aims to promote informed choice in family planning, which dramatically impacts maternal and child health. This includes providing prenatal care, institutional delivery, and postpartum care. As a result of this and considerable government

efforts, there has been an indirect but significant improvement in maternal mortality.

So, regardless of whether we achieve the gender-related SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals], the work of UNFPA has undoubtedly contributed to our efforts in that direction. Its approach has been holistic, embracing the supply side, programme development, and enrolment of men.

What are your thoughts on the future of UNFPA's work?

UNFPA is well-placed to continue working toward fulfilling the significant unfinished agenda. The primary focus of UNFPA should be to prioritise securing sexual and reproductive health and rights, which is crucial for India and many other countries.

The sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescents have become a significant issue in this century, and there is much more to be done beyond addressing child marriage. It is important to concentrate on enabling adolescents to make informed decisions and reaching out to men more effectively. 



BIBEK DEBROY



ADITYA SINHA

OPINION →

HOW INDIA CAN CAPITALISE ON ITS DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND



Youth have long been recognised as pivotal contributors to economic growth. India is poised at a strategic point to capitalise on the first demographic dividend, with nearly half its population under 25 and the working-age group expected to surpass one billion soon. Studies, such as the IMF's "Demographic Dividend: Evidence from the Indian States," suggests that the demographic dividend could enhance India's GDP growth per capita by up to two percentage points annually.

However, India must address significant challenges to capitalise on this dividend and fully unleash youth power.


First is the skill gap. Despite initiatives like the Vocationalisation of School Education and Skill India Mission, there is a vast disparity between the skills taught and those demanded by the job market. The India Skills Report 2023 shows some improvement in employability, but more robust technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programmes, akin to Finland's acclaimed model, are necessary. These programmes focus on strong industry linkage and continuous skill upgrading, which could significantly enhance workforce readiness.

Second, as artificial intelligence (AI) continues to transform industries, skill upgradation is crucial for youth in the middle of the economic pyramid, who often hold semi-skilled positions vulnerable to automation. By enhancing their AI literacy, data analytics, and digital skills, these young workers can

shift from routine tasks to more complex roles where AI acts as a support tool, not a replacement. Emphasising continuous learning and adaptability will help them remain relevant and productive in an evolving job market, securing their employment and enabling them to contribute more effectively to economic growth in a digitalized world.

Third, the predominance of informal employment in India, encompassing about 85% of the non-agricultural workforce, obstructs the full realisation of the demographic dividend. These jobs often lack social security and prospects for skill advancement. Modernising labour codes could facilitate a transition from informal to formal employment sectors, improving conditions and security for workers.

Fourth, states and union governments need to double down on the investments in health and education. Correcting historical oversights in early childhood health and education in India is crucial for empowering the youth to become productive contributors to the economy. Initiatives like POSHAN Abhiyaan and Mission Poshan 2.0, which focus on enhancing health and nutrition from the early stages of life, play a pivotal role in this empowerment process.

Good health and proper nutrition in the formative years significantly improve cognitive development and educational outcomes, laying a foundation for higher skills and greater productivity in adulthood. By investing in the well-being of children, these programmes ensure that the future workforce is not only healthier but also better equipped to handle complex tasks and adapt to changing economic demands. This enhances individual capability and strengthens the overall human capital, driving long-term economic and social progress. 

As AI continues to transform industries, skill upgradation is crucial for youth in the middle of the economic pyramid, who hold semi-skilled positions vulnerable to automation

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TECH EMPOWERS WOMEN



THEMATIC OVERVIEW

TECH-TONIC SHIFT EMPOWERS WOMEN

TECHNOLOGY HAS EMERGED

as an enabler for empowering women worldwide by providing unprecedented access to information, education, healthcare, economic opportunities, financial services, community support, and personal safety. It helps women overcome social, geographical, and financial barriers, fostering a more equitable world.

It has democratised education through online learning platforms, especially for women from underserved areas. Additionally, it has enabled personal and professional growth, opening doors to better job prospects, which, in turn, guarantees financial independence.

Technology has widened economic opportunities, giving much-needed flexibility and financial independence, especially for women who can opt for online remote work and freelance opportunities, balancing their professional aspirations with domestic obligations. While fintech has brought banking to their doorsteps, technology has also increased access to healthcare for women.

Technological advancements have enhanced women's safety through mobile apps and

wearable devices with emergency alerts and GPS tracking features.

Digital platforms have allowed women to form virtual communities to communicate, connect, support each other, and collaborate. These platforms have amplified their voices, allowing them to advocate for their rights, influence public policy, and engage in discussions impacting their lives and communities.

The Digital Sakhi initiative was launched by UNFPA to propel literacy of digital skills among adolescent girls and raise awareness about issues like child marriage, school dropout, and gender-based challenges. Similarly, the Tech-Sakhi initiative supports survivors of child marriage in becoming advocates for change.

UNFPA also launched Just Ask/ Khulke Poochho, an AI-enabled chatbot that provides safe and accurate responses to critical queries revolving around social issues, sexual and reproductive health, and rights among adolescents and young adults, while maintaining end-to-end privacy.

All these initiatives have led to the use of digital media as a tool that empowers adolescent girls to bring about social change in the community.

→ HUMAN INTEREST STORY

FROM CHILD BRIDES TO DIGITAL CHANGE-MAKERS

In Rajasthan, UNFPA allies with two grassroots organisations to expand life choices for married adolescents, equipping them with digital skills and empowering them to advocate for their rights

Ten-year-old Niklesh Kharol was rudely woken from her sleep in the middle of the night and taken to the marriage *mandap*. Now, in the first year of her college in Kekri, Rajasthan, Niklesh realises why her classmates find this strange. "I feel bad to talk of my marriage before others—*ajeeb saa lagta hai* (it is an odd feeling)," she says. "I do think that I should have married as per my own choice," the former child bride says, trying to avoid further discussion on her *gauna*, which is the post-marriage ceremony that requires the child bride to leave her maternal family and join her husband.

Niklesh knows nothing of the man

she married except that he is a college student. Similarly, Manisha Jat knows very little about the man she married when she was just nine months old. “He is eight years older than I am, drives a truck, and is an alcoholic.” She adds, “I don’t want the *gauna*. But there is pressure from home.”

Both Niklesh and Manisha are part of a group of 31 young women who meet at a tech centre established by the Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti (MJAS), an Ajmer-based NGO that works to develop leadership skills among underprivileged women, children, and youth. MJAS partners with the Centre for Community Economics and Development Consultants (CECOEDECON) in collaboration with UNFPA on this initiative.

The tech centre is a space for young women to spend time with one another and imbibe life skills. “Here, while learning digital and life skills, they do things that they like to do, play games, or even take rest,” says Shweta Tiwari of CECOEDECON. Here, the young women, also called Tech-Sakhis (peers), have all received mobile phones and access to computers. It is a place where Sanju Rawat and others learned to use computers and technical skills such as digital storytelling, video shooting, editing, social media usage, and so on. For the girls here, the Tech-Sakhi course run by MJAS in collaboration with the UNFPA is an emancipator. The digital labs and the playground have now become a haven for them. Despite societal barriers, these girls use their new skills to apply for jobs, open bank accounts, and access government schemes. They are also advocating for ending the harmful practice of child marriage through videos that they make.


Sanju has been transcending norms; she calls her husband on her mobile phone, something that is unheard of in her village. “I want to delay my *gauna*,” she says unhesitatingly, “I want to complete my studies (BA) and possibly study



▲ Tech Sakhi Programme

beyond.” The tech centre is supported by other training programmes offered by MJAS, such as a course in grassroots journalism and photography. Maya Gurjar, who started as a Tech Sakhi, has trained to become a grassroots journalist and has also acquired advanced analytical skills for a girl of her age in a remote village. “The economy here has been traditionally dependent on animal husbandry and rain-fed farming—both of which demand intensive labour, and the thinking is that labour must be sourced

from home,” MJAS’ Indira Pancholi explains the region’s penchant for child marriage.

UNFPA’s work in partnership with MJAS to reduce the incidence of child marriage is based on digital learning through a women-centric approach to technology that begins with an introduction to computers and then a photography workshop. Tech-Sakhis start with an introduction to essential digital skills that empower them with practical knowledge and foster digital literacy. The partnership is also aimed at understanding the needs of these girls in terms of rehabilitation, thereby advancing the agenda of comprehensive rehabilitation mechanisms for them. The curriculum specifically addresses the discrimination and the challenges faced by child brides and empowers them with the skills and knowledge to navigate and overcome these challenges. 

UNFPA’s work in partnership with Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti to reduce the incidence of child marriage is based on digital learning through a women-centric approach

Written by Bijoy Patro,
a freelance journalist



→ INTERVIEW – **SUJATHA RAO**, Former Secretary, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare

UNFPA HAS TRANSFORMED OUR UNDERSTANDING OF REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS



How did your partnership with UNFPA start and how did it evolve?

In 1988, I was appointed as the director of the family welfare division at the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. My responsibilities included managing the media. Before the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the primary focus was on family planning, and the media played a crucial role in promoting family planning and the two-child norm. UNFPA, a key partner in this journey, played an instrumental role in promoting family planning. I had the privilege of working closely with them as they provided us with evidence, data, and technical support, which was invaluable for our work. I was later promoted to Joint Secretary of Policy, and my association continued with UNFPA.

On completion of my mandatory five years, I reverted to my parent cadre in 1993 but got back in 1998. By then, the agenda had changed

SUJATHA RAO served as Secretary at the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and dedicated 20 years of her working life to the health sector at various levels. Throughout her career, she collaborated closely with UNFPA. Here, Sujatha Rao talks to **Naina Gautam** extensively about her involvement with UNFPA and the organisation's work in advancing reproductive health and rights



to widen our understanding from a narrow focus on family planning to family welfare encompassing the whole gamut of reproductive services. This was an exciting challenge as it gave a greater understanding of the determinants of fertility.


Which are the areas where you witnessed UNFPA making a tangible difference in people's lives?

UNFPA's contribution has been nothing short of transformative. It has significantly helped us understand and unravel the multi-layered issue of reproductive rights and family planning. Our understanding of issues across the reproductive health spectrum has gone way beyond oral pills and intrauterine devices (IUD) to safe deliveries at appropriate ages and the importance of late marriages and healthy adolescence. UNFPA, being the UN agency responsible for implementing the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) mandate, has played a key role in bringing about this dramatic shift. I firmly believe that this work has not only enabled India to achieve its population goals but also improved health and reproductive outcomes for women,

inspiring a brighter future.

What are your thoughts on the future of UNFPA's work in India?

It is such a shame that donor countries are not providing the financial support that the organisation needs. Issues like population stabilisation, shifts, and demographic changes have a huge impact on our planet's future. Although the ICPD emphasised the importance of a rights-based approach to reproductive health and women's right to choose, the focus on population planning and demographic changes has suffered.

UNFPA must regain strength as the only agency with the authority to address these concerns for development. While there may be a temporary setback, UNFPA has its work cut out, and its importance will indeed be recognised in time. I would like to add that UNFPA is a unique organisation where there is a clarity of purpose and great acceptance the world over. It's for all countries to use their strengths to embed the key messages of balanced growth and growth that is aligned to population shifts so as to ensure all have equal access to information and services required to live in dignity and fulfil their full potential. 



OPINION →

NIDHI BHASIN

TAKE TO TECH TO EMPOWER WOMEN

Empowering women is not just the right thing to do; it is the smart thing to do for a stronger and more prosperous India!

As we move from UNFPA India@50 to India@100, women's role in the economy is crucial. It is clear that empowering women is not just about social justice; it is a strategic move for sustainable growth. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023 ranks India 127 out of 146 countries, with only 64.3% of the gender gap closed.

A big challenge is women's limited access to technology. India makes up half of the world's gendered digital divide. According to The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2022 by GSMA, 81% of men in India own a mobile phone compared to 72% of women, creating an 11% gender gap. Additionally, 52% of men use mobile internet, while only 31% of women do. Social norms and the urban-rural divide are factors, but a significant issue is the lack of tech education for women. This gap not only deprives women of economic opportunities but also hampers India's overall economic growth.

Another challenge is the lack of awareness about available opportunities. Many women, especially those in rural areas, are unaware of the possibilities that technology and digital platforms offer. This lack of awareness restricts their ability to access education, information, and economic opportunities, further widening the gender gap.

Technology emerges as a key enabler in this journey. By leveraging technology, we can equip women with digital, financial, and entrepreneurial skills needed to thrive in the digital age. This not only enhances their individual livelihoods but also contributes to the economic growth of the nation as a whole. Nasscom Foundation's programmes are a testament to this. 60% of our beneficiaries from the Skilling and Employability programme are young women engineering graduates from marginalised backgrounds eager to upskill and take on tech roles.

Similarly, rural women entrepreneurs have found their way and enabled their participation in the digital economy, utilising technology to promote their

enterprises and enhance their personal abilities, business outcomes, and future-readiness through our Women Entrepreneurship Programme.

In the Women Wizards Rule Tech programme, 60% of women professionals are ready to upskill in emerging technologies to advance into higher-level tech roles. Additionally, over one lakh women have even processed for e-governance schemes and services like the Digital Health ID card, Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana, and Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana after receiving digital literacy training in India's aspirational districts, highlighting the transformative power of digital education.

Empowering women through technology is not just a social imperative - it is an economic necessity. It is about

As we look towards *Viksit Bharat*, women's empowerment is crucial. Focussing on reaching more women and empowering them through technology will help

unlocking the full potential of half of our population and channelling it towards building a stronger, more inclusive India. This aligns with the government's vision for a developed India and is key for sustainable growth.

As we look towards *Viksit Bharat*, prioritising women's empowerment is crucial. Focusing on reaching more women and empowering them through technology will help us achieve our sustainable development goals faster. This requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders, including the government, civil society, and the private sector. Together, we can create an inclusive and equitable society where every woman has the opportunity to fulfil her potential and contribute to India's journey towards prosperity. 📌

Nidhi Bhasin is Former CEO, Nasscom Foundation



REDEFINING MASCULINITY



THEMATIC OVERVIEW

BEYOND MALE STEREOTYPES

DISCRIMINATORY SOCIAL

norms lead to defining the term masculinity and set rules related to roles, behaviours, and attributed traits that a man should cater to. Such stringent definitions are harmful not only for women and girls but also for men themselves and other genders. These notions sow the seed of toxic masculinity, making it imperative to comprehend the notion of toxic masculinity, as it helps men better understand the power relations between different genders.

Toxic masculinity is not just restricted to violence against women; it manifests in different forms, such as unequal participation in domestic/ care work, decision-making for women and other family members on a wide range of aspects, and gatekeeping. Experts also point out that masculine leadership impacts policy and investment decisions. Toxic masculinity and discriminatory gender norms are some of the most pressing issues affecting our society. It is vital that we challenge and transform these discriminatory norms.

Overcoming these challenges is difficult due to the reassertion

of traditional gender norms that perpetuate narrow and restrictive views and practices. UNFPA's and ICRW's study titled Masculinity, Intimate Partner Violence, and Son Preference in India has indicated that "masculinity in its most rigid form is a strong predictor of IPV; men who are rigidly masculine are 1.35 times more likely to perpetrate IPV than men who are equitable." IPV stands for Intimate Partner Violence.

By engaging with diverse stakeholders at the level of the individual, family, community, and society as a whole, society can rid itself of social stereotypes around masculinity and manhood. It is vital that we confront and break down these perceptions and establish a society that promotes inclusivity. To eradicate the prevailing "be a man" narrative that connotes patriarchy, violence against women, gender-based leadership, and gatekeeping attitudes, we need to foster positive masculinity. This not only supports well-being but also addresses the problems associated with gender-based inequalities, leading to the betterment of society at large.

→ HUMAN INTEREST STORY

POSITIVE MASCULINITY HERALDS GENDER EQUALITY

In Rajasthan's villages, men and women are working side by side to champion gender equality, challenging discriminatory norms. The state's department of school education has also introduced a positive masculinity school curriculum. UNFPA developed a training manual called Ujjwal on promoting positive masculinity among adolescent boys in school settings. The programme is the first of its kind in the school system to work on positive masculinity

In 2021, Sunita Meena defeated 16 men to be elected as the Sarpanch of Justana village in Sawai Madhopur, Rajasthan. Winning the election was only the beginning. Sunita needed to



Photo: TRIBHUVAN TIWARI

▲ Justana Panchayat Sarpanch Sunita Meena with her husband doing household chores

be made aware of her overall responsibilities and equipped with the knowledge and tools necessary to combat gender-based violence and foster a culture of equality and protection within the local governance system.

Sunita's capacity was strengthened by a Rajasthan-based NGO, Centre for Community Economics and Development Consultants (CECOEDECON), with the support of UNFPA. Her husband, Vijay Parkash Meena, supported her by providing an enabling environment at home. Vijay plays an equal role with the chores at home. "On days when she is busy planning for the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP), I even go out to fetch the fodder, which is seen as women's work," he says. Sunita says that she prefers fetching the fodder because it gives her the space to interact with other women. Sunita serves as the Panchayat Sarpanch while Vijay is employed with the state electricity provider. But this has also made him a role model in the village as others see how the Sarpanch's husband is lending her a hand at home.

Simultaneously, direct intervention with young men and boys has been critical for moving the needle and

making a shift in the deep-rooted toxic notions associated with masculinity. In the village, a group called Youth United to Address Violence Against Women (YUVAW) has been formed with support from UNFPA. It discusses and brainstorms various aspects of gender bias, questions traditional ideas, and promotes positive masculinity. It also challenges different practices and discriminatory social norms against girls and women, conducts awareness workshops in schools on gender-based norms, and motivates girls to raise their concerns about issues like sexual harassment.

The YUVAW group, which is being piloted in 30 gram panchayats in Rajasthan's Sawai Madhopur district, speaks out about the need to share household responsibilities and on issues like domestic violence or harassment of girls in public spaces. For instance, the YUVAW group, together with Sunita, managed to get a liquor vendor moved from the village. The young men had become sensitive to how the liquor shop affected the village's women. This was done as drunken brawls in the village square did not make the space safe for women and men.

Street lights have been installed in the village for safety, and a complaint box or 'Shikayat Peti' has been introduced in schools so that girls can share their concerns. Young men helped in installing the 'Shikayat Peti.'

The peer educators conduct fortnightly meetings with the YUVAW group, where they brainstorm with their peers about the various dimensions of masculinity and its impact on society. They exemplify positive masculinity by advocating for girls' rights within their families and communities. Their efforts are focused on promoting gender equality and creating a supportive environment for girls and

Direct intervention with young men and boys has been critical for moving the needle and making a shift in the deep-rooted toxic notions associated with masculinity

women in their villages.

The discourse on positive masculinity has corresponded with another important subject—family planning. Young women now speak of how families tie down young mothers because the child becomes the priority, and many find it challenging to pursue their education after marriage. This discussion among the youth has enabled ASHA workers to prompt young couples to delay having children. In the villages, this discourse with young men and women is proving to be critical in transforming the conservative notion associated with masculinity.

Written by Bijoy Patro, a freelance journalist



→ INTERVIEW – **A.R. NANDA**, Former Secretary, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare

‘ THE CURRENT LARGE POPULATION SIZE IS DUE TO INEQUALITY ’



A.R. NANDA is a former Executive Director of the Population Foundation of India. He has held several prominent positions in the government, including Secretary of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India. Currently, he is associated with civil society organisations working on health, gender, and nutrition. Nanda has also served as an advisor on the International Advisory Committee for Population Programmes of the David & Lucile Packard Foundation and the WHO Scientific and Technical Advisory Group of the Department of Reproductive Health and Research. In this interview with **Naina Gautam**, Nanda shares insights on his work with the UNFPA, the evolution of population policies, and future challenges



👉 How did your partnership with UNFPA begin, and how did it evolve over time?

In my tenure as Secretary of the Ministry of Health for about three years, I interacted closely with UN systems, particularly UNFPA. These interactions grew when I worked as the Registrar General and Census Commissioner from 1989 to 1994. Before that, I became familiar with UNFPA when I served as the Director of Census Operations for the State of Odisha, starting in 1979. Previously, people viewed population growth as a significant problem hindering development and adversely affecting the wealth and income of nations. The first positive shift in attitude towards population came with the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 in Cairo (ICPD Cairo). Its Programme of Action guides UNFPA and promotes an integrated approach to population,

development, environment, gender equality, and women’s empowerment.

What tangible differences did these changes make in people’s lives?

In the 1991 census, thanks to support from UNFPA and UNIFEM [United Nations Development Fund for Women], we introduced gender issues into the census for the first time. We trained census workers on gender equality and how to capture women’s work. Conventionally, till then, in earlier censuses, the questions were being asked, but by and large, of the head of the household, who were male members in most cases. They would not allow the women to come out and say they were doing household work, cooking, or economically productive work in the agricultural field. We started asking probing questions, thanks to the UN system—UNFPA and UNIFEM. This training continued in subsequent censuses,

including the intensive training provided in 2011. Additionally, the National Family Health Survey, first introduced in 1993-94, benefitted from UNFPA’s key role in its implementation.

How do you see the future landscape of UNFPA’s work in India?

In 2019, we reached a replacement-level fertility rate of 2.1. However, concerns about the large population size persist. UNFPA needs to explain the concept of population momentum, which means that even after reaching replacement-level fertility, the population size will stabilise only after 30 years. The current large population size is due to inequality, which can be addressed with suitable policies, poverty alleviation, and welfare programmes. The following 20 years present a window of opportunity to harness the demographic dividend by training and equipping youth with the necessary skills. 📌



OPINION →

RAVI K. VERMA

TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY AS A PUBLIC GOOD

The most common view of masculinity is that 'man', as a homogenous category, embodies certain essential traits and characters, without which he will not be considered a 'real man'. Some of these traits and characteristics, such as aggression, control, being stoic, and feeling entitled and privileged, are normalised through societal norms, institutional practices, and growing-up experiences and help establish male superiority over women and other gender variant groups.

The expanding body of work on men and masculinity, both in India and globally, aims to challenge and redefine these static, monolithic, and regressive views of men and masculinity. There is widespread agreement that masculinity is not a 'monolithic' concept nor an essential trait that cannot be changed or modified. Masculinity is about power and is a tool to maintain inequality, hierarchy, and dominance. It is increasingly realised that we must resist the usage of terms like 'positive masculinity' or 'toxic masculinity'. In all its manifestations, masculinity is an ideology of power—a social experience that reinforces and validates the instruments of inequality expressed through various traits, attitudes, practices, and behaviours.


The idea of male supremacy takes root very early in life. Adolescents as young as ten already have formed ideas about appropriate behaviour and attitudes that have a lasting impact on their health and interpersonal behaviours and relations. Through rites of passage, boys are made to actualize their eventual role of provider and protector. Boys who experience and/or witness violence within their

families—father beating mother or being violent—are more likely to become violent and justify inequitable attitudes and behaviours and engage in multiple sexual partner behaviours than those who did not experience or witness violence within the family while growing up.

One must recognize, however, that men's privileges come with costs and a sense of powerlessness. A sizable portion of young boys, more than girls, experience sexual abuse and violence as a rite of passage to becoming tough, responsible men. The data on the gendered burden of global health show that men take more risks through alcohol, tobacco, and rash driving, for example, men get sicker because of

low care-seeking and self-care, and men die young due to suicide, homicide, crime, and mental health. The price paid, however, convolutedly becomes the justification for male supremacy and entitlement.

Therefore, it is clear that redefining masculinity is a mission to demonstrate

the benefits of gender equality and challenge ideas of male supremacy and entitlement, which should start early on. Efforts to deconstruct masculinity should make itself accountable to women's and girls' empowerment programmes and align with the feminist vision of gender equality. We must build safe spaces where men and boys can discuss, share, and overcome the violence, suppression, and alienation they have experienced and perpetrated. There is a need for interventions that promote how to 'unlearn' as a first step to redefining masculinity. 

The expanding body of work on men and masculinity aims to challenge and redefine static, monolithic and regressive views of men and masculinity

Ravi K Verma is Executive Director, International Center for Research on Women, Asia



MY BODY, MY MIND #MY RIGHT

THEMATIC OVERVIEW

RECLAIMING BODILY AUTONOMY

A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT THAT

all are entitled to is the right to autonomy over their bodies. Each person, irrespective of gender, race, class, religion, or sexual orientation, should be able to say: “This is my choice for my body. My body, my mind, my right.”

While some societies with high human development index ratings have come a long way in securing the bodily autonomy of women and girls, other societies still have a long way to go. From early and forced child marriage to sexual violence to the absence of consent, the fundamental rights of girls and women are still violated in many areas.

UNFPA’s ‘The Future of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights’ states: “The most recent SDG data from 68 reporting countries reveal that an estimated 44% of partnered women are unable to make their own decisions about health care, contraception, or sex.” The publication adds, “24% are unable to say no to sex, 25% are unable to make decisions about their own health care, and 11% are unable to make decisions specifically

about contraception.”

Discrimination at home, in society, and at workplaces are the root causes of gender injustice. Another prevalent issue surrounding bodily autonomy is the lack of quality sexual and reproductive health care for women and girls along with information and skills to make informed decisions.

A way in which society can become more aware of the problems women and girls face is to introduce sexuality education in schools. Promoting bodily autonomy calls for creating awareness about consent, inculcating respect for individual choices, having conversations about personal boundaries and bodily rights, and empowering people with life skills to make informed decisions.

When society as a whole actively takes part in removing such practices and mindsets, women and girls can have a better chance at bodily autonomy and integrity, a right that every human being should have.



→ ARTICLE

ENABLING WOMEN'S CHOICES

An array of contraceptive options, social interventions, software-driven tracking and delivery system transform reproductive health

An assortment of contraceptive products, various social interventions, and a modern Family Planning Logistics Management Information System (FP-LMIS) are enabling women to secure autonomy over their bodies, health, and reproductive rights in rural Rajasthan. FP-LMIS is a government initiative to enhance the access and availability of contraceptives.

In 2023, two next-generation birth-control products were introduced for women, adding to the basket of contraceptive options available to them. The subdermal single-rod contraceptive implant, Implanon, provides a discreet and user-friendly alternative to traditional methods. It works by releasing hormones into the bloodstream to

prevent pregnancy. The second contraceptive is a subcutaneous injection, which prevents pregnancy by releasing a synthetic hormone into the bloodstream, suppressing ovulation. The initial introduction of two new contraceptives into the existing contraceptive basket in select districts will pave the way for expanding choice across the country. This will contribute significantly towards further reducing unintended pregnancies and improving maternal health outcomes.

In another notable step towards empowering women, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has developed FP-LMIS, a software, to improve the supply and distribution of contraceptives and information on demand to health facilities and ASHA workers. The FP-LMIS is a cohesive system that integrates data management, logistics, and supply chain functions designed to help states like Rajasthan to address chronic legacy issues related to managing family planning programmes. The data helps health officials and policymakers make informed decisions about the allocation of different contraceptives to individual health centres, service delivery, and outreach strategies.

As Dr. K. C. Soni, the Additional Chief Medical and Health Officer of Sawai Madhopur district, says, “This (data management) has helped us with managing products by tracking the availability and distribution of contraceptives and other family

planning products at health facilities.” Further, he states that by securing steady supplies, FP-LMIS helps prevent stockouts and ensures that individuals have access to the contraceptives they need. “Earlier (before the online data management system), we had a ‘push system’ oriented supply chain, which led to stockouts and excess stock conditions, but now there is very less stockout or wastage.” Soni explains that the FP-LMIS facilitates real-time monitoring of service delivery and programme effectiveness. It allows health officials to identify trends, monitor performance indicators,

condoms, Chhaya, Mala-E pills, and pregnancy test kits to eligible couples using the FP-LMIS mobile app.” He says that the results must be seen to be believed. “Nearly 100% of ASHAs in Sawai Madhopur and over 75% of the ASHAs in Badgaon adopted the system, leading to a significant improvement in service delivery.” “It helps me assert my rights as an individual to decide about my body and mind without interference or coercion from others,” says 17-year-old Mancheta of Ajmer’s Rawal village. “It is an issue of my body, my mind, my rights and manifests the fundamental principle of autonomy



and evaluate the impact of family planning logistics management at various levels.

Overall, the FP-LMIS in Rajasthan is instrumental in advancing its family planning goals by leveraging technology. Soni shares, “A pilot programme has been successfully implemented to ensure last-mile connectivity and distribution of family planning commodities through FP-LMIS in the urban block of Sawai Madhopur and the Badgaon block of Udaipur. ASHAs were trained and monitored to ensure efficient delivery of commodities such as

and self-determination.” Mancheta’s 18-year-old friend Kavita explains what employment of rights means to her. “It means that I do not come under *dabav* (pressure),” she says. “A girl should be able to stand for herself and even explain her stand.” Savita, 18, explains that she is entitled to her “*marzi*—her wish”. But she knows that saying a ‘No’ directly can lead to conflicts. “It demands tact,” the young woman says. ❏

Written by Bijoy Patro, a freelance journalist

FP-LMIS data helps in taking informed decisions about the allocation of different contraceptives to individual health centres, service delivery and outreach strategies



→ INTERVIEW – **GITA SEN**, Professor Emeritus, Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore

MOVING FROM FAMILY PLANNING TARGETS TO FOCUS ON HEALTH AND RIGHTS



How did your partnership with UNFPA begin, and how has it evolved?

Before 1994, I worked with UNFPA both globally and within India, mainly focusing on the country. My involvement with UNFPA began in the mid to late 1980s when I was a professor at the Centre for Development Studies in Trivandrum (now Thiruvananthapuram). I was the Director of a new fellowship training programme at UNFPA, working closely with the India country office. At that time, UNFPA's focus was primarily on financing, family planning programmes, and health programmes, with less emphasis on human rights, gender equality, and inequality. This changed after the Cairo Conference on Population and Development in 1994. The conference prompted a global mobilisation of women's rights scholars, advocates, activists, and others, urging UNFPA and world governments to prioritise

GITA SEN is a Professor Emeritus at the Indian Institute of Management-Bangalore. She received the Dan David Prize in 2020 for her stellar role in gender equality. For more than three decades, she has worked on population policies, reproductive and sexual health, gender equality, and women's human rights. She has worked closely with UNFPA over the years. In this interview with **Naina Gautam**, she talks about her work with the agency and its interventions in India's family welfare programmes

sexual and reproductive health and rights, women's rights, and gender equality.


In which areas have you seen UNFPA making a tangible difference to people's lives?

Following Cairo, UNFPA aimed to shift family planning programmes to accommodate people's rights and needs, especially gender equality and women's rights. In India, there were concerns about forced sterilisation programmes and the focus on female sterilisation through camps, as well as doubts about the programme's quality. The big question was: How do we change the family planning programme from being coercive to a programme oriented to health and rights? In this, UNFPA worked very closely with the Government of India to move the programme away from setting targets in family planning and towards a focus on health and rights.

UNFPA has been actively involved in providing safe abortion services and played a significant role in the passing of the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971. One of

the major concerns is sex-selective abortion, which has resulted in imbalanced sex ratios in countries like India and China. UNFPA-India has significantly contributed by participating in the production of an inter-agency statement on preventing gender-biased sex selection. This statement, published in 2012, has influenced UNFPA's approach in India and globally. UNFPA played an important role in helping the Government develop its Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK) programme and later, to improve adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights in the country. It also provided notable help in the area of preventing child and early marriage.

What is the future of UNFPA's work in India?

I believe that UNFPA could have a crucial role in implementing a proactive public communication programme to raise awareness about important issues among the general public. Additionally, I think there should be a significant focus on addressing violence against women and girls. 



← OPINION →



DR. BISWANATH GHOSH DASTIDAR


TIME FOR FERTILITY CARE



The health and wealth of a nation are inextricably linked to the health of its women. Healthy women are key to healthy families. Moreover, in purely economic terms, the costs of the global women's health gap are estimated to be over \$1 trillion. Because the design and funding of research in healthcare technology and medication have historically been undertaken with men in mind, this gap is most glaring in the provision of female reproductive healthcare. Thus, taking urgent steps to close gaps in women's access to reproductive care is not only a social and ethical imperative but also strictly in national interest.

Access to fertility care must be given top priority within the agenda of reproductive healthcare provision, especially in the context of India's dropping total fertility rate (TFR). While undoubtedly an achievement of decades of population control programmes in India, we are now faced with a shrinking labour force and an expanding ageing population.

Compounding this problem is the fact that many of India's infertile population—around 20% of reproductive-age couples—are unable to afford expensive fertility treatment. The national health policy must, therefore, adopt strategies prevalent elsewhere that mandate state-organised and/or funded fertility care for this section.

Access to reproductive care, however, is not only a function of funding but also logistics and autonomy. It appears as though women's care-seeking behaviours are more open, communicative, and confident from within the safe and private confines of one's own home as opposed to a crowded government hospital outpatient department. Perhaps, autonomy begins at home. We would do well to leverage the power of technology in our efforts to build a healthier and more prosperous nation with women's reproductive autonomy and dignity at its core. 

Dr. Biswanath Ghosh Dastidar is a consultant, IVF specialist and Elinical Embryologist

DR. NEETA SINGH

NEED HOLISTIC PRESCRIPTION




Today the prevalence of infertility is increasing rapidly, affecting almost 1 out of every 6 married couples of reproductive age. The reasons for rising infertility and declining fertility range from increasing the age of marriage and delaying pregnancy due to rapid urbanisation and increasing cost of living.

It necessitates the need for affordable and high-quality treatment of infertility. Despite the high prevalence, unfortunately, the condition is hardly managed at primary health care as it does not come under the purview of any of the national health programmes.

There is an urgent need for all the stakeholders and policymakers to create awareness among the youth about the limited fertility window as age is the single most rate limiting factor for success of any advanced infertility treatment.

The treatment is expansive, stressful, time-consuming and is not widely accessible. Most of the infertile couples understand In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF), which is technically known as assisted reproductive technologies, wrongly as a panacea for all infertility disorders. Even at the most technically advanced and reputed centres, the take-home baby rates are around 30-40% per started cycle.

By acknowledging the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon, policymakers and healthcare providers can develop targeted interventions to address the challenges posed by a declining fertility rate. We can adopt some of these strategies that can help address the decline in fertility rate and embrace solutions like pro-fertility awareness campaigns, family-friendly policies, access to quality healthcare, the fertility assessment and counselling clinic, support for parenthood, and promoting gender equality. 

Dr. Neeta Singh is a Professor with the Department of Obstetrics & Gynaecology at AIIMS, New Delhi



HEALTHY AGEING

THEMATIC OVERVIEW

MAKING THE ELDERLY COUNT

THE GLOBAL POPULATION

is experiencing a demographic shift due to increasing life expectancy and decreasing fertility levels. In 'Demographic Change and Sustainability,' UNFPA states that population ageing will continue to be a universal phenomenon. The publication adds, "Currently, older people aged 65 and above outnumber children aged 0 to 14 in more than 60 countries. In other words, 15 percent of the world's population lives in countries with more older people than children, a proportion that will reach 36% by 2050." In India alone, the share of older people is projected to more than double, from 103 million people aged 65 years and above in 2024 to 246 million in 2050.

Preparing for the projected increase in the number of older persons and having the right policies and programmes for the well-being of the current and future older generations are priorities and a shared responsibility of the government and stakeholders. Contrary to the viewpoint that the elderly are burdensome,

they have their own way to contribute to the population like taking care of the grandchildren, extending financial help to the family, and sharing their experience with the younger members of the population.

'Caring for Our Elders: Institutional Responses India Ageing Report 2023' by UNFPA India emphasises the importance of creating an environment that supports dignified, positive, and connected ageing. Integrated care encompassing non-discriminatory access to good quality, safe, and affordable essential health services, medicines, vaccines, and assistive technologies is necessary to support the elderly due to a decline in physical and mental strength. Providing easy access to long-term care systems will enable them to maintain their functional ability, enjoy fundamental human rights, and live with dignity. The ongoing UN Decade of Healthy Ageing (2020–2030) is committed to bringing about these transformative changes.



→ HUMAN INTEREST STORY

SENIOR CITIZENS SET A NEW TUNE

With an active mind and even more active lifestyle, India's elderly are inspiring the young with their irrepressible zest for life

Her eyes flit like that of a doe, and she twirls gracefully, the music flowing through her body and her silver braid moving in tandem, just in time for her to make her next move. At 65, "dancing *dadi*," as the social media knows her, Shashi Bala Sharma, refuses to let age define her steps. From Bollywood classics and *bhangra* to newer popular numbers, she takes them on all with enviable grace and energy. Because every time she dances, she reconnects with herself.

Sometimes, she is a little girl in her home in Moradabad, dancing freely like she did, full of hope. The next moment, she is honouring the memory of her late husband, who loved to see her on stage. Sometimes, she is just a woman who is reclaiming her life from anyone who tells her, "This is your age to go to *mandirs* and do



bhajans" or "sit at home because you might break a bone."

Her dance, says the music teacher in Delhi for 30 years, has helped her in her darkest days and the most joyous ones. It has been a lifeline. So, when COVID-19 blues struck, Instagram saw a new star. Today, from doing brand promotions and dancing to the latest tunes to sharing the stage with Madhuri Dixit, Shashi Bala Sharma has done it all. "65 and still making my Birthday Wishes," as her Instagram profile says. Shashi Bala Sharma is just one of the many individuals who are living it up and redefining "age stereotypes."

After all, ageing well is a choice that can be made consciously. All that is needed is the right attitude, a healthy mind and body, and the right support in the "golden years," as author Ruskin Bond calls them. For a man who turned 90 recently, he still has publishers lining up to sign him and books that fly off his pen. "If you are relatively healthy, age is all in the mind," he says.

In fact, one thing he has found with age he shares is a sense of humour. Even though he likes to write across genres, the years of experience, he says, have probably taught him to look at things with a pinch of salt and make humour of situations.

Of course, Bond is not the only one who is living it up in his golden years. Take, for example, 98-year-old Harbhajan Kaur of Chandigarh, whose brand Harbhajan's, with the tagline of *Bachpan Yaad Ajayega*, has fans across India and the world. It all started when Harbhajan, then 86, expressed to her daughter, Raveena, her disappointment in never having earned her own money. Raveena decided to push and encourage her mother's dream, which had always been her mother's passion—cooking. Harbhajan is much loved in the family; *besan barfis* were soon being sold at Chandigarh's popular Sector 18 market. Today, besides her *barfis*,



Photo: SHUTTERSTOCK

pickles, chutneys, and spice mixes, she has fans across the globe. "Better to wear out than rust," she said in an interview.

Then there is Sheela Bajaj, who is trending on social media for her crochet skills. Even though she had been crocheting for her family for years, she had never thought in her wildest dreams she would earn her first income of Rs 350 at the age of 87. But she did, thanks to her granddaughter Yukti, who saw her grandmother during COVID-19 knit for hours. Clearly, others needed to see her granny's talent, and that was the birth of 'caughtcrafthanded' on Instagram in November 2020. Today, from toys to bags to sweaters to throws and more, she has her hands full of orders.

It is obvious that the elderly have a lot to offer society. With their years

of experience and wisdom, they are a treasure trove, ones that need love and support. An important show of support from the authorities has been the move by the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) having removed the age cap on buying health insurance policies, effective from April 1, 2024. While new insurance policies in India were only eligible towards people aged 65, the new policy makes anyone, regardless of age, eligible to purchase a new health insurance. The aim to create a more inclusive healthcare ecosystem in India is not a bar.

And why not? After all, that is the need of the hour: a more inclusive society, just like India always was. India is changing fast demographically and experiencing a significant demographic shift, with its elderly population projected to reach 15% by 2050 (65 years or older). Active and engaged ageing benefits individuals by enhancing their quality of life and promoting physical and mental health. Simultaneously, it enriches society through the wisdom and experience of its senior citizens as we see Bond smile, Bala swirl, and numerous others with grace and experience in their years nod to that. 

The elderly have a lot to offer to society. With their years of experience and wisdom, they are a treasure trove, ones that need love and support

Written by Prachi Raturi Misra,
a freelance journalist



→ INTERVIEW – **JAYANT K. BANTHIA**, Former Chief Secretary, Govt. of Maharashtra

UNFPA MUST PRIORITISE THE ELDERLY AS AGEING WILL BE AN ISSUE IN THE FUTURE



JAYANT KUMAR BANTHIA, a 1977 batch IAS officer, served as Chief Secretary, Government of Maharashtra. He has a master's degree in demography from the London School of Economics. He was the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India from 1999 to 2004. Bantbia has been involved with all Indian censuses since 1981. He has also worked in Nigeria on deputation as the Chief Technical Adviser to the UNFPA for the 2006 Nigeria Housing and Population Census. Over the years, Bantbia has worked for UNFPA missions in Ethiopia, Malawi, and Myanmar and also assisted in the Palestinian Census of Lebanon. In this interview with **Naina Gautam**, Bantbia talks about UNFPA then, now, and in the future



How did your relationship with UNFPA begin, and how has it evolved?

I first connected with UNFPA during my tenure as the Census Commissioner and Registrar General of India for the 2001 census. UNFPA mainly offered technical assistance and advocacy measures for reproductive rights and gender issues.


What tangible difference has UNFPA made in the lives of people?

The UNFPA's initiative to raise awareness about gender issues in the census marked a significant milestone for the organisation. It was involved in organising training classes and showed a strong interest in understanding and implementing gender sensitisation through the training manual. It is worth noting that after the 1994 Cairo conference, UNFPA played a crucial role in advocating for women's reproductive rights,

advancing its belief that gender sensitisation would play a vital role in the Indian census. We also highlighted the importance of the girl child by pointing to the emerging trends in adverse child sex ratio. This sparked nationwide concern, with medical professionals questioning the credibility of our figures suggesting high rates of female foeticide. But, I clearly stated the facts. I am happy to share that the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao movement originated from the findings of that census. This was followed by the amendment to the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT). Once again, UNFPA India, as the international agency, was involved in advocacy initiatives focused on issues related to the girl child and gender.

What are your thoughts on the future landscape of

UNFPA's work in India?

Well, I think UNFPA's role has to change worldwide, including in India, and should spearhead the Population and Development Initiative of the global agencies for sustainable development. The focus now should be on achieving results and considering other ways in which UNFPA can contribute. I was involved in evaluating the UNFPA country programme 2016–21. In 2016, I clearly stated that it was high time that the UNFPA focused on the elderly population issues in India, inclusive of the gender perspective. I believe that UNFPA should prioritise this area while continuing to focus on gender issues. Reproductive rights are still an important issue that needs attention in our current context. However, I believe that an integrated approach towards population is crucial to UNFPA's response, as it involves development. 



OPINION →

NILANJAN GHOSH

PATHWAYS TO HEALTHY AGEING IN INDIA

Healthy ageing might sound like an oxymoron! It is widely believed that ageing engenders a host of health-related complications, eroding human capital, lowering labour productivity, and escalating health costs. However, by adopting healthy ageing practices focused on developing and maintaining the functional abilities of the elders, it is possible to delink ageing from declining growth, as shown by many nations in the global north. Further, given its importance from the perspectives of equity and sustainability, healthy ageing should have been a goal in the SDG framework—the lack of which highlights the ignorance of the global development discourse about a critical concern.

Ageing is a critical challenge for India despite its demographic dividend for two reasons. First, India is home to 103 million senior citizens (65 years and above). Second, the demographic dividend will disappear over time after peaking by 2041, leading to a higher dependency ratio.

India's 1999 National Policy on Older Persons, the 2007 Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, and the 2011 National Policy for Senior Citizens delineate the policy framework to support older people. Also noteworthy are the National Programme for Elderly Health Care and the Ayushman Bharat Health and Wellness Centers, providing dedicated primary care for older people.


Yet, considering the challenges, it is undeniable that much work needs to be done, starting with ensuring that the elderly take full advantage of the social security programmes designed for them by raising widespread awareness. Alongside this, we must seriously upgrade the healthcare infrastructure with a much larger number of gerontologists and dedicated facilities and provide financial security to our older people. Pension schemes cover only a tiny percentage of the population, leaving the rest to live on fast-diminishing real fixed-income returns, eroded

by reducing interest rates and price inflation.

The lack of understanding about the long-term benefits of healthy ageing leads to insufficient focus on health spending and innovation. Older people contribute economically through non-market activities, but these contributions are often undervalued. A 2020 study suggests that the monetary value of improved survival outweighs the increase in health spending by more than double. Currently, similar estimates are not available in the Indian context, but they are crucial for analysing proposed, ongoing, or past schemes.

For healthy ageing and progress towards India@100, we need a multifaceted approach. We should run an

Older people contribute economically through non-market activities, but these contributions are often undervalued

awareness campaign to educate the elderly about available policies and schemes. Also, we must expand healthcare infrastructure by increasing geriatric care facilities and integrating geriatric care into the primary healthcare system. Complementary CSR funding and PPP models, targeted basic income schemes, self-help groups, senior citizens' clubs, intergenerational programmes, leveraging technology for healthcare access, and enforcing laws to protect the rights of older people are essential for comprehensive senior care reforms. 

Nilanjan Ghosh is Director at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) in India, where he leads the Centre for New Economic Diplomacy (CNED) and ORF's Kolkata Centre



FEMINISING CLIMATE SOLUTIONS

THEMATIC OVERVIEW

GENDER-RESPONSIVE CLIMATE SOLUTIONS

CLIMATE CHANGE IS A

global crisis and its impacts are universal. More so, for women and girls. In 'ICPD and Climate Action', UNFPA points to estimates showing that if the burning of fossil fuels and their corresponding carbon emissions are not drastically reduced, "approximately 50 to 75 percent of the global population could be exposed to periods of life-threatening climatic conditions due to extreme heat and humidity," by the end of the century.

Women are often more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change due to limited access to resources, education, and decision-making power. However, they also play a crucial role in building resilience within their communities, as they are frequently responsible for managing household resources and food production, worsening their existing vulnerabilities.

Climate-induced displacements also increase the risks of sexual and gender-based violence among women and girls who have to travel longer distances for water and firewood. Extreme weather events lead to the loss of

livelihoods, which increases the risk of transactional sex and higher rates of teenage pregnancies. Limited or no access to sexual and reproductive health services further endangers maternal and neonatal health.

The lack of clean water and menstrual products undermines their dignity and hygiene. As a result, school dropout rates are high among girls, and child marriages are rampant in communities affected by climate change. Incidences of stillbirth, miscarriage, and preterm birth are increased due to climate change. The outbreak of wildfires, floods, and droughts affects food security, impacting a woman adversely during the time of pregnancy.

Addressing these issues requires adopting a gender-responsive approach and prioritising women and girls in climate policy and actions. Focusing on their health, education, and empowerment and providing access to human rights-based sexual and reproductive health services will help build resilience in them and they can contribute to and benefit from climate action.



→ HUMAN INTEREST STORY

REIMAGINING WOMAN POWER FOR DISASTER MITIGATION

A transformative initiative driven by the state government and UNFPA is reshaping disaster management in Odisha as women take charge of resilience efforts in vulnerable coastal villages

A few decades ago, Gyana Ranjan Das, the former managing director of the Odisha State Disaster Management Authority (OSDMA), witnessed a saree-clad village woman carrying a well-built man on her shoulder from atop a cyclone shelter down a ladder during a cyclone preparedness drill.

In another instance, accompanying a visiting foreign dignitary to witness an exercise simulating a flood situation, he saw young men trying to cross a pond, walking a single rope with another parallel rope for support. "One after the other, the men fell into the pond. At last, it was

a young girl who volunteered to demonstrate how to cross the pond without falling,” he recalls.

These incidents left Das impressed by the courage, grit, strength, and stamina of the girls and women of villages in Odisha. Field observations prompted the OSDMA team to consider mobilising women and training them in disaster management skills as well as in critical thinking, creativity, communication, and decision-making. This was to empower them in general. “It was a learning process belying the presumption that men are physically stronger and more confident. Those mental barriers must be broken at some point in time,” says Das.

In 2022, the OSDMA partnered with UNFPA to integrate and strengthen the gender-transformative approach to risk reduction through a pilot project. The project, piloted in the six coastal districts of Puri, Kendrapara, Jagatsingpur, Ganjam, Bhadrak, and Balasore, is aimed to mainstream gender in disaster risk reduction by training young women on managing disasters in their community. The

The gender and inclusion cell has been established to institutionalise the gender transformative approaches in risk reduction and provide technical expertise


project focuses on policy review and alignment, capacity building of various stakeholders, building community resilience, knowledge and data management, and multi-stakeholder engagement and advocacy.

There was a great deal of optimism surrounding the idea of training the women despite some dissenting voices. Das countered the argument of some that the girls would eventually marry and leave the villages by saying that the knowledge they gained would benefit the girls no matter where they went.

The pilot project for mainstreaming

gender in disaster risk reduction gave birth to the gender and inclusion cell at the OSDMA, which will eventually be headed by an officer from the administrative services who will work with an advisory board. At a later stage, this will enable policy formulation. The gender and inclusion cell is established to institutionalise the gender-transformative approaches in risk reduction with the aim to provide technical expertise and guide the mainstreaming of gender-transformative approaches across all programmatic, policy, and implementation work of the OSDMA through all phases of disaster management.

India’s revised National Disaster Management Plan of 2019 emphasises social inclusion, particularly gender, as a ubiquitous principle. The Prime Minister’s 10-point agenda for disaster risk reduction also emphasises the greater involvement of women in disaster risk reduction. On the ground, OSDMA and UNFPA are now working with young women, most of them adolescents. “The training will make it easier for women to support themselves and also help build their capacities to use in the golden hour; the first hour after a cyclone warning has been sounded can make a life-and-death difference,” says Aranyak Mishra, Gender Specialist at OSDMA in charge of the gender transformative project.

The gender and inclusion cell is established to institutionalise the gender-transformative approaches in risk reduction. It will provide technical expertise and guidance to mainstream gender-transformative approaches across all programmatic, policy, and implementation work of OSDMA in all phases of disaster. The gender and inclusion cell will be headed by an independent senior official with the department and an advisory committee is constituted to guide the cell. 



Girls during the mock drill training session of the disaster management programme in Baxipalli

Photo: SANDIPAN CHATTERJEE

Written by Bijoy Patro,
a freelance journalist



→ INTERVIEW – **POONAM MUTTREJA**, Executive Director, Population Foundation of India

DATA-DRIVEN APPROACH BY UNFPA FOCUSES ON REACHING THE MOST MARGINALISED



How did your partnership with UNFPA begin, and how has it evolved?

The Population Foundation of India (PFI) and the UNFPA began their partnership in October 2022 with the goal of shaping public and policy discussions related to sexual and reproductive health and family planning in India through a project called Samvaad. The partnership aimed to make contributions in key areas, such as shaping policy discussions by organising meetings and presenting evidence to brief and orient elected officials and policymakers on important issues. These issues related to gender, family planning, and sexual and reproductive health (SRH). Another important priority was to engage with the media to promote informed discussions on critical issues and utilise digital technology and platforms to expand the reach and awareness of family planning, sexual and reproductive health and rights,

POONAM MUTTREJA is the Executive Director of the Population Foundation of India. She has over 40 years of experience in women's health, reproductive and sexual rights. She has conceived the popular transmedia initiative, *Main Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon*. In this exclusive conversation with **Naina Gautam**, she traces the journey of UNFPA in India and the outcomes

and gender issues. Throughout this partnership, the organisations were directly and indirectly involved with over 70 parliamentarians to highlight population issues and challenges in the development of policies. This was achieved through one-on-one meetings, a national-level consultation, and outreach via emails and other digital platforms. These interactions were used to provide a comprehensive overview of current population trends and dynamics.


In which areas has the UNFPA made a tangible difference to people's lives?

The UNFPA's efforts in India have significantly improved lives in several key areas. For example, it has reduced maternal mortality by supporting the strengthening of healthcare systems and promoting skilled birth attendance. Additionally, the UNFPA has increased access to family planning through strategic interventions, empowering women to make informed choices about their reproductive health. Moreover, the UNFPA has combatted gender-based violence by improving support systems for survivors, such as strengthening One-Stop Centres that provide crucial services. The

organisation also provides training to various authorities, including police, judiciary, and healthcare professionals, to better respond to gender-based violence cases. This multi-pronged approach aims to create a more supportive environment for survivors and deter future violence.

Furthermore, UNFPA has played a role in empowering youth through its programmes addressing sexual and reproductive health education and life skills training, equipping young people with the knowledge and tools to make healthy choices. Its data-driven approach, with a focus on reaching the most marginalised communities, ensures that the work makes a real difference.

What are your thoughts on the future landscape of UNFPA's work in India?

As India's demographic landscape continues to evolve, the future of UNFPA's work in the country is poised to address these changes. The focus should shift towards providing young people with the knowledge and resources they need to navigate sexual and reproductive health. Reaching marginalised communities within urban settings will require innovative strategies. 



OPINION →

DIA MIRZA

YOUTH CALL FOR CHANGE AND EMPOWERMENT

B iologist, natural historian, and writer David Attenborough said this about the generation which has inherited a crisis not of their making. The triple planetary crises of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss are impacting their quality of life and their physical and mental health. They are also being subjected to the socio-economic and cultural consequences of climate change and pollution.

Youth in developing countries and from underserved communities are exposed to the reality of climate change with unparalleled immediacy, exposing them to increasing levels of eco-anxiety as they perceive the world through a lens of conflict and stress. Some are experiencing a sense of powerlessness, while others are raising their voices to seek answers, actionable solutions, and accountability from their leaders, policymakers, and big businesses.

Remember Cullis-Suzuki, now famous as 'The Girl Who Silenced the World for 5 Minutes?' In 1992, the 12-year-old spoke passionately at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro from the perspective of the youth. #FridaysForFuture, a youth-led movement that began in 2018 with a 15-year-old Greta Thunberg in Sweden, later expanded to 7,500 cities and mobilised more than 14,000,000 people across all the continents.

At COP27, youth activists Elizabeth Wathuti, India's Archana Soreng, and the winner of the #MyClimateAction contest, Ewi Stephanie Lamma, demanded urgent climate action from world leaders. Climate activist Archana Soreng from the Kharia tribe in Odisha is also a youth advisor to the UN Secretary-General and is highlighting the importance of preserving the rights of indigenous populations as they protect more than 20% of our planet's land and 80% of its biodiversity.

And so the young are leading campaigns to clean up oceans, asking for the end of fossil fuels, refusing to perpetuate the cycle of irresponsible consumerism and waste generation, thrifting, choosing a plant-based diet,

and turning into inventive agents of social, economic, and environmental change. Recently, eight Alaskan youths sued the state to block a major natural gas project, arguing that policies promoting fossil fuels violate their rights.


If we truly want to see the change that the world needs, we need to empower and support young people and not shut them down and shut them up. It is not easy to grow change in an ecosystem that is adverse to it, and youth activism is very often derided and ridiculed.

We cannot allow bots and trolls, hate, and vitriol to become normative and keep attacking young people. We cannot normalise this culture of hate against anyone who

The young are leading campaigns to clean up oceans, asking for the end of fossil fuels, refusing to perpetuate the cycle of irresponsible consumerism and waste generation

questions obsolete systems. We must support our young in pursuing the change they so deserve.

When I came across the words of Paloma Costa, a Brazilian climate activist ("I just want to do things without thinking the world is ending"), it reminded me of a thought that has sustained me as we struggle to make the world a more equitable place and to achieve the critical target of limiting global warming to less than two degrees Celsius.

I may not be able to solve all the problems in the world, but I can solve some of them all of the time by choosing specific areas to contribute to and then working towards change consistently. 

Dia Mirza is an Indian actor and climate activist





50... And Beyond





Outlook

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