



Reproductive Health      Adolescent & Youth      Population Development      Gender      Humanitarian

## Feature Story

### Midwifery helpline offers emergency support in Afghanistan

**SAYED KHEL, Afghanistan** – “It was seven in the morning, and I had not yet started my working day, when Hafsa\* was brought to the clinic with normal labour pains,” said Mahbooba, a 27-year-old midwife who runs the Aq-tash clinic in Afghanistan’s rural Sayed Khel District.

Within a few hours, Hafsa had successfully given birth to a healthy baby, her first child. Everything seemed fine until the new mother suddenly began bleeding uncontrollably and showing signs of shock.

Mahmooda was paralyzed with fear. She knew Hafsa’s life was in danger, but did not know how to stop the



bleeding.

Afghanistan’s maternal mortality rate is the highest in the region. According to a [joint United Nations report](#), women in the country have a 1 in 52 chance of dying

## About UNFPA – United Nations Population Fund

UNFPA is the United Nations agency which leads global efforts to help ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, and every young person’s potential is fulfilled.

UNFPA is mandated by the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo in 1994, to reduce infant and child mortality, reduce neonatal, maternal mortality, and increase access to reproductive health services including family planning. The Cairo Consensus placed these population and development issues within a human rights based framework, and UNFPA is committed to integrating human rights into its work globally.

UNOCA Compound, Jalalabad Road P.O. Box: 16030, Kabul,

from pregnancy-related causes. Other estimates show the risks are even worse: a [2015 survey](#) indicated 1 in 14 women in Afghanistan die of pregnancy-related causes.

And the condition Hafsa was experiencing – obstetric haemorrhage – is [one of the most common causes of maternal death](#) in the world.

Fortunately, Mahmooda remembered the Midwifery Helpline, a toll-free hotline established by UNFPA in November 2016.

## Enormous need for midwifery skills

Afghanistan has an enormous need for qualified midwives. The country has only 3.2 nurses or midwives per 10,000 people, according to the [World Health Organization](#).

And only recently did Kabul Medical University, with the support of UNFPA, begin to offer a [bachelor's degree in midwifery](#). Before that, midwives in the country could only attend less rigorous training programmes.

A huge challenge many midwives face is that they work in remote clinics, often with little support or entirely alone.

The Midwifery Helpline offers much-needed assistance. Dr. Rona Abidi Shayan, a gynaecologist, runs the hotline with three expert midwives. They work in shifts to provide support around the clock, every day of the week.

“Midwives call with desperation, and we ensure that they do what is necessary,” said Tahira Nazari, one of the midwives staffing the help line. “Sometimes, this means giving life-saving medical advice. Other times, it means

seeing if the patient can be referred to a nearby health facility equipped to manage pregnancy complications”.

“Callers to the helpline vary,” said Dr. Shayan. “Sometimes I receive a call from a midwife who has years of experience, but is in a state of panic.”

## Another life saved

Back in the village, Mahmooda was able to call Dr. Shayan, who realized that Hafsa was suffering from uterine atony, a condition that causes dangerous post-partum bleeding.

Over the phone, she took Mahmooda through the steps to manage the condition. Mahmooda administered oxytocin and carried out other emergency measures.

At the end of a very harrowing phone call, Hafsa’s life was saved.

“It is a wonderful feeling to know that, now with the Midwifery Helpline, some preventable labour injuries and maternal and infant deaths can be avoided,” Ms. Nazari told UNFPA.

The helpline receives between eight and 25 calls every day, mostly from midwives or doctors handling pregnancy complications.

“Usually, I follow up with multiple calls, or sometimes they call back for more advice. I keep following [up] until I ensure the patients are completely well,” said Dr. Shayan.

Hafsa is one of those lucky patients. She is now doing well. “Thanks to the midwife and those who helped her over the phone, I have recovered,” she said.

## Rehabilitated Lives, Returned Hopes and Dignity

### Newly established obstetric fistula center supported by UNFPA in Herat treats 27 Afghan mothers

Twenty Seven Afghan mothers who lived with the devastating condition, called Obstetric Fistula (OF) received treatment at the newly established Obstetric Fistula Centre at Herat Regional Hospital supported by UNFPA.

“It is now a few days since my surgery, I was recently told to start walking”, said Najiba in delight, “I feel so light again, I had forgotten what it feels like to be a normal person. I walked around my home, everything looks different and it is as if I am reborn. I am so happy. My illness was the worst of all illnesses and now that I have been treated I feel so grateful each day.”



Obstetric Fistula is a child birth injury, a hole or fistula from the urinary bladder or the rectum to the birth canal or both. Mainly caused by prolonged obstructed labor. The condition devastates lives of women, leaving them with constant leakage of urine, faeces or both.

Mrs. Najiba Hayat lived with Vaginal Fistula for several years. Najiba can't remember when she developed the fistula condition. She shared her story;

**“I have 6 children, and I can't remember what happened exactly, but it was after my second child that I gave birth at home that I felt incontinence on urine. My first child I delivered in Hospital.**

**With later births, which were also at home. The incontinence increased. I didn't know what to do. I constantly leaked urine, I saw many doctors in Herat and also travelled to Kabul, but all was in vain. Last time, in Herat, they told me I either have to go to Kabul again or go out of country. Desperate, but hopeless after being in Kabul once, I just stayed home”.**

**Life was miserable, I slept in the hall way and my husband slept in the room. I felt very bad, but I couldn't blame him, because I smelt bad all the time. It was not easy to stay clean.”**

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## Long Acting Reversible Contraceptives

### United Nations Population Fund introduced Long Acting Reversible Contraceptives in four provinces: people's response was unexpected

Family planning is one of the key tools which can lift a nation out of poverty, drastically improve the health of the nation's mothers, their children, improve household economic situation and for women it presents an opportunity to pursue additional education and participate in public life.

UNFPA believes that rights based and voluntary family planning (including birth spacing) is one of the most critical interventions for achieving sustainable development in Afghanistan and help to realize a demographic dividend.

Inadequate access to family planning and birth spacing services is linked to early drop out of school, poverty, maternal and child mortality and other pregnancy and child birth related complications and injuries, for example fistulas.

Evidence shows that the more years of schooling boys and girls receive, the more likely they are to delay marriage (especially to after 18 years of age) and to delay childbearing. This in turn enhances the chances of living a healthy life, gaining a higher education and achieving an income.



UNFPA in Afghanistan is working closely with the Ministry of Public Health and Afghan communities to promote rights based Family Planning/birth spacing services.

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## Twenty eight midwives graduate with bachelor's degrees through UNFPA supported midwifery programme

On March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2017, 28 midwives received Bachelor's Degrees in midwifery from Zawul Private University in Kabul. These midwives were able to receive their through a UNFPA bridging programme that was initiated to contribute to improved quality of midwifery services

in the country. The midwives who entered the programme already held diplomas in midwifery from community midwifery education.

Midwives play a critical role in providing maternal and neonatal healthcare, which is of particular importance in Afghanistan which has one of the highest maternal and neonatal mortality in the world, midwives can help reduce mortality rates.

## Afghan Youth Has the Potential to Lift the Country Out of Poverty

### Deputy ministry of Youth Affairs, the National Assembly and UNFPA convenes the 2nd meeting of the Afghan Youth Parliament,

On July 23 2017, the Deputy Ministry of Youth Affairs and the Upper House of the National Assembly with technical and financial support of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) brought together 124 youth from 34 provinces of Afghanistan for the second Afghan Youth Parliament meeting.

These enthusiastic young people, aged between 18 – 30 (33% women, 5% nomadic communities and 3% people with disabilities) came together for the second meeting of the Afghan Youth Parliament in the new Afghan Parliamentary building.

At the Youth Parliament young people had the opportunity to discuss issues relevant to them and their com-



munities, such as; youth participation, health, employment, education and sports. Such discussions took place in plenary sessions within the 5 day congregation. The end product is proposals to the Afghan government to consider for implementation.

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## UNFPA introduces demographic studies at Kabul University

UNFPA has long been working to strengthen the statistics system in Afghanistan and conduct one of the largest surveys ever conducted in the country, both in terms of sample size and coverage, i.e. the Socio-demographic and Economic Survey (SDES).



To further ingrain a culture of statistics and demography in Afghanistan the UNFPA supported the Faculty of Economy at Kabul University to include Demographic Studies in its curricula. Specifically, the support is expected to strengthen the theoretical principles and practical foundation of statistics and demographic courses at the Kabul University.

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## Enhancing Development Issues at the Afghan Parliament

UNFPA works with the Afghan Parliament as the society's bridge voicing population issues. Understanding the unique role of the Afghan Parliament in population development, and promoting data utilization, UNFPA in collaboration with the Afghan Parliament developed the Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development.

UNFPA developed an orientation manual for the forum and conducted an orientation session for the members focusing on key population issues such as child marriage, reproductive health and strengthen the Parliamentary Forum for policy advocacy, budget appropriation, oversight and representation roles.

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## United Nations Population Fund presents the newly established National Population Policy to the Afghanistan Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development

On July 10, 2017 the Afghan Ministry of Economy with



technical support from UNFPA – the United Nations Population Fund – presented the National Population Policy to the Afghanistan Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development (APFPD). The meeting was chaired by Dr. Golalai Nur Safi.

The main features of the presentation included the population and socio-economic situation of Afghanistan, the importance of population policy, the vital role of an accurate and precise population policy, methods to enhance the living standards of and overall economic growth of the country. It was acknowledged that the existence of a population policy is critical for efficient development planning. [Read full story](#)



## Progress on Socio-demographic and Economic Survey in Afghanistan

On January 31<sup>st</sup> 2017 the UNFPA launched the result of the Socio-demographic and Economic Survey (SDES) for Nimroz Province in Zaranj, the provincial capital.

SDES provides socio-economic and demographic statistics at the lowest, most local, provincial division. 50% of all households completed questionnaires to document the number, gender and age of household members.

In close collaboration with the Afghanistan Central Statistics Organization, and with financial support from donors, the UNFPA has been implementing the SDES across the country. This commenced in 2011 in Bamiyan and since then SDES has covered 13 provinces across Afghanistan.

Findings of SDES will help the Afghan government policy mak-



ers, development planners, researchers and national academic institutions to plan and implement relevant development interventions. [Read full story](#)

## UNFPA Trains Trainers on Police Sector Response to GBV

### UNFPA Trains Trainers on Police Sector Response to Gender-based Violence

UNFPA decentralized and cascaded the training on Gender-based Violence (GBV) of the Police Sector to Master Trainers from 15 provinces, who will then replicate the training in each of their provinces.

To ensure a wide roll out of the training for the Police Sector responding to GBV cases and to further institutionalize system

building, the UNFPA has trained 30 master trainers from 15 provinces who will then replicate the training in their respective provinces.

The target provinces included; Bamiyan, Daikundi, Parwan, Kapisa, Laghman, Panjshir, Nangarhar, Khost, Paktya, Kabul, Kunar, Saripul, Baghlan, Balkh, Herat and Kandahar.

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## UNFPA Humanitarian Support to People in Need

UNFPA provides reproductive health services and commodities during times of emergency to crisis hit populations through all of the health facilities in the affected areas. UNFPA's support is also extended to people living in areas with little or no health facilities, to internally displaced population and returnees from neighboring countries.

Among those who received care was Razia, 26 years, who fled Kunduz and was living in Takhar under very harsh circumstances.

"When the conflict broke in Qunduz, I was pregnant", said Razia, "We fled the conflict and came to Takhar, and since our arrival we have been selling our belongings to make a living. I am so grateful to the midwife who



checked me for free and whom I went to see many times. When it was time for delivery the midwife also took me to the hospital in her car. I am very thankful for all she did for me.”

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## Two Million Australian Dollars to Support Reproductive Health Care



### Two million Australian dollars to support crucial reproductive health care and address violence against women among internally displaced people and returning migrants

On 20<sup>th</sup> June 2017, the Government of Australia has stepped up its long-running support for the crucial work the United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA, carries out in Afghanistan with a pledge of two million Australian dollars for emergency reproductive health care and supplies along with services to tackle violence against women among internally displaced people and returning migrants.

The funds, facilitated by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and to be dispersed through UNFPA over 12 months, will ensure reproductive health supplies, well-trained medical staff, counsellors and community mobilisers are on hand to provide quality care and support at facilities, including; the centre near the Turkham border crossing – a key crossing point on the Kabul-Peshawar-Islamabad route.

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*“Two million Australian dollars to support crucial reproductive health care and address violence against women among internally displaced people and returning migrants”*