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FOREWORD

Young people below the age of 30—who make up three quarters of the population in Afghanistan—are our country's largest asset.

The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's (GoIRA) focus is to fundamentally and strategically invest in this young generation so they become self-sufficient, while simultaneously eliminating the conditions that drive and enable their exploitation. In doing so, young people will be poised to serve as unmatched engines for Afghanistan's socio-economic transformation.

The Deputy Ministry of Youth Affairs has worked in close collaboration with UNFPA to develop unprecedented strategies and programmes that inclusively and systematically meet the needs of adolescents and youth, while providing countless opportunities for their growth. By involving relevant governmental and non-governmental entities, together we have designed and implemented short-, medium- and long-term solutions to build youth talents, skills and potential in the economic, social, cultural and political spheres.

Through the *National Youth Strategy 2018-2022* and UNFPA's flagship programmes known as 'Youth Parliament', 'Youth Health Line', and 'Youth Health Corners and Pre-Marriage Counselling,' we are leading the way to sustainable change for our young people's futures. This is a fundamental building block for both the peace and prosperity of our beloved nation.

Mr. Layeq Shah Zadran

The Acting Deputy Minister of Youth Affairs



PREFACE



Afghanistan's future stands on the shoulders of its young people more acutely and imminently than the majority of countries globally. In a single generation, people under 30 will be required to lead the country through transitions of great magnitude.

Aspirations abound for what this change could bring. When external factors finally enable peace, Afghanistan could shift its status from a post-conflict state facing the myriad challenges resulting from decades of war to a 21st Century beacon of hope for other countries also emerging from unrest.

For this to happen, we must do everything we can now to prepare young Afghans to rise to the occasion. They will have no other choice than to step up and bring about this vision, but they can only do so with the right tools; in particular strong physical and mental health, civic skills, and social norms based on human rights principles.

UNFPA, with the Government of Afghanistan and other partners, are creating opportunities to build young people's toolkits so they are prepared to heed this monumental call.

We are doing so through a range of initiatives which include leadership development programmes and the first ever, youth-friendly health services. These programmes and services are trusted and grounded in understandings of young people's realities, needs, and wants.

I invite you to read on about UNFPA's work underway to help young Afghans live their best lives today—and to assist them in creating the tomorrow they have long dreamed of achieving.

Mr. Koffi Kouame

Country Representative, UNFPA Afghanistan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Afghanistan not only has one of the youngest populations in the world but also one of the most vulnerable. However, with the right investments and opportunities, young people can become a critical driving force behind Afghanistan's socioeconomic transformation. But first, substantial barriers must be addressed to enable young people to reach their full potential. As the lead United Nations agency addressing adolescent and youth issues in Afghanistan, UNFPA—the United Nations Population Fund—flagship youth programmes help secure young people's rights, choices and opportunities.¹

Youth Parliament, Youth Health Line, and Youth Health Corners—UNFPA's flagship youth programmes—are fundamental drivers of the indicators, goals, and objectives of Afghanistan's *National Youth Policy (2014)* and its supporting *National Youth Strategy 2018-2022*, the *National Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child, and Adolescent Health Strategy 2017-2021*, and the *National Health Strategy 2016-2020*. The flagship youth programmes also reflect the priorities of multiple international commitments, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Youth Parliament: Addressing a Lack of Participation in Decision-Making

The Youth Parliament, established in 2016, gives young people a platform to exercise their voices and rights to shape their futures through engagement with the National Parliament of Afghanistan. In doing so, the Youth Parliament enables young people to bring about social change by influencing policies that impact their lives—and those of their peers and communities.

Youth Health Line and Youth Health Corners: Addressing Sexual and Reproductive Health Needs and Promoting Gender Equality

The pressures stemming from Afghanistan's young and quickly growing population can in large be attributed to a lack of sexual and reproductive health information and services—as well as restricted agency to utilise available knowledge and tools. Substantial gender inequality underpins this reality, further limiting the potential for adolescent girls to thrive in Afghanistan.

The Youth Health Line and Youth Health Corners are the only platforms which offer youth-friendly health services across the country, especially improving access to sexual and reproductive health information and services for young people.

¹ UNFPA Afghanistan's flagship programmes are innovative and successful initiatives currently being implemented that serve as prime models for scaling up and replication to support those furthest behind, especially vulnerable individuals with limited access to services and opportunities, and individuals in remote locations.



Through the Youth Health Line, young people around the country can now dial a toll-free number to speak to a professionally trained youth health counsellor about anything from routine health concerns to some of the most intimate and uncomfortable topics on their minds. Additionally, the Youth Health Line yields invaluable data regarding the behaviours and needs of young people in Afghanistan, which have helped inform national strategies and UNFPA programmes.

The Youth Health Corners offer the only youth-friendly health services within the public health system. As of 2019, Youth Health Corners also offer pre-marriage counselling to set new marriages on a path to success. Entirely proactive and grounded in Islamic principles, pre-marriage counselling builds healthy relationship skills and family planning knowledge while simultaneously promoting gender equality and other needed skills for a harmonious partnership and strong family foundation.

Call-To-Action

UNFPA is helping young Afghans forge a path to shape the country they want for themselves, their families, friends, and communities. Now is the chance to fuel the forward momentum. We call upon policymakers, donors, private sector, UN agencies, national organisations, and South-South collaborators to help sustain and reinforce, scale and replicate these proven models for adolescent and youth health, well-being, and empowerment. We seek partnerships and suggest specific opportunities for collaboration which are detailed at the end of this document.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS?

This document shows readers the rationale and impact of UNFPA's flagship youth programmes—Youth Parliament, Youth Health Line, and Youth Health Corners—and how investing in youth today through creative and context driven approaches helps build a solid foundation for the future. UNFPA Afghanistan invites readers to learn about the landmark work underway to empower young Afghans, especially by promoting leadership opportunities, sexual and reproductive health rights, and gender equality.

We invite the following individuals and institutions to help move the needle towards rights and choices for all young Afghans—especially the furthest behind—so they have the best chance at reaching their potential.

- **Public officials and other influencers** with the power to shape youth policies and programmes in Afghanistan;
- **Donors and private sector partners** with the resources to scale the impact of Youth Parliament, Youth Health Line, and Youth Health Corners;
- **National partners** whose efforts dovetail UNFPA Afghanistan's flagship youth programmes;
- **United Nations agencies** with capacity and mutual interest to leverage resources in support of shared objectives;
- **South-South collaborators** who can replicate Youth Parliament, Youth Health Line and Youth Health Corners in other parts of the world and offer shared learning; and
- **Individuals interested in learning about innovative solutions** to enhance the rights, needs and potential of young people, especially in conflict-prone settings with similar development goals.

GAME-CHANGING PROGRAMMES IMPROVING PARTICIPATION, RIGHTS, KNOWLEDGE, HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Youth Parliament, Youth Health Line and Youth Health Corners complement UNFPA Afghanistan's other flagship programmes changing the status quo in Afghanistan:

- **Family Protection Centres**, which provide survivors of gender-based violence access to medical, psychosocial and legal support, as well as referrals to other imperative services; and
- **Family Health Houses**, which deliver life-saving and essential reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health care to some of the most underserved parts of Afghanistan.

Together, these reflect the priorities of multiple international and national agendas and commitments. They also work towards UNFPA's Transformational Results of zero preventable maternal deaths, zero unmet need for family planning information and services, and zero sexual and gender-based violence and harmful practices against women and girls.

Sustainable Development Goals:

UNFPA Afghanistan's flagship youth programmes help achieve the following Sustainable Development Goals, in support of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*:



THE SITUATION

In Afghanistan, there are 10.5 million young people ages 10-24. That is one third of the entire population. Even more striking: 75% of the population is under 30 years old—making it one of the youngest demographics in the world.² Sadly, over half of the people in Afghanistan live below the poverty line.³ That—combined with the temptations and dangers of tobacco, alcohol and drug use, as well as the ramifications from unmet sexual and reproductive health needs, regular exposure to violence, and a lack of education and jobs—causes young Afghans to be extremely vulnerable. These pressures can lead to choices that might change the course of their lives, or worse, end them. But with the right investments and opportunities, young people can become a critical driving force behind Afghanistan’s socioeconomic transformation.

With deliberate policy decisions and programmes, Afghanistan is uniquely positioned to leverage a ‘demographic bonus,’⁴ which under the right conditions has unequivocally accelerated economic growth and social development in several countries around the world⁵. A demographic bonus occurs when a series of population shifts and trends combine with core investments in young people, resulting in a large working class equipped with the health, education, skills, and opportunities needed to rapidly advance the country’s development and face new challenges that arise. In Afghanistan, the conditions are ripe for a demographic bonus.⁶ While high levels of fertility and infant and childhood morbidity and mortality still exist, these numbers are slowly declining due to improved access to health care, especially sexual and reproductive health information and services. Also contributing to the strong potential for a demographic bonus is a trend in girls’ marriages occurring slightly later in life and improvements in education among other important factors.⁷

However, to fully reap the benefits of a demographic bonus, and for Afghanistan’s young people and thus the country’s future to truly flourish, substantial barriers must be addressed.

2 Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2018-19, 2019

3 Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2016 - 17 Analysis Report, 2018

4 Nasir, Jamal Abdul, and Sohail Akhtar. “Demographic Bonus in Afghanistan.” (2019)

5 Brooks, Deborah Jordan, et al. “The demographic transition theory of war: why young societies are conflict prone and old societies are the most peaceful.” International Security (2019).

6 Demographic bonuses result from a confluence of population trends. These include public health improvements in preceding decades contributing to a rise in births—in other words, increased national fertility—and decreased infant and child deaths. Thus, a large number of young people are born and increasingly survive in a relatively short period, creating a ‘youth bulge.’ As young people reach working age a sizeable workforce emerges, and as fertility rates decline, working people have less economic and social dependents. In turn, their resources go further, helping to alleviate poverty and spur development (Investing in Youth, 2015).

7 Ibid.

Adolescents and Youth Lack Representation in the Political Sphere

When young people take an active role in developing their communities, they gain knowledge critical to overcoming challenges, offer fresh and pragmatic solutions, and equip themselves with the life skills required to make safe choices which lead to healthy lifestyles. The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* mandates that young people have the legal right to express their views freely and fully participate in all matters that impact them.⁸ Countries that engage young people in policy development make decisions that are more informed and appropriate to youth and adolescent needs and in doing so, develop the capacity of their citizens.

Conversely, global evidence suggests that some of the greatest challenges facing young people include deprivation of opportunities to build civic engagement skills and participate in decision-making processes at the community and national levels, as well as a lack of trust in governments and political parties.⁹ Social exclusion of young people is not only an inactivated resource that could benefit the whole society, it also opens the door to negative behaviours.¹⁰

Despite the large proportion of young people in Afghanistan, they are significantly under-represented in the political sphere.¹¹ A minority demographic—older adults—are making key policy decisions for the majority demographic to which they do not belong.

Adolescents and Youth Lack Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Information and Services

Access to information and services on sexual and reproductive health and rights are crucial to the well-being and productivity of individuals and society as they have a significant bearing on a country's development and prosperity. The degree to which sexual and reproductive health rights are realised can greatly hinder or accelerate progress towards many of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Given the large proportion of adolescents and youth in Afghanistan, this population segment is one of the most important priorities for receiving sexual and reproductive health and rights programming. Yet young people in Afghanistan often lack knowledge and opportunities for guidance related to these matters, and until the establishment of UNFPA's flagship Youth Health Corners, they had no access to youth-friendly health care within the public health system.¹² Without these programmes, unwanted pregnancies, pregnancy terminations, birth complications—including disability, illness, and death—and contraction of sexually transmitted infections are more likely.

8 Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989

9 Report on the United Nations SWAP Survey, 2012 in Afghanistan National Youth Strategy 2018-2022, 2018, p. 26

10 Implementation of the World Programme of Action for Youth, 2008 in Afghanistan National Youth Strategy 2018-2022, 2018, p. 27

11 Afghanistan National Youth Strategy 2018-2022, 2018

12 For more information about Youth Health Corners and 'youth-friendly' services, see the section later in this document detailing UNFPA's flagship programmes.

Adolescent pregnancy and motherhood are a serious social and health concern in Afghanistan. Pregnancy during early teenage years can cause severe health problems for both the mother and child. Moreover, an early start to childbearing greatly reduces the educational and employment opportunities of women and is associated with higher national levels of fertility.¹³ Adolescent mothers, 15-19 years old, accounted for 7% of births in Afghanistan between 2015-2020. That is almost twice the average adolescent birth rate among other South Asian countries, of which Afghanistan has the second highest rate after Bangladesh.¹⁴

Social stigmas against sexual activity outside of marriage, and harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage, put young people at even further risk of not realising their rights to sexual and reproductive health care.

Schools have potential to effectively deliver sexual and reproductive health information and services to adolescents and youth, however, a standard comprehensive sexuality education curriculum does not yet exist in Afghanistan's public schools, though one is currently under development with UNFPA's support. In addition to this, school enrolment is very low. On average, 80% of adults over 25 who were surveyed in 13 provinces between 2011-2017 reported that they had never received formal education.¹⁵ With nowhere else to turn, young people are left in the dark, stuck with the consequences of their uninformed decisions and actions—or those imposed on them by others, as is often the case with girls and young women.

Unequal Gender Norms and High Prevalence of Gender-Based Violence in Afghanistan

Gender inequality is based on patriarchal constructs that place men and boys in a superior position to women and girls. These severely harmful norms pave the way for cultural practices that hamper women and girls' health and well-being, productivity, independence, and agency. As a result, families, communities, economies, and the whole society suffer.

Afghanistan has been ranked as having the second-highest rate of gender inequality in the world.¹⁶ Women's rights have drastically deteriorated over the course of more than four decades of war. The protracted state of conflict has caused and exacerbated inequalities between men and women, boys, and girls, leading to a high prevalence of gender-based violence. Afghanistan is one of two countries in the Asia-Pacific region with the highest current rate of physical and/or sexual violence committed by an intimate partner.¹⁷ In fact, gender-based violence is widely accepted or tolerated by both men and women—they have been socialised to do so.¹⁸

¹³ AMS 2010, 2011, p. 49

¹⁴ Conceição, 2019

¹⁵ SDES, 2019

¹⁶ Gender Directorate, 2019, p. 11

¹⁷ Jansen, 2019

¹⁸ 2015 Afghanistan Demographic and Health Survey, 2015; Roseveare et al., 2019

Harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage increase the risk of gender-based violence and destroy young people's potential.¹⁹ Child brides are also exposed to early and frequent sexual relations and pregnancies before they are physically and psychologically mature, increasing the chances of mental health issues, maternal death, and disability. Such coerced marriages, which are typically driven by economic and cultural pressures, are relatively common in Afghanistan. While nationally representative survey data reveal a trend towards later first marriages overall,²⁰ almost half of women between the ages of 25-49 had been married by age 18, and nearly one in seven women had been married by age 15, as of 2015.²¹

Both gender-based violence and harmful marriage practices are human rights violations that emerge from, reflect and perpetuate women and girls' low status in Afghan society. Combined with the seriously lacking sexual and reproductive health infrastructure, also a fundamental human right, female adolescents and youth are particularly vulnerable in Afghanistan.

19 Erken, 2019

20 AMS 2010, 2011, p. 52

21 2015 Afghanistan Demographic and Health Survey, 2015, p. 69

NATIONAL POLICIES AND STRATEGIES CHANGING THE STATUS QUO FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN AFGHANISTAN

In recognition of what is at stake when it comes to young people—both the risks they face and their potential to drive meaningful and transformative socioeconomic progress—the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan²² has implemented specific policies and strategies to address adolescent and youth needs and rights. These policies and strategies are intended to underscore and harness their value as one of the country's most important assets.

In 2014, the Government of Afghanistan enacted the landmark *National Youth Policy*, which aims to inclusively meet youth needs and develop their skills to excel in the economic, social, cultural, and political spheres. To reinforce and operationalise the policy, UNFPA has provided technical, coordination, and financial support to the Deputy Ministry of Youth Affairs to develop Afghanistan's *National Youth Strategy 2018-2022*. The strategy focuses on “educating and equipping young people with productive and employable skills for economic, political and social empowerment” and provides direction for their “active civic engagement in decision making bodies and processes at provincial and national levels.”²³

Underpinned by principles of access, inclusiveness, transparency, participation, social unity, national values, and gender equality, the *National Youth Strategy* has six ‘strategic directions’:

- 1) **Health**, including sexual and reproductive health rights, which UNFPA's Youth Health Corner and Youth Health Line flagship programmes work to advance;
- 2) **Education**, improve access to vocational trainings, promote information education, and opportunities for higher education of rural youth;
- 3) **Employment**, improve labour market administration, address the labour supply and demand mismatch, and promote sustainable youth entrepreneurship;
- 4) **Participation**, strengthen youth leadership capacity building, involve youth in developing and implementation of the national policies, promote youth voluntarism and expand media space for youth voice;
- 5) **Sport**, promote the value of exercise and spirit of health competition and promote the organization of traditional supporting events; and
- 6) A suite of **crosscutting issues**, including gender equity, peace and security, and environmental sustainability.

²² Hereafter called “the Government of Afghanistan” for brevity.

²³ Afghanistan National Youth Strategy 2018-2022, 2018, p. V

In addition, in support of the 2014 *National Youth Policy*, UNFPA helped the Ministry of Public Health's Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child, and Adolescent Health Directorate create the adolescent health component of its national strategy of the same name. UNFPA's Youth Health Corner and Youth Health Line flagship programmes²⁴ help operationalise the *National Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child, and Adolescent Health Strategy 2017–2021*, which is supplemental to the framework of the *National Health Strategy 2016–2020*, also developed by the Ministry of Public Health.

Having worked closely with various ministries of the Government of Afghanistan to develop these policies and strategies, UNFPA's flagship youth programmes work to achieve their indicators, goals, and objectives through innovative, scalable, and replicable approaches.



²⁴ For more information about UNFPA's flagship youth programmes, see the next section.

UNFPA AFGHANISTAN'S FLAGSHIP YOUTH PROGRAMMES

UNFPA is the lead United Nations agency addressing adolescent and youth issues. With the Government of Afghanistan and other partners, UNFPA is taking unprecedented steps to give Afghanistan's young people the best chance of achieving their full potential. Specifically, UNFPA Afghanistan's flagship youth programmes work to increase young people's participation in decision-making; improve access to information and services to enhance sexual and reproductive health, especially for adolescent girls and young women; and promote gender equality and other healthy relationship skills in marriage.

Youth Parliament, a UNFPA Afghanistan Flagship Programme

Why :

Young people in Afghanistan lack mechanisms through which to express to national decision-makers their opinions, needs, desires, and realities. Given three quarters of the population is under the age of 30, it is critical that national, regional, and local policies reflect the best interest of young people, demonstrating an understanding of who they are and what matters to them. Young people also must have the knowledge and skills to effectively and peacefully participate in civil discourse and democratic decision-making processes. With this in mind, in 2016 UNFPA created the Youth Parliament in collaboration with the Deputy Ministry of Youth Affairs.

What:

The Youth Parliament gives young people a platform to exercise their voices and rights to shape their futures through engagement with the National Parliament of Afghanistan. In doing so, it enables young people to bring about social change by influencing policies that impact their lives—and those of their peers and communities. Youth Parliamentarians learn practical civic skills in leadership; campaigning; parliamentary procedures; peaceful negotiation and debate; policy advocacy; and complex, evidence-based decision-making. As a result, National Parliamentarians—and the public—gain insights into the socioeconomic challenges facing young people and how policies can better serve constituents. Youth Parliament is a national institution independent of political party affiliations.

How:

The Youth Parliament comprises 118 people of voting-age—18 to 30 years old—from all 34 provinces of Afghanistan. Each province delegates three Youth Parliamentarians, and an additional 16 delegates come from historically under-represented or marginalised segments of the population, such as disabled persons, nomads and ethnic minorities. One third of Youth Parliamentarians must be female.

Election Process

The election process for Youth Parliamentarians is highly democratic and transparent to instil trust and enthusiasm. Eligibility requirements include age and location—candidates must currently reside in the province they are running to represent; and candidates must have prior experience with some form of civic engagement in order to demonstrate a knowledge of and commitment to addressing provincial issues. Candidates may either nominate themselves or be nominated by local youth organisations, youth councils, and other civil society groups.

Each province's Youth Provincial Council creates and interviews a shortlist of candidates. These councils include representatives from each province in the following capacities: 1) governor's office; 2) election's commission; 3) Deputy Youth Ministry provincial focal point; and 4) a provincial council member who is elected by the public at the district level. Youth Provincial Councils have a combined expertise in regulatory, local governance, and technical matters, and via the provincial councilmembers, the councils indirectly incorporate the voice of the people. Interviews are recorded with the candidates' permission to ensure a fair process, and there is an official mechanism for candidates to register disputes. Once elected, Youth Parliamentarians serve a restricted one-year term.

Convenings and Decision-Making Process

The Youth Parliament convenes annually in Kabul. Six commissions of Youth Parliamentarians review issues and make recommendations to the National Parliament. Each commission is focused on one of the six strategic directions of the *National Youth Strategy*.²⁵

The commissions meet for three days to understand and discuss issues related to their focus area. To inform these discussions, a senior member of the relevant government ministry and an expert from a related development agency present thorough national and global background information and an overview of current challenges. Youth Parliamentarians then add their own provincial perspectives based on the issues and experiences of their peers and communities at home. Based on the combined global, national, and provincial knowledge and insights, the commissions determine recommendations for the National Parliament, called resolutions. One Youth Parliamentarian facilitates each commission meeting to ensure a productive and fair discussion and presents the resolutions at the plenary sessions that follow.

²⁵ The six strategic directions of the National Youth Strategy and thus the respective focuses of the six Youth Parliament commissions are: health; education; employment; participation; sport; and crosscutting issues, including gender equity, peace and security, and environmental sustainability.

After the commission sessions conclude, all Youth Parliamentarians and the minister of each relevant ministry convene for plenary sessions. Here, Youth Parliamentarians ask questions of the ministers and present their resolutions. This process mimics that of the National Parliament. Following the plenary sessions, formal documentation of the resolutions are sent to each associated ministry.

Results:

Youth Parliament legitimatises youth voices and concerns and bolsters this transformational generation's potential. Youth Parliament is the first platform of its kind in Afghanistan to enable youth to exercise their rights and responsibilities in decision-making processes that affect their lives, and those of their peers and communities. In turn, it is an important precursor and catalyst to improving the social and economic condition of youth—and the country. Youth Parliament equips them with the foundation and tools, including leadership and professional development skills, that are fundamental to creating a strong, entrepreneurial workforce, and demographic dividend.

Initial indicators of success are emerging: 15% of Youth Parliament recommendations have influenced national public policies so far. Three Youth Parliamentarians have become mayors in Afghanistan, including one young woman, and one Youth Parliamentarian was elected to the National Parliament. Additionally, 90% of Youth Parliamentarians have gained valuable employment skills and secured jobs.

Sustainability:

The Youth Parliament is an extremely effective and sustainable approach to fostering youth participation and building public policy and leadership skills in youth across Afghanistan, which will remain with them throughout their lives and hopefully passed down to future generations. Because Youth Parliament proceedings are broadcast on television and radio networks, even young people who are not directly involved benefit from the programme. The Youth Parliament aims to inspire and empower all young Afghans to be engaged citizens and community leaders who use their voices to advocate their own needs and desires, as well as those of their families, peers and communities.

Youth Health Line, a UNFPA Afghanistan Flagship Programme

Why:

Afghanistan's youth often have nowhere to turn for crucial health care, including sexual and reproductive health information and services. Adolescents and youth in Afghanistan want mental health counselling, but they have had trouble accessing it in the past.²⁶ These service gaps are especially problematic in rural areas; as of 2017, the nearest public health facility was still further than a two-hour walk for 10% of the population.²⁷ Young people may not know where to get help, have funds to travel, or pay for services, the freedom to leave their homes, or the courage to speak face-to-face with a stranger about personal matters. Even if young people can access public health facilities, they lack youth-friendly services.²⁸

Without these services, which can change the course of young people's lives, adolescents and youth face tremendous risks: unwanted pregnancies; sexually transmitted infections; substance abuse; and anxiety, depression, and suicide are but a few examples of the many harmful outcomes and stigmas that undermine young Afghans' health, well-being, and potential.

To improve adolescent and youth access to anonymous, immediate, and quality health care and guidance, the Youth Health Line was created for young Afghans in 2012.

What:

Now young people around the country can dial a toll-free number, '120,' from any phone to speak to a professionally trained youth health counsellor about anything from routine health concerns to some of the most intimate and uncomfortable topics on their minds. These free conversations are confidential, sans judgement, and do not require parental consent. For many adolescents and youth in Afghanistan, this is the only way they can get help in making open-minded decisions through a guided exploration of all possible options on sensitive subjects, since no other services like it exist at this scale. The Youth Health Line is open daily between 8 am and 8 pm.

“One of my family member's teenager had a sexual problem he couldn't share it with me. But he found his way to the Youth Health Line. I'm very satisfied with the help he received from the staff. It gives me so much pride to work for the Youth Health Line which is able to make positive changes to young person's lives.”

YHL Staff (35), Kabul province

²⁶ Afghanistan's Future in Transition, 2013, p. 40

²⁷ National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2011–2012, 2014 in Concept Note on Family Health Houses, 2018

²⁸ UNFPA Afghanistan's flagship programme, Youth Health Corners, is changing this; learn more in the next section.

Youth Health Line counsellors address the following topics accurately and in a culturally sensitive manner:

- Comprehensive general health;
- Menstruation;
- Oral health;
- Mental health, including suicide and substance abuse prevention and treatment;
- Sexual and reproductive health information and services, including counselling on issues related to safe sex, sexually transmitted infections, and LGBTQI;
- Family planning and contraception;
- Issues related to gender-based violence and available services for survivors;
- The effects of harmful practices such as forced, early and child marriages, and how to get help in these situations;
- COVID-19 information and referrals; and
- Referrals to nearby public health facilities and other support services to further address any of these issues.

In addition to improving health care for adolescents and youth through education and referrals, the Youth Health Line also yields invaluable data regarding the behaviours and needs of young people in Afghanistan. Analysis of disaggregated data informs the design and adaptation of health and youth-related policies and programmes to better meet the needs of young people. For example, an influx of calls about sexually transmitted infections could indicate a need for safe-sex education campaigns for youth. The Youth Health Line can also help measure the impact of such campaigns by analysing call centre data. The data can also flag problems in the public health system for the Ministry of Public Health, such as health facilities lacking medications or contraception.



“I found a job at a different place with a good salary, but I rejected it because through Youth Health Line I’m helping many people and have saved many people’s lives, which makes me feel very lucky and proud. A young girl (21) called me from Herat Province. She was in a deep depression and wanted to commit suicide. She was suffering from many problems. When she called, I guided her to the right way and also told her about the Islamic way which forbids suicide and many more things. She called me many times and I was guiding her; I tried many ways to take her out of the depression and not to commit suicide. Finally, I succeed. And she was so happy that she didn’t committed suicide. She was out of the depression. thanked me and the Youth Health Line a lot.”

-- YHL Staff (33), Herat province



How:

Callers need access to a phone they can use in private, which is often possible since mobile phone penetration in Afghanistan is high; over two thirds of households in rural areas and 90% of households in urban areas own a mobile phone.^{29,30} Using a modern e-health approach, callers receive accurate, up-to-date guidance, and information as well as referrals to the nearest youth-friendly resources and facilities.

Around the country, community health shuras—groups of respected local community and health leaders—are informed of the Youth Health Line and its value. The health shuras are asked to encourage families in their communities to trust and embrace the Youth Health Line.

In collaboration with the Ministry of Public Health's Adolescent Directorate, UNFPA designed the Youth Help Line and provides technical guidance and project management. The Deputy Ministry of Youth Affairs under the Ministry of Information and Culture is involved in the monitoring of data gathered via the Youth Help Line.

Results:

In 2019 alone, the Youth Health Line received over 130,000 calls from young people with nowhere else to turn for guidance regarding culturally taboo topics that can change the course of young people's lives. The Youth Health Line data has demonstrated the programme's immense value, and it has contributed to the *National Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child, and Adolescent Health Strategy 2017–2021*. The call centre data also guided the development of UNFPA's flagship Youth Health Corner and Youth Parliament programmes.



“An 18 years old called us from Laghman province, she wanted some information about GBV and was suffering from her family's violence which was hurting her so much. After calling to the Youth Health Line, I gave her all the information and explained to her how to react to those kinds of situations and protect herself. After some time has passed, she called me again. She was very happy and satisfied with the Youth Help Line services and she said she have a perfect life now.”

-- YHL Staff (25), Laghman province



²⁹ Call centre data show that girls account for 55–60% of Youth Health Line callers, and when girls do not have their own phone, they use their mother's. This is especially the case outside of urban areas.

³⁰ Afghanistan Health Survey 2018, 2019, p. 6



Youth Health Line 2019 Impact



Number
of calls

136,639



Percentage
female callers

58% (79,585)



Percentage
male callers

42% (57,054)

Types of services:

52%

Counselling

24%

Information

24%

Referrals to health facilities

Sustainability:

UNFPA is building the institutional capacity within the Ministry of Public Health and the Ministry of Information and Culture on helpline management and data analysis. Cross-sectoral training programmes transfer skills to both Youth Health Line call centre counsellors and referral service providers, which will serve Afghan youth long into the future.

“

“A girl (25) called us from Helmand province. She was suffering from an STI (Sexual Transmitted Infection) and needed help related to protection. After calling to the Youth Health Line she was guided to some effective ways and protections. Next time when she called us, she was very happy and satisfied that the guidance solved her many tensions and problems, she thanked the Youth Health Line so many times.”

-- YHL Staff (25), Helmand province

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HUMAN INTEREST STORY:

Youth Health Line helps a Girl Reject Child Marriage and Continue her Education

As told by a Youth Health Line counsellor

One day I received a call to the Youth Health Line from a 14-year-old girl named Pari³¹ from Ghor province. She was very depressed and nervous to talk. After reassuring her that the conversation would be confidential, she told me her story:

“I live in a middle-class family, and my dream is to finish school, get a job and do something for my family. But one day when I was returning from school, I noticed a man giving me a very carnal look. I was very scared and went straight home. After a few days, my father told me I have to quit school because he wants to engage me to a man older than he is. The man already has three wives. My heart is broken because I do not want to marry him. Please help me, otherwise I’m scared I will kill myself.”

My first response was empathy. I told Pari that I understand her very critical situation, and that together we would find a solution.

As a next step, we decided to speak with someone who her father trusts. So, the next time Pari called, she put her mother on the phone. But during the course of our conversation, we both realised that Pari’s mother would not have the influence needed to sway the father’s decision.

So, we decided, that our next step needed to be to try speaking with Pari’s father directly.

At first, he refused to take the call. But after many calls, Pari convinced him to talk with us. My colleagues and I explained the damaging impacts that early marriage would have on his daughter, both mentally and physically. We told him that when one person in the Nikah—an Afghan wedding—does not want to marry, the marriage is not accepted under Islamic law. And we explained the positive impact of his daughter’s education for her future.

During our conversation, we realised Pari’s father was not aware of these issues. Finally, he promised to think about his decision.

After a few days Pari called us again, but this time she was very happy and thankful for the counselling she received from the Youth Health Line team.

“After speaking with you, my father changed his decision and now I am going to school,” Pari exclaimed.

³¹ Name changed for confidentiality.

Youth Health Corners and Pre-Marriage Counselling, a UNFPA Afghanistan Flagship Programme

Why:

Adolescents and youth in Afghanistan not only have limited options for realising their sexual and reproductive health rights; it is also uncommon for engaged couples to receive coaching about how to ensure a happy and equal marriages. This is a disservice to the whole of society, as its prosperity depends on the well-being of families. The foundation of healthy families in Afghanistan is a stable, mutually respectful, and loving marriage. To change that, UNFPA and the Ministry of Public Health developed a programme called Youth Health Corners, launched in 2018. Youth Health Corners are the only youth-friendly public health options for young people to receive sexual and reproductive health services. And as of 2019, Youth Health Corners began setting new marriages on a path to success through pre-marriage counselling.

What:

Youth Health Corners are located in 24 existing public health facilities in eight provinces of Afghanistan: Kabul, Jalalabad, Laghman, Kunur, Samangan, Badakhshan, Herat, and Bamyan.³² These designated safe spaces provide youth-friendly health services on a referral and drop-in basis. Issues addressed are similar to those covered by Youth Health Line and also emphasise sexual and reproductive health. Youth Health Corners provide the first nationally approved, standardised pre-marriage counselling programme for young couples entering into wedlock. Entirely proactive and grounded in Islamic principles, pre-marriage counselling builds healthy relationship skills, promotes gender equality, and other needed skills for a harmonious partnership and strong family foundation.

How:

At the entrance of the public health facilities where the Youth Health Corners are located, a banner advertises the services and directs young people to a two-room mini-clinic, which consists of a waiting room and an examination room. Youth Health Corners are staffed by a female and male doctor trained in youth-friendly approaches to discussing and treating youth health issues. The doctors share use of the clinic and provide services on alternating days to clients of the same sex.

³² As of mid-2020.

Every month for two days, the Youth Health Corners offer pre-marriage counselling sessions for small groups of young women and men who are engaged to be married, divided by gender. Here, a Youth Health Corner doctor of the same sex introduces the topics that will be explored to help couples establish healthy, happy, sexual, and emotional relationships where power is shared equally between both partners. The doctor then shows a video of a famous religious leader reiterating and contextualising the same themes within Islamic teachings. This is essential to establishing buy-in and trust from communities and the couples attending the pre-marriage counselling sessions. The doctor then facilitates a discussion and invites questions from attendees.

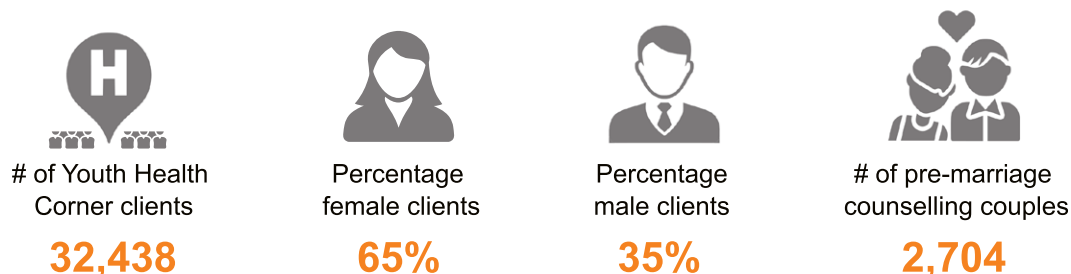
The following themes are explored in Youth Health Corner pre-marriage counselling:

- Communication skills;
- Conflict resolution;
- Managing financial and other resources;
- Parenting skills;
- Family planning;
- Sexual relations, (in a very delicate and appropriate manner);
- Detrimental impacts of gender-based violence to the whole family, as well as harmful practices such as forced, early and child marriage;
- Equality between both partners; and
- Islamic perspectives on marriage.

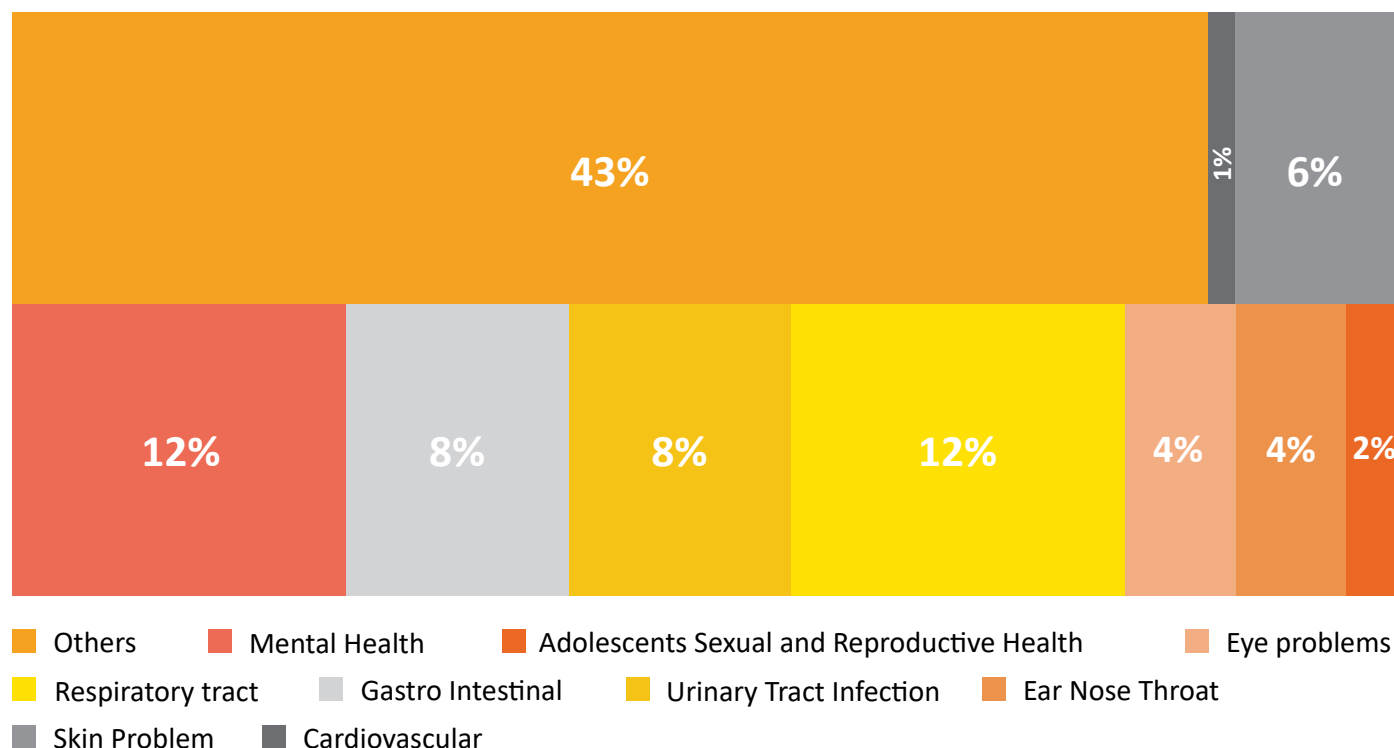
Results:

The Youth Health Corners are helping to desensitise topics that are typically taboo in Afghan culture, but vital to the health and well-being of young people who make up the majority of the population. Anecdotes are emerging from Youth Health Corner clients later discussing the issues explored at the Youth Health Corner with their families and peers which are helping to build awareness of these important matters in communities across Afghanistan.

Youth Health Corners 2019 impact



Top 10 Disease - All Patients/Clients Youth Health Corners - 2019



Sustainability:

UNFPA is building capacity within the Ministry of Public Health and with doctors from the public health facilities—as well as religious institutions—to provide youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services and healthy marriage training. UNFPA is working in a cross-sectoral capacity to ensure all couples entering into marriage receive at least one session of mandatory pre-marriage counselling. An expected outcome of this intervention is a reduction in gender-based violence and improved sexual and reproductive health among young people.

HELP SUSTAIN, SCALE, AND REPLICATE UNFPA AFGHANISTAN'S FLAGSHIP YOUTH PROGRAMMES

Afghanistan's young people have a profound determination and commitment to their country that ripples throughout society. Despite the hardships and traumas many have faced their entire lives, young Afghans hold a firm optimism about their country's future; and a responsibility to bring the possibilities for peace and prosperity to fruition. This devotion and positive outlook are key building blocks to Afghanistan's reconstruction. But for young people to realise their visions for tomorrow, today we must invest in their health, well-being and education, and present ample opportunities to build civic engagement, leadership and professional development skills.

Through UNFPA's flagship programmes, we are helping young Afghans forge a path to shape the country they want for themselves, their families, friends, and communities.

Now is the chance to be part of the forward momentum—ensuring the progress of the last decade in securing rights and choices for all, including young people and women, goes even further. Here are some concrete means through which to join in this challenge.

Call for Funding Partners, Policy Support, In-Kind Support, and South-South Collaborations

- **Localise Youth Parliament.** The Youth Parliament currently operates at the national level, with provincial representatives. Donors, policymakers, and influencers have a unique opportunity to bring the Youth Parliament to the local level, ensuring that this proven model for youth participation, leadership, and civic engagement is more inclusive of grassroots initiatives that reach further. In doing so, hundreds of young people from districts across Afghanistan can raise their voices to ensure local policies reflect the needs and perspectives of the majority of the population, who will be most impacted by these decisions.
- **Expand Youth Health Line and Youth Health Corners.** Bring these desperately needed sexual, reproductive, and mental health services, as well as other life-changing support, to even more Afghan adolescents and youth. Donors and private sector entities seeking an opportunity to make their mark on the generation of tomorrow by improving young people's health and well-being today should invest in these low-cost, high impact flagship programmes. Fund additional Health Line staff and new Health Corners and consider providing in-kind technological solutions to expand their reach. The Youth Health Line and the Youth Health Corners are the only providers of youth-friendly health services in Afghanistan, and demand for these resources has proven their tremendous value.

- **Help make pre-marriage counselling a prerequisite to marriage licensing.** Policymakers are encouraged to mandate pre-marriage counselling through programmes such as the Youth Health Corners to establish healthy relationship skills and gender equality from the start. This proactive, low-cost measure has the potential to prevent problems such as gender-based violence and unwanted pregnancies, while promoting good parenting and conflict resolution skills.
- **Strengthen the referral network of youth-friendly services.** The Youth Health Line and the Youth Health Corner depend on a strong referral network. Policymakers should commit to continuous investments along the referral chain so when young people seek help, they are delivered high-quality, youth-friendly services. UNFPA welcomes partnerships with other UN agencies, international and national non-governmental institutions, civil society, and the private sector to ensure the referral network of youth-friendly services is comprehensive and user-friendly.
- **Replicate youth flagship programmes and share learning via South-South collaborations.** UNFPA's flagship youth programmes can be replicated in other settings, including conflict-prone countries with large remote areas. The Adolescent and Youth Unit welcomes partnerships to help governments, organisations and donors bring these essential youth-friendly solutions to other places—and to share learning on best practices.

Donors



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UNFPA Afghanistan flagship programme spotlight:

**Youth Parliament, Youth Health Line,
Youth Health Corners**



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