

# Birth Registration in Bangladesh

## KEY STATISTICS

Population under 18 years	61.3 million*	
Proportion of children aged under five who have birth registration	53.6%** (2009)	9.8% (2006)
Age of criminal responsibility	9	
Legal age of marriage	18 for girls, 21 for boys	
Proportion of women married before age 18, among women aged 20-49	78%***	

Source: \*SOWC 2010, \*\*MICS 2009 and 2006, \*\*\*BDHS 2007

## Background

Birth registration is a fundamental human right that is specified in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). All children have the right to a name, identity and nationality, and birth registration is a first and significant step in upholding these rights. Birth registration is the State's first official acknowledgement of the child's existence and is the means to secure other child rights such as access to health care and education.

In addition, birth registration protects children from exploitation because it enables the use of legal age limits for employment, marriage, recruitment for armed forces and criminal responsibility. With the birth certificate, the age of the child can be verified.

Birth registration is also essential for national planning and monitoring because it enables the collection of the basic demographic data required to create effective strategies.

Children without birth certificates do not exist in legal terms, and their right to an official name and nationality is denied. They find themselves more vulnerable to the vicious cycle of poverty, abuse and exploitation, and they are easy prey for traffickers, slave traders and unscrupulous employers.

Since 1996, UNICEF has assisted the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives to work towards universal birth registration through the establishment of a low-cost, easy and sustainable birth registration system. This has included initiatives such as introducing an appropriate legal framework, building the capacity of various stakeholders, supplying materials, improving inter-agency cooperation, and raising awareness on the importance of birth registration.

These activities have resulted in a dramatic increase in birth registration rates, particularly for children. The birth registration rate for children aged under-five increased from 9.8 per cent in 2006 to 53.6 per cent in 2009.

## ISSUES

### Awareness

Historically, the biggest obstacle to birth registration in Bangladesh has been the lack of awareness of its importance, which led to the low demand for certificates. Parents often do not have the right information and do not understand the possible consequences of not registering their child.

### Interagency coordination

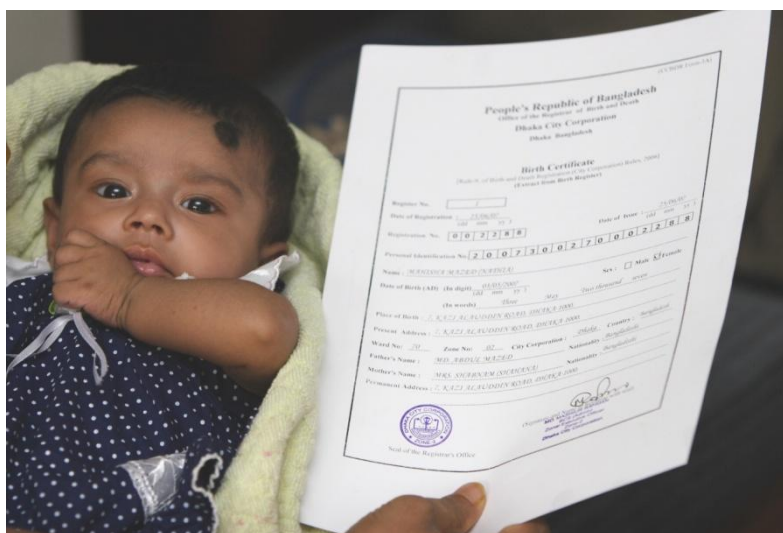
A lack of coordination between the health and education sectors and the birth registration system is also a hindering factor. Babies who are born in health facilities should ideally have their births registered at the time of birth, but this does not always happen. Additionally, only 24 per cent of births are attended by skilled health personnel, so many newborns remain undetected. While birth registrars are normally local government officials such as union council chairmen, they rely on health and education workers to report births. Therefore interagency cooperation is essential to develop a sustainable birth registration system.

### Ineffective system

Until 2006, Bangladesh's birth registration system was governed by legislation developed in 1873. Under this old legislation, birth registration was not required to access services, so there was little incentive for people to register their births or those of their children. The birth registration system was manual, ad hoc and prone to abuse. However, the Government of Bangladesh adopted the Births and Deaths Registration Act in 2004. This Act came into force in 2006 and stipulates that birth certificates will be used as proof of age for a number of administrative procedures: issuance of an ID card, enrolment in educational institutions, marriage registration, issuance of driving licence, etc.

### Duplication

The lack of an electronic birth registration system makes it difficult for birth registrars to confirm duplication within the list. This is problematic because some people choose to revise their own ages by applying for a new birth certificate, for a variety of reasons. For example, some parents artificially increase their daughters' ages so they are above the legal marriage age of 18, while other people reduce their ages so they can apply for a government job before the cut-off age of 30.



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## ACTION

### Legislative and policy reform

UNICEF supported the Government to develop and enact the Births and Deaths Registration Act, 2004. The 2004 Act is in line with the CRC and based on best field practice. It makes

birth registration compulsory for everyone born in Bangladesh, irrespective of age, race, religion or nationality. It is accompanied by five rules that outline the practical process of registering births. Newborn babies must be registered within 45 days of birth, and there are penalties for parents who fail to register children within two years.

The Act stipulates that people must be issued with a physical birth certificate as part of the birth registration process. In order to increase demand for registration, the Act makes it compulsory for people to present the birth certificate in order to access 16 services including school enrolment, passports, voter registration, employment in government or non-government organizations and marriage registration. However implementation is still not universal: not all service providers demand to see the certificates as required. The Act also provided free of cost birth registration for the initial two-year period.

The Government has also developed a Universal Birth Registration Strategy which aims to register everyone by the end of 2010.

Birth registration was declared free of charge until end of December 2008 to motivate people to get their birth certificate. This deadline has now been extended for children under 18 till end of June 2010. After this date, there will be a fee. However the registration of babies under two years of age will remain free of charge.

### Inter-agency collaboration

UNICEF is supporting the Government to strengthen cooperation between the health, education and birth registration systems to establish a sustainable process. Health workers and hospital medical officers can report new births to registrars. However since the majority of births takes place at home, it was decided to link birth registration with Bangladesh's highly successful immunization programme. Legally, all births should be reported within 45 days while the first dose of immunization occurs within 40 days of birth, so initial immunization presents a perfect timing for birth registration. If an unregistered child comes to receive immunization, the health assistant can report the child to the local registrar to start the process of registration. A birth registration component has now been introduced into the regular training programme for health assistants and more than 1 million birth registration forms were provided to these workers through UNICEF-supported project.

A similar process occurs in schools, where birth registration is now required for enrolment. Teachers can initiate the process of birth registration for any unregistered children they encounter. UNICEF supported this through training and supply of materials.

Four ministries – the Local Government Division, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, and the Ministry of Education – have issued circulars to their staff about the new Act and how to integrate it into their work.

A forum, consisting of leading NGOs with activities at the grassroots level, has been formed to promote birth registration. NGOs, specifically those working in health and education, are providing support to registrars to collect birth information. They are also ensuring that birth certificates are used as protective tools for Bangladeshi children, through activities such as promoting the use of birth certificates during marriage registration.

### Capacity building

Several government training institutes have incorporated birth registration and child rights into their regular curricula for registrars, local government officials and support staff. The training manual explains the birth registration process and the role of duty bearers such as registrars, local government officials, teachers and health workers.

Registrars and associated duty-bearers at the national and sub-national level have received training and orientation on the importance and process of birth registration. Health workers, primary and secondary school teachers and Government education officers at district and sub-district level have benefited from such training.

### Supply of materials

UNICEF has supplied the necessary administrative materials, such as application forms, register books and birth certificates, to birth registrars. Copies of the new Act and the Universal Birth Registration Strategy have also been provided.

### Task Forces

National and sub-national task forces, at all administrative levels, were formed to coordinate and increase birth registration rates. Initially they carried out advocacy, social mobilisation and awareness raising activities, and provided administrative support to registrars. They now mainly track the birth registration process and progress in their area, so that the target of universal birth registration is achieved.



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### Electronic birth registration system

Establishing a national electronic birth registration system is the major ongoing challenge of the Government. UNICEF has supported the Government to develop a Birth Registration Information System (BRIS), through a software programme that computerises birth registration data. The BRIS was launched in two areas (Cox's Bazar and Jessore) in December 2009 on a pilot basis. Upon successful completion of the pilot, the system will be introduced nationwide.

Under the BRIS, birth information is securely stored on the centralized database server as soon as a birth is registered anywhere in the country. The framework has been designed so that it is inter-operable with other databases and information systems of the country. The

BRIS periodically produces automated statistics and identifies any duplicated data. The system will increase transparency and reduce possible adulteration of data at various reporting stages. It will increase the reliability of birth registration as the instrument of protection and identity.

UNICEF has provided computers which cover one-fifth of the locations nationwide, as well as an international expert to develop the software. Collaboration with other development partners such as UNDP, Plan International and the Bangladeshi Election Commission is underway, but support from other development partners remains crucial.

### Special initiatives for vulnerable groups

Children who are not at school or who do not have access to health programmes such as immunization are more likely to miss out on birth registration. Special initiatives have been instigated to register vulnerable and hard-to-reach children, such as those living in slums, on the streets, in chars (river islands), brothels, refugee camps or in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. UNICEF has worked with NGO partners in existing projects (such as the Protection of Children at Risk project) to support the registration of vulnerable children. For instance, last year all children living in brothels received their birth certificates.

### Raising awareness

As the low level of awareness among the general public was identified as one of the major obstacles to birth registration, UNICEF supported a mass awareness campaign as well as inter-personal communication activities. Communication and advocacy materials such as newsletters, posters, leaflets, stickers and audiovisual resources for mass media outlets were produced and distributed. Interactive popular theatre was also used to raise awareness of birth registration in village areas.

## IMPACT

The project has had a remarkable impact on birth registration rates. According to the Multiple Indicate Cluster Survey (MICS) conducted by UNICEF in May 2009, 53.6 per cent of children under five years of age have had their births registered, compared with 9.8 per cent in 2006. A separate Government report confirms that 40 million (57 per cent) of children under 18 years of age were registered from 1 July 1991 to 30 June 2009.

Other achievements include:

- The Births and Deaths Registration Act 2004 and its corresponding rules have been adopted and come into force;
- A strategy on Universal Birth Registration by 2010, including provision for a period of free registration, has been adopted by the government;
- Birth registration components have been included in the regular curricula of training institutes for local government officials and health staff;
- A network of government organizations and NGOs has been established to promote birth registration;
- A comprehensive communication and advocacy strategy on birth registration has been adopted and awareness on the importance of birth registration has been raised;
- Task forces on universal birth registration have been formed and activated at all administrative levels.

*Updated April 2010*