Gender Strategy: A road map to drive the gender agenda in Afghanistan

In line with the global architecture for gender- Gender Action plan 2.0, UNICEF Afghanistan Country Office, developed its own first-ever Gender Strategy (2019-2021). The strategy is a roadmap for integrating gender equality within UNICEF programming for improved results for children and women in Afghanistan. Apart from integrating gender in all programming areas, UNICEF Afghanistan identified the following as priority targeted areas of focus:

I. Girls Education
II. Violence against women and girls
III. Adolescent pregnancy
IV. Adolescent nutrition
V. Increasing the female work force in the health care system
VI. Maternal and new born health
Afghan girls kick the ball for a polio-free community

The large football stadium is bursting with excitement; there are loud calls of cheer leading and general screaming and hollering of spectators on the touchlines. This is not just another football game. The players are young polio advocates donning t-shirts branded with polio logos.

To spread awareness on polio, a football match was organized between teams of young girls with the support of UNICEF and the Department of Public Health in Herat province, Afghanistan. More than 100 youth and parents attended the event and watched the match.

The event was launched by a speech about the polio vaccine and its importance by Dr. Ahmadi, UNICEF Polio Communication Officer. “We can’t eradicate polio in Afghanistan without the support of women and mothers. They play a critical role in ending polio since their love for children is unique and they have been evolved to care more than men about the wellbeing of their children,” said Dr. Ahmadi.

Polio workers are making use of football to spread awareness on polio prevention since football is the most popular sporting activity in Afghanistan. Other sports such as cricket is also used.

“I believe that mothers’ awareness about polio is low,” adds Najma. “I recommend that providing detailed information on polio and on the vaccination schedule can contribute to improving immunization and ending polio.”

Polio awareness materials such as brochures and pins with polio messages were distributed among the spectators to supplement the polio messages that were plastered on the walls of the stadium.

At the end of the event, the winning team received a trophy and the rest of the players received sports clothes and supplies.

“This is a good initiative. This event not only increases awareness of the people about the importance of polio vaccines but also empowers women to have an active role in social and sports activities,” says Najma, 17. Najma is one of the spectators who came to the stadium to support her friend who was participating in the match.
UNICEF Afghanistan commemorates 16 days of Activism against Gender Based Violence in Herat

During the 16 Days of Activism, UNICEF Herat office commemorated 16 days activism on elimination of violence against women (GBV) in western region. They engaged with religious leaders as key change agents to prevent child marriage, to advocate for girls’ education, and to put an end to violence against girls and women. Throughout the campaign, religious leaders in 320 mosques were supported to carry out these messages during their Friday sermons. Over 66,800 male and 20,60 female community members were reached around Herat, Farah, Ghor, three areas in western region of Afghanistan. The religious leaders also carried out 17 debates using mass media campaign to increase the awareness on violence against girls and women.

Polio Programme makes inroads to increase gender parity in the Polio team

Up to 290 female vaccinators and social mobilisers have been deployed to different health facilities in southern Afghanistan as part of the polio communication efforts to enhance uptake of vaccine. In addition, 50 females joined the polio social mobilization efforts in December 2019, including at leadership positions of the community outreach teams deployed in polio infected areas.
Afghanistan commemorates Menstrual Hygiene Management Day (MHM)

The Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) Day was celebrated on 26 October 2019 as part of the advocacy work in raising national awareness on the importance of girls’ hygiene and the urgency of this public health issue in Kabul.

The dedication and commitment to advancing menstrual hygiene among adolescent girls was witnessed by the First Lady of Afghanistan who was the guest of honour. Her Excellency was accompanied by the Minister of Education, Minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD), Deputy Minister of Women Affairs and a representative from Ministry of Public Health.

In 2019, a total of 21,130 girl students and 510 female teachers accessed to MHM facilities in 43 schools. UNICEF also supported the training of 92 teachers on MHM and construction of toilets with disposal bins and hand washing facilities in the 92 Accelerated Learning Centres (ALCs).

A total of 110,000 copies of MHM material were printed and distributed in Dari and Pashto.

Thirty male and female staff of MRRD who are involved in construction of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities were trained on gender and WASH equalities.

For 2020, UNICEF is scaling-up its MHM programming for out of school girls and their key influencers.
Launch of National Capacity Building Manuals for strengthening Child Protection System

On 14 October 2019, Afghanistan’s Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) launched the national capacity building manuals on Child Protection, Community Social Work and Case Management. More than 60 representatives from the national and sub-national government, NGOs and UN agencies attended the launch.

The manuals are the first-ever standard training manuals in Afghanistan for Child Protection practitioners, para social workers and case workers. The manuals were developed with the support of UNICEF in joint partnership with World Vision International and financial support of IKEA foundation. A 15-day training of trainers training was conducted by the international trainer from World Vision for 30 master trainers of Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) drawn from selected areas in all the five regions. The cascade training has been completed in five out of 34 provinces in 2019 and the remaining provinces are planned for 2020.

The trainings will be followed with six-month coaching scheme that will be implemented in line with the standard coaching guidelines. This will ensure that trainees are engaged in ongoing action learning for professional growth and development, apply the conceptual and theoretical framework they learnt from the three training manuals, and be fully conversant in the execution of their terms of reference with increased self-reflection and critical thinking for problem solving.

The overall goal of the capacity building initiative is to strengthen the CP system approach for better prevention and response to child protection cases including Gender Based Violence.
ADDRESSING ADOLESCENT ANAEMIA IN AFGHANISTAN THROUGH A SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMME

Since 2015 the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) and Ministry of Education (MoE) have jointly started providing weekly iron folic acid supplementation (WIFS) programme to school-going adolescent girls aged between 10 to 19 years to improve their school performance and boost pre-pregnancy stores of iron for a healthy reproductive life. The programme also has a deworming component for all school-going adolescent girls in order to increase iron absorption and general health. The life-cycle approach supported by UNICEF calls for addressing anaemia in children and adolescents. By December 2018 the programme had reached 1.16 million school-going adolescent girls (10-19) with iron and folic acid (IFA) supplementation in all 34 provinces.

In Afghanistan, there are 7.7 million adolescents aged 10-19 years, half of whom are girls. Adolescence provides a second window of opportunity for growth after the first 1,000 days. Yet, child marriage and pregnancy in this age group, which occurs mainly in low- and middle-income countries such as Afghanistan, can lead to malnutrition. Anaemia among adolescent girls stands at 30.9 per cent, while thinness in this age group, based on body mass index (BMI), is 8 per cent1.

In Afghanistan, children attending school has increased nine-folds since 2001 to over 9.2 million children in 2015, of whom 39 per cent are girls2. Yet, there are 3.7 million children aged 7–17 out-of-school, of whom 2.2 million are girls. Over 80 per cent of these children are in the seven provinces that are the most conflict-prone and insecure namely Uruzgan, Zabul, Helmand, Kandahar, Paktika, Logan and Wardak. Uruzgan has the highest percentage of girls who are out-of-school, standing at 97.9 per cent.
Training of teachers

Training for focal point teachers and academic supervisors was required as this was a new nutrition programme in Afghanistan to be delivered through schools. Some schools in the country operate in two or three shifts per day to accommodate all students in its catchment area. Each shift has its own management team; where two focal point teachers from each shift were trained on weekly iron folic acid supplementation (WIFS).

The WIFS programme delivery involves a ‘fixed day’, once-a-week approach for teacher-supervised IFA administration and a counselling and communication component. The distribution of supplements is accompanied by messages on the benefits of adequate iron intake, including increased mental and physical productivity and the long-term risks of anaemia in adolescents, including maternal mortality and morbidity.

Focal point teachers are trained to deliver relevant dietary advice, such as iron-rich food sources and iron-absorption inhibitors, including avoiding taking tea with a meal. The programme also provides an opportunity for counselling on reproductive health and the risks of teenage pregnancy.

Moreover, WIFS of adolescent girls has been integrated with the National School Health Policy, along with other initiatives such as Menstrual Hygiene Management, which aims to improve school retention and quality of learning for adolescent girls and to provide the continuum of care between adolescent and maternal nutrition.

Both government ministries have been supported in developing annual monitoring plans, including setting up a national WIFS database.

A study in 2018 measured programme performance from interviews with 1,600 students from 40 schools in four provinces to identify lessons learned for WIFS. The study found increased awareness of anaemia and its definition of low levels of haemoglobin (Hb) in the blood among school-going adolescent girls, which are 92 per cent of students. A knowledge of symptoms associated with anaemia, such as low energy and shortness of breath, was demonstrated by 69 percent of girls, but knowledge of how to prevent anaemia was not widely noted. The presence of a statistically significant and higher mean Hb level among respondents who had been exposed to the WIFS programme longer than respondents with recent exposure suggests WIFS may have contributed to improved health outcomes for adolescent female students.
The programme was first rolled out in 10 provinces and focused on the use of interpersonal communication (IPC) for community mobilisation. One of the main challenges is adherence to IFA supplementation, with problems of negative social media that had associated the supplements with female infertility (the IFA tablets were thought to be contraceptive pills).

In response, a national media campaign was conducted to support community acceptance at the second stage of the programme, when WIFS was scaled up to all provinces. Programme assessment confirmed that messages through TV and other media platforms had contributed to increased knowledge and information of students and teachers on anaemia. Monitoring reports also confirmed that the media campaign had played a critical role in increasing awareness and demystifying the programme. To further address the issue, a set of IPC materials was developed and disseminated targeting different audiences such as parents, teachers, students, religious leaders and other community stakeholders.

Supply-chain management also needs further improvement of data discrepancy between the central education management information system and provincial data. To address this issue, supply levels have been included in the revised WIFS database to capture provincial data, which will help to provide more accurate forecasting and distribution.

IFA supplementation to adolescent girls is also facing sustainability challenges, since all components of the programme (training, monitoring and reporting, supply of IFA and deworming tablets) are currently financed by UNICEF through different funding sources as the government does not have sufficient resources to provide full support, including procurement of IFA tablets. In addition, reaching all adolescent girls, especially those who are out of school, is a significant challenge. Even for those in school, frequent closures due to insecurity, natural disasters and weather conditions cause gaps in supplementation.

Sufficient time is needed to create an enabling environment; a longer period during the start-up phase may have helped to better coordinate organisations involved and provided an opportunity to conduct a baseline assessment to have data for comparison. By the time the assessment began, the programme was already underway in some provinces, so the study compares students in provinces with long-term implementation against provinces that had started the programme less than a month previously.

Experiences of the WIFS programme from the initial roll-out in Afghanistan highlights the need for awareness-raising and increasing knowledge among all stakeholders, such as parents, teachers and community members (including religious leaders and other decision-makers), prior to the actual supplementation. Programme adherence significantly improved after the media campaign. However, implementing such national campaigns are expensive and resource-intensive.

There are plans to expand WIFS to out-of-school adolescent girls, beginning with the Accelerated Learning Centers in 2020. These centres are attended by girls who have missed school for different reasons and are therefore older than their classmates. To increase WIFS awareness at community level, a perception study is planned to find creative ways for increased adherence.
For further information, please contact:

**Alison Parker**
Chief of Communication
UNICEF Afghanistan
aparker@unicef.org

**Veronica Kamanga-Njikho (Ms)**
Gender Specialist
UNICEF Afghanistan
vnjikho@unicef.org

United Nations Children's Fund
www.unicef.org/afghanistan

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
UNOCA Compound, Jalalabad Road,
Kabul, Afghanistan

/unicef.org/afghanistan
/afghanistanunicef
@UNICEFAfg
/unicefafghanistan
/UNICEFAfghanistanKBL