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Understanding the Opportunities and Challenges of a Pilot Digital Intervention to Address Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Needs in Bangladesh: *A Qualitative Study*

Kamrul Hasan[1], Md Refat Uz Zaman Sajib[2], Tanvir Hayder[1], Soaiba Zannat[3], Hassan Rushekh Mahmood[1], Anisuddin Ahmed[1]

1. Maternal and Child Health Division, icddr,b; 2. Department of Health and Kinesiology, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign;
3. Department of Health Systems and Populations, Faculty of Medicine, Health and Human Sciences, Macquarie University

Introduction

- In Bangladesh, adolescents constitute nearly **one-fifth of the population**, accounting for approximately **36 million individuals**.
- Adolescents face barriers to **Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) information and services**.
- While the 2011 GoB adolescent health programme aimed to address these issues, offline methods fell short, where **digital interventions, like app-based solutions, offer promising alternatives**.

Aim

The study examined opportunities and challenges in implementing digital SRHR interventions to foster positive outcomes and engagement.
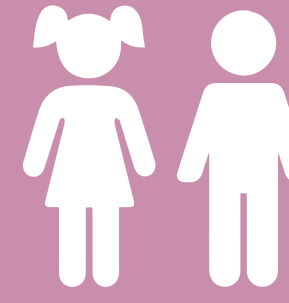
Methods

This qualitative study was conducted in three secondary schools, considering the ongoing government SRHR interventions, including students, peer leaders, and teachers. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed thematically.

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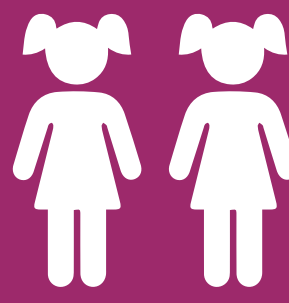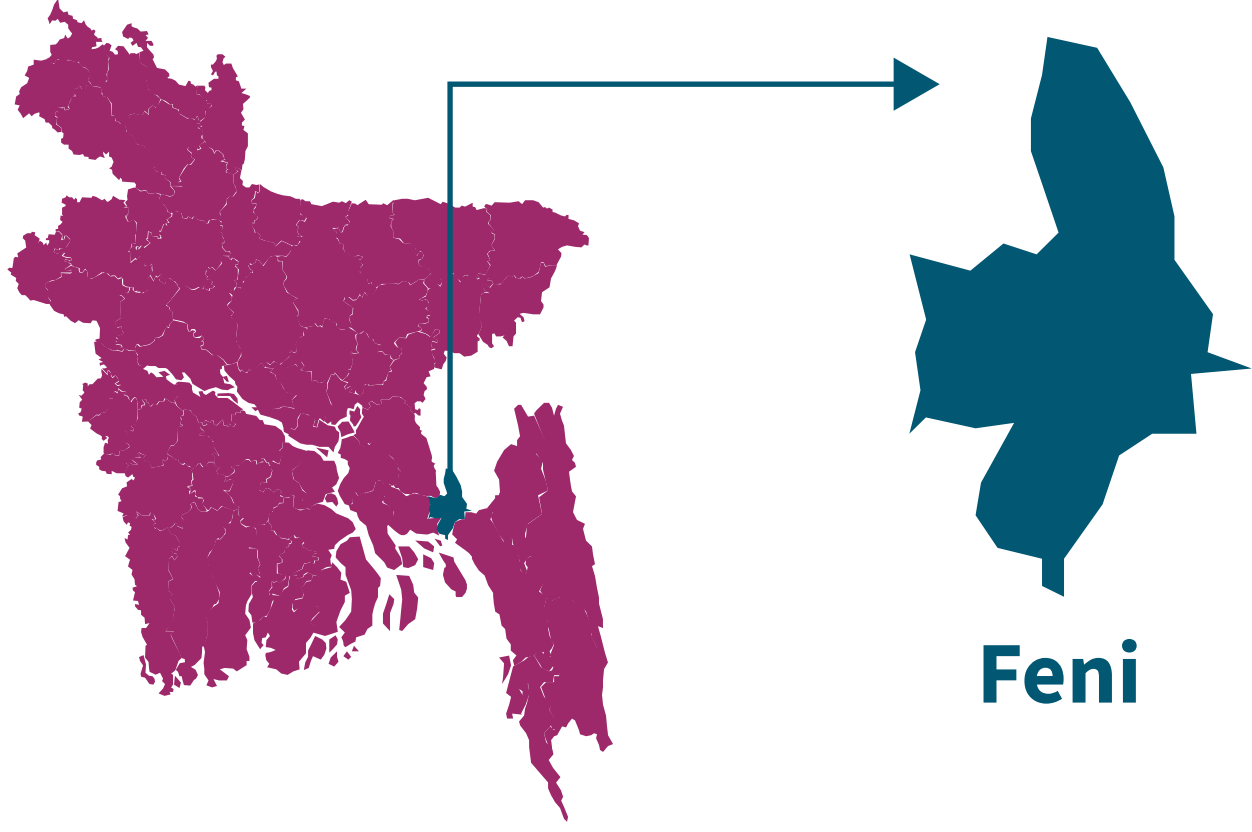
1 Girls' Secondary School: Grade 9
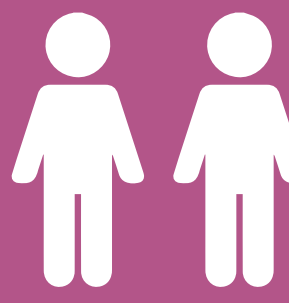
1 Boys' Secondary School: Grade 9

1 Co-education Secondary School: Grade 9

6 In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) with the students and teachers

1 Focused Group Discussion (FGD) with peer leaders

3 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with stakeholders

From March to June 2024

Thematic Findings

OPPORTUNITIES OF THE APP

"Mukhorito" fostered a more informed and health-conscious generation by providing essential knowledge on SRH issues.

> *By using the Mukhorito App , now we can access various types of information that we didn't know before, such as reproductive health and drug addiction. I am satisfied with the Mukhorito"*
> **- Student, Female, 15y**

The study findings highlighted a perceived gradual decrease in the hesitation among adolescents to engage in discussions related to SRH.

> *Before, they kept many things hidden, unable to share them with guardians, teachers, or older siblings. Now, through this app, they are opening up about issues they once kept to themselves. They are learning more, gaining awareness, and actively solving problems together."*
> **- Teacher, Male, 37y**

KEY CHALLENGES OF THE APP

The interconnected barriers—lack of personal smartphones, poor network connectivity, and restricted access to shared devices—underscored the complexities.

> *A major challenge is that most adolescents don't have personal mobile phones. They often rely on someone's device and can only use if guardian permits. Since they spend most of their time at school with us, they stay home less. This lack of personal use puts them at a disadvantage."*
> **- Teacher, Female, 35y**

Another barrier identified was the financial burden associated with accessing the internet for app usage.

> *Many of them (app users) raised issues about not attending sessions, such as lack of mobile data, a dysfunctional phone, time constraints, internet problems, power outages, or no Wi-Fi."*
> **- Peer leader, Female, 16y**

ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS

Integrating the app with the government adolescent health programme, which shares a similar vision, could ensure a more coordinated and comprehensive approach to adolescent health education, maximising its reach and effectiveness.

> *If the Mukhorito app is integrated with the government's adolescent health programme, adolescents will gain greater benefits and deeper knowledge about their health. Providing them with proper health education at this stage will empower them to lead the country and nation in the future."*
> **- Stakeholder, Male, 53y**

Photo: *Sensitisation workshops on orientation of the app at schools*

Key Takeaways

- 'Mukhorito app's well-structured content and engaging stories **enhanced navigability, user interest, and ease of access to SRHR information**.
- It **reduced the stigma surrounding SRHR discussions through peer communication**, creating a more open environment to engage in conversations with peers, teachers, and even parents.
- Both students and teachers acknowledged the app as a **valuable tool for addressing SRHR needs that were previously considered taboo**.
- However, challenges are there including, **limitations in smartphone access, poor internet connectivity, and the high cost of mobile data** to participate in online sessions.
- Introducing the app to younger students, enhancing the educational content with short drama and animations, strengthening institutional support, and integrating the app into existing government programmes could enhance its effectiveness and

Conclusion

- The Mukhorito app shows promise in improving adolescent SRH awareness in Bangladesh by enhancing knowledge, leadership, and service use.
- Collaboration with government programmes is essential for scalability, sustainability, and fostering healthier adolescent outcomes.
- Addressing challenges, integrating them into the curriculum, and ensuring cyber security for data protection can increase acceptance.

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