Pathways

Spring 2020

Young people leading the way to a brighter future
Dear Pathfinders,

I am a woman’s rights activist at heart. I see sexual and reproductive health and rights as the primary way to give women a choice and a chance to make their own decisions in life. I am proud to lead Pathfinder’s programs in Pakistan. Every day, I see how Pathfinder offers women and girls more choices and chances to succeed.

Naya Qadam, Pathfinder’s largest program in Pakistan, seeks to give women and girls power over their reproduction by enabling them to access high-quality family planning services, especially after they have given birth. Post-pregnancy family planning allows women and girls to space or delay their next pregnancy as they wish.

Naya Qadam has a specific focus on reaching young women. Studies show that young women in Pakistan have the least power and least authority to make decisions about their own lives. Naya Qadam offers young women sexual and reproductive health information and services—helping them, one by one, to gain autonomy and a voice.

We desperately need your support right now to help slow the spread of COVID-19 and sustain access to essential reproductive health care throughout the pandemic. Please, make your emergency gift: www.pathfinder.org/covidrelief

Over the past two years, Naya Qadam has made considerable progress in preparing the health system to offer gender-sensitive family planning services, especially during the postpartum period. To achieve long-term sustainability of these services at scale, we remain responsive to the changing needs of the health system and communities we serve.

Today, this means continuing to provide women and girls with sexual and reproductive health care amid the global COVID-19 pandemic. Pakistan’s health system has been inundated with an increasing number of COVID-19 cases. The Naya Qadam team is working day and night on solutions that will help to support continued sexual and reproductive health care during this emergency. This includes working toward the availability of essential commodities, communications campaigns that inform on both COVID-19 and post-pregnancy family planning simultaneously, and a policy framework for post-pregnancy family planning during public health emergencies.

I am moved every day by Naya Qadam’s work, particularly our partnership with Pakistan’s Lady Health Workers. During this difficult moment in time, I recall a fond memory—when we brought together 300 Lady Health Workers for a convention in November 2019. We joined the Lady Health Workers to recognize and celebrate them and to provide a safe space for them to share their stories.

Lady Health Workers are one of the most under-appreciated health cadres in our society. They struggle to make a living; travel long distances to reach remote households; and, often face salary delays, sexual harassment, and community backlash while doing their work. Yet these women are bringing about the social change to which our program aspires.

I was honored to shake hands with the 300 Lady Health Workers. One of the oldest Lady Health Workers at the convention, very frail—she held my hand and started crying. “This is the first time in a long period that someone has recognized me. I want to thank Pathfinder for bringing me here and honoring me.”

We continue to work with the brave Lady Health Workers and midwives, ensuring their protection, and helping them to reach pregnant women in need of care. Today, humanity needs to respond in solidarity to this global pandemic and ensure that no one’s needs are left behind.

As a physician, as an activist, as a Pathfinder—I am here to invest myself in that effort.

Tabinda Sarosh  
Country Director, Pakistan
Pathfinder in Ethiopia

Act With Her: When Girls Say No to Early Marriage

Yeshimebet was just 12 years old when she heard rumors from the neighbors that she would soon be married. For many young girls in her Ethiopian village, this would be a natural evolution—but Yeshimebet wanted something different.

A participant in Pathfinder’s Act With Her program, Yeshimebet had been attending weekly meetings with a mentor—a young woman who was teaching Yeshimebet and other local girls about issues of health, nutrition, education, gender, and economic empowerment.

Using the negotiation skills she learned in her weekly meetings, Yeshimebet discussed her concerns first with her mentor and then her parents, citing specific challenges she would face as a result of the marriage, including ending her education and the possible complications of pregnancy at her age.

The Act With Her program aims to improve gender equality in Ethiopia’s Amhara, Oromia, and Afar regions, empowering adolescent girls and boys with a wide range of knowledge and skills that will help them thrive later in life.

In 2019, more than 500 mentors worked with more than 13,000 adolescent girls and boys ages 10–13. Mentors range in age from 18 to 24 and hold curriculum-based group sessions every week for nearly a year. They also host a series of group discussions with the participants’ parents. Unlike a typical family planning or health project which may deliver services to young people, Act With Her takes an upstream approach by shifting social norms and including not just girls—but also young boys, parents, and families—in ongoing conversations that encourage gender equality and empowerment of adolescent girls.

Boys who support girls

Including boys has already paid dividends. In one community, 13-year old Bishaw, a member of an adolescent boys’ group, learned about early marriage and how it would likely impact his sister’s education and future. Advocating to his parents on her behalf, he was able to prevent her wedding at age 15, while also learning how to bolster his own independence through a financial savings program.

By 2022, the Act With Her program seeks to reach 50,000 adolescent Ethiopian girls and boys with its powerful end goal: to transform the lives of adolescents by advancing gender equality, empowering girls, and ensuring they can make healthy and happy transitions to adulthood. With help from young women like Yeshimebet, Pathfinder and its partners are well on our way to reaching that goal.

Pathfinder implements Act With Her in collaboration with the Government of Ethiopia, in partnership with CARE International, and with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. A randomized impact evaluation of the program is being conducted by the UK Department of International Development-funded Gender & Adolescence: Global Evidence research consortium.

"The negotiation skills that I acquired from Act With Her sessions helped me convince my parents and cancel my proposed marriage.”

—YESHIMEBET, GRADE 8, AGE 12

Yeshimebet also explained to her family her aspirations to become a teacher and the actions that she was taking to attain her goal. After a series of discussions and negotiations, her parents were convinced and agreed to cancel the marriage.

Empowering young Ethiopians

While child marriage is on the decline in Ethiopia and the government is solidly committed to ending it, the country is still home to 15 million child brides, 6 million of whom were married before age 18. In addition, young girls are vulnerable to female genital mutilation and sexual- and gender-based violence. And often, their voices are more limited than boys, due to social norms that put value on being a wife and mother first.

Each year in Ethiopia, 11,000 women die from complications of childbirth...

For a 12-year-old girl like Yeshimebet, the likelihood of complications is far more severe.

Pathfinder in Ethiopia
Naya Qadam, our largest program in Pakistan, seeks to increase access to family planning, particularly post-pregnancy family planning, among young women ages 15–24 in six districts of Pakistan’s Sindh and Punjab provinces. The program has trained more than 7,000 Lady Health Workers to provide post-pregnancy counseling and more than 1,200 public and private providers to offer postpartum and post-abortion family planning services.

Zubaria was 17 years old when she left her home to be a child bride. She had been functionally paralyzed by her previous marriage and had no interest in being a youth champion or mobilizing her community. Through engagement and training with Naya Qadam, Zubaria approached Zubaria with her family’s concerns about young women; they are not aware of any family planning methods carried out at home which are harmful. 

Zubaria started the process of initiating a youth champion began. Naya Qadam has trained 50 youth champions like Zubaria the skills to be effective reproductive health, and postpartum family planning, and giving them theater training so that they can lead interactive social events and go completely quiet. I had no purpose in life,” said Zubaria. The depression began to lift when staff of youth champions like Zubaria, Pathfinder sponsored Zubaria’s training to become an effective reproductive health and rights advocate in her community. “Not only has it increased my self-confidence but also provided me with the outside world,” she now considers herself a “woman’s rights advocate” in her community.

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“Slowly and gradually my brother and parents began to understand that I want to use the postpartum IUD to space or prevent another pregnancy. It took me a while to convince them, but I think my Naya Qadam training and the support I received from them encouraged them to support the decision I made.”

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Dear Pathfinders,

We are living through an unprecedented moment in history.

As I write this, Pathfinders around the world are responding to COVID-19, and I assure you that as this crisis unfolds, the safety and well-being of the entire Pathfinder community is our priority. This includes the individuals and families we serve, our dedicated staff, and you—our supporters who continue to stand by us in moments of great uncertainty.

Much remains unknown about COVID-19, commonly known as the coronavirus. However, I can assure you that Pathfinder is closely monitoring this pandemic and remains relentlessly committed to those we serve.

We have implemented safety measures for our entire team around the globe—ensuring that our work bringing sexual and reproductive health care to vulnerable women continues unabated. For the women, men, and children we serve across 17 nations, the continuity of services is a matter of life and death.

A dedicated, global team of Pathfinders is charged with monitoring the spread and trajectory of COVID-19 and implementing rapid response plans to keep our staff and the individuals we serve safe. The virus is present in all of the nations where we work. Vulnerable populations are ultimately the ones who are most at risk in any outbreak, and we must be prepared to take measures that increase their resilience.

We don’t yet know all potential transmission routes for COVID-19, and the specific risks to pregnant women also remain unclear.

Here’s what we do know: Those we serve could potentially face shortages of HIV medication, complications during pregnancy, and other supply shortfalls. Health care in many places where Pathfinder works could face significant interruptions with dire impacts, especially for people who live in remote, impoverished communities.

Please know we are planning for all contingencies and remain steadfast in our commitment to new mothers in Mozambique, to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, to young women in Burundi…and to every person who relies on our work.

It is of utmost importance to us that we protect not only the people we serve around the world, but that we uphold our values internally and prioritize the health of our staff and partners.

I’ll be thinking of you and your families and hope you each remain healthy and safe. It means everything to know you’re with us.

Thank you for standing at our side.

With gratitude,

Lois Quam, Chief Executive Officer
Pathfinder International