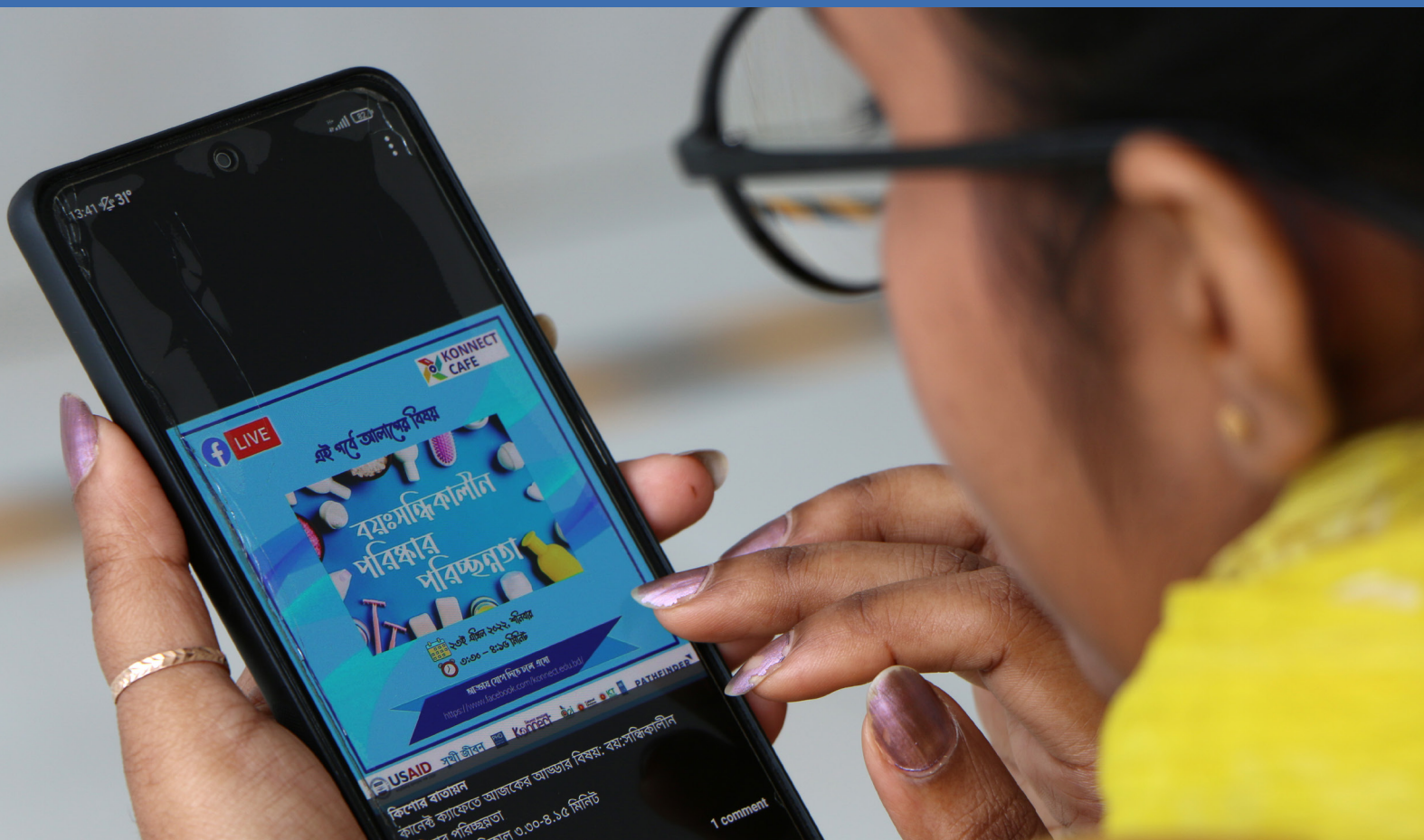


TECHNICAL BRIEF | MAY 2022

Advancing Digital Health to Improve the Sexual and Reproductive Health of Adolescents and Youth



Responding to an Urgent Need and Opportunity

35 million adolescents (ages 10–19) are expected to live in Bangladesh by 2030.¹

86.2% of young people surveyed reported having access to digital devices within their household.²

Nearly 60% of young people surveyed have an internet connection at home.³

More than 50% of young female respondents lacked access to the internet at home, compared to **25%** of young male respondents.⁴

More than 50% of all respondents who use internet said they operate internet via their smartphone.⁵

61% young people surveyed used mobile internet almost every day.⁶

1 in 3 young people surveyed use social media.⁷



Bangladesh has made remarkable progress introducing digital solutions to tackle urgent public health challenges. Strong commitments from the government of Bangladesh (GOB) have driven a rapid expansion in the use of mobile and electronic technology to reach more people with vital health information and services. Despite this progress, few digital health initiatives have focused on meeting the family planning and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) needs of a dynamic and growing population—Bangladesh’s young people.

Adolescents make up more than one-fifth of Bangladesh's total population.⁸ Meeting their unique and varied SRHR needs is essential for achieving Universal Health Coverage and Bangladesh’s Sustainable Development Goal targets by 2030, as well as harnessing the power of a demographic dividend.⁹ Yet young people continue to face extreme barriers that often limit their contact with the formal health system. Conservative social norms; young people’s low level of SRHR knowledge; their perceived lack of respect, privacy, and confidentiality; and their fear of stigma, discrimination, and imposition of moral values by health care providers frequently impede young people’s access to critical family planning and SRHR information and services.

Shukhi Jibon’s digital health approaches offer solutions.

In close collaboration with various government and nongovernmental partners, Shukhi Jibon is bridging physical distances and connecting young people—who are frequent users and early adopters of technology—to trusted information and health providers that offer vetted, non-judgmental family planning and SRHR services tailored to young people’s needs.

Shukhi Jibon advances numerous cohesive, scalable, and sustainable digital health solutions to strengthen adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health and rights (AYSRHR) across Bangladesh.

“We live in a village, and as a village girl I feel shy and uncomfortable to discuss such topics with anyone. So, it would be great if I can text with someone using my mobile phone. Also, I can use my phone to watch videos on YouTube and learn about different issues.”

—17-year-old female respondent, surveyed by Shukhi Jibon

1, 8 Bangladesh Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, MCH Services Unit, Directorate General of Family Planning, Bangladesh National Adolescent Strategy, 2020.
2–7 Pathfinder International, “Exploring the Need for Digital Communication Tools to Deliver Family Planning and Sexual and Reproductive Health Information and Services to Adolescents and Youth in Bangladesh: Findings from Primary Research by the Shukhi Jibon Project,” 2020.
9 Demographic dividend is the potential for economic growth that results when a population’s age structure shifts and the share of people working in the labor force is greater than those who are not.

Generating Evidence to Shape the Future of Digital Health for Adolescents and Youth

Reaching Bangladesh’s adolescents and youth requires innovative approaches and a deep understanding of young people’s needs. From 2019 to 2021, Shukhi Jibon undertook research to gain valuable contextual information to inform the design of the project’s future digital health initiatives.

RESEARCH

Conducting a Landscape Analysis

Assessing Bangladesh’s overall digital readiness and 28 past experiences with digital health solutions to advance SRHR and family planning, Shukhi Jibon conducted research to identify several approaches that can be adapted and promoted to reach young people with family planning and AYSRHR information and services. Findings generated a range of recommendations, including these highlights:

- Ensure content and methods for dissemination are contextually relevant as well as gender- and age-appropriate.
- Leverage existing public access points that are equipped with smart devices and internet—such as health providers, digital centers, and educational institutes—to deliver family planning and AYSRHR information and services.
- Address literacy barriers and develop digital solutions that are easy to access and operate.
- Involve parents and gatekeepers, particularly to secure their buy-in and create a facilitating environment for the young users.
- Promote digital solutions through diversified channels.
- Consider the goals of public- and private-sector partners; advancing stakeholders’ interests is key to ensuring operational success and sustainability of a digital health program.

RESEARCH

Exploring Young Users’ Needs

Shukhi Jibon identified the preferences, behaviors, and needs of adolescents and youth (“users”) when it comes to digital communication technologies and access to comprehensive family planning and AYSRHR information and linkages to services. Findings from the project’s “user” research generated a range of recommendations, including these highlights:

- Consider solutions that use smartphones and feature phones to maximize service outreach.¹⁰
- Create or facilitate an environment where users can access digital family planning and AYSRHR services comfortably, privately, and safely.
- Consider web services (IMO, YouTube, Facebook, and Messenger) popular among adolescents and youth as digital communication tools to promote family planning and AYSRHR information and services.
- Prioritize videos, use text sparingly, and conduct formative research when developing content.
- Expand access to family planning and AYSRHR services at young people’s homes as well as government health facilities and nearby pharmacies.
- Equip family members, especially mothers, with family planning and SRHR knowledge to assist and guide their children in comfortable discussions.
- Actively engage adolescents and youth who have been excluded from discussions about family planning and AYSRHR.

¹⁰ A smartphone performs many of the functions of a computer, including an operating system capable of running downloaded applications. A feature phone, which is more moderately priced and offers fewer features than a smartphone, provides a user with basic internet access and a camera, large phone book, and SMS/MMS storage.



Building on the project's research findings, and in close collaboration with various government and nongovernmental partners, Shukhi Jibon implements multiple innovative digital health initiatives targeting adolescents and youth.

Shukhi Jibon is committed to increasing voluntary family planning uptake among married adolescents and youth and expanding access to AYSRHR services among unmarried adolescents and youth within public-sector health facilities. The project's digital health initiatives accelerate progress toward achieving these goals by (a) increasing public-sector family planning outreach, (2) expanding health workers' use of age-appropriate communication technology, (3) enhancing the knowledge and skills of health providers to support digital AYSRHR services, and (4) increasing community mobilization and support for adolescent- and youth-friendly family planning services.

Reaching More Young People with the Knowledge They Need to Make Informed Choices about Their Health and Futures

Bangladesh's public sector has the power to reach more young people more effectively. Shukhi Jibon supports the GOB's digital initiatives—to make them more useful, engaging, and accessible to young people and others who influence their health decisions. To successfully deliver critical health information to adolescents and youth, family planning and AYSRHR programs need to get creative and move beyond traditional settings. Shukhi Jibon is supporting the GOB to reach young people where they are—on trusted websites and their favorite social media platforms.

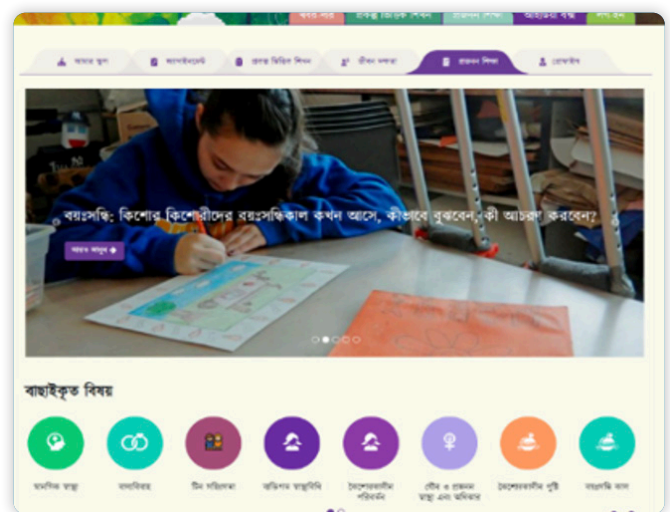
PUBLIC SECTOR PLATFORMS

Bolstering Public Sector Platforms for Young People

Shukhi Jibon supports the Aspire to Innovation (azi) program and the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) to enhance its Kishore Batayan - Konnect platform¹¹ by incorporating a special focus on SRHR and family planning for adolescents. The site's new Virtual Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Corner, launched in April 2022, promotes two featured resources: (1) a blog with content generated from AYSRHR materials, developed with the DGFP, and (2) a moderated Q&A.¹² Both features aim to engage and inspire discussion about AYSRHR among young visitors to the site, as well as the people who influence their decisions and access to services.

On Konnect's Facebook platform, Shukhi Jibon and azi teamed up again to organize “Konnect Café”—a Facebook Live show that brings together young people, experts, gatekeepers, and social influencers to discuss issues, gain a better understanding of each other's perspectives, and foster a supportive environment for AYSRHR. Streamed twice a month, “Konnect Café” stimulates further discussion of AYSRHR issues, such as “Social Media for Wellbeing” and “Dreams, Future, and Planning for Life.”

Partners: azi and DSHE



Shukhi Jibon is supporting Kishore Batayan - Konnect, a government-run online learning platform for adolescents, to introduce a new dimension of learning and empowerment—AYSRHR—to over 300,000 students.

11 The Konnect platform is managed by azi—the flagship program of the Digital Bangladesh agenda.
 12 Users can post questions, anonymously if they wish, which are answered by trained counselors. Peers can also respond to share their experiences.

DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

Leveraging Social Media for Social and Behavior Change Communication

Shukhi Jibon provided technical assistance to the Information, Education, and Motivation (IEM) Unit of the Directorate General of Family Planning (DGFP) to advance its social and behavior change communications by launching a new social media plan for IEM that features live discussions, in-app ad placement, animation, character-based videos, comic strips, quiz competitions, experience sharing, and more.

Shukhi Jibon collaborated with the IEM Unit to maximize the reach of the IEM Facebook page by improving engagement and increasing adolescent and youth traffic. Today, through this page, young people can directly engage with call center agents, who are trained to deliver adolescent- and youth-friendly information, and service providers, who are ready to answer AYSRHR-related queries and provide referrals for services.

Partner: IEM Unit, DGFP

OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

Increasing Real-Time Interaction

Shukhi Jibon harnesses the power of popular tools that many Bangladeshis—especially adolescents and youth—already use to link young people to skilled providers, accurate information, and supportive groups of their peers. The project supports key stakeholders, including family planning district managers, to organize virtual seminars with young people and their influencers to discuss a range of AYSRHR topics, including family planning to child marriage. These sessions are ultimately recorded and disseminated on YouTube to expand their reach.

In addition, through Shukhi Jibon's subgrantee support, young people and their parents receive critical information on their mobile devices. Since 2021, voluntarily enrolled adolescent married couples in the project area received more than 36,000 voice messages and 216,000 SMS. These messages, which focus on AYSRHR and family planning needs, were designed in line with Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW) guidelines and displayed in Bengali. Parents of adolescents also received 200,000 SMS messages as part of an effort to raise awareness on the physical and mental health issues commonly faced by young people.

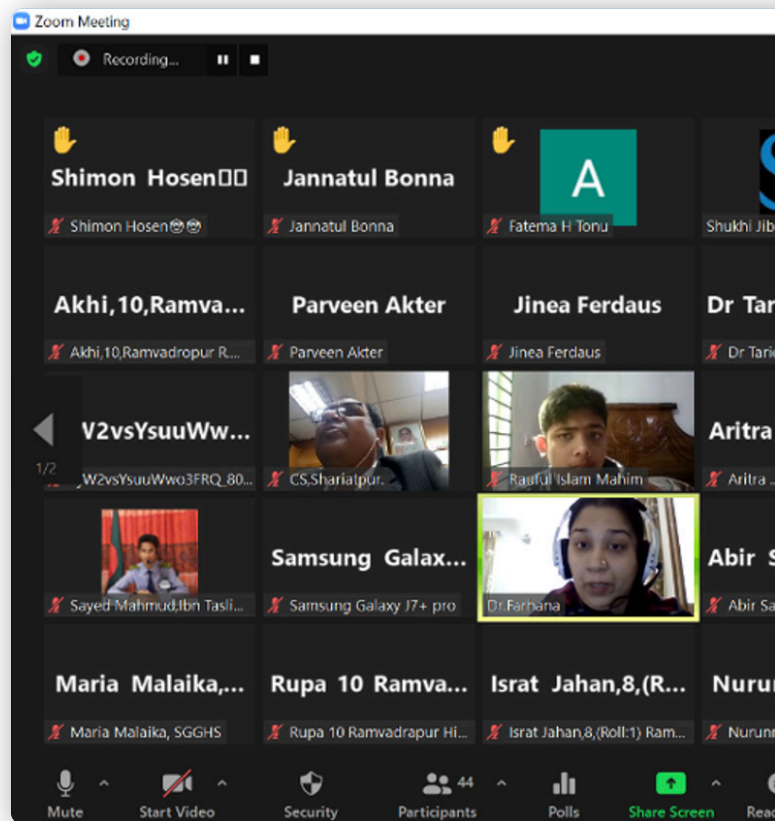
Partners: MOHFW, Ministry of Education (MOE), and Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWCA); Partners in Health and Development; Light House; and other local development partners

ONLINE LEARNING

Digitizing AYSRHR Information

In a traditional classroom setting, many young people do not acquire the AYSRHR knowledge they need. While detailed AYSRHR information is included in the government's approved curriculum for classes 9–10, school health programs often overlook AYSRHR. Many teachers choose to limit their instruction on AYSRHR and focus, instead, on nutrition and general hygiene. To close this gap, Shukhi Jibon is enhancing and expanding digital learning. The project identified AYSRHR information—from within the government's approved textbook—and is in the process of producing interactive, engaging online content. Disseminating pre-approved AYSRHR materials—built upon a government-certified course curriculum—provides several benefits, including minimizing issues related to sociocultural sensitivities and equipping public sector outreach agents, such as teachers, peer educators, and Sub Assistant Community Medical Officers, with dynamic resources to complement their work.

Partners: The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) and DSHE



Participants of a two-hour virtual event, organized by Shukhi Jibon under the leadership of DDFP Shariatpur, included adolescents and youth of Shariatpur, Civil Surgeon, District Education Officer, and representatives of various development organizations.

Strengthening Public-Sector Systems and Services

Shukhi Jibon works with health providers, facility managers, and government stakeholders across the public sector to ramp up their use of communication technology. The project partners with Bangladesh's DGFP to equip the government's health workforce with knowledge and new digital tools to more track, monitor, and improve their family planning and AYSRHR services more effectively.

CAPACITY BUILDING

Training Health Providers to Use Digital Communication Tools

Shukhi Jibon builds the capacity of health providers and managers to use android smartphones, social media, and video sharing sites to access multimedia resources and up-to-date communication material for counseling and information sharing, particularly for adolescents and youth.

Partner: IEM Unit, DGFP



145 providers across three districts participated in training sessions led by Shukhi Jibon, where they practiced using IEM's social media and video sharing sites to quickly direct adolescents toward authentic sources of information. One of these providers, Pinki Purkayastha, an FWV from Sunamgonj, said, "I did not know the IEM DGFP [Facebook] page existed. Right after the training, I talked to a few adolescents."

PHOTO: BILASHSOWROVE BARUA/PATHFINDER

DATA FOR DECISION MAKING

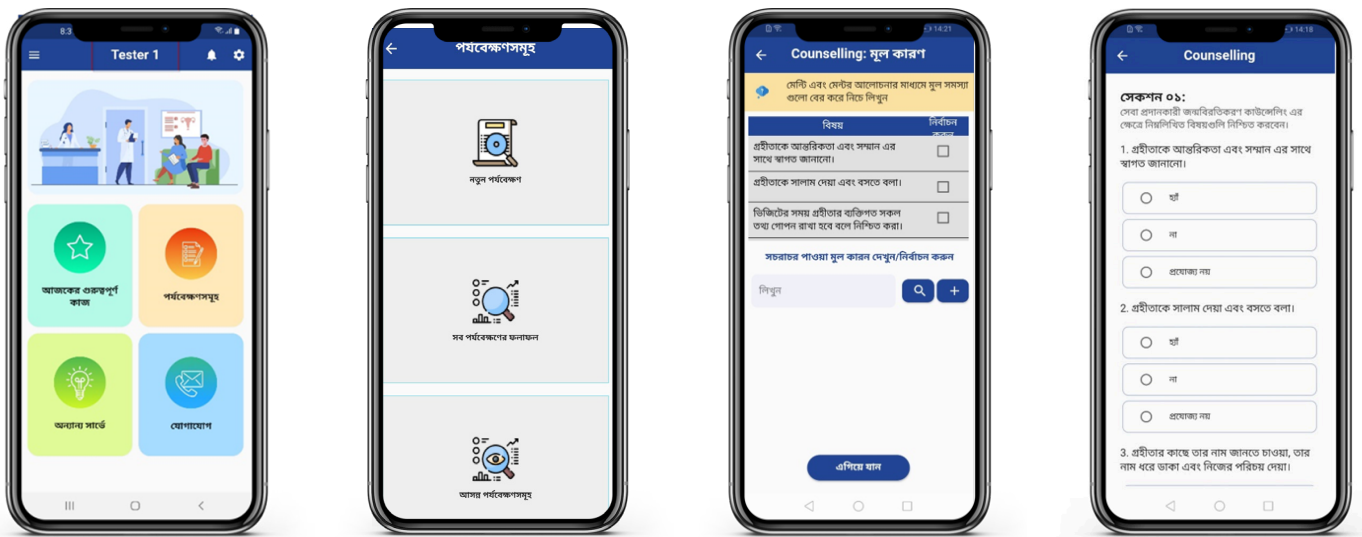
Tracking Volunteer Performance

In response to a request from the DGFP, Shukhi Jibon is assisting in the creation of a web-based platform to monitor the activities of two cadres of the government's field-level volunteers: (1) Family Planning Volunteers, deployed by the Field Service Delivery Programme (FSDP) Unit and (2) Paid Peer Volunteers, deployed by the Clinical Contraception Service Delivery Programme (CCSDP) Unit.

Here is how it works:

An upazila family planning assistant enters data—such as a volunteer's profile and monthly activities—into the tool. This data entry operator and their manager can then review, track, and compare volunteers' performance, by volunteer type and administrative area. Users can refer to a dashboard to see data displayed visually (ex. in graphs, charts, and tables) and download reports for further analysis. The platform, which aims to enhance the use of data for decision making, is currently being pilot tested in five upalizas.

Partner: DGFP



IMPROVING SERVICE QUALITY

Supporting Clinical Mentoring of Service Providers

Training alone is often not enough to ensure family planning service providers and health facility managers become fully competent and comfortable providing client-centered, high-quality care in their service-delivery environments. They need onsite post-training support. In response to this urgent need, Shukhi Jibon became the first project in Bangladesh to support public-sector family planning service providers by integrating mentorship into the government's existing service delivery supervision system. As part of the project's pioneering Mentorship and Supportive Supervision (M&SS) work, Shukhi Jibon developed and began pilot testing a new digital mentorship application in 2021 in Faridpur, Chattogram, Sylhet, Mymensingh, and Rangamati districts.

Partner: CCSDP Unit, DGFP

How the Mentorship App Drives Improvements in the Quality of Care

- Enables users to follow family planning checklists to facilitate clinical mentoring.
- Helps users capture data from their mentorship sessions in a timely manner.
- Promotes data-driven decision making to plan, conduct, and organize M&SS sessions, including the ability for mentors and supervisors to conduct various quizzes and surveys to assess providers' knowledge.
- Makes it easier for parties—mentors, mentees, supervisors, managers, etc.—to organize and communicate data efficiently.
- Aids in action-planning and follow-up.

Historically, despite great enthusiasm, many digital health interventions in Bangladesh have been fractured and often unsustainable. To address these issues, Shukhi Jibon focuses on strengthening public sector platforms, finding digital means to reduce the distance between a provider and client. Backed by the government, these initiatives have the potential to minimize waste and missed opportunities in digital health. Through the continued commitment of our partners, Shukhi Jibon can reach even more young people and propel Bangladesh's eHealth services forward.

COVER PHOTO: KM MUNMUN HAFIZ SHISHIR/PATHFINDER

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