"WE WORK ON ISSUES THAT ARE VERY CRITICAL TO HUMAN LIFE THAT WERE NOT ALWAYS OPENLY DISCUSSED"

UNFPA Mongolia is able to carry out its mandate thanks to the tireless dedication and hard work of its staff. In our newsletter, we feature the wonderful people that make up UNFPA Mongolia, and the vision they bring to the country office.

In this issue, we interviewed B. Oyun, Programme Specialist on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment, to speak about UNFPA and her work.

How would you describe UNFPA Mongolia in three words?

Unique, transformative, and innovative.

In your opinion, why is UNFPA’s existence important?

Let me say it through the three words described. Uniqueness is related to the mandate of UNFPA. We work on issues that are very critical to human life, that have been closed for many years, and not always openly discussed. Examples include sexual and reproductive health issues.

It was not until 1994 that the world officially acknowledged women’s reproductive rights as a human right, and in 1997, our organization began operating in Mongolia. So, until recently, sexual and reproductive issues were a closed and sensitive topic.

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Situation overview: Similar to the Global situation, the COVID-19 infection rate is increasing in Mongolia with an average number of new cases reported each day rising by more than 3,000 over the last week. The fourth wave, driven by the Omicron variant, has started in the country and is expected to peak from 20 January to 10 February.

As of 26 January, 37,811 newly confirmed cases of COVID-19 were reported in Mongolia and 35 new deaths, bringing the total number of reported cases to 433,408, with 2,027 deaths. Since the Ministry of Health reports cases confirmed by PCR tests only, the total cases of COVID-19 are underreported with the exclusion of cases detected by the rapid Ag tests and those self-isolating at home. The number of cases treated at home has doubled from the previous week, reaching 58,165 as of 26 January. Family group practitioners are monitoring these patients and providing COVID-19 treatment packages.

Due to the rapid increase in infections, hospital bed occupancy has increased by 68%. Some 11,200 patients were receiving hospital treatment as of 26 January, of which more than 90 percent had pneumonia caused by COVID-19 infection, and 0.6% of cases were critical.

COVID-19 infection among pregnant women has increased almost 15 times compared to the first week of January, from 96 at the beginning of the year to 1,385 as of 26 January. However, COVID-19 complications are low as a result of improved vaccination coverage among pregnant women.

COVID-19 vaccination coverage: As of 26 January 2022, the coverage of the first dose reached 69.8%, the second dose 66.7%, and third dose or a booster shot of COVID-19 vaccines reached 31% of the total population. The fourth dose of COVID-19 vaccination became available in early January on a voluntary basis, with 73,463 people (2% of the population) having opted for it.

GOVERNMENT READINESS AND RESPONSE ACTIONS:

As a response to the increased number of COVID-19 cases, the Government of Mongolia has made several important decisions to reduce the further spread of highly transmissible Omicron waves. For instance:

1. The Cabinet made a decision on the spending of 5.6 billion MNT for strengthening preventive measures against the Omicron variant.
2. Introduced COVID-19 ambulatory services with X-ray diagnostics to ensure smooth access to COVID-19 clinical pathway;
3. Advised the public to celebrate the Lunar New Year within the household and avoid visiting other households to prevent infection spread.
4. Cancelled the three-day quarantine regimen for travelers arriving from abroad to Mongolia due to community transmission of the Omicron variant
5. Extended the school holiday by a week, and all secondary schools will resume operations on 14 February in hybrid mode.
Ministry of Health: Due to the high spread of infection and expected surge of the Omicron variant in early February, the Ministry of Health issues two policy decrees:

1. Decree on the fourth dose of COVID-19 vaccination. According to the decree, citizens can have the fourth dose voluntarily if three months have passed after the third dose.
2. Interim guideline for COVID-19 surveillance and response was issued. This guideline will serve as a guiding document for the health sector to maintain essential health services with adequate utilization of resources to respond to upcoming surges.

Hospital bed management: In order to reduce hospital burden and pressure on health care, the Ministry of Health introduced new hospitalization criteria. According to this new regulation, priority will be given to people above 60 years of age with underlying medical conditions, pregnant women, patients with diabetes, those with high blood pressure, and children who were not vaccinated.

Quarantine policy: In accordance with the newly updated interim guidance, the recommended duration for isolation and quarantine for positive or suspected cases and primary contact is as below:

For positive cases: If a patient is asymptomatic, they must stay in home isolation for five days. Persons with mild symptoms should stay in home isolation for seven days. Moderate to severe cases should be treated in the hospital for seven and more days. Severe, very severe cases and immune-compromised patients should be treated and monitored in the hospital for 10 and more days. Those who had first-hand contact should stay at home for five days following the day of contact.

UNFPA RESPONSE:

- **Staff safety:** Within the UNFPA response, it was agreed to distribute COVID-19 packages to all staff, including some medical devices such as a digital thermometer, pulse oximeter fingertip, and home-based rapid Ag test as first aid against COVID-19 exposure.

- **Procurement of PCR machines:** Under the “Interim Safeguarding maternal, sexual and reproductive health and rights during the COVID-19 pandemic in Mongolia” project funded by the Government of Luxembourg, the procurement of three sets of PCR laboratories for Ulaanbaatar maternity hospitals has started.

- **Technical support to Ministry of Health vaccination policy:** The revision of existing guidelines on COVID-19 vaccination coverage for pregnant and breastfeeding women with the inclusion of the booster dose is ongoing with technical and financial support from UNFPA.
As we look back on the year 2021, it is a good time to reflect on what has been accomplished over the last year as part of the Combating Gender-Based Violence in Mongolia project (CGBV project), funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

In 2021, progress was made to institutionalize and sustain national response mechanisms on GBV/DV particularly with regard to collecting, analyzing, and disseminating GBV/DV data and institutionalizing these systems.

For example, the secondary analysis of the National GBV Survey was conducted under the project focusing on two thematic key areas:

1) Experience of violence by women with disabilities;
2) Women who experienced psychological violence and women who experienced unhealthy controlling behavior.

Service delivery to GBV survivors also continued, in spite of the challenges posed by COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions. One-Stop Service Centers (OSSCs) and shelters for survivors of violence provided services to 5,964 clients in 2021, of which a majority are women (40%) and children (30% girls and 21% boys). This number is 57% higher than 2020, showing once again that GBV is a shadow pandemic.

A total of 2,002 cases were handled by multidisciplinary teams in 2021. Six project sites were selected to receive technical and financial support to expand and improve their services to address the needs of survivors, including vulnerable groups (people with disability, the elderly, etc.). Progress was also made to engage selected parts of the population, including men and boys, at the community level to be made aware of and behave according to gender-equitable social norms. Two nationwide campaigns were rolled out (International Women’s Day and 16 Days Campaign). These campaigns reached over 20.6 million people/times (views), with over 25 organizations from the government, UN system, local and international civil society, the private sector, and diplomatic corps participating in the campaign, which was spearheaded and coordinated by UNFPA under the CGBV Project co-funded by SDC. The development of the comprehensive community-based Social and Behavior Change Communications Model for GBV prevention has begun with the selection of the implementing organization and will be rolled out in 2022. The Training Manual on Engaging Men and Boys was developed and pilot tested. Finally, the Comprehensive Sexuality Education curricula of the technical and vocational education and training and polytechnic colleges now include a module on GBV issues.
The Steering Committee Meeting of the Combating Gender-Based Violence in Mongolia (CGBV) Project, implemented by the Government of Mongolia and the United Nations Population Fund with the support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, took place on 17 January 2022.

The meeting was chaired by Ms. A. Ariunzaya, Minister for Labour and Social Protection, Chair of the Project’s Steering Committee and co-chaired by Dr. L. Oyunaa, Assistant Representative and Officer-in-Charge (OIC) of UNFPA Mongolia Country Office. The meeting was attended by Steering Committee members; Dr. Stefanie Burri, Head of the Swiss Cooperation in Mongolia, Ms. B.Solongoo, Vice-Minister for Justice and Home Affairs, Mr. B.Ganbayar, Vice-Minister for Education and Science, Mr. Ts.Nyam-Ochir, First Deputy Chief of National Police Agency, Mr. B.Batdavaa, Chairman of National Statistics Office, Ms. L. Nyamgerel, Head of Secretariat of Coordination Council for Crime Prevention and Ms. T.Enkhbayar, Head of Secretariat of National Committee on Gender Equality.

The goals were to present and discuss the achievements, challenges and lessons learned from 2021 project implementation and 2022 work plans, and to identify areas for collaboration and synergy between implementing partners and other projects.

At the end of the meeting, the 2022 work plan was approved, allowing all stakeholders to move forward with the activities. Under the CGBV Project, the priorities for 2022 are built on the achievements of 2021 and include:

- Continue advancing the institutionalization and sustainability of the national response mechanisms on GBV/DV, including data systems such as e-GBV and e-tuslamj. A small-scale survey on OSSC client satisfaction and public awareness-raising activities on gender/GBV will also be conducted.

- Maintain and expand service provision to GBV survivors, including through capacity building of service providers, CSOs and the support of activities promoting survivors’ economic empowerment. Moreover, the Voluntary Counselling and Rehabilitation Model Center for men and boys will be established.

- Promote gender equitable norms at the community-level through the roll-out of the Behaviour Change Communication Model, as well as the organization of two national campaigns (International Women’s Day and 16 Days Campaign).
On 27 January, UNFPA organized training on the Bystander to Action Approach developed as part of the 16 Days Campaign 2021 in Songinokhairkhan District of Ulaanbaatar in collaboration with the Women Leadership Program. Over 50 participants attended, including group leaders, citizens, social workers, and teachers, and were very enthusiastic and engaged during the training. The purpose of this training was to provide tools on when and how to intervene if or when they witness a problematic situation involving violence.
SUPPORTING COVID-19 VACCINATION COVERAGE AMONG PREGNANT AND BREASTFEEDING WOMEN

To support COVID-19 vaccination coverage among pregnant and breastfeeding women, UNFPA Mongolia organized a virtual meeting with the Ministry of Health technical team and agreed to revise the existing vaccination guideline with the inclusion of the booster dose. The technical team of ministry has started the revision on the guideline revision with technical and financial support from UNFPA.

PROCUREMENT OF PCR MACHINES

Under the “Interim Safeguarding maternal, sexual and reproductive health and rights during the COVID-19 pandemic in Mongolia” project funded by the Government of Luxembourg, three sets of PCR laboratory for Ulaanbaatar maternity hospitals is planned. To start the procurement process, UNFPA Mongolia developed an order list with required technical specifications and submitted it to the operation team for review.

SURVEY ON AVAILABILITY OF MODERN CONTRACEPTIVES

UNFPA Mongolia will conduct the "Survey on availability of modern contraceptives" in collaboration with the National Center for Maternal and Child Health and with funding by the Government of Luxembourg, as part of its 2022 Annual Work Plan. To ensure the quality of the survey, including current logistics management and distribution gap analysis, we are working on the survey questionnaire design with adaptation of the global contraceptive availability survey questionnaire provided by UNFPA Asia-Pacific Region Office. The survey questionnaire will be finalized with the approval of the research committee at the National Center for Maternal and Child Health in early February 2022.

BILATERAL MEETING WITH APRO

During the reporting period, the SRH team of UNFPA Mongolia organized two bilateral meetings with the UNFPA Asia-Pacific Region Office; Investment case for SRH components, and Strengthening of family planning services with midwifery empowerment. As a follow-up action to these meetings, the SRH team will work on the concept note for the investment case for maternal and SRH services, and the development of training logbook requirements for midwifery certification to provide family planning services. During the meeting, a training on family planning with international facilitators can be organized in Mongolia in June or July if the COVID-19 situation allows.
In 2021, the Integrated Support Programme of UNFPA Mongolia continued its efforts to increase coverage and improve the quality of SRH services for women, adolescents and youth in Umnugobi province, particularly during a pandemic. A series of online and on-the-job training, including the workshop “Improving SRH and Adolescent health and Obstetrics care and services”, were organized throughout the year to strengthen the capacity of health care service providers to improve the quality of antenatal care, adolescent health, and Obstetrics and Gynecology care and services.

A two-day workshop on “Improving SRH and Adolescent health and Obstetrics care and services” was organized for provincial health sector managers in Umnugobi province from 11 to 12 December 2021. More than 60 health sector managers and service providers, including the heads of the soums hospitals attended the workshop. The medical and policy professionals and consultants from the MOH, Ministry’s sub-councils, Mongolian National University of Medical Sciences (MNUMS) and JCI organization conducted the training and workshop activities.

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A joint monitoring mission in mining-affected soums of Umnugobi, including Manlai, Khanbogd, Tsogttsetsii, was carried out from 13 to 18 December 2021 by UNFPA staff and Umnugobi authorities to monitor the implementation of activities supported by the Integrated Support Programme, particularly in the area of youth development and youth-friendly SRH services. The mission team organized a meeting with soum governors and hospital directors to discuss adolescent health and social well-being issues in each soum and assessed their needs for future interventions. A comprehensive report was prepared by the mission team and submitted to the decision-makers as a reference for future works in the area of improving adolescent and youth-friendly services.
Within the framework of raising awareness of road traffic accidents, the Integrated Support Programme in Umnugobi province implemented by UNFPA Mongolia supported the provincial road safety campaign #IamResponsible in 2020-2021 with a series of activities. As part of this campaign, 14 precautionary poles were installed at seven pedestrian crossings near secondary schools in Dalanzadgad, Umnugobi. The poles will have the “See me” flags available for students to help them cross the road safely. The official launching of this initiative took place on 28 January 2022.

"PATIENT JOURNEY" PROJECT TO SUPPORT CLIENT-CENTERED ACTIVITIES

The Umnugobi Regional Diagnostic and Treatment Center Quality unit organized a full-day workshop on 10 and 11 December 2021 for health sector service workers of hospitals of Dalanzadgad, Umnugobi as part of the "Patient Journey" project implemented under the Integrated Support Programme of UNFPA Mongolia. The workshop aims to improve the quality of health services by creating a client-centered environment, ensuring hygiene and increasing infection control, and helping employees to prevent and cope with work-related stress.

A total of 60 staff participated in training on “Introduction of Client Satisfaction Survey”, “Service Culture and Satisfaction”, “Communication and Attitudes”, "By-stander to Action" and "Psychological Management", with support of UNFPA Mongolia.
Our organization has been working to raise awareness of this important human rights issue and the role of individuals and societies in ensuring that this right is respected.

Second, as an organization for transformation, I believe that UNFPA has made a significant contribution to many important reforms in society. Gender and gender-based violence, like sexual and reproductive rights, has been a topic of concern for many years, with little understanding of the root causes of gender inequality and gender-based violence. In particular, domestic violence has been treated as an internal matter of the family that should not be interfered with.

When I first joined UNFPA in 2007 and tried to discuss gender issues with people, they would usually call in the chair of the women’s council.

Today, in 2022, there have been significant changes in perception, knowledge, and attitude in all areas - government, development policy, public and individual perception. In any case, when it comes to gender issues, I think there is a growing awareness that this is not just a women’s issue, but a social and human rights issue, and a change of mindset has been observed.

Youth development is one of our functions. Until recently, young people were seen as a group that needed protection and discipline. Today, young people themselves are the main driving force of development, and they believe that they can reform society only if they participate. UNFPA’s commitment to change the mindset of young people on sexual and reproductive rights, gender and violence is another important principle of its work.

Thirdly, I said UNFPA is innovative. The Telemedicine Project for remote health services in Mongolia is very important for the delivery of health services to groups in remote areas of Mongolia. It was a very innovative activity that fully adapted to the specifics of our country. Recently, Mandukhai, a youth counselor chatbot based on artificial intelligence in the field of sexuality and reproduction, was launched.

These are huge examples of innovation. One-stop service centers, e-GBV, e-tuslamj, Gender Hub, and other databases have been created. These allow people and policymakers to understand the context of gender and gender-based violence, to look at trends, to identify problem areas, to obtain the information needed by professionals and the public, and monitor the level of service provided. This in itself shows that UNFPA is using the opportunities of this era of scientific and technological innovation to its advantage and is working more effectively.

**What made you join UNFPA?**

I first joined the UN system in 1997 as an assistant administrator for UNFPA’s HIV/AIDS project. This was the first public health project in Mongolia focused on public awareness and changing behavior. I am a social worker and a Mongolian language teacher by profession, but unfortunately, I never taught, and I became an international public servant. I dedicated my youth working with children and youth organizations and learned many things.

I then joined UNFPA’s one-year Global Population Development Program, which trained specialists in India. From there, I learned how to integrate population issues into development policy, and I also gained an understanding of UNFPA’s operations. When I came back, I worked on UNDP, UNFPA, and WHO projects. After that, I earned a master’s degree in social work in the United States and returned to work for UNFPA. This was influenced by my previous work experience, as well as my study and social work experience in India and the United States, and the direction of my activities.
On the other hand, I was interested in the possibility of working more effectively on the inclusion of the three transformational goals of UNFPA in public policy, as well as the great opportunity to apply what I have learned in Mongolia and contribute to the localization of international experience. That's why I started working for UNFPA. I am always grateful for the opportunity to work for this wonderful organization which aligns with my passion and field of interest.

Can you share with us a great memory you have from your time at UNFPA Mongolia?

There are so many good memories. Most importantly, UNFPA has made a significant contribution to the adoption of two key laws on gender issues. When the Gender Equality Law was passed in 2011, we were in charge of all aspects of advocacy and worked with the government. At that time, we used a lot of advocacy methods. I learned a lot from working with many good people, and the law was passed. This was a time of great memories that will never be forgotten. Subsequently, the Law on Combating Domestic Violence was passed in 2016. It was a very complicated process. When I first joined the UNFPA back in 2007, there was talk of revising the law. We supported the revision and worked with civil society organizations and the government to pass the law. We also developed many unique advocacy strategies. I am very proud of the governmental and non-governmental organizations that have worked together on these two. I learned a lot from them and was inspired to do more in the future.

At that time, we worked very well with many wonderful people, such as Banzragch, who was a project adviser to the Standing Committee on Social Policy of the Parliament and adviser to the Speaker of Parliament, and Enkhsaikhan, the head of office of the National Committee on Gender Equality. She later worked with Enkhjargal, Director of the National Center Against Violence, Arvintaria, a lawyer, on the Law on Combating Domestic Violence, as well as a group of women MPs, former MP Erdenechimeg, and other government officials. I’m really proud of these people.

Where do you see UNFPA Mongolia heading in the future?

First, we must not abandon these two laws after having them passed. Since the law was passed, we have done a lot to strengthen the laws’ enforcement capacity and establish a system in this area. There is now a need to focus on further strengthening the implementation of the established system and the laws passed and institutionalizing them as part of the government’s day-to-day activities. We will focus more attention to this area in the future.
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FOR UPDATES ON COVID-19 IN MONGOLIA, PLEASE VISIT:


The State Emergency Committee’s decisions: https://nema.gov.mn/c/resolution.

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