

## FEATURE STORY

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### Obstetric Fistula: Another Chance at Life

DHAKA, Bangladesh – Ajanta (not her real name) was only 14 when she became pregnant and 15 when she gave birth to her daughter. Now, nine months later, she huddles on a bed covered with plastic sheets in Dhaka Medical College Hospital. She is one of around 20 women in the ward, waiting for an operation to end a condition that caused her husband to throw her out and her daughter to be ostracized: obstetric fistula.



Each year between 50,000 and 100,000 women worldwide are affected by obstetric fistula, a hole in the birth canal which occurs when there is a complication during birth but no emergency obstetric care – typically a Caesarean section to relieve the pressure – is available. Also contributing are poverty, malnutrition, poor health services, early childbearing and gender discrimination.

*"One of the things I have learned about Bangladesh on this study tour... is how important it is for countries to work together as real partners in development cooperation. To think globally and to act locally is a concept that has to be reflected in politics."*

*Claudia Niessen, Belgian Senator, Green Party*

The consequences of fistula are life-shattering: the baby usually dies, and the woman is left with chronic incontinence. Because of her inability to control her flow of urine or faeces, she is often neglected or abandoned by her husband and family and ostracized by her community. Without treatment, she won't have many prospects for work and family life and may have to rely on charity to survive. Today, more than two million young women live with untreated obstetric fistula in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia.

"I come from a small village in Sylhet, in the northern part of Bangladesh and I delivered my baby at home," Ajantasaid. "But it was a very long and difficult birth. "Finally, after two days of labour, she was happy and proud to hold her healthy daughter in her arms, as she does at the hospital.



Her face then changes and clouds over. "Ten days later, when I went to the toilet, I could not stop urinating and I felt the urine running down my legs constantly. I was so terrified and scared, I didn't know what was happening to me. I remember running to my mother asking her what was going on with me, but we didn't know."

*"It is clear that when visiting a country like Bangladesh I do not only take impressions home with me but also much motivation for my daily work as a Member of the Austrian Parliament. As politicians we have a responsibility to address the difficulties that people face here in Bangladesh and also to inform people in Austria about the important work that UNFPA is doing."*

What happened to Ajanta once she discovered she suffered from obstetric fistula is an all-too-common story: her husband, whom she married when she was only 14, soon asked her to leave the house because he couldn't stand the constant smell. She found shelter at her mother's home but she soon saw her daughter was being ignored by her community.

"I was so ashamed, I did not leave the house anymore, I did not speak to anyone, I could not even help with the housework. I cried so much but most of the time I was just really scared and desperate for help."

All this is about to change. Ajanta is one of the fortunate women awaiting an operation to repair her obstetric fistula.

*Karl Öllinger, Member of the Austrian Parliament, Green Party*

#### Fistula: Meeting the Unmet Need

"In total we have operated on 1,216 women in Dhaka Medical College Hospital since its opening in 2003. Every year more women come. In 2010, we were able to have 221 women operated," one of the hospital doctors said. "But often it is the cost of the operation that binds our hands. One operation costs around 300 Euro (USD 410), which is a lot of money, especially in a country like Bangladesh."

The National Fistula Repair Center of Bangladesh, where

Ajanta will have her operation, is supported by UNFPA, the Government of Bangladesh and the International Islamic Bank (IDB). So far it has helped more than 1,000 women by removing their fistula.

Although the number of Bangladeshi women who have fistulas removed is increasing every year, a huge unmet need remains. It is estimated that more than 71,000 women still live with obstetric fistula in a country where 82% of births take place at home and where emergency obstetric care is not easily available.

The discussion with Ajanta and the visit to the hospital was part of a visit by Parliamentarians from Austria, Belgium and Germany to UNFPA projects in the country in an effort to understand development work on the ground. When UNFPA's maternal health activities in Bangladesh started in 2003, obstetric fistula was virtually invisible in the development debate. It was known only as a reason and communities ostracized women and husbands abandoned their wives. Years of advocacy, awareness-raising, capacity building and of course financial support by donor countries has allowed facilities like the fistula treatment centre in Dhaka to be built in the country.

Clearly, funding for fistula – and for all other reproductive health needs – remains essential in countries where the need is greatest.

Back at the hospital, Ajanta remains calm and unafraid of her impending operation. She wants her life back and plans to return to her husband to live.

"This operation means so much to me and I can't wait to have a normal life again," she said. "I have no reason to be afraid."



*"The extremely professional help women receive at the fistula centre doesn't only help women from a medical point of view. After the operation and ensuing medical treatment these women get a chance to learn things like knitting or writing in the rehabilitation center. These new qualifications help them get a fresh start in society and become economically independent. I can't stress enough the value of this fistula centre in Dhaka for the empowerment and emancipation of each single woman concerned."*

*Petra Bayr, Member of the Austrian Parliament, Social Democratic Party*



*"Here in Bangladesh it is clear that the linkages between population and development are topics that concern people and that UNFPA's presence and work are important and contributing in a major way to achieving MDG5. It is also nice to see that there is good collaboration between UNFPA and NGOs – and here in Bangladesh I can see the importance of this multilateral cooperation and coordination."*

*Karin Roth, Member of the German Parliament, Social Democratic Party*