UNFPA stresses on access, quality of sexual and reproductive health services

Feb 1, 2016- A new report from UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, has revealed that many young people between 15 and 24 in the Asia and Pacific region face a dangerous dearth of information on sexual and reproductive health, and lack the critical life-skills needed to manage safe, consensual sexual relationships.

The report finds that more of the nearly one billion young people in the region are having sex before marriage than ever before.

The report released in Bangkok, Thailand, on Monday calls on countries in the region to urgently expand and improve sexual and reproductive health services as well as comprehensive sex education for young people, according to a UNFPA press release.

Many youth also face major physical, socio-economic and cultural barriers to accessing services states the report, “Sexual and Reproductive Health of Young People in Asia and the Pacific: A Review of Issues, Policies and Programmes”, which includes data and examples from across 36 countries, including Nepal.

“Without knowledge, information and access to quality care, young people face far bigger risks of unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortion and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV,” said Yoriko Yasukawa, UNFPA’s Asia-Pacific Regional Director. “Development and globalization are helping to change attitudes to sex and relationships, so policies, programmes and laws on sexual and reproductive health must be reviewed and improved to acknowledge and reflect this reality, and best meet young people’s needs.”

Nearly 11 million unsafe abortions took place in the region in 2015, and 34 per cent of these were performed on women under 25 years of age, the report states. Up to 63 per cent of adolescent pregnancies in Asia-Pacific are unintended, leading to further, larger numbers of unsafe abortions, which are often unreported.

"Adolescents and young persons deserve a sound public health response. WHO advocates for enabling the policy environment in all relevant ministries in support of adolescent health and development. National governments must strengthen the availability and use of strategic information related to health and other development domains of adolescents to design effective programmes and monitor their implementation,” said Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh, Regional Director, World Health Organization for the South-East Asia Region.

The report was produced by Burnet Institute, Australia for UNFPA in collaboration with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) South-East Asia Regional Office.

‘Higher risk behaviour, including early sexual debut, multiple partners, and sex under the influence of alcohol,
are prevalent in some countries, and up to 10% of males and 20% of females report having had a sexually transmitted infection or symptoms in the last 12 months,' the report states. An estimated 620,000 youth (15-24) are living with HIV across the region.

The report also states over 30 per cent of girls aged 15-19 had experienced physical or sexual violence in four countries: the Marshall Islands, Pakistan, Timor-Leste and Vanuatu.

“Improving young people’s sexual and reproductive health requires high quality, evidence-based comprehensive sexuality education,” noted Gwang-Jo Kim, Director of the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education in Bangkok. “Young people need accurate information on puberty, sexuality, and related issues and the skills and confidence to make responsible and caring decisions about sex and relationships in general.”

The report recommends governments launch more and better research to address knowledge gaps, especially research on young, unmarried and sexually active young people, including adolescents aged 10 to 14.

It calls for increased efforts to build a supportive environment for young people’s sexual and reproductive health to address socio-cultural barriers, laws and policies, and earlier comprehensive sexuality education that reaches everyone.

“We need to abandon once and for all the idea that leaving young people in ignorance is going to stop them from having sex or that talking about it is going to make them have sex,” said Yasukawa. “Ensuring their right to good information and services – and also the right to talk about sex – is the only way to help young people make responsible decisions about their own sexual and reproductive health, about how to treat and relate to their partners and about their future.”