



**YOUTH MOBILIZED TO
ENGAGE WITH OLDER
PERSONS AND PERSONS
WITH DISABILITIES**

**Promising Practice
in Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD)
in India**



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Cover photograph: The image shows traditional values and practices, ensuring that refugees, despite being in a foreign land, still maintain their cultural practices.

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Title: Youth mobilized to engage with older persons and persons with disabilities

Type of practice: Emerging Practice

Programme objective: For older persons and persons with disabilities to receive timely information on the available services, and the assistance they need, and to avoid isolation and marginalization, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dates: 2021

Population groups: Youth, older persons, and persons with disabilities in India, including refugees and host community members

Partners: Bosco Organization for Social Concern and Operation (BOSCO), and 190 community-based structures, including 21 youth clubs, in India

Programme overview

In 2021, UNHCR India worked with 190 community-based structures, including 21 youth clubs, to support and enhance the protection of at-risk community members. As part of this effort, 40 youth leaders from 10 youth clubs in Delhi, India decided to focus their efforts on older persons and persons with disabilities for them to receive timely information on the available services, and the assistance they need, and to avoid isolation and marginalization, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was achieved by including older persons and persons with disabilities in awareness-raising sessions that youth clubs delivered at community level on issues around education, substance abuse, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), gender-based violence (GBV), the environment, and the use of social media. The youth club leaders were trained on these topics by UNHCR's partner in Delhi, Bosco Organization for Social Concern and Operation (BOSCO), and later replicated these same trainings within their communities and extended participation to other interested community members. The youth leaders also conducted home visits, supported older persons and persons with disabilities in their daily activities. Additionally, thanks to funds generated through food stalls at the BOSCO centre and funds they raised among themselves and other community members, they ensured access to food and regularly checked on their well-being. Overall, this significantly contributed to improvements in the living conditions and psychosocial well-being of older persons and persons with disabilities during the challenges experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, as they often felt neglected and at risk of exclusion.

Context

Despite not being a signatory to the [1951 Refugee Convention](#), India continues a long tradition of hosting and assisting refugees, including by actively contributing to the development and the adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and attending the Global Refugee Forum (GRF). At the end of 2021, India was home to 93,259 refugees from Sri Lanka who receive direct protection and assistance from the Indian Government. In addition, UNHCR registered 44,917 refugees and asylum-seekers – mostly Afghans and Rohingya, with small numbers of people coming from South Sudan and Yemen, the majority of whom are located in Delhi.

UNHCR-registered refugees and asylum seekers have access to primary and secondary education and basic health care, although some face administrative barriers in a few locations especially due to lack of government-issued documentation. Among refugees, women and girls face additional challenges in relation to economic empowerment, education and protection due to prevailing discriminatory gender and cultural norms. Due to lack of government-required documentation, refugees and asylum seekers registered with UNHCR are generally not included in the social protection schemes, thus limiting the full enjoyment of their socio-economic rights and thereby increasing their dependence on UNHCR for assistance.

India is a signatory to the Convention on [the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (CRPD) and its administrative framework provides access for refugees to basic services. However, there are practical and legal hurdles for refugees and asylum seekers who are older persons and persons with disabilities to access the Government's social protection scheme and financial assistance.¹ UNHCR has therefore

been working to plug the gap by providing subsistence allowance through cash-based initiatives. In addition, UNHCR India supports refugees and asylum seekers to become self-reliant and to play an active role in creating solutions to address their needs. This is achieved through interventions such as the Entrepreneurship Development Programme, skills development, on-the-job training, micro grants and work placements.

Refugees frequently encounter a range of challenges in access to employment. The law prevents them from working in the formal economy, pushing them into the informal sector where they are more likely to be exploited, abused or forced to work in dangerous conditions. While some refugees are highly qualified professionals, others may have experienced obstacles to develop or practice their skills, or to access quality entrepreneurial, technical and vocational training. Others have skills that are not compatible with the local market. In this context, persons with disabilities and older persons, who face specific barriers in accessing basic support and care services, and may require assistive devices, or continuous care and assistance, are in a particularly fragile situation.

Exacerbated protection and assistance needs experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic further exhausted the coping mechanisms of forcibly displaced persons in India. During community engagement activities, forcibly displaced persons expressed difficulty coping with situational stress, especially for older persons without support and persons with disabilities and their caregivers.²

¹ UNHCR (n.d.), Good Practices – India. Internal.

² *Ibid.*



“My mom studying the English language and my nephew watching TV,” says Abdul Bari, an Afghan refugee visual storyteller.

As a graduate student, Bari has been teaching his mother English so that she can communicate with local Indians, his friends and she will feel empowered.

©UNHCR/ Abdul Bari

Many older forcibly displaced persons in India are able and willing to work, but without opportunities to do so, they end up dependent on the support of family members. In addition, managing day to day finances and planning for their future can be challenging for older individuals, especially if they live alone.³ As mobility and dexterity may decline with age, completing everyday tasks may become more difficult for some older persons. This can prevent them from socializing, pursuing interests, or taking part in activities they enjoy.⁴ In addition, social connections remain essential for health and well-being at all ages and may be especially important for promoting health in later life.⁵ When complete independence is no

longer possible, many older persons may require additional care. Sometimes this care can be provided by family members, but this can place strain on the caregiver.⁶

The initiatives undertaken by youth leaders to support older persons and persons with disabilities were intended to ensure inclusion and give everybody the same opportunities to participate in every aspect of life to the best of their abilities and desires.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Youth Initiative with persons with disabilities and older persons. Internal.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Programme background

During the COVID-19 pandemic, UNHCR India scaled up arrangements accessible to older persons and persons with disabilities and their caregivers for meaningful consultation on issues related to their protection, assistance and solutions, along with strengthened information sharing, and feedback and response mechanisms. In August 2021, UNHCR established a 24/7 call centre, which is still active, and created a field unit in response to increasing demand to strengthen community engagement and outreach in 21 States across India where persons that fall under UNHCR's mandate are present.

In 2021, UNHCR India worked with 190 community-based organizations including 21 youth clubs throughout the country to support and enhance the protection of at-risk community members. Of the 21 youth clubs, 10 were active in different parts of Delhi and were supported and mentored by UNHCR India's partner, BOSCO. The club members include refugees and asylum seekers of diverse nationalities, as well as an overall 30 per cent of Indians.

Refugee and asylum-seeking youth are encouraged by UNHCR and partners to participate in peer groups in their areas as these provide a platform for them to get together, raise issues affecting their lives and propose solutions, engage in recreational activities like sports and arts, attend awareness-raising sessions and support their communities through concrete activities and sensitization campaigns.

Youth clubs are also intended to nurture a sense of belonging and social cohesion with host communities.

Each of the 10 youth clubs in Delhi has four leaders, a diverse membership that spans different nationalities, religions and ethnicities (e.g. Rohingya, Burmese, Somalis, Sudanese, Congolese, to ethnic Afghan and Hindu and Afghan Sikhs).

The COVID-19 pandemic was especially hard on older persons and persons with disabilities who had to be confined at home, at times with little or no support and at high risk of isolation. Members of youth clubs from diverse communities residing in different parts of Delhi decided therefore to dedicate time and energy to older people and persons with disabilities among refugees and asylum seekers, by visiting them and engaging them in conversations while monitoring their well-being. Through these initiatives, the youth clubs have been promoting the care of older members of society and have strengthened disability inclusion and support. The young people engaged in these support activities are also acting as a model for other young people in the community on issues related to inclusion and non-discrimination. By involving older persons in activities, youth clubs not only helped them to maintain a sense of identity and self-esteem, but also tapped into their wealth of knowledge and experience.

➤ Resources and partnerships

This project builds on the long-standing partnership between UNHCR and the NGO [Bosco Organization for Social Concern and Operation \(BOSCO\)](#), which is a member of the international Don Bosco network. As part of the BOSCO Refugee Assistance Programme, BOSCO is UNHCR's partner in multiple areas such as prevention and response to GBV, child protection, health (including MHPSS), education, cash assistance, community mobilization and self-reliance. As part of its project activities, BOSCO has been providing MHPSS to older persons and persons with disabilities and working with community-based structures including 10 youth clubs and 4 clubs for older persons.

Older persons were encouraged by UNHCR and BOSCO to organize themselves in clubs to socialize and support each other. Four clubs of older persons were established and sought the assistance of the youth groups to implement activities.

Youth clubs aim to empower the youth and provide a vision for the future that lies ahead of them, which was further reflected in the activities that youth clubs conducted with persons with disabilities and older persons. The number of youth clubs in Delhi increased to 12 in 2022, making a total of 1,109 participants across Delhi.

Youth clubs are supported with monthly mentoring sessions and a small incentive of INR 2,000 (US\$ 25) by BOSCO to conduct monthly campaigns in their communities.⁷ An additional incentive of INR 2,000 (US\$ 25) is provided on a competitive basis, and some are also conducting other initiatives to top up the support they receive. It was in the context of this established partnership that the youth clubs in Delhi decided to focus on providing support to older persons and persons living with disabilities.

⁷ UNHCR (n.d.), Good Practices – India. Internal.



"A refugee originally from Iran has been living in India since 1994, and now runs a garage where he employs refugees and youth from India."

@UNHCR/Anurag Banerjee

Process and activities

The array of activities implemented by the youth in support of older persons and persons with disabilities includes the following: “We care for you” campaign for older persons; “Building back better – Disability inclusiveness”; self-care; hobbies and interests; home visits.⁸ Some of these are described more in detail below.



Support to older persons

Older persons may need support and may be at risk of isolation if they are less mobile, lack the support of other family members, and are unable to sustain themselves financially. BOSCO regularly follows up with older persons in Delhi of different nationalities, across the city and National Capital Region (NCR). BOSCO provides psychosocial support through counselling, assesses their need for cash assistance and links them to appropriate services. BOSCO trains youth group members on the support needs of older persons and how to extend support to them in a respectful and dignified manner.⁹ Among the array of services the youth provided to older persons, during the winter of 2021, members of the 10 youth clubs

in Delhi identified older persons from the areas they live in and went to their homes to distribute blankets. The idea was to target older persons, reach out with material support, and provide social support and company.

The older persons appreciated the kind gesture and the fact that they were remembered during a time of crisis. Similarly, leaders and members of the youth clubs across various nationalities reported that they enjoyed giving back and serving the community. They not only made the effort of identifying older persons but also enjoyed going door-to-door and engaging in friendly chats with older persons.¹⁰

⁸ Bosco (n.d.). Bosco Youth Clubs, New Delhi.

⁹ Youth Initiative with persons with disabilities and older persons. Internal.

¹⁰ UNHCR and BOSCO (n.d.). Blanket distribution to elderly. BOSCO – UNHCR Youth Club.



Awareness-raising campaigns

BOSCO conducted awareness-raising sessions with 10 youth clubs on various thematic issues like promoting education, especially for girls; gender equality; prevention of and response to GBV, child marriage, and child labour; mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS). BOSCO also mentored youth leaders on how to conduct similar sessions at community level, with the inclusion of older persons and persons with disabilities among refugees and asylum seekers. These sessions were attended by 6,365 participants.

BOSCO supported the youth leaders with preparatory work for the awareness-raising sessions,¹¹ and conducted regular meetings to ensure the funds distributed were used for the implementation of these campaigns. Youth clubs submit attendance sheets and monthly reports to BOSCO. Seventy-six refugee youth from these 10 youth clubs were also trained on child protection in collaboration with the Child Welfare Committee, the national agency responsible for the protection and care of children in the country.



Promoting the inclusion of persons with disabilities

The 10 youth clubs in Delhi reached persons with disabilities and their caregivers in their communities, including through home visits. They also volunteered to accompany them to access government health services, buy groceries and recreational activities.

Persons with disabilities were engaged in everyday activities to promote increased participation in socially expected roles and activities—such as being a student, worker, friend, community member, patient, spouse, partner, or parent.¹² Other activities included using public resources such as transportation and libraries, moving about within communities, receiving adequate health care, psychosocial support and enjoying other day-to-day activities.¹³

¹¹ During past years these took place both online and face-to-face; as of the documentation of this practice, the sessions are face-to-face only.

¹² Youth Initiative with persons with disabilities and older persons. Internal.

¹³ *Ibid.*

► Participation and accountability

The youth clubs in Delhi have been operating in the community for more than a decade and have been supported, mentored and monitored by BOSCO. A yearly calendar of activities is prepared by the youth clubs in close consultation with BOSCO and activities are carried out accordingly. All the activities of the youth clubs are monitored by the Youth Coordinator at BOSCO and monthly reports are shared with UNHCR. The youth clubs have been successful in gaining the trust of the community and have the support of different community organizations including community representatives.



Afghan refugee women handcraft Christmas ornaments for a Made51 project at the social enterprise in New Delhi, India.
©UNHCR/ Bishwadeep

▶ Achievements, results and impact

The following is a list of achievements to date:

- ▶ 10 active youth clubs with more than 1,100 active youth who have been trained on various thematic issues and have successfully conducted campaigns on child protection, GBV, gender equality, MHPSS, inclusion of older persons and persons with disabilities, the use of social media, substance abuse, climate change and environment, 16 days of activism to end violence against women.
- ▶ In 2021, the youth clubs that received training ran campaigns and reached out to 6,365 people in the community, including 119 older persons and 101 persons with disabilities via speeches, role plays, skits¹⁴ and musical events covering topics related to education, substance abuse, MHPSS, GBV, saving the planet, use of social media. They implemented 16 Days of Activism to End Violence against Women in their communities.¹⁵

“As young people, it is our duty to ensure that the right information reaches everyone in our communities in a timely manner, including persons with disabilities” - Somali youth

“Older persons in displaced situations like us are often at risk of neglect and as youth we must not leave them feeling lonely but ensure that they are part of all community engagements.” - Afghan youth

“It’s not easy to be a refugee and it makes it more challenging if you have a disability; I was touched when two young people visited me and helped me with my grocery shopping.”- a Chin person with a disability

“The feeling that I am not forgotten and that I still matter is what these young people brought me with the warmth of the blanket”- An Afghan older person.

- ▶ Older persons without support and persons with disabilities received timely information on partners’ services, GBV and child protection prevention and response through individual sessions conducted via home visits by the young people.¹⁶
- ▶ Older persons and persons with disabilities were able to buy groceries and were regularly checked on their well-being.¹⁷

“When the youth leaders visited me, I felt that I also matter. They informed me on partner services, shared phone numbers of focal points and even bought my groceries. They have my blessings” - An Afghan older person in Delhi

“I am happy that the youth from my community are sensitive and made the effort to reach out to me and followed up on my well-being” - Afghan person with a disability

¹⁴ Short comedy sketch or piece of humorous writing, especially a parody.

¹⁵ UNHCR (n.d.), Good Practices – India. Internal.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ UNHCR (n.d.), Good Practices – India. Internal.



A refugee woman from Sri Lanka took up tailoring to support her family, and now she has shared her tailoring skills with many refugee women and girls, including older women.
©UNHCR/ Kolari

Lessons learned

The following key lessons were drawn from the implementation of this initiative:

- It is critical for UNHCR to partner with an organization that has expertise in working with youth, older persons and persons with disabilities and has built a good rapport and relationship with communities on promoting the [age, gender and diversity \(AGD\)](#) approach.
- It is also important to ensure dedicated staff to work with youth on various thematic issues.
- Continuous and dedicated time and effort are needed to build the trust of the communities in youth, to keep young people motivated as they themselves might struggle with their lives as displaced persons, and to reach out to older persons and persons with disabilities in an urban environment where they live in rented accommodation and are scattered across the city.
- Through this initiative youth developed empathy towards older persons and valued their role and contributions to families and societies. The older persons appreciated the interactions and care by the youth and their inclusion efforts.

Tips for replication and scaling up

The most important features to be considered when replicating this practice are:

- Dedicated staff time and resources;
- Partners with expertise in working with youth and persons in need, including older persons and persons with disabilities, in addition to youth-led and older person-led organizations and organizations of persons with disabilities;
- Partners with a good understanding of accountability to affected people (AAP) and the AGD principles and approach; and
- The activity must be part of a Partners Project Partnership Agreement (PPA) to ensure that it is implemented.

Next steps

UNHCR India plans to expand this emerging practice to other locations in India with other youth clubs. UNHCR's partners Save the Children, Action Aid and Development and Justice Initiative (DAJI) will be guided in this practice in Delhi by BOSCO and youth leaders in Jammu, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Punjab will be trained to work with older persons and persons living with disabilities. In 2023 they will initiate activities for older persons and persons with disabilities.

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