

Detailed Report on
UNFPA Sponsored Plenary Session on
Maternal Mortality with Special Focus on North-East Region

At`
North Eastern Regional Conference
on
Population, Development and Health in North-East India: Challenges Ahead

Jointly Organized by: IASP and Bodoland University

Date: 18 – 19, May 2023

Venue: Bodoland University, Kokrajhar, Assam

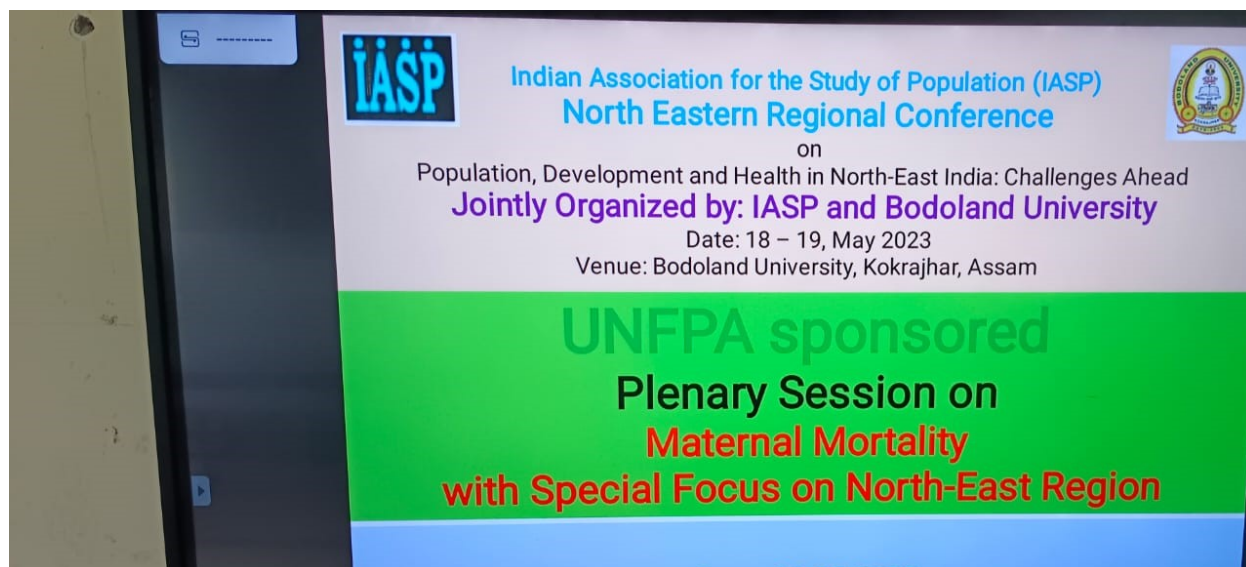




Image: Group photo of IASP North Eastern Regional Conference 2023



Image: Release of Demography India (Journal) in the inaugural session

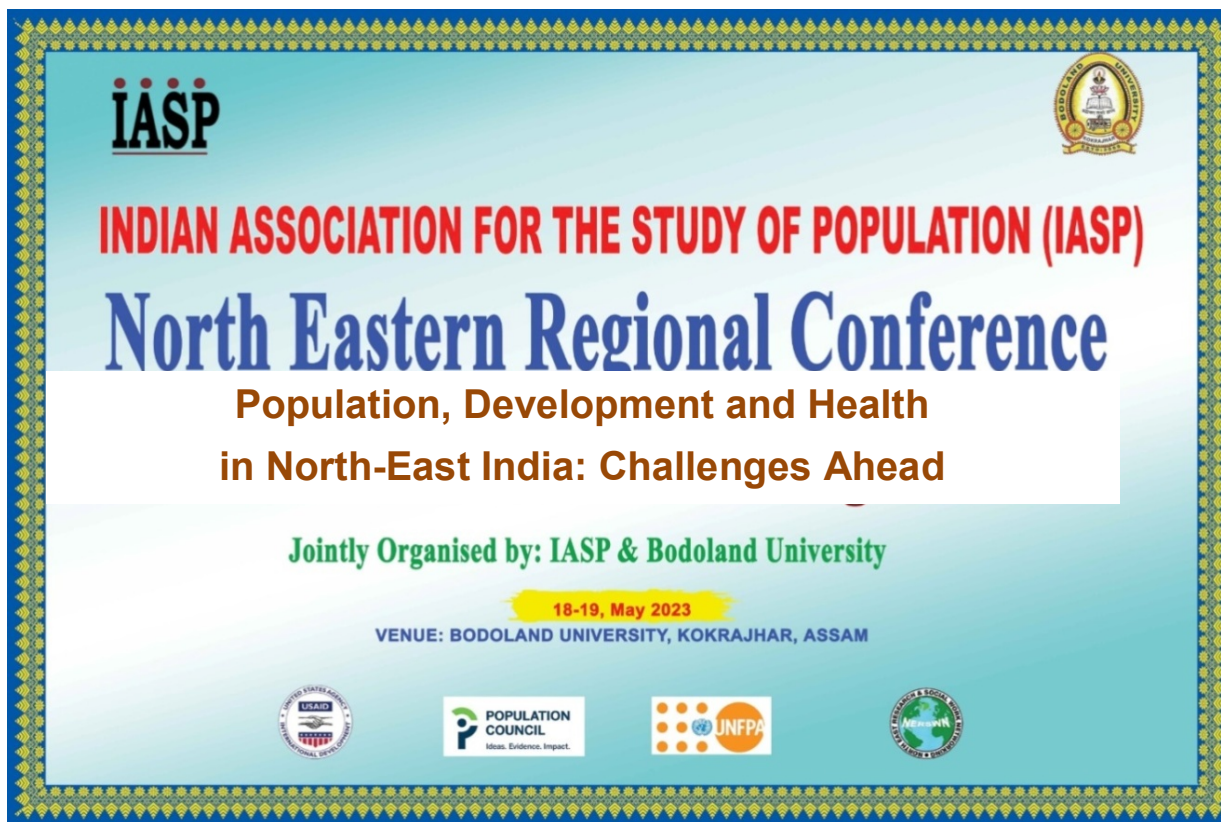


Image: Banner of IASP North East Regional Conference 2023



Image: Prof. LaishramLadusingh, Hon'ble Vice Chancellor of Bodoland University Chairing the UNFPA Sponsored Plenary Session on Maternal Mortality with Special Focus on North-East Region

To promote, disseminate and stimulate research on population issues at local levels, the IASP organizes regional conferences in different parts of the country. In the year 2023, the IASP jointly with Bodoland University organized North Eastern Regional conference at Bodoland University, during 18 – 19 May 2023. The conference was scheduled with inaugural session, two plenary sessions, two poster sessions, and eight technical sessions. Total about 10 posters and 50 papers were presented. The plenary sessions were on : 1) RASTA: Knowledge Building on Health and Nutrition in Northeast Region, sponsored by **Population Council**, and 2) Maternal Mortality with Special Focus on North-East Region, sponsored by UNFPA. In total about 115 persons registered for the conference. Out of them about 60 were from outside Bodoland University. The participants came from various parts of the country such as Rajasthan, Maharashtra, New Delhi, Kerala, Odisha, etc. and all the eight Northeast Indian states.

Out of the total 115 participants, about 90 participants attended the UNFPA Sponsored Plenary Session on **Maternal Mortality with Special Focus on North-East Region** held on 18.05.2023 from 2.00 – 3.30 PM at the Department of Geography Bodoland University, in Geo Class Room – 1. The eminent speakers of the session were 1) Dr. Subrata Mondal from USAID, 2) Prof. Dilip Chandra Nath, Professor Emeritus, School of Applied & Pure Sciences, The Assam Royal Global University, Guwahati, Assam, 3) Dr. Sanjay Kumar, UNFPA, New Delhi, India, 4) Prof. Polly Vauqueline, Centre for Women's Studies, Gauhati University, Guwahati. Prof. Laishram Ladusingh, Hon'ble Vice-Chancellor of Bodoland University chaired the session, whereas Prof. BK Kar, Dept. of Geography, Gauhati University was the discussant of the session.

As the seminar hall was jam packed with about 90 participants, Dr. Manab Medhi, Dept. of English, Bodoland University and Dr. Konita Basumatary, Dept. of Economics, Bodoland University initiated the session by inviting the Chair person, discussant and all the plenary speakers to the dias on time. In the meantime, dignitaries were felicitated with Bodo traditional Aronai and wooden Rhino. Then the anchor graciously requested the Chairperson of the session to lead the proceedings.

Professor Ladusingh, Hon'ble Vice-Chancellor of Bodoland University, and Chairperson of the session very lucidly gave a brief over view of the situation of Maternal Mortality in Northeast India. He pointed out the great diversity that exists within the region. Thereby, he urged researchers to try to understand the maternal mortality issue from regional lens. He also highly appreciated the good gesture of the UNFPA for readily agreeing to sponsor a plenary session on Maternal Mortality in Northeast India, which is one of the pertinent problems of the region. With his brief over view, the Chairperson set the floor ready for further deliberations and discussions on Maternal Mortality in Northeast India.

The Chairperson first invited Dr. Subrata Mondal, from USAID, India to deliver a speech on **Maternal Mortality: Macro level vulnerabilities in the Northeastern States of India**. Dr. Mandal first presented a broad scenario of Maternal Mortality in Assam and India. As per the presented data, there is a continuous decline in maternal mortality for about last two decades in Northeast India. However, compared to national average, it remained higher for all the Northeastern States. For example, MMR in Assam (195) was almost double than that of India (97) in 2018-2020. There is also a huge macro and micro level variation in MMR in the

region. According to the study, some of the pertinent vulnerabilities at macro level are – 1) Lack of access to quality healthcare facilities, 2) Limited availability of emergency obstetric care, including blood transfusions and cesarean sections, 3) Limited availability of emergency obstetric care, including blood transfusions and cesarean sections, 4) Limited availability of emergency obstetric care, including blood transfusions and cesarean sections, 5) Climate vulnerabilities, and 6) Migration. At the micro level, the identified vulnerabilities are – 1) Early marriage and early pregnancy, 2) Traditional beliefs and practices, such as home delivery and the use of untrained birth attendants leading to serious complications and death, 3) Nutritional practices. The study also presented issues relating to travel time to nearest hospital/ clinic, extent of antenatal care visits, unmet need for family planning, etc.



Image: Dr. SubrataMandal delivering his speech

Dr. Mandal also highlighted various interventions undertaken by government to tackle the menace of maternal mortality. Some of such interventions are as follows:

1. In 2018, the Assam government launched the Wage Compensation Scheme for pregnant women in tea gardens. Under this cash transfer programme, pregnant women working in the tea gardens are provided with ₹12,000 by the government in four installments.
2. To cover the hard to reach areas and areas where healthcare facility is inadequate, the Assam government has deployed 130 Mobile Medical Units (MMUs) of which 80 are deployed in the tea garden areas.
3. Assam National Health Mission has also entered public private partnership with 150 tea garden management, which provides financial support to tea garden hospitals and to various charitable hospitals across the state.
4. Meghalaya government is installing Solar panel at public health facilities to enable presence of staff to ensure emergency services.
5. Training of all specialist doctors who handles high risk pregnancies, in Meghalaya

6. Tele-medicine and tele-consultation initiated in several NE states to provide timely support
7. Tele-ICU to serve as an extension of telemedicine services and to electronically share health information from ICUs at spoke facilities with a hub facility in Mizoram

His impressive deliberation generated lot of enthusiasm among the participants to know more about the issues of maternal mortality in the region, that led to a healthy question answer session. Due to the paucity of time, the chairperson had to cut-short the discussion and advised participants to interact with Dr. Mondallater on outside the session and invited Prof. DC Nath to deliver his talk.



Image: Attendance during the UNFPA Sponsored Plenary Session on Maternal Mortality with Special Focus on North-East Region



Image: Attendance during the UNFPA Sponsored Plenary Session on Maternal Mortality with Special Focus on North-East Region

Prof. Dilip Chandra Nath, Professor Emeritus School of Applied & Pure Sciences, The Assam Royal Global University, Guwahati, and former Vice-Chancellor, Assam University delivered a lecture on **Understanding Maternal Health of Indian (Assamese) Woman: A Road Map to SDG**. Prof. Nath initiated his deliberation by indicating that the Maternal Mortality remains as one of the major public health problems in India and demands everyone's attention. Some of the key targets of SDGs which needs to be achieved by 2030 are also highlighted and pointed towards the need to pay attention to them. He presented the comparative picture of MMR in India, Kerala and Assam during 2004 to 2020. As per the 2018-2020 data the MMR of Kerala is as low as 19, for India as a whole it is 97, whereas for Assam it is extremely high at 195 per lakh live births. He also highlighted various flagship programs initiated by the government of India over the period of time, such as JananiSurakshaYojana (April 2005), Janani-ShishuSurakshaKaryakram (June 2011), PradhanMantriSurakshitMatritvaAbhiyan (2016), LaQshya: Labour room & Quality Improvement Initiative (2017), etc. Subsequently he also highlighted various maternal health indicators as per the various rounds of National Family Health Surveys. Prof. Nath also indicated that the recent crackdown against child marriage in Assam is one of the efforts to bring down the MMR. He broadly classified factors influencing MMR as structural, health system, individuals, quality of care, accessibility, management, working environment, etc. He also touched upon the effects of maternal mental disorders after birth on the mother and the infant. Prof. Nath pointed towards need for behaviour change to raise the age at marriage and to avoid early pregnancy, and special focus to be made on tea garden areas. He concluded with a positive hope that India will achieve SDG goal: MMR <70 and all births to be delivered by 100% skilled professionals by 2030.



Image: Prof. DC Nath delivering plenary speech

At the end of his deliberation, the chairperson opened the floor for question answer. The authoritative presentation of Professor Nath and his expertise in the field generated lot of interest amongst the participants and he clarified all the queries with very good justification, facts and figures, and expertise. Following this, the Chairperson invited Dr. Sanjay Kumar from UNFPA to deliver his talk.

Dr. Sanjay Kumar, UNFPA, India delivered a speech on **Maternal Mortality in Assam**. Dr. Sanjay's deliberations revolved around trends of maternal mortality in Assam and examining sub-state level patterns of maternal deaths and health care utilization. He highlighted that in last two decades, the MMR in Assam has shown a declining trend, but to achieve the SDG goal of MMR of 70 per lakh live births by 2030, there is need for 65 percent decline. The study also indicated the existing regional variation within the state. As per the **HMIS 2020-21** data the reported cases of Maternal Deaths in Cachar is 135, whereas it was just nominal in few districts like Hojai, Charaideo, Majuli, West KarbiAnglong, DimaHasao, and South Salmara. In terms of health facilities, there seems to be shortage of CHCs (46 as per population norms) and 9 district hospitals, which are important to provide basis and emergency obstructive care. There is also shortage of Obstetrician and Gynaecologists, and Anaesthetists. Findings from qualitative study suggest lack of knowledge at family level in recognising danger signs and delayed decision for medical care.



Image: Dr. Sanjay Kumar attending to the queries of participants

To tackle the problem of maternal mortality in the state, Dr. Sanjay pointed out to the following aspects:

- There is a greater need to create awareness regarding birth preparedness and identification of danger signs – among pregnant women, their family members and the grassroots health functionaries
- Readiness of health facilities, particularly at the CHC level to handle complicated cases
- For addressing anaemia among pregnant women, special schemes under AnemiaMukt Bharat Programme in the state may be initiated
- Orientation of grassroots functionaries on identifying high risk cases during ante natal and post natal checkup and counselling of the women and family members to avoid complications
- Meaningful analysis and informing the programme implementation and improving health facilities based on maternal death review at the district and below level is required

Dr. Sanjay's thought provoking deliberations with facts and figure of maternal mortality over the time and space ignited several minds to ponder upon the problem. It was evident from the queries raised by the participants.

On the completion of the discussion on Dr. Sanjay's presentation, the Chairperson invited Prof. Polly Vauqueline, Department of Women's Studies, Gauhati University, to initiate a deliberation on **Maternal Mortality in North-East India: Introspections from Gender Lenses**. Prof. Polly highlighted how the inequality persists from the time child is born and takes different forms at different phases of women's life. The inequalities are varied, diverse, complex and interrelated. Gender issues which affect maternal health are access to resources, division of labour, social norms and social values, decision making process, partner's support, power negotiation, etc.

Prof. Polly brought out causes of maternal mortality in Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland. She pointed out that some of the pertinent causes of maternal mortality in Assam are – anemia, malnutrition during pregnancy, economic factors, organizational factors, and socio-cultural factors. In Meghalaya the causes of MMR are mainly teenage pregnancy, connectivity. Whereas in Nagaland, they are mainly poor access to healthcare institutions, lack of awareness, shortage of health care facilities, poor connectivity, etc. Professor drew attention by highlighting that MMR in Finland is just three out of one lakh live births. She also brought the issue of Gender Gap Index published by World Economic Forum which shows a somewhat deteriorating trend for India. For example India ranked 108/149 in 2018, 112/153 in 2020, 140/156 in 2021 and 135/146 in 2022. Similarly, as per the World Economic Forum report 2022 the standing of India on various other index is pretty poor. For example in terms of Economic Participation and Opportunity it is 143/146, in Educational Attainment – 107/146, in Health and Survival – 146/146, and Political Empowerment – 48/146. Contrary to this, Finland occupied 2nd rank in GGI, and in Economic Participation and Opportunity-18/146, in Educational Attainment- 1/146, in Health and Survival- 78/146, and Political Empowerment- 2/146. The comparison between Finland and India clearly indicates that to bring down the Maternal Mortality, there is an urgent need to bring down the gender disparity.



Image: Prof. Polly Vauqueline addressing the audience during discussion

Prof. Polly's lucid deliberations on maternal mortality kindled several minds to contemplate upon the problems of maternal mortality. It was evident from the very insightful queries raised by the participants.

At the end of the session, the Chairperson congratulated all the plenary speakers, and participants for active participation in the session. He also once again thanked UNFPA immensely for supporting the plenary session for a very noble cause, which the Northeast India, especially, Assam has been facing for a long time now.