



## Tobacco consumption in Bangladesh

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For more on **tobacco use in Bangladesh** see <http://www.searo.who.int/bangladesh/gatsbangladesh2017standalonefsscanoffinal14aug2018rev1.pdf>

For more on the **Japan Tobacco deal** see <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-akij-m-a-japan-tobacco/japan-tobacco-buying-bangladesh-akij-tobacco-business-for-1-5-billion-idUKKBN1KROOD>

For the **Bangladesh Cancer Society report** see [https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/sites/default/files/tat004\\_factsheet\\_proact\\_final\\_print.pdf](https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/sites/default/files/tat004_factsheet_proact_final_print.pdf)

For the **study on second-hand smoke exposure in school children** see *Nicotine Tob Res* 2017; published online Dec 7. DOI:10.1093/ntr/ntx248

For the **study on the price of cigarettes in Bangladesh** see *Tob Control* 2018; published online April 19. DOI:10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2017-054035

35% of adult Bangladeshis use tobacco, accounting to a hefty 37.8 million people. Sales of cigarettes are on the rise and the industry appears to be hoping to capitalise on this trend. Last year, Japan Tobacco completed the US\$1.5 billion purchase of the tobacco business of the Akij Group, which controls around a fifth of the Bangladeshi market for cigarettes, including popular local brands such as Navy and Sheikh. "With this investment, we continue to accelerate our expansion in emerging markets that matter", commented Mutsuo Iwai, executive vice president of Japan Tobacco, in a statement to the press. The company's interest in Bangladesh is unsurprising. It is the eighth largest country in the world by population, home to more than 166 million people. The rapid economic growth of the past decade or so has meant that more and more Bangladeshis can afford to buy cigarettes.

The epidemic has had serious effects on the nation's health. In 2018, some 126 000 Bangladeshis were killed by tobacco-related diseases. According to a recent report by the Bangladesh Cancer Society, deaths and disabilities caused by such diseases cost the country \$3.6 billion in 2017–18. Laws banning smoking in public places and selling tobacco to minors are widely

flouted. "The fines for violating the indoor smoking laws are very low; people do not care about getting caught", Nigar Nargis (American Cancer Society, Washington DC, USA) told *The Lancet Oncology*. A shortage of officials responsible for enforcing smoke-free laws compounds the problem. An estimated 44% of Bangladeshis are exposed to second-hand smoke on public transport and roughly the same proportion experience workplace exposures. A study of 481 school-aged children in Dhaka, Bangladesh, found that nearly half lived with at least one smoker and 95% had been recently exposed to second-hand smoke.

36% of men in Bangladesh smoke either cigarettes or bidis, cheap hand-rolled cigarettes. But less than 1% of women are smokers. Instead, roughly a quarter of Bangladeshi women use smokeless tobacco, which comes in a variety of forms. There is fragrant chewing tobacco known as *zarda*; the betel leaf quid or *paan* that is popular across south Asia; and *gul*, a powder that is rubbed over the teeth and gums and marketed as a dental care product. Smokeless tobacco is socially acceptable and is often regarded as being less dangerous than combustible cigarettes. "For many years, tobacco control policy was completely directed towards smoking", said Golam Mohiuddin Faruque (Dhaka Medical College, Bangladesh). "But for the past few years policy makers have been talking about smokeless tobacco." The 2013 amendment to the tobacco control laws introduced specific legislation for smokeless products.

"The major challenge in Bangladesh is affordability; tobacco is much cheaper than in neighbouring countries", commented Nargis. She coauthored a study that found, despite the sharp increases in the price of cigarettes in Bangladesh

from 2009 to 2014–15, cigarettes became more affordable as a result of income growth. Bidis also increased in affordability during the study period. "Incomes are growing faster than the prices of cigarettes, but the tax policy is also lopsided", explained Nargis. Taxes on cigarettes are tiered, with higher rates for higher priced brands, which means that smokers have an incentive to switch to the less expensive brands.

Cheaper brands are becoming increasingly dominant in Bangladesh, with a market share approaching 80%. "It is one reason we are not seeing as many people quitting as we would like; both cigarette smokers and bidi smokers are taking up the cheaper brands of cigarettes", said Nargis. She advises installing a uniform tax rate and switching to a specific tax, as recommended by the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), rather than the current ad valorem tax. The situation with smokeless tobacco is more complicated. Much of the production takes place in the informal sector, which is tricky to regulate. "It is not easy to administer a tax on smokeless tobacco, so the ministry of finance have not really paid much attention to these products", added Nargis.

Still, there is plenty of support for tobacco control policies in Bangladesh. 30 or so non-governmental organisations focus on the issue. "They are fighting particularly in rural areas to convince people of the dangers of smokeless tobacco", said Faruque. Bangladesh was the first developing nation to sign the FCTC. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has pledged to make the country tobacco-free by 2040. There is a long way to go, but ensuring that tobacco becomes less affordable would be a step in the right direction. "At the very least, prices need to be brought to the level of the regional average", Nargis concluded.

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