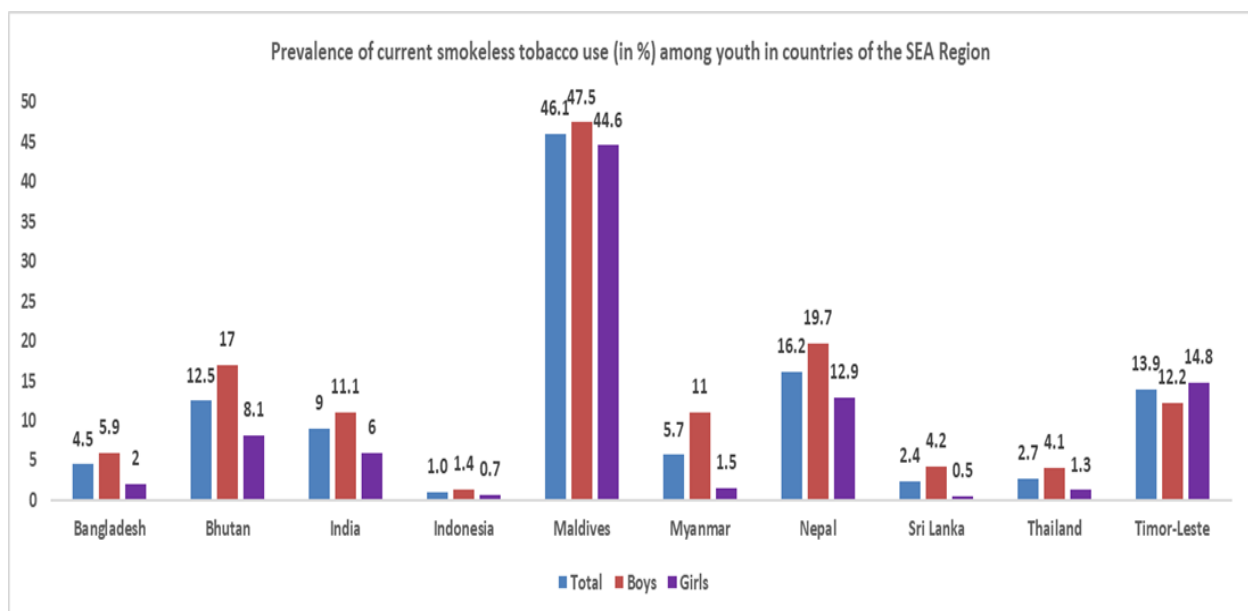
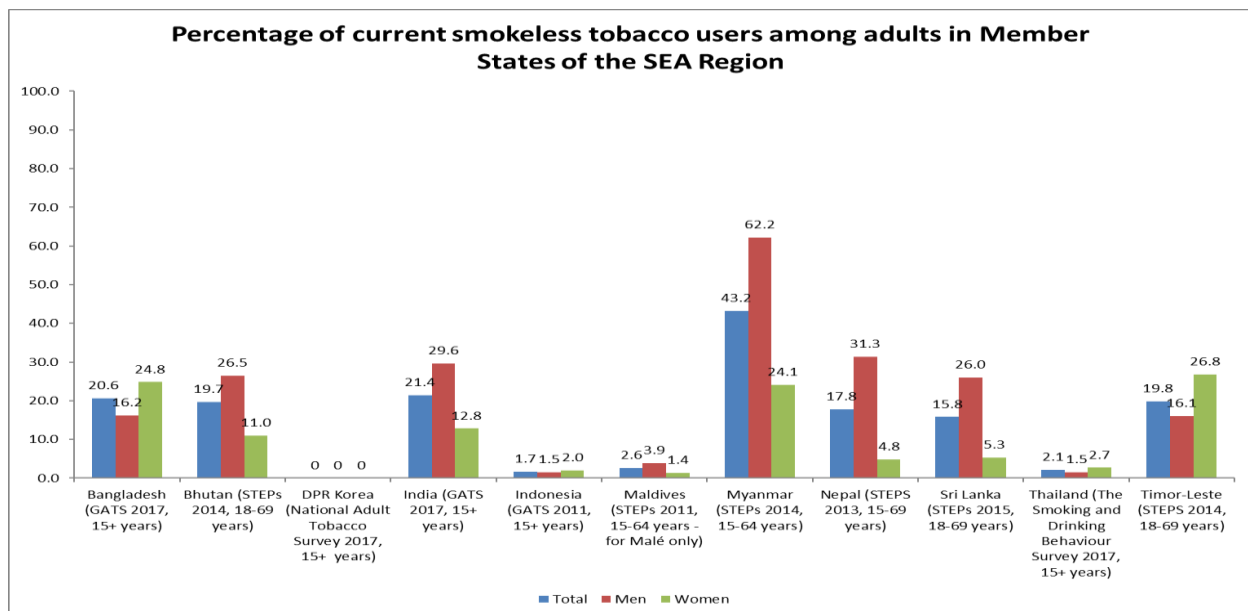


## Smokeless Tobacco- an epidemic in the South-East Asia Region

Of the 301 million global smokeless tobacco users, the South-East Asia region is home to more than 248 million, accounting for over 80% of the world's smokeless tobacco users.

Various forms of smokeless tobacco (ST) products are used by men, women and youth in several countries of the Region. ST is consumed alone or combined with areca nut, flavoring agents and other ingredients to mask the bitterness, improve taste and enhance absorption of nicotine. In many countries of the Region, tobacco has been traditionally grown and consumed at the household level. In most of these countries' smokeless tobacco and areca nut products are culturally accepted and served during social occasions.



Myanmar has the highest prevalence of smokeless tobacco use among men at over 62 percent. Timor-Leste has highest prevalence of ST use among women, nearly 27 percent. Bangladesh has more ST users among women than men at nearly 25 percent. Areca nut (betel) chewing, with or without tobacco, has traditionally been popular in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka. While ST users in the region outnumber smokers, countries such as Bangladesh and India are reporting a decline in ST use among adults. However, rising use of smokeless tobacco products among youth in some countries is a cause for concern.

Many smokeless tobacco products are prepared locally by mixing tobacco with areca nut and adding flavours and other ingredients. Others are manufactured. *Paan masala* is one such popular flavored areca nut product used in India, widely sold in small sachets. It consists of areca nut mixed with catechu, cardamom and a variety of natural and artificial perfumes and flavours. Commonly available smokeless tobacco products include *zarda (jarda)*, *khaini*, *sadapatta* (Bangladesh), *gutka*, *gul*, *gudaku*, snuff, creamy snuff, snus, *mawa*, *mishri* (India) etc. Areca nut products are mainly pan, *paan masala* (India), *doma-pani* (Bhutan), *Kun-yar* (Myanmar) etc. Many of these products are in use in Sri Lanka. ST products used in Timor-Leste include *sange* and *mama-malus*.

Of the 1.6 million who die each year because of tobacco use in the Region many are smokeless tobacco users. Smokeless tobacco contains at least 28 carcinogens (chemicals that can cause cancer). The most harmful chemicals in ST are the tobacco-specific nitrosamines, which are formed during the growing, curing, fermenting and ageing processes of ST. Smokeless tobacco use leads to diseases of teeth, gums and pre-cancerous lesions such as leukoplakia (white patch), erythroplakia (raised red lesions) and submucous fibrosis of the mouth. Many ST users fall prey to cancer of the oral cavity, food-pipe (esophagus) and pancreas. Smokeless tobacco use also causes reproductive health problems and lowers overall immunity. Nicotine contained in smokeless tobacco leads to addiction as in the case of smoking forms of tobacco.

Countries where smokeless tobacco use is prevalent enforce various measures mandated under the WHO FCTC, WHO MPOWER package and NCD Best Buys for regulation and control of these products. Taxation, which is a cost-effective measure for tobacco control, is very complex in case of ST because of a large variety of products. Most ST products are taxed and priced very low compared to cigarettes, making them easily affordable and accessible by population at large, especially youth and women.

Some countries employ bans on use of smokeless tobacco. In India several state governments invoke Food Safety laws to ban smokeless tobacco products. Bhutan is the only country in the world that has banned the production, manufacturing and sale of all tobacco products. Nepal has banned use of all tobacco products in public places, including smokeless tobacco.

In view of COVID 19 pandemic, countries were concerned about spread of the virus through spitting. As use of ST products promotes salivation and frequent spitting, countries implemented advocacy campaigns to prevent use of ST products. India issued an advisory and banned tobacco products during the lockdown period in 2020.