



SAFEGUARDING MENSTRUAL HEALTH DURING FLOODS



United Nations
CERF

Central
Emergency
Response
Fund



ANTICIPATORY HUMANITARIAN ACTION
PILOT: 2020 MONSOON FLOODS IN BANGLADESH



On 4 July 2020, a forecast predicted that there was a high risk of severe flooding occurring in five districts located along the Jamuna River in Bangladesh. This forecast prompted the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) to release an emergency grant to three UN agencies: WFP, FAO, and UNFPA. For the first time ever, the emergency grant provided by CERF was to be used to prepare at-risk communities for the forthcoming disaster, rather than as a means to provide relief to a population already affected by floods.

As part of the landmark initiative, UNFPA procured, pre-positioned, and distributed 4,500 menstrual health management kits to adolescent girls living in vulnerable communities, in the span of 30 days, and prior to the onset of severe monsoon floods. Conservative socio-cultural norms around menstruation often result in adolescent girls in Bangladesh not seeking reproductive healthcare for their menstrual health problems. The first period of a girl remains a significant cause for their dropout from school, especially in rural areas where access to toilets at schools continues to be limited and where families do not often allocate sufficient resources towards managing the menstrual health of girls.

As these issues were expected to become even more significant in an emergency context, menstrual health management kits were distributed to prevent adolescent girls from contracting infections due to worsened hygiene standards and to prevent the deepening of existing gender inequalities. In addition to basic hygiene products, the kits contained flashcards with relevant information on issues

affecting adolescent girls and helpline numbers for contacting local authorities in case of an emergency.

Moreover, the youth volunteers distributing the kits raised awareness on the dangers threatening adolescent girls in the communities by facilitating discussions on issues such as menstrual health, child marriage, and gender-based violence. These discussions were designed to improve the status of girls in the targeted communities by actively engaging their families in conversations about crucial issues that are often considered too taboo to speak openly about.

Through the pilot, 4,500 menstrual health management kits were distributed among adolescent girls between the ages of 10-19 in Kurigram, Gaibandha and Jamalpur Districts of the Rangpur Division. Among these adolescent girls, 170 were individuals with special needs. In the months after the project, girls from the targeted communities started to actively seek the help of the sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence services in the area and called the helplines mentioned in the flashcards for support.

In the stories included in this book, 15 of the 4,500 recipients of the kits share their experiences of how the project affected their lives as adolescent girls in their community. Each of the stories showcase how breaking the silence around 'taboo topics' often enhances the health, security, and well-being of everyone in a community, particularly its most vulnerable members.

**Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the subjects.*



"My family has always suffered from poverty. My father is the sole breadwinner of our household and he has always struggled to provide for all of us. Then, the COVID-19 pandemic took a further toll on his income. Getting food on our plates three times a day became difficult, let alone having hygiene products for us girls to manage our menstruation.

How to manage our period is not really something we practice or talk about in our community. Although during that time of the month, we girls try to be more particular about cleanliness. It is very hard for us to ask for our basic needs to be taken care of, because of our economic hardships.

When the youth volunteers of the project spoke to us and explained the risks we would be facing if we were indifferent about menstrual hygiene, it helped us to understand better. They also provided us with some essential items needed to manage our menstrual health. This has not only secured my health, but also helped me to better concentrate on my studies."

Salma, 17 years old, Jamalpur

This disaster preparedness project was conducted with the financial support from UNFPA through UN's Central Emergency Relief Fund to support vulnerable adolescent girls' ability to manage their menstrual health effectively and to mitigate the impact of flooding before it reached its peak.



"In my village, people think about girls in a very traditional way. Whenever there is a money problem, the first thing a family would think of is to stop the girl's education and marry her off.

Like many other families in my community, the COVID-19 pandemic created an extremely difficult situation for my family. It became very hard to support our daughter's education, but as I got married very early due to financial issues my own family had, I prayed that my daughter would not have the same fate as I did.

Although child marriage is common in our area, this project has been an eye opener for many of us. We never thought of the severe effects of child marriage, which could put our daughter at risk. After the youth volunteers spoke to us and explained these dangers, we took the message more positively. Now, we are more determined to support our daughter's education in any way we can and inspire her to fulfill her dream of becoming a nurse."

Aisha, 15 years old, Jamalpur

Plan International Bangladesh was the implementing partner of the project. Through their support, flashcards were developed with important messages on COVID-19, menstrual health, and child marriage. The flashcards also included a list of places where beneficiaries could receive counseling and reach out for help.

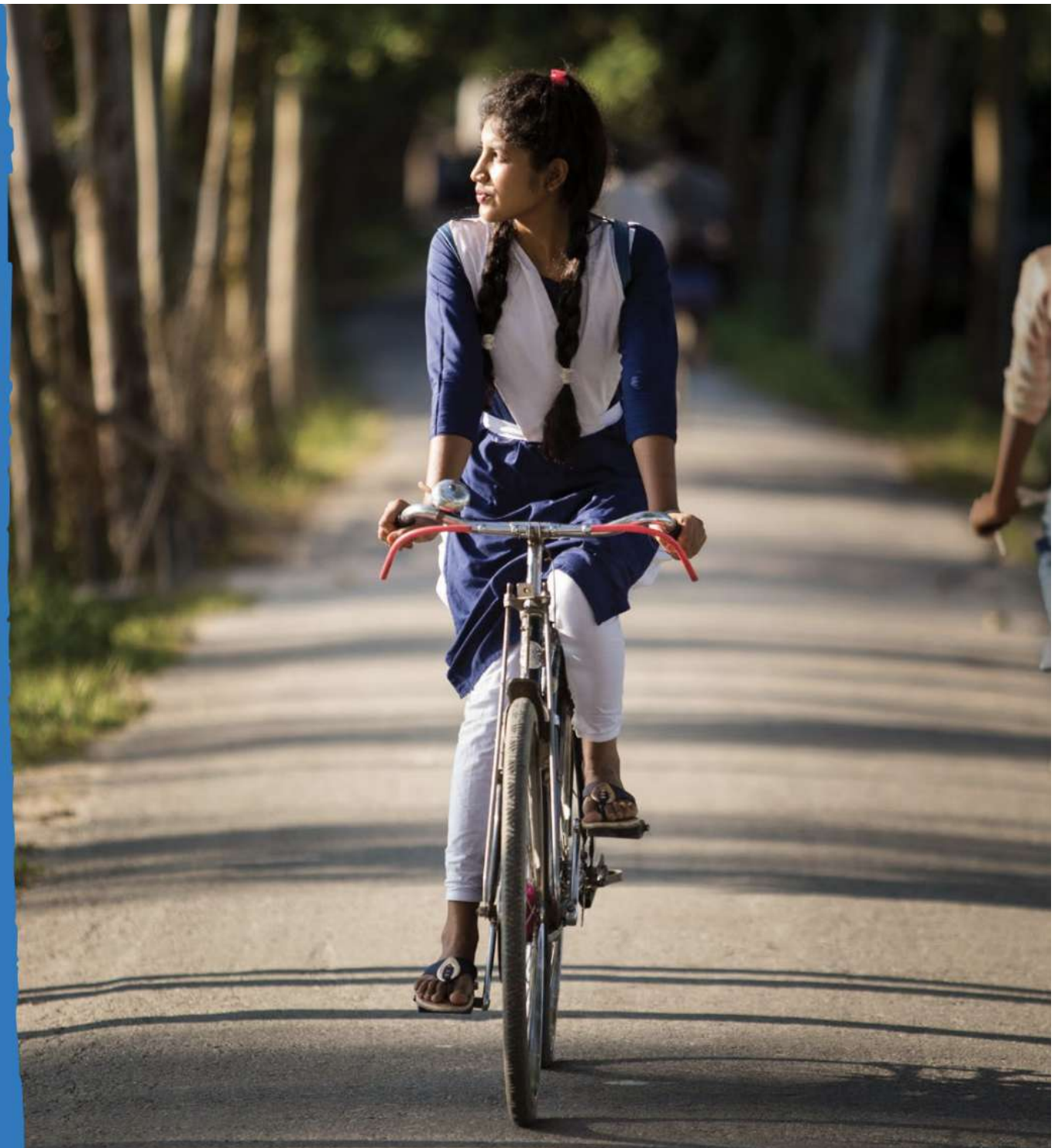
"Going to school during my period was always difficult. I was very uncomfortable about using a cloth and was always worried about staining my clothes. Skipping school during those days seemed to be the best option to keep myself safe.

One day, the volunteers involved in the project came to us and distributed the menstrual health management kits. It contained some useful items for personal hygiene and flashcards with important messages on different issues. We cannot afford to buy the products contained in the kits every month, but for me it was more important to learn about menstrual health management. I had always been afraid to be on my period when heavy flooding happens.

Because of the flashcards, I now feel like I understand the issue better and can support myself. My parents also learned about the troubles I face and the care I need during menstruation, especially during flooding. Now, I can go to school during my period without hesitation!"

Sharmin, 16 years old, Gaibandha

In rural areas, menstrual health management is rarely discussed among families or at school. Many families cannot afford to buy basic menstrual health products and schools often do not have separate toilets for boys and girls. This results in girls either being absent or completely dropping out from school. Through the discussions facilitated by the youth volunteers, the girls and their families were able to learn how to manage their menstruation better.



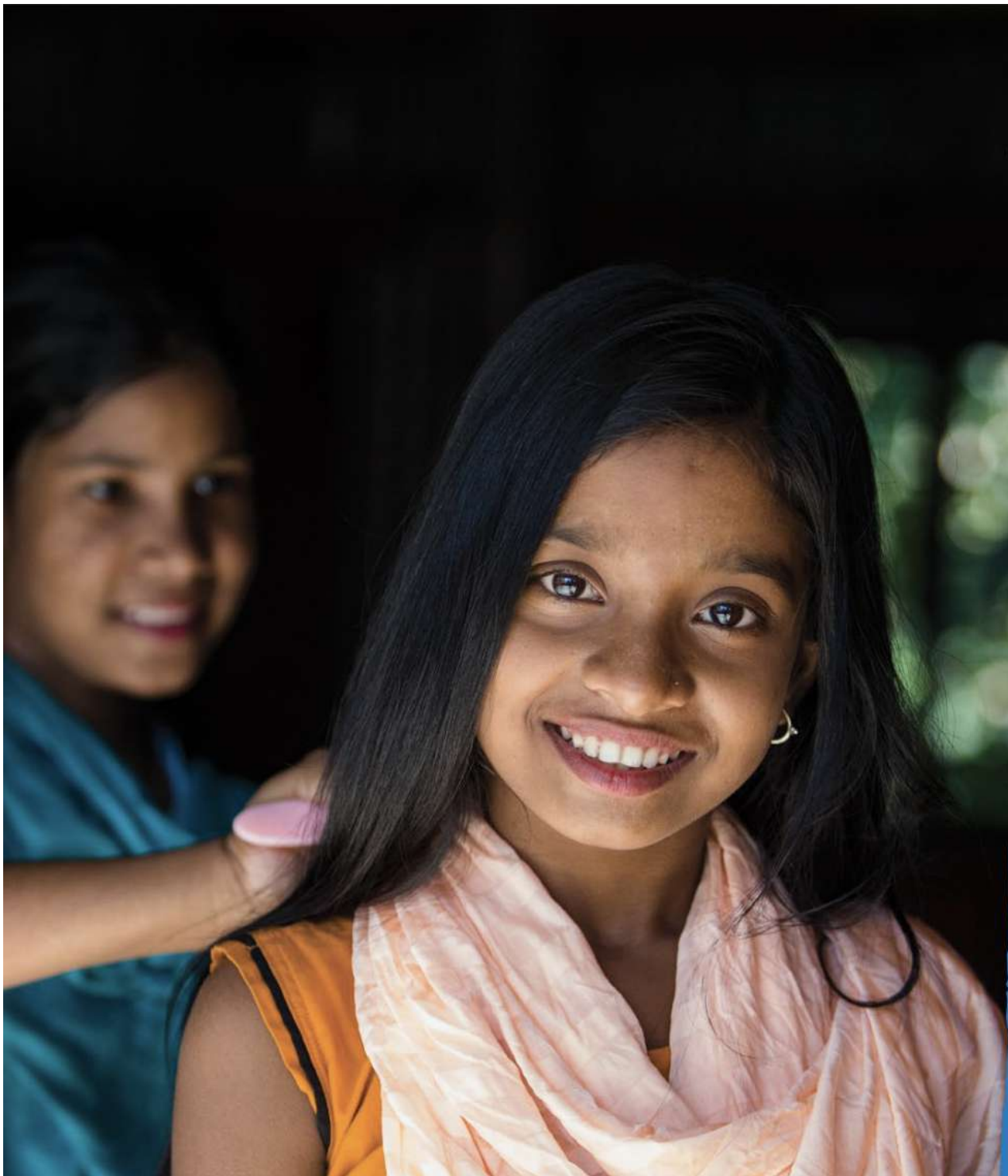


"Floods ruin everything. On some days after the floods hit the village, we would only eat one meal a day. If we were on our period, we were not able to shower or change. Normally we would handle our periods very secretly so that no one sees us, but during floods it was not possible. We had no access to either clean cloths or sanitary napkins. My family is poor. How could they afford it?

This year, people from UNFPA and Plan International supported us. They taught us how to prepare for the floods beforehand. They spoke to us about how important menstrual hygiene is and why we need to take care of ourselves during emergencies. My sister and I can safely shower and take care of ourselves during our periods now."

Anwara, 15 years old, Kurigram

The menstrual health management kits were distributed to decrease the risk of infections among adolescent girls and to raise awareness for practices that uphold their health and wellbeing.



"I was quite young when my period started. This is often difficult in the rural areas where I live, since we do not have a tradition of discussing your period with anyone, even your parents. I don't think my family ever thought that menstruation could cause trouble for me or my sister.

However, every year during floods, hurricanes or other natural disasters, menstruation became a problem for us. As I grew older I understood that there are some hygiene practices which need to be done to maintain good health, but my sister and I still found it difficult to ask for help from our parents.

Then my sister learned about this project and informed other members of the family about it. I went to the point where they were distributing menstrual health management kits to young girls like me. My sister and I finally felt that somebody cared about us and our needs.

At the distribution point, the volunteers also educated us on the COVID-19 situation, child marriage and other important issues. We also received these flashcards, which gave our parents a better understanding of our needs during menstruation. Because of these flashcards, I now feel that talking about our period problems has become much easier for us."

Rehana, 15 years old, Kurigram

The OCHA/CERF Anticipatory Humanitarian Action Pilot supported 4,500 young girls to come out of their comfort zone and open up about their troubles during menstruation.

"During my period, I would dispose of my cloths very secretly because I felt shy and uncomfortable about it. During floods, my menstrual problems would become unbearable. As we were already poor, buying soap and napkins was not possible. I could not tell my family about it, but not being able to take care of my hygiene was also very inconvenient for me.

When we received the menstrual health management kits, we also got to ask questions and seek help from some youth volunteers. They really helped us understand the importance of menstrual health and gave me the courage to talk about it more openly.

I gave the flashcards we received from the youth volunteers to my family and convinced them that I need proper care for my menstrual hygiene. I am glad I could speak up to them as now my mother, and even my father, show an interest in this issue. Now I feel much more comfortable as my family provides me with sanitary napkins, clean cloths and soap during my period."

Afroza, 16 years old, Jamalpur

81 female youth volunteers were mobilized in the CERF Anticipatory Humanitarian Action Pilot to help adolescent girls and their families tackle menstrual health issues through discussions and counseling.





"My family is very poor and my father's income is sometimes not enough to even cover the monthly expenses. Nowadays, during COVID-19, he is even more tense as his income is even less than normal.

Some people in my community suggested to my father that he should put an end to my and my sister's education and marry us off soon. We were frightened by the thought. We have dreams that we want to fulfill and this is not the time to stop us. But what else could we do?

The volunteers of this project not only gave us very useful menstrual health management kits before the floods, but also talked to the community about the need to prevent child marriages. They were able to convince people that education is crucial to ensuring that girls can support their families in the future and stand up for themselves."

Sumi, 17 years old, Jamalpur

While the menstrual management kits were distributed, the volunteers of the project discussed issues such as COVID-19, menstrual health management, and child marriage with the communities.



"The COVID-9 pandemic hit poor families like us very badly. Our financial status worsened fast due to lack of jobs available and the floods. With very little savings to sustain ourselves, all of our family members had to start working.

During this difficult period, whenever I got my period I suffered terribly due to poor hygiene, lack of menstrual hygiene products and the limited knowledge of people in our village. People did not care much about women on their period and did not worry about fixing the unusable bathrooms.

When the volunteers of the UNFPA project came here, they educated everyone on this matter and explained the importance of menstrual hygiene management. This gave the villagers a positive mindset and helped all the girls who were suffering. Now I am able to maintain my personal hygiene and health, which has made my family happy too."

Arifa, 16 years old, Kurigram

The OCHA/CERF Anticipatory Humanitarian Action Pilot, which was implemented by UNFPA and Plan International has proven to be highly effective in empowering adolescent girls in the rural areas of Bangladesh. The project has added a new dimension to our work and we hope to continue from where we left off in our future endeavours.



"Floods always caused a lot of damage in our community. During floods, there was no clean water, not enough food, no electricity and our toilets would always be destroyed. I knew that maintaining menstrual hygiene was important, but during floods and other natural disasters, it was very difficult. I had to manage with the same cloth again and again. I also felt very weak as I didn't usually get to eat healthy food during floods.

The kits I received were of great help. Among the items in the kits was a torchlight, which helps me to go to the bathroom without getting scared. I cannot express how happy and relieved I was that so many girls like myself got to prepare for the floods before they hit."

Nilufar, 17 years old, Kurigram

Through this project, a number of essential items were distributed to enable adolescent girls to manage their menstruation with dignity and security. Among these items were laundry soap, a torchlight, underwear, sandals, sanitary clothes, detergent powder, and face masks to curb the spread of COVID-19.



"People in my village were not well aware of the problems related to menstruation. I knew about cramps and weakness, but there were many other things I was unaware of.

There was one time when I was in extreme pain during my period. At first, my mother and I thought it was normal cramps, but after some time the pain became unbearable. I got scared, because I did not know what was happening. My mother was scared too. I had never experienced such pain.

Thankfully, just a few days before, youth volunteers from UNFPA and Plan International had informed us about a health center. My mother took me there and they immediately gave me painkillers and told us about the steps

that need to be taken to maintain good health during these tough times. After that day, I made sure to eat properly and take care of myself. I don't face such problems anymore."

Asma, 17 years old, Jamalpur

According to statements given by members of the targeted communities, the CERF Anticipatory Humanitarian Action Pilot has empowered adolescent girls to stay resilient in the face of adversity caused by the floods.

"Before the pandemic began, I once asked my father to buy me soap during my period. He got angry and told me that he does not have the money to spend on unnecessary things for me. After I read out the flash card messages to him, he now understands the importance of maintaining proper menstrual hygiene. He also said he was sorry and that he did not know that using soap was so important."

Fatema, 15 years old, Gaibandha

Many of the girls who received the kits called the helpline numbers provided in the flash cards for support. This CERF Anticipatory Humanitarian Action Pilot has ensured continued access to life-saving sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender-based violence services for adolescent girls.





"As girls, we suffer silently when it comes to our period. There have been times when I have not gone to school during my period because I was in so much pain. I feared staining my clothes, but because we are poor, I did not know how to convince my father to get me pads.

Talking to the volunteers helped me and my friends to understand that menstruation is something that we shouldn't shy away from. They made us understand that menstruation is natural and we need extra support during it. They also convinced us that menstrual hygiene is important for our health or else it could cause infections and lead to worse diseases.

I also received a menstrual hygiene kit from UNFPA and Plan International. It had sanitary napkins, soaps, disinfectants, fresh cloth and pants. These products have helped me a lot in maintaining my menstrual hygiene."

Rokeya, 16 years old, Gaibandha

Due to traditional socio-cultural norms and beliefs, adolescents are often reluctant to seek reproductive healthcare for menstruation issues in Bangladesh. Lack of adequate menstrual health products is one of the reasons that lead to many adolescent girls dropping out of school prematurely.



"In our villages, we do not receive menstrual health education, because menstruation is not an issue we commonly talk about. No one worries about the pain girls go through because of our periods every month. We are expected to work the same way we do every other day during menstruation as well. I have always seen my mother, friends and sisters suffer from terrible pain and weakness, but they were too shy to express it.

In our household, men are always treated better. They are given better food, because they earn money for the family, even more so during the pandemic. However, it is also important for girls to eat properly when we are menstruating as we lose blood and the cramps hurt a lot.

Like many others in our village, I did not know this before the youth volunteers from UNFPA and Plan International came here and told us about the importance of eating properly. They brought some nice flashcards, which I took home and shared with my mother. She took my words seriously and now my family makes me eat properly during my period."

Amina, 15 years old, Jamalpur

UNFPA and Plan International provided the technical support to brief the youth volunteers on the pilot milestones and to orient them to talk to adolescent girls and their parents about the issues of concern.



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Mariam, 17 years old, Jamalpur

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"During the early stages of COVID-19, our schools closed down. Most of the shops in the area were also shut down. No one had a proper understanding of what was happening and what was about to happen.

Slowly stores started to re-open, but our schools did not. My education is still halted. We were also worried sick about the elders in the family and about what will happen to them if they are infected by the virus.

When we received the kits, we also got some flashcards. They showed us how to maintain basic hygiene in times like these. This project and the volunteers helped me to not only manage my menstruation, but also to take good care of my family during this crisis. All of us feel safe and healthy now."

Shahana, 17 years old, Gaibandha

UNFPA and Plan International included flashcards in the kits to educate the adolescent girls on hygiene maintenance during COVID-19, child marriage and menstrual health. The cards also included the contact numbers of different authorities, which could be contacted in case of an emergency.



