The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted everyone, and it hit harder for vulnerable groups, including women and people with special needs in rural areas around the world. The pandemic poses significant challenges for children and young women in the Asia-Pacific region. The resulting lockdowns, health effects and changing community needs are increasing the risk of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM), gender-based violence (GBV), sexual violence, sex trafficking, early pregnancy, withdrawal from education and online abuse, particularly for girls. As Plan International wrote in COVID-19: Six Months on Report in November, “the pandemic’s indirect socioeconomic effects are likely to be extensive and long-term, potentially reversing decades of efforts dedicated to improving the lives of vulnerable youth.”

With support from Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies through Plan International USA, Plan International Asia-Pacific launched the regional Emergency Response and Early Recovery (EREF) Funding mechanism under the Inclusive Community Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (ICDRM) project to support Plan country offices in the region in addressing the specific needs of affected people — particularly girls, young women and their families — in times of disaster and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Plan International Nepal received approximately $92,000 to support people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing basic water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) needs. This includes the promotion of hygiene practices to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and complement the government response during the national lockdown.

Kwari (not her real name) was one of the program participants from Plan International Nepal, and she expressed her gratitude after receiving the assistance. A woman with special needs, Kwari is a skilled tailor in her rural village. Before the pandemic, despite her physical limitation, she has been a significant support in providing for her seven family members.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected her business, and consequently, she is no longer able to support the family. She says, “My family’s financial situation is poor. The prohibitory orders imposed by the Government of Nepal locked down the production on our farm. It pushed my father and elder brother to [seek] labor work for livelihood.” Kwari’s work completely stopped, leading her family to go hungry. She says,

Like Kiwari, many young girls could not access sanitary pads during the pandemic.

Considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on girls’ and women’s lives, Plan International Nepal, with partner organization Banke UNESCO Club in collaboration with Bardiya municipality, distributed menstrual hygiene management kits to 315 families where Kiwari lives; they received a package worth $51 (Rs.6081). This intervention positively supported Kiwari’s family. The package consists of bathing soap, soap box, laundry soap, shampoo, sanitary pads, cloths, female underwear, a digital thermometer, a flashlight with battery, sanitizer, surgical masks, and bags with a brochure containing information on COVID-19 prevention. Kiwari recalls,

“CHANGES IN ECONOMIC ACTIVITY AND STORE SUPPLIES OFTEN CAUSE DIFFICULTY IN OBTAINING THE GOODS AND SERVICES WOMEN NEED TO REMAIN HEALTHY, INCLUDING HYGIENE AND MENSTRUAL HYGIENE PRODUCTS.”

Plan also noted that, “Even if these products and services are available in certain communities, the national lockdown may make it difficult to obtain them, as girls and women no longer have access to the support systems and information sources they had through school, social circles and reproductive health support mechanisms.” The four months of EREF implementation in Nepal helped Kiwari and her community to stay resilient during the COVID-19 pandemic.

² Page 6.
³ Page 6.