

HEAR IT FROM



THE GIRLS

ASIA AND COVID-19





During this pandemic, I have received many complaints from girls, boys, and young people about their struggles at home such as stress, exploitation, domestic violence, and child marriage. The inequality that we've been fighting against all these years re-surfaced. Girls are suffering multiple layers of burden starting from difficulty studying at home, more house chores, and are becoming more vulnerable to gender and domestic violence. Boys are being sent to guard the village's entrance, just because they are perceived to be strong, when in fact they are children who are also vulnerable.

My message to all is that equality must still be maintained, especially during the pandemic.

-Suci, Plan International Indonesia's Youth Champion and
Chairperson of Kediri Village Child Protection Group

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A background image showing a group of people, including children, gathered around a public water station. They are engaged in various activities like filling containers and washing their hands. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter.

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INTRODUCTION

The Asia Pacific region has seen significant progress in gender equality in recent years in a number of areas, such as education and political participation. From 2000-2016, the number of out-of-school girls in primary and secondary school dropped by 67 million.¹ The number of females in tertiary school rose by 41 million. From 1990 to 2018 the proportion of women in national parliaments has risen from 8 per cent to 18 per cent.²



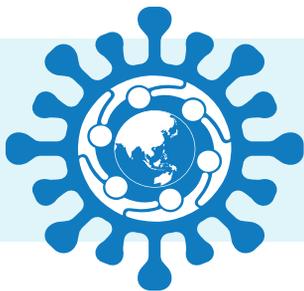
COVID-19 IS DIRECTLY AFFECTING OUR LIVES AND MENTAL HEALTH. IN MY FAMILY, WOMEN NORMALLY DO ALL THE COOKING WHICH MEANS THAT WE MUST GO TO THE MARKET WHERE IT IS CROWDED, PUTTING US AT GREATER RISK.

-Baifeun, Lao PDR

Unfortunately, in other areas, Asia and the Pacific have seen a decline in equality. According to UNESCAP, women's economic empowerment has remained nearly stagnant³ and those who are young and in the informal labour market are expected to be hit the hardest. The East Asia Pacific Region is one of the only regions in the world where rates of teenage pregnancy are increasing in low-and-middle income countries.⁴

Any emergency risks increasing existing discriminations and incidents of violence. It also risks losing progress so recently made for girls and young women. The COVID-19 Pandemic is an emergency on a scale not seen for nearly 100 years. The impacts will be far reaching and, if we're not careful, long-term. We are already seeing the effects in increasing reports of domestic and gender-based violence, school closures, and the shutting down of the informal economy. All of these necessary public health strategies severely threaten the progress made in gender equality, and risk losing even more ground on the fight for girls' rights.

We have an opportunity to mitigate the negative impacts of this global pandemic, particularly those negative impacts to progress on gender equality and girls' rights. We need to listen to those most impacted by the loss of rights and gender equality. Girls. In Plan International Asia Region's Report, Hear it From the Girls, we do just that. We have reached out to girls across the region to hear their stories. We are working to learn lessons from their experiences and respond to their specific needs during this time. We recommend listening as we hear it from the girls themselves.



In addition to working with communities, national governments and partners to tackle the spread of coronavirus in the region, Plan International has been talking to girls to ensure that their voices are heard and their concerns and immediate needs are well documented and taken into consideration when implementing COVID-19 response efforts.

THE IMPACT ON GIRLS

Asia is home to more than half of the world's 1.1 billion girls under the age of 18.⁵

In many parts of the region, girls and women are systematically disadvantaged and often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. They are held back by child, early, forced marriage and high teen pregnancy rates.

As the COVID-19 pandemic rages on, the number of women and girls unable to access family planning, facing unintended pregnancies, gender-based violence and other harmful practices could skyrocket by millions of cases in the months ahead, according to data released by UNFPA.⁶ Young workers are expected to be among the hardest hit by economic downturns and with millions of girls and boys out of school, return to learning remains a top concern for child advocates in the region.

Increased rates of out-of-school girls, unemployed young women, gender-based violence and lack of access to family planning have the real potential to lead to a follow-on increase in child marriage across the region.

Since the first case of COVID-19 was reported in December 2019, governments in

Asia and the Pacific have imposed a range of different social distancing measures and travel restrictions. While stringent social isolation policies undeniably contributed to flattening the COVID-19 curve in the region, they do have damaging physical and psychological impacts particularly on teenage girls.

The common challenges shared with us during the conversations with the girls include prevalence of gender-based violence and child marriage, educational disruption, limited access to menstrual health and hygiene services, increased psychological distress, and exacerbated burden of domestic work.

CHILD MARRIAGE

COVID-19 will disrupt efforts to end child marriage, potentially resulting in an additional 13 million child marriages worldwide between 2020 and 2030.⁷ In Asia, this threatens to reverse years of progress in the fight to eliminate child marriage in the region.



I ALSO KNOW TWO GIRLS WHO HAVE JUST GOTTEN MARRIED DURING THIS PANDEMIC. I TRULY THINK THAT EDUCATION OFFERS US A CHANCE TO A BRIGHTER FUTURE HOWEVER, DUE TO THE CURRENT PANDEMIC, MANY GIRLS ARE GIVING UP THEIR LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR MARRIAGE TO RELEASE THE NEW ECONOMIC HARDSHIP.



-Huu, Vietnam



The number of women and girls unable to access family planning, facing unintended pregnancies, gender-based violence and other harmful practices could skyrocket by millions of cases in the months ahead.

THE IMPACT ON GIRLS

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

“ I AM PREGNANT AND I NEED NUTRITIOUS FOOD THAT I CAN'T GO OUT AND BUY. MY REGULAR HEALTH CHECKUPS HAVE ALSO BEEN DISRUPTED.

”
-Rujina, Bangladesh

More than 47 million women in 114 low- and middle-income countries could lose access to contraception, leading to 7 million unintended pregnancies in the coming months. For every 3 months the lockdown continues, up to an additional 2 million women may be unable to use modern contraceptives.⁸ For countries in Asia that have made fighting teen pregnancy a top priority, this too threatens to reverse hard won gains. It will also increase the likelihood that forced marriage will be used to try to respond to such pregnancies.

“ RIGHT NOW, ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND WOMEN ARE FACING A BIG PROBLEM DUE TO NON-AVAILABILITY OF SANITARY PADS DURING PERIODS. THEREFORE, WE ARE USING CLEAN CLOTHES AVAILABLE AT HOME TO KEEP OURSELVES SAFE FROM DISEASES. PREGNANT WOMEN ARE ALSO FACING PROBLEMS BECAUSE THEY ARE NOT ABLE TO TAKE NUTRITIOUS FOOD. THEIR FAMILIES ARE SCARED AND DO NOT WANT TO TAKE THEM TO THE HOSPITAL FOR DELIVERY.

”
-Manisha, India

“ I WOULD LIKE TO REQUEST FOR GOVERNMENTS TO TO SET UP A HOTLINE NUMBER FOR GIRLS TO GET ANSWERS TO THEIR QUESTIONS AND RID OF ANY FORM OF VIOLENCE THEY MAY FACE DURING LOCKDOWN.

”
-Kamala, Nepal

Millions of additional cases of gender-based violence can be expected to occur across the region if lockdowns continue. At the height of the quarantine in China, our country programs reported a threefold increase in calls to women's shelters. In India, calls to domestic violence hotlines have increased by over 50% since the lockdown while the Philippines has seen a string of humiliating and degrading punishments meted out to children and young people for breaking COVID-19 curfews.

“ I FEEL RESTLESS AND I'M REALLY WORRIED ABOUT HOW WE WILL COPE IF CASES KEEP ON INCREASING AND I'M ALSO WORRIED THAT GIRLS AND WOMEN MIGHT BE VICTIMS OF VARIOUS KINDS OF VIOLENCE.

”
-Neha, Nepal



THE IMPACT ON GIRLS

REFUGEE & DISPLACEMENT CRISES



“ WE ARE LEARNING A LOT ABOUT HYGIENE PRACTICES, BUT WE DON'T HAVE ENOUGH SOAP AND HYGIENE MATERIALS FOR PERSONAL USE. MOREOVER , WE LIVE IN A VERY DENSE AREA. HOW CAN WE PRACTICE SOCIAL DISTANCING? ”

-Kawsara, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

Other than domestic and gender-based violence, the region is responding to an ongoing refugee/displacement crisis in Myanmar and Bangladesh, particularly at the world's largest and most densely populated refugee camp in Cox's Bazar. The camps are under lockdown, making essential items such as food, water and hygiene products scarce. Information sharing to counter fear and provide medical advice is also a major challenge due to the government's restriction on access to the internet.



NATURAL DISASTERS

Asia-Pacific nations experience more natural disasters than any other region. Vulnerability to natural hazards such as floods, severe storms, drought, earthquakes and other climate-related extremes is particularly seen in The Philippines, Indonesia, Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, India and the Pacific. This year, a powerful cyclone has already battered Fiji causing dangerous flooding and destruction on the Solomon Islands and the tropical storms season in other parts of the region is approaching. Our experience shows that girls and young women are particularly hard hit in emergencies and their effects can exacerbate the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak.

EDUCATION

Governments in Asia are starting to ease social/physical distancing restrictions – as seen in Vietnam and China, while other Asia countries will enter this phase in the near future. Some anticipated challenges include the need to ensure girls return to learning, accelerated education needs for girls, quality livelihoods opportunities for young people, access to family planning and protection systems that are able to adjust to different phases of physical distancing requirements.

“ USUALLY I SPEND MY TIME READING, DOING HOMEWORK OR HELPING MY MOM TIDY UP THE HOUSE. STUDYING AT HOME MAKES ME MISS SCHOOL SO MUCH. IF ONLY I HAD ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY, I COULD ASK MY TEACHER DIRECTLY. IN MY HOUSE ONLY, MY DAD HAS A MOBILE PHONE THAT I CAN BORROW FROM TIME-TO-TIME. ”

-Angel, Indonesia

THE IMPACT ON GIRLS

SHRINKING LABOUR MARKETS

Young people will be among the most affected by shrinking labour markets. During times of economic recession, young workers are often the first to be let go and the last to be hired. Young entrepreneurs have trouble finding resources and financing.

“ CHILDREN IN MY VILLAGE AREN'T FAMILIAR WITH USING COMPUTERS TO STUDY AND EVEN MORE TROUBLING IS THAT MANY FAMILIES CAN'T AFFORD COMPUTERS MAKING IT DIFFICULT FOR CHILDREN TO CONTINUE THEIR EDUCATION.

-Ha Vy, Vietnam



“ MY HUSBAND IS DAY LABOURER AND I AM PREGNANT, BUT THE LOCKDOWN MEANS HE DOESN'T HAVE ANY WORK NOW AND SO THERE IS NO INCOME FOR OUR FAMILY. .

-Rujina, Bangladesh

Plan International is committed to working in all sectors and with a wide range of key stakeholders to ensure girls return to learning, accelerated education needs for girls, quality livelihoods opportunities for young people, access to adolescent-friendly and gender-responsive sexual and reproductive health information and services are prioritised. As the longer-term impacts of the crisis unfold, we will continue to work closely with girls and women to amplify their voices and ensure that they are an active part of the process of rebuilding.

“ MOST PARENTS IN MY VILLAGE DROPPED OUT OF SCHOOL EARLY SO THEY DON'T HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE TO SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION AND HELP THEM STUDY AT HOME.

-Yusti, Indonesia

“ I HELP MY FAMILY WITH FARM WORK LIKE CLEARING WEEDS AND HARVESTING CASSAVAS. I AM REALLY WORRIED ABOUT MY FAMILY SINCE ALL PUBLIC ACTIVITIES HAVE BEEN SUSPENDED AND MY FAMILY DEPENDS ON THE MARKET TO EARN INCOME.

-Etelina, Timor-Leste



OUR COMMITMENT TO GIRLS

Plan International is working with governments and partners to prioritise the needs of girls and young women to respond urgently during the challenging public health emergency and to prevent an epidemic-like increase in child marriage as a follow-on effect.



ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Provide gender-responsive unconditional cash-based assistance to the most vulnerable and, once physical distancing restrictions are eased, help connect young people to decent work opportunities.



HEALTH

Provide basic hygiene supplies (hand washing kit and stations) as well as menstrual hygiene management kits and reproductive health information and services



EDUCATION

Promote and provide a range of online and offline self-learning and distance education solutions for girls and boys that cannot go to school; promote gender transformative back-to-school campaigns when children can return to learning



PROTECTION FROM VIOLENCE

Increase awareness, knowledge and skills on child protection and gender-based violence risks, reporting, and referrals; particularly child, early and forced marriage, and domestic violence, and COVID-19 prevention and management



GIRLS' LEADERSHIP

Promote youth empowerment and engagement, and support youth-led organisations, especially girls, to be vocal and visible parts of local and national responses

OUR RECOMMENDATION TO GOVERNMENTS



GOVERNMENTS CANNOT FORGET THAT WHILE COUNTRIES ARE IN LOCKDOWN, OUR PERIODS ARE NOT ON LOCKDOWN. GOVERNMENTS MUST ENSURE THE ACCESSIBILITY OF SANITARY NAPKINS FOR ALL GIRLS AND WOMEN.

-Sajju, Nepal



ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

As job markets tighten and more industries lay off workers in response to the COVID-19 induced economic downturn, ensure that young workers are not disproportionately affected and left behind.



HEALTH

Require continued access to adolescent-friendly sexual and reproductive health information and services to be prioritised in all response and recovery interventions.



EDUCATION

Ensure that girls, especially in rural areas, can access distance learning opportunities; invest in rapid individualised learning assessments and accelerated education programming once children are able to return to more traditional educational settings.



PROTECTION FROM VIOLENCE

Assess, monitor and address/respond to child protection and gender-based violence risks, especially the threat of increased child marriage and domestic violence, during the planning and implementation of responses to COVID-19.



GIRLS' LEADERSHIP

Strengthen the participation of girls and women at every step of the COVID-19 planning and decision-making process, at all levels (regional, national and local); address gender norms that result in women and girls performing the majority of unpaid care work.



”

I AM WORRIED THAT DUE TO THIS PANDEMIC, THE GOVERNMENT AND HEALTH SERVICES HAVE PRIORITISED COVID-19 WHILE THE IMPORTANCE OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IS BEING LEFT BEHIND.

-Lirisha, Nepal

Girls and young women are particularly hard hit in health emergencies. The challenges for children, particularly girls, ranging from disruption in education, increased risk of sexual violence and mental health risks, must be addressed.

We have heard directly from girls the challenges they are facing. Together, we can ensure our responses to this pandemic address the specific experiences and needs of girls in Asia. Plan International is committed to ensuring these needs are reflected in all policy and implementation plans responding to COVID-19 in the region. If we are to truly address the needs of people during this time of crisis, we must include the most marginalised in our work. Girls have told us what they need, now it's time for us to act.



**WE HAVE REACHED 2,645,929 PEOPLE
1,325,979 ARE GIRLS AND WOMEN**

We have also:



Distributed **182,166** non-food items



Reached **779,702** people with prevention and awareness messaging



Supported **153,483** girls and boys with distance learning programs

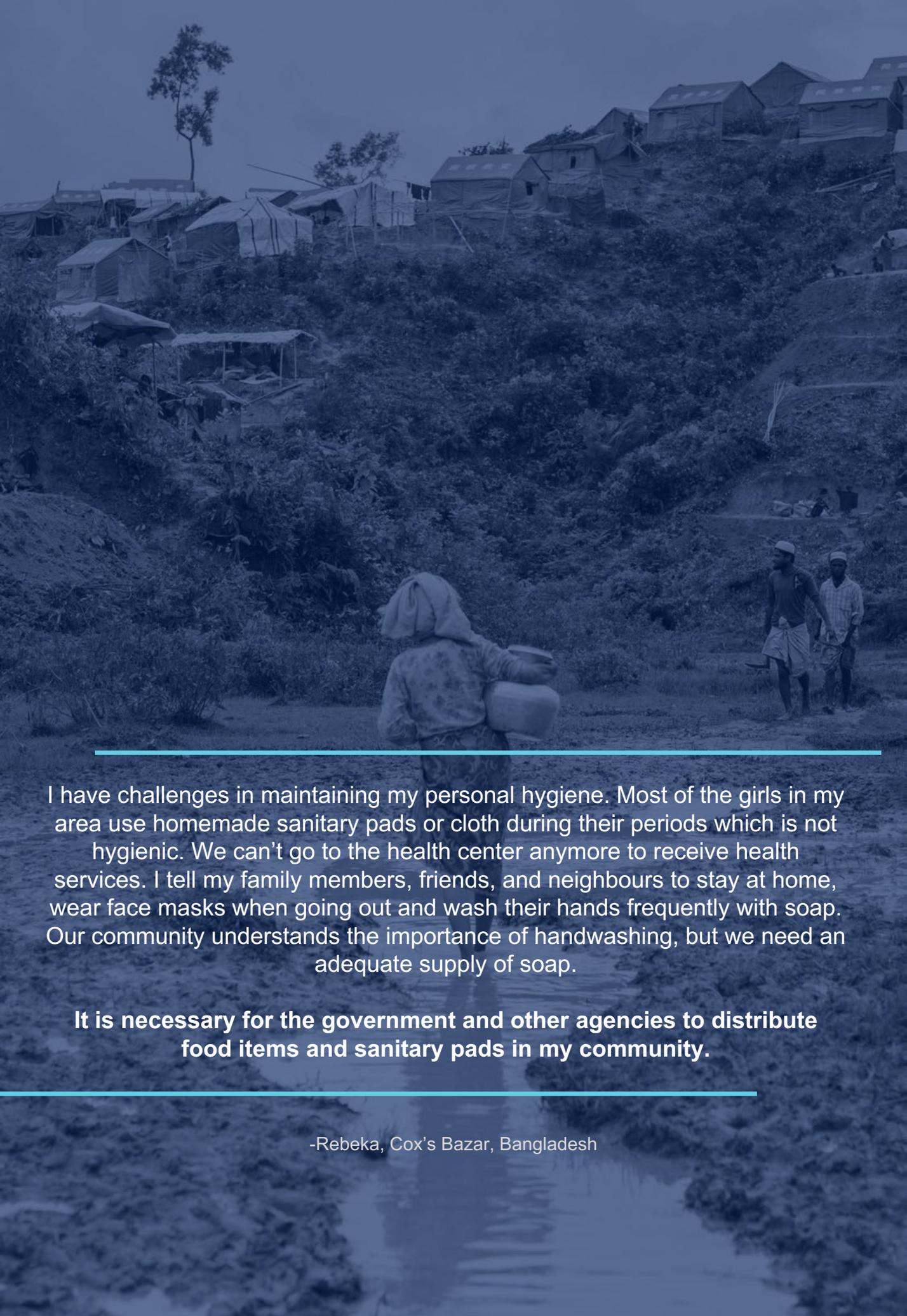


Provided **6,752** people with livelihood support, including those with disability

Figures as of 13 May 2020

For more on our response, the Situation Reports can be found [here](#)

- 1 UNESCO. (2018, March 08). *Gender equality in Asia-Pacific education: International Women's Day 2018 statistical snapshot*. Retrieved from UNESCO : https://bangkok.unesco.org/content/gender-equality-asia-pacific-education-international-women%E2%80%99s-day-2018-statistics-snapshot#_ftn1
- 2 UNESCAP. (n.d.). *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment*. Retrieved from UNESCAP : <https://www.unescap.org/our-work/social-development/gender-equality/about#footnote>
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- 5 UNICEF. (2016, October). *Harnessing the Power of Data for Girls*. Retrieved from UNICEF : <https://www.unicef.org/gender/files/Harnessing-the-Power-of-Data-for-Girls-Brochure-2016-1-1.pdf>
- 6 UNFPA. (2020, April 27). *Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage*. Retrieved from UNFPA: <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/impact-covid-19-pandemic-family-planning-and-ending-gender-based-violence-female-genital>
- 7 UNFPA. (2020, April 27). *Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage*. Retrieved from UNFPA: <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/impact-covid-19-pandemic-family-planning-and-ending-gender-based-violence-female-genital>
- 8 UNFPA. (2020, April 27). *Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage*. Retrieved from UNFPA: <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/impact-covid-19-pandemic-family-planning-and-ending-gender-based-violence-female-genital>



I have challenges in maintaining my personal hygiene. Most of the girls in my area use homemade sanitary pads or cloth during their periods which is not hygienic. We can't go to the health center anymore to receive health services. I tell my family members, friends, and neighbours to stay at home, wear face masks when going out and wash their hands frequently with soap. Our community understands the importance of handwashing, but we need an adequate supply of soap.

It is necessary for the government and other agencies to distribute food items and sanitary pads in my community.

-Rebeka, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We strive for a just world, working together with children, young people, supporters and partners. Using our reach, experience and knowledge, we drive change in practice and policy at local, national and global levels. We are independent of governments, religions and political parties. For more than 80 years, we have been building powerful partnerships for children and are active in more than 75 countries.

Girls Get Equal

Plan International has been campaigning for girls' rights for more than a decade. Our current Girls Get Equal campaign aims to ensure girls and young women have power over their own lives and can help shape the world around them. Promoting young female leadership is central to the campaign. While this includes access to formal positions of power and authority, such as increasing the numbers of young women and girls in decision-making roles in public life, it also looks beyond these formal positions. Girls Get Equal, with its iconic warpaint-style equal sign, seeks to redefine leadership to better reflect how girls, young women, and young advocates and activists are choosing to lead by working with them to ensure leadership is feminist, gender-transformative and inclusive. It means not reinforcing a narrow male-defined set of leadership skills and behaviours or replicating the male-dominated power and leadership structures that currently exist. Throughout the campaign there will be ongoing research, partnering with girls and young women to fully understand what it means to them to be a leader.

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