



Until we are all equal

The LEAP project partnered with girls, women, and children to promote equality and stand up against abuse and violence.



# Empowered Girls, Stronger Communities: The LEAP Legacy

In its three years, the LEAP project has helped girls and young women in Bangladesh get better health care and speak up for their rights.





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“Girls who study and work can live freely,” says Useaking, who made life-changing choices without knowing their cost. “If I had known, I might have chosen differently.” Today, she’s fighting for girls’ rights. Scan the QR code to watch her journey.



Over three years, **the LEAP project reached 118,089 people, including 66,595 girls and women.** The project aimed to prevent abuse and early marriage and ensure that adolescent girls and young women have access to education, health care, and protection.

## THE FACTS

### **WHO:** The **Lifting Healthy, Empowered & Protected Girls & Women (LEAP)** project

was funded by Plan International and Global Affairs Canada and implemented with Partners in Health and Development (PHD), Somaj Kallyan O Unnayan Sangstha (SKUS), Mukti Cox’s Bazar, and Hope Foundation for Women and Children of Bangladesh.

### **WHAT:** The project aimed to:

- 1 | Help girls and young women build confidence and make informed choices about their lives.
- 2 | Make health services more welcoming, accessible, and responsive to their needs.
- 3 | Support local efforts to speak up, take action, and hold leaders accountable.

**WHERE:** Four subdistricts (Ukhiya, Teknaf, Ramu, and Cox’s Bazar Sadar) and three Rohingya camps in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh

**WHEN:** March 2022–March 2025

### **HOW:** The project addressed these challenges:

- 1 | **Getting care closer to girls** We repaired health clinics, helped stock medicines and supplies, and trained doctors and nurses to handle cases of violence with sensitivity and care. We supported health workers to visit girls and women at home so they can get the care they need without having to travel.
- 2 | **Challenging harmful norms** Through youth awareness groups, girls and boys learned to spread messages of equality for girls and to push back against child marriage through theatre, social media, and community talks.
- 3 | **Making systems work better** We helped government staff and health workers improve their planning and budgeting in ways that better support women and girls. We also worked with communities and health centres to build committees that make sure everyone has a voice and that services are fair and accountable.
- 4 | **Bringing families on board** The project brought parents, partners, and faith leaders together, through fathers’ groups, women’s circles, and open conversations, to help create a community where girls feel safe asking for help and making their own choices.

“

I feel deeply inspired – and I believe that by sharing my story, I can inspire other girls [to believe in themselves] too.”

–Naima, LEAP project participant

## Thank you for your support.

Because of you, dreams are replacing child marriage. With your support, girls can stay in school and flourish. This kind of progress helps the whole world thrive: If every girl were to finish secondary school, the global economy could grow by \$15-30 trillion, according to the World Bank, with the benefits of skilled talent and inclusive progress reaching Canada and beyond.

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

# Girls' Futures Hang in the Balance

Imagine being 14 and told your future has already been decided: marriage, motherhood, and a lifetime of responsibilities you never chose.

That's the reality for many girls in Bangladesh, despite laws that prohibit marriage under age 18. Child marriage is declining, but at the current rate of only 2.1% per year, it will take 251 years to eliminate it. This crisis is linked to teenage pregnancies, which rose from 71.5 to 85 births per 1,000 girls between 2021 and 2023. Early pregnancies harm girls' health and keep them out of school.

Over the past three years, with support from donors like you, the LEAP project has helped girls speak about their rights: to refuse sex, access contraceptives, seek health care (including immunizations for preventing sexually transmitted infections), and report verbal and sexual violence. Together, we're advancing Bangladesh's goal to end child marriage by 2030 – but efforts must be scaled up by 22 times to get there.

In communities where puberty once marked the end of schooling and the start of marriage, LEAP is opening pathways to safer, healthier futures. And we've seen that change deepens when families, religious leaders, and communities rethink what's possible for girls.

Saifullah Mohammad Forkan, a 42-year-old religious leader and teacher, attended LEAP sessions and learned that a man's role in a household is not limited to a figure of authority. He now leads community sessions on gender equality and says, "I realized I could

help change people's minds." He says that women are participating more in community decisions.

In youth awareness groups, girls explore what their futures could hold. Naima, who aspires to join the civil service, spent a day alongside the superintendent of tourist police in Cox's Bazar as part of the project. "Reaching a position like this isn't impossible," she says. "If I work hard and give my best, I can get there. I'm deeply inspired."



**Dreamer to leader for a day: Naima stepped into a police role and discovered what's possible.**

“Working with young people, helping with both information and services, was rewarding. Supporting over 2,100 cases of violence against women and girls was a true support at the community level.”

—Nur Mohammad Ferdous Chowdhary, LEAP project manager, Plan International Bangladesh

## BY THE NUMBERS

### Project Highlights

**10,080**

**adolescent girls** received training through **504 youth groups** to understand their bodies, prevent infections, learn how to manage their periods and break down period myths, say no to early and forced marriage, and plan for education and careers.

**2,280** **young**

**married women** received training through **114 groups just for them** on marital rights, safe contraceptive use, sharing household responsibilities, and where to seek help for violence against women.

**22,281** **dignity kits** –

containing reusable pads, soap, and personal hygiene products – were delivered to survivors of sexual violence, who were also provided with mental health resources.

**47,085**

**women and girls** participated in recreational activities to strengthen their understanding of sexual and reproductive health in a safe, engaging environment.

**452** **health and**

**community workers (279 of them women)** received training on speaking respectfully and privately with women and girls about their health needs, including explaining options for family planning and safe childbirth, offering emotional support to and connecting survivors of violence with safe shelters and counseling, and providing referrals for professional care.

## WHAT WE TRACKED

### ➤ Increase in knowledge among girls

One of the key indicators the project monitored was the change in knowledge among adolescent girls aged 15 to 19. At the end of the project, the participants' understanding of menstruation, consent, contraceptives, and early and forced marriage increased by 14 percentage points.

**BEFORE: 39%**

**TARGET: 50%**

**AFTER: 53%**

### ➤ Enhanced knowledge in health service providers

We tracked how well community health workers, midwives, and nurses understood and addressed sensitive topics like sexual violence and abuse in their work. At the end of the project, their ability to share complex information in a respectful and supportive way improved by 16 percentage points.

**BEFORE, OVERALL: 66%**

(men: 67%, women: 66%)

**TARGET, OVERALL: 81%**

**AFTER, OVERALL: 82%**

(men: 79%, women: 84%)



## A STORY OF CHANGE

# “Not Just Marriage – I Want More from Life”

At 16 years old, Shifa found the courage to stand up for her future. But it wasn't always this way.

**S**hifa grew up in a community where families traditionally believed daughters should be married early – or, like her mother said, “before they are too old.” Education for girls was rarely a priority.

The youngest of five sisters and one brother, Shifa was in Grade 9 when her parents told her she would soon marry a man living in Dubai. “I was scared and felt alone when my family pushed me toward marriage,” she recalls. “Deep inside, I knew I wanted more from life.”

Driven by a quiet determination to shape her own future, Shifa joined the Champions of Change group in her community. There, she learned about the risks of child marriage and discovered how education could open doors to a different life.

Armed with new knowledge and a growing sense of purpose, she tried to persuade her parents to let her stay in school. When, despite her efforts, they refused to change their minds, she turned to her mentor, Shimu.

Together, they reached out to a woman leader in their community who spoke directly to Shifa's parents. She explained the legal consequences of child marriage, including imprisonment and fines, as well as the lifelong impact on a girl's health and future.

That worked.

“With the support of my mentor, I was able to stop my marriage and continue my studies,” says Shifa.

Shifa went on to join the Girls Out Loud program, an advanced training for select Champions of Change participants on protection from online bullying and using the internet safely. She began sharing her story and leading regular sessions about menstrual health, child marriage, and violence against women and girls, speaking to young girls, mothers, and even local leaders.

Thanks to Shifa's efforts, her community is changing. She now observes young girls visiting clinics for health services, including iron supplements – something that was rare before.

“

“I want to use my voice and my story to help other girls in my community so they don't face the same challenges I did.”

–Shifa, LEAP project participant



Shifa holds a placard that reads: “Boys should marry at 21, girls at 18 – and not before that.”





A health worker leads a session on women's rights and how to recognize and respond to violence as part of the LEAP project.

## Thank you

...for standing with us these past three years.

Thanks to your support, girls and young women in Bangladesh are learning to speak up for their rights and build stronger, healthier futures for themselves and their communities. Together, we've made incredible progress.



### About Plan International Canada

Plan International Canada is a member of a global organization dedicated to advancing children's rights and equality for girls. Plan International has been building powerful partnerships with and for children for over 85 years and is now active in more than 80 countries. We stand with children, especially girls, wherever they are oppressed, exploited, left behind, or not equally valued. We're determined optimists, and we will continue to persevere until we are all equal.

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