



Until we are all equal



Reshma (right) and Useaking (below) are two of more than 5,000 young people who have learned about their rights and how to advocate for them.

A Lifting Hand

Supporting girls' health and freedom in Bangladesh



The Lifting Healthy, Empowered and Protected Girls and Women in Cox's Bazar (LEAP) project is helping change lives in the world's largest refugee settlement.



Reshma and her mother attend one of the community discussions on the importance of girls' equality and protection of their rights.

Project Summary

Women and girls living in refugee camps experience only fragments of what life has to offer.

Since 2017, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, has hosted more than 1.2 million Rohingya people forced out of Myanmar because of cultural and religious persecution. Girls and women, from both the host and refugee communities, are especially at risk.

Trafficking and violent crime make travelling within the settlement dangerous. To protect their daughters, some fathers limit their movements to keep them safe – but this also prevents them from accessing health care, school, a job or other services.

Now, these daughters become just another person to feed, so their parents may decide to marry them so that their husbands will provide for them. This puts these young women at risk of experiencing sexual violence, having an early or unwanted pregnancy and bearing the brunt of unpaid care.

THE FACTS

WHAT: The LEAP project strives to improve the lives of girls and women living in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh – host to the world's largest refugee settlement – by addressing the greatest risks they face, including gender-based violence and child, early and forced marriage.

HOW: 1. Establish groups where teens, women, men and community leaders can learn about their rights and responsibilities to ensure equality and protect children against violence. 2. Improve health services, including referral networks, to better serve girls and young women. 3. Support local women's and youth organizations.

WHERE: Four subdistricts (Ukhiya, Teknaf, Ramu and Cox's Bazar Sadar) and three Rohingya camps of the Cox's Bazar district in Bangladesh

WHEN: March 2022 to December 2024. This report covers the first year of the project.

WHO: Plan Bangladesh, Plan Canada and Global Affairs Canada, in collaboration with Partners in Health and Development, Somaj Kallyan O Unnayan Sangstha, Mukti Cox's Bazar, and Hope Foundation for Women and Children of Bangladesh

BY THE NUMBERS

Project Highlights



Abul, a grocer, has received many offers for his 16-year-old daughter's marriage. But since attending LEAP-supported fathers' club meetings, he has learned of the harms of early marriage and won't let her be married until she's at least 20.



"I learned about different family-planning methods and chose the best one for me," says Sifat, 20, who was able to access a contraceptive implant with your help.

2,560

girls have participated in **128** Champions of Change groups, where they learn about their rights to sexual and reproductive health and to be protected and equally included in society. [PROJECT TARGET*: 2,520 girls, 126 groups]

520

young married women have participated in **26** groups similar to Champions of Change. [PROJECT TARGET: 420 girls, 21 groups]

2,640

boys have participated in **132** Champions of Change groups, discussing sex education and their role in helping protect girls' rights. [PROJECT TARGET: 2,520 boys, 126 groups]

420

mothers, **520** fathers and men and **436** traditional leaders have been involved in discussions around how to help create a supportive environment for young women and adolescents. [PROJECT TARGET: 2,526 women, 2,100 men, 378 leaders]

83

health providers and **62** women caseworkers have been trained to better support teens and women who experience violence and trauma. [PROJECT TARGET: 357 providers, 200 caseworkers]*

8

woman-led organizations have developed advocacy plans. [NO TARGET SET]

*Targets are for the full three years of the project; the numbers here reflect what was accomplished in Year 1.

A STORY OF CHANGE

Future Moves

Lifting the veil off child, early and forced marriage, one conversation at a time.

Useaking, a 21-year-old mother of two, can pinpoint the event that changed her life forever: getting her period. “I used to have to stay home for days,” says Useaking, whose information on menstruation came from myths and taboos. “I didn’t even know to use rags, let alone sanitary pads, so I couldn’t go out as people would see my bloodstained clothes.”

Staying home, her studies slipped away, and so did her options. Useaking was 17 when she dropped out of school, against her parents’ wishes, to marry a boy she’d met at Sangrai, a traditional water festival. She thought marriage would bring her the freedom she craved.

But with marriage came an early pregnancy. Alone in a new community, Useaking was expecting her first child by age 18. Her second arrived 14 months

later. “At the time, I didn’t know I could use the health services in my area,” she recalls, describing a situation that is common in many parts of Bangladesh, where 22% of girls marry before the age of 15.

She joined one of the LEAP project’s groups for young married women. Together, they learned about their rights to be protected, make decisions, access health care and advocate for these rights. The more she learned about her rights and the importance of family planning, the more confident – and vocal – she became.

Determined to share her knowledge with any girl who would listen, Useaking began speaking out against child, early and forced marriage. Her number one piece of advice: “I tell my girlfriends and girls around me to study or learn a job without getting married at a young age.”



We’re working with local organizations to amplify their expertise. The goal is to strengthen community resilience, respect the mixture of cultures and traditions, and treat everyone with equity and compassion.”

– Amy LeBlanc,
Plan Canada LEAP
program manager



Useaking leads a discussion group with other young mothers.

Click or scan the QR code to watch the mini-doc *Useaking’s Journey*. It’s one of our first-ever documentaries, filmed by Elizabeth D. Costa.



A STORY OF CHANGE

Baby Steps

“Since I haven’t had a son, everyone neglects me,” says Rehana. When we spoke with her, the 30-year-old woman was pregnant with her third child. “Everyone was upset when I had my first two daughters.” Her husband, Shabab, was convinced she would have another girl.

Shabab can only work part time and doesn’t earn enough for the family, so Rehana wasn’t eating much. She was malnourished at a time when her body and her baby needed nutrients most. Still, she was forced to do demanding work around the house. The emotional abuse of her husband’s family affected not only her physical health but also her mental state.

Rehana’s third pregnancy could have ended in tragedy for her, the baby or both. Instead, Jannatul, a travelling community health worker with the LEAP project, visited her at home. Jannatul told Rehana and Shabab about the importance of prenatal checkups, available at the family welfare centre nearby, where Rehana could also get vaccinations. She also told Rehana that she shouldn’t do heavy exercises.

The project also helped the couple access counselling to build a healthier and happier relationship. “I had many misconceptions before,” Shabab says. “I still hope to have a son, but my wife’s health comes first now,” he said.

Rehana gave birth to the baby – a girl – at a health facility, and both are doing well. “Everyone should hope for a healthy child, not a boy or a girl in particular,” says Shabab.



Community health worker Jannatul (pictured here) visited Rehana at her home.



A family attends a celebration for the birth of their baby girl.

DID YOU KNOW?

- ▶ Bangladesh ranks among the top 10 countries in the world with the highest levels of child, early and forced marriage.
- ▶ Married girls are four times more likely not to finish school and are more likely to experience complications from pregnancy and childbirth and be exposed to gender-based violence. They also tend to have less influence on household decisions, including what health care they and their children can access.
- ▶ Child marriage is illegal in Bangladesh, but there are still 38 million child brides, including women who were first married in childhood. Of them, 13 million girls were married before the age of 15.
- ▶ Child, early and forced marriage begins to decline only among those with at least 10 years of schooling. The incidence falls below 50% among those with at least 12 years of schooling.

Thank you for your support.

The discussion groups you’ve helped enable are a critical first step in a long journey toward changing people’s attitudes about a girl’s position in her family and in the wider community.



Click or scan the code to learn how you can support Until We're All Equal.

WHAT'S NEW AT PLAN

Our Shared Dream

We see the world as it is and the world as it could be. No matter how complex the challenges, a better future is possible.

It takes **determination**.

It takes **optimism**.

It takes **vision**.

Our “moon shot” vision is equality for girls everywhere. Improving the lives of girls improves the lives of everyone in the family and the community. That understanding, which we know you share, is at the heart of our fundraising campaign, Until We Are All Equal. When you support this campaign, you're trusting us to identify the greatest threats to equality, especially for girls, and respond to them as they arise.

Just going to school every day is impossible for many girls, with one in six living in a conflict zone. That's why, right now, about 120 million girls are missing out on an education. What's more, many girls – 12 million every year – are forced into early marriage, placing them at a heightened risk of dying from complications of early pregnancy or childbirth.

There are 500 million girls alive on our planet today, each filled with promise and potential and with their whole futures ahead of them. How do you transform the world? Start by investing in girls.



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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